

Swamps of Academe

Russell Kirk ran the sword of imagination through the educational establishment.

By John Willson

IT SHOULDN'T BE SURPRISING that a man who spent much of his life up to age 34 hanging around schools should retain a keen interest in them. Russell Kirk abandoned the professoriate early on, but a major source of his income came from speaking at colleges and universities. His fortnightly column for *National Review*, "From the Academy," was about education, and in 1960 he started an avocational journal, the *University Bookman*, to "publish short articles on higher education, and fairly lengthy reviews of select college textbooks."

He liked to quote sociologist Ernest van den Haag to the effect that both students and teachers had succumbed to "America's Pelagian heresy." "Old Pelagius, so drubbed by Saint Augustine, declared that all men will be saved eventually, without the operation of divine grace," Kirk writes in his autobiography, *The Sword of Imagination*. "The average American in our century has come to believe that all men may be saved through educationism, without need for thought."

"What was once academic community," he sadly concludes, "had become academic collectivism." American education is mired in the "Serbonian Bog."

Kirk loved such tropes. It delighted him to turn "Old Pelagius" into a cypher for American educational folly—"Deweyism," he also called it—or to recall the bog near the ancient Egyptian Lake Serbonis that was said to have swallowed whole armies. If you wade along the edge of the educational bog, he once wrote, "you weep when you don't sleep." But much as he lamented American education having been turned over

to the "Dismal Swamp Teachers' College," he also insisted, with Walter Bagehot, that "conservatism is enjoyment."

The Serbonian Bog consisted in those institutions that swallow up intellect, morality, imagination, sound learning, beauty, humor, good books, true diversity, religion, academic freedom, wise teachers, and lively students. Kirk's columns almost never treated these as abstractions. In fact, he could be wickedly particular. He came to think of Michigan State, which he attended when it was "Michigan's udder university" and at which he taught for a few years, as "Behemoth U," the very definition of a university concerned more with vocationalism, mass education for the elusive goal of equality, and runaway scale than with anything that could be thought of as human or humane.

John Hannah, who presided over MSU's great growth, was to Kirk a "chickenologist"—his degree was in poultry science—and Kirk chuckled when it was said that "the concrete never sets on John Hannah's empire." Dr. Milton Eisenhower at Penn State got little better treatment. They were the "university imperialists." Such men and schools sucked up moral and intellectual energy, and Kirk saw them everywhere. In 1968 alone he visited almost 150 campuses.

Second only to Behemoth was the textbook monster, which he gave a special place in the Serbonian Bog. If Kirk devoted 50 or so of his "From the Academy" columns to Behemoth, he wrote perhaps as much and ten times more in the *University Bookman* on textbooks, criticizing them and their authors for

their "bleak Deweyism," their servile attitudes to political authority, and their failure to waken the minds of our students.

"Textbook writing and publishing," he said, "have become a species of racket." It's interesting, though, that this man of letters would keep mining the textbook ore, seeking good veins, rarely finding them, but insisting to his readers that somebody had to do it. The ideologue dismisses the whole enterprise; the conservative keeps encouraging teachers and parents to find continuity with a better reading past. Russell Kirk was virtually a one-man front in this battle. The Left was marching through the institutions; most of the Right hurled thunderbolts but didn't read and review the books.

Third in the bog was the educationist establishment. The Deweyite Pelagians beckoned would-be teachers to Serbonis. Kirk cataloged their "involuntary servitude": departments of education ("I think we would do well to abolish Education as a separate department or school"), certification, accreditation, unions, "in-service training," consolidation of schools, federal aid (which, Kirk was among the first to see, meant federal control), mandatory sex education, uniform civics courses, and politically correct textbooks.

"No doubt these schemes are progressive," he said. "But toward what do we progress?" To the mantra, "You can't go back to the Little Red School House," Kirk replied, "Why not?" Absent all these collectivist schemes, he insisted that the little schools, and particularly "our American liberal arts colleges ... have long done an incalculably valuable work in keeping alive among us the traditions

of civility and a respect for the wisdom of our ancestors.”

The “Teachers College patronage system” threatened the good, the true, and the beautiful at every level of education. “I am suggesting,” Kirk said, “that a vague desire to adjust to perpetual change ... may be making intelligent change, or decent preservation of our existing civilization, almost impossible.”

The burden of both “From the Academy” and the *University Bookman* was critical of current educational practices and ideas, mostly because so much of the academy at every level was controlled by the “clutch of ideology.” “The ideologues are a minority in the academy,” he wrote in 1964, “but they are a shabby crew.”

He said frequently, however, that “cheerfulness keeps breaking in.” He found hope in a wide variety of colleges: conservative societies in the Ivies, the humane scale at Santa Cruz in the California system, independence at Hillsdale, high standards at Wesleyan, admirable academic freedom at the New School, a sense of moral renewal at several Catholic colleges, intellectual achievement at Brooklyn College. He admired fraternities because they arose to defend the “whole concept of free community,” which was “the most fundamental of social instincts.” True diversity still existed.

Kirk also found that although religion (instruction in which he considered a “natural right”) was on the run in public schools, educationists had fallen under the spell of Freud and Marx, and “values” were replacing true authority, the powers of the imagination were hard to kill. “Montessori is no fad,” he said. “Aye, Maria Montessori understood the imagination of children and their creative powers.” Because she was a devout Catholic, and because she realized, almost by revelation, that the world of the child is the world of wonder, she laid

out a path of hope that stays mostly outside the educationist bog. “If every child could be touched by her spirit,” said Kirk, “we would make speedy headway against our present discontents.”

Like Chesterton and Eliot, he knew from a very young age that the “moral imagination,” which makes us truly human, requires that we think and express ourselves in metaphors and parables. He knew this because he was given good things to read: Scott, Cooper, Dickens, Twain. Whittaker Chambers said that reading *Les Misérables* literally saved his life after he had descended into the diabolical worlds of communism and homosexuality. In Russell’s case, good things to read fortified him against the diabolical.

When he got long uninterrupted chances to read, on the Salt Flats of Utah as an Army conscript in World War II and as a student of literature and history at St. Andrews, he added the politics and philosophy and theology that by his early thirties armed him for intellectual battle and eventually led him back to the Christian God and the Catholic Church. He prepared his interior life so that he could speak with authority about the common life.

Historian George Nash, in his brilliant talk “The Life and Legacy of Russell Kirk,” said that “it is hinted that Kirk is slowly becoming a forgotten figure” and he “has come to be a figure more admired than studied.” Kirk’s critics seem to want him buried deep, the progressives because he so thoroughly exposed the fact that they had no clothes, and a pretty big chunk of the Right because he so rarely gave in to mere politics. (He took the long view and insisted that not politics but morality is in the heart of man.) Others on the Right think him too optimistic about the American enterprise.

To all of whom I offer this summary of a remarkable Sept. 8, 1956 column. Kirk tells the story of a young English poet

invited to speak to the student/faculty assembly of a Midwestern teachers college. He suffers through a long and irrelevant introduction, then proceeds to read to the assembly his new translation of “Antigone.” The culture of the institution bodes ill for his effort: it is usually the case that such events bore the faculty and excite the students to rudeness. “Well,” says Kirk, “nine hundred students and staff-members turned out for the occasion; and they all sat rapt all through the poet’s reading.”

The power of Sophocles’ play overwhelmed the educationist setting. The students stood in applause. The college’s president and most of the faculty were astonished—and bewildered. They could only assume that the faculty member who organized the event had delivered dire threats to the students or promises of great rewards for good behavior. I have seen comparable events in a long career in teaching. It is indeed a curious and moving sight.

Kirk draws a “humble moral”:

There is, I think, an enduring human nature, common to the Greeks of the fifth century, the English of the sixteenth century, and to us. Some qualities of that nature even the worst system of formal education has difficulties in repressing. ... Despite all the muddled secular indoctrination in positivism and pragmatism and progressivism to which the unfortunate inmates of our teachers’ colleges usually are subjected, truth will get a hearing now and then; the ancient hungers of the imagination are hard to deny.

Who do we have with us today to make such connections? Who to see the realities of our heresies and bogs, yet sense the triumph of the human spirit? ■

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Arts & Letters

BOOKS

[*The American Way of War: How Bush's Wars Became Obama's*, Tom Engelhardt, Haymarket Books, 269 pages]

Evil Empire

By Brad Birzer

ON NOV. 9, 1989 a number of students crowded into a tight dormitory room, one of the few with a TV, in Zahm Hall at the University of Notre Dame. They had gathered to watch history unfold, as thousands of East and West Germans came together armed with sledgehammers, hope, and joy to tear down the Berlin Wall, skipping, sliding, and shimmering across the top of that concrete monstrosity. Only eight years before, President Reagan, under the watchful eye of Our Lady of the Lake atop her Golden Dome, had stood a few buildings down from Zahm and identified communism as “some bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written.” The prophecy was coming true, right there on the screen.

Since the early 1960s, Ronald Reagan had been planning an end to the Cold War in what might only be described as the equivalent of a mixture of fantasy baseball and the board game Risk. He stated his aim openly throughout his two terms as president, but predictably few believed him. The kind dismissed

his words as simple optimism from a lovable actor. The cynical—including those who helped shape public opinion—dismissed Reagan’s words as misguided, destabilizing, idiotic, colored by too many White House screenings of “Star Wars.”

But even after Reagan’s vision was fulfilled, the Cold War did not end. The events of 1989 should have offered the West some breathing room, a time to rethink the purpose of our nation and reinvigorate republican ideals. Instead, the past two decades, under Republican and Democratic administrations alike, have revealed America and the West as morally and spiritually bankrupt. Plunder and torture best symbolize the bloated American Empire of the last 20 years, a force that exists merely for the sake of self-perpetuation. Our standing in the world has declined precipitously. At home, many are angry and want to change, organize, and harangue. Despite their best intentions, they stand impotent, comprehending neither the past nor the present, looking at the future—when not navel-gazing—with understandable dread.

When voters elected Barack Obama in 2008, his supporters acclaimed him higher than a prophet; he was messianic. As one fine and intelligent person—an expert in high tech as well as a farmer—wrote to me in immediate post-election euphoria, “Brad, why are you so upset, don’t you realize that we finally have a chance to end war and poverty, permanently?”

What the Obama administration has delivered, of course, is not only the continuation of the policies of the previous

three administrations but a profound exaggeration of them. If anything, we suffer more violations of our privacy and civil liberties now than at any time during the Bush administration, all in the name of a national-security state that keeps the populace in its place while perpetuating war abroad.

In his soul-searching, illuminating, and often depressing look at the unholy *ménage* of Demos, Leviathan, and Mars, Tom Englehardt probes deeply into the war culture of Washington, D.C. He notes that only two positions have any real voice in contemporary public-policy debate: those who want more of this and those who want more of that. The key word is “more.” As Englehardt writes, when it comes to conflict overseas “however contentious the disputes in Washington, however dismally the public viewed the war, however much the president’s war coalition might threaten to crack open, the only choices were between more and more.” More drones, more troops, more nation-building.

So much for campaign promises and the new messiah who would end war and poverty permanently. The first military budget Obama submitted, Engelhardt notes, was larger than the last one tendered by the Bush administration. “Because the United States does not look like a militarized country, it’s hard for Americans to grasp that Washington is a war capital, that the United States is a war state, that it garrisons much of the planet, and that the norm for us is to be at war somewhere (usually, in fact, many places) at any moment.”

Further, as the *Washington Post* revealed this past summer in a penetrat-