

The Legacy (a story)

Robert Drake

THAT MORNING when we got to my uncle's, the back yard was full of cars, some I didn't even recognize because they were from out of state. His wife, my aunt, had died after a very short illness two days before; and I hadn't been able to bring myself to enter the house since then. But I had heard all about everything that was going on over there because my father had hardly left my uncle's side the whole time: my uncle was seven years younger than he and thus his baby brother. And in many ways, my father still regarded him as a little boy; indeed, he called me by my uncle's name half the time, something I hadn't always appreciated until my mother had explained that it didn't mean that my father loved me any the less: my uncle and I were both his children, to his way of thinking, and thus equally precious. You couldn't imagine anybody having a favorite *child* now, could you, she wanted to know. But since I had no brothers and sisters myself, I wasn't sure about that either.

What my uncle ever thought of this confusion of names on my father's part, I never knew because he never said. Indeed, he never really *said* much of anything; my father did most of the talking in their business (they owned a hardware store) and in their personal relationship, I believe. (They had never had a cross word either, my mother always said.) When my uncle did speak, it was usually simply as a footnote or an emendation to something my father had said. And for the most part, this was true in his dealings with me, at least until I was an adolescent.

I remember once hearing him speak—and I thought with some approval—of old Dr. Steele, who had healed the sick and raised the dead—or at any rate presided

over the births and deaths—of several generations all over our county years ago and in the process amassed a considerable fortune in money and land. But he never *said* much. And my mother said that was true: Dr. Steele would come and look at you and watch the progress of your ailment and you could die or get well or be resurrected but Dr. Steele hadn't said yet what was the matter with you or whether you would recover or anything else. But my uncle said Dr. Steele had gotten rich by not talking.

I suspect now, of course, that my uncle was jealous of me; and why shouldn't he have been? My father didn't marry until late in the day, and he was already middle-aged when I was born. And there was my uncle, who, all these years, in a big family (five boys and two girls) had been my father's favorite, his own little boy, you might say, now abandoned for a child of my father's own. So I suppose it was natural for him to resent me. But then I couldn't *help* being there either.

Of course my uncle wasn't abandoned: the mere thought would have horrified my father. But I knew that he never seemed to mind taking me down a peg or two, never seemed to mind deflating me when I was flying too high or, he thought, getting above myself. (He viewed my childhood enthusiasm for the movies and my later delight in opera with wry amusement: he said if I didn't watch out, I would begin to sound like a "Hollywood product" when I talked and look like a "Dago singer" when I gestured with my hands.) And when I was still older, especially after I went off to school, he would always begin with, "Now here's something you ought to know that your Daddy probably hasn't told you. . . ." And it would all sug-

gest that my father was somehow mistakenly shielding me from the harsh facts of life, especially where money was concerned: perhaps he thought I was going to be something of a prodigal. But he, my uncle—the corrector, the reprover—was going to set both me and the record straight. (He never ceased to remind me that such limited success as he and my father had achieved in their business was all their own doing: “We had to start from scratch, with nobody to help us,” he would say, “and what we’ve got, well, it’s just what we’ve made ourselves.”) Finally, of course, there would be, “Of course, I never had all the opportunities you’ve had. Do you know that I always wanted to be a doctor, but where was a poor country boy like me going to get the money for that back then?” Of course it was all my own fault anyhow, he implied—to have had so much *done* for me. (I don’t remember him ever using the word “spoiled” at such times, but I always felt it somewhere near, hovering unstated in the air.) But then I remembered that Daddy was supposed to have quit school to let him go, and I wondered whether he had forgotten that. And I sometimes wondered just how badly he had wanted to be a doctor anyway.

There was a time, after I got to be grown, when it all really used to get me down. When somebody lends you some money, you can repay the loan with interest, and the debt is cancelled. But a *moral* obligation, well, that’s almost impossible to pay back. Sometimes, even after my uncle’s death (and many years after my father and all the rest were gone) and after I had gained some small recognition in the world, I wondered even then what he would say if I could call him back from the grave and ask him, “Are you satisfied now?” But of course there’s no profit in such speculation; indeed, that’s one reason you write, to try to lay such ghosts.

Of course I would have given anything in the world for some sort of outward sign of affection from my uncle, but it never came. I even heard him speak once—I thought perhaps with some pride too—of

not being a naturally “demonstrative” man; some things just didn’t need to be said, he added. And indeed, the only time I ever saw him “lose control of himself,” which is to say break down and cry, was the day my father died, and then it was all over in a minute. But always I looked up to him as a kind of second father (that’s what he really was, Daddy always said) and wished we could be closer. As a little boy, I know it was all I could do—prompted by my father of course—to work myself up to asking my uncle for a nickel. You just didn’t *ask* him for things; somehow I already knew that even then. And when I was much older, my mother told me that, where business was concerned, my uncle was a much “harder” man than my father, much more likely to say “no.” Of course, my father never saw the distance between my uncle and me: in his eyes, my uncle could do no wrong. (Once when a customer ventured to doubt my uncle’s word about his account—he kept the store’s books—my father reached for one of the axes on display nearby and told him to get out of there and never come back!) But the distance was there, and of course it would only widen with time.

My aunt, of course, made all the difference. Warm, outgoing, really loving, one of a family of great charmers, she was easily the most popular woman in town, my father always said; and I simply adored her. She had taught school for many years and also directed the Methodist choir, and she knew everybody in the county. But the main thing for us was her affection for my uncle: “she’s absolutely wild about him,” my mother always said. (But even then I remember thinking she never said how he felt about her.) They had no children, which I always thought too bad: my aunt would have made a wonderful mother, I imagined, and perhaps my uncle would have been warmed and liberalized by parenthood.

But now my aunt was dead, after only a short illness too. She had never been very strong, I gather; and she couldn’t ever say no to anybody who asked her to sing at a wedding or a funeral or take on yet

another volunteer job. (She always got called on to arrange the music for all the home talent shows—the blackface minstrels, the beauty revues, and such like.) And I remember hearing my mother say that really, she “just lived on excitement.” One time I even saw her dance a jig on the front porch for sheer joy when an old friend she hadn’t seen in a long time arrived from Memphis for a visit. Finally, I suppose, it must all have caught up with her; but she had always said she had rather wear out than rust out, according to my mother. And now I was simply devastated. I was only thirteen, and it was my first real grief. My grandfather had died several years before; but he was a very old man, and I was afraid of him because of his great age and his big walrus mustache, and so he didn’t count. But my aunt was only middle-aged: she had no business to go and die like that. But she had, and my uncle was left all alone now, a widower.

And I think that was probably the reason I didn’t go over to their house after my aunt had died, not until the morning of the funeral: I didn’t want to face him. He was such a restrained, quiet man—except for his sardonic wit, what everybody called his “dry” humor, which had sometimes been aimed, uncomfortably, at me—and so different in that way from my father, that I dreaded seeing him in the throes of raw grief. Surely he would be “demonstrative” now. On the other hand, I may have been fearful that he wouldn’t appear grieved enough. My father, of course, could not mention my aunt now without tears. But perhaps my uncle was being his usual undemonstrative self. How could anybody know *what* he was feeling? And I remembered he said Dr. Steele had gotten rich by not talking.

So I had stayed away until then, but of course I had to go to the funeral. My mother was unwell, so I went all alone with my father. And shortly before we were to leave for the church, my uncle’s small house was bursting with people, our family and my aunt’s (some from out of town, even out of state) and a few

close friends. We had come in through the kitchen; and of course there was enough food for an army there—sent in by friends, as is the case in small towns in a time of sorrow. But there was little time to say more than a few words to anybody now because it was almost time to start for the church.

However, I did notice one thing. There was a line of people all waiting to go into my aunt and uncle’s bedroom, looking very solemn and speaking only in whispers. And I wondered what it was all about. Then suddenly I knew: they were going in to have “the last look” at my aunt before the coffin was closed. And then for the first time the finality of her death—maybe all deaths—laid hold of me: she was gone, and I would never see her again except as a corpse, *something to be looked at*, on display. And people would say—or not say—how “natural” she looked. And I couldn’t take that, so I signaled to my father that I would wait for him in the kitchen. The line continued to move into the bedroom, but my tears were coming too fast now for me to notice anything else until I heard a woman’s soft voice in the distance. And then I raised my eyes; and by some curious freak I was looking right up into the mirror on the dresser in the bedroom where my aunt’s body was lying, and I could see reflected there the people passing by her coffin but not the coffin itself, only its raised lid. And then I saw what I had heard. My aunt’s sister had her arm around my uncle’s shoulder, and she was supporting him as he bent over to kiss my aunt goodbye. She talked very quietly to him, and of course I couldn’t hear what she was saying but I could imagine. She didn’t let him linger, though, and she raised him back up to an upright position. And that was all: the little scene was over.

But I was shattered. It was as though I had intruded on the most private moment in the world for my aunt and uncle, more private, much more so even than the act of making love. I wasn’t even sure I had ever seen him kiss her before; and now this was the end of the affair for them, the most intimate relationship possible be-

tween two humans, and the finishing off of what I could only assume had been their great happiness. And I felt that neither I nor anybody else had any right to be present at so sacred a moment: I was shocked and embarrassed both for them, my aunt and uncle, and for us, who had been the unintentional spectators of the scene. And indeed, so strong was its effect on me that I've never spoken or written of it to a living soul until now. I had intended to walk with my father in the procession into the church, but I saw now that he was going to walk beside my uncle (with my aunt's sister on the other side). And I couldn't bear to be so near the remnant of the intimacy I had seen so recently exposed; so I faded into the background, to walk with one of my cousins. And in that order we went on to the funeral.

That's been over forty years ago, but that scene has stayed with me ever since—indelibly etched in my memory. What had my uncle shown there, in that last kiss? Warmth, affection I had never known he possessed? Or had he merely been forced into the act by my aunt's sister, a sentimental gesture and that only? Was there some sort of key to the puzzle of his character there if only I had known how to read it? Even today I don't know; and it's been such a private matter I've carried in my heart all these years (between my uncle and my aunt and me, really), I've never been able to tell anybody about it. Of course, there were other spectators to the kiss (and I had seen it only second-hand, as it were, in the mirror); but I didn't think any of them knew what I knew about my uncle's seeming coldness, my aunt's great love for him, and my own sense of bafflement about what their relationship must have been.

And today I still don't know what to make of that tableau, which flares up before me from time to time, sometimes almost in a white heat, to pose the same questions, not only about the three of us, my aunt and uncle and myself, but maybe even about human relationships in general. Had my uncle been as "wild" about my aunt as she had been about him? And if he

could love, why couldn't he show it and show it while you were alive? Couldn't he say "I love you" to *somebody*? (Were some people simply that way? And whom were they getting back at anyhow?)

He loved my father: I felt certain about that. I remembered once seeing him dash out of the store, my father's raincoat in his hand, and, without saying a word, place it around my father's shoulders as, oblivious of a sudden shower, he wrestled with a refrigerator he and one of the clerks were preparing to deliver to a customer in the store's pickup truck. Then, just as quickly, my uncle returned to the store; and my father went right on with his work, both of them still silent. And of course no words were needed: action said it all. But did my uncle also somehow resent that warmth which so characterized my father in his relationships, perhaps resent my father's still treating him like a little boy? Was that one of the reasons for his coldness toward me? My uncle had known a great love once and generosity: I knew that with every shovelful of earth that went into my aunt's grave. He couldn't tell me or anybody else he hadn't had *that* opportunity. But I knew this also: *my father had loved me, and my uncle had never really forgiven me for that.*

I remember the scene of the kiss came back to me once years later, long after my uncle had remarried, when he cautioned me, now alone in the world, unmarried and with both my parents dead, against possibly getting too intimate with my many friends, both in this country and abroad: friends could let you down, he said. (Did he imply that your family never would?) I remembered it again and again when I saw him seeming to lavish on his stepchildren and their children the affection he had never shown me. (Had he changed or was it something else?) Finally, I remembered it when I got word of his death—once when I was out of the country—and learned that his second wife, who was also "undemonstrative," had had his funeral not in the Methodist Church, where he had been a steward for fifty years, but in the local funeral home; and

she had buried him not beside his first wife, as I learned he had apparently intended, but in her own family's lot, beside her own parents. And they were not any of them people I could imagine ever dancing a jig on the front porch or anywhere else. One of the cousins wrote me the details, and she said she was glad I hadn't been there.

He didn't leave me any money either, but I hadn't expected any. My mother had told me years ago, not long after he had married again, that that would be the case. And as in most judgments concern-

ing individual people and human nature in general, she had been right. But there were many memories left and especially that memory of the kiss that I could never forget. (Was that a kind of legacy?) Had I tried to read too much into it and thus deceived myself about a lot of things then? I've wondered about it ever since, maybe wondered even more as the years have gone on and I've seen more of life. And I still don't know. But I didn't make it up; it really did happen, just like I've said. And I did see it. And nobody can ever take it away from me now.

Index to Reviews and Comments

- 59 "Russell Kirk: The Conservative Mind Three and One-Half Decades Later"
Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* Ronald Lora
- 75 "The Socratic Critique of Sophistry"
Patrick Coby, *Socrates and the Sophistic Enlightenment: A Commentary on Plato's Protagoras* Thomas L. Pangle
- 78 "Perception without Judgment"
Frank Kermode, *Forms of Attention* Ian Robinson
- 80 "The Limits of Libertarian History"
Robert Higgs, *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government* Aileen S. Kraditor
- 87 "Education Under Siege"
Antony Thrall Sullivan, *Palestinian Universities Under Occupation* Charles E. Butterworth
- 88 "Life in the Country House"
Merlin Waterson, ed., *The Country House Remembered: Recollections of Life Between the Wars* William S. Peterson

Russell Kirk: *The Conservative Mind* Three and One-Half Decades Later

Ronald Lora

The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot, by Russell Kirk, *Chicago: Regnery Books, 1986. ix + 535 pp. \$19.95.*

I

NEARLY TWO decades ago, Robert Downs, a former president of the American Library Association, published a small volume of essays on twenty-five books that in his estimation had changed America. His selections ranged from seminal studies such as de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* to *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson's exposition of the dangers posed by the irresponsible use of insecticides and other potent chemicals. Should Downs's volume be revised, Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* would merit inclusion in that select company.

Downs followed an hypothesis of Elmo Roper, which held that great ideas emerge from a small group of "great thinkers" and are then brought to public awareness by the efforts of five concentric groups: "Great disciples" (learned individuals who do not themselves originate the ideas) place the ideas before the "great disseminators" (often teachers and journalists), who are followed by "lesser disseminators," the "politically active," and finally the "politically inert."¹ Following Roper's theory of communications, Kirk belongs among the "great disciples" who at a high level of articulation begin the work of dissemination.

Herein, I offer reflections on *The Conservative Mind*, first published thirty-six

years ago, which recently appeared in its seventh and presumably last edition. Its author, then a young historian at Michigan State College, in subsequent years branched out into half a dozen fields—as social and literary critic, educational and political theorist, and novelist—one of our culture's most accomplished men of letters. In the book that established his reputation, we see a creative intellect at work constructing an intelligible world out of the lives and thought of a diverse collection of individual minds. This mode of intellectual history attempts to uncover constellations of ideas by developing a model that, much as a magnet arranges metal filings, will serve to uncover a historical tradition. Kirk's model is Edmund Burke, the Irish Whig whose *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) remains for many the Bible of conservatism. Burke's wisdom is distilled into six canons of conservative thought: (1) belief in a transcendent order, ruling over society; (2) affection for the variety and mystery of traditional life; (3) conviction that civilization requires orders and classes; (4) persuasion that property and freedom are inseparable; (5) faith in prescription and distrust of intellectuals; and (6) recognition that change and reform are not synonymous, that "innovation is a devouring conflagration more often than it is a torch of progress."²

In a lengthy introduction to *The Portable Conservative*, published three decades after his path-breaking work, Kirk dropped the term canon (implying law or dogma) and substituted a somewhat more