

At the end of the story, as the printer applies for reinstatement in the Party, the irony and the absurdity of this quest for faith and community are brought home. No longer tormented by the “de-ranked conviction that a deserted universe, like a house unlocked after the removal vans had gone, would sink into oblivion. . . ” he walks out of the dingy building (where his pursuit of membership took him) more sure-footed, his eyesight improved.

It is not clear whether or not the author intends for the printer to represent either a struggling and fallible individual in search of meaning in a world that offers little assurance about the ends of life, or Western intellectuals unable or unwilling to come to grips with a world which discredited their dearest beliefs. In any event, *Proofs* offers the reader a penetrating summary of the major political-ideological dilemmas and divides of our times. More than that, it lays bare the discontents and conflicts which will not go away with the collapse of communist systems and which also help us to understand why Western sympathizers hold on to their moral indignation and discredited ideals.

**Russell Kirk:**  
***The Scrimmage of Appetite***

ROBERT CHAMP

*Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*, by  
Russell Kirk, *Peru, Ill.: Sherwood  
Sugden & Company, 1991. ix + 349 pp.*

ADMIRERS OF RUSSELL KIRK will find in this handsome paperback a revised edition of the work first published in 1956 by Henry Regnery. The new edition features two welcome additions: a foreword entitled “Contending Against Decadence” and an index. In the former, Kirk traces

some of the social and intellectual developments connecting the intervening decades; remarks on the fate of individuals, mostly friends, who appear in the essays; and offers an assessment of our current condition. It is a succinct account that will enlighten, sadden, and disturb readers. Its perspective is bracing. Many of the fine things Kirk defends in the course of the book could nowadays no longer be defended: They are gone forever. Many of the worst things he attacks, on the other hand, have taken on new strength and new forms. We are invited then to participate not in nostalgia, although there is much to be nostalgic about, but a recollection of some of the people and events, some now obscure, which hied our chaos on its way.

Last year saw the thirty-fifth anniversary of the founding of *Modern Age*. *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice* appeared the year before that occasion. It helped to show not only the need for such a periodical but the eminent qualifications of the founder. In 1956 Russell Kirk was thirty-seven years old and already an imposing presence in the intellectual world. Works such as *John Randolph of Roanoke* (1951), *Academic Freedom* (1951), and the sweeping and magisterial *The Conservative Mind from Burke to Santayana* (1953), had established him not only as a defender of the conservative intellectual tradition but also as one of its ablest interpreters. In these books he had dispelled certain troubling opacities in conservative thought, a condition rising largely from the conservative’s instinctive distrust of definition; and in the last especially, he had set forth its hitherto neglected history vividly and without apology. And what results his work bore! Before Kirk, many serious readers had taken conservatism to be little more than a synonym for narrow-mindedness; after Kirk, it had necessarily to be viewed as an articulated whole, having a shape and direction—a body of

thought in effect that could no longer be dismissed simply by the knowing sneers and grave tut-tuttings of an intelligentsia grown morally smug and, if the truth be told, a trifle stiff in the knees.

The accomplishment was a timely one. It came at a period when discerning liberal critics—one thinks immediately of Lionel Trilling—had come to sense that liberalism was in crisis. And as we were to learn, it came just in time to quicken among several bright and creative minds of the time that spirit of possibility that would, at the end of two decades of strife and drift in the body politic, bring forth a conservative triumph—such a triumph, indeed, that the vaunted word “liberal” itself became a near expletive.

Still, in 1956, liberalism and the more invidious forms of leftism were very much a going concern in intellectual circles. As a result, early reviewers of *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*, a collection of essays written from about 1951 to 1955, often spoke of it with a steady, sometimes wary, eye on the liberal faith. *Time*'s positive review praised Kirk as an honest thinker and saw clearly the underlying unity behind the book's diverse subject matter, “personal integrity and a belief in God.” At the same time, the reviewer told his readers—contrary to his subject's own ease with the term—“Kirk is no reactionary, is in fact considerably more liberal than many self-proclaimed liberals.” *Commonweal*'s reviewer remarked that Kirk was “a man of an essentially poetic temper,” but demurred when he found Kirk “sweep(ing) Bentham, Marx, Dewey, and Freud indiscriminately into his radical Inferno.” The sourest note of all was struck, predictably, by *New York Times* reviewer Granville Hicks, who never seemed so much the fussy old lady as when belaboring “one of the most belligerent American spokesmen for conservatism.” Genuine appreciation, however, was not lacking, and it came in interesting places. At *The New Yorker*, for ex-

ample, opinion was all the other way from Hicks. The reviewer praised Kirk as “one of the most articulate spokesmen of the new conservatism” and ended his piece with the enthusiastic assertion that, “As a critical tool in the hands of a writer as adept as Professor Kirk, conservatism has a sharp cutting edge indeed.”

As someone once finely said of Sir Isaac Newton, on his easy solution of a difficult problem, “You know the lion by his claws.”

Generally, Kirk was given high marks for his insight into the present situation, for his audacity (few *serious* thinkers, then or now, would have defined “freedom” as “submission to the will of God”), and for his commitment to his adopted role as social critic. His style, with its Burkean undertones, was also commended, social critics not being especially known for grace of expression.

On the other hand, he was scored for pessimism, for not offering a program of his own, and for conflating liberalism and totalitarianism. Probably little good would have come of pointing out to these critics that pessimism is a loaded term; that conservatives, with their eyes on the permanent things, are not in the business of offering programs for saving the race (that is the trademark of the other side). Still, one wishes the last charge had been given an airing. It is unlikely that many of Kirk's accusers in this matter had made a study of liberalism's nineteenth-century ancestors or knew, for instance, of the profound influence exerted by English utilitarianism on the Russian writer Nikolai Chernyshevsky, one of Lenin's intellectual heroes.

*Beyond the Dreams of Avarice* had, on the whole, a good reception and it remains an intriguing book. In the Preface, Kirk called his collection “the random vaticinations of a social critic, intended to suggest the consequences of certain forces at work in our world, by vignette and review.” The randomness lies, no

doubt, in the occasions and circumstances in which the essays were written. Nobody, after all, ever put a book together randomly, and some mention of form is in order here. The book is divided into two sections: the first is entitled "American Observations," the second, "Notes from Abroad." "American Observations" is notable for its variousness, with offerings on such topics as the decline of serious periodicals, the state of American conservatism, Richard Weaver's concept of rhetoric, and utopianism. These essays reveal a man in combat, fighting on his own ground, who finds he can occasionally score a victory. Hence, they are constructed around definitions and tight reasoning, their matter being the stuff of proof and reproof. "Notes from Abroad," save for a few brief essays at the end, is concerned with a single topic—the effect of a planned economy on traditional life in Britain. Kirk's attacks on the planners are every bit as peppery as those on American liberals, but the tone is one of a battle lost. The writing is evocative, full of personal reminiscences and engaging personalities.

There is another distinction worth noting. While "American Observations" pictures for us an intellectual landscape, "Notes from Abroad" gives us a physical one. In this, the latter falls into an old tradition in English letters. Since the days of *Piers Plowman*, the English landscape has been a primary locus of social criticism in that land. Kirk's vision of the landscape as lost, or at least irrevocably harmed, underscores the sense that social criticism as an attempt at amelioration had become in Britain seriously attenuated.

"American Observations" falls then mostly under the rubric "review"; "Notes from Abroad," under "vignette." In fact we glimpse here the two aspects of Russell Kirk we have come to cherish. The first reveals him as the disciplined

thinker, the careful expounder of right reason. The second presents him as a highfalutin "Tramp Royale," gifted with a Gothic temperament and seeking after "variety, mystery, tradition, the venerable, the awful," as he was to tell us in *Confessions of a Bohemian Tory* (1963). The dichotomy, however, is only seeming. The heights and depths of a man do not exist independent of each other. In this work we are able to see the continuum, some of it, between the two.

The subject of the book is what Kirk calls "The Age of Gluttony," the age at which we have arrived after passing through the Age of Enlightenment *via* the "Bleak Age," Kirk's term for that period of surging Prometheanism and expanding industrial tenements which defined the nineteenth-century liberal experiment. The Age of Gluttony is likewise marked by scientific pride and secular reductivism. The old, old desires of man's heart—for God, for personal transcendence, for order, for community—have been either discounted or redefined. All hungers in the new dispensation, we must understand, are physical hungers and the materials to satisfy them need only be divvied up properly to ensure the good life for all. What really distinguishes the Age of Gluttony is that for the first time the Western democracies are considering and often implementing policies intended to bring about this fantastic, sensualized Eden. Helping them along, the intellectual establishment has gone into the business of cajoling, berating, and shaming politicians and populace into a leftward position. *Vox sinistrae, vox dei*, so to speak.

Stripping descriptions of the new paradise of their usual hortatory, feel-good language, Kirk recapitulates the dream, in "The Dissolution of Liberalism," as "some sort of brummagem utopia of creature-comforts, characterized by equality of condition, uniformity of thought, pervasive state regulation, and the obliteration

tion of traditional morality." (One can easily translate this language into 1990s liberalese: equality of condition becomes "fairness;" uniformity of thought, "political correctness;" state regulation, "government guidelines;" obliteration of traditional morality, "safe sex." Some of this new language reveals the consequence of tragic flaws in the liberal agenda since the appearance of Kirk's book, but the agenda remains intact.)

Individual essays focus on the symptomatology of the Age of Gluttony. "Statistics and Sinai" contemplates the reduction of morality to social arithmetic. "The Ethics of Censorship" warns that unless a local censorship, "moderate and regular," is allowed to exist, the result, in time, will be a totalist one. An indication of Kirk's prescience in this matter may well be the current, vigorous feminist onslaught on pornography. "York and Social Boredom" identifies the general decline of interest in religion as an effect of the modern alliance between man and the machine, wherein man "thinks that because he tends a machine, all creation is mechanical, with no other master than the human operator."

As might be expected, some essays offer valuable commentaries on both Kirk's previous and future work. Thus, "Orestes Brownson and a Just Society" provides welcome elaboration on an important figure discussed all too briefly in *The Conservative Mind*. "What Are American Traditions?" answers discursively a question to which Kirk would return, with clarity and concision, in *The American Cause* (1957). "Liberal Learning, Moral Worth" provides excellent background material for readings of both *The Intemperate Professor* (1965) and the more ambitious *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning* (1978). Finally, "Wyndham Lewis' Principles" and "The Last of the Scalds," about the South African poet Roy Campbell, introduces the same kind of trenchant literary criticism

readers were to find in *Eliot and His Age* (1972) and *Enemies of the Permanent Things* (1969). In effect, *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice* offers a primer on Kirk's thought.

The last essay, "Pico della Mirandola and Human Dignity," is one of the book's briefest and also most telling. Here we are led away from the topical concerns of the preceding pages and toward that period when the Modern was in its birth throes, the Renaissance. In Pico, who ranks among the Renaissance's most brilliant minds, Kirk depicts the quintessential humanist—one who "declared that man was only a little lower than the angels, a being capable of descending to unclean depths, but also having it within his power to become godlike."

This Platonic conception of man as occupying the middle ground of existence (the "In-between," as Eric Voegelin called it) was a dominating idea of the Renaissance and one Kirk believes we have lost. In the modern view, "man makes himself." Human dignity no longer consists in man's ability to choose between good and evil; it has been reformulated to show man defining good and evil for himself. God, the ultimate aim of the created spirit in humanist thought, is a mere projection. As the psychological schools, Marxism and the reigning philosophical regime of the time, Existentialism, taught, "an honest God's the noblest work of man" and must be done away with if man is to recognize himself as the source of godly powers.

Kirk's response to this situation is to emulate Pico who, at the end of his all too brief life, decided to abjure "the world and the flesh" and to go forth as an evangelist. In what has become perhaps the most noted sentence in Kirk's books, "If Things are to be thrust out of the saddle once more, and Man mounted (in Pico's phrase) to 'join battle as to the sound of a trumpet of war' on behalf of man's higher nature, then some of us

must go barefoot through the world, like Pico, preaching against the vegetative and sensual errors of the time."

In 1956, Kirk's more inimical critics guffawed at the idea of an American professor going barefoot anywhere. The mocking literalism was ill-placed. Kirk's symbolic language here indicates, of course, recognition of the proper humility necessary to a man who sets himself up against error. It also stands in contrast to that symbol of the powerful forces Russell Kirk has spent his life fighting, the jackboot.

How typical of the Age of Gluttony that, scarcely a dozen years after World War II, liberal critics would have missed the implied comparison altogether.

## ***Explanations Analyzed***

*GRANT MORRISON*

### ***Culture, Structure, or Choice?:***

***Essays in the Interpretation of the British Experience***, by Paul V.

Warwick, New York: Agathon Press, 1990. xiv + 251 pp. \$36.00.

THIS STUDY examines different perspectives on how "social, economic, and political phenomena are to be explained." According to political scientist Paul V. Warwick, there are at present three major competing types of "social science explanation," which are indicated in the book's title. One is "culturalist," and assumes that "shared values, norms, and orientations are widespread and relatively enduring features of human collectivities, and at least partially independent causes of human behavior." A second is "structuralist," of the Marxist variety, which holds that values and attitudes are imposed by the structure of class domination. A third is "rationalist" or rational-choice theory, for which the

model is the market and individuals are assumed to adopt values as means to rationally chosen ends.

Warwick maintains that until "about the mid-1970s" culturalism was broadly accepted in explanations of human affairs, for until then rational-choice theory was not sufficiently developed, and Marxist interpretations "tended to be relegated to the lunatic fringe of social science." Anyone with memories of the academic world before the mid-1970s may recollect that time differently, with Marxism's influence being recalled as scarcely so marginal. Nevertheless, Warwick insists that since the mid-1970s "Marxist theories have become ever more provocative, stimulating, and politically acceptable." As this book was published in 1990 and thus presumably researched and written, or at least put into final shape, in the second half of the 1980s, when Communism's death rattle became audible to the whole world, this might seem an odd point of view, and indeed, in any place other than Western universities, it would be. Warwick does detail flaws in Marxist theory, though as we shall see he borrows arguments and assumptions from Marxists in putting together his own interpretation. He also carefully examines rational-choice theory, which he says has become "a major growth area" in the past fifteen or twenty years. His chief aim is to show how the culturalist interpretation can be saved, for this mode of explanation typically suffers, he says, from a certain "squishiness" or lack of rigor in its formulations; it offers vapid concepts and untestable hypotheses, and "lacks causal specificity."

Warwick tests each of the three perspectives on issues in British history, at times looking at France by way of comparison. He ranges widely but focuses on the last two-hundred years, and though he has a good bit to say about Britain's rise to economic supremacy his real interest is its decline,