

The Legacy of the 30's

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The Middle of the Journey, the novel by Lionel Trilling just published by Viking, is one of the first to deal with what is possibly the the major experience of the intellectuals of our time—their involvement, stemming from the 30's, in the complex of ideas and activities called variously “the Communist movement,” the “Marxist viewpoint,” “progressivism,” “liberalism,” etc. In the 30's the intellectual's commitments expressed themselves in “politics”; more recently they have been chiefly cultural, a matter of opinion and attitude—pro and con. In any case, the moral dilemmas involved in the experience—and the intellectual and artistic problems set by the need to know what it meant (and still means)—are very much with us now. In this article, Robert Warshow discusses some of the implications he sees in Mr. Trilling's novel, which is already one of the two or three most widely discussed books in intellectual circles today.

For most American intellectuals, the Communist movement of the 1930's was a crucial experience. In Europe, where the movement was at once more serious and more popular, it was still only one current in intellectual life; the Communists could never completely set the tone of thinking in Europe, and Communist intellectuals themselves were able to draw a part of their nourishment from outside the movement. But in this country there was a time when virtually all intellectual vitality was derived in one way or another from the Communist party. If you were not somewhere within the party's wide orbit, then you were likely to be in the opposition, which meant that much of your thought and energy had to be devoted to maintaining yourself in opposition.

In either case, it was the Communist party that ultimately determined what you were to think about and in what terms.

There resulted a disastrous vulgarization of intellectual life, in which the character of American liberalism and radicalism was decisively—and perhaps permanently—corrupted. As a measure of the damage, one need only compare the atmosphere that surrounded the Sacco and Vanzetti case in 1927 with the atmosphere during the period of the Moscow Trials and the Spanish Civil War ten years later. Indeed, the special poignancy with which we remember Sacco and Vanzetti is connected with a sense of regret for our own lost virtue; the excitement that grew up around their case was the last strong expression of uncorrupted radicalism: in 1927, nobody really wanted anything except that justice should win. But in the 30's radicalism entered upon an age of organized mass disingenuousness, when every act and every idea had behind it some “larger consideration” which destroyed its honesty and its meaning. Everyone became a *professional* politician, acting within a framework of “realism” that tended to make political activity an end in itself. The half-truth was elevated to the position of a principle, and in the end the half-truth, in itself, became more desirable than the whole-truth. It was fashionable at the time to speak of a “new maturity” in American intellectual life, and in a sense the phrase was accurate, but it was the kind of maturity that is really a willing acceptance of failure.

What had happened was more than the defection of one part of the intelligentsia. The whole level of thought and discussion, the level of culture itself, had been lowered. The soap-box speech merged with the Fourth of July oration. A poet became Librarian of Congress and denounced American intellectuals for weakening their country's spirit. Father Divine rode in the May Day parade. *The Grapes of Wrath* was a great novel. Eventually, *The Confessions of a Nazi Spy* was a serious movie and “Ballad for Americans” was an inspired song. The mass culture of the educated classes—the culture of the “middle-brow,” as it has sometimes been called—had come into existence. For the first time, popular culture was able to draw its ideological support from the most advanced sectors of society. If this represented a lowering of the level of serious culture, it also raised the level—or at least the tone—of popular culture. This is precisely what made it a “problem.” It was not possible to ignore *The Grapes of Wrath* as it was possible to ignore Edna Ferber or Amos and Andy. *The Grapes of Wrath* had all the surface characteristics of serious literature and it made all the “advanced” assumptions. In order to see what was wrong with it, one had to examine those assumptions themselves—and there was no firm base from which to do this.

It is not necessary to claim that the Communist movement was in any real sense the *cause* of this development. In fact that movement, in the character it assumed in the 30's, was itself a part of the development; the real causes lay far back in the history of American culture and the social and psychological effects of industrial capitalism. Moreover, the cultural atmosphere of the 30's embraced a great many areas of American life that had no direct connection with the Communists at all; for most Americans, certainly, that atmosphere was expressed most clearly in the personality of President Roosevelt and the social-intellectual-political climate of the New Deal. For the intellectual, however, the Communist movement was the fact of central importance; the New Deal remained an external phenomenon, part of that "larger" world of American public life from which he had long separated himself—he might "support" the New Deal (as later on, perhaps, he "supported" the war), but he never identified himself with it. One way or another, he did identify himself with the Communist movement.

Thus the problem that confronts the American intellectual when he seeks to deal with the mass culture that surrounds him is, in its deeper meaning, the problem of his own past. For we are living still in the intellectual climate that was first established by the Communist-liberal-New Deal movement of the 30's (by this time there are many people who have never known any other climate; that is what makes it so difficult to describe what has happened). The Communists themselves may be losing ground, but the terms of discussion are still fixed by the tradition of middle-class "popular front" culture which they did so much to create, and we are still without a vocabulary to break through the constriction it imposes on us.

On the practical level, the questions that center around the Communist movement may soon be out of our hands; indeed, they are out of our hands already—the *issue* of Stalinism is settled (though the danger is not). But if we are interested in understanding and evaluating the qualities of modern life, the *experience* of Stalinism remains a problem of peculiar complexity.¹ In its way, and for those who were affected by it, that experience is the most important of our time; it is for us what the First World War and the experience of expatriation were for an earlier generation. If our intellectual life is stunted and full of frustration, this is in large part because we have refused to assimilate that experience, but have dealt with it only politically—outlining again and again the terms of our opposition to Stalinism, but never trying to understand what it means as part of our lives.

For the serious intellectual, something more than an error of taste or judgment was involved when he accepted the pretensions of "proletarian literature," or when he assented to the general opinion that *Bury the Dead* was a vital work of art, or when he rejected the work of Henry James because it was outside the "main stream" of American tradition. The very possibility of these errors, and of a thousand others like them, represented at bottom a fatal acquiescence, a kind of willing mortification of the self. It meant that judgment was no longer free, or at least that there were considerations more important than free judgment. In the last analysis, it meant that the intellectual had sold out—to the pressures that encompassed him, and to his sense of his own inadequacy. And he lived surrounded by the evidence of his betrayal: a culture solidifying in vulgarity and dishonesty, of which he was a part.

Even to stand out against this culture un-compromisingly—a thing very few were able to do; much more was required than just to be anti-Stalinist—was only a partial victory. One kept one's integrity, but this integrity became a purely personal satisfaction, without real weight—and the one assumption that everybody shared was that weight was important. The culture remained and spread and entrenched itself, and its mere existence—this climate in which one had to live—was a standing threat to one's personality, was in a sense a deep personal humiliation. (Is it not the final affront that these words themselves should sound too strong—too "personal"?) With each new *Bury the Dead*, with each new political debate, the humiliation grew deeper and more pervasive, and the problem of the American intellectual gradually emerged in the form in which it exists today.

The problem is nothing so simple as Stalinism; as I said before, that issue is settled: Stalinism today is not a point of view but a psychological and sociological phenomenon. Nor is it a problem of liberal ideology as such: the propositions of liberalism can still be examined and accepted or rejected. The intellectual's problem is to define his own position in the whole world of culture that came into being in the 30's—a world in which he must live and of which he is a full partaker. And the question to be asked is not: What is my opinion of all this? That question is easily answered, but those who ask only that have fallen into the trap, for it is precisely the greatest error of our intellectual life to assume that the most effective way of dealing with any phenomenon is to have an opinion about it. The real question is: What is my relation to all this?

This is a hard question for us because one's relation to experience is a matter of feeling, and our usable vocabulary is a vocabulary of opinion. The most important effect of the intellectual life of the 30's and the culture that grew out of it has been to distort and eventually to destroy the emotional and moral content of experience, putting in its place a system of conventionalized "responses." In fact, the chief function of mass culture is to relieve one of the necessity of experiencing one's life directly. Serious art, too, is separated from reality, for it permits one to contemplate experience without being personally involved; but it is not an evasion: by its very detachment, it opens up new possibilities of understanding and pleasure derivable from reality, and it thus becomes an enrichment of experience.

Mass culture, on the other hand, seeks only to make things easier. It can do this either by moving away from reality and thus offering an "escape," or by moving so close to reality as to destroy the detachment of art and make it possible for one to see one's own life as a form of art (this happens in such a novel as Sholem Asch's *East River*, for example). Even political discussion becomes a form of entertainment and a defense against experience: by providing a fixed system of moral and political attitudes, it protects us from the shock of experience and conceals our helplessness. The movies, the theater, the books and magazines and newspapers—the whole system of mass culture as creator and purveyor of ideas, sentiments, attitudes, and styles of behavior—all this is what gives our life its form and its meaning. Mass culture is the screen through which we see reality and the mirror in which we see ourselves. Its ultimate tendency is even to supersede reality. (In this sense, as Clement Greenberg remarks, art is more important in our civilization than it has ever been before.)

Now it is precisely this—the experience of an alienation from reality—which is the characteristic experience of our age. The modern intellectual, and especially the creative writer, thus faces the necessity of describing and clarifying an experience which has itself deprived him of the vocabulary he requires to deal with it. The writer who attempts a true re-creation of life is forced to invent the meanings of experience all over again, creating out of his own mind and sensibility not only the literary object but also its significance and its justification—in a sense, he must invent his own audience.

This is the source of the problem of communication in modern literature—which is a problem not only of communicating the quality of experience to a reader, but also, and more deeply, of making it possible for the writer himself to have a meaningful experience in the first place. There is no paradox in this, for it is only through an effective vocabulary—that is, through "valid" emotional, moral, and intellectual responses expressible in language—that we can truly know what we do and what happens to us. And the writer is *par excellence* the man of conscious experience; the problem of experience and the problem of a language for experience are for him one problem.

In modern poetry, the problem has been solved most frequently by a persistent use of irony. By employing the vocabulary of mass culture in a more serious context, the poet expresses both his rejection of mass culture and the difficulty he faces in trying to transcend it, while at the same time this irony, by a kind of negative connotation, can also convey some of the quality of fresh and meaningful experience—or, more accurately, it can indicate what fresh and meaningful experience might be like if there existed a context and a vocabulary for it.

This is a possible solution as far as it goes, but its limitations are obvious: a whole literature cannot be built on irony. In addition, this ironic use of language is necessarily so indefinite that it easily slips over from the "negative" to the "affirmative," and the moment that happens it becomes a part of the mass culture from which it has tried to escape. The use of irony for purposes of "affirmation" is usually a device for stating banalities indirectly and tentatively and thus concealing their lack of real content; it is a technique of falsification. The clearest example of this is the style of "American" inarticulateness and diffidence affected by writers like Archibald MacLeish and Norman Corwin.

For the serious prose writer, at any rate, even this partial solution is not available: he must evolve some method of understanding and communicating experience directly—as it really is, as it really feels. And he finds at every turn that he is unable to realize and respond to his experience in any way that seems valid and fruitful to him. He lives within the mass culture, he meets experience through the mass culture, the words and ideas that come to him most easily, most "naturally," are the words and ideas of mass culture. The problem is inescapable; there is no corner of literature or experience where he does not face it. And it must be solved all over again every day.

To be sure, the problem is not confined to the United States. But it exists here in its most developed form; the Europeans are only beginning to face it, and for the Russians it would hardly be accurate to call it a problem at all: for them, the discussion is ended.

It is also true that the problem did not suddenly spring into being in the 30's; the poetry of T. S. Eliot is sufficient evidence to the contrary. But for American intellectuals of our time, as I have tried to show, the center of the problem is in the political-intellectual movement of the 30's. The problem developed over many years and through many historical factors, but it *happened* in the 30's. Thus it becomes our central intellectual task to evolve some method of assimilating the experience of those years, if only in order to perfect our understanding of our cultural failure.

Of the few serious efforts that have been made to deal with that experience, the most nearly successful is Edmund Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate Country*, an almost heroic attempt to create a valid emotional and moral response to modern life. Wilson states the problem of feeling directly: it is the point of his book that the modern world is suffering from a paralysis of feeling, and he communicates the quality of that paralysis with such success as to have called forth the most amusing of all the charges made against the book—that it is not “even” good pornography. But, having established a world that has lost the capacity to feel, he is still faced with the necessity of creating a valid response to that world. He solves this problem by obscuring the boundaries between fantasy and reality—strong and direct emotion is still “admissible” in dreams—but the nature of this solution is itself a kind of failure, emphasizing again the difficulty (perhaps the impossibility) of a straightforward solution. And in the end words fail him—quite literally, almost: he writes a kind of “key” to the book in French, as if the rhythms of a foreign language might conceal even from him that his resources have proved not quite sufficient. (Incidentally, the almost universal rejection of Wilson's book, even among those who should have been most strongly aware of its significance, is one more sign of our intellectual impotence.)

Lionel Trilling's novel, *The Middle of the Journey*, is in some ways a more explicit attempt to deal with the problem of Stalinism: the hero, John Laskell, an intellectual fellow-traveller of the Communists, undergoes an experience that forces him to re-examine the ideological and cultural foundations of his life; in the end, after a series of personal encounters has made the choices clear to him, he rejects the Communist movement and the whole intellectual atmosphere that surrounds it, and seeks a new philosophy more adequate to the needs of experience.

Mr. Trilling's novel is less successful as literature than Wilson's, but—in part for that very reason—it constitutes a particularly clear example of how it is possible for a serious writer to find himself ultimately helpless in the face of mass culture.

Mr. Trilling has shown a profound awareness of the problem of the American intellectual; he has seen also that the center of that problem lies in the Communist-liberal tradition of the 30's. Moreover, his own position, if not unassailable, is at least more solid than most: he partakes of all the serious intellectual currents of our time, but he has not so alienated himself from the general life of American society as to be unable to understand it and sympathize with it. (This is of course an “adjustment,” and it produces certain ambiguities of feeling and attitude. But nobody really escapes; in the long run, it is probably better that the ambiguities be near the surface.) Mr. Trilling has intelligence and honesty; more than honesty, he has a clear sense of all the possibilities of dishonesty—this is his greatest protection. Finally, he is a talented writer: there are parts of this novel that are written with beauty, imagination, and intensity.

As a number of critics have pointed out, Mr. Trilling is greatly indebted to E. M. Forster. His method, like Forster's, is to confront his characters with situations for which their moral preconceptions have left them unprepared; the tensions and readjustments that result from these confrontations make up the novel. And, again like Forster, Mr. Trilling is not embarrassed by the necessary artificiality of fiction: he accepts the novel form as a structure of contrivances consciously manipulated to a conscious end. He is thus willing to devote much of his book to the description of serious conversation and thinking, without suffering from the compulsion to be indirect. And he is willing to make use of melodramatic incidents as a convenient means of making his points and establishing the situations in which he is interested; he does not even attempt to disguise the close mechanical resemblance between the climactic incident of his novel and the climactic incident of Forster's *Howards End*. This common-sense approach gives the book a quality of bareness that amounts almost to poverty—a bareness not characteristic of Forster himself, who has a complex sense of character and a richness of wit that Mr. Trilling lacks. In a lesser novelist than Forster, the bareness is a virtue: it is honest poverty, so to speak, as if Mr. Trilling had resolved to make no appeal except to the intelligence, or to the emotions only in the degree that they remain subject to intelligence. But it is a virtue on the private level—or, at any rate, on the level of opinion. It permits Mr. Trilling to deal with experience without compromising himself intellectually; it endears him to the reader for the qualities of his mind—one feels that we should really be better off if more people were like him. But he is removed from experience *as* experience; the problem of feeling—and thus the problem of art—is not faced.

This evasion becomes particularly clear when one considers how much there was in the experience of Stalinism which Mr. Trilling has simply omitted. For a writer with a strong intellectual awareness of psychological complexities, he shows surprisingly little interest in the deeper layers of motivation: in his emphasis on the idea of responsibility, he makes it appear as if the surrender to Stalinism or its rejection was mainly a matter of philosophical decision. Even in his treatment of the character Gifford Maxim, whose guilt-ridden conversion from Stalinism to religion is plainly the result of deep psychological drives, Mr. Trilling prefers to leave the actual, experiential roots of his behavior unspecified: we never know whether Maxim's guilt is real or delusionary or metaphysical. Such vagueness is of course quite deliberate; it is part of Mr. Trilling's conception of Maxim's character that his motivations should remain unclear, and it is one of the underlying implications of the book's thesis that motivations do not really "count." But the point is that such a thesis and such an approach to character rest ultimately on the assumption that the most fruitful way of dealing with experience is to pass judgment on it—and this is not the assumption of a novelist.

For the same reason, Mr. Trilling does not deal adequately with the fact that Stalinism as he describes it was specifically an experience of the middle class: he is, indeed, constantly aware of the class origins of his characters, and of how their ways of living and thinking are determined by their class, but class, too, does not finally "count," and he does not show how Stalinism offered a way out of the particular psychological difficulties of the middle class as such. More than this, he ignores the fact that the middle class which experienced Stalinism was in large part a Jewish middle class, driven by the special insecurities of Jews in addition to the insecurities of the middle class in general. (This suppression is made all the more obvious by the inclusion of one minor Jewish character in a stock role.) Thus the characters exist in a kind of academic void of moral abstractions, without a history—but Stalinism was in the fullest sense a historical experience, a particular response to particular historical pressures; the people who involved themselves in it were not simply carrying on personal relations within a settled moral order. Here, again, Mr. Trilling is doubtless conscious of what he is doing: he seeks to universalize the Stalinist experience in order to make clear its "essential" significance. But the novel as an art form rests on particularity: the particular becomes universal without losing its particularity—that is the wonder. Mr. Trilling might have come closer to the "essence" of the experience he describes if he had been more willing to see it as the experience of particular human beings in a specific situation; perhaps this means: if he had been more willing to face his own relation to it.

When he does try to create an adequate emotional and moral correlative for his material, it is only to fail in another direction. In Forster's novels, melodrama is always a contrivance of plot or a device to emphasize the deeper content. But Mr. Trilling sometimes invests the deeper content itself with a melodramatic tone. This is especially noticeable in the opening pages, which are like the beginning of a sophisticated spy story, and in the presentation of the character Duck Caldwell, the irresponsible and vicious representative of the lower classes, who is burdened with a weight of moral significance that almost deprives him of all reality (though he is particularly well drawn on the realistic level). Indeed, the excitement that surrounds Duck Caldwell seems a little naive, as if Mr. Trilling were announcing the discovery of evil; if it was a sentimental error to credit the working class with a virtue and an innocence that it never possessed, it is only another kind of sentimentality to make too much of correcting the error.

Yet this tendency to place upon the material a greater weight of meaning than it can bear is almost an unavoidable failing, one more sign of how the problem of creative writing is becoming too difficult for the ordinary talent. When the writer must invent all the meanings of experience, it is not surprising that he should sometimes fail to keep them in proportion.

Most of all, Mr. Trilling lacks Forster's detachment—that almost Olympian disinterestedness (not neutrality) which enables Forster to encompass all the complexities and impurities of experience without strain or shock. Forster is almost never taken in—as little by Margaret Schlegel as by Leonard Bast, not even by Mrs. Wilcox, and least of all by himself. But Mr. Trilling is taken in very often indeed. I have already mentioned Duck Caldwell and Gifford Maxim, whom Mr. Trilling takes at face value whenever, by doing so, he can make them more formidable. There is also Emily Caldwell, who is intended to constitute a kind of positive pole in the book, embodying the "real" world from which the mass culture of Stalinist liberalism has estranged us, but who turns out to be only another creation of that very culture. The brief sexual episode between Emily Caldwell and John Laskell is almost a paradigm of the liberal middle-class dream of sex; it is honest, straightforward, "adult"; it involves affection but no unmanageable passion; it creates no "complications"—which is to say, no responsibilities; it takes place in daylight, in the open air, and—immediately after Emily has bathed.

Finally, there is John Laskell himself, the puzzled man of conscience and good will who comes to see the error of Stalinist liberalism and formulates the “conclusions” of the book. (It is worth noting that not even in the simplest of Forster’s novels is it safe to take any character as the author’s mouthpiece, but Mr. Trilling’s identification with Laskell is unmistakable.) Precisely in this formulation one sees how completely Mr. Trilling has failed to detach himself from the cultural atmosphere he seeks to transcend, for he reduces the whole problem of modern experience to a question of right and wrong opinion. There are two opposing orthodoxies: the orthodoxy of Stalinist liberalism, which holds that man is the creature of his environment and thus free of moral responsibility, and the orthodoxy of religion, which holds that man is the child of God and bears an infinite responsibility—that is, an infinite guilt. Laskell rejects both: “An absolute freedom from responsibility—that much of a child none of us can be. An absolute responsibility—that much of a divine or metaphysical essence none of us is.” Laskell stands for the free intelligence, for the “idea in modulation.” That is what was lost and must be found again. Not to acquiesce is “the only thing that matters.”

Mr. Trilling is here finally reduced to the level of his subject; like the Stalinists themselves, he can respond to the complexity of experience only with a revision of doctrine. His doctrine may be sound (though the *via media*, too, can be a form of cant), but the point is that it is irrelevant: the novelist’s function is not to argue with his characters—or at least not to try too hard to win the argument.

One might think, perhaps, that the virtue of detachment belongs to the intelligence, and thus has nothing to do with the problem of feeling. But the detachment of a creative writer rests precisely on his ability to create what seems (at least to him) an adequate emotional and moral response to experience, a response that is “objectively” valid in the sense that it seems to inhere in the experience itself and to come into being automatically, so to speak, with the re-creation of the experience. Mr. Trilling, lacking an aesthetically effective relationship to experience, is forced to translate experience into ideas, embodying these ideas in his characters and giving his plot the form of an intellectual discussion reinforced by events. He thus becomes personally involved with his characters in a way that the true novelist never is, for some of the ideas are his own and some are ideas he disagrees with, and he must therefore convince his reader that some characters are “right” and others “wrong” (though “rightness” and “wrongness” are qualities not of human beings but only of ideas); whereas the true novelist tries only to make his characters and their behavior “convincing,” which is something entirely different. There are a great many intellectual discussions in Forster’s novels, and very often both Forster and his reader know who is “right”; but to have right or wrong ideas is part of experience—it is not an issue.

I have dwelt so much upon Forster because it is apparent that Mr. Trilling has tried to model himself most of all on Forster (though to some degree on James) and on the moral and intellectual quality that Forster embodies, and because the great gap that remains between the two writers is more than a disparity of talent. The point is not that Mr. Trilling is not a great novelist; a healthy culture has room for the minor talent. What is significant is that Mr. Trilling has not yet solved the problem of being a novelist at all. And this failure is not his alone: in his failure, he comes in a way to represent us all—as perhaps he would not represent us if he had succeeded. The problem remains: how shall we regain the use of our experience in the world of mass culture?

¹ “Stalinism” is of course not a neutral term, but in many contexts the word “Communism” is too broad. We need a term to describe the Communist movement after its bureaucratic degeneration and its conversion, among other things, into a vehicle of mass culture. “Stalinism” is the only word that fills this need. The word will naturally appear entirely inadmissible to those who are not aware of the phenomenon to which it is applied.

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