

ESSAY

James Baldwin, Lionel Trilling, American Studies, and the Freudian Tragic

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Abstract

The intellectual connection between James Baldwin and Lionel Trilling, and the resonances across their criticism, are more substantial than scholarly and biographical treatments have disclosed. For Trilling, Baldwin's writings were notable for their deviation from most humanistic inquiry, which he considered insufficiently alert to the harms and depredations of culture. Baldwin's work became for Trilling a promising indication that American criticism could be remade along the lines of a tragic conception of culture deriving from Freud. This essay concentrates on a relevant but neglected dynamic in American letters—the mid-twentieth-century tension between Freudian thought and American humanistic inquiry evident in fields like American Studies—to explain the intellectual coordinates within which Trilling developed an affinity for Baldwin's work. The essay concludes by suggesting that the twilight of Freud's tragic conception of culture, which figured centrally in the modernist critical environment in which Baldwin and Trilling encountered one another, contributed to an estrangement whereby the two came to be seen as unrelated and different kinds of critics, despite the consonance of their critical idioms during the 1940s and 1950s.

Keywords: James Baldwin, Lionel Trilling, Freud, American Studies, modernism

Lionel Trilling, who in the middle decades of the twentieth century in the United States arguably did more than any other critic to consolidate the authority of Freudian thought in literary and cultural commentary, extolled James Baldwin's work and supported his emergence as a writer in practical ways. "There is probably no literary career in America today that matches James Baldwin's in the degree of interest it commands," Trilling wrote in the 1950s.¹ His endorsement of Baldwin can be understood in terms of his belief that the artist "is what he is

by his successful objectification of his neuroses, by his shaping it and making it available to others in a way which has its effect upon their egos in struggle," and as an extension of his commitment to Freudian thought.² Trilling was not altogether alone in thinking about Baldwin in these terms. Literary critic Alfred Kazin wrote approvingly of the "use Baldwin makes of his conflicts" as vital for understanding the sense of "urgent necessity" communicated by his essays.³ Consistent with Trilling and Kazin's picture of Baldwin, George E. Kent argued that Baldwin found impoverishing and unconvincing the very "Western concept of reality, with its naive rationalism, its ignoring of unrational forces that abound within and without man, its reductionist activities wherein it ignores the uniqueness of the individual and sees reality in terms of its simplifications and categorizations."⁴

Trilling stands out among Baldwin's readers because he early on noticed what Mary McCarthy memorably lauded as Baldwin's "quick, Olympian recognitions," and praised him both as a critic and literary artist.⁵ He deemed *Go Tell It on the Mountain* "one of the most truthful documents of Negro life that we have yet had."⁶ Yet scholars, while gesturing toward the connection between Baldwin and Trilling, have not paused over it, let alone explored it at length. By the time of *Art, Politics, and Will: Essays in Honor of Lionel Trilling* (1977), published two years after his death, readers could be forgiven for thinking that Trilling had had nothing to say about Baldwin. The two seemed to belong to very different spheres of intellectual activity by the late 1960s and 1970s. However, this only makes the intellectual interchange between them, and the parallels in their thinking, during the 1940s and early 1950s all the more remarkable. What has been particularly under-recognized are the ways Trilling's commitment to Freudian thought informed his understanding of Baldwin's work. The period during which a tragic conception of culture deriving from Freud became basic to Trilling's thinking was also the period in which he affirmed Baldwin's work. This was scarcely a coincidence. Trilling located Baldwin within a broad modernist continuum in which Freudian thought constituted a major critical contribution. Trilling believed that writers with great critical acumen, like Baldwin, were those whose work followed from a tragic conception of culture. He followed Baldwin's writings over many years because it exemplified something akin to Freud's tragic conception of culture. Reading Baldwin served to validate and entrench Trilling's commitment to the critical disposition I will call the Freudian tragic.

If the study of Baldwin's writings arises as a practice before the formal beginnings of scholarship on his contribution, alongside Baldwin's very emergence on the critical scene, then Trilling must be seen as among his first interpreters. From such a vantage point, to return to Trilling is arguably to return to an early iteration of Baldwin studies, *avant la lettre*. To focus on Trilling as a reader of Baldwin is then to recover some of the first profiles of Baldwin's work, and to revisit the particular ways in which his work was initially explicated. Doing so makes it possible to recognize the contingency of those early pictures of his work and the contingency of later ones. In the essay that follows, the story of Trilling's relation

to Baldwin's work brings within its scope Freudian thought, which was part of the moment of modernist criticism within which Trilling and Baldwin encountered one another. It also implicates mid-twentieth-century humanistic inquiry. For Trilling, Baldwin's import had to do with his proximity to Freudian thought as a modernist resource and relative distance from liberal humanistic inquiry, typified by such fields as American Studies, during the 1940s and 1950s.

Trilling and the Freudian Tragic

It is mostly forgotten that Trilling, among others, "identified a utopian, nonrepressive dimension of Freud's model of the psyche that equipped the individual to resist the repressive nature of capitalism and the conformism of the postwar affluent society," as Richard H. King has argued.⁷ Trilling would share these ideas with figures like Herbert Marcuse. Yet the modernist intellectual setting from which Trilling espoused Freudian thought in the 1940s and 1950s had distinctive features, and they had much to do with the tragic sense of culture ascribed to Freud.

Cultural critics, in Trilling's view, needed to contend with Freud's tragic sense of culture and make it basic to their interpretive endeavors. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* and elsewhere, Freud insists that if the self is formed by culture, it is also, inevitably, set against it. Among advocates of Freudian thought like Trilling, the tragic stance was a courageous one and indignation an intellectually responsible starting point from which to interpret the world. Freud's work had much to recommend it generally, but its main attribute and strength for Trilling seemed to be "its ultimate tragic courage in acquiescence to fate."⁸ Trilling would endow what he regarded as the "regret over the necessary involvement with culture" in Freud's writings with intellectual authority, emphasizing the reality principle and the antagonism between wish and reality, life and death, in Freud's corpus.⁹ Trilling believed that without a tragic or what he sometimes called an indignant position vis-à-vis culture, intellectual life and humanistic thought suffered. Freud's tragic sense of culture was itself a kind of indignation—indignation about the very fact that people had to make their way within culture. For Trilling, Baldwin's essays instantiated the tragic scene of indignation, making it the basis, at least in part, for the "unsparing, critical fury" they imparted.¹⁰

According to Trilling, Freud was unswerving in his determination to show that the individual "had a kind of hell within him from which rise everlastingly the impulses which threaten his civilization."¹¹ This differed markedly from what Trilling considered a kind of metaphysic of his time, wherein "man can be truly himself and fully human only if he is fully in accord with his cultural environment."¹² By contesting reigning conceits and insisting upon indignation about culture, Freud provided a necessary corrective to what had become an axiom of everyday life and criticism alike. In this way, Freud "shakes us most uncomfortably," Trilling wrote.¹³ Indeed, Trilling lauded Freudian thought

generally and Freud's tragic sense of culture because they could not be assimilated into inadequate and "stabilizing concepts of humanity."¹⁴ Trilling thus gave the Freudian tragic intellectual salience throughout his criticism. The Freudian tragic prompted Trilling to see "everything under a double aspect," making him alert to how the same instance could be a "pathway to enlightenment and a dead end of self-deception," as Louis Menand has argued.¹⁵ Wariness and indignation were intellectual duties when the same set of beliefs or program of action could bring about desired results and, at the same time, hold darker, under-recognized implications.

Trilling did not bring the association of Freud and the tragic into American criticism on his own. During the 1930s, such considerations of psychoanalysis entered the pages of *The Menorah Journal*, for which Trilling had written and served as copyeditor throughout much of the 1920s. In 1936, in "The Master of Psychoanalysis," the British physician and writer Havelock Ellis reviewed recently translated autobiographical writings by Freud, emphasizing the "element of immediate tragedy almost throughout and in spite of all the more remote triumphs."¹⁶ Although there were several social and professional factors discouraging Freud throughout his trajectory, each helping to install the tragic within his work, Ellis concluded that, above all, the "hostility came from within."¹⁷ Trilling would increasingly develop an abiding interest in inner hostility and other kinds of disaffection that did not always seem to originate from easily identifiable external sources. For this reason, among others, the tragic dimension of Freud seemed to demand that "doubt, ambivalence, inner struggle, and guilt" be increasingly recognized as endemic to thought and behavior.¹⁸ In the middle decades of the twentieth century Trilling arguably did more than any other critic to bring Freud within modernist literary criticism, which placed a premium on "doubt, ambivalence, inner struggle, and guilt" in literary works of a decidedly international, and not provincial, pantheon. "Literary scholars establishing themselves in universities" were vital to the creation of the high modernist canon and to the "'mystique' around its works and authors: T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, and Thomas Mann, to name a few," as Dorothy Ross has written.¹⁹ In the postwar American environment in which modernist criticism gained traction, Ross continues, the most decisive figures were university literary scholars who attached themselves to "works that claimed to speak to the problems of the modern world and a body of difficult works that required their critical skills, creating a platform for heroic performance to match that of their subjects."²⁰ Appraisals of the high modernist canon afforded a prime vehicle for cultural inquiry informed by the Freudian sense of the tragic, which Trilling hoped would become predominant in an American literary culture he believed to be marked by simplistic suppositions and optimistic glossing of complex social questions.

For Trilling, literary culture in particular had much to gain from, and in a sense already belonged to, the Freudian tragic. He suggested as much in "Freud and Crisis of Culture," where he wrote that the

particular concern of literature of the last two centuries has been with the self in its quarrel with culture. We cannot mention the name of any great writer of the modern period whose work has not in some way, and usually in a passionate and explicit way, insisted on this quarrel, who has not expressed the bitterness of his discontent with civilization, who has not said that the self made greater legitimate demands than any culture could hope to satisfy.²¹

Freudian thought complemented and brought clarity to literary history writ large on this model and encouraged Trilling in his view that critics had to think with a tragic conception of culture if they wished to understand the workings of literature and attend to its salience in the world. Thus it was Freudian thought generally, but above all the Freudian tragic, that Trilling insisted upon as a much-needed instrument in criticism.

Trilling believed that the Freudian tragic, as a signal modernist contribution, could prepare the ground for a “bleak” and guarded liberalism, which he believed capable of making criticism and the world of letters more consequential.²² By the early 1950s, when Trilling was editing *Perspectives USA*, he understood Baldwin as working in concert with such liberalism, and therefore as creating new avenues for criticism. In showcasing “Everybody’s Protest Novel in Perspectives USA,” Trilling established a relation of identity between Baldwin’s writing and his own critical temperament, and in so doing cast Baldwin’s work as, at the least, compatible with the Freudian tragic. Baldwin seemed primed to help bring about a Freudian reorientation in criticism. The charge of sentimentalism Baldwin directed toward Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son* was, in its own way, an argument about a failure in those works to contend with a tragic conception of culture. Baldwin’s allergic response toward the sentimental would remain a feature of his thinking. “I think it’s a great mistake to be sentimental about human beings, and to be sentimental about oneself,” he told an interviewer in 1970.²³

For Trilling, Baldwin’s writing carried special relevance and acuity within an American intellectual environment in which the tragic and the ambivalent were minimized, and categorization and sentimental description promoted. Baldwin closed “Everybody’s Protest Novel” by noting the putative failure of the protest novel and listing what he regarded as its main weaknesses: “its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.”²⁴ In this formulation—as in much of the writings of both Baldwin and Trilling—literary production registers larger dilemmas, not least that of “categorization.” For Trilling, categorization was one of the intellectual habits of “acceptance and liberation,” which he measured as an analytic orientation that through its very openness hindered assured distinctions, muting psychological conflicts in the interpretation of various texts and cultural patterns. Categorization in this guise sought to liberate texts and culture itself from their inherent ambivalences. For this reason, Trilling devoted not a small fraction of his postwar work to under-

mining what he once called the “good impulse toward acceptance and liberation,” which he claimed was “more established in the universities than most” realized, and was also to a “considerable extent an established attitude with the foundations that support intellectual projects.”²⁵ As methodological imperatives, “acceptance and liberation” could be found in the “distancing defenses of literary criticism” and throughout humanistic fields such as American Studies, which gave analytic primacy to “contexts that were literary, symbolic and theatrical,” but all too often staved off “real events, created by real people, in the real world.”²⁶

In Baldwin’s work Trilling found the intimation of a new critical dispensation in which indignation served as investigative groundwork. Where the habits of “acceptance and liberation” did not bring indignation within their conceptual frames, foreclosing from the start its analytic possibilities, Baldwin entwined indignation and criticism and refused to disentangle them. In closely attending to Baldwin’s trajectory, Trilling followed a writer for whom consummately modulated indignation was something like his very *métier*. The *Perspectives USA* issue in which Baldwin’s work appeared described him as a writer who “insisted that fiction be motivated by the truly individual concern,” and as someone whose “critical attitudes” led him to condemn the “generalized story of social criticism.”²⁷ Although it is not clear if Trilling penned the contributor description, it is in keeping with how he understood Baldwin’s work, which is to say as a counterpoint to the generalized, or palatable, stories put forth in much liberal and humanistic commentary.

American Studies and Methodological Sympathy

If criticism in and around the high modernist canon was a significant part of postwar intellectual life, so too were scholarly apparatuses housed within universities, in which the “good impulse toward acceptance and liberation,” or what Trilling also called “methodological sympathy,” reigned as an interpretive conceit.²⁸ Trilling acknowledged that “methodological sympathy” evinced a “generosity of mind” among academics and writers, but it was also, and lamentably in his view, a “kind of principle of cultural autonomy, according to which cultures were to be thought of as self-contained systems not open to criticism from without.”²⁹ Trilling did not consider his own critical methods as altogether opposed to sympathy toward the larger culture to which one belonged. Writing about America, Trilling describes “an object which I must regard with affection and even with a kind of gratitude.”³⁰ But methodological sympathy entrenched acceptance and liberation as intellectual givens, providing the basis for what Trilling once called the “new school of nationalist-affirmation,” making it far from innocuous.³¹ He thus believed that methodological sympathy suffered from conceptual and analytic limits, and needed to be superseded. Freud’s tragic conception of culture served as an essential countervailing force en route to a better approach, in Trilling’s view. When Trilling observed that a “progressive deterioration of accurate knowledge of the self and the right relation between the self

and the culture” had taken place, “rationalized by theories and formulas to which Freud’s thought about the self and the culture stands as a challenge,” he had the methodological sympathy of American Studies and other humanistic fields in mind.³²

For Trilling, methodological sympathy and its attendant practices of acceptance and liberation minimized what he understood as inherent problems of human existence. In his posthumously published “Some Notes for an Autobiographical Lecture,” Trilling wrote that “to Freud as a systematic thinker I became more committed and I remain so,” never as a figure of “doctrinal authority” but nevertheless as a source of “unremitting questions about motive and intention.”³³ It is worth recalling in this regard that *Civilization and Its Discontents* played an especially important role in Trilling’s thinking, beginning in the 1940s.³⁴ It was in that work that Freud presented among his most succinct formulations about the inherent problems of human existence, submitting that there were “three sources from which our suffering comes.”³⁵ The sources were the “superior power of nature, the feebleness of our own bodies and the inadequacy of the regulations which adjust the mutual relationships of human beings in the family, the state and society.”³⁶ The humanistic practices of many American scholars, organized around methodological sympathy, threatened to efface the reality of human suffering, which for Trilling encompassed the psychological illnesses and related neurotic symptoms that psychoanalysis had disclosed. Along similar lines, Baldwin would observe that the “American vision of the world” stumbled because of a seeming inability to accommodate the “darker forces in human life.”³⁷ “So little reality” entered the conceptualizations and representations of the “American vision.”³⁸ As a refutation of that vision, Baldwin would develop a critical practice in which everything depended on how “relentlessly one forces from [one’s] experience the last drop, bitter or sweet, it can possibly give.”³⁹

Trilling understood Baldwin not only as a commentator working beyond the strictures of normative scholarly production, but also as one unmoved by middle-class commonplaces. The limits of methodological sympathy and its attendant impulses had to do with the “suppositions about our culture which are held by the American middle class,” according to Trilling.⁴⁰ He worried that they were also becoming the standard suppositions of academic inquiry within universities. Baldwin offered an altogether different critical disposition. Baldwin established his critical style by isolating—and delivering verdicts on—different forms of moral escape, very often of the middle-class variety that many mid-century intellectuals decried. What Trilling understood as the safety valve of middle-class thought and its academic and scholarly cognates brought out his sense of apprehension, whereas Baldwin’s writing called to mind those necessary critical and moral ingredients Trilling called “variousness, possibility, complexity and difficulty.”⁴¹ Baldwin himself held that the very “aim of people who rise to the [...] middle class” diverged from complexity and difficulty, observing that while they surrounded themselves with artistic objects, they more and more failed to appreciate that “art and ideas come out of the torment and passion of experience.”⁴² By

the early 1950s, Trilling was not only reading Baldwin's work, he also appeared to be following Baldwin's very trajectory, regarding it as a barometer for the viability of a modernist critical intelligence that could compete with scholarly practices that turned on middle-class truisms. Baldwin's work and its modernist tastes could not be collapsed within the dominant historicist practices of humanistic thought, which were also the emblematic approaches within the field of American Studies, and indeed represented an alternative to their pervasive hold.

Trilling presented his perspectives on American Studies both in discussions of the field and in explorations of American and liberal styles of social knowledge that encompassed practices within the field. In the essay "Reality in America," Trilling called attention to what he took to be the weaknesses of a work that had attained canonical status within American Studies: Vernon Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927). Trilling considers Parrington's text a prime scholarly expression of "mainstream liberal opinion," as Adam Kirsch notes, and the text provides the occasion for an evaluation of liberal criticism as such.⁴³ Trilling's complaint is this: liberal criticism "establishes the social responsibility of the writer and then goes on to say that, apart from the duty of resembling reality as much as possible, he is not responsible for anything, not even for his ideas."⁴⁴ In Parrington—as in American Studies—Trilling finds an "American metaphysic" in which "reality is always material reality, hard, resistant, unformed" and the only mind that is trustworthy is the one that "resembles this reality by most clearly reproducing the sensations it affords."⁴⁵ According to Trilling, liberal thought in its dominant varieties narrows our sense of reality. Moreover, it does not give writers—past and present—enough responsibility, for it is primarily interested in how they exemplify specific contexts and histories. Trilling continues by saying that American Studies treats the American author "in terms of his moment, the conditions of his culture that produced him," describing the practice of historical contextualization common to American Studies not as an illegitimate methodological imperative in itself, but nevertheless as one tethered to categorization and embedded within certain ideological constraints.⁴⁶ Contextualization and categorization alone were lacking as practices, Trilling implies, and were not necessarily exempt from interpretive deficiencies and intellectual hazards. Throughout, Trilling implies that a lack of awareness leads to the conflation of American Studies and liberal democratic thought, each of which then shields the other from critical reading.

"Reality in America" complemented another Trilling essay, "Contemporary American Literature and Its Relation to Ideas," which appeared in the third issue of *American Quarterly*—the newly launched American Studies journal—in 1949, and in which he undertakes an investigation of American literature that doubles at times as a satire of the postwar American Studies project. To the extent that American Studies attached itself to liberal democratic thought and liberal culture generally, Trilling wrote, it was working in the realm of ideology and not ideas. He writes: "To call ourselves the people of the idea is to flatter ourselves. We are rather the people of ideology, which is a very different thing."⁴⁷ To be sure, ideology was not something people could entirely free themselves from. Nevertheless,

it was imperative to acquire sensitivity to the life of ideology, to what Trilling called the “strange, submerged life of habit and semi-habit in which to ideas we attach strong passions but no very clear awareness of the concrete reality of their consequences,” so as to better understand its workings and effects.⁴⁸ Thus the entire matter of American Studies was vexing for Trilling. Although he was a literary scholar who devoted much of his time to American writing, he did not feel that he could give his full assent to the guiding assumptions of the growing field, within which he believed that a predominant inclination toward “acceptance and liberation” abetted a “nearly conscious aversion from making intellectual distinctions.”⁴⁹

If there is one recurring criticism Trilling levels at American Studies, it is this: what if the dynamic whereby writers were brought into relation with their cultural contexts merely generated a set of objects, making American literature, for instance, a collection of objects? The question expresses his main worry about a field where the analyst of literature seems to fall beyond the bounds of critique, and which does not “put the scrutinizer of it under scrutiny.”⁵⁰ For Trilling, American Studies scholars and other humanists too often failed to scrutinize themselves: they had developed interpretive practices that obstructed self-scrutiny, in large measure by rendering their subjects into orderly objects incapable of implicating them. Scholars had not developed a living and reciprocal relation with the past. To be sure, Trilling was not rejecting American Studies scholarship as a whole. But his position is surely one of hesitancy and disquiet, for he considers the field an arena of intellectual activity in which culture becomes merely an object. Trilling’s apprehension about American literature and other cultural forms becoming merely objects presupposes the dangers of categorization that Baldwin early on brought within the scope of his work, establishing his own criticism as a site at odds with interpretive strategies predicated on the idea that it is “categorization alone which is real.”⁵¹

The differences between American Studies, on the one hand, and criticism informed by psychoanalysis, on the other hand, were palpable for Trilling, and would guide his surveys of literary production and intellectual trends. The former failed to activate, or even appreciate, a tragic sense of culture, which led in his view to an intellectually smothering optimism. In Baldwin’s work he discovered a worthy antithesis to such optimism, and to a methodological sympathy that had not been sufficiently modulated by a tragic sense of culture. In Trilling’s terms, Baldwin was not seduced by methodological sympathy, and this in itself made his work admirable given the broader intellectual milieu in which methodological sympathy sufficed as the basis for much cultural inquiry. Through his criticism Baldwin seemed to offer not only a generic antidote to prevailing humanistic inquiry, but also something on the order of Freud’s tragic conception of culture. For Trilling, the Freudian corpus had provided a potent vocabulary for thinking through the constraints upon, but also the possibilities of, personality, and in Baldwin’s essays an appreciation for those constraints and possibilities seemed to be on constant display, neither displacing the other.

Baldwin and the Work of Criticism

Not long after Trilling selected Baldwin's essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel," for inclusion in an issue of *Perspectives USA*, he supplied a recommendation, upon Baldwin's request and on his behalf, to the Guggenheim Foundation.⁵² The letter noted Baldwin's "insight, subtlety, and flexibility of mind," and singled out "Everybody's Protest Novel" as an essay that "seemed so right and true," a harbinger of further high-caliber criticism to come. Along with letters from others, including Saul Bellow, Alain Locke, and Philip Rahv, Trilling's recommendation helped to win Baldwin a fellowship, in 1954.⁵³ The proposal submitted by Baldwin for the Guggenheim fellowship described a study that explored Negro writing in America from the time of Frederick Douglass to that of Richard Wright. Although Baldwin's "Everybody's Protest Novel" took a sardonic stance in relation to Wright's *Native Son* in its conclusion, he nevertheless understood Wright's work as a pivotal part of the story of American letters. Even as Baldwin wanted to veer away from what he regarded as the sentimentality of Wright's work, he was also drawn to its power—as was Trilling. Reviewing Wright's *Black Boy*, Trilling called the book a courageous and "angry book, as it ought to be," that did not finesse oppression and thereby give readers an all-too-common "moral 'escape.'"⁵⁴ Trilling read Baldwin's work in much the same way, but he also recognized in Baldwin a distinctive set of critical procedures and stylistic tendencies, which he would come to hold in high esteem, and consider portentous.

In the 1950s Baldwin wrote of a "metamorphosis" Americans were undergoing, the outcome of which could not be known in advance, but that nevertheless might "destroy our attitudes and give us back our personalities."⁵⁵ Baldwin's attitudes in need of destruction presupposed a reconnection of readers "with themselves, and with one another."⁵⁶ In Baldwin's formulation, attitudes were intimately related to the making of personalities. Although Baldwin did not draw upon a Freudian terminology, he was conversant with, and emulated, the tragic sense of culture that was so much a part of mid-century literary modernism. If he at times wrote reproachfully of American ego-psychology, as in his dismissive reference to "American psychiatry" in *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin also absorbed, and drew upon, mid-century literary modernism and, by implication, its affirmation of psychoanalysis, especially in his early essays.⁵⁷ The original title for Baldwin's essay "Notes of a Native Son" when it appeared in *Harper's* was "Me and My House," indicating, of course, the primacy of his household in the essay, but also suggestive of the family circle at the center of psychoanalysis itself. He would claim that "private life, his own and that of others, is the writer's subject—his key and ours to his achievement," which explained his persistent attention in his criticism to the "laws of one's personality."⁵⁸ To invoke Trilling's words, Baldwin scrutinized the scrutinizer, locating himself squarely within the orbit of his criticism. Especially in such explicitly autobiographical essays as "Notes of a Native Son," Baldwin writes of how past and present are confused, not mere chronological givens, unfolding in

his own inimitable way a tenet of psychoanalysis. And in the ensuing confusions Baldwin implicates both himself and the reader as participants in a shared social order, broaching the subject, as in almost everything he wrote, of the “interior life of Americans.”⁵⁹ For Trilling, it was Freud who made it clear how implicated in culture we all are, and both the draw and promise of Baldwin’s essays was that they returned again and again to a similarly capacious sense of cultural, if also fraught, interconnectedness.

Trilling read Baldwin first and foremost as a cultural critic, as a writer who took responsibility for rethinking the culture around him. Trilling wrote:

The relation of an artist to his culture, whether that culture be national or the culture of a relatively small recusant group, is a complex and even a contradictory relation: the artist must accept his culture and be accepted by it, but also—so it seems—he must be its critic, correcting and even rejecting it according to his personal insight.⁶⁰

The same mix of affection and corrective impulse appears in Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son*, where he proclaims, “I love America more than any country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.”⁶¹ But the point of Baldwin’s love of country is not simply that he combines it with dogged critical assessment. He seems to be after an as-yet-unavailable and enlarged form of criticism that obviates categorization and that engenders a sense of anticipation. In his critical idiom Americans emerge as an “amorphous people” in “desperate search for something which will help them re-establish their connection with themselves, and with one another.”⁶² Thus when categories enter the frame of Baldwin’s work, they are imbued with an indeterminacy that staves off predetermined fixity. As he would tell an interviewer, “Arbitrarily, you know, I’m an American Negro. The word ‘American’ is a kind of conundrum, and the word ‘Negro,’ too.”⁶³ For both Trilling and Baldwin, personal insight was not something easily given, but rather something that had to be judiciously sought. The tragic cast of Freudian thought was an advantage in this regard, especially in Trilling’s view, providing as it did reminders as to the dangers of self-deception, and as a consequence encouraging caution about projects for moral perfection and social reform.

Trilling and Baldwin were not only of like mind about criticism; they also shared much the same views regarding the assumed links between history and democracy and, equally, between education and progress. “Sociologists and historians, having the historical perspective in mind, may conclude that we are moving toward ever-greater democracy,” but, as propositions, both “the historical perspective” and the idea of progress toward “ever-greater democracy” demanded closer examination, a skeptical Baldwin suggested in “Journey to Atlanta.”⁶⁴ His work would serve as a counterpoint to comforting proclamations having to do with democracy, education and progress, and much else besides, by tendering perspectives on the “psychology and tradition of the country” that did not readily comply with what passed for “historical perspective.”⁶⁵ Like Trilling, Baldwin regarded

historical analysis generally as a variable practice that also required scrutiny. Both also questioned conventional views of education, which was put forth too often and too insistently for their liking as a panacea for social ills. The “extravagant store we set by education” seemed to Trilling a symptom requiring explanation.⁶⁶ Baldwin wrote of the conceptual and political problems exacerbated by “Negro liberals” who in his view wielded education as a “vast all-purpose term, conjuring visions of sunlit housing projects, stacks of copy-books, and a race of well-soaped, dark-skinned people who never slur their R’s.”⁶⁷ In his reading of American dynamics, the uses of “education,” which Baldwin placed in undermining scare quotes, emerge as intractable and distressing features of the “psychology and tradition of the country,” by which he referenced longstanding patterns of racism and segregation.⁶⁸ Trilling did not relate his criticism of education to racism and segregation, instead directing his commentary in general fashion toward an educational and scholarly complex that he found insufficiently critical of its own ideas and assumptions. For all of the ways Baldwin and Trilling shared the same critical instincts, then, there were moments when the discrepancies in their evaluations of American history arose, foreshadowing the ways they would, over time, begin to work at a greater remove from one another.

Baldwin’s first review in a major journal, *The Nation*, appeared in 1947. This small event must also be regarded, retrospectively, as the start of his professional career as a writer.⁶⁹ A string of further reviews would soon make him well known among New York’s intelligentsia, perhaps above all for what biographer James Campbell calls “an intellectual certainty above his years.”⁷⁰ Yet if editors and other writers took notice, Baldwin had also taken notice of the intellectual scene and seemed convinced of the venues—among them *Commentary*, *New Leader*, and *Partisan Review*—where his work belonged, and where it could gain the most traction. The review work that Baldwin undertook served as a laboratory of sorts, deepening his familiarity with the stylistic and thematic material of New York intellectual publications, and allowing him to develop his own writing skills, which he strove to make consonant with the anti-Stalinist and modernist literary bent of the New York intellectuals and at the same time inimitably his own. Within this intellectual arena, ambivalence and ambiguity recurred as the basis for an ethics of reading.⁷¹ Thus in reviewing Arnold Rose’s *The Negro in America* (1948), a condensed version of Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma* (1944), Baldwin notes that such works “record the facts, but they cannot control the immense, ambiguous, uncontrollable effect” of the “full story of black and white in this country.”⁷² For Baldwin, as for many of the New York intellectuals and perhaps Trilling especially, the failure to appreciate ambiguity and ambivalence as major elements of socio-cultural life led to ineffectual criticism. For Trilling, these terms were part of a larger lexicon that included “variousness, possibility, complexity and difficulty,” and that he considered essential for evaluating literary and cultural works, and for arriving at better understandings of social and cultural life.⁷³

If Trilling was keen to itemize the limits of American Studies as regards understandings of social and cultural life, the field itself was undergoing changes by

the mid-1950s as it ventured more decisively into moral terrain. In the same year that Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) was published, R. W. B. Lewis, in *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*, closed his study by insisting that the "doctrine of positive thinking is a posture—that is, a substitute for morality."⁷⁴ Drawing at times upon Trilling's writings, Lewis diagnosed a mid-century moment in which "our literature and our public conduct suggest that exposure to experience is certain to be fatal."⁷⁵ Yet if Lewis's work seemed indicative of an American Studies practice moving closer to Trilling, it was also Lewis who delivered among the most trenchant analyses of Trilling's criticism. Lewis concluded that Trilling was invested in a "centrist position," between liberalism and conservatism, that Lewis called a "new Stoicism" in American criticism.⁷⁶ Trilling's criticism, which was marked by a complexity that Lewis admired, more often than not proved to be a "device for shoring up defenses" and for elevating the critical authority of "tragic pity, the sense of identity with the human sufferer," which is to say, something other than a "program for creative action."⁷⁷

Baldwin's work adhered in many respects to the new Stoicism that Lewis identified, above all in the unwaveringly anti-sentimentalist valences that informed his essays. When he mined his experience, Baldwin did not devolve into mere positive thinking or evade moral challenges. His reliance on an attitude that appeared to presume a tragic conception of culture gave his work its brand of Stoicism. If that Stoicism came across throughout his work, it also showed up intermittently when Baldwin disclosed principles that informed his critical practice: "I think all theories are suspect, that the finest principles may need to be modified, or may even be pulverized by the demands of life, and that one must find, therefore, one's own moral center and move through the world hoping that this center will guide one aright."⁷⁸ But if there was a guiding orientation to which Trilling adhered unflinchingly from the 1940s onward, and that Baldwin arguably also made his own, it was Freud's "tragic courage in acquiescence to fate."⁷⁹ It was this orientation that Lewis would recode as Stoicism in an attempt to decipher its ideological lineaments.

Baldwin, Trilling, and the Twilight of the Freudian Tragic

From the time that Trilling wrote for *The Menorah Journal* through his later movement into both academic environments and New York intellectual circles, he seems to have followed a pattern set from his college days, which he remembered as "an effort to discover some social entity to which I could give the credence of my senses, as it were, and with which I could be in some relation."⁸⁰ A similar attitude brought Baldwin into New York intellectual venues, where he noticed themes and styles that seemed to coincide with his own critical tendencies and that promised an intellectually compatible setting. From early on, for Trilling and Baldwin alike, questions of belonging and collectivity, like culture itself, were both significant and difficult. In "Notes of a Native Son," Baldwin's focus on his

family life, and his unwillingness to look away from its harms, communicated an intrepid attitude toward personal circumstances that were imbricated with cultural problems. Trilling regarded the terrain of cultural analysis as one that Freud had done more than any other figure to make meaningful and urgent.

It is surely not a coincidence that both Trilling and Baldwin, as critics in search of a social entity with which they could exist in some relation, each often invoked an elusive but resonant version of the pronoun “we” in presenting critical readings and commentary. Trilling addressed its elusiveness when he wrote that as a “minor rhetorical device,” his own use of “we” had to do with various groups that included him in “loose and contradictory formulations.”⁸¹ Baldwin indicated that his use was more pointed:

Since I wouldn't write from the perspective, essentially, of the victim, I had to find what my own perspective was and then use it. I couldn't talk about “them” and “us.” So I had to use “we” and let the reader figure out who “we” is. That was the only possible choice of pronoun. It had to be “we.” And we had to figure out who “we” was, or who “we” is. That was very liberating for me.⁸²

However different their subsequent explanations, “we” performed indispensable work for each writer insofar as it offered a mechanism for staging questions of belonging to which they were committed, and by also making “we” the site of a certain discursive difficulty. To continually stage the problem of “we” meant deviating from what both regarded as the too rudimentary habits of mere categorization. Built into the “we” was the ambiguity and ambivalence both considered resources for moral deliberation. Its elusiveness gave it a literary quality and seemed to offer, at least for Baldwin but perhaps for Trilling as well, liberating possibilities that could not be recast as the “acceptance and liberation” of much of mid-century social thought. Neither Baldwin, who was admired by many critics for not inordinately prioritizing the psychological comfort of his readers, nor Trilling proffer a comforting “we” that would facilitate any kind of moral escape. In the words that Trilling used in reference to Wright, the “we” that he and Baldwin invoked did not lead to “easy and inexpensive emotions,” and instead presupposed a central concern with moral deliberation alert to “psychic wounds and scars.”⁸³ It was a surely a sense of such scars that Baldwin meant to convey when he wrote that “no American Negro exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in the skull.”⁸⁴

Trilling remained alert to events in Baldwin's career into the 1960s, including the publication of *Another Country*. Amid mixed reviews of the novel, Trilling notably came to Baldwin's defense, describing the subtlety of thought and expression he found in Baldwin's most recent work, even as he also indicated what he regarded as its flaws. Trilling's commentary on the novel demonstrated the ways he continued to read Baldwin's work as a measure of the state of American artistic production and criticism. More importantly, the novel became the occasion for Trilling to divulge a sense of apprehension about the “extravagant publicness”

with which Baldwin had ever more to contend.⁸⁵ Baldwin's work remained for Trilling a major contribution to American letters, a commitment to private life that he hoped would withstand the pressures of a demanding and contentious public arena.

Trilling worried about the status of Baldwin's literary and critical talents given what he understood by the time of *Another Country* in 1962 as the "social circumstances" he had to negotiate in the midst of the Civil Rights movement.⁸⁶ "How is [Baldwin] to find the inwardness which we take to be the condition of truth in the writer?" Trilling asked.⁸⁷ Trilling wrote that Baldwin had become the "only American Negro with a considerable body of respected work to his credit," and a writer, moreover, who "has taken his place in the literary and intellectual *avant garde*," working beyond the confines of the "wholesome simplicities of libertarian American thought."⁸⁸ But Baldwin's increasingly public stature brought him into a decidedly social plane of intellectual production in which a range of expectations involving his "unique position" increasingly impinged upon him.⁸⁹ Trilling considered the situation "insupportably difficult."⁹⁰ Trilling's discussion of *Another Country* would serve as his last recorded response to Baldwin's work.

How attentively Trilling followed Baldwin's writings into the later 1960s and 1970s is unclear. What is clear is that the Freudian tragic that was so much a part of the moment that first drew Trilling and Baldwin toward one another had lost much of its relevance by that time. The intellectual environments that had twinned mid-century literary modernism and Freudian thought became less salient, and psychoanalysis itself came under greater scrutiny beginning in the late 1950s. In *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer* (1959), for instance, Philip Rieff distrusted Freudian claims to a science of psychology, even as he provided a picture of the philosophical significance of psychoanalysis. When scholarly treatments of Baldwin's work began to appear in these years, Baldwin was never explicitly linked to Freud's tragic conception of culture. But the picture of Baldwin as a writer committed to the role of private life in the making of criticism, which Trilling played a part in establishing, lingered. "Baldwin turned inward, not outward," putting forth a vision of community that was inherently conflict-ridden because it "requires coming to terms with oneself," wrote one scholar in 1969.⁹¹ In and around Baldwin's work, "true emotion, true community, because it threatens the make-believe world, is dangerous to society, and one who dares try it courts ostracism or worse," S. P. Fullinwider wrote.⁹² Such readings of Baldwin, though few and far between, furthered Trilling's longstanding emphasis on his distinctive critical idiom and its distance from routine interpretive protocols. At the same time, they also tended to elide the specific tragic inflections that Trilling attached to writers he admired. Moreover, although the antipathy toward the moral escapism afforded by middle-class cultural forms was to an extent implied in later renderings of Baldwin, his work came increasingly to be seen as following from a primary focus on racial discord. Baldwin's "new stridency of tone" and putatively newfangled concern "with the emotion of rage," in the words of literary historian

Robert Bone, provided evidence for a reworked artistic and critical program beginning in the 1960s.⁹³ Trilling considered Baldwin a pivotal voice in discussions of black life and American racial antagonisms, but more often seemed to regard him as a critic who produced a set of deliberations about self and culture, private life and national belonging. He read Baldwin's critical method via his own priorities, and emphasized how Baldwin "ranges over the subtleties, complexities and perversities of the modern ideology and includes in his purview not only the particular anomaly of the Negroes in their disadvantaged situation, but the whole moral life of the nation."⁹⁴ In many ways, Trilling looked to Baldwin as taking part, first and foremost, in a tradition of "men who maintain a quarrel with respectable society and have a perpetual bone to pick with the rational intellect."⁹⁵ For Trilling, the interpretation of racial ideologies and practices in Baldwin's criticism was a subset of a more far-reaching critical portfolio of sorts, and it was that larger portfolio and its "extravagant publicness" that he feared could dilute and thus endanger Baldwin's insight.

In his final assessment, Trilling explored the moment of *Another Country*, but also looked back more generally upon Baldwin's career, as if marking a closing phase.

Baldwin never did come to feel that his claim to full artistic freedom lessened his attachment to the social cause to which circumstance almost inevitably committed him—he was never led by his sense of a personal fate to become indifferent to the actualities of the Negro situation. Yet the emphasis did fall on the personal fate, and this, as I say, was all to the good.⁹⁶

It was this prioritization of personal life that, as Trilling saw it, had become imperiled by the late 1950s. Whether Baldwin understood the situation in precisely these terms is unclear, but it is undoubtedly the case that his changing position exerted pressure on views he had previously held. "The reality of man as a social being is not his only reality and the artist is strangled who is forced to deal with human beings solely in social terms," he had once written.⁹⁷ The concern for Trilling was not that Baldwin would move in the direction of the "new school of nationalist-affirmation," but instead that he would dispense with the tragic conception of culture and the modernist registers that had seemed integral to his criticism.⁹⁸ If Baldwin would not merely rehearse the "literary academicism of liberalism," or what Trilling also called the "liberal criticism that descends from Parrington," the danger nevertheless was that his work would conform to its central premises, including the view that "that mind is alone felt to be trustworthy which most resembles [material] reality by most nearly reproducing the sensations it affords."⁹⁹

Baldwin's capacity for giving culture something approaching a tragic cast, all the while entwining that tragic sensibility with moral deliberation, brought and kept his writings near the forefront of Trilling's mind for many years. Following Baldwin's trajectory became a literary-intellectual obligation of sorts. Baldwin

was an exception within an environment in which, according to Trilling, there were few “books that raise questions in our minds not only about conditions but about ourselves, that lead us to refine our motives and ask what might lie behind our good impulses.”¹⁰⁰ In the 1970s, however, by which time Trilling’s academic credentials and stature as a critic had been established for decades, Baldwin, for all of his fame, described himself as a harassed figure. The positions the two held in American intellectual life seemed less comparable, less part of a continuum, in no small part because of the racial unrest toward which Baldwin’s writings, more and more, pivoted. Baldwin would write in *No Name in the Street* (1972) that “in America, I was free only in battle, never free to rest—and he who finds no way to rest cannot long survive the battle.”¹⁰¹

Baldwin exhibited a “reluctance or inability to recall his early years as a writer,” as Douglas Field has argued.¹⁰² Yet in the 1970s, he began, albeit intermittently, to look back upon the left-liberal intelligentsia who had applauded his work in the late 1940s and early 1950s, writing in one instance:

They were all, for a while anyway, very proud of me, of course, proud that I had been able to crawl up to their level and been “accepted.” What *I* might think of *their* level, how *I* might react to this “acceptance,” or what this acceptance might cost me, were not among the questions which racked them in the midnight hour.¹⁰³

The note of acrimony in Baldwin’s recollection communicated buried but persistent resentments. But his reflections also reprise the Freudian tragic of that past moment, suggesting its default status in his criticism, as he broaches the silences, evasions, tensions, and psychological conflicts that characterized the scenes of his professional origins. He brings to the subject of his emergence as a writer what Trilling, in an appraisal of Freud, called “unremitting questions about motive and intention.”¹⁰⁴ Baldwin’s retrospective commentary on the recognition bestowed on him suggests that he met it with ambivalence and conflicted feelings. Much as “Joyce accepted silence, exile, and cunning as a system which could sustain his life, I’ve had to accept it too,” Baldwin told an interviewer in 1970.¹⁰⁵ Yet even in the early essays, Baldwin’s ambivalences seep through. In “The Harlem Ghetto,” Baldwin writes,

Harlem wears to the casual observer a casual face; no one remarks that considering the history of black men and women and the legends that have sprung up about them, to say nothing of the ever-present policemen, wary on the street corners—the face is, indeed, somewhat excessively casual and may not be as open and as careless as it seems.¹⁰⁶

Perhaps more so than avowedly autobiographical writings, “Notes of a Native Son” and “Stranger in the Village” among them, such oblique and sporadic findings in Baldwin’s essays imparted the tensions that accompanied his professional formation.

Notes

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