

# *The Mind of Richard Weaver*

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***Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Time***, by Richard M. Weaver.  
Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964. 176 pp. \$4.50.

RICHARD WEAVER's posthumous book exhibits, as one would expect from the concentrated personality that he was, the weaknesses no less than the excellences that distinguished him as a writer. He left it in manuscript and had no opportunity to make final revisions. In this review I shall dwell on both its virtues and its defects, in the conviction that to praise him by selective emphasis would be to insult the responsible writer. A thinker, particularly a thinker of Weaver's rare integrity, wants his due meed of recognition and acclaim, of course. But one does not flatter him who accepts the product of his mind uncritically. I know of no other way to take a writer seriously than to hold him fully responsible for what he chooses to publish.

Before turning to what I take to be the qualities, negative and positive, of his last book, I must sketch, hastily, its content. Although its title suggests a positive standpoint, its subtitle is a more accurate indication of Weaver's interests. "Visions of order" enter into the book as criteria which enable us to examine our disorder. It is true that the first two chapters, "The Image of Culture," and "Status and Function," and to some measure the third, "The Attack Upon Memory," furnish us with a general conceptual scheme by means of which to perform the diagnosis. But it is the disorder that Weaver found in his world that prompted him to undertake

theoretical considerations of the nature of culture, of stasis and flux, and of the indispensable role of memory in humane living. This is to say that Weaver was not a man interested in theoretical questions as specialists in these matters are. He was forced to think in abstract terms because this was an indispensable condition in order to come to terms with the malformations of the world in which he lived.

"The Image of Culture" sketches an "organic" view (a term Weaver does not use) of culture. It is asserted early in this chapter that the controversy as to whether a given culture is flourishing or declining cannot be settled unless "one is willing to contemplate the order of human values" and consider "the nature and proper end of man." But while this conviction is repeated throughout the book, the very difficult problems to which it gives rise are not elucidated. Weaver prefers to turn from these to the discussion of a principle of culture he deems of great importance in our present crisis, namely the principle of integration and exclusiveness. Culture integrates the individual by imposing on him a "tyrannizing image" which "is an ideal of excellence," thus giving its members a sense of the value of their lives.

But because integration entails exclusiveness, the notion of a "democratic" culture is inadmissible. Culture is not open to everybody at all times on equal terms. And for that reason, in turn, the task of the conservative today is to defend the discriminations and exclusions of culture. There is nothing new in this view. Weaver

learnt it initially from Ralph Linton and other social scientists, by way of a friend. What is new and important is the courageous and bold manner in which he applies it, drawing from it consequences that the social scientists who originated the view would be horrified to draw. For with rare exceptions, these gentlemen are part of the well-disciplined liberal academic herd. And that means that while they would think it unforgivable to meddle with the cultures of primitive peoples, they choose to serve in the front lines of the struggle to destroy their own culture, by prescribing for it all sorts of scientific nostrums.

Emphasis on integration and exclusiveness might have led Weaver to a kind of *Realpolitik* attitude towards culture. But in Chapter Five, "Forms and Social Cruelty," Weaver acknowledges that a culture sometimes tends to levy an excessive tribute upon the human beings for whom it exists. Obviously Weaver was not an apologist for the *status quo*. He could recognize that a culture was capable of iniquity.

The second chapter is a difficult one to digest. Entitled, as indicated, "Status and Function," it seems to collapse the topics social scientists would normally consider under these rubrics and the more pervasive and general problem of stasis and flux. But exactly what Weaver takes to be the relation between status (in its usual sociological acceptance) and social and cosmic stasis, I am afraid I could not make out clearly. In any case, the problem of the "terrible mobility" of our day is one that is close to Weaver's heart, as it must be to the heart of any conservative. But I must report that Weaver has no more viable solution of this problem than any of us has. For it is one thing to propose measures to control the drift of our world toward socialism and quite a different thing to prescribe how to slow down the erosion of the basic values of our civilization. It is the latter that concerned Weaver, but against it he had no possible practical advice to offer.

The third chapter, "The Attack Upon

Memory," analyzes a disorder called by Weaver "presentism." This is the belief that only the present can confer significance upon things. It is easy to see how such a shallow delusion would cut our roots and would end by denying our organic relationship to one another and to our traditions. But Weaver goes farther in his analysis of presentism. He contrasts history with positive science, and shows with great ingenuity that presentism is the result of the scientism we so uncritically accept. Chapter four, "The Cultural Role of Rhetoric," is one of the two most original and best thought out of the eight. The relationship of rhetoric to dialectic is a subject on which Weaver thought deeply and fruitfully, as *The Ethics of Rhetoric* amply shows. What this chapter establishes may perhaps be suggested by reference to Pascal's famous *pensée*: The heart has reasons that reason knows not of.

On the Fifth chapter I have already touched. The Sixth is the second of the two best and to the reviewer it comes as a pleasant and complete surprise. On the subject of "The Dialectic of Total War" Weaver, though not a pacifist, contributes wisdom, clear thinking, and as realistic and sober a discussion of the problem as we can expect from any of our contemporaries. The penultimate chapter has the Voegelinian title of "Gnostics of Education." If we leave out of account the unconvincing, because utterly factitious, parallelism between the gnostic heresy and the precious errors of the contemporary liberal ethos, what Weaver has to say about the so-called "philosophy" of progressive education is something with which educated men today are, by and large, fairly well acquainted.

Regarding the last chapter, "The Reconsideration of Man," the less said the better. To at least one of his admirers it constitutes an embarrassing performance. For reasons I was never able to fathom, Weaver wasted a good deal of time and energy seeking what he took to be damaging arguments against the evolutionary hypothe-

sis. But it would have taken far more science and philosophy than he had at his command to begin to undermine successfully the work of Darwin and his heirs.

These eight chapters do not constitute a complete examination of our contemporary disorders, but those aspects of our plight that they do examine are important, and all that Weaver has to tell us about our illness in specific terms—something the preceding account could not convey—deserves careful attention. Because I want to leave my reader a sense of my own high regard for the book—a regard that remains untarnished even after the unsparing consideration of its weaknesses—I am going to examine some of these first, closing the review with a sketch of what I take to be the positive virtues of the thinker.

Some of the weaknesses of Weaver's work are serious, but among the most serious is one that, given the audience he sought to reach, is not altogether a fault: the audacity of his mind. His was an audacity that contrasted sharply with his external appearance and the superficial aspects of his personality. This courteous academic man, who in so many ways was the prototype of the square professor with his two-bit can of pipe tobacco and his bargain-counter pipe, spent the major part of his working day (seven days a week, I understand) swimming far from the safe shores of his own competence towards high seas that were beyond his depth. A rhetor doing the work of a philosopher, he tackled problems for which he was not equipped. But—and this is no less important—he nearly always returned from his adventures with something worthwhile to show for them.

His disregard of his limitations can be illustrated by his treatment of the nature of culture. Infecting it with incoherence is a defect that runs like a geological fault throughout the whole of the book's length. Early in chapter one, the reader becomes aware that Weaver oscillates between the sociological and the honorific meaning of

the term "culture." We know, of course, that the term is far from having a univocal acceptation among social scientists. But its diverse meanings all aim to refer to the fact that human groups pursue values and accept meanings that enable them not only to survive but to give some worth to their lives. In this sense, any group that holds together at all has culture, even though its values may be so incompatible that their pursuit may lead to basic frustrations. In the honorific sense—although here "culture" is no more of a univocal term than it is in the sociological sense—not all groups can be said to have culture. By and large culture in this sense seems to be only attainable by dominant sub-groups in a society. Greek culture or the Italian culture of the Renaissance was the possession of a minority, and was possible because the minority used for its own ends a less cultivated majority. Since the two meanings refer to totally different things, one cannot achieve coherence if one fails to reckon with the required distinctions.

We are not confronted here with a nice but sterile academic question. Weaver wanted to criticize the crisis of our world. But which of the two cultures was open to criticism? Shuttling freely between the two meanings, Weaver avoids trouble with social scientists, who claim that the fact of culture in their sense is the valid ground for their espousal of cultural relativism. But Weaver—who at times sounds like Melville Herskovits—informs us that he is no cultural relativist. However, merely to deny it is not enough. If he is no relativist, what in Weaver's view gives superior cultures their pride of place? It cannot be their successful integration and their exclusiveness, for on these criteria most primitive cultures would be ranked as superior to contemporary civilization. A defender of Weaver might argue that he intended the term in its honorific sense. But the defense is inadmissible, for the fact is that he often uses "culture" in its sociological sense, and sometimes it is not

possible to decide in which of the two senses he is using it.

No, it is not their integration and exclusiveness that are the criteria of excellence, another defender may urge, but the nature and proper end of man, to which on more than one occasion Weaver turns as basis from which to criticize the disorders of our day. And the lamentable last chapter is without doubt an effort to furnish us with a better notion of man than we can get if we base our concept of man on an evolutionary basis. But where does Weaver go for his idea of man? Weaver has no difficulty: He tells us that "religious, philosophical, and literary studies of man" concur in their teaching about him. Notice that neither the positive nor the social sciences are mentioned. But let that pass. Are we to assume that Jesus concurs with Mohammed, Loyola with Jansen, that Plato concurs with Epicurus, Kierkegaard with Dewey? That Calderon concurs with Marlowe, and Jane Austen with Kafka? Clearly the problem cannot be disposed of that easily.

But nothing can be gained by continuing the *exposé*. For the value of the book easily transcends the animadversions one might level at it. What then are its virtues? For one reader, the first is the quality of the author's thought. The quality of thought for which philosophers have so little regard, comes, in Weaver's case, from the coherent and fully examined attitudes of the author. The man's mind as expressed in his work gives off the bouquet of an *Edelwein*. There is a sturdy, yeoman's common-sense to the way in which this rhetor quietly shows us that what the liberal ethos takes to be the highest virtues of our world are deplorable vices. But back of the judgments there is something for which I have no other term than "instinct." His sub-intellectual reaction is coherent and not to be deceived by the mendacities and sentimentalities that are the liberal values.

One gathers the feeling that here is a man who—whether right or wrong about the formulation and argumentation of his indictment of our age—was not bamboozled by the lies that assault us. His arguments were not always the best, but the attitudes from which his rejections and acceptances issued were for the most part unerring. Weaver was authentic in the original sense of the term. He possessed a character and a mind that were "written with the author's own hand."

For this reason there is another positive value to Weaver's work: Although not an original thinker, the way in which he put his ideas to use and the ends to which he was dedicated were original. When he turned his mind to a subject he did so because the deeper layers of his personality were aroused. His encounters with the world at the intellectual level were never mere SR responses. His thinking arose out of a personal need for intellectual order and moral excellence and not out of a careerist desire to acquire off-prints to put on the dean's desk.

Finally, for one of his admirers at least, the high value of his work lies in its courage. Dick Weaver had the gifts that would have enabled him, had he chosen, to have had an easy and successful career as a regular professor and a popular writer. Had he chosen the easier path, had he become one of the sycophants of the *Zeitgeist*, one of the boot-licking, gliberal court-historians of his generation, flattering it while it pretends to criticize it, he would have been one of the big shots of his university and would have been invited to contribute to the organs of the Establishment. He chose the harder path. And he paid the price in slow academic recognition and in the size of the audiences he reached. But in the end he won. He earned promotion in the field, into the leadership of a band of rebels—they are pitifully few, but what an elite squad!—who have been teaching us to value truth and to eschew the lie.

## "Erewhile a Holocaust"

**The Destruction of Dresden**, by David Irving. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964. 255 pp. \$4.95.

THE *Destruction of Dresden* is a detailed history of one of the great tragedies of the Second World War: the three raids (two British and one American) which obliterated some 1600 acres and killed some 135,000 people in the German city within fourteen hours on February 13-14, 1945. (The death toll inflicted upon Hiroshima was, by comparison, "only" 71,000.) Two elements of this tragedy are clearly established by Mr. Irving: (1) the frightful suffering inflicted upon innocent civilians in return for only small military gain; (2) the fact that the residential area of Dresden was, by "civilized" standards of warfare (if such there are), not a legitimate target. These two facts suggest two difficult problems: the *historical* problem of assigning responsibility for this tragedy, and the *moral* problem suggested by the fact that in modern warfare not only barbarians like Hitler and Stalin, but "civilized men" like Churchill, Roosevelt and Truman order (or acquiesce in) "uncivilized" actions. Irving's book should be required reading for the numerous Britons and Americans who complacently continue to believe that crimes and atrocities are only committed by the "other fellow."

Before discussing these points it may be useful to make a few general comments on the book. It is a thoroughly researched and clearly written piece of work, though the scholarly reader is irritated by the absence of specific footnoting (the discussion of sources pp. 239-50 is only a poor substitute) and the general reader often overwhelmed by technical detail. Part I, dealing with *The Precedents* for "area bombing" before Dresden, is rather disappointing since it is a pedantic chronicle of major raids rather than an analytic discussion of the one problem of general interest: how did the doctrine and practice of bombing civilian targets arise in Britain and win ascendancy in official policy? The book picks up with Part II, an excellent description of the planning for "Thunderclap" (the code name of the attack upon Dresden) and the condition of the city as a "virgin target" whose population did not believe

it would ever suffer major attack. Part III, on *The Execution of the Attack*, is an admirable description of the flawless technical precision which brought more than a thousand bombers to a target some nine hours flying time from their British home bases: it describes the attack from the point of view of the attacking air forces. Part IV, on *The Aftermath*, chronicles the attack from the point of view of the victims. It describes the incredible destruction and suffering caused by the raid in a less vivid but far more precise manner than Martin Caidin employed in his comparable but far less scholarly *The Night Hamburg Died* (1960). Where language fails adequately to portray the horrors of the stricken city the author relies upon well-selected photographs. Part V, inconclusively labeled *Neither Praise nor Blame*, provides a too brief account of the response of neutral and Allied public opinion to the Dresden holocaust, and some very restrained comments on the question of responsibility.

Irving's book is based partly upon the already vast literature dealing with Allied Strategic Bombing (more especially the British four volume Official History of *The Strategic Air Offensive against Germany* written by Webster and Falkland), partly upon the systematic interrogation of surviving participants, whether Allied or German, elevated or humble, of the events described. The author received especially valuable help from Sir Arthur Harris, the former Commander in Chief of the RAF Bomber Command (and as such the director of the raid), and his deputy Sir Robert Saundby, "who has exercised his copious memory in recollecting the story behind the execution of the RAF attacks and who has patiently checked and criticised the text of this book" (p. 12). Saundby provides a foreword in which he expresses a pained puzzlement about the causes of the tragedy ("I am still not satisfied that I fully understand why it happened"—p. 9). The sombre tone of Saundby's foreword stands in refreshing contrast to the pharisaical introduction written by his American counterpart, Gen. Ira C. Eaker, for the American edition.

The enormous casualties inflicted upon Dresden were due to various factors. The city's normal population of 630,000 was nearly doubled by the influx of hordes of Silesian refugees who fled from the Russian armies only eighty miles away. The air raid precaution service was inexperienced and dominated by an "it can't happen here" outlook. German fighter defenses were grounded partly by lack of fuel, partly by a breakdown of the communications network (pp. 144-45). The