

## *How Conservatives Failed “The Culture”*

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OFFICIAL PROFESSIONS to the contrary, many self-described American intellectual conservatives have a thinly veiled disdain for philosophy and the arts. Even among academics indifference to what lies beyond broad ideas and popular culture is common. The ruling assumption of the now dominant strains of intellectual conservatism seems to be that the crux of social well-being is politics: bad politicians ruin society; good politicians set it right. Nothing fascinates conservatives more than presidential politics. For social problems to be effectively remedied and for worthy objectives to be achieved, “our” candidate must win the next election, “our” people man the government.

Many supposedly intellectual conservatives seem to consider ideas and culture from afar, as it were, feeling no deep personal need for or intimate connection with them. Some are in a way attracted to the arts or even to philosophical speculation, but see no significant and immediate connection between these and the life of practice. Ideas and the arts are mainly pleasant diversions. Many others have only slight interest in philosophy and culture for their own sake. More or less consciously, they tend to assess either thought or imagination from the point of view of whether it advances or undermines the political

cause that they assume to be incontestable. Does the book, lecture, play, movie, or song help or hinder the cause? Although such works may enlighten or entertain, they do not strike these individuals as having intrinsic and independent authority. Works of thought and imagination are for them not intriguing and potentially unsettling forces that might trigger painful self-examination and unpredictably reconstitute one’s own accustomed views; making sense of them is not so much a matter of soul-searching as of locating them on the political spectrum.

One might explain these reactions as instances of the social decline now widely bemoaned. Schools, families, and other institutions have not conveyed the excitement of ideas and the higher arts, leaving the young largely “tone-deaf” and unaware of their deeper appeal and formative influence on civilization. For persons not strongly drawn to them in the first place, the element of sheer decadence in the dominant intellectual and cultural life of today has only reinforced existing prejudices.

A related explanation for truncated conservative approaches to thought and imagination is the spread of an ideological frame of mind. In this century leftist

ideology has been the most influential. It has been often extreme and has caused great human suffering. But the left has no monopoly on ideology. Even the best of ideas can start to separate from the changeability and complexity of real life and harden into reflexive and reductionistic propositions.

There is a sense in which ideology—as well as party programs, slogans, etc.—is not only inevitable but legitimate: to advance practical objectives it is frequently necessary, especially in politics, to summarize and codify ideas in order to mobilize support and exhort to action. Ideology in that sense is not necessarily incompatible with humane purposes. Neither is there anything inherently objectionable about the popularization of difficult ideas. The full import of sound philosophy may be apparent only to relatively few, but those insights need to be communicated beyond the circle of learned experts. What is complex must be made simple. In the process of transmission there is a danger that thought will harden into ideology, but good popularizers will try, by means of well-chosen concrete illustrations, for example, not to turn ideas into abstract and sweeping generalizations that ignore the texture of real life.<sup>1</sup>

The health of society requires that elites be continuously reminded by genuine intellectuals and artists not to mistake ideology for eternal verities. If that indispensable task is not performed or if the reminders are not heeded, undue influence will fall to the more inventive and ambitious ideologues. Their politically charged formulations may start to acquire a life of their own. In the absence of a vital intellectual and aesthetical culture that challenges and breaks up the encrustations of ideology, such persons may gather unto themselves large new responsibilities unsuited to their prepa-

ration and temperament. They may start acting the role of arbiters of goodness, truth, and beauty, perhaps establish themselves as authorities in the universities. Trying to meet the expectations that traditionally surround such roles, ideologues may acquire greater subtlety, but the affected disciplines and institutions are damaged by the association.

Ideology is now rampant in the universities. Since virtually all of it is of the left, it might seem beneficial to have it balanced in some small measure by ideology of the right. Yet for political correctness of one kind to compete with political correctness of another kind may be a marginal intellectual advantage for the longer run. Together, the weeds in the garden suffocate and crowd out the flowers.

The ideological mind-set, formed as it is at bottom by a desire to dominate rather than illuminate, is an intruder in philosophy and the arts. It is closed in upon itself and resentful of competition. Instead of cultivating the openness to new influences that marks real philosophy and art and letting itself be exposed to the possible intellectual turmoil of fresh insight, ideology shunts inconvenient thought and imagination aside. Ideologues produce propaganda, although sometimes propaganda of a sophisticated kind. When such individuals set the tone, the intellectual and artistic life suffers.

In all avenues of human action, achieving particular objectives requires that the will be asserted and available resources marshalled. It takes power. The power sought and exercised in politics is but an example of an ever-present need of human action in general. Without power, great or small, nothing gets done, be it for good or ill.<sup>2</sup> Yet a drive for power that is not substantially and integrally connected with the free and indepen-

dent sphere of ideas and culture—to say nothing here of the all-important imperative of morality—becomes a merely self-advancing and self-gratifying manipulation of other human beings.

Who is today the paradigmatic conservative intellectual, the kind of individual to whom educated and reading conservatives look for authoritative judgments and to whom they ultimately defer? He seems to be a cross between an intellectual and a political activist, less a thinker concerned with the fundamental and enduring questions of life than a “policy wonk,” less a learned scholar than a media pundit. Although possibly bright and articulate, this type cannot long be distracted from his absorbing interest: politics and politics-related questions and schemes. He seems untouched by philosophical depth or by any deeper aesthetical need or sensibility.

Individuals of this description can wield considerable influence over the kind of decisions that appear to them most important. But these persons are not so much independent agents as unwitting instruments of larger forces—a fate they cannot bemoan because it does not reach their consciousness. Because of a weak grasp of the dynamic of human existence, they have difficulty understanding the scope of social problems. Their limited awareness of what really shapes the long-term direction of a society or civilization—specifically, of the roles played by thought and imagination—leads to inadequate analyses of the existing political and social situation and of what might bring real and lasting improvement. These persons are frequently surprised by events and are prone to defeating their own stated objectives.

Unless ideas and art have some

direct and obvious relationship to politics, many intellectual conservatives regard them as having negligible practical importance and to be provinces of the left in addition. Because philosophers and artists can be expected to favor the wrong causes, it is desirable to mobilize opposition to them from within their own ranks; yet, apart from this political problem, these conservatives see no large and compelling reason to worry about professors, writers, composers, and artists. After all, society is moved not by them but by individuals who pursue more “practical” pursuits, especially persons who affect public policy and, most prominently, leading politicians. To the bearer, this view of where the real power lies represents hard-nosed realism. In actuality, it exemplifies a narrow and shortsighted understanding of what shapes the future.

The decline of academia and the general culture has assumed such blatant forms and started to have such an obvious impact on society at large that nowadays the conservative political intellectuals are paying more attention. But the seriousness of those problems is not unrelated to the mentioned assessment of what sets society’s long-term direction, an assessment that is in line with the more questionable aspects of American pragmatism. In the last two decades especially, the “realism” of conservatives who assume the centrality of politics has detracted from and undermined an earlier and rather different kind of American conservatism, which started to gain new momentum in the early 1950s. Its leaders saw ideas and imagination as being at the bottom not only of the troubles of civilization but also of any possibility of renewal. “Realism” competed with and drew attention away from efforts to bring about the kind of intellectual and cultural renaissance that eventually might have arrested or reversed

ominous developments in academia and the arts and more deeply penetrated society.

Some brief comments on what really moves human beings and originates social change will help explain the seriousness of not recognizing the actual role and importance of thought and imagination. The power of even the ablest and most knowledgeable wielders of political influence is sharply circumscribed by another power. That power does not marshal and deploy resources in a utilitarian political fashion. It works in a more subtle and yet efficacious manner: it shapes the fundamental sensibilities, desires and views of a people.

Every society and individual has a vision, however inarticulate, of what life is like and might become. Deep within, we carry fears and hopes. What we ultimately live on, and live for, are our most cherished dreams about the future. Held and nurtured in the imagination, their vividness and concreteness stir us to action. We live by what we thrill to, says D.H. Lawrence. The imagination is more generally at the bottom of our sense of the whole, of how we see human existence, its opportunities, dangers, joys, and sorrows.

On the basis of that concrete feel for the texture of life, we also form *ideas*. They give conceptual expression to our intuitions. Some individuals undertake that intellectual articulation systematically and in depth. The result is philosophy.

Our dreams and ideas bear the distinctive imprint of our individual personalities, but every society has a dominant sense of its own identity and purpose that affects even the innermost beliefs and wishes of the person. Individuals are connected by ideas and intuitions that give them a similar outlook on life. By virtue of that commonality,

certain works of thought or imagination—of philosophy, history, fiction, poetry, drama, music, or movies—can give voice to the groping needs and intuitions of their audience; they capture the mind or imagination of a people or its elites. Some of these works catch on in a special way that places them among the enduring treasures of civilization. By the same token, the pioneering, eye-opening works affect how particular people view themselves and human existence.

Great power for shaping society lies with those who make us see life through their eyes. Deep within our personalities are the marks left by the imaginative and intellectual masterminds—poets, religious visionaries, painters, composers, and philosophers—the individuals whose intuitions or ideas leave others changed. Directly or indirectly, those individuals create the tenor of an age, for good or ill. They may be long dead, but their visions move the living.

Great works of art or thought may discuss or depict politics, and they always present a point of view, but their primary inspiration is never merely political passion. They transcend the concerns of particular historical situations. They throw light on the human condition, sometimes on the reality of politics, but they do not preach and exhort. Art and didacticism are incompatible, as are philosophy and propaganda. Still, as illuminating, orienting statements, the great works of art or thought always carry implications or have consequences for practical politics, however indirect and unanticipated. They are typically a reaction against life going wrong and present a vision of new possibilities. By affecting how people imagine or think about the world, these works affect political attitudes.

It is objected perhaps that most people are rarely exposed to high cul-

ture and do not even want to be. Only a small minority becomes familiar with the great works of art or thought and is substantially influenced by them. It may be said of some of these works, in fact, that in particular generations only a handful of persons, perhaps only one or two, can be said really to have absorbed them. How, then, could they have any impact on society in general?

The answer is that the elite culture—including works that are fully accessible to but a few—is transmitted to others by those who have felt its power. Individuals inspired by a great work apply and diversify its vision in their own artistic or intellectual efforts, spreading it to new audiences at different levels of refinement. The transformative power of the great work eventually affects the sensibilities, dreams, or thoughts of all, even if it does so very indirectly and in watered-down form. The perspectives of the seminal works eventually find their way into the general culture—schools, newspapers, movies, television soap operas, novels, and, not least, the imagery of advertising.

Those who enter our minds and imaginations are in a position to make particular ideas, attitudes, behaviors, and experiences seem inviting or repulsive. They can affect our notions of what to admire, what to fear, what to scorn, and what to laugh at, and they can incline us to action that corresponds to these responses.

Especially over time, the power of all the politicians in the nation's capital is dwarfed by the power of those who influence us through teaching, writing, preaching, art, and entertainment. Even if the latter group represents a variety of viewpoints, a particular cultural and intellectual ethos tends to predominate that can be traced back to ground-breaking works of art and thought. In our own

time, egalitarian pressures and mass-communication have produced a perhaps more thoroughgoing likemindedness than seen before. Behind what counts as moral sensibility today, for example, who but the ignorant and dull-witted could fail to discern the deep and brilliant, if deleterious, influence of the thought and imagination of Jean-Jacques Rousseau?<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the dominant fundamental mind-set that artists and intellectuals have cultivated, *it* has planted in us certain expectations and desires. *It* has prepared the ground for or built obstacles to political action of a certain type. Politicians who run afoul of the prevailing sensibilities and ideas of their time risk their political lives. In other words, they are at the mercy of a power that is not of their own making. Only marginally can they change the “rules of the game” that are determined deep within the consciousness of a people.

Many conservatives believe that intellectuals and artists are naturally and almost inevitably on the left. If this were the case, all efforts to move society in a different direction would be condemned to failure. There simply is no overcoming those who can shape our sense of what makes life worth living.<sup>4</sup>

Conservatives whose culturally and intellectually “unmusical” natures make them indifferent to philosophy and the higher arts do nevertheless have minds and imaginations. They, too, live by what they thrill to. Their fascination with Washington, D.C., and presidential politics has been nurtured by images of power and corresponding ideas in the popular culture. Imaginative and intellectual impulses subversive of general trends have also made them critical of the powers-that-be, but, to a far greater



extent than they know, they live within the patterns of sensibility and thought that define the ethos of their troubled civilization.

A disparagement of thought and imagination is discernible also among intellectuals on the right who are critical of the now dominant strains of conservatism. Although sometimes perceptive in other respects, they tend to view ideas and culture “sociologically,” as the expressions of group interest. The fundamental reality of politics is for them the conflict between “us” and “them.” Ideas and art may be influential but do not rise above conflict; they are essentially instruments whereby people who seek power advance their cause (a perspective not unlike that of Karl Marx).

Writers of this persuasion consider themselves consummate realists. They see conservatives for whom literature, art, and philosophy are keys to social renewal as not quite attuned to the hard facts of life. This complaint is not wholly unjustified in that some conservatives are attracted to thought and imagination—and, for that matter, religion—more as avenues of comforting escape than as sustenance for living in the world as it is. What the “realists” do not recognize is that thought and imagination, far from being mere symptoms of power-realities, have everything to do with the very definition of “us” and “them” and that they can either mute or intensify hostilities. That thought and imagination are often vehicles for partisan interest has been here not only acknowledged but highlighted, but it is also the case that political passions and patterns of strife originate deep within the mind and the imagination. One may recognize and even underscore the element of truth in a Niccolò Machiavelli or a Thomas Hobbes and still insist that culture and philoso-

phy—no less than morality—can *transcend* and therefore modify the boundaries of political conflict. Realism is highly desirable, but to be more than superficially such it must understand the scope and power of art and ideas.

In the decades just after World War II several leading American conservative intellectuals understood well the historical origins of civilization and the great influence of thought and imagination. Russell Kirk and Peter Viereck are good examples. The two differed politically, Viereck being less opposed than Kirk to the budding federal welfare state inherited from Franklin Roosevelt and now managed by the Eisenhower administration. Although sharply critical of the Eastern intellectual-cultural-political elites in important respects, Viereck also felt a stronger bond with them than Kirk. But the two men agreed on the primacy of the “pre-political” sphere of ethics, ideas, and culture. There could be no real recovery of Western civilization without a renewal of mind and imagination.<sup>5</sup>

Kirk and Viereck were inspired by a seminal American thinker, Irving Babbitt (1865-1933), the Harvard professor of French and comparative literature who founded the so-called New Humanism or American Humanism. Babbitt had diagnosed a deepening crisis of civilization. If there were to be any chance of overcoming it, the foundations must be laid for a reorientation of the ethical, aesthetical and intellectual life. Babbitt was particularly concerned to unmask certain moral-imaginative habits—the “sham spirituality” of Rousseauistic sentimental pity—which had become the hallmark of elites in the Western world, and to demonstrate their potentially disastrous social and political consequences. To get to the bottom of the powerful and insidious impulse of

“sentimental humanitarianism,” Babbitt wanted to expose its deepest roots in morally conceited and self-indulgent imagination. More generally, he sought a broad intellectual and cultural movement that might in time redirect the moral and political life of civilization.<sup>6</sup>

Babbitt strongly influenced the perhaps most fertile strain of conservative thought after the war. But, on the whole, American intellectual conservatism has not carried through on its most promising potentialities. It has had difficulty accepting or understanding that real and lasting social change must begin deep within the mind and the imagination and work itself out over generations. Although paying lip-service to the need for ideas and imagination, many of the leaders of the movement wanted immediate results, by which they meant, first of all, political victories. Intellectual conservatism did not fully assimilate or go very far developing and supplementing the work of its leading minds, dead or living. It did not develop the wide-ranging and philosophically mature intellectual culture that might have held and expanded its ground in academia and thence more deeply penetrated society. The element of intellectual and imaginative vitality was diluted or made to seem secondary by the ever-present concern with practical politics and, of course, economics.

Early examples of a preoccupation with politics that prefigured later developments could be cited at length. The *National Review* magazine, which was founded in the mid 1950s, exhibited from the beginning a strong tendency to let political concerns overpower intellectual-philosophical considerations. In 1956 Peter Viereck published a concise but broadly informative historical and typological survey intended primarily for students, *Conservatism from Adams to Churchill*. The book conveyed the richness and variety of the subject while presenting the author's own view of con-

servatism. In *National Review* one of the editors, the ex-communist Frank S. Meyer, dismissed the book and excommunicated Viereck on grounds of deviation from conservative political orthodoxy, as defined by Meyer—as if issues of practical politics must always take precedence.<sup>7</sup>

The example is revealing in that Viereck, whatever the flaws of his practical politics, understood the sources of genuine civilization a good deal better than most leading American conservative intellectuals. It is no coincidence that, although Russell Kirk long wrote for *National Review*, he was always uncomfortable with its editorial regime and resisted efforts to have his name affixed to its masthead.

In 1951 the young William F. Buckley, Jr., had published *God and man at Yale*. The book denounced “collectivist” teaching at Yale University and argued that the financial backers of academic institutions should ignore disingenuous talk about academic freedom and use their influence to ensure teaching favorable to “individualism” and the market. In his book *Academic Freedom* (1955) Kirk offered a much different point of view, stressing the importance of free inquiry. He politely but firmly rejected what he called Buckley's “program of indoctrination.”<sup>8</sup>

The politicizing trend within American intellectual conservatism was by no means all-encompassing, and the movement did make strides in many respects. It gained some ground in academia. Still, the early signs of ambivalence about the free and independent sphere of thought and imagination made it not entirely unexpected that the movement would eventually start losing its cultural-intellectual way. Feeling no deep and continuing need to refresh itself from regenerative philosophical, historical, and literary-artistic sources, it started to become

more formulaic, predictable and repetitive, in short, ideological.

The importance of practical politics and public policy studies is undeniable; the higher their quality, the better. But, in the last couple of decades especially, concentration on such matters has moved the center of gravity even within *intellectual* conservatism. The tendency was in full view already in the early 1960s with the effort to promote Barry Goldwater for the presidency. It was widely assumed, in *National Review*, for example, that winning the presidency was the ultimate goal, the real "pay-off," as it were, of intellectual work. With the ultimate political prize seemingly within reach, F.S. Meyer (who predicted Goldwater's victory) and many other intellectuals could think of little except the coming election. After the defeat of Goldwater conservatives were fascinated by books and articles that chronicled the Goldwater campaign, analyzed what had gone wrong, and discussed how the campaign had set the stage for future political gains.

In the 1970s and 1980s the tendency among intellectual conservatives to look to politics as the heartbeat of society only grew stronger. Writers gained prominence who declared that heretofore conservatism had been intellectually feeble and impractical. These writers, based mainly in the New York-Washington corridor, actually knew little of earlier conservative thought, and philosophically their own interests and emphases meant a narrowing of the horizons: public policy and related questions took center stage. Their journalistic aptitude and ability to appeal to the existing media and publishing elites, together with their success in acquiring influence within the Reagan administration, gained them much attention. They tipped the balance

within a movement that remained uncertain of its cultural and intellectual identity and always susceptible to the lure of practical politics.

Young conservative intellectuals had once to some appreciable extent looked to leading representatives of the mind and the imagination for direction. Now the kind of philosophical and scholarly work that over time might have brought real change in the universities and elsewhere somehow looked less appealing and important. It yielded increasingly to public-policy debate and high-level journalism, which bolstered already existing trends in the universities. Some of the new leaders were intelligent and articulate but did not read very deeply, scanning books for their political cash value. The movement as a whole started to get its signals, literally as well as figuratively, from op-ed pieces in the *Wall Street Journal* and talking heads on television. Feeling the urge to be where the real action is and to be close to people of real power, many left academia for government and the public policy networks, a trend that both exacerbated and was exacerbated by the continuing advances of the academic left.

Because the conservative discussions of public policy and adjoining issues have not been inspired or informed by the kind of advanced intellectual and artistic culture that once seemed in the making, those discussions have been more prone to ideological reductionism and lack of imagination than need have been the case. It is instructive to compare the emphasis that now prominent intellectual conservatives place on policy analysis and journalism with the assessments of Kirk, Viereck, and others of where to look for sources of renewal. The latter group did not look for the most needed knowledge in



“that up-to-date journalism of the academic world, the courses in current politics, economics, and other uselessly ‘useful’ techniques”<sup>9</sup>—to say nothing of day-to-day political discussion. Vastly more important to understanding the prerequisites of a humane society were literature, the arts, history, philosophy, and ethics.

American conservatism with academic pretensions has also undergone a philosophical transformation, although ideas of an earlier type are still in evidence. Many of the academics identified in the opinion magazines and newspapers as the main intellectual alternative to campus radicalism differ markedly from earlier intellectual conservatism. A well-known representative of the new outlook was Allan Bloom at the University of Chicago. Like him, many so-called conservative academics take an anti-historical approach to ideas—a paradox, to say the least, since intellectual conservatism long had the reputation of distrusting abstract rationalism and of stressing the need for joining thought to the historical sense. Many academics called conservatives today espouse abstract principles, or “values,” according to which they would like to see the world remade. Paradoxically, one of their cherished principles is “equality.” In fact, some of these intellectuals bear a striking resemblance to the eighteenth-century French Jacobins—yet another paradox, since the acknowledged father of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke, focused his ire on precisely those ideologues.<sup>10</sup>

Academics of this type may have doctorates from and even teach in “name” universities, but most of them seem rather thinly educated and typically focus on political ideas narrowly understood. They even study works of literature from the point of view of their *politi-*

*cal* “teaching,” implying that the highest import of art is its political message. These academics usually argue toward preconceived ideological conclusions, finding prestigious classical authors to be supportive of their own modern political prejudices. Academics of this kind are numerous, and many are well-connected in the public policy networks, foundations, and media. They can expect favorable publicity and other attention, which is a source of influence especially in a society in which celebrity status confers intellectual authority.

In recent years individuals known as conservatives have taken a greater interest in the state of “the culture.” In part this development may be a sign of an awakening to the importance of thought and imagination. At the same time it confirms and gives new impetus to the ideologization of American conservatism in that interest in “the culture” is often heavily slanted by the old fascination with political power. Issues of cultural decline are discussed as if the key to reversing the trend lay in the hands of politicians and their intellectual allies.

Much of the present conservative interest in “the culture” is due to a growing awareness of the political impact and propaganda potential of the mind and the imagination. It has also become politically opportune to bemoan cultural sleaze. Although it can certainly be salutary for well-educated and aesthetically discerning politicians and other public figures to comment on a harmful cultural and academic situation, the fact that such a task has fallen to, or been seized by, politicians and political intellectuals is a sign of the failure of intellectuals and artists. Criticisms of cultural, intellectual and moral decadence that politicians address to large audiences are likely to be simplistic and heavy-handed. They may also feed the spurious and dangerous notion that the key to social health is political action.

The Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, a person with some credentials as an intellectual, has complained, on good grounds, about a lack of shame in American society. Public discussion of the Speaker's concern showed wide support for promoting shame by having political and civic leaders set moral and other standards and start campaigns to elicit the desired reaction. It seemed out of place to point out that shame of the kind that formed part of an older Western morality is not so easily manufactured. It had origins deep within the personality of Western man, as shaped by the long moral, religious, aesthetical, and intellectual history of his society. Shame of that type could not be replaced through civic boosterism.

Does it need to be said that the views about culture, truth, and morality that are put forth by intellectuals who live and breathe political strategy and tactics are no real alternative to the think-

ing now dominant in academia and beyond?

An authentic revitalization of will, imagination and reason would deepen and enrich human existence as an end in itself, not serve a particular political agenda. A characteristic of a creative civilization is that you cannot fully predict where it might lead in thought, art, ethics, and politics. Many purported conservative intellectuals currently concerned about "the culture" seem to know exactly what will be the political-ideological consequences of "improving" it: more "capitalism," "democracy," and "equality." Perhaps in some future Washington administration there will be appointed a "culture czar." A more appropriate title might be "commissar."

Rather than submit to a reign of conservative political correctness, a cultural and intellectual movement worthy of the name would take its chances with poets, artists, philosophers, and men and women of conscience.

1. For a trenchant discussion of different meanings of the term "ideology" and of how to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable forms, see Joseph Baldacchino, "Babbitt and the Question of Ideology," in George A. Panichas and Claes G. Ryn, eds., *Irving Babbitt in Our Time* (Washington, D.C., 1986). 2. It is common, not least among professed religious believers, to view power as inherently subversive of morality, but one must question a form of moralism or spirituality that always casts aspersions on asserting the will in this world. A good, if not sufficient, anti-dote to dubious "otherworldliness" or "mysticism" is Benedetto Croce, *The Philosophy of the Practical* (New York, 1967). Unfortunately, the available English translation of this work is far from flawless. 3. The most penetrating analysis of Rousseau's imagination and the nature of its influence remains Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New Brunswick, 1991). For an analysis of some of the political effects of Rousseauistic "virtue," see Claes G. Ryn, *The New Jacobinism: Can Democracy Survive?* (Washington, D.C., 1991). 4. For a systematic and more technically philosophical discussion of the role of thought and imagination, and their relation to morality, see Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason* (Chicago and Washington, 1986). 5. A dozen works from the early to the mid 1950s by the two authors set forth

the view that sound ideas and culture must prepare the ground for healthy social and political change. These books include Russell Kirk's well-known *The Conservative Mind* (Chicago and Washington, D.C., 7th. rev. ed. 1986; first published in 1953), the lesser known *Academic Freedom* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955) and *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice* (Chicago, 1956), Peter Viereck's *Shame and Glory of the Intellectuals* (New York, 1965; first published in 1953), *Dream and Responsibility* (Washington, D.C., 1953) and *The Unadjusted Man* (Westport, Conn., 1973; first published in 1956). 6. Babbitt diagnoses the moral and cultural crisis of the West and suggests remedies in *Literature and the American College* (Washington, D.C., 1986; first published in 1908). *Rousseau and Romanticism* explores the moral-imaginative dynamic that has tended to replace classical and Christian views of life in the Western world. *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis, 1979; first published in 1924) examines the relationship between politics and ethical and aesthetical developments. For a collection of representative essays that spans Babbitt's wide range of interests, see *Character and Culture: Essays on East and West* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1995; first published posthumously in 1940). 7. Meyer's review of Viereck's book appeared in *National Review*, August 11, 1956. Called "Counterfeit at a Popular Price," it was reprinted in

Frank S. Meyer, *The Conservative Mainstream* (New Rochelle, 1969), 67-70. **8.** It would be wholly misguided, Kirk wrote of Buckley's proposals, to have trustees and alumni conduct "a rigid surveillance of all professors' work in the lecture room," which

would create a climate of academic "servility." Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 125-26. **9.** Viereck, *Shame and Glory*, 248. **10.** For a discussion of the Jacobin flavor of much contemporary political thought, see Ryn, *New Jacobinism*.

## *On Being Reactionary*

*Rein Staal*

CONTEMPORARY CONSERVATISM stands in danger of being the conservatism of nothing. Too much conservative energy pours into negotiations over the pace and method of what are presented as social changes and the policies designed to address them. Many on the Right appear content to represent the voice of prudence in a liberal world. When it falls victim to this mood, conservative thought fails to focus on the true nature of our cultural and political predicament. We must recognize that we face a great contest. At stake is the understanding of personal identity that supplies moorings for the conservative virtues and lies at the root of any distinctively Western tradition. That understanding is being crushed in the tentacular grasp of the technobureaucratic order, its idioms, and its methods. Such a predicament calls for the conservatism of conservatism, a recourse to first principles. No political disposition, no set of policies, will suffice. Our situation calls for a frankly reactionary posture. We must return to the metaphysical foundations of Western culture, even and especially if these are denied or distorted in the prevailing matrices of power.

At the heart of that return lies a

renewed appreciation of the personal nature of our world and of ultimate reality. The drama of society mirrors the drama of the soul. Our world and its history, indeed all our stories, derive their meaning from personal initiatives. I want to suggest that our most pressing political dilemmas raise the question whether God, man, and world are ultimately personal or impersonal realities. The Western tradition rests at its core on the experience of personal identity. It rests also on the appreciation of ontological heterogeneity, of the plural and many-leveled character of ultimate reality. Most criticism of the tradition reflects an antipathy to distinct and irreducible personal existence. That antipathy comes from viewing multiple centers of agency and responsibility as an illusion and as an affront to the constitution of being. The tragic story of the Left, obscured by its egalitarian formula, amounts to the generation of tyranny out of monism.

I propose to sketch the fundamentals of a principled reactionary stance through the development of several converging themes. An initial contrast between the personal and the impersonal suggests the twin themes of political thinking and political language. We face the rapid spread of