Morals, Manners, and the Middlebrow: Lionel Trilling and the Television Adaptation of “Of This Time, of That Place”

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The great communications industries do not exactly rely on their content and methods upon the class of New York intellectuals, yet journalism and television show its effects.

—Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture*

I don’t like doing television work, partly because I’m not very good at it, partly because it seems a distraction from and confusion of the sort of work I do like to do.

—Lionel Trilling, letter to Huw Wheldon

On March 6, 1962, television viewers watched as Fred Astaire gingerly descended a flight of steps onto a college quadrangle. This evening, though, audiences at home did not tune in to watch Astaire sing or dance with his usual grace and elegance. Rather, they flipped on their sets to see the star introduce an adaptation of Lionel Trilling’s campus fiction “Of This Time, of That Place,” originally published in 1943, for ABC’s *Alcoa Premiere* (1961–63). Facing the camera, Astaire echoed the words of Trilling’s short story, “It’s a fine September morning, true autumn with a touch of chill in the air.” Departing from Trilling, Astaire continued, “This is the first day of the fall term here at Channing College. . . . For most, this year will not be much different from last. The students will know a bit more, their teachers will gray a bit more, but for a few, this will be a year never to be forgotten” (“Of This Time, of That Place” 1962). There is a certain irony in Astaire’s introduction, as now few remember the program ever existed.¹ Nonetheless, upon

¹ Diana Trilling (1993, 384) even went so far as to claim in her memoir *The Beginning of the Journey* that the series never occurred: “While Lionel was still alive, ‘Of This Time, of That Place’
its initial broadcast the program received a warm reception. The following season it was the pilot episode for the ABC television drama *Channing* (1963–64), for which Trilling was a paid script consultant.

Accustomed to picturing Trilling as an august New York Intellectual, readers may find it difficult to imagine a television show based on his work. For some, the thought that Trilling ever drew a paycheck from a TV production company may come as a surprise as well if not downright inconceivable. And yet despite Trilling’s well-worn reputation as a cultural mandarin, his role as a public intellectual often brought him in contact with the mass media (Nowlin 1991, 23; Teres 2010, 68). John Rodden (1996, 166) portrays Trilling as a cultural regulator “ever in pursuit of Arnoldian balance and capable always (merely, as it were, by introspection) of discerning the right moment to apply the [right] cultural corrective.” The twin cultural correctives that Trilling was most interested in executing were, as Thomas Bender (1993, 107) argues, “to dissociate . . . American liberalism from the radicalism of the 1930s that seemed to mandate a reading of literature with the aid of political categories that were too crude and mechanical . . . [and] to establish closer and more sympathetic relations between intellectuals and the cultivated middle classes in the United States.” That Trilling pursued these cultural adjustments though his professorship at Columbia University, his membership on the editorial boards of the *Partisan Review* and the *Kenyon Review*, and his bestselling work of criticism *The Liberal Imagination* ([1950b] 2008b) has been well documented by literary historians. Less discussed is Trilling’s work in the mass media: his coeditorship of two book clubs, Readers’ Subscription (1951–59) and The Mid-Century (1959–63); his frequent guest spots on the CBS radio program *Invitation to Learning* (1940–64); and his appearances as a panelist on television talk shows. In this sense, although *Channing* is unique among Trilling’s efforts, it is by no means as unusual as it might first seem.

*Channing*, however, illustrates the difficulties inherent to Trilling’s cultural regulation in the wider mass media. This essay explores Trilling’s role as a supervisor of culture and the institutional forces that shaped that role by tracing “Of This Time, of That Place” from the pages of the *Partisan Review* to the dramatic

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1. *Channing* was bought for television. It was to be the pilot of a television series about campus life in a Midwestern college. The film was made and shown but it had none of the quality of Lionel’s story and nothing came of the projected series.”

2. Trilling appeared on *Invitation to Learning* numerous times between summer 1943 and winter 1957 and on TV’s *Conversation* on September 23, 1956, and *Open End* on November 17, 1957.
series that it inspired. I argue that while Trilling could assume his role as a cultural supervisor rhetorically, he could not achieve this position across all fields of production. Michael E. Nowlin (1991, 26) notes that Trilling’s critical role rested on an Arnoldian tradition that conceived of “high culture” as a transcendent, intellectual space from which one could criticize the forces driving an industrialized, bourgeois, and democratic society. In academic and avant-garde circles Trilling could maintain this posture, because he worked in what Pierre Bourdieu describes as “the field of restricted production,” a segment of the larger cultural field that has greater autonomy because it addresses fellow cultural practitioners. Thus Trilling’s “Of This Time” has the freedom to criticize more commercial forms of fiction while at the same time demonstrating how high culture might resist its own institutionalization. In contrast, television belongs to “the field of mass production,” a field with a much larger audience but one dominated by financial and institutional concerns (Bourdieu 1993, 115). Under this form of domination, Channing became the very embodiment of middlebrow, drawing on the conventions established by the drama anthologies of television’s golden age. While Trilling tried to resist these changes in the adaptation, his advice fell on deaf ears. Ironically, in taking on the role of a script supervisor Trilling was unable to act as a supervisor of culture.

Office Hours

“Of This Time, of That Place” follows the professional difficulties of Joseph Howe, a onetime modernist poet from New York City now employed as an instructor at Dwight College, a small midwestern school. Howe begins the story torn between his poetic commitments and his desire to belong to the college community. These competing values are tested through his interactions with two students, Ferdinand Tertan and Teddy Blackburn, each difficult in his own way and each acting as a foil to the other as well as to Howe. Tertan, a scholarship student from a poor central European family, is deeply committed to the life of the mind, producing novels and philosophical works in his spare time. Sadly, it is not long before Howe discovers that Tertan is clinically insane and feels compelled, regardless of his affection for the student, to report him to the dean. In stark contrast, Blackburn comes from a perfectly respectable middle-class home and participates in numerous extracurricular activities but is a lackluster intellect. Worse, Blackburn is dishonest, willing even to blackmail Howe for better grades. Howe in effect
rejects both students, sending Tertan away, eventually to an asylum, and rebuffing Blackburn for his lack of scruples. Although most accounts of the story portray Howe’s interactions with these two students as primarily reflecting Trilling’s own anxieties over academic employment, I would argue that Trilling also uses Howe’s struggles to advance the cultural theories he was then codifying in *The Liberal Imagination*. Rather than succumbing to anxieties over academic institutionalization, Trilling’s story is itself a strategy to reassert his critical authority through the medium of fiction.

*The Liberal Imagination* gives literature the Arnoldian task of challenging and containing the ideological excesses of liberalism. Trilling ([1950e] 2008e, xvii) is notoriously vague in what he means by liberalism, but he defines it in the book’s preface as a philosophic tendency that begins by being “concerned with the emotions above all else,” with happiness chief among them. However, in its contemporary form liberalism begins to have a paradoxical relationship to emotions. Although liberalism tries to protect them as a matter of principle, in practice liberalism “moves toward organization” and in so doing “tends to select the emotions and qualities that are most susceptible of organization” (xvii). Trilling finds these emotions wanting, unsatisfying in their depth and scope. By *organization* Trilling signals not only the bureaucracy associated with the postwar welfare state but also the excesses of Stalinism. With this in mind, Trilling cautions that his readers ought to be wary of the simplicity of ideas that can be easily “passed on to agencies and bureaus and technicians,” but he warns them that they will “fail in critical completeness” if they do not take into account the necessity of organization (xx). For Trilling, literature has the role of palliating a mechanistic liberalism and regulating the liberal character. Literature recalls “liberalism to its first essential imagination of variousness and possibility,” because it “is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty” (xxi).

However, when Trilling writes *literature* he has a fairly narrow canon in mind. In the essays that comprise *The Liberal Imagination*, he encourages his middle-class readers to turn away from middlebrow fiction precisely because it

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3. Trilling began conceiving of *The Liberal Imagination* as a collection of essays as early as 1942. See Woolridge 2013, 51.

4. In a response to a critical essay by his fellow *Partisan Review* editor William Barrett, Trilling (1949, 655) states that his critique of liberalism is also an attack on Stalinism: “I do indeed mean to attack Stalinism but I also mean to attack liberalism as it tends to corrupt itself by approaching Stalinism at its limits.”
lacks “variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty.” For critics like Janice A. Radway (1997, 367), middlebrow fiction signifies a distinct cultural form that developed to serve the social and emotional needs of the professional managerial class. Middlebrow culture offers its readers a “sentimental education” that encourages them to identify with the characters that represent figures from whom they are otherwise isolated by class and professional boundaries (261). Like Radway, Trilling believes that literature plays a role in meeting the emotional needs of the professional managerial class, but he finds the “sentimental education” middlebrow fiction offers to be ideologically suspect and lacking in moral complexity. In “Manners, Morals, and the Novel,” originally published in 1948, Trilling ([1950c] 2008c, 214) explains that middlebrow novels, such as John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), John Hersey’s *Bell for Adano* (1945), Mary Jane Ward’s *Snake Pit* (1946), and Laura Z. Hobson’s *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947), fail as literature, because these sentimental works merely hold up “some image of society to consider and condemn.” Examining *The Grapes of Wrath* elsewhere, Trilling (1980a, 189) writes that the novel “cockers-up the self-righteous of the liberal middle class: it is so easy to feel virtuous in our love for such good poor people! The social emotions can provide a safe escape from our own lives and from pressures of self-criticism and generously feed our little aggressions and grandiosities.” In a more temperate moment Trilling ([1950a] 2008a, 98) admits that at its best middlebrow fiction might be capable of being “earnest, sincere, [and] solemn,” but he insists that it lacks “the real emotions of literature.” Middlebrow fiction fails, then, because it flatters its liberal readers and reaffirms their own prejudices without ever offering up these same assumptions to introspection.

By design, then, “Of This Time, of That Place” works to educate the middle-class reader about the deficiencies of middlebrow fiction. The story takes on this task first by engaging in the genre conventions of middlebrow fiction and then by subverting them. As such, Trilling develops Tertan into the type of sympathetic creature object that populates so many works of middlebrow fiction. Tertan fits the mold because he is triply unfortunate: he is a pariah among the student body, he is working class, and he is also mentally ill. Furthermore, Trilling also encourages readers to sympathize with Tertan because they experience him through Howe’s
eyes. At their first meeting in his office, Howe feels a great affection for Tertan and is “surprised at the tenderness” that the student entreats in him (Trilling 1979b, 84). Mark Krupnick (1986, 82), speaking in accord with almost all of the story’s critics, notes that part of this tenderness stems from the fact that “Howe is like Tertan in feeling alienated from the smug provincial society of Dwight College.” Both teacher and student are outsiders at the college, poets in a community whose poetics takes the social utility of literature primarily into account. Tertan resists what he calls “mundane academe” (Trilling 1979b, 115). For instance, when entering Howe’s class for the first time he announces with “heraldic formality” in a loud voice, “I am Tertan, Ferdinand R., reporting at the direction of Head of Department Vincent” (75). While at once conforming to the rigidity of alphabetized roster sheets and titles, in preserving these things in speech Tertan mocks them. Tertan exhibits a similar resistance with his school photo. Instead of looking straight into the camera—what he later terms an “instrument of precision” (115)—Tertan turns his eyes upward, giving him a “sly superior look” (93). Indeed, photography itself becomes a symbol for the very mechanical nature of the university that Tertan hopes to subvert. To a certain extent these are values that Howe wishes he still possessed.

Trilling suspected that readers would sympathize with Tertan, perhaps even more than Howe does. Trilling even felt that they might find Tertan’s insanity difficult to accept because of his unfortunate circumstances and his devotion to Howe. Reflecting on the story years later, Trilling (1979a, 164) writes: “All the authority of certain moral ideas, quite generous ones, would urge them to this conclusion. For was not Tertan terribly alone, and in a socially disadvantaged position, and benevolent, and dedicated, and was he not by way of being a genius, and are not geniuses often said to be mad, although mistakenly?” For these readers, Trilling claims, the difficulty of accepting Tertan’s insanity stems from “our modern anxiety at confronting a painful fate which cannot be accounted for in moral terms and which cannot be said to result from some fault of society” (165). Aware that these readers have developed this habit from middlebrow literature, Trilling hopes to subvert this tendency by illustrating the inadequacies of middlebrow reading strategies. In his composition class the question Howe sets before his students is “at whose door must the tragedy” of Henrik Ibsen’s Ghosts (1881) be laid (1979b, 87). Oswald Alving’s insanity is not the fault of society, a point that Tertan brilliantly illustrates in his own reading of the play. As Tertan explains, “There is no blame ascribable . . . the preordained is the preordained, and it
cannot be said without rebellion against the university, a palpable absurdity” (89). Tertan’s madness is also “preordained,” and just like Oswald, “nothing . . . can reverse the diagnosis” (1979a, 165). Although many of Trilling’s early readers apparently missed this point, even going so far as to call him late at night to protest the outcome of the plot, the story holds that like Ibsen’s Oswald, Tertan’s madness is preordained and there is nothing that either Howe or the reader can do about it, regardless of their sympathies. Though he is loath to do so, Howe must report his student to the dean.

At the same time that the story hopes to teach readers about the inadequacies of middlebrow literature it also hopes to contain the ways academic institutionalization can reduce modern literature to a mere idea that can be easily “passed on to agencies and bureaus and technicians.” This is quite different from the optimism in the essays that comprise The Liberal Imagination. In these pieces Trilling makes clear that it is modern literature—epitomized by the nineteenth-century realist novel and the high modernism of the 1920s—that will reinvigorate liberalism. In “The Function of the Little Magazine,” originally published in 1946, Trilling ([1950a] 2008a, 98) writes that modernists such as Marcel Proust, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, William Butler Yeats, Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, Rainer Maria Rilke, and André Gide “all have their own love of justice and the good life, but in not one of them does it take the form of a love of the ideas and emotions which liberal democracy, as known by our educated class, has declared respectable.” These men “do not seem to confirm us in the social and political ideals which we [democratic liberals] hold” (98). However, unlike middlebrow novelists, these authors challenge our beliefs and have access to “our secret and primitive minds” and thus gesture toward the real emotions of literature (Trilling [1950d] 2008d, 301). While modernism always had a special purchase for Trilling, he held that the novel in its traditional form could achieve similar ends but through different means. In “Manners, Morals, and the Novel” Trilling ([1950c] 2008c, 206) explains that the realist novel challenges all ideology through the study of morals and manners and is capable of illustrating “a culture’s hum and buzz of implication.” Instead of arguing a single point of view, great novels are dialogic and dialectical. At their highest points novelists show the “yes and no of their culture” (Trilling [1950f] 2008f, 9). Literature is to explore the complex web of society and in so doing “penetrate to the truth, which, as the novel assumes, lies hidden beneath all the false appearances” (Trilling [1950c] 2008c, 211). In other words, literature is to free readers from their illusions or, to use the idiom
of the Cold War, their ideologies. Thus the key element in great fiction is the development of irony, because irony has the capacity to distance the reader from any fixed point of view.

Trilling’s valorization of modern literature is undercut by his suspicion that the institutions that propagate it will also inadvertently undermine its effects. This idea first expresses itself in his criticism in “The Situation of the American Intellectual at the Present Time,” first published in 1952, a response to the *Partisan Review*’s “Our Country and Our Culture” symposium. While most of the respondents castigate mass culture and the growing conformity of intellectuals, Trilling is at his most triumphant, praising the influence that he and his fellow New York Intellectuals managed to achieve. He celebrates the fact that in the United States “wealth shows a tendency to submit itself, in some degree, to the rule of mind and imagination, to apologize for its existence by a show of taste and sensitivity” (Trilling 1978c, 73). Nonetheless, as Nowlin (1991, 31) points out, the essay also documents “the danger of intellectual life succumbing to formalism, reinforced all the more by easy institutionalization.” Trilling peppers his account with asides that show his discomfort with the growing prestige of literature. He writes that the middle class “do[es] not necessarily demand the best, but they demand what is called the best” (Trilling 1978c, 73). He implies that these readers, rather than desiring an unadulterated relationship to literature, turn to culture to secure some level of prestige. Trilling is well aware that universities play a particular role in this process. This anxiety reaches its apogee in “On the Teaching of Modern Literature,” originally published in 1961, where Trilling (1978a, 10) writes that teaching seems to “accelerate the process by which the radical and subversive work becomes the classic work.” In the classroom modern literature becomes dull and routinized, another piece of information on the route to becoming cultured. Trilling mocks the absurdity of this situation: “Compare Yeats, Gide, Lawrence, and Eliot in the use which they make of the theme of sexuality to criticize the deficiencies of modern culture. Support your statement by specific reference to the work of each author. [Time: one hour.]” (10–11). In short, Trilling feels that, like Friedrich Nietzsche, he has asked his students to stare at the Abyss, and they have done so “both dutifully and gladly.” In turn, the Abyss responds: “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” (24).

Although it preceded “The Situation of the American Intellectual at the Pres-
ent Time” by almost a decade, “Of This Time” anticipates many of these anxieties through the figure of Teddy Blackburn. In many ways Blackburn is a member of that intellectual middle class to whom Trilling (1980b, 120) once declared his allegiance. Blackburn’s large face, large body, and beefy appearance mark his character as something “typical,” like a “monk, politician, or inn-keeper” (1979b, 85). Blackburn seems not only to be the perfect audience for Trilling’s theories, he also espouses them in a simplified and somewhat distorted form when he meets Howe for the first time. When asking Howe to let him crash his romantic poets class, Blackburn explains that although he was previously an English major and is now majoring in the social sciences, he has discovered that he wants a more fully developed liberal education: “Sociology and government—I find them stimulating and very real. . . . But now I find that perhaps I have neglected the other side.” When Howe inquires what this other side might be, Blackburn responds: “Imagination, fancy, culture. A well-rounded man” (86).

While on the surface Blackburn may seem to be the perfect subject for Trilling’s theories, he demonstrates the problems of institutionalized culture. For Blackburn, culture becomes a means of attaining power through accreditation and cultural capital. The actual content of literature is merely incidental. Blackburn reveals his disrespect for literature’s transformative power when he writes of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” that Samuel Taylor Coleridge “transports us to a honey-sweet world where all is rich and strange, a world of charm to which we can escape the humdrum existence of our daily lives, the world of romance” (102). Sufficed to say, Howe gives the exam a low mark. When Blackburn confronts him about his poor grade, Howe calls Blackburn on his bluff but says that he will disregard this grade if he does better on the next exam. When Blackburn does no better on the next exam, he confronts Howe and threatens to blackmail him. Blackburn tells Howe that unless he raises his grade, he will inform the dean about a bad review Howe’s poetry has received from an eminent critic and that Howe recommended Tertan, a clear “psychiatric case,” to the college literary society (108). Having already reported Tertan to the dean, Howe sees little actual danger in Blackburn’s threat and easily rebuffs him and lowers his quiz grade to an F.

Although Howe dispatches Blackburn easily enough in the story, he is not capable of dismissing what Blackburn represents with the same ease. Robert Henn (2009, 61) astutely argues that Blackburn, like Tertan before him, acts as a double for Howe: “For Howe’s relationship to Blackburn also reveals a continual
though unrecognized attachment to those motivations that he consciously disdains. Like Blackburn, Howe possesses a desire for, and a will to, power via the academic profession.” Even as Howe rejects his quest for “material power without regard for humanist ideas,” Howe too seeks material power through the college and is shaped by that desire (61). Introducing readers to the protagonist, Trilling writes: “At twenty-six Joseph Howe had discovered that he was neither so well off nor so bohemian as he had once thought. . . . His writing filled his mornings and should have filled his life yet it did not” (1979b, 79). Having grown tired of his bohemian “genteel poverty,” Howe parleys “the small but respectable reputation of his two volumes of verse” to pursue an academic career (79). Now in his second year at Dwight, Howe finds that he is satisfied teaching in rooms where there is “a comfortable sense of pleasure in being human” (87). At the first convocation of the school year, Howe receives “a clear satisfaction from the ritual of prayer and prosy speech and even from wearing his academic gown” (78). While his methods are never as mercenary as Blackburn’s are, Howe’s approach to his position is about securing for himself material comfort through aesthetic culture, often at the expense of such culture.

The full effect of Howe’s institutional commitments and their implication for literature come to a head when he attends the annual commencement ceremonies. Krupnick (1986, 83) has suggested that by reporting Tertan to the dean, Howe completes his initiation into the college. At the commencement ceremonies he discovers just what sort of institution he has joined. Just before the ceremonies Blackburn approaches Howe about his final grade in the class. Ecstatic that he has received a C in Howe’s course, Blackburn tells Howe, “I want to tell you how glad I am that I was able to satisfy your standards” (1979b, 113). However, Howe does not return Blackburn’s congeniality and tells him that the C was an act of pity, supposedly committed in the school’s interest to be rid of him. Nevertheless, Howe’s statement is a flagrant falsehood, and he has to turn away from Blackburn. As readers discover: “The paper had been fantastic. The paper had been, if [Howe] wished to see it so, mad” (114). Unlike Tertan’s madness, this usage of the word mad does not contain negative clinical connotations and is used purely in the romantic sense to convey the literary heights that Blackburn’s essay has achieved. Blackburn has attained literary and artistic finesse. Further complicating Howe’s reaction to his former student is the fact that his newly earned academic and cultural credentials have afforded him the distinction of being the “first man of his class to be placed” (114). Like Howe, who has just been promoted
from instructor to professor, Blackburn has managed to combine humanist skill with worldly power. The recognition of this similarity is almost too much to bare and becomes so much worse when Howe sees Tertan while arm and arm with Blackburn and the dean. Tertan stands “in majestic jauntiness, superior to all the scene.” Recognizing his isolation, Howe “ache[s] with a pity of which Tertan was more the cause than the object, so general and indiscriminate was it” (115). Howe’s pity for Tertan is not one of middlebrow sentimentalism. Rather, it is far more self-centered and perhaps self-cherishing. Recognizing Tertan’s separateness from the crowd, Howe realizes that he has lost a humanist ideal in accepting gainful employment.

All of this may seem to suggest that “Of This Time, of That Place” points to Trilling’s understanding that the role he created for himself as a supervisor of culture was impossible to achieve. While Trilling is certainly aware of the institutional limitations placed on both him and his fictional creation Professor Howe, I would hesitate to say that in this moment Trilling recognizes the finitudes of humanism. For the story is a means for Trilling to have his cake and eat it too. On the one hand, Trilling exposes the power of institutional authority and the powerful influence it has on literary professionalism. On the other hand, the story criticizes the commercial middlebrow fiction of its time while at the same time providing an intellectual space to criticize the institutionalization of culture. In doing so “Of This Time” preserves the role for literature, or at least the literary intellectual, that Trilling set out in The Liberal Imagination regardless of the institutionalization the short story fears. The story points to the ability of high culture to always criticize its own institutional conditions. While this form of self-reflexivity remains critically promising, it was not available to Trilling on television. As the action of “Of This Time” is moved from print’s Dwight College to the cathode tube’s Channing College, Trilling finds little room for his form of dialectical thinking.

Tears for Tertan

If Trilling’s narrative registers a hesitation about how a literary education can lead to financial profit, he was less concerned about profiting from that same narrative. On September 12, 1961, Trilling signed a contract with Avasta Productions for the story rights to “Of This Time, of That Place.” When Trilling sold the short story in 1943 to the Partisan Review, he was paid only $25 (Trilling 1993, 382). In a
dramatic contrast, Avasta Productions (1961, 1) paid $3,500 for the story rights for *Alcoa Premiere*. In May 1962 Revue Studios, *Alcoa Premiere*'s coproducers, contacted Trilling to make a series based on the earlier adaptation. In a new contract with Revue Trilling reauthorized the use of his characters and agreed to work as a script consultant for *Channing*. In hiring Trilling as a consultant, Revue reserved the right “to consult with [Trilling] on the dramatic and artistic elements to be contained in said series, as well as the right to seek [his] advice and guidance for purposes of enhancing [its] desires and interest in having the series realistically conform to and reflect proper academic procedures and activities.” In turn, the contract allowed Trilling to decrease his advisory role if he felt Revue's demands on his time had become excessive. Trilling also stipulated that his name could not be used in any of the show’s promotional materials, a departure from his original contract with *Alcoa*. For this work Trilling was paid $500 per episode, totaling $13,000 for the season (Colin 1962, 1).

Although television certainly paid more than the avant-garde, Trilling found that as a script supervisor he had little control over the direction of the series. In serializing “Of This Time” for the small screen, Revue Studios reshaped the material so that it had more in common with contemporary trends in television drama than it did with the story that had appeared in the *Partisan Review*. In the wake of the quiz show scandals and the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) crack down on TV violence, US television networks began an aggressive push to develop drama series that would combine the cultural ambitions of golden age drama anthologies with the ratings dependability of the more popular serials Hollywood produced. CBS’s *Defenders* (1961–65) set the standard for this type of programming. Based on Reginald Rose’s *Studio One* play *The Defender* (1957), the series chronicled the Prestons, a father and son legal team who took...
on controversial and sometimes hopeless cases. Following the model set by *The Defenders*, the networks aired a number of socially conscious dramas over the next few years: *Ben Casey* (ABC, 1961–66), *Breaking Point* (ABC, 1963–64), *Dr. Kildaire* (NBC, 1961–66); *East Side/West Side* (CBS, 1963–64), *The Eleventh Hour* (NBC, 1962–64), *Mr. Novak* (NBC, 1963–65), *The Nurses* (CBS/ABC, 1962–67), and of course *Channing*. All of these programs focused on young professionals—doctors, lawyers, social workers, and teachers—who through the course of their duties dealt with the major social issues of the 1960s. At their best these programs were serious, sincere, and dramatic. However, they could also be mirthless and self-consciously solemn. The exhausted TV and film critic Richard Schickel (1964, 15) responded to the sudden wave of serious television programming by declaring the 1963–64 season the “Year of the Problem” and stated that misery now ruled the airwaves.

Despite their reputation for moral seriousness, these series and the golden age drama anthologies that inspired them were essentially middlebrow. Had Trilling owned a television set throughout much of television’s golden age, he might have been tempted to say that some of the most celebrated scripts of this period merely held up “some image of society to consider and condemn.” Rose’s television work provides a perfect example of the golden age’s middlebrow orientation. His *Thunder on Sycamore Street* (1954) railed against residential segregation, * Twelve Angry Men* (1954) denounced racial discrimination in the justice system, and *Almanac of Liberty* (1954) upheld the principle of free speech in the face of anti-Communist hysteria. *The Defenders* and the television programs it helped inspire continued to address major political issues. However, as Jon Kraszewski (2010, 123–27) argues, they no longer dealt with these issues in abstraction but filtered political concerns through the lenses of their protagonists’ professions. In practice this focus on professional concerns and the need to sustain the story line week after week had the effect of muting the series’ politics. These series hardly reproduced the Popular Front culture of the 1930s and 1940s that Trilling

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8. *Daily Variety* commented that *The Defenders* presented “a unique effort to combine the dramatic programs of the ‘Golden Age’ with the basic qualities of the serials dominant these days” (quoted in Baughman 2007, 189). Given the entertainment industry’s predilection for mimicking success, it was not unique for long.

9. In a 1955 interview with Lewis Nichols (1955) in the *New York Times*, Trilling said: “We have no TV, and I don’t listen to the radio or records, or go to art galleries or the theatre. I’m a completely negative personality.” In contrast, his *New York Times* obituary states, “Toward the end of his life he relaxed by watching television” (Lask 1975). While it is not clear if Trilling watched the *Alcoa Premiere* pilot on his own set, he clearly did watch it.
denounced as cultural Stalinism, but they still provided the “sentimental education” native to middlebrow culture.

In transforming “Of This Time, of That Place” from an antimiddlebrow polemic into an example of middlebrow culture, Avasta Productions and Revue Studios had to reimagine Trilling’s protagonist Joseph Howe. With his “Flash Gordon profile,” TV’s “Joe” Howe (Jason Evers) was no longer a modernist outsider within the campus’s hallowed halls (Davidson 1964, 15). Instead, with the help of Dean Fred Baker (Henry Jones), Howe spent his days struggling to help his students cope with their troubles. Over twenty-six episodes Howe, with the aid of the faculty and the campus administration, helped a prison inmate (John Cassavetes) work on his memoirs before his execution (“Message from the Tin Room” 1963), encouraged a polio victim (Peter Fonda) to become more self-sufficient (“An Obelisk for Benny” 1963), sought to relieve the existential angst of a young theological student (George Segal) struggling with heroin addiction and a loss of faith (“A Patron Saint for the Cargo Cult” 1963), contended with an economics professor’s (James Earl Jones) internalized racism (“Freedom Is a Lovable Thing, God Wot!” 1964), and alleviated the assimilation anxieties of a Jewish all-American athlete (James Caan; “My Son, the All-American” 1964). Although Howe’s quest to help his students was not always successful, his essentially heroic nature always prevailed. Associate producer Jack Guss described TV’s Howe when he told *TV Guide* that Evers played a professor “in an atypically heroic sense, and the viewer can identify with him.” Guss added: “Often he’s unsure of himself; he’s fallible. He, along with the students, seems to be in a perpetual process of learning. He also just happens to be a nice guy and you want to get to know him better” (Davidson 1964, 17). Television’s transformation of Joseph Howe was to a certain extent unavoidable. Viewers may have been willing to watch Howe betray Tertan once, but it is unlikely that they would tune in to see a professor crush the dreams of his students week after week. Still, the focus on making Howe more likable, making him someone “you want to get to know better,” also meant that the series turned away from the types of cultural questions that Trilling’s original short story raised. This Joseph Howe helped people. He dealt with the issues of the day. But he was not concerned with the role institutions played in shaping the life of the mind.

This transformation was already apparent in the *Alcoa Premiere* adaptation, which was also *Channing’s* pilot episode. In a dramatic reinterpretation of the source material, Howe does not betray Tertan (Burt Brinckerhoff) but attempts
to shield him from the world’s cruelties. To make this action more comprehensible, the adaptation also thoroughly reimagines Tertan so that he is both more sympathetic and more verifiably mad. Played by Brinckerhoff as a cross between a saintly Allen Ginsberg and a tragic Jerry Lewis, TV’s Tertan lacks the condescension of his print counterpart. While on the page Tertan could give the school photographer a “sly superior look,” only in the episode’s final scene, when he is in the full grasp of insanity, can he even mention the word irony. Primarily, Brinckerhoff flashes the camera looks of sincerely felt hurt after being rejected by his fellow classmates. Indeed, what marks Brinckerhoff’s performance, and perhaps the series as a whole, is its earnestness. When Tertan first introduces himself by giving his last name first, he means no disrespect. He is simply overwhelmed. Although he is bookish and awkward and aware that he is smarter than the other students, Tertan is personable and hopes that Channing will provide him a space of belonging.

However, Tertan’s peers ostracize him precisely because he is insane, turning him into an object of sympathy for Howe and the audience. The nature of Tertan’s insanity is rendered far more visibly than in the story and in turn far more melodramatically. Early in the teleplay Tertan visits Howe’s office to share his numerous philosophical and fictional works. But before he can do so he suffers a peculiar attack. Reaching into his briefcase to pull out his manuscripts, Tertan doubles over. At this moment his expression is somewhere between frozen and blank, and he falls to the floor. As this happens the sound track transitions to an ominous theme that will play in the episode any time Tertan exhibits unusual behavior. Helping his student get up from the floor, Howe inquires what happened. Once back on his feet Tertan yells, “I tripped!” as he slaps away Howe’s hand and runs out the door (“Of This Time, of That Place” 1962). After Tertan has a second outburst, a complete departure from the short story, Howe eventually decides to visit Tertan’s parents’ home. Finding the Tertans’ door unlocked, Howe walks in to find an apartment decorated in an opulent if somewhat cramped Old World style. Howe enters the residence as the musical theme that earlier signaled Tertan’s insanity begins to play again. A bell rings from offscreen. The camera jumps to a door in the back of the apartment. Tertan’s father enters the front door and meets Howe, but the ringing of the bell interrupts their introduction. The camera then jumps to the back door again, suggesting where the sound is coming from, this time zooming in, slowly revealing that this door locks from the living room. Mr. Tertan (Stefan Schnabel) reveals that his wife, who is not well, is
ringing the bell from the other side of the door. As Howe expresses his concerns to Mr. Tertan, a shadow begins to loom underneath the doorjamb, and the door begins to shake. Mr. Tertan tries to silence his wife by yelling to her in Hungarian, but his efforts are to no avail. The door shakes again, and from behind the door comes a bloodcurdling, inhuman wail. Unable to sit still any longer, Howe makes a move to the back door to see what is wrong, but Mr. Tertan restrains him. Mr. Tertan reveals that his wife Lisa “who could once speak five languages could now not answer you in one.” Tertan, his father explains, will soon suffer the same mental degeneration. Mr. Tertan’s confession and his plea that his son be able to stay in Howe’s class elicits Howe’s and the audience’s sympathies. It is a call for sentimentality, uncomplicated by Trilling’s tragic sense of reality.

Discovering that Tertan is insane—a diagnosis that is later confirmed by a psychologist as “an extremely rare form of inherited brain disease, rather severe and progressive”—establishes the pilot episode’s chief dramatic conflict. Will Howe keep Tertan’s mental degeneration a secret so he can remain at Channing, where, as Mr. Tertan puts it, “he is in glory in [Howe’s] class”? Or will he follow college policy and report the boy and protect his position? These questions pose a particular challenge for the television Howe, as he has cared for a mentally ill student before and paid for it dearly. Although viewers only learn of it later in the teleplay, during Howe’s previous appointment at Sedgwick College one of his students, a nineteen-year-old woman, killed herself and addressed her suicide note to him. Although her suicide note mentioned nothing about an affair, the campus community imagined something improper must have occurred, and the college dismissed him from his position. Now at Channing Howe remains insecure of his position. Early in the pilot, when his pregnant wife (Nancy Hadley) mentions that they should abandon their attic apartment and buy “a house the size of a postage stamp,” Howe panics, imagining that he might be dismissed at any time. Tertan’s insanity and Howe’s quandary recall this earlier defeat, and Howe is thus reluctant to act kindly toward the boy.

Enter Blackburn (Paul Carr). Derisively called “an operator” by Dean Baker, Blackburn remains a blackmailer and a poor literature student. However, in a dramatic improvement over the short story, Blackburn is much more than a mere foil to both Howe and Tertan. He is a credible threat to both men, leading the charge to deny Tertan membership in the school’s literary society and blackmailing Howe with greater credibility. However, before he blackmails Howe he tries
to influence him by offering to use his connections with local realtors to secure Howe an affordable nearby home. When it is clear that Howe will resist his overtures, Blackburn attempts to extort Howe, threatening to report him to the dean for both his support of Tertan and his past at Sedgwick College. Ultimately, Howe rebuffs Blackburn, turning his C− into an F, and tells him to go to the dean if he has a problem with it. He also vows to pass Blackburn regardless of what he does so that the college can be rid of him. In a move typical of middlebrow fiction, the script teaches Howe not about the institutionalization of literature but about the moral conviction he needs if he is to succeed as a college professor. Howe explains to Blackburn just before the latter leaves his office, never to be seen again, that although he may have a “jungle-like agility” that might take him far, the Tertans of the world are far more valuable. “Tertan will never make a dollar, or vote, or own a house,” Howe explains. “His name will never be in the class book. Poor devil, he won’t even make the telephone directory. But that poor sick boy is worth ten of you.”

The episode’s denouement shows that Howe has made the right choice. By protecting Tertan and casting aside Blackburn he has proven that he is fit to be an instructor at Channing—and fit to help future students as the series continues. At the graduation ceremonies Tertan appears deranged—or at least the sound track would make us believe so. Dean Baker offers to take care of Tertan, but Howe confesses, “I’ve known the boy was sick for some time, I took a chance I could get him through one more term.” However, Baker reveals that he has been aware all along of Tertan’s insanity and Howe’s efforts to get him through at least one more term and that he trusted Howe’s judgment. In Baker’s view, allowing Howe to protect Tertan from discovery also allows Howe to excise his fears of being dismissed from Channing and to intervene positively with his students. Approaching Tertan alone, Howe learns that Tertan has been happy at Channing. Thus Howe’s efforts have not been in vain. Rather than Tertan merely vanishing “in the last sudden flux of visitors,” the episode ends with a long shot of Tertan and Howe walking arm and arm with one another toward the graduation ceremonies in the distance, wholly reconciled.

What did Trilling think when he saw this on TV? Despite the transformation of his short story from an antimiddlebrow polemic into the very embodiment of middlebrow art, he was initially happy with the adaptation. Trilling wrote to the Revue Studios producer Mark S. Smith to let him know how much he approved of
the finished production. Responding to a letter from Betty Berman (the mother of Trilling’s student Marshall Berman, the future critic) that praised the production, Trilling (1962a, 1) wrote: “I am happy you liked the screen play. I did too, even though I was naturally aware of how much of the story had to be sacrificed. It was genuinely decent, often delicate, and I was moved by it.” Not all letters were positive. To one disappointed fan Trilling admitted, “Of course the story was not adequately represented in the dramatic version—a story of inevitable, ironic failure, even betrayal (in some metaphysical sense) was turned into a story of ‘success.’” He added, “There was also a degree of vulgarity in it—the wife [Mrs. Howe] was shocking and the mad mother rattling the door was impossible.” However, in the balance, Trilling (1962b, 1) decided, “It seems to me that it had a degree of decency, even of sweetness that was exceptional in the medium.” Trilling (1978c, 76) having seen his short story adapted, it is possible to imagine him contemplating, however briefly, that mass culture might have finally “attract[ed] genius and discover[ed] that it has an inherent law of development.”

However, once Trilling began working as a script supervisor his appraisal of the show declined. In this new position Trilling criticized not only the show’s lack of realism but also its middlebrow orientation. In an October 7, 1962, letter to Smith Trilling made his reservations known. After reading three early scripts (one in two versions), Trilling felt moved “to make some remarks of a monitory nature,” for he saw “certain tendencies emerging which should be guarded against.” He complained about “a drift toward conventionality in the general conception of character,” but what most struck him as mistaken was Howe’s newfound heroic nature. In his letter to Smith Trilling writes, “I think every effort should be made to keep Joseph Howe from appearing to be the kind of man who builds his life on doing good those who need good done to them, a man who, week after week, adds a new item to his cherished collection of lame ducks.” Expanding on this notion, Trilling (1962c, 1) adds:

A college teacher’s life, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, is a busy one, but Howe never has a second thought about giving up a day or an evening in the cause of sympathy. All this helping that he does, it must be remembered, is outside the line of his duty—he isn’t a Lawman or a Private Eye or a Neural Surgeon. If he becomes a Case Worker who happens to have been planted in the English department, he will be a crashing bore. He needs to have, if not more irony, at least more impulse to privacy.

10. While Trilling apparently did not keep this piece of outgoing correspondence, we know it exists because it is mentioned in letters Trilling received from Smith and the screenwriter Larry Marcus, who were both very happy that Trilling approved of their efforts.
Given that Revue had hired Trilling to ensure that the series “realistically conform[ed] and reflect[ed] proper academic procedures and activities,” one way to read Trilling’s critique is that he is signaling out the scripts’ lack of realism. When does Howe plan his classes or serve on committees? Isn’t he aware of publish or perish? Trilling seems to be asking. However, Trilling’s negative evaluation also touches on those aesthetic qualities he elaborated on in The Liberal Imagination. Although Trilling stresses the word privacy, his invocation of the irony has a far deeper resonance in light of his criticism. Trilling’s letter, much like his essays in The Liberal Imagination, place sympathy in opposition with irony. In both cases irony is more valued than sentimentality. Trilling’s monitory notes show him trying to extend his critical values to Channing in an effort to improve the series.

While Trilling’s aesthetic values remained consistent across the field of cultural production, his effectiveness varied wildly. He did much to shape Cold War cultural discourse, but his work as a script consultant seems to have had little effect on the episodes that followed. While Trilling’s letter to Smith is the only record of his consultancy that is preserved in the Lionel Trilling Papers at Columbia University, it seems unlikely that he would have been happy with the series’ subsequent episodes with their doomed convicts, junkie theologians, and overanxious athletes, all of whom Howe attempts to help. Joseph Howe continued to add to “his collection of lame ducks” week after week until the series was unceremoniously canceled. Here Trilling was perceptive. The line separating Neil Brock (George C. Scott), the caseworker protagonist of East Side/West Side, and the medical doctors Ben Casey (Vince Edwards) and James Kildare (Richard Chamberlain) from Professor Joseph Howe was a thin one. Although Trilling was able to decipher the essentially middlebrow character of the adaptation once it became a series, he could do little to change this fact. His script consultancy may have been a “criticism of life”—perhaps one or two steps removed—but he was fundamentally unable to change it.

The New Faculty

A year after the cancellation of Channing Trilling (1978b, ii–iii) wrote in the preface of Beyond Culture, originally published in 1965, “The great communications industries do not exactly rely on their content and methods upon the class of New York intellectuals, yet journalism and television show its effects.” The
statement is both bold in its proclamation and quiet about what it obfuscates. On the one hand, Trilling makes a powerful claim for the influence of the New York Intellectuals as a class. Although their numbers were small, Trilling claims they exerted an enormous influence on the life of the nation as a whole. On the other hand, when Trilling writes that the “communication industries do not exactly rely on their content and methods” of the New York Intellectuals, he is concealing his own involvement in television. Even if Channing was not an entirely faithful adaptation, its content came directly from the pages of the Partisan Review. However, by 1965 Trilling seemed just as willing to forsake television as he was to disavow his connections to it. Even as early as 1963, before Channing completed its first and only season, Trilling was already declining work on the small screen, even as a guest on cultural programs. When Huw Wheldon of the BBC heard that Trilling would be traveling in England, he invited the critic to be a guest on the cultural program Monitor (1958–65). Trilling (1963, 1) declined, stating, “I don’t like doing television work, partly because I’m not very good at it, partly because it seems a distraction from and confusion of the sort of work I do like to do.” While New York radio sometimes broadcasted his lectures late at night, after Channing Trilling never appeared on or worked for television again.

Trilling’s refusal may have been just as well. Soon the kinds of literary culture television was eager to adapt often pointedly rejected Trilling’s brand of cultural criticism. Marshall McLuhan’s Understanding Media (1964) disregarded the Arnoldian conception of culture and replaced it with a snappy techno-inflected modernism. His elevation of the medium over its content freed television from its responsibility to be culturally respectable and helped inspire the aesthetic of Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In (1967–73) and Sesame Street (1971–). In 1964, from the pages of the Partisan Review, Susan Sontag’s description of camp also challenged the moral seriousness Trilling represented.11 A few months later Sontag declared in “One Culture and the New Sensibility,” originally published in 1965, that the Arnoldian literary tradition was at an end. “The Matthew Arnold notion of culture defines art as the criticism of life—this being understood as the propounding of moral, social and political ideas,” she wrote. “The new sensibility understands art as the extension of life—this being understood as the representation of (new) modes of vivacity” (Sontag [1966] 1990, 299–300). Television soon

11. Adam Kirsch (2011, 158) writes, “Against Interpretation, Sontag’s 1966 essay collection, nowhere mentions Trilling by name, but he represents all the tendencies in literature and criticism that Sontag was rebelling against.”
embraced camp, most notably in Adam West’s *Batman* (1966–68). These innovations left little room for Trilling to operate in television. As enjoyable as it might be to picture Trilling guest starring on *Batman* as the villainous Bookworm, shouting “Sock it to me!” on *Laugh-In*, or teaching the residents of *Sesame Street* the alphabet (*A* is for Arnold, *B* is for *bildung*, *C* is for . . .), unfortunately none of these scenarios ever came to pass.

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