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Luiza Larangeira da Silva Mello

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- 2 Since Hayden White published *Metahistory*, in 1973, theorists of history and historians in general have been interested in the poetical and rhetorical aspects of historiographical texts. Inversely, they have more recently inquired into the epistemological potential of literature and the historical dimension of the knowledge produced by literary works. In a special issue of the prestigious French review *Annales*, entitled *Savoir de la littérature* and published in 2010, the editors Étienne Anheim and Antoine Lilti declare that "rather than track down the portion of fiction, narration, or stylistic invention in the texts of historians," the essays in the issue intend "to question the nature of the knowledge carried by literature." (Anheim; Lilti, 2010: 253)¹ New as these questions might have seemed to the historical theorist in 2010, they had already been posed, explicitly or implicitly, by twentieth century literary theorists and critics such as Erich Auerbach, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Lionel Trilling.
- 3 In this essay I intend to explore some possibilities of dialogue between History and Literature through the works of the American literary critic Lionel Trilling (1905-1975). I will be doing this in two different ways: I will both analyze Trilling's argument in favor of the historicity of literature and will relate this argument to Trilling's interest in the history of sensibilities, especially the history of moral sensibility, or, to use his own phrases, the "moral imagination" (Trilling, 2008: 107) and the "moral life" (*id.*, 1972:1). Finally, I intend to trace the historicity of Trilling's own arguments. In doing so, I hope to show how Trilling's literary criticism can still – nearly 45 years after his death – offer a contribution to historians who are interested in analyzing literary works, particularly those interested in the history of sensibilities.
- 4 If I succeed to do so, I will be able to argue that Trilling's defense of literature's historicity implies a cultural criticism in both a broad and a narrow sense. In a broad

sense, Trilling's cultural criticism puts him among some eminent nineteenth and twentieth century philosophers, sociologists, and literary critics, who developed theories about modern western societies, such as Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud (the latter three being avowedly major intellectual influences on him). In a narrower sense, Trilling focuses his criticism on American culture and its lack of historical sense – which makes it modern *par excellence*. His criticism of American culture makes him part of a strong American intellectual tradition, which includes writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James.

- 5 However, unlike Hawthorne and James, who came from Anglo-American protestant stock, Trilling came from a Jewish middle-class immigrant family settled in New York and moved upward on the social ladder by means of intellectual and academic life, graduating from Columbia College in 1925. In the following decade, he became part of the group known as the New York Intellectuals and frequently published in the *Partisan Review*, both associated, in the late 1930s and the 1940s, with a Jewish anti-Stalinist left.² Nonetheless, as Thomas Bender has noted, though the New York Intellectuals are usually connected to leftist radicalism, at least during the 1930s, Trilling's formative influences can be traced not so much to Marxism as to the "liberal humanism" of the Columbia College Anglophilic curriculum in the 1920s (cf. *ibid.*, 1931).
- 6 In the next sections I intend to show that there is a connection between Trilling's liberal humanism and his argument in favor of the historicity of literature. Furthermore, I will contend that at the heart of this connection is the pivotal subject of Trilling's work, that is, the ways in which the self is figured by literature. Though this is the theme of many of his essays, especially in his late work, I will focus on his famous 1972 book, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, which was based on a series of lectures delivered at Harvard University two years prior. Finally, I will venture to relate his analyses of the moral sensibility in this book to his defense, in his earlier work, of liberal humanism and the historicity of literature. To this end, I will draw upon several essays published in the 1940s in the *Partisan Review* and *The Kenyon Review*, and republished, in 1950, in his first volume of essays, *The Liberal Imagination*; with his 1943 book on E. M. Forster; and with the volume of essays called *The Opposing Self*, published in 1955.

Literature as a historical art

- 7 In *Sincerity and Authenticity* Trilling analyses the emergence of two historical values in the European literature and philosophy of the early modern and modern periods. These values can be grasped in the concepts of "sincerity" and "authenticity". He opens the book's first chapter, which is called "Sincerity: its origin and rise", describing the ambivalent reaction shared by both academic works and common sense towards the idea that moral values are historical constructs. If, on the one hand, he argues, as we are generally aware of "the differences between the moral assumptions of one culture and those of another [...] we find it hard to believe there is such thing as an essential human nature" (Trilling, 1972: 1); on the other hand, the moral life represented in Homer's, Sophocles', or Shakespeare's works may seem so familiar to us that we are easily persuaded the values which form our moral sensibility are universally experienced in all cultures, all places, all times. This very ambivalence, continues Trilling, is felt towards the "element, the state or quality of the self which we call sincerity" (*ibid.*: 2). If, at first, we are inclined to think the word "sincerity" and the value referred by it are "as old as

speech and gesture" (*ibid.*), on deeper reflection we feel compelled to agree "that the word cannot be applied to a person without regard to his [or hers] cultural circumstances" (*ibid.*). Thus, while it is absurd to find the biblical Abraham, or Homer's Achilles, or Beowulf either sincere or insincere, it is perfectly reasonable to inquire into the sincerity of Shakespeare's, or Goethe's, or Jane Austen's characters.

- 8 In the pages following this preliminary presentation of his subject, Trilling tries to give the reader a more or less stable definition of the word "sincerity" through the analyses of some major works of European literature from Shakespeare to Matthew Arnold. I will come to this definition presently. I would first like to focus on Trilling's hermeneutic method, which is a historical method. Trilling states that sincerity begins to be more and more figured by literary works at the moment when, in the early modern period of European history, the increase in social mobility is counterbalanced by the increase in the repression of social mobility. This dynamic unsettles the traditional individual identity as a group identity and generates the possibility for someone to "rise above the station to which he [or she] was born" (*ibid.*: 16), to become something other than he or she originally was. Thus, the preeminence of sincerity in early modern literature can only be fully understood if we take the historical sensibility related to the concept of sincerity into consideration. It is Trilling's historical method that grounds René Wellek's argument that Trilling's criticism of literature should be understood as a criticism of culture (Wellek, 1979: 26)³.
- 9 Trilling's historical method is not the result of an unconscious criticism practice. On the contrary, it is the outcome of decades of theoretical reflection on the principles of literary criticism. In an early essay titled "The sense of the past", first published in 1942 in the *Partisan Review* and eight years later in *The Liberal Imagination*, Trilling contends that literature is related to history in three different if complementary ways. First, literature is historical, in his view, in the sense that it usually narrates, as the official history itself does, "personal, national, and cosmological events" (Trilling, 2008: 184). Secondly, literature is historical because it inevitably relates to a literary tradition and, in doing so, it incorporates and modifies literary history. Finally, for Trilling, literature is related to history in the sense that "side by side with the formal elements of the work, and modifying these elements, there is the element of history, which, in any complete aesthetic analysis, must be taken into account" (*ibid.*).
- 10 Trilling's effort to demonstrate the historicity of literature and its close relation to the formal, aesthetic aspects of literary texts is avowedly an argument against the position taken by American literary theorists and critics who took part in the movement known as *New Criticism*. Trilling's relationship with the New Critics is a complex one. Both criticized a kind of literary criticism that sought the meaning of literature in the social, economic, or political reality, a reality outside literature; or, as Thomas Bender put it, both had the "ambition to develop nonpolitical categories of literary analysis" (Bender, 1990: 327). However, as Joseph Frank has noted, Trilling, as opposed to the New Critics, implied that, even while literature could not and should not be *explained* by an external sociopolitical reality, literary works were able to shed some light on the sociopolitical and cultural reality (cf. Frank, 1978: 33-34). Adam Kirsch, in a 2011 book titled *Why Trilling Matters*, contends that twenty-first century critics and writers can still look up to Trilling, since "more than any twentieth-century American intellectual, Trilling stood for the principle that society and politics cannot be fully understood without the literary imagination." (Kirsch, 2011: s.p.) What those critics are saying – and I am inclined to agree with them

here – is that, though Trilling rejects a kind of literary criticism that explains literature via an extra literary reality, he believes literature fashions and is fashioned by the culture it is a part of, and, therefore, can help us understand that culture. In other words, though Trilling acknowledges the relevance of the New Critics' contention against the traditional nineteenth century liberal literary history, which grounds its scientific method in the search for the reflex of the external reality on the literary text, he claims that the New Critics defense of an absolute autonomy of literary works and of a purely formalistic analyses of these works disregard the ineluctable fact that "literature is an historical art" (Trilling, 2008: 184).

- 11 The lack of the sense of the past in American formalist criticism is understood by Trilling as part of a broader tendency of American liberalism to operate inside the realm of abstract ideas. When the New Critics, pronouncing literature's complete autonomy, disregard the complex relationship between literature and history, they are claiming the independence of literature from culture and its social density. In doing so, they come close to the very liberal imagination they sought to keep away from. If the New Criticism and the liberal criticism are on opposite sides concerning their principles and methods of literary criticism – the first defending the autonomy of literature and the latter explaining it as a reflex of sociopolitical reality –, they are similar in their denial of the historicity of literary, cultural, social, and political values. In other words, Trilling seems to be implying that New Criticism is itself part of a broad American liberal tradition. Therefore, in order to understand the full extent of Trilling's defense of the historicity of literature, it is first necessary to understand his criticism of American liberalism and his defense of a liberal humanism.

Liberal humanism

- 12 Academic studies on Trilling's work usually argue that, in spite of his affiliation with the New York Intellectuals and the *Partisan Review*, during the 1930s, his Marxism "was more a passing episode" (Bender, 1990: 330) and "there is little Marxism in his works unless we consider simply historicism and determinism or a strong interest in class relations and in the problem of 'alienation' as Marxists" (Wellek, 1979: 27). If that is so, it is not a coincidence that the Marx quoted by Trilling in *Sincerity and Authenticity* is the young Marx of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, whose mind "is more humanistic, in the sense of being less ambitious of scientific rectitude, than that of the author of the canonical works" (Trilling, 1972: 122). It is not a coincidence either that Trilling's first collection of essays is entitled *The Liberal Imagination*. The collection's title was not only a common phrase in the essays he published in the *Partisan Review*, but it had also already appeared in the title of the introductory chapter of his 1943 book on the work of the English writer Edward Morgan Forster, "Forster and the liberal imagination".
- 13 It is not an easy task to tease out Trilling's meaning of the words "liberal" and "liberalism" – and the same thing can be said about nearly all key categories in his work. However, as Thomas Bender has noted, there are two broad meanings of the word liberalism in Trilling's writings. The liberalism he found dangerous was the one tied to political ideologies, in a "wide spectrum of American political opinion, from conventional progressive attitudes to those of fellow travelers and Stalinists" (Bender, 1990: 325), that is, a liberalism connected to Enlightenment rationalism and its sometimes blind faith in progress. The liberalism he appreciated was tinged with the colors of two main literary

and philosophical traditions: a broad humanistic tradition, which prompted a "critical spirit" (*ibid.*) of self-scrutiny and the critical examination of the values shared in one's society; and a British romantic literary tradition, "which proposed a richer awareness of power and a fuller appreciation of tragedy" (*ibid.*: 326), comprised of authors such as Keats, Wordsworth, and Matthew Arnold, all subjects of Trilling's essays, books, and the courses he offered with Jacques Barzun at Columbia University for years.

- 14 This particular approach to liberalism, allied with his disillusionment of Soviet communism, by the end of the 1940s, and his unsympathetic comments on the students' revolt in the late 1960s, earned Trilling the label of a conservative. Joseph Frank applied this label in an article entitled "Lionel Trilling and the Conservative Imagination" (Frank, 1978), published in 1956, a year after the publication of Trilling's *The Opposing Self*. More recently, Michael Kimmage analyzed Trilling's moderate liberalism together with Whittaker Chambers new-conservatism as part of what he calls the American culture "conservative turn" (Kimmage, 2009). I am, however, inclined to agree with René Wellek, when he argues that we cannot properly apply this label to Trilling "if we take 'conservatism' in any current political sense either in England or in the United States" (Wellek, 1979: 28). In spite of his criticism of the liberal imagination, "Trilling remained, undoubtedly, committed to the principles of liberalism and its criticism of the American business civilization as well as the ideals of equality, justice and freedom." (*ibid.*)
- 15 However, I am here less concerned with Trilling's political views or biases than with his interpretation of the liberal imagination as it is represented in literature. If we cannot precisely grasp the meaning of the word liberalism in Trilling's essays, we can say, nonetheless, with some degree of certainty that, although Trilling is sympathetic to what he calls the "essential" liberal imagination (Trilling, 2008: xxi), which values the individual above institutions and collective allegiances, he also warns his readers against the liberal tendency to oversimplification. I believe the relation to the liberal tradition he attributes to Forster is very close to the relation to this tradition he himself nurtured. The following passage of his book on Forster seems to be representative of it:

[Forster] stands in a peculiar relation to what, for want of a better word, we may call the liberal tradition, that loose body of middle class opinion which includes such ideas as progress, collectivism and humanitarianism.

To this tradition Forster has long be committed – all his novels are politically and morally tendentious and always in the liberal direction. Yet he is deeply at odds with the liberal mind, and while liberal readers can go a long way with Forster, they can seldom go all the way. They can understand him when he attacks the manners and morals of the British middle class, when he speaks out for spontaneity of feeling, for the virtues of sexual fulfillment, for the values of intelligence; they go along with him when he speaks against the class system, satirizes soldiers and officials, questions the British Empire, and attacks the business ethics and the public schools. But sooner or later they begin to make reservations and draw back. They suspect Forster is not quiet playing their game; they feel he is challenging *them* as well as what they dislike. And they are right. For all his long commitment to the doctrines of liberalism, Forster is at war with the liberal imagination. (*id.*, 1965: 13)
- 16 If Trilling shows his admiration for the liberalism of Forster, "who might say with Swift, 'I have hated all nations, professions and communities, and all my love is for the individuals'" (*ibid.*: 9), he also admires him for escaping the "liberal mind's [...] simple logic" for which "good is good and bad is bad" (*ibid.*: 14). What Trilling likes about Forster's manner is that it "will not tolerate absolutes" (*ibid.*: 12).

- 17 The same ambivalence towards liberalism appears in the preface to *The Liberal Imagination*. There, Trilling claims that there is an essential liberal imagination, which is open to reality's "variousness and possibilities, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty", but he also fiercely criticizes liberalism's efforts to "organize the elements of life in a rational way" (*id.*, 2008: xx); an effort that is blind to the fact that "the world is a complex and unexpected and terrible place which is not always to be understood by the mind as we use it in our everyday tasks" (*ibid.*). And although, when trying to define the liberal imagination he mentions European writers such as John Stuart Mill, Goethe, and Forster, on the other hand, when he talks about the nefarious tendencies of liberalism he focuses on American liberalism and how it shows itself in the American critics', writers', and readers' relationship with literature.
- 18 Trilling is here fighting against a tendency in American culture – and also, as we have seen, in American literature and American literary criticism – to ignore reality's ambiguities and paradoxes; a tendency as well to ignore the fact that the way human beings grasp reality is socially and culturally fashioned. These tendencies are related to the lack of the sense of the past, which traditionally distinguishes American culture.

Individual and society; self and culture

- 19 At the heart of Trilling's criticism of American culture is his perception of the liberal imagination's blindness to the ambiguities of reality, the belief that the relationship between human beings and the real is straightforward and instantaneous, and the ensuing difficulty Americans traditionally have in realizing that values are historical constructs. These features are grounded in the way American culture usually values individual autonomy over societal relationships.
- 20 This issue is more fully developed in another essay in the same collection, called "Manners, Morals, and the Novel", published originally in *The Kenyon Review*, in 1948, and specially dedicated to the features of the novel and the way it relates to reality. In this essay, Trilling argues that the novel, as it evolves from the eighteenth century on, is a literary genre which specificity is to deal with the question of reality. He defines the question of reality as the "old opposition of reality and appearance, between what really is and what it merely seems" (*ibid.*: 207). This opposition between reality and appearance is, for Trilling, a social one, as it is grounded in the tense relationship between the individual and society. In other words, it is the opposition between what the individual really is and what she or he appears to be to society. The European novel, from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, grasps this opposition, which lies at the core of its main subject, namely, "the manners".
- 21 Trilling understands manners not only as the expression of cultural customs, as the *mores*, but more inclusively as "that part of a culture which is made up of half-uttered or unutterable expressions of value" (*ibid.*: 206). His definition of manners points to the social dimension of culture, which is precisely the subject of the novel. According to Trilling, the novel is born in a moment when the strictly rigid, almost static feudal social structure gives way to a more flexible one, in which "money is the medium that, for good or bad, makes for a fluent society. It does not make for an equal society but for one in which there is a constant shifting of classes, a frequent change in the personnel of the dominant class. In a shifting society great emphasis is put on appearance" (*ibid.*: 210).

Thus, argues Trilling, snobbery, hypocrisy, and class are three pivotal subjects of the novelistic tradition.

- 22 At this point, Trilling declares that, with the exception of Henry James' work, his description of the novel does not fit the American novel. And that is because, in Trilling's words, "Americans have a kind of resistance to looking closely at society" (*ibid.*: 213) and to taking seriously the subjects of class, snobbery, and manners. He tries to understand this resistance by inquiring into the relationship of the American liberal imagination to reality. If, on the one hand, reality is of central importance to Americans, on the other hand, they usually refuse to deal with it in terms of reality's ambiguities and paradoxes. For them, the opposition between reality and appearance is not a component of reality itself, but an opposition that excludes appearance from reality. In other words, for the American liberal imagination, "reality is whatever is external and hard, gross, unpleasant" (*ibid.*: 215), while the subject of novels is whatever is evanescent, frivolous, and internal to the author's subjectivity.
- 23 Most of the issues Trilling deals with in "Manners, Morals, and the Novel" are expanded and more fully developed more than twenty years later in *Sincerity and Authenticity*. In his later book, Trilling resumes his old interest in the tense relation between reality and appearance, which is at the core of the novelistic genre. In the book's first chapter, Trilling argues that the idea of sincerity implies three types of congruency. Firstly, a congruency between what someone really is and what he or she is aware of being. This aspect of sincerity is summed up in the verses of Shakespeare's Hamlet, when Polonius advises his son Laertes

This above all: to thine self be true
And it doth follow, as night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man.
(*apud.* Trilling, 1972: 3)
- 24 Secondly, sincerity implies a congruency between what someone really is and what she or he should be according to cultural values shared by a specific society, even if these values are thought to be universal values. They are related to what Schiller called "the archetype human being", "an ideal man", or, in Matthew Arnold phrase, the "best self" (*ibid.*: 5). Finally, sincerity implies a congruency between what someone really is and what he or she professes to be to society. This aspect of sincerity is present in Hawthorne admonition: "Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait by which the worst may be inferred" (*ibid.*).
- 25 At the core of these three types of congruency is the congruency between reality and appearance. It is no mere coincidence, then, that both the emergence of the idea of sincerity and the genesis of the novel can be located in the early modern period. What is, however, even more significant is that sincerity (as well as its opposites, hypocrisy and dissimulation) depends on the relationship between individual and society, which is the novel's main subject. This dependency grounds the paradox of sincerity. Since sincerity depends on the congruency between someone's true self and what this person seems to be in the eyes of society or what he or she should be according to the social values, the very necessity of responding to society demands corrupts the integrity of the self. Though sincerity has had a long prestigious life, since its appearance in Shakespeare's plays in the sixteenth century and until its centrality in the Victorian novel, the paradox inherent to the very economy of sincerity is responsible for its decline at the end of the nineteenth and during the twentieth century.

- 26 From the paradox of sincerity emerges, nonetheless, the idea of authenticity. The logic here is that the effort to be sincere to others, to adequate one's self to the demands of society, alienates one from one's true, authentic self:

Society requires of us that we present ourselves as being sincere, and the most efficacious way of satisfying this demand is to see it that we really are sincere, that we actually are what we want our community to know we are. In short, we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part of the sincere person, with the result that a judgment may be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic (*ibid.*: 10-11).

- 27 Society not only represents a menace to a person sincerity, but, above all, to his or her authenticity. Society may corrupt the sincerity of an individual, but, paradoxically, any individual depends on society to be sincere. Authenticity, on the other hand, dispenses (or presumably dispenses) the relationship between the individual and society, as it dispenses both the congruency between what someone appears to be and what she or he really is and the congruency between what someone truly is and the general social values. The only congruency required to reach the state of authenticity is the congruency between one and oneself. The only congruency required is the one prompted by the first of Shakespeare's lines quoted above: "This above all: to thine own self be true." In others words, to be authentic we must be true to our authentic self. But *where* and *what* is this authentic self?

- 28 One attempt to answer this question was made by turn of the twentieth century psychoanalysis, which Trilling addresses in the last chapter of the book, entitled "The Authentic Unconscious". Freud's idea that "in the human mind there are two systems, one manifest, the other latent or covert" (*ibid.*: 140-141), that is, one conscious, the other unconscious, renders sincerity an obsolete value, while demonstrating affinity to the idea of authenticity:

The therapeutic process of psychoanalysis would seem to constitute a very considerable effort of self-knowledge, a strenuous attempt to identify and overcome in the mental life of the individual an inauthenticity which is not the less to be developed because it is enforced and universal. And this is so not only by reason of the nature of what has been concealed and is now to be discovered, because, that is, the idea of authenticity readily attaches itself to instinct, especially libidinal instinct, but also because a profound inauthenticity of the mental life is implied by the nature of neurosis, by its being a disguised substitute for something else. Psychoanalysis speaks of the pain or malfunction of neurosis as a 'substitute gratification' – what could be more inauthentic than an impulse towards pleasure which gains admission into consciousness by masquerading as its opposite?" (*ibid.*: 143-144)

- 29 The kinship between the idea of authenticity and the theory of psychoanalysis is reinforced, according to Trilling, by the fact that "a conception of society had been central to Freud's psychology" (*ibid.*: 150). While the conscious part of the mind, the ego, "was surrogate of society", the other part (I believe we could call it the authentic part), the id, "was defined by its pre-social impulses" (*ibid.*). However, later developments of psychoanalytic theory, in particular in Freud's 1930 book, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, render this dualism of the mind much more complex. In this book, Freud argues that there is an unconscious part of the ego which is not the id, but, on the contrary, is the part responsible for the id's repression, the part responsible for "moral judgment and self-criticism" (*ibid.*: 151), the part he calls the "superego". Though it "derives its authority from society, [...] in point of repressiveness the superego is far more severe

than society, whose purposes are largely practical and therefore controlled by reason" (*ibid.*: 152).

- 30 Trilling's analysis of the Freudian theory of the mind points to one of the inherent paradoxes posed by the modern aspiration to authenticity. The paradox is that, while we are inclined to search for the true, authentic self in our unconscious self, the "movement of the superego from rational pragmatic authority to gratuitous cruel tyranny" (*ibid.*: 154) makes this unconscious part of our self deeply inauthentic. Moreover, Trilling will contend that "the hegemony of this ferocious idol of the psychic cave may indeed not have been required or intended by civilization, but surely in tolerating the great fraud civilization is profoundly implicated in its grotesque inauthenticity" (*ibid.*: 155).
- 31 The paradox of authenticity can also be found in the very meaning of the concept. Authenticity's admonition that we should be true to our own selves exhorts us to free ourselves from the repressions and the limits imposed on us by society, and even by culture. Authenticity supposes the existence of a self that is not inscribed in the limits of society or culture, a self that is only one's own self, that is, one's true self. The search for authenticity, then, tends to destroy the cultural particularities that fashion a singular self. And in doing so, it ultimately destroys the self's singularity. If the authentic self is a self that is not socially and culturally fashioned, we may assume the possible existence of a self fashioned by a pre-cultural human nature, a self that is, therefore, universally human. How can a universal self be a singular self?
- 32 This is a problem that most of the modern western intelligentsia had to deal with. A problem that was at the heart not only of the sociological, anthropological, and philosophical theories of modernity, but also at the heart of some literary works at the turn of the twentieth century. In his well-known 1903 essay *The Metropolis and the Mental Life*, George Simmel states that "the broadest and the most general contents and forms of life are intimately bound up with the most individual ones" (Simmel, 1971: 333). Simmel seems to be implying that the less a person is subject to the pressures of communitarian relationships, the less his or her identity is defined by his or her belonging to a group – be it family, church, corporation, country, social position etc. – the more this person gains in individual freedom and the more his or her identity is defined by the universal features that characterize human beings. This idea is at the core of a humanistic conception of the self and of the modern notion of individuality – tributaries of both Enlightened and Romantic traditions –, which evolved from the second half of the eighteenth century and reached its apex during the nineteenth century.
- 33 As James Clifford has noted, "the European bourgeois ideal of an autonomous individuality was widely believed to be the natural outcome of a long development, a process that, though pressured by various disruptions, was assumed to be the basic, progressive movement of humanity" (Clifford, 1986: 140). Clifford argues that this ideal is connected to a conception of culture as "a single evolutionary process" (*ibid.*). By the turn of the twentieth century, however, "a new ethnographic conception of culture became possible. The word began to be used in the plural suggesting a world of separate, distinctive, and equally meaningful ways of life" (*ibid.*). This new historical meaning of culture became intertwined with the idea that the self is culturally constituted. The idea that "a self belongs to a specific cultural world much as it speaks a native language" (*ibid.*), an idea that seemed self-evident during the entire twentieth century – and that, in large measure, still seems so even in the second decade of the 21st century – was being hammered out around 1900.

- 34 Trilling is aware of this historical shifting in the meaning of the word culture, and aware, as well, of the historicity of the idea that selves are culturally constituted. In his view, it is no coincidence that the period during which prevailed the "ideal of an autonomous individuality" was the same period during which was gestated the idea of authenticity. This idea had been in gestation at least since the second half of the eighteenth century, when the paradoxes of sincerity were figured in works such as Rousseau's *Confessions* and Molière's *Le Misanthrope*. As authenticity suggests "a more strenuous moral experience than 'sincerity', a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, [...] and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life" (Trilling, 1972: 11), it begins to be conceptualized at the end of the eighteenth century, when the idea of self becomes characterized by "its intense and adverse imagination of the culture in which it has its being" (*id.*, 1979: I).
- 35 It is also no coincidence that a hundred years later, around 1900, at the same moment when emerges the idea that selves are culturally constituted, authenticity as a value reaches its preeminence over the value of sincerity. This simultaneity is at the heart of the paradox that marks the concept of authenticity. "At the behest of the criterion of authenticity", says Trilling, "much that was once thought to make up the very fabric of culture has come to seem of little account, mere fantasy or ritual, or downright falsification" (*id.*, 1972: 11). In other words, in order to be authentic, to be true exclusively to one's self, one has to free oneself from the bonds of culture. But how is this possible if it is culture itself that constitutes the self? Being authentic, being true to one's self paradoxically involves becoming free from one's self, since the self is fashioned by culture.
- 36 If this paradox could hardly be solved, Trilling argues that it was at least much exploited by the modern theories of art. The paradox was present in Oscar Wilde statements that "the first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible" (*apud.* Trilling, 1972: 118) and that "Man is least himself, when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth" (*apud.* Trilling, 1972: 119). Being the symbol of a mere social appearance, the mask was also a sign of inauthenticity, as it had been a sign of insincerity. But, paradoxically, using a mask was deemed the way to become free from the culturally fashioned self, to become authentic. Wilde was aware that this enterprise was only possible through art. "In art," he says, "there is no such thing as a universal truth. A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true" (*apud.* Trilling, 1972: 120).
- 37 It is, thus, not by chance that authenticity has become a central value both to modern literature and literary criticism at the first half of the twentieth century. The praise of authenticity is, according to Trilling, at the core of modern literature and criticism's paradoxical relation to the idea of self. While twentieth century writers and critics are supremely "preoccupied [...] with the self and with the difficulties of being true to it" (*ibid.* : 7), they nonetheless emulate authors of literary works to transcend their own selves – particularly the aspects of their selves that are shaped by culture and society – and to become authorial *personas*. "The doctrine of the impersonality of the artist" (*ibid.*: 8), as Trilling calls it, and its inherent paradox were followed by literary artists and critics in their sensitivity to "the implications of the poet's voice in its unique quality" and their "insistence that the poet is not a person at all, only a *persona*" (*ibid.*), and that his or her work is therefore independent from his or her cultural, social, and historical circumstances.

- 38 According to Trilling, if this longing for an authentic art generally characterized the modern western literature and criticism in the first half of the twentieth century, both in Europe and in America, in the latter it was increased by the American tendency to conceive the individual both as a unique and a universal being, disregarding the fact that an individual's self is culturally constructed. Therefore, though Trilling does not deal particularly with the American case, when he analyses the appreciation for authenticity associated with modern literature, in *Sincerity and Authenticity*, he does not refrain from specifying the nature of American sincerity and American authenticity in the book. More than that, his analysis suggests that if the search for authenticity is a characteristic of modern art in general, it is stronger in the American case, since American culture traditional lack of the sense of the past makes it "modern" *par excellence*.

Trilling and the American intellectual tradition

- 39 The fifth chapter of *Sincerity and Authenticity*, entitled "Society and Authenticity", reworks the historical dynamics between sincerity and authenticity focusing on nineteenth century English literature. Quoting a well-known George Eliot anecdote, Trilling contends that both English common sense and English literature are marked by the idea of categorical duty to which the individual has to submit in order to preserve his or her authenticity:

...plainly this was the implicit belief of the English novelists of the nineteenth century. They would all of them appear to be in agreement that the person who accepts his situation, whatever it may be, as given and necessary condition of his life will be sincere beyond question. He will be sincere *and* authentic, sincere *because* authentic. Indeed, the novelists understand class to be a chief condition of personal authenticity; it is their assumption that the individual who accepts what a rubric of the Anglican catechism calls his 'station and its duties' is pretty sure to have a quality of integral selfhood [...] a man is what he is by virtue of his class membership. His sentiment of being, his awareness of his discrete and personal existence, derives from his sentiment of class. And the converse was also true. The novelists gave judicious approval to upward social mobility so far as it could be achieved by energy and talent and without loss of probity. But they mercilessly scrutinized those of their characters who were ambitious to rise in the world, vigilant for signs of such weakening of the fabric of personal authenticity as might follow from the abandonment of an original class position. It was their presumption that such weakening was likely to occur; the names given to its evidences, to the indication of diminished authenticity, were snobbery and vulgarity." (*ibid.*: 114-115)

- 40 The idea that the individual's integrity and authenticity depend on his or her propriety, on the adequacy to his or her social position, or class, is an extension, to the society as a whole, of the relationship between the aristocracy and its social position. The English concept of *gentleman* is perhaps the most eloquent manifestation of this. To the English versions of sincerity and authenticity Trilling compares the American versions of these values, which is intertwined with the idea of innocence. Referring to Henry James's treatment of this point, Trilling ironically declares that:

Henry James is not simple on the subject of anything that has to do with Americans, but the general tendency of his work would seem to confirm the opinion which once prevailed – how curious it now seems! – that Americans, being wholly innocent, were wholly sincere, that American sincerity was as certified as that of children, peasants and nineteenth-century dogs. (*ibid.*: 112)

- 41 The Emersonian theme of the child as a representative of the innocence that ought to characterize the individual in a democratic society, a theme taken up in most of James's novels, is the substance of Trilling's comments on James's work. The American innocence greatly differs from the sincerity that characterizes the relationship between individual and society in English culture. English sincerity is grounded in the social sphere. American sincerity – we should say American innocence – is pre-social. It is an Adamic, prelapsarian innocence. Just as there exists a dynamic relation between the values of sincerity and authenticity in English literature, there is a similar dynamic in American literature. In the latter, authenticity is conceived as the quality expressed by the individual's exclusive fidelity to their inner self, a fidelity corrupted by the influence of society. English sincerity and American innocence, as well as their conceptions of authenticity, refer to two modes of self-fashioning, to which Trilling alludes through the Hegelian categories of "honest soul" and "disintegrated consciousness:"

Americans, we might say - D. H. Lawrence did in fact say fifty years ago - had moved into that historical stage of Spirit which produces the 'disintegrated' or 'alienated' consciousness. What defines this consciousness, according to Hegel, is its antagonism to 'the external power of society', the wish to be free of imposed social circumstances. The English Belonged to an earlier historical development, in which Spirit manifests itself as the 'honest soul' whose relation to society is one of 'obedient service' and 'inner reverence'. The Hegel represents the 'disintegrated consciousness' it is beyond considerations of sincerity. But the 'honest soul' has sincerity as its essence. [...] The English sincerity depends on the English class structure. (*ibid.*: 114)

- 42 The passage touches on some points worth developing. The Hegelian categories are taken from Hegel's commentary on Diderot's essay *Le Neveu de Rameau*, which Trilling had previously analyzed in the book's second chapter. Diderot's essay takes the form of a dialogue between the nephew of the famous French composer Jean-Philippe Rameau and Diderot himself. A composer himself, the nephew is relegated to ostracism, while his uncle receives all the laurels of fame. The dialectical relationship between career failure and the constant pursuit of success, in addition to an exacerbated discipline, leads the nephew to develop the ability to mimic the social roles that may be useful to him in gaining career benefits. It leads, too, to a harsh judgment on the very notion of society. Society is seen by the nephew as corrupting human virtues and as "a mere histrionic representation" in which "every man takes one or another 'position' as the choreography of society directs" (*ibid.*: 31). This criticism, in tune with that of the French moralists of a hundred years prior, and based on an Augustinian conception of virtue, does not take sincerity as the ground for societal relations, but takes these relations as essentially insincere. For Hegel, the Diderot in the dialogue represents the "honest soul", which has a submissive relation to the "external power of society" (*ibid.*: 35), while Rameau's nephew represents an individuality that is "disintegrated consciousness" (*ibid.*), whose relation with the external social power is a relation of antagonism.
- 43 What is at stake when Trilling compares the English culture to the American is the difference between a society in which individuality is formed as the "honest soul" and a society in which individuality appears as a "disintegrated consciousness", an individuality that antagonizes the society – and the culture – of which it is a part. Quoting Henry James, Trilling defines American society, compared to the English society, as "thinly composed, lacking the thick, coarse actuality which the novelist [...] needed for

the practice his [or her] craft. It did not offer him the palpable material, the *stuff*, out of which novels are made" (*ibid.*: 113).

- 44 I believe Trilling's criticism of the New Critics' formalism in his early essays is a reaction to a similar formalism he perceives in American national culture. According to him, Americans might be characterized, in Hegel's words, by their "'disintegrated' or 'alienated' consciousness". In other words, they wish to be free from the very grip of history. Though not mentioning it explicitly, Trilling is referring to a nineteenth century branch of American literary history, which includes authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Henry David Thoreau, affiliated with a movement known as Romantic Transcendentalism, which sees history mostly as a burden that impairs the individual creative energy and moral sense.
- 45 However difficult it may be to sum up, in a few lines, the essence of this complex movement, it is possible to say it has created a new interpretation of the English-American Calvinist tradition, in which the sovereignty and transcendence of the Christian deity are transferred to the individual. In the Puritan tradition, the values of the community sprung from a transcendent, sovereign, and mysterious God, and assumed, in this fashion, an uncontested absolute character. The Romantics shift those absolute foundations from God to the individual. In this perspective, the relationship of the individual to truth and to the real is direct, objective and absolute – it is not mediated by the particular and variable character of history, of social traditions and cultural conventions. It is in this sense that Emerson, in his famous essay, *Self-Reliance*, praises the individual who trusts his own mind completely, who trusts his deeply personal and almost intuitive wisdom that is free from any obligation to any past or present authority, which would only restrain the authenticity of individual thinking. For Emerson and his fellows in the transcendentalist movement, the ways of life and the values of the European societies, precisely because their claim to legitimacy derived from the authority of tradition, were regarded as corrupted and degenerated versions of the original Christian values that could only be reclaimed in a direct relationship between individuals and the world around them (cf. Emerson, 1983)⁴.
- 46 This was not, however, an exclusive point of view about the relation of the individual to society within the American intellectual tradition. An alternative point of view was offered by American authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James, who believed that the sense of the past was not only the very foundation of both the individual's aesthetic sensibility and moral sense, but also the lens that mediates every person's perception of the world. Both Hawthorne and James were interested in the individual's search for autonomy from the external power of society, but they were, at the same time, aware to the fact that every individual exists only through his or her relationship with society.
- 47 I believe Trilling himself becomes part of this alternative branch of American literary history when he approaches literature and history in his literary criticism. Although he does not conceal his admiration for what he calls the "classic modern literature" (Trilling, 1972: 8) and its search for authenticity and the autonomy of the self, he especially admires this search when it is accompanied by the awareness, present in the works of writers such as Hawthorne, James, and Forster, that every self is inevitably historically shaped. It is this awareness that also shapes Trilling's own search for the historicity of literature.

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ENDNOTES

1. "Plutôt que de traquer la part de fiction, de narration ou d'invention stylistique dans les textes des historiens, pourquoi ne pas s'interroger sur la nature du savoir dont la littérature est elle-même porteuse ?"
2. As Alexander Bloom noted, though they resisted to identify themselves as a group, the New York Intellectuals came together in the 1930s and had many things in common: "Coming from the immigrant ghettos in which their parents have settled upon arrival in America, they moved toward the center of American intellectual life by a circuitous route through left politics and the avant-garde cultural life of the 1930s." (Bloom, 1986: 4).

3. According to Wellek "it is not easy to focus on the literary criticism of Lionel Trilling if literary criticism is understood strictly as comment on literature: theories about it, principles, and specific texts. Trilling belongs, with Edmund Wilson, to critics of culture, in particular American culture, and he is often concerned with questions of politics, pedagogy, psychology, and self-definition, which are only remotely related to literature." (Wellek, 1979:26)

4. The following passage of Emerson Self-Reliance is representative of this position: "I remember an answer which when quite young I was prompted to make to a valued adviser, who was wont to importune me with the dear old doctrines of the church. On my saying, What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within? My friend suggested, - 'But these impulses may be from below, not from above.' - I replied, 'They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil.' No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it. A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition, as if everything was titular and ephemeral but he. I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions. Every decent and well-spoken individual affects and sways me more than is right." (Emerson, 1983: 261-262)

ABSTRACTS

In this article, I intend to look into the issue of the relation of History to Literature through the works of the American literary critic Lionel Trilling (1905-1975). Therefore, I will both analyze Trilling's argument in favor of the historicity of literature and will relate this argument to Trilling's interest in the history of sensibilities. Finally, I intend to look into the historicity of Trilling's own arguments. In doing so, I hope to show that Trilling becomes part of a particular branch of American literary history, alongside Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James, which is marked by the awareness that every self is inevitably historically shaped.

Dans cet article, j'aborde la question de la relation entre l'histoire et la littérature à travers l'oeuvre du critique littéraire américain Lionel Trilling (1905-1975). Ainsi, je vais analyser son argument en faveur de l'historicité de la littérature, le mettant en rapport avec son intérêt par l'histoire des sensibilités. En outre, je me penche sur l'historicité propre à la démonstration de L. Trilling. Ce faisant, j'espère montrer que l'auteur, tout comme Nathaniel Hawthorne et Henry James, inscrit sa pensée dans une tradition de l'histoire littéraire américaine dont la marque distinctive est de comprendre tout individu comme étant, de manière inévitable, historiquement façonné.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Lionel Trilling; historicité de la littérature, tradition littéraire américaine.

Keywords: historicity of literature; American literary tradition.

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