

**A RHETORIC OF MORAL IMAGINATION:
THE PERSUASIONS OF RUSSELL KIRK**

A Dissertation

by

JONATHAN LEAMON JONES

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2009

Major Subject: Communication

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee, James Aune
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ABSTRACT

A Rhetoric of Moral Imagination: The Persuasions of Russell Kirk. (December 2009)

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This rhetorical analysis of a contemporary and historical social movement, American conservatism, through a prominent intellectual figure, Russell Kirk, begins with a description of the author's work. Ideologies, arguments, and sentiments are considered as implicit rhetoric, where social relations are defined by persuasion, ideas, historical appeal, persona, and various invitations to shared assumptions. First, a descriptive historical context is the foundation to explore the beliefs, communicative strategies, and internal tensions of the conservative movement through the development of various identities and communities during its rise as a formidable political power. Second, an analysis of the author and the author's texts clarifies argumentative and stylistic choices, providing a framework for his communicative choices.

The thesis of this discussion is that the discourses implicit and explicit in the author's writing and conduct of life were imaginative and literary products of what he termed "moral imagination." How this imagination developed, and its impact upon his persuasion, was a unique approach not only to an emergent intellectual tradition but also to the disciplines of history, fiction, policy, and audience. This work argues there were two components to Kirk's rhetoric of moral imagination. First, his choosing of historical

subjects, in biographical sketch and literary content, was an indication of his own interest in rhetorical efficacy. Second, he attempted to live out the sort of life he claimed to value. I argue he taught observers by an ethos, an endeavor to live a rhetorical demonstration of what he genuinely believed was good. As demonstrated by what many who knew Kirk identified as an inner strength of character and conduct, his rhetorical behavior was motivated by a love for and a curiosity toward wonder and mystery. By an imaginative reading of history, his exemplars of more properly ordered sentiments of a moral order sought to build communities of associational, relational persons that found identity in relation to other persons. His ambition was to explore and communicate what it meant to be human – in limitation, in promise, and in the traditions and customs that provide a framework for “human” in a culture.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents, Clyde and Nancy Jones.

“Until the day breaks and the shadows flee...”

- Song of Solomon 2:17

“Pray for us scribbling sinners now and at the hour of our death.”

- Russell Kirk, “A Cautionary Note on the Ghostly Tale”

“They say that his accomplishments are few, that it is only the rhetoric that is conservative. But the rhetoric is the principal thing. It precedes all action. All thoughtful action.”

- William F. Buckley, Jr. on Ronald Reagan in the November 28, 1967 edition of *National Review*

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Words cannot express my deep gratitude. I begin by acknowledging my parents, whose love and support consistently placed me in a place of great comfort and blessing. They gifted a faith and selflessness I can only hope to emulate.

James Aune, since my time as an undergraduate, has demonstrated a formidable intellect and a charity that all scholars should take as their example. I am grateful to him, to the members of my committee, and to those professors that have, as mentors, guided and challenged my development. Those deserving special mention include R.J.Q. Adams, Elias Barajas, Douglas Brooks, William Clark, Edward Funkhouser, Roy Joseph, Jennifer Mercieca, Stjepan Meštrović, and Christopher Swift. Further, I am honored to participate in the arguments, through involvement with First Things magazine and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, of “postmodern conservatism.” Those who do much of the arguing, particularly Bruce Frohnen, Paul Gottfried, George Nash, Peter Lawler, James Poulos, and Gerald Russello, have provoked much thought.

This project would not have been possible without the kind assistance of Annette Kirk. Her encouragement and generosity surpassed all my expectations. And, most of all, I am continuously blessed by family and friends. It is to them that I will remain, happily, in debt.

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CHAPTER I INTRODUCTIONS

Restoration of True Significance: Imaginative Context and Definition

Much like the elusive subject of Russell Kirk the writer and thinker, there is no easy way to define the term that often defined him: “conservative.” In this dissertation, “conservatism” is not an ideology or a firm set of doctrines. It is presented as Kirk tended to present it – as a disposition, an approach, and a sentiment.¹ An author or editor of forty-one books, founder of two journals of culture and politics, and frequent contributor to newspapers, magazines, and academic journals, Kirk wrote and lectured widely in the four decades since the appearance of his most famous work, *The Conservative Mind*, in 1953. This book was his doctoral dissertation from St. Andrews University in Scotland, and it appeared at a time when the title seemed to many a puzzling paradox. Conservatism, he insisted over the course of his career, was “the negation of ideology.” Further, “a conservative impulse, if denied intelligent leadership and moral imagination, may be diverted banefully into ideological fanaticism.”² I argue Kirk’s “conservative impulse” was literary, imaginative, and reconstructive, political insofar as the impulses of disposition, approach, and sentiment opposed his perceptions of technocratic solutions and an accompanying hubris. And this impulse, even as it was influential and important to aspects of American public discourse, has little endured. Kirk, however, was an insightful and ceaseless critic. His “reconstructions” offered a unique perspective of content and persuasion.

¹The journal model for this dissertation is *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*.

The contribution of this project to rhetorical studies is the communication of the “negation of ideology” – reconstruction of “conservative” political language in particular and political community in general.

The problem of defining conservatism stems from the great variety of figures, ideologies, and movements that have claimed the label. Infused with a strong market-based liberalism and noisy populism, much of contemporary American “conservatism” might appear depressingly strange to those, such as Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio,³ that were instinctively suspicious of “free trade” and foreign entanglements. This might be characterized as “America first” – foreign policy, for example, should aim only at “preventing invasion and threats of attack.”⁴ Yet little more than five decades later, well-known, self-identified conservatives such as David Frum were proclaiming the moral obligation to “end evil” by overthrowing dictatorships aggressive to their neighbors and hostile to the United States.⁵ This view has struck many other conservatives, as it would have Kirk, as an absurd vision of the world, one in which historical nations are replaced by a collection of “individuals” supposedly held together by a shared belief in abstracted concepts such as “equality” and “human rights.” In their strongly opposing view, one among the big, confusing, and occasionally contradictory collections of views of American conservatism, populations are not interchangeable. Humans need rootedness, a sense of place and of history, a sense of self taken from forebears, kin, and culture – that is, an identity both collective and personal.⁶

There continues to be significant rhetorical complexities to such arguments. It is useful to briefly outline the “types of conservatism” included in this dissertation. The

tapestry of American conservative responses, if expressed in a linear way from the end of the Second World War, would begin with the “southern agrarians” concerned with cultural matters and expanding federal power. These writers, including Richard Weaver and Allen Tate, were mutually sympathetic with non-regional “traditionalists” like Kirk,⁷ although my subject did not share the sentiments that tended to haunt some southern agrarians, most notably race relations and the Civil War.⁸ Today, they tend to identify themselves as “paleo-conservatives” and are generally resentful of the socio-political influence of “free market” advocates and “neo-conservatives.”⁹ Also among the critics of President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal and its managerial continuation under President Dwight Eisenhower (and others until, one might argue, President Ronald Reagan) were the libertarian-minded. Many of them were influenced by ideological and actual refugees from communism such as Friedrich Hayek, Frank Meyer, and Ayn Rand. Meyer and William F. Buckley Jr., through personal persuasion and *National Review* magazine, espoused “fusionism,” the joining of traditionalism and libertarianism in the effort to counter Soviet expansionism and domestic collectivism. And so long as the Soviet Union existed, this awkward pairing was in fact willing to, wearily and somewhat distrustfully, work together.¹⁰ Into this framework was “neo-conservatism” born in the 1960s. According to sociologist and “traditionalist” Robert Nisbet, this movement cannot be separated from the prior rise of the “New Left” of the same decade: “Irving Kristol, a central figure in the development, once described a Neo-conservative as a liberal mugged by the Revolution.”¹¹ They were, by and large, skeptical of government programs, disillusioned with movements of leftism, familiar with the practices of social

science, and eager to confront global evils. Neo-conservatives were also viewed by some others in the uneasy coalitions of American conservatism as unwelcomed interlopers.

Kirk was deeply skeptical of an ability to “end evil,” and of many enterprises carried out to that end that Frum and other neo-conservatives might advocate for. His avowals of the embeddings of culture and human nature amid an enduring and transcendent mystery, and his love of locality and family, lead me to identify him as a leader of “traditionalist” conservative sentiment, and as one firmly set against political systems or ideologies claiming a “scientific” basis. Over the decades from Roosevelt to the Bush presidencies, many competing persuasions (the rise of the “religious right” is also notable) within the movement of American conservatism struggled to have their influence exercised. And despite valuing rather different things, they were united for a time by two factors: scorn of communism and a willingness to work together.¹²

Preview of Arguments

Kirk’s persuasions advocated “order,” which began internally and extended first and most importantly to family and local community. He did not deny the existence of “absolutes” in a relativistic, secular, increasingly irreligious society, but I argue that his rhetoric was infused with a skepticism that could be characterized as “postmodern.” As a relentless critic of the “modern,” Kirk encouraged his readers to find value, wisdom, and truth, even as he declined to offer solutions or present a detailed understanding of such terminology. The empiricism of fact and measurement, in other words, he thought wholly inadequate when applied to the complexities and messiness of human beings. From this bias comes the relevance of “moral imagination,” which recurs throughout his

persuasions. It grants conservatives insight of ethical perception beyond the barriers of experience and physical moments. It is humanity's power to perceive abiding law and truth in the chaos of life, beyond appetite and self-interest. The moral imagination, a combination of intuition, instinct, imagination, and experience, nudges humans to where and what they ought to be; it was for Kirk key to the recovery of order and harmony for the personal soul and ultimately for the whole of society.¹³ As a "rhetorical popularizer" of an "Anglo-American" conservative tradition, his "recovery of rhetoric" was strongly against the systematic and the ideological. His concern was for a "natural" order, the creation of images through language, the importance of stories, and an elevation of "sentiment" in the public sphere. These were necessary to understand the relations between human beings in a dramatic, and not programmatic, paradigm. "Reconstructions were of politics in relation to ideology, America in relation to "modern prosperity," and the "modern" in relation to a critique of liberal autonomy.

In opposition to much of the currents of "modernity," Kirk the traditionalist deployed a rhetoric of flourish and memorable phraseology aimed at strengthening the bonds of association at the level of the local, the familial, and the communal. The will that truly mattered was the supreme will of the Creator, only very partly and rather mysteriously revealed in fragments, not the soft or hard despotism of various temporal sovereigns. Modernization for its own sake, like power for its own sake, was a civil and social disorder. I argue that Kirk would nod in agreement with Jean-Francois Lyotard, who concluded his book *The Postmodern Condition* as follows:

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the

reconciliation of the concept for the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return to terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.¹⁴

An affinity between Kirk's persuasions and an understanding of "postmodernism" through the prism of "associational rhetoric" is the theme of this dissertation. More specifically, conservatism sourced in an unknowable order and set against ideology in favor of customs and conventions, a "humbled attitude" of cautious change, overlaps with a "postmodernist" distrust of legitimating knowledge through an overarching system of thought.¹⁵ And so the opinion "let us wage a war on totality," following Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives," is a call of distrust to a totalizing series of propositions in the public sphere.

I contend that Kirk, as a figure more concerned with culture than politics, attempted to negotiate his conservatism as a denial of the "autonomous self" and as an acceptance of the social construction of life (guided by, in his case, religious and socially traditionalist norms developed over extended periods of time). What is shared with Lyotard is that his postmodernism rejects the "grand narratives" of liberalism (such as "autonomy" and "progress") as well as collectivism (such as fascism, socialism, and communism). Even so, Kirk is grounded in what might be termed a metaphysical master narrative, one of divine interaction with humanity. And because human beings are sinful and severely lacking in knowledge, their statements about the world can only be provisional, subject to revision and circumstance.¹⁶ Sentiments were more concerned with the power of imagery upon the human heart than the logical discourse of the mind,

and this led Kirk to conclude that rhetoric – image through language – was a critical art for the conduct of conservatism. The mind should not be deprived of high poetic images.

Preview of Methodology

A concern for the terms by which a social world is constituted and its values defined is the reason I value the rhetorical method of James Boyd White. Rhetorical persuasion in Kirk's communication, being difficult to precisely define and easier to contextualize with an adoption or appreciation of his sentiments, was a dialogue with friends and mentors of ages past. An intuitive, literary, and imaginative mind, this is to say, took forthright positions but with a meandering and non-systematic method. Like the discipline of rhetoric itself, his writings were layered with meaning – particularly in fiction, where the stories were careful to convey a moral lesson. Rhetoric, a complex discipline with a long history, has a number of overlapping meanings. The meanings, according to *The Rhetorical Tradition*, can include the practice of oratory; the study of strategies of effective oratory; the use of written and spoken language to inform and persuade; the study of the persuasive effects of language; the study of the relation between language and knowledge; the classification and use of tropes and figures; and the use of propaganda.¹⁷ In his analysis of "rhetoric and community," J. Michael Hogan wrote that social and political fragmentation was hardly unprecedented in the United States. Echoing a concern of Kirk's, he believed "the signs of stress and fragmentation appear everywhere, not just in our national political and cultural dialogue but in all of the various communities that define our social lives – our families, our neighborhoods, our towns and cities, our professions, and our social and cultural associations."¹⁸

If Russell Kirk was, first and foremost, a “literary” figure, then a reader should not expect to derive much political theory, philosophy, or electoral direction from him.¹⁹ And so my methodological means toward a description of the author’s work through historical context and the stylistic and argumentative choices recurrent in the themes of his texts follows White, a legal and literary scholar. His book *When Words Lose Their Meaning* provides a way of reading that draws attention to the language of the text, the culture of which it is a part, and the relation the writer or speaker establishes when using the language. This way of reading is anthropological, linguistic, psychological, and literary, investigating a sub-group of society and its language as communities are created, dissolved, and recreated through the spoken and written word.²⁰ In the considerations of complex, difficult to define terms – “liberalism,” “conservatism,” “rhetoric,” “modernism,” and “postmodernism” first among them – I employ and accept many of Weaver’s and Kirk’s biases. And, in following White’s method of reading, it is my contention that an unfolding of a political philosophy is impractical as a matter of history or politics. Raymond Williams has written that terms of political discourse such as “liberal” and “conservative” are murky, with each at various times used as pejorative terms. They came mainly into the public discourse of English from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Liberal was used in the sense of “open-minded” and “unorthodox;” conservative in modern (post-French Revolution) political discussions was often used in the sense of “organic,” as in a contrast of the “organized modern state” with an “Old England” of the organic community.²¹

My analysis of such terms follows these developments within the biases of Kirk and through the methods of White. Kirk's biases of definition have several deficiencies, further analyzed in the last chapter. Yet his perspective is valuable because it is unique, because it is defensible, and because it sharply contrasts with much of the American conservative movement since the end of the Second World War (a movement, like many socio-political movements, with both significant successes and significant problems). Kirk's strategy of community reconstruction was a linguistic and a bodily effort. It was a reconstruction of politics away from the negativities of "ideology;" a reconstruction of conservatism to a more British and "Burkean" character; and a reconstruction of "home" away from the ravages of "modernity."²² White's project is illuminative to the strategies of reconstruction. The preface to *When Words Lose Their Meaning* informs the reader that its subject is rhetoric, the study of the ways in which character and community (that which makes a culture) is defined and made real in the performances of language. White writes, "As the object of art is beauty and of philosophy truth, the object of rhetoric is justice: the constitution of a social world."²³

According to Kirk's unique and influential judgment, words and communities had indeed "lost their meanings." They were in dire need of reconstruction. There should be a rediscovery of a "conservative" tradition. This tradition was drawn from Cicero and Edmund Burke, among others.²⁴ With this in mind, I argue that to read Kirk in the terminology and structure of White takes the reader to the past for the purposes of a lost reverence, to "identify" lost meanings. Second, to look toward the mysteriously transcendent through the sentiments and biases of Kirk was to "recover rhetoric" as an

alternative to the centralizing, homogenizing, hubristic tendencies of “modern” politics, which were infused with paternalism, statism, and the false human anthropology of “individualism.” Kirk sought to guide the reader to that place where he made his “home” – the small, local networks of associations that echo Burke’s well-known “little platoons” of society. Set against the “modern” in ways at once superficial and philosophical, such guidance was placement in an uncertain yet transcendently-grounded “postmodern” time and place.²⁵ White has written that “beyond the individual person are the practices and activities that make up the life of the social world.” In application of that thought, I intend to demonstrate the social and political world and representations of reason, nature, and communicative conduct as complex sets of understandings, relations, and activities labor to summarize Kirk’s activity.²⁶

To better understand the possibilities he represented as a way to conjure up a “conservative past” so as to influence the present and future is to recognize persuasions with a life, a force, of their own. Against the triumphs of intellectual abstractions such as economic determinism and promoting “democracy” in places with no tradition of it, his messages might be described as a rejection of politics in favor of cultural literacy. The logics of the latest intellectual fashions cannot well begin to heal the wounds of the polis. The realities of the world (namely, sin) cannot be contained, he wrote, though things like mystery, asymmetry, history, poetry, and family can afford a good life. His retracing of the steps of “conservative” thought in the Anglo-American world helped to place those that embraced the label after the Second World War as a serious part of the national dialogue. Kirk found threads of what some might call “conservative thought” in

great figures of antiquity like Moses, Aristotle, and Cicero, as they were investigators of the mystifying truths of human nature: “Poetic, ethical, and political truths endure longer than do scientific theories.”²⁷ In his conceptions, thought ceased to be conservative when it became rigid, harsh, intolerant, and adamant about utilizing political dominance to achieve policy ends. I characterize Kirk’s conservatism as saturated with skepticism, in its approach to society, idea of government, and political practice. Civil society was seen as a fragile achievement, its society antecedent to the persons of its composition and the product of historical conditions allied to its customs.²⁸ Reconstructions against the perceived political fanaticisms of ideology (he defined the ideologue as one who “thinks of politics as a revolutionary instrument for transforming society and even transforming human nature”²⁹) was his “American cause.”

Purposes of Conservatism

Conservatism, Kirk repeatedly emphasized, was not an ideology. It does not “breed fanatics; and it does not “try to incite the enthusiasm of a secular religion.” He found human circumstances to be “almost infinitely variable.” Those who wished to “sacrifice their past and present and future to a set of abstract ideas” should seek solace in Fascism, Communism, or “Benthamism.” The “high-minded conservative,” on the other hand, believes in enduring norms ascertained through appreciation of the wisdom of previous generations, the study of history, and the reconciliation of authority with the altered circumstances of present life. Deep suspicion should be the disposition to the “cult of Reason – the abstract rationality which asserts that mundane planning is able to solve all our difficulties of spirit and community.”³⁰ Kirk revised the “conservative

principles” that first garnered attention in *The Conservative Mind* throughout his life, but they can be summarized as follows: belief in an enduring moral order; adherence to custom, convention, and continuity; belief in the principles of prescription; guidance of principles by prudence; attention to the principle of variety; chastisement by the principle of imperfectability; persuasion that freedom and property are closely linked; the upholding of voluntary community and opposition to involuntary collectivism; the need for prudent restraint upon power and passion; the understanding that permanence and change must be recognized and reconciled in a vigorous society.³¹ These principles form the basis of his outlook of “conservatism” and of the ensuing critiques.

As there are many definitions of conservatism, there are many conceptions of rhetoric. The sentiments of persuasion of this rhetorical analysis follow Richard Weaver, a rhetorician, friend of Kirk,³² and prominent conservative intellectual in the “southern agrarian” tradition. For him, rhetoric was that which created an informed appetite for the good. His book *The Ethics of Rhetoric* stated that rhetorical language, “for whatever purpose used, excites interest and with it either pleasure or alarm.” Rhetoric “moves the soul with a movement which cannot finally be justified logically.”³³ This observation is not opposed to the rhetoricians of antiquity that Weaver admired – Plato’s view that rhetoric is the art of enchanting the soul and winning it by discourse, or Aristotle’s view that rhetoric is the faculty of discovering in a case the available means of persuasion, or Cicero’s view that rhetoric is speech designed to persuade.³⁴ The assumptions of Weaver’s life and writings were that words and definitions mattered due to the realities, seen and unseen, which call humanity to a greater good, one more satisfying to self and

community than the pursuit of momentary pleasurable aims. In a letter to his academic dean at the University of Chicago, Weaver, reflecting on the seven years since the *Ethics of Rhetoric* was first published in 1953, wrote “the chief new conclusion I have come to is that all arguments are arguments from definition.” He continued, “But I insist on the point that the definition of the nature of the thing is the ultimate goal: we get to that the best we can, sometimes with many makeshifts and delays.” A religionist or a moralist is “duty bound to prefer the realm of essence, to keep putting it forward where he can;” and “the idea of a metaphysical certitude not subject to daily revision because of changing accidents is necessary to keep one out of the quicksand. That is why arguments from definition, expressive of the realm of essence, are higher in the ontological scale.”³⁵ The great yearning of man to be something in the imaginative sense, Weaver wrote in *Visions of Order*, “to be more something more than he is in the simple existential way or in the reductionist formula of materialism is both universal and proper to him.” The urge to represent something higher is “an active ingredient of his specific humanity.” Evolved from the spiritual impulse, images are made of wishes and hopes, of things transfigured, and of imaginations and value ascriptions.³⁶ Humans needed, he thought, a recovery of perspective in an age of incredible technological progress. Their intellect and ability did, in fact, have limits.

Much like Weaver, Kirk possessed an “imaginative sense” concerned with supreme images, images that could be either tyrannizing or liberating. Because ideas and images and actions have consequences, bad ones have bad consequences. A doctrine of “progress,” heavily infecting social life, facilitated a dream of reconstituting human

nature itself according to wants of modern, mechanized society. Kirk's answer was the "moral imagination," which could free humanity to discover fragments of their true purpose – to come "home" to communion with their loved ones and their creator. The phrase "moral imagination" comes from Edmund Burke.³⁷ As Kirk took the term, it can be defined as a uniquely human ability to conceive of fellow humans as moral beings and as persons, not as objects whose value rests in utility or usefulness. An enduring source of inspiration that elevates and guides to "first principles," it is also a process by which a self "creates" metaphor from images recorded by the senses and stored in memory, which are then occupied to find and suppose moral correspondences in experience. An intuitive ability to perceive ethical truths and abiding law in the midst of chaotic experience, for Kirk the moral imagination should be an aspiration to a proper ordering of the soul and, consequently, of the political order.³⁸ In these formations, to be a citizen is not to be an autonomous individual; it is a status granted by being born into a world defined by one's relations to others. Even under the umbrella of an "imaginative sense," however, there was some discord (as in the "traditionalist" disagreement about Weaver's praise for President Lincoln). Kirk's concepts, particularly his concern with "sentiments" as opposed to the "ideas" that could lead to ideology, do provide him a unique place in the language of conservative argument. One revealing example can be found in the concept of personhood.

To be fully human was to embrace the duties and obligations toward a purpose of security and endurance for the common good. Success was to be measured by the development of character, not the fleeting emotions of status. To ignite this view, Kirk

wrote, was to rescue of normative consciousness from the clutches of ideology: “For it ought to be the moral imagination which creates political doctrines, and not political doctrines which seduce the moral imagination. Our first task here is the restoration of a proper vocabulary.”³⁹ His vocabulary in the context of moral imagination and against ideology, a steady theme of his fiction, non-fiction, and advocacies, was that individual autonomy is a false and incomplete human anthropology, one that should be replaced by personhood. Thinking “sacramentally,” (meaning humans are connected with a sacramental order of creation, a configuration of the mind in communion with the divine and beyond the rational) Kirk sensed that nature was created in such a manner that humans can draw “true analogies,” wisdom inaccessible by scientific method. Lived experiences, registered in memory and conjured through other experiences, can be interpreted through imagination so that memories may become images, analogous to the experience.⁴⁰ In “invitations” to “associations” of personhood, the rhetorical movement was to take readers back to the past so as to rediscover, in a “conservative tradition,” the lasting and fulfilling meanings to life, a “lost reverence.” His “rhetoric of moral imagination” was to move humanity toward a transcendent reality, an alternative to the direction of much of modern society. From this, there might develop a placement of a network of associations, fostered in smaller communities, enduring in their long and naturally developing customs and traditions.

Opposition to Ideology

Kirk defined ideology as “political fanaticism, a body of beliefs alleged to point the way to a perfect society.” Politics, it follows, is a revolutionary instrument for

transforming society and even human nature. He contrasts ideology with beliefs and sentiments to secure order, justice, and freedom.⁴¹ There was a rejection of nuance and circumstance. The ideologist, he wrote, is convinced that “rigid closet-philosophy” contains answers plainly to be discerned if only the program were to be implemented. If others were to be governed by these rules, betterment could follow, through force if so required: “He may be an a priori reasoner, or an a posteriori reasoner, but in his system no room is left for Providence, or chance, or free will, or prudence. He is the devotee, often, of what Burke called ‘an armed doctrine.’”⁴² The enemy of imagination, ideology “is an alleged science of politics, dogmatic and often utopian, closely allied with the interests of a particular social class of political sect.”⁴³ From the nineteenth century, it has held considerable sway in the conduct of human affairs. Yet, particularly in light of the limited life experiences of most humans, Kirk believed literature, narratives, vocabulary, images, and the like served the most desirable formative purpose for the young. With words, a statesman participates in the creation of political reality. Changes in language could bring about real effects, but ideology negates the multiple cross-currents and harms the compromises, customs, and structures that make up a culture. This critique Kirk applied across the political spectrum, to “liberal” and “leftist” centralizers as well as to “rightist” advocates for democracy building.⁴⁴

Formation against ideology was to be accomplished by the enabling of an imaginative vision and a developed ability to absorb and involve it satisfactorily. Such actions were practiced, first and most important, at the level of family and neighborhood and in the valuing of a healthy vision. And while Kirk’s fiction does not feature in this

rhetorical analysis of traditionalist American intellectual conservatism, a more comprehensive understanding of his “conservative vision” should scrutinize his fiction. In those writings (his fiction mostly consisted of ghost stories, often directly drawn from the lives of his own family,⁴⁵ and ended with a moral lesson) an imaginative mind “vividly casts the drama of the soul’s struggle with good and evil in relation to a transcendent realm of meaning of purpose.” Principles are put to the test in Kirk’s fiction. It is there that the belief in divine providence, a moral law, eternal life, and the duality of humanity as body and spirit permeate.⁴⁶ In confronting cultural and social crisis, such were the sentiments put forward in the public sphere instead of ideology. In defining sentiment, I mean a response to events in the world somewhere between thought and feeling. Closely related to imagination and imagery, sentiments were thought quite capable of profoundly moving a person’s conviction. More than sensation or emotion and not a synonym to feeling, sentiments in his work were an ill-defined something that contained thought and exerted influence over the will.⁴⁷

What unfolded, both in the lessons of his fiction and in his socio-political writings, was an imaginative, moral vision obtained and nurtured by disposition. I label this the “associational,” and, when applied to White, “associational rhetoric.” More specifically, the associational are persuasions – of persona and lived sentiment as well as speaking and writing – that establish a relationship between the author and a hearer through the harnessing of language in the formation of a community. The formation of kinship, the network of associations most powerfully felt at the local and familial level, is a product of dialogue, most attractive to those of a likeminded inclination. And when

articulated in the context of a struggle against decay and decadence, the course of conversation is capable of a durable, and even profound, societal impact. Kirk hoped that bits and pieces of his call for cultural renewal would be reflected in public life.⁴⁸ A language “remade,” accepting and following his poetic imagery of moral imagination, was and is persuasive to those willing to adopt a spirit of heroism, adventure, and responsibility, drawn in part from great figures to be emulated like Cicero and Edmund Burke. Kirk’s texts offered these readers not a language of planning and theory, and certainly not a language of detailed definition and advice, but of thematic alternatives to the utility and cold rationality they professed to be far too dominant a societal energy.⁴⁹

Alternatives to Ideology

Among the inspirations for alternatives were literature and examples of history expressed so as to address present and future crisis in the contexts of their circumstance. The call for a cultural renewal to be reflected in public life was constituted from that which communicated civic virtue and moral conduct. In the Kirk household, his daughter Cecila wrote in a tribute, the stories of moral imagination were integral to the formation of the person:

By sparking my imagination through fairy tales, and by providing perspective and reason through historical novels, my father imparted a cultural legacy to me. For through the printed word, the wisdom of generations transcends the ‘provincialism of time’ and speaks to us across the ages and the oceans. We acquire an understanding of tradition through the ‘eternal contract’ of the generations, of the immediate and the timeless. Historical literature in particular provides a continuity and order; humane letters truly is conducive to a balanced habit of mind. The record of our collective and real stories, history reveals the enduring qualities of human nature.⁵⁰

Virtue and the enduring qualities of human nature were understood to be built by the concrete actions which facilitate community, such as raising a family. Social and

associational relations teach the person striving toward high moral virtue to exist peacefully among others. Looking back over history (and to Burke foremost given his attempts to explain the development of modern conservatism) Kirk emphasized figures and conditions he judged relevant to his projects, estimating their strength of association to more present trials.⁵¹ The lessons of literature and history were ingredients in the moral imagination because they informed and instructed concerning the dignity of human nature, making it apparent “that we are more than naked apes.” Letters and learning he thought hollow if deprived of opportunities to apprehend a more decent order in the soul and in the commonwealth:

This moral imagination was the gift and the obsession of Plato and Vergil and Dante. Drawn from centuries of human consciousness, these concepts of the moral imagination – so powerfully if briefly put by Burke – are expressed afresh from age to age. So it is that the men of humane letters in our century whose work seems most likely to endure have not been neoterists, but rather bearers of an old standard, tossed by our modern winds of doctrine: the names of Eliot, Frost, Faulkner, Waugh, and Yeats may suffice to suggest the variety of this moral imagination in the twentieth century.⁵²

Kirk wrote it is the event, not the fact, which should be the appropriate concern of historians. Due to an “obsession” with fact, “a nineteenth-century idol, most modern historians have forgotten that facts, too, are constructions – and meaningful only in association.” The restoration of a proper historical consciousness rests upon old insights, the feeding of the moral imagination and the appreciation of history. The elevation of human reason at the expense of redeeming character through them may lead a rising generation to “wander bewildered in cunning passages, contrived corridors and issues. And at the heart of such a labyrinth, we are told, there has lurked for ages the Minotaur.”⁵³ A patrimony of culture and order cannot simply be inherited; it must also

be renewed. The thread binding Kirk's persuasions across a variety of topics was concern that attention to material increase and passing pleasure distracted succeeding generations from renewing and fulfilling transcendent societal contracts. By faith in a mostly unguided social order and in an unseen God, he advanced incremental and non-systemic improvement toward an ideal of human virtue, even as he fretted over the scarcity of virtuous actions.

For Kirk, improvement begins with the recognition that humans are inherently and indelibly social, always searching for group affiliation. By stressing the illusions of ideology, he framed his role in controversies as a defender of existence over rationalized possibility, a defense of a "conservative" social arrangement against "illusions." From the days of Bentham and Mill, he wrote, liberals have too little "concerned themselves with the Heart." By living in the belief that a "sweet reasonableness" can solve societal problems and alleviate private trouble, and by the inclination of "a neat Plan," the natural search for one mystery, God, with another mystery, ourselves, is disordered. The result is internal and external improvement secured by "adjustment, positive legislation, and sensible goodwill." Alternatively,

The thinking conservative knows that the outward signs of disorder, personal or social, very often are no more than the symptoms of an inner ravaging sickness, not to be put down by ointments and cosmetics. He is inclined to look for the real causes of our troubles in the hearts of man – in our ancient proclivity toward sin, in a loneliness of spirit that conjures up devils, in twisted historical roots beneath the parched ground of modern existence, in venerable impulses of human nature which, when frustrated, make our life one long lingering death. He knows, moreover, that the task for the prudent counselor and the prudent statesman is to make life tolerable, not to make it perfect: there is something in the constitution of humanity that cannot be satisfied with the poor things of earth, and so we ought to teach ourselves in honorable resignation, not frantic indignation.⁵⁴

Conservatism in Community

Conservatism as a general inclination influencing a prudential judgment was, he conveyed, a mentality, a human urgency toward truth. Because of God's mystery placed in creation, the mind, created in God's image, could never be fully understood. This restlessness and instability, transferred to politics, requires authority. As humans live best by prescription, by ancient custom and usage through the rights which usage and custom have established, the pillars of any tolerable social order require a just authority and a respected prescription.⁵⁵ To avoid the "loneliness of spirit that conjures up devils" is to be a member of a social association nourished by the humane. Contrasting Bentham with Burke, Kirk held the "founder of conservatism" knew a principle that animated his writings – the "complexity of human interests and the subtlety of the Good." The "greatest good" did not reside in efforts for political equality, in the "liberation" from prejudice and prescription, or "in obsession with economic objects." Instead, the greatest good emanated from "conformity to the providential order of the universe: in piety, in duty, in enduring love. But Bentham swept Burke's world of spirit and imagination contemptuously aside."⁵⁶ Conservatism as Kirk imagined it was a living organism, creatively constituted from history and example. Its guide as a sentiment was not a planned social order but an unknowable revelation of virtue. As humanity was complex and mysterious, no set of positive laws universally applied are sufficient for happiness and goodness. A flawed nature, lusting after power and aggrandizement, envious and violent, "must be restrained by custom, authority, and a balanced government which checks power with power." Happiness comes through the fulfillment of duties in

purposeful work and by being part of a community of continuity, not by the satisfaction of material desire.⁵⁷

In the community of continuity, systems both ethical and political attain ascendancy through appeals to the imagination. And when the imagination ceases “to touch the chords of wonder and mystery and hope, their power is lost, and men look elsewhere for some set of principles by which they may be guided.”⁵⁸ Kirk, rejecting the concept of liberalism, which he criticized as too enamored with emancipation from obligation in favor of societal improvement by centralization, insisted that humanity always remains. By this I mean his sentiments were infused with another concept, one of always-present freedoms for evil. Rejecting the primacy of politics and economics as vehicles for earthly salvation, Kirk suggested that social, political, and economic difficulties were in the end questions of the nature of the human person. This notion fed his habit of converting a belief popular in one historical period into his contemplations of American conservatism. One critic wrote that Kirk’s overall approach to history was to draw a sketch of the true and good, and then assign selected individuals to complete the literary portrait.⁵⁹ Kirk would, I believe, agree with this analysis. Respect for creation and the beings longing for order within creation, wrote his friend and publisher Henry Regnery, was the underpinning for his impressions of political and social order, an interest first brought together “imaginatively” by his admiration for Edmund Burke. For Kirk, the British parliamentarian in argument, temperament, and prejudice represented “a philosophy derived from a deep sense of piety and a profound understanding of the sources of order.” Private contentment and public peace, the

products of prudence and humility latent in classical philosophy and Christian discipline, defined the principle of order that conservatism should strive to attain.⁶⁰ The appeals to the imagination took from literature and history in the effort to promote visions of virtues and ethics. They were transcendent and thus difficult to define, even though Kirk admired precise language. His literary biography, *Eliot and His Age: T.S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century*, considered by the author and several friends to contain his best writing,⁶¹ approvingly cited the poet's belief that a vision of conservatism was needed in "this grotesque civilization" to "transcend the expediency and the pragmatism and the corruption of parties." Eliot's images of moral imagination in opposition to diabolical imagination will endure because they portray the most passionate and perplexing element of humanity, which is love: "In the end, Eliot found his way to the intellectual love of God and to the love of created beings. All of us, or nearly all, are pilgrims still in the Waste Land."⁶²

Thus my classification of Kirk as a primary, organizing supporter and as a rhetorical popularizer of a strand of American conservatism (labeled "traditionalist" for lack of a better term) places him as a literary figure engaged with history, poetry, and sociology far more than politics. Through a humanistic, "associational" disposition, he consistently – even repetitively – maintained that morality is necessary (in the case of markets most especially); and no amount of regulation could adequately replace it. A fostering of the good depended upon an ethical system itself sustained by religious conviction. His persuasions were in unwavering advocacy of such discipline. Robert Nisbet, a friend of the Kirk family and a sociologist perhaps best known for his book *The*

Quest for Community,⁶³ was an insightful conductor of traditionalist conservative critiques to the emergent dominating modernity of the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century. The most momentous intellectual revolt against “rationalistic individualism” was not, he wrote, “the drive toward political collectivism,” but a conservative revolt, one “to be seen in those approaches to the study of man where the individual has been replaced by the social group as the central unit of theoretical inquiry and ameliorative action.”⁶⁴ As humans are naturally social, the longing is not simply for order within creation. The desire to bond with particular times, places, and people – to be a part of a family, a locale, a community, an extended spiritual and cultural experience – is an inescapable form of association that belittles abstracted attempts of autonomy and “individualism.” Humans will always seek membership and belonging as a means of self-definition. Yet many developments in the wake of Enlightenment liberalism have successively destroyed established social contexts. The state, married to the principles of “progress,” is the apparatus of legitimate organization that persists and beckons. Nisbet asserted that the destruction of smaller associations and communities, and most notably within the arguments of conservatism the atomization and displacement of markets, assisted the rise of totalitarianisms. Deprived of memberships, humans mired in the complexities and confusions of modernism and liberalism sought belonging through more remote and abstract units of the state. The result was a membership tenuously tied to large, distant, and politicized entities incapable of intimately and directly addressing alienation, isolation, and loneliness.⁶⁵

In contrast, the “associational” in its formation of kinships rejected the individual as the fundamental unit of social life. Nisbet argued the theme of the individual uprooted, without status and seeking fellowship in some kind of moral community, was a recurrent one. The vision of one “lost” in modernity had become central, calling attention to the consequences of morality and economic conduct in modern life.⁶⁶

Centralized political power aimed at alleviating alienation, isolation, and loneliness he found to have appeared, unsurprisingly, after nearly two centuries of individualism in economic organization and private morality. There was a close relationship between individualism and state power due to the weakening of associations intermediate to human life and the state. The reason was to provide for the mass public, brought into existence by a “planned destruction” of old customs, associations, and other securities: “The liberal values of autonomy and freedom of personal choice are indispensable to a genuinely free society, but we shall achieve and maintain these only by vesting them in the conditions in which liberal democracy will thrive – diversity of culture, plurality of association, and division of authority.”⁶⁷ Praising Nisbet near the end of the *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk approved of the project to “restore to true significance such terms as ‘community,’ ‘liberalism,’ ‘individuality,’ and ‘democracy,’” to “rescue sociological speculation from its infatuation with Benthamite dogma and method.” Collectivism and individualism are both a hindrance to the struggle to build a “true community.” This representative passage of his sentiment of human anthropology is worth quoting at length:

The towering moral problem of our time, Nisbet reasons, is the problem of community lost and community regained. We long desperately for a sense of continuity in our

existence, and a sense of direction; these are denied to most of us by the decay of family, the obliteration of the old-guild organization, the retreat of local spirit before the centralized state, and the forlorn condition of religious belief. The most conspicuous result of the revolutionary destruction of traditional society – a result, too, of mass industrialism – has been the creation of the Lonely Crowd: a mass of individuals without real community, aware that they matter to no one, and often convinced that nothing else matters. The assault on institutional religion, on old-fashioned economic methods, on family authority, and on small political communities has set the individual free from nearly everything, truly: but that freedom is a terrifying thing, the freedom of a baby deserted by his parents to do as he pleases. In reaction against these negative liberties, presently the confused and resentful masses incline toward any fanaticism that promises to assuage their loneliness – the Communist or Fascist parties, the lunatic dissidence of dissent, the totalist state with its delusions.⁶⁸

In Kirk's rendering, the language of liberalism too often centered upon "rights," liberty," and "freedom" without the necessary accompanying adjectives, namely "order," "virtue," and "duty." An approach of "association" would recognize the importance of social context to an individual freedom, meaning that the socialized sources of a person's individuality would not be neglected. A pre-existing culture, tradition, and custom encompass humanity's relationship to a politicized state. The network of social relationships would discourage one to attempt define and impose one's own concept of existence and meaning, as mystery, community norms, and the limits of reason provided a check to the hubris that he thought would lead to ideology. And "America needs nothing less than it needs ideology," Kirk wrote.⁶⁹

Restoration of Terms

To restore terms to "true significance" was to conjure a language of conservatism through an imaginative, associational rendering of incremental and non-systemic personal reform. This, in turn, might inspire and revive communal reform. Citing Weaver's project to create an informed appetite for the good, Kirk agreed that rhetoric

was a “great power in the world whether it be base or noble.” At its truest, it functions as something like an “intellectual love of God.” The writing of modern social scientists suffers from “a primary equivocation, is marred by pedantic empiricism, is weakened by a melioristic bias, loses by a distrust of metaphor, and is affected by a caste spirit; and all this is true because the sociologists have ignored the traditional rules of rhetoric.” Noble rhetoric, which shows humanity better versions of themselves, links in Weaver’s “chain” that extend up toward the ideal, is in decay.⁷⁰ Although Kirk did not agree that Abraham Lincoln was a better guide for conservatives than Burke (for Weaver, Lincoln argued from “principle” instead of “circumstance”), he concurred that “we all are oppressed in some degree by the degradation of rhetoric which parallels the decline of ethical studies in our era.” Referring once again to the base role of a transcendent order, Kirk continued, “Thus, debasing the Word, we ignore ethical judgments” to justify atrocity as “Devil terms” are deployed to “take the place of temperate argument in our daily conversation.”⁷¹ Again praising *The Quest for Community* in an essay about ethical labor as the highest ordering of work, he described Nisbet’s efforts to restore words within the context of a towering moral problem: community lost.

Kirk, I argue, espoused this sentiment as part of a lived persona: the family and the varied associations of local community could not only be regarded as external products of thought and behavior. They were existent prior to the person and remained an indispensable support of proper conduct. The conservative must be personally attuned to the people and “places” of community. This was, in effect, sensitivity to the linked chains of the past, present, and future. History, and specifically modern history

chronicling the rise of the modern state, Kirk suggested was in no small part the account of the decline of community and of consequent ruin. A liberation from “the dead hand of the past was the object of the devotees of romantic emancipation,” but this expected freeing from tradition had become “a tyranny more thorough and inescapable than anything known to the despotisms of antiquity.”⁷² The idea that the “right” to define one’s own concept of existence is at the heart of liberty, of human meaning, and of the universe,⁷³ is a foreign and dangerous one to Kirk. The state of mind that the “individual” (not the “person” born into a social setting of shared responsibility across time) is responsible to the self first, and inherently possessive of a right to pursue unrestrained freedom, he might classify as, in eventual outcome, a politicized temptation to the exercise of a centralizing compulsion, one often made more terrible by the resultant loneliness and alienation. Personhood, reduced to subjectivity at the whim of an individual right, would be ripe for manipulation by impersonal institutions following a distant, unmoored logic of rational utility. Kirk, in the desire to reconnect with an older, pre-Enlightenment Western tradition, perceived the influence of utilitarianism as strongly present in the currents of twentieth century American political discourse. To “escape” the structures of liberalism and modernism through the moral imagination was to avoid the trample of long-developing culture and tradition, the asymmetrically strange and odd, the nonconformist, and the mysteriously religious.⁷⁴

Given such a bias, the founders and heirs of modern thought seek the conquest of nature and the emancipation of worldly authority from moral restraint. For Kirk, utilitarianism, a universalizing, rationalist, secular enforcement of equality grounded in

the Enlightenment and the ideological fever of the French Revolution, lurked to the danger of the unity of a long-developed common law – even in an America influenced by a “natural law” rooted in “Christian ethics.”⁷⁵ His persuasions wished to articulate things true for all people at all times, things gifted through an interpretation mediated by historical experience. From the understanding that man was made in the image of an ultimate person invisible to humanity now, ethical principles emerged that facilitated humans living in community so that they would not be as the beasts. This order of society, whatever its modern pretenses, he thought could shine through to grant ethical meaning to existence. Such “permanent things” were the measure of true societal progress. Upholding these produced higher social goods than utility: norms of courage, duty, justice, integrity, charity, and familial help – the standard for judging persons and institutions. Principles founded upon an understanding of the human condition were to be reinvigorated in an American manifestation of the civilization that “originated in a little cult of Galileans two thousand years ago.”⁷⁶ Appealing to and following an ultimate good, an appreciation of norms was acquired in the outgrowth of organic community unorganized by the mechanisms of the state, beginning with family and extending to the smaller spheres of community such as church and school.

Experience, the teacher of life, assisted in the search for the “good,” a virtue that was the end and the purpose of life to be passed forward. Looking to the past, the function of the teacher of moral imagination is to encourage better choices for these ends and purposes. In his forward to the contribution of historian John Lukacs to the “Library of Conservative Thought,” series editor Russell Kirk opined, “There is no man but

historic man.” Applauding Lukacs as “the chief champion of the doctrine of free will,” he stated that the study of mankind must begin with a study of the self: “A fuller and more acute historical consciousness is one important instrument for our regeneration.” Such regeneration commences with an approach of ethical self-consciousness.⁷⁷ This view of history, combined with the view of conservatism as a disposition, an approach, and a sentiment, are among my justifications for evaluating Kirk’s significance through a rhetorical analysis of “association,” as formations are created, dissolved, and recreated through the spoken and written word. And the formations begin with language in definition, a language inseparable from the biases of approach toward social and political thought in action.

There are not only a multitude of definitions for conservatism and rhetoric. Reading Kirk, the reader will be struck by how terms like “liberalism,” “modernism,” and “postmodernism” were employed, directly and indirectly. His arguments, colored as they were by strong opinions in reference toward images of a greater good, were less concerned with definition and context than with imagery and poetics, so as to draw in readers as a fiction writer might. The rhetorical choices of invention and imagination dealt with over these chapters provide a description of Kirk’s work in historical context and textual analysis through the adoption of how the author’s worldview used broad, difficult terms. As a “rhetorical popularizer,” his “man of letters” persona was a sentiment of life, and he considered such sentiment as superior to a systematic program of writing and speaking. In this, and in following White’s concept of textual community built by a mind in language and culture to shape a reader’s life, one begins to discern the

ways in which an imaginative, moral vision was obtained, nurtured, and expressed. More specifically, imagery, historical selectivity, memorable phraseology, and a notable persona both challenge the effort for precise definition in Kirk's writings and bring one to a conclusion that his "community of association" in rhetorical analysis was elusive and ever-changing.

It is in this sense that I use the term "postmodern," a period after the "modern order" in rejection of "modernity" following the insights of a certain "realism."⁷⁸ There is much to argue with in Kirk's conceptions, but the important point is the ways in which they were his conceptions, and that they came to influence – as a way of learning to shape the formations of a reader. In a rejection of centralization, mass politics, and the elevation of reason and rationality (in the context of the economy, for example, a market-orientation devoid of a foundational humanism, as markets can be no better than the moral content of their participants), the critique of Kirk and the traditionalists was to be wary of detaching "progress" from the responsibility of its moral evaluation. True human progress, they articulated, must be subordinate to a human purpose of virtue in the natural existence and development of social settings, the home and those localized places where the kinships of association flourish. To idolize an individual, government planning, technical or scientific progress, or an abstract idea of human organization outside the context of custom and history was to defy a delicate common good. The big, the distant, and the militarized – either for war or for its politicized "moral equivalent" – were the enemies of order.⁷⁹

The formation, fostering, and protection of communitarian social capital inherited through a historical culture, either imaginatively constituted or in a “blood-and-soil” context, was for Kirk a “defense” of “natural society.” A properly constituted order of civic health needs a grouping of persons and communities governed by moral laws. “If ignorant of history and political theory and the record of human nature, but well intentioned and philanthropic,” it is easy to fall victim “to the sentimental humanitarianism or, worse still, to the power-craving zealot for doctrinaire political alteration.” He liked to quote Burke’s estimation that the sound statesman combines a disposition to preserve with ability to reform.⁸⁰ Thus a “sober” and “tested” conservatism respectful of its origin in morality is founded upon an understanding of history and human nature. Kirk wrote that conservative leaders since the time of Edmund Burke and John Adams have subscribed to certain “general ideas” distrustful of abstractions, that is, “absolute political dogmas divorced from practical experience and particular circumstances.” Instead, there are “certain abiding truths which govern the conduct of human society.” And from these principles American conservative thought arose. To take from Kirk’s essay “The Essence of Conservatism,” the principles are: governance by moral laws originated in divine justice; variety and diversity resistant of an enforced uniformity and equality; equal rights, not equal things, before the law; the connection of property and freedom; the checks of power, restricted by sound constitutions and customs; viewing the past as a great storehouse of wisdom, guided by moral traditions, social experience, and a complex body of knowledge bequeathed by ancestors; the urgency of true community in modern society, which is governed by

charity and love; America setting an example for the world, not remaking the world in its own image; the knowledge that men, women, and institutions are not perfectible, and that progress is achieved through a prudent recognition of the limitations of human nature; a recognition that political and moral innovation can be destructive, especially if undertaken in a spirit of presumption and enthusiasm.⁸¹

Such a list, similar yet distinct from the well-known “canons of conservative thought” first articulated in 1953’s *The Conservative Mind* and updated for the last time in 1993’s *The Politics of Prudence*, reveals the foundations of his persuasions. The canons were an expression of how to achieve a stable world of enduring and beneficial values through the arguments of “association.” Such arguments took “traditionalist” biases and sentiments expressed in a poetic, literary, imaginative language and historical rendering and called others toward reconciliation. And to reconcile the growth and alteration that is essential to life with the strength of social and moral traditions required the family, religious and voluntary groups, local governments, and a variety of institutions that keep community alive. Inside a “stable world” of “enduring values” was contentment best discovered by the bonds that united the living with the past and future, and with particular times, places, and people. A quote from T.S. Eliot, featured in the program of Kirk’s memorial service and also engraved on his headstone, summarizes this approach of persuasion. Further, this quote is an indication of how his historical consciousness and “traditionalism” impacted his political writing and the ghost stories that were a majority of his fiction: “The communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.”⁸²

Arguments for Community Preservation

That the very fabric of society had begun to unravel was a leading theme of traditionalist conservative arguments, both before and after Kirk's rise to prominence in the 1950s. Through the arguments of "moral imagination," problems were addressed not in political terms but in moral and religious ones. The meaning of the rhetoric was not an elaborate system for understanding language practice but one aspect of a crusade for recognizing the complexity of the human experience in opposition to all forms of reductionism. Russell Kirk's America was presented as an attitude, a style, a persona, and as a community worth preserving. The image, the mask, that he found as a means of preservation was "conservatism." Yet for Kirk rhetoric was not just a mask, something covering up a "true" state of affairs with vivid and distracting language. Argument had a central role in creating tradition; it could be "constitutive" of a true state of affairs. The moral in reference to ancient wisdom was for him less definable than it was imaginative. In setting out to "play" the sage of conservatism through the self-described vocation of "man of letters,"⁸³ earning a living by writing and lecturing was a creative enterprise. And such creativity did not only come through the content of his most popular output, fiction. His style, I contend, was to "adopt" the past – as with Burke and Cicero – and to discuss the issues and problems of his day in a language originated from traditions eventually "made" his own through imagery and poetics. It was, in effect, "myth" as "truth." His vocabulary, pace, rhythm, and historical renderings invited reflection while reading, drawing in those inclined to his sentiments especially.

This “community” of “associational rhetoric” was more than what might be denoted by the word “local.” As in Nisbet’s definition, the word community meant relationships among individuals characterized by a high degree of personal intimacy, of social cohesion and moral commitment, and of continuity. The basis may be kinship, ethnicity, religion, power, revolution, or any number of activities, beliefs, or functions. What is essential to the definition is a basis of “sufficient appeal and of sufficient durability to enlist numbers of human beings, to arouse loyalties, and to stimulate an overriding sense of distinctive identity.”⁸⁴ The performance of duties in community, Kirk wrote, teaches “prudence and efficiency and charity.” A nation could be “no stronger than the numerous little communities of which it is composed.” Regardless of how well intentioned or trained a centralized administration of managers might be, they could not “confer justice and prosperity and tranquility upon a mass of men and women deprived of their old responsibilities.”⁸⁵ The possibilities of violence from a reductionist, a rationalist, and a systematic thinker were strongest in those places and times where a crowd – one subject to the articulations of the self-imposed elite – was gathered. These sorts of thinkers were for Kirk all articulation, with too little concern for history and morality. But an imaginative affirmation of the wisdom of the past allowed for humans to judge with prudence.

Politics as a professional pursuit, or as a dominating habit of mind, was an erosion of place and association, subordination to the desires of status. It was to partake of the “diabolic imagination,” to participate in a lust for violence, destruction, cruelty, sensational disorder, and a “delight in the perverse and subhuman.”⁸⁶ The diabolic enters

into society with a fascination for freedom as an end unto itself, an affirmation of a power always tempting yet inferior to the divine. In sharp distinction to the varieties of libertarians also a part of the “American conservative” allied response to domestic and foreign efforts for greater centralization, Kirk and the traditionalists held in contempt the notion of the individual as the fundamental unit of society. Institutions designed for the pursuit of personal happiness and actions designed first and foremost for a “fulfilling” personal psychological and physical experience – such as intimacy divorced from procreation – he thought overly enamored with “self-fulfillment.” The language of the individual impedes the revival of localisms. It was “the new industrialism and the destruction of traditional institutions” that brought about the emergence of the “political masses.” As the old elements of true community faded, humans have sought “in the vast impersonal State a substitute for all the old associations that, dimly, they know they have lost.” He continued, “The leaders of liberalism assumed that a man is sufficient unto himself; and that assumption was fallacious, for man cannot subsist without community.”⁸⁷ As a barrier against political totality, a more “genuine participation of the citizen in communal affairs” was required. Weaver and Nisbet, “two sane men in a frenzied time,” knew that language was “not a mere device for expression of sensations, but an instrument of divine origin, intended for the promulgation of Truth.”⁸⁸

Therein is the heart of Kirk’s rhetoric of moral imagination. In approach of persuasion, the associative unions of family and place across the generations, the communication of the dead beyond the language of the living, he disputed his perceptions of the currents of modernity: individualism, collectivism, institutions and

plans large, overly abstract, and unaccountable, as well as a therapeutic deism reducing faith to pleasant experience and little concerned with the wisdoms of history. In a culture descending into darkness, Kirk intended to popularize truth, to reflect light. His rhetoric was a literary, imaginative creation of images and “true myths.” This was reinforced by a lived persona that served as an inspiration to an intellectual conservative movement in America once exhausted and confused. Like Cicero, as a rhetorician he took from sources outside the domain of rhetoric, accessed through philosophy, history, law, literature.⁸⁹ His project was awkward in the context of the United States, a country founded on strong principles of liberal and Enlightenment thought, and a place long-enamored more with the concepts of progress than roots. Even so, in his writings across the decades, imagination still ruled the world. In the quest for a moral imagination, in the search for principles of enduring order, one must always strive to distinguish “god-terms from the true meanings of words.” In the modern world, “fallacious first principles have debased rhetoric and ravaged community for more than a century and a half.”⁹⁰ To avoid the turning of these causes lost due to the fallen nature of humanity into ideological programs was to appreciate the “permanent things” of truth, the good, beauty, love, and incompleteness. Until full communion with the transcendent from whom they came, humans would always be, on some level, lonely.

The Rhetoric of Moral Imagination

This work argues there were two components to Kirk’s rhetoric of moral imagination. First, his choosing of historical subjects, in biographical sketch and literary content, was an indication of his own interest in rhetorical efficacy. Although not

explicitly stated, this interest was a regular feature of his work. John Adams, Edmund Burke, Cicero, John Randolph of Roanoke, and Robert Taft, among others, were among the greatest rhetoricians of their time. Their ability to lead through persuasion, example, and content of argument was highly esteemed by traditionalist conservatives distrustful of the “progress” of a technocratic modernity. And in valuing their works and highlighting their example, Kirk’s persuasive project was to bring the “wonders of life” out from the “iron cages of rationality.”⁹¹ Second, these figures attempted to live out the sort of life they claimed to value. Kirk’s autobiography, *The Sword of Imagination*, lists “three ends” of his nearly eight decades: to conserve a patrimony order and an inheritance of culture, “reminding people that truth was not born yesterday;” to live a life of “decent independence, living much as his ancestors had lived, on their land, in circumstances that would enable him to utter the truth and make his voice heard;” and to “marry for love and to rear children who would come to know that the service of God is perfect freedom.”⁹² I find that he mostly accomplished these ends, despite a limited influence in the public spheres of politics and social trends.

As a matter of rhetorical analysis, I argue he “taught” observers by ethos, an endeavor to live a “rhetorical demonstration” of what he genuinely believed was good. As demonstrated by what some who knew him identified as an inner strength of character and conduct, his rhetorical behavior was motivated by a love for and a curiosity toward wonder and mystery.⁹³ Plato, a dramatist before he was a philosopher, was an inspiration for Weaver and Kirk, each inclined to the sentiment of poetry and fiction – the stories of “true myth” – as something harmonious with a permanent form of

true order. Accordingly, his historical studies were biographies with a moral point. In the spirit of Plutarch, the founder of moral biography, this aspect of Kirk's project likewise investigated "parallel lives," retracing the path of thinking among British and American conservatives. In his dialogues with readers and students, the threads of what were termed "conservative" began with Moses, Aristotle, and Cicero, and then found their best modern pronunciation in Burke. By an "imaginative" reading of history, exemplars of properly ordered sentiments of moral order did not reduce the person to something other than a relational being who must find identity in relation to other persons. Kirk's worry was for humanity to exist as a pilgrim alien in their own community, in some way isolated from the imaginative made vibrant by the literary, from the historical supported by memory, and from the philosophical sustained by reason. His ambition was to explore and communicate what it meant to be human – in limitation, in promise, and in the traditions and customs that provide a framework for "human" in a culture.

Such an ambition was Kirk's conservatism, and his communication of it is one important reason why he is relevant today. Philosophically, for "traditionalists" like the "Burkean" Kirk, the dispositions, approaches, and sentiments of conservatism tend to include: belief in a divine intent in history, an immutable law of morality to which humans have a duty to conform; the notion that order and stability are the first requirements of good government, best achieved by restraint, modesty of political and social ambition, and respect for tradition; the acceptance of variety as more desirable than uniformity and liberty as more desirable than equality; the pursuit of the good life, and not just the pleasurable life, as the proper human end, necessitating duty and honor

to take precedence over individual indulgence; and conviction that there are limits to the power of human reason, which should lead to skepticism of abstract principle neglectful of history and culture and distrust for grandiose plans of reform. In sum, without an enduring and stable order, there can be no accomplishment of justice, liberty, equality, or prosperity. Underlying these characteristics are modes of thought and approach that can be classified as empirical, rationalist, and intuitive.⁹⁴ Kirk's mind, I contend, was intuitive, feeling heavily the weight of history and culture and keen to exist free from all dogmatic commitments save the transcendent and made manifest through the immediate.

In Kirk's time, as in ours, the many figures, arguments, and philosophical justifications of American conservatism elude easy characterization. Much of this is due, I believe, to the defense of a revolutionary achievement, the founding of a republic grown by the constant mixture of heterogeneous peoples and cultures. The terminologies of this dissertation, beginning with the word "conservative," are not defined comprehensively but rather as defensible explanations of what cannot be easily defined – as, perhaps, it should be, given the goals of my subject. In the chapters that follow, my intention is to provide a descriptive context of history and textual conduct. Through an understanding of the argumentative and stylistic choices that Kirk made, it is my hope that a rhetorical analysis emerges, explaining his life and persuasions to a broader audience. In examining his philosophy of life, I contend his rhetorical choices persuaded inventively, imaginatively, and even poetically. These choices were flush with imagery, historical selectivity, and memorable phraseology. Therein is the challenge of precise definition as well as the importance of historical context. My intention is to evaluate the

content and significance of Kirk through rhetorical analysis. And finally, despite my criticisms, fundamentally I share many of his sentiments and admire his efforts. All definitions and analysis should be recognized in light of that association.

Notes

¹ I take “a disposition, an approach, and a sentiment” from my conversations with those who knew Kirk and have written about his place in the American conservative movement. Of these, George H. Nash and his widow, Annette Kirk, were most helpful in forming this characterization.

² Russell Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), p. 143. This book, his last, was published posthumously.

³ Lee Edwards, perhaps second only to George H. Nash as the primary chronicler of American conservatism, has labeled Taft the undisputable standard-bearer of conservatism during the years of Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. See: Lee Edwards, *The Conservative Revolution: The Movement That Remade America* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1999).

⁴ John P. Armstrong, “The Enigma of Senator Taft and American Foreign Policy,” *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, April 1955, p. 208.

⁵ See: David Frum & Richard Perle, *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror* (New York, NY: Random House, 2003) and David Frum, “Unpatriotic Conservatives: A War Against America,” *National Review*, April 7, 2003. From the magazine piece: “But the antiwar conservatives have gone far, far beyond the advocacy of alternative strategies. They have made common cause with the left-wing and Islamist antiwar movements in this country and in Europe. They deny and excuse terror. They espouse a potentially self-fulfilling defeatism. They publicize wild conspiracy theories. And some of them explicitly yearn for the victory of their nation's enemies.”

⁶ This is a definition of Chilton Williamson of *Chronicles* magazine. The term “paleo-conservative” comes from political theorist Paul Gottfried, a strong critic of “neo-conservatism.” The term “neo-conservative” comes from political scientist Michael Harrington, a founder of the Democratic Socialists of America.

⁷ It should be noted, however, that Kirk strongly identified with and valued his upbringing in the American Midwest. The label “Midwestern traditionalist” is not unfair, but it may be too incomplete to use widely.

⁸ My discussions with his widow Annette Kirk and close friend, research assistant, and graduate student David Schock provided clarity on this point. In addition, one notable aspect of his writings is the absence of “moonlight and magnolias” romanticism.

⁹ The works of Patrick Buchanan and Paul Gottfried are useful on this point. Writings from a “paleo” perspective may be found in *Chronicles* and *The American Conservative* magazines. (The latter was founded by Buchanan to provide an outlet for writers in his view “marginalized” from the American conservative movement, and by neo-conservatives in particular.) For an overview, see Gottfried's *The Conservative Movement* and his memoir, *Encounters*.

¹⁰ There is a well-known story in conservative circles about Kirk refusing to join *National Review* so long as Meyer was an editor. According to his widow, her husband was happy to contribute a regular column on education but was reluctant to share a masthead with those – doctrinaire libertarians – he thought just as ideological as communists. Meyer and Kirk eventually came to reconciliation, and Meyer converted to Catholicism shortly before his death. (Kirk was also a convert.)

¹¹ Robert Nisbet, *Conservatism: Dream and Reality* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 99. For a comprehensive overview, see: Irving Kristol's *Neo-Conservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* and Irwin Stelzer's (ed) *The Neocon Reader*.

¹² Since the end of the Second World War, and recognizing the complications and shifting definitions of terms, I would classify the “four strands” of the thought and political alliances of modern American conservatism as follows – traditionalist (value continuity, order, and natural hierarchy), libertarians (value

freedom), neo-conservatives (value idealism, democracy, rationalism, and empiricism), the religious (value morality and the fight against relativism and secularism).

¹³ Bryan-Paul Frost & Jeffrey Sikkenga (ed), *History of American Political Thought* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), p. 650.

¹⁴ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 82.

¹⁵ I assume throughout this dissertation that “ideology” means something like a “party program” or “political program” – a systematic, bureaucratic approach to social problems that is somewhat rigid. This understanding has been sharpened by my conversations with Professor William Bedford Clark.

¹⁶ Here I credit my conversations with James Aune for greater clarity on these points.

¹⁷ Patricia Bizzell & Bruce Herzberg (ed), *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings From Classical Times to the Present* (2nd edition) (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), p. 1.

¹⁸ J. Michael Hogan, (ed) *Rhetoric and Community: Studies in Unity and Fragmentation* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), p. xii.

¹⁹ From my conversation with them, this seems to be the opinion – which I share – of Paul Gottfried, Vigen Guroian, and Annette Kirk, all of whom knew him well. Kirk’s most noteworthy political involvements were for Barry Goldwater in 1964, a politician he wrote at least one speech for, and for Patrick Buchanan in 1992, when he agreed to lend his name to the Michigan state primary campaign.

²⁰ This generalization comes from my interview with White, March 16, 2009, and “Interview with James Boyd White,” *Michigan Law Review*, Vol. 105, March 2007, p. 1403.

²¹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London, UK: Fontana/Croom Helm, 1976), p. 149 – 150 and p. 191.

²² I take these sentences from my conversations with James Aune, as well as from his written criticism.

²³ James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. xi.

²⁴ Cicero and Burke are the two historical figures most central to this dissertation. They are repeatedly referenced in Kirk’s writings, and it is my belief that their socio-political thought weighed the most heavily upon his formation as an author concerned with public affairs.

²⁵ I credit James Aune for the clarity of these summations.

²⁶ White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, p. 11.

²⁷ See, for example: Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), p. 86 – 95 and p. 106 – 114. The quoted text is from p. 87. This work, written as a high school civics textbook, was meant to update *The Conservative Mind* but with greater focus on formation of the United States.

²⁸ Roger Scruton, *The Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Political Thought* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 131. Scruton, a “traditionalist conservative” British academic and admirer of Kirk, in his writings and lectures often conveys three “distinct parts” of conservatism: an attitude to society, an idea of government, and a political practice.

²⁹ Russell Kirk, *The American Cause* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), p. xvii.

³⁰ Russell Kirk, *Prospects for Conservatives* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1989), p. 8 – 9.

³¹ Frost & Sikkenga (ed), *History of American Political Thought*, p. 649 – 650.

³² The correspondence between Kirk and Weaver is limited but affectionate. For example, Weaver sent a postcard from his family home in March 1953, before Kirk’s fame, showing off “my ‘Mecosta’ in North Carolina.” He also sent samples of poetry, praised Kirk’s writing, and suggested books to review. Private papers of Annette Kirk.

³³ Richard Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1985), p. 9 and p. 23.

³⁴ These generalizations are from some of the notes and handouts of the classes of Professors Jim Aune and Jennifer Mercieca.

³⁵ Letter from Richard Weaver to Mr. Dean Terrill, September 3, 1960. Private papers of Annette Kirk.

³⁶ Richard Weaver, *Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Times* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1995), p. 9 – 10. Beneath the surface of the most brilliant cultures, he summarized, is a hunger and wonderment of imagination.

³⁷ Despairing of the strong and quick changes that French revolutionaries were bringing to the established customs and institutions of civil society, Burke wrote in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*: “But now all is to be changed. All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle, and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by bland assimilation, incorporated the politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All of the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our own naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our estimation, are to be exploded as ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.”

³⁸ This definition comes from literature professor and theologian Vigen Guroian. Interview: June 25, 2009. He is a longtime friend of the Kirk family. See also: Vigen Guroian, *Rallying the Really Human Things: The Moral Imagination in Politics, Literature, and Everyday Life* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2005), p. 55, and Russell Kirk, “The Moral Imagination,” *Literature and Belief*, Vol. 1, 1981, p. 37 – 49.

³⁹ Russell Kirk, *Enemies of Permanent Things: Observations of Abnormality in Literature and Politics* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden Publishing, 1988), p. 20.

⁴⁰ Vigen Guroian Interview: June 25, 2009.

⁴¹ Kirk, *The American Cause*, p. 2. The book was originally published by Regnery in 1966 and reissued in 2006. In the foreword to *Prospects for Conservatives*, he defines ideology as “a body of rigorous political dogmas, a political religion fanatically held, promising the destruction of all things established and the creation of a terrestrial paradise.”

⁴² Kirk, *Prospects for Conservatives*, p. 6.

⁴³ Kirk, *Enemies of Permanent Things*, p. 154.

⁴⁴ Here, it is interesting to note the historical development of “building democracy,” which was before the Second Gulf War in no small part a leftist/liberal enterprise in the American context.

⁴⁵ Annette Kirk fondly relayed this point to me and highlighted its importance in the larger context of how highly her husband valued his family and the time they were able to spend together.

⁴⁶ Russell Kirk, *Ancestral Shadows: An Anthology of Ghostly Tales* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), p. vii (Introduction by Vigen Guroian). These points were emphasized in my interview.

⁴⁷ I take this attempt at definition chiefly from discussions with Bruce Frohnen, Vigen Guroian, Annette Kirk, and George Nash. Some of my language is taken from Vigen Guroian, *Rallying the Really Human Things*, p. 77. Like imagination, sentiments in Kirk’s writings can be moral or diabolical; they are not inherently positive.

⁴⁸ His widow, Annette Kirk, president of the Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal, told me one of her husband’s favorite sayings was that in a time of trouble “grace may shine through.”

⁴⁹ White’s scrutiny of Plato is useful here. Themes, he writes, recur in ways that at first surprise the reader; yet patterns of association eventually emerge that are appropriate and not wholly translatable. White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, p. 107 – 108.

⁵⁰ James Jr. Person (ed), *The Unbought Grace of Life: Essays in Honor of Russell Kirk* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden & Co. Publishers, 1994), p. 64 – 65.

⁵¹ Here I follow Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life 1500 to the Present* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001).

⁵² Russell Kirk, *Redeeming the Time* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999), p. 71.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 105 and p. 114.

⁵⁴ Russell Kirk, *Prospects for Conservatives*, p. 72 – 74.

⁵⁵ Kirk, *Enemies of Permanent Things*, p. 282.

⁵⁶ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1995), p. 116.

⁵⁷ Russell Kirk, *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice: Essays of a Social Critic* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden Publishing, 1991), p. 25 – 26.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 32.

⁵⁹ For more on this point, see Ronald Lora, “Russell Kirk: The Conservative Mind Three and One-Half Decades Later,” *Modern Age*, Spring 1990, p. 70 – 72. Lora traces the “models” of his thinking and writes that Kirk ignores the important roles conservative thinkers have filled as public intellectuals.

⁶⁰ Henry Regnery, *A Few Reasonable Words: Selected Writings* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1996), p. 90 – 91. He classifies Burke a “thorough-going realist” with “no illusions about the destructive forces at work in our time and country;” yet, recognizing that God’s purpose is revealed through history, “he does not succumb to despair.”

⁶¹ Annette Kirk, after thinking over her husband’s canon as we talked near a bound collection of all his books made privately for him by a family friend, made this statement. Concerning his admiration for precise language, both she and Bruce Frohnen, an author who helped my understanding of Kirk’s “poetic and imagery sense,” believed this.

⁶² Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T.S. Eliot’s Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008), p. 325 and p. 368.

⁶³ Nisbet is likely the most important, and the most prominent, of the post-Second World War “conservative” sociologists. Both he and his wife corresponded with Nisbet professionally and socially. Kirk’s official biography from the Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal lists him among “literary and scholarly friends.” The full list is printed as: T. S. Eliot, Roy Campbell, Wyndham Lewis, Donald Davidson, George Scott-Moncrieff, Richard Weaver, Max Picard, Ray Bradbury, Bernard Iddings Bell, Paul Roche, James McAuley, Thomas Howard, Wilhem Roepke, Robert Speaight, Anthony Kerrigan, Robert Nisbet, Malcolm Muggeridge, Flannery O’Connor, William F. Buckley, Jr., Andrew Lytle, Henry Regnery, Robert Graves, and Cleanth Brooks.

⁶⁴ Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 29.

⁶⁵ Here I acknowledge various Intercollegiate Studies Institute writings of Patrick Deenan for this clarification.

⁶⁶ Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, p. 11.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

⁶⁸ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, p. 482 and p. 483 – 484.

⁶⁹ Kirk, *Enemies of Permanent Things*, p. 166. He continued: “Not abstractions, but prudence, prescription, custom, tradition, and constitutions have governed the American people. We have been saved by ideology by political tradition. We still subscribe, however confusedly, to the norms of politics; we still cherish the permanent things.”

⁷⁰ Kirk, *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*, p. 83.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 85 and p. 87. Kirk wrote, “If Mr. Weaver rejects Burke, then he must reject conservative principles generally” and “Lincoln is a better conservative than Burke, because Lincoln frequently referred to abstract assumptions; and Robespierre is a better conservative even than Lincoln, because Robespierre always guided himself by reference to abstract definition, with a fine indifference to particular circumstances. By corollary, Robespierre is a better rhetorician and a sounder ethical thinker than Burke or Lincoln.” Despite the disagreement about the meaning of “conservative,” correspondence between the two reveals a mutual admiration and affection.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 89 – 94. These passages in comparison to the end of *The Conservative Mind* provide a good example of how Kirk’s arguments and phrasings could be repetitively recycled. For example, this exact wording: “to rescue sociological speculation from its infatuation with Benthamite dogma and method.” Weaver is only mentioned once, very briefly, in *The Conservative Mind*; he is included in a list of “eloquent” “Southern Agrarians.”

⁷³ I take this language from the definition of “liberty” offered in the majority opinion of the Supreme Court case, *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern PA v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833.

⁷⁴ One could point to a multitude of passages in support of this generalization. Here I make this conclusion by referring to the passages of his memoir recounting the endurance of (Catholic) religious truth regardless of the decisions of “modernists.” For example: Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination*, p. 275.

⁷⁵ One summary of this view is located in Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, p. 371 – 372.

⁷⁶ Russell Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2004), p. 194.

⁷⁷ John Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness: The Remembered Past* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994), p. xv – xx. Here, also, is a second example of taking exact wording from another work and placing it elsewhere when the subject (in this instance, the importance of “the rising generation” not being ignorant of history) is similar. The forward ends: “wander bewildered in cunning passages,

contrived corridors and issues. And at the heart of such a labyrinth, we are told, there has lurked for ages the Minotaur.”

⁷⁸ After reading some of the academic work of Peter Lawler and Gerald Russello concerning political theory, the most important being *Postmodernism Rightly Understood* and *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*, my discussions with them have worked to clarify the “conservative” meaning of postmodernism. For Lawler, as is explained in later chapters, a “postmodern view” points toward curbing modern excesses through an understanding “better” than the modern while incorporating what is “good” about it. Interview: February 4, 2009.

⁷⁹ The phrase “moral equivalent of war” is the title of a 1906 essay by philosopher and “pragmatist” William James. In his biography of Ohio Sen. Robert Taft, a political hero of the “old right” groups which shared commonality to the “southern agrarians” (although Taft “could not abide” the “demagoguery” and “anti-Negro ferocity” of figures like Sen. Bilbo), Kirk summarized the politician’s convictions: attachment to the principle of the national interest, love for peace, and detestation of empire. Russell Kirk & James McClellan, *The Political Principles of Robert A. Taft* (New York, NY: Fleet Press, 1967), p. 164.

⁸⁰ Russell Kirk, *The Intemperate Professor and Other Cultural Splenetics* (Peru: IL: Sherwood Sugden Publishing, 1988), p. 107. The Burke quote appears throughout his writings, and in this book on p. 47.

⁸¹ Russell Kirk, “The Essence of Conservatism.” This essay was excerpted and updated by Annette Kirk on behalf of the Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal in 2002. The list was originally published in *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Conservatism* (New York, NY: The Devin-Adair Company, 1957).

⁸² When I visited the gravesite in May 2009, Annette Kirk indicated this favorite quote best spoke to her husband’s rhetorical practice. And it is from my conversations with her and her sister that I have developed the concept of Kirk as a “rhetorical popularizer of traditionalist conservatism.”

⁸³ This description follows Bruce Frohnen, Annette Kirk, George Nash, and David Schock.

⁸⁴ Robert Nisbet, *The Social Philosophers: Community & Conflict in Western Thought* (New York, NY: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1973), p. 1.

⁸⁵ Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, p. 23.

⁸⁶ Kirk took this term and definition from T.S. Eliot’s lectures to the University of Virginia in 1933, later published as *After Strange Gods: A Primer on Modern Heresy*. See Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, p. 174 and Kirk, “The Moral Imagination,” *Literature and Belief*.

⁸⁷ Kirk, *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*, p. 95 – 96.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 99.

⁸⁹ Bizzell & Herzberg (ed), *The Rhetorical Tradition*, p. 4 – 5.

⁹⁰ Kirk, *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*, p. 100.

⁹¹ Gleaves Whitney Interview: July 16, 2009. Whitney, a former speechwriter for Michigan Gov. John Engler, professor of presidential studies, and longtime family friend of the Kirk’s, was helpful in formulating the arguments of this chapter.

⁹² Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination*, p. 473.

⁹³ Annette Kirk told me that, from her first interactions with him as a college student, she always thought of her husband as a “Christian stoic.” Gleaves Whitney and David Schock share this opinion.

⁹⁴ Robert Schuettlinger (ed), *The Conservative Tradition in European Thought* (New York, NY: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1970), p. 12 – 13 and p. 21.

Unbought Grace: Kirk in Influence and Review

Among the chroniclers of the modern American conservative movement, there is a large body of writing pertaining to the life and work of Russell Kirk. These chroniclers include historians, employees of foundations and political organizations, as well as magazine, book, and popular writers with an interest in politics and mystery literature. To summarize and synthesize all the arguments would be a massive undertaking. Instead, the purpose of this chapter is to encapsulate those sources of wide-ranging and potentially lasting influence – those, in other words, who are likely to be read as future scholars examine the impact, direction, and many contradictions of the American conservative intellectual tradition.

This review is a consideration of writers not only in the American conservative intellectual movement, but of those that have produced its histories, debates, and influences. To better combine summary and synthesis so as to determine conclusions about the rhetoric of Kirk and American conservatism (with an eye toward its future developments), this review is generally limited in its scope to popular and academic sources dating to the latter half of Kirk's life and after his death. My goal is to articulate how those who knew him, worked with him, and were taught by him were influenced by his person and work. This will serve as a guide to his literary, social and political legacy within the framework of rhetorical communication. In this chapter, the organizational pattern is to gather published information about Kirk – such as responses to his letters, columns, essays, and books, as well as remembrances and obituaries – organized around the theme of persuasion.

A Professional Conservative

William F. Buckley, Jr., in 1955 the founder of *National Review* magazine, set out to oppose the prevailing trends of public opinion and change the nation's intellectual and political climate.¹ He wrote of Kirk, his friend and longtime higher education columnist, that he was “elated by his spontaneous and generous willingness to associate his august name with that of a wizened ex-schoolboy known mostly for an iconoclastic screed directed at his alma mater.” Kirk, he continued, never missed a deadline in twenty five years, and in the ensuing fourteen years after he quit the column wrote “many books and a hundred essays, gave a thousand speeches, and influenced the lives of another half-generation. His last day, he rose, breakfasted, sat down in his armchair, exchanged words with his wife and two of his daughters, closed his eyes, and died. Few have repaid their debt to their family, their country, and their faith so extravagantly.”² Buckley wrote that Kirk “may well be the best known ‘professional’ conservative in America, by which adjective is meant that he launched his extraordinary career by an act of conscious apostleship to a social and historical and philosophical order which is best described as ‘conservative.’” He highlighted Kirk’s writing about an unseen social order, rooted in his religiosity and love of mystery, as the indispensable contribution to the conservative movement. That illuminated the “problem of ideological abstraction” and served as a useful, timely warning against “a neat seat of dreams” and “dogmatization.”³

Buckley’s longtime friend and pioneer of conservative publishing (including *The Conservative Mind*, which “far exceeded our most optimistic expectations”), Henry Regnery, wrote in his *Memoirs of a Dissident Publisher* that Kirk was a proponent of

“wisdom” in a consistent, accessible manner. It was he, in fact, who gave the conservative movement its name and coherence: “Kirk had two great advantages in the task of presenting conservatism as a tradition relevant to our time: skill in organizing a vast body of knowledge with which he was thoroughly familiar, and a distinguished literary style.”⁴ His son, Alfred Regnery, wrote that *The Conservative Mind* offered sudden intellectual respectability: “it made waves nationwide and was vastly important in solidifying conservatism into a movement.” Kirk presented conservatism as a “plausible and reasonable alternative to liberalism, along with reasonable and plausible criticisms of liberalism. He demonstrated to conservatives that it was possible to remain an intellectual while still acting and thinking constructively about politics.”⁵ In its obituary, *The New York Times* identified the book as an “intellectual bible for the conservative movement” that “established his reputation and lent intellectual weight to the budding conservative movement. Contrary to those who maintained that liberal ideas defined the American experience, Dr. Kirk offered a conservative hagiography that included Edmund Burke, John Adams, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, T.S. Eliot and George Santayana.” Recounting its own review and noting the general positive reception, the obituary continued: “Writing in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1953, Gordon Keith Chalmers, then president of Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, called the book ‘very readable, brilliant and even eloquent.’ His assessment was typical of the book’s critical reception, drawing respectful reviews even from liberal commentators.”⁶

Edwin Feulner, president of the Heritage Foundation, one of the most prominent “think tanks” in American conservatism and the host of Kirk’s most well-known lectures, considered his friend to be “a contemplative man of action.” “From the ramparts of custom, tradition, and convention, he lobbed metaphorical bombs at the mad metaphysicians of libertarianism and the ‘squalid oligarchs’ of laissez-faire capitalism,” Feulner wrote. Kirk was a man of letters and of the world who christened himself a “bohemian Tory” but might be more accurately described as an “explorer and a pilgrim, a student of the human heart, who took the haunts of men as his text.”⁷ *The Conservative Mind* “broke the spell under which American conservatism had languished for more than a hundred years.” Once incoherent and isolated, the conservative movement benefited hugely from its publication; the book was a “landmark study” that showed “conclusively that conservatism had an illustrious lineage.” Before it, he summarized, “Derided by the intelligentsia, ignored by the media, and unsung even by its own adherents, conservatism was so ill-regarded that the very notion of a conservative mind was considered oxymoronic.” Defending “permanent things” was where Kirk cast his lot, alongside those he invited to be his comrades in arms, “manning the barricades.”⁸

Prominent academics of American conservatism have noted that the lack of a single definition was partly responsible for its factionalism. Through expounding his political philosophy at a time when there was a “gap” between pre-war and post-war conservatism, as well as a hunger for fresh ideas, he laid the foundation for the next generation of conservative intellectuals and politicians. Kirk’s “groundbreaking work” was “soon cited by all major American conservative thinkers as one of the most

influential books of their lives.”⁹ Further, after 1953, one could remain an intellectual and also think seriously about practical politics. According to Jonathan Schoenwald, “Kirk helped provide the intellectual content for conservative popularizers to disseminate, which eventually proved that Americans could understand and adopt ideas formerly considered too esoteric and formal to enter the political mainstream.” *The Conservative Mind* influenced generations of conservatives and “sparked a wave of interest among intellectuals;” and with academics including Leo Strauss and Robert Nisbet it formed a response of theories and methods to liberalism.

But like Buckley, Kirk was also a popularizer, one of a small yet growing group of thinkers who made their living lecturing and writing to mass audiences. According to his wife, he kept a hectic schedule.¹⁰ This activity played a key role in disseminating information to skeptical and receptive audiences alike, although Kirk’s influence is still open to debate and interpretation. By the early 1960s, conservatism began to descend from the “ivory tower” as a more confident, coherent force.¹¹ Lee Edwards, a conservative and popular historian, has summarized: “Still, no prominent philosopher, popularizer, or politician called himself a conservative, in part because no one agreed what ‘conservatism’ was.” Yet Kirk’s definition – a conservative hoped to reconcile what is most imperative in old customs and in the wisdom of his ancestors with the change that society must undergo if it is to endure – was politically and intellectually crucial. The reason was that debate and politically organized responses to the challenges of economy and modernity could occur with the foundation of fusionism and reconciliation, not the reactionary.¹² In his assessment of Kirk and the Heritage

Foundation, host and disseminator of many of his speeches, Edwards concluded:

“Because the Heritage Foundation rests securely on the ideas of Kirk, Hayek, Weaver, and a hundred other conservative thinkers, it has become the most influential think tank in the most important city in the most powerful nation in the world.”¹³

Launching a Movement

Within the partnership against the “Left,” thinkers as diverse as Pat Buchanan (a leading “paleo-conservative” in the vein of southern agrarian writers) and David Frum (a well-known “neo-conservative”¹⁴) share a high esteem of Kirk. Each, in fact, might be characterized as eager to claim him as a forefather to their own worldview. Frum, a thinker with a rather different outlook than Kirk concerning America’s role on the world stage, nevertheless eulogized the man he admired as an inspiration as follows:

Yet if Kirk’s great work cannot be counted as history, exactly, it ought to be esteemed as something in some ways more important: a profound critique of contemporary mass society, and a vivid and poetic image – not a program, an image – of how that society might better itself. It is, in important respects, the twentieth century’s own version of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. If Kirk was not a historian, he was an artist, a visionary, almost a prophet. As long as he lived, by word and example he cautioned conservatives against over-indulging their fascination with economics. He taught that conservatism was above all a *moral* cause: one devoted to the preservation of the priceless heritage of Western civilization.¹⁵

Buchanan praised Kirk’s career as a man of letters determined to fight the “curse of ideological infatuation.” He was a “prophet” for calling for the development of conservatism as the antithesis of ideology, grounded in the past with principles derived from the Constitution, experience, history, tradition, custom, and the wisdom of generations previous. For him, Kirk was a vital articulator for the preservation of the true, the good, and the beautiful – viewing all ideologies with skepticism and the more

zealous and fanatic with hostility.¹⁶ Another well-known “paleo-conservative,”

Dartmouth English professor and former *National Review* book reviewer Jeffrey Hart, wrote in his history of the magazine that:

I can testify from my own experience that as a visitor to campuses and lecturer to twentieth-century college students, Kirk was a marvel....a self-invented work of art, prodigiously learned: he came as a delight to the students and as a change from the banalities of their ordinary world of do-good deans and predictable professors. Kirk to them was a *rebel*, enacting the *J'Accuse!* Against the shopworm liberalism that met them from the moment they work up in the morning. He had read one hundred times as many, one thousand times as many, books as anyone they had ever met, including plenty of Latin, quotations from which, in the original, punctuated his talk.¹⁷

Hart labeled *The Conservative Mind* a “founding document of the American conservative movement,” its assemblage of major thinkers beginning with Edmund Burke as a major statement that proved “that conservative thought in America existed, and even that such thought was highly intelligent – a demonstration very much needed at the time.”¹⁸ This view of Kirk’s most famous and influential book is also that of historian George Nash. His book *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, the standard history first published in 1976 and periodically updated, is a comprehensive guide to the origin and the many external and internal battles fought in the name of defending ideas and sentiments that composed the “Right” as America’s post-war economic and social boom transformed its society. Nash detailed the diverse authors and public figures influenced by Kirk and placed him in the “traditionalist” camp “evolved” (or, more specifically, less provincial and more accepting of debate) from the agrarian and isolationist writers of the pre-war era, loosely defined as the “Old Right.” He summarized: “With the advent of Russell Kirk, the new conservative or traditionalist segment of the nascent American Right reached full bloom. Clearly this was a

phenomenon of some status and importance, as the rising number of essays about it attested.”¹⁹ Another prominent “paleo-conservative,” humanities professor Paul Gottfried of Elizabethtown College, has written that Kirk exerted “profound influence” on postwar American thought. He recounted that William Rusher, the first publisher of *National Review*, considered *The Conservative Mind* one of the three most powerful, most enduring contributions to the conservative movement, alongside Whitaker Chambers’s *Witness* and Fredrick Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom*.²⁰

In 1957, Kirk founded the quarterly *Modern Age* and in 1960 *The University Bookman*, both of which still publish with the assistance of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. For Nash, they are “indispensable for the traditionalist side of conservative thought, important sources of seriousness and maturity.”²¹ These publications have provided outlets for young writers to make a name for themselves by publishing articles related to literature, politics, and the life of the mind. Two of the most notable of these writers are James E. Person, author of *Russell Kirk: A Critical Biography of a Conservative Mind* and Gerald J. Russello, author of *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*. Person, a Michigan native from near Kirk’s birthplace, was introduced to Kirk through his writings on education and gradually became interested in Kirk’s literary and social criticism, fiction, and writings on culture and politics. By comparison to other political writers and theorists, “he was not a ‘man with a message’ or any other such ideologue or sanctimonious bore.”²² These sympathetic books are valuable for their demonstration of the underlying worldview that informed Kirk’s writing, namely the importance of an unseen, historical social order. As “a comforter of the afflicted and

afflicter to the comfortable,” he was, in Person’s estimation, a tireless and eloquent advocate for the necessities of such an order.

Particularly for his admirers, this brand of conservatism and its colorful, literary means of explanation served as a foundational perception for the difficult definitions of progress (an uneasy term for conservatives in the aftermath of the centralizations of the New Deal and Second World War). Kirk’s historical, imaginative conservatism allowed for a clearer discernment of the dangers of “mass appeals to envy masking as a concern for absolute social equality, the encroachments of an intrusive, omniscient government, the cult of the autonomous self, the decay of belief in the wisdom of the species, and the various abstractions that transformed American culture for the worse during his lifetime.”²³ Firmly set against the “spirit of the age,” one of deception and cultural decay, Kirk’s enduring reputation as a major thinker of his time, according to *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia*, is assured as a consequence of his “rediscovery and persuasive expression of a living conservative intellectual tradition,” one responsible for drawing conservatism away from utilitarian and individualistic premises toward one more grounded in “community-conserving norms and culture.” The enduring, unseen moral and social order of Western civilization was to be defended against ideology and the temptations of totality (be they of the Left or the Right). Toward the end of its survey of Kirk’s influence over the imaginations and political thought of younger authors such as Person, who benefitted from the graciousness and hospitality of those, most notably his widow Annette,²⁴ the encyclopedia stated:

Although his work helped to launch a political and intellectual movement, because of his singular lack of interest in hobnobbing with either power brokers or literary moguls Kirk

was virtually snubbed by the intellectual and media establishment. His influence instead can be best measured by the scores of disciples who came to Piety Hill to study and live and went forth to careers in education, communication, publishing, the church, and government.²⁵

Creating Political Reality

Perhaps the most insightful work of recent Kirk scholarship is Gerald J. Russello's *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*. It contends that Kirk was one of the first conservative thinkers to perceive, within the vague and difficult definitions of postmodernism, an opportunity for conservatism to reassert itself amidst a collapse of modernity. The book emerged, in part, from several articles perceptive of previously unexplored aspects of Kirk's thought. One article, "Russell Kirk and the Critics," summarized early responses to Kirk and speculated about future critical reactions. These responses were generally positive among southern agrarian writers such as John Ransom and more negative among political scientists such as Gordon Lewis, who thought that contemporary issues did not require an "impassioned nostalgia for a dead society and a clever contempt for all the schools of political thought." Many critics (especially those writing in the 1950s and 1960s) failed to detect Kirk's high esteem for the imagination – a "something" outside the individual, embracing of feeling and a warm, family, and local based affection, not primarily rational, and existing in addition to the physical realities of a fallen, destitute nature.

Russello suggests that underlying Kirk's writings was this question: will this imagination be respected and properly employed (that is, attuned to and sensitive toward the more permanent things), or ignored?²⁶ His rendering presents Kirk as a figure of imaginative attitude, style, and persona, and as a promoter of creative sentiments of

morality. When Kirk asks of the reader, “What are you and I?,” his answer is something like “What we imagine ourselves to be.”²⁷ As will be explored further, this propensity for self-creation was an appreciation that humans are situated in time and place, and that whatever might be produced in such spaces cannot escape its temporality. Ideology, for example, was an idea opposed by both conservatism²⁸ and postmodernism. More specifically, there was opposition to attempts to bring into a temporal space the eternal (truth into Truth) and to the making of thought and practice (which are intimately rooted in time and place) into abstractions potentially disconnected from reality. In Russello’s telling, missing from the literature in response to Kirk were the ways in which his incredulity toward “meta-narratives,” that which is capable of a detrimental rendering into totality, animate his politics and fiction. If postmodernism has “reintroduced sentiment, contingency, locality and imagination into social discourse,” as Russello claims, then there is a rich vein of scholarship to be explored at this intersection. *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* is a worthy first step.

Kirk and those perhaps sympathetic toward something of the “postmodern,” in working to establish influence against trends of political centralization, had to accomplish a difficult task: taking a disorganized collection of eccentrics, anti-Communists, the libertarian-minded, and traditionalists and molding them into a coalition. (Within American conservative circles, this coalition came to be known as “fusionism.”²⁹) Without Kirk, modern American conservatism might well have taken a noticeably different form. In a review of the collection *The Essential Russell Kirk*, Russello argued that his major books – namely *The Conservative Mind*, *Eliot and His*

Age, America's British Culture and *The Roots of American Order* – created the “intellectual latticework” from which the prevailing liberal order could be challenged. The coalitions in opposition to centralization were not fringe outcasts, but rather the representatives of a “living tradition.”³⁰ And in the literature about Kirk, there is some acknowledgement that this living tradition, distaste for government-coerced “unity,” has developed into a response to the exhaustions of the liberal, Enlightenment-based order. Russello’s book, among others cited in this dissertation, is an investigation into the ways in which Kirk advocated for a political and social outlook consistently opposed to his concept of ideology, “religious dogmatism in a political context.” Indeed, much of “modernity” was seen by him and other “traditionalists” as inconsistent with a conservative outlook because ideology eliminates the “nuances and shades of gray that exist in actual or social life.”³¹

History, full of blind alleys and wrong turns, was not for traditionalists a linear progression always toward the better. The “ideology” of “progress” was the perceived to be the mortal enemy of a moral imagination. All overarching narratives were to be mistrusted: “Rousseauistic General Will, Hobbesian or Lockean states of nature, Benthamite calculus, Marxist class struggle, or the global marketplace.” Russello’s work is a noteworthy contribution to the literature of conservatism because it explores how Kirk made use of ideas, words, and imagination (all of which, a conservative might well argue, have consequences, many of them unforeseen) into a narrative. The images of the “imaginative” and the “literary” in a social and political context of anxiety were, in other words, capable of changing the ways in which humans experience reality, impacting

how they interacted with their families and communities. A fundamental aspect of Kirk's project was to construct these imaginative entities from the "disintegrating fragments of what he conceived of as a coherent tradition."³² In Kirk's biases and persuasions, there existed more proper beliefs and behaviors (some of humanity's presuppositions, such as family, that might be understood as a "narrative") that should inspire confidence to not throw aside accumulated wisdom of society in times of confusion and technological advancement, particularly for the chasing of status and comfort.

Among scholars, popular writers, readers, and politicians, Kirk has received recognition as one of a select few figures responsible for reviving an intellectual, "living tradition" as an alternative to the anxiety and atomization of modernity and advanced economy. Senator Barry Goldwater credited him as giving conservative viewpoints an intellectual foundation and respectability few thought possible in modern society.³³ W. Wesley McDonald's *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology* recounted President Ronald Reagan praising Kirk as an "intellectual leader" who by "having shaped so much of our thoughts," helped to make his victory in 1980 possible.³⁴ As with the work of George Nash, McDonald's book is valuable for its overview of responses, positive and negative, to Kirk at the start of his career. A commonality of the criticisms – Arthur Schlesinger and William Newman are good examples – was that *The Conservative Mind* and similar works were against innovation and change. One reason they thought so was that sentiments such as prescription, tradition, authority, order, and prejudice restricted freedom and destroyed the possibilities of necessary reform. Kirk, later in his career, would more directly address these concerns, most notably in his book *The Roots of*

American Order, first published in 1974. By the late 1950s, though, academic conservatives were actively responding to these challenges. Peter Viereck of Mount Holyoke College, a historian and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, listed some of these and named himself and Kirk as among the “New Conservatives” – “young American scholars” supportive of “Rightist” ideas in contemporary politics.³⁵ In later decades, academics such as Walter Berns, James Ceaser, Patrick Deneen, Paul Gottfried, Jeffrey Hart, Willmoore Kendall, Peter Lawler, Robert Nisbet, and Richard Weaver would publicly embrace (and argue over) ideas and policies set against the “liberal” order. McDonald’s evaluation of Kirk’s social and moral thought concludes that scholars should take more seriously the ethical and philosophical aspects of Kirk’s work. Whatever the case, I believe that one lasting influence will be Kirk’s role in moving American conservatism away from a “freedom” and “liberty” -centric libertarianism and toward an understanding of society as an organic organism responsive to social and communitarian capital.

While “strands” libertarian and traditionalist were united in their opposition to the collectivist tendencies of the “Left” broadly defined, McDonald highlights how the libertarian-minded, in Kirk’s view, failed to properly appreciate the importance of placing ethical norms above utility and subjective interests. The book is an informative summary of Kirk and his critics inside and outside of his movement. In particular, its author fills a gap that should receive more attention as the Cold War fades from the American collective memory: the many disagreements within the “Right” broadly defined. McDonald characterizes Kirk’s view of libertarians (or “individualists” in

Kirk's more common terminology) as those willing to assault, in the name of their highest good, freedom, "a higher freedom, solidly grounded in a stable community, that would liberate people to achieve their ultimate spiritual and cultural goals," unstrapped of their local association by social atomism and large-scale economic impersonalities.³⁶ Critics do tend to recognize that Kirk believed humans were beings of belonging and begetting, in the image of the transcendent and in need of association with other persons. As social creations, this is to say, the greatest human happiness came from following these innate tendencies, a posture respectful of the past and altruistic first to those who need and benefit from it the most – the family and thus the local community. Yet a rhetorical analysis of his lifestyle and persuasions informs of the ways in which Kirk's biases and beliefs related to the conservative intellectual movement in America, and why he remains relevant today.

Defying Categorization

Among libertarian-influenced American conservatives, Kirk remains a complicated, albeit respected, figure. *National Review* published a memorial shortly after his death in 1994. Gerhart Niemeyer, professor of government at Notre Dame, wrote that categorization³⁷ does not fit Kirk's life work, and the place in the public sphere he occupied was "the ground of common sense, of sobriety, of ultimate verity. It was the ground where prevailed love of being, love of country, love of God. It was the ground of historical continuity, of public loyalty, of personal integrity. It was the ground on which conservative persons could put down roots, from which their minds drew nourishment."³⁸ John Engler, Governor of Michigan and a longtime friend of the Kirk

family, gave tribute to the man he once represented as a state legislator by hailing him as a defender of traditional values “in a culture enamored of the shock of the new. Through numerous writings and lectures, conversations and seminars, he taught Americans about America – about its deeply conservative habits, about the roots of its constitutional order, about the Burkean influence on our Founders.”³⁹

More than a decade later, George Nash told the Heritage Foundation that Kirk’s “place in the galaxy” was secure because of the character of the messenger and also because of the content and tone of the message: “More than any other conservative writer of his era, he elevated the tone and substance of conservative discourse.” As a bridge-builder to the “classics of culture,” Nash insisted that Kirk’s legacy as a popularizer, author, and sentimental moralist would endure because he elevated the discourse, which facilitated in his followers a renewed hope for their vision.⁴⁰ Through reviewing the literature from those in the coalitions of the “Right” – in these and other tributes or considerations during and after his life – two themes are present: the writer acknowledges the debt that is owed to Kirk, and professes that they are, in some capacity, sharing in his legacy. Sharp divisions certainly still persist, and libertarians and foreign policy “hawks” tend to ignore his work, but it remains that Kirk is consistently praised as a wise oracle.

Mark C. Henrie, editor of the *Intercollegiate Review*,⁴¹ wrote that the divisions of American conservatism, many of them rooted in different readings of history, caused some to suspect Kirk’s “traditionalism” as “un-American.” If the American tradition of political thought, in other words, proceeded through the terminology of the U.S.

Constitution and the Federalist Papers (“liberal,” rights-based documents), then America was a “Lockean” country, with an original position resembling John Locke’s state of nature and a founding compact reflective of his principles. As such, Kirk’s assertion of a genuinely conservative American tradition made little sense, and his “recovery” of a preexisting Burkean tradition in its social and political thought contained a large element of invention.⁴² One noteworthy academic response to the “New Conservatives” of the 1950s⁴³ was a 1957 article in the *American Political Science Review* by Samuel Huntington. He thought the ideas, historical figures, and final judgments of *The Conservative Mind* were too diverse to form a consistent philosophy – thus Kirk’s book was not a challenge to more academically respectable ideologies. There was little to be gained in arguments over definitions of conservatism, a discussion which in the light of its relatively recent emergency would be overly arbitrary. Huntington’s attempt to locate the strands of its emergence – the aristocratic, the autonomous, and the situational – did, however, lead him to this positive characterization:

Conservatism is an autonomous system of ideas which are generally valid. It is defined in terms of universal values such as order, balance, moderation. Whether or not a particular individual holds these values high depends not on his social affiliations but upon his personal capacity to see their inherent truth and desirability. Conservatism, in this sense, is, as Russell Kirk says, simply a matter of “will and intelligence”; the principles of conservatism may be drawn from “all classes and occupations...” This theory of conservatism is obviously popular among the “New Conservatives.” It implies not only that conservatism is relevant and desirable in contemporary America, but that it is the preferable political philosophy under and historical circumstances.⁴⁴

Henrie contended that “traditionalists” could be understood as “un-American” only when the country was understood as the abstract embodiment of a “liberal” theory. And it is by placing Kirk in contrast to the pre-Second World War conservatives –

generally more sympathetic to libertarian-oriented solutions⁴⁵ – that “there are several ways in which he was actually quite close to the values and aspirations of common Americans untutored in political theory.” The affinity between “traditionalist conservatives” and “many ordinary Americans” would be especially pronounced on religious and moral matters.⁴⁶ Sociologist and “New Conservative” Robert Nisbet, who wrote extensively about the “quest for community” and the atomizing effects of valuing liberty as a high virtue, appraised Kirk’s impact as a “traditionalist” in terms of building intellectual creditability and popularizing Edmund Burke: “Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind* gave scholarly and timely pedigree to conservatism in England and the United States, demonstrating the key role of Burke in both countries.”⁴⁷ Kirk’s work on the British statesman and philosopher would be continuously cited by academics, most predominately by those generally classified as of the “Right,” such as political theorist Walter Berns.⁴⁸

As “intellectual conservatism” enjoyed increasing political success, the anthologies and collections devoted to it tended to grant Kirk generous credit. A *Dictionary of American Conservatism* credits his writing with providing “common ground for numerous persons dissatisfied with what they saw and felt in American life;” it also noted “Kirk’s Michigan home drew a constant stream of visitors, many of distinction, many others whose distinction lay in their variety.”⁴⁹ In its entry for his name and longer consideration of the conflicts within intellectual conservatism after the Second World War, *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia* praised him thusly: Kirk’s enduring reputation as a major thinker of the twentieth century is assured as a consequence of his rediscovery and persuasive expression of a living conservative

intellectual tradition. He was responsible for drawing conservatism away from utilitarian and individualistic premises, toward which it had veered in the 1950s, to a position rooted in community-conserving norms and culture. More broadly, he contended with considerable effect against the challenges of ideologies of both the Left and Right to the enduring moral and social order of Western civilization.⁵⁰

Denouncing Assumptions of Progress

As a coherent body of political thought, Kirk regarded “conservatism” as a recent development, even as its roots extended “deep into the history of ideas and of social institutions.” Although escaping easy definition, he wrote that the term might still be “apprehended reasonably well by attention to what leading writers and politicians, generally called conservative, have said and done.”⁵¹ Since the defeat of Sen. Goldwater, they had been saying and doing quite a lot. And by the early 1970s, less than a decade after that landslide and consequential defeat,⁵² selections from “conservative” American and British writers, including the reissue of work extending back centuries, were being produced by large, mainstream publishing operations and not just niche, politically-oriented ones like Regnery, ISI, and Arlington House.⁵³

A collection from “neo-conservative” writers labeled Kirk a “prominent” and “exceptional thinker” committed to adapting a traditionalist, “Burkean” strain of thought into American public life. The typical American “conservative” in the pre-Second World War period was a nineteenth-century liberal, believing in laissez-faire, scientific improvement, and progress more generally. Yet this Burke revival, according to Adam Wolfson, was a spark in the 1950s that lent to American conservatism a very different voice: no longer willing to apologize for big industry, these traditionalists joined Burke in the lament that the “age of chivalry is gone” and concurred with the British

statesman's denunciations of the "new conquering empire of light and reason."⁵⁴ The expression of unease with the transition to a more modern, mass society during the mid-twentieth century, with Kirk at the forefront, did not offer detailed solutions to public policy problems. Instead, I argue that he utilized his knowledge and rhetorical ability for a more philosophic definition and general cultural recovery. With Burke as a touchstone, Kirk explained what it meant to exist and think a "conservative," as one in succession with a variety of great historical figures that defended a more proper vision of civic and personal life. Americans, including those well-disposed to the rightist politics, had tended to not take the figures lionized in his writing and lecturing very seriously. But "Kirk's prolific writings changed the face of American conservatism," and his influence is still felt in defenses of the traditional family and in rejoinders that the federal government has usurped the prerogatives of localities.⁵⁵

A notable recognition of this legacy came from the political figure many conservatives deemed the culmination of those efforts begun in the 1950s, and whose origins might be traced to the resounding defeat of an earlier seminal movement figure in 1964: President Ronald Reagan, who entered the national political stage campaigning for Goldwater. In conferring the Presidential Citizens Medal, he stated: "As the prophet of American conservatism, Russell Kirk has taught, nurtured, and inspired a generation. From his lofty perch on Piety Hill, he reached deep into the roots of American values, writing and editing central works of political philosophy. His intellectual contribution has been a profound act of patriotism."⁵⁶ "Leftist" journalist and critic John Judis agreed with the "prophetic" characterization, writing in his biography of William F. Buckley, Jr.

that to claim to be a right-wing intellectual was to “court ridicule” before the publication of *The Conservative Mind* (originally titled, he noted, *The Conservative Rout* in response to the low esteem of which such sentiments were then held). For Judis, the book was a “pathbreaking history” that, in combination with the efforts of Buckley to bring together disparate and depressed conservatives, provided a significant boost to the fortunes of the conservative movement, laying a solid and necessary foundation for future victories.⁵⁷ The book stimulated the development of a self-conscious conservative intellectual movement in the early years of the Cold War, according to George Nash, and “it is not too much to say that without this book we, the conservative intellectual community, would not exist today.”⁵⁸

I argue a similar viewpoint of Kirk’s importance (in terms of lifting intellectual creditability) exists across the spectrum of those, either of the Left or the Right, that have engaged his work. This would include the period and climate in which he wrote. Under the umbrella of intellectual conservatism, political philosopher Willmoore Kendall, who had contentious relationships with several institutions including Yale University and *National Review*, acknowledged Kirk’s contributions before he attacked them with vigor. Kendall’s populism and admiration of Rousseau and Leo Strauss was in sharp contrast to many “traditionalists.” The polemics against Kirk’s brand of conservatism eschewed any attempt to locate a “divine” or “mysterious” element in the American polity, as “Burkean” thought could not address the problems of modernity.⁵⁹ When Kendall and leading libertarians like Frank Meyer accused Kirk of following Burke too closely at the expense of the American Constitution – meaning a casting aside the

indelible impression of documents such as the *Federalist Papers* upon the currents of contemporary political life – it was a declaration of “war” to determine what would be the most beneficial “resistance” to the march of domestic collectivization, of expanding government. In his article “Collectivism Rebaptized,” as elsewhere, Meyer took direct aim at Kirk, writing that he was “at best equivocal” with regard to the “fundamental political issue,” the struggle against “collectivism and statism which merge gradually into totalitarianism.” Yet even in forceful advocacy of “individualism” (the principles of the primacy of the individual, the division of power, the limitation of government, the freedom of the economy), which Meyer understood as a difference not of temperament but of principle, he praised Kirk as “undoubtedly the most significant” of his critics, devoting lengthy sections to detailing his points against him and the “traditionalist” sentiments of society.⁶⁰

An Advocate of Ordered Liberty

The literature also points to Kirk’s literary and political legacy as grounded in the notion, one present in his political writing and fiction, of “order” as a precondition of “liberty.” And it is here that his influence wanes. In a colloquy sponsored by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, McDonald stated that his desire for a liberty accompanied by discipline over selfish and antisocial passions was a provocative, but not a popular, stance to take. Despite the boldness and rhetorical flourish with which he made the claims for an intellectual heritage to be taken seriously (drawing a grudging respect from many on the Left and securing a place of influence from within the Right), I think it is fair to state that since the end of the Reagan era and fall of the Soviet Union

Kirk's stature has faded. Some traditionalist conservatives believe his books and articles receive scant attention outside conservative circles; and even in those circles he is something of a neglected figure.⁶¹ Further, Kirk's ideas puzzle and trouble some activists in the world of "professional conservatism," especially those inclined to an aggressive foreign policy and sympathetic to market-based economic reforms. Kirk could be as harsh in his criticism of business as he was of government or organized labor. He was, throughout his life, skeptical of American military adventures. And on more than one occasion, he protested the possibilities of environmental destruction.⁶² Many of his writings featured long deceased and forgotten political thinkers and literary figures that might seem irrelevant to contemporary concerns. Two British writers, observers sympathetic to critiques of American statist policy solutions, dismissively labeled him "the dean of nostalgia."⁶³ And in fact, it has been noted that his "anti-modernist traditionalism" does seem out of place to many current conservative activists, especially those seeking power and status.⁶⁴ Even so, a review of the literature, of the large body of writing pertaining to the life and work, confirms Kirk's central place amid the arguments of these and other conflicts within American politics. Interestingly, it is likely that the most comprehensive of responses to his life and work are from self-described conservatives, either to quarrel with or follow his ideas and sentiments.

Kirk's "literary and imaginative" conservatism, infused with the notion of a noble yet losing battle against modernity, was at one end of the polarity between the thought that freedom is the highest political good. At the other was a traditionalist instruction concerning proper choices.⁶⁵ The debates were characteristic of a larger point

about his wide-ranging lasting influence upon American conservatism: those who forged its direction, leading its arguments out of the political wilderness, highly respected Kirk. A variety of them were compelled to praise, associate, criticize, and respond. In an “age of ideology,” he was one for whom personal ideology was not a matter of great concern. He was, in my conception of him, a literary philosopher of the “moral imagination.” And a review of the political, popular, and academic literature reveals that his explication of historical thinkers prompted much discussion, particularly of the “moral imagination.” This helped to grant American conservatives intellectual respectability during a time when it was severely lacking. I also believe, in sum, this “reconstituted” conservatism was very much a part of the modern age, even as it sought the wisdoms of generations past. In their responses to the new development of a challenge to the prevailing liberal order in the wake of the New Deal, worldwide war, and unprecedented economic expansion, Kirk’s critics and admirers grappled with what it meant to recover a more “true” resonance of conservative thought.⁶⁶ This was, frequently, at the direct prompt of his writings and persona – his challenge to embrace the “unbought grace of life,” an “eternal chain of right and duty which links great and obscure, living and dead.”⁶⁷ The effort to make sense of him, and of his challenges to the “modern” order, will continue for some time to come.

Notes

¹ Alfred Regnery, *Upstream: The Ascendance of American Conservatism* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2008), p. 63.

² William F. Buckley, Jr., “Russell Kirk RIP,” *National Review*, May 30, 1994.

³ William F. Buckley, Jr., *Did You Ever See A Dream Walking?: American Conservative Thought in the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1970), p. 218 – 219.

⁴ Henry Regnery, *Memoirs of a Dissident Publisher* (Chicago, IL: Regnery Books, 1979), p. 148.

⁵ Alfred S. Regnery, *Upstream: The Ascendance of American Conservatism* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2008), p. 46 and 47.

⁶ *The New York Times*, “Russell Kirk Is Dead at 75; Seminal Conservative Author,” April 30, 1994.

⁷ Edwin J. Feulner (ed), *The March of Freedom: Modern Classics in Conservative Thought* (Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing, 1998), p. 25 – 26.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 27 and 34.

⁹ Jonathan M. Schoenwald, *A Time For Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 18 – 19.

¹⁰ May 2009 interviews with Annette Kirk, conducted daily for one week. And as will be detailed in other chapters, she also put me in contact with others who knew her husband well.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 21 – 22.

¹² Lee Edwards, *The Conservative Revolution: The Movement That Remade America* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1999), p. 16.

¹³ Lee Edwards, *The Power of Ideas: The Heritage Foundation at 25 Years* (Ottawa, IL: Jameson Books, 1997), p. 225.

¹⁴ In the April 7, 2003 issue of *National Review*, Frum attacked “antiwar” conservatives such as Pat Buchanan in a widely discussed article, “Unpatriotic Conservatives.” His piece was, in part, a direct challenge to the opinion of Buchanan (expressed during the First Gulf War) regarding “the ex-liberals, socialists, and Trotskyists who signed on in the name of anti-Communism and now control our foundations and set the limits of permissible dissent.”

¹⁵ David Frum, “The Legacy of Russell Kirk,” *The New Criterion*, Vol. 13, Dec. 1994.

¹⁶ Patrick J. Buchanan, *Day of Reckoning: How Hubris, Ideology, and Greed are Tearing America Apart* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2007), p. 56 and 86.

¹⁷ Jeffrey Hart, *The Making of the American Conservative Mind: National Review and its Times* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2005), p. 50.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Hart, “The Burke Habit: Prudence, Skepticism, and “Unbought Grace,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 27, 2005. This was the last piece in a series on the meaning of conservatism. Hart, like Buchanan, attacked Bush and the “neo-conservatives” as Wilsonian idealists. Hart calls this “a snare and a delusion as a guide to policy, and far from conservative,” and traces its origin to Locke and Rousseau.

¹⁹ George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), p. 114.

²⁰ Paul Gottfried & Thomas Fleming, *The Conservative Movement* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1988), p. 12.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 591 – 592.

²² James Person Jr., *Russell Kirk: A Critical Biography of a Conservative Mind* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1999), p. xi.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 216 and p. 218.

²⁴ Such graciousness and hospitality has also been extended to me, for which I am grateful. At the beginning of this project, I contacted Mrs. Kirk. Her response: “I will help you with your research in any way that I can. Let me know when you would like to come to visit.” (Email, Dec. 7, 2008).

²⁵ Bruce Frohnen (ed), *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), p. 474.

²⁶ In my judgment, a “postmodern affinity” of “traditionalist” American writers deserves more scholarship.

²⁷ Gerald J. Russello, “Russell Kirk and the Critics,” *The Intercollegiate Review*, Spring/Summer 2003, p. 7 – 10.

²⁸ The term “conservatism” was, for Kirk, inherently anti-ideological and resistant to precise definition. The “six canons of conservative thought” in the first chapter of *The Conservative Mind* all begin with vague terms, followed by definitions of sentiment: “belief,” “affection,” “conviction,” “persuasion,” “faith,” and “recognition.” (It should also be noted that these canons changed over time, and Kirk increasingly wrote and lectured more about historical figures as exemplars of conservatism as his career progressed.) For more, see *The Roots of American Order*, p. 9. Here, he defined ideology as “servitude to political dogmas, abstract ideas not founded upon historical experience. Ideology is inverted religion...”

²⁹ See: Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, p. 266 – 283.

³⁰ Gerald Russello, “An America Tory: On the Essential Russell Kirk,” *The New Criterion*, Vol. 25, Jan. 2007, p. 78.

³¹ Gerald J. Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007), p. 61.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 212 and p. 213.

³³ The private papers of Annette Kirk contained an almost overwhelming collection of notes from well-known political and literary figures, including Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, Barry Goldwater, Herbert Hoover, T.S. Eliot, Flannery O’Connor, and Ray Bradbury.

³⁴ W. Wesley McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004), p. 3.

³⁵ Peter Viereck, *Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Nostrand, 1956), p. 107.

³⁶ McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology*, p. 168.

³⁷ In his lectures, Kirk would refer to himself as a historian. But it is likely he did not wish to be known by any one label (philosopher, historian, columnist, author, mystery writer, ect). Evidence of this is present in the public domain and was also indicated to me by a *National Review* writer and Michigan native influenced by Kirk, John Miller.

³⁸ “Russell Kirk, in Memoriam,” *National Review*, June 13, 1994.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ George H. Nash, “The Life and Legacy of Russell Kirk,” delivered to the Heritage Foundation in June 2007.

⁴¹ This quarterly journal from the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (founded in 1953 as the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists by the libertarian journalist Frank Chodorov) is the premier scholarly journal of conservative opinion in the U.S. The journal, from 1965, now publishes scholars and authors of a more “traditionalist” point of view; Kirk was a frequent contributor and remains a frequent subject. Many of its most noteworthy pieces, including Will Herberg’s “What is the Moral Crisis of Our Time?” are republished in a large volume, *Arguing Conservatism: Four Decades of the Intercollegiate Review*, edited by Henrie.

⁴² Peter Berkowitz (ed), *Varieties of Conservatism in America* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2004), p. 5 – 7. See also Kirk’s *The Roots of American Order*, p. 282 – 293, “A Note on John Locke.”

⁴³ That is, moving away from the disorganized, confused conservatism of the 1930s and 40s and toward an articulation of ideas and concepts claiming root in American intellectual history and seeking political influence, as exemplified by Kirk, Richard Weaver, Peter Viereck, and Robert Nisbet, among others.

⁴⁴ Samuel Huntington, “Conservatism as an Ideology,” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 51, No. 2, June 1957, p. 455.

⁴⁵ I would make note here of a prominent pre-Second World War anti-statist, and an inspiration to William F. Buckley and several other early *National Review* writers, essayist Albert Jay Nock. He had a large impact upon theories of American libertarianism.

⁴⁶ Peter Berkowitz (ed), *Varieties of Conservatism in America* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2004), p. 9.

⁴⁷ Robert Nisbet, *Conservatism Dream and Reality* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 97. Nisbet also notes: “His book was the subject of a *Time* magazine cover story.”

⁴⁸ Walter F. Berns, *Freedom, Virtue, and the First Amendment* (Chicago, IL: Regnery, 1965), p. 16. In this book, Berns points his readers to Kirk’s *A Program for Conservatives*.

⁴⁹ Louis Filler, *A Dictionary of American Conservatism: A Complete Guide to Issues, People, Organizations and Events* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1988), p. 178 – 179.

⁵⁰ Burce Frohnen (ed), *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), p. 474 – 475.

⁵¹ William F. Buckley Jr. (ed), *Rumbles Left and Right: A Book About Troublesome People and Ideas* (New York, NY: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1963), p. xi and xv. From Kirk’s introduction to this collection of writings.

⁵² For more on why this defeat was so consequential to American conservatism and the country as a whole, see Rick Perlstein's *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*.

⁵³ *The Wisdom of Conservatism*, in four volumes from Arlington House, included pieces from Cicero, Aristotle, Dante, Machiavelli, King James I, ect. Its introduction to Kirk called him "one of the most astute political commentators in America" for his defense of "the permanent things of our civilization" (Vol. 2, p. 1075). Also notable on this point is Kirk's (ed.) *The Portable Conservative Reader*, published in 1982.

⁵⁴ Irwin Stelzer (ed), *The Neocon Reader* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2004), p. 217.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 218.

⁵⁶ Website of the Presidential Citizens Medal (citizensmedal.com/russellkirk). See also: "Russell Kirk, in Memoriam," *National Review*, June 13, 1994, entry by Edwin J. Feulner.

⁵⁷ John B. Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1988), p. 113.

⁵⁸ George H. Nash, "The Conservative Mind in America," *The Intercollegiate Review*, Fall 1994, p. 27.

⁵⁹ Grant Havers, "Leo Strauss, Willmoore Kendall, and the Meaning of Conservatism," *Humanitas*, Vol. XVIII, Nos. 1 and 2, 2005, p. 17 and p. 20.

⁶⁰ Frank S. Meyer, *In Defense of Freedom and Related Essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund Press, 1996), p. 5 -6. The essay first appeared in the July 1955 issue of *Freeman*.

⁶¹ In my discussions with them, academics and traditionalist conservative writers Paul Gottfried and Bruce Frohnen have made this statement.

⁶² This according to Annette Kirk, who told me of their work in local conservation efforts.

⁶³ John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America* (New York, NY: The Penguin Press, 2004), p. 47.

⁶⁴ Scott McLemee and W. Wesley McDonald, "A Conservative of the Old School," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 7, 2004.

⁶⁵ The writings of Nash offer the best history of these conflicts – especially the works already cited in this chapter. Kendall's 1963 book *The Conservative Affirmation* was written as a response to Edmund Burke's American admirers, which – if some personal accounts are to be believed – he thought "cultish."

⁶⁶ Much, unfortunately, was excluded from this chapter so as to be in better conformity to other chapters. At the Kirk Center, I gathered over eighty reviews of Kirk's life and work from "non-conservative sources," a majority of them favorable. Those interested in tributes from friends and colleagues should read *The Unbought Grace of Life: Essays in Honor of Russell Kirk*. Rod Dreher's *Crunchy Cons*, which Annette Kirk spoke very favorably of, has provided a moving tribute to Kirk's influence. Two volumes of William F. Buckley, Jr., *Miles Gone By: A Literary Autobiography* and *Odyssey of a Friend: Letters to William F. Buckley, Jr.* (a collection of letters with Whittaker Chambers) are also noteworthy pieces relevant to Kirk's place in the American conservative movement.

⁶⁷ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1995), p. vi.

CHAPTER II FIGURES

Dissent in Moral Imagination: The Goals of a Conservatism

The American conservative movement in the aftermath of the landslide defeat of Senator Barry Goldwater by President Lyndon Johnson has enjoyed successes few would have predicted in 1964. Russell Kirk, a conservative thinker whose lectures, books, articles, and essays afforded him the ear of figures such as Goldwater and President Ronald Reagan, helped give intellectual heft to the politicized fights against statist solutions, particularly the New Deal and the Great Society. This effort, not yet either a respectable undertaking or a formidable answer to America's problems as he published his landmark work *The Conservative Mind* in 1953¹, was marred by factious infighting, bigotry, extremism, and reckless high-profile figures, including members of the John Birch Society and Senator Joseph McCarthy. But the ideas of what I term "traditionalist" conservatism did enter the mainstream of American politics, provoked in part by the societal turmoil of the late 1960s and the sense of cultural and economic malaise of the 1970s. The persuasions and philosophical foundations set by Kirk, and by some of his "contemporaries of sentiment"² (many of whom were ideological refugees from variations of leftism) can be distinguished as a "dissent" from their perceptions of the present and future course of modern America.

These contemporaries were among the practitioners of what some political scientists have termed "moral conservatism." They are distinguished by the honoring of community integrity in custom and institution, pessimism about utopian ideas, and opposition to "abstract, computational morality."³ Kirk was not a philosopher, even as

he engaged philosophy, and he was not a rhetorician, even as he forcefully and frequently employed rhetoric. Kirk, a thinker in favor of the view that conservatism ought to be inherently anti-ideological, is more accurately characterized as a “rhetorical popularizer” of a “traditionalist” branch of conservatism, one tinged with a creative and literary flare. A rhetorical analysis of the birth of the modern American conservative movement illuminates the communicative strategies of this writer, a person for over four decades essential to its significant policy impact as New Deal and the Great Society came under greater suspicion. And perhaps Kirk will become significant once again, as conservatives discuss how to again rise to political prominence in the wake of electoral defeat. But first, it is useful to consider in more detail what inspired his goals and beliefs.

Following Edmund Burke

The man he most championed was Edmund Burke. It is evident Kirk was a great admirer of the Whig statesman. *The Conservative Mind* advocated for a conservatism that was not a “system” but an approach, a style, a sentiment, a bias: against efforts of utopianism, against ideology, and against the promise of a bright new future casting aside considerations of human nature. High status was to be given to customs, norms, traditions, and institutions in concord with the “natural rights” from God, for these were the received wisdoms worthy of commitment against movements that would seek to alter them so as to pursue ideological aims. There should be no state organized “unity,” which Kirk viewed as a calling card of foreign adventurism and of the various collectivism of recent memory, including American progressivism, socialism, and the totalitarian socialisms national and international.⁴ Although Kirk engaged in furious intellectual

battles with his allies over the meaning of American conservatism, a coalescing force was hostility toward anything resembling a “transformative” or “unifying” government.

For Kirk, conservatism was opposition to all forms of political religion and a rejection of the idea that politics could be redemptive. It was conviction that a properly ordered republic has a government of limited ambition, even as government may be used to influence behavior (such as the end to “no fault divorce” so as to fortify the nuclear family). Following Burke, whom he labeled the “founder of philosophical conservatism,” he believed that good governance, part of a more purposeful moral universe, was embodied by a cultivated humility and prudence. The “true” natural rights, the purposes for which God willed the state, were equal justice, security of labor and property, the amenities of civilized institutions, and the benefits of orderly society. These were the rights which contrast with the delusory “rights of man” fiercely pursued over the course of the French Revolution.⁵ He scorned those who “worshipped” at the alters of science and rationality, seeking to build a heaven on earth and pining for the authority to order societal problems, and the persons that constitute them, according to their image of economics or politics – anything other than in the image of God.⁶ In his rhetoric, a consciousness deliberately separated from a living reality was an “ideological mind” building systems of thought around concepts of utopia, primed to manipulate humans with an attractive, false hope.

In his mind, such “ideology” was always wrong because it edited actuality. And a simplified actuality then prepared persons to accept “systematic” solutions. According to Jeffrey Hart, an academic and conservative “traditionalist,” the best arrangement for any

discussion in the self-governing of human affairs was for opinion to be filtered through accumulated experience. Embodied in habits, assumptions, and institutions, opinion could be cautiously subject to change as change was necessary.⁷ Similarly, against what he viewed as the devolution of the term “natural rights” used in Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*, sprung from the radicalism begun at the end of the eighteenth century, Kirk believed the notion of “inalienable natural rights” has been embraced by the masses in a vague and belligerent manner. Rights, which have practically evolved as a synonym for desires, have become a confusion that plagues society. The lengthy catalogue of “rights” that have grown through the generations since the American founding ignore the “essential conditions which are attached to all true rights; first, the capacity of individuals to claim and exercise the alleged right; second, the correspondent duty that is married to every right.”⁸

This was an awkward argument to make in America, as its political reality stems from an eighteenth-century liberal republic. Yet for the imaginative Kirk, a nation founded not on ethnicity, language, or culture, but rather upon the primacy of individual rights was one that would allow the currents of “traditional” society and its trans-generational wisdom to be swept away in the current of the new. The elevation of individual rights was, he thought, chaotic and harmful for the development of a discernible order, a tapestry of the familiar that makes life coherent and comfortably predictable. Such coherence in places and times where tradition was elevated, by contrast, imposes a structure upon life. Contempt for tradition, Burke wrote, was an unfortunate characteristic of the Enlightenment, and of the French Revolution most

notably, as its leaders had no respect for the wisdom of others but a full measure of confidence in their own. With an eagerness to systematically destroy an old scheme, for the revolutionaries all things which give perpetuity were mischievous and deserving of suspicion. Burke thought that government should not vary as a mode of dress, and that attachment to country only so far as it agrees with the “fleeting projects” of the moment is an accomplishment of destruction. A casting aside of received wisdom, especially of the Christian religion once a powerful boast and comfort, Burke memorably labeled “a drunken delirium from the hot spirit drawn out of the alembic of hell.”⁹ And Kirk was determined to apply such insights to his homeland.

This, however, is not to suggest that either Burke or Kirk wished for a stifling rigidity of structure that might trap tradition-bound societies. The British parliamentarian was a long-standing and forceful advocate for change and reform, with the protection of what he considered change and reform cautious and respectful of cultivating norms. Debates over the construction of social order, Burke contended, should be informed by prudence and a spirit of piety. Kirk followed his intellectual mentor in viewing the “Age of Reason” as an age of ignorance and excessive, unearned pride. He perceived the same spirit that animated the French revolutionaries as alive and well in the latter half of the twentieth century. It was, he wrote, the abstractions of the “equalitarians” that reluctantly turned Burke away from British domestic concerns and toward political philosophy as his career in public service drew to a close.¹⁰ And not long after becoming the first American to earn a doctorate at Scotland’s ancient St. Andrews University, Kirk began to follow a similar path, one prophetic for those inclined to his sentiments.

Biographical Note

He grew up in rural Michigan, the son of a railroad engineer who dropped out of school as a child. Like his father, Kirk grew to distrust mentalities that admired the assembly-line precision made prevalent by mechanical pioneer Henry Ford, processes he witnessed firsthand during a brief stint as an automobile factory employee. After graduation from Michigan State, Duke, and St. Andrews, he steadily worked as a freelance writer and lecturer. Already an Anglophile in literary tastes, he developed an attachment to his ancestral homeland of Scotland. In exploring its castles, country estates, and architectural grandeur, Kirk's affection grew for the metaphysical principle of continuity given visible reality. In his writings, he conveyed the motorized harmony of regularity as more inhuman and uninviting than the spontaneous yet persistent mysteries of life. Hart, in his history of *National Review* magazine, which published Kirk's column "From the Academy," wrote of the sensibility rooted in the rural poverty of his early youth. Alongside the "small town" conservatism of Ohio's Robert Taft was an admiration of the localism, constructionism, and agrarian economy of the southern states. Kirk's first book, *Randolph of Roanoke* (published in 1951 when he was 33) was a revised Master's thesis that Hart cited as an example of the "imaginative strength to his criticism, often valid, of the huge university, big labor, big business, big bureaucracy, and big crowds."¹¹

As a writer of fiction and non-fiction, Kirk was prolific. His writings, mostly histories and criticisms of various forms, included the founding of two journals, *Modern Age* and *The University Bookman*, and the publication of twenty-six nonfiction books

(and editor of several more), nine volumes of novels and collected short stories, nearly three hundred book reviews and seventy introductions and forwards, over eight hundred essays and short pieces published in periodicals, and thousands of newspaper columns.¹² Works of fiction, and particularly the ghost stories, usually contained a moral lesson in accord with his non-fiction. Friends and students would speak of an “imaginative mind” not of the Enlightenment but “gothic and medieval” in its temperament and structure.¹³ Yet it is *The Conservative Mind* for which Kirk will be most remembered. More than half a century after its publication in, the book endures as a founding document of contemporary American conservative thought. This work was also an intellectual inspiration to many who wanted to gain political influence through countering the expansive state. Finally, and perhaps most consequentially, it popularized Burke as a thinker essential for American conservatives – a point not lost on influential writers unidentified with his sentiments.¹⁴

An Imaginative Language of Tradition

The language he created for elaborating “conservative sentiments” was infused with contingency, locality, imagination, and the transcendent. Kirk thought that when a generation ceases to link spiritually with another generation, civilization shrivels. The “infection” of modern social confusion onto the public consciousness was, it followed, a consequence of confounding the sphere of private morality with the sphere of public activity.¹⁵ He argued that generational prejudice and prescription, due to their great age, are delicate growths, “slow to rise, easy to injure, hardly possible to resuscitate. The abstract metaphysician and fanatic reformer, intending to cleanse society, may find he

has scrubbed it clean away.”¹⁶ Kirk’s language was of a mood and temperament, which he presented as cautious and respectful of human limitations. This “true conservatism” – Burke’s conservatism – was hostile to a “deification” of the “free market” and an exporting of American-style democracy and individualism, which could give way to egotism and hubris among public servants.

Instead, conservatism was a community set against the solitude and emptiness of rational man standing alone. It was not a systematic program; firm definitions were elusive. Perhaps there is a hint of the ironic, then, given that the “canons of conservatism” remain among his most well known pieces of writing. These were an attempt to codify a philosophic foundation for the conservative sentiments. Although Kirk did not renounce either the content or the idea of canons, they did change over time. In later editions of *The Conservative Mind* he warned that a surer, sounding grounding for definition were certain thinkers that he highlighted.¹⁷ The Seventh Revised Edition (1995) listed the canons as follows:

(1) Belief in a transcendent order, or body of natural law, which rules society as well as conscience. Political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems. A narrow rationality, what Coleridge called Understanding, cannot of itself satisfy human needs. “Every Tory is a realist,” says Keith Feiling: “he knows that there are great forces in heaven and earth that man’s philosophy cannot plumb or fathom.” True politics is the art of apprehending and applying the Justice which ought to prevail in a community of souls. (2) Affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of human existence, as opposed to the narrowing uniformity, egalitarianism, and utilitarian aims of most radical systems; conservatives resist what Robert Graves calls “Logicalism” in society. This prejudice has been called “the conservatism of enjoyment” – a sense that life is worth living, according to Walter Bagehot “the proper source of an animated Conservatism.” (3) Conviction that civilized society requires orders and classes, as against the notion of a “classless society.” With reason, conservatives often have been called “the party of order.” If natural distinctions are effaced among men, oligarchs fill the vacuum. Ultimate equality in the judgment of God, and equality before courts of law, are recognized by conservatives; but equality of condition, they think, means equality in servitude and

boredom. (4) Persuasion that freedom and property are closely linked: separate property from private possession, and Leviathan becomes master of all. Economic leveling, they maintain, is not economic progress. (5) Faith in prescription and distrust of “sophisters, calculators, and economists” who would reconstruct society upon abstract designs. Custom, convention, and old prescription are checks both upon man’s anarchic impulse and upon the innovator’s lust for power. (6) Recognition that change may not be salutary reform: hasty innovation may be a devouring conflagration, rather than a torch of progress. Society must alter, for prudent change is the means of social preservation; but a statesman must take Providence into his calculations, and a statesman’s chief virtue, according to Plato and Burke, is prudence.¹⁸

As a rhetorical popularizer against projects of state-organized unity, of rationalism and utopia, Kirk would likely lament much of the impressive political triumphs of the “American Right” since 1994, the year of his death. Aside from individualism and free market idealism, there has been an ideological turn and a hardening of policy positions, principally in the area of foreign policy. The notion of bringing freedom to peoples through military imposition, with the aims of greater democratization – even if such notions are alien to the local history and culture – was for Kirk a natural outcome of the elevation of “rights” sentiment, rhetoric, and action. By these policies, he perceived liberalism as consumed with the spread of an abstracted concept of liberty and self-governance. Kirk believed that good intentions will often overshadow considerations of prudence, a “statesman’s chief virtue.” His appreciation of variety, mystery, tradition, and the venerable is a clumsy fit with the notion of “spreading democracy” through force. In 1944, anxious to leave military service and worried about a looming domestic collectivism and overly active foreign policy, Kirk voted for the Socialist candidate for president, Norman Thomas, as a reward for the candidate’s anti-imperialist speeches.¹⁹ In Kirk’s view, the liberalism that infected both

parties – while professing to be a promoter of liberty – was instead too often movement for control over a wide array of human functions.

The natural progression of “unchecked” liberalism was a transition, pleasant to the ears, away from Christendom, the natural aristocracy, and the bonds of generations to a desolate utilitarian collectivism. *The Conservative Mind* was something of a treatise warning that tradition, prudence, and prescription were suspect in most of the governmental marches forward toward greater “reform” and “revision.” Taken to their logical conclusion, in Kirk’s view these state efforts tended to create conditions that were insecure, forlorn, disjointed, and ripe for the will to power, particularly when the intention was greater union toward ideological goals. Kirk’s goals and beliefs, and the rhetorical strategies he employed to advance them, were motivated by a defense of the tendencies, practices, and institutions he admired in the American founding and in Americans themselves. The perspectives of *The Conservative Mind* borrowed heavily from Europe and Burke, and it was the author’s argument that the American tradition was fundamentally “Burkean.”²⁰ This tradition should stand against socioeconomic trends and governmental efforts that threatened to undermine the generational wisdom necessary for a properly functioning social order. Many of his books could be taken as a warning against political movements that sought quick change so as to pursue what Kirk found to be certain ideological goals, a disdain for high culture and elevation of statist solutions first among them.²¹

Such a “conservative sentiment” was provisional and tactical in that the inherent diversity of humanity that for Kirk dictated the fronts of the battle was not stationary.

There could not be a “final victory” for conservatives because the toil was not to achieve a vision but to sustain what was worthy within it.²² Resolutions will not be grand flourishes but instead short-term responses to the persistent challenges of sinful humanity. Kirk wrote that “the good society” was marked by a high degree of order, justice, and freedom. Among these, order had primacy, as justice could be enforced until “a tolerable civil social order is attained,” less “freedom be anything better than violence until order gives us laws.” “Absolute tolerance” was seen as the end of society because its inhabitants had, essentially, become indifferent to one another within a community. What followed was the “inverted religion” of ideology. A “democracy of the dead,” in contrast, recognized the judgments of those proceeded as well as the opinions of those in the moment. This kind of order was founded upon the practical experience of humans over many centuries and upon the judgments of vision and the intellect of predecessors. Against these sentiments was an age of various ideologies – “fanatic political creeds, often advanced by violence. By definition, ‘ideology’ means servitude to political dogmas, abstract ideas not founded upon historical experience.”²³ No order, abstract or otherwise, could approach perfection because humans are always imperfect. That a people could never make their way to utopia was a consistent theme of his writings. Even so, for Kirk the “roots” of an order could be made healthier; they could be reinvigorated and improved. Similar to Burke’s calls for measured reform, Kirk believed that permanence and progression could be complimentary, but only if the foundation was solid and continuously “renewed.” In rhetoric, the suitable past of generational prejudice and prudence was nearly always presented as fragile.

Still, the traditions organically passed forward in time could partake of societal invention naturally. Through these, in no small measure, humans may participate in their natural rights. An embrace of feeling, affection, and sentiment was an appreciation for human dynamism and continuation in all its messiness. Kirk abhorred a “rationalist” mode of thought writ large, such as one capable of supporting giant public-works policies prepared by leaders for the sake of “their” people, complete with military-like rhetoric and organization, conducted in a time of crisis for the purposes of “improving the physical fitness of potential soldiers and stimulating public commitment to national service in the emergency.”²⁴ He stated often that ideology was a motivation for government action, and in troubled times especially. Kirk saw these to be falsely founded upon claims of a systematic uncovering of certain “facts” of human nature. And these facts were not the unique or sole properties of early Enlightenment era liberalism. More modern incarnations such as socialism could assert itself to be a truer adaptation than liberalism to the “equality of humanity.” In Kirk’s biases, Marxist revolutionaries understood themselves to be upholding a “natural science” of the movements of human history. These movements were preceded by a rationalist reduction of actual human beings to an ideological construction of an abstract human nature. This construct was then brought together, disastrously from Kirk’s perspective, with various institutions deemed appropriate to the abstraction. He responded with the claim that conservatism, as the negation of ideology, was a genuine and necessary alternative to the modern age.²⁵ People, he taught, were not things. They could not be ordered and reorganized as things could be ordered and reorganized.

A Rooted Imagination

Of noteworthy absence in Kirk's writings, and in the canons that serve as a useful summation, were expressions of support for "market values." He saw no contradiction in a loathing of both socialism and of a "free market" mindset. In his conceptions, each was a compliment to coarse mass culture, promoting a disloyalty to place and family. Conservatives after Kirk tended to disagree with him about the social consequences of unconstrained markets. Identification with the "conservative" party shaped abstract beliefs about the composition of a good and just society, socializing toward a market-orientation.²⁶ Within conservative alliances, arguments about the morality of markets has tended to be fierce and irresolvable, but with points of common ground. For example, although they disagreed about the contemporary value of historical figures, including Burke and Rousseau, Kirk shared such a sentiment against unrestrained markets with conservative political theorist and personal friend Willmoore Kendall. Both authors sought in their writings an objective moral order above the fluxes of history. That all societies are grounded in such orders, and that every society does and ought to adhere to fundamental truths, was for them a view in opposition to "liberal" notions of an open society made freer by market forces.²⁷ And what was absolutely necessary to perceive and generalize about the moral order, Kirk thought, was the "moral imagination," which I find to be the phrase that best sums up his persuasions.²⁸

This imagination, and not calculating reason, was what separated man from "beasts." Further, the principle conflict of the modern age was, according to Kirk, not between competing programs for the material betterment of mankind, but between

opposing types of imagination. Thus opposition to utilitarian market values would be due to a failure to acknowledge the existence of an ethical standard beyond mere self-interest. Industrialization and urbanization, potent expressions of the market economy, were a primary cause for the decline of tradition. He concluded the impulse to radical, quick change came largely from cities, as many people there were uprooted and detached from community, from the fellowship of those with whom they shared bonds of kinship and common community experience. Conservatism, rather, best prospers in smaller, more stable, places where humans were slow to break the ways that bind them to past generations.²⁹ And so the moral imagination of the conservative “aspires to the apprehending of right order in the soul and right order in the commonwealth.”³⁰

In its fidelity to the past, at the core of Kirk’s thought was an apprehension about rootlessness. This was a sense of place and history, a sense of self derived from prior generations and culture, an identity collective and personalized. Following Burke, he thought a system of government organized for the living only disallowed generations to link together in a partnership necessary to caution against the fancies of the moment. The “higher” order, a shelter for true freedom and justice, declared the intrinsic dignity of man, not the contracts of secular authorities. This moral order worked upon the various political orders, as religious concepts of justice, charity, community, and duty transform a society without the abrupt alteration of governmental framework.³¹ It was, therefore, loyalty to persons as opposed to allegiance to the nexus of economic and political payments that constituted the good society. Writing that reason with a “capital R” – pure rationality as the guide to morals and politics – dominated the first half of the eighteenth

century, Kirk stated his opinion of the dangerous attractions of sovereign rationality: “philosophical systems last a long while, in the public consciousness, after they have been mortally wounded, so that journalists like Thomas Paine were crying up the Age of Reason well into the nineteenth century, and Reason has its worshippers still.”³² Kirk’s admiration for the evolutionary conservatism of Burke was especially prominent in those writings concerning order, and he agreed that “a disposition to preserve and an ability to improve” were the standard of a statesman. For the “Kirkian” traditionalist conservative, a moral order in the midst of revolutions of theoretic dogma required those, like Burke, with no fear to attack the powerful, defend the weak, or oppose the established interests through the power of imagination and forceful argument.³³ The guide to this higher moral order, the bulwark against the rootless, circulating fictions inevitable in creeping liberalism, was a concept of associational natural right. In Kirk’s writing, a transcendent understanding of a mysterious but discernable moral order was a universal “code” inherent to the human heart and unshakable by any other constitution.

Reading Burke’s “anti-ideological” philosophy through the lens of Kirk, one necessity to incorporate natural rights into the political current was neither a deductive rationalism nor some manner of instinct-exalting romanticism. A moral order was needed. Following this, Kirk wrote in an essay titled “What is Conservatism?” that conservatives believe general principles should always be tempered by experience, or prudence. And as circumstances vary, the products of human organization should observe its own traditions and historical experience, which take precedence over principals drawn up as “a priori notions divorced from a nation’s history and

necessities.” A true and valuable principle is an idea derived from knowledge of human nature and of the past. These are necessary for the statesman, but they must be applied discreetly and with unceasing caution. Conservatives must remain restrained, chastened by their principle of imperfectability. To aim for utopia in the immovable face of imperfect nature and social order was to end in disaster or boredom. Those who live in tradition, as a poet tends to do, realize that a culture cannot long survive if starved from the evolving culture of a larger group or class.³⁴ His persuasions of “moral imagination,” in other words, were meant to be “poetic,” formulated by the past.

The Importance of Prudence and Continuity

In his treatment of Burke, Kirk found the symptom of a badly conceived state to be the propensity to make theories disrespectful of the foundations of current or historical developments. The lines of human morality were unlike those of mathematics, to take an example, because there were exceptions and modifications made not by the processes of logic but by the rule of prudence. Further, prudence was not simply among the first rank of political and moral virtues, but was in fact their conductor, a necessary guide to any large body rightly constituted.³⁵ The diversity of conservative thought after the Second World War included, clumsily and distrustfully under one banner and existing in opposition to collectivism and state-organized unity, two opposing sides: an efficient modernism, cash-nexus selfishness, and atomistic vision of society friendly to plutocracy; and an inefficient, organic, historical, medievalism. Yet both generalized usages of the descriptive “conservative” possessed, as a unifying common denominator,

a distrust of the masses, preference for an established elitist authority, and disapproval toward the plans of utopians and statist.³⁶

Kirk's deployed his rhetoric primarily in dissent against cultural disintegration, liberal economies, foreign intervention, and the "deformed order" they assisted. "Only a civil order which retains some understanding of consecration, ordination, and reverence can withstand fanatic ideologues and squalid oligarchs," he wrote. Conservatism required imagination, but also something even rarer and nobler – "consecration."³⁷ (He personally followed this viewpoint to a religious conclusion, converting to a sacramental Christian understanding of human connection to the divine, Catholicism, at age 46.³⁸) Motivated to defend what he termed the "Anglo-American" tradition of skepticism toward a utilitarian, contractual view of government, Kirk began *The Conservatism Mind* with a robust opening salvo: "'The stupid party': this is John Stuart Mill's description of conservatives. Like certain other summary dicta which nineteenth-century liberalism thought to be forever triumphant, his judgment needs review in our age of disintegrating liberal and radical philosophies."³⁹

In vivid, confident language, he described the descent of liberalism in the United States, where obedience to positive law and regulation was less habitual than in Britain, as the kind of descent that "slides down to dusty death." The lasting strength of the "antithesis of true community," collectivism coerced by the state, meant that "true individuality is desperately needed in our age." These individuals are participants not in a unitary democracy but in "the democracy that means genuine participation of the citizen in communal affairs." The object of the "devotees of romantic emancipation" is

“liberation from the dead hand of the past.” The total state, “which flourishes upon rootlessness among the masses,” he thought was never wholly unpopular. This state “employs flattery and bribery to retain the support of the masses” yet it also “detests and endeavors to obliterate knowledge of the past.”⁴⁰ Its necessary opposition, the veritable conservative, was not a “dull, boorish, bigoted and avaricious being,” but a resolute and independent-minded member of certain associations who preferred the tried and tested to the novel and was committed to safeguarding the institutions of the past – not in any way reactionary and inflexible, but prudently and carefully. In my view, this rhetoric stands in contrast to much of the populism and reactionary power-grabbing that passes for “American conservatism,” particularly in recent decades.

The rhetoric of the American conservative movement from the mid-twentieth century forward worked to facilitate bridging the gap between ideas in the public sphere and the translation of those ideas into laws that might diminish the influence and reach of government. Kirk’s life as a leading intellectual figure of this movement indicates his view that rhetoric is insufficient. The memorable phrases and clarity of opinion found throughout his prolific writings were accompanied, for decades, by an active lecturing schedule. He also involved himself (as Burke did, albeit on a much more limited scale) with the messiness of actual politics, writing speeches for Sen. Barry Goldwater and supporting various local candidates. For conservatives who advocate “evolutionary” reform, as I argue Kirk and many “traditionalists” did, ideas were not self-implementing and self-sustaining. They must be associated with direct action, beginning with the family and extending outward into the polis. And situations can certainly change when

ideas propagated by determined, outstanding rhetorical figures are finally accepted and codified into law. Concerning the “skepticism” of conservatism, one can believe in the power of ideas and rhetorical display while also believing in the possibility – or even the likelihood, given the view of human nature – of failure.

The Persuasion of a Type of Liberty

In the struggle to “resist Leviathan as master,” Kirk included the imperative to persuade in his canons of conservatism. Persuasion and action were, however, daunting and frustrating tasks. Richard Weaver wrote in *Ideas Have Consequences* that the moral dissolution of Western nations could be traced to the advancement of nominalism, rationalism, and materialism throughout the Enlightenment period. But words have the power to define and to compel, and by persuasive speech in the service of truth “the community of language gives one access to significances at which he cannot otherwise arrive.”⁴¹ Kirk, although he recognized the power of words, parted with Weaver in the usefulness of Burke and natural law (not to be confused the natural rights of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau) to the basics of conservative philosophical sentiment. The Whig statesman was not only a foe to metaphysics and the applications of inquisitive reason to the political process; Kirk believed him to be among the most eloquent and profound defenders of “natural” law, morality, and politics in Western civilization. And so, in thinking about the persuasions of “moral imagination,” the parliamentarian was relevant to postwar America because he was a defender not merely of defensible interests in some way under siege. Burke was also an example to be emulated by conservatives because he articulated a body of principles and sought to put them into action. He was,

in the summary of George Nash and the opinion of Kirk, both a traditionalist and a truly rational man, in rhetoric and in deed.⁴²

As such, the principle of prescriptive liberty, accompanied by a skeptical temperament and the understanding that there are limits to human understanding, was superior to abstract liberty. Coined by the dictator Burke anticipated in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Napoleon,⁴³ the word ‘ideology’ was used by Kirk as a term of action with no check upon its excesses. Warning against the pitfalls of democracy, Kirk wrote that “passion, deluded sentiment, and a destructive yearning for simplicity” are the characteristics of those suffering from the “intoxication of self-expression and the negation of discipline.” The destruction of moral habits was the worst of all the “terrors of democracy” (especially when democracy is presented in a simplified form). No constitution, however “artfully designed,” can “suffice to restrain men who have embraced the doctrines of complete equality and an inalienable popular right to power.”⁴⁴ Abstract ideas, however, cannot be wholly dismissed by themselves. To do so would be to dismiss principles which may be reasonably discovered in politics. It was, rather, the abstraction of ideology assembled without a guide to knowledge and history that must be resisted. This guide was principle served by experience, informed by the natural law and developed over the generations. There must be reverence – a received custom – or there is, eventually, a self-destruction. History – “often shadowy and subtle to our eyes” – was the gradual revelation of a “Supreme design,” which helped to know nature: a “human nature, the revelation of universal and permanent principles through the study of mind and soul – not the Romantics’ half-pantheistic nature.” Kirk wrote that

humans collect and condense the wisdom of experience, the written part of it made known by the means of history, chiefly through tradition, custom, prejudice, and prescription. These are “surer guides to conscience and conduct than books or speculation. Habit and custom may be the wisdom of unlettered men, but they come from the sound old heart of humanity.”⁴⁵

Kirk’s written and spoken rhetoric, on these and other philosophic matters, brings together a confident and quotable phraseology with an intellectual foundation arriving at an opportune moment. This is what I have meant by the term “rhetorical popularizer.” He developed a polemical approach to fundamental conservative anxieties about the direction of American social order. This approach, in turn, was a cohesive, organizing strand for sentiments skeptical of the big, the militarized, and the centralized in the public sphere of a late twentieth century America undergoing explosive growth. Against the trends of the time, Kirk refused to accept both collectivism and the extreme yet attractive response to those allied against it, a libertarian-influenced “individualism.” Recognizing insecurity about America’s shallow place in the history of ideas and practice by comparison to Europe, he made the British statesman perhaps most sympathetic to its revolution, Edmund Burke, more famous in his homeland.⁴⁶ And in taking from history to conjure parallels of conservatism, he offered, particularly to those inclined to agree with his biases and assumptions, a potent, if overly imaginative in the context of America, criticism of the impulse to organize humanity into some manner of a systematic and centralized formation.

Uneasy with the voracious appetite of government, Kirk articulated a vision of organic, collective, and immemorial wisdom so as to stem the tide a larger, more bureaucratic state. There are “permanent things,” well beyond the clumsy reach of the state he wrote, that give life meaning: truth, goodness, beauty, and the transcendent. The order which holds all things in place “is made for us, and we are made for it. The thinking conservative, far from denying the existence of this eternal order, endeavors to ascertain its nature and to conform to that order, which is the source of the Permanent Things.”⁴⁷ There are those of the post-Enlightenment “right” and “left,” he suggested, that adhere to a system of ideological dogma when they should instead value a body of enduring sentiments. Thus the challenge of Kirk’s rhetoric: how to communicate the negation of ideology? How to convey a state of mind, a character, a guarded approach to civil social order?

His approach was a willingness to make value judgments, complete with a conviction of message confident that history and the permanent things would vindicate the useful truthfulness of that message. Kirk agreed with Weaver that ideas have consequences, but he also thought there existed words and sentiment before ideas. It was through the vigorous popularization of terms and arguments, combined with a lived example, that Kirk conveyed sentiments could enter the public consciousness. These sentiments and dispositions then await their awakening as political and social climates change, and as figures capable of articulating them to the masses emerge. In a democratic constitutional republic, where the people are themselves responsible for the methods and outcomes of governing organization, words were for Kirk significant.⁴⁸ In

an essay contemplating rhetoric, Kirk wrote that political principles and the methods of persuasion cannot be dissociated because “some genuine connection subsists between the order of rhetoric and the order of society; false phrases open the way for false measures.”⁴⁹ He found it important to recognize that an abuse of language was of vital help to the abuses of power – and the truly conservative person was one who discovered the permanent things more pleasing than the worldly and temporary.

When speaking and writing of conservatism, Kirk used the word as an adjective, not as a noun. Sustained by a body of sentiments, flexible so as to accommodate a diversity of views on a wide range of subjects, this “negation of ideology” was a state of mind, a type of character, a way of looking at the civil social order.⁵⁰ The ancient truth of considerable limits to what humans know and may know indicated, for the conservative, that the best actions in the selfish arena of politics were incremental, informed by accumulated prejudice acclimated to circumstance. The sudden construction of universal law, prone to the whimsical and superficial casting aside of human nature and history, was inflamed by the desire to be freed of duties. In his essay “The Dissolution of Liberalism,” Kirk wrote that all systems, ethical or political, attained ascendancy over the minds of men through their appeal to the imagination. Nevertheless, “when they cease to touch the chords of wonder and mystery and hope, their power is lost, and men look elsewhere for some set of principles by which they may be guided.”⁵¹

Rhetorically, Kirk imitated an unfolding performance of myth – a persuasive performance not of falsehood but directed toward a concept of wisdom. These were represented in ways particular to time and place; they were not simply an entertaining

fancy. A myth might grow out of an actual event lost in the remote past, but it eventually transcended the particular circumstance of its origin to assume significance universal and abiding. These were the products of the moral experience of people, stumbling toward the divine love and wisdom implanted in the consciousness from before the dawn of existence by a power and a means knowledge can never describe.⁵² In popularizing the perceived wisdom of Burke and other figures, he updated for an American audience in a time of intellectual uncertainty (insofar as American conservatism was concerned) a manner of discernment surpassing the private reason of the supposedly ingenious. This was unique. The argument that humans created in the image of God, were part of a “moral” imagination seeking the “abiding” amid the “chaos” was attractive at the time of his arrival on the national scene in the 1950s. It remains, for some, an attractive vision – especially for those open to the arguments of “Anglo-American” political thought and willing to accept the notion of an unseen moral order.

To see how this vision has endured, one may turn to the strategic choices of *The Conservative Mind*. Kirk’s persuasion was embedded in the practical unfolding of his political philosophy. For the first half of the twentieth century, an intellectual “movement” of “conservatism” made little sense. This is not to say that disparate and directly ancestral arguments were not being made – libertarianism, for example, found a voice in writers like Albert Jay Nock and Frank Chodorov, polemicists furiously scribbling against centralization; and southern agrarians declared that traditions help guide humanity’s higher nature, advancing a life defined by the structuring of will in accordance with perceptions of a transcendent good. There was a shared distrust of the

state and of politics, but little agreement concerning methods and solutions.⁵³ There was, until the “fusionism” of William F. Buckley Jr. and Frank Meyer, no indication of a cohesive whole as a movement, and little efforts of coordination or coalition. Kirk, especially in his seminal work, relayed the goals of his conservatism as a defense against the chaos of collectivism and individualism. Many other figures – including Meyer and Kendall – would likely have rejected such goals out of hand. In Kirk’s persuasions, humans were not autonomous individuals as if there no relation to community in which one was embedded. His rhetoric of moral imagination, an imagination presented to his readers as a healing relief, placed little faith in the political process other conservatives eagerly sought to join. Kirk, distinctive in persona and persuasion, was according to Nash a “self-invented work of art, prodigiously learned.”⁵⁴

The defense of an imaginative, prudent, “traditionalist” sentiment against the ravages of modern times suggested that humans were not capable of recognizing a truly human, humane community by an elevation of rationality or materialism in the public sphere. Persons were more than the collection of material parts. The conduct of moral principles was essential and foundational to a moral and just political and social system. In Kirk’s writing, the cause of suffering was moral evil, for “ours is a moral order.” Further, human laws were derived from immortality. Quoting Burke’s statement that “the higher happiness is moral happiness,” he continued: “Pride, ambition, avarice, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrisy, ungoverned zeal, disorderly appetites – these vices are the actual causes of the storms that trouble life.”⁵⁵ Taken with the many other similar quotations, I believe such a passage does suggest one of the chief characteristics of

American conservatism: close partnership with a confessional label, namely Christianity. Yet Kirk's conservatism was more secularly ecumenical than it might at first appear, as his praise in *The Conservative Mind* for non-religious figures like Paul More and George Santayana might attest. This leads, at least in part, to my later characterizations of a "postmodern" and "imaginative" construction. Conservatism, this is to say, was and is subject to a continuous "reimagining," one of paradoxes and puzzling alliances.

Regardless of theological grounding, in its rhetoric a typical assumption of Kirk and those associated with his sentiments was that fallible man could never be perfectible. To preserve a true meaning to human existence, the inclinations for hubris and totality (especially among political leaders) should be kept in check by a something resembling a "theological vision." Guided by customs and traditions developed over long periods of time, a meaningful vision of the "good" life was ordained by the transcendent, an unseen reality that drew creation into communal association. Without reverence, veneration, and contemplation toward a "good" end, life was for Kirk little more than a pointless rebellion.⁵⁶ To negate the hubris of earthly power and ideology was to, correspondingly, be open to "reality" in all of its mystery and complexity. The "transformational" occurred after death, not in politics. Kirk's persuasions of morality and imagination, I intend to demonstrate, both refused ignorance of the revelation he thought to animate society and drew in those already inclined to believe the traditions of their ancestors, tested over time, deserved continuation.

Kirk's rhetoric of moral imagination lamented the human relationships of the present, past, and future was too often active as a convenient distraction. "Greatness," no

birthright, was fragile; it had to be fearlessly forged. The arguments that one “invents,” according to some rhetorical scholars, should appeal to reason, emotion about the subject under discussion, and trust in the speaker’s character.⁵⁷ I argue the persuasiveness of Kirk’s polemics, especially those directly inspired by Burke, did broadly follow these three outlines. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, “a sustained polemic against the Declaration of the Rights of Man,” took the ideology of that revolution quite seriously. And the “counterrevolutionary discourse” against the revolutionaries and their intellectual heirs, real and perceived, became a fundamental intellectual current in laying the groundwork for much of intellectual conservatism.⁵⁸ For Burke, and I believe for Kirk as well, the French Revolution was an “astonishing” and “cataclysmic” event, playing a key role in shaping the modern world.⁵⁹ It has been argued that the production of an “imaginative vision” in rhetoric, a consequence of the language between people, is a conduit for citizen participation in representative governments.⁶⁰ Kirk’s rhetoric put such a notion to practice, as when he belittled an increasingly prominent grouping of American “conservatives”: “I had thought that the Neoconservatives might become the champions of diversity in the world; instead, they aspire to bring about a world of uniformity and dull standardization, Americanized, industrialized, democratized, logicalized, boring. They are cultural and economic imperialists, many of them.”⁶¹

In Kirk’s structures of argument, many public debates of his time were among various strains of liberalism. The political fanaticism of ideology – a sort of selfish utilitarianism coyly suggesting that the “institutions of freedom” were good⁶² – was still at hand, no matter if the liberalism was “conservative,” “liberal,” or “radical.” In arguing

against politics as a “substitute” for religion, Kirk foresaw his purpose in laws set by nature and universally valid. The language symbols that conveyed existence, such as literature and stories to express a moral lesson, reconstituted for some of his readers a reality outside of the more empirical and everyday experiences. To assert one’s own human dignity was to recognize the revelation of limits to any transformative experience before death. If a mastery of craft or language begins with awareness of how much humans were themselves mastered, as Kirk suggested, then his dissent from modernity could be thought to embrace the liberty of the “moral imagination.”

Notes

¹ Interview: George H. Nash, June 10, 2009. Nash is a prominent chronicler of American conservatism whose first book *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, his revised doctoral thesis from Harvard University, is the standard history. (Edmund Burke was prominent in Kirk’s doctoral dissertation at St. Andrews University, revised and published as *The Conservative Mind*.)

² Kirk had involvement in the effort to purge the American “Right” of its more unseemly elements, an effort headed by a young William F. Buckley, Jr. See: Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), p. 156. Buckley’s arguments and actions are chronicled in Nash, Schoenwald, and Micklethwait & Wooldridge.

³ Evan Simpson, “Moral Conservatism,” *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 1, Winter 1987, p. 30.

⁴ In traditionalist conservative critiques from the 1930s onward, American progressives were overly enamored with efforts for large-scale planning and state-organized unity, such as looking toward Mussolini in the search for a cure to the crisis of capitalism and economic depression. They also liked to point out that Nazism and Communism appealed to similar constituencies. For example: Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, *Leftism Revisited: From de Sade and Marx to Hitler and Pol Pot* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1990) and Peter Witonski (ed) *The Wisdom of Conservatism Volume I – IV* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1971).

⁵ Russell Kirk, “Burke and Natural Rights,” *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 4, Oct. 1951, p. 448 – 449.

⁶ Inveighing against “secular religions” was a common thread in his writing, across subjects.

⁷ Jeffrey Hart, *The Making of the American Conservative Mind: National Review and its Times* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2005), p. 168 and 343.

⁸ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1995), p. 48.

⁹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New York, NY: The Liberal Arts Press, 1955), p. 99 – 100 and p. 103.

¹⁰ Russell Kirk, “Burke and the Philosophy of Prescription,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 14, No. 3, June 1953, p. 366.

¹¹ Hart, *The Making of the American Conservative Mind*, p. 48 – 49.

¹² George H. Nash, “The Life and Legacy of Russell Kirk,” delivered to the Heritage Foundation in June 2007. Many of these materials are archived by the Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal.

¹³ The word “imagination” frequently appears in this work. The interested reader should consult the works of W. Wesley McDonald, George H. Nash, and Gerald Russello for further explanation. My conversations with David Schock, Kirk’s graduate student of fiction, helped me to better understand the aspects of his mind, characterized by Schock as “Gothic and medieval in its temper and structure.”

¹⁴ There are many examples one could cite. During my visit to the Kirk Center, Annette Kirk purchased for me the current issue of *Newsweek*. In his column, the magazine’s editor described the book as “instrumental” in popularizing Burke as relevant for American conservatives and called Kirk “a crucial figure in the postwar American conservative movement.” Jon Meacham, “A Modest Case for a Burkean Boomlet,” *Newsweek*, June 1, 2009, p. 5.

¹⁵ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, p. 433.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁷ Gerald J. Russello, “Russell Kirk and the Critics,” *The Intercollegiate Review*, Spring / Summer 2003, p. 11. Since 1994, Russello has debated Kirk’s political and social legacy with a variety of critics from within the American conservative movement.

¹⁸ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, p. 9.

¹⁹ George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), p. 106 – 107.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

²¹ Interview: Paul Gottfried, March 2, 2009.

²² According to Annette Kirk, one of her husband’s favorite sayings belonged to his friend T.S. Eliot: “there is no such thing as a lost cause because there is no such thing as a gained cause.”

²³ Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), p. 6 – 10.

²⁴ John A. Garraty, “The New Deal, National Socialism, and the Great Depression,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 78, No. 4., Oct. 1973, p. 911. In this selection, Garraty is referencing the New Deal’s Civilian Conservation Corps.

²⁵ Mark C. Henrie, “Russell Kirk and the Conservative Heart,” *The Intercollegiate Review*, Spring / Summer 2003, p. 16.

²⁶ For more on this point, see Chapter 1 of Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* and Paul Goren, “Party Identification and Core Political Values,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 49, No. 4, Oct. 2005, p. 881 – 884. To generalize, the older generation viewed the market as an atomizing force of community; the newer generation viewed the market as a path to prosperity and the building of newer, better communities.

²⁷ Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, p. 258 – 259.

²⁸ As is detailed elsewhere in this dissertation, coined by Burke in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, the “moral imagination” refers to the intuitive power to perceive ethical truths and abiding law in the midst of chaotic experience.

²⁹ Bruce Frohnen (ed), *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), p. 471 – 474 (Entry for Russell Kirk).

³⁰ Russell Kirk, “The Moral Imagination,” *Literature and Belief*, Vol. 1, 1981, p. 37.

³¹ Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, p. 175.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 360.

³³ Russell Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House Publishing, 1967), p. 148 – 150.

³⁴ George A. Panichas (ed), *The Essential Russell Kirk* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), p. 9.

³⁵ “An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs,” reprinted in Peter J. Stanlis (ed), *The Best of Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1963), p. 649 – 652.

³⁶ Peter Viereck, *Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Nostrand, 1956), p. 41.

³⁷ Panichas (ed), *The Essential Russell Kirk*, p. 171. See also *The Conservative Mind*, p. 442.

³⁸ Of special note here is this document: “Responses to the Questionnaire on Religion, March 2, 1992, Sent by Mr. William F. Buckley Jr.” In his lengthy responses to the 19 questions Buckley sent to various conservatives in preparation for his book *Nearer, My God: An Autobiography of Faith*, Kirk states at one

point: “Being congenitally skeptical, I did anticipate moments when I might question my faith.” The answers, however, reveal an attraction to the idea and the reality of the Catholic Sacraments. Private papers of Annette Kirk.

³⁹ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, p. 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 461 – 462 and p. 484 – 488.

⁴¹ Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 159.

⁴² Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, p. 252 – 253.

⁴³ John Adams wrote in an 1813 letter: “Napoleon has lately invented a word, which perfectly expressed my opinion...He calls the project ideology.” *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*: 11th Edition.

⁴⁴ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, p. 83 – 84.

⁴⁵ Russell Kirk, “Burke and the Philosophy of Prescription,” p. 375.

⁴⁶ An entire book section of Time Magazine (Vol. 62, No. 1, July 6, 1953) was dedicated to *The Conservative Mind*. Acknowledging that “Burke’s conservatism was universal in its application,” the review devotes significant space to the British statesman. This positive treatment found that “Kirk tells his story of the conservative stream with the warmth that belongs to it.”

⁴⁷ Russell Kirk, *Prospects for Conservatives* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1989), p. 36 – 37.

⁴⁸ On this point, see two essays by academics that were also personal friends of Kirk: Vigen Guroian, “Moral Imagination, Humane Letters, and the Renewal of Society,” and Gleaves Whitney, “Recovering Rhetoric: How Ideas, Language and Leadership can Triumph in Most Modern Politics.”

⁴⁹ Russell Kirk, “Rhetoricians and Politicians,” *Kenyon Review*, Fall 1964, p. 768. Quoted in “Recovering Rhetoric: How Ideas, Language and Leadership can Triumph in Most Modern Politics,” a lecture by Gleaves Whitney. Heritage Lecture 651, Jan. 14, 2000.

⁵⁰ Russell Kirk, “Ten Conservative Principles,” adapted from *The Politics of Prudence* and available through the Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal. In summaries of his work, these principles are commonly cited, as are the “canons of conservatism.” There is overlap, but later additions are an example of his unwillingness to be tied to formulaic projections.

⁵¹ Panichas (ed), *The Essential Russell Kirk*, p. 23.

⁵² Ibid, p. 23 – 25.

⁵³ The best historical overviews are in the works of Paul Gottfried, Jeffrey Hart, George H. Nash, and Peter Viereck. All are or were academics with long personal and professional involvement with the many figures of American conservatism. See also: Albert Jay Nock, *Our Enemy, The State* (Delavan, WI: Hallberg Publishing, 1983), p. 15. Nock wrote: “The prevailing ideology of the twentieth century, especially strong among the intellectuals but infecting all other ranks as well, is faith in political panaceas for economic and social woes.”

⁵⁴ Interview: George H. Nash, June 10, 2009. Nash credited Jeffrey Hart for this phrasing.

⁵⁵ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, p. 36.

⁵⁶ “This temporal order is only part of a transcendent order; and the foundation of social tranquility is reverence. Veneration lacking, life becomes no more than an interminable battle between usurpation and rebellion.” Ibid, p. 66 – 67.

⁵⁷ Patricia Bizzell & Bruce Herzberg (ed), *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings From Classical Times to the Present* (2nd edition) (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), p. 31.

⁵⁸ Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 46.

⁶⁰ Michael J. Hyde (ed), *The Ethos of Rhetoric* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), p. 43.

⁶¹ Russell Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2004), p. 187.

⁶² I take this generalization from the first chapters of Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*.

Amid the Ideologies: Sourcing Kirk's Political Thought

Conservatism as it is understood in modern societies arose out of a reaction, first to the French Revolution, and second to the impulses of its hugely influential consequences, the seeking large-scale social transformations as a remedy for human restlessness and unhappiness.¹ Within the American post-World War II context of which Russell Kirk loomed so large, James Aune has identified four strands: a traditionalist wing represented by Kirk, southern regionalists such as Richard Weaver and M.E. Bradford; libertarianism, defined by an emphasis on solutions orientated around markets; a “fusionist” wing, so labeled by the effort to fuse capitalism and cultural conservatism; and the “neo-conservatives,” distinguished by a social-scientific focus, secularism, internationalism, and a willingness to accept the principle of the welfare state.² In examining the persuasions of Kirk and what I term traditionalist conservatism,³ the historical background of this work is a story of how American intellectual conservatism, its varied and occasionally contradictory strands made stronger and more cohesive by the landmark publication of *The Conservative Mind* in 1953, was overwhelmed by the politicization of a movement that, particularly in 1980, was forced to confront the challenges of governing.

First, to anchor this analysis, I take Edmund Burke, a relentless scourge of the rapid, large-scale social transformations of the French Revolution, as an organizing explanation for both the fruitfulness and the instability of American conservatism after the Second World War. Kirk's most famous work stated: “conscious conservatism, in the modern sense, did not manifest itself until 1790, with the publication of *Reflections*

on the Revolution in France. In that year the prophetic powers of Burke fixed in the public consciousness, for the first time, the opposing poles of conservation and innovation.”⁴ The tensions of instability within American conservatism I characterize as inflexible ideology against the arguments of caution, prudence, circumstance, and mystery. In this generalization, libertarianism and “neoconservatism” contain ideology and rigidity, while traditionalism is guided by the cautious, circumstantial prudence thought by Kirk to be exemplified by Burke. And “fusionism” is the attempt to merge such varied strands into an electoral coalition. Second, so as to inform the rhetorical analysis of Kirk’s persuasions, I highlight the Roman rhetorician Cicero, a figure Kirk also highly praised. This was due to the appeals of reason of the moral “natural law” combined with the “natural” affections implanted by the divine, so as to guide human action by ethical norms.⁵ Cicero, Kirk, and Burke “thought” as a poet does in prose: through metaphor, story, and historical appeal.

The aim of this section is to analyze the “Ciceronian” and “Burkean” relationship between rhetorical prudence and public effect. I contend that Kirk’s persuasive goal was to present a civic republican version of the orator as an ethical representative of the community. He was not as “great” or as consequential a figure as Cicero or Burke; but I will argue that he followed their example. This is to say that Kirk occupied space as a publicly political figure somehow “set apart” from politics, and as an advocate of a natural law tradition reverent of the wisdoms of past generations amid the ideologies and the hubristic confusions of modernity. My argument, then, is for the distinctiveness of Burke and Cicero (but Burke especially, given that his writings were the beginning of

modern conservatism⁶) and, in following that distinctiveness, for the labeling of Kirk's persuasive goals, inspired by certain historical example and thought, as "associational," "imaginative," and a variant of the "postmodern." While more comprehensively considered in other sections, it is beneficial at this point to offer a definition of the "traditionalist conservative" sentiment.

Defining Traditionalist Conservative Sentiment

In my view, this sentiment of conservatism may be defined as the negation of ideology, the secularization of the doctrine of original sin, the cautious sentiment tempered by prudence, the product of organic, local human organization observing and reforming its customs, the distaste for a priori principle disassociated from historical experience, the partaking of the mysteries of free will, divine guidance, and human agency by existing in but not of the confusions of modern society, and the understanding that there is no framework of action, no tenet, no theory, and no article of faith that may be applied to human problems. Culture is more important than politics; and family, generational wisdom, and local community serve as better guides to problem solving than theory and systematic application. By this view, much of modernity and its stylistic descendents are biased as the defiance of common experience, as seemingly endless experiments based in theory and speculation. Instead, traditions – practices based in experience – are perceived as more likely to succeed and as more likely to correspond with an innate desire for beauty and order.⁷

Without echoes and remembrance of our human experiences, the traditionalist conservative might ask, where is eternal life? Much of the modern human is a tourist, a

sampler, a “chooser” of taste and fashion consistently and fundamentally unnourished. The convolutions of the human experience will defy the reductionisms of modernism, from the many varieties of Marxism to utilitarianism to architectural “cleansing,” if allowed to do so. A reality beyond our experience, a welcome of mystery and shunning of totalizing propositions, is for Kirk revealed in historical circumstances. He wrote in a letter to Jerry Pournelle, a political theorist, essayist, and intellectual protégée, “There remains in this country a large body of support for an imaginative conservatism. Though the odds are against us, we may succeed in saving a good deal from the wreck of the modern world... Surely we have a hard row to hoe. And we may fail. But we are put into this world to do battle... I suspect, indeed, that the modern age will come to smash; and then we will have to build afresh, upon old principles.”⁸ Through the imagination, a healing begins to take place.

Surveying a century he bemoaned as wrecked by ideology, Kirk urged “repair” to virtues so that the twenty first century “can become a time of renewal and recovery.” This would be accomplished by an end to “ideological fascination and return to politics as the art of the possible,” a spiritual reinvigoration that “may teach men and women afresh what it is to be fully human, a little lower than the angels.” This “recovery of order,” a turning away from “the destructive mind,” depended upon “our mentality and our sentiments, and our powers of persuasion.”⁹ As a self-styled “Bohemian Tory” and lifelong resident of his ancestral, rural Michigan home who never learned to drive, his sentiments resisted an uprooting of standards and norms. Kirk warned of embracing planning and shallow emotional appeal at the peril of an imaginative core that could

prompt truth to become gradually known. Through this embrace, the faddish freedoms that supposedly liberate from the past are, in effect, an absence of place. These reduce humans to the small, superficial, and unimportant, granting little more than the illusionary yet always tempting falsehood that life is a monologue and that one is capable of creating, or even directing, a destiny. What is needed, Kirk wrote, was greater skepticism of the apostles of progress and greater scorn to the notions that politics may be reduced to a set of problems that our rational intelligences may solve.¹⁰

He conveyed that no cold, synthetic creation such as government would ever accumulate sufficient knowledge or goodness to “solve” anything. But the better comprehension of place, of belonging, and of a more properly constituted order of the soul would help to build a more just social and political order. The “positive law” should be in communion with the “natural law,” its content set by an unchangeable nature. And the need for persons to be in association with each other and local attachments should be respected so that a flourishing human life could be built in mutual support with the community. It is not the person, this is to say, that must attempt to usher in the Kingdom of God. That is the charge of the supernatural community, not the task of the polis, the natural community that is represented by the organizations of governance. Such sentiments bring us, finally, to Kirk’s appreciation of the civic disposition and public conduct of Burke and Cicero.

Imagination in Historical Reading

Kirk’s consideration of the “superior law” placed Burke and Cicero as enunciators of the *jus naturale*, the law of the universe of which the laws of humanity

could only imperfectly manifest. The “higher” happiness was moral happiness and the causes of suffering were moral evils.¹¹ He connected Burke’s “natural right” to the Ciceronian *jus naturale*, reinforced by the developments of Christian dogma and English common law doctrine. Though he did not associate Cicero with any modern political thought, Kirk associated the two statesmen as “anti-rationalists” asserting that natural right was human custom conforming to divine intent.¹² Burke’s accomplishment, he wrote in *The Conservative Mind*, was the expression of a principle of order, an “anticipatory refutation of utilitarianism, positivism, and pragmatism.” Citing a talent for social prediction, his Burke foresaw the revolutions of France as no culmination of an enlightenment but as the inception of a moral convulsion. And, like Cicero, “to check it, he adapted the reverential view of society.” Against the principle of utility, where the law was “treated like mathematics or physics, made a tool of convenience,” stood the “old illusions that law had a supernatural sanction, an origin superior to man, the Ciceronian and Scholastic notion that it was a human groping after divine enactment” that must not be “dismissed in the interest of efficiency in an industrial age.”¹³

I label such a historical reading as an enterprise of imagination – not necessarily incorrect, but a simplified explanation to suit a purpose seen as vital and moral. More specifically, Kirk claimed actual, historical performances (in the case of Cicero, rhetorical persuasion) for the purposes of a constituted meaning centered upon cultural inheritances he thought more properly ordered. And as with Burke, this rhetorical enterprise was made more “alive” and more memorable by the vitality of its language and by the power of its imagery. Kirk’s prudence and circumstance, rather than

inflexible principle, meant an effort to create and enrich a conservative intellectual tradition through the wisdom of ancestors. He was labeled “The American Cicero” by southern agrarian writer M.E. Bradford and historian Forrest McDonald, who wrote in *National Review*: “Every additional finding moves us closer toward a whole from which internal contradictions and tensions are entirely absent. We shall never get there, of course, for what Kirk is seeking, ultimately, is the Truth; and it is inherent in the conservative way of viewing things that the Truth is not for man to know.”¹⁴ Kirk’s arguments and phraseologies in advocacy of localism, civility, mystery, virtue, and the good did not advance specific solutions but were constructed to advance sentiment and “humility.” Such dispositions he connected with his understanding of natural law, as informed by historical example.

Such an understanding of natural law recognized an unseen order protective of the “permanent things” and with the unchanging transcendent at its foundation. “When the time is out of joint,” the teachings of traditionalists such as Cicero and Aquinas about the “law of nature” might “diminish man’s inhumanity unto man.”¹⁵ Kirk’s extended deliberation of Cicero in *The Roots of American Order* commended him as a “man of brilliance” and a “model of republican virtue.” Each “weary” of empire, he believed that “with Cicero fell the Republic.”¹⁶ He articulated that Cicero’s works contained the most detailed of early discussions of natural law. Kirk defined the Ciceronian awareness of natural law as recourse to the laws of nature, that which kept Roman law from becoming archaic as Roman society changed. With its “harmonious character and facility for reasoned enlargement,” Rome’s natural law tradition outlasted its unstable political

structures. Human laws, he wrote, were only copies of natural laws. “Those eternal laws are peculiar to man, for only man, on earth, is a rational being. The test of validity for the state’s laws is their conformity to reason.” For Kirk, the “natural law” was the interpretation of the “customary” or “positive law” in the light of “general ethical principles.” Natural law was not a written code, but rather a means for doing justice by referring to the general norms for mankind.¹⁷

Kirk and Cicero

In finding a kinship with Cicero, a man he wrote of as strongly attached to tradition, prudence, precedent, and constitutional order, and in highlighting the influence of his thought upon the American founders, Kirk was able to locate Cicero comfortably within his own notion of an American founding of British and “Burkean” character. The “principles” of Roman law forming elements of Anglo common law, a practice superior, for example, to the revolutionary zeal of France, was a common theme of his writings. In *America’s British Culture*, he wrote: “British and American jurisprudence was much influenced, formerly at least, by the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero; and British judges, reading Roman law surreptitiously despite repeated fulminations from the Crown, were not immune from the doctrines of Gaius, Ulpian, and the Corpus Juris. But obviously the juridical system of the United States is not copied directly from the Roman system of courts and procedures, any more that the Constitution of the United States is an embodiment of Greek political philosophy.”¹⁸

In Kirk’s rendering, Cicero was part of a group of “ten exemplary conservatives, with much diversity of talents among them.” While acknowledging that the descriptive

word “conservative” was not a term of politics in antiquity, he wrote that Cicero the philologist might not have objected to the description, as the English word was derived from the Latin “conservator,” signifying one who preserves from injury, violence, and infraction. And as one who died for the “old Roman constitution,” he continued, those defending constitutional order have looked toward Cicero as their exemplar. Kirk held him in esteem for his devotion to the “natural, moral law.” At the end, “the high old Roman virtue was his.”¹⁹ As such, Cicero might legitimately be cited in a “conservative” context because he lived in a “Burkean” moment when everything was “going to hell” and he was trying to preserve traditions under siege at the crashing of his own civilization. And so I classify the great Roman orator, the great Irish statesman, and Kirk as part of the broad, humanistic, and stoic (and, later, Christian) tradition of the West – one that valued basic natural rights and was incessantly called into question by variations of utilitarian and utopian thinking.²⁰ For Burke, one of the most monstrous errors of the French Revolution was the reference of political theory to a hypothetical, abstract of physical nature, man’s supposedly original state. And to remodel civil society from a supposedly simple and uniform original state was to ignore organically and locally developed differences, preferences, and loyalties.²¹ “By their violent haste and their defiance of the process of nature, they are delivered over blindly to every projector and adventurer, to every alchemist and empiric,”²² Burke scolded the French National Assembly in *Reflections*.

Although Burke felt his opponents did not grasp the distinction between “traditional” natural law in following in the shadow of Cicero and “revolutionary natural

rights,” it has been argued by scholars that the parliamentarian understood this distinction from early efforts in France for large-scale revolution, and that the basis of his attacks on the revolutionists were the violations of the “natural law.” He believed that moral arguments should be drawn from “human nature,” not abstract reasoning; and civil society was only “natural” in being demanded by human nature toward a social ideal attached to an established order and virtue.²³ In Kirk’s conceptions, Burke advocated for a moral law whose archetype is found in God, derived from an eternal and immutable law and not imposed but gifted by a giving of nature impressed by invariable law. Francis Canavan wrote this view of natural law, which Burke most explicitly stated in his speech opening the Warren Hastings trial, was “strongly reminiscent of Cicero’s, but differs significantly from the Roman orator’s in that Burke assumes the Christian doctrine of divine creation as the source of the moral order.”²⁴

To examine the “Ciceronian” and “Burkean” relationship between what I have termed “rhetorical prudence” and “traditionalist conservative” public effect is not to only argue for the distinctiveness of Burke and Cicero as an influencer of a strand of modern political and social sentiment. It is to also chronicle an idealization of political constitution and an ancestral method of social existence relevant for its consistent, pervasive inspiration of sentiment in Kirk’s writings. Michael Leff’s article “Cicero’s *Pro Murena* and the Strong Case for Rhetoric” is a piece of scholarship that usefully explains the possibility of connecting the Roman’s rhetorical practice with “current issues in the study of rhetoric and public policy.” He writes that “Cicero delivered the *pro Murena* in 63 B.C.E., the year of his consulship, and in response to an extraordinary

set of circumstances.” This speech was an articulation of a philosophical approach to practice. Cicero’s rhetorical challenge was sensitive and difficult in execution: defend a guilty party being prosecuted by friends and allies. According to Leff: “He needed to make a sufficiently plausible legal defense for the jurors to vote as their prudential interests inclined them to vote. In order to succeed in this effort, he had to highlight the political implications of the case without violating the decorum of legal argument, and he had to weaken the authority of the two leading prosecutors, while, for political and personal reasons, he could not offend them deeply or permanently.”²⁵ Leff continues that readers “can attest to the rhetorical power of this blend,” of mixing “playful attacks against the professional and philosophical pursuits (but not the persons)” of the prosecutors, including the powerful Cato, “deadly serious emotional appeals,” and “deft maneuvering around the specific legal issues.” Even so, Cicero’s appeal need not be read as “pure, unalloyed examples of rhetorical manipulation.”²⁶ The content and organizing principles of the speech were not ideologist but rather, in Leff’s conclusion, “a kind of judgment specifically connected with prudence, decorum, and action where rhetorical skills are seen not just as instruments of persuasion but as equipment for living.”²⁷

And so a plausible case might be made, despite the absence in ancient Rome of direct resemblances of modern Western constitutional liberty, for a “Ciceronian” support of the idea, and of the lived sentiment, of values to be faithfully commemorated. These would include tradition, guidance by accumulated wisdom, constitutionalism, and a civic republican vision of the orator as an “ethical representative” in the formation and endurance of a beneficial community of persons in association. Through the undertaking

of an ancestral attachment to the generalizations of the uncertain, dangerous public spheres of Cicero and Burke, the persuasions and ethics of these two figures lead, I believe, down a similar path, facilitating Kirk's imaginative, literary kinship of shared sentiments.²⁸ This was a path of skepticism and uncertainty, a sense that there was core of mystery to the human experience, and a sense that story and imagery can persuade at least as well as logical, more strictly factual arguments.

Tradition and historical appeals, in other words, could serve as a sturdy foundation in a confusing world. In defending counsel-elect Murena against electoral malpractice, Cicero's task to neutralize the authority of Cato and Sulpicius without earning their antipathy was dependent not upon facts but upon character. According to James May, this source of argumentative material "comes closest of all Ciceronian speeches to the native Latin oratorical tradition that appears to have valued the character of the litigants more highly than the facts in establishing one's case." Further, his oratory continuously appealed to traditional Roman political and social contexts.²⁹ Connecting such rhetorical practice with contemporary issues in the study of rhetoric and public policy is a de-emphasis of "facts" and an emphasis of custom. The emphasis of ethos and custom positions the orator (even if indirectly given the absence of such a claim as a part of the speech) as an example to be emulated, as a living personification of a high value. From the first of the speech, Cicero seeks to establish his own claim to be the one who upholds and practices what is morally and properly Roman.³⁰ "Speaking a few words on my own behalf," Cicero stated:

Today I pray again to those same immortal gods that Murena's acquittal may preserve him for his consulship, that your opinion given in your verdict may tally with the wishes

of the Roman people expressed in their votes, and that this agreement may bring peace, calm, and tranquility and harmony to yourselves and to the people of Rome. Believing that that customary election prayer, hallowed by the auspices taken by a counsel, has the force and religious weight that the majesty of the Republic demands, I prayed too that the election over which I presided should bring to the successful candidates all good fortune and prosperity. Accordingly, gentlemen, since the immortal gods have either transferred to you their whole power or at least have allowed you to share it, I now commend to your protection the counsel whom I previously entrusted to the immortal gods. He will thus be defended by the voice of the man who declared him consul and preserve along with the office conferred upon him by the Roman people the safety of yourselves and of the whole citizen body.³¹

The appeal to authority of Cicero's defense, his own and that of the Republic, was a call for a precarious community of political and social process to remain united by commonly held, civic principles of justice. The appreciation of these principles was necessary to maintain order for the Roman commonwealth. Conceding the prestige of Cato, "the root and core of the whole prosecution," his speech attacked a flaw that might assist prosecutorial abuse, a commitment to an austere version of Stoic philosophy that could, Leff writes, "manifest itself as inflexible, rigid adherence to principle that renders these men unable to exercise prudent judgment and adapt to changing circumstances." The systematic contrast between his agility in handling circumstances and the more inflexible positions of his opponents suggests that his rhetorical sensibility is not just a means to win cases but a kind of political virtue as well.³² Cicero stated that "wise and far-sighted jurors" have always resisted conduct similar to Cato's condemnations:

I do not like a prosecutor to come into court with overweening power, an excessive force, overwhelming influence or too much popularity. Let all these assets be used to deliver the innocent, protect the weak and help those in trouble; for the trial and destruction of fellow-citizens, let them be rejected. Yet it will perhaps be said that Cato would not have agreed to prosecute had he not first reached his decision upon the case. It will be creating an unjust precedent, gentlemen, and a wretched state of affairs for men on trial if the prosecutor's judgment is to count against the defendant as presumption of guilt.³³

Cicero's implicit warning was to watch what could become of the Republic. This manner of posturing, the presentation of guidelines for caution and pleas for good conduct as informed by history and tradition, inspired Kirk. *The Roots of American Order* in particular investigated alternatives, within the context of natural law and revelation, to the equation of right with human will, and justice with power. Kirk's reliance on natural law and revelation was sourced in skepticism of the promises of rigid ideology and of the motives of a fallen humanity. Modernity, on the whole, was for him shoddy and shallow, hopelessly unmoored.³⁴ Faith in natural law, and in a revealed yet mysterious transcendence, upheld moral and social order. Cicero's warning, Kirk wrote, must be on the minds of the modern American. His Cicero lamented beloved Rome and found it wanting due to a descent of morality and to the public corruption aided by unscrupulous laws. For Kirk, a good commonwealth requires virtuous citizens, which was an increasingly difficult calling during a time when the old morality was battered by political disorder and corruption. His reading of the famed orator claimed him as "anything but a revolutionary."

Yet Kirk approved, in circumstances such as the American Declaration of Independence or an attempted German overthrow of their genocidal dictator, of a Ciceronian appeal to fight an entrenched order that has ceased to recognize "the moral law, the law of right reason, the law of man's nature, the source of justice."³⁵ Nonetheless, there is a difficulty and a reason why I term his historical and political writing "imaginative" and "literary" ahead of other characterizations. This is the lack of an in-depth, consistent treatment of how a person may discover, apprehend and obey the

dictates of natural law. It may be that Kirk for his purposes was satisfied to only state that moral principles embodied in the natural law tradition were worth pursuing personally and civically. If so, the epistemological complexities centered upon concepts of intuition and human reasoning were not as much of a concern.³⁶ He confidently assumed, in *The Roots of American Order* as elsewhere, that natural law traditions beginning with Jewish revelation were of a supreme and divine origin, their moral precepts wholly consistent with “permanent things.” This confidence is unlikely to be matched by those not in accord with such sentiment, rendering his persuasions more limited than they might otherwise be.

In suggesting that the commonality of historical appeals, the valuation of transcendent “natural law” traditions,³⁷ and skepticism of ideological-based power as “civilization collapses” placed Cicero and Burke in line with a directly similar set of sentiments of traditionalist conservatism, it is important to realize that Kirk “thought in images.” One critic argued that “it is not merely an obvious affection for Edmund Burke that links Russell Kirk with the eighteenth century;” there is also a literary and inventive style, a versatility of a “of a more leisurely age” that makes him an odd fit for the historians of his century.³⁸ His response, illuminative of his treatment of Cicero and Burke, is worth quoting from at length:

My ‘historicism’ (something of a devil-term), or my repairing to historical sources of understanding of the human condition, is not really produced by a belief that everything grows out of process; rather, I began to relish historical studies, particularly of a philosophical bent, quite early in life – and I write about what I know. I agree with John Lukacs, in his *Historical Consciousness*, that historical writing may become the chief mode of literary expression in the dawning age – and may work a renewal of our apprehension – of the inner order and the outer order. The future is unknowable, and the present escapes as I sit at this typewriter: so the past, including past revelation and the

insights of dead men, is our principal source of wisdom. We work within our limitations, and I never have obtained the prophetic afflatus.³⁹

To understand Kirk's writing, I believe, it is necessary to understand his firm, consistent opposition to utilitarianism and reductionism. He professed Cicero to have lived in a "Burkean" moment, as the motifs of moral imagination and permanent things crumbled against enemies of a moral and constitutional civic republicanism. This is "what he knew" – threats to "inner order" and "outer order," an opposition to the proper ordering of the soul that extended virtue out into the public sphere. Leff agrees that in Britain and the United States Cicero has been appropriated by some conservatives,⁴⁰ and the legitimacy of doing so is not the point as much as a demonstration of how a constituted meaning was grounded in history for the sake of persuasive legitimacy. This, combined with Kirk's imagery, memorable and vivacious language, poetic sense, and repetitive consistency, resulted in a contemplative analysis of "Ciceronian" idealism that a reader inclined to the same sort of traditionalist sentiment might find formidable. Utilitarianism and reductionism were not, he communicated across his four decades as a professional writer and "man of letters," principled; they were coldly destructive to the human spirit which desired to follow an unseen moral and social order.⁴¹ The mysteries of existence guided toward skepticism of planners and abstractions for those who value principles of "enduring order": following the threads of classical thought, knowledge and respect for tradition and generational wisdom as a leading requisite for public office, protections of constitutionalism, and an ethical conduct of public oratory.

In thinking through Cicero as an inspiration for traditionalist conservatism, what it means for an orator to "serve ethically" begins with the setting of an example. Leff

characterizes Cato's prosecution as a "systematic philosophy" and a "rigid, purified ethic that would suppress pleasure to the demands of reason." By contrast, "Cicero retorted that Romans inhabit a different, more comfortable ethical world, one in which values oscillate, where pleasure and toil alternate, where duties are understood in relation to a realistic assessment of occasions and situations." Such is a political ethic "conveyed through tradition and connected to a living culture."⁴² In Kirk's conceptions, traditions are living; and a means for change is a means for conservation. The means for change, however, were "Ciceronian" in the resistance of turning idealism to formula and ideology and in the long-lived embodiment of a rooted civic sentiment. Causes of public decay were directly related to a decline of moral virtue. I believe it makes sense that Kirk would model himself after Cicero and Burke, statesmen who lived by a conception of what the good citizen is (even to the edge of public disgrace) and defenders of public order amid the threats of chaos. This is how the popularizer and imaginative organizer of American traditionalist conservatism, the man who once signed a letter to a historian "Cordially, Marcus Tullius Kirk,"⁴³ viewed his role as a public figure – his "virtue" was self-conscious and stoic, with an air of falsehood for those not inclined to share his assumptions and biases.⁴⁴

Cicero's passage of warning, full of rhetorical flourish, was reminiscent of Kirk in its attack on judgment and in its regretful bemoan for a deficit of cautionary prudence. Among the communicative points of Cicero was the presentation of a different example, one of necessity in the preservation of the community good, for "the Trojan horse is within our walls; yes, within our very walls; but never while I am counsel will you be

surprised in your sleep”: “You say that the public interest led you to start proceedings. I readily, accept, Cato, that you have been brought here by your well-known patriotism and by the belief that it was in the national interest, but you slip up because you did not stop to think. What I am doing, gentlemen, I am doing not only out of friendship with Lucius Murena and for his good name but also for the sake of peace, quite, unity, liberty, our preservation, in short the very lives of us all. This I publicly declare and I call upon you to bear witness to it.”⁴⁵ A republican constitution as a living example of an ideal acclaimed by great minds, writes Thomas Mitchell, was for Cicero a guarantee of the rights and liberties inherent in the definition of *respublica* and necessary to satisfy the inherent political needs in the nature of man.⁴⁶

For Cicero, the safeguards in the laws and traditions of the Roman Republic should be in accord with the higher aspects of human nature, that which differentiates man from other animals. An orderly regulation, as demanded by nature, granted an appreciation of beauty and harmony, impelling achievement in the world. Mitchell writes of Cicero’s idea of a “balanced regulation of the appetitive soul by reason:” “More specifically, it meant the presence in human actions of order, consistency, and moderation arising out of a state of soul in which the appetites and impulses were in harmony with each other and with the soul’s controlling power, reason.”⁴⁷ And it is by the espousal of a “moderated” wisdom as informed by custom and tradition (albeit for Kirk one infused by “Judeo-Christian” revelation) that some modern conservatives have claimed Cicero and Burke, just as any figure seen to “reason” from moral arguments drawn from human nature might be claimed by those seeking to ground their opinions in

history.⁴⁸ Kirk's building of a historical story as part of a larger persuasive effort (or, perhaps, as part of a claim to legitimacy) placed Burke as its foundation and was inclusive of Cicero through an admiration for his skepticism of governing powers and embrace of tradition within the context of an "anti-rationalist" sentiment that looked to the institutions of history for guidance.

It might also be argued that Cicero's rhetorical conduct developed arguments for a "natural sociability" that inspired Kirk's "communitarian" and "traditionalist" mindset. Joy Connolly contends that Cicero is a "peculiarly communal vision of the body in action in the public view." The reason is that a "Platonic concern with the internal state of the soul" was supplemented "with an emphasis on how the whole self appears to others."⁴⁹ George H. Nash, a historian of American conservatism, has contended that Kirk's persuasions originated from a lived persona embedded in his upbringing. Heavily influenced by classical literature and philosophy from adolescence, his fascination with "old things" was an inspirational element directly applied to the conduct of professional and personal life. Although some thought he was "too self-consciously anti-modern," engaging in an antiquated posture and pose too far beyond the mainstream (which was a barrier to persuasion), Nash believes he genuinely "possessed the power to inhabit different parts of the past."⁵⁰ And although the parallels and inspiration drawn from Kirk's conduct and writing are clearer with Burke, I still detect a self-conscious application of "classic" (that is, Ciceronian) rhetorical public effect.

Surveying the course of Kirk's writing career, one finds the constant call for prudence and historical guidance as sociable persons, born into an inescapable social

world, seek association and engage in community action. Similarly, Connolly writes that key to Cicero's views about republican citizenship and the relationship to ethical self-formation was a view of citizenship, like eloquence, which "is the practice of spectacular virtue in the course of an active life in the setting of a political community." This is to say that Cicero was not principally concerned in his rhetorical writings with the ethical formation of the private individual. He was also concerned with a civic ideal whose dynamic was reflective of the republican constitution.⁵¹ The reasoning of my association of such a sentiment with more modern thinkers (meaning thinkers of the liberal Western tradition claimed by conservatives, beginning with Burke) is scrutinized further in other chapters, but a quotation by philosopher Jude P. Dougherty contains an apt summation of how some sympathizers connected Kirk to the past:

Though all would admit that the present is necessarily shaped by the past, attitudes toward the inherited vary, and those attitudes in turn govern behavior. Respect for ancestry, heritage, or tradition determines concretely the emphasis placed on the study of history, languages, and art, and on the observance of religious and civic ritual. Cicero, reflecting on qualifications for leadership in the commonwealth, made a knowledge of and respect for tradition a prime requisite for office. Such knowledge is required of those who would assume positions of leadership for without it they will have no framework from which to judge. For to judge is to measure, to compare, to assess. Judging requires a standard against which a measure is taken. For more than one generation Russell Kirk has been both a Livy and a Cicero leading his readers to an appreciation of the time-transcendent.⁵²

For historian Forrest McDonald and several others who paid tribute to Kirk shortly after his death, the mission of this "Bohemian Tory" was to enrich the American conservative tradition by seeking the wisdom of their intellectual ancestors. The inventiveness of this enterprise was to correlate and defend the circumstances and challenges of those figures to contemporary times. At the foundation of these

connections were the sentiments McDonald has summarized as follows: belief in a transcendent moral order, social continuity, the principle of prescription, prudential and natural change as opposed to coerced change on the basis of abstract theoretical systems, acceptance of variety and inequality following the imperfectability of humanity and a view of society as a living organism, rejection of the mechanistic model of society fashionable in the eighteenth century, and a distrust of social and political tampering as the communities of society work to heal ailments absent the heavy hand of government. Casting aside some views tempting to those weary of large government, Kirk was an articulate defender of society as a vibrant reflector of order.⁵³

For Kirk, who looked to Cicero as the exemplar defender of constitutional order, such were the models of virtue that should endure in the conservative's consciousness. He urged the American conservative movement, ever tempted by ideology, to follow Cicero's exhortation and example, referring to the defense of the "moral imagination" and the "permanent things."⁵⁴ By this view, conservatism in modern societies as a reactionary force was not a reaction based on an overly nostalgic romance with the past and distrust for efforts of reform and change. It was, more precisely, an attitude toward social existence that encouraged acceptance of the realities and limitations of the human condition through a respect for the "passed down" orders, beginning with a transcendent one. Herein is Kirk's claim to Cicero and Burke as "exemplary conservatives." Leff distinguishes Cicero's rhetorical conduct as one of complexity and multiple functions, and as a place "where prudence and rhetoric meet in action."⁵⁵ Kirk, I think, likewise recognized this as he sought to emulate "prudence" in his persuasive writing and

persona, and as he wrote about Cicero and Burke. The rhetoric of Burke, he wrote in his biography of T.S. Eliot, was permeated by a distinguishing of the savage from the civilized through a possession of the moral imagination; and drawn from centuries of human history and shared experience, “these ideas of the moral imagination are expressed afresh from age to age.”⁵⁶

Kirk’s Ethical Perceptions

An enduring source of inspiration that elevated to “first principles” as it guided towards virtue, wisdom, and ultimately redemption, this imagination was ultimately for Kirk an ethical perception. Given the aim of his “moral imagination” to apprehend the most enduring and proper order of the soul and of the community, as poet or an artist might exercise their talents – beyond the barriers of private experience and momentary events⁵⁷ – it is not surprising he would take pieces of consequential historical figures for the purposes of persuasive application to the problems of contemporary times. It was Kirk’s view, after all, that few problems were truly new, given the inevitable disappointments of a fallen human nature. And remedies, just as in antiquity, required the articulation of words. Through, in part, the strength and attractiveness of language and argument were ideas and sentiments born. Political principles cannot be dissociated from the methods of persuasion, he wrote, and some genuine connection should subsist between the “order of rhetoric” and the “order of society.” Otherwise, “false phrases” open the way to “false measures.”⁵⁸ The utilization of apt words in effective arrangement was Kirk’s imitation of Cicero and Burke, among other “conservative” leaders.

The “permanent things” of truth, goodness, beauty, and love endured because they moved the soul of a person deeply and inexpressibly, like a word of poetry or art. And the “good” rhetorician knew this, instinctively, weaving insight with effectiveness. In Kirk’s mind, he, Cicero, and Burke were like a lamp lighting the way for the “better angels” of human nature. And the act of speaking was an ethical enterprise, as rhetoric at its best seeks union with permanent things.⁵⁹ Cicero often spoke to an audience knowledgeable of rhetoric. A large part of the orator’s audience shared with him an education in the art of persuasion.⁶⁰ This point is relevant to Burke and Kirk in that their audiences were likewise narrow and educated; the former speaking most famously to constituent voters and parliamentarians and the latter communicating through speech and writing most effectively to those of “traditionalist temperament.”⁶¹ The shared sentiment and action Kirk might have described as transcendent was a public effect of ethical conduct and accomplishment advocating for wisdom. In his dialogue *On the Character of the Orator*, Cicero stated: “In my opinion, indeed, no man can be an orator possessed of every praiseworthy accomplishment, unless he has attained the knowledge of every thing important, and of all liberal arts, for his language must be ornate and copious from knowledge, since, unless there be beneath the surface matter understood and felt by the speaker, oratory becomes an empty and almost puerile flow of words.”⁶² Kirk took from these famed orators a public function of character, one self-created and organized around his sentiments of order and decency.

The influence of Roman rhetoric upon the political traditions of Britain and the United States is a vast, fascinating topic. Scholars will continue to discuss how the

rhetoricians of antiquity used rhetoric to think through public concerns in ways relevant to more “modern” claims that citizens possess the capacity to act as interpreters and enforcers of public morality and civic identity. The “speaking self” of Enlightenment liberalism included texts of rhetoric that speak, according to Connolly, “a language generated out of and generating communal and reciprocal truth; these texts insist on the importance of the style of the verbal connectives that construct us as political entities in a community.” The reason is that language gives the self possession of a critical self-directedness, a command of cultural ideals, a capacity to conform to impersonal rules and moral norms, and a resolve to act on the basis of personal deliberation. Cicero’s narratives were with eloquence, and thus with community.⁶³ I argue that Kirk, in following heroes such as Cicero and Burke, as in his own conjectures, similarly (even if inadvertently) articulated a philosophical and ethical approach to practice. This approach conveyed that to abuse language was to abuse reality and to harm the formation of an enduring, satisfying associational sociability.

In other words, Kirk’s outlook was an approach to civic affairs of a “conservative mentality.” This way of perceiving the social and political world, as Neal Wood has written of Cicero’s social and political thought, was the idealization of the ancestral constitution and ancestral life as fashioned by previous generations. “It is the sacred archetype of social truth and civic virtue, an awesome monad of morality and utility from which we deviate at our own peril. Our social and moral duty is to safeguard and adapt such a priceless inheritance to present circumstances, and ready it for passage to posterity.”⁶⁴ A purpose of the state was its people’s preservation in their traditions, in the

observation of values such as fidelity to family, friends, and country. Tradition, defined Jaroslav Pelikan, was the living faith of the dead, and traditionalism remains the dead faith of the living. Throughout human history it has provided the perennial themes and the key metaphors by which creative expression has been preserved from trivialization and banality.⁶⁵ The American intellectual conservative tradition contained wide room for inclusion of an array of argument and practice, some of them (especially on foreign and monetary policy) directly in contradiction with one another. Others include intellectual and moral excellence, worry that democratic practices and egalitarian norms threaten individual liberty, the claims of religion and its ensuing role in citizen education, defense of market-orientations such as capitalism, and stinging critiques of the atomization and radicalism of capitalism to established orders.⁶⁶

In light of these traditions, Kirk's connection of principle to the methods of persuasion, and of rhetorical order to societal order, is difficult to generalize. This is due to the lack of an exhaustive, systematic approach. There were, instead, dispositions and sentiments, appeals to history, and poetic touches in the conjuring of imagery. And yet the word tradition is, I suggest, relevant to the Roman republicanism of antiquity when accepted on Kirk's terms. Skepticism of planners and rationalists, then as now, takes one to the long-developed, continuous discussions of heritage and natural right, to the dead faiths of the living as a refuge from the hubristic confusions of the world. Engaged imaginatively, the informed rhetorician speaking to enduring truths and accumulated wisdom was a dominant, robust energy for the good. This was an aid to the progression of a more true liberty and economic freedom, for he thought that prescriptive freedom

cannot endure without a moral order. And therein, I believe, was Kirk's admiration for the cautious constitutionalism of Cicero and Burke. In their persuasions, he discovered eloquence for a coherent and beneficial freedom, one sanctioned by and in conformity with a transcendent moral order. The pursuit of individual desire was to only gratify the temporary and fleeting, a servile to appetite.

Intellect, art, and morals were not, for Kirk, distinct. Those eras in which humanity extended their devotion to excessive production and social planning were usually "punished by bad taste and bad morals."⁶⁷ Finding a "common patrimony" with Roman sources (and with Cicero especially) he placed in the public sphere the idea of a healthy tension between the claims of order and the claims of freedom, to be reconciled with an accumulated wisdom beginning with the Hebrew and Greek philosophers. He held that across time, intellectual communities formed by natural law doctrines and great works of humane literature formed an ethical cast that worked upon the imagination, teaching what it means to be human. This was the common faith, common system of law and politics, and common body of literature that made one civilization of normative and that built cultural bonds outlasting dynasties, empires, and philosophies. Naming Cicero and Burke as defenders of the "unbought grace of life, Kirk hailed them as thinkers forced in times of trouble to examine first principles as they attempted to avoid the imminent collapse of order and restore a measure of justice and security.⁶⁸ And in assuming that man's "most profound longings are for eternal verities and a high justice that governs all things," he updated for his audience a "Christian and Ciceronian concept of Divine Justice."⁶⁹

Kirk's positioning of Cicero was, throughout his writings, in the context of a "just society." Cicero represented a "higher form of republicanism" – preserving the charitable aims of democratic ideals but talking of order, duty, and honor. As the forms of government suit the traditions and organic experiences of the people, he thought the freedom of Burke and Cicero does "not stoop to the degradation of the democratic dogma; it will not contest the sovereignty of God, which is absolute over us all." Humanity, following natural law harmonious with proper order, need not be reduced to "the condition of equipollent units upon the dreary plain of absolute equality." The making of "truly human persons," something more than a "production-consumption equation," required joining alongside the investigations into questions of moral worth of such figures – which schools are loath to do.⁷⁰ Kirk applauded the Roman orator as one opposed to the troubling currents of his age that should inspire students to what Cicero, in *On the Character of the Orator*, termed "a judgment arising from a natural sense of what is right."⁷¹

To extract from Cicero judgments applicable to the arguments of American conservatism and to the concerns of modern societies is to employ the imagination. It makes more sense as a matter of substance and consistency when Kirk's veneration – that is, his worldview, including his persona – is embraced. Roman men of rhetoric and philosophy, he wrote in his memoirs, found it their duty to "enter ardently into the politics of the commonwealth." But as a man of letters possessing no political talent or administrative ability, Kirk followed their example through a refurbishment of imagination, so as to infuse into the era "some element of poetry." His history was not

“historical” as a historian might approach the discipline. Surveying Kirk’s career (particularly his retelling of the past), the distinctiveness of Burke and Cicero is found in the frequency and consistency of his positive reference.⁷² The bearing of their “natural law” advocacy bore fruit for traditionalist conservatism through Kirk’s considerations of the sentiments, biases, and postures of locality, civility, caution, mystery, virtue, civic morality, and the common good.

His disdain for rational social and political planning and high regard for custom and tradition sought validation in many figures, but first and foremost, to judge from his output of socio-political writing, in Burke and Cicero. Secular venerations of such statesman might endeavor to rouse, Kirk wrote, the political and moral imagination among the shapers of public opinion, those who through force or argument influence by the strength of their convictions.⁷³ But for Kirk, rhetoric, like all exercises of the human imagination, must be tied to ethical ends. If a serious consideration of such ends were not present, he thought language could decay into an instrument of undue coercion. In a lament and of the upheavals of modernity, the cultural fracturing stemming from atomizing intensities like capitalism, he practiced a “rhetoric of imagination” fused with and responsive to current circumstance.⁷⁴ To neglect an inheritance in such a manner, Kirk imparted, was to be a part of its dissolution.

The rhetorical imagination of words and a lived persona, seeking to keep rationality from making materialists of humanity, instituted for readers and those sympathetic to its sentiments what might be termed a religious consecration of civic life because moral order and political order depended upon one another. In such a

persuasion, society was sustained by an ill-defined “natural order,” while the imperative was more unambiguous. Reacting to the ideologies, as well as to the perceived confusions and hubris of modernity, Kirk took history and molded what I termed a “poetic” fabric of literary imagery in his calls to action. He colorfully, and even cheerfully, praised and condemned, offering himself as a representative of a more ethical and enduring civic community, as a heir (insofar as there could be one) of great orators and statesman like Cicero and Burke. Read the speeches of antiquity and the writings of exemplary historical conservatives, he recommended, for their spurning of materialism and individualism was not a path to be deviated from. Those traditions of lasting benefit did not survive as inward, shallow, or temporary bursts of status; they were the voices of the past still alive and speaking truths consonant to the betterment of the human condition. In the arguments and rhetorical conduct of Cicero and Burke, he discovered a bond of duty and moral obligation. This bond was the determination to guard the fragile civic inheritances of the past through inventive arguments of rights and order.

Kirk and Burke

Despite writing about several figures of antiquity such as Cicero, Kirk’s “political thought,” the sentiments and postures of locality, civility, caution, mystery, virtue, morality, and the good, were sourced, first and foremost, in Edmund Burke. As a graduate student at St. Andrews University in Scotland, he developed a deeper understanding and greater admiration for Burke, which would last a lifetime. *Reflections on the Revolution in France* served as the foundation for the traditionalism and anti-utopianism of Kirk’s conservative principles. A disposition to preserve wisdom, and a

careful consideration of the “how” of societal improvement, especially when state served as the organizing force, appealed to his anti-modern and rural sensibility. According to the British philosopher Roger Scruton, what distinguished Burke from the French revolutionaries was not his attachment to things past, but rather his desire to live fully in the concrete present, to understand the present in all its imperfections, and to accept the present as the only reality that is available. Kirk, seeing a straight line from Burke to T.S. Eliot, drew attention to a similarity he viewed as essential to conservative thought. Simple nostalgia, humans longingly and emotionally looking back in time, was often just one more form of modern sentimentality. But a genuine tradition, which granted the courage and the vision to live well in the modern world, was fragile and worthy of protection.⁷⁵ As Kirk saw it, such was the charge of the “Burkean conservative.”

In speeches to Parliament such as his call for conciliation with America, delivered in March 1775, Burke put forward his view that it was foolish to insist upon abstract rights divorced from history and practicality. He was an advocate of liberty as an inheritance and as a product of natural law, writing in *Reflections*: “I am not here going into the distinctions of rights, not attempting to mark their boundaries, I do not enter into these meta-physical distinctions. I hate the very sound of them. This is the true touchstone of all theories which regard man and the affairs of man: does it suit his nature in general? Does it suit his nature as modified by his habits?”⁷⁶ The constitution of a state and the distribution of its coercive force required delicate and complicated skill – knowledge of human nature and the organization of human necessities. His treatment of rights assumed that if civil society was an offspring of custom and convention, such

conventions must appear in law and provide boundaries for the powers – legislative, judicial, or executive – that are in the end the offspring of a final judge. For Burke, “one of the first motives of civil society, and which becomes one of its fundamental rules, is that no man should be judge in his own cause.”⁷⁷

The tradition-minded balance of individual rights with a social order respectful of long-standing community norms and institutions greatly appealed to Kirk. It was his sense that the traditions of a society were not easily reinvented and could be applied without unpredictable and possibly disastrous consequences. These traditions were made by a collective wisdom developed over long periods of time. They were prejudices difficult to understand and articulate in any comprehensive way, even as they existed for the sake of social stability. There was no perfected past or perfectible future; there was no lost cause because there were no gained causes. Change – always necessary given the evils lurking within the human condition – must occur cautiously and humbly. This notion does not exclude rapid change, especially in cases of clear infringements upon human dignity, but rather opposes change based on an abstracted theory. Likewise, tradition should not be maintained at all costs or for its own sake. But it should be accorded a high measure of deference and an assumption of validity. For Kirk, the man who served for three decades as a respected Member of Parliament was a statesman because he was a wise and prophetic “philosopher in action,” and although he was a chief architect of the modern political-party system, one who transcended partisanship. In one of his early books, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered*, Kirk wrote:

“Suspicious through he was, from first to last, of abstract doctrine and theoretic dogma, Burke has obtained immortality not for what he did, but for what he perceived.”⁷⁸

What was perceived and rhetorically defended was a “Ciceronian” and Christian doctrine of natural law. Kirk approvingly quoted from Burke’s denunciation of Warren Hastings, a powerful figure in the East India Company: “We are all born in subjection, all born equally, high and low, governours and governed, in subjection to one great, immutable, pre-existent law, prior to all our devices, and prior to all our contrivances, paramount to all our ideas, and all our sensations, antecedent to our very existence, by which we are knit and connected in the eternal frame of the Universe, out of which we cannot stir.”⁷⁹ Throughout the book, Kirk displayed his admiration that Burke “usually reasoned from circumstance to principle: that is, he saw the things and the men, and then sought for general principles to apply to present discontents...Detesting arbitrary exercise of political power, Burke was led into the four great struggles of his life – this effort to obtain conciliation with the American colonies, his participation in the Rockingham Whigs’ contest against the domestic power of George III, his prosecution of Warren Hastings, and his impassioned resistance against Jacobinism, the ‘armed doctrine.’”⁸⁰ Reading the biography, one senses the aim for an intellectual kinship as Kirk covered the major controversies of his mentor’s long and influential political, literary, and philosophical career. The resistance of claims of abstract right upon metaphysical premises and governing by notions of perfectibility, the distaste for scientific materialism and romantic sentimentality, and the defense of a historical civil

order were among the themes of Burke highlighted by his biographer that would also appear recurrently in the drama of Kirk's own life and work.

Both authors found compelling the considerations of worthy and destructive revolutions. The Rockingham Whigs to which Burke devoted his political life were characterized by Kirk as opposed to arbitrary monarchical power, dubious of many of England's overseas colonial adventures, and persistent in its advocacy of internal governmental reform. When Burke spoke of the Glorious Revolution as a "revolution not made, but prevented," he meant that James II, the last Stuart king overthrown in a bloodless coup in 1688, was by his attempts to increase royal prerogatives the true revolutionary.⁸¹ The American Revolution, in contrast, was guided by prudence and prescription. The colonists sought to preserve and continue the English institutions of representative government and private rights, while fanaticism and vain expectations guided the French forward into the void of uncertainty and terror. Burke argued at the outbreak of trouble on the American continent that colonists were trying to conserve, not destroy, natural rights and liberties codified in law and custom over centuries. They did not seek to "claim fanciful liberties conjured up by closet philosophers; they were 'not only devoted to liberty, but to liberty according to English principles,' in Burke's phrases. 'Abstract liberty like other mere abstractions is not to be found. Liberty inheres in some sensible object.'"⁸²

A "Burkean" philosophy of civil order, then, was not as devoted to particular policy outcomes as to the necessity of protection and a skeptical humility about the ability to effectuate change. A priori abstraction and reasoning were not to be trusted,

given the possibility of unintended, unpredictable, and unforeseen consequence. A distinguishing aspect of Burke's variant of custom and constitutionalism was sensitivity to intermediary attachments between the individual and the state. According to philosopher and historian Richard Boyd, one treatment of Enlightenment civil society was largely synonymous with political society, where civil society is contractually formed by solitary individuals whose entry into the civil compact subsequently allows for the cultivation of nonpolitical attachments which can give life meaning. Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were prominent examples of such a line of thought. A second meaning of civil society was more focused on attachments such as the family, the church, the political party, and commercial associations. These nonpolitical attachments were viewed as more fundamental than political unions to the cause of human fulfillment. Such intermediary attachments, formed organically over long periods of time, sought to be free from undue political interference.⁸³ Kirk would associate Burke with the second generalization, as his mentor combined a disposition to preserve with the ability to reform, and as he consistently advocated against the intolerant moral absolutism that can flow from political zeal and unmoored idealism. (Also in his popularization was the argument that Burke was a founding father of not only modern conservatism but the political party.)

The conception of "reform conservatism" sought to solve problems in a way to avoid preventable harm and to prevent more radical reforms that might undermine the institutions, traditions, customs, norms, and practices developed in a free society. Such a society should be sustained, in other words, by responding to challenges with the aim of

cautious, measured reform in concert with the history of its people. Burke's *A Letter to a Noble Lord* is worth quoting at length on this point. In explaining his purpose behind attempts at economic reform, he contends his aim was to solve a problem by responsible, modest means. He also wished to prevent others from using the existence of problems and the subsequent, understandable climate of reform to enact legislation he believed too mischievously vague. The French revolutionaries, Burke wrote, complained of everything and refused to reform anything. He suggested that government ministers abandoned wisdom and virtue, actual or presumptive. By contrast, responsible reform is "a direct application of a remedy to the grievance complained of:"

I found a great distemper in the commonwealth; and, according to the nature of evil and of the object, I treated it. The malady was deep; it was complicated, in the causes and in the symptoms. Throughout it was full of contra-indicants. On one hand Government, daily growing more invidious for an apparent increase of the means of strength, was every day growing more contemptible by real weakness. Nor was this dissolution confined to Government commonly so called. It extended to Parliament; which was losing not a little in its dignity and estimation, by an opinion of its not acting on worthy motives. On the other hand, the desires of the People (partly natural and partly infused into them by art), appeared in so wild and inconsiderate a manner, with regard to the economical object (for I set aside for a moment the dreadful tampering with the body of the Constitution itself) that if their petitions had literally been complied with, the State would have been convulsed; and a gate would have been opened, through which all property might be sacked and ravaged. Nothing could have saved the Public from the mischiefs of the false reform but its absurdity; which would soon have brought itself, and with it all real reform, into discredit. This would have left a rankling wound in the hearts of the people who would know they had failed in the accomplishment of their wishes, but who, like the rest of mankind in all ages, would impute the blame to any thing rather than to their own proceedings. But there were then persons in the world, who nourished complaint; and would have been thoroughly disappointed if the people were ever satisfied. I was not of that humour. I wished that they should be satisfied. It was my aim to give to the People the substance of what I knew they desired, and what I thought was right whether they desired it or not, before it had been modified for them into senseless petitions. I knew that there is a manifest marked distinction, which ill men, with ill designs, or weak men incapable of any design, will constantly be confounding, that is, a marked distinction between Change and Reformation. The former alters the substance of the objects themselves; and gets rid of all their essential good, as well as of

all the accidental evil annexed to them. Change is novelty; and whether it is to operate any one of the effects of reformation at all, or whether it may not contradict the very principle upon which reformation is desired, cannot be certainly known beforehand. Reform is, not a change in the substance, or in the primary modification of the object, but a direct application of a remedy to the grievance complained of. So far as that is removed, all is sure. It stops there; and if it fails, the substance which underwent the operation, at the very worst, is but where it was.⁸⁴

By instituting radical, sweeping, quick reform, the French revolutionaries assaulted intermediary bodies standing between the individual and the state. For Burke, the most genuine construct of society was eternal, joining the dead, the living, and the unborn. Ordained by God, all participated in this spiritual and social partnership; social harmony came through a love of family and neighbor and a sense of duty. In his book on the American constitution, *Rights and Duties*, Kirk wrote of Burke's declaration that society is a partnership, one unlike the commercialism for gain of private profit. "Human beings do have rights by virtue of their human nature; but those rights are not bloodless abstractions, nor are they limited to mere guarantees against government. To narrow natural rights to such neat slogans as 'liberty, equality, fraternity' or 'life, liberty, property,'" Burke knew, was to ignore the complexity of public affairs and to leave out of consideration most moral relationships."⁸⁵ The evolved wisdom of society shaped the necessary ability to be restrained from actions destructive to themselves and their community – "the right to have some control put upon their appetites," in the words of Kirk. One difference between the French Revolution and the Revolution of 1688, Burke wrote in *Reflections*, was that the latter was made to preserve "indisputable laws and liberties," the ancient constitution of government which is the people's security for law and liberty:

The very idea of the fabrication of a new government is enough to fill us with disgust and horror. We wished at the period of the Revolution, and do now wish, to derive all we possess as an inheritance from our forefathers. Upon that body and stock of inheritance we have taken care not to inoculate any scion alien to the nature of the original plant. All the reformation we have hitherto made, have proceeded upon the principle of reference to antiquity; and I hope, nay I am persuaded, that all those which possibly may be made hereafter, will be carefully formed upon analogical precedent, authority, and example.⁸⁶

Burke's disdain for the French attempt at a comprehensive break with the past and the building of a future based in part upon metaphysical ideas was seemingly a contrast with his sympathy to the cause of American separation from Britain. Even here, though, reform and efforts for compromise were his answer to colonist cries of independence, or to parliamentary and royalist belligerence. But Burke can ostensibly contradict himself when he discusses the American and the French revolutions, because, his writings suggest, he refers two different communities and two different traditions.⁸⁷ According to Kirk, although the framing of a philosophical system to refute the assumptions of egalitarianism was a "task uncongenial to Burke's nature," his lengthy argument articulating the difference of hostility and sympathy with two revolutions was a reply to three separate schools of thought embodied by the French Revolution: the rationalism of Enlightenment philosophers, the romantic sentimentalism of Rousseau and his disciples, and the utilitarianism of Bentham. *The Conservative Mind* argued that Burke knew himself to be contending against a "spirit of innovation possessed by of a recognizable general character." The innovative spirits were: if a divine authority existed, it differs sharply in its nature from the Christian conception of an active, personal God; abstract reasoning or idyllic imagination may be employed to direct the course of social destiny; man is naturally benevolent and generous and yet corrupted by

institutions; the traditions of mankind are a tangled myth from which we can ascertain little; mankind, capable of constant improvement, should have be fixed upon the future; and the aim of a reformer, moral or political, is emancipation, a sort of liberation from old creeds, oaths, and establishments, while the citizen of the future is to rejoice in the possibilities of pure liberty and self-governance.⁸⁸ Kirk viewed these glittering ideas as the powerful undercurrents of the “modernizational” government and social theory which Burke confronted – a politician nearly alone, as he saw it, as a prominent political and societal figure uneasy about the unintended, unforeseeable, but perhaps sadly predictable consequences.

As a member of parliament and as a widely read writer, Burke wrote and spoke a frequently about constitutions. These words were focused upon the British and European constitutions; no record of his thoughts about the American Constitution of 1787 survives. Kirk summarized Burke’s view of a “good constitution” as an organic, uncommon experience of a people over a considerable elapse of time – and that it is unwise to attempt to create an improved constitution out of whole cloth.⁸⁹ An enduring constitution was a product of the nation’s struggles, bringing about a need for religious faith so as to better maintain order: “We know, and, what is better, we feel inwardly, that religion is the basis of civil society, and the source of all good, and of all comfort.”⁹⁰ A sound national constitution was the product of long, tested experience; and sweeping, sudden changes to the old may destroy ancient virtues instead of ending the inevitable vices. In surveying the landscape of France, Burke contended that a utopian, anti-egalitarian movement might also destroy the natural aristocracies that serve, necessarily,

as an intermediary body between the individual and the state. Such an aristocracy, “the cheap defense of nations” provided for the leadership of the people. In *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, Burke wrote, “A true natural aristocracy is not a separate interest in the state, or separable from it. It is an essential integrant part of any large body rightly constituted. It is formed out of a class of legitimate presumptions, which, taken as generalities, must be admitted for actual truths.”⁹¹ An admirable constitution, then, maintains balance between the claims of freedom and the claims of order. From the natural law flow natural rights, even as government does not exist solely to defend the claims of personal liberty among its citizenry so that order may be maintained.

Burke believed there must be the preservation of restraints upon the personal will. Explaining his belief that government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants, Burke wrote in *Reflections*:

Men have a right that these wants should be provide that these wants should be provided for by this wisdom. Among these wants is to be reckoned the want, out of civil society, of a sufficient restraint upon their passions. Society requires not only that the passions of individuals should be subjected, but that even in the mass and body, as well as in the individuals, the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection. This can only be done by a power out of themselves, and not, in the exercise of its function, subject to that will and to those passions which it is its office to bridle and subdue. In this sense the restrains on men, as well as their liberties, are to be reckoned among their very rights. But as the liberties and the restrictions vary with times and circumstances and admit to infinite modifications, they cannot be settled upon any abstract rule; and nothing is so foolish as to discuss them upon that principle.⁹²

Such a defense of the religious and community establishments which may stand in the way of politicizing the personal will places Burke at odds with the notion, present throughout the Enlightenment period, that a privatization of religious belief could work to eliminate the publicly ruinous consequences of a zealous secular or religious faith

(such as war). Despite this, Burke continuously defended the established Church of England and advocated on behalf of Catholics in Britain and Ireland. Many of his arguments, in fact, referenced and assumed the truth of Christian claims, particularly those against the “armed doctrine” of Revolutionary France. He set himself against “humanistic” ideologies that sought to regenerate humans after the fashion of their irreligious creators. In the section of *Reflections* defending the church as one of the foundations of the constitutional commonwealth, he wrote:

We know, and it is our pride to know, that man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against, not only our reason, but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long. But if, in the moment of riot and in a drunken delirium from the hot spirit drawn out of the alembic of hell, which in France is now so furiously boiling, we should uncover our nakedness by throwing off that Christian religion which has hitherto been our boast and comfort, and one great source of civilization amongst us and amongst many other nations, we are apprehensive (being well aware that the mind will not endure a void) that some uncouth, pernicious, and degrading superstition might take place of it.⁹³

An uncompromising ideological worldview unmoored from the inheritance of Christian faith and civilization would have little patience for the sort of cautious but persistent calls for reform that animated Burke’s life and career. One reason to reject revolutionary change was because its pursued goals were unlikely to achieve the promised results, which could in turn facilitate uncompromising countermeasures of infighting and opposition. Without the restraints of the wisdoms and temperance of Christian faith, the passions of humanity in an environment of power and status struggle were a recipe for large-scale disorder. Burke believed that to consider man separate from the constraints of society was a mistake. Humans were made as social creatures; and the natural inclination was to live with others in settings where needs and wants are fulfilled.

Living a moral existence, however, was also an elusive and frail enterprise. But God-given rights existed within a society, one preferably under the guidance of Christian mores. They were therefore existent within the circumstantial limitations of society. (This generalization of natural rights would divide some of the leading figures of the modern American conservative movement, most notably Kirk and Richard Weaver.) Burke's conception of man in his natural state was to link individual rights and morality to the long development of society to which man belonged. The unavoidable rise of conflicts would lead man to draw upon his natural instincts for achieving those divinely inspired recognitions of mutual need which point to back morality as a check against hubris. In time, these developed into shared associations of wisdoms that afford a common perspective for the best methods of resolving conflict. The person became a part of the group by sharing in these perspectives and accordingly adapted behavior to fit with the community, accepting the manners, morals, and institutions (religious, social, political) that were the consequences of the shared beliefs of a society. This was a duty in the continuance of generational covenants, and necessary for wisdom to be passed forward in time.⁹⁴ Thus the proper end result of social life was not an idea of or attempt for equality, but rather a mosaic of societal stability.

The "Enlightenment" attempt to remake a society "rationally" so as to forge a philosophical vision of equality or justice was, for the traditionalist conservative taking inspiration from Burke, deserving of skepticism and hostility. Kirk, following "British conservative" thought, discovered that mediating institutions have survived the trials of social life. They may serve as an adequate guide for those learning to be productive

citizens. They deserve deference. It would be presumptuous, suggested Burke, to think the accumulated wisdom of others struggling through similar problems should be carelessly cast into oblivion. Promises of change can be attractive but also overly optimistic – they might even be a highly organized matter of deception by elites so as to obtain governing authority. The best forms of justice come not in the science of constructing a commonwealth, accompanied by abstract, heated calls for equal access to power, but in preserving and reforming the good of inherited society and attempting to understand the role of each individual within it. In his public exchanges with advocates of the “rights of man” theory such as Thomas Paine, Burke warned against the taking of norms for individual liberty from an idyllic conception of a primitive or pre-civil state of nature, where the social contract might be revocable at the arbitrary will of a disaffected individual. He thought this to be anarchy, harmful not just toward the workability of representation but the very existence of civil institutions. In a 1771 speech to constituents, he said that a legislative act had no reference to any rule but original justice and discretionary application. There must be a constitutional guide of natural rights: “For if the judgment makes the law, and not the law directs the judgment, it is impossible there should be such thing as an illegal judgment given.”⁹⁵

Kirk took from this a strong sense that justice should not be dispensed arbitrarily or a priori, as the effects are not always immediate or predictable. He admired Burke’s own sense of applied, practical justice when it at times compelled him to defend those whom he thought victims of such abuse, most notably the long and difficult undertaking of prosecuting Warren Hastings for mistreatment on the Indian subcontinent and the

advocacy for the religious and political rights of his fellow Irishmen. (Further, it could be surmised that Burke was philosophically skeptical of Britain's imperial projects, given the radical imposition of one group forcing itself, and its collection of norms, practices, and customs, upon another.) In Kirk's imaginative mind, the thread from Burke's positions to prominent aspects of American conservative political thought was strong. Even so, internal disagreement among this movement abounded and continues to the present. "Burke's conservatism" possessed a degree of variation by time and place. As a result, the writings of Kirk emphasized Burke's political thought as a disposition, as an approach, and as a sentiment. This posture, found most famously in the denunciation of one revolution, was about the content of change. The definition of "change," when it was valuable and when it was harmful, depended upon the structures of the existing order and the people that constituted it.

Kirk portrayed Burke's politics as a continual practice of prudence and prescription, guarding and preserving the long-developed, fragile institutions of his country. The disposition to preserve and the ability to reform as conditions demanded, passed into English politics during the 1820's and into American political discussion during the 1840's, were Kirk's definition of the conservative statesman.⁹⁶ In his particular circumstance, Burke's conception of government was influenced by the social system of parliamentary representation. France, in her revolution, destroyed its framework; England, in 1688, returned to hers. The French should have build upon the old, formidable foundations of society instead of breaking, violently, the chains of its past. The British constitution was not simply a document or a general guide, but a

compact of preserving the necessary order to maintain society, based on the time-tested opinions of generations about how best to meet public needs and allow for the development of individuals. It mirrored the pattern of nature particular to its people, instilled through family, church, community organizations, and domestic obligations.⁹⁷

Others within the early modern American conservative movement of the mid-twentieth century, particularly Richard Weaver, took issue with this view. Since Burke argued from circumstance and not the “nature of things,” Weaver argued that the parliamentarian should not be seen as a sensible visionary because Burke took the principle of political prudence so admired by Kirk as an exercise in the calculated expediency of utilitarianism. By such arguing not from definition but from circumstance, he found little in common with an ethical standard of natural law in Burke’s work. Instead, Weaver found in the *Reflections* a philosophical explanation of the source in arguing from circumstance, a defining characteristic against conservatism. He believed that the method of argument was a more accurate index of belief than any explicit profession of principle. According to Weaver, Burke’s contention that one could discover false theory through comparison to practice was inductive of an unfortunate exercise: “he judged the badness of the principle by the pressure of the grievance; and hence we are compelled to suppose that he believed politics ought to be decided empirically and not dialectically. Yet a consequence of this position is that whoever says he is going to give equal consideration to circumstance and to ideals (or principles) almost inevitably finds himself following circumstances while preserving a mere decorous respect for ideals.”⁹⁸

The cultural and social shock provoked by the rise of industrial capitalism, science, and mass communication was in the early stages of formation when Burke wrote. That Kirk and Weaver would disagree about the foundations of Anglo-American conservatism did not prevent them from recognizing the necessity of history as a marker for renewal against the claims of expanded rights, with an enlarged government as an organizing instrument. In the forward to a new edition of Weaver's last book, *Visions of Order*, Kirk shared in the assault on "presentism," scientism, and democratism that subvert the "the high old order of our civilization and our human dignity." He wrote that order was "Weaver's austere passion: the inner order of the soul, the outer order or society." A disordered rhetoric, in turn an anarchic rhetoric, undid humanity.⁹⁹ And with regard to what must be opposed, these writers did find common cause. Conservatism against the ideology that flowed from the contractual, the scientific, or the rational principles of reason "inquired" for as complete a view of political reality as possible, capturing nuances and subtleties missed by a more systematic approach. In Kirk's conceptions, Burke's writings indicated such circumstances were far too complicated, far too messy and human, to be neatly summed up. This mistrust of abstract political systems, quasi-metaphysical principles founded upon reason, was shared by Kirk and Weaver, placing them both comfortably among the strand of the American conservatism mournful at what the "Enlightenment project" had wrought. A chief rationale, in fact, for Kirk's claim that non-ideological conservatism began with Burke was the defense of traditionalist insight against the "scientific" construction of government.

Generally, for those that might be labeled traditionalist conservatives, the good of society was good itself and not tradition for its own sake. The accumulated wisdom of society, its good to be passed down through the generations, was confirmed by trials of experience. Humans were hardly capable, Burke thought, of reaching during their lifetime a fullness of understanding required to summarily dismiss the customs and institutions of society – no matter how brilliant their capacity, words, and actions. Yet this prejudice should be coupled with the recognition that not every tradition, custom, or institution was worthy of preservation. Cautious reform was the cure for always imperfect human creations, not abandonment because of possible disharmony with an impulse of reason. And inconvenience, Burke warned in *Reflections*, will never fade.

Ideas were not in perfect union with the disordered reality represented:

The science of constructing a commonwealth, or renovating, or reforming, it is, like every other experimental science, not to be taught a priori. Nor is it a short experience that can instruct us in that practical science, because the real effects of moral causes are not always immediate; but that which in the first instance is prejudicial may be excellent in its remoter operation, and its excellence may arise even from the ill effects it produces in the beginning. The reverse also happens: and very plausible schemes, with very pleasing commencements, have often shameful and lamentable conclusions. In states there are often some obscure and almost latent causes, things which appear at first view of little moment, on which a very great part of its prosperity or adversity may most essentially depend. The science of government being therefore so practical in itself and intended for such practical purposes – a matter which requires experience, and even more experience than any person can gain in his whole life, however sagacious and observing he may be – it is with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has been answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society, or on building it up again without having models and patterns of approved utility before his eyes.¹⁰⁰

Ideas were not wholly agreeable to the represented reality because the most useful forms of knowledge were based on experience rather than ideas. The articulation of knowledge was thus symbolic and incomplete, limiting the human ability to reason.

Burke, Kirk explained to his readers, could be classified as an ant-rationalist. Calling for Parliament in 1774 to “revert to your old principles” and leave America to “tax herself,” he said, “I am not here going into the distinctions of rights, nor attempting to mark their boundaries. I do not enter into these metaphysical distinctions; I hate the very sound of them.”¹⁰¹ Weaver, sympathetic to the idea that a people’s ties to the past provide a better answer to its political problems than abstract reasoning, might add a warning about the potential for coarseness in the culture of self-governance fought for by Burke and his Whigs. He believed the greatest perversion of culture was a misconception of the role of democracy. The most pressing duty of the believer in culture was to define the notion of democracy and keep it within its place, so as to not only preserve it as a viable form but also to protect those other areas of activity which are essential to supply a different kind of need, the spiritual. Burke, Kirk, and Weaver would I think agree that the rhetoric of a culture and social order depended upon history. Weaver wrote all questions susceptible to rhetorical treatment arose out of history, and it is to history that the rhetorician turns for his means of persuasion. And so, given present developments, it was understandable to mourn the loss of humanity’s “historical consciousness.”¹⁰²

Burke the politician declared that solutions to a crisis required more than the wisdom of an organic historical order and lessons from comparable times past. Present realities and the balance of interests in an actual situation weighed heavily on his mind as a man intimately immersed in the controversies of a globe-spanning superpower. He thought that a studied contemplation of immediate and practical advantages in the trade-offs of public policy ranked high as a source of acceptable solutions. This would come to

be known in America more than a century later as “political realism” or “expedient compromise.” Burke labeled it “prudence.”¹⁰³ One example of imprudent rationalist Enlightenment action was to regard liberty as a political abstraction instead of a regulation under the traditions of common experience and law. The tyranny of the majority circumscribed in law was a triumph of the general will formalized into a founding document, such as Article Six of the French constitution. Viewing this article, Burke saw the state as inculcated with the authority, in the name of the general will, to deny natural rights beyond those which the state saw fit to allow. And so the French National Assembly could, in effect, be dominated by a group arbitrarily deciding which rights citizens were to be granted or denied. The prudence of *Reflections* and many of Burke’s other writings on revolution and constitution were a defense of the principles of constitutional sovereignty and an attack on the principles of popular sovereignty. In this, he was willing to be alienated from party, constituency, and many countrymen.

Ideas of pure rationality as the guide to morals and politics dominated the first half of Burke’s eighteenth century. Kirk wrote, critiquing Locke, Hume, and Kant, that “What we learn in this world we learn through custom, repeated experiences, rather than through pure Reason.” He continued, following Burke, “All religion is irrational; it is derived from Revelation and Faith; it cannot be sustained by logical argument, which only betrays Christianity to its enemies.”¹⁰⁴ Kirk contended that such views on sovereignty and the worth of accumulated knowledge meant “Burke never approved of any revolution, with the exception of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which he called a revolution not made but prevented, and therefore no revolution at all.” He suggested that

through timely concession and compromise the Rockingham Whigs hoped the loss of America might have been averted.¹⁰⁵ Kirk pointed out that every revolution, as the parliamentarian stated in *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, contained in it something of “evil.” David Hume, another figure revered by many conservative thinkers and a fierce critic of rationalism, is remembered in part for statements about the illuminating light of reason bordering upon the darkness, dazzling yet confounding, and making assurance of any one object problematic. The ideology that drives revolution, the promise of rational thought and constant improvement, was the sort of systematic and autonomous initiative that struck fear into the heart of Burke. And, in conclusion, existing against the “age of ideology” would come to serve as a unifying force for later figures of disparate lives, judgments, and prejudices like Kirk and Weaver as they readied their pen to warn against ideologues immune to experience and insistent upon dogmatism toward creed.

Kirk’s efforts to popularize for an American audience the champion of parliament he discovered as a graduate student in Scotland were largely successful. The view that Burke was a modern conservative intellectual foundation, relevant to American politics, joined the argument about what conservatism was and the policy impact it might have. As the post Second World War economy boomed, President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal and President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society were frameworks under which lawmakers operated. On this point, Kirk quoted the literary critic Lionel Trilling. He wrote in 1950: “liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition.”¹⁰⁶ At that time, statist solutions also enjoyed a large

measure of public support. Burke's American admirers swam upstream against a strong tide of government action. In sum, if a policy, a custom, a norm, a tradition, an institution did not violate the natural rights and has suited the past – if these belonged to the father and grandfather and great grandfather, for instance – it was in Kirk's reconstructions and popularizations to be granted, across the generations, a high status of received wisdom worthy of commitment against movements that would seek to alter them so as to pursue ideological aims. There must be, in other words, no state organized "unity," a calling card of foreign adventurism and domestic collectivism. And although Kirk engaged in some furious intellectual battles with his allies over the meaning of American conservatism, such a generalization skeptical of "transformative government" was present in the varied threads of thought in response to large-scale governmental action. This manner of conservatism, "Burkean" and "Kirkian," was in opposition to "political religion." It was a rejection of the idea that politics could be redemptive. It was the conviction that a properly ordered republic has a government of limited ambition.

Burke, tradition-minded but eager for society and economy to progress, sought throughout his long career the balancing of individual rights and social order. How, and not if, a society should change was the question. The maintaining of a civil social order respectful of individual rights worked toward social stability:

Good order is the foundation of all good things. To be enabled to acquire, the people, without being servile, must be tractable and obedient. The magistrate must have his reverence, the laws their authority. The body of the people must not find the principles of natural subordination by art rooted out of their minds. They must respect that property of which they cannot partake. They must labor to obtain what by labor can be obtained; and when they find, as they commonly do, the success disproportioned to the endeavor, they must be taught their consolation in the final proportions of eternal justice.¹⁰⁷

Utopian reformers, disdainful of constraints and confident of their own intelligence, did not in Burke's estimation possess the disposition to preserve and the ability to improve which works for a good order. Yet humans could aspire to a natural standard of order and justice. This was a product of continuously encountering the constraints of human nature, and of the resulting developments of institutions and associations over the generations. Thus the practices of a good order could sit in judgment of newer ideas as the necessary and desirable changes followed an evolutionary model of "nature." The natural standard of justice and good order, this is to say, could not be understood directly by abstract reasoning uprooted from historical constraint. Such a process would be dislocation from the wisdoms of continuous change, a basis of learning about justice and good order. Burke wrote:

Your literary men and your politicians, and so do the whole clan of the enlightened among us, essentially differ in these points. They have no respect for the wisdom of others, but they pay it off by a very full measure of confidence in their own. With them it is a sufficient motive to destroy an old scheme of things because it is an old one. As to the new, they are in no sort of fear with regard to the duration of a building run up in haste, because duration is no object to those who think little or nothing has been done before their time, and who place all their hopes in discovery. They conceive, very systematically, that all things which give perpetuity mischievous, and therefore they are at inexpiable war with all establishments. They think that government may vary like modes of dress, and with as little ill effect; that there needs no principle of attachment, except a sense of present convenience, to any constitution of the state.¹⁰⁸

From Burke's writings against revolutionary fervor, Kirk updated for his time a sense of "natural justice" informed by the prejudices of generational knowledge. Both writers suggested that the realities of human nature, the continuation of difficult to articulate truths across various troubles, would shape institutions as long periods of time passed. The practices that work toward providing for society were the most natural, the

truest arbiter of ideas. When changes were necessary, as they would be given the variations of humanity and situation, the partisans of innovation should be opposed by a conservative sentiment. Kirk saw dangerous, attractive ideas as always flourishing, such as the a priori, revolutionary mind. His “conservative mind” grounded natural justice not through the distorted lens of abstract reasoning, but in the continuous, cautious values of prescription and skepticism. A claim founded in a supposedly systemic manner, the rationalist reduction of real human beings to the ideological “construction” of an abstract human nature, was the opposite of conservative. It was the negation of ideology that is conservative. This negation was in Kirk’s writings a genuine political alternative in the modern age. An organic, developed order supported a more genuine justice, freedom, prosperity, and civic health. An imaginative affirmation of the wisdoms of the past allowed for humans to judge with prudence. Against the view that what is human should be measured in terms of wealth or power, the sentiments Burke articulated and Kirk admired originated in an attitude to civil society and its foundational moral order. And it is from such a conception that thoughts and rhetoric might be derived.

What he and other “traditionalists” admiring of British conservatism took from Burke was an approach against efforts of utopianism, against ideology, and against the promise of a bright new future casting aside considerations of human nature. The long-term continuation and large policy impact of “Burkean conservatism,” however, is another matter entirely, given that America was founded as a liberal republic inspired by concepts of liberalism. In terms of relevance to the former colony, I think that a reconstruction of the British constitutional and monarchical society familiar to Burke and

defended in his works remains overly optimistic and overly imaginative. Nonetheless, it was necessary to summarize the philosophical underpinnings of this chapter. Kirk's rhetoric of "moral imagination" was built on a foundation of "Ciceronian" and "Burkean" character.

Notes

¹ Roger Scruton (ed), *Conservative Texts: An Anthology* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 1.

² James Arnt Aune, *Selling the Free Market: The Rhetoric of Economic Correctness* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2001), p. 6 – 7.

³ This is the term of description his widow, Annette Kirk, president of the Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal, believes to be most accurate and representative. For reasons stated and suggested throughout this dissertation (the emphasis on culture and on order of the being, society, and the soul), I concur and will follow her request to describe her husband in this way. Interviews: May 2009.

⁴ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1995), p. 6.

⁵ Peter J. Stanlis, *Edmund Burke: The Enlightenment and Revolution* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991), p. 175.

⁶ This is both my opinion and the opinion of several figures I interviewed that are prominent authors of traditionalist conservatism, Annette Kirk, Bruce Frohnen, Paul Gottfried, George Nash, and Gerald Russello among them.

⁷ I owe this phrasing to Ray Sawhill, a media designer with whom I have corresponded about architecture.

⁸ Letter from Russell Kirk to Jerry Pournelle, April 20, 1963. Private papers of Annette Kirk.

⁹ Draft of remarks prepared by Annette Kirk on behalf of her husband to the Philadelphia Society, 1993. The occasion was the fortieth anniversary of the publication of *The Conservative Mind*. Private papers of Annette Kirk.

¹⁰ For example: "Yet when standards or norms have been long flouted and almost forgotten, often satire is thrust before blind eyes, or falls upon deaf ears: for not many people remain who recall that once upon time there was talk of virtue. Such is the condition, in large part, of our culture in the latter half of the twentieth century." Russell Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2004), p. 127. The context is an approval of Malcolm Muggeridge's "scourging of liberalism."

¹¹ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, p. 36.

¹² Ibid, p. 50.

¹³ Ibid, p. 66 and p. 117.

¹⁴ Forrest McDonald, "The American Cicero," *National Review*, Dec. 31, 1985. Kirk was also labeled "The American Cicero" by Bradley Birzer of Hillsdale College in a 2007 tribute.

¹⁵ Russell Kirk, *Redeeming the Time* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999), p. 212.

¹⁶ Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), p. 106 – 107.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 110.

¹⁸ Russell Kirk, *America's British Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008), p. 102. In addition, he makes such a case in a chapter of *The Roots of American Order* ("The Light of the Middle Ages").

¹⁹ Russell Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2004), p. 64 – 65.

²⁰ Interview: Bruce Frohnen, June 3, 2009.

²¹ Stanlis, *Edmund Burke*, p. 70.

²² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New York, NY: The Liberal Arts Press, 1955), p. 199.

- ²³ Stanlis, *Edmund Burke*, p. 39. See also: Francis Canavan, *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1960), p. 21 – 22, 32 – 33, p. 86 – 89, and p. 132 – 133.
- ²⁴ Francis Canavan, *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke*, p. 21.
- ²⁵ Michael Leff, “Cicero’s *Pro Murena* and the Strong Case for Rhetoric,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1998 (p. 61 and p. 71).
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 71 – 72.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 83.
- ²⁸ Bruce Frohnen: “As a historian, Kirk was a terrific man of letters.” Frohnen believes that the “poetic and image sense,” combined with a keen intellect and wide range of reading, lead to useful and defensible historical constructs of traditions. Interview: June 3, 2009.
- ²⁹ James M. May, *Trials of Character: The Eloquence of Ciceronian Ethos* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 58 – 59.
- ³⁰ Rex Stern, “Cicero as Orator and Philosopher: The Value of the *Pro Murena* for Ciceronian Political Thought,” *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 68, 2006 (p. 214).
- ³¹ C. Macdonald (ed) *Cicero in Twenty-Eight Volumes, In Catilinam I-IV Pro Murena Pro Sulla Pro Flacco* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 188 – 189.
- ³² Michael Leff, “Cicero’s *Pro Murena* and the Strong Case for Rhetoric,” p. 74.
- ³³ C. Macdonald (ed), *Cicero in Twenty-Eight Volumes, In Catilinam I-IV Pro Murena Pro Sulla Pro Flacco*, p. 261.
- ³⁴ David Schock Interviews: May 2009. Schock, a Michigan newspaper editor, musician, and filmmaker, was Russell Kirk’s research assistant and doctoral student at International College.
- ³⁵ Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, p. 112 – 113.
- ³⁶ For a helpful discussion of this issue, see W. Wesley McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004), Chapter Three, “The Moral Imagination, Reason, and the Natural Law.” Frohnen and Schock made this point also.
- ³⁷ In was Kirk’s opinion that “the supreme law comes from God, Cicero wrote in his *Laws*.” *The Roots of American Order*, p. 111.
- ³⁸ Donald Atwell Zoll, “The Social Thought of Russell Kirk,” *The Political Science Reviewer*, Fall 1972 (p. 112).
- ³⁹ Russell Kirk, “Comments on Mr. Zoll’s ‘Social Thought of Russell Kirk.’” Private papers of Annette Kirk. The letter was also published in the next issue of *The Political Science Reviewer*.
- ⁴⁰ Michael Leff email response to the author, June 8, 2009.
- ⁴¹ There are many examples one could cite. For example, from a book of collected lectures: “Neither an irrational devotee of the archaic, not an apostle of the utilitarian society that was emerging near the end of his life, Edmund Burke looms larger every year, in our time, as a reluctant philosopher who apprehended moral and social order....The prudent statesman, in any epoch, must deal with prevailing opinions and customs as he finds them – though he ought to act in the light of enduring principles (which Burke distinguished from “abstractions,” or theories not grounded in a true understanding of human nature and social institutions as they really are).” Russell Kirk, *Reclaiming a Patrimony* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 1982), p. 16.
- ⁴² Michael Leff, “Cicero’s *Pro Murena* and the Strong Case for Rhetoric,” p. 83.
- ⁴³ Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Press, 2003), p. xx. From an introduction by Forrest McDonald.
- ⁴⁴ Interview: Bruce Frohnen, June 3, 2009.
- ⁴⁵ C. Macdonald (ed), *Cicero in Twenty-Eight Volumes*, p. 285.
- ⁴⁶ Thomas N. Mitchell, *Cicero: The Senior Statesman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 53.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 35.
- ⁴⁸ I think the historical figure most fitting in this generalization might be David Hume. In *The Roots of American Order*, Kirk’s consideration of “Eighteenth-Century Intellectuals” stated Hume “demolished Rationalism by rational argument” and approvingly summarized the philosopher’s view of human nature: “Follow Nature, not a vain illusory Reason; understand the nature of man, and be guided accordingly; we

cannot know more, our intellects being puny” (p. 362). Hume appears to have been a mildly negative figure in *The Conservative Mind*, being at one point dismissed with Jeremy Bentham as “these rationalists,” detested by Burke (p. 50).

⁴⁹ Joy Connolly, *The State of Speech: Rhetoric and Political Thought in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 142.

⁵⁰ Interview: George H. Nash, June 10, 2009.

⁵¹ Connolly, *The State of Speech*, p. 143 and p. 3.

⁵² James Jr. Person (ed), *The Unbought Grace of Life: Essays in Honor of Russell Kirk* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden & Co. Publishers, 1994), p. 18.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 17.

⁵⁴ Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, p. 65 and p. 190. In a humorous touch, Kirk adds, “Even publicans, sinners, and Neoconservatives may do battle for the Permanent Things.”

⁵⁵ Michael Leff, “Cicero’s *Pro Murena* and the Strong Case for Rhetoric,” p. 83 – 84.

⁵⁶ Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T.S. Eliot’s Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008), p. 5.

⁵⁷ Kirk’s definition of the “moral imagination” is throughout his writings, always similar to this generalization. For example: Russell Kirk, “The Moral imagination,” *Literature and Belief*, Vol. 1, 1981, p. 37 – 49 and *Reclaiming a Patrimony* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 1982), p. 45 – 58.

⁵⁸ Russell Kirk, “Rhetoricians and Politicians,” *Kenyon Review*, Fall 1964, p. 768.

⁵⁹ Here I take characterization, summation, and language from my interviews with Annette Kirk and David Schock. I also follow the insights of speechwriter and Kirk family friend Gleaves Whitney. See his “Recovering Rhetoric: How Ideas, Language, and Leadership Can Triumph in Post-Modern Politics,” Heritage Lecture 651, Jan. 2000.

⁶⁰ Christopher P. Craig, *Form as Argument in Cicero’s Speeches: A Study in Dilemma* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993), p. ix.

⁶¹ In interviews, Bruce Fronhen, Paul Gottfried, Peter Lawler, and George H. Nash indicated or stated this to be the case. I am inclined to agree, although the question of effectiveness will remain in conjecture.

⁶² J.S. Watson (ed), *Cicero on Oratory and Orators* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 1970), p. 11.

⁶³ Connolly, *The State of Speech*, p. 262.

⁶⁴ Neal Wood, *Cicero’s Social and Political Thought* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), p. 206 – 207.

⁶⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 65 and p. 78.

⁶⁶ Peter Berkowitz, “Conservatism and the University Curriculum,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 13, 2009, A13.

⁶⁷ Russell Kirk, *Prospects for Conservatives* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1989), p. 161. The book was originally titled *A Program for Conservatives*. The title was changed to reflect the author’s distaste for ideology and political or social planning; Annette Kirk informed me her husband felt the original title was too systematic. Both editions are quoted in this dissertation to make this point.

⁶⁸ Russell Kirk, *Enemies of Permanent Things: Observations of Abnormity in Literature and Politics* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden Publishing, 1988), p. 32 – 33 and p. 65 and p. 169. Interestingly, he also included figures of disdain among those who sought to avert the collapse of order, namely Hobbes, Locke, Machiavelli, and Marx.

⁶⁹ Russell Kirk, *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice: Essays of a Social Critic* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden Publishing, 1991), p. 145.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 148 – 149 and p. 163 – 164. See also p. 298.

⁷¹ Watson (ed), *Cicero on Oratory and Orators*, p. 235.

⁷² In at least four books and in several lectures and lectures, Kirk quoted at length from this passage of Cicero’s *De Re Publica*: “Long before our own time, the customs of our ancestors molded admirable men, and in turn these eminent men upheld the ways and institutions of their forebears. Our age, however, inherited the Republic as if it were some beautiful painting of bygone ages, its colors already fading through great antiquity; and not only has our time neglected to freshen the colors of the picture, but we

have failed to preserve its forms and outlines.” The books are: *Prospects for Conservatives* (in two titles, a longer quote of this selection is printed before the first chapter), *The Political Principles of Robert A. Taft* (co-author), *The Roots of American Order*, and *The Sword of Imagination*. In his Taft biography, he wrote: “Virgil says that the good man is a law abiding citizen; and Taft’s enunciation of the principles of justice, no matter what the mood of the crowd, reminds one of a passage in Cicero’s republic.”

⁷³ Russell Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), p. 306 – 307.

⁷⁴ A useful discussion of this point may be found in Gerald J. Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007), p. 117 – 121.

⁷⁵ Roger Scruton, “T.S. Eliot as Conservative Mentor,” *The Intercollegiate Review*, Fall 2003/Spring 2004, p. 46.

⁷⁶ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New York, NY: The Liberal Arts Press, 1955), p. xvi.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 67 – 70. Burke wrote of his concept of government: “Government is not made in virtue of natural rights, which may and do exist in total independence of it, and exist in much greater clearness and in a much greater degree of abstract perfection; but their abstract perfection is heir practical defect. By having a right to everything they want everything. Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants.”

⁷⁸ Russell Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House Publishing, 1967), p. 28 – 29.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 118.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 41.

⁸¹ Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), p. 295 – 296.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 398. This book is Kirk’s explanation of why “prudence and prescription” guided the Americans, whose revolution was a preservation and continuation of the English institutions and private rights, while the French were possessed with “fanaticism and vain expectations.”

⁸³ Richard Boyd, “The Unsteady and Precarious Contribution of Individuals: Edmund Burke’s Defense of Civil Society,” *The New Review of Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 3, Summer 1999, p. 467 – 468.

⁸⁴ Peter J. Stanlis (ed), *The Best of Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1963), p. 675 – 678.

⁸⁵ Russell Kirk, *Rights and Duties: Reflections on Our Conservative Constitution* (Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing, 1997), p. 101 – 102.

⁸⁶ Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, p. 35 – 36.

⁸⁷ Jeff Spinner, “Constructing Communities: Edmund Burke on Revolution,” *Polity*, Vol. 23, No. 3, Spring 1991, p. 412.

⁸⁸ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1995), p. 25 – 27.

⁸⁹ Kirk, *Rights and Duties*, p. 253. Here he provided a review of *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, and *Thoughts on the Present Discontents*.

⁹⁰ Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, p. 102.

⁹¹ Stanlis (ed), *The Best of Burke*, p. 652.

⁹² Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, p. 68 – 69.

⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 103.

⁹⁴ George J. Graham, Jr., “Edmund Burke’s Developmental Consensus,” *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Feb. 1972, p. 31.

⁹⁵ Stanlis (ed), *The Best of Burke*, p. 361 – 364.

⁹⁶ Kirk, *Edmund Burke*, p. 213. In Appendix A, Kirk reprints a long passage from *Reflections* where Burke expounds upon the differences of preservation and reform.

⁹⁷ Stanlis (ed), *The Best of Burke*, p. 31.

⁹⁸ Richard Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1985), p. 73.

⁹⁹ Richard Weaver, *Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Time* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1995). Forward by Russell Kirk.

¹⁰⁰ Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, p. 69 – 70.

¹⁰¹ Edmund Burke, *A Speech on American Taxation* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2005). See also: Stanlis, p. 121 – 124.

¹⁰² Weaver, *Visions of Order*, p. 55.

¹⁰³ Louis Gottschalk, “Reflections on Burke’s ‘Reflections on the French Revolution,’” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 100, No. 5, Oct. 1956, p. 420.

¹⁰⁴ Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, p. 361.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p. 376.

¹⁰⁶ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, p. 476.

¹⁰⁷ Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, p. 287.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. 99 – 100.

Against the Idols: Kirk and the Agrarian Rebuke

The rhetoric of Russell Kirk's imaginative conservative sentiments, while historical, can also be tied to contemporary rhetors. The American revolution (an un-conservative term for the "Burkean" and "Kirkian" conservative) was "conservative" in that its unprecedented mixture of Greco-Roman civic republicanism, therapeutic deism, and Enlightenment thinking came to be successfully at peace with a market liberalism advanced by many self-identified conservatives. And alongside traditionalism and religiosity, sympathy for this economic viewpoint is a workable model for what it means to be of the "right," or in the terminology of the economic, political, and social hegemony of post-Second World War America, a conservative. Yet the distaste for centralized planning and love of history and place Kirk shared with the southern agrarians he sympathized with – even as he, as a Midwesterner, was something of a cultural stranger – was not widely shared among American voters, or among many sectors of the American conservative movement. The progressive promise of decent, rationalist governance, the shock of the Great Depression, and President Franklin Roosevelt's corporatist, statist response in the form of the New Deal presented a formidable barrier to the advancement of ideas centered in localism and public restraint. The "traditional" society of agrarianism, in contrast, "old and true," represented that which had not, from the traditionalist conservative perspective, "completely succumbed to science, aggressive technology, materialism, commercialism, and other evils of egotistic Northern modernism."¹

The connection to contemporary rhetors comes through the skepticism toward the “modern.” Kirk’s reconstitutions, through a vision of conservatism, of associational communion employed a view of rhetoric as an art, one circumstantial, designed to persuade, and admiring of skepticism and modesty in civic debate. To accurately speak to the future in a virtuous manner was to consider the past, the audience, and context, as the most effective rhetoricians drew from the wells of accumulated wisdom. Kirk recognized the cultural fracturing brought about by the political and economic upheavals of modernity and thought that the traditional rhetoric of great statesman like Cicero and Edmund Burke could be fused with new circumstances. He desired that what I have termed an “associational rhetoric” of language, a language constituted and reconstituted in community, facilitated an intuitive recognition. This recognition was a turn toward the assumptions of a “natural” order and human nature, regardless of the various opinions and laments in response to political and social crisis.

Evoking a World

Kirk, Weaver, and the writers of southern agrarianism evoked a different world of vice and virtue than one their readers might have been familiar with. The “evoking” of a different, “better” world necessitated good character when the relation between self and culture was not so much instrumental as “reciprocal.” To reciprocate “agrarian” and “traditionalist” sentiments was to partake of the “anti-modern,” the communal and associational “good.” Finally, there remained for the traditionalists and non-traditionalists alike a familiarity in appeals to concepts few would spurn – community and family. Building on this, the imagination of Kirk and others was a vision in creation

of a “real world,” heavily borrowed from history and in opposition to much of their political leadership. These thinkers and writers conveyed a “metaphysical contract” of eternal society that must be preserved, a partnership between the living, the dead, and those yet to be born.

The activism of self-identified “progressive” presidents like Woodrow Wilson and Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt was, for some critics including Weaver and Kirk, to be vigorously opposed. These actions – from the idealism of the League of Nations to the rapid building of armed forces and the consolidation of political authority – were seen as a commitment to a modernist building of heaven on earth, its rallying cry to a singular purpose served by the living organism of the state, the end manifestation of a more purified and perfected people. European theories of centralization and socialisms (national and international) were important influences upon the development of domestic policy in the United States, and anti-Great Depression policy in particular.² Detractors, including Kirk, suggested that the state had no limits in principle if a centralizing mindset reigned, because the people and the government were “bound” to one another by the argument and application of constant political struggle, rather than by family, local association, or religious obligation. Fascism and socialism were considered a false and dangerous extremity of the tribal impulse. For Kirk and the agrarians, when citizens derived personal worth from their relation to the encroaching and holistic state, tyranny was sure to follow. Instead of prejudice, prescription, and natural rights, the intellectual, historically-aware conservative foresaw a doctrine of “perfectibility” and the unitary state.³ They were horrified, for instance, by the insistence of Italian dictator Benito

Mussolini that everything should be in the state and nothing outside the state, and that there could exist a “secular philosophy” with regard to all questions that might concern the human mind.⁴

The drive for unity among those with an interest in power, and with wielding it over others, was a common concern for southern agrarians, a loose collection of regional writers distrustful of human authority beyond their typically rural settings. Weaver believed that the strength of government-organized unity may first be exercised in the name of freedom, but once such power was (invariably) made monopolistic and unassailable, it would be used for other purposes. It was no surprise, he wrote, that the U.S. embarked upon an age of imperialism after the Civil War: “the new nationalism enabled Theodore Roosevelt, than whom there was no more staunch advocate of union, to strut and bluster and intimidate our weaker neighbors. Ultimately it launched America upon its career of world imperialism, whose results are now being seen in indefinite military conscription, mountainous debt, restriction of dissent, and other abridgements of classical liberty.”⁵ George Nash, in his chronicle of the development of the agrarian sentiment within the conservative intellectual tradition, wrote that for Weaver, the south maintained a “system of sustaining forms” and a “complex of law, custom, and idiomatic behavior” that acted as a “powerful check against the sense of lostness, the restlessness, and the aimless competition which plague the modern masses and provoke the fantastic social eruptions.” Yet the south endured due to three “strong barriers to anomie:” a structural form of society, the idea of transcendence, and its preservation of history.⁶ Concerned by the rise of mass plutocracy, big business, big labor, and big government,

unconstrained capitalism was likewise harmful to local community and its solidarity due to the reliance upon industrialism. These were forces of unsettlement – technology in union with the promise of innovation and unending progress.

Weaver, a cultural southerner who spent most his academic career as a rhetorician in modernist and mechanized places such as the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas (now known as Texas A&M University) and the city of Chicago, stands out among the southern agrarians because of his praise for Lincoln. In *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, he wrote that rhetoric, like myth, was a means to convey what might otherwise remain inexpressible. But woven by power and status seeking humans, rhetoric is prone to error and misdirection. Good rhetoric, an incomplete expression of pre-existing beauty, love, and ethics, reflected a fragment of eternal and unknowable truth. Rhetoric, existing outside the reaches of human logic, “can only be valued analogically with reference to some supreme image...It is impossible to talk about rhetoric as effective expression without having as a term giving intelligibility to the whole discourse, the Good.”⁷ His hierarchy, distinguishing between four types of argumentation (genus, similitude, circumstance, and authority) placed Lincoln’s arguments against slavery at the top, as they dealt in absolutes and sought knowledge of the truth. Weaver did not wish to accept rhetoric apart from the fixed nature of things: in a pluralistic democracy, it was not sufficient for a healthy body politic that standards for public discussion would be located within the confines of audience acceptance. There must be a means to determine validity in argumentation. Effective and persuasive language divorced from the assumption of a fundamental certainty could not overcome

the unhappy advance of organized, mass coercion aided by propaganda for the ultimately empty goal of greater status.⁸ A “rhetoric of truth,” however, which resisted a debased language and acknowledged unseen realities might. Rhetoric must be more than an instrumental discipline. For Weaver, it should also serve as an ethical means.

Losing the Good

That political leaders, and presidents most especially, seemed little concerned with ethical language – and far more interested in the centralization of authority – contributed to agrarian anxiety about losing the authentic, the rooted, and the good. Weaver’s notion of an ideal rhetoric, one employed to find and illuminate truth, suggested a culture, like the myths that may encompass it, were in some way spiritual by the order of a being that is the summit of love, truth, and beauty. The enduring religiosity of the south since the shock of industrialization and world wars may point toward the cherishment of “southern values” and institutions not simply because they were regional and historical, but because they were thought to be true. The ability for leaders to subjugate others to their will in ways once unimaginable was a frightening concept for those whose ancestors, within living memory, made their life and living from toiling in the soil. Rhetoric, that which points humanity toward a better understanding of human limitations and the proper boundaries of action, was for Weaver muddled by the temptations of economic prosperity and political power. He discerned southern culture as fragile and worthy of protection; and he distrusted those of any ideological background who might claim the necessity of a “cleansing.” Those rhetoricians that considered the ethical consequences of decisions by taking into account irreversibility

and finality, unwilling to rule out, a priori, some consequences as unacceptable,⁹ approached an argument from circumstance. In contrast, the essence of Lincoln's rhetoric was reform according to law; that is, reform according to definition. And so the "true conservative" was one that approached the universe as a paradigm of essences, "of which the phenomenology of the world is a sort of continuing approximation. Or, to put this in another way, he sees it as a set of definitions which are struggling to get themselves defined in the real world."¹⁰ The southern agrarians, despite significant disagreement about Lincoln, tended to agree with Weaver in viewing their region and the bubbling, if inexpressible, desires for "natural" laws as a proud exception to prevailing and unfortunate American trends.

Characteristic of the disagreement about Lincoln's use of presidential power was M.E. Bradford, a professor of literature and a well-known defender of the heritage and traditions of the south. He criticized Lincoln as a man who had abolished his past and his family, driven to join "another tribe" and to "act upon a larger and larger stage, and not by the Christian rectitude which requires us to be good stewards of our given abilities or to answer a special 'call.'" He participated, instead, in "essentially gnostic myths of 'self-invention,' and detached from the traditional pattern in which a providentially given set of talents is developed and employed."¹¹ (His criticism of Lincoln was one reason that prevented him from assuming the chairmanship of the National Endowment for the Humanities that President Reagan nominated him for in 1981.¹²) Bradford's rejection of Lincoln was more representative of the southern agrarian critique of centralized, activist presidential power and the national greatness rhetoric occasionally

used to justify it. He was considered a prominent “paleo-conservative,” a term that entered the political lexicon as a conceptual and political counterpoint to “neo-conservative” in the book *The Conservative Movement*, published in 1988 by self-described paleo-conservatives Thomas Fleming and Paul Gottfried. In their usage, the description applied not just to the traditionalists or anti-modernists writing in the agrarian south but also to any “embattled conservative” opposed to the influence of anticommunist Democrats (leftists accepting of the New Deal) upon the conservative intellectual (and political) movement.¹³

These thinkers, whose chief outlets were small circulation periodicals of literary and cultural criticism, emphasized religiosity, national and Western identity, the protection of civil society and mediating institutions, family traditionalism, pride of history and heritage, and anti-interventionism. They actively opposed communism, corporate and social welfare, demographic change, and those policies seen as governmental authoritarianism. There was identification with those who opposed the League of Nations, supported the Immigration Act of 1924, and worked to defeat President Franklin Roosevelt. Others looked back further in history for a kinship of outlook, to Edmund Burke and the anti-federalism of President Thomas Jefferson and John Calhoun. Paleo-conservatives took many of their bearings from the pre-Second World War, anti-New Deal arguments. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the uneasy and informal alliance with anti-communist supporters of welfare capitalism, such as Norman Podhoretz and Irving Kristol, descended into something resembling mutual distrust and a long-simmering hostility. According to Gottfried, the tension has been

exacerbated by the second American war with Iraq and persistent calls for an aggressive, interventionist foreign policy. The “struggle for democracy” in other lands tends to be viewed as overly ideological, a harmful diversion from the struggle against more pressing domestic concerns. This has caused “paleo-conservatives” to create new outlets of news and opinion, and potentially to develop new allies also suspect of “Wilsonian” ideological premises.¹⁴

For these figures, a conservatism overly enamored with economy, power, and material accumulation was insufficiently concerned with the content and development of family and civic character, and as such it did not deserve its label. Sentiments like restraint and humility – characteristics not often used to describe any president, even by their supporters – were highly valued by southern agrarian critics. They sought the “local” and the “old” rather than the global, the new, the abstract, or the ideological. Southern agrarians generally believed that family was the most crucial institution, the very foundation of a good society which faithfully adhered to permanent things and ancient moral truths. Against these stood both big government and big business, which look out for each other at the expense of community-based, moral association. Bradford told the Heritage Foundation in a 1986 lecture: “All of our social myths presupposed some version of the corporate life – that man is a social being, fulfilled only in the natural associations built upon common experience, upon the ties of blood and friendship.” No president for traditionalists could unite a concern for social health, however eloquently expressed, with the valued traditions of community and custom. Such a task must fall to smaller units of organization. Otherwise, a spirited passion, such

as the temptation among government officials to create equality of outcome, “threatens to swallow up our reverence for law, responsible character, moral principle, and inherited prescription.”¹⁵

Conflicts of Visions

Jonathan Haidt, a psychologist specializing in investigations of human morality, has suggested that such a vision helps to explain a root of differing political visions in contemporary American politics. He generalized about “two rules:” feelings come first and tilt the mental playing field on which reasons and arguments compete; and second that moral domain varies across culture. A “liberal, Enlightenment” morality of justice and rights does not capture the concerns of all groups – those inclined to justify judgments with talk about respect, duty, and family roles. Thus morality is not just about how humans treat each other. It is also about binding groups together, supporting essential institutions, and living in a sanctified and noble way. A stable network composed of many overlapping groups that can “socialize, reshape, and care for individuals who, if left to their own devices, would pursue shallow, carnal, and selfish pleasures” is desired by those whose vision values self-control over self-expression, duty over rights, and loyalty to group.¹⁶ For “traditionalists” and “paleos,” a human person was bound, however loosely, by the loyalty that place defines and inspires. And the needs of the moral life – community and a sense of belonging – could not be met by market forces. Agrarian writers declined to accept an expansive view of individual liberty, one that would allow the human person to be reduced to “commodity.” Rather, a non-ideological vision of family and community protected culture, history, and tradition

not for their own sake, and not to their own end, but because this realm of interpersonal feeling was a means to ethical conduct and self-knowledge. And at the foundation was religious faith, or at the least a sense of the sacred.

Southern agrarian critics of expansive presidential power continuously expressed hostility toward perceived threats to living in a more sanctified and noble way. Among the most persistent of these threats was destruction to enduring and valued mediating institutions between the family and the state. A decline of these institutions damaged group cohesion. The means of destruction included militarization, industrialization, growth in the size and scope of government, and the rapid imposition of a cultural decay made possible by new technologies. And so religion and politics, for example, were not to be synonyms – there is no “moral equivalent to war.” The failure to make a distinction might make one susceptible to the “messianism” of centralizers like Wilson and the Roosevelts, presidents perceived by agrarians to utilize foreign conflict as an instrument of domestic control. Such presidents were also perceived as being a friend of not only big government, but capitalists bent on making big industry bigger. There was antagonism to the elevation of empiricism, seen to be the spirit of the age, as applied to human organization. A “physical imagination of science,” in contrast to a “physical imagination of poetry,” limited the metaphysical undertaking of “symbolic imagination” that operated in necessary analogy of the human to the divine.¹⁷ To cast it aside for the promise of intellect or power was a descent into the loneliness and alienation of nothingness, for the sake of a cult of the will.

A failure of imagination supported false, synthetic communities, which were the products of coerced unity. Robert Nisbet, a sociologist whose work was admired across generations of southern agrarians and their paleo-conservative heirs, believed the “quest for community” was a powerful, internal force made difficult by the demands and complexities of the modern world. For him, freedom should be not simply an affair of individuality. It should also be fostered by the light of community association developed among the like-minded. He defined conservatism as “the protection of the social order – family, neighborhood, local community, and region foremost – from the ravishments of the centralized political state.”¹⁸ These social orders were voluntary, local, naturally-occurring in a social context, and slow to form. The orders were acquainted with a vision of human life as possessed of meaning and responsive to a mysterious, transcendent force that tells the person their actions are not arbitrary and temporary. Agrarian writers communicated such an inexpressible sentiment by attempting to construct an insular world through the written word – even as the great difficulty, and perhaps hopelessness, of constructing their own world was acknowledged. They found the rhetorical language of presidents overseeing an unprecedented post-war economic boom to be infused with a sense of immediacy – the “modern” acting impiously, some manner of desecration of long-held, regionally-developed virtues. For Weaver, the customs of his south was a last center of resistance against the “false messiah” of science and technological manifestation, its traditions incorporated as moral ends toward a more civilized life.¹⁹ An imaginative mindset, particularly toward history, was essential to comprehending these persuasions. This mindset was also the essential aspect of their rhetoric.

Text Creating a Language

Literary critic and legal scholar James Boyd White has described rhetoric as “the study of the ways in which character and community – and motive, value, reason, social structure, everything, in short, that makes a culture – are defined and made real in the performance of language.”²⁰ In this definition, a rhetorical examination assumes that presidential rhetoric, to take an example, is relevant to an audience – the audience is not simply a passive recipient “soaking up” ideological positions. In addition, there is the assumption that the communicative acts of a president are not simply an empty shell masking a more “real” process of politics, no matter how such a political reality might be defined.²¹ As a matter of method, then, I think it is useful to consider the communication of southern agrarians and paleo-conservatives in their critiques of the American political power as a text creating a language. By this I mean that as Edmund Burke aimed to guide the reader of his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* toward the language of the British Constitution, thus inducting them as a member of the community that his language created and inclined to reject other possibilities, so too did these writers attempt to construct and preserve communities defined, in no small part, by their use of words and style.²² Among many traditionalist writers, the south was viewed as a place of literary flare and strong resistance to “outside influence.” In his book *The Politics of Prudence*, Kirk summarized the political sentiment of the region thusly: “Ever since the forming of the Union in 1787, the dominant political tendency in the southern states has been resistance to centralizing power. Far more than any other region, the South has set its face against Leviathan – that is, against the swelling omnipotent nation-

state, what Tocqueville called democratic despotism, the political collectivity that reduces men and women to social atoms.”²³

The language of southern agrarianism conveyed that it was easier to destroy than to create. There was skepticism of attempts to remake community in obedience to an all-encompassing political or social goal. In a time of widespread disharmony, such as a war, American presidents have spoken and taken action with the explicit statement, or at least the suggestion, that unity (with the government as an organizing instrument) was vital to govern constituents through a crisis. In 1917, President Wilson affirmed the importance of national unity: “It is imperative that we should stand together. We are being forged into a new unity amidst the fires that blaze throughout the world.”²⁴ The 1930 southern agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* and the writings of poets and essayists such as John Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren (who, as an integrationist and mentor to Ralph Ellison, came to publicly repudiate some agrarian views) were praised by Weaver for eloquence, as “paraphrase could not do justice many vivid passages.” A people might be politically “reconstructed,” but as Weaver argued “its culture is a matter of birth and growing, hardly amenable to political edict.”²⁵ In his persuasions, Bradford laid claim to “the rhetoric of the common good.” Its “theoretical ground” was a preference to a “greater good or obligation.” Here, a properly employed rhetoric should operate in “restoring to the political conversation of our time” a character of caution, concerned with the risks of change.²⁶ Looking back from the early 1970s, Bradford thought derisively “concerning the abstract philosophic or ethical validity of

arguments advanced in encouraging the great reorderings of priority marked by the past twenty years.”²⁷

To justify and expand upon such sentiment, traditionalists looked to history. There, they had little trouble forming a kinship of association skeptical of the quick social and political change seen as disastrous to the continuation of constitutionalism and local community. Kirk praised the Roman statesman Cicero as “a man of brilliance who set his face against a military revolution,” writing that “as a model of republican virtue, Cicero meant much to the leaders of the infant American republic.”²⁸ Kirk and the agrarians wished, I argue to share in the ideal of a foundational natural law of the sort expressed in Cicero’s *The Republic*: “True law is right reason in agreement with Nature; it is of universal application, unchanging and everlasting; it summons to duty by its commands, and averts from wrong-doing by its prohibitions.”²⁹ The imposition of liberal individualism and collective state action as advanced by presidents and legislatures were, in a paleo-conservative and southern agrarian critique, measured by harm to others. There was a recognition that the individual was born into a community, and into the moral constraints that prevail among community members. The underlying core of Ransom’s manifesto, for example, was a rejection of the “hollow blandishments” of science and the industrial economy thought to be translating a scientific ethos into society. A systematic application of scientific expertise to the complexities of human interaction failed to provide for the promised good life. It introduced consumerism and degraded the concept of labor.³⁰ It was alien to the communities of the region.

Such language was infused with a moralizing sentiment and set against a relativism thought to aid a militarized ideology. Southern agrarians and northern sympathizers such as Kirk did not just look back fondly to figures such as Burke, Adams, Jefferson, Calhoun, and Randolph.³¹ They drew from historical example to make warning for the present and lessons for the future. Bradford labeled Lincoln “the genial prophet of expansion, modernization, and commercial progress,” a figure that never disappears even after he has long been absorbed into myth. He wrote that an “attractive meliorist rhetoric must be developed to enforce his designs,” the central aspect of this rhetoric being “the mythic articulation of a tempting vision of delights to come – or likely to come, if just a few attendant suggestions are honored by a bemused electorate.”³² A strong, forceful rhetoric of presidential action (and of course the actual centralizing deeds themselves), mythologized so that other presidents were willing (or perhaps, in certain circumstances, eager) to follow, was perceived by these critics as an unfortunate public attraction. The domestic planners, who found inspiration in the socialists, national and international, were a menace of unforeseen circumstances and unintended consequences. Such ideologies, under the archetype of the ongoing attempt to live by human devices since the Enlightenment, were nostalgia for the future, unmoored and overly permissive of evil action due to a lack of prejudice, wisdom, restraint, and an unconcern for history. To return to the example of Mussolini’s intrusive, centralizing, “spiritually unmoored,” executive force, he wrote in his 1921 political tract *Diuturna*: “Everything I have said and done in these last years is relativism, by intuition From the fact that all ideologies are of equal value, that all

ideologies are mere fictions, the modern relativist infers that everybody has the right to create for himself his own ideology, and to attempt to enforce it with all the energy of which he is capable.”³³ The rhetoric of those sharing in Kirk’s dispositions, communal and value-laden, was an opposite of this generalization.

In White’s analysis of Burke’s *Reflections*, there was an “intimate and necessary” connection between the organization of language and the organization of community. A reader was presented with a language in which the community of value was constituted, maintained, and defended. Further, “to be adequate to these purposes, his language must be many things, the first of which is comprehensive, capable of addressing a question as a whole, as it really is, and of putting together everything that bears upon it.”³⁴ Ransom lamented that the “unreconstructed Southerner” was the only one who will stand against prevailing fashion and look backward rather than forward, like a “quaint local character of eccentric but fixed principals who is thoroughly and almost pridefully accepted by the village as a rare exhibit in the antique kind.”³⁵ Championing “European principles of culture,” he and other southern agrarians did not display much formal agreement over what constituted the good life. Yet there were recurring motifs – specifically the ravaging effects of “modernism” and the loss of cultural memory. Paul Murphy, the author of a history of southern agrarian writers, summarized that a central question of their motives and goals was “not only of where do I stand, but also, who belongs?”³⁶ The rhetoric, the language, and the text (in the twelve essays of *I’ll Take My Stand* and elsewhere) were not meant for all. These communicative acts were aimed at a particular, small audience of European-based males with an anxious mindset. It is notable that

women and African-Americans – together a solid majority of the total of southern residents – were hardly mentioned in their work.³⁷ The posture, even with the reality of political and social control in their regions, was pessimistic and defensive.

Agrarian writers presented their readers with a language of impending defeat as they nobly fortified against an impending flood. Metaphors of struggle abounded in the texts. Ransom's manifesto stated that the southern region, "looking defensively about her in all directions upon an industrial world," must not succumb to the "weapons of industrialism." He then asked: "Will the Southern establishment, the most substantial exhibit on this continent of a society of the European and historic order, be completely crumbled by the powerful acid of the Great Progressive Principle?" The defeat of the Civil War, he continued, had physically impaired the ability of the region to present "an attractive example of its philosophy in action," the result being that the "American progressive principle has developed into a pure industrialism without any check from a Southern minority whose voice ceased to make itself heard."³⁸ Accompanying the siege mentality and heated language was a belief that the south represented humanist values universally applicable. A justification of regional sentiments was embodied in a dramatic narrative, one of loss and closed possibility. From this, in turn, arguments could be extracted. These arguments proposed that threats imperiled not only a nation or a certain area but a critical element of civilization as well. The threat came from an identifiable enemy – for southern agrarians, the atomizing forces of modernity – and a response, even if it was lament and retreat, was necessary. It has been argued that presidential war

rhetoric has also followed such a pattern, although one important difference was that presidents usually indicated that a threat required forceful, immediate responses.³⁹

One scholar of presidential rhetoric, John M. Murphy, has argued that as the human view of the world has changed from one “infused with God’s purpose through one saturated with human reason to one permeated by language, so too has authority mutated.”⁴⁰ The political promise of liberalism, egalitarianism, individualism, and rationalism, was in Kirk’s praise of Sir Walter Scott, “infected with this passion for uniformity and utility.” Better was “tenderness toward ancient prerogatives, with every precaution to make sure that no person or class suffers a particular injustice in the name of some seeming general benefit.”⁴¹ Such prerogatives and cautions, though, were increasingly difficult in the south, given the rapid transformation of the region between the publication of *I’ll Take My Stand* and the end of the Second World War fifteen years later. Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal sparked a profound reorganization of the southern economic and social structure. Although the region steadily industrialized after the Civil War, there was no “industrial revolution.” There was, instead, a lag behind the rest of the nation in industrial capacity and employment. The sharecropping system faded and large-scale federal intervention spurred modernization.⁴² The defensive posture of Ransom and the agrarians was a defense of a disappearing way of life, a clarion call against the inroads of scientism, technology, and industrialization presented as destructive and atomizing to localism. And as a professional teacher, editor, and literary scholar – as well as a founding member of “The New Criticism,” the textually centered method of literary analysis that for a time was prevalent in scholarship – Ransom

himself eventually disengaged from traditionalist cultural and political analysis.⁴³ Others would certainly take up the banner of grievance for what was “lost,” warning against visions of perfectibility. But few could match the rhetorical influence of a transformative president such as Roosevelt, the leader who, in some effect, successfully renamed laissez-faire economic liberals the “conservatives.” In the final analysis, the “culture of the soil,” where agriculture was the leading source of wealth and prestige, could not long withstand the modern world.

Preserving Authentic Community

What endured in the agrarian rebuke of presidential power and its rhetoric of strength, unity, and centralization was a desire for authentic community. In studying rhetorical ethics, Wayne Booth envisioned the “self as a field of selves,” not as an automatic individual making discrete rational choices and bound by unambiguous rules so much as a social product in process of changing through interaction, sharing values with other selves.” White has applied such an imperative to polemical material, focusing on the constitutions and reconstitutions of language, character, and community and their processes of mutual influence.⁴⁴ The formulations of Kirk and agrarian writers implicitly claimed a better, more fulfilling, way of living – a higher calling. In their custom and tradition, the rural and the old were, in a “traditionalist mindset,” what remained of the ingredients to the essential social good of a community. This was the personal and the familial in voluntary association. These smaller “communities,” with mediating institutions between the person and the state, stood in opposition to a “modernist” industrialism and its accompanying irreligion, disregard for high culture, and

degradation of the quality of human interaction. In the words of Ransom: “This is simply to say that Progress never defines its ultimate objective, but thrusts its victims at once into an infinite series. Our vast industrial machine, with its laboratory centers of experimentation, and its far-flung organs of mass production, is like a Prussianized state which is organized strictly for war and can never consent to peace.”⁴⁵

The discursive community was sustained and extended by the terminology of exclusivity made more attractive not just by small numbers and the fragile existence of a valuable heritage, but a certainty of moral and spiritual correctness. “Progress,” in contrast, was seen as relativistic and uncertain. To follow its vast, glittering light was to be on a path of destruction and emptiness. An anti-ideological, moralizing sentiment, appealing to the wisdoms and prejudices of great figures, was an agrarian mode of reasoning, “practiced as if they were valid, reliable, authoritative.”⁴⁶ The political rhetoric of agrarian writers followed the critiques of presidential power. The growth of government should be limited by its legitimate authority, the source of which was the workings of civilization and the “natural rights” of persons created in the image of God. Writing at the end of the first Gulf War in 1992, Bradford stated: “the notion that the Declaration was designed to have one meaning in its own time and another one today, sometimes the doctrine of president Lincoln, goes against everything that we know about human nature in that it imagines Christian men obliging their children and grandchildren to conduct vast and potentially dangerous social and political experiments that they are unwilling to see attempted in their time and place.”⁴⁷

International crisis and domestic financial woes were changing the relationship of the American people to their government. During New Deal period, legislation such as the Lend-Lease Act of 1941 gave President Franklin Roosevelt wide authority to dispense food, ammunition, and arms to any country he considered vital to the defense of the country. There were predictions of dire consequences if these and other New Deal policies took effect. Roosevelt was viewed by some critics as a dictator, eager to take revenge for the failure to implement his entire program, often due to the actions of the courts. Kansas Governor Alf Landon, the Republican nominee for president in 1936, wrote to his campaign manager that “it is a terrible thing for the President to gamble with the social and economic welfare of a hundred and thirty million people because he is peeved at the Supreme Court’s decision.” His running mate, the publisher Frank Knox, expressed confidence that “the President’s attack upon the Constitution has proved to be a “disastrous boomerang.”⁴⁸ Senator Robert Taft of Ohio criticized the New Deal’s centralization and expansion of federal power in terms of costs to economic and personal freedom. “Every policy,” he inveighed, “should be studied in the light of the regulations which it may involve, and in the light of its cost in taxation.” War, conducted since the rise of the nation-state by centralized governments, concentrated power in the hands of a centralized state, thus threatening the American ideals of limited government and separation of powers he cherished. In 1939, Taft anticipated that war would lead to “an immediate demand for arbitrary power, unlimited control of wages, prices, and agriculture, and complete confiscation of private property.” In the months before the attacks upon Pearl Harbor, he repeated his belief that if the U.S. entered World War II,

“before we get through with that war the rights of private property in the United States will be to a large extent destroyed.”⁴⁹ Yet events intervened, and by 1965 hardly any conservative politicians would speak nearly as explicitly about rescinding the New Deal as Senator Barry Goldwater did on the campaign trail. Further, a majority of the electorate appeared to be comfortable with the welfare state. Most writers and officials within the American conservative movement followed President Dwight Eisenhower’s lead in accepting the reality of its existence and even its parameters – at the same time as they renounced deficit spending, extolled the virtues of self-reliance, called for trimmed budgets, and disapproved of the growth of federal bureaucracy.⁵⁰

Considerations of the constitutions and reconstitutions of rhetorical language face what might be termed an ontological problem: what does it mean to be a human being, and a human being who speaks or writes rhetorically?⁵¹ In the exercise of centralized government prerogatives, a central component of rhetoric was a demonstration that actions were decisive and correct. Presidents could use “the imagery of movement” to transpose calculated inaction into significant action. The veneer of humility could be accompanied by calls to action.⁵² To take one historical example among many, the first inaugural address of Thomas Jefferson praised George Washington as an earnest and determined leader. In a time of significant political rancor and uncertainty, Jefferson’s appeal to his audience acknowledged those who doubted his own judgment and, at the same time, reminded them of precedent. During this rhetorical process of association, Jefferson stated of his predecessor: “Without pretensions to that high confidence you reposed in our first and greatest revolutionary character, whose preeminent services had

entitled him to the first place in his country's love and destined for him the fairest page in the volume of faithful history, I ask so much confidence only as may give firmness and effect to the legal administration of your affairs."⁵³ And concerning President Woodrow Wilson, J. Michael Hogan has written that unlike other presidents, he did not oversimplify ideas for audience consumption. Wilson was "widely perceived as the very incarnation of the ideal orator: a man who used the power of eloquence to advance truth and the common good; a man of high ethical principles and prophetic vision; the 'good man skilled at speaking.'"⁵⁴

A Social World

But for agrarians, and for agrarian sympathizers like Kirk,⁵⁵ effective appeals to public opinion could not indicate the advancement of truth or the fostering of the common good. This was especially true when the orator was imagined to be a threat to a cultural and social order. The orator, Weaver wrote in *Visions of Order*, in the diagnosis of cultural crisis must be concerned with "men in being." This meant, at the least, a rejection of the idolatry of the "machine culture." He warned that "we have given grants of power to things which we delight to create and to contemplate, and they abuse us and interfere with our better interests. But the road away from idolatry remains the same as before: it lies in respect for the struggling dignity of man and for his orientation toward something higher than himself which he has not created."⁵⁶ This sort of reference to a higher good, while not always lived by those that claimed an appeal of God, was frequently invoked to an audience receptive to such an appeal. In their rebuke of abstract rights, ideological theory, industrial capitalism, and other products of liberalism,

southern agrarian “reconstituted language” connected sentiment with terms through negative association. This was contrasted with a somewhat “standardized” method of argument advancing standardization. Ponderings of agrarian economics, for example, drew attention to the ways in which a globalized economy harmed stable culture and community. And denunciations of distant bureaucracy drew attention to superior forms of human organization, a sentimentalized humility and citizenship learned through familial relations. Calls for judgment of these drew attention to the unfortunate separation of ethics and virtue from the reasoning of public life.

Such argumentation situated the speaker squarely in a social world. Ideally, this was one of an “agrarian” or “traditionalist” sentiment. The persuasions worked to socialize behavior in a particular, somewhat insular social world. Effective rhetoricians, as well as effective political leaders, understand social context as the arena of their activity and as a source material.⁵⁷ And so a “centralizing” presidents such as Wilson, who might have been a “good man” referring to a higher good, was to be resisted in rhetoric and deed. There was poor conformity to an association seen to be under threat. As such, I believe the social context of agrarianism could only be partially grounded in concrete reality. Those sympathetic to such a way of life were operating in an inescapable, and always changing, vortex of modernism, liberalism, and individual rights unleashed by the philosophical earthquake of the Enlightenment. As “inventors” of texts, as poets and orators, many of the contributions to discourse were to “re-present” from a collection of fragments that were to be understood to remain fragmented – assuming that they ever existed at all.

The language, like Burke's in the *Reflections*, was literary in character and "anti-theoretical." In White's analysis of Burke, the purpose was to "create" a language so that new ideas and sentiments could find their expression, which the reader would then learn and use.⁵⁸ Likewise, Kirk, Weaver, and the writers of southern agrarianism evoked a different world of vice and virtue than one their readers might have been familiar with. The "evoking" of a different, "better" world necessitated good character when the relation between self and culture was not so much instrumental as "reciprocal." To reciprocate "agrarian" and "traditionalist" sentiments was to partake of the "anti-modern," the communal and associational "good." Finally, there remained for the traditionalists and non-traditionalists alike a familiarity in appeals to concepts few would spurn – community and family. Building on this, the imagination of Kirk and others was a vision in creation of a "real world," heavily borrowed from history and in opposition to much of their political leadership. These thinkers and writers conveyed a metaphysical contract of eternal society that must be preserved, a partnership between the living, the dead, and those yet to be born.⁵⁹ The southern agrarian and the traditionalist, attuned to the local more than most,⁶⁰ were questioners of modernity. Given what they thought of the confines of sinful humanity, they attempted to preserve for their audience some measure and memory of the "lost good." That such a good may never have existed was not the point.

Notes

¹ George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), p. 312.

² John A. Garraty, "The New Deal, National Socialism, and the Great Depression," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 78, No. 4, Oct. 1973, p. 908. Catholic social theory was another important

influence upon Roosevelt's New Deal policies. See also: *Father Charles E. Coughlin: Surrogate Spokesman for the Disaffected* by Ronald H. Westport and *Right Reverend New Dealer: John A. Ryan* by Francis L. Broderick.

³ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1995), p. 88.

⁴ William K. Stewart, "The Mentors of Mussolini," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. XXII, No. 4., Nov. 1928, p. 843.

⁵ George M. Curtis and James J. Thompson (ed), *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Press, 1987), p. 247.

⁶ Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, p. 313.

⁷ Richard Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1985), p. 23.

⁸ Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 108 – 111.

⁹ Robert J. Cox, "The Die is Cast: Topical and Ontological Dimensions of the Locus of the Irreparable," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 68, No. 3, p. 238.

¹⁰ Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, p. 112 – 113 (quoted from p. 112).

¹¹ M.E. Bradford, "Dividing the House: The Gnosticism of Lincoln's Political Rhetoric," *Modern Age*, Winter 1979, p. 10 – 11.

¹² Irvin Molotsky, "Scholar Chosen as Humanities Chief," *The New York Times*, Section 2, Page 48, Nov. 14, 1981. The position eventually went to another conservative academic, William Bennett.

¹³ Bruce Frohnen (ed), *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), p. 651.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 652.

¹⁵ M.E. Bradford, "Is the American Experience Conservative?" Heritage Foundation Lecture 77, Oct. 21, 1986.

¹⁶ Jonathan Haidt, "What Makes People Vote Republican?" *The Edge*, Sept. 9, 2008.

¹⁷ Allen Tate, *Essays of Four Decades* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999), p. 186 – 187.

¹⁸ Robert Nisbet, *Prejudices: A Philosophical Dictionary* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 55.

¹⁹ Ted J. Smith (ed), *Steps Toward Restoration: The Consequences of Richard Weaver's Ideas* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1998), p. 144 – 145.

²⁰ James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. xi.

²¹ Jim Aune, course in presidential rhetoric, Texas A&M University, Fall 2008.

²² White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, p. 192 – 193.

²³ Russell Kirk, "Donald Davidson and the South's Conservatism," *The University Bookman*, Fall 2008, p. 56. This essay was reprinted from *The Politics of Prudence*.

²⁴ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 33.

²⁵ Curtis and Thompson (ed), *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver*, p. 18.

²⁶ M.E. Bradford, "Rhetoric and Respectability," *Modern Age*, Summer 1989, p. 241 – 242.

²⁷ M.E. Bradford, "A Fire Bell in the Night: The Southern Conservative View," *Modern Age*, Winter 1973, p. 11.

²⁸ George A. Panichas (ed), *The Essential Russell Kirk* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), p. 106 – 107.

²⁹ Cicero, *The Republic*, quoted in Singer, Peter (ed), *A Companion to Ethics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), p. 164.

³⁰ Paul V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 17.

³¹ "John Randolph of Roanoke," Kirk's master's degree thesis at Duke University, was later published as a book of that title. In the introduction to that book, he wrote of his goal: "the imaginative candor of John Randolph of Roanoke deserves rescue from obscurity."

³² M.E. Bradford, "Dividing the House: The Gnosticism of Lincoln's Political Rhetoric," p. 14.

³³ John W. Cook, *Morality and Cultural Differences* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 42.

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- ³⁴ White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, p. 199.
- ³⁵ Susan V. Donaldson, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition By Twelve Southerners* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2006), p. 1.
- ³⁶ Murphy, *The Reubke of History*, p. 10.
- ³⁷ Donaldson, *I'll Take My Stand*, p. xvi.
- ³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 20 – 21.
- ³⁹ Campbell and Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, p. 224.
- ⁴⁰ James Aune & Martin J. Medhurst (ed), *The Prospect of Presidential Rhetoric* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), p. 35.
- ⁴¹ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, p. 121.
- ⁴² Murphy, *The Reubke of History*, p. 114.
- ⁴³ Frohnen (ed), *American Conservatism*, p. 707.
- ⁴⁴ Aune and Medhurst (ed), *The Prospect of Presidential Rhetoric*, p. 323.
- ⁴⁵ Donaldson, *I'll Take My Stand*, p. 8.
- ⁴⁶ Aune and Medhurst (ed), *The Prospect of Presidential Rhetoric*, p. 324.
- ⁴⁷ Mark C. Henrie, (ed), *Arguing Conservatism: Four Decades of the Intercollegiate Review* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008), p. 241.
- ⁴⁸ William E. Leuchtenburg, "When the People Spoke, What Did They Say?: The Election of 1936 and the Ackerman Thesis," *The Yale Law Journal*, Vol. 108, No. 8, Symposium: Moments of Change: Transformation in American Constitutionalism, June 1999, p. 2080 – 2081.
- ⁴⁹ John Moser, "Principles Without Program: Senator Robert A. Taft and American Foreign Policy," *Ohio History*, Vol. 108, Sept. 2001, p. 181 – 182. See also: Ronald Rodash, *Prophets on the Right* (New York, NY: Cybereditions, 2007).
- ⁵⁰ Paul Gottfried & Thomas Fleming, *The Conservative Movement* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1988), p. 30 – 31.
- ⁵¹ Richard A. Chervitz & Henry W. Johnstone (ed), *Rhetoric and Philosophy* (Philadelphia, PA: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishing, 1990), p. 260. (From the chapter by James Aune, "Rhetoric after Deconstruction.")
- ⁵² Dan F. Hahn, *Political Communication: Rhetoric, Government, and Citizens* (State College, PA: Strata Publishing, 1998), p. 75.
- ⁵³ Stephen Howard Browne, *Jefferson's Call for Nationhood: The First Inaugural Address* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), p. xvii.
- ⁵⁴ J. Michael Hogan, *Woodrow Wilson's Western Tour: Rhetoric, Public Opinion, and the League of Nations* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), p. 20.
- ⁵⁵ Here, I believe it is important to recognize that Kirk was unlikely to have shared in the "racial views" of many southern agrarians. To my knowledge, no private or public piece of communication would indicate, for example, a defense of Jim Crow laws.
- ⁵⁶ Richard Weaver, *Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Times* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Press, 1995), p. 91.
- ⁵⁷ Christopher W. Tindale, *Rhetorical Argumentation: Principles of Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), p. 179.
- ⁵⁸ White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, p. 217. See also p. 209 – 211.
- ⁵⁹ Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Press, 2003), p. 390.
- ⁶⁰ Curtis and Thompson (ed), *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver*, p. 242.

CHAPTER III PHILOSOPHY

A Smaller Sphere: Kirk's Critique of Modernity

Rhetorically, Russell Kirk was an inventor. His constituted community of conservatism, an invitation for readers and hearers to share in his assumptions and conclusions, was based upon notions of such large and complex terms as equality, justice, freedom, and virtue. It was also distinctive to the American experience as that experience might be commonly understood. By selectively taking from the past and interpreting the present, he consciously “invented” what conservatism meant. This, in turn, actively built an audience of association, especially with the like-minded of bias and sentiment. Through a plausible (if at times unique and isolated) interpretation of historical figures, events, and the constitutions that form governments, he brought together a “community” that I designate as a grouping of “order.” His critique of modernity can be summarized in the consistent, deliberate use of one word in place of another: “person” rather than “individual.”¹ Kirk, to take a noteworthy and telling example, downplayed the influence of John Locke upon the American constitution. He was part to a loose, raucous “anti-Lockean” and “anti-Rousseauian” community of American conservatives that included writers of the southern agrarian tradition among others.² His alternative: against the tide of modernity, through a determination to not reduce the beautiful to the useful, the “actual-ness” of society, locally cultivated for more than utility, helped toward the ends of happiness ultimately found in the transcendent and reflected in the small spheres of home, family, and the immediate. Kirk’s existence in the modern world, and thus his persuasions, was incorporative, not

transformative. “Natural law,” the “permanent things,” and the “moral imagination” were not a formula for pure reason.³ His sentiments of order assumed an associative community that gifted the traditions of custom and the shape of morality. A “properly-ordered” moral imagination was necessary for the love and communion that humans intrinsically crave.

A False Freedom

Kirk thought any promise of an earthly paradise foolish. In writing against “a formula of politics,” (meaning the ideological) he was a leading representative of the strand of post-Second World War American conservatism that sensed an inverted religious fanaticism, an undercurrent of intolerance and totalitarianism, in the propensity to take the “freedom of choice” as the highest good. When unwilling to compromise or deviate from its revelations, there is, he thought, potential danger contained in such a freedom. Kirk’s determination that rationalism, unfettered freedom, and materialism could not explain the whole of life or offer a satisfactory, fulfilling end contributed to his conversion to Catholic Christianity, as well as to the legacy of what I and other critics of his writings consider his “postmodern imagination.”⁴ Gerald Russello has written the “problem” Kirk dedicated a career to facing was the Enlightenment project itself: its universalizing equality, secularism, and rationality were destroying the delicate cultural and intellectual inheritance of Western civilization. Following this mindset, preservation of the good and the virtuous was difficult when faced with what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has memorably termed “liquid modernity,” an engagement of society whose members interact primarily as consumers.⁵ Here, present-day consumerism in materially

prosperous yet spiritually confused liberal democracies was no longer about satisfying needs, but desire – a proposition Bauman described as “much more volatile and ephemeral, evasive and capricious, and essentially non-referential entity than ‘needs,’ a self-begotten and self-propelled motive that needs no other justification or ‘cause.’”⁶

The freedom that modernity valued, in other words, was elusive, unstable, and risky. As a rhetorical popularizer for his vision of the better life, spiritual and material, Kirk’s constituted community was an argument countering the “diabolical imagination,” an imagination that must be tolerated by an acceptance of the act of choosing. This did not mean, however, that he consented to the premise of the exercise of free choice as inherently good regardless of consequence. His assumptions and discourses were premised on a different anthropology altogether. More specifically, as imperfect, corrupted, emotional, social creatures, he thought humans should be free to be virtuous. Kirk’s sentiments, arguments, and language were a rejection of the content and methods of modernity (insofar as they can be generalized). His language of custom and tradition (conducted in a style that could, I think, be fairly depicted as anachronistic) was not well-suited to the dialectic of the current social and political order, one so impacted by the autonomy of liberalism. But he did put forward an alternative. The authority of the home, of that particular time and place where a person enjoyed the formation of their identification as persons, should ground one in a way acknowledging that temporal possibilities were not endless.

The “traditionalist” conservatism of Kirk, which I identify with “paleo-conservatism” and the imaginative, sentimental, literary localism of southern agrarians,

was a warning against the defiance of authority for the sake of being absolutely free in morals and politics. Libertarians, a group he derided as “chirping sectaries” in the title of one essay, were deficient due to their general unconcern for a transcendent moral order, allegiance to self-interest, failure to comprehend the human condition as both good and evil, and adoption of egoistic attitudes. The dictates of custom were in opposition to the “old-fangled folk” who “carry to absurdity the doctrines of John Stuart Mill”: “The ruinous failing of the ideologues who call themselves libertarians is their fanatic attachment to a simple solitary principle – that is, to the notion of personal freedom as the whole end of civil social order, and indeed of human existence.”⁷ Kirk’s concept of freedom was, at least in part, “Augustinian”: freedom must be orientated toward a good (and toward the supreme Good that comes from God) or it is not truly a good. And the absence of such an orientation led to a false and empty freedom, regardless of how seemingly attractive or beneficial it was at the time.

It was, Kirk conveyed, in politics and theory where words such as “liberty” and “freedom” and “justice” and “order” were most used. But custom, cultural habit, poetry, and literature, in their resilience built by the spheres of home, were more important than politics and economics because they were not simplified attempts to make logical those things which are inherently illogical and asymmetrical. Therein was the “classical and Christian concept of justice” as opposed to the “denial of any source for justice except the commands of the sovereign state.” All law, he continued, “is derived from the religious understanding – that is, all law in the traditional societies of the West; law in totalist states is another matter entirely.”⁸ Thus liberty and freedom must be “rightly

ordered” because “liberty and justice may be established only after order is tolerably secure.” By contrast, libertarians gave priority to “abstract liberty.” Conservatives realized that liberty “inheres in some sensible object,” discerning that “true freedom can be found only within the framework of a social order, such as the constitutional order of these United States. In exalting an absolute and indefinable ‘liberty’ at the expense of order, libertarians imperil the very freedoms they praise.”⁹ Kirk and other figures of “Augustinian imagination” such as Allen Tate, perhaps the most prominent southern agrarian poet and author, sought to constitute a vision of life to satisfy the human longing for transcendence while still being rooted in a particular time and place. Like Augustine, they knew they were born into a declining world. The temptation to turn inward, away from communion with others, as time and place crumble does exist for the sensitive chronicler anxious of the new and unfamiliar. And yet the “Augustinian perspective” was a turn inward of memory, understanding, and will, not to isolation. Despite the fragmentation and brutality of a breaking civilization, and without forsaking the present, these writers “sought a society built on the heart, a stable community of men directed toward a common, transcendent goal.” The task was to preserve from the “ravages of civilization in collapse” those elements of permanent value.¹⁰

And so the object of life was not success, pleasure, or power. Nor was it the political enforcement of equality. The equality “consequent upon the nature with which God has endowed us,” Kirk wrote in *The Conservative Mind*, was of one sort only: moral. “Divine mercy judges us not by our worldly estate, but by our goodness, and this, after all, far transcends mundane political equality.”¹¹ High virtue, and the truest end of

freedom and virtue, was love, communion, and association with persons that valued the same. In Kirk's rendering, these were the interactions of family, local community, and God. Culture, a long and fragile development of family, community, and God, was more important than politics. And all political problems were, at their foundation, moral problems. Contrary to a varied yet persistent revolutionary zeal in history, tradition, custom, and accumulated wisdom were not tyrants to be abolished in the abstract construction of a newer and more just society. They are imperative to the personal and communal good. In his book *The Roots of American Order*, Kirk wrote:

Society, Burke said, indeed is a contract, a partnership; but it is not a mere commercial concern to ensure private profit, not yet expressed in the unlimited General Will of Rousseau. Indeed men do have rights by virtue of their human nature; but these rights are not bloodless abstractions, nor are they limited to mere guarantees against governments. To narrow natural rights to such neat slogans as 'liberty, equality, fraternity' or 'life, liberty, property,' Burke knew, was to ignore the complexity of public affairs and to leave out of consideration most moral relationships. One of the most important of the rights which men possess in society, Burke remarked, is the right to be restrained from actions which will destroy their neighbors and themselves – the right to have some control put upon their impulses and appetites.¹²

“Freedom,” then, was not in and of itself a virtue. A properly directed freedom must include community restraint. Many of his political critiques of modernity were polemics against libertarianism, whose manifestations of freedom he saw as something resembling a religion. Abstract notions of individual liberty in modern, prosperous liberal democracies were not easily compatible with sentiments of community restraint informed by the morality of custom and tradition. Christian ethicist and law professor Stanley Hauerwas has contended that morality is not chosen and confirmed by example. Instead, the moral life is learned through imitation: “This is intrinsic to the nature of Christian convictions, for the Christian life requires a transformation of the self that can

be accomplished only through direction from a master. The problem lies not in knowing what we must do, but how we are to do it. And the how is learned only by watching and following.”¹³ Lacking God, Kirk wrote that humans “act either according to impulse or in obedience to ‘common utilitarianism.’” Across his writings, he was firm in this conviction: “So far as liberty, equality, and fraternity have any existence or meaning in modern society, they are rooted in Christian morality; and if positivists and rationalists succeed in their endeavor to explode the religious convictions of society, they will bury in the ruins those very liberal social principles by which the school of J.S. Mill professes to live.” The “fundamental internal error” of utilitarian, modern politics was “that society can be ruled by discussion. But the tremendous impelling power in all societies is force;” and few forces were more compelling than religion and place.¹⁴

A Manner of Communion

A more “properly ordered” means of virtue drawn from community norms, tradition, custom, and accumulated wisdom has in common with many postmodern critics an antipathy to the dogmas of modernity. There is skepticism that reliance on forms of rationalism is sufficient to solve what are, for the “traditionalist” conservative, fundamentally moral problems. The fallen, inherently sinful nature of humanity could in fact be redeemed, but not by a mechanistic spectacle, not by experts, and certainly not in this life. For Kirk, the political expressions of modernity were a road to relativism, moral decay, and an unfortunate, enormous appetite for innovation. The moral imagination must survive as a guide for society in this gap. I believe this imaginative, sentimentalist perspective of the modern world colored nearly the entirety of Kirk’s persuasion.

“Postmodern conservatism,” a term new to the discussion of how the “right” could reform itself, is perhaps one avenue of returning conservatism to a different mode of discourse, one less enamored over the pursuits of political power. With regard to human organization, the dialectic of logical analysis that arranges in accordance to abstract notions of the individual or society was characteristic of liberal modernism. According to Russello’s *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*, such dialectic imparted only a “thin” theory of life. An imaginative writing, though, was concerned with the formulation of images and the cultivation of imagination.¹⁵ Be it poetry, history, or the many variations of opinion-giving, this “knowledge” that humanity was meant for eternity considered itself aware of ethical truth and abiding law in the chaos of events, which set humans apart from the momentary existence of other animals.

Such an imaginative sensibility, inspired by Kirk and other writers,¹⁶ might be characterized as an “inexplicable faculty” that strengthened the bonds of human love and communion. Despair, a crisis of meaning, could be avoided because it was possible to distinguish between the good and disillusion of progress. Individualism, the argument went, was isolated and self-seeking; it cannot long endure. Man is a highly social, “gregarious animal.” The very idea of modern individualism was unstable, Kirk wrote, because humans are made for cooperation. Individualism is the negation of society: “We yearn to be love and to be loved, to belong to something bigger than ourselves... When we cease to cooperate, the average sensual man becomes Cain, with his hand against every man’s. In such a condition, there exists freedom of a sort, but it is what John Adams called the freedom of the wolf, as distinguished from the moral freedom of the

truly human person.”¹⁷ Love, always stronger than death, endured in the constant of human nature. The freedom that does exhaust itself was a product of a culture “coddling” communion through the values – the generational knowledge of elders and extended family members – within the small spheres of local community. Its ends were indifferent to political maneuverings aimed toward earthly perfectibility; those ends, Kirk wrote, tend toward devolution away from true perfection and into the repressions of pure power. His manner of communion – organic, slow to develop, and unorganized by political authority – was embracing of the “truly free,” as there is an object, a fulfilling end, of personal and familial affection. Completed only with a transcendent full communion, a “matured culture” allowed history, custom, tradition, and accumulated wisdoms to preserve the well-ordered guides of personhood. All ages and institutions were to be judged in the light of such principles of justice and order, learned in part through revelation and in part through the long and often painful experiences of humanity.¹⁸ Modern concepts of freedom, it followed in his critiques, were unresponsive to his ideas of “natural right.”

For Kirk’s “Gothic mind” and “Bohemian Tory” approach, many public debates were among different stands of a similar liberalism. (Most notably, many economically “conservative” notions were economically “liberal.”) It was wrong, he wrote, to prematurely follow the assumptions of the many flowerings of utilitarian assumption, such as that institutions were likely good and that “freedom of choice” was a good, so long as others were not clearly harmed. Ontologically, he found many social and political arguments to be centered in a self-serving utilitarianism.¹⁹ That such sentiment,

beautiful and forcefully stated as it might be, do not and likely cannot exist comfortably in the world (modern or otherwise), was recognized by Kirk.²⁰ But to dwell on this reality was to miss the point of his persuasions, especially as a conjurer of imagination and images. The “instruments of effectiveness,” as was fitting with his “bohemian” persona and “man of letters” lifestyle, were predominantly stories, remembrances, and imaginative readings. As with freedom and modernity, he suggested there were limits to what language could offer. Language had to point to something else beyond human capacity; it was not to be thought of as encompassing. What must be rejected were assumptions of rationalism when engaged in personal interactions. Thoughts did not mimic hypothesis and language need not adhere to rationalist argument in expressing a point. Kirk, this is to say, spoke and wrote discursively, inviting the reader to an “anti-modern” association in resemblance to the associations of family and locality.²¹

In this association, the rhetorical path could be loquacious and repetitive, full of play, but the language did not endlessly reflect on itself. It worked for a goal that may have required memorable – and, not infrequently, somewhat heated and apocalyptic – language to draw in those of a like-minded, traditionalist, literary disposition. In that spirit, he did not attempt to define his terms in detail. His view of modernity was, therefore, not well formulated. In engaging the work he produced in more than four decades of correspondence, writing, and lecturing, I conclude he observed the many working definitions of this large term, modernity, in a similar fashion because he felt they shared an underlying framework: humans have the ability to think like a “god.” This state of mind (that individuals are responsible to themselves first, inherently

possessing the constructive ability and the right to pursue freedom and its ensuring contracts²²) was, in practice, a politicized temptation to the exercise of calculated, centralizing compulsion. Kirk, for instance, was certainly not the only commentator in the immediate aftermath of two gruesome conflicts to criticize world war as a direct consequence of the collapsed modern project. Surveying the devastation, he found the divorce of power and person complete after centuries of reductionism. Personhood was reduced to subjectivity as impersonal institutions and processes followed a “soulless logic.” According to political scientist Rein Staal, “the aspirations that had inspired the founders of modern thought – the conquest of nature through science, indeed the conquest of human nature through science and the emancipation of power from moral restraint – had been achieved beyond anyone’s wildest dreams, and they had turned to ashes before that success could be enjoyed.”²³ In Kirk’s mind, the mission was to counter the trendy, the radical, and the morally defective. And his alternative included pointed evaluations of those within the American conservative movement who bought into the premises of liberal modernity. Defining himself against presumptive allies sharpened the imaginative, historically-based reading: as a man unbound to ideology and political expediency, opposition was an obligation. Many conservatives, lacking first principles, were too easily and too cheaply seduced in ways not dissimilar to the liberalisms of leftist causes. Temporal authority was their common end.

The imaginative, historical reading of *The Conservative Mind* and *The Roots of American Order*²⁴ located its enemy in the utilitarianism and romanticism of several Enlightenment figures, Bentham, Mill, and Rousseau first among them. Their ideals

were the underpinning of utopian, ideological dreams “left” and “right,” including the libertarianism and socialism strongly present in the currents of twentieth century American political discourse. To escape the structures of liberalism and “reconnect” with an older, pre-Enlightenment Western tradition was Kirk’s way to avoid the scheming trample of long-developing culture and tradition, the asymmetrically strange and odd, the nonconformist, and the mysteriously religious.²⁵ Utilitarianism – lurking in the universalizing, coldly rationalist and secular equality of the Enlightenment, the ideological fever of the French Revolution, and the elevation of unmoored “rights” – could, he wrote, be countered by the search for meaning. The things true for all people at all times, transcending matter and time, came through interpretation mediated by historical experience. From the understanding that man was made “in the image of a Person who is invisible,” ethical principles emerged that make easier the difficulty of humans living well in a community, “so that they will not be as the beasts that perish.” An order of a society, whatever its modern pretenses, could shine through to grant an ethical meaning to existence.²⁶ The “permanent things” were the measure of true societal progress. Upholding these produced higher social goods than utility: norms of courage, duty, justice, integrity, charity, and familial help were Kirk’s standard for judging persons and their institutions.²⁷ Such an appreciation of norms were acquired in the outgrowth of organic community unorganized by the mechanisms of the state, beginning with family and extending to the small spheres of community such as church and school. Accumulated experience was the teacher of life.²⁸ But, following Burke, Kirk sensed

that history, even as it instructed, could be perverted by the passions of human sin.

Burke wrote in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*:

We do not draw the moral lessons we might from history. On the contrary, without care it may be used to vitiate our minds and to destroy our happiness. In history a great volume is unrolled for our instruction, drawing the materials of future wisdom from the past errors and infirmities of mankind. It may, in the perversion, serve for a magazine furnishing offensive and defensive weapons for parties in church and state, and supplying the means of keeping alive or reviving dissensions and animosities, and adding fuel to civil fury. History consists for the greater part of the miseries brought upon the world by pride, ambition, avarice, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrisy, ungoverned zeal, and all the train of disorderly appetites which shake the public with the same.²⁹

For Burke and his traditionalist American followers, permanent causes of evil could adopt different ruses and diverse causes in differing ages. He continued, “those attending only to the shell and husk of history” may think they are waging war with “intolerance, pride, and cruelty” but they are, “under the color of abhorring the ill principles of antiquated parties” instead “authorizing and feeding the same odious vices in different factions, and perhaps worse.”³⁰ Thus a revived ancient order, however imaginative or rooted its qualities, should reconcile itself to the strength of ethical perception beyond the earthbound barriers of experience and momentary events. Herein was the necessity of poetry and art capable of informing and inspiring humanity to value the inherent dignity of their nature. The assumptions of utility and the lessons of history alone, Kirk adamantly held, were insufficient for the good life. In fact, they were a terminal path of disillusion and boredom. And so the “idyllic imagination” of Rousseau (whom Burke called “the insane Socrates of the National Assembly”), which rejected old dogmas and manners, rejoiced in the notion of emancipation from duty and convention

and in the end harmed the forming of a normative consciousness which should be nourished, at least in part, by a literature of moral imagination.³¹

Responding to Crisis

In his critiques of modernity, Kirk brought the preservation of human agency (of a religious sort) into his perceptions of an ideal modern freedom. And the non-ideal was thought to manifest something resembling a secular religion. Rigid, a priori abstractions of individual liberty were, in effect, worshipful; but they worshiped planning and science, in agreement with Mill's argument that the grand sources of human suffering were conquerable by human striving. In contrast, a sentiment of locality and community restraint, informed by an enduring morality, was a firm refusal of the utilitarianism that was "the immediate inspiration of a crowd of anti-religious and anti-traditional popularizing writers." As a harbinger of the "lavish hopes for material comfort," he derisively summarized Mill: "These superior human beings, as they progress toward material perfection, will cease to require the childish comforts of religious consolation; present sufferings abolished, they will shrug their shoulders at the prospect of eternal life."³² By contrast, Kirk's "permanent things" could be possessed in ways permanent to the conduct of life, through subjection to the "properly ordered." Historically informed sentiments were a tool for that mysterious journey.

In this dissertation, it is through comparisons to "utilitarian thinkers" that biases, rhetorical terminologies and historically-based narratives take their texture. In Kirk's writings was an assumption of the opacity of "fact."³³ This is not to say he rendered facts wrongly, only that his assumptions of historical continuity – such as a straight line from

Burke to an American founding certainly influenced by Locke and “Enlightenment” principle – may have brought too much of his own intellectual desire to the dialogues he instigated and shaped. To briefly consider a contrast, the “third person narration” of a historical telling, generally but not always dispassionate, is itself a rhetorical device. Facts are linguistically delivered, a cog in the larger discourse that is not a strict reproduction of incidents (which an audience might take it to be). Yet the manner of the “telling,” removed and seemingly uninvolved, occupies the illusion of unbiased reproduction. There was little such posturing with Kirk, whose language, style and content did not follow a logical pattern to get a point across. His persuasions (discursive, narrative, “fiction-centric,” and full of story and play³⁴) feature little pretense of existing as unbiased or straightforward. The “certainty” of his rhetoric was not in the language or terminology, given that he made few attempts to step outside of a “conservative framework.” And the rejection of “rationalism” in politics was further evidenced by the absence of “hypothesis” from his social and political writings. Aims plainly evident, he intended for an audience to reach his own conclusions with him through a process of reading and hearing and thinking. But it was not only this, as their shared agenda was largely indefinable. In the popularizing of Burke and an Anglo-American conservatism, Kirk’s rhetorical inventions were a response to the crisis of modernity through the criticism of the excesses of individual autonomy and its literary, historical constructions of an alternative narrative.

By facing a “modernity” distinguished as socially and economically atomizing, the narrative of alternative sentiments expected to build and support localized civic

institutions. These “small spheres” were a descendent, and more broadly a synonym, of Burke’s “little platoons” of family and local association.³⁵ The complexities of humanity, life itself, and the realities of sin were benefitted by institutional support, afforded by adherence to some ancient customs (marriage first among them). Marriage relationships with children, for example, also involved the neighborhood and the varied layers of community. The union is elaborated for extended periods of time, many conservatives have argued, both in social costs and in social capital. Thus public commitments to the parameters of marriage are reasonable and vital – for those wishing to raise a family in particular. By this view, those part of a relationship receiving benefits from institutional commitment should encounter no shame or disregard. “Public” commitments tend to be stronger than “private” ones. Marriage, a long-developed custom, deserves community support. The traditionalist might state that aggregate trends pinpoint the married family with children as a cornerstone of society and morality, a worthy example to be emulated, and a reflection of the love of God whose sanctity is under constant threat.³⁶

In other words, it is because so few are exceptional in their talents, opportunities, and circumstances that norms and institutions matter. This manner of thought is, I have suggested, essentially a rejection of the liberal Enlightenment-based project. At the risk of over-generalization, in the modern project, dominant in so many public arenas from issues of law and economy to entertainment and sports, the destiny of the individual is shaped, to a large extent, by their own conception of their own imperatives. This is an assumption common even among the “political right” broadly defined. In his opinion of

the controversial *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern PA v. Casey*, Justice Anthony, an appointee of President Ronald Reagan, wrote: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”³⁷ A contrasting view might highlight the costs of unchecked individual autonomy or challenge those concepts of freedom without a “virtuous” end, promoting instead the self-denial and delayed gratification that have served the past well. When such “conservative sentiments” of restraint, locality, and family-orientation bloom, figures like Kirk might suggest that however furiously and well he wrote, they were only a small part of the revival. The world and the person cannot be remade by the flame of any flawed human image. The long-existing sentiments he was tapping into, rather, were a conduit of recovery. In an essay detailing the more genuinely conservative (distrusting of the “typical social planner, trained in Benthamite methods, blind to individuality and true order, intent only upon Efficiency and Simplicity”), he wrote of the obligation to recovery order, moral and political, “a task to stagger Hecules.” He conjured up battle imagery (“Ignorant armies, supplied with the weapons of annihilation, clash by night on our darkling plain”) and concluded:

Their adversaries are the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse – in particular that Fourth Horseman, who is called Revolution. Yet my young comrades and I, pursued and pursuing through the ponds and scrub of the Pere Marquette railway yards in the dark, rescued prisoners from the enemies’ base: we found it possible to win against odds. If we defy the Four Horsemen, it may come to pass that the Permanent Things will not fall trophy to Chaos and Old Night.³⁸

Such representative flourish and content, perhaps overly prone to blustering and usually lacking in specific policy prescriptions, are less credible in a society that highly values progress, mobility, and individualism. Kirk’s traditional conservatism, as I have

identified it, does have an air of irrelevancy and quaintness. A deep skepticism of “material opportunity” and “social improvement,” entrenched also in the conduct of his personal and family life,³⁹ could be described as antithetical to the American experience, especially in the midst of a long economic expansion. The sentiments and responses to modernity of Kirk and those of a loose but related grouping (“southern agrarians” and “paleo-conservatives”) were not explicit as a base of influence for policy or political discourse. One reason is that the “Old Right mentality” was as much an instinct and a aesthetic taste as a set of commitments, and orchestrating an argument around questions of taste is, perhaps, a hopeless enterprise. Much of what I have labeled the “traditionalist” outlook stemmed from a sentimentalized affection, which may or may not be originated in an actual, shared experience of the past.⁴⁰ This contributed to the making of his influence as less than what it could have been. Today, Kirk’s impact upon American “rightist” thought and practice is at times negligible, even within the confines of an “intellectual conservatism” increased in popularity to the point of becoming a prominent political movement.

Out of Fashion

In a sense, Kirk was a victim of the successes of which he was an integral part. With conservatives in a position by the late 1970s to harness the mechanisms of government toward national power, a thinker who declined to participate with the details of policy would inevitably lose audience to “experts,” technical and otherwise. Clad in out-of-fashion suits, immersed in old books, and a self-described “bohemian,” he was oddly out of place with the media savvy and business-like soldiers of the “Reagan

revolution.” There is also a bigger gulf: his defense of “natural” hierarchies, grave misgivings of technology, and relative silence on the danger of “bigger government” to economic growth (especially by comparison to the more libertarian-minded) were informed by moral and aesthetic worries. A disdain for populism and the identification of the Reagan-era conservative project with “freedom” and “democratic capitalism” were reasons enough for marginalization, no matter how strong the mutual hostility to centralization.⁴¹ Kirk’s Catholic Christianity and invocation of a “constituted” past to validate sociopolitical principles, parallel to and informed by a religious heritage, were at odds with those within the conservative intellectual movement (particularly the “neo-conservatives”) who worked to shape conservatism in a way less considerate of the past. For the “neo-conservative” critic, history may well need a secular redemption, a freeing from the present to become more open and thriving in the future. For Kirk, these “forward-looking” worldviews contested with the collectivist movements on its own liberal terms; they were, in essence, arguments among cousins. He continuously cited a preoccupation with liberty in the Anglo-American political tradition as a root of its moral malaise.⁴²

An “associative” view of socio-political order animated by the moral imagination and the sentiments of religiosity was, essentially, a cultural effort. Perpetuation of the factions of politics and attempting to impose beliefs through the fiat of law – politics, in other words, being more important than culture – was conducive to the framework that replaced one imposition for another, unconcerned with an ultimate ethic in the pursuit of

power. Kirk recognized America and the West in the “Age of Enlightenment” to not be incomparable in this respect:

Yet presidents of the United States must not be encouraged to make Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace, nor to fancy that they can establish a New World Order through eliminating dissenters. In the second century before Christ, the Romans generously liberated the Greek city-states from the yoke of Macedonia. But it was not long before the Romans felt it necessary to impose upon those quarrelsome Greeks a domination more stifling to Hellenic freedom and culture than ever Macedon had been. It is a duty of the Congress of the United States to see that great American Caesars do not act likewise.⁴³

Kirk’s incorporative manner of things true across time and history as applicable to current crisis confronted modernity as the elevation of a private rationality over accumulated wisdom. This facilitated impersonal actions at the expense of the small spheres of home, family, and local community. Its motives for action were not love and communion but some manner of utility, just another step up the ladder of exercising secular authority. And so to once again generalize a complex subject: under the umbrella of modernity, personhood was “reduced” to individuality, a wellspring of the modern, Western, liberal tradition which flowed through Locke and many of his contemporaries. This generalization was one reason Kirk maintained the worldviews of contemporary political discourse, right or left, each tended to fight on “liberal terms” as cousins. (To return to the example of libertarianism and socialism, one emphasized political liberty and another economic equality.) Political liberty included within it a notion of equality argued in terms of rights. A liberal political paradigm accepted both political liberties as a basis of social order as well as economic equality – equality was, then, not inherent in the fundamental dignity of the person but an outgrowth of political liberty referring back to right and opportunity.

“Red Tories” such as Phillip Blond, sharing in the similar intellectual sentiments of Kirk,⁴⁴ have argued this is precisely the wrong place for a society to be. Personhood as reduced to an atomistic individual is isolated and self-willing, deluded into a supposed capability of determining actions and goods without societal interference. In this argument, rightist and leftist movements have substituted rights for the dignity and value of personhood. And among the more regrettable products was a managerial state that has wrecked havoc on “the old mutualism of the working class.” The result is a “destroyed” middle and working class morality in the name of permissiveness, and a commoditization of intimacy and the body: “this left-libertarianism repudiated all ties of kith and kin and, through it was utopian in aspiration, its true legacy has been the dystopia of divided families, unparented children and the lazy moral relativism of the liberal professional elite.”⁴⁵ Traditionalist conservatives were not surprised such anthropology would lead to the “de-personalizing” of persons where the “violation” of “rights” becomes a chief societal offense.⁴⁶ Here, also, is an explanation for the difficulty of gauging the impact of Kirk’s persuasions. Appeals against modernisms were, in and of themselves, inescapably a part of the modern project by technological delivery, as well as by assumption. Through responding to political struggles and public policy issues, the offering of solutions (however vague and cultural-centric) suggested that humans were in fact able to discover satisfactory solutions for their problems. Kirk’s rhetorical inventions, no matter how coherent or compelling, in their attempts at poetry and aesthetics might best be thought of as “beautiful losers.”

Discourses of Values

The healthy cultural and spiritual environment of his vision, elusive even to those chasing it, was apprehended in a shared language of values. Kirk asked the reader to imagine that the world of his rendering was a real world, one in which readers were to make their way through active engagement with the materials of the text to learn about the real or imagined world of which they are a part. The reading was reconstructive and participatory, an “experience from the inside, with the intimacy of the artisan, if only in a tentative and momentary way, the life of the language that makes a world.”⁴⁷ His creative facilities opposed the “individualistic” ethos of the United States, and it spurned the idea that the American Constitution of 1789 was, largely, a “Lockean” construction. He warned against “choice” as a high virtue, because the convenience of choice could become an unanticipated, lonely terror.⁴⁸ Individual autonomy as a central truth that should be vindicated by social and political order was for Kirk a form of dissociation, a surrender of the soul to obsession for immediate yet unfulfilling enjoyment. Society was, instead, an intricate continuity of lives. To raise the human condition to a level less unworthy began by “brightening the corner where you are; by improving one human unit, yourself, and helping your neighbor.”⁴⁹

His discourses imparted, implicitly and explicitly, that humans were communal, moral beings meant to accomplish something good, in ways big or small, during their short stay in the temporary world. In confronting modernity, Kirk and other conservative thinkers⁵⁰ unearthed what was for them a paradox: modernity was both marked by relentless warfare and a universally declared desire for peace. Commitments once reserved for local community had been transferred to mass movements standing as

surrogate moral communities, providing an otherwise missing sense of historical purpose. With the dissociation of “traditional” communities from the centers of power, the “modern” ventures of war, standardization, mechanization, and bureaucracy become invested with their own sense of moral identity and belonging.⁵¹ Regardless of the truth of such sentiment, I believe it was understood by traditionalists that moralizing was insufficient to end the supposedly corrosive character of abstract freedom, especially economic freedom. The corrosive character of society could not “end.” And as a result, despite a period of American “conservative” ascendancy in the wake of discontentment with “liberal” government actions, the “familial, religious, and local” communities continued to suffer a decline. This was due, at least in part, to the traditionalist inability to provide a plausibly authoritative account for norms of tradition, faith, and place – regardless of the actual norms of law, markets, and choice.⁵²

Kirk’s persuasions against a utility to “personhood,” where the social limits of developing customs and institutions were dismissed to “free” human agency, necessarily made provision for transcendent metaphysical principle. By this principle, all signs were not arbitrary and all meaning was not existentially or culturally constructed. The “small sphere” of local community, originating in the family unit that mimics the love of God, was for Kirk and his followers an imagination capable of comprehending the true and the good in ways that motivate humanity to the objective realities, to the truths that move human hearts to the actions beneficial to their natures. Wayne C. Booth, in his ruminations on the purposes of rhetoric, pinpointed this as the “central metaphysical question”: who or what made the universe such that it can be apprehended only in a

shared language of values? He wrote that “rhetorical questions pursued honestly will finally lead to a God-term.” Although Booth was dismissive of reliance on “any religious doctrine to show how much has been wrong with the doctrines of modernism,” he and Kirk would, I believe, find common ground in the “central notion that man’s value-embedded symbolic processes are as real as anything we know.” Both might agree that man is self-making and remaking, a symbol-manipulating creature, an exchanger of information, a communicator, a persuader and manipulator, an inquirer.⁵³ Man is a “rhetorical animal,” imposing belief through personal engagement – but to what end? I argue that Kirk would concur with Booth’s statement that “the ‘whole scene’ of the atomic self, isolated in a cold universe, is undermined, the great liberal, critical fiat, ‘Make up your own mind,’ no longer quite makes sense.”⁵⁴ (Nonetheless, Kirk would rebuff any claim of meaning as simply linguistic.)

Kirk’s “literary Catholicism” taught that constructs, and the constituted communities of their imaginative reading, employed a reality more intelligible by the transcendent. Physical symbols were in union with meanings; the “indissoluble unity” between signifier and signified made it possible to grasp the depths of mystery.⁵⁵ Kirk’s constituted community and symbolic meanings attempted to break the barrier of momentary, private experience. His “moral imagination” was sacramental. Without it, he foresaw an “armed doctrine” in the vacuums of individualistic modernism, an inverted religion utilizing “central political power and strength of arms to enforce conformity to its ‘rational’ creed.” His critique of modernity was a lament at the destruction of ancient institutions and beliefs for a cleared path to utopia. Secular dogmas replaced a Christian

charity with false “fraternity;” the symbols of transcendence were adapted to a new order but in a degraded form, the incessant promise of an appetite satisfied motivating the malicious.⁵⁶ As ensconced by an innate desire for communion, by custom, and by accumulated wisdom, humans do possess in the rhetoric of “moral imagination” the faculty for ethical perception. Whatever its imagination, historical constructs, and rhetoric, Kirk’s critique of a modernity that has abandoned this love and communion offered little that was “new.” Tapping into ancient arguments about unseen things, he insisted audiences recognize purpose among creation. This insistence was integral to his arguments as an author and indicative of his failures as a socio-political figure with a lasting and concrete legacy.

Notes

¹ I am grateful to Peter Lawler for the clarity of these distinctions. Interview: Feb. 4, 2009.

² Kirk’s embrace of localism and “Bohemian Tory” sensibility had something “southern” about it, but in my opinion he did not wish to be identified either personally or politically with that region or any other. His own “Midwestern mindset,” formed in a childhood fondly remembered, was strong. In our conversations, Annette Kirk, a native of New York City who adopted the Midwest and successfully encouraged close relatives to move there, also expressed this opinion.

³ My understanding of how “free persons” come to be “subject” to law and how in modern times principles of civil law inherited from ancient legal traditions can become formulas of pure reason is from Haltzel, Michael H. & Joseph Klaitis, *Liberty / Liberte: The American & French Experiences* (Washington, DC: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1991), p. 11 – 49. Chapters 1 & 2.

⁴ See Gerald J. Russello, “Russell Kirk and Postmodern Conservatism,” *First Things*, October 23, 2008. A fuller treatment may be found in his book *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007).

⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), p. 76.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 74.

⁷ George A. Panichas (ed), *The Essential Russell Kirk* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), p. 373. My cataloging of the “deficiencies” is a reproduction of Panichas from the same page. The essay, titled “Libertarians: Chirping Sectaries,” was perhaps Kirk’s most pointed argument against libertarianism: “It is of high importance, indeed, that American conservatives dissociate themselves altogether from the little sour remnant called libertarians. In a time requiring long views and self-denial, alliance with a faction founded upon doctrinaire selfishness would be absurd – and practically damaging.”

⁸ Russell Kirk, “The Meaning of Justice,” Heritage Foundation Lecture 457, March 1993.

⁹ Panichas (ed), *The Essential Russell Kirk*, p. 380.

¹⁰ Robert S. Dupree, *Allen Tate and the Augustinian Imagination: A Study of the Poetry* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 1983), p. 13 – 14.

¹¹ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1995), p. 58.

¹² Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), p. 288. “Mankind can endure anything but boredom,” (p. 132) he wrote in consideration of the spiritually improvised late Roman world; and such a “dead world” is ripe for abstracting freedom.

¹³ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 225 – 226. I acknowledge Davey Henreckson for the quote and his contributions to questions concerning the meanings of a “conservative freedom.”

¹⁴ Russell Kirk, “The Foreboding Conservatism of Stephen,” *Western Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. V, No. 4, Dec. 1952, p. 572 – 573.

¹⁵ Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*, p. 211 – 212. See also: “Combining postmodern, conservative philosophies” by Kevin Holtsberry in the *Washington Times*, Aug. 26, 2007.

¹⁶ According to Russello and Lawler, likely the two scholars most responsible for placing “postmodern conservatism” in the public sphere, these writers include cultural critics Christopher Lasch, Allan Bloom, and the Catholic novelists Walker Percy and Flannery O’Connor.

¹⁷ Russell Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), p. 445.

¹⁸ In various considerations of “Christian humanism,” there seems to me to be a common theme: efforts toward earthly utopia were both anti-humanist and anti-Christian. One should not, in other words, be a “professed utopian.” See: *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice: Essays of a Social Critic* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden Publishing, 1991), p. 175 – 179.

¹⁹ It is curious to reconcile this generalization with his suggestion, most explicitly stated in *The Roots of American Order* and *America’s British Culture*, that the founding and constitution of the United States was not “liberal.” The effort to do so is central toward comprehension of his “imaginative” mind.

²⁰ Before the first chapter of *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk quoted from Coleridge’s *Essays on His Own Times*: “...the great majority of men live like bats, but in twilight, and know and feel the philosophy of their age only by its reflections and refractions.”

²¹ Interview: Gerald Russello, February 5, 2009. The Kirk household put this generalization into practice, hosting, often for extended periods of time, a wide variety of visitors and “lost souls” over four decades.

²² Immanuel Kant, in his well-known essay “What is Enlightenment?” answered this question as the freedom to use individual intelligence. Kirk might respond that such an answer is incomplete (given the fallen nature of humanity) and an invitation to impersonal reductionism and bureaucratic banality.

²³ Rein Staal, “The Forgotten Story of Postmodernity,” *First Things*, December 2008. Staal writes that the “crisis of modernity had been grasped well before the intellectual fad of our own time,” citing the German Catholic theologian Romano Guardini as one who detailed the “essence of modernity” – the separation of power from person.

²⁴ *The Roots of American Order* was first published in 1974 as a textbook of government for college students. Kirk characterized it as a more accessible compliment to *The Conservative Mind*: “to assist in renewing an appreciation of America’s moral and social order among the general public and among university and college students” (from the Foreword).

²⁵ Here I acknowledge George Nash for greater clarity in understanding this point.

²⁶ Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, p. 37.

²⁷ John Attarian, “Russell Kirk’s Economics of the Permanent Things,” *The Freeman*, April 1996.

²⁸ Annette Kirk stated to me this was a statement her husband liked to make in his conversations with the young scholars who would visit his home and library.

²⁹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New York, NY: The Liberal Arts Press, 1955), p. 162.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

³¹ See Kirk’s “The Moral Imagination,” reprinted in the collection of lectures *Reclaiming a Patrimony* (p. 45 – 52) and elsewhere. History was necessary but not sufficient for the moral imagination, “an enduring source of inspiration that elevates us to first principles as it guides us upwards toward virtue and wisdom and redemption.”

³² Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, p. 301.

³³ Although it may seem strange to make this generalization given a long and prolific career, I do so with two factors in mind: the repetitiveness of his examples and themes (what might be broadly classified as “teaching”) and the consistency with which they were expressed across formats (written and verbal, book length, essay, and lecture).

³⁴ Kirk’s penchant for story-telling is consistently noted in sketches of his life. See: *The Unbought Grace of Life: Essays in Honor of Russell Kirk*.

³⁵ Jeffrey Hart, a professor of English, longtime contributor to *National Review*, friend of Kirk, and prolific “paleo-conservative,” has stated that local association is vulnerable to the free market as a “kind of utopianism” maximizing human imperfection with the result of “greed, short views and the resulting barbarism.” See also his essay “The Burke Habit” in the *Wall Street Journal* series of American Conservatism, Dec. 27, 2005.

³⁶ Bruce Frohnen (ed), *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), p. 288 – 289.

³⁷ *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern PA v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833, 852 (1992).

³⁸ Russell Kirk, “Enlivening the Conservative Mind,” originally reprinted in *Prospects for Conservatives* and reprinted in Edwin J. Feulner (ed), *The March of Freedom: Modern Classics in Conservative Thought* (Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing, 1998), p. 49 – 51.

³⁹ Interview: Peter Lawler, February 4, 2009. According to Lawler, Annette Kirk watched the family finances closely (and more closely after their four daughters were born), which was a necessity given the unconcern for money that he stated was consistently characteristic of Russell Kirk. In visiting with Annette Kirk, she recounted how “just about anybody” could stay at the family home. Perhaps the most notable was “Clinton the Hobo,” a man who occasionally stole but also delighted the family with his skill at poetry recitation. She also stressed her humanitarian duty to help those in need, including a family of refugees from North Vietnam over several years.

⁴⁰ Gottfried, Paul & Thomas Fleming, *The Conservative Movement* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1988), p. 97.

⁴¹ David Frum, *What’s Right: The New Conservative Majority and the Remaking of America* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1996), p. 160 – 161.

⁴² In *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk associated “absolute liberty” with “absolute power,” writing they are “quite compatible” in a centralized government. The French Revolution was an example of how an organically developed and fragile morality could be corrupted as men became drunk with power: the revolutionaries “detested that complexity in a state which really is men’s chief safeguard against arbitrary action and oppression.” (p. 101 – 102).

⁴³ Russell Kirk, “Political Errors at the End of the Twentieth Century, Part I: Republican Errors,” Heritage Foundation Lecture 321, Feb. 1991.

⁴⁴ Annette Kirk told me that her husband was “more comfortable” with socialists than libertarians, as not all socialists are centralizers and many of them value cohesive community unorganized by the state, not partaking of the rigidity and inhumanity of libertarian faith in markets.

⁴⁵ Phillip Blond, “Rise of the Red Tories,” *Prospect Magazine*, Issue 155, Feb. 2009.

⁴⁶ To take the issue of abortion: the fetus has “infringed” upon the rights of the woman. Even if “rights” were to be “granted” to the fetus, how could the tension between the fetus’ rights and those of the woman be resolved? To generalize, the courts have granted that the independent, self-sufficient individual has “greater right” than the dependent individual.

⁴⁷ James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 8 – 9.

⁴⁸ To return to the example of marriage, the understanding of that union as less of a sacrament and more of a “contract” between two individuals, capable of dissolution at will, was a disruption of fragile, necessary social arrangements.

⁴⁹ Russell Kirk, “May the Rising Generation Redeem the Time?,” Heritage Foundation Lecture 377, Dec. 1991.

⁵⁰ I think here of the sociologist Robert Nisbet, a friend of Kirk and the academic his widow informed me most resembled her husband in outlook.

⁵¹ This argument may be found in Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1969).

⁵² For more on this point, see: Frohnen (ed), *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia*, p. 177.

⁵³ Wayne C. Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), p. 136.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 141.

⁵⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, Encyclical Letter, Sept. 15, 1998.

⁵⁶ Panichas (ed), *The Essential Russell Kirk*, p. 151. The essay, “Edmund Burke: A Revolution of Theoretic Dogma,” was adapted from Kirk’s biography. Kirk wrote: “At bottom, the difference of Burke from the revolutionaries – like all large differences of opinion – was theological. Burke’s was the Christian understanding of human nature, which the men of the Enlightenment violently rejected.”

Creation in Imagination: Postmodern Rhetorical Constructions

Russell Kirk was one of the first American conservatives after the Second World War to perceive in “postmodernism” an opportunity for conservatism to assert itself amid the collapse and confusion of “modernity.” Surveying the Western political and social landscape after decades of conflict, he was skeptical and cynical toward what he termed “ages of reason” positing logical, empirical answers for the messiness of the human condition. Those responses to crisis and uncertainty he classified as too closely binding an individual will and vision of leadership with actions not contemplative of other persons. Inspired by Edmund Burke’s opinion that casting aside revealed religion and organic civil society for a “humanistic religion” would bring forth unpredictable and revolutionary consequences, Kirk claimed to persuade in the void of an “exhausted” modernity. In the place of a “defecated rationality,” empty theory, and cold reason should exist an “age of sentiments,” conviction derived from other sources than human reason alone.¹ He wanted for humanity, disciplined by tradition and imagination, to eschew the temptations of “systematic thinking” but still find a unity of vision, based upon serene temperament and an embrace of values and mystery.²

The persuasive language of Kirk was, I argue, fortified by the skepticism of what could be termed “postmodernism.”³ More specifically, his conservatism – sourced in an unknowable, transcendent order and set against ideology in its preservation of worthy customs and conventions in its “humble attitude” toward a cautious change – overlapped with the postmodernist distrust of legitimating knowledge through an overarching system of thought, particularly a system which would suggest to encompass legitimate

truth and proper societal placement of various organizational parts. Kirk's incredulity toward "metanarratives," in other words, rebuffed a totalizing series of propositions. The second "postmodern" aspect of Kirk's language and persona was a rejection of the "autonomous self" and an acceptance of a "social construction" attitude toward life. This construction, as has been argued, came from the tradition, custom, and convention (more than a bit of it imaginatively conjured) which developed and perpetuated meaning through the learned practices and symbolisms of expression – fragilely, the vital work of each successive generation.

A Refutation of Self

In "postmodern" discourse, self is often displaced as a central presence in experience and appropriated as a personal signifier. This is, in effect, a refutation of self as a central presence in human experience and a turning away from commentaries directing toward the processes of rationalization.⁴ As a thinker and popularizer against the power of the large, the mechanized, and the rationally planned, I think that Kirk's persuasions of more "properly ordered" sentiments (those orientated toward home, history, custom and community) fit Michael McGee's summary of rhetoric in the context of postmodernism:

As a theory of power, rhetoric talks about how opposing ideas and opposing people relate to one another in discourse and how people create discourse in the context of which to execute their power plays and power moves. Rhetoric shows us how to argue, which is a way of defending ourselves against attack. It shows us how to justify. It shows us what counts as evidence, how to find evidence, how to do research. It shows us how to approach judgment. And it also tells us how to make judgments and how to justify our judgments.⁵

In the approach to judgment so as to sway an outcome, the persuasive will can be employed as discourse to influence the environment by promoting identification with the audience. This appeal is not an “imposition” but an “invitation” to an association greater than the individual. Such identification is a form of “community building” through the artful, attractive capacity of words for any number of purposes. And among the purposes, of course, might be an increase of influence or actual power. If modernism as a political perspective (as some of its critics would have it) is rooted more in the “empirical” than the “transcendent,” I would suggest that the “postmodern” and the “conservative” might find common cause against the drive for power as channeled through the individual will – where experts or markets would dominate more than shared conceptions of the sacred. For Kirk, the “rationalist” pursuit of wanted goods defined what was “good” by what was desired and by the means of its delivery. Thus the elevation of scientific knowledge became, for the human will, an “instrument of his moral and physical destruction.”⁶ A formula of ideology promising earthly paradise was, by such sentiment, a totalizing system and a destructive grand narrative of power. Solutions, it followed, resembled an inverted religion resistant to compromise against its absolute truth. In its rhetoric and sentiments, the commonalities of postmodernism and Kirk’s conservatism are at the intersection of this “anti-ideology.”⁷

Kirk’s end was not the fulfillment of personal desire but the regeneration of the moral imagination for his time. And his time was a period overly enamored with technology, planning, and confidence in the human ability to discover ever better means of existence. He conveyed humanity was engaged in a struggle against the “altar of

progress” of an abstracted reasoning devoid of experience and historical lesson. Human disregard for sentiments of mystery, custom, and tradition was a vulnerability to the romantic magnetism of utilitarianism, and “leaders in spirit and mind must be taught to rise superior to material possessions; and this cannot be accomplished without a genuinely ethical or humanistic working.”⁸ Those who knew him intimately have recounted a lifelong antagonism to efforts among American conservatives to keep or develop an ideology.⁹ Kirk sensed that “ideology” enshrined an objectionable and false abstractness to historically contingent beliefs. And disastrously, his political allies might, in practice, advocate to impose something resembling a civil religion. Especially in the case of foreign military conflicts, this was likely to lead to disastrous results, no matter how innocent the motives.¹⁰

Countering Ideology

Ideology, like imagination, might arise from anywhere in his rhetoric. The critiques of traditionalists tended to find ideology most prevalent in politics.¹¹ For them, it functioned as a replacement religion. Second, an ideological rigidity made political compromise very difficult. Ideology was for these writers a manner of “religious dogmatism” in a political context, one completely inconsistent with a conservative outlook due to the minimization of the nuances and shades of gray that animate social and political life. In summarizing this sentiment, Gerald Russello, author of *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*, has labeled ideology a “quintessential modern product” because “it divides the real from the theoretical and inflates the latter at the expense of the former.” To counter this, Kirk’s moral imagination featured discernment,

as one of its chief purposes was “the ability to see through the travails of the moment into certain truths.” This “vision” began with an appreciation of the transcendent as a check against the hubris of totalities, concrete or theoretical. The elusiveness of the “central mysteries of life,” which could reinvigorate the ethical and practical motions of daily conduct, was also an opportunity for creation and discovery through the uses of a faculty central to human morality: imagination. Kirk’s use of the term “imagination” was for the purpose of such discernment. His persuasive abilities, inflamed by a believing Catholicism, were aimed at taking a “fractured self” and reconstructing toward the highest end, the ethical.¹²

After his conversion in 1963 at age 45, Kirk’s transcendent moral imagination was further activated by Catholicism and what I have termed its “sacramental imagination.”¹³ This encompassing way of life demanded, as he saw it, an “emptying of self” by the sacraments and their prompts to a healing reconciliation and a continual prayerful contemplation. As evidenced by aesthetic pleasure, the moral imagination was a formidable persuader.¹⁴ But, Kirk asked, what of the many (including those who might claim apostolic faith) with a “diabolic imagination” – those who search for identity through the ideologies and images that surround them? These tend to be driven by what “sells,” or what is thought to “work,” aiding what Kirk might characterize as an intolerable civil social order.¹⁵ I believe that one question he struggled with was the following: within an aggressively secular public sphere, what also existed alongside a fallen human nature, when there is too much reliance on a straitened form of rationalism

and the false science of materialism to address fleeting feelings of emptiness – effectively, a spiritual deficiency?

The “Kirkian” conservative was likely to view all political problems, at their foundation, as moral or spiritual problems. And the postmodern might view all political problems as unsolvable, as humans exist in the confusions of rootless, circulating fictions.¹⁶ If rights-based liberalism, with a more mechanistic view of the human imagination, fetish for rational solutions, and love of power-wielding experts finds its political expression in modernity, a “postmodern conservative” might view the “liberal” (that is, Enlightenment) order as failing to meet the always-present necessity of human mystery and unexplainable sentiment (that is, spirituality). This is to say that “what comes next” need not be a “hyper-modernism” of relativism, amorality, devotion to unending progress and innovation, and derision of tradition. Kirk’s “moral imagination,” with its power of perception and claims of possession of universal value testifying to the inherent dignity of human life, was a pursuit of virtue confluent with the common pursuit of standards of discrimination that resisted the aims and designs of the “enemies of permanent things.” It was a denial of the concept that humanity could know or build any form of totality. Kirk thought a moral imagination orientated to the permanent things to be an enduring source of inspiration that elevated and guided toward virtue, wisdom, and first principals. To explain and defend this was the role he assumed.

In this imaginative and creative task, most important was the work toward “redemption.”¹⁷ Within this transcendent, religious context, I suggest that Kirk’s incredulity toward “metanarratives” was directed toward a subjective and mediated

understandings of, for example, salvation history (truth) presented as salvation history itself (Truth), or reducing “The Way, The Truth, and the Life” – which Catholic Christianity emphatically states refers to a historical person – to a totalizing series of propositions. This is why I contend both postmodernism and the “Burkean,” “Anglo-American” conservatism which Kirk persuasions wished to build possessed important commonalities. These were a rejection of the autonomous self and a reception of the social construction of life as guided by tradition and custom, which developed and perpetuated meaning through learned practices and the symbolisms of expression. To generalize of the cultural impact and communicative language that would allow for comparisons, in both of these large terms (postmodernism and conservatism) is an earnest epistemology – a critique countering themes of modernity – as well as an arch cultural schtick of persuasion, something less philosophically serious and more culturally aesthetic. This rhetorical device of creation, persona, and imagination does facilitate, I believe, a feasibly constructed interjection of language (a persuasion most successful among the “religiously-inclined”) crucially assisting the call toward the more “permanent,” yet always mysterious, things.

And because there was, for the traditionalists, so much reality that would remain hidden, there was much that language could not adequately capture. In making sense of the stories of modernity, a “contextualization” of issues following an established (rooted in “history”) and sentimentalized pattern of “ethics” and “morals” was helpful.¹⁸ Amid the inexplicable ways of political and societal organization, emotions and experiences like uncertainty, suffering, frustration, and a sense of story from another point of view

could be conveyed with loss or distortion. For the traditionalists, the “moderns” were missing vital elements of societal order. Kirk’s task, as he saw it, was to find a way to talk and write about these experiences in the language of the “community” and “association,” attractive to the like-minded as well as a larger potential audience. This process required thinking about the language itself: what it can do, what it can be made to do, and its limitations.¹⁹ The “spiritual” and “traditionalist” actions and arguments, in other words, were involvement by means of invention to a reimagining of the world and not to a routine application of established rules or principles. Thus Kirk’s conservative sentiments were, like Burke’s, highly “adaptable” even as they emphasized the solidity of place, history, tradition, and custom.

Postmodern Rhetorical Critique

In these considerations of Kirk, the “moral imagination,” and postmodern rhetorical construction, I recognize the term “postmodern” is a large and often confused one. Here I follow Bruce Gronbeck’s portrayal of postmodern rhetorical critique: the base of sociality is rhetorical and social relationships are constructed, maintained, repaired, and altered rhetorically, through systems of discourse that humans use to build reciprocal roles. He has asserted that “without faith in discursivity, human bonds are destroyed,” and that “there are no foundations not only for institutional life – politics, education, economics, religion – but no fundament from which the idea of meaning itself can arise.” Life contains mutual influence grounded in “shared meaning structures, that is, grounded in rhetorical transactions.”²⁰ And so a “rhetorical postmodernism” need not abandon attempts to find foundational meaning or truth. There is, instead, recognition

that philosophy has limits, and that rationalism – perhaps the most consistent underpinning of the “modernist” projects (including the literary and artistic ones), against which postmodernism is a reaction – can never eradicate the inherent mysteries of existence. A totalizing theorist, by contrast, partaking in the “universalist” and the abstract, essentially rejects the incomprehensibility of the human creation through a determination to correct its ills by addressing the whole. There is, as Kirk might have stated, less of a concern with personal sin than there should be.

The intersection of Kirk’s Catholic Christianity, his conservatism, and the postmodern rhetorical constructions was an understanding and acceptance of the unknowable, internalized so as to always scorn promises to unlock the mysteries and uncertainties of life. These variations of conservatism and postmodernism recognized that humans were situated in a certain time and place. The products of time and place, further, could not be separated from their temporality. In the persuasions of “moral imagination,” the ideologies opposed by conservatives and the meta-narratives opposed by postmodernists turn the temporal into the eternal, the developing into the absolute, and truth into Truth. Kirk’s persuasion was a conservative sentiment “anti-ideological” in that it opposed making thought and practice – things intimately rooted in time and place – into bloodless abstractions uprooted from reality. There was preference to “trust” that which had been repeatedly shown to work (insofar as this difficult detection was possible) – but not because a new idea must be false or because time-tested wisdom was absolute truth itself. The rhetorical constructions, the invitations to join in shared assumptions and sentiments through language and ideas, were also questioning the

notions of certainty. According to Gerhart Niemeyer, in Kirk's concept of anti-ideology there was embrace of an "intellectual openness toward reality: the immediate reality of social, economic, and political relations, and the divine reality beyond and above this world. Beyond this openness, conservatives cannot say much about themselves. They pretend no firm system of ideas about the means to deal with life's troubles."²¹

This sentiment was most evident in Kirk's construction of a conservative intellectual tradition. Using well-known, well-respected historical figures, he "evoked a past from which conservatives could draw their guiding principles and individual models."²² His books, essays, lectures, and mentorship contributed to the "future" and also "wrote" the past. The figures lionized in his most famous work, *The Conservative Mind*, forged an "identity" capable of noteworthy rebellion against an ascendant post-war American liberalism. This book, among several others, was a work of "genealogy," a "recovery" of figures and principles and a significant act of imaginative historical scholarship, accomplished through a deliberate attempt to dramatize the past.²³ Presented were thinkers and actors who "saw" that the modern world's intention to transform aspects of its disappointments – including, possibly, human nature itself – was a failure. It was a religious vision only occasionally secularized.

As a Catholic, Kirk was careful to affirm that humanity does possess the ability to live well.²⁴ He was influenced by "New Humanist" critics such as Irving Babbitt and Paul More; their contention that works of history and literature could serve as moral uplift was a lasting influence.²⁵ And some postmodernism, in its acceptance of a sentimentalized imagination as a conduit of appreciation for the inexpressible, bemoaned

the altar of rationality and ideological construction too often worked to separate humanity from historical existence – an existence that should be open to historical narrative as fictional construction.²⁶ For Kirk, this was not an elevation of the arbitrary or a denunciation of fact and truth, but an incorporation of the concept of the good and the limits of knowledge into the conduct of life. He professed such a sentiment as a humbled acknowledgment of the mystery that dominated all stages of human existence. Ordered societal explanations of totality were to be avoided not simply because humans cannot access them, but because it was not wise to human nature to try. The totalitarian temptation was far too well established. Humans, Kirk communicated to his audience, cannot fulfill the entirety of human desire.

Thus he highlighted the importance of deference to the dispositions formed by trial and error as an expression of collective experience. There should be “that body of literature which helps us to form the normative consciousness of the rising generation: that is, to enliven the moral imagination.” Kirk described himself as a “historian and diagnostician,” not as one who has labored to offer “facile remedies for our present bent condition.”²⁷ This approach – “history as literature” – engaged the language of a text by committing to an imagining of a world where certain declarations of significance were valued and others were not. This is one reason why I consider Kirk’s use of language to have been both an ethical and a highly social activity. He thought about the human condition, and those figures serving as positive (“men of vision”) or negative examples, by comparison to a greater good. From this transcendent foundation, a purpose of his writings, particularly about history and literature, was to bequest a common culture,

ethical and intellectual, so that readers might be united through the works of the mind. The language of reverence and mystery was a calling to a higher purpose, a challenge to look beyond the temporary and toward an order which holds things in their place. The associations might follow the acts of moral imagination were, as a consequence, at least in part dependent upon Kirk's unique interpretation of American history and custom, which were presented as "Burkean" and "Anglo-American."

A Variant of the Postmodern

His variant of "postmodernism" was, then, not an attack on truth, virtue, or some divine foundation as a basis of human conduct. It was more of an enticement to join a community so as to discuss truth, goodness, beauty, and the transcendent things thought to give life meaning. There was, in Kirk's "associational" rhetorical constructions, a truth of revelation that should inspire awe, reverence, and humility for all those that encounter it. For these, there was the power of ethical perception beyond private experience and temporal tedium of momentary events. Philosophically, there was no formula capable of reducing the reality of an unseen order (one gradually, partially revealed to a human nature properly attuned to it) into a discursive syllogism.²⁸ Of human nature "discovering" truth, Kirk wrote:

By definition, human nature is constant. Because of that constancy, men of vision are able to describe the norms, the rules, for mankind. From revelation, from custom and common sense, and from the intuitive powers of men possessed by genius, we know that there exist law for man and law for thing. Normality is the goal of human striving; abnormality is the descent toward a condition less than human, surrender to vice.²⁹

To convey the notion to innovate was not to reform, and to reflect upon how a conservative critique of human nature and affairs might impact discussion about the role

of government, Kirk from his earliest writings pondered underlying realities of human experiences (elusive and inexpressible as they were). Spiritual voids “addressed” by the fleeting pursuits of pleasure should be met, in his view, not by the variations of technical pursuit. The discipline of the mind, the instillation of prudence, the presentation of a coherent body of ordered knowledge across subjects, and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake better fulfilled human emptiness. As such, the “rising generations” must be helped to make their way toward wisdom and virtue. “True freedom of the mind” abides by such aims.³⁰ Through a detailing of these imaginative ethical standards, I believe Kirk made use of his fame, stature, and gift with words to construct for his followers an “associational” way to talk, read, write, and live.

In this conception of life, to step back from the constant motion of seeking status and power, of always being “plugged in” to technology – of religious dogmatism in a secular, political context – allowed for the room to express the past and initiate a variety of imaginations: historical, poetic, civic prophetic, and moral. As modernism and liberalism exhaust, Kirk wrote, it was proper to appeal to the emotional and imaginative resources humans can invest in place and personal history. These were essential components of the person in the continuation of a social self-identity. The imagination gave flesh to sentiments and anxieties, new and abiding, perhaps too inchoate to define but still appreciative of beauty, which is the “index to civilization.”³¹ He behaved, even in his non-fiction, as if this renewal could be achieved through a literary narrative. A “postmodern conservative”³² possessed concern for the imagery a society creates of what it admired and condemned – people can participate in and change history. A

community brought to creation by its language demanded the mysteries of free will, divine guidance, human agency, local, family-orientated choices, and the “organic” applications of developed, historical custom be respected as cornerstones of a temperament in but not of the confusions of modern society. This was one way for the natural limits of personal and political power to be better understood.³³

Kirk’s associations of imagery and imagination were, I think, designed to foster the “ingenuity” of a civil society. The “narrative” form of his writing (as opposed to a more strictly “historical” one) was supposed to be conducive to providing lessons and examples of valuable meaning drawn from a human consciousness that transcended history.³⁴ History, after all, was itself seen to be contained within the immanence of a mysterious nature. Kirk, in writing that the “ideologues” and “planners” sought totality rather than the seeker of inexpressible permanent things, applied such a prejudice to the various ways of understanding civil and historical society. According to Russello, the imagination assumed a central place in Kirk’s thought because a disorder of the imagination was an inevitable feature of a modern world. This disorder was continuously advanced by those leaders that insisted upon the imposition of ideologically-based rigidity, regardless of stated intention. Given that people searched for their identity through remembered and creatively conjured images, many “modern” images were based either on the false science of materialism or a debased sensuality. (Kirk termed this the “diabolic imagination.”) And so it fell to the non-ideological conservatives to fashion the appropriate images which could convey the sensibilities of mystery to each generation. This approach of conservatism was reconstructive, a “recognition that

engagement of the sentiments through an imaginative rendering of history was just as important as an appeal to reason.”³⁵

By such generalizations, I have argued that his conservatism was a descendent of the anti-ideology of Edmund Burke, a Whig in alliance with an early period of “Enlightenment” British liberalism (the Glorious Revolution) who strongly reacted against its excesses in the form of the French Revolution. Irish author Conor Cruise O’Brien, relating the bitter split within Burke’s political party, quoted the soaring rhetoric his subject delivered to Parliament in May 1791: “I regard the French Constitution, not with approbation but with horror, as involving every principle to be detested, and pregnant with every consequence to be dreaded and abominated.”³⁶ A more proper doctrine of human conduct, Burke might argue, could be found in the claims of Christianity and the veneration of an evolved constitution of natural rights flowing from the transcendence of Christian revelation, not through quickened designs of a hopeful abstraction. I think the “postmodern sentiment” of these generalizations, in the “narrative form” of Kirk (and aided by his colorful and quotable language) was a useful device for his historical instruction and persuasion and an essential device for his constitutions of American conservatism. This was the rhetorical device of “anti-modern” skepticism consistently placed in the public sphere.

This skepticism as I have generalized it considered “objective,” “scientific” and “empirical” “proof” to not exist when considering the mysteries of the human condition. Proof was unlikely to ever exist, in any way “easily” identifiable, to the satisfaction of one not inclined to believe an argument in the public sphere about how to organize

human affairs. Second, for Kirk and the traditionalist conservatives the flawed and finite behavior of human thinking – full of selfishness and status-seeking – was unable to “know” the truth about the divine, about humankind, and about their environment. Knowledge was always filtered through unique perspective. Responses featuring the claims of rationality and abstract reason were openings for totalitarian terror. Kirk’s rhetoric elevated Burke’s teaching that, given the arrogation of individual reason to rule directly over others, it was easy and tempting to increase what reason was ruling, and to expand from the “political and legal to the economic, social, moral and spiritual.”³⁷ Kirk’s “postmodern” rhetorical constructions of the “moral imagination” were in general harmony with such sentiments: finite, flawed, self-centered human thought and conduct was not capable of discovery of truths about the divine and its created humanity except in fleeting fragments. Human reason was hopelessly limited. The British philosopher (and political conservative) Michael Oakeshott’s most well-known work, *Rationalism in Politics*, has argued the modern history of Europe was besieged by the rule of reason. Behind every utopia and every grand generalization of the “courses of history” or the “nature of man,” and behind every “instant constitution” for a new governmental association, was “political rationalism,” a glorification of technical knowledge.³⁸ This “glorification” was very much contrary to Kirk’s call for a sustained and serious engagement with “morally imaginative” literature, poetry, and history. The endurance of an inexplicable and mysterious beauty in nature despite so many attempts at conquest, particularly that which endured before mechanized machinery, was a testament to the insatiable human search for glory and immortality. And so a large, mechanized tyranny

exercised in the name of the “good” was difficult to quell because it could be conduced with the approval of the tormentor’s conscience, a conscience eager to find a piece of glory and immortality.

Like Kirk, Oakeshott insisted upon a propensity to enjoy what was “available” rather than to constantly wish for something else, to delight in what was present rather than what may be. The aesthetic experience, in other words, was reflective of the ethical life. Philosopher and rhetorician Peter Lawler has written that postmodernism properly understood begins with the realization that humanity should be grateful for what they have been given. And what they have been given was not only a self-conscious morality and a mysterious freedom, but “all sorts of natural compensations for our distinctively human misery.” Powerful emotions such as love were not an illusion, and humans have been fitted by nature to seek and to know truth.³⁹ In addition, Oakeshott wrote to be conservative (that is, to share in the conservative sentiments) was to thematically engage, to appreciate, not a creed or a doctrine but something resembling a disposition. The end to this appreciation was a manner of thinking and behavior in certain matters, namely the preference of some kinds of conduct and conditions of human circumstances to others. These preferences were, in turn, to be constructed from within contemporary circumstance rather than transported from idiom of general principle – a process which might be the beginning of an ideology. The conservative disposition centered upon a propensity to “prefer the familiar to the unfamiliar, the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbound, the near to the

distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss.”⁴⁰

Rhetorically, an “appreciation for the present” was another appeal to great “conservative” figures of history, even as there were consistent efforts for reform among them (namely what Kirk found to be the cautious, humble, historically-rooted reform of Edmund Burke). For those I have identified as traditionalists, such reflection was an invitation to readership to share gratefulness and an acknowledgement of the fragile inheritance of the past in terms of ethics and morality. Esteem must not follow the new or the advanced because of novelty, but because of measures of inherent worth. Change, likewise, would always come; and it should find societal acceptance as a general principle. Oakeshott, like Kirk and the reconstituted Burke, advocated against large-scale, abstract, quick change (especially for the sake of change): the good society, and the kinship and friendships in association that form the foundations of a strong civil society, could not tolerate rapid innovation. Human were, across time and environment, associational beings. As persons, as family units, and as societal actors, this manner of persuasion conveyed that humans prefer the familiar to the unknown, the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbound, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, and the present to promises. Change and circumstance will long be with us, they asked their audience, but how often do people contemplate their accommodation? An “unthinking” change was generally presented as an emblem of extinction and a threat to identity. The follower of Kirk’s conservative temperament (one supportive of identity preservation)

was to judge by disturbances to the moral imagination. It was, in his persuasions, the way to avoid the diabolical.

Avoiding the Anarchy of the Modern

Aware that not all innovation was an improvement, and appreciative of the good of the present, the persuader of associational, traditionalist conservatism suggested that to innovate without improvement was either a designed or an inadvertent folly, but folly all the same. As every improvement involves change, this judgment must weigh the benefits (to aesthetic and spiritual health, for example) and also the benefits anticipated. Innovation, however, was an equivocal enterprise, in which gain and loss (including familiarity) were so intertwined that it was often difficult to forecast the future. There was no such thing as an unqualified earthly improvement. According to Oakeshott, the conservative temperament and aesthetic preferred the small and the limited to the large and the indefinite and a slow rather than a rapid pace. It stops to observe current consequences and make appropriate adjustments. The more “traditional associations” founded upon kinship and loyalty must not become detached from positions of relevance to societal decisions of economics and politics if they were to communicate moral lessons. The occasion was important as well: the most favorable occasion for innovation were those times when the projected change was to be limited to its intention and least likely to be corrupted by undesired, unforeseen, and unmanageable costs. The disposition was “warm and positive” with respect to the enjoyment of kinship and open discussion. It was “cool and critical” with respect to change and innovation. These two

inclinations were to support and elucidate one another. The known good was not to be surrendered for an unknown “better.”⁴¹

Lawler has differentiated his and Oakeshott’s characterization of “conservative” and “postmodernism” sentiment with the “rootless, circulating fictions” variety that might deny the existence of any foundational truth. He wrote that “attacks on our ability to perceive the truth and goodness of nature and human nature are actually modern in origin.”⁴² Kirk, I believe, would have concurred. In *The Conservative Mind*, he wrote that collective wisdom, designated as the “filtered experience of mankind,” can save humanity from the “anarchy” of the modern “rights of man” and “presumption of reason,” which through justifications of “absolute liberty,” “absolute equality,” and similar projects actually precipitate men into moral and civil chaos. “True conformity to the dictates of nature” required reverence for the past and solicitude for the future. “Nature” was not simply “the sensation of the passing moment;” it was eternal, “though we evanescent men experience only a fragment of it.” Human beings have no right to imperil the happiness of posterity, he continued, by impudently tinkering with the heritage of humanity: “an enthusiast for abstract “natural rights” obstructs the operation of true natural law.”⁴³

Kirk constructed this living tradition as an alternative to modernity and to the exhaustions of liberal, Enlightenment-based order. An outlook consistently opposed to ideology – religious dogmatism in a secular, political context casting aside the nuances and shades of gray that exist in actual social life – urged the recovery of virtue and wisdom through the use of what Burke first called the “moral imagination” and an

upholding of what poet T.S. Eliot first called “the permanent things.”⁴⁴ For some traditionalists, these phrases have summarily articulated their critique of modernism, or their “postmodernism.” The “postmodern sentiment” was a rejection of what has distinguished the “modern world” above all, by which I mean a particular definition of what a human being was thought to be – an individual. But that definition, according to Lawler, could describe what a real or complete human being is. If the modern world was to be superseded by another world, as he and others believers in Christianity argued, humans would continue in their humanity. They would remain beings with souls, capabilities, and longings uncommon with those of other animals.⁴⁵

Sentiments of “conservative and postmodern” imagination argued that a spiritual dimension was imperative to forming the associations that humanity craves. Their rhetoric, as such, shunned the perceived sentiments of the rational, scientific, “modern” pursuits. They worked to provide their audience with insight that the solely “physical” could not. Their concepts of moral order were part of a prevention of the escalation of brutality serviced by technological advance. Defending the “permanent things” and perceiving ethical truths amid the chaos of events was, for Kirk, a creative faculty. In his rhetoric, a debased barbarism tended to fill the vacuum left by the absence of the spiritual, those elements orientated toward home, history, custom and community: “Ideology provides sham religion and sham philosophy, comforting in its way to those who have lost or never have known genuine religious faith, and to those not sufficiently intelligent to apprehend real philosophy.”⁴⁶ In such language and by such an underlying attitude, I will argue that Kirk the writer and philosopher was reinforcing his relationship

with the reader, forming, if just for a moment, a community of two that was to be comprehended through shared assumptions.⁴⁷ The avenue for this connection is a criticism of the “modern.”

For Kirk’s community of readers, a technologically-minded pursuit of wisdom, goodness, and permanence was a source of restlessness and artificial happiness, a diversion to unfulfilling nothingness. The drive to conquer nature should be associated with the inability to live well, as negative impulses swell into a vacuum of status-seeking, a process inevitable for failure due to inescapable sin, leading to an inescapable death. “Individual” self-fulfillment has taken precedence over the human person. In the entry for “modernity and postmodernity” in *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia*, Lawler made a connection between the elevation of the “human person,” a spiritual as well as a material being, and “conservative postmodernism” (“postmodernism rightly understood”). Moral and political life in “modern times” no longer sought to cultivate human souls but to advance rights of contract and to protect from physical harm: “This authentic postmodernism is based on a criticism of modernity for its lack of realism, for its inability to tell the truth about the greatness and misery of being human. The basic human experiences are of limitation and of responsibility; to live well, human beings must accept the distinctively human duties that come with living in light of the truth.” Even so, human beings were not free to impose their own will on nature. They could not, in other words, make and remake the world at their convenience. But, “born to know and love,” not just to suffer and die, they were fitted by nature to know the truth.⁴⁸

Despite a shared hostility to grand theorizing and absolute certitudes, Lawler and Russello have written the sentiments of a “postmodern conservative” differ from much of could be classified as postmodern thought. In their renderings, such thought followed Nietzsche’s efforts to liberate human will from the reductionistic tendency of modern scientific reason. It was a celebration of a free human creation for no particular purpose. History could not end as Hegel or Marx concluded it might because history has no real point; and that which is rational or predictable is inhuman. Such a criticism of the “modern” was, instead, an “intensification of the modern tendency to liberate human will from natural and divine constraints.” Place, and not the nothingness of Nietzsche’s abyss that surrounded humanity’s brief and accidental existence, was central to Kirk’s postmodern and moral imagination. While some thinkers against modernism sought to replace society with radical politics or more marginal subcultures, his “postmodern conservatism “was an imaginative reaching back.”⁴⁹ The rhetoric was historically-centered, invoking the exemplary examples of those that lived a respect for the customs of, for instance, “localism” and “civic virtue.” These were presented as guards against the dangers of politicized totality.

An Abandonment of Principles

I find that Kirk’s personal reality was necessarily social. He foresaw the primacy of personal identity in modern liberalism as a limit to local civic community, whose mediating institutions should function as a fundamental defense against the politicization and commoditization of the person. His “ordered liberty” began with the Hebrews, a people that discovered, through the leadership of Moses, that there “watched over them

an all-powerful intelligence or spirit which gave them their moral nature.” Such a revelation was for Kirk the unveiling of truth that could not have been obtained from the empirical experiences of the world. It was communication of knowledge from a source that transcended ordinary human perception, and without such social knowledge and cooperation humanity cannot cooperate. Communities needed revelation and reason, together.⁵⁰ Echoing Burke’s references to “Providence,” Kirk took his assertion that the principle of “true politics” was morality enlarged. He criticized modernism and liberalism for the abandonment of principles based upon classical and Christian notions of natural law, granted by God and perceived by creation through reason and revelation. As a man much read in history and experienced in the conduct of human affairs, Burke knew that men were not naturally good. They were actually beings of “mingled good and evil, kept in obedience to a moral law chiefly by the force of custom and habit, which the revolutionaries would discard as so much rubbish.” Burke knew, and hence those that enjoy the fruits of constitutionalism know, that “all the advantages of society are the product of intricate human experience over many centuries, not to amended overnight by some coffee-house philosopher.” Religion, “man’s greatest good,” worked in conjunction with the reason of experience toward an established order fundamental to civilization. Thus Burke “set his face against the revolutionaries like a man who finds himself suddenly beset by robbers.”⁵¹

Modernism and liberalism were, Kirk conveyed, successors to the arrangements of abstract rights. They stubbornly pursued perfectibility. But because the “Burkean conservative” was infused with the “postmodern conservative” sentiment, “anti-

ideology” understood humanity as a social animal by nature, grounded in time and place and joined to history – even as this truth was puzzling and hardly expressible. Political theories of the origins of society based on an “a priori” assumption of a primitive “state of nature,” therefore, were to be rejected. These were dangerous because they ignored history and opened the door to abstract, ideological speculations that substituted fictions for a “reality” in practical politics. In the arguments of a “Burkean conservatism,” such “social contract” theories conceived of society as isolated, self-sufficient beings living in organized communities.⁵² Burke’s “traditionalist” followers led by Kirk, the forerunners of “postmodern” critique, countered that society was indeed a contract, but one between God and man, as well as among all generations. The more stable rights flowed from faith and custom. Herein was the “ordered liberty” of Kirk’s assessment of contemporary society. His phraseology, praise of historical figures, and vivid imagery were among the attractions of his rhetorical community of traditionalist conservative sentiment in “true” association. As he constructed it, such a community refused to displace the authority of the ancestral. And, like the Hebrews, these communities of association communicated externally and among themselves while in communion to the transcendent. They preferred a cautious vision of wisdom to the more alluring yet arbitrary and perilous authority of choice. A goal of his rhetoric was to, in some inexplicable way, halt the progress of the “tyranny” of such choice.

When reacting against the excesses and hubris of the “modern,” Kirk viewed his persuasive writing to be in the service of the right, the good, the true, and the beautiful. In analyzing his arguments and those of a similar “postmodern” disposition, stylistic

flourishes accompanied a sustained historical and philosophical attack against the rise of the “scientific” as applied to messiness of human conduct and organization. The rhetoric of reaction, then, while “imaginative” was not “sophistry” as the term might be used as a pejorative. I believe that Kirk and traditionalist “postmodernists” did not desire the machinery of manipulation or argument for its own sake. They perceived, instead, that a culture inflicted by “modernism” consisted largely of what people (and perhaps most notably the “elites,” given their perceived influence) thought and were willing to accept. Symbols and images, in other words, were not simply distractions but rather the very ingredients of a culture. In the “postmodern” creation of moral imagination, and in the associative life of morality, the meanings of words mattered a great deal. A culture that could no longer resist the temptations of the “modern” was a culture that was unlikely to value the small, the local, and the long-developed. It was a culture unlikely to commit much energy to the discussion of those words. Members of Kirk’s community were not like the “unfortunates” mired in the confusions of modernism and liberalism. In fact, they possessed something more valuable, more foundational, more mysterious, and in the end better. For his rhetoric of moral imagination, and following his historically-based and imaginative facilities of socio-political creation, this was a “something” that must be shared and more highly valued if society was not to be enchanted by promises which might transform enthusiasm into a more violent cause. In working against modernity, his rhetorical conduct was creation in imagination.

Kirk’s writings promoted the notion that the goodness and virtue humans may access was found by an understanding and acceptance of human limitations. Much of

this was done through the presentation of examples from historical figures. W. Wesley McDonald has written that characteristic of his style was the tendency to express principles through the words and ideas of those figures he most admired within the British and American conservative tradition. Kirk applied these in “innovative” ways as responses to contemporary ideological challenges, by insisting upon a historical approach and philosophical reflection to understand society rather than abstract universals.⁵³ For example, the rhetorical missives against unbridled capitalism and utilitarianism, prominent in *The Conservative Mind*, could be viewed as his working out of a more coherent, consistent metaphysics of the human person (one eventually found in Catholic Christianity).

And so an “associational community” where the common, social goods of communion are valued would not consider a “person” to be an “individual,” as the term “individual” would work to devolve the common good into a limited concept of individualism. In my estimation, Kirk sought the “metaphysics” (to use an awkward term perhaps encompassing the concepts of tradition and transcendence) of the human person, an unseen order of faith and reason that placed ethical norms above utility and subjective interest. His impression of the modern world was of noise and confusion, a place of hopeful promise but ultimately a place of false and fleeting hope. Much of the problem of modern morality, as he wrote, was evidenced by the unstable status of the good.⁵⁴ His language, confident in assumption and robust in tone, was the attempt to combat the illusive strength of an ill-defined “modern.”

Notes

¹ Gerald J. Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007), p. 11.

² Morgan N. Knull, "A Man in Full," *The Intercollegiate Review*, Fall/Spring 2000 – 2001, p. 77.

³ In this dissertation, I use the term – in conjunction with Lyotard's "incredulity toward metanarratives" – as meaning a critique of the "modern."

⁴ Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, "Grounding the Postmodern Self," *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 4, Nov. 1994, p. 685.

⁵ Corbin, Carol (ed). *Rhetoric in Postmodern America: Conversations With Michael Calvin McGee* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 1998), p. 31.

⁶ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1995), p. 362.

⁷ For a summary of Kirk's efforts to make American conservatism something other than a class-bound ideology reflecting the interests of the wealthy and the "political performance" of business interests, see W. Wesley McDonald's *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology*.

⁸ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, p. 427.

⁹ According to Annette Kirk, for her husband the most formidable example of a "conservative" attempt to keep or develop an ideology was libertarianism.

¹⁰ This brings to mind, as an example, the "paleo-" and "neo-" arguments over the Iraq war of 2003. In our conversations, Mrs. Kirk also stated to me that adherence to "wishful thinking" and ideologies are among the biggest problems facing the current conservative movement.

¹¹ My conversations with Mrs. Kirk, Paul Gottfried, and George Nash (among other "traditionalists," and Nash would probably identify himself as a "fusionist") were noteworthy for their emphasis upon these points: conservatism as the "negation of ideology," and a lament for the ideological underpinnings of much of American conservatism, particularly since the election President Reagan.

¹² Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*, p. 62 – 64.

¹³ To generalize, Catholic Communion of the Eucharist, by its very nature, dissolved boundaries and granted its participants a hint of how God has configured the world – "sacramentally." The things of this "real world," and the sacraments in particular, were capable of disclosing the reality of God's love and grace. They were a medium through which God is present, a conduit of association.

¹⁴ One could cite several examples from Kirk's personal life concerning the importance of aesthetic beauty to the moral imagination. On this point, I think of the story, as relayed to me by his widow and housekeeper, of strenuous opposition to "modernizing" changes conducted by the church whose cemetery holds his grave.

¹⁵ In the forward to the seventh revised edition of *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk wrote: "The book distinctly does not supply its reader with a "conservative ideology:" for the conservative abhors all forms of ideology. An abstract rigorous set of political dogmata: that is ideology, a "political religion," promising the Terrestrial Paradise to the faithful; and ordinarily that paradise is to be taken by storm. Such *a priori* designs for perfecting human nature and society are anathema to the conservative, who knows them for the tools and weapons of coffeehouse fanatics. For the conservative, custom, convention, constitution, and prescription are the sources of a tolerable civil order. Men not being angels, a terrestrial paradise cannot be contrived by metaphysical enthusiasts; yet an earthly hell can be arranged readily enough by ideologues of one stamp or another. Precisely that has come to pass in a great part of the world, during the twentieth century." (p. xv – xvi)

¹⁶ This term is taken from Stjepan Mestrovic's characterization of Jean Baudrillard, found on p. ix of his book *Anthony Giddens: The Last Modernist* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998). I think both the "Kirkian" conservative and the postmodernist would agree with a T.S. Eliot statement that Kirk liked to quote: "There is no such thing as a lost cause because there is no such thing as a gained cause."

¹⁷ George A. Panichas (ed), *The Essential Russell Kirk* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), p. 205.

¹⁸ Michael McGee stated that attempts toward the "big picture" include being able to "story or pattern" not only the particular issue of the moment, but the history and contextualization of the issue with the problems that bother other people. (*Rhetoric in Postmodern America*, p. 48.)

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that Kirk, when he did define difficult terms like “ideology” and “conservatism,” was quite willing to change his language and argument. This can be seen in the editions of *Prospects for Conservatives* (first titled *A Program for Conservatives*) and *The Conservative Mind*, as is detailed in other chapters of this dissertation.

²⁰ Bruce E. Gronbeck, “Musings on the Emptiness and Dreariness of Postmodern Critique,” The National Communication Association, conference paper, Chicago, 1997. In the footnote to the paragraph containing the quoted passages, he wrote: “The understanding of rhetorical effectivity and agency I offer here is heavily indebted to Kenneth Burke: especially the foreword to *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (1941; rev. ed. abridged; New York: Vintage Books, 1957); the theory of action opening *The Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950); and the scope of “Dramatism,” in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. David L. Sills (New York: Macmillan, 1968), VII: s.v. ‘Dramatism.’”

²¹ Gerhart Niemeyer, “Russell Kirk and Ideology,” *The Intercollegiate Review*, Fall 1994, p. 36.

²² Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*, p. 72.

²³ George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), p. 113. See also: Russello, p. 72 – 73.

²⁴ In correspondence with William F. Buckley Jr., he wrote that his Catholicism (Christ in the Sacraments) was the means for a life lived well. Private papers of Annette Kirk. (The extent of his personal devotion, occasionally a point of speculation for some critics, was also jokingly noted.)

²⁵ James Person Jr., *Russell Kirk: A Critical Biography of a Conservative Mind* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1999), p. 152.

²⁶ Perez Zagorin, “History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now,” *History and Theory*, Vol. 38, No. 1, Feb. 1999, p. 1.

²⁷ Russell Kirk, “The Moral Imagination,” *Literature and Belief*, Vol. 1, 1981, p. 49. Also reprinted in Panichas (ed), *The Essential Russell Kirk*, p. 218.

²⁸ Niemeyer, “Russell Kirk and Ideology,” p. 38.

²⁹ Russell Kirk, *Enemies of Permanent Things: Observations of Abnormity in Literature and Politics* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden Publishing, 1988), p. 39. Also reprinted in Panichas (ed), *The Essential Russell Kirk*, p. 240.

³⁰ Kirk considered these aims to be religious in nature. See his essay “The American Scholar and the American Intellectual,” reprinted in *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice: Essays of a Social Critic* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden Publishing, 1991), p. 13.

³¹ Russell Kirk, “Class, Manners, Beauty, and the Shape of Modern Society,” reprinted in *The Intemperate Professor and Other Cultural Splenetics* (Peru: IL: Sherwood Sugden Publishing, 1988), p. 132. In this essay, Kirk praised George Santayana, another example of how he tended to commend similar historical figures concerning different topics. He also tended to return to similar topics across time, environment, and publication. I view such tendencies as a help to the effectiveness of his rhetorical constructions.

³² This term comes from political philosopher Peter Lawler. A collection of writers, the author of this dissertation included, identify with the term and write for *First Things* magazine under its banner.

³³ I suggest this is a sharp contrast to many American conservative commentators and controversialists who tend to be focused on electoral victory or the political issue of the moment. Kirk had several notable disagreements with aspects of the American conservative movement (in a Cold War context) – among them libertarians, the military establishment, and advocates of the first Gulf War.

³⁴ The success of that endeavor will continue to be debated among American conservatives and other readers of his work. In any case, it is important to note that readership of Kirk has probably fallen since his death in 1994, if one were to judge by mentions of him and his writings since that time.

³⁵ Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*, p. 5 – 6.

³⁶ Conor Cruise O’Brien, “A Vindication of Edmund Burke,” *National Review*, Dec. 17, 1990.

³⁷ Sociologist Robert Nisbet, an admirer of Burke, Kirk and Michael Oakeshott, detailed the conservative critique of knowledge as an “appeal to prejudice in human behavior” in his book *Conservatism Dream and Reality* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 31 – 34. (Text quoted on p. 34.)

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 33.

³⁹ Peter Lawler, "Postmodern Conservatism, Conservative Postmodernism," *The Intercollegiate Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 2002. Reprinted in Mark C. Henrie (ed), *Arguing Conservatism: Four Decades of the Intercollegiate Review* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008), p. 809 – 810.

⁴⁰ Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1962), p. 168 – 170. Quote on page 169. The descriptions of Oakeshott's thought with regard to sentiment and rationalism are chiefly taken from the section of the book "On being Conservative," a well-known essay.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 171 – 176.

⁴² Lawler, "Postmodern Conservatism, Conservative Postmodernism," *Arguing Conservatism*, p. 810.

⁴³ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, p. 56 – 57.

⁴⁴ Anne Carson Daly, "The Conservative Mind at Forty," *The Intercollegiate Review*, Fall 1993, p. 48.

⁴⁵ Lawler, "Postmodern Conservatism, Conservative Postmodernism," *Arguing Conservatism*, p. 801.

⁴⁶ George A. Panichas (ed). *The Essential Russell Kirk*, p. 368. The original essay was titled "The Errors of Ideology." It appeared first in Kirk's 1993 book *The Politics of Prudence*.

⁴⁷ White, James Boyd. *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 13.

⁴⁸ Bruce Frohnen (ed), *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), p. 580 – 583. (Text quoted on p. 582.)

⁴⁹ *Ibid* and Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*, p. 145.

⁵⁰ Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Press, 2003), p. 11 – 12.

⁵¹ Russell Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House Publishing, 1967), p. 152. Throughout the book he praised both Burke's style and insight (a phrase near the quoted text: "majestic denunciations of the Revolution").

⁵² Bruce Frohnen (ed), *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia*, p. 107 – 108. (Entry: "Burkean conservatism")

⁵³ W. Wesley McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004), p. 10. See also p. 210 – 212.

⁵⁴ One recurring point in Kirk's writing was that unlimited freedom in the name of the good and the self-satisfying has, as its end, some manner of despotism. This sentiment was something, he once wrote, that "most intelligent Americans today agree with." See Russell Kirk, *The American Cause* (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1966), p. 63.

The Moral Life: Rhetoric and Association in Conservative Community

Russell Kirk envisioned an ethical connection to informing through historical instruction and offering opinions on cultural and political crisis. The author had a responsibility, he thought, to involve the reader in a verbal process bespeaking the morality of the mind. Through a persistent, somewhat repetitive pattern of phrase and argument, by a restatement of certain terms and sentences, he expanded and echoed their first appearance and intention.¹ He wrestled continuously with words and meaning, but remained loyal to a concept of “first principles” around which a community of the like-minded could rally. As a teacher and exemplar of an American conservatism that followed Burke, he sought “wisdom” and “prudence” in the public sphere, and not just cleverness, intelligence, and willingness for hard work. Members and potential members of Kirk’s “community of sentiments” were both inside and outside of the American conservative movement as it developed after the Second World War. Yet his skepticism of global democratic revolutions placed him apart from much of the conservative movement after the fall of the Soviet Union, as “paleo-conservative” critics of “neo-conservatism” have argued.² As such, Kirk’s conservative community was an anomaly, albeit an influential one. An examination of his rhetoric, which was filled with historical appeal and perspectives out of step with much of current conservative argument, draws out this uniqueness.

The wisdoms and prejudices of Burke translated into America were, for Kirk, greater knowledge and valuation of the truths embedded in the noise of an increasingly bureaucratic and standardized society. It meant thinking in terms of norms instead of

ideals and rights. In his view, liberalism, or rationalism in politics, followed the rise of industrial capitalism and the growth of the state to become an effort for control over property, trade, work, amusements, education, and religion.³ Kirk wrote in part to build a community of readers that recognized human beings existed for more than as fodder for the exercise of power. It was not proper, this is to say, to be temporarily comfortable by the dazzling advances of technological knowledge. His criticism was intended to inspire greater action: recognition that the human will cannot liberate emotional and spiritual emptiness, and also that freedom as a supreme principle is an empty end unless there is an understanding of what it is for – community and communion.⁴ The reader must know, therefore, what was good and true in the human life. There is more to being a human, a relational being, than the pursuit of pleasure.

Kirk's persuasions assumed that people can in fact be drawn to the permanent things, spiritually, even as notions such as good and true are not easily defined. There was the assumption, across his works, that the immovability of the good and true may be known and shared, for the person and across generations. His conception of the world held that the supposed liberating impersonality of organization, coerced structure, and technology follow, in the well-ordered society, the constraints of personal subordination required for more authentic community, communion, and emotional bond. The reader was continuously invited, through his text and persona, to participate in an alternative, one of prudence, prejudice, and tradition. At the foundation of this sentiment, Kirk's books and essays made a distinction between the "abstract rights of man" and man's "actual nature." The French reformers of 1789, for instance, did not turn to "precedent,

prescription, and custom, as did the British” because these were held “in contempt, as if such influences were the dead hand of the past.” The revolutionary sanction for the “sacred” rights of humanity, amorphous and lacking precedent, valued the wrong things in the wrong way. He thought the actions and constituted language of the new French government utilized natural rights doctrines both incorrectly and incompletely, leading to a turn to the abstractions of such “speculative minds” as Rousseau’s.⁵ And this, sadly, was too much of an inspiration for the modern world. As an antidote, for more than four decades Kirk invited his readers to share in his assumptions and conclusions through his writing, political activism, and lectures. This was an invitation to apply the wisdoms of past to the problems of the present. His language – imprecise, mystical, and reverential – was the driving force of this persuasion.

A Methodological Formulation

My methodological basis for examining the ways in which Kirk warned against the managerial state and the decay of civilization, and the ways in which he struggled to articulate alternatives, is James Boyd White’s *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community*. White has written that the relationship between an individual author and the harnessing of language and culture can be considered as a “textual community.” Here, the aim is to establish a lasting rapport between the author – including the representation of self through the text – and the audience. White’s connotation of language is as follows: “shared conceptions of the world, shared manners and values, shared resources and expectations and procedures for speech and thought.” It is through these that “communities are in fact

defined and constituted.”⁶ In probing the relation that a speaker establishes with language, he has suggested imagining the world of text as a “real world.” And by ascertaining a sense of the relationship that exists between the speaker and the materials of the culture, “we can experience from the inside, with the intimacy of the artisan, if only in a tentative and momentary way, the life of the language that makes a world.”⁷ This is an invitation for the reader to “exist” as a “character” in the world “created and sustained” by the text.

A text, especially a historical or fictional one, is according to White largely “about” the ways in which its reader will be changed by reading it.⁸ Such a “method of reading” is defined generously so as to include “writing and speaking, indeed all the ways we have of living with language and with each other through language; and it is about a ‘way of reading’ conceived of not merely as a method of analysis but as a way of attending and responding to a text and a situation, of acting and being in relation to language and to other people.”⁹ As with Kirk, I believe White’s insights are, in effect, an invitation to partake in his own conceptions, manners, values, and expectations as an author and critical observer of cultural and societal development. By this I mean the “way of reading” facilitated recognition of the limitations of not appropriating an author into the present, and of assuming that the reader will not be changed by a text. Peter Teachout has categorized the methodological method of the book as an “inquiry into the role of argument in culture – into the way in which the imaginative employment of the ‘rhetorical resources’ of a culture can operate to criticize and transform that culture.”¹⁰ This book, I think similar to the life work of Kirk in “association,” is an exposition of the

ways in which language, personal character, and culture are bound together. And like the “traditionalist” calls for a remembrance and practical valuing of what is good in a time and culture, White’s method is a critical and creative employment of inherited language and the ways in which it serves as a powerful force for the “reconstitution” of both self and community. The relationship humans establish with words determines, in part, “who they really are,” as persons in relation and as a larger culture.¹¹ This method is an exploration of the human imagination at work within a context – criticizing the cultural environment, the language, the mythic environment.

From these inherited elements and impressions, the rhetorician builds a cultural language which presents the possibility of restoration – of self and community. In a law review article, White wrote that like law rhetoric invents; and like the law, it invents out of something, not out of nothing. Thus the persuader must accept that fact of real and important differences among cultures and that it is necessary to engage in a process of meaning-making and community-building of which they are, in part, the subject. Rhetoric, he argued, is specific to its material: the knowledge out of which the rhetorician ultimately functions will not be scientific or theoretical but practical. “This is, in fact, our earliest social and intellectual knowledge, the knowledge we acquire as we first begin to move and act in our social universe and learn to speak and understand. It is the knowledge by which language and social relations are made.”¹² Examining how communities cultivate, together and in opposition, to other identities, this type of rhetorical analysis focuses on justice, ethics, and politics. For White, discourse “calls” communities into being. When an author represents through a text, the language

constitutes individuals, values, and cultures – but not in a coercive manner, as readers possess the agency by which they are able to “use language to gain meaning or lose meaning, to constitute or reconstitute their identity, community, and culture.”¹³ Rhetoric is an art by which culture and community are established, maintained, and transformed. The rhetorical process is a process through which individuals and communities form and maintain their identities.¹⁴

Within communities formed by rhetoric, rhetorical appeal takes note of the structural reciprocity between language and the character. Each person is partly made by language, which present categories through which the world is perceived and motives are developed. Yet humans are also users and makers of language; and in the remaking of life and internal character there is necessarily a shared, collective process. According to White, “the reciprocity I speak of thus is defined by our language – our language is the set of shared expectations and common terms that enable us to think of ourselves as a ‘we’ – and that language too can be transformed.”¹⁵ Humans, in their communicative acts, create social settings. This is the conduit through which individuals form relationships. Communication is reflexively constituted within the act itself, forming and reforming identity, social relationships, and ideas. The complications of morality and politics – and indeed, all the perplexing aspects of the relational life – are thus encompassed by the field of communication, including the beginning and negotiation of meaning. Persuasion is necessarily impacted by cultural and economic evolutions, as social practices are inseparable from language. In this continuous creation are occasions

where an individual might remake what White terms the “shared resources of meaning,” which shapes the scope and direction of public and communal life.

Language, then, is not stationary. In the “flux” of reading, of words and symbols, White has presented a technique of reading that focuses attention on the nature of the language a particular writer or speaker has inherited, on the way the author acts upon this language as a modifier, and on the nature of the social and ethical relations that the author establishes with the reader, those whom are written about, and with the natural world.¹⁶ Burke’s *Reflections*, for example, praised the virtues of the British constitution in contrast to the dangerously abstract creation of French revolutionaries. The British statesman employed definition of a sturdier, more properly ordered community. One way the reader was brought into this alternative was by an appeal to self, character, and culture. Appealing to the history and culture surrounding the constitution, which he positioned as proudly ancient and admirable, Burke worked for changes in the persons of his particular association that would then lead to changes in the community. Burke’s purpose, White wrote, was not to communicate ideas that were “already perfectly storable in existing languages but to make a language in which new ideas and new sentiments can be expressed, a new constitution established, in the text and in the world: a language he wishes his reader first to learn and then to own and use.”¹⁷

Imparting a Better Reason

In using White’s insights as a foundation for study of Kirk’s “rhetorical moral imagination,” I find that his conservatism was mistrust of the secular overarching narrative – and most especially of the variants of materialism, scientism, and

progressivism of Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau, Hobbes, Locke, Mill, Bentham, and Marx. Individual autonomy and liberalism in the American context were temptations to ignore the reality of sin, the weight of history, the mystery inherent in humanity, and the traditions present at birth. Inspired by Burke, Kirk took his readers on a pursuit of actual solutions to real problems, utilizing the “imagination” to explore how individuals can live and prosper as members of a community faced with societal and political crisis. The persuasive power of the “moral imagination” and calls for its substantive use provided a more acceptable set of political solutions than a reliance on ideology.¹⁸ Kirk’s rhetorical appeal, as with Burke, made a heavy, if selective, use of history. Although America did not have a strong “conservative tradition,” it was not against any principle to constitute, from a study of admirable figures, an imaginative invention of such. This invention may have separated tradition from history, but it allowed for Kirk’s recurring narratives of Burke, T.S. Eliot, and others to become the teachers of American prudence and wisdom. Kirk’s tradition partook of invention and renewed functions as a response to new situations; otherwise, he thought it would die. Reform was a positive, necessary term. And yet, as in the mind of some Catholic thinkers he admired, he found it was futile to discuss the process of reforming without reference to form.¹⁹

History, Kirk wrote in *The Conservative Mind*, was the gradual revelation of a supreme and unfathomable design – “often shadowy to our blinking eyes, but subtle, resistless, and beneficent.” One arrives at principle – right reason imparted in “permanent form” – through a comprehension of nature and history; and principle is the

human expression of cognizance of providential purpose.²⁰ The moral imagination, conveyed with attractive rhetoric in reference to a more supreme true and good, stirred the spiritual, mystical aspect of man. It was the knowledge of humanity as composed of sinful beings destined to morality even as they were created for eternity. The capacity to perceive abiding, ethical truths amid the many avenues of life's chaos compelled this imagination to not live in the moment, as did a machine or an animal. A "moral imagination" was the "strange faculty – inexplicable if men are assumed to have an animal nature only – of discerning greatness, justice, and order, beyond the bars of appetite and self-interest."²¹ Among American conservatives, Kirk's traditionalism, fame, and talent as a communicator placed him as a prominent leader of communities (formed mostly through texts and lectures) set against not just the variants of leftism and collectivism, but also against his own occasional allies, given an American conservative movement prone to nationalism, foreign policy adventurism, and cosmopolitanism.²² The language he established with readers in his constituted community of association, of those inclined to a likeminded sentiment and disposition, was chiefly local, regional, agrarian, bohemian, and mystical.

Following the work of White, such a language weaves into – and consistently manipulates – a way of thinking among readers, fostering an acceptance of assumptions. Proper sentiments, for Kirk, were the very foundation of good actions beneficial to community and to the personal soul. Without them, the noise and bustle of the modern could drown out voices advocating for the familial, the small, the organic, and the historical. In a short book explaining the superiority of the American system over the

materialist Soviet one, he wrote: “In much of the world, political discussion has degenerated into a Babel of furious of furious voices, all crying out abstract god terms and devil terms that bear small relation to real governments, or real economies, or real men and women. The American cause cannot be explained or served by strident propaganda of that sort. And the American cause is so complex and living a thing, grown out of such an ancient soil, that it cannot be described in singles phrases like ‘capitalism’ or ‘democracy’ or ‘equality.’”²³ The “American cause” was composed of many moral and political and economic factors, he wrote, some of them peculiar to America. Thus the American Constitution, embodying the principle of restrained government through checks and balances, was a successful “conservative” instrument, but one always in need of protection and renewal. The zealous appetite and ambitious will of man must be controlled. Tradition in history – an unwritten law of conduct for society and an established order of civilization – was a force capable of doing so.

Kirk was a relentless critic of perceived modernist errors: runaway liberalism, collectivism, utilitarianism, positivism, atomistic economic individualism, a leveling humanitarianism, pragmatism, socialism, and ideology foremost among them.²⁴ His own vision was antithetical to these and other products of “Enlightenment thought.” But the vision was still rooted, he claimed, in the American founding many of his traditionalist followers personally cherished. On this point, White’s methodology lends some measure of coherence for the seemingly contradictory, such as praise for the American founding yet condemnation of the supremacy and excesses of liberal, individual autonomy. The rhetorical appeals contained within constitutions and reconstitutions of language,

character, and community, to restate White's subtitle, are mythic realities made more real. They work to constitute a popular base for action. The particular, smaller worlds constructed by authors appealing to current and potential members of a community of readers and listeners contained traditions, values, and aspirations for a particular way of dealing with experience, and of making meaning out of an uncertain and complex world. Therein was the possibility of real friendship, kinship, and community.²⁵ Examination of the loose yet enduring alliances of American conservatism, particularly of those distrustful of freedom as a high ideal and "individual autonomy," does I think reveal a real and affectionate association, a kinship forged mostly by the pen.

Constructing a Textual World

White has written that an author can construct a world through text, selectively borrowing from history to advance a vision of a more perfect order. And through "constitutions and reconstitutions," rhetoric can produce and form identity, change the character of the audience, and help to form organizations and social movements. He has assumed, it follows, that identity is not always a given. The text is action with words; the engaged audience is not internally stationary. The text creates and awakens actions: "the writer always makes a community with another in his text, and this community has a life and character of its own. To attend to this fact is to raise all the questions that such relations present: the nature of friendship, justice, and generosity, the way that the self and its interests are defined in relation to others, and what it means to try to form a social world that is better for both."²⁶ For one critic, White has suggested the author of a text acts with words to create, criticize, and recreate relations at two levels: that which the

author establishes within the text between characters, and the relation that the author attempts to establish with the reader. Depending upon the linguistic conventions and rhetorical resources, this relation might vary from the slyly manipulative to the didactic to the dialectical and genuinely educative.²⁷

Surveying the critics of his work, White responded that his concern was not so much the ways in which language loses meaning as much as the ways in which authors “transform” their language and give them new kinds of meaning. What happens next, he has asked, after a meaning is lost, and how can an audience respond to that loss? His work argues that the experience of loss is often definitional in the life of a person, and perhaps even more so in the life of a culture. In those moments, there is a realization: “language cannot work in the simple and unproblematic way one had theretofore imagined, and more deeply, that the sense of harmony between one’s self and one’s culture, the sense of belonging in a world in which you say and think what others do, is broken beyond repair.” People think about the matter of “dead and living language” on either of two assumptions. First, that words themselves carry their own meanings, and the task is to arrange them in sequences that will have the same significance, in any utterance and in any context. Second, that words have the potential of meaning, and that it is our opportunity and task to give them specific significances through usage.²⁸ White does not conceive of words as static units of meaning. Instead, words and phrases develop meaning through interaction with language, culture, and situation. Likewise, one purpose of Kirk’s writing was to facilitate judgments and attitudes toward societal and political order in accord with his vision of the American founding, a founding he thought

rooted in the British tradition. As such, his language and manner were an integral part of the argument. He sought, as I have presented him, to address the total human situation, to speak to ailing conditions, and to set the example as a man of excellence and as an advocate of the sacred.²⁹ He was, in sum, the leader of a “community,” a place where culture and wording may change but the “permanent things” remain – there are natural laws, and man does not stand alone.

A legal scholar, White viewed the relationship between law and the larger community as reciprocal: the source of law is ultimately the community itself, which the law in turn serves to reinforce or reconstitute.³⁰ I find this to be similar to Kirk’s view of history and tradition. Those institutions and practices worthy of preservation, worthy of generational teaching, must be communicated into new forms if they are to endure, even as their wisdoms, gifted by the divine, will not change. As an “opposite” of abstractions, traditions grow out of accumulated experiences and over time and acquire “almost the force of law” through prescription. These dynamic entities, frequently dissatisfied with the status quo, are continually alive, bringing forth new meanings and possibilities.³¹ Following a rejection of the autonomous individual and liberal political theory, it was not possible to escape one’s own tradition. In one of his last books, *Enemies of*

Permanent Things, Kirk wrote:

Some traditions may grow obsolete; all require respectful scrutiny, now and then, in light of the age, lest they ossify. Traditions take on new meanings with the growing experience of a people. And simply to appeal to the wisdom of the species, to tradition, will not of itself provide solutions to all problems. The endeavor of the intelligent believer in tradition is to blend ancient usage with necessary amendment so that society is never wholly old and never wholly new.³²

In an early essay critiquing liberal political theory, Kirk suggested that liberalism doesn't have the narrative power necessary to maintain the popular imagination that longs for more permanent things than the fulfillment of the desires of the moment. "The liberal system" has ceased to signify anything other than a "vague good will." All the same, liberalism has achieved ascendancy because it "promised progress without the onerous duties exacted by tradition and religion. It is at present in the process of dissolution because, founded upon an imperfect and distorted myth, it has been unable to fulfill its promise, and because it no longer appeals in any degree to the higher imagination. It has been undone by social disillusion."³³ The Enlightenment awakening of Burke and Cardinal Newman, a liberality of the mind, for Kirk had descended into a "secular dogmatism, a presumptuous system with too much confidence in rationality. The community of his authorship was an alternative to the inevitable vacuum of the liberal imagination. Advocacy of the permanent things – the moral imagination – was important because he did not wish "to see that vacuum filled by an intolerant radicalism of any description."³⁴

It is in such representative sentiment a reader may discover the distrust for overarching secular narratives and trust in the mystery of an unseen order. Across Kirk's writings, there were always the possibilities of decay and renewal, a constant of civilizations dependent upon good and moral decisions. Determinism and ideology, insofar as they were influenced by a confident materialism and scientism, were a rejection of the Christian concepts that Kirk and Burke shared in their generalizations of the fallen world and in their diagnosis of its problems: free will, the reality of sin, the

weight of history, the limits of human progress, and the necessity of redemption. White's deliberation of Burke's *Reflections* labeled civilization as "an art of a remarkable kind," as the composition (that is, the constitution) of a world affecting both the human and physical materials of which it was made. In Burke's writing against the French attempt to rationally reduce and define, it was the culture that shaped the person, as well as the person that shaped the culture. Thus the love of family and respect for nature made Britain a landscape prosperous and beautiful: "At each stage the central idea is that of completeness: the constitution is not the theory, the abstraction, but the complete way of life; the individual is not to be spoken of, or spoken to, as a merely political or merely intellectual or merely emotional creature but as a complete person, knowing all that he knows, doing all that he does; and the relationship between the communal culture and the individual character is to be reciprocal and beneficial across the whole range of human experience."³⁵

I find Kirk's "constitutions" to be as Burke's, as represented in that quoted passage. White described Burke's manner as conversational, imaginative, difficult, and creative, "a kind of cultural art" taking place within the individual in his relations with others and with culture. Similarly, among the most significant criticisms of Kirk is that the conservatism he long advocated for existed entirely in his mind and did not reflect the actual America around him.³⁶ In this dissertation, I contend that such an awkward "reflection" was due to his persuasion highly valuing the "mystery" of human experience. These mysteries of human experience were ripe for "constitutions and reconstitutions;" and like the concepts of good and moral which were a vital part of

them, Kirk's concern was for attitude and inclination, not a definition. Against ideological abstraction, his writing worked to form communities set against much of the modern while still very much a part of it, as evidenced by a reluctance to construct a detailed, comprehensive, coherent alternative. Kirk's moral imagination, a primary term and one taken from Burke's *Reflections*, signified for him the power of ethical perception beyond private experience and momentary events. He wished it to be extracted from centuries of human consciousness, aspiring to apprehend the right order of the soul and of political, societal organization. From age to age, permanent things were "expressed afresh" and sustained by the spirit of faith and a system of manners. This informed humanity of the inherent dignity of their nature.³⁷ Through the taking these phrases from figures he exemplified, and through the building of a tradition he textually wove to be a continuation of history more rightly ordered, Kirk encouraged in his readers – his community – an embrace of imagination.³⁸ This was his constitution and reconstitution, the foundation of his associational community. Certainly lurked behind his texts and anyone willing to welcome a change in the imagination may have adopted them. Within this community one might find adventure, heroism, and historical examples of what could again come to pass. There was an "accessible" hope for those mired in the dead ends of the directionless pursuit of power and pleasure.

This was also a confident hope. Kirk aimed, like Burke, to "persuade his reader to his view of the world, to his sentiments and his language, and these are not held out for criticism or refutation."³⁹ The application of metaphors was a way to express the existence of normative truths that transcended dialectic, upholding permanent things for

the sake of cultural and spiritual health, the small community, and the commonwealth. His writing has been described as a “romantic” reading of the past for the purposes of the present, and as an inspiration for an emerging conservative movement through the pulling together of a series of only partially related ideas and events into a more coherent narrative.⁴⁰ Indeed, Kirk did not record the past. Instead, he created it in reference to a greater good. *The Conservative Mind*, for example, was far more concerned with ideas and vision, drawn from disparate figures and events, than with “facts” straightforwardly rendered. An admirer, prominent “neo-conservative” critic and presidential speechwriter David Frum, wrote shortly after his death that “he strained all his powers to summon up a vision of the Anglo-American past that would stir the imagination, and entice us to preserve as much of the vanished aristocratic age he loved as we possibly could.” While appearing to be a history, as each chapter closely studies the writing of varied thinkers in this constituted past, Frum wrote that Kirk was not interested “in the tangle of facts and events from which his subjects’ ideas emerged.” The book was a “work of literature meant to achieve political ends.”⁴¹

Integrating a Textual World

There was a “reorganization” of material and argument throughout Kirk’s conceptions of history and order.⁴² He “took” historical, spiritual, and social patterns (as well as images) to generate something unique and “new” from pre-existing material. This is why I have labeled him a “rhetorical popularizer,” even as he vigorously engaged in the arguments of history and philosophy. White has made this distinction between the historian and the philosopher: the historian records processes by which life is lived, and

the philosopher, like Plato, establishes a world within which “language and life can be cooperatively rethought and remade.”⁴³ Kirk aimed to do both. Surveying the many and varied chasms of the conservative movement broadly defined, Kirk wished to draw in and provide a service to those who stood, even if they did not fully realize it in the conduct of life, for the “good.” These were observers who understood that intellectual activity and a rousing of the imagination were urgently required in modern society. In their association of sentiment, they could be defined by comparison to, as Kirk phrased it, “all those professedly ‘pragmatic’ persons who think of a conservative government as one that keeps in office by serving or placating certain prevailing interests – and so prevents worse from befalling those in the seats of the mighty.” Temporal victories, in fact, would evaporate in short order if unsupported by the enduring art of persuasion. He insisted that a political movement could only subsist by its alleged pragmatism for so long until “tumbled over by the next political carnival, shouting fresher slogans.” But as long as there were those versed in the conscience and mind of characters capable of sacrifice, thought, and sound sentiment, there will be the possibility of enduring reform and reinvigoration.⁴⁴

Language, character, and culture, inextricably bound together, express an integrated view of the world. From that premise, White’s method fits Kirk because the integrative ethic of these authors was not a language of theory. There was no “system” or fixed set of ideological truths. There was a series of “ethical performances.” A vision was considered as actually performed in language and conduct, not just in claims made and ideas expressed. The “true meaning” of a text was to be found in attending to it as a

complete performance, in the way words were used, in the attitudes and prejudices behind them, and “in the larger movement and pattern of the work as a composition – in short in the work’s imaginative design.”⁴⁵ Kirk’s texts featured no premise of neutrality; and the performance of his language was a lament against the commercialization of modern civilization. That commercialization, an optimistic societal uplift, was perceived to be eager for commoditization and eager to cast aside the rural, the naturally aristocratic, and the traditional. Concern for those living amidst the glittering attractions of modern life was matched by Kirk’s retreat to the life of “a man of letters” in isolated and rural Michigan, on the ancestral family property. He conducted his life, this is to say, as if he truly, intensely meant his words. Surveying the contentious educational landscape of his time, Kirk brought into his argument the sentiment that cautious, informed, and necessary reform was made impossible by the “antagonist world” of the “terrible simplifiers, the frantic ideologues” who refused to be bound by a moral order – the contract of eternal society joining the dead, the living, and those yet unborn. If social order was not to dissolve into the “dust and powder of individuality,” he wrote in an essay about the possibilities of domestic revolution, it was necessary in any society and in any age to submit to a code of civility.⁴⁶

Such civility, though, would ring hollow as empty rhetoric without the accompanying persona. Repeated in the essay on the American university and the “New Left” that had come to dominate it in the 1960s was a recurring theme that highlights his persistent, repetitive pattern of phrase and argument: the existence of moral order, the mysterious ties that bind, and the exemplary figures (primarily Edmund Burke) who

prudently demonstrated ways toward the solidity of the metaphysically valuable. This consistent loyalty to permanent things and first principles, in rhetoric and deed, clarified and reiterated for an audience his own “true meanings.” A memorable, repeated phraseology and clarity of language, complimented by a personal adherence to localism and civility, I believe attracted readers to his “world” of the smaller communions of church, guild, family, and friends. This was a deliberate retelling of Burke’s “little platoons;” and it was effective because more than a few Americans were ready to hear it as American society underwent its rapid post-war transformations. This style of life was for many more alive and fulfilling than the bland predictability of a more “rationalist,” “standardized” existence overly inclined to serious theory and the work of “utopia.” Forrest McDonald, an academic who has written sympathetically about southern agrarian sentiment, recalled a strong current of geniality in Kirk’s correspondence, an affability and “play” in argument. There was, also, much historical pretense: the signing of his name in one letter to McDonald was Marcus Tullius Kirk.⁴⁷ Marcus Tullius is the name more commonly known as Cicero.

To convey the notion to innovate was not to reform, and to consider how a “conservative” critique of human nature and affairs might impact discussion about the role of government, Kirk was compelled to address what he thought to be the underlying realities of human experiences. The spiritual voids addressed by the fleeting pursuits of pleasure should be met not by the variations of technical pursuit but by the discipline of the mind, the instillation of prudence, the presentation of a coherent body of ordered knowledge across subjects, and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake – in short,

“rising generations” should be helped to make their way toward wisdom and virtue.⁴⁸ In drawing out these ethics, and by making their necessity explicit, he provided a way for conservatives to talk and live. To step back from the constant motion of seeking status and power, of always being “plugged in,” and of religious dogmatism in a political context, allowed room to express the past and initiate a variety of imaginations: historical, poetic, prophetic, civic, moral. Convinced that liberalism had exhausted itself, he appealed to the emotional and imaginative resources humans can invest in place and personal history as essential components of personal and social self-identity.

Particularly for those of inclined to similar sentiments, Kirk wrote to address and soothe anxieties, new and renewed as modernity raged, perhaps too inchoate to define. According to Gerald Russello’s consideration of his relationship to “postmodern thought,” he did this through a “literary narrative.” This was a sharp contrast to many “conservative” commentators and controversialists after the Second World War. They tended to be focused on electoral victory or the political issue of the moment. Kirk’s conservatism was never “modern.” It remained unburdened by what might be termed “Enlightenment frameworks.” His concern for the imagery a society creates of what it admires and condemns fits with his rejection of history and tradition as something objective, immovable, materialist, or determinist. People can, he thought, actually participate in and change history.⁴⁹ The constituted community of his language demanded that the mysteries of free will, divine guidance, human agency and choice, as well as the developing creations of custom, be respected as cornerstones of a temperament in but not of the confusions of a modern society. Thus the limits of

government and political power could come to be understood by a citizenry. His association was for the “natural ingenuity” of a civil society, an association presented in uniquely given his imaginative qualities and seemingly solitary stands on some issues. But Kirk’s “narrative” form, as opposed to a “historical” one, was conducive to providing lessons and examples of valuable meaning drawn from a human consciousness that was thought to transcend the currents of history. History, after all, was for Kirk itself contained within the immanence of a mysterious nature. It was ideologues and the many hubristic planners that sought the tyrannies of totality, not the seekers of inexpressible but permanent things.

Because so much reality will remain hidden, there was in the constitutions of many American conservative traditionalists much that language could not adequately capture. The task was to find a way to talk about these experiences, difficult to express and to sympathize with, in the “language of the profession.” What language could be made to do was for White “a call to invention, to reimagining the world, not to the routine application of rules or principles.” Literature “at its best is always about the language in which it is written, its ways of imagining the experience of others, its response to the conventions of authority with which it works, and so on.” To seriously engage the language of a text was to commit to an imagination of a world where certain declarations of significance were possible and others less possible. The use of language was an ethical enterprise. In White’s characterization, “we define ourselves and those we speak about in what we say.”⁵⁰ Kirk, in an essay on the teaching of “humane literature,” claimed that a “principal purpose of studying literature is to give us all a common

culture, ethical and intellectual, so that a people may share a general heritage and be united through the works of the mind.”⁵¹

Such an “invitation” to share in his beliefs and conclusions still resonates for some conservatives, and particularly for those of a religious persuasion that worry about the content of culture. A personal character, in Kirk’s definition, should be sound because of its larger cultural, societal implications. And so the language of reverence and mystery was a calling to a “higher purpose,” a challenge to look beyond the temporary and toward an order which holds things in place. Kirk continues to be read because he presented robust and confident answers in a time of widespread anxiety. In “association” – and especially in the call to “personhood” – there was an invitation to discuss truth, goodness, beauty, and all of the “transcendent” things he thought gave life its true meaning. Even so, the limits of an inventive and narrative persuasion continue to present challenges to a conservative movement tempted, as most political movements are, by the pursuits of power.

Notes

¹ George A. Panichas (ed). *The Essential Russell Kirk* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), p. xv.

² See, for example: Patrick J. Buchanan, *Where the Right Went Wrong: How Neoconservatives Subverted the Reagan Revolution and Hijacked the Bush Presidency* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2004), p. 58, as well as the writings of Rod Dreher, Paul Gottfried, and Justin Raimondo.

³ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1995), p. 446.

⁴ Peter Lawler, “1968 in Context,” *The Intercollegiate Review*, Fall 2008, p. 21.

⁵ Russell Kirk, *Rights and Duties: Reflections on our Conservative Constitution* (Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing, 1997), p. 41.

⁶ James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 193.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 9.

⁸ The texts are Homer’s *Illad*, Thucydides’ *History*, Plato’s *Gorgias*, Swift’s *Tale of a Tub*, Johnson’s *Rambler* essays, Austen’s *Emma*, Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, and documents of American law including the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 18 – 19.

- ¹⁰ Peter Read Teachout, "Worlds Beyond Theory: Toward the Expression of an Integrative Ethic for Self and Culture," *Michigan Law Review*, Vol. 83, No. 4, p. 849.
- ¹¹ Ibid, p. 850. The reader of *When Words Lose Their Meaning* inclined to such a view will, I believe, be drawn into its analytical orbit, as with the "traditionalist" reader of Kirk.
- ¹² James Boyd White, "Law as Rhetoric, Rhetoric as Law: The Arts of Cultural and Communal Life," *The University of Chicago Law Review*, Vol. 52, No. 3, p. 695.
- ¹³ Jeremiah Peter Hickey, *Reconstituting Representation: The Supreme Court and the Rhetorical Controversy Over State and Congressional Redistricting*, Texas A&M University Department of Communication, Doctoral Dissertation, December 2008, p. 13.
- ¹⁴ In the preface to *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, White offered this definition of rhetoric: "the study of the ways in which character and community – and motive, value, reason, social structure, everything, in short that makes a culture – are defined and made real in performance and language." Thus two speakers in conversation, for example, form a small and momentary community in a language necessarily provided by others but modified by the speakers.
- ¹⁵ James Boyd White, "Thinking About Our Language," *The Yale Law Journal*, Vol. 96, No. 8, p. 1962.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, p. 1963.
- ¹⁷ White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, p. 217.
- ¹⁸ Gerald J. Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007), p. 109 – 110.
- ¹⁹ This is a quote from Chesterton, who wrote in an essay concerning divorce: "It is futile to talk of reform without reference to form." See Martin, Rabatin, Swan (ed). *G.K. Chesterton: Collected Works, Vol. IV: Family, Society, Politics* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1987), p. 229.
- ²⁰ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, p. 40.
- ²¹ Wesley W. McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004), p. 55.
- ²² For a lengthy discussion of the internal divisions of American conservatism after the Second World War, see George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), p. 524 – 553. In print and in conversation with the author, Nash has characterized Kirk as a "traditionalist through and through" (p. 546).
- ²³ Russell Kirk, *The American Cause* (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1966), p. 18.
- ²⁴ Alfred S. Regnery, *Upstream: The Ascendance of American Conservatism* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2008), p. 46.
- ²⁵ Peter Read Teachout, "Worlds Beyond Theory," p. 854.
- ²⁶ White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, p. 281.
- ²⁷ Terence Ball, "Review, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*," *Ethics*, Vol. 96, No. 3, p. 623.
- ²⁸ James Boyd White, "'Our Meanings Can Never Be the Same': Reflections on Language and Law," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3, p. 69 – 70.
- ²⁹ Panichas (ed), *The Essential Russell Kirk*, p. xxv.
- ³⁰ James Boyd White, "Is Cultural Criticism Possible," *Michigan Law Review*, Vol. 84, No. 7, p. 1374. He continues that such a perception of law "also blurs the distinction between those who make and those who obey the law, enabling us to see law as a means of self-regulation or self-constitution."
- ³¹ Wesley W. McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology*, p. 102 – 103.
- ³² Russell Kirk, *Enemies of Permanent Things: Observations of Abnormity in Literature and Politics* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden Publishing, 1988), p. 181. See also Russello, p. 6 – 8.
- ³³ The essay, "The Dissolution of Liberalism," appeared in *Commonweal*, January 1955. It is reprinted in Panichas, (ed). *The Essential Russell Kirk*, p. 23 – 31. (Text quoted on p. 25.)
- ³⁴ Ibid, p. 30.
- ³⁵ White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, p. 229.
- ³⁶ Gerald Russello, "An America Tory: On the Essential Russell Kirk," *The New Criterion*, Vol. 25, Jan. 2007, p. 80.
- ³⁷ Russell Kirk, "The Moral Imagination," *Literature and Belief*, Vol. 1, 1981, p. 38 – 39.
- ³⁸ It was from his friend T.S. Eliot that Kirk took the term "permanent things."

³⁹ White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, p. 222.

⁴⁰ James Person Jr., *Russell Kirk: A Critical Biography of a Conservative Mind* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1999), p. 51.

⁴¹ David Frum, "The Legacy of Russell Kirk," *The New Criterion*, Vol. 13, Dec. 1994, p. 14 – 15.

⁴² In the case of *The Roots of American Order*, likely Kirk's second most well-known work, this rendering can be applied to the national founding.

⁴³ White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, p. 111.

⁴⁴ Mark C. Henrie (ed), *Arguing Conservatism: Four Decades of the Intercollegiate Review* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008), p. 764 – 765. This is a reprint of Kirk's essay, "Enlivening the Conservative Mind."

⁴⁵ Teachout, "Worlds Beyond Theory," p. 878 – 879.

⁴⁶ Henrie, *Arguing Conservatism*, p. 550. This reprint of Kirk's essay, "The University and Revolution," is characteristic of his education columns for *National Review*.

⁴⁷ Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Press, 2003), p. xx. "The tone of the letter was characteristically modest," according to McDonald.

⁴⁸ Lecture by Kirk to the Heritage Foundation in June 1990. Heritage Lecture 285. "Prospects for Conservatives Part II: Cultivating Educational Wastelands."

⁴⁹ Interview of Gerald Russello by John J. Miller. National Review Online, June 28, 2007.

⁵⁰ James Boyd White, "What We Know," *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature*, Vol. 10, No. 2, p. 152 – 153.

⁵¹ Panichas (ed), *The Essential Russell Kirk*, p. 434.

CHAPTER IV CONCLUSIONS

Promise and Error: Kirk's Concepts of Home

Since its founding on the North American continent, as throughout its expansion, the idea of America and the nation itself has existed as a potent allure for tens of millions. Russell Kirk, ever fearful of the “destructive power of fanatic ideology,” envisioned the United States as the “great conservative power in a world that has been falling to ruin since 1914.”¹ He advised that too many citizens were unprepared to defend the convictions and institutions of the principles that the American nation should uphold. Culture, the locus of ethics and morality that was a conduit of norms to succeeding generations, was for him embedded in the fabric of everyday life. It was menaced and fragile, following an assumption that humanity was fallible and never close to perfectible. This view has placed him awkwardly in the contexts of American conservatism, as his persuasions pinpointed the “conservation” of Enlightenment liberalism as not conservative – a term like “neo-liberalism” being more accurate. His rhetoric, centered on culture,² was orientated toward the “home.” His ultimate reference, his supreme images of the good, was an unsystematic vision of civic settlement that privileged, as he saw it, the “associative in communion” above the alienated, the responsible over the self-serving, and the communal over the individual.³

Kirk approached culture as morality writ large, a morality still bearing the imprint of historical predecessors. Such cultural shaping could come by a cautious social evolution, a quickened “liberation,” or preservation. Not all means were desirable. Society, Kirk wrote, can be betrayed through ignorance by destructive coercions foreign

and domestic; and “good-natured ignorance is a luxury none of us can afford.”⁴ Kirk’s concept of a well-ordered America was an “organic” system of morality, a system taught first and best from the home. It was ignited by a creator and inseparable from a “restrained liberty.” He believed the “founders of the Republic put no trust in absolute, unqualified Liberty. Unrestrained Liberty they thought as dangerous as unrestrained Power.” Liberty and civil freedom must be “balanced and bounded by the safeguards of conscience, custom, good order, and good constitutions.” The “modern American” should return to the biases of the eighteenth-century American, using the word “freedom” to denote freedom under God and law as justified by the years of national experience.⁵ His concepts of nationhood and home, animated as they were by historical renderings and a rhetorical discourse of an imaginative vision, were also inspired by a concern for the communities of his actual and potential audience. These concepts were not objectively complete or “fair,” nor were they meant to be.

Hope and Obligation

As a practitioner of rhetoric, Kirk was not a historian or a philosopher but a moralizing “collector.” He worked to convey a consensus of those thinkers and actors he presented as worthy of emulation. By discerning general principles of a transcendent order through the moral imagination, to which American society should continuously conform, Kirk’s convictions (such as a Christian concept of original sin and human imperfectability) were formulated and shared. Politically, as a founder of American intellectual conservatism one error he sought to correct was the penchant for looking perpetually to government to solve social problems. He thought this culturally

debilitating. To the detriment of the small spheres of localism (the voluntary fraternities of civil society that maintain a more just, natural, and lasting order) the embrace of the big, bland, predictable, rationalist, and the standardized had given rise to the licenses of freedom, an invitation to decadence and statist solution.⁶ A culture devoid of inbuilt and organically transferred ethics and morals, one that resorted to legal deterrence as an influence over behavior, was broken. His defense of America as a shining example of conservative sentiment in a world gone mad was a defense of a social fabric, resting on revelation, and confronted by an advancing “liberal” anthropology begun by the excesses of secular Enlightenment, especially the “ignorant impracticality which produced the events of 1789 in France.”⁷

This social fabric was contemptuous of individualism and utilitarianism as social atomistic. They were, in fact, a basis of voracious democracy, ponderous states, and theories of abstract rights. Kirk’s high regard for generational obligation took the “individualistic” strains of “modernity” and “liberalism” as direct challenges to the continuance of community as he would prefer them to be viable. Modernity and liberalism, products of complex and many-sided traditions, can I think be understood as political doctrines whose primary goal was to secure the conditions necessary for the exercise of personal freedom. Implicit in this definition is the “natural” freedom and equality of all humans, established by individual rights, consent, tolerance, liberty of thought and discourse, a separation of private and public, and personal autonomy as elaborated by institutions including a division of powers, representative democracy, and an independent judiciary.⁸ Taking such a definition as valid, I believe Kirk was uncertain

about how to effectively “reorder” a nation founded on many of these political doctrines, an uncertainty shared by some traditionalists and many conservatives in the years after the Second World War. It was difficult to “reorder” by the light of “conservatism” without a solid understanding of what in America’s (revolutionary) history was in fact conservative. Kirk’s struggle to “construct an American genealogy” produced, according to the historian Arthur Schlesinger, a “great scurrying about” for roots and an “odd and often contradictory collection of figures.” One European-born prominent member of the “American Right” called him “desperate,” writing the “American experience of life...is indisputably a fierce yen for institutionalized ‘progress’ by utopian legislation and industrial gadgetry.”⁹

Kirk’s concept of America was as a place of despair and disappointment but also hope. The country could return to the conservative sentiments of its past were it to finally set aside the attractions of an effectively unlimited individual will. One end of an “unlimited will” for traditionalists like Kirk was the growth of a managerial state “necessary” to secure present and future individual liberties.¹⁰ In making “respectable” an “intellectual conservatism” with the publication of *The Conservative Mind* in 1953, his “moral imaginations” of “permanent things” were nourishment for two goals: to promote attachment to worthy American traditions and to issue warning about the widespread ignorance of them. And the inventions of history and rhetorical appeal were not antithetical to reality, he insisted, because tradition itself employs invention. Facts and the imagination of their telling could formulate tradition from history. This process was creative and dynamic, as “tradition” was constantly revised, rewritten, and

reinterpreted. Each generation, Kirk wrote, faced the task of confronting fundamental truths anew through fresh interpretations. Present throughout his writings and lectures, such a style of communication (a lament, a warning, and a call to return) was different from the telling of history,¹¹ which might presuppose a separate past to be analyzed as a series of actual, sequential events. His concepts of tradition, on the other hand, assumed within itself the continuity of what was passed on, to be always “involved” with the past yet perceived in the present.¹² As I have characterized it, Kirk’s concept of America was fundamentally reconstructive. These actions and calls to action were a defense, and a critique, that followed his rejection of “modernity.” The reconstructive project was literary and aesthetic, a “discourse of grief” and a call for preservation against what he identified as the arrogant secularisms of modern thought. The “moral imagination” energized rhetorical processes through a concern for communities and persons losing their way in the confusions of an increasingly complex existence. This crafted (or so he aspired) a shared imaginative experience.

His great worry was for a multifaceted domestic crisis sourced in a deficiency of spiritual worth. Such a spiritual deficit should, he communicated, be addressed by philosophy and theology more than the political and social battles of the moment. There was this danger because modern “American civilization” was mired in a broad “culture of choice,” one facilitated by the market economy. The country had “room aplenty for a variety of traditions; diversity and freedom of choice, indeed, are themselves American traditions.”¹³ Even so, the bustle of life, migratory habits and overly eager enterprise of the citizenry, distractions of media, and influx of immigrants unwilling to assimilate

have worked to decrease the authority of tradition and custom. While the promise granted by the founders endures, driven by the respect they and their insights still command, the obsessions of modern life for technology, growth, and upward mobility would result in confrontation with humanity's natural limits. Such obsessions were likely to be facilitation for loneliness, alienation, and suffering. But institutions of self-governance and reverence for prescriptive religion, morality, and family relationships were a check to the "assault upon tradition, so that, curiously enough, in a nation with only three centuries of history behind it, the mass of the people are probably as sympathetic to tradition as is the bulk of the population anywhere else in the world."¹⁴ Crisis, as with promise, always lurked in these competing and, perhaps, irresolvable American tensions. From a traditionalist conservative perspective, virtue could not be accomplished by any one individual. Societal renewal rested upon an understanding that personhood was intimately tied to the communal, as virtue must be learned and shared in concert with a healthy generational continuity and memory.

The High Virtue of Personhood

It was imperative to Kirk's persuasion, then, to consider transcendence of "personhood" and the ensuing commitments of that term. This necessarily required the imagination, an acceptance of the reality of the soul. For him, a temporal governor of the human race was formed by the good of community extending outward from the home, the place most responsible to succeeding generations. The moral imagination, which always awaited its rediscovery, "exceeds the power of a whiff of grapeshot." New-seeming ideas, sentiments, and modes of state craft might grow popular, but for Kirk the

“Post-Modern imagination stands ready to be captured. And the seemingly novel ideas and sentiments and modes may turn out, after all, to be revived truths and institutions, well known to surviving conservatives.” It may be, he continued, the “conservative imagination” which is the guide to the “Post-Modern Age.” Herein was the American promise; this was a land that allowed, even welcomed, such an unsettled, practically indescribable, theology and philosophy to bloom. Stating that “imagination governs the human race,” he wished for Americans, valuing the personhood formed by home, to not abandon their spiritual heritage. In this, the country could remain a place favorably inclined toward “the diminishing of ignorance.”¹⁵

Despite the strong roots of individualism and Enlightenment sentiment in the documents, figures, arguments, and actions of the American national founding, Kirk persisted, based on his readings and biases, to make use of historical renderings and rhetorical persuasion about how societal values were to be decided. These postulates of order, justice, and freedom as applied to civil society followed the example of a creation of national community, meaning the constitution of American nationhood. According to James Boyd White, the achievement of national founding was the self-conscious reconstitution of language and community so as to achieve “possibility.” He wrote that “In separating from Great Britain and setting up their own government, Americans claimed the freedom and the power to remake their own world.”¹⁶ And indeed, “individual choice” for Kirk need not be a foundational basis of political or social legitimacy. His imaginative, sacramental, and religious perception of an inherent human dignity, and of a value regardless of the estimation of others, was a statement of

opposition to a more prevailing view. In his persuasions, the moral equality and natural limits against sentiments of value relativism and Enlightenment-influenced notions of individual freedom could also be described as quintessentially American. His written and spoken rhetoric, from an analytical and a productive view, was capable of employing two seemingly contradictory notions without the intent, in my view, to misinform or distract an audience.

Across these persuasions, individuality and freedom as a high virtue were conveyed as openings for dehumanization because humans were inconsistent and selfish. Dissenting from the optimistic prospect that an individual was capable of progress through the force of reason, and the collective striving of humanity for the benefit of all as humanity was basically good, his opposing position of “the only possible perfection is perfection through grace in death” made connection between the political and the aesthetic. In a lecture on the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, Kirk stated, “Without religious culture and religious hope, the modern world would come to resemble a half-derelict fun fair, gone nasty and poverty-wracked, life a gamble at best – one enormous Atlantic City.”¹⁷ The acceptance of immovable flaw and mystery worked well with his philosophy and theology, and with his refusal to attempt philosophical rigor or consistency.¹⁸ Humanity betters itself, for Kirk and the coalition of conservative writers of like-minded sentiment such as the “traditionalists,” the “agrarians,” and the “paleo-conservatives,” by a realization that anything socio-political aiming to approach the completeness, the totality, of reality was unfeasible. The attractive and inspiring idea that humanity ought to be and can be the master of its own fortune tends to lead to

ideology, a magnifier of vice. As such, a humbled reliance on the transcendent, the intuitions present as a common feature of human nature across environment and time, intersecting with subjective experience and the forces the past, remained central to the health of community and civilization. It was also central to his conduct as a “rhetorical popularizer,” in both the approaches of persona and philosophical underpinning.

Visions of Liberty and Tradition

Kirk’s rhetoric was a persuasion that America needed nothing less than it needed ideology. Prudence, prescription, custom, tradition, and constitution have governed the American people, not abstractions: “We have been saved from ideology by political tradition. We still subscribe, however confusedly, to the norms of politics; we still cherish the permanent things.”¹⁹ The accumulated wisdom of generations, tempered by the slow evolution of observation and involvement, took religious belief (which for Kirk made American democracy successful) out of the private sphere of debate. His persuasion placed the confounding of religion and politics as significantly less problematic than the total separation of religion from a civil social order. Within the American conservative intellectual movement, politically active and discursive, I believe such an argument was at the heart of conflicting visions. One valued individuality, choice, and market economy, while the other valued cultural and historical inheritances. Further, the tension between liberty and tradition has frequently materialized in many debates. Philosopher Peter Berkowitz, like William F. Buckley and many other writers for *National Review* an advocate for a fusionist “constitutional conservatism,” has characterized the various parts of the conservative partnership in America (libertarian,

socially traditionalist, and foreign policy hawkishness) in their overlap and uneasy association to the dogmas of classic liberalism as follows:

The principles are familiar: individual freedom and individual responsibility, limited but energetic government, economic opportunity, and strong national defense. They derive support from Edmund Burke, the father of modern conservatism, as well as from Adam Smith, Alexis de Tocqueville, and, in his most representative moments, John Stuart Mill – outstanding contributors to the conservative side of the larger liberal tradition. They are embedded in the Constitution and flow out of the political ideas from which it was fashioned.²⁰

The “conservative side of the larger liberal tradition” was a source of anxiety for Kirk’s sentiment and rhetoric. The moral imagination, an “enduring source of inspiration that elevates us to first principles as it guides us upwards toward virtue and wisdom and redemption,”²¹ was a necessary bulwark against what he depicted, in an essay praising the British Catholic convert and writer Malcom Muggeridge, as a modern civilization stumbling down toward a dusty death. The “enthronement of the gospel of progress” was blithe to the truth that civilization began with revelation. This is an incitement to decay: “Culture arises from the cult; when the cult dissolves, so in time does the culture.”²² For Kirk, liberalism, modernism, and freedom as a high virtue made a similar error to the collectivism he also scorned in his rhetoric. These concepts and their advocates were deluded in their assumptions that humans were, on balance, naturally good willed, and that they will surely care for one another if only a certain environment could be put into place. It was not the quest for greater knowledge that he wished to see abandoned, nor the mannerisms and lifestyle of the intellectual, but the ambitions of intellectuals of the political “left” and the “right.” The American people, as with all people, were too contradictory, too complicated, and operating with far too much incomplete information

to truly know what might be best in every circumstance. The socio-political policies of a civil society, therefore, should be designed with this ignorance taken into account. The dehumanizing aspects of value relativism and freedom as a high virtue, each evident across the varieties of public discussion, were to be countered, according to many traditionalist conservative arguments, first by an epistemological modesty.

In the midst of abundance and freedom, the pursuit of happiness was, essentially, a pursuit of distraction. In his “reflections on our conservative constitution,” Kirk claimed the original intent of the framers was to give the people a “Republic of elevated views and hopes” rather than the “arbitrary rulings” that have “invaded some of the more intimate concerns and interests of American democracy.”²³ The precepts summarized by Berkowitz were “amorphous notions labeled ‘liberalism;’” and they were anxious to cast aside a Christian moral appreciation of law, which “could give way, in the long run, only to the commandments of the Savage God – enforced by some Rough Beast, his hour come round at last”:

In the domain of the law today, as in all other realms of human endeavor, there is waged a battle between those who believe that we human creatures are made in the image of a Creator, and those believe that we are not much more than fleshly computers. Even within the courts of law, created to help to keep the peace, this war is fought to the knife. How will this struggle over the nature of law, with the followers of Apollo on one side and the votaries of Dionysius on the other, be terminated? Will the Christian sources of the law be effaced in America – or will the Christian moral imagination and right reason rise up again in strength in our courts of law?²⁴

As with southern agrarians, this characteristically stark generalization and rhetorical flourish was the product of a genuine despondency that something valuable has been lost. The valuation of “rooted place” and familial responsibility extended outward to immediate community was ruined by the chasing of “individual freedom.”

When a citizenry indulged their many appetites as freely as possible, once great states, regardless of their civic constitutions, would begin to sink toward their dissolution. And no matter how admirable a constitution might appear on paper, Kirk wrote, it would be ineffectual unless “the unwritten constitution, the web of custom and convention, affirms an enduring moral order of obligation and personal responsibility.” Since the horrors of global conflict begun in 1914, the world has been “blinded and deafened” by the crash of empires and the collapse of constitutions; and “only American territories and American laws have stood little touched amidst the general ruin.”²⁵ His homeland, in other words, did not yet fully embrace an optimistic faith of the individual ever progressing by the light of secular reason, or a minimizing of more seemingly unimportant and strange matters such as mystery and beauty.

A Sentiment of Limits

America had kept true to his favored concept of a more genuine, enduring home for the pursuit of what made humans truly happy. It was a place yet to elevate either “modernism” or “hypermodernism.” Political philosopher Peter Lawler has defined modern thought as the “attempt to master or to overcome nature through action directed by thought.” Like Kirk, his discernment of postmodernism “rightly understood” was not “as it is usually understood.” All postmodernists correctly reject the systematic or reductionist rationalism of modern thought, Lawler wrote, but postmodernism need not be foundationless or a “celebration of endless self-creation out of nothing.” It can also be perceived as a sentiment of limits, conducive to the humbling of hubris, a “realistic acknowledgement of the limits of human understanding.” Although there is much about

being and self that would always elude comprehension and control, it was possible to know enough to live well. An arbitrary character of human authority and the freedom from all standards aside from human will should be called “hypermodern.” Its intention was not to understand nature but to guide transformative action in accordance with the whims of human desire:

Antifoundationalism, the assertion of the groundlessness of human existence, is really hypermodernism, or the exaggeration to the point of caricature of the modern impulse to self-creation. Havel and Solzhenitsyn, true postmodernists, write of human beings living in the light of the truth, meaning primarily the truth about human purpose and limits. Postmodernism rightly understood rejects the illusion of self-creation in favor of the reality of conscientious responsibility. So postmodernism is not a rejection of Socratic or Thomistic rationalism. Human reason exists primarily not to transform reality but to understand and to come to terms with it. There is some correspondence between human thought and the way things really are. Postmodernism is the return to realism. But realism is not to be confused with the possibility of comprehensive human wisdom, which would only be possible if man became God or history came to an end.²⁶

Lawler’s arrangement of the “natural” world here is one unthreatened by the mysteries of being as mediated by human nature and reason. The reason, I suspect, is that there was no attempt for a full, totalizing comprehension of human life in “postmodernism rightly understood.” “Hypermodernism,” in such a conception, has often resulted in some attempt to dominate. “Freedom” colluded with the reality of sinful human nature in all its negative and domineering impulses. It was possible to ponder the strengths and limitations of the modern world from a perspective “outside” of modernity because the effort for security, happiness, and status continues to develop with no end in sight; enough has been seen to recognize these will remain pursuits. “Postmodern conservatives” can “see” beyond the modern world because the intention to transform human nature has failed. The project of “transforming the human person into the

autonomous individual was and remains unrealistic; we can now see the limits of being an individual because we remain more than individuals. The world created by modern individuals to make themselves fully at home turns out to have made human beings less at home than ever.”²⁷ Kirk’s aesthetic inclination featured similarities to these generalizations of “home.” In searching for a “dwelling place” of his audience, the background of his writing was alarm for how the modern person existed, first in the small spheres of community. Traditions can help to guide to a higher nature, an aspect of being which, under the guidance of transcendent good, moved and inspired toward the direction of humanity and personhood in inherent dignity. This spiritual purpose, supported by universal standards external to the limits of self, was a check against that (more popular and present) aspect of human will governed by selfishness, greed, lust for power, and arbitrary desire.

With regard to the “rhetoric of moral imagination,” instruction of a will toward harmony with the governing energy of a transcendent good in the context of America was its supposedly conservative traditions. In Kirk’s imaginative rendering an allegedly “Burkean” character of American constitutional construction shined through the unfortunate impulses of many citizens and their scheming managers. Human appetites were voracious and sanguinary and must be restrained by the “collective and immemorial wisdom” of “prejudice, tradition, customary morality.” The traditions which Americans still valued were indispensable in developing and guiding a higher nature. Precepts and social conventions were the considered judgments and filtered experience of generations. They built duty, prudence, and good citizenship.²⁸ A goal of Kirk’s

persuasion was such a vision, one difficult to typify even as I classify him as a “postmodern conservative.” The ethic of this vision, and his lament for the Christian basis of America and its constitutional order seen to be endangered by consumerism and rampant individualism, was led by a creativity that inspired phrases like “some Rough Beast, his hour come round at last.” The imaginative visions and the moral imagination were formed out of a worried affection for the approach of American communities to its composition and long-term future direction. Kirk’s persuasions were not directed only to various political and social circumstances.²⁹ In his writings, the cultural intelligence of which family, transcendence, custom, and personhood were a means of expression came from the delicate handiwork of the few; and “wisdom is not got through shouting-matches within one generation.”³⁰ Beauty was a form of truth, just as a “good” work of art was capable of capturing a fragment of the universal truths and thus set a standard for the good society.³¹

The connection between inclinations political and aesthetic was crucial to Kirk’s concepts of America, in practice and in ideal. A shaping of political identity was not only the outcome of opinions on specific issues; this development of identity was part of the representation of what a person was striving to become. Rhetorical scholar Michael McGee’s outline of the fragmentation of American culture, where interpretation is “the primary task of speakers and writers and text construction the primary task of audiences, readers, and critics” has suggested that contemporary discourse is a reflection of this fragmentation. Text construction has become something “done more by the consumers than by the producers of discourse.”³² I think Kirk understood and welcomed the

developments of a person as an amalgam of different traditions, an amalgam most Americans shared: he was Puritan and Catholic, Midwesterner and Scotsman, an American who built an Italianate home in the rural woodlands of central Michigan. His work was “intended to demonstrate how one could reclaim a particular tradition and make it one’s own.”³³ A “certainty” of a worldviews political or economic was simply not as important – or as lasting for the health of the person, the family, and the community – as the habits, customs, norms, and traditions ignited by the imagination. And in reviewing his life and work, I find that was one reason why he always included literary figures as exemplars of conservative sentiment.

The Importance of True Constitutions

Kirk’s faith, orientated toward the transcendence of Christian revelation instead of politics and its politicians, led him to conclude that America could simply rest on a foundation of “conservative principle.” Founding documents could be read as “true constitutions,” as the product of a nation’s struggles “sprung from the bosom of the community” and not constructed in the “high plains” of abstraction as was the French Republic. *The Conservative Mind* expressed “true constitutions” to be a “natural” growth; “in a sense they are the voice of God expressed through the people; but nature and God work through historical experience, and all sound constitutions are effective embodiments of compromise. They reconcile the different interests or portions of the community with one another, in order to avert anarchy.”³⁴ It was by such generalizations that Kirk posited a European, “Burkean” traditionalism antagonistic to the spirit of modernism, liberalism, and revolutionary zeal into the fabric of an America with more

than a few “Lockean” premises. Still, his concept of an American “home,” despite the many errors contained within the conduct of its people, retained its promise as the last, best hope for a “conservative” to practice their dispositions.

Kirk insisted that America enjoyed its own conservative tradition sourced in the British experience, even as this case depended upon an extrapolation at odds with many professional observers. Lawler has written, for example, that “Arguably all American political disputes center on disputes concerning the meaning of the principles set forth in Thomas Jefferson’s revolutionary document, the Declaration of Independence.” But for Kirk, that document was an aberration, a mere statement of separation with little significance. The genuinely American constitutional principles, such as the rule of law and the protection of property, he thought to be inheritances from the English constitutional tradition. This is perhaps the best example of how his conservatism was inventive, and “an effort to improve on the American foundation in view of its weaknesses.”³⁵ Over the course of his career, Kirk was resolute in seeing a principled foundation of social order in line with his own impartialities, an American genesis soaked in “Judeo-Christian” introspection and supported by beautiful documents of form and sentiment. And thus it could be the case, he endeavored to discover with his audience, that the dreariness of a utilitarian utopianism primed to exploit lonely individuality in the name of efficiency and an abstracted, synthetic unity could, through a renewal of moral imagination, be resisted.

By this view, America’s ensuing political traditions, adept at eschewing ideology, adhered to a long Western tradition of natural and divine law. If Kirk’s

inventiveness was an effort to improve upon the American foundations of political organization in view of its weaknesses,³⁶ then his persuasions of American concepts required simplifications, assumption, and wishful thinking. *The Roots of American Order* insisted, for instance, that John Locke's politics and "psychology" had very little impact on American beliefs in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Kirk reported those present at the national founding "accepted neither the determinism and absolute sovereignty of Hobbes, nor yet the whole doctrine of the origins of society and of the human understanding as put forward by Locke." Conceding that Americans "would make use of Locke, but they would not worship him," he found from his study of Americans' reading during that period that "educated Americans often mentioned Locke on the eve of the Revolution, but seldom read his books at first hand."³⁷ I highlight these passages not to argue the soundness of the opinion but to note his rhetorical performance of historical significance.

It may or may not be the case that Locke was of little use to early Americans. Nevertheless, this breezy dismissal was aided by two points: Locke was "mentioned" but never lionized, and the "whole doctrine" was not fully accepted. I think it is unlikely, however, that any commentator in disagreement over Locke's influence would make such claims. This is an example of why I judge Kirk a historical inventor and "rhetorical popularizer" of "traditionalist" conservative sentiment. He wrote that despite its many failings, the American order had been a success in human history due to its "checks upon popular impulses" to keep its citizens from "arbitrary domination." A "practical secular covenant" was extracted by those believing in "a sacred Covenant, designed to restrain

the human tendencies toward violence and fraud; the American Constitution is a fundamental law deliberately meant to place checks upon will and appetite.”³⁸ His rhetoric converted the past through some manner of manipulation of record and memory. The intentions to persuade consistently engaged the audience through the openly and repeatedly stated biases, exclusions, additions, and characterizations of the author. Kirk’s rhetoric of America was not so much practical or partisan as it was an extension, backwards in time and across continents, of symbolisms and emotions permeated with the “possibilities” of sacramental, communal solidarity. By this I mean he expected for men and women to live and work, with skepticism toward quickened, abstract change and a humbled outlook, within the small spheres of their influence.

Return to Spiritual Order

In his rhetoric, it was the responsibility of citizens to actively engage these local communities, first through the family, where virtue in habitations may be acquired in compatibility with an irrepressible social drive. The audience was “called,” in other words, to live and think in accordance with his sentiments and emotions as codified by his own persona and example. This was Kirk’s “founding spirit” of America, a land where “the pursuit of happiness” could signify the restoration and improvement of the order of the soul and thus of the republic. Happiness, he wrote in *The Roots of American Order*, was to be “found in the imaginative affirmation.”³⁹ The country was a place of “conservative” hope by this renewable spirit, the strength of mind which was capable of leading one mired in noisy, confusing, modern distractions to possibilities of more fulfilling communion in association. The prudence and constitution that have governed

the American people living and building in their communities of custom make them resistant to the hubris of managers and planners. But Kirk's rhetoric discovered many still clamoring to more completely control human affairs. Trouble always lurked when imagination failed and more "diabolical things" came to be valued: "When faith in a transcendent moral order, duty to family, hope of advancement, and satisfaction with one's task have vanished from the routine of life, Big Brother appears to show the donkey instead of the carrot."⁴⁰ Culture, more important than politics and arising from the "cult" (the sense of the sacred growing from a civilization's agriculture, defense, order, architecture, literature, music, arts, law, politics, and education) always needs renewal. His rhetoric of "conservative" renewal was orientated toward the "home" of a particular cultural continuation, a personal and familial restructuring taking advantage of existence in a place and time where such renewal was still possible.

Yet American culture, derived yet detached from centuries of British culture, was prone to pride and hubris. Here was his solution to renewing a "shaken culture": "Even such as you and I, my friends, if we are resolute enough and sufficiently imaginative, may alter the present course of events."⁴¹ This conclusion is what I have identified as a call to join his perceptions of crisis and renewal by following his sentiments. In the context of Kirk's America, there was conjured a place he thought connected to a historically-rooted growth of prudence and generational wisdom, not the meanderings of an ideology unlimited in its utopianism.⁴² These persuasions were often preceded by historical renderings of a memorable, quotable language. Further, the audience could be part of something larger than individual effort, something directly following the

judiciousness of the founders. They could join his project of redemption and return at no cost aside from the personal and intellectual development many of them were already seeking. In sum, Kirk's critiques were as a contributor to the "universe of discourse," not as a centered subject originating thought. As an "inventor" of texts, his role was to "re-present" from a collection of fragmentary episodes. This was a recovery of the subject of American conservatism.⁴³ The gathering of fragmentations for an inventive presentation, leading to a call for renewal, was more explicit in the last years of his career. As he spent a greater amount of time addressing young conservatives, Kirk would summon a restoration in the wake of a failing liberal order:

In the later 'Sixties, many of the rising generation thought it amusing to pull down what earlier generations had patiently built up; their zeal extended even to the burning of university libraries. In the early 'Nineties, I hope and trust, many of the rising generation will find it satisfying to restore their patrimony from earlier times – and so save the world from suicide. That labor will require cleverness and courage. Some of you present here tonight may choose it for your vocation.⁴⁴

This urging to discuss and discover restorative applications for principles following the intangible "moral imagination" made it difficult to establish effects, which I believe supported optimism amid requiem. According to Paul Gottfried, a political philosopher and frequent contributor to debates of conservatism's meanings, the "misfit" between an ideal America representing his "conservative tradition" and what came to actually exist drove Kirk to formulating his persuasion as "value conservatism." This was an idealized form in search of "permanent things" that found "illustrations of their values in literary and historical works," an appeal first and foremost to young intellectuals of Catholic religious identification. For Gottfried, though, what Kirk was really drawing forth were the "non-radicalized sectors of an otherwise radicalized

society” when he claimed to be discovering conservative traditions. Even as the emphasis on surviving and flourishing traditions caused exaggerations and distinctive historical evaluations, the work as a “literary and aesthetic traditionalist” assumed an inherently meaningful universe.⁴⁵ In Kirk’s persuasions, and by his biases, authors may exaggerate but a good story of important things tells the truth. The intellectual abstractions of determinisms, collectivisms, “free markets,” and the like hammered the facts and mysteries of life – their asymmetry, poetic rhythms, and communal, family relations – into something supposedly digestible and as a quasi-religion. Instead, the universe itself was the ultimate work of art, literature, poetry, and truth; its incomprehensible parts worked marvelously together toward a purpose. Kirk wrote in *The Conservative Mind* that if persons were “discharged of reverence for ancient usage, they will treat this world, almost certainly, as if it were their private property, to be consumed for their sensual gratification; and thus they will destroy in their lust for enjoyment the property of future generations, of their own contemporaries, and indeed their very own capital.”⁴⁶

The reality of original sin, the only doctrine empirically verifiable, meant the function of a conservative in the modern world was to stand against its radicalisms. They were to remind the herd that some things do not and cannot change, and to emphasize that some truths will escape the rationalizations and logics of the latest fashions. Rhetorical scholar Wayne C. Booth has written that the notion humans have reason to believe only what has been proved “cannot be lived with by most of us for even a moment.”⁴⁷ Indeed, we are all bursting with ghosts, Kirk opined in his memoir, our

emotions, thoughts, and wishes ever changing with the seasons. The “compositions” and “recompositions” of the sensations and ideas and desires of our ancestors flow deeply in our blood.⁴⁸ And so politicians and planners don’t grant or shape values, and they cannot “save” that from the home and hearth meant to be loved and passed forward in time.

Human nature was not malleable. The permanence of tradition, art, literature, poetry, and history were small pieces of transcendent truths hanging on amid the whirlwinds of innovation. If culture was something resembling morality write large, then the “soul” of American civilization could, Kirk believed, be lost at the very moment of its culture’s material triumph. In sum, he “invited” readers on this “journey” to give direction to changes, to “insure that generation may link with generation, some of us must undertake the rescue of the moral imagination.”⁴⁹

An Associative Vision

I find that by these persuasions, the temporality of material and utilitarian pleasure was presented as an inferior happiness compared to the intricate continuity of lives. As Burke’s “little platoons” of society built on the unit of family, so too did Kirk model his concepts of America on the “home” of family. Imaginative to the point of invention, they were tied to something always perceived as very real. These concepts were similar to a religious rhetoric of “Augustinian imagination” culminating in contemplative silence and bringing the mind into immediate contact with an external veracity.⁵⁰ A “moral imagination” was thought to prepare beneficial responses to the uncertainties of self, family, and community, as appropriated to any trial. Kirk’s “discovery” of a conservative American heritage came in no small part by meditation on

“ancient things” – prompts of thought when viewing European ruins and walks in his ancestral home of Scotland, for example. An “aesthetic stance” was present in his version of conservatism from the beginning of his career. “Americans of a certain temperament could vibrate to Kirk’s remembered experience when he had visited ‘Burke’s house [in Dublin] or the sad scrap of it that remains.’” They could together mourn how “the past shrivels,” according to Gottfried. Becoming a “Kirkian conservative,” he continued, meant embracing an aesthetic experience and celebrating the sentiments of his most well-known contribution to political thought, the six canons featured in *The Conservative Mind*. It was available to all willing to share and espouse it, although the appeal was limited. But for those who did, his presentation of sentiments with a literary flare, a bohemian Anglophilia, indifference to party politics, and aesthetic sensibility made him popular with some American readers.⁵¹ Despite this, he remained a solitary and lonely figure within the context of the movement he helped lend intellectual creditability. And in cultivating distaste for technocratic innovation and working from a “late nineteenth-century setting,” his views were not “in sync” with much of the conservative movement as it came to exert influence shortly before (and I would say well after) his death.⁵²

Kirk’s “associative vision” found all citizens to be flawed creatures torn between higher and lower inclinations and in need of the American “conservative traditions.” Yet the appeal of his rhetoric was limited by the constraints of America itself, in idea and fact. His insistence of a “Burkean” beginning, articulated most comprehensively in *The Conservative Mind* and *The Roots of American Order*, can I believe be fairly classified

as wishful thinking, as an unsustainable and unmoored blueprint of conservative founding. Kirk categorically, and I think deliberately, existed and wrote as one out of step with the romanticism, Lockeanism, Calvinism, liberalism, modernism, Greco-Roman republicanism, and other ingredients of an Enlightenment-based blend present on the North American continent at the time of revolution. As such, his rhetoric was simultaneously constituted, enabled, and constrained by an “institutional design.”⁵³ And although artful rhetoric can alter political or social arrangements, there remain reasons for skepticism when accessing the scope and legacy of his influence upon audience, even one sympathetic to his concerns.

More specifically, Kirk’s effectiveness is contingent upon an acceptance of his unconventional, and perhaps singular, readings. His continuing importance as a practitioner of political rhetoric depends upon a preexisting critical inclination (in approach to questions of culture, politics, and society) to concepts such as rationalism, modernism, and liberalism. These are quite far from a large-scale acceptance. The “critical inclinations” were articulated as attempts to order society in accordance with something other than the transcendent, the local, and the “naturally” accumulated. In his critiques of culture and the managerial state, in fact, Kirk may have calculatingly limited his appeal. An endeavor to persuade beyond the boundary of “traditionalist conservatives” and those inclined to agree with at least some of the “traditionalist” or “Burkean” sentiments would, I expect, have resulted in a different writing style, one more conducive to the contemporary reader, or one politically disengaged. The persona of a “Bohemian Tory,” a traveling man of letters, was likely intentionally archaic. An

inaccessibility of this sort tended to evoke the responses he desired, but only for those already drawn to him.⁵⁴ In “converting” the past by a “manipulation” of record and memory, his characterizations of America contained questionable exclusion, distinctive and questionable addition, and a happily embraced bias. I think this is because such symbolisms and sentiments were likewise entertained by an alliance of the likeminded. There was a reassuring, communal solidarity to be found among a place and a people he wanted desperately to be saved. But this alliance of the likeminded could not expect to enjoy political or cultural ascendancy – and there is little evidence to suggest they did harbor any such expectation.

Kirk wrote that conservatism had “almost lost the power of language.” Most conservatives expressed themselves badly, and few were able to describe any coherent moral or philosophical basis for their beliefs. Though their impulses may have been “genuinely conservative in the historic sense of that abused term,” they would endeavor to defend themselves by the arguments of their old adversaries.⁵⁵ As a response, he developed a “culturally-based” rhetoric orientated toward the “home: of a smaller, more localized communion extending outward into the polis. It was expressed, in part, by appreciation for the reality and the promise of an America founded upon “conservative” principles. The “good” always in mind, his portrait of civic and familial association criticized modernity as an incoherent collection of propositions and practices flowing from a common error: hubris. Though the very same criticism might be made of his concepts of conservatism and literary based imagination, those inclined toward his sentiments unearthed an articulate addressing of their anxieties. I have stated the

historical background of this work was an accounting of how “American intellectual conservatism,” its varied and occasionally contradictory strands made stronger and more cohesive by the landmark publication of *The Conservative Mind* in 1953, was overwhelmed by the politicization of a movement that was forced to confront the challenges of governing.⁵⁶ Whatever Kirk’s legacy, one lasting influence will be his role in moving American conservatism away from a “freedom” and “liberty” influence of libertarianism and toward the understanding of society as an “organic organism,” a civic order responsive to social and communitarian capital. The extent of this influence, in persuasion and persona, remains to be seen.

Notes

¹ Russell Kirk, *Rights and Duties: Reflections on Our Conservative Constitution* (Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing, 1997), p. ix.

² In his lecture “Renewing a Shaken Culture,” delivered as Heritage Foundation Lecture 434 in Dec. 1992, shortly before his passing, Kirk again emphasized the necessary relationship between religious faith and a “high culture.” He feared that if faith and morals succumb to indifference, “then probably the whole culture will disintegrate, the material culture as well as the intellectual and moral culture, and human existence here will become poor, nasty, brutish, and short...”

³ Here I take characterization from Philip Blond’s pamphlet “The Civic State,” published by the Demos Institute, Summer 2009. The document is part of the “Red Tory” movement in the United Kingdom. This movement, loosely aligned with the Conservative Party, is environmentalist and skeptical of neo-liberal economic policy.

⁴ Russell Kirk, *The American Cause* (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1966), p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62 – 63.

⁶ James Person Jr., *Russell Kirk: A Critical Biography of a Conservative Mind* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1999), p. 4 – 5.

⁷ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1995), p. 221. He writes, “In America, general education kept the people informed of their immediate rights and duties; and though too often American education is superficial, care and penetration sacrificed to hasty instruction of the many, still the quantity of instruction has kept American from the ignorant impracticality which produced the events of 1789 in France.”

⁸ Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 5. (The author also credited Judith Shklar for this characterization of the liberal tradition.) The figures Berkowitz placed as the “leading spokesmen” of the liberal tradition: Locke, Kant, Mill, Hobbes, Montesquieu, Smith, Burke, Tocqueville, and the authors of *The Federalist*.

⁹ That critic was William Schlamm, a German refugee and co-founder of *National Review*. See George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), p. 290 – 291. Nash’s chapter, “The Search for a Viable Heritage,” is a useful overview of the

struggles surrounding these questions, which loomed large in the 1950s and 1960s: was it proper to identify conservative thought with a single kind of society? How much about America was “like Europe?”

¹⁰ Interview: Paul Gottfried, March 2, 2009. A political philosopher and chronicler of conservatism, Gottfried is most identified with the term he coined, “paleo-conservatism.”

¹¹ From my conversations with Annette Kirk, it should be noted that never claimed the label of historian. The descriptive term “historian,” as applied to himself and his work, seems to be absent from his writings, lectures, and private papers.

¹² Gerald J. Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007), p. 90.

¹³ Russell Kirk, *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice: Essays of a Social Critic* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden Publishing, 1991), p. 61.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁵ Russell Kirk (ed), *The Portable Conservative Reader* (New York, NY: Viking, 1982), p. xxxix – xl.

¹⁶ James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 231.

¹⁷ These two quotations are from “The First Clause of the First Amendment: Politics and Religion,” delivered by Kirk in Dec. 1987. His talk was part of a series in celebration of the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution. Heritage Foundation Lecture 146.

¹⁸ Peter Lawler stated that Kirk had little interest in theological and philosophical debate, which he attributed to a comfortable acknowledgment of mystery and antagonism to totalizing theory of any ideological presupposition, a sentiment shared by many “anti-utopians.” I believe that Lawler, as a leading scholar of “postmodern conservatism,” is correct in his assessment, although I think it would be difficult to characterize those writers in admiration of Kirk or “postmodern conservatism” in a similar way. Interview: February 4, 2009.

¹⁹ George A. Panichas (ed), *The Essential Russell Kirk* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), p. 360. The essay, “The Drug of Ideology,” originally published in *Enemies of Permanent Things: Observations of Abnormity in Literature and Politics*, was another attempt to connect the American founding with the “genius of English politics.”

²⁰ Peter Berkowitz, “Constitutional Conservatism,” *Policy Review*, Feb. & March, 2009.

²¹ Russell Kirk, “The Moral Imagination,” *Literature and Belief*, Vol. 1, 1982.

²² Russell Kirk, “Malcolm Muggeridge’s Scourging of Liberalism,” Heritage Foundation Lecture 229, Sept. 1989.

²³ Russell Kirk, *Rights and Duties*, p. 31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 148 – 149.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 260 – 261.

²⁶ Peter Lawler, *Postmodernism Rightly Understood* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), p. 1 – 2.

²⁷ Peter Lawler, “Postmodern Conservatism, Conservative Postmodernism,” *The Intercollegiate Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 2002. Reprinted in Mark C. Henrie (ed), *Arguing Conservatism: Four Decades of the Intercollegiate Review* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008), p. 802.

²⁸ W. Wesley McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004), p. 43. See also: McDonald, “Russell Kirk and the Prospects of Conservatism,” *Humanitas*, Vol. 12, 1999.

²⁹ Michael J. Hyde (ed), *The Ethos of Rhetoric* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), p. 43. In his chapter “Truth as Metaphor: Imaginative Vision and the Ethos of Rhetoric,” Robert Wade Kenny wrote: “The rhetor’s imagination is a vision that sees *through* the incommensurability and contingency that marks the bare surface of extant circumstances...”

³⁰ George A. Panichas (ed), *The Essential Russell Kirk*, p. 173. Kirk’s essay, “T.S. Eliot’s Permanent Things,” was a defense of “normative principles” to be discovered in transcendent reality.

³¹ In *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk approvingly noted Spanish philosopher’s George Santayana’s adherence “to a firm and haughty standard for judging dominations and powers: a good society is beautiful, a bad society ugly. Upon this ground, he builds his conservatism and his condemnation of the

direction modern life has taken.” As a scourge of liberalism, “Santayana was consistently contemptuous of the innovation which despoils the world in the name of efficiency and uniformity, consistently quick to defend the conservation of social harmony and tradition.” (In the Seventh Revised Edition, this praise is from the chapter, “Babbitt, More, and Santayana.”)

³² Michael McGee, “Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 54, p. 274 and p. 288.

³³ Gerald J. Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*, p. 207.

³⁴ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, p. 175.

³⁵ Peter Lawler, *American Views on Liberty* (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 1997), p. 146 – 147.

³⁶ *The American Cause* pinpointed a “false reading” of the Declaration of Independence as a primary problem of the foundations of political organization. More specifically, for Kirk the word “equal” meant that all enjoyed a natural right to equal treatment under the law. This must go hand in hand, however, with recognition of the different functions and abilities among the members of society. This was made difficult by the ideological attraction of classlessness and equality.

³⁷ Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), p. 291.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 29.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 475.

⁴⁰ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, p. 470.

⁴¹ Russell Kirk, “Renewing a Shaken Culture,” Heritage Foundation Lecture 434, Dec. 1992.

⁴² See: Chapter Four of *Rights and Duties*, “A Revolution Not Made, but Prevented,” for Kirk’s defense of his view of the American founding following Burke’s defense of the Revolution of 1688 and 1689: “The men who made the American Revolution, in fine, had little intention of making a revolution in the sense of a reconstitution of society.” The French Revolution and the Russian Revolution, by contrast, were of a “different phenomenon.” Those efforts were utopian and unlimited “ideological revolutions” whose consequences were “quite contrary of what their original authors had hoped for.”

⁴³ For a discussion of critical rhetoric and the “recovery of subject,” see Ian Angus & Lenore Langsdorf (ed), *The Critical Turn: Rhetoric and Philosophy in Postmodern Discourse* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), p. 62.

⁴⁴ Russell Kirk, “May the Rising Generation Redeem the Time?,” Heritage Foundation Lecture 377, Dec. 1991. This is not to suggest that Kirk in previous decades failed to address his audience in such a way. See for example: “Imagination against Ideology,” *National Review*, Dec. 31, 1980. Here he argued that the American educational system has failed to nurture the imagination of young people, a shortcoming that could be remedied by greater acquaintance with literary figures. This follows T.S. Eliot’s suggestion, which he cited, that political leaders should read literature as a means to combat the menace of ideology.

⁴⁵ Paul Gottfried, “From Tradition to ‘Value Conservatism’: A Sympathetic Critic’s View of Kirk’s Legacy,” *The University Bookman*, Winter 2008, p. 13 – 14.

⁴⁶ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, p. 44.

⁴⁷ Wayne C. Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), p. 66.

⁴⁸ Russell Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), p. 19.

⁴⁹ George A. Panichas (ed), *The Essential Russell Kirk*, p. 235. The essay, “Normative Art and Modern Vices,” contended that human nature is constant by definition. Because of this constancy, “men of vision” are able to describe the norms from which the “intuitive powers of men possessed by genius” can know the differences among the laws for men and the laws for things.

⁵⁰ Robert S. Dupree, *Allen Tate and the Augustinian Imagination: A Study of the Poetry* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 1983), p. 199.

⁵¹ Paul Gottfried, *Conservatism in America: Making Sense of the American Right* (New York, NY: Pelgrave MacMillan, 2007), p. 13 – 14. Gottfried in this passage is quoting from *The Conservative Mind*.

⁵² Paul Gottfried, *Encounters: My Life With Nixon, Marcuse, and Other Friends and Teachers* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2009), p. 168 – 170.

⁵³ James Aune, "Modernity as a Rhetorical Problem: *Phronesis*, Forms, and Forums in *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 2008, p. 414.

⁵⁴ This is an opinion of Paul Gottfried. I agree. Interview: March 2, 2009. What I mean more specifically by "an inaccessibility of this sort tended to evoke the responses he desired" was increased attention to his opinions, achieved in contrast to the opinions of other figures (usually more known and better funded) of the conservative movement, with whom he could have an argument.

⁵⁵ Kirk, *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*, p. 19.

⁵⁶ In my view, after the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980, the philosophical foundations of "American conservatism" (and its accompanying arguments) began to fade, as an inevitable politicization took hold of a movement now with political power. Kirk's contribution (examples of others would include libertarianism and "neo-conservatism") might be termed a "Burkean interpretation of the past." In this, the "civilized person" lived by authority. Without reference to it, no form of a "truly human" existence was possible. A "properly ordered" freedom was the way to a tolerable social order.

Strategies of Representation: The Associational in Conservatism

Terms such as “modernism,” “postmodernism,” “liberalism,” and “conservatism” are often present in the rhetoric of American political and social discussion. My characterizations of these large and difficult terms have been informed by scholars of “traditionalist intellectual conservatism,”¹ figures that tended to emphasize order of the being, society, and the soul. The striving to find absolutes in a relativistic and secular society, and to encourage others to value these wisdoms, was a pervasive element in their persuasions.² The notion that society must be grounded in an objective, moral order standing above the flux of history, and that every society ought to adhere to fundamental, transcendent truths, were sentiments at odds with much of the currents of modernity. That large and difficult term, suggesting empirical fact and measurement, was for Russell Kirk an insistence upon taking charge of the environment, so that nature became a set of laws susceptible to human knowledge.

In his rhetoric against the “modern,” this environment was portrayed as losing its property. He believed there was a “text” of life upon which the will of a supreme being was inscribed and through which humans could come to understand more profoundly their proper place in an order. Yet in “modernity,” Kirk and the “traditionalists” distrusted the process of “modernization” which was always under way.³ My application of rhetorical scholarship to the traditionalist strands of the American conservative intellectual movement (through the lens of Kirk’s calls for a localized, communal bond – associations strengthened by the strategies and personas of his persuasions) makes use of a method inexplicit yet participatory in a noteworthy nexus. This is the affinity between

their political, social persuasion and an understanding of postmodernism as illuminated by the “associational rhetoric” employed by the reading methods of James Boyd White’s *When Words Lose Their Meaning*. In this dissertation, I have argued that conservatism sourced in an unknowable order and set against ideology in favor of customs and conventions, a “humbled attitude” of cautious change, overlaps with a “postmodernist” distrust of legitimating knowledge through an overarching, totalizing system of thought. Kirk’s rhetoric persisted in denying a “system” which would encompass legitimate truth and proper societal placement of organizational parts. This has made him a unique and somewhat awkward fit among modern “conservative” American arguments.

Denial of Autonomy in Textual Community

In his “postmodern” discourse, incredulity toward “metanarratives” rebuffed a totalizing series of propositions. A denial of the “autonomous self” and an acceptance of a social construction of life (although a construction guided by religious and community norms perceived as healthy and commendable) developed and perpetuated meaning through the learned practices and symbolisms of expression, the fragile and vital work of each successive generation. It was “characteristically modern,” according to one self-identified “postmodern conservative” scholar, to be so devoted to freedom that the limitations and directions embedded in nature and revelation seem like tyranny.⁴ This line of reasoning and connection of terminologies may or may not be persuasive to an observer. But I argue the rhetorical method of White does bind a deliberation of rhetoric and postmodernity⁵ to the criticisms of Kirk and others through its concern for the terms by which a social world is constituted and its values defined.

White's explanations and expositions may obfuscate his unconventional way of reading a text. One conception of his work was that literary and ethical performances represent acts of "friendship" through the educations offered about how to relate in a complex, confusing environment. These acts opened possibilities for a realization of self and community. Cumulatively, they form a durable cultural construct linking backward and forward through time to generations past and generations yet to be born.⁶ The sense of belonging to the same community is conveyed, a sense actively cultivated by the author. Persuasions, therefore, exist in the establishment of relations between an author and reader through the harnessing of language so as to form a "textual community." A lasting rapport between the two would be the goal of the "associational" rhetorical practitioner. This includes a representation of self through text, which works toward a capacity of drawing in the likeminded. This formed kinship that in political terms can be a commanding one, particularly when articulated as a struggle against the siege of decay and decadence. (Kirk, from the start of his career as a writer and lecturer, communicated that only a few were fit for the battles of modern existence.⁷)

More specifically, I find that White and Kirk "invited" the reader to exist not only as a participant but as a "character" in the world created and shared by the texts. Implicit in White's effort to define a way of thinking about texts was the expansion of what was meant by reading and writing to include every effort to claim meaning and to establish relations in language. By examining the language and culture the writer has inherited, and the kind of relationship established with those, it was possible to examine the relation between the writer and the reader. This was a relationship created by the text

itself, what White labeled the “textual community.” It was then possible to ask “what connection exists between that textual community and the larger culture that supplies the materials with which it is formed.” While the text was necessarily constituted out of the resources found within culture – namely words, expectations, values, and conventions – the text and the author can nevertheless be critical of those very cultures and their components.⁸ They may even propose a “new world,” as I believe Kirk did. If Gerald Russello and others are correct in the designation of this idiosyncratic and traditionalist conservative intellectual as inhabiting a “postmodern imagination,” the anti-ideological, anti-modern, anti-liberal “Bohemian Tory” and man of letters posture, with his screeds against various coercive efforts for human perfectibility, begins to better “fit” a categorization of rhetoric.

By this I mean that one concept of “postmodernism” can help to shed light on certain “conservative” criticisms of modernity, despite differences of ideals with many scholars claiming postmodernism. Emphasis on the construction of life by tradition and custom, denunciation of the “autonomous self,” and the distrust of comprehensive narratives were just a few of the commonalities of postmodernism and a body of traditionalist conservative outlook begun by Edmund Burke, a source of widespread admiration for Kirk and those he influenced. The creation and continuation of a textual community, as well as the attraction of those inclined to similar sentiments toward shared assumptions through language, argument, persona and other ingredients of culture, was an effort in overlap with postmodernism and traditionalist conservatism. Each self-consciously carved out an “imaginative” ethic for self and culture. In his

consideration of postmodernism, Wayne Gabardi has defined culture as “the historical transmission of a learned repertory of embodied human practices expressed in symbolic codes through which individuals and social groups develop and perpetuate a way of life.”⁹ Certainly, thinking through terms such as “culture” and “postmodernism” requires effort for definition and an acknowledgment of position and bias. Some scholars have disparaged an imaginative, historical transmission of values as a “new conservatism” that was simply the projection of the experiences of life under a new form of capitalism in which information manipulation has replaced the production of “real” things. And if postmodernism is defined not as a disdain for “foundationalism” but more narrowly as a reaction against the Enlightenment emphasis on scientific progress and the elimination of tradition in the name of a universalizing “reason,” then some element of conservatism can be seen as “postmodern” if the term is used, as I use it, as a way (in critiquing the “modern”) to describe an appreciation for tradition and limits to knowledge, not to emphasize the arbitrary character of human authority or the freedom of each person from all standards but their own will or creativity.¹⁰

My contention is that White’s approach to language, as shared conceptions of manners, values, resources, expectations and procedures for speech and thought by which communities are defined and constituted,¹¹ was as unconventional in its approach as Kirk and “postmodern conservatives.” Second, I contend this method helps to explain rhetoric and its stands against much of the “modern world” most especially. Like it might be stated that White’s view of language is not language as it is usually understood, Peter Lawler has written that his “postmodern conservatism” was not postmodernism (or

modernism) as it is usually understood. Surveying the failure of the “modern project” to eradicate human mystery and to bring history to an end, he has found in postmodernism human reflection on the realistic acknowledgement of the limits of human awareness, an immersion in unselfconscious contentment: “The driving intention of modern thought is not to understand nature or human nature, but to guide action to transform nature freely in accordance with human desire.”¹² By accommodating to culture in a way that strives to dominate it, he continued, a reflection on human freedom was an inclination to confuse human will with the transcendent, to lord over creation, and to perceive technological success a parallel to the supernatural. The individual replaced the divine; and when speaking of self-consciousness, freedom, and mortality, it expressed a distorted debt to religious heritage, a debt of anxious denial made possible by the claims of freedom. In this, the transformation of social, political, religious, and familial beings into individuals, the life mission of liberal, Enlightenment figures such as John Locke achieved real success.¹³ But writers like Kirk worked for “recovery” they knew to be small, limited, and difficult. They labored for a return to “personhood” and the communal bonds of family and local community. In my analysis, White’s rhetorical conjecture has provided a way of demonstration for how this recovery was accomplished and how it was possible.

Attitudes Concerning Rhetoric

In pondering rhetoric and postmodernity by such biases and definitions, I contend that “modernity” was a “rejection” of rhetoric. For Kirk, the project of grounding existence in the “autonomous individual” was an enterprise fundamentally

unresponsive to the fulfillment of human need and desire. Likewise, Richard Weaver, a rhetorician of the “southern agrarian” tradition and a friend of Kirk whose concepts of rhetoric and imagery is a baseline of this analysis, defined rhetoric as that which creates an informed appetite for the “good,” which moves the “soul with a movement which cannot finally be justified logically. It can only be valued analogically with reference to some supreme image.” In traditionalist conservative understandings, there was a “hierarchical order” leading to the “ultimate good,” and “all of the terms in a rhetorical vocabulary are like links in a chain stretching up to some master link which transmits its influence down through the linkages. It is impossible to talk about rhetoric as effective expression without having a term giving intelligibility to the whole discourse, the Good.”¹⁴ Similar to Kirk, many “southern agrarians,” and the “conservative” writers of a “postmodern imagination,” Weaver in his rhetoric was intensely concerned with a cultural crisis engendered by science (or “sciencism”), industrial capitalism, as well as “mass” education and communication.

Declaring that “language is sermonic,” he spurned the social-scientific, journalistic, and general semantics view that humans might utilize neutral, objective, and scientific communication. Instead, all acts of communication take a point of view and attempt to persuade.¹⁵ Dialectic, he continued, is “abstract reasoning on the basis of propositions; rhetoric is the relation of the terms of these to the external world in which facts are regarded with sympathy and are treated with that kind of historical understanding and appreciation which lie outside the dialectical process.”¹⁶ According to James Aune, the “perennial appeal of the anti-modernist view” was its assertion that the

autonomous self was “prone to loneliness.” In seeking to restore the values of region, family, and community to public life, this casting aside of the “autonomous liberal self” was a return “to a language of natural law” displaced by the liberal writers of Enlightenment who insisted that people could know, without a community united through “sacred texts, rituals, and oratory,” what morality requires. The insistence upon the “availability of a non-perspectival truth and on the need for a homogeneous community” was not a widespread stance in contemporary communication study and scholarship. Even so, similar arguments have influenced a variety of writers uncertain of the focus on autonomy and open to the notion that rhetoric in its truest sense was a clarifying vision, a means by which the impulses of the person and community can find some form of redemption.¹⁷

A “rejection” of rhetoric was in the elevation of personal autonomy and individual choice. The art of rhetoric was dangerous to the freedoms and rationalizations of the autonomous. The endowment of oratory was derailing to the prospects of knowledge. A “rejection of rhetoric” was both implicit and explicit in the writings of Immanuel Kant, whom Aune labeled “perhaps the most influential theorist of liberalism in the Western democracies.” The very philosophy of liberal democracy itself was based on a “fundamental distrust of persuasion,” he stated, and “once the autonomous individual rather than the family or community became the fundamental building block of politics, any effort to subvert that autonomy, whether through rhetoric or violence,” came to be viewed by Kant’s many and varied followers as an unwelcomed imposition.¹⁸ If nature advises that human freedom was an illusion, necessitating the postulation of

freedom as a transcendental possibility to explain morality in terms not grounded in the causal explanations of nature, then this “practical philosophy” of the dignity of individuals (in accordance to the ability to be practical, rational societal participants) suggested the “freedom” to accept objective moral laws was a marker of human progress – desirable, inevitable, irreversible.¹⁹ The individual held the capacity to recognize and act from duty. In opposition to such a sentiment, persuasions of “liberty” and “individuality” should recognize the extent to which persons of a social world (not “individuals”) require the necessity of placing moral chains upon their own appetites. Failing social norms to limit forms of expression were disastrous first and most notably for the family, the very foundation of the good community. Humans, with the innate need for communities, only thrive in the presence of social order – an order that should arise from the personal responsibility of constraining appetites, and not from the more arbitrary, synthetic chains of a leviathan. In Kirk’s use of rhetoric, the task was to preserve “Anglo-American” institutions by such actions.

Opposing sentiments to the currents of modernity, brought to life in a manner resembling White’s “reconstitutions” of language and community, were largely anti-rational, anti-utopian creeds. Wayne Booth has written that rhetoric “may be anything from the classification of ornamental figures to the theory of man as a logos-possessing animal.”²⁰ Kirk and the figures of this study, taking inspiration from Burke as the founder of conservatism, professed to be turning the power of rhetoric against modernist delusions. By an imaginative, literary rendering of history, custom, and tradition, they answered that “men do indeed have natural rights,” but not as many would have them. In

the “Christian and classical idea of distributive justice,” Kirk wrote that “the foremost of our true natural rights is the right to justice and order, which the radical fancies of the French revolutionaries would abolish.”²¹ The restoration of “true order” came through the encouragement of voluntary associations; there must be liberation from the restraints placed by mass forces upon the fulfillment of a moral nature. I think it is true that an objective, moral order standing above history to which society ought to adhere was at odds with many currents of modernity, and also of postmodernism. As evidenced by Kirk and the figures of this study, this loose and informal coalition of “Anglo-American” conservatism asserted the value and primacy of a literary, imaginative discourse. Through word, speech, phraseology, persona, and the contents of historical inclusion and exclusion, they constituted possibilities for an integrated community in fellowship with their example. The language of order and value was embedded in the everyday practices of life, to be made alive by its participants.

Ingrained Values

Values were not “separated” from the shared experiences of the person, as persons were inherently social and “made” for communion. White has written that “to define the term ‘rationality’ or ‘reason’ to exclude reasoning about matters of value is to demean language and to be false to experience.” To assume that the “proper way” to discuss values is to treat them as abstract concepts, as part of an “analytic scheme,” takes the assumption that words will have the same meaning in each usage, and that a word’s “stipulated statement of meaning” could be substituted for the word itself. Yet this denies “to our important terms their actual force and nature.” In actual life, words are

complex and central modes of discourse are poetic; and “to deny our language and minds these resources in favor of a mode of thought impossibly mathematical would be to diminish our intellectual and social lives beyond reason.”²² Unlike the “rationalists,” postmodernists tend to mistrust reason and an associated universalism. In Lawler’s opinion, “Rather than speaking in categories applicable to all human beings as human beings, they attend to the unique habits, ways, and cultures of particular peoples. They tend to believe “there is nothing ‘beneath’ socialization or prior to history which is the definatory of the human.”²³ An “associational rhetoric” of language constituted and reconstituted, however, may facilitate an intuitive recognition, a turn toward the persuasions of assuming a natural order and a human nature in the opinions and laments of response to political and social crisis. White’s convictions of language, as a cultural artifact conducive to the possibility of self and community restoration – an invention from something engaging in a process of meaning and community-building – stand as an insightful method to understanding how a small strand of “traditionalist intellectual conservatives” sought to buttress and construct a metaphysics of the human person that would not “individualize,” and that would not dissolve family and community into a “morally limiting” hypothesis of individualism. In definition, identity was formed. A “successful” text and persuasion was a “community” among readers, one that adopted its terms and methods so as to achieve their purposes.²⁴

An essential part of this method was to “create” the objects of its persuasion. This was, more specifically, to structure the ways of thinking, conversing, and being by which value and character found definition and thus “community” in its constitution. In

his chapter on Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, White portrayed the statesman's ambitions to be wider than the security of a "reader's intellectual assent to the truth of certain propositions." Language as shared conceptions of the world, as shared manners and values, and as shared resources and expectations and procedures for speech and thought "imagines" the created text, especially when presented to an audience susceptible to similar sentiments, as part of a "real world." Burke hoped, like his admirers two centuries later, that a "textual community" would become an actual political, social community as well. The object was to imaginatively "give" an identity, a reality, which could become a center of its formation: "He wants his readers to see things in the world as he presents them in the text, to think and to feel about them as he does, to form a community – strenuously opposed to the French revolutions, strenuously supporting the British Constitution – that is grounded, in part at least, on this text and speaking its language."²⁵ The "modernity" of France's revolutionaries, for Kirk and other "conservative" scholars of Burke such as Peter Stanlis and Francis Caravan, stifled the principles of "good constitution" which flowed from an undirected scheme of exchange, that which was grown by the "common experience of a people over a considerable length of time" and carefully maintaining of the tension between the claims of freedom and the claims of order.²⁶ An intellectual skepticism toward "self-sufficient" reason positioned these "communities of association" in opposition to many products of the rationalisms of "Enlightenment," a large, complex term that was an underpinning of another large, complex term, "modernism."

Kirk and “imaginative” thinkers of a “postmodern sentiment” challenged not only certain “utopian” doctrines but also the form and manner of their intellectual activity. If “Enlightenment” commenced with “a conception of man that denied the ancient doctrine of the decay of nature, based on the Christian view of the fall of man, and held out limitless possibilities for the improvement of human nature and the temporal conditions of life on earth,” then this “gradual fusion of many strands of thought”²⁷ was countered by a strand of sentiment to uphold ancient doctrine with words of meaning. Kirk, like Weaver, believed that humanity cannot dissociate political principles and the methods of persuasion. There was a “genuine connection” subsisting between “the order of rhetoric and the order of society; false phrases open the way for false measures.”²⁸ An abuse of language was reciprocal to an abuse of authority. As Weaver famously stated, ideas “have consequences.” Communicated by words and actions, though, ideas do not stand alone. A text that “created” a language in reference to a transcendent, ancient order was not an ethically neutral activity. It was not a way of manipulating data or information. The imaginative text was a way of conforming, and perhaps transforming, a character.

Postmodern Imagination in Conservatism

In my view, Kirk’s “rhetoric of moral imagination” included the “postmodern imagination” as one measure to counter – particularly as a response to mass politics, government coercion, and individualism – the devolution of will into power he thought modernity was prone to. His rhetorical meanings were responsive to a social system in which individual autonomy took precedence over communal solidarity as a fundamental

value. This rhetorical form functioned in a “system” where those forms could be “commodified,”²⁹ one reason to embrace mystery and transcendence and shy away from market-orientated “solutions.” If cultural rhetoric is more implicit than explicit in modernizing societies, governing the “nature of emotional display, rationality, and collective deliberation as fundamental norms and values,” then I believe the “distinctive characteristic of modernity” as not simply the emphasis on the autonomous self but also the “consistent anxiety that one is not living an authentic existence”³⁰ follows, in the conception of Kirk and Weaver, from an illusion of freedom. Humans were creatures of ritual, their practice of rhetoric and philosophy found. Their creations were unable to abstract, concretely experience, or deduce from experiment the truths of the human condition. Instead, these truths were to be experienced by seasons and times. The markers of organic, generational wisdom needed ritual, mystery, and history to make humanity the communal, social creatures responsible to each other they were made to be. When changed through coercion by large, distant entities unknowing and uncaring of these values, it was a painful, alienating experience. Generational wisdom was superior.

What I have termed “associational rhetoric” was, in part, a method of persuasive communication that spoke to such “accumulated knowledge.” The various facets of “imagination” present in my study (including the historical, poetic, prophetic, political, social, and moral) refer to a foundational, supreme image in accord with Christian revelation and revealed over time. Yet they partake of a contingency in persuasive construction, derisive of efforts to join the “scientific” and “humanistic.” In contrast, according to Dennis Mumby, the “first stream of modernist thought” as put into recent

communication theory practice can be “roughly characterized in terms of the positivist appropriation of Cartesian dualism.” Orthodoxy has emerged in the social sciences in which knowledge and truth are equated with the scientific method: “The foundation of this method is the radical (Cartesian) separation of subject (researcher) and object (of knowledge) and the development of research tools that allow this bifurcation to remain as inviolable as possible.” A “Cartesian” legacy embodied in a positivist modernism leaves little room, he believes, for a “conception of communication that has any ontological substance at all.” Such a bifurcation of subject and object, and of personal mind from the world, suggests that communication is a vehicle for ideas already formed, assistance to existing power structures, a hindrance to the ability to perceive the world, and obstructive to the production of truth claims.³¹

The persuasive conservatism of this study, apprehensive for the “permanent things” of truth and beauty, found much of what could be classified as “modern” as an obstacle to human realization. Their “postmodernism,” while a large and exhausting term, began, as with other versions, as dissatisfaction for modernity. There was a sense of lost faith in the ability of representation. The term has encompassed “vast, complex, and, at times, contradictory fields. Still, one organizing feature of postmodernism is clearly discernible: postmodernism is always understood in contrast to modernism.”³² One of the first to use the word was a “religious conservative,” the Episcopal clergyman Bernard Iddings Bell in 1926. In a collection of lectures, *Postmodernism and Other Essays*, this personal friend and early (friendly) reviewer of Kirk was explicitly religious in criticism of modernity’s crisis of faith, which he thought stemmed from too much

trust in reason and science. The modern age had gone astray; it believed the wrong things. All “religious” systems, including liberalism, must be based on assumptions of trust – where can the modernist turn as a basis of authority? A trust in the sufficiency of the individual mind, coinciding with the rise of science through which the intellect could perceive the “infallible laws of nature and divine the form and structure of the universe and, eventually, principles of society and moral conduct,” operated only within the frame of the physical and measurable. Science and rationality cannot answer “why,” which Bell’s postmodernism “takes to be the basic, philosophical question for society.”³³ In sum, amid the ideologies and seen by some American “conservative” figures as an unmoored religious dogmatism in a political context, an intersection of postmodernism and “traditionalist” conservatism emphasized a creative faculty for the end purpose of communion with other humans in the light of the transcendent.

This intersection, worried for the imagery of a society, approached cultural tradition and history not as “objective” but as something that humans can participate in and change. In Burke’s phrase, there was an appreciation for the “little platoons” of society. Kirk recognized this, once writing in *National Review* that “the Post-Modern imagination stands ready to be captured.”³⁴ In this capturing, the “split values” of modernity and liberalism might recede, allowing the “facts” of human nature to be presented in “value-laden” terms. “The tendency within liberal thought to diminish the significance of virtue in descriptions of, and prescriptions for, political life is well known,” Peter Berkowitz has written. Leading theorists for liberalism and modernism have made “strong practical and theoretical reasons for, and display considerable

resourcefulness in, circumscribing virtue's role."³⁵ Wayne Booth's *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* accused modernism of "dividing man's responses to the world into two unequal parts, one of hard knowing and the other of soft faith or commitment." Modernism's dogmatism hindered the development of doubt and the reasoning of values, harming the development of community to discuss shared concerns. The value of "assent" required rhetorical communication, a value not always in harmony with "scientismists" and modernist consequences: "Belief or thought or knowledge, action or will or choice, feeling or emotion or passion occur in every theory of thinking, acting, or feeling; and though the terms shift, each of the three domains always appears somewhere, even if only for long enough to be dismissed as illusory or irrelevant."³⁶ A "reduction to the physical" clouds concern, a "befouled rhetorical climate which prevents our meeting to discover and pursue common interests." The "modern dogmas" teaching that values cannot be reasoned downplay the togetherness of human symbolic exchange. A genuine, obvious knowledge is that "each of us 'takes in' other selves to build a self;" all societies are composed, to a large degree, of "what other men and women have created through symbolic exchange." Booth summarized the rhetorical construct of symbolic exchange as building association as follows: "not only do human beings successfully infer other human beings' states of mind from symbolic clues; we know that they characteristically, in all societies, build each other's minds."³⁷

Approaches of Persuasion

Through persuasion, I find that a willingness to listen, exchange, and build, as a "replacement" to precise, "value-free" definition and action, can serve in mutual inquiry

as a learning experience. Considering traditionalist conservatism, there are parallels of Booth's characterizations and the fights against "scientism" prevalent in the writings of Kirk, Weaver, and authors that argued confidence in scientific, rational reasoning as applied to humans was improper. A "scientific narrative" approach to the social life, to justify, for example, "individualism," was presented as an arrangement of social ends unwrought by social means due to a discord with the lessons of experience. As an alternative, following historical example, humans in their moral nature and through the progress of associational life should become a creature of opinions, habits, and sentiments that form a constituted nature – as inhabitants of a particular place.³⁸ Products of the rationalisms of "Enlightenment" such as materialism were presented as a straightjacket to the imaginative, even if there was an appeal to the transcendent. Insofar as a "determinist epistemology," a grounding in the "autonomous individual," a split of values from persuasion, and other broad generalities of liberalism and modernism operate as a single discourse, totalizing in effect, postmodernism and associational rhetoric as I have characterized them by relation to the figures of this study do not. The attractions of equality of outcome and the primacy of "individual right" were not an assumption of their life and vocabulary.

The persuasions of a "moral imagination" were more literary and spiritual than political. Societal concern was, at root, cultural. Rhetoric should not be concerned with abstract individuals, Weaver wrote, but "men of being." It should be "designed to move men's feelings in the direction of a goal;" and a "rhetorician enters into a solidarity with the audience by tacitly agreeing with one of its perceptions of reality." A society cannot

live without rhetoric because “there are some things in which the group needs to believe which cannot be demonstrated to everyone rationally. Their acceptance is pressed upon us by a kind of moral imperative arising from the group as a whole.”³⁹ The emotional and sentimental associations of language and symbol (for Weaver, the highest form of appeal was to base a case on definition, or the “nature of the thing”) motivating an audience toward shared conceptions and assumptions of language brings to mind other rhetorical scholars, first among them Booth, Kenneth Burke, and Chaim Perelman.⁴⁰ The argumentative rhetorical tradition of reasoning in a context, defining the relationships among logic, dialectic, and rhetoric by analyzing recurring argument patterns, proposed that “argumentation is intended to act upon an audience, to modify an audience’s convictions or dispositions through discourse, and it tries to gain a meeting of the minds instead of imposing its will through constraint or conditioning.”⁴¹ Perelman’s notion of an argument that presupposes a meeting of minds, which social and political institutions can facilitate or prevent, also acknowledged that audience was not compelled by logic or reasoning alone. Agreement required appealing to something “greater” than the individual or an abstraction.

“Associational rhetoric” as I have defined it in this dissertation values human agency. The term, as I understand it, seeks to “preserve” rhetoric.⁴² Kenneth Burke’s “symbolic action,” where language and human agency combine, considered figures to be able to express a particular line of argument and simultaneously induce an audience to participate.⁴³ Literature and art change their participants. And rhetoric uses language symbolically to form attitudes and induce actions. “Any specialized activity participates

in a larger unit of action,” Burke wrote. The “principle of rhetorical identification” may be summed up as follows: “the fact that an activity is capable of reduction to intrinsic, autonomous principles does not argue that it is free from identification with other order of motivation extrinsic to it.” The human agent is “not motivated solely by the principles of a specialized activity, however strongly this specialized power, in its suggestive role as imagery, may affect his character.” The use of words by humans to form attitudes and induce actions can bring about cooperation and community, as humans by their nature respond to symbols.⁴⁴ Mired in the social mysteries of personal relations and community, humans seek vocabularies that will be “faithful reflections of reality” yet they must develop “vocabularies that are selections of reality.”⁴⁵ In Kirk’s rhetoric, for finite persons to believe the truth of symbols was essential to a society of “good order,” as the purpose of symbols was to convey the truths of existence. They were ever present in the spaces that separate God from creation.

Surveying the life and work of Kirk, I conclude that a basic function of his rhetoric, both in its application of the resources of persuasion and in more difficult to determine effects, was the application of inventive narratives most defensible to those of a similar inclination of sentiment. His language and persona had impact upon the actions and thoughts of others at an opportune time, as liberalism, collectivism, and cultural decay were seen by many opposed to “statist solutions” to be ascendant. The small, social “communities” of “conservative” readership, varying by their very nature as they came from messy, conflicted, mysterious beings, reflected in the moral imagination relationships “outside” of the scope of rational inquiry. For Booth, what humans “create”

through symbolic exchange, the “taking in” of other selves “to build a self” greatly enriched in its symbolic influence by the existence of language,⁴⁶ constituted a rhetorical climate unconfined to scientific “proof” and the experimentations of logic. An “imaginative” use of persuasive language was tied to a “form of life” in that there is no unmediated experience. Language was a social action, not a universally-acknowledged, referential marker. Its employment was only an imperfect approximation of reality. Language involved not just linguistic parts but circumstances, as well as the time, place, and the relations prevailing upon them. A “symbolizing entity” became a part of what it symbolized: “to represent or to say a thing is already to bring it into existence.”⁴⁷

Struggling Against Totality

Kirk brought his conservatism into existence by constructing a defensible history and philosophical justification. The application of an “associational rhetoric” to the study of his persuasion finds that the practice of a “neutral and objective discourse” was not feasible. For my subject, his sympathizers, and others of similar sentiments, the use of scientific reason to reorganize society, the positivist currents of modernist thought, could never take the place of speculative, but centered and referential, wisdom. Second, the rhetorical method of White “binds” concepts such as rhetoric, liberalism, modernism and post-modernity to his literary, cultural, social, and political criticisms through a deliberate concern for the terms by which a social world was constituted and values defined. *When Words Lose Their Meaning* was an enterprise of imagination where actual and historical performances of persuasion claimed meaning through cultural inheritance and translation – through the vitality of constituted language. By language, he referred to

the identifiable ways of communication that a culture makes available to its members. Language was “not simply a matter of diction and grammar, but tone of voice, verbal gesture, a universe of expected responses, consciousness, of what need not be said, and so on.” The examination of how a language “works” as a set of social and cultural practices, as a system of meaning, was an external, descriptive, and analytic question about something in the world, outside of the self.⁴⁸ Partaking of an “inherited language,” one then looked at a text or a speaker and asked a set of questions, beginning with the language: what was being done, and what were the assumptions and biases? How was the text impacting speaker and hearer? One cannot talk “objectively” about the “good,” or politics, or ethics; the performance of using such terms meant something as an extension of a linguistic and historical inheritance.⁴⁹

And so an incomplete but present nexus between this approach to persuasive language and the “traditionalist, postmodern” conservative criticisms of modernity (the emergence of “individuality” being the “pre-eminent event” of modern history, particularly in Europe⁵⁰) was the impossibility of effectively and completely communicating the “rules” which influence or “govern” action. Many conservative writers and academics, as well as “postmodern” scholars, have written against the actions of “totalizing” social arrangements. Immanent with their epistemological assumptions was a critique of rationalism based on the “impossibility of possessing complete knowledge.” (In fact, one important justification for conservatism is that humans within an existing order usually favor its continuation, and that they should be attached to their already extant institutions and orders.⁵¹) This is to say that the

intellectual life of any order cannot be “segregated” from the rest of society. All was subject to analysis, question, and criticism. Concerning my subject, the actions of construction in imagination and invention appealed to history and a transcendent, foundational order. This began with his reading of those that should be emulated, Edmund Burke first among them. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, following White, established a “relation” with the reader in its use of language. The audience was part of the historical subject to be constituted with an identity. The use of language was ethical⁵² not in a “normative sense” of “morally good or bad” but in “in an analytic sense: speech is always a form of social action, and as such always has ethical content, which can of course be either good or bad.”⁵³

In my generalizations, the “modernist” separation of values from context was addressed by a “postmodern” or “traditionalist conservative” recovery through an approach of questioning brought to any text. The word “associational” in this dissertation does not view audience as “free agents” to be persuaded; nor were they “outside” the rhetoric. Members of an audience were subjects continuously participating in discourse, shaping it and in turn being shaped by it. All experience was mediated. Socialization began from the moment of acquiring language and symbolisms. This active, participatory process of reading and hearing meant that abstraction absent engaging in a process of association was not possible, for the minute one starts to think “objectively” one conjures assumption, history, bias, performance.⁵⁴ Recognition of responsibility for language, for its ethic and possibility, is an application of this sort of rhetorical method to my study of American intellectual conservatism, despite the many

internal disagreements of that movement. Aside from Kirk, the author closest to this “recognition” was Weaver. He once wrote, in disputing the “tenet of modernism” that a “scientist qua scientist is not charged with ethical responsibility,” that readers should not follow those unreasonably expectant of a “scientific” solution to human problems. A “perspective outside the modernist assumptions” should find this tenet to be inherently unethical, as it allowed writers anonymity and freedom from responsibility for what is written or said by suggesting that texts replicate objective knowledge.⁵⁵

Much of “the modern”⁵⁶ was envisioned as uncertain and deadly, primed for sophistry and manipulation in the separation of form from ethical content. An eloquence absent ethical responsibility (that is, “facts” not presented in value-laden terms) in a world where, as Booth has stated, “many claim that there are no shared values,” might encumber the “one clear value” shared “in full cognitive respectability: It is always good to maintain and improve the quality of our symbolic exchange with our fellow ‘selves’ – to sharpen our symbolic powers so that we can understand and be understood, ‘taking in’ other selves and thus expanding our own.” Similar to White and the figures of this study, Booth believed that “what we say matters, and it matters how we say it. Even so, the rules for good discourse or clear thinking can no longer be confined to logical prose – humans must take in the proofs of personal appeal and commitment, of art and myth and ritual.”⁵⁷ The command of rhetoric against the manipulations and controls of “modernity,” by an imaginative, literary rendering of long-standing, organically developed historical insight, custom, tradition, prescription, wisdom, and so on, was to

“reclaim,” so that an audience might learn to speak and write truth. It was to once again value the “permanent things.”

Such questions concerning the rhetoric of association and reconstitution were, I think, an invitation to a mode of thought. An anthropological, linguistic, literary, historical, and psychological mixture of cultural inheritance was an examining of the identities, relations, and communities created, recreated, molded, and dissolved in speech and writing.⁵⁸ Weaver’s function of rhetoric (which included dialectic), to guide toward a high good of redemption, could not be justified, he claimed, by “logic.” Rhetoric does not “act” on its own accord. The ethical faculty of humanity, as well as their knowledge, was formed by a faculty of perception. This echoes some of the work of Kenneth Burke, who wrote that humans have the capacity to choose consciously, and that definitions indicate one’s perspective on the world.⁵⁹ In my generalization, a modern, “individualistic” attempt of dominion, as present in the mindset of my subject, was essentially a “rejection” of rhetoric – and certainly of the rhetoric of “traditionalist” conservatives and “postmodernism” as I have conceived them. The “anti-rationalism” and “anti-utopianism” of his sentiments, prejudices, biases, and dispositions made use of the interpretative constructs of an “associational” and “communal” rhetoric. In his conceptions of “moral imagination” and “permanent things,” a neutral offering of material truths, discovered by empirical investigation, was inadequate given the realities and mysteries of the human condition. Such human limitations were consistently and awkwardly negotiated by the irrepressible social, transcendent impulse. His rhetoric, in sum, was a necessary vehicle against perceptions of a modern, technocratic, scientific

delusion. Its purpose was to call humanity toward a purpose of renewal, to a world of communion with its properly constituted values.

Kirk's embrace of earthly uncertainty was an intersection of two large and confusing terms, postmodernism and conservatism. The "postmodern conservative" was skeptical of new models and standards of "efficiency." There is an enduring distrust of an elevated rationality in the conduct of human affairs. The "hegemonic and hubristic" pretenses of Enlightenment, the philosophical earthquake that birthed the limitations (and, as Kirk might argue, the persistent inhumanity) of modernity's individualism and rights were, for the "traditionalist conservatives," a cold and flimsy moral architectural structure. For them, tradition and revelation (such as Thomism or Augustinian thought, among other Christian traditions of reason), mixed with the reflexive critique of modernity, meant a return to appropriate discipline rather than a mastery of means. To maintain a quality of life, one informed by the accumulated wisdom of generations when the standards of efficiency and rights (by their perspective, a hurrying to nowhere) were embedded in a culture and its conducts of existence, was an arduous and worthy pursuit. By this view, a sentiment of "postmodernism" could be a critique of the over-ambitious nature of Enlightenment rationalism, the over-inflated projections of the achievement of the human mind, and the over-confidence in supposed rational political models (such as the military deeds of a hegemonic modern nation-state). Kirk's rhetoric of moral imagination was the expressed suspicion of attempts to describe in narrative fashion the history of ideas, as if it were a linear path perfectly described and analyzed by a sort of idea-determinism. It was a way back to "pre-modern" ideas. It was in association with

Lyotard's memorable definition of postmodernism ("simplifying to the extreme"): incredulity toward meta-narrative.

Knowledge, in Kirk's persuasions, could never be reduced to science or learning. For how could knowledge even "concrete," scientific knowledge, possibly find its legitimacy without recourse to a totalizing, narrative method? Instead, all discourses of learning were taken not from their "immediate truth-value," but by reference to the value acquired in what Lyotard characterized as "occupying a certain place in the itinerary of Spirit or Life." As Kirk might have argued, knowledge must find its validity in the practical subjects of humanity.⁶⁰ And this would, I imagine, include knowledge of how to use speech and persona to seek the truth. For conservatives, especially traditionalist, non-utopian (libertarianism being the chief "rightist" utopianism) ones inspired by Kirk, the "negation of ideology" and the grounding of valid truth in persons created in the reflection of a perfected "Good" meant that earthly totality was futile and dangerous. Its supposed truth was prone to the many weapons of violence wielded by the rhetorically attractive. In their persuasion, the contempt for those who would reconstruct society by their various plans should be accompanied by the appreciation of custom, convention, and "old prescription" – checks upon anarchic whims and an innovator's lust for power. Such a view was "postmodernism rightly understood." It was a return to "realism," an understanding of limitations, an embrace of the mysteries of life, and a rejection of the view that language, for instance, was a historical construct with no natural foundation. For the "Burkean conservative" and for Kirk as a chief popularizer of this sentiment, this

was a firm rejection of earthly claims for totality, as totality only arrived through the full communion of death.

Toward an End of Justice

Kirk's conservatism, unique and for a time influential, was brought to life by the rhetorical flush of creativity in history. His conservatism may be defined as the negation of ideology, the political secularization of the doctrine of original sin, the cautious sentiment tempered by prudence, the product of organic, local human organization observing and reforming its customs, the distaste for a priori principle disassociated from historical experience, the partaking of the mysteries of free will, divine guidance, and human agency by existing in but not of the confusions of modern society, no framework of action, no tenet, no theory, and no article of faith. This was a distrust of the systems and processes of the idols of humanity and of the lusts of power and status, a cynicism toward conceptions of "ideology" and "metanarratives." In Kirk rhetoric of moral imagination, the desire to transform traditional institutions and human nature on the basis of a plan was always unacceptable. "Mediating institutions" – the seedbeds of virtue such as family, neighborhood, church, guild, union, hobby group – should demonstrate that human motivation cannot be reduced to ideology, especially a "commoditization" of economic ideology. Humans were creatures of mystery and love. This was evidenced by the many grand mysteries rationality could never unlock, such as language and music. To revolt against that "real world" was to scorn the fulfilling accomplishments humans could actually achieve, children first among them, so as to chase false, empty ones. Kirk thought and talked in images and stories, valuing first and

foremost the family and the local community where charity and good citizenship was, he firmly believed, best learned and practiced.⁶¹

In the final analysis, Kirk's use of rhetoric was toward an end of justice. If a rhetorical tradition, at its best, is an "enacted philosophy,"⁶² then his life and rhetoric deserves continued study. By the constitution of a social world, he conveyed that many communities had lost their meanings. Those communities, and the language, should be reconstructed. Kirk wished to reconstruct politics in relation to ideology, conservatism in relation to America, and America in relation to a more communal "home."⁶³ In his invitations to these associations, the rhetorical movement was to take readers back to the past so as to rediscover, in a "conservative tradition," the lasting and fulfilling meanings to life, to rediscover a "lost reverence." His "rhetoric of moral imagination" sought to move humanity toward a transcendent reality, the necessary alternative to the lamentable direction of much of modern society. From this, a placement, in terms of where most readers were situated, was ideally a network of associations enduring in their long and naturally developing customs and traditions. Yet Kirk's limitations were in the very readings of history necessary for these goals. His conservatism intentionally ignored or minimized the many "liberal" aspects of the American founding. The case for his homeland as a place of "Burkean" character was rendered incomplete by the poor fit between many of his heroes, Burke first among them, and American political reality. Shortly after he popularized his views and granted American conservatives greater intellectual respectability, he has himself become a half-forgotten historical figure. Kirk had little faith in the causes of political parties and movements, but too much faith in the

imagination of an Anglo-American conservatism and in the willingness of readers to follow such an imagination. That is why he will remain notable, worthy of reading, and at best only partially accurate.

Notes

¹ These scholars include Peter Berkowitz, M.E. Bradford, Francis Canavan, Patrick Deenan, Paul Gottfried, Jeffrey Hart, Willmoore Kendall, Russell Kirk, Daniel Larison, Peter Augustine Lawler, George Nash, Gerhart Niemeyer, Robert Nisbet, Gerald Russello, Roger Scruton, Peter Stanlis, Peter Viereck, Eric Voegelin, and Richard Weaver.

² George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), p. 258 – 260. Nash, like Gottfried, identifies many “traditionalist conservatives” as Catholics (in terms of overrepresentation and influence within the intellectual conservative movement in America, not in number).

³ William E. Connolly, *Political Theory and Modernity* (New York, NY: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 2 – 3.

⁴ Bruce Frohnen (ed), *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia*, p. 581 – 582. (Entry: “Modernity and Postmodernity,” written by Peter Lawler).

⁵ In this chapter, as elsewhere, I use “postmodernity” and “postmodernism” as synonyms. The context is a critique of “the modern” and “modernism” in their many forms since the founding of “philosophical liberalism” in the eighteenth century.

⁶ Peter Read Teachout, “Worlds Beyond Theory: Toward the Expression of an Integrative Ethic for Self and Culture,” *Michigan Law Review*, Vol. 83, No. 4, p. p. 891 – 892.

⁷ In an early work published shortly after *The Conservative Mind* brought him fame, Kirk wrote: “The thinking conservative knows that the outward signs of disorder, personal or social, very often are no more than the symptoms of an inner ravaging sickness, not to be put down by ointments and cosmetics. He is inclined to look for the real causes of our troubles in the heart of man – in our ancient proclivity toward sin, in a loneliness of spirit that conjures up devils, in twisted historical roots beneath the parched ground of modern existence, in venerable impulses of human nature which, when frustrated, make our life one long lingering death.” Russell Kirk, *Prospects for Conservatives* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1956), p. 73.

⁸ James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 278.

⁹ Wayne Gabardi, *Negotiating Postmodernism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 2000), p. 89. See also: Gerald J. Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007), p. 25.

¹⁰ James Aune class note, “Intro to Post-structuralism,” April 2007. This definition, according to Aune, is not common in the academic field of communication, as the more “radical,” “leftist” definitions tend to be adopted. See also: Carol Corbin, (ed) *Rhetoric in Postmodern America: Conversations With Michael Calvin McGee* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 1998), p. 132 – 136 for a description of Jurgen Habermas and hegemony as an example. In addition, Russello has written that postmodernism emerged as a response to a “perceived collapse of modernity in the arts;” Charles Jencks first used the term this way in 1977. Theodor Adorno and Max Hornkeimer defined the “essential nature” of modernity as whatever does not conform to the computation and utility of the Enlightenment (Ibid, p. 178).

¹¹ Terence Ball, “Review, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*,” *Ethics*, Vol. 96, No. 3, p. 621.

¹² Peter Lawler, “Postmodern Conservatism, Conservative Postmodernism,” *The Intercollegiate Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 2002. Reprinted in Mark C. Henrie (ed), *Arguing Conservatism: Four Decades of the Intercollegiate Review* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008), p. 802. See also: Peter Augustine Lawler, *Postmodernism Rightly Understood* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), Introduction.

¹³ *Arguing Conservatism*, p. 805.

- ¹⁴ Richard Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1985), p. 23.
- ¹⁵ James Aune class note, “Richard Weaver (1910 – 1963),” April 2007.
- ¹⁶ Richard Weaver, *Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Times* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Press, 1995), p. 56. Russell Kirk wrote the introduction to this edition. This quote is noted in *ibid*.
- ¹⁷ James Aune draft, “Coping with Modernity: Strategies of Twentieth-Century Rhetorical Theory,” (section, “The Anti-Modernist Moment,”) forthcoming in Andrea Lunsford (ed), *Handbook of Rhetoric*.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid* (introduction).
- ¹⁹ I am uncertain that personal autonomy occupies a central place in Kant’s philosophy, especially by comparison to the British and Scottish liberal tradition. It strikes me as feasible that Kant is more “accepting” of persuasion for the refinement of morality than the Anglo-American tradition of liberty, where autonomy pervades practical life. Such a question, however, is beyond the scope of this work and certainly beyond my expertise. The relevant point is the classification by a piece of rhetorical scholarship concerning the intersection of persuasion and liberal philosophy.
- ²⁰ Wayne Booth, “The Revival of Rhetoric,” *PLMA*, Vol. 80, No. 2, p. 8.
- ²¹ Russell Kirk, “Social Justice and Mass Culture,” *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 4, p. 442.
- ²² White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, p. 23.
- ²³ Peter Augustine Lawler & Dale McConkey (ed), *Community and Political Thought Today* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), p. 133.
- ²⁴ This purpose was to convey that properly constituted social order was a product as personal responsibility manifested through various groups and voluntary associations, starting with the family.
- ²⁵ White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, p. 192 – 193.
- ²⁶ Peter J. Stanlis, *Edmund Burke: The Enlightenment and Revolution* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991), p. xxx – xiv. These phrases were taken from the foreword by Kirk.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 115 – 116. The Enlightenment, a “complex era and movement,” was according to Stanlis characterized by a program of “modern innovations” against established “ancient” authority in learning: “These ‘moderns’ considered themselves enlightened to the extent that they believed in truths that rested upon empirical facts or upon rational principles confirmed by scientific experiments. They opposed all forms of ignorance, prejudice and superstition, as these were established in social institutions, and especially in Christianity, and most particularly in the traditional Scholastic philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, based on Aristotle, and the clerical authority of the Catholic Church.”
- ²⁸ Russell Kirk, “Rhetoricians and Politicians,” *Kenyon review*, Fall 1964, p. 768.
- ²⁹ James Aune, “Modernity as a Rhetorical Problem: *Phronesis*, Forms, and Forums in *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 2008, p. 403.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 416.
- ³¹ Dennis K. Mumby, “Modernism, Postmodernism, and Communication Studies: A Rereading of an Ongoing Debate,” *Communication Theory*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Feb. 1997, p. 150.
- ³² Kenneth Allan & Jonathan H. Turner, “A Formalization of Postmodern Theory,” *Sociological Perspectives*, Vol. 43, No. 3, p. 364.
- ³³ Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*, p. 181 – 182.
- ³⁴ Gerald J. Russello & John J. Miller, “Captain Kirk: Inside the Imagination of Russell Kirk,” June 28, 2007, National Review Online. Author interview.
- ³⁵ Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 5 – 6. The author highlighted Hobbes, Locke, Mill and Kant. Berkowitz argued that “the problem with much contemporary thought” is “not just the lack of a coherent account of the place of virtue in the political theory of liberal democracy but, more telling, the absence of embarrassment in the face of such a lack.”
- ³⁶ Wayne C. Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), p. 92.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 114.
- ³⁸ See chapter one, “Practical Reason and Politics,” and chapter three, “Reason and Sentiment,” in Francis Canavan, *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1960).
- ³⁹ Richard Weaver, *Visions of Order*, p. 63 – 65.

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- ⁴⁰ It is not my intention here to identify them with “associational rhetoric.”
- ⁴¹ Chaim Perelman, *The Realm of Rhetoric* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1982), p. 11.
- ⁴² Aune, “Modernity as a Rhetorical Problem,” p. 413.
- ⁴³ Christopher W. Tindale, *Rhetorical Argumentation: Principles of Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), p. 70.
- ⁴⁴ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), p. 27.
- ⁴⁵ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), p. 59.
- ⁴⁶ Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, p. 114 – 115. For Booth, the use of language has made “men fantastically malleable by their fellows.”
- ⁴⁷ Tzvetan Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 243.
- ⁴⁸ James Boyd White, *When Language Meets the Mind: Three Questions* (Nijmegen, The Netherlands: Wolf Legal Publishers, 2007), p. 8 – 9.
- ⁴⁹ Interview: James Boyd White, March 16, 2009.
- ⁵⁰ Ann Bousfield, *The Relationship Between Liberalism and Conservatism: Parasitic, Competitive or Symbiotic?* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 1999), p. 80.
- ⁵¹ Ibid, p. 76. Here, Bousfield wrote of conservative British philosopher Michael Oakeshott in particular.
- ⁵² A claim of “ethical” is present in White’s eight textual examples of “constitutions and reconstitutions.”
- ⁵³ Interview: James Boyd White, March 16, 2009 & *When Language Meets the Mind*, p. 26.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid (Interview).
- ⁵⁵ Bernard K. Duffy & Martin Jacobi, *The Politics of Rhetoric: Richard Weaver and the Conservative Tradition* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 99 – 100. The authors, in this quotation, were highlighting *The Ethics of Rhetoric*.
- ⁵⁶ In the contexts of the chapters of this dissertation, I have used the terms “the modern” and “modernity” as synonyms.
- ⁵⁷ Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, p. 202 – 203.
- ⁵⁸ “Interview with James Boyd White,” *Michigan Law Review*, Vol. 105, March 2007, p. 1403. (Later reprinted in *The Netherlands Journal for Legal Philosophy and Jurisprudence*.) The “questions” were: what is the language in which the text is written, and the culture of which it is a part? How are we to evaluate these things? What relation does this writer or speaker establish with this language as he uses it – does he just replicate it unthinkingly, or does he make it the object of critical attention or transformation? How are we to evaluate what he does? What relation does the writer or speaker establish with those to whom and about whom he speaks? How are we to evaluate these relations?
- ⁵⁹ Duffy & Jacobi, *The Politics of Rhetoric*, p. 102 – 104.
- ⁶⁰ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv and p. 34 – 35.
- ⁶¹ I take this generalization from Annette Kirk. Interviews: May 2009.
- ⁶² Michael C. Leff & Fred J. Kauffeld (ed), *Texts in Context: Critical Dialogues on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric* (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1989), p. 50.
- ⁶³ I am grateful to James Aune for his work with me to summarize this project. Our discussions are reflected in this final paragraph.

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Other

Articles and documents from the private papers of Annette Kirk, as cited in the text. These articles and documents are located at the Kirk family home in Mecosta, Michigan.

Class notes, dissertations, newspaper pieces, and law cases, as cited in the text.

VITA

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