

between their titles and their contents, implicitly inviting the reader to perform the same operation on his book. Indeed, while the humanities are explained, classified, and praised in Morón's book, the section of the title that refers to the "Age of Technology" seems to remain an unfulfilled promise. The author asserts that we live in an age of technology, and that technology's self-evidence has freed it from the need to justify itself, which in turn makes the justification of the humanities necessary. But not all readers will agree with this initial position.

The overwhelming presence of technology in our contemporary world may, after all, only be instrumental rather than essential (in the Thomistic sense). In its own way, the late nineteenth century in Europe was as much enthralled by technology as our own time, even while the humanities still strove for encyclopedic completeness of self-expression. Technological advances compelled Walter Benjamin in one of the twentieth century's darkest moments to offer a cogent analysis of the politicization of art in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." The English translation of the title is notoriously misleading: Benjamin was referring to the work of art "in the age of its mechanical reproducibility." He sought to make an argument about authenticity in a technological age, not about mechanics.

Morón reasonably excludes the arts from his discussion of the humanities but, *mutatis mutandis*, similar questions of legitimacy arise in the two fields. By attending only marginally to the political relevance of humanistic studies in *this* technological age—funding, the public's sense of their importance, the current tendency of some to indulge in private pleasure rather than public use—Morón risks at times the charge of unfounded optimism. His description of the life of a contemporary humanities professor, "not formally tied to more than ten hours of

class and office hours per week," does not conform to my or my colleagues' experiences of the teaching life at American four-year colleges and universities, even though the author is correct to praise the intangible rewards of our line of work. Morón's penultimate chapter on the "Usefulness" of the humanities is the shortest of all, except for one other.

In the final analysis, these decidedly minor shortcomings are not completely Morón's. The humanities simply must not be measured with the yardstick of technological usefulness: doing so inevitably shows them wanting. The humanities are, in essence, an invitation to human beings to become themselves more fully. Ciriaco Morón Arroyo's passionate and reasoned explanation of the spirit and the method of the humanities on their own terms constitutes the high merit of this thoughtful book.

## *A Weaver Treasury*

JOHN ATTARIAN

**In Defense of Tradition: Collected Shorter Writings of Richard M. Weaver, 1929-1963**, edited by Ted J. Smith III, *Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000. xlviii + 813 pp.*

UNTIL NOW, A SCHOLARLY EDITION OF Richard M. Weaver's writings has been lacking. Edited by Virginia Commonwealth University professor Ted J. Smith III, this splendid volume from Liberty Fund, also the publisher of *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver* (1987), goes far in rectify-

---

JOHN ATTARIAN received his doctorate in economics from the University of Michigan and is the author of *Social Security: False Consciousness and Crisis* (2002).

ing that deficiency. Smith presents all of Weaver's published shorter writings (except for those in *The Southern Essays*, and one early essay, apparently lost), plus eleven previously unpublished essays and speeches which were in nearly final form when Weaver died. Thus "all of Weaver's published and significant unpublished writings except his composition texts are now available in book form."

Smith's long introductory essay, surveying Weaver's life and career, with special focus on his teaching and writing, is a model of lucid prose and meticulous scholarship. Among other valuable achievements, Smith demolishes numerous accumulated inaccuracies about Weaver which have become accepted as truths. The allegedly agrarian Weaver was a townsman all his life. Supposedly a recluse, he was friendly and sociable. The Weaver of legend attended one high Episcopalian service annually; in fact, he not only attended Episcopalian services in Chicago, but Presbyterian and Methodist services in Weaverville. Disinterred from these and other myths, the real Richard Weaver emerges as a genial friend, dedicated teacher, scrupulous scholar and penetrating thinker who set himself the tasks of developing a metaphysical conservative philosophy of history and culture, and resisting the dissolution of the civilization he loved. He persevered in the teeth of repeated setbacks with devotion and determination amounting to gallantry. Professor Smith discloses that he is preparing a large scholarly biography of Weaver. Judging from this essay, that badly-needed work could not be in better hands.

Smith handles Weaver's writings with welcome forbearance. Section introductions and footnotes are informative, but Smith does not impose his own interpretations on his reader, wisely letting Weaver speak for himself. Not least of this book's virtues is its architecture, organizing Weaver's works into eight thematic sec-

tions in logical sequence: Weaver's life and family; his critique of modernity; education; rhetoric and sophistic; humanities, literature and language; politics; history; and the South. Beginning with Weaver's life, Smith reveals that it pivoted on his conversion from liberal endorsement of modernity to traditionalist critique and repudiation of it, narrated in his essay "Up from Liberalism." Since much of Weaver's critique of modernity flowed from his belief that modern man had gotten human nature, the nature of reality, and the meaning of existence disastrously wrong, this raises the question of how it happened, leading us to education. Weaver rightly attacked Deweyite progressive education as motivated by a political agenda to the detriment of instruction in truth and truth-seeking. A key issue here is the contesting uses of language—speaking truthfully versus speaking manipulatively.

Use of education and language as vehicles for power and social engineering is by definition a political strategy, and Weaver's examination of rhetoric was synergistic with his simultaneously unfolding conservatism, leading us to politics. Weaver's politics were informed and shaped by a rich knowledge of history, illuminated by a penetrating awareness of the trend of modernity and by a philosophy of human action, and thus of history itself, as living out a metaphysical dream. This profound sense of history owed much to his abiding love of the South. "Of all the things he thought and wrote about," Smith observes, "it was the American South, that 'last non-materialist civilization in the Western World,' which most engaged Richard Weaver's attention and affections." Thus the South is the appropriate, culminating endpoint—neatly bringing us full circle, back to Weaver's Southern roots.

The numerous book reviews reveal not only the volume and range but also the attentiveness and penetration of

Weaver's reading; his skill at extracting and compactly presenting a book's essence; his fidelity to high standards of scholarship and exposition—and his utter contempt for vacuity, incompetence, and humbug. Indeed Weaver's reviews crackle with a pungent and mettlesome censoriousness too seldom seen in our unmanned and invertebrate age: "His position as a whole is so confused that one cannot be certain what he had in mind"; "this is an essentially softheaded book"; "Amid a perfect forest of banality and truism there are but a few shoots of original perception"; "This essay is an amazing tissue of presumption and innuendo"; "Filled with halting sentences and fumbling diction, many passages of this work are a torture to get through." But meritorious work receives glowing accolades: "one may admire the magnitude of his conception and the profundity of his reach...the work of an intellect of the first order"; "...a fine piece of biographical research and execution. The facts are marshaled with judgment, and the style at times achieves literary distinction."

With such an embarrassment of riches as this volume offers, providing a tour of its contents would be a hopeless task. Moreover, Weaver's positions are sufficiently familiar to *Modern Age* readers that recapitulation is redundant. It is more useful, then, to indicate contributions which *In Defense of Tradition* makes in facilitating study of Weaver.

These shorter works valuably complement Weaver's books by restating or further developing central ideas. Exposition in *Ideas Have Consequences* and *Visions of Order* is often dauntingly compact, using mere paragraphs or even sentences where other writers might devote pages. The short pieces are more accessible introductions. Thus in "The Importance of Cultural Freedom," Weaver writes that a culture's style has its source in "some idea, feeling, or projection," which "imposes something of its form upon all the

numerous and varied manifestations of its activity"—a short and lucid exposition of *Visions of Order's* discussion of the "tyrannizing image," which serves as a culture's source of power over its people and "the ideal of its excellence." And the core idea of *Visions of Order's* "Forms and Social Cruelty" appears compactly in "Proud 'City of God.'"

Other short works are useful supplements. Modern man, *Ideas Have Consequences* argued, is "impious"; he has assaulted "what former men have regarded with filial veneration." Several shorter works elaborate this major concept. In "Up From Liberalism" (1959), Weaver writes that "an aggression by the self which outrages a deep-laid order of things...has seeped into every department of our life," that the modern Western mind is informed by a "metaphysic of progress through aggression." His posthumously published "Humanism in an Age of Science" offers a discerning critique of science as driven by an essentially impious orientation to existence, a premise "that if you *can* do a thing, you *must* do it." That so much scientific effort is seen in wartime hints that "science in its nature is not contemplative, but aggressive." Weaver also argues insightfully that being is a "kind of force," that things influence thought and decision simply by virtue of their existence, and that therefore the mere existence of machinery, such as automobiles or a weapon of war, is "a standing temptation to use it. The mere fact that it is there seems to induce us to find additional opportunities for its use."

Weaver's thought manifested high continuity, unsurprising in a thinker who penetrated to, and reasoned from, core ontological truths. Some short works, however, raise the possibility that he modified some positions. *Ideas Have Consequences* famously excoriated modern corporate capitalism and the common man's "spoiled-child psychology." Yet "How to Argue the Conservative Cause"

(1959) states that most Americans “are neither atheists nor materialists.” Weaver also asserts proudly that “we have the highest popular standard of living in the world by far,” for which we need not apologize. “Capitalism has delivered the goods, and it is absurd to think of going on the defensive about that.” This, George Nash argues plausibly in *Steps Toward Restoration*, is a “remarkable reversal” of Weaver’s earlier views. “Perhaps at the height of the Cold War against an atheistic and collectivist enemy, the United States of America looked better to him than it had in the late 1940s.”

Against this interpretation, however, one must set “Mass Plutocracy” (1960), which contends that “the American people as a whole have now adopted...the qualities and outlook of a plutocracy,” characterized by belief in money’s “talismanic power,” seeing it as “the axis on which the world turns.” The plutocrat “trusts it to bring security and happiness almost automatically. And trusting in it this way, he believes that little if anything else is needed.” Plutocratic thinking eliminates the notion that one “will have to stand a test as a man and not just as a possessor of outward means.” Once characteristic of only those few who “had allowed their possessions to distort their vision,” plutocratic thinking now afflicts the masses. And in “Cotton Culture,” written just two years before “How to Argue the Conservative Cause,” Weaver decries “the machine’s inhumanity to man and...the lust for abstract power through money. The real answer is neither socialism nor mammoth farm supports, but the distributive economics and agrarianism of a farmer named Jefferson”—the self-same position taken in *Ideas Have Consequences*.

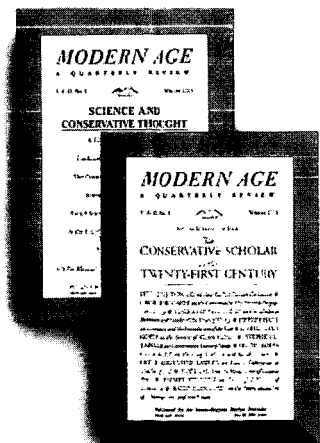
This suggests strongly that Weaver’s purported retreat from his critique of consumption-based modern capitalism is problematic. Did he really reverse himself? Was he being inconsistent in “How

to Argue the American Cause” and “Mass Plutocracy”? Was the former work merely a matter of Cold War tactics, and the latter more indicative of his true sentiments? Or was there an evolving nuance and complexity to Weaver’s economic thought, which might have ripened still further had he been spared his untimely death? This is just one example of how *In Defense of Tradition* helps open up topics and controversies for Weaver scholars to explore.

One essay merits special mention: “Two Diarists” (1961/1962), intended as a chapter for a book contrasting America’s Southern and Northern cultures, on which book Weaver was working at the time of his death. Weaver contrasts the two cultures through the diaries of the Puritan clergyman Cotton Mather and the Virginia country gentleman William Byrd. Mather, repeatedly writing of how the Lord assured him that He would use

## MODERN AGE: A Quarterly Review

is distributed by Bernhard  
DeBoer and Ingram Periodicals  
to newsstands and bookstores  
nationwide.



Mather to do some special service for Him, "appears consumed with the idea of his own personal importance to God." Keenly perceiving that a diary reveals as much by what it does *not* say as by what it does, Weaver notes that Mather rarely describes nature and shows no affection for it. Mather apparently sees nature as of no intrinsic value, but infinitely useful—which implies, Weaver adds, that it has "no essential independence or meaning." The way thus opens for "prying, experimenting and controlling."

Weaver sees in this a species of the demonic, for demonism is "blind to everything except what it wants. No one has ever heard of a demon who loved the world or of one who showed mercy to a victim because that victim had some rights. The demon...must make his will prevail." Engrossed in "dominating the world according to a law," the Puritan is "one of the most fatally unbalanced types in history."

Byrd, by contrast, fills his diary with drab accounts of his daily life—what he did when, what he ate, where he went, with whom he spent time, the weather. Weaver divines from this that Byrd "lived in the external world" and "gave it a great deal of attention." Byrd also reports what he saw with few rushes to judgment, and seems to find the world "a tolerable place to live in." His other writings are richly descriptive of the world around him and show little vexation at hardship or misadventure.

Weaver concludes that American radicalism and conservatism flowed from Puritan New England and the South, respectively. "That difference has its taproot in their respective attitudes toward creation." For the Puritans nature was "a negative reality," there to be used, and

shaped to man's will, leading to a belief that "nature has no purpose apart from man's will, in consequence of which he is constantly called upon to judge and reform her." From this came a stress on change for its own sake. The Southerner, such as Byrd, accepting his world as he found it, calmly adjusting to it, had no such impious aspirations. "Acceptance of the pattern for what it is was the major premise of his thinking." Egotism is checked by "an awareness of other things," and thus Byrd manifested the classical virtues of measure, poise, and "willingness to let live." Alas, when these values collided with Puritanism, "it developed that the Puritan temper possessed a power of aggression which classical balance and tolerance could not withstand."

Parting evidence of what Weaver's fully matured and cultivated mind was capable of—his uncanny powers of observation and penetration, his ability to divine the metaphysical significations of even minor details of daily life—"Two Diarists" drives home what we lost when Richard Weaver died. He not only brilliantly expounds his central concept of impiety, he applies it to the Puritans to locate a source of the overweening expansionism, self-righteousness, and meddlesomeness which have so blighted American life, especially through impious liberalism.

Handsomely crafted and superbly edited, *In Defense of Tradition* is an invaluable contribution to scholarship and to the study and understanding of one of conservatism's greatest minds. More than that, it facilitates access to one of the most discerning and illuminating explorers of the modern human predicament. This landmark in conservative publishing belongs in the hands of every concerned observer of our time.