

regard for the integrity of the disparate elements they comprise, by their power of looking before and after." What darkens our prospects is "a falling off in mind's vital confidence in itself," in "its own freedom and power." That decline unchecked, we may face "a diminution of national possibility...a lessening of social hope."

For many, postmodernism promises a renaissance. Whether such optimism is reasonable remains to be seen. Our new civilization, at any rate, will not be built from the Renaissance. For a salient impetus of that epoch was the rediscovery of the ancient classics. To the champions of the "new," Lionel Trilling speaks from the grave. If they are right, that the dead past should bury its dead, Trilling and his humanism are only a ghost. If wrong, the ghost haunts us still.

Reviewed by RICHARD B. HOVEY

The Rebels' Creed

Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith, by James H. Billington, *New York: Basic Books, 1980.* viii + 652 pp. \$25.00.

THE WORD "revolution," as even its etymology suggests, refers to the completion of a circle: the return to some point of origin. How did this word, so clearly applicable to the world of physics, find its way into political discussions? In what sense is the displacement of rulers a return to some social point of origin? James Billington has devoted a scholarly *tour de force* to the task of answering these questions.

Billington is interested less in the history of revolutions than in the history of the *idea* of revolution. So he emphasizes not the occasional outcroppings of political violence that dot modern European his-

tory, but the consistent subterranean ideology from which those upheavals were formed. Consequently, this book is not for the novice; the author assumes that his readers will already be familiar with the names and dates, the Garibaldis and Paris Communes, that form the outline for his argument. Obviously intent upon stirring up controversy on his chosen topic, Billington ranges over the entire European continent, and the entire span of the years between the French and Russian revolutions, for material to illustrate his thesis. In the process, he packages a remarkable historical erudition, featuring 141 pages of instructive footnotes (annoyingly located at the end of the book), in surprisingly digestible form.

Because his work embraces such a wide sweep of subject matter, Billington unveils his thesis immediately, in the Introduction. The idea of revolution, he contends, found its origins in the café society of Paris in the gestational period of the French Revolution. From that time forward, the ideology of revolution became a secular faith whose power derived as much from zealous missionary work as from political practicality. With time, the revolutionary fervor gave birth to two distinct revolutionary theories. One, based upon the call for *égalité*, nourished an ideal of equality, and eventuated in socialism and communism. The other, based on *fraternité*, emphasized patriotic sentiments and gave rise to the ideology of nationalism.

And what of that third word from the revolutionary battle cry, *liberté*? Here Billington embellishes his thesis: "Liberty had been the battle cry of earlier revolutions...which produced complex political structures to limit tyranny...." But those earlier revolutions had occurred in countries where the prior success of the Protestant Reformation had legitimized dissent and "modified monarchical power by accepting some form of organized political opposition." It was in predominantly Catholic countries such as Italy and Poland where the revolutionary ideal found the most fertile ground.

For this phenomenon, too, Billington

provides an explanation. In predominantly Catholic countries the loss of faith leaves noticeable gaps; the nation yearns for a system of belief, and a liturgy of ritual. Revolutionary ideology, as it developed in the wake of the French upheaval, provided for those needs with a comprehensive belief in the perfectibility of man through radical political change. The "point of origin" toward which these revolutions aimed was a return to a system of government based on the essential facts of human nature. But first, of course, the revolutionary leaders would have to transform human nature itself.

Faith and ritual provide the focus for Billington's exploration of the revolutionary ideal. He notes the bizarre, contrived public liturgies that marked the success of the French Revolution, culminating in national feasts and hymns to "Liberty, daughter of Nature." He traces the fascination that revolutionary leaders evinced for the occult—their consistent conscious efforts to pattern organizations after the Freemasons and the Bavarian Illuminati, and their even stranger penchant for initiations and ceremonial observances. From the Babeuf Conspiracy through the Algerian FLN, revolutionary groups have leaned toward the "cell" method of organization. In part, no doubt, this is a convenient system for prudent conspirators. But is it also a system of ritual secrecy—a means of allowing rebels to join the company of the Elect? Billington would have us ponder that question.

When history is considered as a matter of unvarnished facts, with dates and names in the ascendancy, one sees only sporadic outbursts of revolutionary ideology. But Billington persuasively argues that a single thread of organization ran through virtually all such events. This was not a conspiracy, or at least not a witting conspiracy. But the different revolutionary sects nourished each other in their faith, and the different ideological schools provided bases for new developments in the faith. In particular, Billington emphasizes the pivotal, but unrecognized, role of Filippo Buonarroti. This survivor of the Babeuf

Conspiracy, a direct descendant of Michelangelo, plied his own artistic talents by corresponding with dozens of younger revolutionary thinkers in the early decades of the nineteenth century. His influence, as Billington reveals it, is discernible in each of the myriad ideological trends of the later revolutionary eras.

In his previous major work, *The Icon and the Axe*, Billington distinguishes himself as a marvelous raconteur of historical tales. In *Fire in the Minds of Men*, he maintains that reputation intact. But he also shows his ability to extract from history some striking lessons for contemporary politics. The radicals of the New Left in the 1960's, for instance, with their combination of ideological rebellion and personal license, remind him of the Proudhon faction in its fight against Karl Marx. Lafayette becomes a pathetic figure in the development of the French Revolution because, "like many an aging reformer in later times, he thought he could elevate and educate the young extremists—and perhaps also recover something of his own youth amidst an army of adonis-liberators." And Saint-Simon illustrates the radical undercurrent that permeates all of modern social science; he "ended up popularizing the most revolutionary of all modern ideas: there can be a science of human relations."

Through all these tales, Billington never ceases to emphasize the belief of the revolutionaries in their ability to rework human nature. Nor is there ever any doubt about the arrogance of those who held this faith. During the earliest days of the revolutionary faith, the café intellectuals of the Palais-Royal did not hesitate to speculate about a society governed by "*intelligences supérieures*"—themselves, of course. The press, the primary vehicle of revolutionary praxis, is glorified throughout the development of ideology; most of the movement's leaders chose to make their careers in journalism. And the power of both theory and theorists eventually became so great that, during the reign of Napoleon III (himself an ardent follower of ideological trends), serious considera-

tion was given to the construction of a monument to honor Hegel.

Such homage for theorists is highly unusual in the political world, and the pursuit of such honors undoubtedly fired the revolutionary journalists in their quest. But aside from occasional brief and glorious successes (in the Paris Commune, for example), revolutionary theory remained divorced from actual political control until the success of the Bolsheviks. That success, in Billington's estimation, marks "the first major break in the basic unity of European civilization since Luther." For the first time, ideology became in itself a means of conferring political legitimacy. And the very nature of that ideology made it inevitable that a single revolutionary government would split all of Europe, by exporting its theories and thereby subverting other nations. In Billington's judgment, the revolutionary ideology is more important than the particular focus it takes; the crucial fact about Lenin is that he was "a professional revolutionary before he became a Marxist."

This is, again, a book with which the author clearly intends to stir up scholarly dispute on the nature of revolutionary faith. But Billington himself is not at all certain that the revolutionary episode will continue to influence historical developments so strongly. As he explains in his Introduction,

The present author is inclined to believe that the end may be approaching of the political religion which saw in revolution the sunrise of a perfect society. I am further disposed to wonder if this secular creed, which arose in Judaeo-Christian culture, might not ultimately prove to be only a stage in the continuing metamorphosis of older forms of faith and to speculate that the belief in secular revolution, which has legitimized so much authoritarianism in the twentieth century, might dialectically prefigure some rediscovery of religious evolution to revalidate democracy in the twenty-first.

Perhaps it is obvious that Billington

himself fervently desires the religious revival of which he speculates. And he himself, in his studies of the Soviet empire, has noted the recrudescence of religious belief amid the rubble of abandoned Marxist theories. In Poland, especially, the power of faith is now being illustrated in one of the very countries that first nurtured the secular faith of revolution.

On the other hand, there are reasons for fear as well as for hope. Religion played a key role in the Iranian revolution, yet the ideology now ensconced in Tehran is neither democratic nor pious. Within Christianity, the currents of liberation theology—redolent of Saint-Simon's injunction for revolutionaries to "turn to true Christianity again..."—threaten to turn honest religious beliefs into secular political aspirations. And in France, where it all began, the *Nouvelle Droite* seems to embody the very sort of nationalistic revolutionary theory which Billington describes so well. The outcome is surely very much in doubt. But in introducing a new element to the discussion of revolutionary theory, Billington has contributed his own share to the defense of an older, much more revolutionary, but less political faith.

Reviewed by PHILIP F. LAWLER

Wilder and Wilder

Thornton Wilder and His Public, by
Amos Niven Wilder, Philadelphia, Pa.:
Fortress Press, 1980. 102 pp. \$8.95.

WE CANNOT HAVE TOO MUCH about Thornton Wilder. The assumption lying behind that assertion is that Wilder is a major author who has been undervalued. Or perhaps not even so much undervalued as neglected. Not infrequent have been those casual chats with professional colleagues