

BOOK REVIEWS

The Achievement of Russell Kirk

James E. Person, Jr.

Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology,

by W. Wesley McDonald, *Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004. xiv + 243 pp.*

ON ONE OCCASION many years ago, historian Garry Wills was described in *The New York Times Book Review* as “cheerfully resigned to being a singular conservative, a renegade in the eyes of others who crowd under that rubric.”

Today there are many public figures who “crowd under that rubric,” to the point that to many people in the United States the very word *conservative* translates roughly as “anyone whose social, political, economic, and philosophical beliefs stand to the right of Senator Edward Kennedy.” But to those who seek to understand more fully the meaning of American conservatism, surely a more precise distinction can be made. And it can be, but the drawing of such distinctions is no easy task. For in truth the post-World-War-II American Right is actually a series of movements, some of them overlapping, that emerged out of divergent philosophical traditions: anti-Communists, libertarians, evangelicals, agrarians, neo-Confederates, neoconservatives, se-

JAMES E. PERSON, JR., is the author of *Russell Kirk: A Critical Biography of a Conservative Mind and Earl Mamner: From Walton's Mountain to Tomorrow* (*Cumberland House, forthcoming*).

cessionists, monarchists, adherents of economism, rightward-leaning anarchists, and traditionalists, among others. Adherents to these groups tend to argue with each other frequently and only erratically seek common cause. (On this note, it was William F. Buckley Jr.'s, signal accomplishment, during the founding years of *National Review*, to gather an amalgam of key writers and editors from among these groups and not only keep them on speaking terms with each other, but also unite them—however loosely—into something resembling a movement.)

Among the traditionalists, the name Russell Kirk (1918-1994) is preeminent and highly respected. Author of *The Conservative Mind* (1953), *A Program for Conservatives* (1954), and *The Roots of American Order* (1974), he has been regarded as one of the foremost figures of the postwar revival in conservative thought. While numerous commentators on contemporary political thought have acknowledged his considerable influence on the substance and the direction of American conservatism, no analysis of his social and political writing has dealt extensively with the philosophical foundations of his work, until now. In his provocative study *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology*, W. Wesley McDonald of Elizabethtown College examines those foundations and demonstrates their impact on the conser-

vative intellectual movement that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. He cites the influence of the British statesman Edmund Burke and the American humanist educators Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More upon Kirk, and in doing so he demonstrates how Kirk's conservative philosophy was shaped. Thus, one of the book's key purposes is to shed needed light to clarify some of Kirk's positions; and in so doing demonstrate that they are philosophically defensible, and not merely the products of intuition.

Kirk believed that intuition, as understood by most people, is more often than not the domain of mystical visions and that Inner Voice which, in the average sensual man—typified by Eliot's creation Sweeney—"breathes the eternal message of vanity, fear and lust." If the inner light that guides one's path is darkness, how great is the darkness? But Kirk did not have an entirely negative view of intuition, for he found it to be a distinct part of what Cardinal Newman called the illative sense, "which," Kirk said, "we may vulgarly term the jigsaw-puzzle capabilities of the intellect, a multitude of little evidences falling into place gradually, so that in the end one discovers 'powerful and concurrent reasons' for belief, even though one cannot consciously trace the intricate process by which conviction was brought about. Intuition had a part in that imagination, of course, as it has in the perception of every man of genius." As Professor McDonald makes clear, intuition divorced from the transcendent, from the normative imagination, provides the guiding spirit for ideology.

In speaking of imagination, any discussion of Kirk must necessarily lead to a reference to the moral imagination, an expression he borrowed from Burke. The term "moral imagination" appears throughout Kirk's works, but what does it mean? According to Kirk it is the power of knowing man, despite his weaknesses and sinful nature, as a moral being, meant for

eternity. It recognizes that human beings, after all, are created in the image of God. The moral imagination, wrote Kirk, "is man's power to perceive ethical truth, abiding law, in the seeming chaos of many events. Without the moral imagination, man would live merely day to day, or rather moment to moment, as dogs do. It is the strange faculty—inexplicable if men are assumed to have an animal nature only—of discerning greatness, justice, and order, beyond the bars of appetite and self-interest."

But *imagination*? To face the modern age, is it not more important to be practical and to possess practical know-how, and to set down imagination among the toys of one's youth? Nay, not so, says McDonald. In a particularly insightful passage he says:

By employing our imagination, we can tease moral universals out of manifold history. Intuitively, we can experience life in the broadest sense and formulate concepts describing what is universal in history. The "moral precepts and the social conventions which we obey represent the considered judgments and filtered experience of many generations of prudent and dutiful human beings—the most sagacious of our species." By reflecting upon the trials and errors of our ancestors' struggles to achieve moral perfection, to fulfill their ultimate spiritual destinies, and to give expression to the ethical imperative, we bring the past as a living presence to bear on the present situation. Particular acts of courage, charity, honesty, faith, and duty offer concrete examples of attempts to rise above personal bias and advantage. When we adopt the perspective "of the ages," ethical truths that personal experience alone could never reveal arise in our awareness because we are drawing from a well of knowledge infinitely broader than that which is available to our own intellects or even the combined intellects of a whole generation of individuals. A tradition is a summation of previous concrete efforts to achieve the common good; our tradition, in turn, inspires us to additional acts of morality. To whatever degree

society has a concern for the common good, its traditions will be a source of formative good, directing and supporting its efforts to achieve the highest possible purpose. Insofar as our ethical or higher selves prevail, we will be brought into harmony—that is, genuine community—with others similarly motivated. Traditions provide, further, an ethical check on our merely arbitrary, socially disruptive, momentary impulses by bringing us under the control of standards external to our individual wills. “A people,” then, observed Kirk, “who have exhausted their traditions are starved for imagination and devoid of any general assumptions to give coherence to their life.”

Here McDonald discourses upon imagination and tackles manfully the question raised long ago in a review by Richard M. Weaver: Which tradition? It is common for the modern liberal to respond coolly to conservative appeals to tradition by remarking about the *tradition* of slavery or the *tradition* of dueling, both of which disappeared—the liberal claims—because far-sighted men and women burst the “shackles” of tradition to embrace a superior way. But surely this is a problematic (and even foolish) argument on several counts, not least among them that it affirms allegiance to the Whig interpretation of history, what C. S. Lewis called “chronological snobbery”: the belief that change is progress, and that the perspective of we moderns is markedly superior to the benighted beliefs of previous generations. The “chronological snob” is characterized by a breezy contempt for the past, viewing it as a squalid saga of backwardness, bloodshed, and oppression, a darkness over civilization that lifted only during the past thirty glorious years. McDonald and Kirk are as one in believing that tradition is far more than a simple habit of behavior that spans several generations: it is “a summation of previous concrete efforts to achieve the common good,” which “inspires us to additional acts of morality.” However problematic certain traditions may seem to

future generations, those traditions serve the key purpose of helping secure order in the soul and harmonious relations within the commonwealth, this by providing “an ethical check on our merely arbitrary, socially disruptive, momentary impulses by bringing us under the control of standards external to our individual wills.”

In placing high value upon the moral imagination, with its view of man as a creature flawed by sin and in need of an inner check, traditionalist conservatism differs entirely from those views that hold with the idyllic imagination: the Rousseauistic belief that the past is a burden to be shrugged off, that men and women are born free but are everywhere in chains, and that with just the right combination of positive legislation, therapy, thought control, social tinkering, and other ghastly niceties, they can be molded into something akin to gods and goddesses. The various ways by which men believe other men can be rendered perfect are called ideologies. Kirk explained that ideology does not mean political theory or principle, although the term is commonly employed in that sense. “Ideology,” he said, “really means political fanaticism—and, more precisely, the belief that this world of ours may be converted into the Terrestrial Paradise through the operation of positive law and positive planning. The ideologue—Communist or Nazi or of whatever affiliation—maintains that human nature and society may be perfected by mundane, secular means, though these means ordinarily involve violent social revolution.”

McDonald notes that Kirk rejected ideology as a prideful delusion, and that he considered conservative thought a way of seeing life and reality as they really are. The conservative, in Kirk’s eyes, shows forth the union of wisdom and virtue within the soul and within the community, drawing prudently upon the wisdom of custom, convention, and ways of con-

tinuity—tradition—to craft a worthy legacy for the rising generation, and, by extension, to leaven the commonwealth. Kirk went on to note that conservatism, as opposed to ideology, “is founded upon the concept that politics is the art of the possible, and the concept that the old and tried is preferable to the new and untried”—a concept foreign to much of the modern age, where an unthinking belief that “newer is better” is commonplace.

Beyond this, Kirk (as McDonald rightly notes) understood that the conservative knows with Babbitt, More, and T. S. Eliot—as the ideologue does not—that man is shaped by his culture even as he shapes his culture; and that culture is that which makes life worth living: culture, not a guaranteed income or any of the other cradle-to-grave promises of the nanny-state ideologue. Culture speaks to the innermost needs of man, because it arises out of religion. As Kirk noted, “When religious faith decays, culture must decline, though often seeming to flourish for a space after the religion which nurtured it has sunk into unbelief. But neither can religion subsist if severed from a healthy culture; no cultured person should remain indifferent to erosion of apprehension of the transcendent.” Indeed not; for as George Orwell once wrote, “Faith vanishes, but the need for faith remains the same as before.” And when faith languishes, the ideologue—his hour come round at last—steps forward presuming to fill the inner void in people’s lives. In modern times, perhaps the most blatant (and silly) statement of the faux-religious nature of ideology was blazoned forth upon the cover of the British socialist magazine *New Statesman* some years ago after a Labour government came to power: in large type, the lead article was titled, “Paradise Resumed.”

McDonald suggests a strong affinity between the minds of Kirk and Babbitt in their understanding of culture. It is in-

triguing to explore the extent of overlap between the beliefs of the two men, for Kirk had immense respect for Babbitt. In *The Conservative Mind* Kirk described Babbitt as a man in whom “American conservatism attains maturity.” Babbitt, he says, was “a big, earnest Ohioan who worked on a Western ranch in his youth, studied at Harvard and at Paris, wandered afoot in Spain, fought against the currents other men rode to success, and died with remarkable fortitude, working to the last to convince America that man cannot remain human unless he restrains his appetites. Although friendly to religion, he remained suspicious of all churches; if he detested the corruption of American principles, still he is one of the most thoroughly native of American writers. Aristotle, Burke, and John Adams were his mentors in social thought. Founding the school of American philosophy which he called humanism, he left behind him an influence which may endure long after Laski has been nearly forgotten at the London School of Economics. In him, American conservatism attains maturity.” Indeed Kirk respected the great humanist greatly, especially for Babbitt’s recognition that “man cannot remain human unless he restrains his appetites.” Such was the respect for which Kirk held the “big, earnest Ohioan” that he crafted one of his most thoughtful and lengthy essays to introduce to the 1986 National Humanities Institute edition of Babbitt’s *Literature and the American College*. Here, Kirk discourses in comfortable agreement with Babbitt’s argument that cultural standards, or criteria, are increasingly ignored in the American college, replaced by an emphasis upon the sensational and sentimentalism. (“*How would you feel, if you were in Caliban’s shoes, and Prospero spoke to you like that?*”)

It is of course an open question as to whether Babbitt exercised a lasting influence upon his culture. I suspect Kirk is right in making this claim—he was pro-

foundly right in so much—because he understood that the humanist influence works quietly within the lives of men, crafting a remnant of wise and virtuous people who leaven their communities through their example. In time, it might well be argued, the influence of Babbitt upon Kirk was superceded by that of T. S. Eliot—as evidenced in the above-mentioned introduction to *Literature and the American College*, wherein he, at one point, speaks of the limitations of Babbitt’s thought. Eliot, Kirk notes with approval, “severely criticized Babbitt” for refusing to move beyond the revering of tradition to acknowledge the legitimacy of tradition’s religious roots. But that is the subject of another essay.

Like Kirk, Babbitt lived at odds with the ideologies of his day, intuiting that ideology is at war with man—a fallen creature, not perfectible in this life—and that there are constants, call them *permanent things*, which must be observed. These permanent things, those timeless norms of belief and behavior that cannot be driven out by ideological conditioning, are apprehended by the moral imagination, though Babbitt did not use these terms. As for Kirk, McDonald demonstrates ably how the great man’s recognition of the moral imagination and his traditionalist beliefs differed in several respects from the conservatism espoused by many who crowd under conservatism’s banner today. Culture, Kirk believed, arises from the cult—the local faith community—not from politics. Thus, unlike a number of prominent conservative figures today, Kirk was a localist and regionalist rather than a nationalist, and a proponent of agrarian and small-community life rather than cosmopolitan concerns.

With his eye upon the local community, Kirk advocated fair trade over free trade, and was a champion of the free-market economy on a humane scale rather than no-holds-barred laissez-faire capitalism on a large scale. Believing that the

local community should be livable and pleasant, Kirk ran against much of the modern conservative grain, being a strong conservationist who took seriously a belief that man is responsible for being a responsible steward of the Earth. (On one occasion he wrote, “Nothing is more conservative than conservation.”) And unlike many conservatives, Kirk took long views of events. Late in life he told this reviewer that he considered it *silly*—which was almost always the strongest term of abuse he ever used—to refer to cultural conservatives as “beautiful losers,” as there are no final victories here below, and what is recognized as a defeat and a failure today may tomorrow lay the groundwork for triumphs of cultural renewal.

McDonald labors effectively to draw these distinctions, elaborating upon the differences between traditionalist conservatives and the modern neoconservatives in particular. He laments that much of what passes today for “conservatism” comprises elements that Kirk would not recognize as conservative at all—perhaps most of all the belief that culture is a portable commodity, to be “poured in from the top” in countries where American influence holds sway. McDonald makes no secret that his sympathies lie with the traditionalist conservatives, the cultural conservatives, the Kirkians, and that he has little use for libertarians and neoconservatives, who tend to invoke Russell Kirk as a name to conjure with, while holding little sympathy with Kirk’s philosophical legacy and example. The libertarians, Kirk believed, have a surface similarity with some aspects of traditionalist conservatism, but they end as worshippers of the autonomous self, which is antithetical to the life of local loyalties and small-community culture advocated by Kirk. The neoconservatives, on the other hand, are disdained by McDonald—as they were by Kirk, during his lifetime—for their international adventurism, love

of a large, activist federal government, and rejection of the permanent things. For their part, the neoconservatives enjoy an uncomfortable relationship with Kirk, acknowledging the immense significance of his achievement while privately (and sometimes, not so privately) dismissing him as a wise eccentric who enjoyed being happy at home in Mecosta, Michigan, while the *real* work of conservative reform (they claim) was being carried out by aggressive political activists working in Washington, D.C., and appearing on Sunday-morning television talk-shows.

And yet, as McDonald correctly asserts,

If Kirk were still alive, he would entertain no illusions about conservative prospects for the short term. "Yet cheerfulness will keep breaking through," he always maintained. It was never his nature to succumb to despair, cynicism, or bitterness. When things appear at their worst, there is always reason for hope. While the fabric of social order seems today irreparably frayed, there are those (the "Remnant," as Kirk liked to call them) "doing their best to stitch together once more the fragments of that serviceable old suit we variously call 'Christian civilization' or 'Western civilization' or 'the North Atlantic community' or 'the free world.' Not by force of arms are civilizations held together, but by the subtle threads of moral and intellectual principle."

One might dispute one or two minor matters of phrasing in *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology*. In addition, in the above-mentioned introduction to *Literature and the American College*, Kirk expressed a concern he shared with T. S. Eliot, who "severely criticized Babbitt" in his University of Virginia lectures during the 1930s; Kirk proceeds to explain how Babbitt refused to move beyond "tradition" to the religious sources of tradition. Perhaps McDonald could have explored this area—or perhaps it is the thesis of an article or another book. For on the whole W. Wesley McDonald has served well the

legacy of Russell Kirk, producing a work that will serve, for years to come, as a major scholarly resource for those who seek to understand Kirk's philosophy and its implications.

An Emersonian Bloom

Patrick J. Walsh

The Best Poems of the English Language: From Chaucer Through Frost, selected and with Commentary by Harold Bloom, *New York: HarperCollins, 2004. 972 pp.*

HAROLD BLOOM is to be congratulated for his courage in speaking up for literary standards in an age of intellectual decline. It is difficult to fault a man who called the *New York Times Book Review* "not very literate" and summed up Stephen King as an "immensely inadequate writer on a sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, book by book basis." In 2003, the noted Professor of Literature at Yale chided the National Book Foundation for "recognizing nothing but the commercial value" of books. To his credit, Bloom has also spoken out regarding the "menace" to reading, "from grade school through graduate school throughout the English speaking world." The menace is "a reading governed by ideological and social considerations."

Professor Bloom has been waging a heroic battle against levelers in academia, but he does this from an untenable position. As an unabashed gnostic, Bloom believes that his secular gnostic opinion is a kind of nonconformist view within academia. But in this he is mistaken. For

PATRICK J. WALSH writes from Quincy, Massachusetts.