

# MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



## *Restoring the Meaning of Conservatism*

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following commentary will be the first in a series to be appearing in *Modern Age*. It is occasioned by what can be discerned as a distinctly serious problem in the usage of the term "conservatism": its definition, its conceptual properties, its application—and the ambiguities that surround its meaning in contemporary thought and opinion. Abstract theories, vapid simplifications, and political partisanship increasingly becloud its basic significations and hinder its full expression. These conditions now summon forth the need for debate and rectification, as the title of the commentary adumbrates: "Restoring the Meaning of Conservatism." In forthcoming issues, full-scale essays dealing with some of the matters raised here will be published, for instance, Professor George W. Carey's "The Future of Conservatism," Mr. James Patrick Dimock's "The Heroic Conservatism of Richard M. Weaver," and Professor Arthur Versluis's "The Revolutionary Conservatism of Jefferson's Small Republics." Selected responses by readers, always welcome, will be published, as space allows.

*"If you don't stand for something, you'll  
get knocked down by anything."*

—Anonymous

IT IS NOW MORE THAN A HALF CENTURY since the publication of Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*, and during that time the word *conservative* has undergone diverse changes in meaning and value. For some it is a word that has been diminished to the point where its distinctions are unrecognizable. For others it is a principled word savaged by the modern media elites and by theorists and ideologues: in short, a word reduced in quality of character

and integrity. It can be remarked that what has been befalling the word conservatism mirrors the fate of language itself when it is corrupted. Too often, then, a word like conservatism becomes another saleable commodity, subject to constant alteration by theorists and ideologues loyal not to first principles but to specious schemes and policies that mould standards of definition and use.

Desanctifying words and meaning of permanency becomes an increasingly common practice embodied in behemothian attitudes and emboldened by an accommodating *Zeitgeist*. When there are "no fixed significations" in our dialectic

tical vocabulary, as Richard M. Weaver, rhetorical theorist *par excellence*, has stated in a penetrating essay on "Relativism and the Use of Language" (1961), we are no longer "receptive to true meanings...[and] may accept wrong or perverted ones." Quite appropriately, Weaver uses as the epigraph to this essay a passage from John Milton's letter dated September 10, 1638, in which the English poet and essayist warns that when "language becomes irregular and depraved, it is followed by...ruin and degradation. For what do terms used without [style] or meaning, which are corrupt and misapplied, denote but a people listless, supine, and ripe for servitude?" Coupling Milton's warning and Weaver's anxieties helps to explain what is happening to the term conservatism in our present situation, auguring a fate, as Weaver reminds us, similar to that of "liberalism": "beyond any hope of rehabilitation."

Clearly, the term conservatism needs in these early years of the twenty-first century to be rescued if it is not finally to "be viewed as a naturalistic phenomenon," and if we are to believe with any degree of confidence that "meaning cannot be judged as relative simply to time and place"—even though meanings "do shift over a period of time." And clearly, for Weaver, "the power of the word affirming to define and compel" is dependent on "affirming that language is a humanistic creation." More than forty years later, Weaver's essay has for us even greater relevance in a technologico-Benthamite society in which logos, no less than spiritual convictions and moral criteria, is visibly receding from the "roots of order" and "order of values," with all the entailing consequences.

From the time of its founding in 1957, *Modern Age* has registered when necessary the devolution of the terms conservative and conservatism, with acute concern, as any glance at back issues of the journal, itself subtitled as *A Conservative*

*Review* for a period of time, will confirm. Indeed, it comes as no surprise to the scholars and thinkers who have been defining *Modern Age's* mission and ethos these past nearly five decades, that the term has experienced a change of meaning *vis-à-vis* "the old standards of signification." This change can be described, in Weaver's phrase, as "improper change" and the abandonment by modern minds of "ontological referents," as Weaver expresses it in his chapter, "The Power of the Word," in *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948).

Ideology, as Weaver and other seminal conservative thinkers like Irving Babbitt and Russell Kirk in America, and, to some extent, the extraordinary moralist literary critic F.R. Leavis in England, have stressed, imposes changes on life, literature, and thought to help serve particular ends and to advance a doctrinaire view. These changes, especially in the use and meaning of words, are not "circum-spective," but issue from what Weaver speaks of as ideological "perversion" (and, in especial, "rhetorical prevarication"). They are an affront to language, as Weaver maintains, that "is a covenant among those who use it" and that, in the long run, prevents "the anarchy which an unconditional permissiveness" spawns. The word conservatism has been so much relativized that its meaning and import are now shorn of noetic and dialectical validity. Even those who are steadfastly loyal to conservative principles and ideas are uneasy and defensive when applying and defending them.

It is becoming painfully obvious that conservatism as a word has lost its compelling power, its definition confined, exponentially, to prefixes, ellipses, brackets, and adjectival equivocations, even as its essential properties have been annexed and manipulated by those who have contributed to a process that Weaver portrays with singular reality and right reason, though one must also suspect that he is neither widely read nor ad-

equately comprehended by purported conservatives in nominalist garb any more than is the conservative humanist Irving Babbitt (1865-1933), whose book *Democracy and Leadership* (1924) is a classic text for anyone who aspires to conservative understanding—and perspicacity.

Interestingly, Weaver's European contemporary, Simone Weil (1909-1943), had written an essay in 1937, "The Power of Words," in which the conservative religious philosopher, in the course of upholding the discipline of rational thought, sternly warned that abstract social and political vocabulary was contributing to the creation of a world of myths and monsters. When a word is properly used and defined, she asserts, it "becomes simply a sign, helping us to grasp some concrete reality, or concrete objective, or method of activity." She goes on to insist that the power of words to "clarify thought, to discredit the intrinsically meaningless words, and to define the use of others by precise analysis...might be a way of saving human lives." In another essay, composed in 1941, "The Responsibility of Writers," she voices her concern regarding the erosion of the "criterion of value" in language and literature. "The fate of words," Weil writes, "is a touchstone of the weakening of the idea of value, and although the fate of words does not depend upon writers one cannot help attributing a special responsibility to them, since words are their business."

Both Weaver and Weil, in their common concern with words, see them as "vehicles of order," crucial to the needs of the community and of the life of the soul; indeed, conservatism embraces the primary need for order in its twofold dimension, axiomatically and logocentrically, and has in fact been called "the party of order." Russell Kirk, it will be recalled, in his succinct enumeration of the six canons, or premises, of conservative thought and belief, places as his first, "belief in transcendent order." He goes on to cite

"affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of human existence"; "conviction that civilized society requires orders and classes"; "persuasion that freedom and property are closely linked"; "faith in prescription"; and "recognition that change may not be salutary reform." Contemporary conditions, and the peculiar misdirections and the loss of moral bearings that characterize our socio-political and cultural plight, increasingly distort the metaphysical substance of "critical conservatism," the "reflective conservatism" that Kirk is presenting in his "convictions or sentiments" and appealing for in their "restoration"—"so that we may rake from the ashes what scorched fragments of civilization escape the conflagration of unchecked will and appetite."

If anything, Kirk's vision of conservatism has been receding or is being replaced by quantitative and pragmatist versions severed from noumenal and metaphysical ingredients. The conservative idea, it can be stated, has given way more and more to a progression of invasive doctrinal revisions, to that corruptive process of flux and decline which Simone Weil foresaw and which Weaver no doubt had in mind in quoting Ralph Waldo Emerson's words at the beginning of "The Power of the Word": "The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language." The corruption of the word conservatism goes hand-in-hand with its present-day definers and users who are allegiant to an advanced form of empirio-criticism that lacks precisely the inclusion of metaphysical elements. Today, the fate of conservatism as a word and as a body of opinion is a consequence of empirio-critical proclivities and policies that have been creeping into individual life and the public square. As evaluative, reflective, and moral modes of conservative thought steadily evaporate, whether by conscious removal or aggressive replacement, Weaver's critique, as it is being identified here, has considerable pertinence.

What Weaver has to say about the deformation of language is especially of interest to conservatives who are disturbed by what is happening to a conservative order and to its tradition and ideas, that is to say, the shifts and now the general drift of a conservative faith in its contemporary versions, thus exacerbating the difficulty of defining conservatism or retrieving it from the tribe of neoterists who have their own ambitions and who will conveniently twist and transform the conservative impulse or norms. For what we discover is that a conservatism as the preservation of what T. S. Eliot spoke of as “Permanent Things” is today being forcibly relegated to a passive or inferior station, or is being categorically derided and dismissed. As such we now find ourselves in the midst of a crisis of conservatism that is also a crisis of standards, language, and point of reference.

Of course, conservative disorientation may be simply chalked up to an abysmal ignorance of the canons of conservatism, or of a repudiation of the soul of conservatism as a meaningless concept. Yet, even beyond ignorance there are visible signs of disarray in the conservative body of opinion heavily impelled by socio-economic and socio-political enclaves, as metaphysical principles are being overturned by empirio-critical reconstruction and re-interpretation. Such a disturbing phenomenon attacks the innermost terrain of conservatism and gives rise to an *ersatz* conservatism, thus replicating the positivistic reconfiguration of fundamental religious beliefs. A neo-Jacobin fever pervades the political realm as metaphysical principles, discriminations, are wantonly undermined, both on the left and on the right. As we give way to divisive tendencies and fractious tempers, we offer an open invitation to false conservatives in sheep’s clothing to strike directly at the soul of conservatism.

A half century ago, Weaver intuited

the full menace of this process, in words that have special meaning for us today: “We live in an age that is frightened by the very idea of certitude, and one of its really disturbing outgrowths is the easy divorce between words and the conceptual realities which in our right minds they must stand for. This takes the form especially of looseness and exaggeration.” Alas, in the present unsettled climate of ideas, we are hard pressed to locate, let alone defend, the certitudes of conservatism that are worthy of conservation. And that is exactly why we need to re-read Weaver, Kirk, Babbitt, T. S. Eliot—and to reflect on their word and work: to return to the testimony of great keen-sighted conservative thinkers betrayed by smug publicists, usurpers who have pretensions of a higher moral calling, but who are creating an “inhumane world.” Indeed, the crisis of conservatism, as we now feel its blows, brings to mind the confusion that Babbitt observed “between true and false liberals, between the ethically strenuous and the ethically indolent.”

In a sense, an equivalent confusion now characterizes what should distinguish the true conservative from the false conservative whose word and example are certified in the intellectual community and in the electronic media. In effect, the meaning of conservatism has been dissipated for want of definers, or as Weaver would say: “Teachers of the present order have not enough courage to be definers; lawmakers have not enough courage to be definers.” Here, then, Weaver prods us not only to examine the fate of conservatism in the early years of the twenty-first century but also to be alert to fundamentals that need to be recovered before a principled conservatism becomes a mere relic. It is imperative, in this connection, to sustain the beneficences of conservatism before they are completely usurped by false conservatives as they push aside traditionalist conservative scholars by dint of their blown-up

importance and power. These conservative scholars, whose writings have illumined the pages of *Modern Age*, decade after decade, remind us again and again that “much remains to conserve and to renew” beyond the tinselled conservatism that its fabricators have brought to fruition in public discourse, and in word and print. The time is ripe to revisit these scholars if the soul of conservatism is not to be lost.

No less than other words of value, conservatism has in effect been giving way to “drift and circumstance” and to a diminishing “discipline of exactness” in language. The radical politicization of intellect as an armed vehicle of ideology has also heightened “compromise in definition and elimination” and the expansion of “moral helplessness,” to employ Weaver’s phraseology. We need, then, to restore to their true function the forgotten texts of conservatism that justify the continuity of the word’s significance. If, as it appears, we have neglected foundational texts, it is never too late to wrestle with their words and meaning and to retrieve predication from falsifiers. How are we now to save the word conservative from the powerful jaws of relativism and revisionism and restore to it its basic essences and the humane lessons of metaphysics? Simply returning to foundational texts, however necessary, is in itself not enough; meditating on them is requisite if their truths are to be assimilated and lived, and if we are to rediscover our “lost unity of mind.”

In this connection, two texts that should be studied in any effort to estimate the authority of conservatism as concept should advantageously include Dr. Leavis’s first chapter in *The Living Principle* (1975), “Thought, Language and Objectivity,” and Irving Babbitt’s final chapter in *Democracy and Leadership*, “Democracy and Standards.” These particular texts, which are largely ignored in current academico-intellectual discourse,

will aid us not only to grasp more clearly what exactly we mean when we use the word conservatism, but also to prevent the shoddy journalism that envelops it. Leavis poses for us a central question: How are we to maintain the “creative continuity” of language that has meaning and weight, and that must be protected from impoverishment and reductionism? His chapter affirms language that, as he notes, “exemplifies the truth that life is growth and growth change, and the condition of these is continuity.” Leavis’s words, when approached in the special context of the purpose and the argument of this commentary, reinforce the need to perceive one’s sense of the word conservatism as one that has continuity and that ultimately defeats its declension. Conservatism, as such, need not be a problematic word, empty in content, robbed of its living tradition and importance by blatherers and usurpers.

Restoring the meaning of conservatism, and cleansing it of its detritus, is a necessity that cannot be postponed. To study carefully the text of Irving Babbitt’s “Democracy and Standards” further accentuates the urgency and the effort of paying attention to standards of language and culture in an age that wantonly employs quantitative utilitarian measurements and eliminates “the qualitative and selective principle,” which separates conservative sensibility from “sheer restlessness of spirit.” What Babbitt sees as the supreme need for moral responsibility is precisely the inner gravamen that resists the sophistries and the blandishments found in so much of modern political theory and practice, flourishing “in an atmosphere of vague and inaccurate definition,” and one that inevitably infects contemporary habits of mind.

Can conservatism be rescued from this infection that in time becomes a plague? Can conservatism be rescued from a “sham spirituality...promoted by the blurring of distinctions”? Babbitt’s pages re-

quire the mindfulness of any conservative who is cognizant of “the danger of power without wisdom” and who must resist the insidious forms of “the substitution of standardization for standards.” Indeed, no conservative who is even minimally aware of moral reality, “the data of consciousness,” can, to apply Babbitt’s words, “allow himself to be whisked off into any cloud-cuckoo-land” in the name of some idea, impulse, doctrine, or crusade “coming between him and a keen inspection of the facts.” To recover the authenticity of conservatism in the present-day world also means the recovery of the idea of “the civil war in the cave,” a pivotal spiritual concern that has become as vague as the definition of conservatism itself. An integral conservatism is obtainable only when, as Babbitt declares, “will and intellect and imagination have been brought into right relation with one another.” Moreover, to grasp a viable humane ethos grounded in the law of measure championed by Babbitt, and in a “politics of prudence” invoked by Kirk, sooner or later presupposes the containment of the disordering extremism of *demos* and *gnosis*.

Towards the end of his chapter on “Democracy and Standards,” Babbitt writes: “The unit to which all things must

be finally referred is not the state of humanity or any other abstraction, but the man of character. Compared with this ultimate reality, every other reality is only a shadow in the mist.” And towards the end of his chapter, “Argument by Definition,” in *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (1953), Weaver offers us these words: “The true conservative is one who sees the universe as a paradigm of essences....as a set of definitions which are struggling to get themselves defined in the real world.” No two statements, so astonishingly contiguous in their ethical criticism and ethical vision, can better inspire us for the task of restoring and renewing the meaning and the complexion of conservatism.

In the pursuit of this task we must bear in mind that our conservatism is ultimately the moral exemplification of our conservatorship; that the conservative as conservator guards against violations of our reverent traditions and legacy, and is, in fine, a preserver, a keeper, a custodian of sacred things and signs and texts, *sub specie aeternitatis*. Only when we perceive and accept the meaning of conservatism in this venerable context will we begin to allay the confusion of this word—and the confusions of our time.

—George A. Panichas