A Case of Insularity:

Diana Trilling on *In Cold Blood*

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 by voters centered in the American interior made some of his critics wonder how they could have ignored so much of the United States in the first place. "O I have ta'en / Too little care of this!" They vowed to be more cognizant of their fellow citizens in the future.

New Yorkers in particular have a certain reputation for blotting out the existence of the wasteland west of New Jersey. According to the classic Saul Steinberg cartoon of 1976, across the river from New York lies Jersey, followed by Kansas City and a few points west, all of which occupies less territory than the expanse between Ninth Avenue and the Hudson River.

A similarly dismissive view of the American interior, minus the wit, found expression in candidate Hillary Clinton's portrayal of half her opponent's base in 2016 as a "basket" of racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic "deplorables." A continent populated by such virulent bigots is a wasteland indeed. Perhaps those who were left to wonder how they could have misread the depth and breadth of disaffection with the liberal order in 2016 did not fail to notice the American heartland so much as they chose, with Hillary Clinton, to deny its legitimacy.

Hillary Clinton made her now-infamous comment in New York, and although she herself was neither a born nor naturalized New Yorker, it comports with other expressions of local disdain of a backward continent. A stunning example was published exactly fifty years before in the form of a review by a member of the New York intelligentsia of *In Cold Blood,* Truman Capote's report on the 1959 murder of a family of four in a farmhouse on the outskirts of Holcomb, Kansas—a village set "almost in the exact middle of the continental United States," as Capote observes. That Capote had been sent deep into the American interior by the *New Yorker* suggests that a certain incongruity was built into the making of *In Cold Blood*. In Holcomb, Kansas, the word "Manhattan" refers not to Manhattan island but Manhattan, Kansas, site of Kansas State University.

Before Hillary Clinton delivered her litany of epithets, Diana Trilling, in a commentary on Capote's "nonfiction novel" in *Partisan Review*, derided the "virtuous, substantial, Republican, churchgoing, civicminded citizens of the Middle West," revealing one in particular—Herbert Clutter of Holcomb, Kansas, a prominent KSU graduate and civic figure, the head of his household, and the first within it to be murdered—as the prisoner of his own shallow mentality.[1] Grouped by the editors of *Partisan Review* not with the book reviews but with "Arguments," Diana Trilling's discussion of the events recounted in *In Cold Blood* has a prosecutorial edge that is indeed more appropriate to a polemic. Almost as appalled at the virtues of the heartland as Hillary Clinton at its vices, Trilling blames Mr. Clutter's propriety for the catastrophe that befell his family. In effect, a man so temperate could not respond to or even understand the threat posed by two armed intruders, an inability that left his family defenseless. Trilling's verdict that Mr. Clutter was

responsible for the murder of his own loved ones represents a judgment of astonishing perversity.

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Capote's *In Cold Blood* chronicles the slaughter of the Clutter family at the hands of two drifters—not only the event itself, but its backstory and aftermath. There is much to take issue with in Capote's nonfiction novel, beginning with the exploitation of mass murder for literary purposes. Diana Trilling, however, begins by faulting the "wholly objective" style of *In Cold Blood*, quite missing the book's bias toward the one who did the killing, Perry Smith, whom some believe Capote was in love with. Not only is 30 percent of *In Cold Blood* devoted to Smith,[2] but Capote labors to extenuate his guilt, arguing against the evidence of his own text that Smith had no idea of what he was doing when he executed the Clutters one by one. How much trust can be placed in the judgment of a critic who overlooks such a patent departure from impartiality?

As a rule, Capote makes sub rosa instead of explicitly editorial comments in *In Cold Blood*—a practice that has misled some. Surveying criticisms of this work (which had been published the year before), Diana Trilling notes that certain unspecified readers "feel that in his unquestioning acceptance of Kansas farmers, members of 4-H Clubs, even KBI agents, Mr. Capote by strong implication gives his assent to American society in terms long outmoded in serious writing." While it is not clear at this point whether or not the author agrees with those who withhold their "assent to American society," neither is it clear what

assenting or not assenting to the society you live in might actually mean. For that matter, what does it mean to refuse to "accept . . . Kansas farmers"? Erasing them from a mental map? Boycotting their wheat? Campaigning to expropriate their land? Leaving them with their land but holding up their way of life to scorn and ridicule? Why? Evidently the notion of not accepting Kansas farmers has not been thought through.

Similarly, what does it mean not to accept the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, which in the Clutter case jumped to no conclusions, arrested no one mistakenly, tracked down the killers (Smith and Richard Hickock) in another state, and went about its work so methodically that it dispatched an agent to a pawnshop in Mexico City to recover the radio and binoculars stolen from the Clutter house? Does the unacceptability of the KBI mean Hickock and Smith were framed? Not even they claimed that. Like the unacceptable existence of Kansas farmers, the illegitimacy of the KBI is a glib notion the author can get away with floating only if the reader defers to a prosecutorial tone.

Diana Trilling concentrates her prosecution on Kansas. In her view, what Kansas farmers, Kansas investigators, and Kansans generally seem to lack is authenticity, a norm examined in Lionel Trilling's last book, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1971). It appears to be the very sincerity of people like Mr. Clutter—their straightforwardness—that marks them as deficient in the deeper, more difficult truth of authenticity in the eyes of Diana Trilling. Inauthenticity resembles shallowness, and Diana Trilling looks down on Kansas because, in her judgment, it is so shallow. Hence the disdain with which she surveys the "virtuous, substantial, Republican, churchgoing, civicminded citizens of the Middle West." For her, a civicminded Republican of the Middle West is a creature almost as repellent as a racist

homophobe in the thinking of Hillary Clinton. Inevitably, her recoil from this stereotype turns her against Mr. Clutter, a figure of civic virtue whom she discredits in depth. As she writes,

> He [Mr. Clutter] was a pillar of his community, himself so fashioned for respect that he could even depend upon it for his "nervous" wife, who, after the birth of each of her children, had wandered always further into sadness and uncertainty. But this pillar of strength was a murderer—or so at least I read the story.

In practice, it seems, not accepting the existence of Kansas farmers means subjecting an exemplary farmer to an ad hominem analysis. In the judgment of Diana Trilling, this farmer, Herbert Clutter, who was killed with a shotgun after having had his throat cut, was himself morally guilty of the murder of his wife and two teenaged children.

Hickock and Smith came to the Clutter house armed with a knife and a shotgun because they heard from a fellow inmate at the state penitentiary that it held a safe containing $10,000. However, the report was false. According to Smith's account as given by Capote, when Hickock demanded to be shown the safe, Mr. Clutter

> looked Dick straight in the eye and told him, being very mild about it—said, well, he was sorry but he just didn't have any safe. Dick tapped him on the chest with the knife, says, "Show us where that safe is or you're gonna be a good bit sorrier." But

> Mr. Clutter—oh, you could see he was scared, but his voice stayed mild and steady—he went on denying he had a safe.

As Diana Trilling sees it, Mr. Clutter's mildness doomed his family, because it rendered all of them, including fifteen-year-old Kenyon, unable to defend themselves.

How it did this, she does not say. It simply "incapacitated" them through the magic of patriarchy.

> From Mr. Capote's detailed reconstruction of the night of the murders, Mr. Clutter was not only himself unable to meet the aggression directed against him by this invasion of his home, he would seem to have incapacitated his grown son and daughter for any self-defense, even by effective guile. . . . It was apparently inconceivable to Mr. Clutter, and therefore to his obedient son and daughter, that the two men might do worse than rob them, harm them.

Thus, when Mr. Clutter failed to resist Hickock when asked the location of the nonexistent safe, the thought of resistance became inconceivable to his grown children even though they did not witness the scene, which took place in the basement while they lay in their bedrooms on the second floor of the fourteen-room house. Mr. Clutter's fateful mildness, in turn, came from his habit of conducting himself by the book of good behavior—"programmatically," as Trilling puts it. His sincerity in looking Hickock "straight in the eye" and telling him the truth masked his inauthenticity—his inability to act like a man. "His

response to [Hickock's] anger could not have been more contemporary in its . . . lack of instinctual manliness."

Aside from the obscurity of the theory of induced helplessness and the indecency of blaming a victim of murder for the execution of his own family, there are at least three flaws in Trilling's allegation that Mr. Clutter doomed his family by failing to lunge at the armed Hickock.

First, someone in Mr. Clutter's position might well feel that keeping calm and not flying into a panic or rage—that is, behaving as Diana Trilling indicts him for behaving—offers the only chance of defusing the danger into which he and his family have been thrown. Few would have the fortitude to remain as calm as Mr. Clutter.

Second, although Mr. Clutter was surely alert to danger (a knife was in play, after all), he could not have foreseen that telling the truth when ordered to reveal the location of his safe would lead to the slaughter of his family. No one could have foreseen it. It is precisely the unthinkable extremity of the violence unleashed on the Clutter family that drew Capote to the story in the first place and draws readers to *In Cold Blood* to this day. In Diana Trilling's opinion Mr. Clutter was a fool or a Pollyanna if he found it "inconceivable" that Hickock and Smith intended to murder his family, but "inconceivable" is exactly what the highly competent KBI investigator, Alvin Dewey, finds it to be. "It appeared to him . . . 'inconceivable' that these men entered a house expecting to find a money-filled safe, and then, not finding it, had thought it expedient to slaughter the family for perhaps a few dollars and a small portable radio."

Third, according to the text of *In Cold Blood,* Dewey was certain that Herbert Clutter would have resisted with all his strength if he had realized (as in fact he could not have) that the lives of his family were at stake. Soon after the murders Dewey dismisses the theory that Mr. Clutter was forced to bind and gag his loved ones, reasoning that "If Herb had thought his family was in danger, he would have fought like a tiger." Later in the text it is reported, similarly, that "Herb *couldn't* have suspected, or he would have fought. He was a gentle man but strong and no coward. Herb, his friend Alvin Dewey felt certain, would have fought to the death, defending Bonnie's life and the lives of her children."[3] For Diana Trilling, not accepting the KBI seems to mean contradicting Dewey's emphatic judgments without so much as mentioning them. She insinuates that Mr. Clutter has lost the fight instinct**,** quite as if she knew him—a figure in a book—better than an actual friend did. (During his sojourn in Kansas, Capote and his assistant Harper Lee were befriended by Dewey and his wife, which presumably explains how Capote himself came to report Dewey's thoughts.)

Not only does Diana Trilling ignore Dewey's certainty that his friend would have "fought to the death" to defend his family had he known what awaited them, she invents a scene to show what a failure Mr. Clutter has become. His reaction to Hickock, she argues, was "guilt-ridden—if these people less fortunate than himself wanted his money, he must give it to them." In essence, Mr. Clutter has grown so accustomed to behaving well in the eyes of a churchgoing community that his healthier instincts have withered, so that he can no longer draw on them when he suddenly needs them. However, there is no scene in Capote's nonfiction novel in which a guilt-stricken householder decides that he must give

two armed invaders money because they are less fortunate, as if charity had expelled courage. So determined is Trilling to show this admired figure as a woeful failure that she resorts to inventing a scene out of thin air to prove it.

Trilling, then, depicts Herbert Clutter as a Kansan unmanned by his repressive moral code and his way of life. One who in his daily life "permitted himself no rage" (as she puts it) was unable to summon up rage when he desperately needed it, and thereby betrayed his family. Note that it is a man who kept his composure in the presence of danger who incurs this damning judgment.

How does Diana Trilling's pretense of knowing Mr. Clutter inside out reflect a New York point of view?

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Just before deploring Mr. Clutter's "lack of instinctual manliness" when it mattered most, Trilling remarks:

> One is reluctant (it seems like chic) to draw so exemplary a citizen, a successful teetotaling Republican devout progressive farmer, into the circle of self-alienated Americans. Yet manifestly this was a man without connection to his inner self, living by forced intention, by conscious design, programmatically, rather than by any happy disposition of natural impulse.

With ill-concealed delight in exposing a model Kansan as an inauthentic human being, Trilling refers knowingly to his inner self, just as she refers elsewhere to his "guilt-ridden reaction" and enfeebled instincts. Guilt, instinct, "inner," "conscious": here is the jargon of psychoanalysis.

While American psychoanalysis had an outpost in Kansas in the form of the Menninger Clinic in Topeka (across the state, some 300 miles from Holcomb), its capital was New York. The refugees from Hitler who did much to transplant the European practice of psychoanalysis to American soil arrived and clustered in New York, the most cosmopolitan of American cities. Among them was the analyst of whom Diana Trilling speaks most warmly: her last, Marianne Kris (a childhood friend of Anna Freud whose father had been the Freud children's pediatrician).[4] The Trilling household itself was a kind of psychoanalytic hub, with both Trillings in treatment for much of their adult life. Taxis, penthouses, doormen, Greenwich Village, the New York Psychoanalytic Society, and, not least, "the New York literary-intellectual community" figure in one way or another in Diana Trilling's retrospective account of her serial treatments, suggesting how embedded they were in the milieu of New York. Where else in the United States was the rather foreign practice of psychoanalysis woven so closely into daily life that patients could undergo treatment five days a week for decades on end, as both Trillings did?

Such patients might well assume that the height and measure of psychoanalysis was practice in the city of New York. Lionel, says Diana Trilling, implicitly believed "that in being in Dr. Loewenstein's care he was . . . in the best possible analytic treatment,"[5] quite as if the sun of psychoanalysis revolved around New York. Certainly New York analysts

held a strong position within the American Psychiatric Association. When the concept of neurosis (the mortar of Freudian thinking) was called into question as the APA undertook the revision of its diagnostic system in the 1970's, among the first to object were members of the New York District Branch of the APA.[6] Quite rightly, they scented danger. The leader of the revolution that eventually overthrew the dominance of psychoanalysis—Robert Spitzer—trained in New York as an analyst himself. Only with the adoption of a non-Freudian diagnostic system—one "atheoretical with regard to etiology"—under Spitzer's captaincy, five years after Lionel Trilling's death, did the APA's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual declare its independence of Freud.[7] Adding one insult to another, the intellectual inspiration of the new system came from Washington University in St. Louis.

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It is psychoanalysis, an institution then based in New York, that underwrites Diana Trilling's commentary on the deficiency of character that rendered Herbert Clutter responsible for the murder of his wife and children, in her judgment. Dr. Kris, described by Diana Trilling as "a most remarkable woman, warmhearted, large-minded, sensitive, sensible, imaginative," adhered to "the Freudian doctrine [that] identified female normality with 'passivity,' a counter to the 'activity' of the male."[8] Appealing to the same grossly simplistic notion of masculinity, Diana Trilling arraigns Mr. Clutter for not taking action when confronted by Hickock. Herbert Clutter, she argues, was all talk, and a talker is "not a very masculine thing to be." Mr. Clutter, it seems, did not measure up to Hollywood

heroism. So it is that one who kept calm in the face of a knife-wielding home-invader becomes a figurehead of a man who betrayed his family. Certain that she knows Herbert Clutter to the depths, Trilling takes the sort of interpretive liberties with an actual human being that Freudian critics were in the habit of taking with fictional characters, even suggesting at one point that he kept a gun-shy dog because of his denial of his own emotions.

Trilling's attempt to unmask Herbert Clutter as a kind of imposing nonentity reflects a mental map of the United States in which the interior resembles a vast no-man's land. Mr. Clutter, the personification of Eisenhower country, is revealed as a no-man himself. His conventionality, his inauthenticity, betokens an individual so entirely "without connection to his inner self" that he can only live a life of cardboard, and therefore proves completely unequal to the challenge when two armed ex-convicts enter his home. Instead of probing the depths or the shallows of Mr. Clutter's psyche, Diana Trilling would have done well to probe the psychiatric excurses (including inordinately lengthy excerpts from a journal article) incorporated into the text of *In Cold Blood*, and to check whether the actions of Smith and Hickock bear out the psychiatric evaluations and explanations given.[9]

Over the course of a life in the humanities I have encountered many a strained interpretation, but none more outrageously strained than Diana Trilling's interpretation of Herbert Clutter as the murderer of his own family. What can have inspired such a twisted reading? On the basis of her disparagement of citizens of the Middle West, of whom Mr. Clutter was one, an answer suggests itself: sheer insularity.

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[1] Diana Trilling, "Capote's Crime and Punishment," *Partisan Review* 33 (1966): 252-59.

[2] Ralph Voss, *Truman Capote and the Legacy of* In Cold Blood (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011), p. 126.

[3] After his throat is cut, Mr. Clutter does attack. "The man had the strength of ten men—he was half out of his ropes, his hands were free." It is at this point that Smith kills him with a shotgun.

[4] Obituary in New York Times, Nov. 25, 1980.

[5] Diana Trilling, *The Beginning of the Journey* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1993), pp. 234, 252.

[6] Hannah Decker, *The Making of DSM-III: A Diagnostic Manual's Conquest of American Psychiatry* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 151.

[7] See DSM-III, p. 7.

[8] Trilling, *The Beginning of the Journey,* pp. 246, 249. The patient began seeing Kris in the 1950's.

[9] On the dishonest use psychiatry in *In Cold Blood*, see Stewart Justman, "Murder Without Motive: *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *In Cold Blood*," *Law and Humanities* 13 (2019): 177-97.