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COMPLETING THE CIRCLE:
LIONEL TRILLING'S INFLUENCE
ON THE CRITICISM OF ROBERT BRUSTEIN
by
SCOTT E. WALTERS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University
of New York

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Abstract

COMPLETING THE CIRCLE: LIONEL TRILLING'S
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by

Scott E. Walters

Adviser: Professor Jonathan Kalb

The final essay of Robert Brustein's 1994 book, Dumbocracy in America: Studies in the Theatre of Guilt, 1987-1994, is entitled, "Lionel Trilling: Memories of an Intellectual Father." As the title suggests, the essay describes the enormous influence Trilling had on Brustein's decision to become a critic, and on the shape that his criticism has taken over the years since then. Looking back over his thirty-five years as theatre critic for The New Republic, Brustein states that his work was "an attempt to bring [Trilling's] literary and human values to bear on the themes of dramatic works," concluding that "everything I wrote about the theatre was an attempt to pay tribute" to Trilling. Starting from a point of admiration and imitation, Brustein early in his career revolted against some of Trilling's ideas, including his disdain for theatre. However, he slowly made his way back to many of Trilling's basic philosophies. As Brustein notes, "My continuing quarrel with the simplistic politics of the American theatre resembles in kind . . . Trilling's dispute with the liberal intellectual politics of his

time." This study examines this quarrel as it related to middle-class American society, the effects of modernism on the aesthetic and moral sensibilities of American culture, the student revolts of the 1960s, and the rise of Political Correctness in art and education.

PREFACE

The ascribing of influence is, in essence, a search for echoes. In music, when a piano string is struck, it calls forth faint sympathetic vibrations in other strings that fill the sound and make it rich with overtones. Similarly, when an idea is expressed, it also is supported by reverberations from the past. For this study of Lionel Trilling's influence on the criticism of Robert Brustein, I have taken as my starting point a statement made by Brustein in an essay on Trilling, in which he said that "everything I wrote about the theatre was an attempt to pay tribute to my intellectual father"¹ [emphasis added]. While Brustein was obviously sincere in his admiration for Trilling, his assertion cried out for verification through an examination of his writings. Thus, I resolved to focus on Brustein's published texts.

Influence, however, has much wider meaning than simply the identification of those instances when an author explicitly draws upon a predecessor's ideas. In Brustein's case, many of his most deeply held values seemed to have been shaped by Trilling. Consequently, to a large extent the influence may be unconscious, buried so deep in memory that Brustein himself may be unaware of the echoes. Nevertheless, if Harold Bloom's assertion in The Anxiety of Influence is true and criticism is "the art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poem,"² then critical analysis should reveal traces of Trilling's ideas in Brustein's work, as Brustein indicated. Connections could be

¹ Robert Brustein, Dumbocracy in America: Studies in the Theatre of Guilt, 1987 - 1994 (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 1994), 258.

² Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence, 96.

made between essays separated by many years and written under extremely different circumstances, because they shared a common heritage. It may be difficult to establish conclusively that a given Trilling essay served as the direct inspiration for an essay of Brustein's, but if influence existed, there should be some slight family resemblance.

Although my primary focus was the published work of Brustein and Trilling, I could not ignore the fact that one of these figures is still living and writing. The opportunity to query him about some of my ideas was, I thought, too valuable to pass up in the interests of detachment or objectivity. Therefore, in December 1996, in the early stages of my research, I wrote to Brustein to inform him of my work. He responded not long after, expressing support for my undertaking, and indicating a willingness to look over my chapters and "offer any advice I might have."³ Wary of compromising my scholarly independence, I decided against accepting his help exactly as offered. However, a year later, in December of 1997, I did interview him, speaking with him twice during a trip to Cambridge. I found him to be thoughtful, charming, and willing to discuss any topic I wished to raise. His responses to my questions provided supplemental background and clarification, and supported several of my observations, but provided nothing that differed significantly from what I had garnered from his writings. As a result, I felt justified in having focused my research in the way that I had.

This study, however, is not intended as an examination of Brustein's entire oeuvre, and even less so of Trilling's. I have chosen only those ideas that seemed to me most interesting, important, and suggestive within the context of

³ Robert Brustein, letter to Scott Walters, January 7, 1997.

their mutual "dispute with the liberal intellectual politics of the time."⁴ This narrow focus necessarily has eliminated many critical, literary, theatrical, and historical events to which Brustein responded, but which fall outside of the scope of this study. Missing is any discussion of Brustein's practical work in the theatre, for instance, and of his ideas regarding theatre training. Nevertheless, I believe this study focuses on what is most central to Brustein. To use Trilling's terminology, I have examined the "primal imagination" of Brustein's liberalism in the hopes of shedding light on the "present particular manifestations"⁵ illustrated by his writings.

⁴ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 261.

⁵ Lionel Trilling, The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), xv.

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been able to complete this study.

But most of all, I want to thank my beautiful wife, Laura, who encouraged me when things were dark, applauded me when they got better, and through it all gave me constant support and love. She gave me a reason to keep striving, and I truly could not have finished this without her.

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CHAPTER 1

The final essay of Robert Brustein's 1994 book, Dumbocracy in America: Studies in the Theatre of Guilt, 1987-1994, is entitled, "Lionel Trilling: Memories of an Intellectual Father." As the title suggests, the essay describes the enormous influence Trilling had on Brustein's decision to become a critic, and on the shape that his criticism has taken over the years since then. Looking back over his thirty-five years as theatre critic for The New Republic, Brustein states that his work was "an attempt to bring [Trilling's] literary and human values to bear on the themes of dramatic works," concluding that "everything I wrote about the theatre was an attempt to pay tribute" to Trilling.¹ Following that essay, Brustein appended a postscript in which he defends his decision to end his book with a tribute to Trilling, despite Trilling's "lifelong indifference to the stage." He explains, "I deliberately placed this essay at the conclusion. It seemed to complete a circle."²

It is a telling metaphor, for the path a circle traces first moves away from the point of origin, before the curve begins to move back again. In many ways, such a progression describes the critical relationship of Robert Brustein and Lionel Trilling, and the path that Brustein's critical writings took over the years. Starting from a point of admiration and imitation, Brustein moved away from Trilling during the early years of his career as he revolted against some of Trilling's ideas. He undertook a career as a critic of theatre, an art form Trilling

¹Robert Brustein, Dumbocracy in America: Studies in the Theatre of Guilt, 1987 - 1994 (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 1994), 258.

² Ibid., 261.

disdained, and slowly made his way back to many of Trilling's basic principles, aspiring toward a role in theatre criticism similar to Trilling's role in literary criticism. As Brustein notes in his postscript, "My continuing quarrel with the simplistic politics of the American theatre resembles in kind (not, of course, in subtlety) Trilling's dispute with the liberal intellectual politics of his time." He goes on, "My teacher's arguments stemmed from a deep sympathy with basic liberal values, and so do mine."³ In a recent interview, Brustein elaborated on this statement, telling me that "like Trilling, I was trying to find a liberal position at a time when liberalism either was in disrepute or was terribly misunderstood or terrible things were happening in its name."⁴

There are many who would disagree with Brustein's self-description, and instead label him, as one critic for the Village Voice recently did, the "darling" of the neoconservative set.⁵ But if, as John Henry Raleigh says in Matthew Arnold and American Culture, "Man is known by the tradition in which he sees himself,"⁶ then such a strong statement of intellectual influence is telling. Coming as it does near the end of a long and illustrious career, one must accept, at least for the sake of argument, Brustein's evaluation of the trajectory of his career, and of his basic philosophy. The questions that arise for the scholar from such a statement are manifold, but the most important ones for me are these: 1) what traces of Trilling's influence can be seen in the critical writings of Robert Brustein? And, as important, what aspects of Trilling's ideas does he reject or ignore? 2) How has Brustein interpreted and adapted

³ Ibid.

⁴ Robert Brustein, interview by author, Tape recording, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2 December, 1997.

⁵ Richard Goldstein, "Extreme Fighting," Village Voice, 28 January 1997, 47.

⁶ John Henry Raleigh, Matthew Arnold and American Culture (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1961), 225.

Trilling's ideas for his own purposes? To follow the central idea of Harold Bloom's The Anxiety of Influence, how has Brustein "read" or "misread" Trilling's work in creating his own? 3) To what extent has Brustein's retrospective identification of Trilling as an intellectual mentor reflected his actual behavior, and to what extent does it reflect a desire to recast his own work within a particular tradition? These are the central preoccupations of the pages that follow.

Brustein and Trilling at Columbia

Brustein came into personal contact with Trilling in 1949, when he was a master's student in English at Columbia University and Trilling was a full professor in the English Department. Trilling was at the height of his powers and fame with the publication of his most influential book, The Liberal Imagination, and Brustein, aged twenty-three and "at a stage when intellectual influences have an emotional power amounting almost to a passion,"⁷ was strongly drawn to the older critic. According to Brustein, The Liberal Imagination "dazzled me. It was so exquisitely written and so finely thought and nuanced that I just immediately thought he must be the greatest writer in America as far as criticism was concerned."⁸ The attraction was not only intellectual, but emotional as well. "I imagined Trilling was my father," Brustein writes candidly in his tribute, "the passion I felt for him was filial."⁹

While in many respects Trilling reminded Brustein of his own father, "another gentle Jew with deep-set eyes and snow-white hair,"¹⁰ Max Brustein

⁷Brustein, Dumbocracy, 256.

⁸ Brustein, "Interview December 2."

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

had barely completed the fourth grade and was largely unable to understand his son's scholarly ambitions, much less encourage and cultivate them. Feeling the need for an admired older man to serve as mentor, Brustein "adopted" Trilling and became a devoted follower, scribbling "crabbed notes in bulging notebooks, recording his insights on Wordsworth or Keats or Coleridge."¹¹

Such a projection of fatherly attributes onto Trilling, while clearly indicative of Brustein's deep feelings, was not unique. The feelings were shared by many of Brustein's classmates as well. In her autobiographical book, The Beginning of the Journey, Trilling's wife Diana composes a list of gifted students taught by Trilling who have gone on to become respected intellectuals in America. She concludes by saying that, while Trilling may have influenced the critical and political lives of these students, he was "also a father figure to many of the young men he taught."¹² Evidence of this is ubiquitous in writings about him. Phillip Lopate, for instance, in "Remembering Lionel Trilling," makes a connection strikingly similar to Brustein's own, relating Trilling to his own father and noting that his "need for an approving father persisted over the years."¹³ Norman Podhoretz, in his autobiography Making It, devotes an entire chapter to "The Family Tree" of New York Jewish intellectuals,¹⁴ listing Trilling as one of the "Founding Fathers."¹⁵ Carrying this idea further, in an essay entitled "The 'Intelligentsia' in American Society," Daniel Bell offers a formal genealogy

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Diana Trilling, The Beginning of the Journey: The Marriage of Diana and Lionel Trilling (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1993), 401. For much of Trilling's career at Columbia, only male students were accepted into Columbia College.

¹³ Phillip Lopate, "Remembering Lionel Trilling," American Review 25 (1976): 165.

¹⁴ Norman Podhoretz, Making It (New York: Random House, 1967), 109-136.

¹⁵ Ibid., 111.

of "The New York Jewish Intellectuals c. 1935 - c. 1965," listing Trilling as one of "The Elders," and including Brustein as one of "The Younger Brothers" along with the likes of Norman Podhoretz, Steven Marcus, Jason Epstein, Norman Mailer, and Susan Sontag [sic].¹⁶ Trilling served as the bridge for a great number of young men into the bosom of the intellectual "family," welcoming them into the fold with their first publishing opportunity in one of the "family" journals to which Trilling was attached -- Commentary or The Partisan Review. As Lopate notes, and he might well be speaking for Brustein, Trilling had "the one power that I needed from my father that he did not seem able to give--that of welcoming me into adult life."¹⁷ This adult life was the life of the literary intellectual, vigorously engaged in the life of the mind, and surrounded by a family of like minds.

At the point at which Brustein first met Trilling, however, such a life was still a dream. Brustein's previous contact with this heady group had been confined to reading Trilling's essays with a "tremor of excitement whenever they appeared in The Partisan Review."¹⁸ His first class with his "intellectual hero"¹⁹ was a large lecture course Trilling taught on nineteenth-century Romantic poets. Despite the class' vast size -- Brustein was one of 200 to 300 students -- he imagined Trilling was speaking directly to him.²⁰ From the first, Brustein was "enthralled by the man,"²¹ despite his rather lackluster lecturing style, a result of

¹⁶ Daniel Bell, "The 'Intelligentsia' in American Society," Chap. in The Winding Passage: Essays and Sociological Journeys 1960 - 1980 (Cambridge, MA: ABT Books, 1980), 127-128.

¹⁷ Lopate, 165.

¹⁸ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 255.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 255.

²¹ Ibid.

Trilling's discomfort and dislike of such enormous lecture courses. As Lopate remembers, Trilling "did not have one of those shining deliveries that other popular professors enjoyed. Often he seemed puzzled as to why so many people had come to listen to him chase his thoughts."²² Some of these "other popular professors" included Professor of Dramatic Literature Joseph Wood Krutch, noted eighteenth-century scholar Marjorie Nicolson, the prolific classicist Moses Hadas, and the Renaissance scholar S. F. Johnson. Trilling had a comparatively hesitant style of delivery for which his brilliance had to compensate. Brustein, like so many of Trilling's students who would later write about him, hung on his every word, reveling in his "retiring, unfailingly courteous manner" and hoping that he "might break into an intimate reflection, a sudden revelation of his personal life."²³ Brustein had to admit, however, that lecturing "was not his native gift."²⁴

It was in seminars that Trilling's strengths came to the fore, and two years later Brustein applied for admission to the legendary doctoral seminar in literature that Trilling taught with Jacques Barzun. Despite his interest in drama, which lay outside the scope of the seminar, Brustein was determined to join, and requested an admittance interview. Since Barzun was on leave the first semester, Brustein had his interview with Trilling alone, and his ambition was nearly derailed when he and Trilling disagreed over the subject of theatre.

Trilling was not happy about Brustein's theatrical pursuits. "Drama for him was what Sir Philip Sidney called a poor stepsister of the arts," Brustein

²² Lopate, 151.

²³ Brustein, *Dumbocracy*, 255-56.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 255.

explains, "not a serious literary pursuit."²⁵ Brustein disagreed, pointing to the works of Shakespeare and Moliere, Sophocles and Racine as evidence for the drama's importance as an art form. "Better on the page than staled upon the stage," was Trilling's reply, leading Brustein to conclude, to his dismay, that what "seemed to provoke his disdain was the dramatic genre itself."²⁶ Despite their disagreement over this issue, Brustein was accepted into the seminar.

Trilling's narrowness of focus concerning what constituted a "serious literary pursuit" was shared by English Department students as well. Podhoretz, who followed Brustein at Columbia and was also a student of Trilling's, writes about the intellectual atmosphere at Columbia in his essay, "Jewish Culture and the Intellectuals." Describing himself and his fellow students, with some irony, as "grim and earnest young intellectuals," Podhoretz notes that they considered themselves "the direct heirs and propagators of Western civilization, and we felt chosen to study, teach, and possibly contribute to it. It was a glorious mission, demanding discipline of mind and spirit as arduous in its way as a monastic calling."²⁷ This exaggerated seriousness of purpose fed the general contempt for theatre, which was surrounded by the glitz and glamour of production and therefore lacked the solemnity necessary for sober consideration and respect.

Podhoretz describes an experience similar to Brustein's, when his interest in Jewish literature and culture was greeted with hostility by his fellow students, most of whom were themselves Jewish. He was similarly derided for

²⁵ Ibid., 256.

²⁶ Robert Brustein, "Lionel Trilling: Memories of a Mentor," The Yale Review 76 (Winter 1987):163. This is an earlier version of the one printed in Dumbocracy in America. While the ideas of each essay are similar, many of the details differ in telling ways, and I will draw from each as needed.

²⁷ Norman Podhoretz, Doings and Undoings: The Fifties and After in American Writing (New York: Farrar, Straus & Company, 1964), 115.

enrolling in a course in Oriental literature, both subjects which his compatriots considered “outside the proper concern of a true fledgling in Western civilization . . . [and] irrelevant and therefore wasteful and sinful.”²⁸ Such prejudices were strong and long lasting. Years later, Brustein still shows evidence of his resentment when he states that Trilling continued to find his interests “somewhat frivolous.”²⁹ Such feelings would serve as fuel to fire Brustein’s ambitions to justify the genre in Trilling’s eyes by applying Trilling’s critical values to dramatic literature and demonstrating its worthiness for thoughtful consideration.

Once accepted into the seminar, which was composed of “ten or eleven of Trilling’s disciples,”³⁰ Brustein’s writing soon began to attract attention. An essay on James Joyce’s Ulysses, a book of particular interest to Trilling, was received warmly by both Brustein’s fellow students and Trilling, and “overnight,” according to Brustein, he became one of the “Trilling elect.”³¹ As with so many descriptions of Trilling’s activities, there is a hint of clannishness here, of being initiated into an intellectual fellowship and allowed to take a first step toward an inner sanctum.

The following semester, with Barzun now returned from leave and adding his own insights into the mix of the seminar, Brustein submitted an essay on Mozart’s Don Giovanni entitled “The Hero as Seducer.” Years later, Brustein would use the ideas developed in this essay as the basis for his 1970 production of Molière’s Don Juan at the Yale Repertory Theatre. Inspired by

²⁸ Ibid., 117.

²⁹ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 258.

³⁰ Ibid., 257.

³¹ Ibid.

Søren Kierkegaard's "The Immediate Stages of the Erotic," Brustein describes a Don Juan who was "not just a literary invention but a character that fulfilled some deep need in Judaic-Christian culture. He had assumed the importance of a myth, embodying the force of seduction in a sexually repressed society" that condemned as immoral nonmarital sex. Thus, Brustein drew a parallel between Don Juan and Eros and Aphrodite.³² Reaction was mixed. "Barzun trashed the essay," Brustein writes. "Trilling sat back bemused."³³ It was "a pretty raunchy essay," Brustein admitted. "Trilling was much more bourgeois in his leanings than I was at the time, so I'm not sure what he thought. But I think he recognized that I had critical abilities."³⁴

After class, Trilling asked to see Brustein in his office, where he suggested that he contact his friend Robert Warshow at Commentary to do a book review. While Brustein does not conjecture as to what about his essay might have led Trilling to make such an offer, Brustein's characterization of his reaction as "bemused" indicates an admiration for the audacity of Brustein's mind as much as an interest in his idea per se.

An examination of Trilling's writings reveals that Brustein's essay did touch upon areas Trilling himself had explored, and in ways that Trilling would have approved. In "The Meaning of a Literary Idea," Trilling indicates that ideas, whose force and depth determine the value of a work of literature, "may be generated in the opposition of ideals."³⁵ In other essays, Trilling had used the

³² Robert Brustein, Making Scenes: A Personal History of the Turbulent Years at Yale 1966 - 1979 (New York: Random House, 1981), 103 - 104.

³³ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 257.

³⁴ Brustein, "Interview December 2."

³⁵ Lionel Trilling, The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), 298.

word "ideal" in a very special sense to mean those values and beliefs which control or repress the primitive forces which Trilling, following Freud, saw as underlying human life. Ideals, therefore, are a society's super-ego, which function to control with social pressure the basic appetites of humanity. For Trilling, who throughout his life used Freud as a source of ideas regarding humanity's relationship to society, sexuality was one of the most powerful forces controlled by society's ideals. Thus, Brustein's unpublished and now lost essay, which emphasized the clash between sexuality and society and recognized the force of ideas that result from such a clash, would have presented an interesting echo of Trilling's own writings at the time. Perhaps sensing in Brustein an independent and venturesome mind, one with "a style and a sensibility,"³⁶ Trilling was drawn to "adopt" Brustein and initiate him into the "Family."

Brustein was, of course, ecstatic when Warshow followed Trilling's recommendation and gave Brustein an anthology of short stories published by the Saturday Evening Post to review. The book review grew into a short featured article entitled, "The New Faith of the Saturday Evening Post: Saviors for Lost Sheep," which was published in 1953. In it, Brustein asserts that the common theme running through the stories was "adoption." Thirty-four years later, in his tribute to Trilling, Brustein wonders whether he was "thinking about my relationship to my adopted father"³⁷ when he wrote the essay.

Brustein notes a pattern in the stories that is "emphatically moral and even religious"³⁸ and that adheres to the following general outline: "a powerful

³⁶ Brustein, "Interview December 2."

³⁷ Brustein, "Mentor," 164.

³⁸ Robert Brustein, "The New Faith of the Saturday Evening Post: Saviors for Lost Sheep" Partisan Review 20 (1953): 367.

person experiences a difficulty which is resolved through the generous impulse of someone weaker; by his own considerable power or through mysterious intimacy with 'higher-ups,' the stronger then rewards the weaker, and the weaker is subsequently adopted."³⁹ While Brustein sees in these stories a hint of the "direction in which the fantasies of at least some Americans are tending,"⁴⁰ and communicates his scorn for such fantasies throughout his analysis, his later comments seem to indicate that he himself was not immune to them. For, with the publication of this essay, Brustein was living out in his own life the pattern he describes in his review. As a result of Trilling's powerful intervention, Brustein had been plucked from obscurity and placed on the public stage, where his utterances were available to be evaluated and considered by the public at large, as well as those Partisan Review intellectuals whom Brustein had so long admired. This opportunity served as his pathway into the intellectual community to which he aspired, and for Brustein there was no turning back. "Trilling had determined me in a career as a critic," Brustein writes. "His help and example had resolved my life."⁴¹

The reward that Brustein describes as typical of this new pattern in his review of the anthology was "the security of a cloistered and protected life under the guardianship of a higher authority."⁴² With Trilling as mentor, this meant joining him "in his areas of interest: nineteenth-century literature, American literature, modern British literature."⁴³ For Brustein, however, whose passion for

³⁹ Ibid., 368.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 369.

⁴¹ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 257.

⁴² Brustein, "The New Faith of the Saturday Evening Post, 368.

⁴³ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 257-258.

the theatre continued to grow despite Trilling's disapproval, this was not possible. The cloister was too confining. As Diana Trilling notes, Trilling's tendency to serve as a father figure "meant that at some point in their relation to him [his disciples] were bound to rebel against his authority."⁴⁴ For Brustein, this observation was prescient.

At approximately the same time as the publication of his first essay in Commentary, Brustein received a Fulbright to study abroad at the University of Nottingham in England. He returned two years later to serve as an instructor in the English department at Cornell University, and the following year as an instructor in drama at Vassar College.

In 1957, he received his doctorate from Columbia and was hired as a lecturer in drama in the Columbia University English department. A year later, he was made an Assistant Professor of dramatic literature. At this point, he seemed well on his way to following in the footsteps of his mentor, combining a teaching career at Columbia with the occasional publication of an essay in magazines such as Commentary and The Partisan Review, both venues for the work of Trilling as well.

Two years later, however, was a turning point. In that year, "mildly bored by teaching English composition and dramatic literature surveys,"⁴⁵ Brustein took a year off as a full-time professor to pursue an acting career. He maintained a foot in academia by continuing to teach part-time at Columbia. After a year of auditioning and performing in the occasional play or television show, Brustein concluded that the life of the professional actor was "neither

⁴⁴ Trilling, Beginning of the Journey, 401.

⁴⁵ Brustein, Making Scenes, 6.

personally satisfying nor creatively fulfilling"⁴⁶ and returned to teaching. In the fall of that year he was hired by The New Republic as dramatic critic.

"I edged cautiously into a reviewing career," Brustein writes in the forward to Seasons of Discontent, his first anthology of dramatic reviews. In an oblique reference to Trilling, foreshadowing his later statement concerning his mentor's influence on his critical approach, Brustein states, "[I was] curious to see if a declining theatre could still be subjected to the same rigorous tests that were currently being applied to literature, poetry, music, and painting."⁴⁷ Predictably, he is frustrated by the dismal state of the American theatre, where he found little he could offer to counter Trilling's negative opinion. As he writes, "most American plays were exuding an ooze of squalid contentment," and as a result they had "lost their relevance to the deeper realities of contemporary life."⁴⁸ Reminded daily of the theatre's potential by the great plays to which he was introducing his students in his dramatic literature classes at Columbia, and appalled by the impoverished nature of the drama he faced on the stages of New York, Brustein says he joined "the ranks of those who had warred upon Broadway as a cultural institution, underlining its inadequacies, exposing its values, anatomizing its fakes, and attacking its heroes and saints."⁴⁹

This chain of events was inevitable, and his description of them may be as much a justification for his own aggressive approach to reviewing as a description of his reason for undertaking dramatic criticism. If, as he says, he was of the opinion that the theatre was declining, then it should not have come

⁴⁶ Ibid. 7.

⁴⁷ Robert Brustein, Seasons of Discontent: Dramatic Opinions 1959 - 1965 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 14.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 15.

as a surprise that it would suffer in the face of rigorous criticism. What is more likely is that he sought, through his attacks, to make the theatre aware of its own poverty, and thus shame it into change. In this, he wished to assume the role of the public intellectual, one of those revered figures whose ideas create, or at least influence, the atmosphere in which practitioners make their decisions. Much of the dramatic criticism being written at the time, as Brustein repeatedly noted, was on the level of consumer reports. It was Brustein's desire to introduce the theatre into the wider intellectual exchange, in the hope that such discourse would lead practitioners to aspire to higher levels of accomplishment.

This desire to lead the theatre, prophet-like, out of its intellectual desert reflects the oversized ego that Brustein has often been accused of possessing. While such confidence in his own vision may have been necessary on a personal level for one so young and relatively inexperienced Brustein to advance his opinions with confidence, it also reflected a certain arrogance and superiority regarding the intelligence and taste of the rest of the theatrical community. Writing in the era that had seen intellectuals experiencing increasing influence on all aspects of American society, such a belief in the intellectual's power would not have been incongruous. Indeed, it was one of the central points Trilling made in his contribution to "Our Country and Our Culture," an essay which serves as an object of attack in Brustein's 1961 essay, "The Madison Avenue Villain."

In that essay, Brustein seized upon what he considered a cheapening of the literary field by Trilling himself. He chose for his attack the pages of The Partisan Review, the place where Trilling continued to build upon his reputation as the premiere man of American letters. This was akin to attacking the lion in its den, but was not without precedent. Indeed, "The Family" of New York

intellectuals seems to have possessed great appreciation for those members of the younger generation who mounted intellectually respectable attacks upon one of its established members. That was the way that Norman Podhoretz had been recognized as a young lion of the Partisan Review crowd eight years earlier, when he published, in the face of positive reviews from Trilling and corroborating opinions from others, a scathing review of Saul Bellow's novel The Adventures of Augie March. Bellow himself, who was considered "The Family's" most promising novelist and who was given a copy of the galley of Podhoretz's review prior to publication, had responded violently, lobbying several members of the editorial board to cancel the review. The resulting brouhaha catapulted Podhoretz into prominence in the minds of "The Family." Admittedly "jealous of [Trilling's] other sons" such as Podhoretz, Brustein may have published "The Madison Avenue Villain" in an attempt to garner similar attention. Surely an attack upon Trilling, the Grand Old Man of American letters, would be more effective than attacking Bellow.

The essay takes as its starting point the change in the American imagination of the allegorical image of the villain from "the grasping Wall Street financier who coldly victimized a wide-eyed American Everyman" to the villain of Madison Avenue mentioned in the title: a bland "man without a self" who is seen as a "confused victim of the complexities of modern life" in an "Ivy League suit, Brooks Brothers shirt, and Oppenheimer haircut." While lacking the melodramatic contours of the previous villain, Brustein notes that this Organization Man is nonetheless implicated in the

manipulation of consumer and voter opinion by commercial repetition; the false, misleading and fatuous quality of modern advertising; the invidious control by the ad and talent agencies over the mass media; the vacuity and violence pervasive in TV; the slavish deference of networks and advertisers to ratings reports;

and the general defeat of truth and spontaneity by blandness and uniformity.⁵⁰

The Madison Avenue Villain is the Man in the Grey Flannel suit as villain. In another swipe at a Partisan Review darling, this time sociologist David Riesman, Brustein condemns the "neutralizing haze" that is created by such books as Riesman's The Lonely Crowd, which Brustein asserts transforms the Man in the Grey Flannel Suit into "the confused victim of the complexities of modern life," while at the same time excoriating the effects that this so-called victim has on American society. Instead of provoking from critics hatred and condemnation for such men, such books instead encouraged expressions of sympathy, with the result that the villains of Madison Avenue are not held accountable for their own actions. Brustein sees the ascendancy of this slippery Madison Avenue character as a mystification and obscuring of the true source of power in America, the real-life Wall Street mogul.

Brustein begins his attack on Trilling by first identifying ex-radicals-turned-anti-communist elders as partly responsible for the demise of the image of the old Wall Street villain and the ascendance of the new Madison Avenue version. With the rise of McCarthyism, these ex-radicals (of which Trilling was the most prominent) had gone from attempting to change the system to attempting to defend it. Lest the reference to Trilling be missed, Brustein singles out a nine-year-old Partisan Review symposium entitled "Our Country and Our Culture," in which Trilling played an important role, as an example of the depths to which the ranks of the radical intellectuals had sunk: the entire symposium "consisted of repudiating the old attitudes of dissent in favor of a more positive attitude towards American middle-class values."⁵¹ Their vigilance down,

⁵⁰ Robert Brustein, "The Madison Avenue Villain," Partisan Review 28 (1961): 575 - 77.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 581.

intellectuals had allowed the seemingly benign but actually dangerous and insidious Madison Avenue Villain to gain control with little struggle.

To make matters worse, many intellectuals had become interested in American popular culture, expressing cause for optimism rather than attacking it for its "malign effect on the brains and nerves of the American people."⁵² This uncritical attitude Brustein attributes to the fact that "many critics were now involved in this system themselves and feared endangering their own interests."⁵³ Brustein passionately asserts that the intellectual's increasingly welcome entry into the arena of mass media is not an encouraging sign of the increasing interest of the American middle class to matters of the mind, but rather an unsettling sign of the increasing cooptation of the intellectual classes by Big Business (through the agency of the Madison Avenue Villain), with a resultant silencing (or self-censorship) of potential voices of dissent.

It is at this point, when talking about the coopting of the American intellectual, that Brustein moves from the general to the specific. Starting on safe ground, he first takes to task what might be called the middle-brow intellectuals in grey flannel suits, those who "convert the objects of the intellect into commodities which can be sold across the counter like a bar of soap."⁵⁴ He mentions by name Mitch Miller, Groucho and Harpo Marx, Alistaire Cooke and William Saroyan, Leonard Bernstein and David Susskind, all of whom "help to dignify the media's debauching of culture"⁵⁵ by debasing their own potentially considerable talents in pursuit of fame, money, and power. This is fairly safe

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 583.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 589.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 590.

ground for Brustein, since these figures would be generally recognized by members of the Partisan Review intellectual family as legitimate objects of scorn. Brustein then shifts his attention to a second group of “intellectual middlemen” that includes “some of our most distinguished intellectuals,”⁵⁶ including Trilling.

At the time that Brustein wrote this essay, Trilling was serving, along with Jacques Barzun and W. H. Auden, as one of the editors of The Readers' Subscription, a commercial book club aimed at cultivating what Diana Trilling describes as a “more discriminating public”⁵⁷ through the offering of a mixture of classics and contemporary literature of recognized high quality. Brustein finds such activities highly suspicious, roundly condemning the intellectuals who promote them for reducing themselves to “part-time or full-time commercial salesmen.”⁵⁸ Most damning in Brustein's eyes, these intellectuals break what he calls an “unspoken covenant” that “helps shake our resistance to whatever is pernicious in the culture.”⁵⁹ No longer possessing the clear perspective of outsiders, intellectuals lose their ability to recognize the faults of society and speak against them. The result is an increasingly rapid descent into the mire of the lowest common denominator.

Once again blaming the “intellectual's recent rapprochement with the American middle class” for this abandoning of the intellectual's traditional post on the fringes of society, Brustein warns that no matter how good the intentions, debasement is inevitable. “The book clubs,” he admonishes, “if originated for

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Trilling, Beginning of the Journey, 265.

⁵⁸ Brustein, “Madison Avenue Villain,” 591.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

discriminating readers, soon run out of quality books, or, forced to seek a wider membership, soon lower their standards, with the result that the critic starts writing inflated blurbs for second-rate literature."⁶⁰ This is a frontal attack on Trilling, whose responsibilities as co-editor of the Readers' Subscription included not only choosing the club's monthly selection, but also providing short critical essays for the Griffin, the monthly newsletter sent out to subscribers. The object of Brustein's attack could not have been clearer.

Brustein ends his essay by calling for intellectuals to restore the "failing values of the intellectual community -- honor, dignity, integrity -- by returning to the traditional postures of idealism and dissent"; they must abandon the temptations of the marketplace so as to avoid the tendency to "soften or suppress what [they know] for the sake of an expanded pocketbook."⁶¹ "To my very purist eyes in those days," Brustein told me, Trilling was "churning out these essays about books that he was selling," and this connection between art and commerce "struck me as being something of a conflict of interest."⁶² Thus, Brustein accuses Trilling and others like him of selling their souls, and ultimately the soul of America, for personal gain.

The truth was that Trilling, who signed on with The Readers' Subscription because it was being run by a former student, never earned very much money from the venture; in fact, Diana Trilling says the most he ever made was \$500 a month, and usually considerably less.⁶³ In addition, according to Diana Trilling,

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 593.

⁶² Brustein, "Interview December 2." Brustein now acknowledges that he himself now engages in a similar activity, writing articles about plays for the programs of the American Repertory Theatre, "so I'm no better than he was as far as salesmanship is concerned." ("Interview December 2.)

⁶³ Trilling, Beginning of the Journey, 266.

the essays Trilling wrote for The Griffin “reveal enough care and thought to raise the question whether at this stage of his career he should have been expending his energies this prodigally.”⁶⁴ He was not a fast writer, and each essay took considerable time to compose--time that might have been used writing more important essays. In this sense, Brustein's belief was correct: Trilling's involvement with the book club did detract from his critical work by demanding his continued attention to the selection and description of each month's offering. Trilling's motivation for doing so, however, does not appear as venal as Brustein paints it. Rather, it seems a natural extension of his classroom activities, bringing the benefits of literature to a wider audience whom he believed to be hungry for such material. While Trilling never responded to Brustein's attack, Brustein notes laconically that “for a time relations between us cooled.”⁶⁵

While years later, Brustein would characterize this assault on Trilling's integrity as pompous,⁶⁶ at the time it seemed a necessary step for the intellectual “son” trying to move out of the shadow of such a brilliant “father.” At age thirty-four, Brustein's attack on Trilling reflected not only the revolt against the father figure mentioned above by Diana Trilling, but also more generally the growing impatience among the younger generation of New York intellectuals to be allowed to take their place at the table--a sentiment expressed most cogently by Daniel Bell in an essay published in The New Leader in 1957. The younger generation was unable to revolt against the elders and assume a more prominent role, Bell wrote, because the elders themselves had led their own counter-revolt, performing the purge usually done by the younger generation.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 258.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

During the 1930s, the older generation had been fiery radicals, promoting the ideas of communism and the image of the Soviet Union as a model for American social change in the midst of the Depression. The disillusion that resulted from Stalin's sham Moscow Trials, as well as the Nazi-Soviet pact, however, led to a sudden collapse of their belief in a socialist future. The resulting anti-communist sentiments, embraced by all but the most radical of the New York intellectuals, led to a belief, Norman Podhoretz wrote in 1957, that "liberalism was guilty of a failure to take a sufficiently complicated view of reality."⁶⁷

In short, they had been naive. As a result of this disillusion, continued Podhoretz, "Complexity became a key word in the discourse of the period," not only for the older generation, but for the younger upon whom it was impressed, exercising an almost "thaumaturgic hold" upon their imaginations.⁶⁸ To the young people educated in the 40s and early 50s,

it seemed that a war was being fought in American culture between two styles of asserting one's seriousness as an intellectual: the old style of "alienation," represented by a commitment to the ideal of Revolution and an apartment in Greenwich Village on the one hand, and, on the other, the new style of 'maturity.' The new style was not very clearly defined, but there was no doubt that its shape and color had to express the conviction that a life dedicated to ideas and art was possible within "bourgeois" society."⁶⁹

This move from opposition to the main currents of American life, to accepting and being willing to work within the system, represented a considerable change in attitude for this generation of intellectuals, whose life in the thirties had been

⁶⁷ Norman Podhoretz, "The Young Generation" chap. in Doings and Undoings: Fifties and After in American Writing (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Co., 1964), 107.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 108.

confined to what Irving Howe called “the little magazine as island, the radical sect as cave.”⁷⁰ Now “the world seemed to be opening up, with all its charms, seductions, and falsities.”⁷¹ What brought about these changes? “Partly ideological adaptation,” Howe admits,

A feeling that capitalist society was here to stay and there wasn't much point in maintaining a radical position. Partly the sly workings of prosperity. But also the loosening of society itself, the start of that process which is now [in 1969] in full swing -- I mean the absorptiveness of modern society, its readiness to abandon traditional precepts for a moment of excitement, its growing permissiveness toward social criticism, perhaps out of indifference, or security, or even tolerance.⁷²

Thus, rather than providing a stable set of ideas against which a younger generation could rebel, the older generation had been in almost constant upheaval, and the younger generation had been swept along in their revolution rather than creating their own. To Podhoretz, the result was a younger generation, of which he and Brustein were members, that was prematurely mature through having adopted the viewpoint of their elders without having had the personal experience to support it.

In a prescient statement, Podhoretz concludes his essay by noting that this is a restless generation, and as it grows older it gets more and more restless; it is beginning to feel cheated of its youth . . . Since this is a generation that willed itself from childhood directly into adulthood, it still has its adolescence to go through—for a man can never skip adolescence, he can only postpone it.⁷³

By 1961, when Brustein wrote “The Madison Avenue Villain,” this prediction was beginning to come true. Like many others in intellectual circles, Brustein

⁷⁰ Irving Howe, “The New York Intellectuals,” chap. in Selected Writings 1950 - 1990 (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1990), 259.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Podhoretz, “Young Generation,” 111.

was in adolescent revolt against his intellectual father, and at that time, due to Trilling's activities, this meant rejecting the mass consumer culture that was increasingly dominating American society.

In his essay Brustein claimed the high ground in matters of intellectual and artistic standards. While painting Trilling as willingly absorbed into the mass media culture, helping to give it legitimacy by his presence, Brustein presents himself as standing outside that culture and attacking its malign effects. While the theatre certainly could be seen as a part of what was most suspect in American culture, Brustein was clearly implying in this essay that he, at least, remained unmoved by its siren calls and would remain tied to the mast of quality and dissent regardless of the temptations.

The image of the intellectual as outsider, upholding some higher standard of quality against the onslaughts of the Madison Avenue Villain and the mass mind he represents, is an important one for Brustein throughout his career. A vigorous proponent of high art, Brustein has always fought against the compromises he sees in appealing to a mass audience. And he was far from alone in this at the beginning. For instance, in the spring of 1960, Dwight Macdonald had published in Partisan Review a blistering attack on the deleterious affects of mass culture, entitled "Masscult and Midcult." The personal springboard for Brustein's early attacks does distinguish him from his contemporaries, though. By adopting this mantle of intellectual distance and incorruptibility, Brustein was able to counter Trilling's anti-theatrical snobbery with his own purer snobbery. While the state of the theatre may indeed be dismal, as Trilling never ceased to remind him through his inattention to it, it was nobler to fight the battle to restore the theatre's tarnished reputation to its past glory than to give in to pressures to conform to the lowest common denominator

or reap personal gain. Brustein would identify “the various obstacles in the way of a genuine dramatic art”⁷⁴ and seek to eradicate them by revealing their cheapness. Thus, “The Madison Avenue Villain” was not simply an attack upon Trilling; it was also a counterattack, a revolt, and a declaration of independence as well.

It was not Brustein’s intention to sever ties, but to begin a dialogue. Brustein’s respect for Trilling’s ideas was great, but he seems to have preferred the more radical Trilling of The Liberal Imagination to the more quietistic version that had developed during the 50s. A great many of his writings in the years that followed can be seen as Brustein’s attempt to appeal to Trilling’s more radical past, as well as an attempt to win Trilling’s assent to his choice of fields. That this effort was seen by Brustein as one of reclamation, not conversion, is evident in several essays where Brustein expresses the belief that Trilling, in his “presumably dissolute youth” had “actually been attracted to the theater and had published an early (uncollected) essay on O’Neill.”⁷⁵ Actually, Trilling had published two generally positive essays on O’Neill within a year of each other in 1936 and 1937, but a decade later had revised his opinion considerably downward, dismissing O’Neill as second rate. When Brustein published his book, The Theatre of Revolt, he included a chapter on O’Neill that attempted to embrace tacitly Trilling’s earlier essays, while acknowledging and responding to his later negative comments.

Trilling, Brustein, and O’Neill

There are very few instances of Brustein and Trilling writing about the same subject. Trilling did publish a textbook anthology, The Experience of Literature, in 1967, which includes eight essays on plays included in the

⁷⁴ Brustein, Seasons, 14.

⁷⁵ Brustein, “Mentor,” 163.

anthology—plays Brustein commented upon at one time or another—but Trilling himself downplays the importance of these prefaces. They “say no more than might suggest to the reader how he could come into a more active connection with what he has read,”⁷⁶ he writes. Trilling’s writings on O’Neill, however, offer a thorough analysis of a dramatist, analysis that provided Brustein a first opportunity of initiating a dialogue with him concerning the drama when Theatre of Revolt was published in 1964. Over a quarter century had passed since Trilling wrote his essays, and O’Neill’s place in the pantheon of great American dramatists had since been established. Many plays which were generally regarded as O’Neill’s masterpieces had been written and produced since Trilling’s publications, and Brustein felt that these proved that O’Neill deserved his reputation. In the 1930s, Trilling had great hopes for O’Neill, but serious qualms as well. Brustein’s essay attempted to represent those qualms as legitimate, and to demonstrate that O’Neill had, in fact, overcome the weaknesses Trilling noted, in ways Trilling could not have anticipated.

When Trilling published his first essay on O’Neill in The New Republic in 1936, the author had just won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Malcolm Cowley, then the literary editor for the magazine, commissioned the article from Trilling, who had written only book reviews and short “notes” for several years previously. While it is unclear why Trilling was chosen for this assignment, Brustein’s belief that it is evidence of a youthful passion for the theatre seems unfounded. There is little evidence of such an interest in Trilling’s earlier writings, nor does Diana Trilling mention any such tendencies in her autobiographical account of their marriage, The Beginning of the Journey. Nevertheless, Brustein insists that Trilling told him he “hung around theatres as

⁷⁶ Lionel Trilling, Prefaces to the Experience of Literature, Uniform Edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), x.

a child,"⁷⁷ and it is possible that Trilling might have privately harbored such an attraction. Still, there is something that smacks of wishful thinking in Brustein's assertion.

It is important to keep in mind the historical context of Trilling's 1936 essay on O'Neill, as well as a second essay that followed a year later and served as the introduction to The Modern Library's collection of three plays by O'Neill. O'Neill was only the second American author to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature since its founding in 1901--the other being Sinclair Lewis in 1930. There was, therefore, a great deal of national pride in O'Neill's selection, at a time in America's history when the Depression was continuing to wear down the American spirit. The news of a hero--even a literary one--was most welcome. That two Americans had captured the Prize within a few years of each other seemed to be international recognition of a renaissance in American literature.

Yet O'Neill represented a difficult case for the critical establishment in America, and this is reflected in the irresolution in Trilling's essay. The quality of O'Neill's work varied widely, and his faults were manifold and obvious. In a 1931 review of Mourning Becomes Electra, New York Times reviewer Brooks Atkinson, who generally supported O'Neill's works, summarized this critical struggle: "During several years of strain and bluster most of us have been on Mr. O'Neill's side as a dramatist, though not without misgivings. Although he has been straining after larger themes, his reach has often fallen short and his mind has been truculent and rebellious."⁷⁸ Getting more specific regarding

⁷⁷ Brustein, "Interview December 2."

⁷⁸ Brooks Atkinson, review of Mourning Becomes Electra, in The Critical Response to Eugene O'Neill, edited by John H. Housh, Critical Responses in Arts and Letters 5 (Greenwood Press, 1993), 127.

O'Neill's faults, which he asserts have been overcome in Mourning Becomes Electra, Atkinson notes the "fret and fever of his early work, the truncated thinking, the turgid writing, the elaborate symbolism of masks, the subterfuge of asides, the inarticulation and the collapse into grandiose generalities."⁷⁹

Most of these complaints appear, to a greater or lesser extent, in Trilling's 1936 essay as well, as he struggles to reconcile them with the power that had just been recognized by the international literary community. In the essay, Trilling seems to want to herald the arrival of a new literary "genius," but he doesn't seem able to do so with a full voice. While drawing a parallel between O'Neill's "force of . . . utterance"⁸⁰ and that of Sophocles and Aeschylus, heady company to say the least, he notes that this force exists "despite the many failures of [O'Neill's] art and thought."⁸¹ Such a pattern continues throughout the essay, with each strength presented as overcoming a connected weakness.

This sense of ambivalence is reinforced when one considers the downward turn Trilling's opinion of O'Neill took in the years that followed. While in 1936 and 1937, in the midst of the Great Depression and the widespread enthusiasm over O'Neill's selection by the Nobel committee, Trilling is willing to call O'Neill a "genius," by 1949, following an extended theatrical silence from O'Neill and an uninspired and tepidly received 1946 Theatre Guild production of The Iceman Cometh, his only play produced since receiving the Nobel Prize, Trilling dismisses him for "general inadequacy of mind" and "lack of intellectual power."⁸² This may seem a complete reversal, but the change is primarily one of

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Lionel Trilling, "Eugene O'Neill," chap. in After the Genteel Tradition: American Writers since 1910, ed. Malcolm Crowley (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1937), 127.

⁸¹ Ibid., 128.

⁸² Trilling, Liberal Imagination, 295.

emphasis brought about by a change of context. In 1936, when the uniqueness of O'Neill's vision, the scope of his concerns, and the power of his expression were more important than inadequacies of style and thought, it was important for Trilling to support his experiments. By 1949, the situation had changed, and so had Trilling's opinion.

Indeed, in future years Trilling was so disturbed by his earlier championing of O'Neill that he tried to speed his essay's descent into oblivion. While Cowley thought highly enough of his 1936 essay to reprint it the following year in an anthology entitled After the Genteel Tradition, later in life Trilling would refuse permission for further reprints, explaining simply to his wife, "I find I don't like it."⁸³ For O'Neill enthusiasts, of course, having someone with the stature of Trilling calling O'Neill a "genius" provided great cachet. To Trilling, it simply proved an embarrassment.⁸⁴

Brustein, in his chapter on O'Neill in Theatre of Revolt, seems to attempt to assuage Trilling's embarrassment by showing that he was correct in both his later opinion that O'Neill was inadequate, and in his earlier belief that he was a genius. In The Anxiety of Influence, Harold Bloom writes about the pattern of misprision he calls "tessera," which is "completion and antithesis . . . A poet antithetically 'completes' his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had

⁸³ Trilling, Beginning of the Journey, 258.

⁸⁴ Since Trilling's death, and the expiration of copyright protection, the essay has been reprinted. See, for instance, The Critical Response to Eugene O'Neill, edited by John H. Housh, as the fifth volume in the Greenwood Presses' series, "Critical Responses in Arts and Letters" and published in 1993.

failed to go far enough."⁸⁵ There is a sense that Brustein is unconsciously employing such a strategy. His primary arguments for O'Neill's worthiness begin where Trilling's left off, and his reasons for valuing O'Neill seem to rest on seeing in O'Neill's later plays a change of artistic direction that effectively eliminated the faults that Trilling described. The result is a reversal of Trilling's opinion that seems simply to be completing it.

When Trilling was writing in the 1930s, there continued to be considerable discussion of O'Neill's place in world drama, despite the fact of the recently conferred Nobel Prize. He was, as Trilling noted at the end of his 1937 introduction to the three O'Neill plays, still in "mid-career,"⁸⁶ and few of his plays had been unalloyed triumphs. By the 1964 publication of Theatre of Revolt, O'Neill had been dead for eleven years, and eight years earlier, The Iceman Cometh had been revived in a critically hailed production that ran 565 performances at Circle in the Square. In addition, Long Day's Journey Into Night had received its premiere and had posthumously garnered O'Neill his fourth Pulitzer Prize. These successes were followed in quick succession by equally well-received productions of A Moon for the Misbegotten and A Touch of the Poet, both of which served to reinforce the growing acknowledgment of O'Neill's status as a master. While Eric Bentley, in his famous 1951 essay "Trying to Like O'Neill," had reluctantly acknowledged O'Neill as the "leading American playwright; damn him, damn all . . .,"⁸⁷ by 1964 most critics were no

⁸⁵ Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 14. While Bloom's book focuses on the "anxiety of influence" in poets, in the interchapter in which he describes his concept of antithetical criticism, he broadens the discussion to include criticism, noting that "all criticism is prose poetry," and that "just as a poet must be found by the opening in a precursor poet, so must the critic." (95)

⁸⁶ Lionel Trilling, "Introduction," in The Emperor Jones, Anna Christie, The Hairy Ape, by Eugene O'Neill (New York: The Modern Library, 1937), xix.

⁸⁷ Eric Bentley, In Search of Theatre (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, Inc., 1954), 220.

longer even bothering to damn O'Neill, and were, in fact, praising him. Thus, Brustein's laudatory opinions regarding O'Neill were generally shared. From the perspective of Brustein's attempt to address Trilling's undervaluing of the drama, it was less important to prove wrong Trilling's later dismissal of O'Neill than to show that the context had once again changed.

Brustein begins his chapter by acknowledging that, in the past, the issue of O'Neill's reputation has been "controversial,"⁸⁸ and that earlier negative evaluations such as Trilling's had a great deal of truth. O'Neill's earlier plays "are not without value," Brustein admits,

though none is thoroughly satisfying. Some contain powerful scenes; some have interesting themes; and some are sustained by the sheer force of the author's will. Still, the bulk of O'Neill's dramatic writings before Ah Wilderness! are like the groping preparatory speeches of one who had to write badly in order to write well; and in comparison with the late O'Neill even intermittently effective dramas like The Hairy Ape, All God's Chillun Got Wings, and Desire Under the Elms are riddled with fakery, incoherence, and clumsy experimental devices. No major dramatist, with the possible exception of Shaw, has written so many second-rate plays.⁸⁹

However, echoing general critical opinion, Brustein asserts that "O'Neill will be primarily remembered for his last plays,"⁹⁰ i.e., those plays written and produced since Trilling's negative opinions of 1949. The most important task of the O'Neill critic, he explains, is to "account for the extraordinary disparity in style and quality between the earlier and the later work."⁹¹

He does this by splitting O'Neill's career into two stages. The first, which

⁸⁸ Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964; reprint, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1991), 321.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 321.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

begins with The S. S. Glencairn plays and extends through Days Without End, encompasses all those plays that Trilling had available to him when he wrote his essays in the late 1930s, and which Brustein describes as unsatisfying. The second stage begins with a play that Trilling had dismissed, but which Brustein says was "transitional," Ah Wilderness!.⁹² This second stage continues to the end of O'Neill's career, and includes The Iceman Cometh and A Long Day's Journey Into Night, both of which Brustein calls "genuine masterpieces of the modern theatre."⁹³ By contrasting these two stages, Brustein hopes to "illustrate O'Neill's development from a self-conscious and imitative pseudo-artist into a genuine tragic dramatist with a uniquely probing vision."⁹⁴

Trilling in 1937 saw O'Neill's power as resting in his insistence on struggling in his plays with the "great inscrutable forces" that philosophy and religion address: "Life and death, good and evil, spirit and flesh, male and female, the all and the one."⁹⁵ Because these were his chosen themes, Trilling believed realism to be "uncongenial"⁹⁶ to O'Neill's talents, and instead considered him as most creative when he was working with "parable, symbol, and myth." Consequently, he saw his use of nonrealistic devices, such as "his masks and abstractions, his double personalities, his drumbeats and engine rhythms" as "the integral and necessary expression of his temper of mind and the task it set itself."⁹⁷ This task, Trilling opines, leads to a variety of stylistic

⁹² Ibid., 324.

⁹³ Ibid., 323

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Trilling, "Introduction," 129.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 128.

faults centering on O'Neill's use of language, which he describes as being filled with "bathos and redundancy," possessing a tendency toward "big and inexact words," and caused by a seeming "temperamental insensitivity to the accurate word and exact rhythm."⁹⁸ Thus, Trilling creates a causal chain which links together what is best about O'Neill with what is worst. O'Neill's abstract themes require nonrealistic dramatic techniques, but his abilities with language are not sufficiently subtle to command those techniques.

Brustein acknowledges such criticism in the very first paragraph of his chapter, quoted above, but he goes on to explain these egregious faults as resulting from an American culture that hailed O'Neill as great before he had an opportunity to be good. Hungry for a "homegrown dramatic champion" who could compete with the giants of European drama since Aeschylus, American critics and audiences applauded O'Neill's efforts for their big themes rather than their intrinsic quality. As a result, Brustein goes on,

O'Neill developed ambitions which were not only large, they were monstrous; he was determined to be nothing if not a world-historical figure of fantastic proportion. Trying to compress within his own career the whole development of dramatic literature since the Greeks, he set himself to imitate the most ambitious writers who ever lived -- and the more epic their scope, the more they stimulated his competitive instinct.⁹⁹

This tendency toward imitation is seen most obviously in the Greek trappings of Mourning Becomes Electra, but also in precisely the nonrealistic devices that Trilling sees as most important to O'Neill's voice. Brustein attributes these devices not to O'Neill's themes, but to the intellectual and artistic influence of August Strindberg. While Brustein admired O'Neill's choice in imitating Strindberg, he must admit the fit is not a comfortable one. "Strindberg's formal

⁹⁸ Ibid., 129.

⁹⁹ Brustein, Revolt, 322.

experiments grow out of his material," Brustein asserts, "while O'Neill's seem grafted onto his, and thus give the impression of being gratuitous and excessive."¹⁰⁰ As long as O'Neill was mired in imitation, this excessiveness permeates his plays, not only in his stage devices, but his language as well. In this, Trilling and Brustein were in agreement: O'Neill's nonrealistic techniques and language are inextricably tied.

According to Brustein, though, the Nobel Prize marked the beginning of a new phase of O'Neill's career in which O'Neill abandoned his tendency toward imitation, and instead looked within himself with a sense of honesty heretofore missing. The plays that followed--The Iceman Cometh, Long Day's Journey Into Night, A Touch of the Poet, and A Moon for the Misbegotten--are evidence of O'Neill's "transformation into an objective artist"¹⁰¹ creating plays from material that is "pulled out of his being rather than self-consciously adopted."¹⁰² The form these plays took were resolutely realistic. Gone were the Expressionistic techniques noted with approval by Trilling, and gone also was O'Neill's overripe language.

Brustein focuses on the confession of Edmund in Long Day's Journey Into Night as evidence that O'Neill himself at last realized his limitations. When Edmund's father, Tyrone, admits that Edmund has the "makings of a poet," Edmund replies:

The makings of a poet. No, I'm afraid I'm like the guy who is always panhandling for a smoke. He hasn't even got the makings. He's only got the habit. I couldn't touch what I tried to tell you just now. I just stammered. That's the best I'll ever do. . . . Well, it will be faithful realism, at least. Stammering is the native eloquence of

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 327.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 336.

¹⁰² Ibid., 337.

us fog people.¹⁰³

By finally facing his lack of poetic expression, and instead examining his own experience “through the medium of faithful realism” Brustein asserts, O’Neill finds his own native eloquence, and “stammers no more.”¹⁰⁴ “In the lilting speech of predominantly Irish-Catholic characters, O’Neill finally discovers a language congenial to him, and he even begins to create a music very much like Synge’s.”¹⁰⁵ Freed from the “attitudinizing and fake poeticizing” of his earlier approach, says Brustein, O’Neill ironically discovered his own poetry in the prosaic language of his experience.

The themes of O’Neill’s later plays, written in the realistic style, continue to address the “great inscrutable forces” that Trilling found most exciting about his earlier work, Brustein continues, concentrating a “fierce, bullish power into fables of illusion and reality.”¹⁰⁶ But the inscrutable forces have moved inside of O’Neill’s characters, and he confronts them with an intensity and honesty greatly exceeding that of his earlier plays. In the process, O’Neill writes a series of masterpieces, becoming a “dramatist of the first rank.”¹⁰⁷

Thus, Brustein takes the elements of Trilling’s criticisms and recombines them in a revision that embraces the original ideas but reverses one aspect of them in order to make a point. Through this tessera, Trilling becomes an important critical predecessor, who correctly noted O’Neill’s egregious faults but incorrectly diagnosed the problem due to incomplete information that would be

¹⁰³ Eugene O’Neill, Long Day’s Journey Into Night (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 154, quoted in Brustein, Revolt, 356.

¹⁰⁴ Brustein, Revolt, 358.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 359.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 356.

provided only by the passage of time. Brustein is able to complete Trilling's story and correct what he characterizes as a single error, joining himself with his "father" in a mutual appreciation of O'Neill's importance. Of course, there is no evidence of such an agreement. O'Neill did not find a place in the section on drama in Trilling's anthology The Experience of Literature, nor did Trilling ever write about O'Neill in the years that followed. Yet through Brustein's chapter, as well as the essays that preceded and followed it, a dialogue between the two men continued between the lines.

CHAPTER 2

The previous chapter described an instance of Brustein's dialogue with Trilling over the value of the theatre. As already noted, except for a few short essays serving as prefaces to plays in his anthology, The Experience of Literature, Trilling never again commented at length on the theatre, and Brustein never again responded to Trilling in his writing. Nor did their critical dialogue proceed during the course of daily conversation. While they occasionally socialized together, Brustein admits that their early relationship was "cordial though not very personal, even when I began teaching in the same department [at Columbia]."¹ Hence, the opportunities are few from 1964 on to speak of their critical relationship by way of documenting their interactions.

Nonetheless, mutual awareness of the ideas and opinions of Trilling and other New York intellectuals was intense. As Irving Howe noted in an essay in Commentary, "The New York intellectuals . . . may not see one another from year's start to year's end, but they are nervously alert to one another's judgment. Attention is paid."² And in a 1978 interview, Norman Podhoretz was even more explicit: "All of us, in fact, write to each other as an audience."³ To read the essays published in Partisan Review and Commentary at any particular moment, therefore, is to become engaged in a passionate conversation among intimate friends over current issues and ideas, with each

¹ Robert Brustein, Dumbocracy in America: Studies in the Theatre of Guilt, 1987 - 1994 (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 1994), 258.

² Irving Howe, "The New York Intellectuals: A Chronicle and a Critique," Commentary (Oct. 1968): 42, quoted in Alexander Bloom, Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3.

³ Ibid.

essay a rejoinder to a previous essay, and inevitably leading to a future response. Phrases innocuous to the casual reader are charged with great significance when read within the context of the continuing debate.

Publication was the medium of choice for this group. A survey in 1970 of the “90 elite intellectuals” in America found that, when asked “how they would (or did) get their ideas . . . across to other intellectuals,” the “large majority said they would write in journals.”⁴ Brustein was well-situated to be read by this group: the same survey of intellectuals showed that 54.4% regularly read The New Republic.⁵ With his longer pieces published in Partisan Review, Commentary, or the New York Times, also regularly read by intellectuals, Brustein’s ideas regarding theatre and its relationship to cultural issues of the day had the potential for considerable attention. Similarly, Brustein was alert to the debates taking place in those journals as well. It is in this way that Trilling can be said to be a continuing influence on Brustein. For Trilling becomes in Brustein’s mind an embodiment of a certain type of intellectual whose approval he desires and labors to win, both for himself and for the theatre. He regularly attempts to inject himself and his interests into the general intellectual conversation, making connections between trends in the theatre and more general aspects of American culture.

That Trilling stands foremost among those whose approval Brustein seeks is revealed by the multiple references, both direct and oblique, in his books and essays. Brustein’s 1975 The Culture Watch is dedicated to “my teacher Lionel Trilling” (significant because his previous books, and most that followed, were dedicated only to members of his family: his sons, his father, his

⁴ Charles Kadushin, The American Intellectual Elite (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), 43.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

wife). In his 1981 memoir Making Scenes, Brustein mentions Trilling with admiration several times, and it is there that he first refers to him as an “intellectual father.”⁶ Trilling’s rejection of theatre in their first interview is recounted in an essay entitled “The Humanist and the Artist,” reprinted in Who Needs Theatre?. As previously mentioned, his 1987 Yale Review essay, “Lionel Trilling: Memories of an Intellectual Mentor” describes his relationship with Trilling in very personal terms, and in 1994, he revised this essay for Dumbocracy in America and significantly retitled⁷ it “Lionel Trilling: Memories of an Intellectual Father.” There are also echoes of Trilling’s work in the titles of several of Brustein’s books. For example, the subtitle of Trilling’s The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society is echoed in the subtitle of Brustein’s The Culture Watch: Essays on Theatre and Society 1969-1974, and Critical Moments: Reflection on Theatre and Society 1973-1979. Thus, in every decade of his career, Brustein alludes in some way to Trilling.

While one must accede to Brustein’s declaration that all his writing has been an attempt to “pay tribute” to Trilling by applying his “literary and human values” in the theatre, early in Brustein’s career his reaction to Trilling’s negative evaluation of the theatre, and his positive attitude toward middle-class values seems more important. Furthermore, Trilling stands for a larger group of literary and intellectual friends from whom Brustein’s theatrical associations distanced him, as he writes in the postscript to Dumbocracy in America, with a hint of regret.⁸ His resolve to overcome this alienation is reflected in two

⁶ Robert Brustein, Making Scenes: A Personal History of the Turbulent Years at Yale 1966 - 1979 (New York: Random House, 1981), 205.

⁷ In a recent interview, Brustein claimed to be unaware that he had changed the title when revising it for Dumbocracy in America. When I asked him why he might have exchanged the more neutral “mentor” for “father,” Brustein laughed and said, “Maybe with The Yale Review I’m more circumspect.” (Brustein, Interview December 2.)

⁸ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 261.

sentences from that postscript: "if I can boast of a single consistent purpose, it is to merge these two disparate worlds [the theatrical and the intellectual], to help facilitate an American theatre worthy of respect." He goes on, "I am rarely happier than when I see people of sensibility responding to penetrating plays; I long for a society in which great drama is an essential part of everyday life."⁹

That such people of sensibility generally disdained the theatre, and that this was so for Trilling in particular, was especially painful for Brustein because his attraction to the theatre was so intense. "I loved the drama above all literary forms," he wrote in the foreword to Seasons of Discontent, "loved it for its blending of language and action, its galloping immediacy, its economical means and structural beauty -- and I loved the theatre when it gave body and substance to plays I admired, or improvised a rich, imaginative life of its own."¹⁰ While Trilling had little interest in drama as a literary form, he had even less in the theatrical production of dramatic texts.

Trilling's negative attitude toward performance, according to Brustein, reflected the "suspiciousness felt by the literary profession in general toward the products of the stage."¹¹ This disdain for theatrical production goes as far back as Aristotle's defense of tragedy in The Poetics against those who preferred the epic, but it was particularly powerful in the world of American literary criticism at the time. As influential a figure as Yvor Winters exhibited a strongly antimimetic bias, and F. R. Leavis, despite his interest in Shakespearean drama, virtually ignored its connection to production. To some extent, this was the result of the rise of New Criticism, with its emphasis on close reading that focused on

⁹ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 261.

¹⁰ Robert Brustein, Seasons of Discontent: Dramatic Opinions 1959 - 1965 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 14.

¹¹ Robert Brustein, Who Needs Theatre: Dramatic Opinions (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987), 315.

elements that would be less noticeable in performance. For whatever reason, though, many in Trilling's literary world believed the works of the great dramatic writers were "best scanned in the contemplative quiet of the study" and not "'staled' on the stage or 'clapper-clawed by the general public."¹²

For Trilling, this attitude may have been reflective of his more deeply held belief that complex ideas "give up something of their largeness and modulation and complexity" when being implemented by a large group of people. Ideas that can "survive delegation," Trilling writes in the preface to The Liberal Imagination, "incline to be ideas of a certain kind and of a certain simplicity."¹³ While Trilling was here writing specifically of ideas in practical politics, this opinion is, by analogy, applicable to the transformation of works of dramatic literature into theatrical productions. Because in production a great playwright's ideas are delegated to a large number of people -- actors, directors, designers, technicians -- the process necessarily, according to Trilling's way of thinking, leads to the simplification of a great work of dramatic literature. Furthermore, it is the task of this group of people to translate the text into performance by making a series of interpretive choices, which necessarily eliminates options and ambiguities in the text. For a critic such as Trilling, who believed the greatest value of literature rests in its complexity and variousness, this was a great loss, and one which led him to avoid the mediated experience of the stage.

Brustein rejected this attitude categorically, insisting that "the great works of dramatic literature have no reality whatever until they have found their life on

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Lionel Trilling, The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), xiv.

the stage.”¹⁴ By giving body and substance to a great play, the stage brings into existence an additional level of psychological and symbolic depth through the presentation of imagery and human emotions in continuity and detail. Thus, the process is additive, not reductive. This collective act extends not only to the work of theatre artists, but to the audience as well, which plays an important part in the creation of the event. This is true, Brustein writes in the introduction to Who Needs Theatre?, because unlike film, television, and narrative fiction, which all take place in the past, the theatre is being created at that moment in that place. “Theatregoing,” he asserts, “is a communal act” and as such

is one of a dwindling group of activities that bring Americans into communication with each other; it is, therefore, an enterprise that preserves some vestige of belief in the possibilities of society, if not of communion. It may be one of the last remaining shreds of evidence that we are a people, and not just an isolated mass of frightened fantasists, barricaded in our homes, seeking safety from a sinister and threatening external world. . . . [The theatre] represents social history in the making, both on the stage and in the audience. It signifies the community we have forsaken, the accidents and risks we would rather avoid, the sweat and gristle we prefer to disguise, the labor of humans working against the odds.¹⁵

Brustein’s belief in the value of the stage as an act of community and a reflection of society is augmented by his belief that the very humanness of the stage -- its vulnerability to accident, serendipity, and, to use Trilling’s word, variousness -- is what makes it most profound. To Trilling’s idea of an immutable perfection in the printed literary form, Brustein countered that the stage reminds us that “human beings are nature’s hostages” and that our fate is imperfection. He quotes Antonin Artaud in this regard: “We are not free . . . and the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theatre has been created to teach us

¹⁴ Brustein, Who Needs Theatre, 316.

¹⁵ Ibid., 4.

all that first."¹⁶

The importance of this concept of theatre extended beyond the world of the artist to the society as a whole. "A country without a theatre," Brustein declares (and it is significant that he says "theatre" and not simply "drama"), "is a country without a soul."¹⁷ However, while it is possible for Brustein to argue for the worthiness of the theatre in the abstract, his vision of it also had to account for what he saw in the actual theatre. And what he saw there was backwardness and superficiality.

Writing about the state of the American theatre in the 1965 foreword to Seasons of Discontent, he notes with characteristic acerbity that, after the end of the Eisenhower era, all the arts in America but the theatre were increasingly energized "by a rush of radical dissent and artistic ferment." But not the theatre.

[T]raditionally retrograde, [the theatre] continued to doze in the center of blandness and mediocrity, impervious to experiment, immune to achievement, hostile to thought. Financed by timid producers, manufactured by pedestrian playmakers, and evaluated by conventional-minded reviewers, most American plays were exuding an ooze of squalid contentment which worked like a narcotic on an audience already stupefied by affluence. In this atmosphere, theatrical advance was blocked before it could even get under way, and an increasing number of spectators -- the more discriminating ones -- were turning their back on the stage.¹⁸

To make matters worse, Brustein observes with disapproval, one style of writing dominated the stage (realism), one style of acting (Strasberg's version of Stanislavski's "Method"), talented writers had abandoned the medium, and theatre criticism was dominated by "newspaper reporters, many of whom had prepared for dramatic criticism through stints in such departments as music,

¹⁶ Ibid., 3.

¹⁷ Brustein, Seasons, 10.

¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

foreign affairs, dining and dancing, and sports.”¹⁹ Clearly, while he might not agree with Trilling’s opinion that the theatre was intrinsically an inferior art, he could not help but concur with that negative judgment as it pertained to the American theatre he confronted when he assumed his position at The New Republic in 1959.

Faced with a theatre that he considered debased, and seeking to facilitate the return of the “discriminating spectator,” Brustein himself undertook the job of starting the reclamation through his writing. While he wryly acknowledges that the readers of his essays in The New Republic included few theatre professionals or even theatregoers, he writes that this gave him the freedom to be honest about what he saw, since he had to worry neither about affecting the run of a play, nor hurting the feelings of those involved in its production.²⁰ As time went on and his reputation grew, he rather coyly goes on, he became increasingly confident that he “would somehow be overheard”²¹ and affect the shape of the theatre. In fact, as has already been discussed, this was his most fervent desire. His belief in the critic’s responsibility to influence the direction of the theatre, indeed to help point the way, is reflected in the frequency and vigorousness with which he attacks his fellow, more mainstream, theatre critics for their lack of knowledge and of taste. If evidence was needed to point out the disingenuousness of his self-described freedom from constraint

¹⁹ Ibid., 13-14.

²⁰ It is difficult to take this statement seriously, since it implies that Brustein would have been less honest in expressing his opinions had he had a reading public that included theatre professionals -- a highly unlikely possibility. However, he was not alone in enjoying the freedom of writing for a small-circulation magazine. John Simon, in a Commonweal review of Brustein’s Seasons of Discontent, posited that there were two options open to the would-be drama critic: “to work for a mass medium, and, prefiguring the views of the average theatregoer, become a Gallup poll *avant la lettre*; or to enjoy the freedom of working for a prestige magazine, and be free to count his readers on the fingers of one hand . . .” [John Simon, review of Seasons of Discontent, by Robert Brustein, Commonweal 83 (11 March, 1966): 669.]

²¹ Seasons, 15.

afforded by his outsider status at The New Republic, it is provided by his insistence that those critics whose writing did affect attendance and was read by theatre professionals should be as informed and fiercely discriminating as his own.

Yet in a perverse way, such attacks are consistent with his views regarding the responsibilities of the intellectuals, whose natural condition is to be alienated, and whose power is rooted in their very powerlessness (although Irving Howe would later note that powerlessness, if not as corrupting as power, could nonetheless be damaging).²² To involve oneself in the shaping of society through participation in the activities of the ruling class, went one convenient argument shared by the ambitious and the unambitious alike in the 1960s, is to lose one's ability to pointedly criticize. In 1954, Howe wrote in "This Age of Conformity," whenever intellectuals "become absorbed into the accredited institutions of society they not only lose their traditional rebelliousness but to one extent or another they cease to function as intellectuals."²³ Brustein shared this opinion, writing that thought is free only in places such as "the academy, the little magazine, the scholarly journal, and listener supported FM radio."²⁴ Thus, the more mainstream critics, writing for mass publications, were by definition subject to his attack. As we saw in "The Madison Avenue Villain," even a critic like Trilling who primarily published in venues Brustein sanctioned, was subject to attack once he ventured beyond their confines. At that time, before all the "charms, seductions, and falsities"²⁵ of the world had been offered to Brustein

²² Irving Howe, "The New York Intellectuals," chap. in Selected Writings 1950 - 1990 (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1990), 259.

²³ Irving Howe, "This Age of Conformity," chap. in The Partisan Review Anthology, eds. William Phillips and Philip Rahv (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 149.

²⁴ Robert Brustein, "The Madison Avenue Villain," Partisan Review 28 (1961): 593.

²⁵ Howe, "The New York Intellectuals," 259.

himself and he had to decide whether he possessed the inner strength to resist debasement, Brustein considered the the corrupting influence of the mass market absolute.

In 1961, Brustein published "Why I Write" as a response to a reader who had written to question his competence as a critic because of his derogations of a production that most of the other reviewers had praised. In the essay, Brustein lambastes what he calls the "common' reviewer," who he says can be found in the pages of the reader's newspaper, and who has been "especially hired to cater to [the reader's] taste, his virtue being," he goes on to say,

that he knows just as little as you do, and sometimes even less, having qualified for his job by his supreme averageness. What he practices is called journalism, a technique created in the eighteenth century with the rise of democracy, the lowering of standards, and the growth of a large lay public which wanted to be informed quickly without troubling its brain too much. He is your man, if your demands are not too severe, for he is much more eager than I to proclaim new masterpieces -- inflating reputations, publicizing personalities, and boosting the economy of the theatre along the way.²⁶

While this attack is certainly driven in part by defensiveness, it also serves to establish Brustein's self-image as an alienated intellectual standing outside and above the mainstream. He even goes so far as to deny that "a drama critic has a duty to love the theatre,"²⁷ though his own passion was obvious. Perhaps he felt such a denial would appeal to the more anti-theatrical of the New York intellectuals, whose attention might be attracted to a theatre critic who seemed to be "one of them." That more is at stake for Brustein is signaled by the fact that he doesn't merely cast aspersions on the work of his fellow critics; he defines what criticism ought to be, articulating the standards to

²⁶ Brustein, Seasons, 288.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 287.

which he himself is to be held. The standards are extremely high. Noting that real criticism was “invented by Aristotle, designed for experts, dedicated to absolute standards, and practiced today by very few,”²⁸ Brustein goes on to quote T. S. Eliot’s opinion that the function of criticism is “the commentation and analysis of works of art . . . for the elucidation of art and the correction of taste.”²⁹ This quotation reflects Brustein’s opinion that theatre ought to take its proper place among the literary arts. Theatre criticism is not to be seen as an arm of show business, committed as much to keeping Broadway theatres full as to identifying and promoting quality work; it is written for the eyes of posterity, and must be worthy. Poor criticism -- criticism devoted to “the designation of some trumpery piece as ‘the best damn show I’ve seen in years’”³⁰ -- may seem to keep the theatre thriving, but in the long run would lead -- indeed, had already led -- to its impoverishment.

The young romantic Brustein believed that the quality of dramatic criticism, good or bad, would help shape the direction the theatre would take. He thought that this was particularly true in a culture such as America’s, where the writings of theatre critics have an enormous influence on the choices made by the “common spectator,” whom Brustein also scorns in “Why I Write,” presumably preferring the “people of sensibility” mentioned above. That critics abused such power to lead by not living up to high standards was a constant source of outrage and frustration for him, and he regularly expressed those feelings in print.³¹ Like Walt Whitman, Brustein apparently longed for a

²⁸ Ibid., 289.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 288

³¹ A glance at the index of Seasons of Discontent contains eighteen references to critics Walter Kerr and Howard Taubman, none complimentary.

sacerdotal class of intellectuals³² who would keep their distance from the corrupting influence of money, shape democratic culture, and guide it in directions he considered more worthy. And like Henry Adams, he seemed to dream of a “national set of young men like ourselves or better, to start new influences” in literature, politics, law, and society.³³

Trilling also believed in the importance of critics, but he felt that their positive influence increased as they became more involved in the social, political, and cultural affairs of the nation. He would most certainly not have agreed with economist Joseph A. Schumpeter, who in a section of his book Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy wrote that intellectuals are “people who wield the power of the spoken and written word” but are distinguished from others who have similar skills by “the absence of direct responsibility for practical affairs.”³⁴ For Trilling, the aspect of American culture that provided most convincing evidence for the improvement and maturing of the society was “the change in the relation of wealth [and power] to intellect,”³⁵ which had led to a “large class of people of considerable force and complexity of mind” having risen to near the “top of the social hierarchy.”³⁶ Far from being corrupted by their connection to power, Trilling believed the opposite to be true: intellectuals had a purifying effect on the powerful. “In many civilizations,” he wrote, “there comes a

³² Macdonald, “Masscult and Midcult,” chap. in Against the American Grain (New York: Random House, 1962), 72.

³³ Richard Chase, “The Fate of the Avant-Garde,” chap. in The Partisan Review Anthology, edited by William Phillips and Philip Rahv (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 215.

³⁴ Joseph A. Schumpeter, Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1942).

³⁵ “Our Country and Our Culture,” Partisan Review 19 (1952): 319.

³⁶ “Our Country”, 320.

point at which wealth shows a tendency to submit itself to the rule of the mind and imagination, to refine itself, and apologize for its existence by a show of taste and sensitivity. In America," he concludes, "the tendency to this submission has for some time been apparent."³⁷ A sign that the intellectual had been accepted into American society was illustrated by a cover story in the June 11, 1956 Time entitled "Parnassus -- Coast to Coast," which profiled, among others, Trilling, Jacques Barzun, Sidney Hook, W. H. Auden, Reinhold Niebuhr, and J. Robert Oppenheimer. Noting these intellectuals' newly won recognition, the essay also points out their newly-changed attitude toward America. "The Man of Protest," the article said, "has to some extent given way to the Man of Affirmation -- and that happens to be the very role that the intellectual played when the nation was new."³⁸ To Trilling, this new relationship to America was a sign of maturity; to Brustein, it was a sign that the "values of the intellectual community -- honor, dignity, [and] integrity" were endangered, and he called for intellectuals to return to the "traditional intellectual postures of idealism and dissent."³⁹ Looking back, Brustein told me, "I was in disagreement with Trilling because I thought the duty of the intellectual is to be a rebel, and to stand outside the society and not be absorbed by it. Trilling was making an ideology of being middle-class, and becoming one with the audience, and I was always scratchy about that. I still am, to some extent, to this day."⁴⁰

The disagreement between the two men over this issue, while no doubt rooted in differences of temperament and beliefs, may partially be the result of

³⁷ "Our Country," 319.

³⁸ Alexander Bloom, Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 207.

³⁹ Brustein, "The Madison Avenue Villain," 593.

⁴⁰ Brustein, "Interview December 2."

the passage of time. Trilling's more ameliorist statements were written during the postwar glow of the 1950s, when a powerful mass culture was just beginning to appear; by 1961, when Brustein wrote "The Madison Avenue Villain," the darker aspects of the mass media had started to become more obvious, and the Vietnam War, which would engulf the country in protest and change leftist politics for a generation, was in full swing.⁴¹

Yet it would be wrong to dismiss this difference as being due purely to a difference in generations. At root, it reflects a disagreement over the effects of democracy on intellectual culture in general. In a 1974 Commentary roundtable discussion called "Culture at the Present Moment," Trilling indicated that he was "in accord" with Hilton Kramer's disagreement with Ortega y Gasset's contention that the masses crush quality. "Unlike the situation in earlier societies," Kramer said, "the fate of high culture in a democratic society is intimately related to the democratization of power. Culture is no longer the monopoly of a particular class, but is shared and debated, and is constantly being renewed through that sharing and debating."⁴² This upbeat view of American culture was not shared by Brustein who, in the paragraph from "Why I

⁴¹ A case in point would be the quiz show scandals that revolved around a member of the intellectual class: Charles Van Doren. Columbia professor, son of author and Columbia professor Mark Van Doren, and novelist Dorothy Van Doren, and nephew of biographer Carl Van Doren, Charles Van Doren was well-acquainted with Lionel Trilling, Jacques Barzun, Joseph Wood Krutch, Franklin P. Adams, and Thomas Merton. As David Halberstam notes in his book The Fifties: "It was a traumatic moment for the country . . . Charles Van Doren had become the symbol of the best America had to offer. Some commentators wrote of the quiz shows as the end of American innocence. Starting with World War Two, they said, America had been on the right side: Its politicians and generals did not lie, and the Americans had trusted what was written in their newspapers and, later, broadcast over the airwaves. That it all ended abruptly because one unusually attractive young man was caught up in something seedy and outside his control was dubious. But some saw the disintegration of the moral tissue of America in all of this." Van Doren's appearance before the congressional committee investigating the incidents took place on November 2, 1959, several years after Trilling's optimistic appraisal of mass culture; Brustein's comments came in the wake of the scandal. (665)

⁴² "Culture at the Present Moment: A Round-Table Discussion," Commentary 58 (December 1974): 34.

Write" quoted above, associates the "rise of democracy" with the "lowering of standards, and the growth of a large lay public."⁴³ One locus classicus for this suspicion that a democratic society tends to erode standards of judgment and debase works of art and intellect is Alexis de Tocqueville's classic nineteenth-century study, Democracy in America, whose title Brustein later appropriated for Dumbocracy in America.

Tocqueville acknowledges -- reluctantly, for his sympathies clearly lie with the American experiment -- that "great artists, distinguished poets, and celebrated writers"⁴⁴ are rare in America. He attributes this lack to the unbounded opportunities for Americans to increase their fortune, which constantly divert the American mind from the "pleasures of imagination and the labors of the intellect" in favor of the "pursuit of wealth."⁴⁵ The cultivation of taste in the arts, however, as with all intellectual pursuits, relies upon quiet meditation, a condition predicated, Tocqueville implies, on financial security and a contentment with economic stasis. It is not enough to have sufficient money to live in comfort -- there were many families in America who possessed enormous fortunes -- but, in order to give the attention necessary to the development of taste, one must abandon the continual pursuit of greater wealth. In America, however, "everyone is in motion, some in quest of power, others gain,"⁴⁶ and the resulting "incessant jostling" of men as they seek their fortunes

⁴³ Brustein, Seasons, 288

⁴⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, Vol. 2, translated by Henry Reeve, revised by Francis Bowen, edited with an introduction by Phillips Bradley (New York: J. & H. G. Langley, 1840; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 35.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

"annoys the mind without exciting or elevating it."⁴⁷

This leads Tocqueville to ask a question which has serious ramifications for the arts: "where is that calm to be found which is necessary for the deeper combinations of the intellect?"⁴⁸ Because American society nowhere possesses this Wordsworthian sense of calm, meditation is not only impossible, but also, and perhaps more importantly, little esteemed. This profoundly affects the artist through its effects on the artist's customer, which is Tocqueville's primary subject.

In countries where wealth is concentrated in the hands of a small aristocratic class, Tocqueville goes on, art patrons possess fortunes that allow them sufficient time and tranquility, as well as the education and inclination, to meditate on what is most perfect in all things, and sufficient resources to acquire them. Through the early part of the eighteenth century, the artist could rely upon what M. H. Abrams described as the "trained taste and expert connoisseurship of a limited circle"⁴⁹ of art patrons. Thus, those who supported the arts had developed a taste for things that were, according to Tocqueville, "extremely well made and lasting."⁵⁰ Through an aesthetic version of the trickle-down effect, "this affects the general way of thinking of the nation in relation to the arts" so that "even the peasant will rather go without objects he covets than procure them in a state of imperfection."⁵¹

In a democracy, by contrast, where people are forever rising and sinking

⁴⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁹ M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 17.

⁵⁰ Tocqueville, 49.

⁵¹ Ibid.

in the social scale, everyone spends a great deal of time laboring in an attempt to rise even further. Such constant labor does not allow the leisure to ponder issues of aesthetics. And the desire to appear higher socially produces a concomitant desire to possess the symbols of wealth before the best can be afforded. This Tocqueville calls the "hypocrisy of luxury," and it is what Trilling has in mind when he speaks later (his book club activities notwithstanding) of "the satisfaction with the thing that looks like the real thing but is not the real thing."⁵² Since the pursuit of wealth has robbed people of the calm necessary to develop an educated sense of taste, the result, according to Tocqueville, is a multitude of people "whose wants are above their means and who are very willing to take up with imperfect satisfaction rather than abandon the object of their desires together."⁵³

This, in turn, affects the artist, who responds by producing these "imperfect commodities" at a lower cost and with greater rapidity, in order that these impatient desires might be fulfilled in great enough numbers to make the artist's fortune.⁵⁴ In such an atmosphere, how can quality art thrive? With few citizens having acquired the taste to desire and recognize the very best, the artists are no longer "able to soar to what is great" in their art, but instead "cultivate what is pretty and elegant, [so that] appearance is more attended to than reality." The result is a general lowering of quality, but a great increase in quantity. Tocqueville concludes that in "aristocracies a few great pictures are produced; in democratic countries a vast number of insignificant ones."⁵⁵ This

⁵² Trilling, Liberal Imagination, 103.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 50.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 51.

extends to all the other arts, with artists increasingly encouraged to create work scaled to the lowest common denominator. The quality of the consumer's standards of taste, for Tocqueville, is a central factor in the production of quality art in any society.

Tocqueville's discussion, of course, begs the question of what is "quality art," which has been the subject of intense debate throughout the 20th century. In 1840, when he was writing the second volume of Democracy in America, there was general accord concerning objective standards of judgment that could be used in describing the overall contours of quality in art and literature, even if universal agreement did not exist upon the details of those rules. Indeed, many felt that this tacit accord still existed over a century later, as illustrated by Robert M. Hutchins' statement, in the 1952 preface to the Great Books of the Western World series, that "there never was very much doubt in anybody's mind about which the masterpieces were."⁵⁶ Now, nearly fifty years later, such certainty is startling.⁵⁷ Yet just such a traditionalist belief in "absolute standards"⁵⁸ underlies Brustein's criticism, and as we shall see illustrated during his 1997 debate with August Wilson, prompts him to lead the charge against those who would apply more relativistic or political codes to the evaluation of works of art. He would be in complete agreement with Mortimer Adler, another graduate of the Columbia curriculum, who, writing in the same volume as Hutchins, explained that the criteria used to select the books to be included in the series were "excellence of construction and composition, immediate

⁵⁶ Robert Maynard Hutchins, "Preface," in The Great Conversation, Great Books of the Western World 1 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), xi.

⁵⁷ Although the fact that Hutchins felt it necessary to make such a statement may be evidence that the consensus may have started to deteriorate.

⁵⁸ Robert Brustein, Reimagining American Theatre (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 1991), 262.

intelligibility on the aesthetic level, increasing intelligibility with deeper reading and analysis, leading to maximum depth and maximum range of significance with more than one level of meaning and truth."⁵⁹

Brustein is an unshakeable high-brow when defining what he believes to be quality in the arts, and he bristles at the use of the word "elitist" as a pejorative term. "The branding of serious art as 'elitist,'" he writes in the title essay of Dumbocracy in America, "is simply another power ploy to promote supremacy, by hoisting popular culture into the lofty niche formerly reserved for more complicated, profound, and discriminating work."⁶⁰ This is being accomplished, he goes on, through efforts to "demolish our traditional standards and values."⁶¹ While the words he uses to describe these values -- words such as "complicated, profound, and discriminating," for instance -- are hopelessly vague, when taken together with other such statements they do begin to outline a coherent position -- what he calls in another essay, the "sometimes monastic rigor of serious art."⁶²

Central to this rigor is the insistence that the artist should bring into question the values of the middle-class spectator. Middlebrow expression provides "relaxing entertainment" that "tends to confirm people in what they already know";⁶³ in contrast, highbrow expression challenges those assumptions, in keeping with the duty of the alienated artist and intellectual to hurl critical thunderbolts from the fringes. "From [the artist's] point of view,"

⁵⁹ Mortimer Adler, "A Letter to the Reader," in The Great Conversation, Great Books of the Western World 1 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 78.

⁶⁰ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 66.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 31.

⁶³ Ibid.

Brustein writes, "it is an aesthetic sin to follow public taste; it is a duty and an obligation to lead it."⁶⁴ It is in this sense that Brustein is an unabashed and admitted elitist, since, as he points out, the etymological root of "elite" refers to leadership, and "without an elite in the arts, we have no leaders, which is to say we have no vision, which is to say we have no arts."⁶⁵ This romantic concept, rooted in the nineteenth-century, of the artist's and intellectual's responsibility to lead implies not only that they know where society should be going, but also that society's status quo is unsatisfactory, since their leadership is based on antagonism. "You have to be adversarial in order to move forward into some kind of new perception," Brustein said recently. "And you have to be dissatisfied with what is in order to advance on what can be."⁶⁶ This concept is precisely the point of disagreement with Trilling, who admits that "no cultural situation is ever really good, culture being not a free creation but a continuous bargaining with life, an exchange in which one may yield less or more, but never nothing,"⁶⁷ but then goes on to assert that there

comes a moment when the faces, the gait, the tone, the manner and manners of one's own people become just what one needs, and the whole look and style of one's culture seems appropriate, seems perhaps not good but intensely possible. What your compatriots are silently saying about the future, about life and death, may seem suddenly very accessible to you, and not wrong. . . . Something of this sort of feeling is, I think, at work among American intellectuals at this time.⁶⁸

In 1932, Ortega y Gasset had written in The Revolt of the Masses that "the mass crushes beneath it everything that is different, everything that is excellent,

⁶⁴Robert Brustein, The Third Theatre (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 14.

⁶⁵ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 32.

⁶⁶ Brustein, "Interview December 2."

⁶⁷ Lionel Trilling, A Gathering of Fugitives (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1956), 65.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

individual, qualified and select.”⁶⁹ It is the intellectual’s sworn duty to resist this destruction with all his might, and decades later, Brustein continued to do so through his criticism. To lead, in this situation, is not only to lead toward something, but also to lead away from something destructive to intellectual excellence.

It is useful at this point to employ a distinction made in Renato Poggioli’s in The Theory of the Avant-Garde, between the “public” and the “people.” The public, according to Poggioli, is comprised of those who partake of a particular art; the people are the public in a broad sense: all people.⁷⁰ Brustein’s statements about leadership are directed at a particular public: the public who partakes of the arts and literature, and specifically the theatregoing public. This public is largely made up of the middle-class bourgeoisie, as will be discussed more fully below, and hence it should not to be confused with the romantic concept of “the people.” Brustein sees his audience as a much smaller and more select group, showing little interest in improving the taste of the people who are best left to the mass entertainments they prefer. His goal throughout his career, he stated retrospectively, has been to create a theatre filled with “people of sensibility,”⁷¹ who are most likely to understand and appreciate the direction in which the artist takes them. Hence, in many ways, Brustein wants to reinstitute what Abrams described as the pre-eighteenth century culture of a limited circle of patrons with “trained taste and expert connoisseurship”; the difference is that Brustein would substitute a class of intellectuals for the aristocratic class. Brustein would agree with Dwight Macdonald, who wrote in

⁶⁹ “Our Country and Our Culture,” 285.

⁷⁰ Renato Poggioli, The Theory of the Avant-Garde, translated by Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 49-50.

⁷¹ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 261.

his influential 1958 essay "Masscult and Midcult," that "the only public the writer or artist or composer or philosopher or critic or architect should consider must be that of his peers. The informed, interested minority -- what Stendahl called 'We Happy Few.' Let the majority eavesdrop if they like, but their tastes should be firmly ignored."⁷² Brustein's intention was not to directly raise the level of taste of the existing public for theatre but to create interest in the theatre among a public who already possessed a high level of discernment, and hope that others would be inspired to follow. Who were these people? "Intelligent people," Brustein said. "People who read novels, who read poetry."⁷³

A description of the characteristics of such "intelligent people" can be found in his essay "Why I Write," in which Brustein described the "ideal spectator." This, he explains, is a person who "responds only to the best in theatre, and who therefore visits it seldom, generally with a profound distaste" for what he or she finds there. "If it depended on you and me," Brustein continues, addressing the Ideal Spectator, "the Broadway box office would close tomorrow, and all the producers would go back into the real estate business -- if, indeed, they ever left it. For while we share a fanatical devotion to dramatic art, we suspect the 'theatre' is very rarely a place where this is displayed."⁷⁴ What Brustein seeks in the audience is an intellectual aristocracy within a political democracy. In "The Artist and the Citizen," written in 1978, he quotes Ibsen's insistence that "the absolute necessity of democracy . . . [is] to make itself aristocratic," defining aristocratic as a "nobility of character . . . a

⁷² Macdonald, 73.

⁷³ Brustein, "Interview December 2."

⁷⁴ Brustein, Seasons, 288.

nobility of will and spirit.”⁷⁵ This “natural nobility” differs from the hereditary aristocracy described by Tocqueville by being attained, Brustein notes, through a “compound of culture, education, art. For whatever the blessings and benefits of political democracy,” Brustein concludes, “the democratization of culture could only be a curse.”⁷⁶ This opinion is best summed up in his 1962 essay “Vox Populi, Vox Box,” where he concludes that the “voice of the people is still the voice from the TV box, and he who would have it otherwise must first start a revolution in the consciousness of modern man.”⁷⁷ This revolution must begin with the intellectual elite.

This raises an additional factor unknown to Tocqueville in his critique of American democracy: the influence of the mass media. In 1952, Trilling is rather sanguine about its rise, saying that while “mass culture is no doubt a very considerable threat to high culture,” one never knows what might happen in the future. “It is possible that mass culture, if it is not fixed and made static, might become a better thing than it is now, that it might attract genius and discover that it has an inherent law of development.”⁷⁸ Twenty-two years later, Trilling is even more upbeat:

You get a degree of cultural sophistication among masses of people today which, if I recall correctly, is exactly what we were trying to achieve in Columbia College thirty years ago, that readiness to criticize people in authority, that sense of contradictions in culture. All this is being made available to everybody and is very quickly picked up. . . . If you watch Dr. Welby, or Kojak, or Cannon, you will be filled with the highest ideals. You will learn tolerance and understanding, you will learn that the conventional way of doing things is not right. Nothing, it seems, is easier

⁷⁵ Robert Brustein, Critical Moments: Reflection on Theatre and Society 1973 - 1979 (New York: Random House, 1980), 83.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Brustein, Seasons, 140.

⁷⁸ “Our Country and Our Culture,” 322.

than to hold those ideals we fought so hard for in the 30's. Nothing is more self-justifying. . . . But with the appearance of intelligence and responsibility so facilely supplied by television, who needs literature? . . . Literature can be a more profound mode of moral instruction than television can probably ever be. But not necessarily.⁷⁹

Trilling takes a fairly balanced view of popular culture, rejecting the notion that it is a corrupting influence by definition. Indeed, in the same discussion, he mentions having attended a party at the Aspen Institute where someone sat down at a piano and began playing popular songs from the past. Soon some young people began singing to his playing, and Trilling joined them.

I discovered that I knew dozens, scores, hundreds of songs from the time of my childhood [Trilling wrote], from the time of my mother's childhood -- that I knew and adored them. It suddenly came to me that I was filled with the most enchanting music from popular culture, and I thought what a splendid thing it was to be possession of these songs, which certainly do not in any way make against [sic] my notion of what high culture is. Indeed, in an important and striking way they are continuous with it.⁸⁰ [italics mine]

It is difficult to imagine Brustein admitting to such a thought. He is much more likely to say, along with Dwight Macdonald, that mass culture is "bad in a new way: it doesn't even have the theoretical possibility of being good."⁸¹

In response to these conditions, what Brustein calls "minority art" arises, which is anything that must be produced individually, and which possesses characteristics that are appreciated by a small segment of society, i.e., an elite. The work done in the independent theatres that were created in the late nineteenth century are examples of such a minority art. In the past, according to Brustein, minority and majority art coexisted in America, neither taking much notice of the other. As he put it, "Broadway no more noticed the experimental

⁷⁹"Culture and the Present Moment," 48.

⁸⁰Ibid., 34.

⁸¹ Macdonald, 4.

theatre than the Big Band was conscious of the Budapest Quartet."⁸² For a time, this state of affairs allowed minority art to maintain a purity and prestige that compensated for its lack of popularity. The advances made by a "handful of hair-shirted fanatics" were eventually incorporated into the majority theatre, but these advances, Brustein asserts, "were hardly achieved by currying popular favor. Audiences proved grateful -- afterward."⁸³ Fearful that he would sound "undemocratic, elitist, or intellectually snobbish," Brustein notes that "creative work is not subject to democratic laws; it is a lonely and isolated activity that gains adherents slowly, and collects a plurality only years after it has accomplished its purpose."⁸⁴

However, after the "culture boom" of the fifties and early sixties, Brustein writes, "and the emergence of what was later to be called the 'arts market,'" the separation between highbrow culture and middlebrow culture dissolved. "[M]inority expression itself quickly became identified as a source of profit"⁸⁵ by Big Business, and thus became a commodity to be sold in quantity, rather than an object to be appreciated by a cultured few. Constantly in search of new products to peddle, the popular media, as extensions of Big Business, began to create fashion where once there were artistic values, transforming minority

⁸² Robert Brustein, The Culture Watch: Essays on Theatre and Society, 1969 - 1974 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), xi. Brustein's choice of the Budapest Quartet, while rhetorically effective in the context of the sentence, is actually inaccurate: Benny Goodman, the King of Swing, recorded Mozart's Clarinet Quintet in A with the Budapest Quartet in 1938, and appeared with them several times during the succeeding three years. Up until that time, it was unheard of for the high brow to mix with the low brow. Following this groundbreaking recording, which sold well and added considerable prestige to Goodman's reputation, Goodman commissioned pieces for the clarinet by Bartók, Copland, and Hindemith and went on to record with Joseph Szigeti and symphony orchestras. (See Nat Brandt, Con Brio: Four Russians Called the Budapest Quartet [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993], 86 - 88.

⁸³ Robert Brustein, The Third Theatre (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 14.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

artists into media personalities before they had an opportunity to develop their ideas to maturity. Artists were encouraged to make their fortunes by cheapening their products for sale to the larger public, with the result that they and their work were corrupted, and their development as artists stunted. The majority art lost the benefits of their experiments, because they were seized upon before they were fully realized. The result, he concludes, is the increasing obliteration of the "old distinctions between highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow"⁸⁶ and the impoverishment of the arts.

This is not an idea original with Brustein. As noted above, Dwight Macdonald discussed this trend in the pages of Partisan Review in 1960. Macdonald posited that the biggest danger to high culture was not "Masscult," but rather "Midcult," "a peculiar hybrid bred from [Masscult's] unnatural intercourse with [High Culture]." "This intermediate form," he goes on

has the essential qualities of Masscult -- the formula, the built-in reaction, the lack of any standard except popularity -- but it decently covers them with a cultural figleaf. In Masscult the trick is plain -- to please the crowd by any means. But Midcult has it both ways: it pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them.⁸⁷

While Brustein disdains Masscult, he actively attacks Midcult, seemingly in agreement with Macdonald's warning that Midcult is more dangerous because more insidious. Trilling's belief, shared by many others in the Partisan Review circle, that the rise of the educated middle class signaled a step forward for American culture, as we have seen was greeted with horror by Brustein, who saw it as the further advance of Midcult. Macdonald's attack on the Book-of-the-Month Club paved the way for Brustein's attack on The Reader's Subscription,

⁸⁶Robert Brustein, The Culture Watch: Essays on Theatre and Society, 1969 - 1974 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), xi.

⁸⁷ Macdonald, 37.

both represented as Midcult pandering. Macdonald extols the “old avant-garde of 1870-1930” -- the same group that produced the independent theatres Brustein admired in Theatre of Revolt -- because it created a small, elite community defined by shared tastes, snobbish but serious, and most importantly because it “simply refused to compete in the established cultural marketplaces. It made a desperate effort to fence off some area within which the serious artist could still function, to erect again the barriers between the cognoscenti and the ignoscenti that had been breached by the rise of Masscult.”⁸⁸ Brustein tried to close the breach through his criticism that created a new audience of cognoscenti in the theatre.

Brustein's belief in the corrupting touch of fashion and popularity has been a constant theme throughout his career, even as he has struggled with his own temptations in this regard. While he has always been suspicious of the compromises he sees as attendant to popular success, his feelings in this regard are particularly strong in his first two collections of essays, before he has himself had an opportunity to taste power. He frets over Edward Albee, for instance, whose sudden vault to media stardom, Brustein feels, came too early in his career. Similarly, he bemoans, but ultimately cannot condemn the wasting of Zero Mostel's comic genius in a series of middlebrow musicals such as Fiddler on the Roof.⁸⁹ “I wish he were using his success in a more fruitful way,” Brustein writes. “This is no doubt a very difficult task, since talented Americans are inevitably confronted with a conflict between success and creativity.”⁹⁰ The unspoken assumption in both these cases is that success and

⁸⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁸⁹ Brustein, Seasons, 170.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 171.

creativity are mutually exclusive, again reflecting his belief that the artist should be alienated from the surrounding culture, in order to avoid falling victim to the temptations of Midcult approbation.

Brustein also champions what he calls the "Third Theatre," which is supported "primarily by the young" and came to life during the off-Broadway movement of the fifties, grew with the work of the Living Theatre, and then exploded with energy in response to the anti-war protests of the sixties.⁹¹ He supported it as long as it remained a fringe movement for "artists and intellectuals."⁹² However, once the American avant-garde "for the first time in its history, became the glass of fashion" Brustein increasingly found it wanting. Once what had previously been considered the "exclusive concern of an alienated, argumentative, intensely serious elite"⁹³ (adjectives that could easily have been applied to the Partisan Review intellectuals) became a conversation topic on television and in popular magazines, Brustein found its quality deteriorating. Since the Third Theatre was originally outspoken, scorchingly mocking, "created by those who feel disaffiliated from political structures," and radical though not ideological, "anarchical in posture but not program, equally impatient with the liberal and conservative establishments," Brustein thought it was a promising alienated theatre, whose "artistic license" was "an alternative to commercial acceptance."⁹⁴ Perhaps Brustein believed he had found in the Third Theatre the response to Trilling's dismissal of theatre, complete with an audience comprised of youthful alienated intellectuals standing outside the

⁹¹ Brustein, Third Theatre, 7-8.

⁹² Brustein, Seasons, 17.

⁹³ Brustein, Third Theatre, xi.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

establishment.

However, Brustein underestimated the degree to which fashion had developed in the middle class a passion for being shocked. While “épater le bourgeois” had been the rallying cry of the old avant garde, the educated middle class now greeted each new attack with increasing enthusiasm. The arms of Midcult embraced the movement, and in so doing made it commercially viable. To Brustein’s horror, “What once seemed daring and original now often seems tiresome and familiar; stereotyped political assertions, encouraged by easy audience acceptance, have replaced instinctive, individualized dissent; and the complex moral and metaphysical issues of great art are being obliterated by a simple-minded nihilism that reduces everything to zero.”⁹⁵ Revolt had become entertainment, and as a result the impulse toward protest had been replaced by a pale imitation, like ancient religious rituals performed for appreciative tourists.

Brustein’s discomfort with the easy acceptance of adversarial attitudes by the mainstream was shared by Trilling. His belief, expressed in his 1965 book Beyond Culture, was that the integration into the general society of values of the “adversary culture”⁹⁶ had resulted in a situation where there was little resistance to adversarial ideas, no matter how extreme. The necessary dialectic between tradition and avant-garde had been nearly destroyed. Building on this, Hilton Kramer noted in 1972 in “The Age of the Avant-Garde” that the avant-garde had become institutionalized, and far from being greeted with hostility, was in fact being subsidized. The public acceptance of the Third Theatre was one of the early manifestations of this trend: first fashionableness, then institutionalization.

⁹⁵ Ibid., xii.

⁹⁶ Lionel Trilling, Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning (New York: Viking Press, 1965), xiii.

Both phenomena were abhorrent to Brustein, who saw acceptance by a larger audience as a sign of corruption.

Thus, Brustein slashed his way through the pages of Seasons of Discontent, as well as The Third Theatre, skewering many adversaries -- actors, playwrights, and as already noted, fellow critics -- and reserving some of his strongest criticism for the audience. And to return to my main thesis, it was this negative opinion concerning the taste of the American public that most clearly distinguished his outlook from Trilling's. Recall that the older critic had previously expressed his belief that the situation in America had improved markedly; Brustein disagreed. It is the keystone of Brustein's argument that the disintegration of the theatre is not endemic to the form, as Trilling had opined, but rather a temporary situation that could be improved by altering the conditions in which theatre is produced -- the first and foremost alteration being improvement of the audience.

A statement made in a 1960 review concerning the Lincoln Center of the Performing Arts and the burgeoning repertory theatre movement could stand as a general statement concerning Brustein's belief in the importance of the audience to the theatre's health: "[a theatre can] develop a great vision only if it is supported by an intelligent, imaginative, and enthusiastic audience."⁹⁷ This is a very strong statement, which might be viewed as an exaggeration made for rhetorical effect, except when one considers the number of times in Brustein's criticism that he names the audience as one of the primary factors in the creation of the theatrical environment. Brustein had no faith in Trilling's view that the American public had become increasingly educated and cultured during the decade following World War II, nor in his belief that this should

⁹⁷ Brustein, Seasons, 214.

change the intellectual's relation to the public.

Trilling's View of the Audience

The Eisenhower era that Brustein described as lethargic, complacent, and self-satisfied was precisely the era in which Trilling found great hope. Brustein's essay, "The Madison Avenue Villain," has already been discussed in the previous chapter in terms of Trilling's venture into the marketplace; it also addresses the two men's conflict over the nature of American culture and the American spectator. In that essay, Brustein describes as "prophetic" a Partisan Review symposium of 1952 entitled "Our Country and Our Culture," in which Trilling and twenty-three other contributors participated, which, as mentioned before, "consisted of repudiating the old attitudes of dissent in favor of a more positive attitude towards American middle-class values."⁹⁸ This symposium, occurring as it did in the pages of a magazine that had begun its life as an organ of the Communist Party, and whose tradition was one of alienation from many of the fundamental beliefs and characteristics of American society, signaled a major change in the position of the American intellectual vis-à-vis the larger culture. This group of intellectuals was, in the words of Partisan Review editors, "now feel[ing] closer to their country and its culture,"⁹⁹ and was "no longer accept[ing] alienation as the artist's fate in America; on the contrary, [intellectuals] want very much to be a part of American life."¹⁰⁰ This was due, according to Trilling, to "an unmistakable improvement in the American cultural situation,"¹⁰¹ which had moved the intellectuals and the educated middle class

⁹⁸ Brustein, "Madison Avenue Villain," 581.

⁹⁹ "Our Country and Our Culture", 282.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 284.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 319.

much closer together philosophically.

The end of World War II had greatly changed the position of the United States on the international scene, and the result was a new sense of confidence in the values and abilities of America. Not only had America demonstrated strength on the battlefield; it had also demonstrated the strength of its commitment to democracy, to the value of that tradition. Having observed the rise and effects of fascism in Germany, Italy, and Spain, and of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, there was less inclination on the part of intellectuals to look to Europe as the model of what culture and civilization ought to be. A new appreciation for the strengths of American democracy had arisen, centered on what Trilling called the "not inconsiderable advantages of a whole skin, a full stomach, and the right [of the intellectual] to wag his tongue as he pleases."¹⁰²

Following the war, the American economy boomed, bringing affluence and a new sense of well-being to a larger segment of America. The G. I. Bill of Rights sent millions of ex-servicemen streaming into the universities, where they were introduced to the great ideas of the world and classic works of art and literature. Once graduated, they took with them their newfound cultural appreciation, and the resulting demand for quality works of art and literature began a "cultural explosion" which was the impetus for such book clubs as Trilling's. This explosion was further magnified by the entry into the arts scene of the fortunes of the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, which began supporting the arts with unexpected generosity. Across the country, theatres, symphonies, operas, and dance companies were springing up. "For the first time in the history of the modern American intellectual," Trilling wrote, "America is not to be

¹⁰² Ibid.

conceived of as a priori the vulgarest and stupidest nation of the world."¹⁰³

To anyone who might question, as Norman Mailer did in the symposium, the wisdom of intellectuals letting down their guard and rushing too quickly into the waiting arms of American culture, Newton Arvin testily responded, "The negative relation to one's culture has great validity in certain periods; at others, it is simply sterile, even psychopathic, and ought to give way, as it has done here, in the last decade, to the positive relation. Anything else suggests too strongly the continuance into adult life of the negative Oedipal relations of adolescence." He concludes, "The important thing is that writers and artists must achieve enough maturity to recognize the profound difference between creative dissidence and mere negative self-alienation."¹⁰⁴ This view held that the American society had at last grown up, and it was the responsibility of American intellectuals to grow up with it.

Publishing in 1956 an expanded version of his contribution to the Partisan Review symposium, Trilling explained that "when you speak of your relation with your country and your culture, you are responding to a tone and a style in your compatriots, to their tempo of movement, the inflection of their voices, the look on their faces. You trust or you do not trust." As has been previously shown, by the early 1960s Brustein did not trust. He cast a cold eye on his compatriots, and was openly hostile toward the representatives of power and commerce.

According to Trilling, however, this "ever-growing class" of people "whose minds are their only property"¹⁰⁵ were inclined, for a variety of reasons,

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 287-288.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

to be interested in the intellectual life and the arts. The reasons for this predilection, according to Trilling, included their education, “old cultural sanctions” which may operate as “a kind of snobbery but which still do operate,” and the realization that the practical life of the mind is influenced by the “mental life of theory and free imagination.”¹⁰⁶ Because of this, these people were “at least potentially supporters and consumers of high culture,”¹⁰⁷ a fact which Trilling saw as all for the good.

The members of the newly expanded intellectual middle-class, Trilling wrote in a line that may have sparked Brustein’s later response, “do not necessarily demand the best, but they demand what is called the best; they demand something.”¹⁰⁸ It is indeed disturbing that Trilling is not troubled by this distinction between what is the best and what is called the best, since such a lack of differentiation seems to sustain what Tocqueville had condemned as the “hypocrisy of luxury.” It is particularly strange that Trilling should so easily accept such an attitude, since six years earlier he had worried about the dangers of “a kind of mechanical literacy” which might lead people to mistake what looks like the real thing with the real thing itself. Now, Trilling saw this demand for the symbols of wealth and power as a positive development signaling the arrival of a new era. The public was buying, and this desire for all things cultural could be molded by intellectuals into a desire for things of cultural quality. Fashion could lead to deeper understanding.

While Brustein concurred that the public was in need of education, he saw this new class’s demand for “what is called the best” as a shallow desire for the cultural prestige attached to a fashionable object, not for the object itself.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 321.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

That art had become stylish was not an indication that it had become understood; it had simply become another commodity. "It is often taken as a sign of progress and maturity," he wrote in 1961 in response to the critics trumpeting a new Camelot,

that our formerly Philistine fatherland has now begun to consume artistic objects with an appetite fully as ravenous as that once reserved for comic books. The phrase for this awesome phenomenon, I believe, is 'cultural explosion' -- but out of this explosion have come only shattered fragments which we vainly try to shore against our ruins. For despite increasing activity and interest, our culture is in a state of severe impoverishment. While everyone, including monkeys and IBM computers, is busy 'creating,' almost nobody is creating well, and the appetite for genuine works of art remains dreadfully undernourished by the native approximations. This fact is dimly, though indirectly, reflected in the various organs devoted to initiating cultural fashions. America's fascination with artists has always been much greater than its interest in art, but you can't have one without the other; and *Life*, *Esquire*, the women's magazines, and the newspapers are all revealing a measure of desperation in trying to unearth 'exciting new personalities' to feed an insatiable public.¹⁰⁹

The demand for "what is called the best," Brustein seems to be saying, had not developed into a demand for what was actually the best, and consequently had never caused quality work to be created. In the case of the theatre, the members of the "newly expanded intellectual class" had taken their places in the auditorium, but had failed to establish a vital relationship to the stage. Because they went to the theatre, according to Brustein, primarily for "cultural improvement, charity purposes, or expense account entertainment,"¹¹⁰ art that had the appearance of high art -- what Macdonald had called Midcult -- was as good as the real thing. In fact, it was better, since high art by definition (or at least by Brustein's definition) called one's beliefs into question and thus

¹⁰⁹ Brustein, *Seasons*, 46.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 214.

made intellectual demands that they were unwilling to meet. Conspicuous consumption demanded only that the art be in style.

Brustein fully develops these ideas in a 1959 essay published, like the later "The Madison Avenue Villain," in Partisan Review, and entitled "Notes on a Suburban Theater." In it, he implicitly challenges Trilling's positive view of the cultural aspirations of the American public, describing the blandness that has seeped into the Broadway theatre as a result of the public's influence. As with "The Madison Avenue Villain," Brustein doesn't mention Trilling by name, but there is a sense that he hovers over the essay as a silent dialogue partner.

Brustein begins this essay by establishing the importance of the audience to the development of American drama, noting that the drama's "very survival is now contingent on audience approval" and pointing out that the theatre "has always been conditioned to a large degree by the character and opinions of the American spectator."¹¹¹ Because of this, he concludes, the theatre, as a mirror of public tastes, has changed due to a "crucial mutation"¹¹² in the audience. The outlines of this mutation have by now become so permanent as to be the stuff of cliché, but in 1959 his description of them still had the ring of new-minted truth: for economic reasons, Brustein declares, the audience has become homogeneous. While in times past, spectators were drawn from a variety of classes and education levels, they now come "primarily from college-educated upper-income groups" recruited from the "wealthy areas both in New York and its suburban surroundings."¹¹³ With its audience drawn from the

¹¹¹ Robert Brustein, "Notes on a Suburban Theater." Partisan Review 26 (1959): 593.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

“strongholds of conspicuous consumption,”¹¹⁴ he goes on, Broadway has become a luxury institution with a luxury audience that attends for social reasons rather than out of an interest in the art. “To miss the current hit,” Brustein wryly notes, “is to risk contracting a serious case of social B.O.,”¹¹⁵ and as a result of this attitude, “sophistication and glamor” have become the standards of excellence, rather than “artistry or vision.”¹¹⁶ Meanwhile the content of the plays remained safe and comforting, never challenging commonly-held assumptions as Brustein believes the best art does.

The explanation for this, according to Brustein, lay in a change in the characteristics of theatre artists: they were now drawn from the same class as the spectators. While “in the past, a theatre man was often alienated from the audience automatically by virtue of his different politics, income, education, and background,” this was no longer the case.¹¹⁷ In an argument that foreshadows his “Madison Avenue Villain” attack on the trend toward the integration of the intellectual into the wealthier and more powerful sectors of American society, Brustein declares that the artist has lost his sense of alienation from the spectator, and as a result exhibits a “reluctance to probe the audience in any painful or tender areas,”¹¹⁸ since these areas would obviously be painful for the artist as well. Both spectator and artist partake of a willing blindness, making

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 594.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 596.

¹¹⁷ Brustein is, of course, here stretching the truth for rhetorical purposes. This state of affairs began to crumble with David Garrick, and to a large extent disappeared after the knighthood of Henry Irving. Nevertheless, there has long been an air of bohemianism attached to the theatre, as illustrated by, for instance, Noel Coward's song “Don't Put Your Daughter on the Stage, Mrs. Worthington.” That aside, however, the days when such class distinctions were “automatically” part of working in the theatre are long gone.

¹¹⁸ Brustein, “Suburban Theatre,” 604.

the Broadway drama "a pleasant conversation between the audience and the stage into which no note of controversy or disagreement is ever introduced."¹¹⁹ The resulting insipidness, Brustein implies, has impoverished the theatre immensely.

Brustein exaggerates for effect, but it must be admitted that Broadway of the late 1950s was in a slump. While English drama was experiencing an aggressive renaissance with the rise of the Angry Young Man, American theatre largely was languishing in a kind of torpor, with such comfortable plays as Paddy Chayevsky's The Tenth Man receiving critical acclaim. Like the traditional Marxist's view of base and superstructure, which posits economics as the influence that forms all other elements of a society, the audience in Brustein's equation shapes, through an economic form of natural selection, the very nature of the theatre itself. If the spectators value form over content, the theatre will change to accommodate that preference. Similarly, if they seek prestige rather than spiritual or intellectual challenge, the theatre will likewise provide that. Like the biblical story of the creation of Man, the theatre is created in the audience's image, and reflects both its strengths and weaknesses. If the theatre reflects a bland, simplistic, and unworthy image, as intellectuals such as Trilling seem to believe, this is not a reflection of the worth of the theatre, but of the society it reflects.

And the reflection that Brustein sees in the mirror of the theatre is not the one Trilling sees. Where Trilling sees a "very considerable class which is moved by ideas,"¹²⁰ Brustein sees the "stupefying vacuity of the Broadway

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 605.

¹²⁰ "Our Country and Our Culture," 322.

audience."¹²¹ If Trilling believes that "art and thought are more generally and happily received and recognized" than ever before,¹²² Brustein sees a class which, while perhaps better educated, still wants its drama to describe "life the way [it] likes to see it, not the way it is."¹²³

Once this image of the unworthy audience was established in Brustein's mind as the primary source of the theatre's impoverishment, the next phase of his critical project became clear to him. He should focus on the correction of taste, both that of the audience and that of the popular critics who reinforced those preferences. In doing this, he hoped to lure new, more intellectually vibrant spectators into the theatre, which then would call into existence a more challenging drama to meet their tastes. This circle of influence would gradually create a theatre worthy of respect. While Brustein would occasionally address these issues explicitly in essays such as "Why I Write," they more usually are implicit from this point on, serving as an unspoken premise of his regular reviews.

What is most noticeable about Brustein's criticism from 1959 through 1968 -- collected in Seasons of Discontent and The Third Theatre -- is the overwhelming tone of sourness and scorn. As Julius Novick amusingly notes in his 1968 book on regional theatres, Brustein is noted for "holding his nose at the top of his lungs,"¹²⁴ which gives his criticism a great deal of raw energy and focus, but also a certain sense of dyspeptic crankiness that threatens to undermine the seriousness of his ideas. To his credit, he acknowledges this

¹²¹ Brustein, "Suburban Theatre," 605.

¹²² "Our Country and Our Culture", 321.

¹²³ Brustein, "Suburban Theatre," 604.

¹²⁴ Julius Novick, Beyond Broadway: The Quest for Permanent Theatres (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 262.

problem in the foreword to Seasons of Discontent. "How do you continually confront the specious products of a debased theatre," he asks, "without falling into an impotent rage or, worse still, losing faith in the value of your calling?"¹²⁵ Brustein is frequently in danger of succumbing to the former, if not the latter. He justifies this, however, by holding on to his belief that, as George Bernard Shaw said, "destructive activity [is] a secret good" because it "gives us breathing space and liberty."¹²⁶ Brustein is able to defend theatre as an art form by portraying himself as an intellectual Hercules sent to clean up the theatrical Augean stables.

Ultimately, in order to minimize the tendency toward impotent rage, he decides to limit his writing to the coverage of three types of events: "the significant new work or revival; the portentous overpraised fraud; the local or visiting company whose work illuminated some aspect of the theatre as a whole."¹²⁷ If a play Brustein considered insignificant had been, in his opinion, "analyzed accurately"¹²⁸ by the daily reviewers, Brustein saw no need to waste his energy rehashing. To attack the typical Broadway offering on a regular basis would prove repetitious and fruitless. Better to give his attentions to productions more worthy of attention or attack.

All three of these types of events, however, as previously noted, often involved the correction of the critical record as created by his fellow critics. Writing "not for the sake of a contemporary theatregoer's ephemeral pleasure

¹²⁵ Brustein, Seasons, 16.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 15.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 16. It is interesting to note that a similar policy was announced in 1963 by the nascent New York Review of Books, which announced in its first issue that it would spend no time "on books which are trivial in their intentions or venal in their effects, except occasionally to reduce a temporarily inflated reputation or to call attention to a fraud."

¹²⁸ Ibid.

but for the sake of a harsh posterity,"¹²⁹ Brustein could not let stand reviews characterized by what he believed to be ignorance and lack of understanding. Productions would close, more or less quickly, leaving only the reviews as a record of their existence and value (at least until the advent of video recording). For future generations, these impressions would be the only ones available, and thus would come to be seen as truth. It was contingent upon a critic such as Brustein to make certain that some other viewpoint than Walter Kerr's or Howard Taubman's would exist. And so his attacks on the opinions of his fellow critics are regular and vociferous.

He is most diligent in defending the works of modern giants such as Henrik Ibsen from accusations of tediousness or from what he considered to be total misunderstandings. His essay on a production of Ghosts entitled, "On Finding a Cure for Syphilis," ridicules the controversy raging among other reviewers as to whether Ibsen's play is dated and irrelevant because a cure for syphilis has been found. With a sigh at such a "dreary debate," Brustein proceeds to offer an elementary lecture on "what even the most casual student of Ibsen already knows: that Ghosts is not dated, is not naturalistic, is not about Oswald, and is concerned with hereditary syphilis only as a metaphor for Fate or Destiny."¹³⁰ The essay, as the foregoing quotation should suggest, has the tone of an exasperated teacher describing for the third time what should have been known from the beginning.

Similarly, Brustein rushes to the defense of other works of classic drama receiving poor treatment at the hands of critics, or just as likely, theatre artists. A sampling will give the flavor of these defenses. On Ibsen's Rosmersholm: "[the]

¹²⁹ Ibid., 289.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 58.

production is just finished enough to convince the reviewers that the play -- not the players -- is the source of the evening's aridities; but the fact is it takes a heap of bungling to make Ibsen's house a tomb."¹³¹ On Peer Gynt: "Perhaps it is unfair to blame anyone but the reviewers themselves for the absurdities they write about Aristophanes and Ibsen; certainly, journalists -- occupied with exalting the present -- have always been inclined to knock the past."¹³² About Bertolt Brecht's Mann ist Mann: "the reviewers have been inclined to criticize the Q.E.D. simplicity of the plot line. But the simplicity lies in them."¹³³ Mother Courage and Her Children is a "Brechtian masterpiece [that] has been produced with all the care, respect, and expertise that our professional theatre can muster. If this is still not quite enough, we must locate the inadequacy in the nature of the American theatre itself."¹³⁴ About Anton Chekhov's The Three Sisters: "This production will confirm the Philistines in their conviction that Chekhov is a deadly bore."¹³⁵ And, to complete this sampling, on Thomas Middleton's and James Rowley's The Changeling: "Since the play was completely buried under the debris [of the production], few members of the audience seemed to realize it was a masterpiece, especially when most of the reviewers made it an occasion for Philistine sneers."¹³⁶

The point, of course, is to defend those plays that Brustein believed to be masterpieces against the onslaughts of critic and player alike, so that the audience member does not receive the impression that these dramatists, writing

¹³¹ Ibid., 65.

¹³² Ibid., 219.

¹³³ Ibid., 72.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 155.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 166.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 253.

in some dim and distant theatrical past, are no longer relevant or vibrant for today's world. This is part of Brustein's effort to educate spectators by broadening their taste through exposure to great dramatic literature.

The seriousness with which he took this task is evidenced by the amount of space in his reviews devoted to such topics. As Alberta Lintecum shows in her analysis of Brustein's writing during his first nine years at The New Republic, fully 70% of the average Brustein review was devoted to a discussion of the dramatic text, the playwright, and/or the play's social implications, leaving decidedly little space available for discussion of the production. Since most theatre artists in America at that time were being trained according to the dictates of the Method, and thus were receiving very little instruction in the techniques necessary to interpret classical texts, they were less likely to effectively interpret classical plays in production. Consequently, it is not surprising to find Brustein focusing on texts rather than performances.

As another part of his self-appointed educational task, Brustein patrolled the theatrical waters to look for, and torpedo, those "overpraised frauds" whose existence threatened to corrupt the spectator's understanding of what deserved reverence. William Inge receives particularly sharp treatment at his hands, to such an extent that Brustein had his press tickets withheld for the opening of A Loss of Roses because of his regular attacks. In "The Men-Taming Women of William Inge," which was published in Harper's and thus is considerably longer than his normal reviews, Brustein dismantles Dark at the Top of the Stairs as well as the rest of Inge's work, which he characterizes as mediocre, shallow, and evasive. Noting that Inge had never suffered a critical or box office failure, Brustein attacks the play's plot ("improbable" and "wandering aimlessly"), the dialogue ("dry, repetitive, and monotonously folksy"), and Inge's view of man

(“as blandly nerveless as that held by Rodgers and Hammerstein”).¹³⁷ The play “drones on like a Midwestern cricket,” Brustein writes, “making no powerful statement, displaying no moving action, uttering no memorable dialogue.”¹³⁸ Not content simply to contradict the near unanimous praise being heaped on Dark at the Top of the Stairs, Brustein then provides a devastating and, in my opinion, completely accurate analysis of Inge’s work as whole, stating in summary that he “is a dramatist of considerable limitations with a very small gallery of characters, situations, and themes.”¹³⁹

Similarly, Brustein castigated such generally applauded figures as Tennessee Williams, Paddy Chayevsky, and Arthur Miller. Miller was singled out for particular attack when he broke an eight-year silence to assume the role of unofficial company playwright for the young Repertory Theatre at Lincoln Center. While Brustein throughout his career has maintained that Miller is overrated, and has taken a dim view of even those plays generally regarded as masterpieces (e.g., Death of a Salesman), the vociferousness of his attacks on Miller during the sixties had more to do with his participation in the Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center than with the intrinsic quality of his work. Brustein set out to halt what he considered to be a theatrical abomination that was threatening the young Lincoln Center: the “ghastly repetition of the whole Broadway syndrome, this time under the dignified aegis of subsidized culture.”¹⁴⁰ After admitting, in the forward to Seasons of Discontent, that he was “extremely hard” on Miller, he goes on to explain that his reason for being so was that

¹³⁷ Ibid., 84.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 85.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 86.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 19.

Miller “was assuming a role with this company that was virtually guaranteed . . . to set back theatrical clocks. It was not simply that After the Fall and Incident at Vichy seemed to me bad and pretentious plays, but that they seemed so moribund in their style, ideas, and language.”¹⁴¹ More to the point, he goes on to say, “this was the theatre that had dominated Broadway for over twenty years, the theatre that effectually banished poetry and imagination from the stage.”¹⁴² Wishing to see the subsidized theatre move in another direction than the prosaic realism often seen on Broadway, Brustein set out to clear a path for a different kind and style of play.

In the title essay of The Third Theatre, Brustein admiringly quotes J. M. Synge’s preference for theatre that contains a “rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality.”¹⁴³ For Brustein, this takes the form of a certain richness of language and a colorful sense of theatricality. His comment on Miller’s having banished “poetry and imagination” from the stage, quoted above, extends to his feelings concerning realism in general. Even his appreciation for playwrights generally considered realists, such as Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov, rests on an appreciation of the nonrealistic elements that underlay their writing. Brustein insists that Ibsen’s Ghosts, for instance, is not a naturalistic drama but, rather, “a modern tragedy constructed on a Sophoclean pattern”¹⁴⁴; it is about “tragic Necessity.”¹⁴⁵ In the hands of lesser playwrights, realism tends to be leaden in its humorlessness, and to substitute

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 19.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Brustein, Third Theatre, 3.

¹⁴⁴ Brustein, Seasons, 58.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 59.

for depth of thought and feeling the “heavy breathing of Meaning and Significance.”¹⁴⁶

When he finds a play that breaks out of the realistic straitjacket into which the American theatre had been slipped, he tends to be over-effusive in his praise. He calls Rabindranath Tagore’s King of the Dark Chamber, for instance, a twentieth-century “Indian masterpiece,” which “fulfills the highest function of the minority theatre.”¹⁴⁷ Written in a style much like a simple fable, the play explores the spiritual development of Queen Sudarshana, married to a King so ugly that he remains hidden away in a dark room. At first she rejects him, and is instead attracted to a handsome impostor, but she eventually learns to see beyond the surface of things to their inner truth and beauty. As a result, the King announces that he will leave his dark room and live in the light with his queen. Brustein applauds the play’s “highly charged poetic intensity,”¹⁴⁸ a quality which for him is the reverse of traditional realism. Failing to acknowledge that the roots of Tagore’s play rest very deeply in the traditions of Sanskrit drama, he declares that Tagore uses music, mime, chorus, lyrical speech, song, declamation, gesture, make-up, and costume “in a completely original manner.”¹⁴⁹ Whether original or not, though, it is obvious that The King of the Dark Chamber was very different from the usual fare in the American theatre. Brustein clearly saw in Tagore’s subject matter and simple poetry an antidote to commonplace realism, something which might help free the American theatre from its dullness of imagination.

¹⁴⁶ Brustein, Third Theatre, 4.

¹⁴⁷ Brustein, Seasons, 44.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

Similarly, Brustein's over-enthusiastic championing of Barbara Garson's Macbird!, with its Elizabethan trappings in support of a satirical dismantling of the Johnson administration, becomes more understandable when seen in this context. While today the play seems slightly sophomoric (at least to me), the play imitates what Brustein considers the right model, Elizabethan satire (the subject of his doctoral dissertation) and combines this flexible form with biting contemporary wit. As important as Garson's tone and style is her audacity at drawing a parallel between contemporary politics and Macbeth, going so far as to suggest that Johnson, as Macbeth, was involved in killing John Kennedy, as King Duncan. Crowing that such daring made her a "true child of Lenny Bruce,"¹⁵⁰ Brustein extols Garson's "impudence and anarchic zest," which reveals "a new theatrical freedom . . . that will doubtless make it infinitely more exciting to occupy a theatre seat from now on."¹⁵¹ Gleefully noting that the "Great Usher in the Sky" had seated him next to Walter Kerr, much of Brustein's enthusiasm seems to originate from the discomfort that the play seemed to cause more conservative audience members, Kerr among them. Exhilarated by the mixed nature of the audience, which included not only well-wishers but "Broadway celebrities, gossip columnists, theatre journalists, and political commentators,"¹⁵² Brustein seems almost ready to dance in delight at the sight of Garson confronting these people, as if she had soaped their windows as well as written this play.

Perhaps more than any other, this review gives a sense of the type of theatre experience Brustein dreamed of: anarchic, biting, energetic, filled with

¹⁵⁰ Brustein, Third Theatre, 56.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

lively language, an elaborate plot, and a sense of overt theatricality. Years later, in the foreword to Who Needs Theatre?, Brustein would make explicit the type of theatre he thought he was striving to encourage in his early criticism. It was, he says, "a theatre of danger, dreams, surprise, adventure, a theatre of the unexpected and the unknown."¹⁵³ Such a theatre might banish the portentousness that the contemporary audience perversely regarded as an indication of high seriousness, leaving the American audience free to develop a genuine interest in the theatre, based on a vital and enthusiastic connection.

Such a change would presume an artistic vision and commitment to an ideal that Brustein believed could only be attained within a permanent company. Consequently, he takes great interest in the work of the various companies that spring up during the first half of the 1960s. For him, the permanent company represented an escape from the commercial exploitation of the contemporary theatre, and a return to the artistry of the avant-garde theatres of the late nineteenth century that were founded on strong artistic principles shared by a group of committed artists. Tocqueville had written that in societies where guilds are dominant the members develop an identity as a group, and a kind of "corporate pride" springs up.¹⁵⁴ In such a system, each artist "has not only his fortune to make, but his reputation to preserve. He is not exclusively swayed by his own interest or even that of the customer, but by that of the body to which he belongs; and the interest of that body is that each artisan should produce the best possible work."¹⁵⁵ In short, the artist or artisan places his talents at the service of a larger idea, and in exchange receives his

¹⁵³ Brustein, Who Needs Theatre, xiv.

¹⁵⁴ Tocqueville, 48.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

sense of self-worth from his or her contribution to the group. Brustein promotes this selfless, communal approach to production, writing that “if a repertory company is ever to function properly, its members must subordinate their own aspirations to the demands of the company, working in perfect harmony for the sake of a balanced and unified work.”¹⁵⁶ By subordinating the individual to the whole, the self-aggrandisement and self-promotion that characterizes the Broadway scene, and increasingly the off-Broadway scene as well -- as Tocqueville says, the “incessant jostling” of artists trying to climb to the top of the heap -- would be replaced by a heightened sense of artistry, as the artist would no longer have to stand alone in the face of changing fashion and the siren calls of fame.

Such a model seems unlikely in an America devoted to fame and the pursuit of personal fortune, and has repeatedly proven a chimera. Past attempts to create such theatre, e.g., The Group Theatre or the Lincoln Center Company, have foundered on shoals of commercialism. Failures, however, do not negate the value of the ideal. While with hindsight Brustein’s belief in the benefits of a selfless devotion to an ideal system may appear to some naively idealistic, it nonetheless articulated a vision and aspiration still capable of moving theatre people in the 1960s. Obviously, this vision is consistent with Brustein’s other values, and it supports his claim for the worthiness of theatrical production. If the theatre could shed the values of commerce and its definition of success as fame and fortune, and instead create art based on a sense of artistic vision and value, the theatre might legitimately join the ranks of the other arts in terms of seriousness of purpose. This, in turn, would not only result in a new appreciation of the potentialities of the theatre by the existing audience, but it would also draw back the “discriminating spectator” that Brustein so dearly

¹⁵⁶ Brustein, *Seasons*, 211.

wished to see return to the theatre.

Given the importance of this issue, the failures of the burgeoning repertory movement were doubly painful to Brustein. He condemned the Phoenix Theatre for developing “no new methods of staging, no new methods of playing, no new interpretive approach” and for its unwillingness to “abandon itself to a purpose higher than its own existence,”¹⁵⁷ i.e., a well-conceived artistic vision. As mentioned before, Lincoln Center was roundly and severely reprimanded for being “subsidized rubbish” that simply transplanted the ideas and values of the Broadway stage into the noncommercial arena. Many of those who reviewed Seasons of Discontent were impressed with Brustein’s ability to predict the downfall of Lincoln Center years before it occurred. Had they studied Brustein’s aesthetic values, they could have easily predicted his scorn for the misconceived Lincoln Center venture.

The one bright spot Brustein saw at this time was Joseph Papp’s New York Shakespeare Festival, which he enthusiastically praised for creating a “uniquely American Shakespeare style.”¹⁵⁸ This was an accomplishment of utmost importance to Brustein, who felt that American Shakespeare productions were unduly imitative of English traditions. For instance, he faulted the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre for being a “transplant, producing hybrids--it looks for all the world like a British repertory, though it has been largely staffed with American actors.”¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, the Guthrie had not “solved, or even bothered to confront, the problems of an American classic style.”¹⁶⁰ While Brustein never

¹⁵⁷ Brustein, Seasons, 221.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 227.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 239.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid..

explicitly described the characteristics of such a style, its outlines can be apprehended in his praise for Papp's productions, which he praised for their "peculiarly American" style that was "volatile, ripsnorting, rough-and-ready"¹⁶¹ and "so virile it makes the Old Vic look like a collection of Bennington girls doing their junior year field work."¹⁶² Papp's interpretations were bold, fresh, yet "faithful to the text," thus satisfying Brustein's radical and traditional inclinations.

In addition, the company demonstrated the rightness of Brustein's belief in the strengths of a guild-like ensemble devoted to art rather than self-aggrandizement. He commends Papp for having created an "ensemble comparable to any in the world," which, because of Papp's "laudable disdain for the star system,"¹⁶³ has "thank heaven, developed no stars."¹⁶⁴ Thus, Papp's company embodied many of the characteristics Brustein held most dear, not only in style of production, but in underlying artistic principles as well. He concludes one essay in an uncharacteristically optimistic manner, saying that he is convinced "there were no problems [the company] could not ultimately solve, considering the care, taste, imagination, and originality with which it was so plentifully endowed."¹⁶⁵ In many ways, Brustein's appreciation of the New York Shakespeare Festival is indicative of the type of "worthy" theatre that he believed would lure back into the theatre the Ideal Spectator.

That said, it must also be noted that Brustein's attempts to create a theatre "worthy of respect" through his criticism had predictably little effect on the theatre in general. Given his reliance on a complete overhaul of the theatre

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 228.

¹⁶² Ibid., 225.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 228.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 225.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 231.

audience in order to achieve his goals, this is not surprising. There was little improvement in the audience, except in those instances where the audience was composed of a small group of intellectuals, as was the case with the early off-Broadway movement. Brustein's elitism confronted the much stronger populism of American society, and he resembled nothing more than a fly angrily buzzing against a very thick window. While there clearly were glimmers of hope to be seen in the gathering steam of the repertory theatre movement, the ineptitude of these theatres in the face of the modern classics was obviously frustrating to Brustein. The promise of the repertory movement had not been realized. His frustration with his lack of impact would lead him a few years later to accept the position of Dean of the School of Drama at Yale University, where he was able to put his ideas into practice in his own repertory company.¹⁶⁶

On a smaller scale, whether he had had any impact on Trilling's opinion of the theatre is impossible to say; there certainly is no evidence in Trilling's writing that he had. Yet he had begun the process of persuading him, and would continue his conversation with him by focusing solely on dramatic literature in Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama. In this book, he seeks to secure a place for the drama in the development of modern literature, building upon themes that were raised in Trilling's writings, as well as the larger tradition of modern criticism.

¹⁶⁶ Robert Brustein, Letter to Scott Walters, April 20, 1998.

CHAPTER 3

Brustein's attempt to interject the modern drama into the consciousness of his fellow intellectuals was severely hindered, as we have seen, by the woeful state of the American theatre. The generally dismissive attitude toward theatre of many of the literary intellectuals was bluntly expressed by novelist Philip Roth in a predominantly positive review of Seasons of Discontent published in The New York Times Book Review. Roth wrote :

To be sure, Brustein himself is fully aware of the distance -- in values and standards of judgment -- that lies between the literary and the theatrical world. He is aware that no amount of criticism -- at this point -- will cause the theatre to change its nature. Short of some profound social shock, literary and theatrical America will remain irreconcilable. Nevertheless, he continues to measure the distance between the two worlds and report on it.¹

Roth's observations on this irreconcilability might have been drawn from Brustein's book itself, which Roth notes might more accurately have been titled Seasons of Agony. Roth sympathizes with Brustein's plight as a critic with high standards among the Philistines of Broadway, and admires his ability to "undergo hours of torture and still come off the rack with his rage and sanity intact."² This is a backhanded compliment, however, and Roth's pessimistic declaration of irreconcilable differences must have been painful for Brustein.

¹ Philip Roth, review of Seasons of Discontent, by Robert Brustein, in The New York Times Book Review (November 7, 1965): 2.

² Ibid.

The clear implication is that Brustein is wasting his time laboring on a hopeless cause, that his attempts to improve the theatre through his criticism are a waste of his intellect and talent.

Roth's review illustrates why Brustein lamented at the end of Dumbocracy in America that his "theatrical associations have distanced me from my intellectual friends."³ The truth is, though, that his "friends" were only echoing his position. Brustein's 1959 essay, "Why American Plays Are Not Literature," for example, notes American theatre's "cheerful isolation from a central literary tradition" and goes on to say that a

successful playwright today may think of himself as a craftsman, an entertainer, even a creative artist, but only in rare cases would he call himself a literary man. He does not share at all in those common interests -- few enough in our society -- which unite the poet, novelist, and essayist.⁴

The unintended consequence of Brustein's purgative attacks on the theatre, in other words, seems to have been the strengthening of the anti-theatrical prejudices of the very intellectuals whose attendance he believed would save the theatre.

Brustein's 1964 The Theatre of Revolt can be seen as an attempt to correct this unintended effect by drawing attention away from contemporary American drama to modern European drama with greater intellectual weight.

³ Robert Brustein, Dumbocracy in America: Studies in the Theatre of Guilt (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1994), 261.

⁴ Robert Brustein, "Why American Plays Are Not Literature," chap. in American Drama and Its Critics, edited with an introduction by Alan S. Downer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 245.

As he notes in "Why American Plays Are Not Literature," "all the great European playwrights of the past hundred years wrote poetry, epics, novels, short stories, essays, or criticism,"⁵ and thus he argues that theatre itself need not be isolated from the larger literary and intellectual world. He was in complete agreement with Raymond Williams, who wrote in Drama From Ibsen to Brecht, that it is "impossible to understand modern literature without the work of at least eight or ten dramatists . . ." since "the energy and power of dramatic imagination have continued to create some of the essential consciousness of our world."⁶

Because of several changes in the American theatre scene, Brustein was able to use The Theatre of Revolt to repudiate those who shared Roth's attitude toward the American stage (Trilling included), and demonstrate theatre's right to join the larger literary conversation. Given the creation of the National Council of the Arts (the forerunner to the National Endowment for the Arts) headed by Broadway producer Roger L. Stevens, and the shift of creative energies of many theatre artists from Broadway to the burgeoning regional theatres with their repertoires dominated by classical and modern European works, the time seemed right for a re-evaluation.

Chapter One of this study examined Brustein's use of a pattern of misprision Harold Bloom called "tessera" in order to reclaim Trilling's regard for

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Williams, Raymond. Drama From Ibsen to Brecht. Revised edition. London: The Hogarth Press, 1987, 11.

O'Neill. "Tessera" was one of Bloom's "revisionary ratios" by which a younger poet or critic struggles to overcome the works and ideas of a powerful predecessor. Another such method of misreading Bloom calls "clinamen." Bloom borrows the word clinamen from Lucretius, who used it to describe the necessary "swerve" made by atoms in order to allow change to appear in the universe. Similarly, a poet or critic "swerves away from his precursor"⁷ in order to make his or her own mark on the literary universe. A clinamen, therefore, "appears as a corrective movement in [the poet's] own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves."⁸ In The Theatre of Revolt as a whole, Brustein executes his own clinamen by adopting the outlines of Trilling's definition of modernist literature, but showing that Trilling should have "swerved" to include the theatre in his analysis. In addition, he accepts Trilling's identification of an "adversary culture" within larger society, but continues to argue, counter to Trilling's more meliorist approach, that an attitude of alienation and hostility toward society, which he calls "revolt," is the most appropriate and useful one for the artist and intellectual to have. "The stronger the man," Bloom writes, "the larger his resentments, and the more brazen his

⁷ Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973, 14.

⁸ Ibid.

clinamen.⁹ In regard to Trilling's dismissal of theatre, Brustein's resentments were considerable.

From the first word of The Theatre of Revolt, Brustein makes a claim for performance as an effective vehicle for the communication of ideas by creating an imaginary performance that communicated an abstract idea in terms of concrete images. It is worth quoting in full his description of the classical theatre, which he calls the "theatre of communion," and its contrast with the modern theatre, which he labels the "theatre of revolt." The latter, as shall be seen, concretizes many ideas concerning modern literature that Trilling advanced in more abstract language. Brustein writes:

First, imagine an open temple of classical proportions, surrounded by rising tiers. Gathered on separate levels are artisans, citizens, nobility -- divided into classes but forming a unified congregation of spectators. In front of the temple is an altar before which stands a high priest in hieratic robes. Beyond the temple is a city; beyond the city, the celestial spheres, moving steadily in their orbits. The priest conducts a ritual ceremony by miming a myth of heroism and violence. The congregation is startled by the growing frenzy of the action; the atmosphere grows taut and strained. The high priest concludes his service with a ritual sacrifice, and blood pours from the altar. The congregation screams as if it were the victim. Some spectators fall from their seats; the temple cracks; the city begins to crumble; the spheres start wildly from their course. At the point when total dissolution seems imminent, the scene freezes. The spectators file out, their anxiety mixed with an ethereal calm.

Now, imagine a perfectly level plain in a desolate land. In the foreground, an uneasy crowd of citizens huddle together on the ruins of an ancient temple. Beyond them, a broken altar, bristling with artifacts. Beyond that, empty space. An emaciated priest in disreputable garments stands before the ruined altar, level with the crowd, glancing into a distorting mirror. He cavorts grotesquely before it, inspecting his own image in several outlandish positions. The crowd mutters ominously and partially

⁹ Ibid., 43.

disperses. The priest turns the mirror on those who remain to reflect them sitting stupidly on the rubble. They gaze at their images for a moment, painfully transfixed; then, horror-struck, they run away, hurling stones at the altar and angry imprecations at the priest. The priest, shaking with anger, futility, and irony, turns the mirror on the void. He is alone in the void.¹⁰

The images are memorable and striking (if a bit purple), powerfully communicating in compressed form what Brustein believes to be the differences between the classical and modern worldviews, social structures, and functions of the artist. The two mini-performances come complete with actors, an audience, spectacle, action, and implied dialogue. Visualized successively, without benefit of exegesis, the images are complex, vivid, clear, and extremely dramatic, their effects felt in the viscera as well as the intellect. As a claim for the powers of theatre to embody ideas, and for Brustein's championing of the drama and dramatic performance as "the greatest literary form because it combines action and language,"¹¹ the opening of The Theatre of Revolt is quite effective.

Brustein opens his book this way not only to provide contrast, but to show that the "theatre of revolt" is an outgrowth of the "theatre of communion." The "theatre of communion" evolved toward a "sense of spiritual disintegration,"¹² describing a trajectory that "arches from belief to uncertainty to unbelief, always developing in the direction of greater skepticism toward temporal and spiritual

¹⁰ Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to Modern Drama (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964; Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1991), 3 - 4.

¹¹ Brustein, "Why American Plays Are Not Literature," 251.

¹² Brustein, Dumbocracy, 6.

laws.”¹³ His example of this development in Greek tragedy moves from the “religious piety of Aeschylus to the tragic ambivalence of Sophocles to the angry agnosticism of Euripides, finally dissipating itself in the spiritual indifference of Menander and New Comedy.”¹⁴ He sees the development as cyclical, however, following the general theory of history outlined by Giovanni Battista Vico, in which civilization proceeds from “divine to heroic to human manifestations -- after which a clap of thunder signals the repetition of the process.”¹⁵ This pattern of recurrence is also at work in the “theatre of revolt,” and the book ends by presenting Jean Genet as a possible return to the start of the modern cycle that began with the disintegrated spirituality that serves as the end point for the classical. A return to the spiritual faith typified by Aeschylus is impossible, according to Brustein; an unbridgeable chasm divides the modern from the classical. The modern theatre is forever condemned to spiritual disillusion.

While Brustein does not explain why this should be so, one can certainly hear the echoes of his Columbia colleague Joseph Wood Krutch, whose influential 1929 book The Modern Temper argued that the discoveries of science had unseated God in the heavens and replaced Him with impersonal Nature in endless Space. Nevertheless, humanity continued to demand that the meaning and the mystery of life be addressed, and, according to Trilling,

¹³ Ibid., 5.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 32.

that demand was met by literature, which “now stands virtually in place of religion and may even be thought of itself as a religion.”¹⁶ Quoting from literary scholar Graham Hough’s book The Dream and the Task: Literature and Morals in the Culture of Today, Trilling notes that modern literature is required to “provide the foundations of feeling, conduct and belief for those who have no other source of supply.”¹⁷ Brustein’s opening paragraphs reflect modern literature’s position as a religion by presenting the artist in the quasi-historical guise of priest.

The modern ritual described by Brustein¹⁸ is an empty one, played out on the ruins of a temple in the midst of empty space. The artist-priest, “emaciated” and in “disreputable garments,” clearly is a representative of what Trilling referred to as the “adversary culture,” a figure who exhibits in his behavior a “bitter line of hostility”¹⁹ toward the civilization in which he lives, and possesses “certain powers of indignant perception”²⁰ which he uses aggressively against that civilization.

At the beginning of the performance, the artist-priest is intensely self-absorbed, watching himself in a distorting mirror and assuming “several

¹⁶ Lionel Trilling, “The Two Environments: Reflections on the Study of English,” chap. in Beyond Culture (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 219.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ All quotations in the paragraph that follows are from the ritual described in Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt, pages 3 - 4.

¹⁹ Lionel Trilling, “On the Teaching of Modern Literature,” chap. in Beyond Culture (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 3.

outlandish positions." This sort of intense involvement with self, Trilling notes in The Opposing Self, is central to modern literature,²¹ and when combined with an "attraction to the extreme mental states -- to rapture, ecstasy, and transcendence, which are achieved by drugs, trance, music and dance, orgy, and the derangement of personality,"²² the distortions such as those described by Brustein are likely to follow. As Brustein's ritual continues, the crowd thins, reflecting the unpopularity of modern literature and drama. The artist-priest is now no longer performing for the masses but rather a smaller group of presumably educated spectators willing to be patient with his self-absorption.

As a reward for their patience, the spectators find themselves the target of the artist's indignation, as he uses his distorting mirror to reflect their image grotesquely back at them. This sort of attack is characteristic of modern literature, says Trilling, and it is "shockingly personal."²³ By showing the spectators their images, no matter how distorted, the artist-priest asks the spectators to examine themselves and question what they have become. He "asks us if we are content with our marriages, with our family lives, with our professional lives, with our friends"²⁴; in fact, he asks "if we are saved or

²⁰ Lionel Trilling, "Preface," chap. in The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism (New York: The Viking Press, 1955), x.

²¹ Ibid., ix.

²² Trilling, "On the Teaching of Modern Literature," 18.

²³ Ibid., 8.

²⁴ Ibid.

damned.”²⁵ The artist-priest is pitiless in his focus, and the spectators gaze at their images briefly and stupidly before running away “horror-struck . . . hurling stones at the altar and angry imprecations at the priest.” While historically, this may have been figuratively the case in the early years of modernism, Trilling and Brustein both argued that the reaction was later replaced by either passive acceptance or willing enthusiasm. The myth of the hostile public, however, is necessary both to generate avant-garde energy among artists and to buttress Brustein’s argument about the avant-garde essence of modern drama.

The artist-priest responds to his abandonment with “anger, futility, and irony,” and also, so it seems, a certain self-satisfied sense of heroism. He now assumes an alienated persona similar to that of Dostoevsky’s anti-hero, the Underground Man, whom Trilling describes as “shout[ing] aloud his envy and hatred and carr[ying] the ark of his self-hatred and alienation into a remorseless battle with what he calls ‘the good and the beautiful,’ mounting an attack upon every belief not merely of bourgeois society but of the whole humanist tradition.”²⁶ Then he “turns the mirror on the void,” reflecting the distortions of his mirror onto the cosmic plane, and as a result of the void’s silence, feels alone.

The point is that Brustein is in accord with Trilling concerning the general outlines of modernist literature, and he spends the remaining 400-plus pages of The Theatre of Revolt explaining that those outlines are also characteristic of

²⁵ Ibid., 9.

drama from Ibsen on. Aspects of modernism described by Trilling that do not appear in Brustein's opening image are introduced and discussed later in The Theatre of Revolt. These include modern literature's emphasis on myth, its promotion of intoxication and passion over reason, its formal difficulties, its susceptibility to "being made into an academic subject."²⁷ (Trilling and Brustein are both aware of how their work is itself evidence of this.)

Thus, there is nothing terribly original about Brustein's ideas about modernism, except for the theatrical manner in which he expressed them; nor does his choice of playwrights stray far from mainstream opinion. Many before him had made the case for drama as an outgrowth of modern literature, and had chosen to focus upon largely the same group of acknowledged masters: Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Shaw, Brecht, and Pirandello. These were the focus of many then-current studies of modern drama, including Raymond Williams' Drama From Ibsen to Eliot (1952, and revised as Drama From Ibsen to Brecht in 1968) and Joseph Wood Krutch's "Modernism" in Modern Drama: A Definition and an Estimate (1962). Ibsen and Strindberg receive the most attention in Maurice Valency's The Flower and The Castle: An Introduction to Modern Drama, published in 1962. Valency says in his forward that a "study of modern drama might well be expected to deal with a dozen or so major figures from Ibsen to Brecht," and in the course of his lengthy book Valency touches on most of the same ones Brustein does. Similarly, Norris Houghton notes in a review

²⁸ Ibid., 25.

the similarity between The Theatre of Revolt and Eric Bentley's The Life of the Drama, which, he points out, were published within days each other, examined the same artists and movements, and were both written by critics for The New Republic who also taught dramatic literature at Columbia. John Gross, reviewing The Theatre of Revolt in Commentary, notes that Brustein's publishers compared it to Edmund Wilson's classic Axel's Castle (indeed, Brustein himself acknowledges it as his model),²⁸ but that a "more obvious comparison would be with [Bentley's] The Playwright as Thinker which covers a good deal of the same ground."²⁹ Gross complains that, in The Theatre of Revolt, "what ought to be a manifesto has too much the air of a twice-told tale."³⁰

To some extent, Brustein's traditional description of modernism, in content if not in form, may have been intentional. While Brustein does depart from the norm in including Eugene O'Neill and Jean Genet in the ranks of the acknowledged masters (Genet certainly was a minority taste in 1964, and O'Neill, despite his Nobel Prize, was usually placed low in the pantheon), his argument benefited from the conservative choice of generally recognized playwrights. Rather than blaze entirely new trails, he used old trails to lead readers to what had been largely ignored. While literati like Philip Roth might

²⁷ Ibid., 4.

²⁸ Robert Brustein, interview by author, Tape recording, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2 December, 1997.

²⁹ John Gross, "The Nay Sayers," review of The Theatre of Revolt, by Robert Brustein, Commentary 39 (February 1965): 78.

³⁰ Ibid.

be able to dismiss the American theatre as intellectually backward, the modern international theatre could not be dismissed so lightly.

To some extent, Brustein's strategy seems to have worked, at least in regards to Trilling. As noted in Chapter One, when Trilling began doing textbook anthologies he included a fair share of plays, a fact which Brustein, with obvious satisfaction, took to mean that "his adversary feelings toward theatre were over."³¹ In fact, not only did Trilling's anthology include drama, but of the six modern plays included, five of them were by playwrights analyzed by Brustein in The Theatre of Revolt. This seems to indicate that Trilling recognized a canon of great modern playwrights similar to that recognized by Brustein, Bentley, Williams, and the others mentioned above.

Brustein additionally must have been pleased not only because Trilling acknowledged the importance of drama, but also because he enthusiastically praised the wonders of theatrical production itself. In his preface to Ibsen's The Wild Duck, Trilling wrote:

The device by which Ibsen suggests the possible beneficence of illusion is a charming one, and also deeply moving, even more in actual presentation on the stage than on the printed page -- it is always an electrifying moment for the audience when the forest in the garret is first revealed to view. There is something strangely affecting in a fiction, a mere fancy, that stands before us a palpable actuality, to be seen and entered into . . . When first the sliding door is pushed back to reveal the moonlit scene, we have the sense that we have been permitted to look out through Keats's

³¹ Robert Brustein, "The Humanist and the Artist," in Who Needs Theatre (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987), 315.

"magic casements, opening on the foam / Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn."³²

Given Trilling's high esteem for Keats, this is high praise indeed. While it may have been a bit optimistic to see Trilling's negative feelings toward the theatre as being "over," it does seem clear that they had changed.

But to be persuaded of the importance of drama is one matter; to subscribe to Brustein's central thesis is quite another. Brustein makes it the purpose of The Theatre of Revolt to show that modern dramatists "share one thing in common which separates them from their predecessors and links them to each other. This is their attitude of revolt."³³ Brustein portrays the modern dramatist as "assuming an attitude of refusal which puts him in conflict with the laws of modern necessity. Rejecting God, church, community, and family -- vindicating the rights of the individual against the claims of government, morality, conventions, and rule -- he adopts the posture of a rebel, chafing against restraints, determined to make all barriers crack."³⁴ Going on in a rather melodramatic vein, Brustein writes that the theatre of revolt

is the temple of a priest without a God, without an orthodoxy, without even much of a congregation, who conducts his service within the hideous architecture of the absurd. A missionary of discord, he spreads a gospel of insurrection, trying to substitute his inspired vision for traditional values, trying to improvise a ritual out of anguish and frustration. Instead of myths of communion, he offers myths of dispersal; instead of consoling sermons, painful

³² Lionel Trilling, Prefaces to The Experience of Literature, Uniform Edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 25.

³³ Brustein, Revolt, 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

demands; instead of a liturgy of acceptance, a liturgy of complaint. He is an apostate priest, and one who secretly would be God. Taking as his motto Lucifer's Non servium, he emerges as the spirit of denial, the man who says No, pursuing his Yes down the countless avenues of revolt.³⁵

Brustein's inexorable focus on alienation and revolt was noted by several critics. John Gross, for example, quips, "Mr. Brustein's most positive term of praise is 'negative,'" and therefore he believes that the "only physician we should trust is the one who pronounces our disease incurable."³⁶ Brustein acknowledges that he focused primarily on the negative, explaining that, while these playwrights were often in conflict over what they supported, they tended to be in agreement about what they were against. His use of an umbrella term such as "revolt" is his effort to unite a group whose variety is usually stressed by others.

In order to maintain this theme and its relentless focus on the negative, Brustein must dismiss, ignore, and sometimes willfully misinterpret evidence that contradicts his central ideas. Nearly every reviewer of the book, for instance, rightly mentions the unconvincing depiction of Chekhov as a rebel, although they forgive him because the essay is otherwise so insightful. Acknowledging this on the first page of his chapter, Brustein notes that Chekhov's "title as a rebel playwright" can only be "partially established."³⁷ Chekhov's drama displays few of the characteristics common to theatre of

³⁵ Ibid., 16.

³⁶ Gross, "The Nay Sayers," 78.

³⁷ Brustein, Revolt, 137.

revolt, he says, but "Chekhov the moralist hovers in the depths of his plays . . . dictating character, action, and theme, while the realist is reworking these so as to exclude whatever seems mannered, subjective, and unnaturally theatrical."³⁸ Brustein de-emphasizes Chekhov's statement that "the artist should not be a judge of his characters," giving it less credence than Chekhov's emendation that the artist "must pass judgment only on what he understands."³⁹ Consequently, he presents Chekhov as rebelling "against the indolence, vacuity, irresponsibility, and moral inertia of his characters,"⁴⁰ most of whom are middle class and thus, to Brustein, deserving of such condemnation. Chekhov's rebellion, Brustein argues, is so successfully masked on the surface of the plays by the "tedium vitae and spiritual vapors" that it takes a great deal of critical digging to find the "energy and dissent" beneath the surface.⁴¹ To his credit, Brustein is honest about the insubstantial nature of Chekhov's revolt. Nonetheless, Brustein's need to equate intellectual and artistic worth with an adversarial relation to culture leads him to emphasize secondary aspects of the dramatist's work at the expense of the primary aspects.

Such distortion exists throughout the book. First he shows evidence of rebellion in the dramatist's personality or background; then he represents more conformist or assenting behavior as psychological attempts to repress the

³⁸ Ibid., 139

³⁹ Ibid., 148.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 148.

⁴¹ Ibid., 150.

rebellion. Thus, Brecht's Marxism is presented not as a deeply held political conviction, but rather as an attempt by Brecht to marshal his overactive libido, which Brustein sees in the bisexual marauding of the title character in Baal. Strindberg's sporadic religious fervor, similarly, is portrayed, perhaps with more reason, as his attempt to resist his own rebellion against God. The most egregious example of Brustein's tendency to manipulate his material to fit his central theme is in his discussion of Henrik Ibsen.

Ibsen is the linchpin of Brustein's idea of the theatre of revolt, and is the first playwright examined in the book. His sense of rebellion is described as constant and extreme. Brustein uses as a unifying image Ibsen's insistence, in a poem addressed to a "revolutionary orator" who had accused him of being a conservative, that all previous revolutions (including the Flood, which he called the "most radical revolution of all time"⁴²) were compromised by their incompleteness. The voice of Ibsen's poem regretted that there were a few survivors aboard Noah's ark, the speaker's own fantasized contribution being the enthusiastic torpedoing of the ark and the complete annihilation of humanity.⁴³ Mankind must rid itself of all institutions, Brustein sees Ibsen insisting, and it must begin again with the individual. "Thus, the real quintessence of Ibsenism," Brustein writes, "is total resistance to whatever is established."⁴⁴ To Brustein, each of Ibsen's dramas exemplifies this anarchic

⁴² Ibid., 37.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 48.

spirit, even to the point of torpedoing his own previously written plays, so that each succeeding one is a refutation of that which had preceded it. While this very effectively makes sense of many seeming contradictions in Ibsen's philosophy from play to play, it leads Brustein to make several odd interpretations, most notably in the analysis of Brand that comprises a substantial part of the Ibsen chapter.

Brustein portrays Brand as an image of Ibsen himself, holding fast to the motto "All or Nothing" and at war with the spirit of compromise. Brand's fanaticism is often harsh and brutal, especially as it relates to his family, yet Brustein represents his commitment to the ideal as primarily admirable and heroic. At the end of the play, after Brand drags his remaining followers to the top of a mountain, where they abandon him, leaving him to his fanatical vision, a gunshot triggers a tremendous avalanche. As the snow thunders down the mountain toward him, promising certain death, Brand looks to the heavens and demands of God, "If not by Will, how can man be redeemed?" And from the heavens comes a booming voice that declares, "He Is the God of charity, mercy, love" -- after which Brand is, presumably, buried beneath tons of snow.

This ending Brustein declares "inconclusive." Unable to accept that Ibsen might be exploring the negative side of blind fanaticism, Brustein asserts that "if Brand's severe demands have all been wrong, and man is redeemed only through love, then the whole intellectual structure of the work collapses; and Brand's relentless attacks on compromise and accommodation are all

superfluous.”⁴⁵ Brustein is unwilling to entertain the possibility of this superfluity, and he twists and turns in order to make the play fit his positive view of revolt. Saying that Ibsen is able to “exalt messianic revolt as an idea, while condemning it in practice,” Brustein concludes that the ending “demands a synthesis which the author cannot provide; instead, he chooses to invalidate the intellectual hypothesis of the play.” Revealing his own predilection, Brustein insists that we must admire the “defeated, yet triumphantly Godlike hero,” and attributes the “vaguely unsatisfying ending” to the “unreconciled conflicts of the playwright” between his own “Romantic idealism” and “Classical detachment.”⁴⁶ While such an interpretation has a certain logic within the context of the chapter, as an analysis of this one play it seems an evasion. The booming voice of God does seem to contradict Brand’s approach to life, and implies that perhaps fanaticism that is lacking in “charity, mercy, and love” is destined to be destroyed. Ibsen may, in fact, be struggling with his own tendencies in the way Brustein says -- after all, Thomas Price says in Dramatic Structure and Meaning in Theatrical Productions that a play is the projection of a playwright’s internal struggle between a hope and a fear.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, Brustein’s inability to countenance the possibility that Ibsen may, in this play, be rejecting revolt

⁴⁵ Ibid., 58.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 58-59.

⁴⁷ Thomas Price, Dramatic Structure and Meaning in Theatrical Productions (San Francisco: EMTText, 1992), 7.

reveals the degree to which he is committed to the idea of it as the ultimate good.

This emphasis on revolt echoes his quarrel with Trilling over the role of the intellectual and artist in society. Brustein not only sees this role as focused on the negative, but he downplays any attempts by playwrights to move toward positive ideologies. "The major social rebels are philosophical anarchists,"⁴⁸ Brustein contends, and thus they cannot traffic with attempts at reform or constructive participation in society, except as a denial of their own tendencies. Brustein goes so far as to say that "insofar as a positive ideology informs their work, their work is compromised,"⁴⁹ noting that, while in some of the plays of Ibsen, Shaw, and Brecht, "the drama begins to look like an act of utility." In actuality, he thinks, "the programmatic element is actually insignificant."⁵⁰ Only revolt is significant in Brustein's cosmos, not intellectual reform.

Brustein's chapter on Shaw, however, reveals a new wrinkle in this philosophy. Oddly, Shaw is attacked not because he is insufficiently rebellious -- in fact, Brustein declares him a "full-fledged member of this movement and its most enthusiastic partisan"⁵¹ -- but because his rebelliousness is too optimistic. While Shaw "exalts, exploits, and publicizes the rebel movement, he is totally unable to accept its darker side," which makes his "philosophy trivial and even

⁴⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁵¹ Ibid., 183.

his comedy . . . too narrow and restricted.”⁵² To be in revolt, according Brustein, means to be disgusted by humanity, focused on an alienated individualism, unwilling to compromise with the institutions of civilization, convinced of one's ultimate defeat, and thus unconcerned with proposing positive ideas. Far from being the unacknowledged legislators for mankind, artists are gadflies who, like Socrates in Nietzsche's description, speak only to dissuade. Shaw falls outside of this definition, since he is reform-minded rather than anarchistic. Hence, Brustein focuses on the “haunted, almost tortured atmosphere” of Heartbreak House, as well as Back to Methuselah's “profound and bitter existential revolt more painful, perhaps than anything we have yet confronted.”⁵³ Without these works, Shaw's buoyant, energetic optimism might have forced Brustein to exclude him from consideration.

Trilling acknowledges in the preface to Beyond Culture (published the year after Theatre of Revolt) that such negativity had been the tendency of modern literature. “Any historian of the literature of the modern age,” he writes, “will take virtually for granted the adversary intention, the actually subversive intention, that characterizes modern writing -- he will perceive its clear purpose of detaching the reader from the habits of thought and feeling that the larger culture imposes, of giving him a ground and a vantage point from which to

⁵² Ibid., 209.

⁵³ Ibid., 203.

judge and condemn, and perhaps revise, the culture that produced him."⁵⁴ But it is in that single phrase -- "and perhaps revise" -- that an enormous gulf opens between Trilling and Brustein. It is the same gulf that makes Brustein uneasy with Shaw.

Trilling says that the "destruction of what is considered to be specious good is surely one of the chief literary enterprises of our age." And this is characterized by "violence, whether of represented act or of expression, and an insistence upon the sordid and disgusting, and an insult offered to the prevailing morality or habit of life."⁵⁵ Thus defined, Trilling's "destruction of specious good" is roughly equivalent of Brustein's "revolt." Trilling does not stop at this characterization, however. He goes on to judge whether such a stance itself is a specious good. As noted previously, in "On the Teaching of Modern Literature," he writes:

[S]ince my own interests lead me to see literary situations as cultural situations, and cultural situations as great elaborate fights about moral issues, and moral issues as having something to do with gratuitously chosen images of personal being, and images of personal being as having something to do with personal style, I felt free to begin with what for me was a first concern, the animus of the author, the objects of his will, the things he wants or wants to have happen.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Lionel Trilling, "Preface," chap. in Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), xii - xiii.

⁵⁵ Lionel Trilling, "The Fate of Pleasure," chap. in Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), 76.

⁵⁶ Trilling, "On the Teaching of Modern Literature," " 13.

Since Trilling believed, along with Matthew Arnold, that literature was a “criticism of life” (modern literature, at any rate), he also believed the critic’s responsibility was to evaluate art in terms of the image of life it offered, and to ask the Goethean question, “But is this really true -- is it true for me?”⁵⁷ In these terms, he is uncomfortable with the nihilistic tendencies of modern art, finding they were not “true” for him. Brustein, on the other hand, saw revolt and the destruction of specious good as indicative of a personal style that was both heroic and idealistic. The artist is an absolutist, committed to an ideal sense of truth and unwilling to compromise in any way. “[T]he free artist would sooner sacrifice the world than relinquish the integrity of his vision,” Brustein asserts, and all human beings must live in “compromised reality . . . [the artist] lives in another world as well, the world of the imagination, and there his vision is pure and absolute.”⁵⁸ This commitment to uncompromised individual truth by such “raggetail, disreputable impossibilitist[s]” represents the “last genuine humanist value of our crippled civilization.”⁵⁹

Brustein thus posits a literature in opposition to the realities of human society and politics, but also divorced from them; artists’ only responsibility is to the purity of their vision. Trilling saw this separation of art from human experience as problematic, particularly given the secular nature of modern history. If literature had really replaced religion in modern society, as Trilling

⁵⁷ Trilling, “On the Teaching of Modern Literature,” 5.

⁵⁸ Brustein, Revolt, 416.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

and many others suggested, then the ramifications of literature's secular theology were crucial to the historical development of modern society.

Particularly disturbing to Trilling was his perception that the oppositional values of the adversary culture were being increasingly adopted by an ever-growing segment of modern society. According to Trilling, the difference between the artistic and intellectual culture in 1965 (when he wrote Beyond Culture) and that of, say, 1915, "can be expressed quite simply in numerical terms -- there are a great many more people who adopt the adversary program than there formerly were. Between the end of the first quarter of this century and the present time there has grown up a populous group whose members take for granted the idea of the adversary culture."⁶⁰ He sees the adversary culture as no longer in opposition to general culture, but rather as a "second environment" parallel to majority culture. The integration by an influential portion of the general public of the "assumptions and preconceptions of the adversary culture,"⁶¹ which had previously existed only in the realm of the imagination, could naturally lead to action based on those ideas. That is when they become of concern to a critic such as Trilling, because "art does not always tell the truth or the best kind of truth and does not always point the right way, . . . it can even generate falsehood and habituate us to it."⁶²

⁶⁰ Trilling, "Preface to Beyond Culture," xiii.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, xvi.

⁶² *Ibid.*, xvii.

Brustein's likely reaction at the time would have been to say that art tells the individual truth of the artist, and need not be true in any broader sense. If society as a whole adopted the truths of the artist's imagination as its own, and behaved according to the dictates of that truth, that would be its own mistake, not the responsibility of the artist. The imagination of the artist exists in an ideal world, and its products cannot be expected to offer literal guidance in the compromised world of flesh and blood and institutions.

Trilling could not make such a clean separation. One cannot describe a tank, he said laconically in 1961, "without estimating how much damage it can do."⁶³ The damage caused by modern literature Trilling sees reflected in the faces of his Columbia students. Confronted with the disturbing ideas of modern literature, written in order to shock the middle class into re-evaluation of its traditional beliefs, his students don't even blink.

I asked them to look into the Abyss [presented by modern literature], and, both dutifully and gladly, they have looked into the Abyss, and the Abyss has greeted them with the grave courtesy of all subjects of serious study, saying: Interesting, am I not? And exciting, if you consider how deep I am and what dread beasts lie at my bottom. Have it well in mind that a knowledge of me contributes materially to your being whole, or well-rounded, men.⁶⁴

Trilling's students have become acclimated to the adversary culture, a process Trilling describes as "the socialization of the anti-social, or the acculturation of the anti-cultural, or the legitimatization of the subversive." As a result, the

⁶³ Trilling, "On the Teaching of Modern Literature," 13.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 27.

students have not been taken aback by what they have read, but rather “have wholly contained the attack.”⁶⁵

Furthermore, they give great credence to the arts, believing that art possesses more truth than other forms of intellectual activities. Lacking the ballast of a strong and conservative cultural tradition to serve as a dialectical anchor in the face of the strong winds produced by modern literature, the students are blown along with great ease, yet are seemingly unalarmed by the tempest.

The source of Trilling’s “despair”⁶⁶ in the face of this “intelligent passivity before the beneficent aggression of literature”⁶⁷ is to be found in his fundamentally dialectical approach to culture. This is illustrated by his frequent references throughout his writings to Freud’s Civilization and Its Discontents, a work he greatly admired, which posits a necessary tension between the individual will and the society that limits its freedom in order to attain social stability. While the individual suffers because of these constraints, he also benefits from the social organization. Trilling’s version of the dialectic is drawn from the ideas of Freud, and differs from Hegel’s model in that the struggle between the opposing elements never reaches synthesis, but remains in constant dynamic tension. Originally, modern avant-garde art existed in such a necessary tension with traditional, mainstream culture. Trilling’s ideas of the

⁶⁵ Ibid., 26.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁷ Trilling, “The Two Environments,” 231.

ideal struggle between the traditional and the avant-garde was based on the existence of a beneficent exchange of criticism, so that avant-garde ideas were honed and improved as a result of the resistance provided by the established culture, and the established culture was advanced by the integration of those honed ideas into its system of beliefs. Thus, the traditional culture provided a measure of stability while the avant garde prevented it from freezing into stasis. The relationship was complementary and dialectical. However, Trilling also believed that since the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century this dialectic had been considerably weakened by the increasing ease with which the adversarial attitudes of the avant-garde minority were being integrated into the mainstream majority culture. With the dialectic weakened, avant garde ideas encountered diminishing resistance, and thus grew without the beneficial influence of the traditional culture's criticism. Both the avant-garde and the traditional culture were diminished.

Trilling had always been uncomfortable with modernism's tendency toward nihilism, and his discomfort increased as modernism became domesticated. Since The Opposing Self, he had struggled to define a literary tradition not based on evil and ugliness, but rather on health. As David Kubal notes in his essay on Trilling in The Consoling Self: Responses to Literary Modernism, Trilling had chosen to examine in The Opposing Self a series of authors (Keats, Wordsworth, Austen, Tolstoy, Henry James, Howells, and Orwell) "all of whom recognized in a conditioned existence, composed of

society, family, and nature, a source of pleasure, strength, and identity."⁶⁸

Brustein's The Theatre of Revolt, by contrast, was based on approbation for a nihilistic, alienated, and aggressively hostile individualism. While Trilling ultimately recognized the need to include drama in the story of literary modernism, as already mentioned, he was unwilling to accept Brustein's enthusiastic and single-minded championing of revolt.

As noted earlier, of the six modern playwrights included in The Experience of Literature, five also appeared in The Theatre of Revolt. The three writers Brustein included but Trilling did not are Eugene O'Neill, August Strindberg, and Jean Genet. O'Neill's exclusion, as discussed earlier, most certainly was made on aesthetic grounds, despite Brustein's special pleading to the contrary. Strindberg and Genet, however, may have been excluded for what might be called philosophical reasons, since they represent the most extreme members of the theatre of revolt, the most violent and iconoclastic, the most mired in the sordid and disturbing, and the most in opposition to traditional morality. Their absence from the anthology is certainly consistent with Trilling's discomfort with what he considered the modernist sensibility.

The discussion of the playwrights included in both the anthology and The Theatre of Revolt is also interesting in this regard. Trilling tended to concentrate on those plays that de-emphasized or even undermined the aspects of revolt

⁶⁸ David Kubal, The Consoling Self: Responses to Literary Modernism (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1982), 148.

highlighted by Brustein.⁶⁹ For instance, the play Trilling chose to represent Ibsen was not Brand with its fanatically anti-social hero, nor Ghosts with its theme of disease bred in the lie of middle-class respectability, nor even An Enemy of the People with its ringing condemnation of short-sighted, narrow-minded self-interest, but rather The Wild Duck, which Brustein said was the “only play in which Ibsen completely denies the validity of revolt.”⁷⁰

Similarly, Trilling selects Brecht's Galileo, a masterpiece that Brustein ignored except for a brief reference in a footnote. It is probably Brecht's most traditional play in terms of structure, and the least overtly Communist, which was perhaps a consideration for the liberal anti-Communist Trilling. Brecht's title character values the pursuit of truth, but his truth is not the subjective truth of individual revolt. It is scientific, objective truth verified through reason and observation. As a rebel, therefore, Galileo stands outside those presented in The Theatre of Revolt, whose rebellion Brustein presents as intensely individualistic and subjective.

Brustein also selected an eccentric group of plays to represent Shaw: Back to Methuselah, Man and Superman, and Heartbreak House. While the latter two are generally recognized as masterpieces, the first is really a minor work, written in Shaw's old age and largely unrepresentative of him at his peak.

⁶⁹ While I find Trilling's choice of plays for his anthology to be significant, there are many factors beyond his control that also may have affected his choice, including the availability of specific works as well as the content of competing anthologies. Nevertheless, a degree of consistency concerning those choices seems to indicate Trilling's own sensibilities at work.

⁷⁰ Brustein, Revolt, 73.

Brustein gives it extensive analysis, however, as an example of Shaw's overly-optimistic, realistically impossible utopianism. That Brustein ignored the more politically rebellious plays, such as Widowers' Houses, Mrs. Warren's Profession, Major Barbara, and Pygmalion, slights the true source of Shaw's rebellion, which was his Fabian political ideals. Trilling's selection is no less peculiar: he too ignores Shaw's socialist plays as well as those discussed by Brustein, and instead selects The Doctor's Dilemma. This he presents as a traditional comedy along the lines of Molière's The Doctor in Spite of Himself in which he says the "‘pure artist’ in Shaw seems to have overcome the ‘artist-philosopher.’"⁷¹ Again, as with The Wild Duck and Galileo, there is little if any hint of personal revolt in the play, save for Shaw's cantankerous dislike of the medical profession. As the only representative of Shaw's work, The Doctor's Dilemma de-emphasizes Shaw's iconoclastic side and turns him for the most part into a slightly outrageous, but largely benign old curmudgeon.

Trilling's other selections are less quirky, but they too contradict Brustein. Both men portray Chekhov's The Three Sisters as depicting sympathetic characters worn down by an unforgiving environment, but Brustein characterizes the play as lacking Chekhov's usual "impatience with delusions of his characters,"⁷² which has its source in his disgust over his characters' failure to resist the effects of a numbing society. Trilling conversely sees Chekhov sympathizing with his characters, whose sensibilities are too fine for the

⁷¹ Trilling, Experience of Literature, 42.

crudities of the modern world. This difference is less extreme than others, but nonetheless indicative of Brustein's emphasis on the negative aspects of a play, and Trilling's on the positive.

Finally, Trilling's final modern playwright is William Butler Yeats. While generally acknowledged as having played an important role in the resurgence of Irish theatre in the twentieth century, Yeats is not noted primarily as a dramatist, despite his prodigious output, nor is he usually included among the ranks of the masters of the drama. Perhaps Trilling really did simply admire Yeats' dramaturgy. But he may have admired Yeats equally as much for his "commitment to the 'beautiful,' as against truthful ugliness" -- a commitment that runs parallel to that of Keats, whom Trilling also greatly admired. Trilling describes Yeats's Purgatory as a "tragic confrontation of destiny less grand than its predecessors [Oedipus Rex and King Lear] but not less intense."⁷³ In its concept of spiritual responsibility after death for the negative consequences and future ramifications of one's actions in life, Purgatory also stands as a refutation of the violence and hostility of the rebel. According to Trilling, Yeats's play allows "the expression of an extreme -- and ultimate -- rage against life and disgust with it, emotions so intense that they would lead a man to destroy not only his own father but his own son, both the root and fruit of life."⁷⁴ Seen as a symbolic representation of modernism's destruction of respect for the past and

⁷² Brustein, Revolt, 157.

⁷³ Trilling, Experience of Literature, 53.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

poisoning of the future, Purgatory could be used as a pointed rejection of Brustein's theology of revolt.

It is ironic, if predictable, that Trilling does not include a play by Genet in his anthology, since Brustein's treatment of Genet is his most powerful attempt to connect his theory of revolt to Trilling's advocacy of Keats's dialectic transformation of pain into beauty. The unacknowledged locus of this attempt is one of Trilling's most famous essays, "The Poet as Hero: Keats in His Letters." This essay, written in 1951 and published in The Opposing Self, when supplemented with the ideas expressed in "The Fate of Pleasure," provides an excellent portrait of what David Kubal calls Trilling's attempt to "help the culture and the poet to an imagination of health that was independent of any ideology, whether it be utopianism or a metaphysics of nihilism."⁷⁵ As with The Theatre of Revolt in general, Brustein attempts to extend Trilling's ideas regarding literature so that they embrace a theatrical figure, in this case identifying Genet as someone who "may help to cure us" and help the "dying civilization he chronicles" to revive.⁷⁶ Like several critics who reviewed The Theatre of Revolt, Trilling would not have agreed with Brustein's apocalyptic notion of the state of modern civilization. Nevertheless, Brustein's portrayal of Genet as providing a new iteration of Keats's belief in the cathartic transformation of the "disagreeables" of life into beauty is the most daring and fascinating undertaking of the book.

⁷⁵ Kubal, 148.

Trilling's essay on Keats centers on the poet's statement in a letter to his brothers that "with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration."⁷⁷ With this sentence, Trilling asserts, "we are at the very center of Keats's theory of art," a theory that includes, among other things, Keats's attempt to "deal with the problem of evil."⁷⁸ For Keats, the poet should not present unaltered the "burrs and thorns of life,"⁷⁹ which he refers to as "disagreeables," but should strictly avoid "ugly themes."⁸⁰ This is not to say that the poet should ignore those parts of life which are painful or unpleasant, for in the same essay Keats uses Shakespeare's King Lear, surely one of the most painful plays in the Shakespearean canon, as an example of the poetic sublime. Rather, Trilling explains,

what Keats is saying is that a great poet (e.g., Shakespeare) looks at human life, sees the terrible truth of its evil, but sees it so intensely that it becomes an element of the beauty which is created by his act of perception -- in the phrase by which Keats describes his own experience as merely a reader of King Lear, he 'burns through' the evil. . . . Keats' statement is an accurate description of the response to evil and ugliness which tragedy makes: the matter of tragedy is ugly or painful truth seen as beauty. . . . Beauty is thus a middle term which comments and reconciles two kinds of truth -- through the mediation of beauty, truth of fact becomes truth of affirmation, truth of life.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Brustein, Revolt, 411.

⁷⁷ Lionel Trilling, "The Poet as Hero: Keats in His Letters," chap. in The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism (New York: The Viking Press, 1955; Compass Books paperback edition, 1959), 35.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Trilling, "The Fate of Pleasure," 68.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Trilling, "Poet as Hero," 36.

It is this concept of the transformation of evil to beauty that Brustein uses to illuminate the plays of Genet, and thus form a bond between the ideas of Genet and Keats.

Brustein begins by making a connection between Genet and Antonin Artaud, portraying Artaud as a visionary whose ideas of a "theatre of cruelty" are realized in the plays of Genet. Artaud, like Freud, "assume[d] that men create neurosis when they suppress their sex and aggression to live together in society."⁸² Artaud believed that society could be transformed if its members were united through participation in a primitive ritual designed to exorcise the destructive fantasies prohibited by repressive social forms. The theatre would provide an "outlet for repressions," where the spectator would encounter the divine through participation in a ritual of "sacrificial frenzy and barbaric joy."⁸³ As a result, Brustein argues, the spectator would be purged "of those bloody impulses that he usually turns on others"⁸⁴ in a manner similar in effect to Aristotle's catharsis in classical tragedy. Brustein is aware that this interpretation of Artaud is controversial, and that others had taken exactly the opposite position, describing Artaud's theories as promoting an "anti-purgation" that "seeks not to relieve the soul of certain dark passions and restore peace and equilibrium, but rather to confront the perhaps too complacent soul with

⁸² Brustein, Revolt, 369.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 367.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 370.

dark and painful energies that admit of no reconciliation."⁸⁵ In fact, many have argued that such presentations as Artaud desires may actually inspire violence. Brustein rejects this, insisting that the primary function of Artaud's theatre is the "exorcism of fantasies," which supply "socially approved outlets for the wilder instincts" that modern societies such as the United States fail to provide.⁸⁶ Thus, Brustein presents Artaud as very much concerned with the problem of evil and the ways in which that evil can be released within the controlled environment of the theatre rather than in the society at large.

This moral rectitude is important in making the connection between Artaud's catharsis of cruelty, Genet's saintly criminality, and Keats's transformation of ugliness to beauty. The seeming decadence of Genet's plays is presented by Brustein as an expression of purity in revolt, a transformation of societally repressed violence in the individual into something transcendent and admirable, and therefore a source of health, not sickness. In this, Brustein shows that, while he may advocate a separation between art and social concerns, at root he shares Trilling's belief in art as concerned with moral issues. While advocating rebellion, Brustein does not favor the abandonment of civilized behavior for barbarism. Artaud's is a cruelty of the imagination, and thus purer and more ideal, and the crimes Genet depicts are mental transgressions, not advertisements for lawlessness. Thus, Brustein argues that

⁸⁵ Marvin Carlson, Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 395.

⁸⁶ Brustein, Revolt, 370.

a playwright such as Genet, seemingly in revolt against morality itself, is actually a strict moralist at heart.

Genet's plays are myths, Brustein maintains, drawn "from the depths of a totally liberated unconscious where morality, inhibition, refinement, and conscience hold no sway; at the basis of his work is that dark sexual freedom which Artaud held to be the root of all great myths."⁸⁷ Genet imagines a world free of the societal sanctions that prohibit certain acts, where repressed desires are allowed free expression. These desires, to use Artaud word, are "exorcised."

By identifying such desires with the "great myths," Brustein emphasizes the religious dimension in Genet's work, thus placing Genet within what Trilling had felt was the modernist tradition of supplanting religion with art and literature. However, when addressing the subject of evil, or as Daniel Bell calls it the "demonic," modern literature and religion take entirely different paths. "[I]nstead of taming [the demonic], as religion tried to do," Bell writes, "the secular culture . . . began to accept it, explore it, and revel in it, coming to see it as a source of creativity."⁸⁸ In this, Genet is an extreme example. Yet he is nonetheless obsessed with the attempt to transform evil into something purer. According to Brustein, Genet's work shows how "beauty, poetry, and crime become the foundations of a new religious faith," for as Brustein notes, Genet

⁸⁷ Ibid., 377.

⁸⁸ Daniel Bell, The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1976), 19.

has a “capacity to transform pathology into ceremonious drama. . . Through the open exaltation of crime, eroticism, and savagery, he hopes to exorcise his own, as well as the spectator’s, cruelty.”⁸⁹ Thus the purpose of Genet’s plays, like those of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, is purgative and cathartic: that which is criminal is transformed into the beautiful in the course of the action. Genet doesn’t “simply wallow in vileness,” Brustein argues, but tries to “transform crime, vulgarity, and squalor into something elegant, lyric, and rhapsodic, a transformation he calls ‘rehabilitating the ignoble.’”⁹⁰ In this, then, there is a commonness of purpose between Genet and Keats, for both seek to “evaporate” or “burn through” evil, to use Keats’s terminology, and replace it with Beauty.

The means of accomplishing this transformation, for both men, is through intensity: intensity of perception for Keats, “rigorous pursuit of the absolute”⁹¹ for Genet. The poet looks deeply at evil, pain, and ugliness -- so deeply that he finds its absolute beauty. This way of seeing life, which Trilling calls “the poet’s way, characterized by ‘intensity’” is made possible by Keats’s concept of Negative Capability, which Keats defined as “when a man is capable of being in uncertainty, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”⁹² According to Trilling, through Negative Capability “the poet avoids

⁸⁹ Brustein, *Revolt*, 379.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 381.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁹² Trilling, “Poet as Hero,” 32.

making those doctrinal utterances about the nature of life, about life's goodness or badness or perfectibility, which, if he rests in them, will prevent his going on to his full poetic vision."⁹³ Thus, the poet suspends judgment and instead regards all aspects of life, no matter how painful or ugly, with the intensity of focus that leads to poetry. Brustein is able to argue that, in effect, Genet is exercising Negative Capability in focusing on crime, vulgarity and squalor by withholding his judgment while seeking Beauty through the intensity of his poetic vision.

Going further, Brustein argues that, for Genet, "the beauty of a moral act depends upon its beauty of expression,' and 'the only criterion of an act is its elegance.'"⁹⁴ As Brustein rather nervously notes, "this is very close to aestheticism,"⁹⁵ and indeed it does strain Keats's approach to poetry to the limit in suggesting that the manner in which something is done is more important than the meaning or ramifications of the act itself. If one takes King Lear as an example, as Keats's does, beauty arises not from the beautiful expression of evil, but rather from the beauty of the title character's resistance to evil, despite his ultimate destruction. Genet, on the other hand, does not show his characters resisting evil but rather achieving an apotheosis through rituals of evil, i.e., by the full exploration of it. Through crime, Genet himself, as well as his characters, seek to achieve the status of legend. Brustein:

⁹³ Ibid., 37.

⁹⁴ Brustein, Revolt, 381.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Legend, however, lies outside conventional morality. For Genet, it is achieved through rigorous pursuit of the absolute -- extreme action, pushed past limits -- and may, therefore, derive from an excess of evil as well as from an excess of good. One becomes luminous, for example, through treachery or cruelty or sordidness, as long as they are fiercely pursued.⁹⁶

He might have added "as long as they are undertaken with style and elegance."

Thus actions are the raw material from which beauty is formed and thus we find ourselves back at the center of Keats's theory of poetry, where "the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all other consideration."⁹⁷ Brustein's depiction of Genet as a would-be saint, echoing Jean-Paul Sartre's monumental Saint Genet, sees his poetics of evil as a clinamen-like extension of Keats's theories of Beauty into areas unforeseen by the poet.

Nevertheless, Trilling and Brustein are still far apart on the issue of Negative Capability and its role in the poet's vision. At the center of Negative Capability Trilling finds a requirement for a solid sense of self from which to exercise dialectical exploration, and this ultimately is the opposite of Brustein's position regarding Genet. "Only the self that is certain of its existence, of its identity," Trilling asserts, "can do without the armor of systematic uncertainties."⁹⁸ It is this solid sense of self that Genet is lacking.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 380.

⁹⁷ Trilling, "Poet as Hero," 35.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 37.

Drawing a parallel between Genet and the characters that Pirandello created in his dramas, Brustein asserts that not only are Genet's characters mere masks, but Genet himself is a construzione, who "built himself up in an image provided by others" like the character in his book Our Lady of the Flowers. This character, "when asked why he stole, replied, 'Because the others thought I was a thief.'⁹⁹ Branded a thief early in his life, Genet in retaliation constructed a self composed of all of the characteristics rejected by society. "If the world is good, then Genet will be evil," Brustein writes; "if men are basically heterosexual, then he will express a 'preference for boys.' . . . But Genet's homosexuality . . . is also an extension of his revolt. He lives to discover boundaries and then to exceed them."¹⁰⁰ Genet, therefore, is the ultimate rebel, for his entire self is defined in opposition to the positive moral identities of others. As such, he possesses no identity in places where evil is dominant. When Genet is in Nazi Germany, for instance, he is "confronted with 'a race of thieves,' where evil is institutionalized, and Police and Crime are one. His revolt becomes a travesty: 'The outrageous is impossible. I'm stealing in the void.'¹⁰¹ Genet requires moral society in order to exist. His persona of evil is a mask without a face beneath, his self merely a camera obscura.

Furthermore, Genet views beauty as simply a veneer that covers otherwise meaningless acts, since an act acquires significance through the

⁹⁹ Brustein, Revolt, 388.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 383.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 383-84.

elegance of its expression. There is no sense of moral beauty in such a definition, unlike Keats's conception of beauty as the soul's attempt to create meaning from pain. The world, Keats argued in one of his most memorable phrases, is a "Vale of Soul-making. . . . I say 'Soul making' -- as distinguished from an Intelligence -- there may be intelligences or sparks of divinity in millions -- but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself."¹⁰² Pain, which is the result of evil, is a necessary part of the development of a soul, for it can "school an Intelligence" by making a heart "feel and suffer in a thousand different ways."¹⁰³ But pain and evil are not in themselves beautiful. Like a chemical reaction, beauty emerges from the experience of pain and evil, and is that which makes an Intelligence become a Soul. There are no Souls in this sense in the theatre of Genet, only masks and reflections. According to Genet, even saintliness, a condition he sees as mysterious and undefinable, like beauty, is not an aspect of the individual soul, but rather "a condition determined as much by the outer world as by inner qualities -- a kind of glory imposed on you by others."¹⁰⁴ In short, image is everything. The soul is a mirror; to quote Gertrude Stein, there is no there there. According to Trilling's Keats, Genet would not qualify as having a strong sense of self, without which there can be no beauty.

¹⁰² Trilling, "Poet as Hero," 44-45.

¹⁰³ Ibid..

¹⁰⁴ Brustein, Revolt, 380.

Tellingly, Brustein's interpretation of Genet inadvertently reveals the inconsistencies of his own conception of revolt, for by his own definition revolt cannot exist independently; like Genet, it is entirely reactive and lacking in a complex moral understanding. Thus, John Gross condemns Brustein for his tendency to "look for a statement about life (i.e., that it's no good) rather than a vision of life in which good and evil interlock."¹⁰⁵ There is a considerable difference between a poetic and moral vision in which good and evil interlock -- an example of Negative Capability which Trilling would have found particularly apt and rich -- and one in which evil is brought into being as a mere reflex in opposition to good. The same is true of opposition, alienation, and revolt, which Trilling saw as necessarily interlocked with tradition in order for the society to thrive and grow.

Genet's seeming conversion of evil into beauty is not a transformation of the two terms, but a mere replacement of one with the other. It is evil as beauty, not beauty revealed through an artistic response to evil. Similarly, revolt, when it replaces tradition rather than maintaining a dialectic relationship with it, becomes monstrous, much like Ibsen's Brand.

In a review of David Riesman's Individualism Reconsidered, Trilling condemned the modern artist for failing to maintain, "Catullus-fashion, 'Odi et amo,'" ["I hate and I love"] and he sees the inability to experience "the balance of the two extreme emotions" as being the reason for the "feebleness of the

¹⁰⁵ Gross, 79.

social intelligence."¹⁰⁶ Brustein's The Theatre of Revolt suffers from such feebleness, for it is based on a single-minded appreciation solely for odi, for the negative, the adversarial, and the nihilistic. All positive elements are routinely dismissed or interpreted away. Thus, the playwrights become fascinating shadows drawn as silhouettes, all in black. Their complexity, so much valued by Trilling in all his writing, is sometimes sacrificed in favor of literary polemic. Perhaps this is to be expected, since Brustein's stated purpose was to "examine the development of a single consuming idea or attitude in eight modern playwrights."¹⁰⁷ Yet his other intentions were "to analyze the work of these writers in depth; and to suggest an approach to modern drama as a whole."¹⁰⁸ Unfortunately, the playwrights were not examined "in depth," but rather only in those aspects that supported the idea of revolt. Consequently, Brustein's "approach to modern drama as a whole" seems incomplete, like Shakespeare's "ill-roasted egg all on one side."

Brustein's vision of modern dramatic literature, and perhaps his own identity, relied too greatly on a single, largely uncomplicated sense of opposition. In The Liberal Imagination, Trilling had drawn a distinction between "the moral mind, with its awareness of tragedy, irony, and multitudinous distinctions, and the transcendental mind, with its passionate sense of the

¹⁰⁶ Trilling, "Two Notes on David Riesman," in A Gathering of Fugitives (London: Secker & Warburg, 1957), 96.

¹⁰⁷ Brustein, Revolt, vii.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

oneness of multiplicity."¹⁰⁹ Such a distinction could be drawn between Trilling and Brustein at the time of The Theatre of Revolt, and while they may have complemented each other, they were unable to converge at a common point. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind, at the same time, and still retain the ability to function," and Trilling quoted this with approval.¹¹⁰ In The Theatre of Revolt, Brustein had established himself as a powerful transcendental mind, but not a first-rate one according to Fitzgerald's definition. It would take the experiences of the late 1960s to complicate Brustein's ideas sufficiently to bring these two men into agreement.

¹⁰⁹ Lionel Trilling, The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), 11.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 245-46.

CHAPTER 4

[W]e are immediately at the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet. One does not go there gladly, but nowadays it is not exactly a matter of free choice whether one does or does not go.¹

-- Lionel Trilling

[T]he moral passions are even more wilful and imperious and impatient than the self-seeking passions. All history is at one in telling us that their tendency is to be not only liberating but also restrictive.²

-- Trilling

Perhaps at no other time has the enterprise of moral realism ever been so much needed, for at no other time have so many people committed themselves to moral righteousness. We have books that point out the bad conditions, that praise us for taking progressive attitudes. We have no books that raise questions in our minds not only about conditions but about ourselves, that lead us to define our motives and ask what might lie behind our good impulses.³

-- Trilling

The essays that make up The Liberal Imagination, from which the above quotations are drawn, were all written in the late 1940s. That they are equally

¹ Lionel Trilling, "Reality in America," chap. in The Liberal Imagination (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), 11.

² Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," chap. in The Liberal Imagination (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), 221.

³ Trilling, "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," 219 - 220.

applicable to the political climate of the late 1960s⁴ is more than just a testament to their perspicacity, or an indication that they reflect eternal laws of some kind. Rather, the quotations point to specific parallels between the two periods -- parallels that form an illuminating background to the deep connection between The Liberal Imagination and Brustein's 1971 book Revolution as Theatre: Notes on the New Radical Style. Revolution as Theatre is Brustein's primary written response to the student uprisings of the 1960s, and Trilling's book contains many of the ideas that Brustein reiterated twenty years later.

The members of Brustein's generation of intellectuals, i.e., those born between 1925 and 1935, were greatly influenced by their elders' struggle with Communism during the 1930s. In the early part of that decade, Trilling and many other intellectuals, concerned about the suffering caused by the Great Depression, embraced the nascent communist state in the Soviet Union as a possible model for the United States. Possessed by what Trilling, forty years later, called an "impassioned longing to believe . . . [in] the ready feasibility of contriving a society in which reason and virtue would prevail,"⁵ they began arguing for radical solutions to the economic distress across the nation. Out of

⁴ I use the term "1960s" to refer to a period that in actuality is defined less by a specific decade than by a series of events characterized by the intensification of political protests surrounding the civil rights and anti-war movements. One might plausibly date the 1960s as conceptualized in popular history as beginning with the Berkeley Free Speech Movement in 1964 and ending, as Fredric Jameson posits in "Periodizing the 60s," around 1972-74. (In The 60s Without Apologies 178)

⁵ Lionel Trilling, "Whittaker Chambers's Journey," in The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965 - 75, edited by Diana Trilling, Uniform Edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 194.

this enthusiasm, the Partisan Review was born in the spring of 1934, initially funded by the Communist Party and committed to participating, through the literary medium, in the “struggle of the workers and sincere intellectuals against imperialist war, fascism, national and racial oppression, and for the abolition of the system which breeds these evils.”⁶ According to Partisan Review co-founder William Phillips, it was a time of great idealism, “when human aims seemed more attractive than national goals and when articulate people talked more about the hope for an ideal society than the benefits of the existing one. It was a time when responsibility meant responsibility to ideas and convictions, justice seemed more important than expediency, the greater good more than the lesser evil, dreams seemed more cogent than reality.”⁷

Idealism, however, soon turned to disillusion in the face of political events that cast a shadow on the Soviet Union's promise. First the Soviet Union refused to form an alliance with the Social Democrats in Germany, thus allowing Hitler to come to power. By the mid-1930s, revelations concerning the Moscow Trials, in which a generation of artists and intellectuals were murdered as a result of a political purge, and Russia's tepid support for the communists in Spain further eroded confidence. By 1936, Phillips and his co-founder Philip Rahv were so disenchanted with what they had learned that they suspended publication of Partisan Review, broke with the Communist Party, and thereafter

⁶ Joseph Freeman, “Editorial Statement,” Partisan Review (Feb-March 1934), 3.

⁷ “What Happened in the 1930's,” chap. in The Commentary Reader: Two Decades of Articles and Stories, with an introduction by Alfred Kazin (New York: Atheneum, 1966), 752.

published a "new" Partisan Review committed to an "unequivocally independent" editorial policy.⁸ The last, and most damning factor in the rejection of Soviet Communism was the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact. Information concerning other atrocities, such as the mass murder and displacement of an estimated ten million peasants and "kulak" farmers farmers who resisted collectivization, would follow in the future. The split from the Communist Party was symbolized by the publication in 1937, in their second issue of the reborn journal, of an extended excerpt from André Gide's controversial book Second Thoughts on the U.S.S.R. In it, Gide summarized the feelings of many previously committed intellectuals when he wrote, "The U.S.S.R. is not what we hoped it would be, what it gave promise of being, what it still tries to appear to be; it has betrayed our hopes."⁹

Increasingly disgusted by both the actions of the U.S.S.R. and the American intellectuals who endeavored to justify them, the writers surrounding the Partisan Review became increasingly militant in their anti-Communist beliefs. As Daniel Bell said, they led their own counter-revolt against their previous radicalism, and their disillusion deeply affected the way they viewed the world thereafter. Whereas once they had been "intense, hortatory, naive, simplistic, and passionate," after the Moscow Trials and the Soviet-Nazi pact, they became "disenchanted and reflective." As a result of their experiences,

⁸ "Editorial Statement," Partisan Review (Dec 1937), 3.

⁹ Terry A. Cooney, The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: "Partisan Review" and Its Circle (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 125.

Bell concluded, his generation “inherited the key terms which dominate discourse today: irony, paradox, ambiguity, and complexity.”¹⁰

Brustein encountered Trilling when the latter was coming to be regarded as the most prominent spokesman for these values, which Trilling believed should balance liberalism’s penchant for unthinking enthusiasms. Reading the essays that made up The Liberal Imagination, which thrust Trilling into the national spotlight, Brustein became “enchanted” with Trilling’s ideas. He was particularly attracted by Trilling’s observations regarding liberalism’s tendency to simplify reality, and accepted the need to recognize the complexity and variousness of life. By the time he had finished classes, his view of the world had been deeply influenced by these principles.

In 1957, another Trilling disciple, Norman Podhoretz, wrote an essay on the subject of his and Brustein’s generation that was less enthusiastic about the legacy of their elders. In it, he noted that he and his peers had leapt into premature adulthood as a result of the overdose of complexity they had absorbed from intellectuals like Trilling, and that now they were beginning to feel cheated of their youth. As mentioned before, Podhoretz exhibited a certain prescience when he wrote, “Since this is a generation that willed itself from childhood directly into adulthood, it still has its adolescence to go through -- for a man can never skip adolescence, he can only postpone it,” but “something

¹⁰ Daniel Bell, “The Mood of Three Generations,” The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties, revised ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1962), 300.

very wonderful may come about" as a result of this breaking loose.¹¹ Daniel Bell, who had similar complaints, elaborated on Podhoretz's ideas in his own essay in which he contended that his generation longed for an "adventure," but suffered from "an inability to define an 'enemy.' One can have causes and passions only when one knows whom to fight."¹²

In a way, the events of the 1960s provided this sought-for enemy, first in the form of the Vietnam War and the appalling social conditions suffered by blacks in America, and later in the form of the student radicals, though one hastens to add that Brustein and others of his generation did share many of the students' motivating political beliefs. The student movement created the intellectual and moral polarities necessary for causes and passions to be ignited, and thus raised the possibility that the postponed adolescence Podhoretz complained of might be experienced after all. Initially, Brustein and many of his peers enthusiastically joined the cause.

The parallels between the Elders' youthful enthusiasm for Communism and Brustein's generation's acceptance of the idealistic anarchism of the student radicals were soon noted. In a conversation with theatre critic Kenneth Tynan, whose political beliefs were fairly radical, William Phillips stated that he could not dispute with him about politics because Tynan's arguments were so

¹¹ Norman Podhoretz, "The Young Generation," chap. in Doings and Undoings: Fifties and After in American Writing (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Co., 1964), 111.

¹² Bell, "The Mood of Three Generations," 301.

old that Phillips “could no longer remember the answers.”¹³ Stephen Spender, in his book about the student uprisings, was even more explicit, suspecting “that part of the fascination [with the student rebels] was not that of hearing ideas that were new, but nostalgic ideas springing from new lips, atonal variations on old themes.”¹⁴

Nonetheless, Brustein boldly invested in the new “variations.” He opposed the Vietnam war, even though his opposition “pained” Trilling,¹⁵ who supported the United States’ effort to “contain the spread of Communism” in Southeast Asia.¹⁶ Brustein not only joined anti-war protests, but also engaged with the civil rights movement. He was one of the original signatories of the 1967 “Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority,” an anti-war and anti-draft document published by the New York Review of Books and signed by over a hundred intellectuals including Norman Mailer, Arthur Miller, Paul Goodman, Mary McCarthy and Noam Chomsky. He took part in various marches on Washington and also participated in “teach-ins and moratoriums, spoke at rallies, [and] defended those being indicted for civil disobedience.”¹⁷ While vacationing at

¹³ Norman Podhoretz, Making It (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 319.

¹⁴ Stephen Spender, The Year of the Young Rebels (New York: Random House, 1968), 4.

¹⁵ Brustein, Dumbocracy in America: Studies in the Theatre of Guilt, 1987 - 1994 (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 1994), 258.

¹⁶ Lionel Trilling, “Liberal Anti-Communism Revisited,” Commentary (September 1967), 76.

¹⁷ Robert Brustein, Making Scenes: A Personal History of the Turbulent Years at Yale 1966-1979 (New York: Random House, 1981), 44.

Martha's Vineyard in the summer of 1967, he joined William Styron, Lillian Hellman, Philip Roth, John Hersey, Henry Beetle Hough, Jules Feiffer, John Marquand, and Daniel Lang in signing an advertisement in The Vineyard Gazette protesting "President Johnson's indefensible diplomacy of violence."¹⁸ And this action brought him into conflict with his new boss, Yale President Kingman Brewster. Hired the year before to revive the flagging School of Drama, Brustein's political actions soon led him to be nicknamed the "Red Dean" by many on the Yale campus. As if to confirm this reputation, shortly after his arrival he had the University Theatre and its greenroom painted red. According to Brustein, many Yale alumni suspected that the School of Drama "had been captured by a wild, irresponsible radical with links to the KGB."¹⁹ While this was far from the case, his anti-war activities were considerably more radical than those of most in the Yale community at that time.

Brustein's activist commitments provided him with a sense of unity with other intellectuals of his generation (an uncommon experience in any intellectual community and not to be dismissed lightly). They also fulfilled his own individual need to be in opposition to mainstream opinion, which at the time was generally supportive of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia. Illustrating his continued belief that alienation from the majority necessarily entailed intellectual superiority, Brustein later wrote that as the anti-war movement

¹⁸ Ibid..

¹⁹ Ibid., 20.

gathered momentum on campus, he and his colleagues "had the moral advantage of being a minority in the country, combined with the psychic advantage of being a majority in the [academic] community."²⁰

To his delight, Brustein found that the walls were crumbling that separated the theatre from the intellectual world, as the theatre began to provide a ready platform for the exploration of a radical vision. As Tocqueville wrote in Democracy in America, "No portion of literature is connected by closer or more numerous ties with the present condition of society than the drama,"²¹ and this increasingly seemed to be the case in America. Anxious to benefit from these newfound ties, and believing that the theatre was one place where the anti-war community could gather, "where audiences and artists could share an emotion of multitude,"²² Brustein began to let his political activities inform his work in the theatre at Yale. "Obviously, the war was on everybody's mind, so the war would inevitably become a major subject of the American theatre,"²³ he wrote with confidence. And as a result, the theatre he was creating at Yale might at last fulfill his dream of providing a home for an intellectual community where "great drama is an essential part of everyday life."²⁴ While he had little interest

²⁰ Ibid., 45.

²¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, Vol. 2, translated by Henry Reeve, revised by Francis Bowen, edited with an introduction by Phillips Bradley (New York: J. & H. G. Langley, 1840; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 484.

²² Brustein, Making Scenes, 45.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 261.

in plays of explicit propaganda and protest, he did see the theatre as necessarily being “engaged . . . volatile . . . [and] contemporary,”²⁵ and at last the social and political situation seemed to support such a theatre.

Fired by his newfound political purpose, Brustein invited the radically anti-war San Francisco Mime Troupe to appear at Yale in September of 1967. While he had never seen the troupe perform, he had had discussions with its leader, Ronnie Davis, and knew of its reputation for creating imaginative street theatre.

Brustein underestimated the extent to which the troupe had embraced an extremist approach to political change, however. Following the performance, Davis stepped to the footlights and informed the spectators that “if they wanted to end the war, they would have to take to the streets with guns.”²⁶ Brustein, whose abhorrence of violence was the primary foundation for his opposition to the war, was shocked at Davis’ remarks. “How could we criticize the violence of our government,” he wondered, “if we advocated violence ourselves?”²⁷ To radicals like Davis, such questions were an indication that Brustein was a “submissive liberal;”²⁸ to Brustein, they separated principled integrity from immoral brutality.

²⁵ Brustein, Making Scenes, 45.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

A year later, Brustein experienced a similar disenchantment when he invited the Living Theatre to perform at Yale following their return from a 4-year European exile as a result of tax evasion charges. In the past he had been a warm supporter of the group, whose artistry and aesthetic anarchy he admired. When they arrived at Yale, however, his enthusiasm was tempered by an uneasy feeling that “they were in the grip of an unacknowledged totalitarianism. . . . The return of the Living Theatre [to America] described a full circle insofar as the company had taken on the very authoritarian qualities it had always denounced, the very repressiveness that had driven them from the country four years before.”²⁹ As their residency at Yale wore on, and members of the troupe began to convert the students to their way of thinking, Brustein soon became convinced that the group had come back to America “not only to revolutionize the American stage but to start disruptions in American universities and civic centers.”³⁰ Their performances, such as Paradise Now, seemed to encourage free expression, but Brustein complained, “nobody was ever allowed to break the pattern of manipulated consent.”³¹ The freedom that was being encouraged extended to everything except the freedom to contradict their anarchistic political program.

Later that year, Brustein shared a stage with the leaders of the Living Theatre, Julian Beck and Judith Malina. Brustein hoped for a rational discussion

²⁹ Ibid., 68.

³⁰ Ibid., 66.

³¹ Ibid.

of, among other things, his published criticism that the Living Theatre and some elements of the radical young suffered from “mindlessness, humorlessness, and romantic revolutionary rhetoric.”³² He was to be disappointed. The symposium was quickly commandeered by the members of the Living Theatre scattered throughout the audience, who began by heckling Brustein and another participant, Paul Goodman, and eventually seized the platform, creating chaos in the auditorium. “‘You talk about freedom!’ one [irate spectator] shouted over the din. ‘What about our freedom? We weren’t allowed to have what we paid for. Your freedom is our repression!’” To which Julian Beck calmly replied, “‘Coming attractions. . . . It’s happening all over the country. And it will happen again and again whenever you try to hold a meeting. Coming attractions.’”³³

It was a prescient remark.

Across America, student radicals were attacking universities and protesting the war and civil rights abuses in ways similar to the those of the Living Theatre. Brustein watched with increasing alarm as the anti-war movement was engulfed by what he considered anti-intellectual and intolerant totalitarianism. Having come to Yale out of a belief that the university provided the ideal environment for a serious theatre that encouraged the free exchange of ideas, he was appalled to find that the fury of the revolutionaries was directed not against “the Pentagon or napalm-producing factories,” targets which

³² Brustein, Revolution as Theatre: Notes on the New Radical Style (New York: Liveright, 1971), 31.

³³ *Ibid.*, 47.

Brustein thought deserved attack, "but rather against the university itself," which he regarded as "one of the last outposts of civilization and humaneness."³⁴ In an America Brustein believed was "dominated by violence, utilitarianism, anti-intellectualism, philistinism, youth worship, and ideological lying," he insisted that "there must remain at least one institution [the university] where these qualities do not dominate."³⁵ Warming to his topic, he issued a proclamation that not only defined his idea of a university, but also by implication the theatre: "There must be one place left that is conservative, in the sense that it conserves what is valuable in our tradition; liberal, in its openness to dissenting points of view; radical, in its examination of the roots of our metaphysical, psychological, social, and political dilemma."³⁶ The politicized atmosphere created by the student movement undermined the ability of the university to serve such a function, and this also spilled over into the operation of Brustein's university-sponsored theatre, the Yale Repertory Theatre. There, too, he came under increasing pressure to tailor his artistic work to suit the immediate political issues of the day. Lewis Feuer, in an analysis of student movements throughout history, wrote that their goal is that "every activity in the university be linked with, infused by, and subordinated to the alienated ideology of the student

³⁴ Brustein, Making Scenes, 70.

³⁵ Brustein, Revolution as Theatre, 113.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

movement."³⁷ Such was then the case at Yale, and it was intolerable to Brustein. His response was the essays that make up Revolution as Theatre.

During the late 1940s, Trilling wrote The Liberal Imagination as a response to events that bore some resemblance to those taking place in the 1960s. Trilling's faith in the revolutionary cause, like Brustein's, was undermined by actions that betrayed his most basic beliefs. Many of these actions were undertaken in support of values that Trilling shared. It became his task to point out where those actions diverged from the shared path toward dangerous philosophical and political terrain.

In the introduction to Matthew Arnold, Trilling wrote that his admiration for Arnold did not indicate complete agreement with his conclusions, but it did signal a general agreement with his method. Central to that method is the concept of "harrying one's friends," which Trilling adopted as his own. Trilling coined this phrase in discussing Arnold's critical focus, writing that Arnold "was not so much concerned with combating vile positions as with refining relatively good ones; as a critic he would rather harry his friends than destroy his enemies."³⁸ This became the primary tactic of The Liberal Imagination, and one tactic in Brustein's Revolution as Theatre. One's friends, generally speaking, comprised those liberals with whom one was in basic agreement on matters of

³⁷ Lewis S. Feuer, The Conflict of Generations: The Character and Significance of Student Movements (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 11.

³⁸ Lionel Trilling, Matthew Arnold, Uniform Edition (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 12.

general principle or goals, but with whom one disagreed regarding a particular opinion or course of action. Thus, Brustein, in his introduction, concretizes Trilling's general statement, writing "If I am harsh in my critique of the style of the young radicals, this is because I feel closer to them than to their antagonists on the Right, and am therefore more despondent when I see them failing in their promise."³⁹

The necessity for harrying one's liberal friends was dictated, for Trilling, by the lack of an intelligent conservatism in 1940s America that might undertake such criticism itself.⁴⁰ This is not to say that there was then no "impulse to conservatism or to reaction," but only that the expression of that impulse was not likely to be in ideas, but rather in "action or irritable mental gestures."⁴¹ Consequently, it fell to liberalism itself to "keep our ideas from becoming stale, habitual, and inert."⁴² It seemed to Trilling that "a criticism which has at heart the interests of liberalism might find its most useful work not in confirming liberalism in its sense of general rightness but rather in putting under some degree of pressure the liberal ideas and assumptions of the present time."⁴³ Such criticism also would serve to prevent liberalism from becoming too extreme in its

³⁹ Brustein, Revolution as Theatre, 8.

⁴⁰ Trilling later felt similarly about the lack of a conservative element in the 1960s to balance the adversary culture as it began to be readily accepted into a larger portion of the mainstream. A dynamic balance between conservative and progressive elements is an important part of Trilling's cultural philosophy.

⁴¹ Trilling, Liberal Imagination, x.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

tactics and ideas. For Trilling knew that, as Richard Sennett later put it, "the most destructive acts are committed by decent people who have no doubts."⁴⁴ It was precisely the role of the critic to raise doubts, to "raise questions in our minds not only about conditions but about ourselves, that lead us to define our motives and ask what might lie behind our good impulses."⁴⁵

In some notes for an autobiographical lecture that were published following his death, Trilling explained that he saw his task in The Liberal Imagination as being to "unmask the unmaskers -- to show that the very ideals [liberals] were committed to were betrayed to the very death by their way of dealing with ideas."⁴⁶ The purpose of this unmasking was to draw attention to the "discrepancy between what I have called the primal imagination of liberalism and its present particular manifestations." Its goal was to recall liberalism to "its first essential imagination of variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty."⁴⁷

Since the idea of complexity plays such an important role in Trilling's criticism, it is important to understand that he uses the term not in the sense of "difficult to understand," but rather of "possessing many interconnected and interwoven parts." Modernism had long emphasized the former sense of the

⁴⁴ Edward Joseph Shoben, Jr., Lionel Trilling: Mind and Character (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1981), 120.

⁴⁵ Trilling, "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," 219-220.

⁴⁶ Lionel Trilling, "Some Notes for an Autobiographical Lecture," chap. in The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965 - 75, edited by Diana Trilling, Uniform Edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 240.

⁴⁷ Trilling, Liberal Imagination. xv.

word, using a technique Viktor Shklovsky called priyom ostraneniye (the technique of making strange) in order to extend perception of the art object through the use of complexity. Similarly, at the time Trilling was writing, members of the Frankfurt School, such as Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, denigrated the communicative function of language and presented their theories in a style so complex as to be virtually incomprehensible to uneducated minds, thus protecting against their works being reductively read and misused by people such as the Nazis. Adorno extended this belief to works of art as well, damning the "liberal fiction of the universal communicability of each and every thought,"⁴⁸ and celebrating the works of Arthur Schoenberg and Samuel Beckett, whose works actively sought to thwart audience expectations and understanding.

While Trilling understood and appreciated the modernist works that arose from such aesthetic notions, his idea of complexity arose more from the traditions of realism and the diversity of human thoughts, experiences, and emotions that was exemplified by the realist novel. While Trilling was not in agreement with the apolitical, formalist approach of the New Criticism as professed by Cleanth Brooks and John Crowe Ransom, their focus on ambiguity and complexity in literature shares many similarities with Trilling's approach. Which is to say that Trilling was not a lone figure promoting the idea

⁴⁸ Martin Jay, Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 272.

of complexity in literature and the arts. Because humanity is complex, and is filled with individuals who experience the world in unique and unpredictable ways, it is an "intellectual and political necessity" to recognize the "variousness and possibility" of the world, and to honor it in practice.

Simplicity, on the other hand, is reductive. Its tendency is to narrow reality to fit within preconceived parameters, and to discount those aspects of experience that do not easily fit within those parameters. Any interconnections and interwoven parts that complicate the situation are ignored. Simplicity disregards the enormous variety of human experience, and consequently diminishes the importance of the unique individual in favor of a conception of a homogeneous group. When the political process is simplified, and efficient decisions are made by a small number of people operating without the complicating factors of opposing viewpoints, totalitarianism is the result. When moral issues are simplified to a mechanistic differentiation between good and evil, melodrama is the result.

"It is one of the tendencies of liberalism to simplify," Trilling asserted, "and this tendency is natural in view of the effort which liberalism makes to organize elements of life in a rational way."⁴⁹ While liberalism is "concerned with emotions above all else, as proof of which the word happiness stands at the very center of its thought," it nevertheless "tends to deny them in their full

⁴⁹ Trilling, Liberal Imagination, xiv.

possibility”⁵⁰ as it moves toward the organization of society, because emotions often resist systematization and greatly complicate rational planning. This tendency toward a mechanized view of the human mind contradicts one of the most basic tenets of liberalism’s primal imagination, which Trilling later in life defined as “affirm[ing] the value of individual existence in all its variousness, complexity, and difficulty.”⁵¹ Yet Trilling says that the contradiction, or sacrifice, is necessary. In order to carry out its “active and positive ends,” liberalism must to some extent “limit its view of the world to what it can deal with” and develop theories and principles “that justify its limitations.”⁵² In other words, all action requires some level of simplification, and liberalism’s task is to strike a balance between the simplification required by action and the complexity of individual experience, between liberalism’s “present particular manifestation” and its “primal imagination.”⁵³ It is in this way that literature functions as what Matthew Arnold called a “criticism of life.”

Because it “is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, complexity, and difficulty,” literature could most effectively remind the liberal imagination of the tangled web of life, and thus balance its tendency toward narrow, overly simplistic ideas. Particularly effective in this regard is literature that emphasizes “moral realism,” which

⁵⁰ “Art, Will, and Necessity,” in *The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965 - 75*, edited by Diana Trilling, Uniform Edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 141.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Trilling, *Liberal Imagination*, xiii.

⁵³ Ibid., xv.

Trilling defined, following E. M. Forster, as “not the knowledge of good and evil, but the knowledge of good-and-evil.”⁵⁴ Such literature recognizes that both types of moral behavior exist, but that they are inextricably intertwined. Thus, good literature serves as the conscience of liberalism, a voice balancing its will to simplification. “If there is one thing the dialectic of history teaches,” Trilling wrote in his very first book review for Partisan Review, “it is an attitude on cultural matters [that] is difficult and complex.”⁵⁵

This is not to say that literature was deeply involved with politics, but neither was it totally separate from it. Like Forster’s concept of good-and-evil, politics and literature, action and imagination, were interconnected. Yet they remained separate entities in their interconnection, like two threads woven together to form a single rope. As with most of Trilling’s ideas, this one is based on a dynamic interaction between opposing impulses in dialectical relationship that leads to no ultimate resolution or synthesis, but rather sustains its tension in perpetuity. This theorized an increased importance to society of literature by insisting that literature’s observations be given equal weight to political thinking and action. Literature was not to be regarded merely as a pleasant pastime, but as a legitimate and realistic representation of social experience.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Brustein shared this belief in the importance of imagination and its separation from the impulse to

⁵⁴ Lionel Trilling, E. M. Forster (New York: New Directions 1943; New Directions Paperback, 1964), 12.

⁵⁵ Trilling, “Marxism in Limbo,” 102.

organization necessary for active politics. While acknowledging the circulation of the ideas between art and politics, like Trilling he insisted on maintaining a strict distinction between the two. "Politics and art follow parallel lines," he said in 1997, "but art lives in the world of imagination. It touches reality, it has to reflect reality -- it's like Plato's cave. But once it starts perceiving itself as successfully changing the world it ceases to be art."⁵⁶ This separation between imagination and reality is crucial to understanding Brustein's differentiation between revolt and revolution, terms that stand in sharp contradistinction in his titles Theatre of Revolt and Revolution as Theatre.

Brustein was greatly influenced by Albert Camus' The Rebel, and indeed his definition of the three types of rebels -- messianic, social, and existential -- echo Camus' own definitions. The general purpose of The Rebel, stated in the introduction, was to examine "whether innocence, the moment it becomes involved with action, can avoid committing murder."⁵⁷ This was a variation on the same question Trilling had addressed, and it formed the subtext of Brustein's book as well. Brustein defined revolt as metaphysical in nature, an adversarial attitude of the imagination necessary "in order to move forward into some kind of new perception. You have to be dissatisfied with what is in order to advance on what can be."⁵⁸ Like Trilling's concept of literature, revolt is one

⁵⁶ Robert Brustein, interview by the author, Tape recording, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 5 December, 1997.

⁵⁷ Albert Camus: The Essential Writings, edited by Robert E. Meagher (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1979), 188.

⁵⁸ Brustein, "Interview December 5."

element of a dialectic, and it therefore relies on an opposing element. That element is the cultural status quo. In other words, revolt is an individual attitude that exists solely in the imagination and is held in opposition to a necessary collective reality.

Revolution, by contrast, can grow out of an attitude of imaginative revolt, but it exists in the realm of reality. Once the roots of revolt no longer grow in an individual, but rather in a group, revolt quickly falls victim to the simplification of political action noted by Trilling. In the process, the impulse of revolt is ineluctably altered. The revolt of the dramatist, Brustein writes in Theatre of Revolt, is “imaginative, absolute, and pure” and thus is “much more total than the programs of political agitators or social reformers.”⁵⁹ Once an attitude of revolt is adopted collectively and becomes revolution, it becomes the new reality, and thus a new attitude of revolt must develop in opposition if the dialectic is to be maintained and change is to continue. For according to Brustein, the artist, whom Brustein believed to be one of the primary agents of revolt, “cannot survive in a reconciled society,”⁶⁰ and a society without artists has no soul.

At the fulcrum of Brustein’s definitions of revolt and revolution is his rather slippery concept of art’s effect on the individual and society. Brustein believed that it is impossible to change society “without a basic change in the basic

⁵⁹ Brustein, Revolt, 8.

⁶⁰ Brustein, “Interview December 5.”

nature of humankind,"⁶¹ and felt that the theatre had a role to play in helping to make that change. "I think art changes consciousness, and in that way changes the individual," he recently asserted in an interview.⁶² Yet at the aforementioned 1969 symposium with Beck and Malina, his viewpoint was slightly different, perhaps reflecting the different historical context:

I do not believe the theatre changes anybody, politically or psychologically, and I don't believe I should try to change anybody. While necessarily concerned with social-political issues as well as psychological-metaphysical issues, the theatre cannot be expected to resolve these issues. . . . Chekhov [said] that the correct presentation of problems, and not the solution of problems, is what is obligatory for the artist.⁶³

The distinction Brustein makes is a fine one, but important to understanding his current position regarding the role of art in politics. "Change," as Brustein used the word in 1969, most likely means "persuade." Brustein is insisting that artists should never attempt to use their art to actively persuade anyone to a course of action or belief. Once they do, they no longer create art, but rhetoric. Art can change spectators, but the change is entirely personal and individual. Art is involved with "correct presentation," but not with the negotiations of solutions. Art leads to a change of consciousness, perhaps inspires an attitude of revolt, but does not enlist the spectator in a specific program. "The personal, private, and metaphysical side of humanity must be kept free from encroachments by

⁶¹ Brustein, Making Scenes, 8.

⁶² Brustein, "Interview December 7, 1997."

⁶³ "A Night as the Symposium," chap. in Revolution as Theatre: Notes on the New Radical Style (New York: Liveright, 1971), 35.

the public and political imperatives of the time,” Brustein asserted in the introduction to Revolution as Theatre.⁶⁴ Theatre, in other words, was situated firmly within the realm of the personal, private, and metaphysical. This would become a central theme for the remainder of Brustein’s career.

This distinction between persuasion and change, as well as Brustein’s oft-repeated Chekhovian dictum to present the problem clearly sans solution, echoes Trilling’s distinction between imagination and action. For to present a problem correctly, it must be presented in all its human complexity and variousness. The solution, on the other hand, inevitably will be a simplification, focusing on certain elements of individual experience and ignoring others in order to institute a workable program or course of action. To the degree that this process of simplification becomes a part of the theatre itself, Brustein believed, the theatre is impoverished. It loses its proper function as an agent of imagination and revolt, complexity and variousness. It no longer upholds its part of the balanced dialectic, and instead tips into excess. In The Rebel, Camus countered excess of any kind -- which he felt led, for instance, to the murderous injustice of the Nazis -- with the law of moderation. “Whatever we may do,” he wrote, “excess will always keep its place in the heart of man, in the place where solitude is found. We all carry within ourselves our places of exile, our crimes and our ravages. But our task is not to unleash them on the world; it is to fight

⁶⁴ Brustein, Revolution, 10.

them in ourselves and in others."⁶⁵ Art was one way to fight these excesses of the imagination, Brustein believed, through the catharsis mentioned by Aristotle. Many years later, he wondered whether that was, after all, the primary function of art: to serve as a safety valve for the release of violent emotions.⁶⁶

This goes a long way toward explaining how Brustein, who wrote so admiringly about the anarchism expressed by the playwrights in Theatre of Revolt, could write so disparagingly about those who thought they were putting those values into action. Asked about the difference between Ibsen's desire to torpedo the ark and the student rebels' similar desire, Brustein insisted that Ibsen, unlike the students, only wished to do so "in the imagination. He wasn't going to do it actually, but it was an imaginative act . . . And that's [the distinction] I meant [to make] between revolt and revolution. . . . All of these artists are artists because they are not revolutionaries. They're artists because they can imagine a torpedoing of the ark without accomplishing it."⁶⁷

Maintaining an attitude of revolt is the ultimate way of harrying one's friends, because to do so is to reject all political action as lacking complexity. While Brustein does not advocate this position purely, as evidenced by his own anti-war activism, he does tend to be suspicious of most liberal action.

The danger of such an attitude, in either art or criticism, is that one is liable to be mistaken for an enemy by those one thinks are friends. As Irving

⁶⁵ Phillip H. Rhein, Albert Camus Revised Edition (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 76.

⁶⁶ Brustein, "Interview December 5."

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Kristol noted, "if you go around constantly chastening utopian enthusiasm, or offering reasons for curbing reformist enthusiasm, you are bound to find yourself regarded as a conservative element."⁶⁸ Trilling himself has, since his death, been labeled "one of the wellsprings for neoconservative thought,"⁶⁹ despite vociferous statements to the contrary by his wife and many of his followers. Such was certainly the case with Brustein, who was universally despised by campus radicals at Yale; he even received a death threat during the 1970 Mayday uprising.⁷⁰ And some of this animus persists today, as exemplified in Richard Goldstein's indignation at Brustein's attacks on political correctness. In The Village Voice, as mentioned previously, Goldstein labeled Brustein a phony liberal -- "not quite a neocon[servative]," but "one of their darlings."⁷¹ In any case, few of those who have labeled Brustein conservative have understood that he believes he is recalling liberalism to its "primal imagination" through his attacks.⁷²

⁶⁸ Irving Kristol, "Skepticism, Meliorism, and The Public Interest," The Public Interest (Fall 1985): 32.

⁶⁹ Peter Steinfels, The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 14

⁷⁰ In Making Scenes, Brustein writes of an SDS member who is quoted as saying in The New York Times, "You know the Sara Lee slogan in the TV commercials -- 'Everybody doesn't like something, but nobody doesn't like Sara Lee?' Well, around here that might be paraphrased to read, 'Everybody doesn't like somebody, but nobody doesn't dislike Robert Brustein.'" (p. 123)

⁷¹ Richard Goldstein, "The Grudge Match as Kulturkampf," Village Voice (January 28, 1997): 47.

⁷² It must be admitted that neoconservatives such as Norman Podhoretz and Irving Kristol also claim to be following the principles of liberalism, and many scholars have claimed Trilling to be a forefather of the neoconservative movement. In many ways, Brustein suffers a fate similar to Daniel Bell in this regard, since several of his ideas sound like those espoused by the

In the 1960s, Brustein supported the overall goals of the student radicals concerning civil rights and the war in Vietnam, but he was disturbed by the methods being used. He attacked the students on the grounds that the rightness of the desired ends cannot justify the use of means that violate the basic tenets of liberalism, most notably the right to free and open discussion of issues. As Trilling had written regarding Arnold's coolness toward political action, his objection was not to action itself, but to the fact that "action is not always itself -- that it goes beyond itself, becomes a means of faith, a way of escaping thought and what seems to be the humiliations of necessary doubt."⁷³ Action without doubt is fanaticism, the total simplification of issues in the moral or political arena.

In the 1930s and 40s, many intellectuals abandoned the Communist Party out of what William Phillips called "a legitimate distaste for party-line thinking."⁷⁴ A similar phenomenon was occurring in the 1960s. "The greatest threat we face today," Brustein wrote in Revolution as Theatre, "is from totalitarian thinking."⁷⁵ The New Left was exhibiting an increasingly low tolerance for dissent. "I do not recall any other period in the last fifty years," the philosopher and Partisan Review contributor Sidney Hook declared, "when

neoconservatives, and he occasionally quotes from them (Diane Ravitch is a favorite), but most of his remaining ideas and principles are in strong opposition to them.

⁷³ Trilling, Matthew Arnold, 12.

⁷⁴ William Phillips, "What Happened in the 30s," chap. in The Commentary Reader: Two Decades of Articles and Stories, with an introduction by Alfred Kazin (New York: Atheneum, 1966), 752.

⁷⁵ Brustein, Revolution as Theatre, 10.

intellectuals themselves have been so intolerant of each other, when differences over complex issues have been the occasion for denunciation rather than debate and analysis.”⁷⁶ Coming from someone who had lived through the intense debates of the 1930s, this statement was not to be taken lightly.

For the liberal critic who wished to follow Trilling’s example, such intolerance proposed a serious barrier. Eldridge Cleaver’s statement that “if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem” allowed little space for diversity of opinion, much less for harrying one’s friends. One was either for or against in toto with no room for discussion or fine distinctions. This intellectual environment, which began to appear at Yale as the political climate across the country became more radicalized, certainly left no room for Brustein’s idea of theatre, which “asks us to entertain two possibilities in opposition. If there is only one fact, then there is not theatre; all that is left is propaganda.”⁷⁷ If all of the answers have been determined, those who continue, like Chekhov, to present questions are extremely unwelcome. “Fuck all liberal intellectuals and their fucking discussions,” one spectator bellowed from the audience during the “Theatre or Therapy” symposium,⁷⁸ and those words seemed to Brustein to sound the death knell for the liberal imagination as Trilling and Brustein had

⁷⁶ Sidney Hook, “Past and Future,” chap. in In Defense of Academic Freedom (New York: Pegasus, 1971), 18.

⁷⁷ Brustein, Making Scenes, 56.

⁷⁸ Brustein, Revolution, 40.

supported it.

Yet Brustein persevered. He continued to present alternative proposals in keeping with his understanding of liberalism's primal imagination. In 1970, he organized a group of 364 Yale faculty members who all signed a statement that appeared in the Yale Daily News opposing all forms of violence. The statement's signatories identified themselves as "vigorous opponents of the Vietnam war and racial discrimination" and established their liberal credentials by protesting "against America's lapses into brutality, racism, and destruction." But the statement continued,

At the same time, the very principles that originally brought us to this position compel us to oppose not only an immoral war and racial oppression but also the appeal to violence in the name of radical morality and evolutionary idealism. We believe that the bombings that have recently broken out in this country are mirror images of the very destructiveness we are pledged to resist.⁷⁹

Such an evenhanded and consistent application of principles was not appreciated by the radicals of the New Left, who by then had come to believe, like so many rebels before and since, that contemporary and historic injustices justified whatever means were necessary to bring about change. The revolutionaries of the 60s, according to Daniel Bell, rejected the "complexity, irony, ambiguity, and paradox" that defined the sensibilities of the 50s, and instead were "given to posing every issue, political or otherwise, in disjunctive

⁷⁹ Ibid., 119-120.

correlative."⁸⁰ Possessing such a manichaeian worldview, melodrama ensued, with all the violence that is characteristic of that genre.

In response to the contradiction posed by those who used rhetorical and actual violence in their protest of governmental violence at home and abroad, Brustein directed in 1970 a production of Cyril Tourneur's seventeenth century, The Revenger's Tragedy, a play that he chose specifically because its central metaphor seemed applicable to this situation. The hero of the play, Vindice, "begins as the critic of a corrupt pageant he witnesses; then, gradually, he enters it, first as a actor, then a playwright and stage manager. Finally, he is swallowed up in the action . . . and his mask, or disguise, usurps his face."⁸¹ In other words, one who "fights fire with fire" by adopting the tactics, or the "mask," of the enemy finds himself corrupted as a result. In his program note on the play, Brustein draws a parallel to his youthful contemporaries. "Like so many of today's radical avengers," Brustein wrote

Vindice begins with an authentic grievance against his violent society and an honest determination to purify it. To do this, however, he must 'put on the knave for once,' and use the tactics of the world he abhors. . . . Having lost his initial purpose somewhere along the way, he inadvertently becomes identified with the objects of his vengeance. . . . The revenger's tragedy is that he cannot escape the cursed circle he has sworn to break.⁸²

⁸⁰ Daniel Bell, "The Sensibilities of the Sixties," chap. in The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1968), 121.

⁸¹ Brustein, Making Scenes, 121.

⁸² Ibid.

Trilling, in the introduction to Beyond Culture, expressed a similar idea when he remarked, "Even when a person rejects his culture (as the phrase goes) and rebels against it, he does so in a culturally determined way: we identify the substance and style of his rebellion as having been provided by the culture against which it is directed."⁸³ Thus, the violence and intolerance of American culture were reflected in the radical's enthusiasm for violent action and intolerance of dissent. "What is not generally seen or accepted . . . by the radical young and their old supporters," Brustein declared, again concretizing Trilling's theoretical statement, "is that the 'revolutionary opposition' is endowed with a fairly generous share of American brutality, just as the 'counter-culture' possesses much of the brainlessness and exploitativeness of the culture as a whole."⁸⁴ Part of this exploitativeness, Brustein believed, was the radicals' attraction to media showmanship.

"Fame is replacing money as the animating drive of ambitious men,"⁸⁵ wrote Brustein, but he was nonetheless appalled to find that many revolutionaries seemed more concerned with publicity and fame than with enacting a thoughtful political program. Radicals were appearing on "all the talk shows, between the commercials and before and after the Late Show," where they indulged in "muscle-flexing and tub-thumping, proclaiming their violent

⁸³ Trilling, Beyond Culture xii.

⁸⁴ Brustein, Revolution, 7.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 18.

plans” between songs and comedy routines.⁸⁶ Such a willingness on the part of the radicals to be co-opted by mass media undermined their claim to be taken seriously as agents of change, and Brustein declared them poseurs and hypocrites.

This was the central idea of the title essay of Revolution as Theatre. In it, Brustein condemned much of what he saw the student radicals and civil rights groups doing as “not revolution but theatre -- a product of histrionic personalities and staged events” which should be “more properly evaluated by aesthetic than by political criteria, according to the quality of the dialogue, costumes, acting, and directing.”⁸⁷ Marches were “staged” in the interest of “dramatizing” a particular issue; radicals such as James Forman disrupted a church service to “demand reparations from Episcopalians;” Sonny Carson, “Mace in Hand,” interrupted a Regional Plan Association meeting that was to discuss New York’s master plan -- all of these ludicrous incidents Brustein regarded as having been “staged for the newspaper reporters and television cameras” and based on a desire for publicity rather than substantive political reform.⁸⁸ Consequently, Brustein believed the public regarded the radicals in the same way they regarded actors playing roles, and thus they were fascinated by the intensity of their portrayal, their heroic posturing, and their rhetorical

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 18-19.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 18.

flourishes. As in most theatre, however, their ideas were left largely unexamined.

Some upper-class liberals, such as those satirized by Tom Wolfe,⁸⁹ were swept up in the intense emotion that followed many of the revolutionaries wherever they went. Sometimes they went so far as to invite revolutionaries to their heavily-guarded New York apartments for lavish parties to raise money for the revolutionary overthrow of their own way of life. Many revolutionaries accepted this role without protest, believing that they were manipulating the enemy in order to advance their own cause. Yet Brustein believed that the willingness of the such apparent oppressors to welcome revolutionaries into their own homes reflected the lack of seriousness with which they regarded the revolutionaries' ability to institute their programs; it also reflected the lack of seriousness with which such revolutionaries regarded themselves. These radicals performed the same function as the monsters in a house of horrors, providing a carefully controlled thrill devoid of actual danger. "It would be interesting to know," Brustein mused, "how quickly the police would be called were one of these Panthers to enter a townhouse without an invitation to address the assembled guests."⁹⁰

Brustein's disgust with this phenomenon reflects his determination to keep art and politics separate and discrete. While in the past, he had objected

⁸⁹ Tom Wolfe, Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers (New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970).

⁹⁰ Brustein, Revolution, 24.

to raw politics in his theatre, in this case he rejected raw theatre in his politics. In both cases, the mixture represented a lack of seriousness and an abandonment of proper function.

Brustein's scorn for those upper-class debutantes who found excitement and moral aggrandizement in rubbing elbows with revolutionaries finds an echo in Trilling's discussion in The Liberal Imagination of Henry James's The Princess Casamassima. Trilling's essay, which many have seen as among his best, takes a fairly harsh view of the title character, who feels guilty about having "sold herself for a title and fortune" early in life and hence embarks on a "quest for reality" that includes a sentimental attachment to the poor, whose destitution she sees as particularly "real."⁹¹ She also develops an attraction for the most extreme revolutionaries, in this case anarchists, whose purpose is to destroy the society that grants her guilt-filled social superiority. Her guilt over her past, writes Trilling, leads her to assume "an absolute morality that gives her permission to devalue and even destroy all that she has known of human good because it has been connected with her own frivolous, self-betraying past."⁹² She falls in with the charismatic lower-class revolutionary Paul Muniment, whose "genuine idealism coexists with a secret desire for personal power,"⁹³ but who hides his ambition lest it seem to undermine his moral purity.

⁹¹ Lionel Trilling, "Princess Cassimassima," chap. in The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), 91.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 90.

James's portrayal of the relationship of these two characters, which Trilling calls "one of the most masterly comments on modern life that has ever been made,"⁹⁴ illustrates the symbiotic nature of sentimental guilt and unacknowledged ambition that underlies the behavior described in the title essay of Revolution as Theatre. Brustein writes of the "cocktail party revolutionary"⁹⁵ who acts out his "revolutionary passions against a background of institutional safety"⁹⁶ for the benefit of middle class students at universities who "protest bourgeois materialism by consciously adopting the life-styles of the under classes, while at the same time expending enormous sums on electronic equipment, records, rock concerts, costumes, and drugs;"⁹⁷ these are the modern day equivalent of James' characters. They allow each other to feel virtuous without personal sacrifice.

Brustein's rather harsh dismissal of the 60s radicals and their upper-class patrons, however, condemns without understanding. In this case, Brustein goes beyond harrying his friends to simply judging them. Whereas Trilling sees James's characters's faults, but retains affection for them (as does James himself), Brustein keeps his distance from their real life counterparts. In this difference in reactions we see clearly illustrated Brustein's differentiation between imaginative revolt and actual revolution. While Brustein, like Trilling,

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Brustein, Revolution, 22.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 25.

can admire revolution in literature, he rejects its human counterpart. For instance, Trilling says of Muniment that while his ambiguous attitude toward power may appear hypocritical, it is understandable as an expression of the demands of leadership at that time. Similarly, he sees the Princess's quest for reality as having an "aspect of heroism" because she "cannot but mistake the nature of reality, for she believes it is a thing, a position, a finality, a bedrock,"⁹⁸ and not an endlessly complex balancing of good and evil created by changeable and changing human beings. Brustein, on the contrary, vigorously condemns as hypocrisy the desire for personal power that he sees in the modern-day Muniments who court the mass media and the wealthy. Similarly, he sees no heroism in what he calls the "moral posturing" of those modern Princesses (and Princes) whose desire to follow their Muniments is accompanied by no personal "risk or difficulty."⁹⁹

The difference between Trilling and Brustein, while perhaps mostly due to the obvious difference between commenting on a work of the imagination versus reality, seems also to be an indication of the degree to which they are willing to empathize. There were several reviewers of Revolution as Theatre who commented on Brustein's "remoteness from the militant scene," and his lack of a "real understanding of the student movement."¹⁰⁰ This was less a

⁹⁸ Trilling, Liberal Imagination 91.

⁹⁹ Brustein, Revolution, 24.

¹⁰⁰ Knoll, Gerald M. Review of Revolution as Theatre, by Robert Brustein. In America 124 (June 19, 1971); Choice 8 (October 1971): 1067.

criticism of his lack of actual involvement than of his seeming unwillingness, despite his expressed sympathy for many of the revolutionaries' goals, to give them the benefit of the doubt and attempt to comprehend what was driving their decisions and actions. Instead, he tends to reduce them to two-dimensional images, straw men whose obvious flaws are unredeemed by human characteristics. In this, he violates Arnold's dictum, often repeated by Trilling, that the critic should attempt to "see the object as it really is."

Such friendliness seemed to come naturally to the older and gentler Trilling. One of several people interviewed about the Columbia uprising by Stephen Donadio in Partisan Review, Trilling speaks directly to this issue in a way that sheds considerable light on the differences between him and Brustein. He says, "when I hear about present student attitudes and demands, as it were in the abstract, they seem to me to be chiefly incomprehensible, even absurd, or, sometimes, merely willful and mischievous." Had he stopped here, he would have reflected Brustein's attitude. However, he goes on:

But it has almost never failed that when I meet the students themselves -- I've interviewed many of them as part of the work of the Executive Committee of the Faculty -- I find that, contrary to my first expectations, I have great respect for them and that their demands at least begin to make sense. I think that what happens is that when I confront them personally I see them in their cultural and social situation, and since I understand why this should arouse their antagonism and rebelliousness, I am better able to see why they should direct their protest at the university, which they take to be representative of the society, as the part of the society with which they are most immediately involved and which is most accessible to their protest. My seeing doesn't prevent me

from thinking that they are wrong in dealing with the university as if it were a microcosm of the society.¹⁰¹

Note that this sense of understanding does not undermine Trilling's critical faculty, for he continues to believe that the students are in error and says so; however, he seems to give them the respect of hearing them out and trying to fully comprehend their viewpoint before reaching his conclusion.

The effect that this difference had is most apparent in the reaction of the student radicals to the two men. As already noted, Brustein was universally despised. Even his wife, who at first was supportive of his decisiveness, after a while began to call him "The Great Right Father" and told him that if he had to quarrel, "at least [he] could quarrel courteously."¹⁰² Brustein's unwillingness to meet and talk with the student radicals outside the School of Drama (nowhere in Revolution as Theatre is there a conversation with a radical that is anything but confrontative or dismissive) is reflected in their unwillingness to listen to his ideas. Trilling stood in marked contrast. Here are the words of a Columbia student, Dotson Rader, who took part in occupying his university's Mathematics Building:

I sat there and wondered where Lionel Trilling was, hoping that somehow he, who wanted to understand so badly what was happening to us, would come over to our side. I remember telling him that in relation to his generation we felt disregarded, unconsulted, powerless, powerless to effect the quality of our lives in his America. Our lives, without roots in history, seemed

¹⁰¹ Steven Donadio, "Columbia: Seven Interviews," Partisan Review 35 (Summer 1968), 391-92.

¹⁰² Brustein, Making Scenes, 123.

diminished to gesture, without power, to desperation, without hope, to fantasy."¹⁰³

If these words resemble those a son might say to his father, perhaps this is not so far from the truth. Gertrude Himmelfarb remembered Trilling telling her, "We mustn't put ourselves in a position to antagonize the students. They are, after all, our children."¹⁰⁴ Himmelfarb and others saw this as outrageous sentimentalism on Trilling's part, but it was not so simple-minded. Trilling was saying was that the student radicals were their intellectual children, and that consequently the older generation bore some responsibility for their actions.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Trilling was very concerned that many ideas of the adversary culture had gradually been accepted by an increasingly large part of the educated middle class, particularly the young. Popular culture in particular had embraced the rebel through the image of anti-heroes such as James Dean, Marlon Brando, and the aggressive characters in, for example, Easy Rider (1969). These images, in turn, were enthusiastically embraced by the young as role models. "There is scarcely a film, no matter how commercial," Trilling said in an interview, "that does not find it to its advantage to appropriate ideas and attitudes that a few years ago were peculiar to the intellectual elite."¹⁰⁵ In other words, popular films were an example of how the

¹⁰³ Stephen Spender, The Year of the Young Rebels (New York: Random House, 1969), 27.

¹⁰⁴ Mark Gerson, The Neoconservative Vision: From the Cold War to the Culture Wars (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1996), 104.

¹⁰⁵ Donadio, 388.

attitudes of the adversary culture had seeped into the mainstream and were influencing the culture on a large scale.

There were some who attributed the political anarchism of the 60s in part to precisely those ideas found in modernist art and literature that had been admired and taught by people such as Trilling and Brustein. In an essay entitled "Sensibilities of the Sixties," Daniel Bell singled out Brustein, among several others, for particular attention in this regard. Brustein's attacks on the new "anti-reason" sensibility of the student radicals, Bell felt, were undermined by the fact that "intellectually and aesthetically" he was "allied with modernism and accept[s] its premises. Yet what the new sensibility did was to carry the premises of modernism through to their logical conclusions."¹⁰⁶ These premises Bell defined as the cult of childhood, a delight in the absurd, the celebration of base rather than high values, and an interest in hallucination.¹⁰⁷ Brustein had celebrated many of these "premises of modernism," of course, throughout The Theatre of Revolt.

According to Podhoretz, Trilling agreed with this analysis, despite that its accusatory finger also pointed at himself, for "the demonstrators he found himself opposing were in a profound sense his own students: where else had they learned the language of 'alienation' from American society but in his own classroom?"¹⁰⁸ Diana Trilling agreed, writing that the student uprisings

¹⁰⁶ Bell, Contradictions of Capitalism, 143n.

¹⁰⁷ Bell, "Sensibilities of the Sixties," 121.

¹⁰⁸ Podhoretz, Breaking Ranks, 208.

“represented the moral substance of contemporary art translated into actuality.”¹⁰⁹

Brustein disagrees, however, at least today. In his 1997 conversation with me, he questions Bell's interpretation by pointing out that “any particular expression or body of thought can be vulgarized, and modernism probably was in [the case of the 60s]. But I don't think you can hold modernism responsible for it.”¹¹⁰ It is an interesting point, that modernist ideas inevitably lost a great deal of their complexity, ambiguity, and profundity in the process of being transferred to popular culture and disseminated in the larger society. Can ideas be held accountable for the abuses of those who misinterpret them?

Perhaps in this case, one must resort to “the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind, at the same time, and still retain the ability to function”¹¹¹ as a way to reconcile Trilling's and Brustein's views in this regard. Perhaps Trilling went too far in seeing modernism behind student radicalism; after all, political conditions themselves may have required such extremism in order to provoke change in a complacent American populace. But perhaps Brustein too easily disavows the influence of the modernist ideas. After all, it was not merely coincidence that Jean Genet, with his search for beauty in violence, crime, and theatricality, was deeply involved with the Black Panther Trial in New Haven,

¹⁰⁹ Diana Trilling, “On the Steps of Lowe Library,” chap. in We Must March My Darlings: A Critical Decade (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 95.

¹¹⁰ Brustein, “Interview December 5, 1997.”

¹¹¹ Lionel Trilling, “F. Scott Fitzgerald,” chap. in The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), 245-46.

and defended the Panthers's advocacy of violence. In his chapter on Genet, Brustein had written that the racial violence in The Blacks "is not to be taken seriously . . . the play is just a play."¹¹² After the uprisings of the late 1960s, one wonders whether he would have written those lines with quite the same confidence.

One must also be careful not to sanctify Trilling, when in actuality there was also an element of simple fatigue involved in his muted reactions. Trilling admitted as much in a Commentary symposium in which Podhoretz implied that Trilling was a coward for failing to strongly condemn the student radicals. "Subjects and problems got presented in a way that made one's spirits fail," Trilling confessed.¹¹³ Brustein elaborated on this comment, noting that Trilling "wanted to make intellectual discriminations, and that time didn't allow it. At that time you were either for or against, and that was a vulgar formulation of a kind Lionel just couldn't accept."¹¹⁴ Brustein considered himself more "contentious and aggressive," and more capable of throwing himself into the fray, where fine points were less important than well-aimed blows.¹¹⁵

It is difficult to assess the persuasive effect of Brustein's aggressiveness on others. Kingman Brewster, speaking to a gathering of newspaper executives in the midst of the upheavals at Yale, could have been speaking of Brustein

¹¹² Brustein, Revolt, 404.

¹¹³ "Culture at the Present Moment: A round-Table Discussion," Commentary 58 (December 1974), 46.

¹¹⁴ Brustein, "Interview December 5, 1997."

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

when pointing out that students were frustrated by “the disparagement of dissent and non-conformity,” and that such attacks were driving “potentially constructive critics, skeptics, and heretics -- what I would call ‘considerate radicals’ . . . into the ranks of those enraged destructionists who would tear down the system.”¹¹⁶ In this case, Brewster may have been implying that criticisms such as those that Brustein was publishing in The New York Times (later anthologized in Revolution as Theatre) were radicalizing the Yale student body, while Trilling’s more personal approach may have inspired greater moderation. On the other hand, Brustein believed there was a sizable contingent across the country, and on his own campus, who basically agreed with his viewpoint, and who thus were strengthened in their resolve by hearing it stated strongly.

Ultimately, while Trilling and Brustein faced the upheavals of the 1960s differently, they drew from similar basic assumptions. Trilling may not have used or approved of Brustein’s style or tactics, but he did express “his gratitude and support”¹¹⁷ for Brustein’s essays attacking the uprisings. Essentially, they furthered the same ideas in complementary fashion according to their separate strengths, and the realization of their common purpose drew them both together.

¹¹⁶ John Taft, Mayday at Yale: A Case Study of Student Radicalism (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1976), 54.

¹¹⁷ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 258.

Heretofore the “conversation” between them had been oblique and largely confined literary and intellectual issues. As noted in the last chapter, the publication of Trilling’s literary anthology in 1967 seemed to indicate at least a moderate lessening of the tensions between them on the subject of theatre. The events of the late 1960s accelerated this reconciliation by calling forth the principles that Trilling had expressed so powerfully in The Liberal Imagination, and that Brustein had so admired. The strength of Brustein’s relationship with Trilling is based on those common liberal assumptions. When those assumptions were threatened, smaller disagreements were abandoned in favor of an effort to prevent their distortion and ultimate destruction. Both men relied upon their own personal strengths -- Trilling his even-handed open-mindedness, Brustein his passionate disputatiousness -- to make their arguments in the midst of what often seemed like chaos. When many of Trilling’s former students, arrayed on both the Left and Right, began to attack him for standing in the Center, Brustein empathized. When Brustein dedicated The Culture Watch to Trilling, he acknowledged that underlying connection.

In 1972, after the tumult had calmed down somewhat on both their campuses, Brustein coincidentally met Trilling onboard a ship sailing to England, where both men were to spend a year. They saw each other frequently during the year that followed, and “talked a lot about the past and about the strange fate of [Trilling’s] brand of liberalism in contemporary

America.” As a result, “they reaffirmed and strengthened an old bond.”¹¹⁸ As 176
mentioned previously, Brustein’s next collection, The Culture Watch, was
dedicated to “My teacher, Lionel Trilling.” In many regards, all of his books
since then could be so dedicated.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 259.

CHAPTER 5

It may be an exaggeration to say that Brustein's critical writings since The Culture Watch have primarily been a recapitulation of themes introduced in his earlier books, but there is an element of truth to the statement. By the time of Trilling's death in 1975, most of Brustein's major critical themes had been sketched in, and the succeeding years have been characterized by the gradual development of those outlines. "My absolutes, then as now," Brustein wrote in 1994, referring back to his first book, The Theatre of Revolt, "have been the independence of the dramatic artist and the integrity of dramatic art, which need to be guarded against any forces that might compromise or debase them."¹ Primary among those forces is politics, which Brustein has seen as increasingly encroaching upon the creation, evaluation, and funding of the arts. He has regularly taken up the pen to combat the democratization of aesthetic judgment, which has earned him the epithet "elitist," a label he proudly wears. The staunchness with which he holds his values is important to understanding most of Brustein's writings: he rarely alters a basic principle.

To recapitulate those values as they appear in his later criticism would ultimately prove redundant. More enlightening would be to focus on a single event that brought together many strands of Brustein's thought, and forced him to defend not only his specific ideas, but the principles that supported them as well. I refer to the debate entitled "On Cultural Power" that took place between

¹ Robert Brustein, Dumbocracy in America: Studies in the Theatre of Guilt, 1987 - 1994 (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 1994), 4.

August Wilson and Robert Brustein on January 27, 1997, in Town Hall in New York City. The background for this event illustrates how Brustein's tendency to recycle ideas may have contributed to Wilson's apparent belief that Brustein was unwilling to examine his plays with fresh critical eyes. In 1978, Brustein wrote an essay entitled "Theatre in the Age of Einstein: The Crack in the Chimney," which he initially published in the New York Times. It was an excellent essay that merited reprinting in a special issue on playwriting in Theater magazine in the spring of 1979. It was also included in an anthology that year entitled Images and Ideas in American Culture: The Functions of Criticism: Essays in Memory of Philip Rahv. Finally, in 1980, Brustein included it in his collection of essays, Critical Moments: Reflection on Theatre and Society 1973-1979.

Over a decade later, in 1990, Brustein gave a talk at Skidmore College entitled "Reimagining Drama," which is essentially the same essay as "The Age of Einstein." In fact, Brustein reprints verbatim the first seven pages as well as the final three pages of the sixteen-page "Theatre in the Age of Einstein." The revision that does occur is found, not surprisingly, in the part of the essay that discusses contemporary playwrights, where some updating is necessary. What Brustein offers is not a complete revision, however, but a rather superficial adaptation in which the same ideas are applied wholesale to a different group of playwrights that prominently includes August Wilson. In the original, Brustein begins the segment on contemporary playwrights with the following sentences: "Take David Rabe, perhaps the most typical and the most highly esteemed of the younger generation playwrights. Rabe has been called the likely successor to Eugene O'Neill -- but a perfunctory glance at his accomplishments soon reveals that he has a closer relative in Arthur Miller."² In the later version of the

² Robert Brustein, Critical Moments (New York: Random House, 1980), 114-15.

essay, he has this to say: "Take August Wilson, perhaps the most typical and highly esteemed of the current crop of playwrights. The winner of numerous prizes, Wilson has often been compared with Eugene O'Neill -- but a perfunctory glance at his accomplishments soon reveals that he has a closer relative in Arthur Miller."³ The ensuing paragraph, with minor changes in wording, substitutes Wilson's name for Rabe's throughout. This pattern continues throughout this part of the essay.

In the paragraph that follows the above in the earlier version, Brustein writes, "In Rabe's case, these crimes [of the nation at large] are almost invariably linked with the Vietnam war."⁴ Using exactly the same phrase, Brustein again substitutes Wilson for Rabe, but this time he changes "the Vietnam war" into "racism." While obviously he must depart from the text of the earlier essay in order to discuss the details of Wilson's plays, much of the essay nevertheless follows the same basic outline of the previous version.

Certainly, one cannot blame Brustein for recycling an old essay to use as a speech to a group of undergraduates at Skidmore; after all, he is a busy man with a great many responsibilities, and he honestly and explicitly acknowledged the source when he reprinted the new essay in his collection, Reimagining American Theatre. But what is one to make of the fact that he not only sees fit to include this late essay, with its rather superficial alterations, in another collection of his work, but gives it prominent placement and, in essence, names the book after it? At the very least, this looks like intellectual laziness: in twelve years, has he not seen the need to thoroughly reexamine his opinions, save to substitute fresher names for those no longer in fashion? At its worst, it looks like

³ Robert Brustein, Reimagining American Theatre (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 1991), 25.

⁴ Ibid.

disrespect for August Wilson, for the underlying implication of such wholesale substitution is that Wilson is simply an interchangeable cog in theatrical machinery not worthy of a thorough examination on his own merit.

If this were the only example of such behavior, it could be dismissed as an aberration, an attempt to clarify ideas he had previously expressed in a manner he found unsatisfying or ineffective. But one year later, Brustein again cannibalizes his own work, this time taking another piece of the Wilson material from this very same essay, "Reimagining American Drama," as well as a piece on David Henry Hwang from another essay in Reimagining American Theatre, "Transcultural Blends." These are then pasted with minor revisions -- this time without attributions -- into "The Options of Multiculturalism," which appeared in The New Republic and then in Dumbocracy in America. The fact that the only examples of such duplication are tied to minority playwrights tends to reinforce the opinion that Brustein does not treat such playwrights with the respect they deserve. It also gives the sense that Brustein is not taking advantage of situations to develop and deepen his ideas in relation to these playwrights, but simply repeats them without alteration. One can understand August Wilson's sense of frustration when, at the end of his debate with Brustein in January of 1997, he complained that he was "not able to learn much else about the positions which he espouses, other than what he has already articulated in his books."⁵ A similar feeling was expressed by several other critics who attended the debate.⁶

This repetition may simply be the characteristic of a man who simply has insufficient time available to thoroughly rethink and elaborate his old ideas;

⁵ Fresh Air transcript, broadcast February 5, 1997.

⁶ See Erika Munk, Theater 27 number 2 - 3 (1997), 5; Robert Simonson, "Wilson v. Brustein: A Drama at Town Hall, in Backstage (January 31 - February 6, 1997), 39; Frank Rich, "Two Mouths Running," in New York Times (February 1, 1997), 19.

certainly serving as Artistic Director of the American Repertory Theatre and administering and teaching in the training program connected to the theatre demands a great deal of time and attention. But another interpretation, mentioned by Trilling about his own writing, may also shed light on this phenomenon. Near the end of his life, Trilling mentioned a sense of "fatigue" at the way that problems got presented that "that made one's spirits fail."⁷ In Trilling's case, it caused him to remain silent about certain issues during the 1960s; in Brustein's case, it may have caused him to reiterate the same ideas, as if those with whom he disagrees had simply not heard him the first time. There is a sense of fatigue in Brustein's writing, a sense that he believes little has changed over the years, and that, in fact, the situation has worsened. An October 1997 New Republic article on the controversy over the funding of the National Endowment for the Arts reflects this dispiritedness: "Do I seem a little strung out? I am. I've written dozens of articles in the last thirty years arguing the importance of federal subsidies for the arts, and they haven't made a single dent in the political consciousness."⁸ Other issues have been equally unyielding: the debilitating effect on the arts of political causes such as multiculturalism and political correctness, for instance, or the lowering of critical standards in the face of the democratization and popularization of the arts. Many of the ideas he found most disturbing in the 1960s have gone on to be institutionalized within mainstream culture. "The ones who were once storming the Dean's Office," Brustein recently quipped, "are now in the Dean's Office. . . . They're the Deans!"⁹ And the same could be said about many other parts of society outside of academia. When asked about this, he admitted dejectedly, "I

⁷ "Culture and the Present Moment," Commentary 58 (December 1974): 46.

⁸ Robert Brustein, "Mend It, Don't End It," The New Republic (October 6, 1997): 29.

⁹ Brustein, "Interview, December 7, 1997."

feel as though there has been a moral collapse that is affecting the arts, and nothing I say seems to be able to counteract it. So I am fatigued with the question."¹⁰ Perhaps this trend, more than anything, accounts for the frequency with which he is characterized as curmudgeonly, conservative, and old-fashioned: he has maintained the same values since the beginning of his career, regardless of which fads and trends have overtaken the theatre and the culture. These values are those of traditional liberalism, whose most articulate spokesman may have been Lionel Trilling.

The Wilson-Brustein Debate

The debate between Brustein and Wilson centered on the role of race as it affects many aspects of the theatre: subject matter, style, play selection, critical evaluation, funding, and casting, to name a few. At a deeper level, it revolved around what one critic called "the old liberal dream of integration,"¹¹ a dream symbolized by Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech and staunchly defended by traditional liberals such as Brustein and Trilling. More generally, it also tacitly asked what role, if any, politics has to play in the arts, a question Brustein had asked since very early in his career. While the immediate circumstances of the debate date from the summer of 1996, the source of the conflict goes back much further to Brustein's review of Wilson's The Piano Lesson in 1990 and a number of essays and articles that both he and Wilson wrote between 1990 and 1996.

The event, which received widespread coverage in both the professional and the popular press, was a defining moment for Brustein, one which brought him more national attention than he had ever received before. Not limited to the

¹⁰ Robert Brustein, interview by the author, Tape recording, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 5 December, 1997.

¹¹ Paul Goldberger, "From Page to Stage: Race and the Theater," New York Times 22 January 1997, C11.

small readership of The New Republic or American Theatre, Brustein's voice could be heard across the nation on National Public Radio's Fresh Air a few days after the debate, and his ideas would be hotly debated not only by those who make their living creating theatre or writing about it, but by columnists and intellectuals whose attention was usually focused on purely political issues. Because of the debate, for a while Brustein could believe that he was joined by many in his belief that the theatre is a "fundamental metaphor of American life,"¹² and therefore worthy of serious attention.

The immediate cause of the debate was a keynote speech Wilson made to a gathering of the nation's regional theatre artistic directors at Theatre Communications Group's eleventh biennial National Conference at Princeton University in late June of 1996. Entitled "The Ground on Which I Stand," Wilson's address sparked considerable controversy at the conference when he attacked colorblind casting as an "aberrant idea that has never had any validity other than as a tool of the Cultural Imperialists,"¹³ criticized the lack of funding for black theatres, and condemned the fact that only one of the sixty-six TCG member theatres was dedicated to promoting black culture. He also singled out Brustein for attack for his "presumption of inferiority of the work of minority artists,"¹⁴ as well as his belief in universal aesthetic criteria, which Wilson equated with Eurocentric and racist values. The text of his speech was printed in the September edition of American Theatre.

Brustein quickly responded with an essay in The New Republic provocatively entitled, "Subsidized Separatism." In it, he characterized Wilson's

¹² Robert Brustein, The Culture Watch: Essays on Theatre and Society, 1969 - 1974 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), ix.

¹³ August Wilson, "The Ground On Which I Stand," American Theatre (September 1996): 72.

¹⁴ Ibid., 71.

speech as a "rambling jeremiad"¹⁵ that ignored civil rights advances that had been made in American society, especially since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and instead advanced the cause of separatism -- an idea that Brustein found abhorrent. In response to Wilson's call for "an entirely separate stage for black theater artists," Brustein asked rhetorically, "What next? Separate schools? Separate washrooms? Separate drinking fountains?"¹⁶ He also accused Wilson of misrepresenting his positions regarding minority playwrights, and of "displaying a failure of memory" for not acknowledging that all of Wilson's own plays were originally produced in the very mainstream theatres he was condemning, and that the Broadway productions of those plays had brought him considerable acclaim.

The October issue of American Theatre reprinted Brustein's essay, followed by a response from Wilson. The November issue included a forum entitled "Race, Art and Inclusion," in which Brustein responded to Wilson's response, along with additional commentary supplied by Lou Bellamy, Artistic Director of Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota, where Wilson is a company member; and Patti Hartigan, the cultural reporter for The Boston Globe. By December, the "debate" was still causing considerable controversy, and American Theatre devoted yet another forum to "Plowing August Wilson's 'Ground'," in which director and professor Richard Schechner, playwrights Alan Gerstle, Marion X, and Douglas O. Barnett all weighed in. Editorials appeared in the Village Voice, Variety, and many daily papers. Henry Louis Gates published a related essay in The New Yorker.

Anna Deavere Smith, whom Hartigan had suggested might do a performance piece on the ongoing debate, suggested that the two men

¹⁵ Robert Brustein, "Subsidized Separatism," The New Republic (August 19 & 25, 1996): 39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

participate in a public discussion with Smith herself serving as moderator.

Brustein was less than enthralled by the idea, but consented because he said he "was too cowardly to appear cowardly."¹⁷ Smith's belief was that exchanging brickbats in the media was too safe, and that having a face-to-face debate would remove the media glare from the proceedings. Obviously, she was wrong.

Once the debate was announced, the media recognized it and covered it as a dramatic news event. "I thought we were going to collect about a hundred people and that would be it," Brustein said. "But I guess this particular debate hit a nerve with some people."¹⁸ Frank Rich, covering it for the New York Times, began his acidly titled essay "Two Mouths Running" with a description of the situation outside the theatre. It was "a scene most Broadway producers can only fantasize about. On a snowy Monday night in January, people were all but rioting to enter a theater adjacent to Times Square . . . And unlike most Broadway audiences, this was mixed in age, race, and class, with suburbanites joined by college students and a snazzy cultural contingent as various as William Styron, George C. Wolfe, Helen Mirren and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr."¹⁹ Inadvertantly, Brustein had helped create the type of theatre -- or at least the type of audience -- that he had dreamed of years ago. "What better way for the theater to give new life to this issue than to present it as a piece of theater in itself?,"²⁰ Paul Goldberger asked in the New York Times. What better way indeed?

¹⁷ Brustein, "Interview December 5."

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Frank Rich, "Two Mouths Running," The New York Times, 1 February 1997, 19.

²⁰ Paul Goldberger, "From Page to Stage: Race and the Theater," The New York Times, 22 January 1997, C11.

Many journalists covered the event like a prize fight. "In this corner," trumpeted Goldberger in the same article, "the new mosaic; in that corner, the old melting pot," with the fight "refereed" by Smith.²¹ Richard Goldstein wrote in The Village Voice that Brustein and Wilson were going to "duke it out, in what promises to be the greatest exhibition of extreme intellectual fighting since -- when was that?"²² Frank Rich repeated Goldstein's image.²³ The atmosphere in the hall, reflecting the build-up, was raucous. There were catcalls and shouted insults, and cheers when one of the combatants landed a figurative blow. At one point in the discussion, Smith threatened to stop the bout unless the audience allowed each participant to speak. This quieted the crowd somewhat, but not entirely. "I remember being in Town Hall when Norman Mailer got on stage with Germaine Greer and Diana Trilling," reminisced Brustein. "That was a similar kind of fracas."²⁴

What effect this atmosphere had on the participants is hard to say; certainly they sometimes seemed rattled and incoherent during the question-and-answer session that followed the prepared remarks, especially when the questions rather pointedly revealed one of their weaker arguments. Many observers were less than impressed by the level of discourse. Margo Jefferson summed up this feeling when she wondered frustratedly in the New York Times, "When are our public conversations going to start living up to the complexities of actual lives?"²⁵ John Simon, reviewing the evening as if it were simply another

²¹ Ibid.

²² Goldstein, Richard, "Extreme Fighting," The Village Voice, 28 January 28, 1997, 46.

²³ Rich, 19.

²⁴ Brustein, "Interview December 5, 1997."

²⁵ Margo Jefferson, "Oratory vs. Really Talking About Culture," New York Times, 4 February 1997, C4.

play, acknowledged that there was "plenty of voltage" in the discussion, but sniffed that Smith "let the dialogue wander off."²⁶

It seems that Brustein's apprehension about the appropriateness of such an event was warranted. While the opportunity to reveal his views to a larger audience was attractive, ultimately a public debate in such an atmosphere did not provide an appropriate venue for the discussion of complex fundamental principles. What Brustein and Wilson were debating, when all was said and done, were the fundamental principles of liberalism and their value to America in the late twentieth century; what drew people to Town Hall, however, was to see two opponents exchange intellectual and personal broadsides in public. The pugilistic metaphors that the press employed in covering the event reflected and encouraged such a view. If, as Rich wrote, the failures of the debate "mirrored the cultural and racial divides in America right now,"²⁷ which they undoubtedly did, it also mirrored the deterioration of public discussion of ideas. The speakers were unable to resist the temptation toward polemic, rather than reasoned discussion.

Newspaper coverage leading up to and following the debate paid some attention to the issues about which the men were to debate, but also hinted at a personal enmity between them based on professional resentments. "August Wilson is the nation's preeminent black playwright, and Robert Brustein is one of the few critics who has not admired his plays," Goldberger wrote. "A secondary theme of this whole debate has to be the perennial power struggle between artists and critics."²⁸ This image of the debate as fueled by personal vendetta was reinforced by the fact that Wilson's perennial director, Lloyd

²⁶ John Simon, "Black and Blue," New York (February 17, 1997): 57.

²⁷ Rich, 19.

²⁸ Goldberger, C14.

Richards, had replaced Brustein at Yale after Brustein had been removed as Dean of the School of Drama. It had long been whispered that Brustein's antipathy for Wilson's work was rooted in lingering resentment over that dismissal. Indeed, Brustein himself acknowledged this appearance in his review of Wilson's The Piano Lesson, when he confessed that he had not reviewed Wilson's previous plays because "protocol required that I hold my tongue" about the work of his successor.²⁹ Thus, interest in the the debate seemed to be comprised of equal parts intellectual curiosity and voyeurism.

The historical memory of those who covered the debate in the press, as well as many of those in attendance, was fairly short. Indeed, when the journal Theater followed the debate with a lengthy section devoted to discussion of the issues it raised, the focus was on Wilson's TCG address and the events that followed rather than contextualization of the debate's central issues. But there is a way to supply some of this missing contextualization even now, long after the events and the press rush, and that is to examine the essays of Brustein that explain his principles more fully than his reviews. Through these essays, which consider the "bloody crossroads" where art and politics meet, one can recognize the liberal influence of Trilling in the Wilson/Brustein debate.

As mentioned earlier, Brustein is a lifelong believer in the necessity of complexity in art. He has long been an opponent of the melodramatic imagination. He resists those plays, including Wilson's, that he feels create a simplified moral universe where good and evil are pure and clearly delineated. Peter Brooks, author of The Melodramatic Imagination, effectively described such a moral universe as it appears in literature that embraces excess as its preferred mode:

Within an apparent context of "realism" and the ordinary, [authors of

²⁹ Brustein, Reimagining American Theatre, 99.

melodrama] seemed in fact to be staging a heightened and hyperbolic drama, making reference to pure and polar concepts of darkness and light, salvation and damnations. They seemed to place their characters at the point of intersection of primal ethical forces and to confer on the characters' enactments a charge of meaning referred to the clash of these forces.³⁰

Political art, according to Brustein, usually partakes of such a melodramatic approach. It prefers, as he said during the debate, "the opposition of right and wrong, or shall we say black and white, when the truth is usually grey."³¹ Grey is the color of complexity, the color of complicity, the color of tragedy. It does not partake of the "melodrama of accuser and accused."³² His 1992 essay entitled "The Theatre of Guilt," from which the foregoing quotation was drawn, contains his most thorough and direct discussion of the aesthetic principles which inform his response to the moral universe of drama.

When the essay was first published in American Theatre, it provoked a storm of protest. The central idea that Brustein advanced -- that moral guilt and innocence should not be distributed in a schematic fashion -- was nothing particularly new: it went back at least as far as Friedrich Hegel's definition of tragedy as the conflict of two incompatible goods. Brustein's formulation was particularly inflammatory because, as its title indicates, it was stated negatively. It focused not on the description of an ideal and of plays that fit that model, but rather on the condemnation of plays that violated a stated ideal.

Such an approach would not have been applauded by Trilling, despite what one might expect to be his agreement with the basic premises of Brustein's argument. In the Commentary roundtable discussion in which Trilling

³⁰ Peter Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), ix.

³¹ Fresh Air transcript, February 5, 1997.

³² Brustein, Dumbocracy, 14.

participated in 1974, which has been mentioned in previous chapters, Norman Podhoretz asked whether "the proper role of criticism today is to say No to the advanced culture? That is . . . may it not be the case that the proper, perhaps only, role for a critical community at this moment would be to stand in an adversary relation to the adversary culture itself, as it is now understood?"³³

Trilling rejected this idea, saying such a oppositional critical movement would be "self-defeating." Podhoretz shot back, "If there were a body of new art today that had to be explicated and brought to public consciousness, that would be wonderful, wouldn't it? But what do you do in a situation where there isn't any?"³⁴ To which Trilling replied laconically, "You become historical minded."³⁵

In other words, Trilling believed that you do not focus solely on revealing the weakness of art you consider unworthy, but rather ignore it, and instead explicate art from the past that possesses the characteristics you value. In "Theatre of Guilt," Brustein rejects this in favor of Podhoretz's approach to criticism -- indeed, a great deal of Brustein's criticism over the course of his career reflects such an oppositional tack. The dismissal of his ideas by the American Theatre readers support Trilling's opinion that such an approach is self-defeating; certainly, the unanimity of the negative response did not suggest many converts.

Despite its negative tone, "The Theatre of Guilt" is nonetheless an insightful essay that discusses the judicial nature of a great deal of 20th-century American drama, which Brustein says has regularly used the theatrical apparatus "as a means of identifying and condemning offenses."³⁶ Like The

³³ "Culture at the Present Moment," Commentary 58 (Dec 1974): 41.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 9.

Theatre of Revolt, "Theatre of Guilt" draws together a variety of artists usually considered to have different styles and subject matter. The common thread, as the title states, is their relationship to moral culpability. Brustein identifies the roots of "Theatre of Guilt" in mystery and morality plays of the Middle Ages, and sees its most direct predecessor in Hamlet's mousetrap wherein "guilty creatures sitting at a play / Have been struck so by the cunning of the scene that presently / They have proclaimed their malefactions."³⁷ From there, Brustein draws a line through nineteenth century realism to the drama of today, all of which "has built its drama on a foundation of accusation, recrimination, and atonement."³⁸ In the best of such drama, for instance Oedipus or Ghosts, "the same person plays the role of investigator and malefactor,"³⁹ and the accusation ends as self-accusation. The protagonists of these plays exist in a complex moral universe, where nobody is completely innocent and all carry their own mark of guilt. Brustein writes:

The heroic protagonist is one who takes his fate in his own hands, who is capable of braving the furies of his own soul, who acts on the basis of self-knowledge and assumes responsibility for those actions . . . But compare some of the later playwrights assumed to be writing in the same tradition, particularly in the United States. Their characters are usually victims rather than heroes. They cast blame on others without engaging themselves. They indict not the protagonists but their oppressors. More rhetoricians than poets, they assume that the prime function of theatre is to arouse the spectator's guilt.⁴⁰

From this statement can be derived many of Brustein's antipathies, and his enthusiasms. His negative reactions to a great deal of black, feminist, and gay drama, for instance, is based on what he sees as the lack of moral

³⁷ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 9.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 11.

complexity in the world of these plays, and the concomitant prevalence of martyrs as protagonists and villains as antagonists. His distaste for Wilson, David Henry Hwang, and Larry Kramer, to name just a few, is based on the same principles that led him to dislike the work of Arthur Miller, Clifford Odets, and Tennessee Williams. Brustein objects less to the specifics of these playwrights' ideologies -- he repeatedly insists that he shares many of their political opinions -- than to the lack of texture or profundity in those ideologies. They are editorial writers, according to Brustein, who "usually stop at thesis without encountering antithesis, which is to say, they are content with only one idea."⁴¹

As early as 1945, Trilling had argued in a similar vein in an extremely complimentary review of Richard Wright's novel Black Boy. Casting a cool eye on a type of sociological novel that serves as "no more than a document of misery and oppression," Trilling applauded Wright for having avoided making his central character "that different kind of human being, a 'sufferer.' He is not an object, he is a subject; he is the same kind of person as his reader, as complex, as free."⁴² Consequently, he is also not free of flaws, is not an innocent melodramatic hero. Wright dares, Trilling says, to "take oppression seriously, to believe that it really does oppress, that its tendency is not so much to exempt the oppressed from the moral flaws of the dominant culture from which they are excluded as it is to give them other flaws of feeling and action."⁴³ An accusatory finger is pointed at the Self in Wright's novel, as much as at the Other.

A Trilling short story entitled "The Other Margaret," published in the same year that he wrote the review of Wright's novel, makes a similar point. It is the

⁴¹ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 159.

⁴² Trilling, "A Tragic Situation," The Nation (April 7, 1945): 391.

⁴³ Ibid.

story of Stephen Elwin, a perceptive and observant middle-class New Yorker not unlike Trilling himself. Elwin has a young daughter, Margaret, and a rather unpleasant black maid, also named Margaret (thus, the Other Margaret). The story concerns the Other Margaret's tendency, when rebuked by Elwin's wife, to "accidentally" break objects for which the Elwin's have a special fondness. "Why, she just hates us," Elwin's wife says bluntly to her husband and daughter. This causes a cry of protest from the young Margaret, who has been educated in a progressive elementary school and has absorbed a multitude of sentimental pieties regarding the various disadvantaged. Confronted with the Other Margaret's hostile behavior, the young Margaret sputters that she shouldn't be held responsible because "society didn't give her a chance. . . . She has a handicap. Because she's colored. She has to struggle so hard -- against prejudice. It's so hard for her."⁴⁴ The young Margaret clings determinedly to her image of the Other Margaret as an innocent victim whose nastiness should be ignored because of her situation, but when the Other Margaret intentionally shatters a special birthday gift that the young Margaret had made for her mother's birthday, she can no longer deny the cold reality. She must face the pain of what Trilling calls "the nature of the double truth": that "society is responsible" for the Other Margaret's behavior is true, in that it provided a racist environment that shaped her view of the world and her place within it ; but it is also true that she is responsible for her own actions, and she chooses how she will behave at any moment.⁴⁵

Mark Krupnick, whose book on Trilling is otherwise perceptive and sympathetic, accuses Trilling of revealing in this story an "undifferentiated view

⁴⁴ Trilling, "The Other Margaret," chap. in Of This Time, of That Place and Other Stories (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 33.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

of the lower classes as anarchical and depraved."⁴⁶ This is as far from the truth as many of Brustein's critics' accusations that Brustein is racist and homophobic because he dislikes individual plays, and it reflects a similar desire to view as reprehensible any contradiction of the basic melodramatic characterization of the oppressed as innocent victims. In fact, Trilling doesn't say that the lower classes are all "anarchical and depraved" -- he has the family speak admiringly of the Elwin's previous maid, Millie, who was also black and as loyal and kind as the Other Margaret is bad-tempered -- nor does he deny society's role in the Other Margaret's life. But what he does do is complicate the issue by introducing an element of personal responsibility for the way the Other Margaret responds to conditions. Krupnick elsewhere writes that "the self for Trilling is always a conscious, personal achievement, an expression of free will. We may not inherit our genes, but we make our selves."⁴⁷ This is a restatement of the personal responsibility aspect of Trilling's "double truth." Trilling insists that neither of these are as deterministic as the young Margaret and others equally prone to such opinions are wont to believe; the individual, through an act of conscious will, must construct a self by the choices he or she makes in response to everyday reality. Such a belief does not release society from responsibility for injustice, prejudice, and cruelty. It merely holds that that individual may not be released from the responsibility for personal morality because of those factors. As Trilling put it in "The Other Margaret," "all men were equal in their responsibility. . . . [A]ll of them, quite as much as himself, bore their own blame. Exemption was not given by age or youth, or sex, or

⁴⁶ Mark Krupnick, Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1986), 88.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 21.

color, or condition of life."⁴⁸ This could easily be a statement of the central theme of "The Theatre of Guilt" -- an acknowledgment that guilt does not reside solely in the oppressor, and that it is the function of art to explore the "nature of the double truth" regarding social and personal responsibility.

In a 1972 essay entitled "Art in an Age of Ideology," Brustein clearly delineates his feelings about political drama:

I do not mean to imply for a moment that theatre ought to avoid the pressing issues of the time, or even that the playwright should remain scrupulously neutral. But if an artist has developed an adversary position through his perception of a complicated reality, he has the obligation, if he has the power, to deliver this reality back through his art so the audience can reach its own conclusions.⁴⁹

The qualification regarding the playwright's "power" to represent his perception is not a loophole through which less accomplished playwrights can slip their lesser work, but rather is the dividing line between the first-rate and the second-rate. The representation of "complicated reality," of multiple truths, is the sign of the masterpiece, the play that deserves praise and recognition. Brustein has consistently applauded plays that reflect such values, and has awarded his praise to minority playwrights as frequently as others.

While not usually showing much interest in the musical, for instance, Brustein enthusiastically hailed George C. Wolfe's Jelly's Last Jam as "a genuine advance in black theatrical expression."⁵⁰ He noted with approval that the play is "less concerned with recruiting a litany of past and present oppression than in probing the prejudices found within the black community itself,"⁵¹ thus encouraging the type of self-examination that Ibsen encapsulated

⁴⁸ Trilling, "The Other Margaret," 33.

⁴⁹ Robert Brustein, The Culture Watch (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 58.

⁵⁰ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 139.

⁵¹ Ibid.

when he said "to write poetry means to pass judgment on oneself."⁵² Similarly, he applauded Wolfe's earlier play, The Colored Museum, for advancing "beyond the clichés of black realism and the imperatives of black pride. It is easy enough to satirize white attitudes toward racial issues (a staple of black drama since the war). What is considerably more difficult -- and more courageous -- is to satirize black attitudes as well."⁵³

This review reveals an ongoing problem with Brustein's reviews that causes even those that he praises to cast a cool eye in his direction: he often praises work by contrasting it with a group of plays that he finds lacking. Rarely does he derogate a specific play in this context, but rather a generically defined stereotype: African-American plays, gay plays, feminist plays, etc. For example, it is not enough for The Colored Museum to be original, it must stand in contrast to the "clichés of black realism."⁵⁴ Jelly's Last Jam cannot be lauded for its interesting approach to the subject matter without Brustein also taking a swipe at those other plays that simply repeat "a litany of past and present oppressions."⁵⁵ Saying, as Brustein does about the latter play, that it is a "genuine advance in black theatrical expression"⁵⁶ implies that the form has been stagnant up until this time. While it is clear that Brustein means these lines to be compliments, they are linked to stated or implied insults. It is as if he complimented a person on his or her attractiveness, but did so by referring to the ugliness of the rest of the family. I suspect that, more than any other factor, this lies at the heart of the characterization of Brustein as condescending.

⁵² Brustein, Dumbocracy, 11.

⁵³ Brustein, Reimagining American Theatre, 27.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 139.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

One sees the phenomenon described above at work in his appreciation of Suzan-Lori Parks' The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World. While he had problems with certain aspects of the play, he professed a "keen interest in Miss Parks's future."⁵⁷ He clearly approves of the fact that she distinguishes her work from "what she calls the 'I'm-gonna-get-you-plays of the seventies,'"⁵⁸ for which Brustein shares her distaste. And he finds it "refreshing" when she says in a post performance discussion, "It's insulting . . . when people say my plays are about what it's about to be black -- as if that's all we think about, as if our life is about that. My life is not about race. It's about being alive."⁵⁹ He is equally pleased to find "an African-American play that values poetry over realism, that is not located in a tenement or backyard" and has the "daring and original idea" of turning the "familiar subject" of racial oppression "into metaphorical form."⁶⁰ In "Politics and Theatre," Brustein had promoted metaphor as the way to "preserve both poetry and political responsibility."⁶¹ While imaginative metaphor does not solve problems, he wrote, it does have the power to "present them correctly."⁶² Metaphors are "suggestive rather than exact, reverberant rather than precise; they represent a poetic avenue to the truth," and preserve the "autonomous nature of theatre art" by being descriptive rather than prescriptive.⁶³ As such, they avoid the moralizing and melodrama to which he objects.

⁵⁷ Brustein, Dumboracy, 138.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 137.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 138.

⁶¹ Brustein, Reimagining American Theatre, 288.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 288-89.

Brustein's admiration for Anna Deavere Smith is apparent in his respectful treatment of her work, which he does not use to condemn other black plays. Fires in the Mirror, he wrote, is "a remarkable feat" and one of "the most interesting works being produced in New York."⁶⁴ Smith deals with an incendiary issue "in a manner which is thorough, compassionate, and equitable on both sides."⁶⁵ The play dramatizes the emotions of grief and rage "and tempers them, with an eloquent dispassionate voice."⁶⁶ He had a similar reaction to her later play, Twilight: Los Angeles 1992. In Smith, he seems to have found a playwright whose work is passionately complex.

In Brustein's review of Tony Kushner's Angels in America, we find the clearest indication of his preference for moral evenhandedness. He writes that it is a "very personal play which distributes blame and responsibility as generously among its sympathetic gay characters as among its villains."⁶⁷ He is particularly impressed by Kushner's ability to make the "monster" Roy Cohn almost appealing.⁶⁸ Noting that the play is "not just another contestant in the Theatre of Guilt sweepstakes," he applauds Kushner's "balanced historical sense that helps him avoid both self-righteousness and sentimentality," and in a sentence worthy of Trilling, he speaks highly of Kushner's "balanced style -- angry but forgiving, tough-minded but warmhearted, ironic but passionate, mischievous and fantastical."⁶⁹ He ends by bestowing upon Kushner one of his

⁶⁴ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 145.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 146.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 148.

⁶⁷ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 177.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

highest compliments, dubbing him an "artist-intellectual."⁷⁰

Playwrights José Rivera and OyamO are both hailed as "dramatists of genuine power and imagination whose perceptions go beyond sectarian racial and ethnic agendas."⁷¹ While OyamO's style "is at times a little too raw, at times a little too declarative," he has a "sense of balance that puts his play in a class with such discriminating studies of racial conflict as Anna Deavere Smith's Fires in the Mirror." Rivera is compared to Baudelaire and Strindberg, which is considerable praise from Brustein, and he says he "looks forward eagerly to his coming work."⁷²

Brustein's negative reviews reflect the same aesthetic preferences, couched in more aggressive terms. Too often either the style in which an otherwise thoughtful principle is expressed, or the context in which it is placed, makes it appear dismissive and insulting. In addition, Brustein can rarely forego a clever line. For instance, in the midst of his essay refuting Wilson's TCG speech, he cannot resist writing that he did not review Wilson's Seven Guitars because "I left after four guitars."⁷³ Similarly, in his first opportunity to respond to Wilson's opening remarks during the debate, he cracked that Wilson "probably has the best mind of the seventeenth century."⁷⁴ Both of these simply made him sound smart-alecky, despite the serious points he went on to make. Too frequently, Brustein lets sarcasm do the work of clear argument, with the result that he is very readable but often antagonizing to those who might be won over to his side.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 191.

⁷² Ibid., 194.

⁷³ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 41.

⁷⁴ Fresh Air transcript, February 5, 1997.

In the afterword to Seasons of Discontent (1965), Brustein was already noting that the playwrights committed to the Civil Rights movement had adopted the tradition of American political drama best exemplified by the plays of Clifford Odets, and that, like Odets' dramas, the plays they wrote "have thus far tended to be self-righteous, melodramatic, and shrill."⁷⁵ In the introduction to The Third Theatre he carries this idea further, saying that the political theatre of the anti-war and Black Power movements had become hackneyed, and that "stereotyped political assertions . . . have replaced instinctive, individualized dissent; and the complex moral and metaphysical issues of great art are being obliterated by a simple-minded nihilism that reduces everything to zero."⁷⁶ He concludes, in a statement whose central idea will become an underlying refrain throughout his career, "I must repudiate all theatre movements that begin to take an ideological direction."⁷⁷

Thus, reviewing LeRoi Jones' plays The Slave and The Toilet, Brustein attacks them as "inspired primarily by race hatred," and says they exhibit "no talent at all."⁷⁸ Objecting to Jones's lack of moral complexity, Brustein says The Toilet is "not a drama but a psychodrama, designed for the acting out of sado-masochistic racial fantasies."⁷⁹ He ends by condemning not only the plays, but all of America for the "unwarranted favor this culture has lavished on LeRoi Jones, because he has shown little theatrical purpose beyond the expression of a raging chauvinism, and few theatrical gifts beyond a capacity to record the

⁷⁵ Brustein, Seasons of Discontent, 311.

⁷⁶ Brustein, The Third Theatre, xii.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 306.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

graffiti scrawled on men's room walls."⁸⁰ Brustein's strong reaction to Jones' plays is deeply felt but not strongly reasoned. His review of James Baldwin's Blues for Mr. Charlie reveals, perhaps, some of the principles he was applying to Jones.

Brustein used Baldwin's own words to reveal how his play violates the humanistic ideal of individuality and tolerance for which he had previously stood. Baldwin had written in Everybody's Protest Novel that "truth is meant to imply a devotion to the human being. It is not to be confused with a devotion to a cause, and causes as we know are notoriously bloodthirsty."⁸¹ Blues for Mr. Charlie, Brustein wrote, is "'notoriously bloodthirsty' propaganda of the crudest sort. Uncontrolled, hysterical, self-indulgent . . ."⁸² Baldwin has "become an Official Spokesman for a Cause," and as a result "his self-righteousness has been expressed at the cost of complexity and scruples."⁸³ He goes on to note that the characters in the play "have no life apart from narrow racial categories, and the categories themselves are based on prejudice."⁸⁴ The stage is "given over literally to a conflict between black and white, or Blacktown versus Whitetown. It is the author's apparent conviction now that all white men are Mr. Charlie, the oppressor . . . As for the Negro characters, they enjoy more noble racial stereotypes."⁸⁵ Brustein concludes that, whereas Baldwin at one time, along with Ralph Ellison, had done the most to "make the Negro visible as a

⁸⁰ Ibid., 307.

⁸¹ Fresh Air transcript, February 5, 1997.

⁸² Brustein, Seasons of Discontent, 162.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

complicated human being,"⁸⁶ he now had been seduced by political power, and as a result "the complex man of sensibility has been totally absorbed by the simplistic man of power -- and that constitutes what Baldwin himself once called 'his corruption and our loss.'⁸⁷

Despite his previous appreciation of the work of George C. Wolfe, Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk had a "profoundly dispiriting effect" on Brustein because, although the play is a "rousing entertainment, " it "displays not a whit of self-satire or self-examination. Instead, blacks are consistently paraded before us as victims of racial prejudice, while their primary forms of expression - - rhythm, jazz, and tap dancing -- are treated as African inheritances expropriated for commercial purposes by a venal white society." In short, he says, the play is a "marathon display of victimology"⁸⁸ and a backslide for Wolfe into the realm of the Theatre of Guilt.

This dislike of political melodrama is not confined to plays by African-American playwrights; other minorities fall into a similar trap. In "The Editorial Play," Brustein takes gay activist Larry Kramer to task because his play The Destiny of Me shows "very little self-examination," and instead focuses on the Other as enemy. Kramer's constant purpose, Brustein says, is to "induce, excavate, and heighten the audience's sense of guilt."⁸⁹ And in "Transcultural Blends," Brustein objects to David Henry Hwang's "large cultural generalizations," which tend to "replace one form of stereotype with another."⁹⁰ It

⁸⁶ Ibid., 164.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 165.

⁸⁸ Brustein, "More Noise Than Funk," 31.

⁸⁹ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 161.

⁹⁰ Brustein, Reminagining American Theatre, 60.

should be clear by now that Brustein is fairly consistent (if not a bit fixated) in his requirement that drama avoid ideological simplification. Nor is his disapproval confined to plays that demonize characters: melodrama is just as evident in plays that sentimentalize. In "The Play You're Not Allowed to Hate," for instance, Brustein attacks Children of a Lesser God as an example of a "new Broadway genre -- the Disability Play."⁹¹ It is particularly to be scorned for its "moral extortion," which it reveals through its active attempts to "manipulate emotions and reinforce conventional wisdom."⁹² The play is grossly formulaic, Brustein writes, but "disguises its soap-opera origins by being a chic compendium of every extant cliché about women and minority groups."⁹³

Brustein's criticism of Wilson's plays is a particularly interesting subtopic within this discussion, for it sheds light on the reasons behind his obsessional antipathy. In 1990, after having refrained from reviewing Wilson's plays for the reasons cited above, Brustein broke his silence with "The Lesson of The Piano Lesson." Many of the issues that inform the later debate were first broached in this review. The main points of objection in this review are: the play's repetition, the three-hour running time, the "crude plotting and clumsy structure,"⁹⁴ the conventional style, the heavy-handed symbolism, the unlikely use of ghosts to resolve an otherwise naturalistic play, and the surprisingly unmusical language. With these foci, its thrust is no different from that of Brustein's reviews of many other plays. What is remembered most by Wilson and his supporters, however, is Brustein's criticism of the subject matter of not only The Piano Lesson but all the plays that preceded it as well. Wilson's proposed cycle of plays dealing with

⁹¹ Brustein, Who Needs Theatre, 61.

⁹² Ibid., 63.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Brustein, Reimagining American Theatre, 100.

the African-American experience in each decade of the twentieth century, Brustein characterized as centering on "white culpability and black martyrdom."⁹⁵ While Brustein admits that the premise on which these plays are built, i.e., the history of American racism, is a worthy one that "no enlightened person would deny," he finds that "as an ongoing artistic program it is monotonous, limited, locked in a concept of victimization."⁹⁶ In support of this opinion, Brustein offers synopses of Wilson's plays that are calculated to emphasize their thematic monotony:

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, set in the twenties, shows how black musicians were prevented from entering the mainstream of the American recording industry; Fences, set in the fifties, shows how black athletes were prevented from participating in major league baseball; Joe Turner's Come and Gone, set in 1911, shows how blacks were reduced to poverty and desperation by the chain-gang system; and The Piano Lesson, set in the thirties, shows how black ideals were corroded by slavery.⁹⁷

Brustein weakens his argument by employing such rhetorical simplification. By failing to recognize, or acknowledge, that these plays are considerably more complex than he represents them as being, he can be accused of creating a straw man in service of his argument. In fact, plays such as Fences and Ma Rainey's Black Bottom actually contain the kind of self-examination and self-accusation that both he and Trilling had previously applauded. Fences is not simply about "how black athletes were prevented from participating in major league baseball"; it is about how the central character, Troy Maxson, reproduces that same injustice in preventing his own son from fulfilling his ambition to become a football player. Similarly, while the stabbing that concludes Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is indeed a response to

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

being "prevented from entering the mainstream of the American recording industry," it is not directed against the representatives of the system that propagates such injustice, but against another black artist. In other words, Wilson's characters are not mere "sufferers," to quote Trilling's review of Black Boy again, but flawed human beings whose responses demonstrate that "oppression is real [and] it does not merely affect the body but also the soul."⁹⁸

More to the point, and more rankling to Wilson and his supporters, was Brustein's comment that Wilson suffered in comparison to O'Neill, to whom he had been flatteringly compared by others: "whereas O'Neill wrote about the human experience in forms that were daring and exploratory, Wilson has thus far limited himself to narrow aspects of the black experience in a relatively literalistic style."⁹⁹ The implication seized upon by Wilson was that Brustein was implying that art based on black experience was not "human experience," i.e., was not universal, and that the default condition for universality was white experience. In his TCG speech, Wilson vehemently refutes this: "never, never is it suggested that white playwrights like David Mamet or Terrence McNally are limiting themselves to whiteness, and that they are being confined in their art by pursuing white themes."¹⁰⁰ This, of course, cannot be contested. Brustein, however, denies that his intention was to say that black experience wasn't universal, but rather "that [Wilson's] way of creating opposition between blacks and whites, and assigning virtues to blacks and vices to whites, is a form of melodrama,"¹⁰¹ and it is true that his review spoke not of the whole black

⁹⁸ Trilling, "A Tragic Situation," 392.

⁹⁹ Brustein, Reimagining American Theatre, 100.

¹⁰⁰ Fresh Air transcript, February 5, 1997.

¹⁰¹ Brustein, "Interview December 5, 1997."

experience, but of "narrow aspects" of it.

Brustein has generally drawn a contrast between "universal" art and its ethnic counterpart. A play that distributes vice and virtue in a schematic way automatically alienates a portion of the audience whose race (or any other characteristic) is identified as evil, thus disqualifying it as universal. This is not to say a playwright should not draw on his or her own background for material. In "Diversity and Unity," from which Wilson quotes negatively in his TCG address, Brustein writes favorably about two minority authors mentioned previously, OyamO and José Rivera. The article concludes, "Drenched in their own cultural juices, they are nevertheless capable of telling stories that include us all, thus proving again that theatre works best as a unifying rather than a segregating medium. OyamO and Rivera belong to the family of playwrights, which is to say they transcend ethnic, racial, and even national boundaries to join the universal culture called dramatic art."¹⁰² Evenhandedness is the primary characteristic of his sense of universality. He repeatedly uses Chekhov to illustrate this quality, referring to him to admiringly as an "impersonal artist."¹⁰³ Chekhov "introduced political, social, philosophical discussions into his work because these comprised the reality he was eager to present. But he was careful never to take sides or hint at solutions."¹⁰⁴ For Brustein, partisanship leads to the twin excesses of sentimentality, on the one hand, or didacticism on the other, whereas the universal demands balance, the variousness and complexity respected by Trilling.

Partisanship also leads to ideological coercion, what Trilling once called the "Angelic Fallacy," which assumes that when a writer is politically "on the

¹⁰² Brustein, Dumbocracy, 194-95.

¹⁰³ Brustein, Reimagining American Theatre, 283.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. , 282.

side of the angels . . . he [and his work] must for some reason be admirable."¹⁰⁵

The Angelic Fallacy requires that critics assume a blindness to faults, the type of reaction that Trilling famously lambasted in The Liberal Imagination, discussing the critical dishonesty of Communist critics in regard to Theodore Dreiser.

Similarly, the fallacy is behind what Brustein calls a "time-tested Broadway artifact -- the Play You're Not Allowed to Hate";¹⁰⁶ failure to like it is to "stand accused of racism, sexism, homophobia, or getting up on the wrong side of the bed."¹⁰⁷ In the case of Wilson, to comment on the faults of The Piano Lesson is to violate the rules of behavior regarding the work of playwrights regarded as on the side of angels. Such political interference in the realm of criticism has always been objectionable to Brustein. As early as 1964, he wrote, "to praise inferior art simply because it is produced by a Negro, is to let guilt turn into an inverted form of prejudice."¹⁰⁸ For Wilson, however, praise or condemnation should not be an important part of the critic's function.

In his TCG speech, Wilson asserts that the "true critic does not sit in judgment. Rather he seeks to inform his reader, instead of adopting a posture of self-conscious importance in which he sees himself a judge and final arbiter of a work's importance of value."¹⁰⁹ In this vein, Wilson also rejects W. E. B. DuBois' concept of the "talented tenth," the percentage of the black populace who should be taking the lead in advancing the lot of the the black community, because it is a "fallacy and a dangerous idea" that "creates an artificial

¹⁰⁵ Lionel Trilling, "Marxism in Limbo," chap. in Speaking of Literature and Society edited by Diana Trilling, Uniform Edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 100.

¹⁰⁶ Brustein, Who Needs Theatre, 62.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Brustein, Seasons, 164.

¹⁰⁹ Wilson, "The Ground On Which I Stand," 73.

superiority" and "only serves to divide us further."¹¹⁰ Wilson insists that "All God's children got talent."¹¹¹ Brustein counters that this is "progressive school nonsense," and asserts that the "greatest tribute that a critic can pay to a playwright such as Wilson is to analyze his work by the same criteria as anybody else's work."¹¹² This is a principle that represents for Brustein the intersection of two deeply-held values that he shared with Trilling: the importance of the judicial role of the critic, which is based on a belief in the value of hierarchy; and a corresponding belief in equal opportunity and evaluation of all human beings regardless of race, gender, creed, or sexual orientation.

The very first sentences of Trilling's essay "What Is Criticism?" established a clear indication of Trilling's view:

The word criticism derives from the Greek word meaning judgment. A critic does more things with literature than judge it, but his judicial function is involved in everything else that he does.¹¹³

As discussed in a previous chapter, Brustein agreed wholeheartedly with this, seeing the "correcting of taste," which is the outgrowth of judgment, as the "function every true critic guards as jealously as if it were his own personal property."¹¹⁴ This act of judgment, of course, implies the necessity of hierarchies, for to judge one thing better is automatically to judge another worse. For Trilling, this was implicit in the concept of mind, which relies on "the idea of order, even of hierarchy, the subordination of some elements of thought to

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Brustein, "Subsidized Separatism," 41-42.

¹¹³ Trilling, "What Is Criticism?," in The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965 - 75, Edited by Diana Trilling, Uniform Edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 57.

¹¹⁴ Brustein, Seasons, 288.

others."¹¹⁵ This ranking of elements applied not only to thought, but to persons as well. Twenty years later, Brustein defends the same viewpoint, writing that it is "neither racist nor sexist to believe that some people are more beautiful than others, some more intelligent, some more brave, some more talented. It is only racist and sexist if we believe those qualities exist because of (rather than regardless of) race, sex, class, or religion."¹¹⁶

Wilson's distrust of hierarchy, whether of objects such as plays or the people who create them, is an example of an idea that Trilling found illustrated in William Morris' novel, published in 1890, News from Nowhere. Here, Morris created a utopia with two ideals: equality and rest. As a result, scientists, philosophers, and artists were excluded from the community, for Morris wanted "no geniuses to distress their less notable fellows by their preeminent ability to tell the truth or be interesting, to shine brighter than the general run of mankind, requiring our submission to the authority of their brilliance, disturbing us with novel ideas and difficult tastes."¹¹⁷ Whereas Trilling had once found Morris' book a charming fantasy, by the early 1970s it disturbed him as young people increasingly came to share Morris' vision. Striving, in the Goethean sense, was no longer to be valued in such a philosophy. Morris' novel "rejects the line of thought which connects transcendence with the putting forth of superlative effort and with the risk of defeat and frustration that this entails."¹¹⁸ To be defeated as an artist is to have put forth a superlative effort in creating a work of art, only to

¹¹⁵ Lionel Trilling, "Mind in the Modern World," chap. in The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965 - 75, edited by Diana Trilling, Uniform Edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 119-20.

¹¹⁶ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 71.

¹¹⁷ Trilling, "Mind in the Modern World," 112-13.

¹¹⁸ "Aggression and Utopia," chap. in The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965 - 75, edited by Diana Trilling, Uniform Edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 151.

have that work found wanting. Wilson, following Morris' path, cannot accept such a judgment, but instead insists that if a work is found wanting, it is because the criteria used in judging it is itself wanting. This, of course, is disingenuous, since Wilson has never refuted those critical criteria when his plays were showered with praise and awards for their excellence.

In his TCG speech, Wilson insists that critical values need to change in order to embrace changes in art, apparently regardless of the value of those changes.

As playwrights grow and develop, as theatre changes, the critic has an important responsibility to guide and encourage that growth. However, in the discharge of their duties, it may be necessary for them also to grow and develop. A stagnant body of critics, operating from the critical criteria of 40 years ago,¹¹⁹ makes for a stagnant theatre without the fresh and abiding influence of contemporary ideas. It is the critics who should be in the forefront of developing new tools for analysis necessary to understand new influences.¹²⁰

In 1974, Trilling had gently satirized opinions similar to this for their underlying relativism:

There is a strong body of opinion which holds that criticism is a conservative force, that it interferes with the artist and checks and inhibits his work. The whole enterprise of art would do better, according to this view, if discriminations were not made. You really are not supposed to grade, you are not supposed to say that this, as opposed to that, is the thing we ought to admire. Rather, you ought to respond, with a genial lack of preference, to the whole program of art, the whole of the artist's engagement with it.¹²¹

Trilling's comment expresses a slightly different idea than Wilson's, in that Trilling does not suggest that the critic must actively promote new work in the same way that Wilson does. Nevertheless, it connects to Wilson's view in

¹¹⁹ Precisely how long ago Brustein began his career.

¹²⁰ Wilson, "The Ground On Which I Stand," 73.

¹²¹ "Culture at the Present Moment," 40.

suggesting that the critic should not entertain the possibility that what is new may not be an improvement over what had gone before. This, of course, makes the critic a mere handmaiden of the artist, a sort of intellectual publicist, and not an independent mind at all. It certainly bears no resemblance to Brustein's idea of criticism, which, as mentioned before, he describes as "invented by Aristotle, designed for experts, [and] dedicated to absolute standards."¹²²

Yet Brustein's confidence in the objectivity of "absolute standards" is problematic. Wilson makes one excellent point that might lead to some valuable self-examination on Brustein's part. In response to Brustein's complaint that decisions about arts funding are being made on sociological rather aesthetic criteria, Wilson replies, "The truth is that often where there are aesthetic criteria of excellence, there are also sociological criteria that have traditionally excluded blacks."¹²³ Both Brustein and Trilling fail to acknowledge that aesthetic criteria are not pure ideas that exist independently of the human beings and the societies that create them. Indeed, one gets the impression that for Brustein, aesthetic criteria exist in the Platonic realm of ideas, and that the critic simply measures the mortal creations of artists against those ideal forms. Asked by a member of the audience at the debate whether he "really believe[s] that standards are universal? Hasn't racism imposed itself on mainstream culture's understanding of what is beautiful, what is important, what is profound, what is meaningful?," Brustein responded with a blunt, "No." "No?" Smith prodded, clearly bewildered by Brustein's response. "No," Brustein insisted.¹²⁴ Brustein's refusal to even consider the possibility that sociological pressures might affect aesthetic criteria reveals a blind spot. Certainly the changing valuation of artists

¹²² "Brustein, *Seasons*, 288.

¹²³ Wilson, "The Ground On Which I Stand," 71.

¹²⁴ Fresh Air transcript, February 5, 1997.

such as Ibsen, whose early work was loathed by many critics, only to be later recognized as masterpieces might lead one to be a bit less definite in response to the audience member's question. Brustein does not claim critical infallibility - more than once he has referred to Shaw's wrongheaded review of Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest as an example of critical misapprehension. But he believes such errors of individual judgment, as well as the sociological influences referred to by Smith, are corrected by the passage of time.

A hundred years from now, if culture has withstood its present tempests and storms and wars, someone will look at these works [of the twentieth century] and have a very strong sense of which ones deserve to survive, as we now look at the nineteenth century and have a very strong sense of what it is that deserves to survive. Historical judgment . . . I think is the only accurate way [to determine quality.]¹²⁵

There is something rather disembodied about Brustein's idea of time's effect on critical judgment, as if judgments were not to be made by people, but by a critically-objective god of some sort. Furthermore, the comment fails to recognize that the criteria used today cannot and perhaps should not be the same as those of the future. Nevertheless, the implication is that the passage of time yields perspective, and future judgment will not be distorted by the involvement with issues and personalities of the day.

While Brustein's faith in the objectivity of posterity may seem somewhat idealistic, Wilson's implication that aesthetic criteria are entirely formed by sociological forces, and should therefore be altered for sociological reasons seems equally extreme. In his reply to one of Brustein's critiques of his TCG speech, Wilson backs away from this opinion a bit. "Inasmuch as we are part of Western theatre," he writes, "work should be judged on those terms and principles as outlined by Aristotle in his Poetics. We [African-Americans] have

¹²⁵ Brustein, "Interview December 5, 1997."

never asked to stand outside of that or to have our work treated differently or judged by different standards or criteria because we are black."¹²⁶ His TCG speech, however, had contained this statement: "we cannot share a single value system if that value system consists of the values of white Americans based on their European ancestors. We reject that as Cultural Imperialism."¹²⁷ He acknowledged in his speech that the Aristotelian elements of drama are the "common values of the American theatre," but he went on to say: "How we both make use of them will be determined by who we are -- what ground we are standing on and what our cultural values are."¹²⁸ But there is a difference between Aristotelian elements, which are part of a drama's form, and critical values, which are the basis for evaluating how successfully the elements are employed. To paraphrase, Wilson says that everybody agrees that a play is made up of plot, dialogue, and spectacle, but different groups use those elements differently and should be judged accordingly. Of course, Brustein protests: "Every minority group now insists that its own group has its own standards. And I think that, in this country at least, all works of art should be judged by pretty much the same standards."¹²⁹

Brustein's qualification is important: it is based on a belief in a common American culture shared by all citizens, from which a common set of standards are derived. Such a belief, of course, is completely undermined by those who hold, as Wilson does, that black culture is a "singular and discrete experience of life" that "cannot be fully absorbed or understood by white people, much less criticized by them." This illustrates a basic disagreement over the discrete units

¹²⁶ Wilson, "Response," American Theatre (October 1996): 106.

¹²⁷ Wilson, "The Ground On Which I Stand," 71.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 71-72.

¹²⁹ Brustein, "Interview, December 5, 1997."

into which culture should be separated: is it at the level of the nation, or the ethnic subgroup? The commitment to the ideal of the American melting pot, i.e., to assimilation and integration into a larger American national culture, is rejected by Wilson, but is paramount to Brustein, as was it to Trilling. In this, perhaps more than anything else, we see Trilling's influence on Brustein.

Trilling's relationship to ethnicity -- specifically, to his Jewishness -- has always been seen as problematic, as was the case generally with the group of New York intellectuals to which he belonged. Irving Howe wrote that these writers came to prominence at a time in the development of Jewish immigrant culture "when there was a strong drive not only to break out of the ghetto but also to leave behind the bonds of Jewishness entirely."¹³⁰ At the same time, this desire to escape was opposed by a desire to remain. "The Jewish immigrant world," Howe continues, "branded upon its sons and daughters marks of separateness even while encouraging them to dreams of universalism. . . . It taught its children both to conquer the Gentile world and to be conquered by it, both to leave an intellectual impress and to accept the dominant social norms."¹³¹ This struggle is illustrated by Trilling's own relationship to his ethnic heritage.

In the 1920s, he began writing for The Menorah Journal, a publication whose purpose was "to promote Jewish ideals and learning, especially among young nonaffiliated Jews, so as to offset the negative psychological effects of anti-Semitism in the larger society."¹³² To that end, the journal took as its goal the promotion of what it called "positive Jewishness." For five years at the

¹³⁰ Irving Howe, "The New York Intellectuals," Selected Writings 1950 - 1990 (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 240.

¹³¹ Ibid., 241-42.

¹³² Krupnick, Fate of Cultural Criticism, 22.

Menorah Journal, Trilling's main theme, in both short stories and book reviews, was the image of the Jew in fiction, and in 1930 he taught a summer school course on the Jew in English literature from Chaucer to George Eliot.¹³³ As the 1930s progressed, and he began writing for Partisan Review, where modernist cosmopolitanism was the dominant influence, Trilling had increasingly less to say about Jewishness.

Yet despite the efforts to distance himself, in 1936 he was nearly denied reappointment as a non-tenured instructor in the Columbia University English Department, at least partly because of his religion. (The Columbia faculty, wrote Alfred Kazin, was "as crowded with three-barreled Anglican names as the House of Bishops,"¹³⁴ and they seemed determined to keep it that way.) In being informed of his upcoming non-renewal, Trilling was told that, "as a Freudian, a Marxist, and a Jew" he was not happy there.¹³⁵ It took an act of aggressive personal persuasion on Trilling's part to overturn the dismissal. Three years later, Columbia's president Nicholas Murray Butler, who was extremely impressed by Trilling's book on Matthew Arnold, intervened to have him appointed as assistant professor in the English Department, pointedly admonishing the department chair that at Columbia "we recognize merit, not race."¹³⁶ Afterwards, Trilling was visited in his home by a member of the English Department, who wished to be reassured that Trilling would not use his

¹³³ Ibid., 24.

¹³⁴ Alfred Kazin, New York Jew (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 42.

¹³⁵ Diana Trilling, "Lionel Trilling: A Jew at Columbia," chap. in Speaking of Literature and Society by Lionel Trilling, edited by Diana Trilling, Uniform Edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 422.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 427.

appointment as a "wedge to open the English department to more Jews."¹³⁷ In addition, the chair of the department, speaking at graduation to another Jewish student, Clifton Fadiman, said, "We have room for only one Jew, and we have chosen Mr. Trilling."¹³⁸

Trilling's experience of such anti-Semitism made him more determined to be regarded solely as an intellectual, not a Jewish intellectual. Alfred Kazin, despite the high regard in which he held Trilling's intellect, was barely able to suppress his disapproval of what he felt was Trilling's attempt to deny his heritage. "For Trilling I would always be 'too Jewish,'" he wrote in his autobiography, "too full of my lower-class experience. He would always defend himself from the things he had left behind."¹³⁹ Kazin and many others saw in Trilling's passion for nineteenth-century English literature, the "adopted finery his conversation,"¹⁴⁰ his "nerveless compromised accents,"¹⁴¹ and his faintly aristocratic airs as attempts to create a persona that would be acceptable to the "old triple-named WASPS at Columbia."¹⁴²

Such an opinion could only be strengthened by Trilling's 1944 response to a query from the Contemporary Jewish Record about his attitude toward his Jewish heritage. Of The Menorah Journal and its "literature of Jewish self-realization," he wrote that it "fostered a willingness to accept exclusion and even to intensify it, a willingness to be provincial and parochial."¹⁴³ He goes on, "I

¹³⁷ Ibid., 428.

¹³⁸ Kazin, 42-3.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 46-7.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 43.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 47.

¹⁴² Ibid., 193.

¹⁴³ Krupnick, Fate of Cultural Criticism, 31-32.

know of no writer in English who has added one micromillimetre to his stature by 'realizing his Jewishness,' although I know of some who have curtailed their promise by trying to heighten their Jewish consciousness."¹⁴⁴ Trilling's statement clearly reflects his belief in cosmopolitanism and an internationalized American culture. He was strengthened in this belief by the rise of Nazism, which had come to power on a wave of xenophobic hatred that focused on racial superiority and rejected all non-Arian influences. It was, in fact, a closed society, which made the violently anti-Semitic political theory and racially-motivated genocide possible by indentifying Jews, for instance, as foreign corrupters of the national character. Thus, in 1944, a predilection for ethnic and national identification seemed extremely suspect, to say the least. Liberalism's ideal of pluralistic equality, and the ideal of tolerance upon which it was built, was far more in line with Trilling's beliefs.

Perhaps Trilling's relationship to his Jewishness can best be summed up in the lines he wrote in tribute to fellow critic Robert Warshow. Trilling wrote that he

acknowledged, and with pleasure, the effect that a Jewish rearing had upon his temperament and mind, and he was aware of, and perhaps surprised by, his sense of connection with Jews everywhere -- and found that the impulses of his intellectual life came from sources that were anything but Jewish, that the chief objects of his thought and feeling were anything but Jewish. At the same time, he had, and thought he should have, a very considerable awareness of the life of "the Jewish community" and a genuine if detached interest in it."¹⁴⁵

Such an awareness of Jewish life and the anti-Semitic prejudices that surrounded it made Trilling committed to the liberal value of equality of all people, and thus sympathetic to the cause of the black civil rights movement.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Edward Joseph Shoben, Jr., Lionel Trilling (New York, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1981), 17.

The Jewish involvement in support of the America civil rights movement of the early 1960s is well-documented. Having experienced the effects of racial discrimination themselves, many Jewish citizens, including Brustein, committed themselves to combating racial prejudice in all forms. Equality had long been one of the central tenets of liberalism, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which punished employers who discriminated on the basis of race or sex, codified the "fundamental idea of the civil rights movement -- that race should never be a factor in anything."¹⁴⁶ The principle underlying the Civil Rights Act was what Brustein in 1969 called the "permanent dream of this nation . . . a dream of equal opportunity -- the right of each man to discover wherein he might excel."¹⁴⁷ For both Trilling and Brustein, this dream was shattered when it was used as the foundation for Affirmative Action.

"From the start, I believed affirmative action had unconstitutional implications," Brustein wrote in his autobiography.

Like most people of my generation, I had always been taught that it was illegal and undemocratic to inquire into the racial or sexual background of potential employees or students. . . . In the past, any inquiries into people's ethnic or religious background were invariably considered a secret method of discriminating against them; now such inquiries were being used for discrimination of an 'affirmative' kind. Either way, it was still discrimination.¹⁴⁸

Trilling had similar qualms. He was outraged by social discrimination that failed to provide adequate elementary and secondary educational opportunities so that every child with the intellectual abilities and motivation could partake of higher education. He insisted that it was "imperative" that those conditions be

¹⁴⁶ Mark Gerson, The Neoconservative Vision: From the Cold Wars to the Culture Wars (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1996), 146.

¹⁴⁷ Brustein, Revolution, 97.

¹⁴⁸ Brustein, Making Scenes, 217.

substantially improved.¹⁴⁹ Yet he balked when, rather than make those changes to improve the lower levels of education, affirmative action suggested instead that admission standards be lowered for minority students who wished to attend the university. He also objected to Affirmative Action being applied to the hiring of university faculty. Affirmative action, Trilling wrote, implied that the "traditional standards of training and achievement" have no other purpose "than that of discriminating exclusion."¹⁵⁰ Trilling was writing specifically about affirmative action in education, but he predicted the argument that would be used by Brustein in regards to aesthetic standards.

Both men supported and sympathized with the goals of Affirmative Action, but saw its approach to implementation as violating the basic tenet of liberal equality. They would have agreed with historian Mark Gerson, who pointed out that Affirmative Action "contravened a basic premise of Western society, that justice adheres to the individual. Affirmative action imbues an entire class of people with guilt they may not deserve and another class with victim status they are not necessarily due."¹⁵¹ In short, affirmative action can be seen as the social version of Brustein's idea of the Theatre of Guilt, with its race-based distribution of virtue and vice that so appalled him. It also undermines the traditional image of America as a place where the unique characteristics of an ethnic group are mixed with those of other groups, and are bonded at a level of common dreams and feelings. For Brustein, this is the source of what is most valuable in American art. While he acknowledges that the rejection of the melting-pot ethos has contributed to a "rich diversity" within American culture, "it has also resulted in the loss of something valuable, namely our unity as a

¹⁴⁹ Trilling, "Mind in the Modern World," 117.

¹⁵⁰ "Ibid., 119.

¹⁵¹ Gerson, Neoconservative Vision, 147.

nation and our capacity to create universal art."

He goes on:

The theatre can certainly be used as an instrument for raising consciousness, or evacuating rage, or stimulating pride, but it has another, older function as the locus of a shared experience, a compound of everything that has been imagined, learned, and dreamed. This is what usually seems to be missing these days -- not the sense of what it means to be black or gay or a woman in 1978, but what it means to be an American in this century, if not a human being in this millennium.¹⁵²

Whereas we have previously seen Brustein use the word "universal" to indicate an evenhanded distribution of moral attributes, in this case the word has more general implications. The "shared experience" of universal art focuses on those aspects of experience that underlie the unique and individual experiences of a particular person or group, in the same way that shared characteristics are used in taxonomy to unify individual and unique animals into species and genera.

This is what Brustein meant when, during his opening remarks at the debate, he said with great emphasis, "the soul has no color."¹⁵³ Race exists on the level of individual characteristics -- characteristics that can be overlooked in favor of the next level of shared experience. "As a Jew," Brustein later said, "I saw when I was a kid that the Western tradition, the English tradition, for instance, the French tradition, wasn't my tradition, but I could appreciate it. And then I could assimilate it to my tradition. I could make something out of it."¹⁵⁴ He could make something out of it because he could look beyond the specific "foreign" aspects of the French or English tradition, and instead focus on those things they had in common.

Wilson is to some extent in agreement with Brustein in this regard, in that

¹⁵² Brustein, Critical Moments, 141-2.

¹⁵³ Fresh Air transcript, February 5, 1997.

¹⁵⁴ Brustein, "Interview December 5, 1997."

he believes that what unites all black Americans is the shared experience of oppression by white Americans, an experience that he believes exists in their collective consciousness. He objects, however, to attempts to generalize this into the experience of oppression in general, because to do so is to drain the experience of its blackness. Many Jews have a similar feeling about those who would draw parallels between the Holocaust and other instances of genocide. Groups tend to cling to the uniqueness of their suffering. Nevertheless, Wilson acknowledges certain commonalities of culture: black people decorate their houses, for instance, and offer food and drink to their guests, the same as whites. But the way that they decorate their houses, and the types of food they serve, are very different.¹⁵⁵ That Brustein's disagreement with Wilson is based on widely divergent values is obvious. What is not as plain is what both men share: a deep belief in a common cultural connection between people. The difference between them comes over the definition of what comprises a group: race, in the case of Wilson, nation in the case of Brustein. Because Brustein's definition calls into play the traditions that have gone into the forming of the nation -- many of which stem from European ideas -- he often sounds like a proponent of a Eurocentrism. It is impossible to deny, however, that European culture has played an important, although not exclusive, role in the shaping of American culture. This ought not be rejected or ignored any more than can the influence of African-Americans. But those influences must intermingle or, to use a word Wilson would reject, assimilate into the larger culture. Brustein attempts to demonstrate the inevitability of such cross-cultural intermingling in his repeated insistence that Wilson's Fences bears a striking structural resemblance to Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. Both playwrights are Americans, Brustein implies, both have been influenced by a similar culture,

¹⁵⁵ Wilson, "The Ground On Which I Stand," 71.

and so it is not surprising to find similarities in their work. The point is not that Wilson's work is unoriginal because of this similarity, but rather that his desire to stand outside of mainstream American culture is nearly impossible.

Colorblind casting, which Wilson rejects, is another example of assimilation, because it seeks to de-emphasize racial differences. To Wilson, this is to deny a black actor -- any actor -- his or her history and culture. To Brustein, it is to join that history and culture with others in a common bond. These are disagreements over first principles, and as such are a significant chasm between these two men. It was not surprising to find them equally far apart in their opinions at the end of their discussion as when they began.

Most of this explication, unfortunately, has never been explicitly made by Brustein in his writings. It is this lack of direct discussion of first principles that ultimately makes the Wilson-Brustein debate so unsatisfying. Erika Munk reflected this frustration when she pointed out that, "Without some form of belief in universal humanity there's no foundation for international human rights, or equality, or democracy."¹⁵⁶ The belief in universal humanity is a first principle from which the conversation could have productively proceeded. Lacking this, the debate ended by focusing on details regarding funding, casting, and criticism while the central questions remained unexamined.

Nevertheless, Brustein's discussion with Wilson casts considerable light on Brustein's first principles. The depth of his belief in the tenets of liberal humanism, and his profound desire to build a sense community shines through. A paragraph from the introduction to Who Needs Theatre, already quoted in Chapter Two, bears repeating in this context:

Theatre-going is one of a dwindling group of activities that bring Americans into communication with each other; it is, therefore, an enterprise that preserves some vestige of belief in the possibilities of

¹⁵⁶ Munk, "Up Front," 6.

society, if not of communion. It may be one of the last remaining shreds of evidence that we are a people, and not just an isolated mass of frightened fantasists, barricaded in our homes, seeking safety from a sinister and threatening external world.¹⁵⁷

Communion requires an emphasis on similarity, not difference. It requires a focus on the human family more than the individual.

Daniel Bell wrote that the real desire of Trilling's generation of New York intellectuals was "to find a home."¹⁵⁸ In many ways, it seems that such a hunger for a place of communion and of community was passed on to Brustein as well. Throughout his career, Brustein has sought to create a community, a home, a family in the theatre, bringing together "people of sensibility" in the presence of great art. His disagreement with Wilson was over the nature of that home, and whether there was to be a true community of shared values, or enclaves of isolated groups eyeing each other coldly.

¹⁵⁷ Brustein, Who Needs Theatre, 4.

¹⁵⁸ Daniel Bell, "The 'Intelligentsia' in American Society," chap. in The Winding Passage: Essays and Sociological Journeys 1960 - 1980 (Cambridge, MA: ABT Books, 1980), 135.

CHAPTER 6

No critic is ever right in the sense that he says all that may be said about an art, or in the sense that what he does say about an art cannot, by one example or another, be shown to be incomplete. We properly judge a critic's value not by his freedom from error but by the nature of the mistakes he does make, for he makes them, if he is worth reading, because he has in mind something beside his perceptions about art in itself -- he has in mind the demands he makes upon life; and those critics are most to be trusted who allow these demands in all their particularity, to be detected by their readers.

Lionel Trilling, The Portable Matthew Arnold¹

The final chapter of Stephen L. Tanner's book on Trilling is entitled "A Traditional Humanist in a Modernist World," reflecting the discomfort that many modernist ideas caused Trilling, whose liberal-humanist ideas were forever being challenged by the nihilism of the adversary culture of the modernist avant-garde.² If Tanner were to have written a book on Brustein, this final chapter might have been called "A Traditional Humanist in a Postmodernist World," for a great many of the ideas that Brustein has resisted arise from the postmodern philosophy that achieved ascendancy in the 1970s. Although Trilling did not live to see postmodernism become the dominant discourse of social consciousness, he nonetheless recognized that a significant change was

¹ The Portable Matthew Arnold, 184.

² Stephen L. Tanner, Lionel Trilling, United States Authors Series (TUSAS 523) (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 125.

occurring, and was alarmed by it. Not usually prone to apocalyptic thinking, Trilling nonetheless expressed a belief toward the end of his life that "a disjunction has occurred between the tradition [of art and literature] and what is happening now, and that all of the assumptions that have hitherto been made . . . no longer hold true, that you can't continue, can't transfer the old assumptions to the new reality."³ According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodernism "puts into question that entire series of interconnected concepts that have come to be associated with what we conveniently label as liberal humanism: autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, center, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, origin."⁴ Brustein has strongly resisted the values of this postmodern disjunction, and attempted to persuade others of the continued viability of traditional liberal humanist values.

The themes of postmodernism outlined by Hutcheon form the list of topics to which Brustein repeatedly returns: the molecular politics that privileges the margins, the abandonment of the idea of a common culture in favor of a "flux of contextualized identities" separated according to "gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, education, social role, and so on,"⁵ the "valuing of the local and peripheral,"⁶ which, when combined with what Hutcheon calls the "collapsing of the high/low art hierarchy of earlier time" leads to the funding of popular arts and crafts on an equal basis with high art, and when the aforementioned are combined, the result is the condemnation of "what has

³ "Culture at the Present Moment," Commentary 58 (December 1974): 42.

⁴ Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism (New York: Routledge, 1988), 57.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

been called the 'racist logic of the exclusive,'⁷ which is concretized in Wilson's call for critics to suspend their traditional critical values in order to learn to appreciate minority art.

Whereas the modernist avant-garde questioned many assumptions of mainstream art, it did so, according to Robert Hughes, out of a belief that "art advances by injecting doses of unacceptability into its own discourse, thus opening new possibilities of culture."⁸ Postmodernism, on the other hand, refuses to acknowledge a central discourse into which an injection of unacceptability could be made, and at any rate questions the very concept of advance in the arts, since to believe in advance would be to acknowledge a valid criteria for evaluation. The modernist avant-garde, according to Trilling, "had a profound will to impose itself morally. It wanted to change people's sensibility, to change people's view of life."⁹ But Trilling believed this no longer to be true of the early postmodernist avant-garde. Morality had been replaced with irony, and seriousness with hip flippancy. Twenty-five years later, Brustein echoed Trilling's lament, saying, as mentioned in the previous chapter, that he felt as though "there has been a moral collapse" in the arts and that he has been powerless to change it.¹⁰ Given that both Trilling and Brustein based much of their criticism on seeing literary situations as illustrations of great moral struggles, postmodernism posed a serious threat to all that they believed in. They differed greatly in style, however, and perhaps the difference between them is partly explained by the difference between modernism's and

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Robert Hughes, The Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 182.

⁹ "Culture at the Present Moment," 34.

¹⁰ Brustein, "Interview December 5, 1997."

postmodernism's threat to liberal humanism. Unlike Trilling, Brustein is fighting a battle over basic principles that he feels his side is losing, and his style reflects the intensity of the situation.

In the postscript to his essay on Trilling, as mentioned previously, Brustein offers his own evaluation of his critical style as compared to Trilling's. Noting the resemblance between his own "quarrel with the simplistic politics of the American theatre" and Trilling's "dispute with the liberal intellectual politics of his time," Brustein goes on to acknowledge that his arguments lacked the "subtlety" of Trilling's, and he confessed that his "level of exasperation is admittedly lower."¹¹ As we have seen, the latter criticism is certainly accurate. While Brustein is not as abrasive as many of his contemporaries -- John Simon and Norman Podhoretz spring to mind as being considerably more aggressive in their styles -- compared to Trilling, whose prose style Tom Samet described as exhibiting "grave courtliness,"¹² his writing is certainly more combative. While there are essays in which Trilling attacks particular individuals -- one thinks of his dismantling of Theodore Dreiser and V. L. Parrington in The Liberal Imagination, for instance, or R. D. Laing in Sincerity and Authenticity -- William M. Chace is accurate when he notes that Trilling's style "reflected a tactical graciousness that disallowed internecine attack."¹³ For the most part, Trilling prefers what Mark Krupnick calls the "high refinement of the ancien regime."¹⁴

¹¹ Robert Brustein, Dumbocracy in America: Studies in the Theatre of Guilt, 1987 - 1994 (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 1994), 261.

¹² Tom Samet, "Lionel Trilling and the Social Imagination," The Centennial Review 23 (Spring 1979): 171.

¹³ William M. Chace, Lionel Trilling: Criticism and Politics (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1980), 175.

¹⁴ Mark Krupnick, "The Neoconservative Imagination," Salmagundi 47-8 (Winter-Spring 1980): 204.

One finds it difficult to imagine, for instance, Trilling responding as Brustein did to August Wilson's call for a separate stage for black theatre artists with the exasperated, "What next? Separate schools? Separate washrooms? Separate drinking fountains?"¹⁵ Furthermore, Brustein has never been reluctant to name names -- a necessary characteristic for a theatre reviewer, who does not possess the luxury to ignore contemporary mediocrity in favor of past masters, but nonetheless a personal preference as well.

The word "subtle," which Brustein uses to describe Trilling's style, has two aspects. One involves the ability to make fine distinctions, and this is the sense with which Brustein seems to be using the term. It is true that Brustein paints in broader strokes than Trilling. But the word "subtle" also means abstruse and elusive, and these adjectives, too, apply to Trilling. Stephen L. Tanner hints at this in his book on Trilling when he writes that Trilling "seldom had any particular doctrine to offer -- only an attitude of mind."¹⁶ As a result, "we are always sure of his intelligence, but not always sure about what specific conclusion he has reached."¹⁷ Mark Schechner goes further, writing that "what passes in Trilling for balance or negative capability or a full and judicious view of situations is sometimes just a pulling of punches."¹⁸ Many things can be -- and have been -- said about Brustein, but he has never been accused of failing to take a clear stand on an issue, or of his pulling his punches. While at times this forthrightness can have a negative effect on the way he is perceived by his

¹⁵ Robert Brustein, "Subsidized Separatism," The New Republic (August 19 and 26, 1996): 42.

¹⁶ Stephen L. Tanner, Lionel Trilling, United States Authors Series (TUSAS 523) (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 127.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mark Schechner, "Psychoanalysis and Liberalism: The Case of Lionel Trilling," Salmagundi 41 (Spring 1978): 25.

readers, it generally indicates a strength of character that makes his criticism dynamic and stimulating.

George Orwell, in his well-known essay "Politics and the English Language," describes the benefits of possessing such a direct style:

If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself. Political language . . . is designed to make lies sound more truthful and murder respectable, and to give the appearance of solidity to pure wind.¹⁹

There is a bluntness and an honesty to Brustein's style that contrasts with Trilling's sometimes labyrinthine musings. At times, Brustein has indeed made seemingly "stupid" remarks, and just as Orwell predicted, his style did not serve to mask that fact. This was the case, for instance, when he condemned the musical La Cage aux Folles for failing to mention those aspects of "drag subculture" that Brustein apparently considered to be universal: "fellatio . . . anal intercourse . . . sex with boys . . . leather . . . [and] 'recreational' bathhouse activity."²⁰ Instead, the play represented homosexual marriage as being little different from heterosexual marriage, an idea that Brustein found intellectually dishonest. When such preconceptions arise in Brustein's criticism -- and this unacknowledged distaste for homosexuality is one such preconception that appeared very early in reviews of Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee, for instance -- it can be rather shocking, for they are expressed in the same forthright manner as any less controversial opinion. Negative reaction to such lapses can be extremely strong, and surely for some undermine the authority of his other opinions.

¹⁹ George Orwell, Inside the Whale and Other Essays (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1962), 157.

²⁰ Robert Brustein, Who Needs Theatre: Dramatic Opinions (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987), 168.

Usually, however, Brustein's directness provides a refreshing approach to difficult issues that are often clouded in ideological obfuscation and political doublespeak. While his response to Wilson concerning separate drinking fountains may not reflect the level of patience that might have been exhibited by Trilling,²¹ it nevertheless directly and powerfully crystallizes the reality of Wilson's separatist rhetoric: that to support it effectively is to undo several decades of civil rights advances by the promotion of a self-segregation that returns America to its racist past.

In a symposium at Skidmore college not long before his death, Trilling said that the greatest sin of the intellectual is that "he never tests his ideas by what it would mean to him if he were to undergo the experience he is recommending."²² Brustein's criticism often is committed to counteracting this tendency toward intellectual dishonesty and glib acceptance of fashionable radical ideas. When the assembled artistic directors in attendance at the TCG conference rose and applauded Wilson's speech, for instance, the phenomenon Trilling remarked upon obviously was in evidence. Stanley Crouch, in an interview with Margo Jefferson discussing the speech, asked bewilderedly "why do you think a white audience would cheer a call for separatism?"²³ Crouch's and Jefferson's theory, only halfheartedly advanced, was that the artistic directors unconsciously wished that black theatre artists

²¹ Henry Louis Gates's reaction to Wilson's speech is closer to what Trilling's might have been; he wrote an essay for the New Yorker describing an already existing and extremely popular group of all-black theatres, known as the 'chitlin' circuit,' for which Wilson himself might write should he so desire. When asked about these theatres during the debate, Wilson reacted with considerable disdain.

²² Robert Boyers, ed., "Sincerity and Authenticity: A Symposium," Salmagundi 41 (Spring 1978): 109.

²³ Stanley Crouch, "War of the Worlds: An Interview with Margo Jefferson," in Theater 27 (1997): 13.

would remove themselves to their own theatres and leave them alone. A less devious explanation is more likely: it is clear that Wilson's speech was simply damn good theatre, an eloquent speaker thundering forth powerful rhetoric with a sense of total emotional commitment. The emotional impact was potent, and for a time the artistic directors were swept away by the hortatory energy of it all. Only later, when the intoxicating effect had worn off, were rumblings of discomfort heard among the assembly: did he say what we thought he said?

Brustein, uniting his typically direct style to Trilling's scorn for "a form of assent which does not involve actual credence,"²⁴ attempted to counteract Wilson's emotional strength with his own passionate rationality, examining the implications of Wilson's ideas point by point. The clash did not take the form of abstract musings on the desirability of separatism, as it might have with Trilling; it was rather a direct refutation of Wilson's speech. This is why Brustein was asked to debate Wilson, not because of the subtlety of his arguments, but rather because his arguments were made in a style that cast their differences into the highest relief. This ability to bring into focus the central differences between two points of view is one of Brustein's primary strengths, and while it may sometimes lead to an overdose of moral chiaroscuro, it nevertheless serves to clarify issues for readers and listeners.

Connected to Brustein's admirable clarity is his willingness to advance his ideas into the public forum and take responsibility for them. As Tanner says, cultural critics such as Trilling and Brustein "put at risk the credibility of their shaping cultural vision each time they approach an individual subject as a cultural manifestation."²⁵ The regularity with which some journalists returned to

²⁴ Trilling, Sincerity and Authenticity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 171.

²⁵ Tanner, Lionel Trilling, 125.

the personal aspects of the debate with Wilson reflects the intimate connection between Brustein's aesthetic and cultural opinions and the perception of him as a man. Brustein's drama criticism is almost always placed within the context of a larger worldview, so his judgments of plays tend to carry more weight than others because of their cultural ramifications. It is one thing to express an opinion about a single play, and quite another to weave that play into a larger cultural tapestry.

If Richard Chase was right when he wrote in "The Fate of the Avant-Garde" that it is the duty of the critic "to concern himself with whatever looks like the most powerful form of obscurantism and the most self-interested and successful kind of cultural mystique and polemic at any given time,"²⁶ then it seems Brustein has defined his critical responsibility in such terms. Whether opposing the demand that he stop the 1969 Yale production of Sam Shepard's Operation Sidewinder because several campus militants did not like the way it portrayed black revolutionaries,²⁷ or protesting the attempts by the First Annual Congress on Theatre (FACT) to create a bond between the commercial and nonprofit theatres, or debating "The Elitism Flap" in 1978 at the Yale Law School, Brustein has rarely ducked a fight. Unlike Trilling, whom Brustein believed was "not an aggressive man" and "didn't have the fighter's spirit," Brustein considers himself "contentious and aggressive," which allows him to "throw [himself] into the fray" a little more readily than Trilling.

Personal combativeness aside, however, participation in the debate with Wilson involved considerable risk to Brustein's reputation. Unfairly tarred with the brush of racism for his previous criticism of Wilson, Brustein nevertheless

²⁶ Richard Chase, "The Fate of the Avant-Garde," 218.

²⁷ Despite his efforts, he did have to cancel the production when Shepard withdrew his support for the production in the face of the opposition.

risked further condemnation in order to defend what he considered important: the liberal notion of "truth, parity, and equality," the belief that "you treat everyone alike."²⁸ He saw his task as attempting to dispute Wilson's position "without appearing to be a racist because I was arguing with a black man."²⁹ He did not always accomplish his goal -- there were times when his attempts to explain his position sounded condescending or misguided. Yet true to Orwell's prediction that saying something stupid in simple English will be obvious even to yourself, Brustein stopped himself in many of these instances and set off in another direction. As a result, Brustein was generally acknowledged as having made the better arguments during the debate. All of which is to say that Brustein's self-professed lack of subtlety in comparison with Trilling may, in fact, be tied to his strengths of honesty, clarity, straightforwardness, and courage. If this is a fault, then it is a minor one.

Discussing Brustein's style as if it were wholly a matter of personal choice, however, leaves out the second element of Trilling's "double truth" discussed in the previous chapter: societal influences. These influences may account for a sizable portion of Brustein's comparatively more exasperated tone. Tom Samet, in the course of explaining a rather odd definition of humanism advanced by Trilling, noted that, like a "good deal of Lionel Trilling's work, the statement has its meaning in submerged polemic and implied negation."³⁰ In other words, many of Trilling's essays are written as unacknowledged responses to specific provocations, and take their shape from the outlines of that to which they are reacting. This, of course, is a common

²⁸ Brustein, "Interview December 5, 1997."

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Tom Samet, "Lionel Trilling and the Social Imagination," The Centennial Review 23 (Spring 1979): 159.

circumstance not unique to Trilling. Nevertheless, the point is well-taken that the tone of a critic's argument is influenced by the critical environment in which the critic is writing. Chace notes that the "America of the 1930's had defined the shape and quality of Trilling's career,"³¹ and the result was a style that was infused with ambiguity, irony, paradox and complexity. Brustein absorbed these qualities from Trilling, but Brustein's career was shaped by the issues and intellectual environment of the 1960s, and as a result his style is infused with passion, combativeness, and impatience.

One of the most disturbing effects that postmodernism has had is the undermining of a sense of community, or shared values and common experience, which both Brustein and Trilling had attempted to influence. Throughout his career, Trilling had used the pronoun "we" in his criticism to embrace a variety of groups, from the small group of New York intellectuals of which he was a part, to the much larger educated middle class to which his work was primarily addressed. Attacked for the presumption of using this inclusive pronoun to tacitly imply general agreement with his own opinions, Trilling defended himself by saying that "the assumption of cultural continuities" between disparate social groups "is not easily put down,"³² and used the "large sub-culture . . . of youth" as an example of the way that a "world-wide continuity of culture" can come into being, about which "it is possible to make predications."³³ Likewise the New York intellectuals, who Trilling felt were "bound by organic filaments to groups less culturally fluent which are susceptible to its influence" through the circulation of ideas through journalism

³¹ Chace, 174.

³² Lionel Trilling, Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), x.

³³ Ibid.

and the mass media.³⁴ Trilling's "we," then, reflects a confidence in the existence of a shared community, a common culture constructed like a web connecting groups throughout society. It is this confidence that postmodernism has shattered, and that Brustein has attempted to reinstate. Even when Trilling was writing, however, the use of "we" was considered idiosyncratic, so the fact that Brustein confines himself in his writing to using the singular pronoun "I" may not be significant. Nevertheless, there is an increasingly embattled quality to Brustein's "I" that seems to reflect that the cultural continuity relied upon by Trilling has to a large extent broken down. Brustein occasionally has been shocked by the degree to which he finds himself out of step with the arts community in his advancement of a liberal agenda that for so long had dominated artistic discourse.

In the introduction to Dumbocracy in America, for instance, he described his reaction to the virulent letters that appeared in American Theatre in response to his essay "The Theatre of Guilt." "I was more puzzled by the unanimity of the reaction than hurt by its ferocity," he explained, "since pieces of mine on similar subjects, most notably in The New Republic, had rarely provoked such consistent outrage. What surprised me," he went on

was to find such uniform dismissal of an argument I thought at least would spur debate. It is true that theatre people, though often warmhearted, also tend to be sensitive to any questioning of their codes or procedures. Still, I was struck anew by the gulf between what is collectively affirmed in the arts (and the university) and what is assumed by most other elements of society, including many intellectuals.³⁵

For Brustein, this gulf has severed the "organic filaments" that Trilling had seen connecting intellectuals and artists to the rest of American society. It is ironic,

³⁴ Ibid., xi.

³⁵ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 3.

and a little sad, to find Brustein looking longingly across the gulf at the "other elements of society" whose values he vociferously resisted when they were being championed by Trilling during the 1950s. Brustein's sense of isolation in this regard may also contribute to his combativeness.

Ultimately, Brustein's frustration also may reflect the difficulty in contemporary American culture of trying to be a public intellectual in a way similar to the way that Trilling was for his generation. For the most part, there are no recognized forums like The Partisan Review to which intellectuals regularly turn in order to express their ideas to other intellectuals concerning broad issues. The lively conversation mentioned by Irving Howe and Norman Podhoretz that took place within the pages of a few prominent journals has grown faint as intellectuals have increasingly turned to more specialized venues. Henry Louis Gates, for instance, perhaps himself an example of a contemporary public intellectual with a reputation similar to Trilling's, published his response to Wilson's TCG speech in the pages of the New Yorker, a stylish but intellectually lightweight magazine in which Gates's essay seemed strangely out of place. "The Chitlin Circuit" was the kind of essay that in the past would have been published in The Partisan Review and read by most of the important minds in American letters. It is unlikely that contemporary intellectuals turn to The New Yorker in quite the same way.

Brustein has suffered from a similar marginalization, as his space in The New Republic has shrunk, and the amount of time between appearances of his column has grown progressively longer. It is difficult to sustain a sense of immediacy and vibrancy when your voice is heard once a month, and when your ideas must be expressed in less than two pages. In addition, it is extremely unlikely that The New Republic remains as prominent on the reading

lists of intellectuals as it was in 1970, when nearly 55% of the intellectuals regularly scanned its pages. For a man such as Brustein, who defines his role as a critic in terms of the correction of taste, such a diminution of power is disheartening, to say the least. While early in his career, the fact that few were reading his work created a sense of freedom, to find himself once again in a similar situation after so many years can only cause a sense of frustration.

A Final Evaluation

Trilling says that his examination of an author's literary style begins with "the objects of his will, the things he wants or wants to have happen."³⁶ Throughout this study, I have examined the things Brustein has wanted in the theatre: a bond between the artist and the audience that is based on shared values, an appreciation of complexity, freedom of individual creative expression, an encouragement for fresh and unique views, an independent role for art free from politics and conventional morality, a value system that offers equal opportunity for individuals and bases its rewards on merit, and finally, an important role for art in the lives of the people. To what extent has he been effective in promoting those values? Ultimately, what effect has his criticism had on the American theatre?

Recently, when asked the latter question, Brustein's first impulse was to say that he had no impact at all, because "I'm not sure criticism changes anything."³⁷ And yet, he had to admit that he often meets people "who have been affected by something I wrote, even long ago."³⁸ It is clear from his letters and conversations with me, however, that he sees his practical work at the Yale

³⁶ Trilling, Beyond Culture, 13.

³⁷ Brustein, to Walters, 20 April 1998.

³⁸ Ibid.

Repertory Theatre and the American Repertory Theatre, as well as his work at the theatre training schools that have been attached to those theatres, as being far more significant than his criticism. He reminded me that his work as an artistic director, too, "was an answer to Lionel's uninterest in things theatrical."³⁹ An examination of this aspect of Brustein's career is beyond the scope of this study, but would be a worthwhile undertaking. Nevertheless, the link between his writing and his practical work provides a crucial insight regarding the significance of Brustein's criticism for the modern American theatre. He writes:

I have helped to train hundreds of theatre artists in my time, who have gone on to fame and fortune. My one demand on them -- that they recognize that the first allegiance of an actor is to the stage -- has not been often accepted. Maybe they hear my voice in their ears from time to time. I don't know. I do know this though: the [American Repertory Theatre] as an ideal theatre institution, like the Group Theatre in the thirties, will continue to resonate in people's minds and imaginations. And my convictions and opinions are built into the fabric of that institution. It is the living embodiment of my critical principles, as the Group Theatre was of Harold Clurman's.⁴⁰

The comparison to Clurman is telling, for like Brustein, Clurman successfully combined work as a director, producer, and critic. In his essay "Harold Clurman and the Group," which, perhaps significantly, immediately precedes the tribute to Trilling in Dumbocracy in America, Brustein, with obvious admiration, calls Clurman "that rare thing in the American theatre -- a creative artist with a philosophical passion."⁴¹ As the man who "articulated [the Group's] standards of artistic aspiration,"⁴² Clurman's greatest contribution, according to Brustein, was to "articulate the values that would remain indelibly impressed on

³⁹ Brustein, to Walters, April 20, 1998.

⁴⁰ Brustein, to Walters, April 20, 1998.

⁴¹ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 251.

⁴² Ibid.

the minds and imaginations of later theatre artists."⁴³ Those values, idealistic and artistically ambitious, were made powerful by their embodiment in The Group Theatre, which continues to be an inspiration as "a kind of theatrical Camelot with Clurman in the unlikely role of Arthur Pendragon."⁴⁴ While Trilling may indeed be Brustein's intellectual father, it seems clear that Clurman is his theatrical father, for in many ways he is committed to following his example. "Clurman defined the terms on which a serious American theatre would henceforth be approached and the standards by which it would henceforth be criticized,"⁴⁵ not only through his writing, but through his practical work as well. This connection between criticism and production, thought and action, theory and praxis is critical to Brustein's conception of his role in American theatre.

Thus, to discuss Brustein's criticism separately from his work as an artistic director, director, teacher, and playwright, as I have done, is perhaps to do him an injustice. Trilling once wrote, expressing feelings that could easily be shared by Brustein, that "I am always surprised when I hear myself referred to as a critic. . . . I did not ever undertake to be a critic . . . but what [I] envisaged was the career of a novelist. To this intention, criticism, when eventually I began to practice it, was always secondary, an afterthought: in short, not a vocation but an avocation."⁴⁶ Likewise, while Brustein began his career as a critic while still a young man, for most of his life he has defined himself as a theatre practitioner, since he felt that his criticism was having little effect on the theatre. "It was partly out of feelings of impotence that I undertook to practice theatre on a full-time

⁴³ Ibid., 254.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 251.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 253.

⁴⁶ Trilling, The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965 - 75, edited by Diana Trilling, Uniform Edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 227.

basis," he wrote in a letter to me.⁴⁷ In Making Scenes, he wrote that when he was offered the job as Dean of the Yale School of Drama, he was "being offered the chance to not just complain but do something about my complaints, along with the chance to test my convictions concerning the value of a decentralized repertory theatre in the United States connected to a conservatory."⁴⁸ His criticism has provided him with a platform to discuss broader issues of culture that are extremely important to him, but his practical work is where his heart is.

Despite this split focus, or perhaps because of it, Brustein has been an important and influential critic of the American theatrical and cultural scene. The competing demands on his time made by his other responsibilities may have weakened certain aspects of his criticism, or at least stolen the time required by a critic to think deeply about values and ideas. Perhaps the subtlety he sees himself lacking when compared to Trilling might have been strengthened had he focused primarily on his writing. But what has been lost has been more than made up for by the gains, for by putting his critical ideas to the test, Brustein strengthened his chances of achieving his stated goal of helping to "facilitate an American theatre worthy of respect."⁴⁹

While initially such a goal seems quixotic, closer examination reveals the modesty of its scope. To "facilitate" means simply "to make easier." Brustein's goal, thus defined, has not been the complete singlehanded transformation of the American theatre, but rather the moving of that theatre a bit further toward an expressed ideal through his efforts. Brustein's example as critic and practitioner, like Clurman's before him, helps make it easier for a respectable

⁴⁷ Brustein, to Walters, April 20, 1998.

⁴⁸ Brustein, Making Scenes: A Personal History of the Turbulent Years at Yale 1966 - 1979 (New York: Random House, 1981), 4.

⁴⁹ Brustein, Dumbocracy, 261.

American theatre to be created and developed in the future by others who share their values, because a model now exists for emulation, and its principles have been clearly and forcefully expressed in print. In the pragmatic world of the theatre, the validity of ideas must be proven by success on the stage. The American Repertory Theatre is recognized as having made a significant contribution to the development of the resident theatre movement: the Tony Award for Achievement is evidence of this acclaim.

Productions, however, serve only as indirect testimony to the underlying principles upon which an institution is built. To have a life beyond the memories of those who were present at a performance, or who participated in its creation, a more permanent record must be provided. Brustein's autobiographical book, Making Scenes: A Personal History of the Turbulent Years at Yale 1966 - 1979, is his attempt to provide this record, in the same way that Clurman's story of the Group Theatre is recorded in The Fervent Years. Both books are less personal autobiography than a history of the development of an idea, and the obstacles that were overcome in embodying it in a permanent institution. Brustein's other collections serve a similar purpose, in that they trace the growth of his beliefs as they have confronted the productions and issues of four decades of theatre. These books are the history of an aesthetic and ethical creed which others might use as guidance and inspiration in their own explorations. Yet Brustein's example, and Clurman's before him, may not be enough to sustain those who might follow in their footsteps. A longer legacy may provide a necessary supplement.

In the first chapter of this study, I noted John Henry Raleigh's view that "Man is known by the tradition in which he sees himself."⁵⁰ Brustein's self-

⁵⁰ John Henry Raleigh, Matthew Arnold and American Culture (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1961), 225.

identification with Trilling served as more than simply a disciple's tribute to his master, although it was that as well; it was a claiming of Trilling's tradition as his own. It asked the world to see his writings not simply as theatre reviews, but within the context of cultural criticism. There were other American theatre critics who had taken a similar approach in the past -- Eric Bentley, for instance, or Joseph Wood Krutch -- but the identification of Trilling as mentor, while conveniently conforming to literal reality, also serves another important rhetorical purpose: it creates a lineage. Through Trilling, Brustein appropriates a past tradition that embraces all of the New York intellectuals that have had such an important impact on American criticism, as well as figures such as Edmund Wilson and Van Wyck Brooks, and such forbearers such as Matthew Arnold, Henry James, and, through the lineage of liberalism, men of letters such as Tocqueville, Hume, Madison, and Montesquieu. Whereas the family tree of American theatre criticism is rather spindly, the roots provided by Trilling run deep and strong, and pull their sustenance from sources rich in intellectual content.

This claiming of a heritage, however, not only affects our view of Brustein's work; it must also influence those who would claim Brustein as their own source of inspiration, for they, too, will find sustenance in the multitude of influences. There are a few who, if not treading in his footsteps, are at least following a similar path in theatre criticism: William Henry III, for instance, who, before his untimely death, seemed to be following a similar critical trajectory as Brustein with the publication of his In Defense of Elitism; Brustein himself tentatively mentions "maybe Jonathan Kalb, maybe John Lahr."⁵¹ But as Mark Krupnick notes, cultural criticism in general, much less in dramatic criticism, is in

⁵¹ Brustein, to Walters, April 20, 1998.

"short supply."⁵²

How will Brustein's criticism be regarded by posterity, then, which Brustein has always believed will sort out the good from the less good at some point? I believe that he will come to be seen as an important figure in dramatic criticism, not because he is free from error in his judgments -- he has advanced many opinions about plays and issues that now seem truly baffling -- but because his judgments express a clear, passionate, and principled worldview. In the quotation that begins this chapter, Trilling indicates that such a quality makes a critic worth reading, because his opinions extend beyond "his perceptions about art in itself."⁵³ If, as Brustein asserts, theatre "represents social history in the making,"⁵⁴ then Brustein's criticism provides a detailed picture of that history, and of how it was perceived by a thoughtful, passionate, and honest critic. In his essay "Opinions and Convictions," Brustein touches on this issue in his discussion of George Bernard Shaw's critical peccadilloes. Throughout his life, Shaw disliked Oscar Wilde's masterpiece The Importance of Being Earnest and preferred An Ideal Husband. However, Brustein notes, we now "prefer Shaw to a critic with a better box score not just because of his prose style but because he wrote out of conviction. He had a vision of theatre larger than his estimate of individual plays. . . . If we [as critics] cannot avoid making judgments, then at least we can try to give those judgments meaning by investing our criticism with reference and learning and a transcendent view of the art we have elected to serve."⁵⁵ Like Trilling before him, Brustein succeeds

⁵² Mark Krupnick, Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1986), 1.

⁵³ Lionel Trilling, ed., The Portable Matthew Arnold (New York: Viking Press, 1949), 184.

⁵⁴ Brustein, Who Needs Theatre, 4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 270 - 271.

in doing just that. As a result, Brustein's criticism will remain interesting and valuable as a picture of how we lived during the last half of the twentieth century. And it will perhaps influence the future as well, as critics and practitioners alike find their own mentor in Brustein, as he found one in Trilling. Whatever his flaws, like Trilling Brustein stands as a man of principle, honesty, courage, artistry, and sagacity. That is perhaps the greatest tribute he could have given Trilling.

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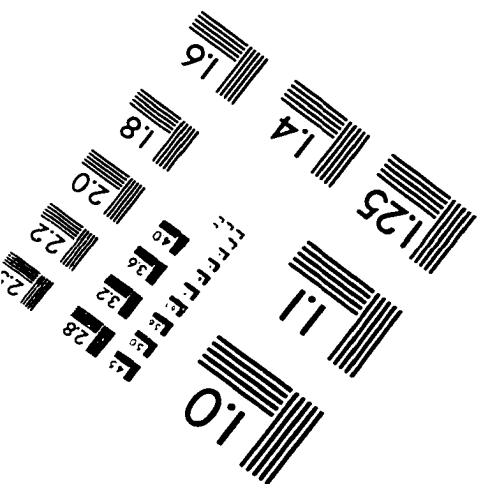
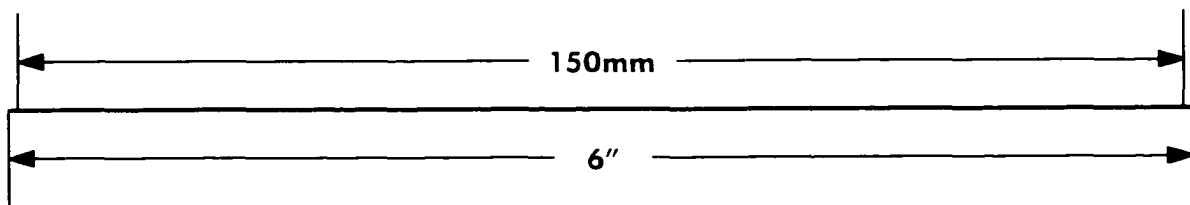
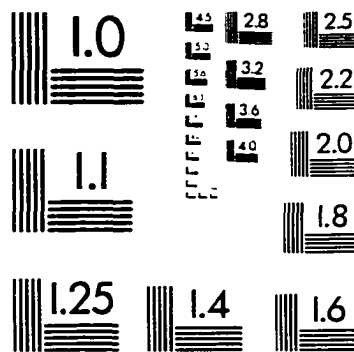
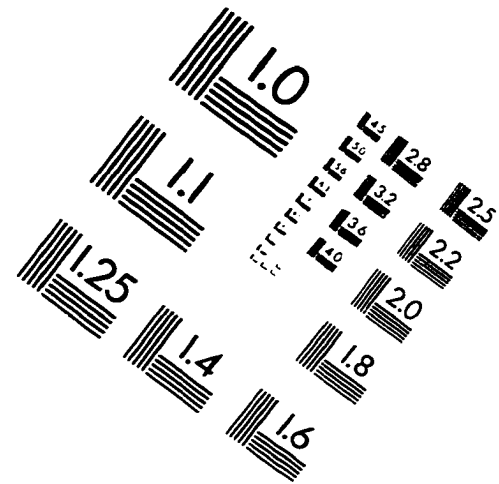
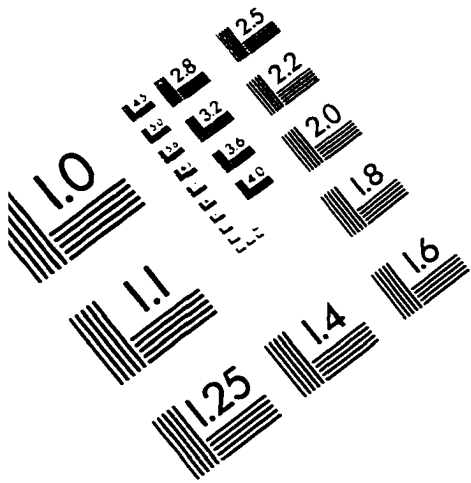
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