

Recovering the Holy

Steve Faulkner

Gentle Regrets: Thoughts from a Life,

by Roger Scruton, *London and New York: Continuum International, 2006.*
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ROGER VERNON SCRUTON is standing at night in a quiet street in Prague, listening. It is the early 1980s, well before the fall of the Berlin Wall. He stands in a dark street “where street lighting was sparse, where cars were an object of suspicion, and where few people ventured after dark” and he listens to the quiet sounds of a city sleeping: “the turning of a key in the latch; a window opening; the flapping of curtains in a sudden breeze.” He has slipped away from his government watcher and takes a moment to reflect on a city that died when the communists took charge. He listens to the sounds of a people falling into a common sleep, people who by day avoid each other or speak to each other “only in the cautious and shifty way that the Party required of them.” But at night they sleep in their city and wait. And the listener waits too, for “the ghost of this historic city to return and tell of a community living in peace, working, resting and praying as one.”

Scruton is on his way to speak to a hushed gathering of the city’s intelligentsia, dissidents meeting up three flights of empty stairs in someone’s apartment. They have invited him because Roger Scruton is that most unlikely of British intellectuals, a conservative, the found-

ing editor of the *Salisbury Review*, which alone among English periodicals is being retyped, ten carbons at a time, and distributed in a samizdat edition in Prague. But these gathered intellectuals are getting more than an editor of a conservative journal. Scruton is also a philosopher of aesthetics, a writer passionate about architecture, a musician, composer, and a music critic; he is also a defender of high culture, of benevolent authority and its necessary correspondent, thinking obedience, without which a democracy cannot long survive.

Because Scruton is a perceptive and outspoken defender of Merry Old England—of its tradition of law, its religion, its old architecture of “the vernacular style,” its classical music—he has become the leading intellectual pariah of Dreary Progressive England. Unafraid to cry out against the grand planners of Progress east and west, Scruton has been invited to speak to a motley gathering of Prague’s thinkers and dreamers: “old professors in their shabby waistcoats; long-haired poets; fresh-faced students who had been denied admission to university for their parents’ political ‘crimes’; priests and religious in plain clothes; a would-be rabbi; even a psychoanalyst.” In the hushed apartment, they hear him out, unlike the intellectuals in his native country.

Years later, after the collapse of European Communism, Scruton finds himself again in Prague. He is still a listener, a careful observer, who refuses to disguise the effects of Central Europe’s newfound freedoms where capitalism has returned with a vengeance. He recalls the hopes of the dissident intellectuals and remembers the ghost of Prague he had once listened for, the ghost that had “lingered on, until that day when peace was restored, and prayer forgotten. And with a faint cry heard only by the poets, it vanished forever.”

Scruton is not an ideologue. He is a conservative in the best sense of that

STEVE FAULKNER *teaches creative writing at Longwood University in Southern Virginia.*

word. He examines and weighs, balancing progress against the past, looking both here and there for the good, the true, and the beautiful. His book *Gentle Regrets: Thoughts from a Life* is a clear, engaging, and often self-deprecating anthology of his ongoing attempts to understand his own life and the culture of modern Europe.

A window opens upon the character of this man in the Paris of 1968. He was just twenty-four-years old: "In the narrow street below my window the students were shouting and smashing." Plate glass shattered, cars exploded, students tore down lamp-posts to form barricades, laughing, jeering, and heaving cobblestones at the frightened policemen. Upstairs in his room, the young Scruton had been reading through the afternoon. The book was Charles de Gaulle's *Mémoires de Guerre* (1955-1960): "According to the Gaullist vision, a nation is defended not by institutions or borders but by language, religion, and high culture; in times of turmoil and conquest it is those spiritual things that must be protected and reaffirmed." Scruton turned to a friend who had come round after she had been all day on the barricades and asked what she proposed to put in place of the bourgeoisie "whom you despise, and to whom you owe the freedom and prosperity that enable you to play on your toy barricades?" Scruton admits he was "obnoxiously pompous; but for the first time in my life I felt a surge of political anger, finding myself on the other side of the barricades from all the people I knew."

This is the Scruton we meet again and again in the pages of this remarkable book, a man willing to admit and even explore his own faults (the regrets of his title), but willing also to oppose the popular crowds that surge about, blown by every wind of revolution, every flapping breeze of novelty. He loves, for example, opera. But he rejects the popular producers who impose their own egos upon that most subtle

confluence of libretto and score where "a dramatic idea [is] expounded through a tonal argument." He rarely attends the performances of opera anymore where the interpretations of the producer are "placed squarely between the work and the audience, so turning every seat in the opera house into one with an obstructed view." So he sits at home and listens to recorded performances, where the producers cannot ruin the vision of the original composers.

And, while at home, he takes the time to write his own opera. He writes a libretto, but can find no composer who will add the music. So he writes his own music as well. Why not? With high hopes, he goes to see its first performances, staged with full orchestra in Prague. But if producers will thrust their interpretations upon the great composers, they will have little trouble interposing their views upon a new one. "I was grateful, of course," he says, "and flattered to be mistreated in the same way as Verdi and Wagner. But the experience confirmed my sense that opera is now so widely misunderstood that only those who avoid going to performances will know what it means."

He rejects, too, in a wonderfully lucid chapter aptly titled "Returning Home," the outrages of modern architecture. "Architectural modernism," Scruton writes, "rejected all attempts to adapt the old language of the city. It rejected classical orders, columns, architraves and mouldings. It rejected the Greek and Gothic revivals. It rejected the street as the primary public space and façade as the public aspect of a building. It rejected every written and unwritten rule that had shaped the growth of our towns."

He goes on to observe that, like the student uprisings of 1968, the architects rejected all this not because they had a well-thought-out alternative, but because they were determined to overthrow the natural order of the bourgeois city "as a place of faith, festivity, commerce and

spontaneous hierarchical life.” He says that the modernist pioneers “were social and political activists, who wished to squeeze the disorderly human material that constitutes a city into a socialist straightjacket.” He sees this modernist crusade as the enemy of home, of the craftsmen and local designers who built to match their surroundings and enhanced their homes and businesses with the materials of their areas in order “to redeem a place and a time, to honour the community by honouring those who had built it over centuries.”

Scruton therefore rejects “the wide roads, pedestrian zones, high buildings that would deface the sky and wide glass windows from which the new breed of post-industrial worker could stare over spaces as clean, straight and empty as the mind that surveyed them.” But of course he does not merely reject the excesses of modernism, he allies himself to some of the alternatives proposed by Ruskin in *Stones of Venice*, Alberti in his *Ten Books of Architecture*, and Viollet-le-Duc in his two volumes of lectures, as well as the modern designer Leon Krier, who “laid down the simple principles that would enable Poundbury [the modern country village envisioned by the Prince of Wales] to build itself.”

But this book is much more than an analysis of culture. It is a memoir that takes us into the private life of a boy who loved his mutt of a dog, whose childhood was troubled by a distant, angry father, and by the death of his mother. He was a boy who found refuge in books and in ideas, but who also found in those very books something else, a certain sadness, “a sense that something was wrong with the world.... Sadness looked out at me from art and literature.... I encountered it in the words of Rilke, I saw it in the mad paintings of Van Gogh, and I heard it...in the infinite, still spaces of Beethoven’s last quartets—spaces made through sound, in which, however, there reigns a

greater silence than can be heard in any desert.”

The young Scruton rejected faith and succumbed to the promises of science, later studying analytic philosophy at Cambridge. But always he listened and watched and regretted the losses of European culture. He was not a believer, but not a mocker either. In a chapter, “Stealing from Churches,” he watches a young woman of his acquaintance walk into a church in a tiny hamlet in France, a small, dark place of stone and thin grisaille windows. The woman, scouting around, discovers two “exquisite bottles of silver-bound crystal—the cruets of the sacrament.” She exclaims at their beauty and immediately pockets them and hurries from the church.

For Scruton this scene becomes a metaphor of that much larger theft, the theft of the sacred from the heart of Europe. Hence, tourists babbling and poking through churches while old women kneel and pray nearby is a theft. Idealists of every stripe constructing their own alternatives to faith is theft. To steal the sacred, he says, is to steal the heart. “Hence the theft is easy; and amends are long and hard.”

He meets a young woman in Poland whose strong faith forbids her from pursuing her love for a divorced Scruton and whose will to find the freedom in obedience gives both of them the courage to walk away. He visits the chapel of the idiosyncratic but faithful priest, Monsignor Gilbey. The chapel is hidden up a narrow back staircase in the middle of London’s Traveller’s Club. Climbing “through a tangle of thrumming pipes, tubes and wires reminiscent of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*,” the Monsignor leads the way to a cupboard door and upon entering Scruton finds himself transported into the world of Philip II of Spain: an altar, silver candlesticks, a single row of chairs and prie-dieux, a tall armchair, a Madonna with flowing robes, a crucifix “bearing the long polished limbs of an El-Greco-like

Christ in ivory,” fragments of liturgical furniture, and a place for the reserved sacrament.

A former chaplain at Cambridge, Gilbey had been forced to resign when he refused to accept women undergraduates into Fisher House, the Roman Catholic Chaplaincy attached to Cambridge University. A quiet speaker, Gilbey is full of anecdotes and aphorisms: “True education is not for life, but for death.” “We are not asked to undo the work of creation or to rectify the Fall. The duty of the Christian is not to leave this world a better place. His duty is to leave this world a better man.” Scruton finds in Gilbey, as he did in the Polish student, an invitation “to transubstantiate ourselves in thought, from appetite to will, and from flesh to spirit.”

Years later, after many a long, hard mile, and a thorough apprenticeship in atheism, Scruton finds himself somehow regaining his lost faith. The old sadness that had haunted him since childhood slips into unlooked-for song. The book ends with an analysis and critique of Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem *Duino Elegies* and T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. In each he sees a masterful poet crying out for a lost

religious community; Rilke invents for himself a community not of this world; Eliot imagines the recovery of the holy within a Christian community long dead. Scruton decides to recover Christian community by simply walking into his country church and volunteering to play the organ during the liturgy: “Moving to the country ten years ago I went out of curiosity to our local church, no longer a thief but as a penitent.” In that country church, Scruton discovered the old language of the Book of Common Prayer, and that magnificent Psalm, the *Jubilate Deo*, that calls us to joy and praise. As almost everyone can see, the Anglican faith is a dying thing, but Scruton once again stands listening, resisting the crowds leaving the churches, searching for the ghost of old Anglicanism. And like Eliot before him, he finds there order, tradition, beauty, and a way of life not quite gone. It is the language, religion, and high culture he had read of and hoped for above the burning street in Paris when he was twenty-four. And playing the *Jubilate Deo* in that little country church, Scruton begins to find the lasting seeds of joy, the antidote to that haunting sadness.



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