

# Mixed Blessings: A Critique of Recent Weaver Studies

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## I

IF CONSERVATISM'S DIAGNOSIS of modernity is wise and profound, much of the credit belongs to Richard Weaver (1910-1963). Deeply influenced by the Southern Agrarians, Southern intellectuals who criticized industrial economies and upheld a rural way of life, Weaver, a University of Chicago English professor, produced searching explorations of the nature of reality, rhetoric, culture, and modernity. His *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948), justly celebrated for tracing patterns of cause and effect running from world view to conduct, remains after half a century one of conservatism's most important and seminal works.

Fortunately, interest in Weaver is rising. In 1995 the Intercollegiate Studies Institute republished *Visions of Order* (1964), while Transaction Publishers issued *The Vision of Richard Weaver*, edited by Joseph Scotchie, a collection of essays on Weaver making an invaluable addition to the Weaver literature.

## II

The same cannot be said, alas, for Scotchie's *Barbarians in the Saddle: An*

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*Intellectual Biography* (1997). Seeking to introduce readers to Weaver by presenting the essentials of his published books and assessing their influence, it may charitably be called a disaster.

Readability is problematic. Scotchie's style is often botched ("Weaver is asking the patient to heal thyself") or sophomoric ("goodies," "zany").<sup>1</sup> Twisted syntax, mixed tenses, misquotations, and misspellings abound. A reader giving Weaver the attentiveness he merits faces a continuous stream of distractions like "humilitates," "*fons et origin*," and "admondition."<sup>2</sup>

Then there are the factual errors, such as 1955 as the year of the founding of *Modern Age*.<sup>3</sup> Worse, Scotchie is unreliable on Weaver. Revisions of *Visions of Order*, he asserts, "continued up until the early 1960s."<sup>4</sup> Yet Ted Smith's preface to ISI's edition reports "no substantial revisions...after August 1960 at the latest."<sup>5</sup> Scotchie gives Weaver's death date as April 9, 1963.<sup>6</sup> He was actually found dead on April 3.<sup>7</sup>

Scotchie does convey that Weaver stressed an honest view of man, valued civilized communities, and prized order, and that he deplored modernity's view of man as naturally good.<sup>8</sup> His presentations of *The Southern Tradition at Bay* (1968), Weaver's posthumously published doctoral dissertation, and *The*

*Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver* (1987) reveal Weaver's love for the South and respect for the Southern Agrarians.

Unfortunately, Scotchie's preoccupation with Southern topics makes his book lopsided: twenty-four pages go to *The Southern Tradition*; nineteen to Weaver's greatest book, *Ideas Have Consequences*; twenty-three to *The Southern Essays*; just fourteen to *Visions of Order*. It also makes the book obtuse. *Ideas Have Consequences* "is mostly a withering assault on urban culture, using the rise of the masses as a metaphor for the fall of civilization."<sup>9</sup> This is a crassly undiscerning reading, missing Weaver's thesis, that the West is disintegrating because centuries ago it made a Faustian "evil decision" whereby "man could realize himself more fully if he would only abandon his belief in the existence of transcendentals." Western culture's sound metaphysic was thereby replaced with an unsound one. This was fatal, because the foundation of belief and action for every member of culture is his "metaphysical dream of the world ... an intuitive feeling about the immanent nature of reality."<sup>10</sup> Being anterior to reason, it determines reason's moral impact. Getting the metaphysical dream right, then, is crucial. Weaver added that "a waning of the dream results in confusion of counsel, such as we behold on all sides in our time," and in "a dispersion which never ends until the culture lies in fragments."<sup>11</sup>

Engrossed in Southern Agrarianism, Scotchie mentions none of this. He quickly summarizes Weaver's views on the rise of science and deism and man's reduction to consuming animal, and hurries on to his real concern—the liquidation of agrarian life: "With accumulation of material goods now the main goal of life, the flight from the country to the city commenced. In the context of Weaver's criticism of modern life, this is the most urgent consequence of the 'evil decision.'"<sup>12</sup> Weaver "took memorable swipes

against urban culture,"<sup>13</sup> criticizing jazz, gender equality, political demagoguery, and slapdash housing construction. That these were consequences of a mismeasure of existence, as Weaver said repeatedly, never occurs to him.

This chapter, "Man in Megalopolis," might have been titled "Things in *Ideas Have Consequences* Which Interested Me." Those which apparently did not were nearly every profound point Weaver made. This failure cripples the entire book. Scotchie unwittingly witnesses for Weaver's own devastating observation that "The bane of Southern writing has been an infatuation with surfaces."<sup>14</sup> An infatuation with political surfaces, he also shows, is the bane of modern conservatives. He fastens upon passages employable as *entrées* for political commentary or agrarian advocacy, and ignores everything else, yielding a shallow, narrowly selective exposition with vast lacunae.

Thus, on *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, he misses Weaver's observation that "rhetoric ... seeks to perfect men by showing them better versions of themselves, links in that chain extending upward toward the ideal."<sup>15</sup> Weaver's treatments of Edmund Burke and Abraham Lincoln inspire a discussion of conservative criticisms of Lincoln, a claim that Weaver "doesn't make an overwhelming case for Lincoln the conservative,"<sup>16</sup> and a protracted grumble, thoroughly justified but utterly ungermane, at the Republican Party's decadence. Buried in all this is the observation that "Every man, according to Weaver, has his own metaphysical dream of the world. That dream is his idea of beauty—and how the world should be ordered and administered. It also determines what a man will live, fight, and die for."<sup>17</sup> Alas, Scotchie ignores this insight's significance in Weaver's thought, and makes nothing of it.

"The Importance of Cultural Freedom" inspires this masterful insight: "all healthy

cultures are regional and we can infer, either agrarian or small town."<sup>18</sup> So much, we can infer, for Renaissance Florence and Venice. Explicating *Visions of Order*, Scotchie merely offers vacuous remarks about modern education, "our old friend King Science," "idolization of youth," total war—and "Weaver's blistering criticism of machine worship,"<sup>19</sup> a blinkered reading of "Forms and Social Cruelty" used as an occasion to return, like the biblical dog to its vomit, to agrarianism.

The danger is that a reader first encountering Weaver in Scotchie's pages will conclude that this is all there is to him—that Weaver was but a disgruntled Southern Agrarian who made peevish but prescient observations about America's cultural and political disorder, and who in conservatism's intramural warfare would muster in with the paleos. Scotchie scarcely indicates that Weaver's central concerns were metaphysical—with a mysterious objective reality, culture's ontological sources, and the West's lethally wrong choice of metaphysical dream—or that his work is a powerful resource for Western renewal. With the consequences of the "sickly metaphysical dream" worsening, especially, the onslaught of what T. S. Eliot called the "diabolic imagination," such unaffordable sins of omission verge on moral treason. One recalls Nietzsche's observation about people "who, instead of solving a problem, bungle it and make it more difficult for all who come after. Whoever can't hit the nail on the head should, please, not hit it at all."<sup>20</sup>

Scotchie's admiration for Weaver is manifest, his intentions laudable. Nonetheless, *Barbarians in the Saddle* should not have been published—yet. It desperately needed circulation in manuscript for critical comment; attentive editing; and, above all, a penetrating, focused, reflective reading of Weaver.

### III

Happily, Fred Douglas Young's *Richard M. Weaver 1910-1963: A Life of the Mind* (1995), which aims at presenting Weaver's intellectual development,<sup>21</sup> is scholarly, lucid, and clean of the howlers that so thickly litter Scotchie's pages. Young is highly informative about Weaver's early years, education, character, and private life. (He gives Weaver's death date as April 1, consistent with the date of his finding.)<sup>22</sup> The Agrarians receive ample attention, as does Weaver's conversion from socialism to what he called "the poetic and ethical vision of life."<sup>23</sup>

Better still, Young conveys that Weaver was "a radical and original thinker" who "sought root causes and meanings and scrupulously insisted that properly defining terms was the starting point for real understanding."<sup>24</sup> Hence he seldom addressed current issues but "took the long view of history."<sup>25</sup> In another welcome contrast to Scotchie, Young eschews self-indulgent political harangues.

Religion's role in Weaver's thought receives its due. Scotchie merely asserts that Weaver "was not very religious. He only attended church services once a year."<sup>26</sup> Young rightly argues that "This did not mean that he was irreligious,"<sup>27</sup> and gives evidence for believing that this is perhaps attributable to Weaver's reserve. While in college preparatory school, Weaver was in a Congregational youth group; a notebook of his from those years contains four reverent prayers.<sup>28</sup> And Weaver's mature thought certainly drew on religion. Citing Weaver on the power of rhetoric to perfect men by orienting them to the ideal and to redeem the soul's restlessness, Young perceptively observes that Weaver's view of human nature resembled Paul's and Augustine's: "It is fallen and restless. Or, as Augustine put it..., 'You have made us

for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”<sup>29</sup> “The religious base of Weaver’s thought,” he adds, “is never far away from the surface of his writing and is often explicit.”<sup>30</sup>

*Ideas Have Consequences* receives competent, trustworthy and illuminating exposition. Weaver’s criticism of nominalism and its consequences—despairing of finding objective truth; regarding man as naturally good; embracing of rationalism and environmental determinism; maleducation—receive appropriate prominence. He captures, too, Weaver’s view that the metaphysical dream is “the most important” level of thought. The causal chains running from nominalism to egalitarianism, and from loss of an integrating metaphysical vision to fragmentation and obsession, and from there to egotism in work and art, are ably presented. Weaver’s political concerns are linked to metaphysical first principles, and kept in perspective, as derivative parts of a unified whole:

The egotism that has become pervasive in the twentieth century, Weaver asserted, is the natural fruit of a noxious weed, a false view of man’s nature and destiny.... Weaver held that this sort of egotism was characteristic of those people to whom the whole notion of self-discipline was anathema. The real danger was that those who sneered at such a concept were flirting with tyranny.<sup>31</sup>

Young’s handling of *The Ethics of Rhetoric* is equally outstanding. In an ample, well-balanced chapter, all of Weaver’s important ideas on rhetoric—his Platonic sources, his distinctions between rhetoric and dialectic and between argument from circumstance and argument from definition, his concepts of “god terms” and “devil terms”—receive clear, concise exposition. Weaver believed, Young observes,

that a society’s health or declension was mirrored in how it used language.... He

feared the pernicious and pervasive notion that words were relative to time, place, and speaker and were devoid of inherent content. He believed the inevitable result would be that truth and meaning themselves would be drowned in a sea of relativism. *The Ethics of Rhetoric* was a Weaverian manifesto declaring that words had vital referents, and that meaning might be saved *only* [Young’s italics] if they were used properly.<sup>32</sup>

Still, Young fails Weaver through far too truncated a treatment. *Language is Sermonic, Life Without Prejudice, The Southern Essays, and Visions of Order* go wholly unexamined.

While the clarity of the first three works makes prolonged exposition unnecessary, any adequate treatment of Weaver must address *Visions of Order*, which complements his treatment of the “evil decision” and its consequences. He defines culture as “a complex of values polarized by an image or an idea.”<sup>33</sup> The “tyrannizing image,” Weaver elaborates, is a culture’s fixed point, originating idea, and source of power over its people, “the ideal of its excellence,” its “sacred well...from which inspiring waters like magnetic lines of force flow out and hold the various activities in a subservience of acknowledgment.”<sup>34</sup> Since Weaver says elsewhere that “A culture nearly always appears contemporaneously with the expression of religious feeling,”<sup>35</sup> one may speculate that a tyrannizing image is, however indirectly, theophantic; certainly the ultimate sacred, integrative, tyrannizing image of perfection is a deity. Explicating the “tyrannizing image” is crucial for understanding Weaver.

*Visions of Order* examines culturally disintegrative forces, such as “[a] misconception of the role of democracy,” which, rejecting hierarchies and distinctions, dissolves the structure, exclusivity and upward affiliation essential to culture, and a reductive view of man as an insignificant, determined, purely ma-

terial being, which has yielded “an attitude forbidding to his religious and poetic representation.”<sup>36</sup> These are not only consequences of the “evil decision” of *Ideas Have Consequences*, they exacerbate the derivative evils explored there, and hence merit much attention.

Admittedly, sifting and elucidating *Visions of Order* is a daunting task; Eliseo Vivas complained that Weaver treats culture incoherently, and that his reach exceeds his grasp.<sup>37</sup> It would seem that in studying the South and current trends, Weaver had penetrated these surfaces and divined underlying causal patterns, was in the toils of a metaphysical vision, and was reaching ever deeper toward central truths. He faced the classic difficulty of communicating profound visionary intuition in scholarly prose—not the best medium for the task; poetry and art à la William Blake might have helped, especially regarding the “tyrannizing image.” (In this light, Vivas’s criticisms, though justified, seem captious.) All the more reason for a lucid exposition of *Visions of Order*, and not to have essayed it is a grievous failure on Young’s part. His book is valuable, but like Weaver’s own life, it ends too soon.

#### IV

Let us end this censorious essay constructively. Clearly, Weaver deserves better. The failures of these two books at least indicate what needs doing: schol-

arly exposition and assessment, revealing Weaver’s ripening wisdom and incorporating all his major works. If such a work gave his metaphysical and religious thought due prominence, it would be invaluable for illuminating Weaver and promoting cultural recovery. This task demands a spacious text; twice Young’s length would not be excessive.

Fuller access to Weaver is appropriate, too. Weaver merits a complete edition of his published writings, with scholarly editorial notes and commentary. As Young shows, Weaver’s unpublished material is most enlightening. A substantial volume of selections from his notebooks, unpublished fragments, and letters, likewise with notes and commentary, would be priceless.

With these resources, we would be better equipped for the imperative task of advancing Weaver’s metaphysical diagnosis and prescriptions. We could also further explore Irving Babbitt’s influence on Weaver. As George Panichas has perceptively observed, Babbitt’s *Character and Culture* (1940) and Weaver’s *Visions of Order* demonstrate “astonishing continuity and correlation.”<sup>38</sup> And synthesizing and elaborating the insights of *Ideas Have Consequences*, C. E. M. Joad’s *Decadence*, and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, which address the same problem, would help redeem the time. As Weaver observed to Ralph Eubanks, “There is much to be done.”<sup>39</sup>

1. New Brunswick, 1997, 91, 118, 89. 2. *Ibid.*, 19, 20, 21, 29, 64. 3. *Ibid.*, ix. 4. *Ibid.*, 123. 5. Richard Weaver, *Visions of Order* (Bryn Mawr, 1995), xiii-xiv. 6. *Barbarians in the Saddle*, x. 7. “U. C. Professor R. M. Weaver is Found Dead,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 4, 1963. 8. *Barbarians in the Saddle*, 2-4. 9. *Ibid.*, 42. 10. *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago, 1948), 18. 11. *Ibid.*, 21. 12. *Barbarians in the Saddle*, 44. 13. *Ibid.*, 45. 14. *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver* (Indianapolis, 1987), 36. 15. *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Chicago, 1953), 25. 16. *Barbarians in the Saddle*, 67. 17. *Ibid.*, 68. 18. *Ibid.*, 91, 92. 19. *Ibid.*, 124, 129. 20. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York, 1968), 165-

166. 21. Columbia, 1995, 7. 22. *Ibid.*, 176. 23. *Ibid.*, 76. 24. *Ibid.*, 4. 25. *Ibid.*, 6. 26. *Barbarians in the Saddle*, 21. 27. *Richard M. Weaver 1910-1963*, 102. 28. *Ibid.*, 18, 19, 186 n. 14. 29. *Ibid.*, 135-136. 30. *Ibid.*, 181. 31. *Ibid.*, 115. 32. *Ibid.*, 151. 33. *Visions of Order*, 20. 34. *Ibid.*, 11-12. 35. *Life Without Prejudice and Other Essays* (Chicago, 1965), 15. 36. *Visions of Order*, 14, 145. 37. “The Mind of Richard Weaver,” in *The Vision of Richard Weaver*, 77-83. 38. “Irving Babbitt and Richard Weaver,” *Modern Age*, vol. 38, no. 3 (Summer 1996), 275. 39. *Richard M. Weaver 1910-1963*, 176.