

MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



Conservative Minds Revisited

THE YEAR 2003 MARKS the fiftieth anniversary of Russell Kirk's seminal work, *The Conservative Mind*. Since Kirk (1918-1994) was also the founding editor of this quarterly review, it is fitting that *Modern Age* mark this milestone appropriately. But politics are among the most fluid of mutable human affairs; anxiety therefore arises when we set out to celebrate a "political" book after half a century. Will we find upon scrutiny that "[t]he communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living"? Or will we be forced to acknowledge after the passing of the years that this work, once so vital, now can have only an antiquarian interest?

In 1953, Kirk's book acted as a catalyst, helping to precipitate a new political identity in America. It inspired intellectual élan in a nascent *movement* that would become, perhaps, the most significant feature of the public life of the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, Kirk's book provided that movement with its very name. Thus, the contemporary relevance of *The Conservative Mind* would seem at first to stand or fall on the continued vigor of American conservatism.

Yet here we encounter an irony in Kirk's

legacy. While it is true that Kirk's book "named" conservatism in America—and in doing so, incited definitional controversies which remain with us to this day—it is also clear that Kirk's work relates to the partisanship of its time, and ours, in a most eccentric way. The main contours of modern American conservatism were forged in relationship to the demands of the Cold War struggle with Soviet Communism. Consequently, much was made of the value of free markets over the planned economy, of individualism over collectivism, and of democracy over totalitarianism. What is striking about *The Conservative Mind*, however, is how little these pivotal issues of the period figure in Kirk's "essay in definition." Kirk had a far different historical horizon in view.

Since 1989, with each passing year, the memory of the Cold War fades a bit more, and new—or long submerged—political and social perplexities arise to structure our political discourse. A younger generation now often finds that key works of post-war American conservatism—great labors of research, insight, and speculation—have grown anachronistic to the point of unintelligibility. But Kirk's book does not read as a dated document from the era of fallout shelters and "Father

Knows Best.” Even in the 1950s, *The Conservative Mind* was not of its time. Perhaps, properly speaking, a conservative mind is never of its time—which may explain why, in the age of progress, conservatism is derided by the *lumpenintelligentsia*, even as it has proved irresistibly attractive to our true giants of literary imagination. Kirk’s book remains a mysterious looking glass, drawing new generations into unaccustomed reflections.

But conservatism is not a pattern laid up in heaven, hovering above the human world and never quite touching down. It is not a radiant vision promised in a future dawn that never quite arrives. Kirk did not write a systematic treatise on the metaphysical essence of conservatism. Instead, Kirk wrote what amounts to a genealogy. He wrote, not of conservatism, but of the conservatives. Because of conservatism’s peculiar historical self-awareness and its incarnational foundation, such an approach is fitting. One appropriates the fullness of conservatism not by speculative leaps but by *filiation*—through what Burke called “the choice of an inheritance.” One arrives at one’s own conservatism by following the intimations of older conservative minds, following unto a moment of recognition and self-discovery.

In light of such considerations, *Modern Age* undertook to mark the golden anniversary of *The Conservative Mind* with a series of essays not on Kirk, but on various of the conservative minds that Kirk had discussed in his *magnum opus*. We invited, in particular, a younger generation of writers—recipients of graduate fellowships from the Intercollegiate Studies Institute over the past decade or so—to tell us what a new generation of conservatives can learn from an engagement with the thinkers in Kirk’s canon. One of Kirk’s great delights through much of his life was walking in the Scottish Highlands. Could there be a more fitting tribute to him than to tread anew along

the paths and among the peaks he knew so well?

I

Our symposium begins with Jeffrey Cain’s sensitive treatment of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s middle years, between his youthful infatuation with the French Revolution and his later defense of the “ancient ideals of England” as established in the constitution of the church and state. Kirk had addressed Coleridge’s late writings in the course of concluding that it was Coleridge who was the Romantic generation’s true philosopher. But—Cain observes—the young radical grown-up into hoary conservatism is a commonplace, even a cliché. Such an image invites the judgment that conservatism is nothing but a jaded world-weariness, a marker of failed ideals. By focusing on the intellectual and moral *continuities* in Coleridge’s lifework Cain reminds us to the contrary that conservatism is an idealism of its own. Conservatism is profoundly humanistic, even as it avoids humanitarian sentimentality.

Sean Mattie then takes exception to Kirk’s chapter on John Quincy Adams. Kirk had faulted Adams for being so confident in human perfectibility—and so confident in his own powers—that he failed in his duty to conserve the traditions of New England. In particular, Kirk indicted Adams’ dabbling in projects of national consolidation and his late abolitionist enthusiasm. Mattie argues, however, that Adams was a consistent defender of the *republican* character of the American social civil order—and so, a defender of the best American traditions, a worthy son of his founding father. For conservatives inclined to a regime-centered approach to human values, Adams can serve as a model of patriotism and political prudence.

Of course, Kirk developed what might be termed a religion-centered rather than a regime-centered understanding of con-

servatism. He held politics to be deeper than economics, but culture to lie deeper still than politics: and at the core of culture lay the cult. Consequently, Kirk identified Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of J. Q. Adams' contemporaries, as the true conservative giant of mid-nineteenth-century New England. In his contribution to our symposium, Lee Trepanier details Hawthorne's efforts to renew the Puritan tradition through the power of art. What, then, are we to make of the ultimate failure of Hawthorne's aesthetic and religious politics? How does practical failure count in our assessment of conservative minds?

One of Kirk's achievements in *The Conservative Mind* was to advance a revival of interest in the work of another religious thinker: Orestes Brownson, a figure so *sui generis* as to elude placement in school accounts of American intellectual history. In the mid-nineteenth century, Brownson sought to save his fellow Catholics from a theocratic temptation, but more significantly for us, he sought to save his fellow Americans from a secularist temptation. His richly theoretical examination of the "American Republic" reached a staggering conclusion: that Catholics could appreciate the logic of the American political order better even than the revered founding fathers, who had "built better than they knew." Richard Dougherty here limns Brownson's profoundly original approach to questions of church and state. In most respects, Brownson's understanding of these matters remains unsurpassed even to our own day.

Joshua Hochschild begins his contribution by observing that one of the most prominent philosophers of tradition in our day, Alasdair MacIntyre, faults Burke for his woefully inadequate *theory* of tradition. MacIntyre admires instead the more systematic thinker John Henry Newman, and so Hochschild sets for himself the task of analyzing Newman's tradi-

tionalism. He deftly demonstrates the Aristotelian foundations of Newman's thought, but also insists that Newman's is a "re-imagined" Aristotelianism. Newman is thus a living model for the perennial conservative vocation. By grounding "tradition" so thoroughly in *phronesis*, however, Hochschild's essay invites the further thought that "tradition" may *not* be the appropriate term for that which conservatives seek to defend. Such an arresting possibility presages, one may hope, future inquiry in our pages.

Paul Elmer More was "America's Reactionary," in Brian Domitrovic's recounting of the life and intellectual achievement of that great scholar. Confronted with the galloping successes of *Wissenschaft* in the early-twentieth-century American academy, More sought to restore humanistic learning to a privileged place within higher education. Unlike the natural sciences, perhaps even unlike philosophy—at least, as understood by someone such as MacIntyre—the humane learning championed by More does not "progress." But nor can it be "refuted"—either by demonstrative arguments or by historical events. Such humanism remains a permanent human possibility, waiting to be brought to life in all its amplitude by one such as More. Domitrovic concludes that "traditional forms of speculation on human nature and the proper end of life" will very soon prove indispensable, as we face the ethical conundrums arising from biotechnology.

George Santayana was a "critical conservative," according to Russell Kirk—but also, according to David Corey, a "spiritual conservative." He was an implacable anti-liberal, one of the earliest thinkers to have observed in detail how liberalism's vaunted "moral liberty" leads ineluctably to social homogenization. Yet he offers no alternative political program: he offers instead a "spiritual" way of life, a habit of seeing in the everyday objects of human experience a revelation of tran-

scendent *essence*. Corey compares this disposition, favorably, to Michael Oakeshott's understanding of the nomocratic core of conservatism. One might object that a retreat from all projects of utilitarian advantage or interest calculation in the name of enjoyment or delight is a species of political irresponsibility. But one is also reminded of the tradition of Christian monasticism. As with Saint Benedict, sometimes the retreat from the polis is the most profound of political acts.

Our symposium closes with Clinton Brand's thoughtful meditation on T. S. Eliot. Kirk memorably advanced the strong claim that we live in the Age of Eliot. If so, then despite the darkness all around, we may still live in hope. For while tradition is "a hard and rugged way," it is also a life-giving way. And indeed, it is the way which generations of writers have sought to blaze through the pages of *Modern Age*.

II

When Russell Kirk founded *Modern Age* together with Henry Regnery in 1957, he announced the journal's intention "to pursue a conservative policy for the sake of a liberal understanding." In searching the writings of the authorities that Kirk himself affiliated with in *The Conservative Mind*, our symposiasts have tried to

illuminate themes for conservative reflection in our own time: Conservatism is a humanism. A constitutional piety has a prominent place in American conservative values, though the meaning of our Constitution remains contested. Cultural renewal may come through artistic insight, even in the midst of failed political projects. The quest for spiritual transcendence, beyond critique, may provide the experience from which to relativize a relativistic age. And as several of our symposiasts attest, tradition remains both a promise and a riddle. Could it be, even after half a century, that we find ourselves only at the *beginning* of the question concerning tradition?

In keeping with the tradition begun by Burke himself, the tendencies which formed themselves under the conservative banner in the 1950s were all a species of *dissent* from various features of the contemporary world. Yet in Russell Kirk's work we find a struggle to *assent*, to hold fast to that which is good in the human things known in tradition. Strange to say, even today there are still discoveries to be made about the good of our being. All of the conservative past may merely be prologue—to the insights that lie ahead, for those who set their compass by the stars of old.

—Mark C. Henrie