MODERNITY, MONSTER, MIND: Massimilla
Notes from Beyond the Academic Abyss

Reviews of:

Beyond Good and Evil, by Friedrich Nietzsche, 1886
Translated by Thomas Amphibian
Oxbridge University Press 255 pp

Beyond Culture, by Lionel Trilling, 1965
Foreword by JB Middleman
Ohio State University Press 202pp

Beyond that, a brief not-to-be-published closing
Re: *The Closing of the American Mind*, by Allan Bloom, 1987

(Reviews appearing in *Beyond Belief: A Nontechnical Journal of the Liberal Arts*.)

Before I grew up to become one, I thought intellectuals were monsters. Remember the Wizard of Oz—an overblown, disembodied head popping and puffing with dogma and fury and threats? The straw man quivered to his poor excuse for toes as he stepped up to ask for a brain. Ah, our disappointment when the curtain opened to reveal a man pulling the strings—a stuttering little scientist with no encephalon to offer, nothing but a diploma, a paltry scrap of paper tagging status on a puppet without substance. Or so it seemed.

At a recent lecture by Wolfgang von Wissenschaftlich on Wolfram of Eschenbach at The Metropolitan International /American Society for Mental Advancement (MIASMA), I couldn't help noticing a snide reference to the size of the American "educational machine." With diplomas "of every make and mark" conferred each year on the most diverse, if job-starved and recession-rattled, population of doctoral candidates in the world, the United States would seem the El Dorado of higher learning. "But does one scholar care what the next is doing?" the venerable speaker asked. "And who among them strikes to the terrible crystals?" Apparently, Americans are still stereotyped as shallow-minded in Germany, whose system of education produced sizable thinkers such as Kant and Hegel. And Nietzsche was a giant, or so the saying goes.

He was also the Wizard of Oz. That is, he was the man behind the curtain. Shy, stooped, and lonely, preoccupied with a constellation of illnesses, Nietzsche wrote the bulk of *Beyond Good and Evil*, the most cogent masterpiece of his middle-to-late period, in 1886 on the top of a trunk in an attic in Turin. Since the book didn't sell at the time and Nietzsche never saw another edition, the magnitude of his reputation today seems to point to an Oz-sized feat of trickery. How did he do it? A new edition of *Beyond Good and Evil* with a perceptive translation by Thomas Amphibian provides some of the answers.

For one thing, Nietzsche rarely kowtows to audience expectations. The book is about the limits of traditional Christian morality and the importance of recognizing and embracing the perilous position of the modern individual in a relativist universe. In arguing that one must create one's own values, Nietzsche even eschews traditional modes of argument. This largely aphoristic work is designed to teach the reader how to read it, and one of the rules of engagement seems to be that any invention or revaluation is better than none. Accordingly, there is hardly one technicality or banality in the book. Nietzsche didn't believe in democracy, which was not so defiant a position in his day as it may seem to Western readers now; but he didn't believe in physics either, at least not in the allegedly rational basis and various applications for which it is championed today. In this work, he dismantles the Soul, the Self, the Good, the True, suggesting these represent prejudices that hark back to Plato. Man is not the measure of all things, he assures us . . . but Nietzsche certainly is.

Naturally, I am misrepresenting Protagoras's most famous aphorism. When Protagoras the Sophist first asserted that "Man is the measure of all things," he meant primarily that the human perspective, however limited, is the only one available to us. By this account, we can know no truth entirely distinct from appearances. Nietzsche is an heir to the Sophistic perspectivist school, one unfairly maligned by the disciples of Parmenides and Plato. Indeed, by undermining common notions of "the True" and "the Good," Nietzsche does not uphold a belief in evil either. He argues that evil would amount to nothing more than a version of good. If good and evil are shades of the same drab conception of truth, should not, say, untruth be preferable to truth? Of course, to ask an only ostensibly paradoxical question such as this one is not to imply the answer is "yes" but to champion the pursuit of the truth about truth, a nobler kind of devotion to a less stable worldview. This shift in approach could come at the cost of no less than everything we take as a given, including the assumption that we must probe for moral depths beneath false surfaces. It would require challenging the realm of the "frog's eye perspective," the swamp of muddled compromises within which every specimen of our modern mind and body politic splashes, slithers, and—to use Amphibian's translation of Nietzsche's word—sticks.

By showing that our beliefs, our values are framed by our place in the world, Nietzsche points to his underlying concern with culture, and he does not like what he sees. In this respect, it is interesting to observe how little he approves of Wissenschaftlich's famed "German orthodox" education. Nietzsche argues that the law of reason itself is a myth invented by rationalists who have forgotten their cultural roles. What we regard as rational pursuits are only rationalizations, efforts to relate what are ultimately contradictory drives, sometimes in the name of suppressing what is most vital in the human spirit. He complains that reigning commandments about the pursuit of theory and knowledge reflect no thought to the worth of that knowledge. For Nietzsche, modern researchers are alligators that can't see out of the slow-moving river, or not much above the perspectives of their apprentices, the usual browsing and slurping prey on the bank. The modern age demands broadminded thinkers with opinions about the rules by which people live. In fact, a thinker has the *obligation* to have individual opinions, a right he has earned through tangles with doubts and disasters, risks and reversals. Nietzsche deplores

a new generation of "ruminant" students who follow the herd, re-chewing the same reliable fodder. The philosopher-artist speaks just as cuttingly of professional experts sharpening the tools of mediocrity until these experts become little more than spanning joints themselves. Though his book is subtitled *Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, Nietzsche alleges that his aims are ultimately reactionary. *Beyond Good and Evil* calls for richness of purpose reminiscent of that which inspired the great pre-Socratic artists, leaders and thinkers. The challenge extends beyond academe to society at large when Nietzsche punningly refers to his contemporaries as "an industrious race of machinists and bridge-builders of the future with nothing more than *course* work to get through."

The book is not just a diatribe. The psychological sensitivity evidenced by Nietzsche's vivisection of values productively troubles the living stream of history and thought. His style—including the subtle recklessness of his figuration and tone— is likewise stunning. His assertions are not ready-made but shot through with red threads of counter-assertion. For instance, Nietzsche backhandedly praises the moral, religious, and artistic whims of the late 19th Century by likening them to costumes that parody the ages, as if in the name of making greater mockeries of themselves. Nietzsche's language itself is richly woven with parody, as when he announces, "The spirit is more like a stomach than anything else" and dubs the general welfare "not an ideal, but an emetic." These slyly personal tropes (Nietzsche had a temperamental digestive system) are hallmarks of a voice so expressive and quirky, so full of spasms and psalms, that it can be enjoyed in its own right. The meaning in the voice is infectious, though. This is a book for those who can stomach inspiration.

Beyond Good and Evil is not so obscure or choppy as some of Nietzsche's other works, but the stepping stones that make up many a chapter zigzag enough to tempt a reader to skip and slip, to fall into the pond of undisciplined skimmers and hungry opportunists. As maddening as Nietzsche's mode of argument is his political position. He aligns his desire for noble tastes and daring thinking with a mandate for proponents of a "master morality" who could be said to rule over proponents of a "slave morality"—aligned not surprisingly with the specialized scholars and machinists he mentions earlier. Practitioners of the master morality would operate from a position of intellectual, aesthetic, and creative strength rather than focus on mere utility or the so-called greater good. Still, for a man who sees easy divisions and dogmas as despicable, the terms "master" and "slave" (perhaps adopted from Hegel's more specialized lexicon) are suspect. In another chapter, as well as in other works, Nietzsche claims to expose resentment—he employs the French word *resentiment* to label an emotive strategy distinct from those implicit in anger and pity—a regrettable source of false perception. Re-sentiment or revaluation, in short, can amount to a clever strategy rooted in mere resentment. How much at the heart of the Christian Beatitudes, Nietzsche proposes, might reflect a type of revenge morality? For Nietzsche, it is because the meek are helpless to change their lot in the here and now that they recast their powerful and successful neighbors as "evil" inferiors destined to fall. Still, one cannot help wondering if a great deal of resentment (indeed, "slave morality") doesn't play into the desire of Nietzsche, the neglected ex-scholar, to subordinate or re-evaluate all his old unenthrallable colleagues in the name of his "nobler" agenda, even if that agenda means making a mockery of himself as well.

Perplexities such as these and some regrettable remarks about women, however, should not deter anyone from navigating this book. In our own age, with its munchkin smorgasbord of degree programs in "fields of knowledge" that hardly know of one another, *Beyond Good and Evil* speaks to diverse schools of thought in and out of the academy. It reveals Nietzsche as the ultimately truly wise Wizard of Oz, being a man whose surprising depths—in the sensing of daring, vitality, and imagination—actually do have more impact than his notorious façade. To remedy the infections contracted in our shallow-water haunts of overspecialized learning, banality, and politic gobbledygook, Nietzsche dares prescribe a necessary medicine. He takes us back to the premise that he believes Socrates (or Plato) should never have abandoned—the recognition that it is always essential to get down to the bedrock of our ignorance. For Nietzsche, philosophy can no longer be treated as the universal science of sciences, but only as an intense form of inquiry and criticism, as well as a very lucid form of poetry. For the way it crosses boundaries, opens vistas, provokes, and informs our Zeitgeist, *Beyond Good and Evil* lies *beyond* the yellow brick road.

Similar remarks could be made about Lionel Trilling's *Beyond Culture*, a book I find myself rereading with renewed curiosity as it receives its first reissuing in 15 years, with a helpful preface by J.B. Middleman. Echoing Nietzsche in his title, Trilling suggested some of the same reforms for mid-century America that Nietzsche prescribed for turn-of-the century Europe. No two thinkers, however, could have acted on the world more differently than these. Nietzsche was of a long German pedigree and had all the trappings necessary to remain in the homeland academy, but didn't. Trilling was a first-generation Jew and therefore had a difficult time getting established in the academy, but did. (If his name had been Israel Trilling, it is doubtful that he would ever have been hired.) Nietzsche needed to reject the academy to make his great statement; Trilling needed to embrace the academy to make his. Nietzsche, though more popular now than any other philosopher, was completely unknown in his day. Trilling, though his popularity has somewhat thwagged in recent decades, was as famous in his day as any intellectual could hope to be. (Examples from Voltaire to Sartre suggest that the French have generally been better than the Americans at fostering public intellectuals whose contributions remain popular.)

Like Nietzsche, Trilling argued that the modern critic must stand askew of his culture, but Trilling was less rebellious than his predecessor, or even his own activist students at Columbia in the 60's. Coming from the Left that had produced *The Partisan Review* in the 40's, he consistently preached liberal humanism. Even so, he proved willing to let some prophets of counter-culture enter the curriculum. (It is also to Trilling's credit that he lent a hand to socially conscious rebels such as his student Allen Ginsberg.) Broadly committed to undergraduate teaching and to exploring the relationship between literature and culture, Trilling addressed a large middle-class audience. *Beyond Culture* (1965) expresses his social and moral vision, as well as his take on the modern Zeitgeist.

The social dimension of this vision may seem to come to the fore in a chapter on the Legend of Jane Austen, in which Trilling sympathizes with the idealization of a

"community of intelligent love"; but in his essay on Freud, he emphasizes the tension between culture and the individual. This quarrel between ideology and the self also informs his own uncertainties about his personal role *vis-à-vis* a changing society. Even at his most provocative, Trilling is—quite unlike the bracing, ironic, whining, emotive, funny, often breathtakingly inventive Nietzsche—more urbanely sensitive to the *devoirs* of his contemporary audience.

It is a testament to his very tact that Trilling is able to convert his scholarship *and* his teaching into popular material. Two of the most interesting essays in the book evoke the classroom experience. If literature is to remain the source of cultural values even as students lobby, despite faculty resistance, for courses in modern literature, Trilling is forced to face a fearsome question: What values does modern literature teach? Snappy, though somewhat cursory, analyses of such unruly modern masterpieces as Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy,* Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and Mann's *Death in Venice* raise the beasts of Death, Darkness, Dionysus and Dostoevsky: perverse or diabolical heroes—in short, the adversaries of traditional humanism. If, as Joyce once argued, the mind of a culture is defined by the nervous systems of its artists and writers, and modern art and literature oppose culture, what on earth, Trilling asks, is he preaching in the classroom?

Teaching these writers "cold," with profound misgivings about the horror, the nihilistic "Abyss" to which he is exposing his students, Trilling discovers to his own horror that they "don't get it." They treat "The Abyss" as a purely intellectual challenge, as if it had "greeted them saying, 'Interesting, am I not?'" Can the act of teaching this literature somehow neutralize its impact? In a later essay, Trilling expresses doubts about the role of the then rapidly growing university. Could the routinizing complacency of this literary enclave interfere with or even discourage intellectual progress? If this prized environment could no longer take its members *beyond* a secure view of culture, the American mind would succumb to trivializing forces.

Though deeply rooted in the culture of the university, Trilling was willing, at times, to challenge the stances of academia in the name of addressing American culture at large. After all, this book was not written for students and teachers *per se*, but for the educated segment of a then very prosperous America plagued, at the same time, by withering civil injustice. It is to all of "us" that he poses these questions: Isn't modern literature opposed to the culture that produced it? Are not the whirlwinds of counter-culture essential to sociopolitical progress? Is the university too secure in its commitment to business as usual to make many Americans engage new challenges? These doubts, as well as Trilling's defensive prefatory address to his audience, suggest that the very sense of community and the principles that made his own role possible were already crumbling. Trilling faces the music with open ears.

These essays remain relevant. Trilling's willingness to state his mind and his open, accessible way of doing so made him a cultural force, at least for a 20th century American version of Woolf's "common" readership. As the tendency in American academe and the literate American public toward specialization and, to coin a term, technicalization

continues to isolate "us" in our work, where can we turn today for public debate? Can the media take on such a role, or doesn't passive recourse to light and fugacious commercial fare only affirm a seeming shallowness? Moreover, what would Trilling have to say about digital addiction and the potentially maddening, artificially synapsed world of the ever-widening Web? Are these developments unifying or isolating? Do they make it harder for us to think on our own? Trilling might not have had all the answers, but he knew how to ask at least somewhat provocative questions; and that, he'd assure us, is what we need to emulate.

If a drawback to Nietzsche's wizardry is a tendency to shake the reader up too irreverently at times, Trilling's pitfall is an occasional too-reassuring vagueness. He begins his book by claiming that the university does not neutralize the impact of modern art, for instance, but goes on to suggest that it does. He argues too glibly that he is sensitive to all audiences; and though he deplores "easy generalizations," he slips into them himself when it is convenient to do so. These are only reflections, though, of the difficulties of addressing both specialists and lay people in one idiom, a task he achieves with a certain wizardry of his own.

What Trilling shares with Nietzsche is an original, nontechnical voice and a rigorous call for self-doubt. For both critics, the obvious path leads nowhere. They indict smug routine, Emerson's "hobgoblin" of "foolish consistency," a monster that grows so large off the efficiencies of modern industrial society. The illusionists of Hollywood once suggested that all we needed to do was award ourselves for our ideas to realize that they were ours all along. Much better, perhaps, to remain figures of tin and straw, forging our own little communities, doubting our paths with the courage of the lionhearted. It is by venturing beyond secure bounds *within* bounds that we can discover the universal in ourselves.

Then again, there is a new kind of cynicism in the air today of a type somewhat different from the social unrest of the 60's that Trilling never fully engages. For Trilling, despite his fears of teaching the modern "adversary culture," the academy was dangerous because it offered too much vocational and ideological security, or soon would. Today there are not only enough books about Conrad, Kafka, Joyce and other alleged "untamables" to fill an entire building, but an equally large number of books about insecurity, divisiveness, and trouble in the ivory towers and with values at large. Well, at least there *ought* to be as many of the latter, all of which could fit invisibly inside a hand-held electronic reader. Sociopolitical forms of criticism alone do not always address these concerns. After all, the culture of one university department might be uniquely designed to produce a never-ebbing river of essays on Conrad's politics and Woolf's sexuality that specialists in other departments, not to mention non-academics, rarely read. By this token, the disjunction between the critical concerns of many in the academy and the commercial, social and independently creative focuses and struggles that dominate in the so-called "real" world merits more elaborate contemplation than academicians, bridge-builders and even journalists seem willing to afford it. Moreover, were we teleported in all our 21st-century populousness and contentiousness back into Trilling's era, a new section in the bookstore—"the Abyss in Education"—would be under construction, *literally*. Now the

bookstore and everything in it is migrating to a virtual space, where one can always navigate away from site to site to site, never to return to Ithaca.

Still, it is almost as if Conrad anticipated that risk, insisting that we ask: What was the purpose of that journey anyway? Can we ever really come back? Trilling regretted that his students could look into the Abyss and see only one more means to a familiar goal. Insiders that they were, they saw the facade of the monster without seeing the monster itself. Nietzsche, by contrast, was the almost consummate outsider, a genius loitering productively on the edge of the Abyss, someone who helped, from his perch, to *envision* it. In *Beyond Good and Evil,* Nietzsche therefore adopted a different perspective: "He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster," he warned. "And when you gaze long into an Abyss, the Abyss also gazes into you."

TOWARD AN AFTERWARD

"The longing for a beyond has been attenuated."
"This is a muddy stream where only monsters can swim."
—Allan Bloom

I can't help thinking that, if I were to entertain these themes informally beyond the confines of one century, two books and two thousand words, Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* would come to mind. The connection between Bloom and Trilling, given their mutual alliance with Saul Bellow (whom Trilling quotes in *Beyond Culture* and who introduces *Closing*) is telling. More important, Bloom is fairly obsessed with Nietzsche. Even his chapter headings ("Our Virtue," etc.) come right out of *Beyond Good and Evil*, which was written exactly one hundred and one years before *Closing*.

By declaring the American mind too "open," Bloom affirms that Trilling's double doubts about The Abyss have come to fruition, even as he writes his Jeremiad in the late 80's. The Abyss has swallowed up the heart of traditional American culture on the one hand and relinquished its own productive "impact" in the process, creating, in a nutshell, "nihilism American style." It's an exciting, if arguably conservative thesis.

At the same time, Bloom offers a completely schismatic take on Nietzsche. He respects the philosopher's call for "creators of values" and elite intellectual heroism. He also echoes *Beyond Good and Evil* in denouncing what he sees as a narrow "technical education" and reaches beyond even that denunciation to claim that the Ph.D.'s of today know less than Grandpa (who never even went to college). Why the decline in education? The glory (in America) that was virtue, nature, reason, and Poe's "glory that was Greece" has all been infected by a German virus called Nietzsche who (with the help of Heidegger as a kind of carrier) killed off the foundation for even his own program.

This latter claim is ridiculous and potentially profound. Even if individuals serve (in my view, and also Tolstoy's) only as catalysts in and for a vast vortex of sociohistorical change, the assertion that a thinker/critic can have an effect completely contrary to his

intentions is compelling, especially since Nietzsche's influence on a gamut of intellectuals from Freud to Yeats to Habermas, Sartre, Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, de Man, *et. al.*, is pronounced. As Trilling's concerns about his new course implied, the university can transmit such influences. Nevertheless, Nietzsche for the most part only responded to The Abyss, an abyss which what we might call mass culture has come to late and on its own terms. Besides, in *The Clouds*, Aristophanes ironized the way in which 5th-Century Athenian parents took umbrage at the rebellious popular music of the younger generation. Such complaints appear to be nothing new. It is patently absurd of Bloom, for that matter, to credit Nietzsche and Heidegger with the rise of commercial pop stars in his own time, as if dead German philosophers were the unacknowledged legislators of the music industry. It is misleading even to associate the writing of a 19th-century philosopher-poet with electric guitar music that drowns out Mozart. Mozart's work comes closer to Nietzsche's definition of the Dionysian that Bloom (or Trilling) is willing to observe.

Spanning a century, Nietzsche, Trilling, and Bloom all blame higher education for teetering on the edge of obscure technicality. Theirs is a chronic modern complaint. It is difficult, perhaps, for the will to wisdom to demand expertise—out of dread of the dilettante—without risking the tyranny of the technician. On the other hand, given the ongoing break-up of faith (among a large number of cognoscenti) in "standard" Western religions, canons, and conventions over the past century and a quarter, it is not all that surprising that Bloom applauds the very words—"gravity," "good and evil," "tradition"—that Nietzsche finds so objectionable. A century earlier, outmoded conventions needed ripping up. Since then, given the workings of a tornado in almost all fields of endeavor—a process that has left no one in Kansas anymore but bewildered, on unfamiliar ground—conventions have needed some reassembling. Both men, in their contexts, oppose complacency in the name of a more vital balance.

If the end of the 20th century is context in question, then the argument that "getting beyond" necessitates the challenging foundation of a tradition, a common pool of knowledge, a "core curriculum," is perhaps on the mark, and reflects a heartfelt stance on Bloom's part. Yes, a sloppy species of relativism or *amour-propre* combined with a shallow materialism can actually amount to a closing of the mind. The philosophic life requires a reverent embrace of, or at least a thought-through response to, the work of some central circle of culture heroes. But whence is that center to come? Bloom's plea for the clichéd melting-pot, the old gender roles and the old Platonic prejudice as opposed to the new relativist prejudice just seems—I'm avoiding political terms—primitive. McIntyre had already done a more cogent job of arguing for the reestablishment of Aristotelian virtues in modern Western society. In fact, as far as sources go, Nietzsche himself favored the Old Testament, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Emerson (foreign and modern viruses welcome) as new literary and philosophic models without turning from *his own* old core curriculum at all. He favored the pre-Socratics over Plato (who nevertheless played the straw man to his own Thrasymachus), but Bloom does not acknowledge how much Nietzsche actually surpassed him in seeing the Greeks as exemplars of the old model of excellence. In this particular sense, Bloom is of Nietzsche's party without knowing it.

On the one hand, Bloom's vague call for "natural human good" and references to "current events" already make his book seem somewhat dated (Noam Chomsky used more severe terms from the start) and implicate him in the "wishy-washiness" he claims to oppose. However, his call for old values—exemplified by Plato and the Bible—is powerfully symbolic of a belief in a coherent and cohesive conceptions of nobility and honor to which some remain committed and for which others wax nostalgic to this day. Indeed, Bloom's call for the sacred embrace of Love as opposed to what Keith Botsford would later call "melanin and genetic content" and "the latest theorem of gender or race" still strikes a chord. Bloom himself would go on to write/dictate a book on the themes of love and friendship in literature while lying partially paralyzed on his deathbed.

Still, even Plato's best treatments of love include the final rhapsody of *The Phaedrus* and the exposition of multiple views in the agonistic speeches and dialogues of *The Symposium*. In short, even Plato can be more multiplex and elusive than he may seem. Many today are seeking their roots and heroes in disparate sources and traditions perhaps in reaction to the dearth of depth in superficial black-and-white conformities. One may still speak of communities, if not a community. The expanding if fractured canon of intellectual pursuits in the American academy can therefore be regarded as a positive trend after all, or at least a scattered cloud-formation with a silver lining. Perhaps one need no longer seek a yellow brick road to some Promised Land below. Still, ongoing doubt in the firmament above the ivory towers and a gathering fog in the much-touted blogosphere are evidence that the strongest "core claims" in Bloom's book remain pertinent, and that his more reactionary claims, or something like an echo of them, have forced various individuals and institutions to clarify their own positions. Though Bloom's role in what Camille Paglia later called the "culture wars" of the 80's defines a far more fleeting phenomenon than Nietzsche's ongoing influence as a gadfly, both of their arguments, like Trilling's position between the extremes, confront American and much of Western society with its own malaise frankly, humanly, lucidly, and sweepingly. On this challenge "our"—perhaps everyone's—increasingly more globalized and globalizing culture depends. But all culture, like all morality, entails an ongoing quest. Who, pray tell, is the wizard of early 21st century cultural criticism, and is that person's voice ringing out loudly enough to be heard?

"Different times, different monsters."
-Conrad