

LIONEL
TRILLING

THE
LAST
DECADE

Essays and Reviews, 1965-75

Edited by Diana Trilling

THE WORKS OF LIONEL TRILLING

UNIFORM EDITION



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Editor's Note

All the pieces in this volume date from the last ten years of Lionel Trilling's life and all but two were published in that period. "Art, Will, and Necessity" has not previously been printed. In various versions it was delivered as a lecture in both England and the United States. The version used in this volume is the last that I can find. "Why We Read Jane Austen" was not yet completed at Lionel Trilling's death and was published posthumously in the form in which it was left.

It is to be kept in mind that the Notes for an Autobiographical Lecture are *only* notes. At the time this lecture was given, Lionel Trilling had very likely begun to think about an intellectual memoir and I include these jottings (though I put them in an Appendix) for the light they cast on what might have been a direction of that projected work.

I wish to express my appreciation to the National Endowment for the Humanities for its support in preparing an archive of my husband's papers. I am also deeply and continually grateful to Barbara Crehan for her devoted research assistance.

New York, 1978

D.T.

A Novel of the Thirties

[Afterword to the republication of *The Unpossessed*
by Tess Slesinger, Avon, 1966]

I

IN THE 1950's it was established beyond question that the 1930's had not simply passed into history but had become history. The decade had never been thought of as a mere undifferentiated segment of the past, but now it was to be canonized as a veritable epoch or period, an entity with a beginning, middle, and end, and a style appropriate to the discernible logic of its events. Like any authentic period, this one had its characteristic pathos and the power of arousing nostalgia. Intellectuals who had grown up in the intervening time discovered in themselves a lively affinity with the famous years which, they suggested, would have sustained their best impulses, as the year in which they wrote manifestly did not. They thought of the admired age as belonging more truly to them than to the people who had lived in it—their received opinion held that such figures of the decade as were still on the scene had not been equal to, or worthy of, the moral opportunities that had been offered by their high-hearted magnanimous moment.

A survivor of the actualities of the Thirties was bound to meet the celebrations of those hypostatized years with some wryness. At scarcely any point was his own recollection of the decade in accord with the moralizing nostalgia of the younger men. He took what comfort he could from the thought that there can be no history

without myth, that fictions about the past are always being contrived by generous youth. And he was relieved to find a degree of corroboration of his own sense of things in the view of at least one writer of a generation later than his. In 1955 Murray Kempton published *Part of Our Time*, in which he looked at the events and personalities of the period in some detail and with the intention of objective judgment. One might deplore the rather high, ripe elegiacism of his prose, an Ossianic tone perhaps generated by the subtitle of the book, "Some Ruins and Monuments of the Thirties." But what he had to say about those years went far toward explaining why they should have left a sour taste in the mouths of many who had experienced them. Mr. Kempton did not describe them in an adversary spirit; he spoke more in wondering sorrow than in dismay and he knew that for American intellectuals of this century, the Thirties were the indispensable decade. But he also knew something of the dryness and deadness that lay at the heart of their drama and that they had brought to the fore a peculiarly American desiccation of temperament. He knew the dull unreverberant minds and the systematically stupid minds that had been especially valued. He knew the minds that had corrupted themselves on the highest motives—he had no illusions about the *innocence* of the time, and he could give a pretty good account of its accepted lies.

For me the authority of Mr. Kempton's book was the greater because it put into evidence Tess Slesinger's novel, *The Unpossessed*, which it spoke of as "almost forgotten." The characterization took me aback, for the book had never been forgotten by me, and to see it referred to in this way was a forcible reminder of how rapidly the years go by and with what ease they carry things to oblivion. The fact was as Mr. Kempton stated it—after a sizable flurry of success on its appearance in 1934, *The Unpossessed* did pass from memory and Mr. Kempton's reference to it was the only one I could recollect having seen since a few years after its publication. Mr. Kempton spoke of it as a "document" and used it as such, and

indeed it does have, as an account of a particular time and place, a certain evidential value. But it deserves to be remembered for more reasons than that, for the spiritedness of its address, for what in it is pertinent not only to its own period but to ours.

The book would not have been forgotten if the author had continued her career as a novelist. Had there been a considerable body of work, *The Unpossessed* might well have been kept in memory as its auspicious beginning. But no novel followed the first; the only other book by Tess Slesinger is the collection of her short stories, *Time: The Present*. She published nothing after this and she died ten years later.

She was, I have no doubt, born to be a novelist. Her talent, so far as she had time to develop it, invites comparison with Mary McCarthy's. She had a similar vivacity and wit, although rather more delicate, and similar powers of social and moral observation, which, like Miss McCarthy's, were at the service of the impulse to see through what was observed. In her satiric enterprise Tess Slesinger was gentler than Miss McCarthy; her animus, although it was strong, was checked by compunction. This was partly because the literary practice of the time still imposed certain restraints, but chiefly for reasons of personal disposition.

Still, her animus *was* strong, and the effect upon it of what I have called her compunction perhaps does something to explain why her career as a novelist came to an end. Those who knew Tess Slesinger when she wrote *The Unpossessed* were aware that the book was not only a literary enterprise but also a personal act. It passed judgment upon certain people; in effect it announced the author's separation from them and from the kind of life they made. The act had in it, I have always thought, more aggression than the compunctious young person could support. I have no doubt that it was a perfectly "healthy" aggression, not any greater than was needed to meet the situation. If there was anger in it, there was no hatred and no malice. But probably it disconcerted Tess to break ties, to judge

others to be wrong and to say so publicly, the more because, as I believe, she had not lost her affection for those whom she was judging adversely and from whom she was separating herself.

The burden of uneasy—of “guilty”—feeling must have been increased by the success the book achieved. It was not success of an overwhelming kind, but it was real. And in those days success was not, as now it is, thought to be naturally compatible with purity of intention, even the sign and reward of a special virtue. In the ethos of the time, the idea of “integrity” had great coercive power and it was commonly supposed that success indicated an integrity compromised or even wholly lost; the gratification it brought was almost certain to be shot through with shame. This did not, of course, make success any the less interesting and attractive, and those who constituted the circle of Tess’s friends wanted it for themselves, chiefly in the form of fame through literary achievement. But it was Tess who first had it. This must surely have made a difficult situation for her. It would have been difficult for a man; it was even harder for a woman. And it wasn’t only as a woman that Tess had done what men wanted to do and hadn’t done. She had done it as a girl. She quite liked being a girl and handled the *persona* gracefully, with only an infrequent self-consciousness or affectation; her natural charm was of a daughterly or young-sisterly kind, and in some considerable part consisted of her expectation of being loved, indulged, forgiven, of having permission to be spirited and even naughty. And now by her act, by what the book said and by the success it made, she had, she might well have felt, abolished the person she had known herself to be and liked being. One can understand that she might find the new prospect of a novel rather terrifying.

It was also true that she had wanted to stop being a girl, and daughterly and young-sisterly. She wanted to be quite grown, to the point of having children. It was not a wish that at the time could be thought of as a personal instance of a desire which was in the course of nature; it implied cultural considerations of a quite

arduous kind. Young people will perhaps not understand this and I find it harder and harder to do so. Yet it is the fact that the intellectuals of the Twenties and Thirties were likely to assume that there was an irreconcilable contradiction between babies and the good life. The fear of pregnancy was omnipresent and it was not uncommon for young married couples to have a first pregnancy aborted not because they were so very poor but because they were not yet “ready” to have the child. One might have a wide circle of married friends of some maturity without knowing any who were parents. Men were generally presumed not to want children, intellectual men thought of them as “biological traps,” being quite certain that they must lead to compromise with, or capitulation to, the forces of convention. There was also the belief that it was wrong to bring children into so bad a world. And quite apart from all practical and moral concerns, the imagination of parenthood was not easily available, or it worked only to propose an absurdity, an image that was at essential odds with that of the free and intelligent person: what parent known to anyone had ever been free and intelligent? That Tess, like Margaret Flinders, one of the two heroines of *The Unpossessed*, should want to be a parent and should avow her wish was a cultural choice of no small import, a mutation in faith, with all the stress that attends such occasions and makes them unpropitious for the writer.

She had her wish. In Hollywood she made a happy second marriage with Frank Davis, a producer, and she bore a son and a daughter. She died of cancer when she was thirty-nine.

II

The first time I saw Tess Slesinger was at her wedding to her first husband, Herbert Solow, on a June evening of 1928. Solow and I had been at Columbia College together, although we were not in the same class and had not known each other until after we had both graduated. He was a man of quite remarkable intelligence,

very witty in a saturnine way, deeply skeptical, tortured by bouts of extreme depression. His was the first political mind I ever encountered. Knowledge about power and the means by which it is won was the breath of life to him, the more because his passionate curiosity served high, strict political principle. He was meant to be a great political journalist. I do not know the reasons for his never having made a continued effort toward the career he might have had—our friendship was not intimate, although of long duration—but I suppose them to be connected with his periods of depression. The years of his youth were devoted to radical politics, in which his most notable achievement was the organization of the Trotsky Commission in 1937. He was a member of the staff of *Fortune*, where his work as writer and editor was held in especially high regard. He died in 1964.

The wedding took place in the meeting-hall of the Ethical Culture Society, whose well-known school in the same building on Central Park West Tess had attended. Neither Solow nor I would have been indifferent to the implications of the scene. The Society was not wholly Jewish in its membership, but largely so, and it was often thought of as a means by which Jews of a certain class carried forward their acculturation, although that word, if then invented, was not yet current. The tone of the Society was judged to be that of an unassailable gentility; it was respectable, well-mannered, undistressed. The Jews who belonged to it were chiefly German, more easily detached from their Reform faith than were the East European (generally called Russian) Jews from their orthodoxy. The extent of the acculturation of the German Jews was a matter for pride with them, and they were likely to be envied and resented by East European Jews for what would have been called their refinement. To all that its Jewish members were presumed to want from Ethical Culture, Solow and certain of his friends were antagonistic. Our adverse feeling had been raised to the level of principle by our connection with the *Menorah Journal*.

It can scarcely be a digression from Tess Slesinger if I take notice

of this remarkable magazine, for Tess lived in its ambience during an important part of her life, and her debt to its managing editor, Elliot Cohen, was considerable, and one that she was happy to acknowledge.

I should explain that the *Menorah Journal* that I knew is not commemorated in the large anthology edited by Leo Schwarz in 1964 and intended as a memorial to Henry Hurwitz, the founder and chief editor of the magazine. Between Hurwitz and Cohen there were extreme differences of temperament and opinion, and Dr. Schwarz's piety has perpetuated the ancient quarrel by excluding from the anthology any contribution that might seem to have been inspired or influenced by Cohen. No one reading the sedate, temperate, measured, rather elderly volume could possibly know that between 1925 and 1929 the magazine had published the stories, essays, and reviews of a group of lively talented young people who thought of it as the natural medium for their work and gave it a tone of irreverent vivacity that its chief editor had not bargained for and did not want.

The *Menorah Journal* would not have come into being, or continued there, had it not been for Hurwitz, who stubbornly insisted that it be maintained by the Jewish community. But Hurwitz was a man with whom it was impossible to converse, at least if you were young and clever. He was shy and stiff, without wit and no more than a formal humor, and he easily became defensive, although I am sure he meant to be genial and even kind. Cohen was his opposite in every way. He was a Socratic personality, drawing young men to him to be teased and taught. He conversed endlessly, his talk being a sort of enormously enlightening gossip—about persons, books, baseball players and football plays, manners, morals, comedians (on these he was especially good), clergymen (with emphasis on rabbis, one of whom he once described as “the Jewish Stephen Wise”), colleges, the social sciences, philanthropy and social work, literary scholarship, restaurants, tailors, psychiatry. He had gained much from having been born and reared in Mobile,

Alabama; he was proud of his knowledge of an American life that wasn't easily available to New York Jewish intellectuals, and he cherished his feeling (it was not the less genuine because he was conscious of it) for the unregenerate commonplaces of ordinary existence. Indeed, the basis of his intellectual life sometimes seemed to be a feeling for "the people"; he had a reasoned tenderness for the culture of the people such as we find nowadays in the writings of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams. At that time, among his younger friends, it seemed almost an eccentricity.

Cohen was not very much older than the youngest of us, but with his great beautiful head he had the aspect of an essential seniority which he was entirely willing to support, for he never played the game of being young. He entranced and infuriated us. He had an infrequent smile that was dazzling in its charm; his surliness, if things did not go as he wished, was impenetrable. No one ever had such pleasing manners, or such bad ones. And no one—certainly none of our teachers—ever paid so much attention to what we thought and how we wrote. He has often been called a great editor and so he was. He gave us things to do and when we had done them, he gave them back to us to do over, and better, having first carefully showed us what was wrong. Eventually one had to set up a protection against Cohen's involvement in one's work. Nothing concerned him so much as the written word, and he wanted above all things to be a writer, but he wrote only with the greatest difficulty, and—except in his letters and in the little ironic pieces he wrote for a time under the *nom de guerre* of "An Elder of Zion"—never in a way that gave a true indication of his quality; as a consequence, one stood in danger of becoming the instrument of his intellectual intentions. But at its beginning his interest in one's writing did only good.

I had come to know Cohen through his having accepted a short story of mine in my senior year at college; at some time in the following year I had brought him together with Solow. The acquaintance flourished; not long after it began, Solow became Cohen's

assistant editor and between the two men there developed a close relationship of often painful ambivalence that lasted until Cohen's death in 1958. After her marriage to Solow, Tess Slesinger came into the circle of Cohen's tutelage; no doubt she learned the more from him because he held her in great affection, as she did him. Eventually, like others, she felt the need to work without particular reference to his approval, but, as I have said, she was direct and constant in her gratitude for the help he had given.

What bound together the group around the *Menorah Journal*, what made those of us who came to Solow's wedding take a high line about the Ethical Culture Society, was the idea of Jewishness. This had nothing to do with religion; we were not religious.¹ It had nothing to do with Zionism; we were inclined to be skeptical about Zionism and even opposed to it, and during the violence that flared up in 1929 some of us were on principle pro-Arab. Chiefly our concern with Jewishness was about what is now called authenticity.

The word must not be given too much weight, and some might judge that it can have no weight at all, considering what we were not concerned with. If we excluded religion from our purview, if we excluded Zionism, with all that it implied of the social actualities of Europe as well as of an ethnic aspiration that must inevitably be moving, what could a conception of Jewish authenticity possibly refer to? At this distance in time the answer must seem fairly dull—we had in mind something that probably still goes under the name of a "sense of identity," by which is meant, when it is used of Jews, that the individual Jewish person recognizes naturally and

¹ With the exception of Henry Rosenthal, my closest friend at college, who was studying for the rabbinate. Rosenthal gave up his religious profession in the Thirties and took a degree in philosophy, which he now teaches. Other members of the group were Clifton Fadiman and Louis Berg; Felix Morrow came into it at a later date; Meyer Levin, when he was in the city, consorted with it, and so did Albert Harper. Anita Brenner, a young Texan, a precocious scholar of Mexican archaeology, should also be mentioned. Lewis Mumford, a non-Jewish contributor to the *Journal*, was a presence in the offing and I recall encounters with him; but he was an established figure at an early age, and although only ten years older than the youngest of us, he seemed very grand and we were not easy with him; in those days seniority was more of a bar to communication than it has since become.

easily that he *is* a Jew and "accepts himself" as such, finding pleasure and taking pride in the identification, discovering in it one or another degree of significance. From which there might follow an impulse to kinship with others who make the same recognition, and perhaps the forming of associations on the basis of this kinship.

The way in which Cohen and his clever young friends thought about the matter was not essentially at odds with the view of the man they judged to be all too literal and limited—Henry Hurwitz had started the Menorah Society at Harvard to deal with the sense of exclusion felt by Jewish students, the method being to make them aware of the interest and dignity of the Jewish past, to assure them of, as it were, the normality of the Jewish present, toward which they would, it was hoped, have the attitude of *noblesse oblige*. Our intention was much the same, perhaps even to the *noblesse oblige*, although the actual use of the phrase would have appalled us; only our means were different. When it came to the Jewish present, we undertook to normalize it by suggesting that it was not only as respectable as the present of any other group but also as foolish, vulgar, complicated, impossible, and promising. We named names, we pointed to particular modes of conduct. To write our endless reviews of Jewish books, directing our satire at the sodden piety so many of them displayed, to tease Jewish life, as Cohen did in his "Notes for a Modern History of the Jews" and his "Marginal Annotations," to write vivacious stories of modern sensibility in which the protagonists were Jewish, as Tess Slesinger did, was to help create a consciousness that could respond to the complexities of the Jewish situation with an energetic unabashed intelligence.

The situation of the American Jew has changed so much in the intervening years that it may be hard for some to understand the need for such efforts. Nowadays one of the most salient facts about American culture is the prominent place in it that is occupied by Jews. This state of affairs has become a staple subject of both journalism and academic study—for some years now the *Times*

Literary Supplement has found it impossible to survey the American literary scene without goggling rather solemnly over the number of Jews that make it what it is; foreign students have withdrawn their attention from the New Criticism to turn it upon The Jew in American Culture. Jewish protagonists are a matter of course in the contemporary novel, Jewish backgrounds taken for granted. Jewish idioms and turns of speech have established themselves in the language.² And, so far as I can make out, there are virtually no barriers to Jews in the universities. But in the time of which I write, things were not so. Jewish writers were not yet numerous and such novelists as there were did not yet find it natural and easy to take their subjects from their own lives. In the universities the situation was very tight indeed. Cohen, after a brilliant undergraduate career at Yale, had given up the graduate study of English because he believed that as a Jew he had no hope of a university appointment. When I decided to go into academic life, my friends thought me naive to the point of absurdity, nor were they wholly wrong—my appointment to an instructorship in Columbia College was pretty openly regarded as an experiment, and for some time my career in the College was conditioned by my being Jewish.

As compared to some anti-Semitic situations that have prevailed, this was certainly not an extreme one, but it had a sufficiently bad effect upon the emotional lives of many who experienced it. Jews who wanted to move freely in the world were easily led to think of their Jewishness as nothing but a burden. One doesn't often encounter nowadays the ugly embarrassment, once quite common, with which Jews responded to an implicit accusation directed against them which they accepted as in some way justified. The young people around the *Menorah Journal* were not much concerned with the anti-Semitism itself. Their interest was in its emotional or characterological effects, which they undertook at least to neutralize.

² And as elements of American speech are having an effect on English English—"Should, Should. Shouldn't, Shouldn't," is the way a *TLS* reviewer recently expressed his indifference to prescriptive statements.

To wish to create an enclave of culture that would have the effect of advancing Jews—chiefly, of course, Jews of the middle class—toward an “acceptance” of themselves, can scarcely seem a momentous purpose, and, indeed, now that the old state of affairs has gone by, it may be hard to see why it should have engaged the energies of young people to whom cleverness or spiritedness is attributed. And indeed the therapeutic intention I have described, although it was important in our sense of our enterprise, was not at all what made for its excitement. This came from the fact that we had found a way of supposing that society was actual and that we were in some relation to it. If the anti-Semitism that we observed did not arouse our indignation, this was in part because we took it to be a kind of advantage: against this social antagonism we could define ourselves *and* our society, we could discover who we were and who we wished to be. It helped to give life the look of reality.

For a young man in the Twenties, the intellectual or cultural situation was an enervating one. The only issue presented to him was that of intelligence as against stupidity, the fine and developed spirit confronting the dull life of materialist America. With that theme, for what it was worth, Mencken had done all that could be done. I read *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The Freeman* and hoped that some day I would be worthy to respond to their solemn liberalism with something more than dim general assent. I was addicted to Wells and Shaw but it seemed to me that they spun delightful but fanciful tales about young Philosopher Kings who insisted that their divine right be recognized. I recall my college days as an effort to discover some social entity to which I could give the credence of my sense, as it were, and with which I could be in some relation. But this probably makes me out to be more conscious than I really was—put it, rather, that I was bored and vacuous because I had no ground upon which to rear an imagination of society.

The discovery, through the *Menorah Journal*, of the Jewish situation had the effect of making society at last available to my imagination. It made America available to my imagination, as it

could not possibly be if I tried to understand it with the categories offered by Mencken or Herbert Croly, or, for that matter, Henry Adams. Suddenly it began to be possible—better than that, indeed: it began to be necessary—to think with categories that were charged with energy and that had the effect of assuring the actuality of the object thought about. One couldn't, for example, think for very long about Jews without perceiving that one was using the category of social class. It was necessary not merely in order to think about Jews in their relation to the general society but in order to think about Jews as Jews, the class differences among them being so considerable and having so complex a relationship to the general concept of Jewishness that had at first claimed one's recognition and interest.

At least among some of us, feelings about class developed a quite considerable intensity. They became the basis for personal judgments, often quite bitter, for some years before they were politicalized. But the politicalization was not long in coming. The stock-market crash of 1929 and the consequent depression brought to an end the *Menorah Journal* as we knew it. Funds were in very short supply, the magazine ceased monthly publication and became an uncertain quarterly. In 1932, Cohen withdrew from the managing editorship and Hurwitz began his long sad struggle to keep the magazine alive, which, in some sort, he did until 1947. The young contributors turned to the Marxist radicalism of the day.

III

In any view of the American cultural situation, the importance of the radical movement of the Thirties cannot be overestimated. It may be said to have created the American intellectual class as we now know it in its great size and influence. It fixed the character of this class as being, through all mutations of opinion, predominantly of the Left. And quite apart from opinion, the political tendency of the Thirties defined the style of the class—from that

radicalism came the moral urgency, the sense of crisis, and the concern with personal salvation that mark the existence of American intellectuals.

The Unpossessed was the first novel to deal with this new class in an effort of realism. Not until two years later did John Dos Passos bring his *U.S.A.* trilogy to its conclusion with *The Big Money*, which, among other records of personal disaster, sets forth the careers of intellectuals who chose the life of liberty and enlightenment and were destroyed by the cold actualities of this ideal existence. What Dos Passos had to say in 1936 about the death of the heart and mind that might overtake the radical intellectual had been exceeded in stringency by Flaubert in 1869, but *L'Education Sentimentale* was not widely known at the time and *The Big Money* was read with shock and bewilderment. The idea that the life of radicalism is not of its nature exempt from moral dangers is still difficult to accommodate—the articles on Dos Passos and *The Big Money* in the latest edition of *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* do not take note of its place in Dos Passos's view of American life and are content to speak of “the vitiation and degradation of character in a decaying civilization based on commercialism and exploitation.” *The Unpossessed* cannot claim the force of *The Big Money* and it lacks the detailed verisimilitude which was Dos Passos's *forte*, but it too brought word of danger in the very place where salvation was believed to be certain, and its unhappy news came early.

Not the least interesting element of *The Unpossessed* is its title, which, we may suppose, makes reference to Dostoevski's great novel about radicalism, *The Possessed*. A recent English version corrects Constance Garnett's translation of the name of the book to *The Devils*, a literal rendering which does indeed convey, better than Mrs. Garnett's, the direct force of Dostoevski's adverse judgment of his radical characters. In the word “possessed” there is now a laudatory connotation which is stronger than the pejorative one. To be possessed by a devil is a condition that is indeed bad and even re-

pulsive, but one may also be possessed by a *daimon* or a god, which makes quite a different state of affairs. We intend admiration when we say of a person that he fought or rode or worked “like one possessed,” implying an accession of vital energy which carries him beyond his usual powers. Similarly, the man who is said to be possessed by an idea or a purpose, unless it is manifestly evil, is usually regarded with admiration. Like the word “passion,” the word “possessed” has subordinated its bad to its good meaning. And it is the good meaning that Tess Slesinger had chiefly in mind—those persons in her novel who are *not* possessed are unfortunate or blameworthy.

The word in the sense she intended, that of not being in the service of some great impersonal vital intention, applies differently to the men and the women of the novel. In the latter case, the old sexual meaning of the word is in point. Neither of the two heroines is possessed by the man she loves. Margaret Flinders, besides being denied the gratifications of motherhood, is frustrated by her husband's refusal to lay full claim to her treasure of frank and open feeling. Elizabeth, adoring her cousin Bruno Leonard, is no less adored by him, but he is unable to take advantage of the commitment she is eager to give him and thus condemns her to a life of sexual promiscuity. The failure of the men to possess the women is consonant with their inability to surrender themselves to the ideals they profess. Miles Flinders is fussy and finicky, his intelligence limited by his conscience, the last man in the world to bear the brunt of the actuality of political power. Bruno Leonard is what is often thought to be the “typical intellectual,” egotistical, self-doubting, skeptical of all purpose whatever; at the big party in aid of the Hunger Marchers and his own ill-conceived magazine, he makes a cynical and vulgar speech in which he expresses his disgust with himself and the whole class of intellectuals.

As a document of its time, *The Unpossessed* must be used with caution. I have said that it has a certain evidential value, but it must be added that its testimony is not of a direct and unambiguous

kind. Mr. Kempton uses it in an insufficiently critical way and he comes to conclusions that are not to be accepted. From the radical-intellectual characters of the novel Mr. Kempton undertakes to make inferences about the actual persons who were their prototypes and to describe the tendency of their time that they exemplified; he says of the group that it "was an elite not of origin so much as of attitude; like [Edmund] Wilson, its members hated the middle class from above. Its motives were disgust and alienation. . . . It represented an aesthetic rather than a social tendency." Some of the errors of this description arise from Mr. Kempton's reading of the novel: most readers would say, I think, that "hated" is too strong and simple a word for the characters' attitude to the middle class; nor could it accurately be used of the attitude of the actual persons to whom the characters may be thought to refer. And Mr. Kempton's word, "aesthetic," needs explication, for none of the characters is especially concerned with art or displays attitudes derived from such a concern. The word can perhaps be made to serve accuracy if it is taken to suggest a preoccupation with the look and feel of society, the look and feel of the moral life. But such a preoccupation would be, precisely, social. I think that what Mr. Kempton meant to say was that the novel portrays a group whose tendency was social or moral rather than *political*.

This the novel does do, its further intention being to suggest that the characters practice a deception upon themselves when they think of themselves as being political, and that this deception is to be viewed with satiric irony. The situation thus proposed is interesting in itself and it might well be thought to throw some light on the way people act or on the way certain people acted at a certain time. But it does not throw light on the actual group of which some members were, as Mr. Kempton infers, the prototypes of the novel's characters. In point of fact, the group was nothing if not political in the particular mode of radical politics at the time. That mode may be understood from Daniel Aaron's study, *Writers on the Left*. A reading of this useful work might lead to the conclusion that

no politics was ever drearier. But it will make clear that the group's participation in it was, if anything, more consciously, and, I think, more intelligently, political than was common.³ If eventually the group came to regard radical politics with despair, no member of it reached this state of feeling by having passed through Miles Flinders' simplemindedness, nor would he have expressed his hopelessness in anything like the ugly self-pity of Bruno Leonard's drunken speech. The radical politics the group despaired of was that of the Communist Party, which was not the rather comical remote abstraction that *The Unpossessed* represents it as being, and any member of the group would have been able to explain his disillusionment by a precise enumeration of the errors and failures of the Party, both at home and abroad. During the considerable time when Stalinism was established as sacrosanct among a large and influential part of the intellectual class, all the members of the group, on reasoned political grounds, opposed this powerful body of opinion, to which, it must be said, the author of *The Unpossessed* found it possible to give her assent during her Hollywood years.

It cannot be imputed to *The Unpossessed* as a fault that it does not accurately present the people and events it is presumed to have had in mind as the basis of its invention. A novel is not in the first instance a document, and its right to make free with the actuality from which most novels take their start cannot be compromised. To actuality the novel owes nothing, although to reality it gives total allegiance: so runs the prescript of criticism. But sometimes actuality and reality are one, or very nearly so, and *The Unpossessed*, good as

³ See especially Chapter 14, note 3. Since my name is mentioned in this extended reference to the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, perhaps it is here that I should correct Mr. Kempton when, if I read him aright, he suggests that I am represented in *The Unpossessed*. This is not the case and was not supposed to be the case by any of the author's friends at the time the book appeared and was much talked about, with, of course, frequent reference to such portrayals of actual people as it was understood to contain. I make the correction partly in the interests of accuracy, partly in order to be able to claim a more nearly complete objectivity in speaking about the book than might be thought possible if I were personally portrayed in it. Perhaps I should add that none of the characters of the novel is a literal, or even nearly literal, representation of the person to whom the character may be referred.

it is, would have been a better book still if the author, by a firmer commitment to actuality, had set a more substantial historical scene, if she had encompassed the political particularities of her time. Politics was not her subject, which is the ironic discrepancy, eventually the antagonism, between life and the desire to make life as good as it might be.

The dialectic is a familiar one and it has attracted literary temperaments as diverse as Molière and Hawthorne. It begins with the discovery that the established values of society are wrong, not only corrupt but corrupting, and with the decision to reject them in favor of other values, which, to all appearance, are far superior, of a different and higher spiritual order. It proceeds in the growing awareness that the preferred new values have their own deficiencies and constitute their own danger. They are by no means proof against human depravity. If they are affirmed by a group, the small dissident social unit is seen to have its own principle of corruption, perhaps different in kind from that of the rejected society but no less active. In the conscious commitment to virtue there is seen to lie a fault which in due time becomes fully apparent—an absoluteness or abstractness which has the effect of denying some free instinctual impulse that life must have. It then seems to be true that the rejected society, for all that its values are wrong, does at least permit “the simple and normal life,” as Thomas Mann called it in speaking of his famous story *Tonio Kröger*, in which he expounds an analogous dialectic, that between art and established society. In the antagonism between “nature” and “spirit”—the terms are Mann’s—the established society, although it may indeed be the enemy of spirit, is the ally of nature. And if it seems to be after all but an ambiguous ally, it may be the more willingly accepted when it is understood that corrupted spirit is rather worse than corrupted nature.

In the radical political culture of the Thirties, the dialectic was to be perceived at work in its fullest ironic force. The doctrine of the politics affirmed freedom; the conduct of the politics was likely to be marked by a dull rigidity. The doctrine was directed toward the

richness and fullness that would eventually be given to human life, but a solicitude for mankind in general and in the future had the effect of diminishing the awareness of actual particular persons within the reach of the hand. One has but to read the politically oriented novels of the time to know the dreary limitation that overtook the imagination of what life is or might ever be.

It is scarcely surprising, since the dialectic is between “spirit” and “nature,” that a woman should have been the first to take note of the state of things. For some decades before the Thirties, the belief prevailed that woman stood in a special and privileged relation to “nature,” or, as it was sometimes called, “life.” Many writers, among them Meredith, Henry James, Shaw, Henry Adams, Wells, Lawrence, and Yeats, had contributed to a rather engaging *mystique* of Woman which developed concomitantly with the feeling that the order of the world as it had been contrived by man was a dismal and possibly a doomed enterprise. The masculine mind, dulled by preoccupation, was to be joined and quickened by the Woman-principle, which drew its bright energies from ancient sources and sustained the hope of new things. Implicit in the *mystique* was a handsome promise made to women—they were to be free, brilliant, and, in their own way, powerful, and, like men, they were to have destinies, yet at the same time they would be delightful, and they would be loved because they were women. The *mystique* faded and the promise lapsed. There are no traces of them in our contemporary literature, and when in older books we encounter the female characters born of that late Victorian and Edwardian dream of Woman, all aglow and shining from the peculiarly close connection with nature, or life, that their authors assigned to them, they appear as the nymphs and goddesses of a vanished age. But up through the Twenties, the *mystique* and its promise could still command the belief of some women.

It was a generous credence. Tess Slesinger set out with it and it made part of her singular personal charm. It probably shaped her style, for better or worse. *The Unpossessed*, quite apart from its

parti pris, is avowedly and unabashedly a woman's novel and that lack of substantiality of which I have complained is in part the result of a woman writer's stylistic intention—gross and weighty facts were to be kept to a minimum so that there would be little impediment to the bright controlled subjectivity of a feminine prose manner inaugurated by Katherine Mansfield, given authority by Virginia Woolf, and used here with a happy acerbity of wit superadded.

At least a little irony must surely have touched such faith as Tess Slesinger gave to the waning cult of Woman. Yet there is a strange moment in *The Unpossessed* which suggests that the author received it with rather less doubleness of mind than might have been expected of her. Among a small party of friends Margaret Flinders' husband, Miles, has shown great emotional distress. His wife moves quickly to comfort him by her touch and succeeds in doing so. This passage follows: "Had Margaret Flinders sprouted wings? Bruno watched her moving in her sudden radiance. She was beside Miles in a second, her arms about his neck. Something had taken hold of Margaret, filled her with triumphant storm; and Miles, allured, bewildered, stood like a moon beside the sun." It is then said that Miles "was frightened of her. . . . But he was smitten with joy and pride in her." And: "He timidly put out his hand and patted her. The gesture was ridiculous; like patting God."

It is possible, of course, to interpret this in an adversary way. The American litigation between the sexes, after having been quite overt and articulate, has gone into a latent phase, but not before it produced a judgment against women that has established itself in our structure of belief. The substance of this judgment is that women are hostile to men and carry their hostility to the point of being "castrating," or, as some say, thinking it to be a subtler and more scientific word, "castrative." And here in this passage, it will occur to some readers to remark, is the archetypal female fantasy: the woman in her specifically feminine role puts on power, becomes more powerful than the man; in the metaphor of her own perverse mythology, she is the sun to the moon of the frightened and be-

wildered husband; nor does the fantasy of power stop short of her assumption of a masculine godhead.

The passage is certainly curious. And no doubt there is ground for the adversary reading of it I have supposed, just as there is ground for taking the book as a whole to be that so often graceless thing, a novel of feminine protest. But to settle for this view of *The Unpossessed* would be to misunderstand its real intention, which, as I have said, was to set forth the dialectic between life and the desire to make life as good as it might be, between "nature" and "spirit." That this intention should be susceptible of misunderstanding is, no doubt, the fault of the book itself: had the two terms of its dialectic been of equal substantiveness, had the actuality of politics been more fully realized, the possibility of seeing the issue as merely that between men and women would not have existed. And it is the real intention of the book that gives rise to the imagery of the passage I have quoted—the wings, radiance, triumphant storm, dominant sun, and very godhead are not to be understood as the feminine armament in a war between the sexes: the Blakean paraphernalia are meant to suggest the will and the hope of still uncorrupted nature in its resistance to the tyranny of spirit.

"In our time," said Thomas Mann, "the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms." Instead of political terms Mann might have said social terms or moral terms, any *terms* at all for the meaning of man's destiny, and still W. B. Yeats would have seized the sentence to inscribe at the head of a poem which says to its solemn epigraph that what it remarks is all very well, and maybe true, but has nothing to do with the real motions of man's heart. Yeats, however, knew that there is no escape from *terms*—the pathetic little tantrum of a poem called "Politics" ("How can I, that girl standing there. . . .") is followed in *Last Poems* by "The Man and the Echo" in which the old poet, searching his life for the harm he may have done others by what he had spoken and written, defends himself from his own accusation by saying that it had not been open to him to "shirk/The spiritual intellect's great work,"

going on to say that there is no "work so great/As that which cleans man's dirty slate."

It is characteristic of the modern age that an ever-increasing number of people suppose that they must be involved in the spiritual intellect's great work. Whoever can recall the Twenties and Thirties might well have a clear notion of how constant has been the augmentation of their number. The modern person who has reached a certain not uncommon point of intellectual development lives in relation to *terms*, that is to say, to ideas, principles, pasts, futures, the awareness of the dirty slate and the duty of cleaning it. Some stand closer to the activity of the spiritual intellect than others, but all are obedient to its imperative, and proud of their obedience. Yet over this necessity there hovers the recollection, or the imagination, of a mode of existence that is not in the control of the spiritual intellect, the mode of existence that, to use Yeats's language, is of "the body and its stupidity," the blessed stupidity of nature and instinct. Tess Slesinger, who might herself have been "that girl standing there" of Yeats's little poem, enrolled herself early among those who undertook to advance the "great work." Like the friends with whom she began her public intellectual life, she believed that there was no better occupation than to scrub the slate clean of the scrawls made on it by family, class, ethnic or cultural group, the society in general. She did not change her judgment of the enterprise, but in one especially vivacious and articulate moment she took notice of the scribble she had not expected to see on the slate—the one made by the spiritual intellect itself.

James Joyce in His Letters

[Commentary, February 1968]

IN 1935, near the end of a long affectionate letter to his son George in America, James Joyce wrote: "Here I conclude. My eyes are tired. For over half a century they have gazed into nullity, where they have found a lovely nothing."

It is not a characteristic utterance. Joyce was little given to making large statements about the nature of existence. As Dr. Johnson said of Dryden, he knew how to complain, but his articulate grievances were not usually of a metaphysical kind. They referred to particular circumstances of practical life, chiefly the lets and hindrances to his work; at least in his later years, such resentment as he expressed was less in response to what he suffered as a person than to the impediments that were put in his way as an artist.

And actually we cannot be certain that Joyce did indeed mean to complain when he wrote to George of his long gaze into "*nulla*"—his letters to his children were always in Italian—or that he was yielding to a metaphysical self-pity when he said he had found in it "*un bellissimo niente*." The adjective may well have been intended not ironically but literally and Joyce can be understood to say that human existence is nullity right enough, yet if it is looked into with a vision such as his, the nothing that can be perceived really *is* lovely, though the maintenance of the vision is fatiguing work.

To read the passage in this way is in accord with our readiness nowadays to see Joyce as pre-eminently a "positive" writer, to be