

The Redeemed Imagination

by Jack Trotter

"The virtue of the imagination is its reaching, by intuition and intensity of gaze (not by reasoning, but by its authoritative opening and revealing power), a more essential truth than is seen at the surface of things."

—John Ruskin

The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk

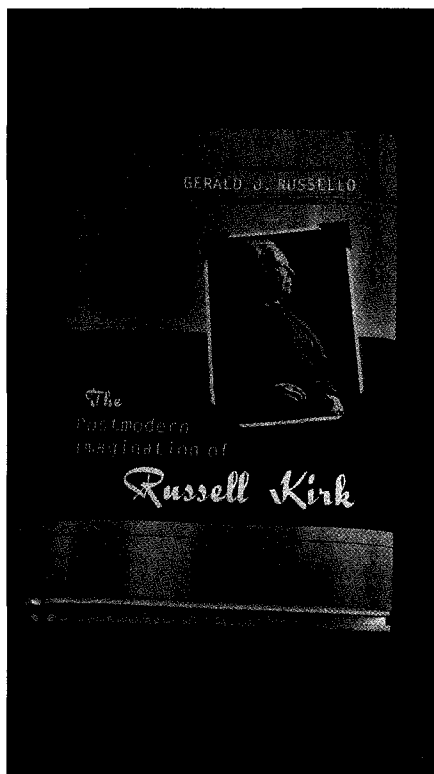
by Gerald J. Russello

Columbia: University of Missouri Press;
264 pp., \$44.95



Few concepts in contemporary intellectual debate are more hotly contested than the idea of the postmodern. The term designates, in its primary meaning, a movement in contemporary art away from the austere and often tragic sensibility of high modernism toward a more "playful" celebration of fragmentation, discontinuity, and "depthlessness." In this sense, *postmodern* has been commonly employed since the 1960's to characterize a range of otherwise disparate styles of art, from Andy Warhol's iconic Campbell's-soup-can silkscreens to Robert Mapplethorpe's grotesque photographic self-portraits. By the late 1970's, the cognate *postmodernism* was frequently employed to describe a cognitive break with the foundational philosophical assumptions of the modern era. More recently, however, the adjectival use of *postmodern* has proliferated like bad money. In popular usage, postmodern art has been joined by a glad-handing host of eager wannabes: Meet postmodern science, postmodern ministry, and postmodern principles of management. Everybody, it seems, has become a connoisseur of the "postmodern condition," though no one can quite agree about what sort of treatment the condition requires. The memorable refrain of the

Jack Trotter writes from Charleston,
South Carolina.



Melanie Anderson

old Kenny Rogers hit might well serve as the mantra of the postmodern age: "I just dropped in (to see what condition my condition was in)."

Nonetheless, a perusal of the academic literature on the subject reveals that the terms have now come to stand for an epochal break with virtually everything associated with the Enlightenment. Thus, modernity is eclipsed by postmodernity in its (by now) reflexive rejection of the "metanarrative" of Progress and its correlates: the worship of empirical reason; the belief in a stable, coherent, and autonomous self; and the conviction that language is characterized by transparency of meaning (an unambiguous relation between signifier and signified). To that extent, there is some consensus about the meaning of the *postmodern*, broadly understood. Agreement begins to break down, however, when one asks whether

postmodernity represents a genuine break with modernity, or whether it is merely a temporary reaction against (yet within) the ongoing modern "project" (as Jürgen Habermas, among others, has argued).

Given the seemingly interminable ramifications of this ongoing debate (far too complex to reprise here), it is no exaggeration to say that Gerald Russello, in titling his new book *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*, has strolled into the middle of a semantic minefield. Moreover, he is aware that many conservatives react with visceral repugnance at the mere mention of postmodernism, associating it with deconstructionism in literature, with nihilism in philosophy, and with supercilious posturing in the arts. But Russello is quick to note that one of the earliest writers to employ the term was the conservative Anglican clergyman Bernard Iddings Bell, whose *Postmodernism and Other Essays* (1926) was a seminal influence on later conservatives, including Kirk himself. According to Bell, the modernist places "his trust in the sufficiency of his own mind," in the unerring capacity of reason to uncover, not only the laws of nature, but the fundamental principles of a just and well-ordered society. That Cartesian faith in the infallibility of reason was, of course, the enabling delusion of the Enlightenment and of the positivist cult of "scientism" that sailed in its wake.

Yet, if to be skeptical of the truth claims of the Enlightenment is enough to make one a postmodernist, then the genealogy of postmodernism would reach back at least as far as such Counter-Enlightenment figures as Joseph de Maistre and Edmund Burke. Certainly, Russello acknowledges such thinkers as precursors of the postmodern, but he is not always

clear about what distinguishes postmodernism *per se* from its precursors. This is much easier to accomplish if one turns to the Nietzschean line of French postmodernists—Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, *et al.*—whose radical skepticism seeks to “unmask” not only Enlightenment reason but the *Logos* itself as merely a structure of domination. In short, what has become mainstream postmodernism is, in essence, a nihilistic attack on all transcendent truth claims, upon the entire tradition of Western metaphysics. Clearly, then, if Kirk was a postmodernist, he wasn't *that* sort of postmodernist. To bolster his claim that such an animal as a “conservative postmodernist” might be something more than a morphologist's nightmare (like Othello's Anthropophagi, those “men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders”), Russello turns to Peter Augustine Lawler, whose *Postmodernism Rightly Understood* (1999) is an attempt to do just that.

According to Lawler, whose argument against postmodernism as commonly understood converges at some key points with the position of the archmodernist Habermas (whom Russello mentions only in passing), the Nietzschean line of postmodernist thought really never escapes the modern—it is, rather, hypermodernism. In this view, while the *haute* postmodernist clerisy seeks to deconstruct any “residual modern faith in reason or nature,” they do so “only in the name of completing the modern project of liberating the individual's subjective or willful and whimsical perspective from all external constraints.” Only a conservative postmodernism, counters Lawler, offers a path out of the wasteland of modernity. Only such a conservatism recognizes that our radical contingency is also a radical dependency on an authority that transcends and yet ratifies the goodness of created being. Yet, as brilliant as Lawler is in stripping away the pretense of the hypermodernists to have somehow escaped the modernist shipwreck, one is left wondering why it is that he (or Russello) feels such a compelling need to attach such a hopelessly vacuous adjective to the venerable name of “conservatism.”

To do justice to Russello, it is quite true that Kirk himself adopted the term *postmodern* at an early date and used it not infrequently to describe the present era, which he also called—in his curiously 18th-century manner—the “Age of Sentiments.” As he wrote in *Redeeming the Time* (1996), the “Age of Discussion”

(which Kirk identified with the now exhausted liberal confidence in rational discourse) has been superseded by a new age in which “the immense majority of human beings will feel with the projected images they behold on the television screen” and will be “aroused by sentiments rather than reflections.” Kirk's observations here and elsewhere do have something in common with postmodernist theorizing about the power of the “image” in a digitized, media-saturated world. Yet his rather antiquated dichotomy (between “discussion” and “sentiment”) suggests that Kirk had failed to come fully to grips with the power and sophistication of contemporary mass media. Virtually everything now is enveloped in an electronic cloud of simulation. The real disappears with a Cheshire grin into the hyperreal. Selves are dissolved and reconstituted as nodes of desire within an all-encompassing global agora, which reminds one of nothing so much as Plato's Parable of the Cave, where prisoners unaware of the nature of their bondage gaze upon the shadows of images and take them for truth. Kirk was hopeful that the “Age of Sentiments” might prove to be more amenable to conservative ideas and traditions, but, thus far, only a simulacrum called neoconservatism seems to have gained any significant market share.

The key term in Russello's title is *imagination*, which, for Kirk, was the antithesis of ideology. And, as Russello takes great pains to demonstrate, Kirk's career as a writer and conservative thinker could well be described as a sustained campaign against the ideological deformation of the “permanent things,” by which he meant those universal truths that, because of the limited and fallen nature of humanity, could only be transmitted through custom and tradition, ritual and precedent. To abstract those truths from the living traditions in which they are decently clothed, from the multiplicity of local narratives out of which the story of humanity emerges, is to render them lifeless, inert, and dangerous. Despite his own occasional lapses into ideological thinking, Kirk was acutely aware that tradition itself becomes ossified without the aid of imagination, particularly what he called the “moral imagination.” For each new generation, the “permanent things” must be reimagined (not reinvented) according to the circumstances of place and historical change.

Perhaps what Russello means when

he calls Kirk's life and work an act of postmodern imagination has something to do with the degree of self-consciousness that we who live amidst the rubble of modernity must bring to the work of conserving the past. Modernity has been a process of “creative destruction” of the past, of the patrimony of many centuries, and there will be no easy recovery. That patrimony has become so attenuated, so utterly drained of its substance, that we are left in the paradoxical position of conservators who must reconstruct that which we wish to conserve. Over against the sterile rationality of modernity, Kirk saw that the conservation of tradition involves a work of the “redeemed imagination,” one which, as Russello puts it, “would be able to join in the joys and the suffering of others by means of an imaginative reconstruction of the materials that compose self and community.” Russello further ties this Kirki-an notion of the “redeemed imagination” to an “emerging” postmodern view, one that reaches beyond the merely “parodic imagination” and recognizes the need for ethical participation in history. It is not at all clear, however, that Kirk saw fully just how radically altered the American “tradition” had become during (and, perhaps, before) his own lifetime.

In view of Russello's claim that Kirk may be classed among the postmodernists (rightly understood), and thus at the very “cutting edge” of contemporary conservatism, it is disappointing that he does not engage at greater length those dissenting voices that would have it that Kirk's relevance is today much diminished, and that his influence may be, in certain respects, debilitating. The most prominent of such voices was that of Sam Francis, who, in the pages of this magazine (September 2004), argued that Kirk's conservatism is, and always was, “archaic.” While Francis did not deny Kirk's importance as an exponent of “classical” conservatism, he contended that Kirk spent his life defending a cause that was already lost before he began. In this view, Kirk's claim to have discovered a still-vital conservative tradition in American society (a position defended in *The Conservative Mind* as well as in the later *Roots of American Order*) was simply misguided, in large part because Kirk took as his guiding light the conservatism of Edmund Burke. Burke, according to Francis, was in the enviable position of defending a traditional order that was, indeed, still vital. By Kirk's time, he argues, that tradition had already been overthrown by a revolution that began

with Lincoln and which was all but completed by the politics of the New Deal. "The problem today," Francis wrote,

is not how to conserve [a bankrupt American order], let alone how to persuade Americans that it ought to be conserved. The problem . . . is how to convince Americans that it ought to be—and can be—changed.

Francis's accusations, if they have validity, suggest a massive failure of political imagination (postmodern or otherwise) on the part of Kirk and his traditionalist disciples. Russello refers to such criticisms in passing, but mounts no convincing defense against them.

It is not likely that readers who are well versed in Russell Kirk's life and thought will find altogether persuasive Russello's attempt to ally the Sage of Mecosta with an emergent conservative postmodernism. Yet there is much to recommend this volume. Although not a lengthy work, Russello's book covers in some detail the most important aspects of Kirk's thought: his historiography, his politics, and his jurisprudence. While these have been discussed exhaustively elsewhere, especially in the pages of such journals as *Modern*

Age (founded by Kirk) and the *Intercollegiate Review*, Russello manages at times to bring fresh insight to bear upon our understanding of Kirk's legacy. Especially interesting, for example, is his treatment of Kirk's "intuitionist" vision of natural law. Here, Russello locks horns with Wesley McDonald, author of *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology* (2004). In McDonald's view, Kirk's deeply ingrained dislike of abstraction in all its forms inclined him to reject any conception of natural law "that predefines the good for all time." Yet, at the same time, Kirk (who was a Catholic convert) repeatedly claimed that his conception of the natural law was compatible with the Thomist tradition. For McDonald (who is clearly hostile to that same tradition), natural law as handed down by the medieval Scholastics was "static and predefined because the concepts of natural law are . . . unchanging and universal." While Russello concedes that Kirk's articulation of the natural-law tradition was sometimes confusing, he asserts that "it is unclear whether the tradition of natural law offered by Aquinas is as sharply rationalistic as McDonald avers." Drawing on philosophers Joseph Pieper and Yves Simon, Russello argues that Scholastic thought does not strictly separate reason

and intuition. Both are modes of understanding that work in tandem. *Ratio* (discursive, logical thought) must be supplemented by *intellectus*, a form of knowing that includes the capacity of *simplex intuitus*, which, as Pieper notes, is "that simple vision to which truth offers itself like a landscape to the eye." Whereas *ratio* is active, *intellectus* is passive understanding, but "the process of knowing," Russello argues, "consists in the operation of both at once." In his study of Kirk, McDonald forcefully argues against Thomistic (or Catholic) readings of Kirk's intellectual legacy. Russello seems to be defending such readings, while offering a more expansive definition of the Scholastic heritage.

The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk is a book that will serve not only as a fresh introduction to Kirk's groundbreaking career as one of the principle architects of modern American conservatism, but also as a provocative and intelligent guide for the already well-versed reader. Russello, who is a fellow of the Chesterton Institute and editor of the *University Bookman* (also founded by Kirk), possesses an impressively detailed knowledge of the whole of the Kirkian corpus, and his writing is generally clear if not always as penetrating as one might wish. However, it is odd that Russello did not include a chapter on Kirk's fictional works—especially since Russello places so much emphasis on the roles of narrative and imagination in Kirk's thought. Russello does mention in passing that Kirk often used his fictions of the supernatural to illustrate, symbolically, the workings of the moral imagination, but the reader is offered nothing to support this claim. Given the recent critical upsurge of interest in such writers as H.P. Lovecraft, Russello may have missed a golden opportunity to advance our understanding of Kirk's unorthodox orthodoxy in an area that has been sorely neglected.

Finally, while the University of Missouri Press must be congratulated for its continuing efforts over the years to publish studies of conservative scholars and writers such as Kirk and Eric Voegelin, it has not served Russello or Kirk well on this occasion. *The Postmodernism of Russell Kirk* is riddled with typographical and grammatical errors—not to mention a fair number of stylistic solecisms—which more careful editing should have prevented. Indeed, this reviewer has not run across a book so sloppily edited in many a year—particularly, the first half of the volume. The spirit of Russell Kirk, "archaic" conservative or not, deserves better. ☞

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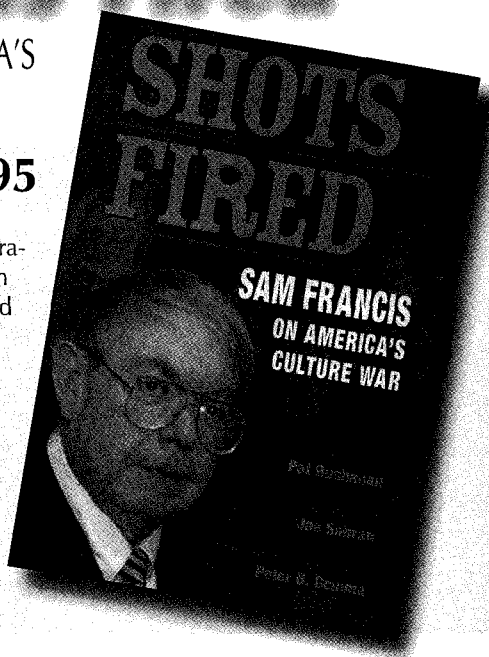
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Cool Britannia Gothic

by Catharine Savage Brosman

The Thirteenth Tale

by Diane Setterfield

New York: Atria Books; 407 pp., \$26.00

Does the public get the books it wants? Publishers, in their own interest, make it their business to see to that, whether it is a question of chemistry textbooks or novels. While recent sales of earlier textbooks can suggest what the market will be for new ones, when it comes to fiction, publishers must play their hunches, taking into account current tastes and trends. What is needed, for a book that hundreds of thousands will buy, is either a well-known name that acts like a magnet, or a sure best-seller formula, or some quality that, *via* publicity and reviewing, can lift it into the public imagination. Established favorites often win at the literary racetrack, of course; sometimes, gambles lead to nothing; other dark horses turn out to be winners.

This dark novel by Diane Setterfield, who was born in 1964 in Berkshire and lives in Yorkshire, is a winner, for her and also the publishers, doubtless. The manuscript was the object of a bidding war in both Great Britain and the United States. Ultimately, Orion paid her an advance of 800,000 pounds sterling for the British rights, and Simon & Schuster, which owns the Atria imprint, one million dollars for the U.S. rights. These extraordinary advances to a previously unpublished author say much about publishing and the fiction market. The book topped the best-seller lists in America, but, as British commentators remarked, sales have been more modest in England. A paperback edition is to appear in October 2007. An abridged audio version with Lynn Redgrave, an unabridged version, an e-book, and a Spanish translation already exist.

The Thirteenth Tale, which takes place chiefly on the Yorkshire moors, is a Gothic novel of suspense and horror. That is a selling point; the Barnes & Noble website says that admirers of Charlotte Brontë and Daphne Du Maurier will enjoy this book. Setterfield told an interviewer that, as a university student, she bought only books identified as classics rather than invest-

ing in contemporary fiction. Among fictional antecedents mentioned within the book are *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Woman in White* (Wilkie Collins's 1860 detective novel, a very early example of the genre), *The Turn of the Screw*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and *The Castle of Otranto* (by Horace Walpole, 1764). To speak of antecedents is not to suggest lack of originality; the author's adaptation of fictional patterns and conventions is brilliant. As Vida Winter (a character) observes, all stories derive from others. Vida cites, among the basic plot patterns of European tales (which have been analyzed in fact by contemporary structural narratologists), the pattern of three (subtly visible here): three sons or daughters, three tests, three adversaries. *Jane Eyre* is mentioned frequently; a governess reads from it to her young and impressionable pupils—surely a strange choice—and a page torn out has enigmatic meaning. Further similarities to Gothic fiction include equivalents to the “madwoman in the attic.” (One character is confined to an asylum.) Others lock themselves in or are forced into seclusion; one seems to be an apparition; a set of twins is half-feral. Add to that a ruined house, a destructive fire (arson) and attempted murder, apparent magic and ghosts, a foundling, unspeakable crimes—almost surely, incest and rape—births shrouded in fog and strange deaths, and other hidden facts that only gradually and circuitously come to light.

The structure is a frame-narrative, with frequent switching from outer to inner story and thematic connections between the two, almost eerie. Margaret Lea, the first narrator, to whom the second, Vida, tells her story (the more important), is not merely a passive auditor; Margaret, who also searches for part of her past, must play the role of detective because Vida, having lived a lie and then, as a novelist, made a career out of storytelling, is untruthful, even as she expresses the desire to reveal herself. Layers upon layers must be peeled back. Setterfield's handling of Margaret's discovery process, which relies partly (the reader finds) on Vida's subtle switching of pronouns, is very skillful. The author eschews narrative cheating—deliberately planting false clues—but readers can be easily misled, as is Margaret, and are teased by intricacies in the plot.

The references to earlier suspense fiction are repeated in the manufacture of Setterfield's novel. The dust jacket

shows a stack of old volumes, recognizable by corners of bindings and the mottled green-and-white or red-and-white markings along the page edges. The novel is bound in old-fashioned maroon, and the spine has gold lettering and a design reminiscent of much earlier books. Furthermore, in a clever technique that raises a fictional character onto the plane of apparent “reality,” Setterfield, or her advisors, chose to have a quotation from Vida on the back cover; another serves as the epigraph. The cover-four quotation is not, however, promotional—Setterfield stops short of having her character praise the book—but rather a general statement about truth and fiction, drawn, like the epigraph, from the text. If one accepts the old convention of the found or passed-on manuscript, the quotations are justified, since, as the last pages reveal, the text is, ostensibly, an account written up by Margaret from extensive notes she took while Vida recounted her story, and is to be given to heirs, who may publish it if they wish.

It is of more than passing interest that Setterfield took a B.A. and then a Ph.D. in French at the University of Bristol. For her thesis, she wrote on André Gide's use of the *mise en abyme* (a term from heraldry to which he gave a special meaning)—that is, reproducing at a second narrative level plots or features from the first level. Setterfield taught French and wrote academic papers before leaving the profession to devote herself to fiction. She has observed, quite rightly, that, by working with a foreign language, one comes to understand better one's own and has acknowledged some influence from French, though more in the process of composition than in the result.

Reading *The Thirteenth Tale*, one is tempted to look for Gidean narrative techniques, perhaps as illustrated in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (*The Counterfeiters*, 1925). Indeed there are similarities: stories-within-stories and, thus, multiple narrators; fragmented narration; changes in perspective; quotation of letters and diary passages; and various echoes and mirror images, used by others but illustrated particularly well by Gide. Gide, who assessed his characters within the novel and in *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs*, would have appreciated, presumably, the appearance of Vida in both the inner story and the extreme outer one, that of “reality,” where Setterfield can, ostensibly, quote from her. This blurring of narrative boundaries is not new, but Setterfield's