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## RUSSELL KIRK AND THE MORAL IMAGINATION

FRED DOUGLAS YOUNG

The first time I heard Russell Kirk speak, I was surprised. Having read some of his hard-hitting essays on the modern age's malaise, I was prepared to hear an impassioned orator. On the contrary he presented a benign appearance, and he spoke quietly, making his points in the manner of a man sitting down with a few friends to share some insights that he found helpful and that he believed might be of some assistance to them. Not that what he had to say, without fanfare, was any less pithy and to the point. Although he was friendly and approachable, his manner was perfectly characterized by William F. Buckley when he referred to Kirk's "warm aloofness which is his trademark." Russell Kirk was a gentle man.

Reading Kirk's books and essays will richly reward anyone trying to make sense of the last half of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century, whether the reader finds himself sympathetic to or at odds with Kirk. Both the title and subtitle of his autobiography, *The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict* (2002), are apt. Our era sees the sword as primarily symbolic although at one time it was the basic weapon of individual warriors in mortal combat. What more powerful weapon could be wielded in the clash of ideas than the "sword of *imagination*"? The chapter titles and subtitles testify to the author's penetrating insights and mordant sense of humor: "The Dead Alone Give Us Energy," "When Public Schools Taught Discipline," "A Penurious Scholar at the Cow College," "In the Educational Waste Land," "Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus on the Sand Dunes," "The Conservative Mind Breaches the Walls," "War with Behemoth University," "Among Illiberal Men of Letters," "Flannery O'Connor: Notes by Humpty-Dumpty," "Right Reason Does Not Pay," and "From the Night Club of the Holy Ghost to the Shroud of Turin," to name a few. Those who perhaps have pegged Kirk as a conservative in order to dismiss him may well be surprised at his disdain for ideology as such and his glowing admiration for such figures as Norman Thomas, Dick Gregory, and Eugene McCarthy.

Russell Kirk was a happy warrior who enjoyed taking on adversaries whom he characterized as "the intellectual goons of the latter half of the twentieth century." He was proud of his roots. Not only is history important, Kirk insists, but one's individual history and sense of place are critical to understanding who one is and what life is about. In looking back over his life it was "in the heat of combat," Kirk writes, paraphrasing Edmund Burke, that he "learned how to love what ought to be loved and how to hate what ought to be hated." Two of his favorite phrases were "the permanent things" and

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“the moral imagination.” Those two phrases were Kirk’s way of settling one of the oldest philosophical conundrums dating back to Plato and Aristotle—that of the One and the Many. For Kirk the *moral imagination* was the One which gave meaning and coherence to the *permanent things*, the Many. These phrases give us a clue to what was most important to him and join all that he said or wrote during a long and productive life. Perhaps that is why it is a mistake to label him a conservative—or even why, finally, no label will suffice for this brilliant multifaceted man. Many have tried. In a genuine effort to understand him, one writer has said that Kirk was a “Cavalier and Covenanter” and a “Tory and Puritan” in his temperament.

A prosaic summary of Kirk’s origins would include that he was born of working-class parents in the small town of Plymouth, Michigan, less than a month before Armistice Day. From his mother he learned as a child to appreciate Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walter Scott, and James Fenimore Cooper. By the time he was seven he intuitively felt that the answer to the question “Who am I?” was more than just the reflection he saw in a mirror; he somehow knew “that he had a soul; no, that he *was* a soul.” Kirk received a sound education in Plymouth “when public schools taught disciplines” and ever after took it for granted that classrooms ought to be “orderly, safe, and reasonably pleasant places.”

The Great Depression had a pivotal impact on Kirk’s thinking, as with many of the generation who lived through it, but he was convinced that the country was not ripe for political upheaval. He observed that “to make a revolution violently in a great modern state, there must exist a large sullen class of the discontented and unfortunate, their circumstances seemingly desperate. . . . But the United States in 1932 had scarcely any proletariat . . . and no coherent mischievous class of ideologues to plot and lead a violent transformation of the American republic. . . . The first New Deal neither averted a revolution nor made a revolution.”

As a beneficiary of a college education and having to depend on scholarship aid, Kirk appreciated and understood the importance of what he had been given and fought tenaciously to make that opportunity available to others. This explains perhaps why higher education was the one topic he never tired of writing about while defending the classical mode. Kirk was graduated in 1940 from Michigan State College of Agriculture and Applied Science—later renamed Michigan State University—and he accepted an offer for a graduate assistantship in history from Duke University. On his own Kirk decided to do his master’s thesis on John Randolph of Roanoke, which was later published by the University of Chicago Press. His time at Duke endeared Dixie to Kirk, who “read deeply about the South ‘befo’ de wah’ and poked into its ashes.”

After World War II Kirk returned to Michigan State to teach history. When it was made clear to faculty members such as himself that earning a Ph.D. would be necessary for achieving tenure, Kirk crossed the Atlantic to

Scotland, where he was enrolled at the University of St. Andrews. He began his studies there in September of 1948. Four years later he was awarded the *litterarum doctorem* at St. Andrews, the highest arts degree. His dissertation, on the political thought of Edmund Burke, would later be published in America as *The Conservative Mind*. When he returned from Scotland in 1952, Kirk concluded that America had become so disillusioned with New Deal liberalism that a conservative resurgence was imminent. Believing that true conservatism eschews ideology, he devoutly hoped the impulse would not be seduced by Ayn Rand libertarianism.

While at Michigan State, he became a partner in a bookshop, and he noted that most buyers of the *Kinsey Report* were the same type of people who, “with a slight alteration of environment, would be gathered round the witch doctor’s blaze or rolling in the pious ecstasies of the extreme dissidence of dissent. They want any god but God.” Finding that he could not continue at Michigan State without compromising his views of what true education should entail, Kirk resigned his post and took up residence at the family home in Mecosta, Michigan. For a time he lived with relatives there and wrote for various periodicals, including the *New York Times Magazine*.

During the years after he left Michigan State, he not only wrote extensively but lectured far and wide on college campuses; during one year in the 1950s he spoke to nearly one hundred college audiences. In the fall of 1954 William F. Buckley journeyed to Mecosta and enlisted Kirk as a contributor to his new periodical, the *National Review*. Buckley remembered that “I was so elated by his spontaneous and generous willingness . . . that I took to ordering more Tom Collinses, but in every case, one for each of us. The evening proceeded toward such a pitch of such hilarity that, at midnight, I was barely able to drive the car back to Russell’s house” from the restaurant where the two had eaten dinner. “On arriving, he led me to my bedroom, and bade me goodnight.” When he awoke seven hours later, Buckley ran into Kirk “only then emerging from his study. He had, in the interval since dinner, written a chapter of his history of St. Andrews University, and would catch a little sleep before he served me breakfast.” In the obituary he wrote upon Kirk’s death, Buckley remembered that “in the ensuing 25 years he never missed a deadline,” and compared Kirk’s professionalism to that of Samuel Johnson and G. K. Chesterton.

Kirk insisted that at that time “there existed no concerted ‘conservative movement’ in the sense of an organized and systematic effort.” As for money there was none “at all behind the conservative intellectual renewal, either from individuals or from foundations.” His best efforts to raise money to start a conservative journal amounted to less than a thousand dollars. But he was not discouraged since the most important medium of exchange in this yet inchoate and tentative movement was ideas. Kirk was encouraged because he believed that “the climate of serious opinion was beginning to alter, even in the Academy. In either Britain or America, it takes some thirty

years for a body of ideas to be advanced, promulgated, discussed, and at length accepted by the thinking portion of the public. It was so with the Fabians in Britain; it has been so with the conservative intellectual impulse in the United States.”

Kirk was a teacher all his life. A proper teacher, said Richard Weaver, is a definer—one who understands “the difficult, the dangerous work of teaching men to speak and to write the truth.” Kirk no doubt would have agreed that this was an apt way of expressing the mission he undertook from the time he left Michigan State University in 1952 until his death in 1994. He continued to write regularly for the *National Review* and *Modern Age* and published articles occasionally in the *Wall Street Journal*.

That Kirk never suffered the fate of the late Victorian poet Francis Thompson, who, according to Albert C. Brugh, “in his last years declined into journalism,” is well attested by lectures he gave to the Heritage Foundation during the last fifteen years of his life. In *Redeeming the Time* he takes up the battle on behalf of the *permanent things*, exhorting his readers to enlist on the side of cultural renewal. He assumes the role of a doctor of culture—described by Richard Weaver in *Visions of Order* as one who has “developed habits of thought which enable him to see it in perspective”—to take the proper measure of its woes and to prescribe the hard cures.

In a lecture entitled “Civilization Without Religion?” Kirk leads his hearers to understand that the answer to the question is, quite simply, “No.” Kirk’s embrace of Christianity as set forth in the Apostles’ Creed was emphatically not, he insists, a Damascus Road conversion. In point of fact he shies away from that word: “It was the intellectual love of God” that gradually subsumed his earlier Stoicism. Kirk liked to compare his coming to faith to that of T. S. Eliot, which one writer puts this way: “One might say that he became a Christian on discovering that he already *was* one—a very common type of conversion.” Fascinated by the Shroud of Turin, Kirk mused “that the Gospel account of the resurrection might be found literally true at the end of two thousand years—why, any such surmise was horrid to many twentieth-century folk. If the Resurrection should be conceivable, might not a Last Judgment be conceivable? And who could put up with that?” Right reason must be combined with a moral imagination based on religion to engage the malaise described by Malcolm Muggeridge as “The Great Liberal Death Wish.”

On the vexed question of how to live the virtuous life, Kirk no doubt would have agreed with C. S. Lewis when he wrote in *The Screwtape Letters* that “mortals tend to turn into the thing they are pretending to be”—*pretending* meaning, in this instance, an older definition as a person who intends something. Kirk’s early fiction may be compared to Lewis’s novel *That Hideous Strength*: it is well written with believable round characters but at the same time bluntly didactic. Both men created characters who face the great questions with moral imagination and transcendent standards. Perhaps taking

a cue from Flannery O'Connor, whom he very much admired, Kirk made good imaginative use of violence and the grotesque in many of his short stories.

In "The Intemperate Professor" Kirk writes that "too many professors feel that they have been invested with the prophetic afflatus" but notes that "a prophet without a gospel is worse off than a rebel without a cause. For lack of anything better, such a professor often turns to some 'political religion,' some ideology, as a substitute for the traditions of civility and right reason." Such men "formed their opinions—or got them ready-made—thirty or forty years ago, and have refused to alter them since." Since they were possessed of "a dry-docked mind" not encumbered with the necessity to be critical in the best sense of the word, they were free to pursue their real goal, one that does not differ from the general condition of most men in most ages: "Harder to repress than lechery or gluttony or avarice, this lust for power is the strongest of vices." Unhappy men—theirs was a condition not to be envied: "To live with a gnawing grudge against one's own civilization is the way to a personal Hell, not to the Terrestrial Paradise." Such a bad example was not education, Kirk believed, since the "example a teacher sets is quite as important as what he teaches." He greatly admired these words of Cardinal Newman's: "The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description. Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us. . . . No man will be a martyr for a conclusion."

His *America's British Culture* (1993) is a superb general work making the case which the title implies and calling to mind Richard Weaver's plaint against those who decry all generalization: "It is useless to argue against generalization; a world without generalization is a world without knowledge. The chaotic and fragmentary thinking of the modern age is due largely to an apprehensiveness, inspired by empirical methods, over images, wholes, general truths, so that we are intimidated from reaching the conclusions we must live by." Weaver goes on to comment on perhaps one of the most misunderstood statements of all: "The exception neither proves nor disproves the rule; in the original sense of the maxim it tests the rule: *exceptio probat regulam*." C. S. Lewis wrote that "generalizations are the lenses with which our intellects have to make do."

Kirk was published more than a dozen times in the *Sewanee Review* over the course of four decades. Two articles under his name appeared in 1952: "Burke and the Principle of Order" and "The Conservative Mind of Newman." Kirk, intending to compliment the latter by saying that he was "indeed, no politician" admired the cardinal's thought for its being "suffused with that sense of the vanity of worldly things." That was what made his tangential references to politics worth considering. The next year he published an essay-review, "The Plight of American Minds and Hearts: Notes

by an Anomic," which explored David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, Peter Viereck's *Shame and Glory of the Intellectuals*, and Bernard Iddings Bell's *Crowd Culture: An Examination of the American Way of Life*. Kirk concluded his scrutiny of those pessimistic works on a hopeful note: "I think we may be standing upon the brink of the most far-reaching change in human opinions and institutions" since the French Revolution. But this time there would be no "heads on pikes" but change wrought by those "who know that the crowd's loneliness is the consequence of a flight from God." "York and Social Boredom" was the first essay by Kirk to appear in the *SR* (1953). In it he focused on that English city's revival of medieval mystery plays and the astonishing popular enthusiasm for them.

"The Last of the Scalds" by Kirk was published in the winter 1956 *Sewanee Review*. Reviewing two books of Roy Campbell's poetry, he praises them for demonstrating that Campbell is a good example of one whom Burke said "will never love where they ought to love who do not hate where they ought to hate." He quotes Campbell approvingly; "My moral code is the simplest I have met with: never to forget a good turn or an injury; and I can recommend it to everybody. It saves a great deal of bother about one's own or other people's 'rights.' I have never had many political ideas. I dislike progress as I see it working blindly and like a mole."

In the summer 1958 issue of the *Sewanee Review*, Russell Kirk took the occasion in reviewing Eric Voegelin's *The World of the Polis: Plato and Aristotle* to proclaim bluntly that a "philosopher aspires to teach wisdom; a philodoxer is a purveyor of *doxa*, illusory opinions and vain wishes." That blunt statement points to his conviction, implicit in much of what he wrote and said, that creation (or reality if you like) is angular, lumpy, and asymmetrical, with a richness and variety which will not be reduced by the systematizers and ideologues into some sort of logical construct. Kirk approvingly quotes Thomas Molnar who wrote, "There is no order in the universe except the *human order*."

Never tiring of touting Burke as having much to say to the twentieth century, Kirk in a winter 1961 article entitled "Burke, Providence, and Archaism" reviewed Francis Canavan's *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke*, Thomas H. D. Mahoney's *Edmund Burke and Ireland*, and *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, volume II, edited by Lucy S. Sutherland. Dismissing Toynbee's efforts to pigeonhole all thinkers as archaists and futurists, Kirk points to Burke as "neither an irrational devotee of the archaic, nor an apostle of the utilitarian society that was dawning . . . he seems to loom larger every year, in our time, as an intellectual and literary figure of the first rank."

In an essay-review entitled "Ideologues' Folly" Kirk returned to a familiar theme in the spring 1963 *Sewanee Review*. Intellectual ideologues despairing of achieving a utopia in their own countries often yielded to the seductive but foggy notion of a world community as a place to implement their

perfectionist vision. In the concluding sentence Kirk declares, "We are not going to return to a medieval synthesis, but thinking men must begin to face the facts of human existence, and to confess that it is our own frailty, not the imperfection of social institutions, which makes us perpetually discontented."

In a review of Carl B. Cone's *Burke and the Nature of Politics: The Age of the French Revolution*, Kirk wrote in the spring 1966 *Sewanee Review* about Burke's hatred of any sort of tyranny and, in a sentence which may well have been autobiographical, declared that "somehow Burke transcends party struggles and the questions of his hour; and, though suspicious from first to last of abstract doctrine and theoretic dogma, Burke will endure not for what he did, but for what he perceived." One of the wonderful and surprising things about Russell Kirk's writing is that just when one thought he could not say anything new about Burke, he wrote "Burke, Watercolors, and Darkness." Appearing in the *Sewanee Review* in winter 1968, Kirk wrote of Burke's defense of intuition and quoted with approval what he had said about "the divine Blake, who has seen God, sir, and talked with angels."

Fifty years after it was first published, Kirk wrote "*The Waste Land Lies Unredeemed*" in the *Sewanee Review* in summer 1972; it "remains quick, relevant to our present discontents." In "Personality and Medium in Eliot and Pound" (fall 1974) Kirk continued his fight against critics who tried to understand the poet through some ideological grid or other by lauding Eliot's characterization of himself as "Catholic, royalist, classicist; Anglican, Calvinist, Puritan."

In the summer 1992 number of the *Sewanee Review*, Kirk wrote a brief review of *The Collected Letters of George Gissing, 1863-1895*, the Victorian novelist who urged educational opportunities for women equal to those of men, and noted that a generation after his death George Orwell would become "his most understanding disciple." Kirk's last article before his demise, a tribute to M. E. Bradford who died in 1993, appeared in the winter 1994 issue. Although the two men sharply disagreed on their assessments of Lincoln, Kirk wrote approvingly that "Mel Bradford and this writer found themselves at one in their political and literary principles: The two of us endeavored to uphold the Permanent Things."

On the issue of multiculturalism Kirk writes that it is not only a fraud but a highly dangerous one at that. Public-school students two generations ago learned more than a little about Guatemala and Morocco, Aztecs and Berbers although there was no chatter about multiculturalism. Now schools eager to trumpet this new orthodoxy spend more time on sex education and social studies. Posing the question as to whether virtue can be taught, Kirk concluded that it can be *learned* albeit through the family and not in some classroom—this piece of advice amidst a current clamor that values be imparted to the MTV generation in a classroom setting.

Those who are familiar with Kirk's writings, as well as those who have



not read him at all, will profit from a recent book by Gerald Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* (2007). Russello is a fellow of the Chesterton Institute at Seton Hall University and is editor of the *University Bookman*. His general theme is the provocative suggestion that Kirk anticipated many features of postmodernism.

Russello devotes separate chapters to each vital component of what he sees as Kirk's conservative subjects: history, law, and politics. Every society makes use of these building blocks to forge and sustain itself. History is both "the stories and events a society deems worthy of repeating." Kirk had no truck with the view of history as a science or the Enlightenment notion that facts were in and of themselves subjective. "The historian," writes Russello, "participates in the creation of history, and the objects of knowledge cannot be separated fully from those who study them." Kirk used this postmodern knife with surgical precision to reveal liberalism's foregone conclusions about the past which always pointed to their "modern" and "objective" view of the world. Kirk wrote that "the endeavor of the intelligent believer in tradition is so to blend ancient usage with necessary amendment that society is never wholly old and never wholly new." Russello argues that Kirk's underlying assumption was "that conservatism is an attitude or set of attitudes that define one's stance toward reality, not devotion to particular social institutions": hence Kirk's aversion to the legislative process as it is reflected in his *John Randolph of Roanoke*. His fondness for Anglo-American common law's structural restraints against the excesses of popular government are an important subtext in that biography.

For Kirk, Russello believes, modernity's worst feature was perhaps its stubborn refusal to take into account man's fallen nature and its insistence on rational solutions to all human problems. The political expression of that view was liberalism. A lack of imagination doomed its inevitable failure which, Kirk believed, would prepare the way for "a new age that had discarded both liberal rationality and the premodern tradition represented in the writings of Burke." The early uneasiness some conservatives felt toward postmodernism has shifted, Russello writes, to a "cool respect that has blossomed into warm accommodation." And he points out that Kirk early saw postmodernism as a path for conservatism to "reassert itself amidst the collapse of modernity."

Russello readily concedes that some features of postmodern thought are at odds with what Kirk believed. Postmodernism's insistence on seeing cultures of oppression in modernism by its denigration of free will and original sin inevitably creates the kind of ideological straitjacket that it accuses modernity of putting people in. But Kirk shares with postmodernism the belief that "individuals always act within a tradition, even if they change it." Kirk also shares with postmodernists the assumption that history can have multiple meanings since it always involves a historian and an individual reader. In common with them he also manifests a "presentism" in his

treatment of the past, since for him, “every past moment in a very real sense is also a present moment.” He never made the leap the postmodernists do by concluding that there is no real purpose in studying history, but looked for *lessons* taught by the past rather than some overall meaning.

Kirk’s *Eliot and His Age: T. S. Eliot’s Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (1971) was reviewed by such writers as Paul Theroux and Frank Kermode. This book is a superb blend of biography and critique. Kirk no doubt was drawn to Eliot because of his emphasis on the importance of tradition and history. Near the end of the work Kirk wondered what Eliot had accomplished in fifty years of writing and concluded that Eliot, who seemed to have inherited from John Adams and John Quincy Adams, his New England ancestors, a Puritan propensity toward self-criticism, “was under no illusion that he had succeeded.” But he had continually spurned “the opiate of ideology” and beyond that he “made the poet’s voice heard again, and thereby triumphed; knowing the community of souls, he freed others from captivity to time and lonely ego; in the teeth of winds of doctrine, he attested the permanent things. And his communication is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.”

The emphasis which Kirk placed on the importance of place and sentiment resonates with my own experience of growing up in the rural South where land once owned by particular families bore names such as the “Barlow Place,” the “Boyd Place,” and the “Prince Place” long after it had passed to new owners. “With his emphasis on place, sentiment, and the imagination,” Russello writes, “Kirk outlined what he saw as the enduring components of a conservative temperament.”

Perhaps Kirk’s most ambitious work, as Russello points out, was *The Roots of American Order* (1974). In this book, as well as in his *America’s British Culture*, Kirk’s style of historical writing is at its best. It is intellectual history in which the ideas he examines are not treated from a bloodless and rationalistic platform, but are seen as incarnate in people and institutions. History and commentary are not shoehorned together as one, “and the effect is more like history conceived as a joint enterprise rather than a scientific examination of something beyond or outside us.” History to Kirk was neither an ideology nor a tool. Instead “it is . . . a series of clues to enduring norms of behavior . . . that, however imperfectly understood at any one moment, reveals a latent integrity.” There is an intelligible pattern to it, since history arises “out of the free actions of individuals.” But there remains an implacable mystery as well, he believed, and in his biography of Burke he hints that history ultimately reflects a divine plan. History is a moral enterprise for the historian for whom choices of sources and language are vital. The historian is not driven to discover what happened: “it is a means through which we can find answers, but is not itself the answer.”

In his concluding chapter, “Conservatism, Modernity, and the Postmodern,” Russello quotes Hans Bertens’s “a return to history” as one positive

result of the plethora of writings on postmodernism. Having been liberated from the notion of progress as understood by modernism, postmodernists, perforce, must go back to the past to help make sense of the present. Russello recognizes that, for most conservatives, “postmodernism has no diagnostic or empirical value; it is at best a noxious remnant of liberalism.”

In an essay written for the *National Review* in 1982, Kirk wrote that “the Post-Modern imagination stands ready to be captured. And the seemingly novel ideas and sentiments and modes may turn out, after all, to be received truths and institutions, well known to surviving conservatives.” In an optimistic vein he went on: “This is just such a time as commonly has required and produced, in the course of history, a re-examination of first principles and a considered political philosophy.” One reason Kirk appreciated Eliot was that Eliot had “smashed the nineteenth century literary world with a perspective that reconstituted tradition even while upholding it.”

Kirk’s writings, Russello points out, were “almost defiantly imaginative” and frustrated many of his admirers by not being “sufficiently analytic.” He had a natural aversion to any systematizing dogmatism, whether modernity’s favorite metanarratives of Rousseau, Locke, Comte, Hegel, and Darwin or the more recent paradigms of a Marxist class struggle or the global marketplace. He concludes, “These representatives of the modern age each thought the cord of modernity lay in rejection: of sin, of history, or of the limits of human progress. As a Christian Kirk believed in sin; even before his conversion, the reality of evil was clear enough to him. Kirk advocated a reminder of limits, and he called for reinvigoration of ‘the energy and talents of individuals’ and a recognition of the ‘always inscrutable’ work of Providence.”

In February of 1994 Kirk was told by his doctor that congestive heart failure meant he had but a few months to live. Before he died two months later, he completed the final chapter of *The Sword of Imagination*—“Is Life Worth Living?” It is very much in character with Kirk the man that the last sentence of his autobiography is the charge *Forward!* Russell Kirk’s life, lectures, and writings make it abundantly clear that he would have agreed with C. S. Lewis, who wrote that “Pope was wrong when he said that the proper study of mankind is man. The proper study of mankind is *everything*.”