

An aerial photograph of a coastline. The top half shows a dense forest of green trees against a clear blue sky. The bottom half shows a sandy beach curving along the edge of the water. A red rectangular box is centered over the image, containing the title and author information.

**THE MIDDLE OF
THE JOURNEY**

LIONEL TRILLING

INTRODUCTION BY
MONROE ENGEL

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS
CLASSICS

THE MIDDLE OF THE JOURNEY

LIONEL TRILLING (1905–1975) was born in New York and educated at Columbia University, to which he returned as an instructor in 1932, and where he continued to teach in the English Department throughout his long and highly distinguished career as a literary critic. Among the most influential of his many works are two collections of essays, *The Liberal Imagination* and *The Opposing Self*, a critical study of E. M. Forster, and one novel, *The Middle of the Journey*. Lionel Trilling was married to the writer and critic Diana Trilling.

MONROE ENGEL was Lionel Trilling's editor at the Viking Press in 1947, when *The Middle of the Journey* was published. He is the author of five novels, including *Fish* and *Statutes of Limitations*, and a study of Dickens. He was for more than thirty years a member of the Harvard English Department.

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PREFACE

IT HAS TO be puzzling that *The Middle of the Journey* is Lionel Trilling's only novel. Though he was for many years the brightest star of the Columbia English Department and an extremely influential and wide-ranging critic, his case is distinctly unlike that of other academics who take time off from their primary concerns to demonstrate that they could have been novelists had they so chosen and manage to prove only that this isn't true. To be a novelist was Trilling's most cherished ambition, and that *The Middle of the Journey* is an original and compelling novel should be even more apparent now than when it was first published in 1947, when it was easy to attend overmuch to its topicality—what reference it had to the highly charged issue of Communist subversion. Soon after its publication then, a more specifically reductive reading of it as a *roman à clef* was encouraged following the accusation by Whittaker Chambers, an eloquent defector from the Communist Party, that Alger Hiss, a former member of the State Department, had belonged to a Communist Party underground group. The novel originally bore the conventional disclaimer that all its characters were "wholly imaginary," but in the introduction to a reissue published twenty-eight years later, Trilling wrote that there was one character "who had been more consciously derived from actuality than any of the others." That character was Gifford Maxim, and the "actuality" he derived from was Whittaker Chambers, with whom Trilling wrote he had "long been acquainted." Any resemblance of the husband and wife named

Arthur and Nancy Croom to Alger Hiss and his wife though, he asserted, had to be entirely fortuitous, since he had had no knowledge of either of them. Fortuitous I would add, except as it is evidence of Trilling's powers of social observation and generalization which are evident throughout the novel.

Now though at any event, more than half a century later, any topical allusions found in *The Middle of the Journey* can be of only secondary interest. And it should be clear that Trilling created a story gripping in its own right, with telling characters, convincing dialogue, strong thematic structure, and penetrating social and psychological insights. It is unmistakably the work of a writer in fluent command of his chosen genre, not so much a novel of ideas as a novel informed and animated by ideas, in which political issues provide opportunity for searching inquiry into more fundamental moral issues. The challenge of this choice, which Trilling met brilliantly, was to have much of the drama of the story evolve from the conflicting convictions of his characters. Those convictions however have more to do with ideology than with anything he would have dignified with the label "idea."

For "idea" had very particular meaning for Trilling. In an essay published two years after *The Middle of the Journey*, "The Meaning of a Literary Idea," he wrote that though "the respective products of the poetic and the philosophic mind . . . are by no means the same, and although I can conceive that different processes, even different mental faculties, were at work to make them and to make them different, I cannot resist the impulse to put stress on their similarity and on their easy assimilation to each other." He went on then however to lament that Americans are not "the people of the idea . . . [but] the people of ideology . . . [and that] ideology is not the product of thought." In contrast to the work of such great European writers as Proust, Joyce, Lawrence, and Kafka, who have produced "essentially an active literature," he found American fiction, with two great exceptions, "essentially

passive." These two exceptions, "who [held] out to [him] the possibility of a living relationship with [one's] work," were Faulkner and Hemingway. Paradoxically though, he reminds us, both Hemingway and Faulkner "insisted on their indifference to the conscious intellectual tradition of our time and have acquired the reputation of achieving their effects by means that have the least connection with any sort of intellectuality or even with intelligence." Yet nonetheless, their novels are palpably "at work upon the recalcitrant stuff of life." In support of this claim, he asserts further that "the life of reason, at least in its most extensive part, begins in the emotions" and moreover that the modern literature by which we are most affected has been written by men who "do not seem to confirm us in the social and political ideas which we hold."

In its own forceful way, very unlike either Faulkner or Hemingway, *The Middle of the Journey* too is "at work upon the recalcitrant stuff of life." This is discomfortingly evident in the ways in which the novel portrays the significant deficiencies to which the virtues of liberalism could seem bound—a recurrent matter of concern for Trilling in his criticism as well. In the preface to Trilling's first and probably most influential collection of essays, *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), he stresses the need "for liberalism to be aware of the weak or wrong expressions of itself." And earlier, in a study of E. M. Forster published four years before *The Middle of the Journey*, he had written that though all Forster's novels "are politically and morally tendentious and always in the liberal direction . . . [he was] deeply at odds with the liberal mind" because of its "inadequacy of imagination" which, among the several critical matters it "likes to put out of sight" are "not only the reality but the power of death."*

*Trilling wrote also in the 1975 introduction that initially, before he thought of using Chambers, "the novel was to be about death . . . about what had happened to the way death is conceived by the enlightened consciousness of the modern age."

The title of Trilling's novel is of course an allusion to Dante, and its protagonist, John Laskell, thinks at one point that, "getting middle-aged," he is suddenly "aware of a large vacancy in his thought—it was the place where the Party and the Movement had been," even though he had never actually been a Party member. In the years Laskell is contemplating, never exactly specified but presumably not very much before 1947, many Americans who considered themselves liberals and were not members of the Communist Party could still support or had once supported some of the Party's professed aspirations. That Laskell's cast of mind seems close at times to Trilling's—though the two are otherwise very unlike each other—gives additional weight to his discovery that whatever his political beliefs had once been, or what political actions he had once joined, he "was not really a political person." And having now had to abandon those beliefs, he discovers that he "did not feel the vacancy as a loss, only as a space through which the breezes of his mind blew very freely."

At the start of the story, Laskell is just recovering from a near-fatal case of scarlet fever. This close brush with death, coming only a relatively short time after the sudden and unexpected death of Elizabeth Fuess, the woman who had been his lover and whom he'd expected to marry, solicits his attention to the very knowledge that Trilling—and, as he had written, Forster too—charged the liberal imagination with evading. And near the end of the novel then, a child is killed in circumstances that compel Laskell to feel implicated in her death.

More or less within the brackets of these two events, Laskell's illness and the child's death, differing attitudes toward death serve recurrently as a measure of character. The principal setting of the story is a rural portion of Connecticut near a village named Crannock where Laskell has been invited to recuperate in comfortable quarters found for him by Arthur and Nancy Croom, friends somewhat his junior, who have a summer house there. The Crooms had also arranged

for the doctor and the two nurses who cared for him in his New York City apartment during his illness and for the supplies needed to support that care. In his sickroom, under quarantine, Laskell is living in stark isolation save for these two nurses. That each of them is both physically and temperamentally a very different presence, however, and that this difference becomes unexpectedly significant for Laskell, prevents the room from being a social vacuum. But in rural Connecticut, where the population though sparse is varied—extending from country gentry to country bohemian to country poor and even to country criminal—Trilling creates a representative society, a background that increases our understanding of his central characters and that once more reveals the breadth and particularity of his social knowledge. In the course of the weeks Laskell spends here, he learns about local alliances and animosities, is witness to and involved in a church bazaar and a funeral, and has a brief, spontaneous affair with Emily Caldwell, a generous and unsophisticated woman the Crooms unreasonably distrust. He appreciates the interest and the pleasures of the countryside, but he also feels nostalgia for “his vanished life of illness,” for “the beauty and truth of that life.” And, a related matter, his friendship with the Crooms is damaged by their continuing reluctance to hear him discuss his feelings about his illness even as they had been reluctant earlier to hear him talk about Elizabeth’s death.

Gifford Maxim is a dramatic contrast to the attractive and successful Crooms, whose optimistic belief in the future is attested to by their growing family and the family summer house they are carefully renovating. Maxim—who had visited Laskell in New York at the end of his illness and comes to visit him and the Crooms in the country for several days—is a solitary figure of uncouth appearance. He has extravagant convictions and very limited financial resources, and he had until recently been an important enough member of the

Communist Party to be privy to many of its least-palatable secrets. Having now defected from the Party on moral grounds, he is certain that what he knows puts his life in danger. Even before his defection, however, he had been sufficiently aware of the essential relationship of death to life to offer Laskell solace at the time of Elizabeth's death.

Maxim's intelligence is formidable. He cites appropriate passages from Spinoza and Dostoevsky in talking about how and why his convictions have changed, but he can also state his convictions eloquently and simply. "Never has there been so much talk of liberty while the chains were being forged," he says, and "my community with men [now that I've left the Party] is that we are children of God." In discourse and argument, Maxim is more forceful than any of the other principal characters of the novel, including Laskell. He has been aware of, probably at some point taken part in, and eventually found no longer tolerable, just those crimes of the Party that the Crooms continue to deny even as they deny angrily that his defection can have put his life in danger. Laskell on the other hand—in part because of the connection he makes between the vehemence with which Nancy Croom denies this possibility and her refusal to allow him to talk to her of his feelings either about his illness or about Elizabeth's death—has come to believe that Maxim's life may well be under threat even as he has also lost all belief in the professed aims of the Party in which the Crooms persist in believing.

Nonetheless, despite these critical differences in belief, the novel does not press the reader to make an absolute choice between Maxim and the Crooms. Laskell himself cannot make such a choice. "He could scarcely believe he had lost the Crooms so far as affection went" despite the fact that "they no longer showed him the right direction of moral and political development." Never having felt any affection for Maxim in the past though, he feels none now. Laskell appreciates the

validity of Maxim's defection and fears, but is offended by his extravagance and self-dramatization and by the reactionary convictions that have succeeded his belief in the Party.

This recognition of the nonconcurrence of feeling and judgment is emblematic of what makes *The Middle of the Journey* a memorable novel rather than a tract disguised as a novel. In "The Meaning of a Literary Idea," Trilling specified that "what comes into being when two contradictory emotions are made to confront each other and are required to have a relationship with each other is . . . quite properly called an idea." In the end though, whatever the persistence of his affection for his friends, Laskell has been distanced from both the Crooms and Maxim. The hostility that has been building steadily between these adversaries peaks dramatically in the final chapter in a long and savage debate in the Crooms' living room. After a time, dismayed by the way the confrontation has developed, Laskell leaves the room and the house. His understanding of his dismay confirms his earlier perception that he "was not really a political person," but it has other implications as well. He has come to see Nancy, Arthur, and Maxim each as revealed not so much by their beliefs as "in their wills . . . Nancy's fierce . . . Arthur's stubborn . . . Maxim's subtle and masked in talk of mysteries . . . It was not their wills that worried him but the necessity they shared to make their wills appear harmless."

—MONROE ENGEL