

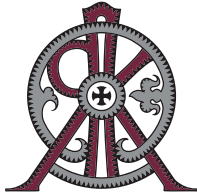


**SELECT ESSAYS
FOR
OUR TIMES:
VOLUME I**

RUSSELL KIRK

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THE
RUSSELL KIRK
CENTER
FOR CULTURAL RENEWAL

Mecosta, Michigan

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Introduction

“Statues have their enemies.” So Russell Kirk wrote in “Why Edmund Burke Is Studied,” an essay which commences this new ebook. In the Year of Our Lord 2020, these words reverberate with relevance. Kirk refers to the particular monument to Burke on Massachusetts Avenue in Washington, D.C., to argue that Burke was, even against the vicissitudes of the times, a “symbol of human order.”

Order is not a fashionable word these days. Neither is liberty rightly understood. Rather, ours is a time of ideological revolution—what Burke called the “antagonist world.” Yet even as not all was lost in the upheavals during Burke’s later life, there remains hope in our time of cultural decadence, as Kirk observed, that we might restore “the world of reason, and order, and peace, and virtue.”

This new selection of five Kirk essays gives witness to both Kirk’s dismay over the revolutionary drift of American civilization and his hope for its reversal. This is the first of a series of ebooks representing the best of Kirk’s works. As we move forward, we will be reviewing the Kirk archives and mixing in unpublished or forgotten essays with his better-known writings. In either case, it is our hope that they meet new and old audiences who may gain fresh insights in reading or re-reading these essays. We hope the essays in this ebook series speak to “our times” in a perennial language. That is the Kirkian way.

Kirk is at his analytical and rhetorical best in “The Age of Sentiments,” in which he points to the consequences of civilization having moved into a new era in which people feel with projected images “that rouse *sentiments* rather than reflections.” It is not hard to extend his criticism of television to our world of social media, in which connections are thin and isolation has become a kind of ethos for our time.

Kirk begins “A Culture’s Road toward Avernus” by pointing out that in the wake of the Second World War not many Americans were open to the idea that “our inherited culture is involved in great difficulties.” However, in our time to write of America’s slide into cultural decadence is uncontroversial. How did we get to this point? What is the cause of our descent into decadence? Is there a return path?

In “The American Mission,” Kirk counsels us to take a fresh look at that “champion of ordered freedom,” Orestes Brownson. Brownson argued a timely point: that the central problem of politics is the reconciling of authority and liberty. He discerned that it was this country’s mission “to present to mankind a political model: a commonwealth in which freedom exists in a healthy balance or tension.” Many conservatives today, to say nothing of liberals, contest this view of America. Kirk, though, was steadfast that America remains the best hope for a just order.

Finally, in the closing essay, “The Great Mysterious Incorporation of the Human Race,” Kirk returns to Burke’s notion of “the intricate continuity which joins the dead, the living, and those who will be born” with a view toward renewing the republic of letters. Kirk conjures afresh the idea of such a “community of souls,” one that transcends time and reminds us that “nothing in the civil social order is wholly old or wholly new, for Providence has arranged that change as the means of our preservation.” He points us toward writers of moral imagination and exhorts the rising generation to “regenerate” a truly humane literary tradition.

Let us return to Kirk in these essays, and let us read the great authors and engage that great civilizational conversation he commends to us. Then, as he directs, “let us draw the sword of imagination, and endeavor to redeem the time.”

—Jeffrey O. Nelson
Co-founder, Russell Kirk Center
June 14, 2020

Essay I:

Why Edmund Burke Is Studied

Epilogue to *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered* (ISI, 1997)

Cato the Elder told his friends, “I had rather that men should ask, ‘Why is there no monument to Cato?’ than that they should ask, ‘Why is there a monument to Cato?’” Now I do not suppose that people often inquire, “Why is there a monument to Burke in the city of Washington?” Nevertheless, some Americans in high places remain interestingly ignorant of the great men and women whose statues loom tall in L’Enfant’s little parks; therefore, in considering Edmund Burke’s statue I offer you some reflections on why Burke is still much read and quoted nowadays.

Statues have their enemies, a sept of that body of the malicious whom I have called, in one of my books, the Enemies of the Permanent Things. Three decades ago the gentleman then Secretary of the Interior declared that Washington was cluttered with monuments to nobodies—anyway, to folk forgotten by everybody—and that those statues ought to be cleared away. Pressed for an example of the nobodies he had in mind, the Secretary of the Interior responded, “Well, that statue of Benjamin Rush, whoever he was.” Now Dr. Benjamin Rush, as many today are aware, was one of the more eminent signers of the Declaration of Independence; but that is not the most important thing about him. Rush was a famous physician, a man of letters, one of the two founders of the first antislavery society in America, the holder of various public offices, and a chief man of intellect during the formative years of the Republic. As one edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* summarizes Rush’s literary productivity:

Benjamin Rush's writings covered an immense range of subjects, including language, the study of Latin and Greek, the moral faculty, capital punishment, medicine among the American Indians, maple sugar, the blackness of the negro, the cause of animal life, tobacco smoking, spirit drinking, as well as many more strictly professional topics. His last work was an elaborate treatise on *The Diseases of Man* (1812). He is best known by the five volumes of *Medical Inquiries and Observations*, which he brought out at intervals from 1789 to 1798 (two later editions revised by the author).

Such was the scholar and public man whose effigy the Secretary of the Interior would have consigned to Avernus. (Incidentally, that Secretary was given to frequent praise of "intellectuals.") But *nil admirari!* Earlier in this century, the administrators of New York City's parks came near to tossing into the Hudson the bronze bust of Orestes Brownson, the most vigorous of American Catholic thinkers; the bust had been knocked off its pedestal in Riverside Park, and everybody in authority had quite forgotten poor Brownson. (That bust was rescued in the nick of time by Fordham University and may be seen on Fordham's campus today.) From ignorance or from malice, there flourishes in our era a breed of haters of the past, who chuck down the memory-hole of 1984 (the dystopia, not the literal year) everything venerable upon which they may lay their hands. Statues in particular are anathema to them. If given their way, such persons would commission junk sculpture to supplant every representation in stone or bronze of a great human being. Not long ago an agency of the federal government was eager to persuade colleges to adorn their campuses, at national expense, with "abstract sculpture," the product of the welder's torch; so far as I know, no "representational" sculpture was approved in this national program. One thinks again of Orwell's dystopia, in which the one remaining gratification is the pleasure of effacing the humane. "If you want a picture of the future," O'Brien tells Winston, "imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever."

Men in our time—so my old friend Max Picard wrote before 1930 in his book *The Human Face*—

fear to gaze upon the face of man. We have no wish to be reminded of the whole man, we do not wish wholeness; on the contrary, we wish to be divided, and we are pleased in our state of division and do not wish to be disturbed. For that reason we do not contemplate the human face.

Now Edmund Burke, who detested political abstractions, was no abstraction himself; he was a whole man, undivided. Being undivided, he is not loved by the zealot for a faceless egalitarian uniformity in society; nor by the enthusiast for perpetual change, the "permanent revolution." If, by the end of this century, this Burke statue still stands in deathless bronze on Massachusetts Avenue; and if its original by Thomas still stands at Bristol; and especially if the fine statue of Burke stands beside that of his friend Oliver Goldsmith in College Green, Dublin—why, they will remain as symbols of a human order that has not been pulled down altogether. But if those statues of Burke are one day no longer to be seen—well, their vanishing will be a sign that humankind has been expelled from what Burke called "this world of

reason, and order, and peace, and virtue.” Humanity will have been thrust into Orwell’s dystopia—into the realm of Chaos and old Night, described by Burke as “the antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, confusion, and unavailing sorrow.”

No memorial statue of Burke ever was to be found at Beaconsfield, where Burke had his house and farm. Somewhere in church or churchyard there, Burke’s bones lie buried; but the precise spot is unknown. Should the Jacobins triumph in England, Burke feared, his body might be exhumed by the radicals and his head and quarters put on macabre public show, as had been done to the corpses of politicians before him; worse than that had been done to quick and dead in France during the closing years of Burke’s existence. Therefore his body had been interred secretly and by night, somewhere about Beaconsfield church. That Jacobinism never seized upon Britain was the accomplishment, in considerable part, of Burke’s eloquence; the “antagonist world” did not then take on substance in England.

Yet a fatality seems to have afflicted the visible memorials of Burke’s life, these statues apart. Burke’s birthplace on Arran Quay in Dublin, still standing uninhabited when first I strolled along the Liffey, since has been thoughtfully demolished by Dublin’s municipal authorities. Soho Square, where Burke had his London residence, is turned into a loathsome hell upon earth, the equivalent of New York’s Times Square; young women are whipped at lunchtime in restaurants, for the amusement of affluent men. As for the great house of Gregories, with Burke’s library and collection of statuary and paintings, that was burnt a few years after Burke’s death. But the high brick precinct-wall survives, near to Beaconsfield church, and (so I read somewhere) a large barn that had been Burke’s—for he cultivated six hundred acres at Gregories. When last I visited Beaconsfield, I entered what had been the park of Gregories to seek for the barn. I did not find it; instead I came upon rows of little, neat, ticky-tacky houses, terraced so that, viewed from left to right, each miniature house stood a few feet higher than the house to its right. A curious sensation of *déjà vu* afflicted me. However could I have beheld this new-built housing scheme before? Then it came to me. Beaconsfield has become in recent decades the headquarters of Britain’s film industry, and these terraces of monotonous dwellings can be pressed into service as film backgrounds. What picture had I seen that had so utilized these rather distressing manifestations of suburbia since World War II? I had it: *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury’s dystopia about book-burning. Burke’s books had been burnt here, and there were bookburners aplenty among the socialist masters of the new comprehensive schools. On returning to America, I told Ray Bradbury about this unhappy concitation of the backward devils; he never had fancied, while his film was being produced in England, that it was being filmed upon the wreck of Burke’s estate.

Much more, visible and invisible, has been wrecked by the advancing troops of the Antagonist World since Burke was buried secretly in 1797. As I write, a great part of old Bucharest, including three grand ancient monasteries, is being swept away by the Communist regime in Romania—to clear the way for monstrous new high-rise hives and a gigantic boulevard along which the legions of Mordor may parade. One thinks of the lines of John Betjeman:

*I have a vision of The Future, chum,
The workers' flats in fields of soya beans
Tower up like silver pencils, score on score;
And Surging Millions hear the Challenge come
From microphones in communal canteens
"No Right! No Wrong! All's perfect, evermore."*

The East, since Burke's day, has been swallowed up by the Antagonist World; and the West has been ravaged and harrowed, though not overcome utterly as yet. Even the quarter of Washington in which Burke's likeness stands seemed, only a few years ago, on the verge of being lost to the world of reason, and order, and peace, and virtue.

To what statesman of the past, what philosopher in action, might one turn for guidance in a time when the fountains of the great deep were broken up?

Yet American society retains considerable recuperative powers; cheerfulness will keep breaking in; and the capital of the United States begins to mend itself. Such recuperation of the body politic results, in part, from the institutions that Burke praised and the principles Burke expounded—even though few Americans know anything about Burke except that somehow he “was for our side” in the Revolution.

Why is there a monument to Burke? Because he was a principal defender of that world of reason, and order, and peace, and virtue in which the United States participated, through its inheritance of civilization. Constitution, custom, convention, and prescription give society a healthy continuity, as Burke knew; and he pointed out that prudent change is the means of our preservation; he understood how the claims of freedom and the claims of order must be kept in a tolerable tension. Such truths he taught not as a closet-philosopher, but as a practical statesman and manager of party. His speeches and pamphlets were read by the men of 1776 and the men of 1787—and studied with yet closer attention after 1789. No other political thinker of their own time was better known to the American leaders than was Burke. That is one reason why the Sulgrave Institution presented a statue of Burke to the city of Washington.

In divers ways—some obvious, some subtle—Burke’s politics and Burke’s rhetoric have been woven into American modes of thought and argument, generation after generation. Let me suggest my own path to Burke.

I first encountered the name of Burke when, as a boy, I browsed through my mother’s old schoolbooks. Among these was an edition of Burke’s speech “On Conciliation with the Colonies,” published by Scott, Foresman in 1898, “edited for school use by Joseph Villiers Denney,” a professor at Ohio State University, with thorough notes and intelligent “Questions on the Literary and Rhetorical Qualities of the Speech.” By “schools” the publishers meant high schools, not universities. “On Conciliation” had nearly vanished from American high schools by the time I arrived there, and I know of no public school nowadays which prescribes the study of Burke’s speeches. But my mother and her classmates seem to have been undismayed by this manual. Here and there, in her copy, my mother has written between lines, neatly, definitions of words or phrases; and on the back flyleaf is a notation, presumably with reference to the teacher’s passing remarks on Burke’s *The Sublime and the Beautiful*: “Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not.” In 1898, when my mother was a high school senior, it was taken for granted that young people could apprehend Burke. It cannot be so taken for granted in the graduate schools of large universities today. As Burke predicted in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, the time would come when learning would be trodden down under the hoofs of a swinish multitude—a phrase borrowed from the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, incidentally.

Courses in American history still contained references to Burke during my own high-school years, but I was more interested in a textbook’s brief account of the Virginian John Randolph of Roanoke, who entered Congress as a radical, but by 1804 had become of Burke’s persuasion. Later, as a graduate student at Duke University, I wrote a master’s thesis about Randolph—and through studying him, became an attentive reader of Burke. Here is a specimen of Randolph on Burke, in a letter to Harmanus Bleeker written in 1814:

My time of late has been . . . occupied in reading and meditating the Vth volume of Burke. . . . It has been an intellectual banquet of the richest viands. What a man! How like a child and an idiot I feel in comparison with him. Thank God! However, I can understand and relish his sublime truths and feel grateful for the inspired wisdom which in the true spirit of prophecy he has taught to us poor blind and erring mortals.

Out of these studies came my first book, *John Randolph of Roanoke*. Perceiving how pervasive Burke’s influence had been on either side of the Atlantic, I made that the theme of my second book, *The Conservative Mind*. I discovered, presently, how Joseph Story had woven the teachings of Burke into his famous *Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States*; how John C. Calhoun had learned much from Burke; how James Russell Lowell and other American men of letters were moved by Burke’s style; how Woodrow Wilson, writing in 1901, declared himself Burke’s disciple.

Near the end of the eighteenth century Burke had contended against an “armed doctrine,” Jacobinism, the first ideology of what was to become an age of ideological passions. By the 1940s Americans and their allies found themselves contending against fresh revolutionary ideologies. What precedent did the file afford? To what statesman of the past, what philosopher in action, might one turn for guidance in a time when the fountains of the great deep were broken up? It was this search, primarily, that brought about a strong renewal of serious interest in Burke, beginning nearly four decades ago.

**To seek political wisdom from Burke is
no more exotic for Americans than it is to
seek humane insights from Shakespeare or
spiritual insights from Saint Paul.**

During the 1950s many studies of Burke and his times were published in America and Britain; every serious periodical commented upon the “Burke revival.” By 1962 Clinton Rossiter noted in the second edition of his *Conservatism in America* that “a fascinating by-product of the conservative upsurge of the postwar years has been the re-introduction of Burke as a serious thinker into courses in political theory at colleges throughout America.” Leaders of both American political parties began to quote Burke; Senator Eugene McCarthy, in his *Frontiers of Democracy*, acknowledged Burke’s dominant influence upon his political principles.

The bursting out of radicalism during the later sixties and early seventies to some extent impeded the renewal of Burke’s influence in intellectual quarters; but attention to Burke increased once more as the disaster of war in Indochina receded. Nowadays Burke is praised in such journals as *The New Republic*. Even certain syndicated columnists of today quote Burke repeatedly—a practice confined pretty much to your servant thirty years ago.

Burke’s statue on Massachusetts Avenue, in short, signifies more now than it did in 1922, the year of its erection. Then it was a reminder of the struggles during the closing third of the eighteenth century; now it wakes us to the clash of beliefs, political and religious, as the twentieth century of the Christian era nears its end. Our Time of Troubles, Arnold Toynbee instructs us, commenced in 1914; the world has sunk more deeply into those grim difficulties with every year that has elapsed since then. Is it conceivable that the rising generation in America, whose schooling has been so costly and yet so poor, may learn something valuable from the imagination and the intellect of the man of genius whose brazen

image seems to survey the stream of traffic on Massachusetts Avenue—rather in the fashion of the statue of the Happy Prince in Oscar Wilde’s fable, gazing forever upon the great city’s inhumanity?

A little more than two hundred years ago Edmund Burke found his fortune at a stay. Out of office, with the younger Pitt entrenched as prime minister, Burke seemed ineffectual to many; his party—the first genuine political party of the English-speaking world—had suffered defeat and eclipse; his private affairs were troubled. There lay before him his impeachment of Warren Hastings, and Hastings’ trial, to which bitter affairs Burke would devote the next decade of his life; this was no cheerful prospect, Burke knowing from the first that the House of Lords would not find Hastings guilty as charged. “We know that we bring before a bribed tribunal a prejudged cause,” he wrote to Philip Francis on December 10, 1785.

Five years later, nevertheless, Burke (almost alone) commenced the undoing of the French Revolution; he published the most brilliant piece of political writing in the English language, began to alter the whole drift of British foreign policy, won back the clergy to the national cause, and achieved in political isolation a reputation and an influence exceeding that he had enjoyed while still a manager of party. It is this later Burke especially who attracts the interest and admiration of contemporary Americans.

**No other statesman or writer of the past
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than was Burke.**

Clinton Rossiter, in 1962, grew almost alarmed at the ascendancy of Burke among the thoughtful. The conservative task for Americans, Professor Rossiter argued, “calls for creation and integration, not imitation; it may call for revival of Adams, Hamilton, Calhoun, Madison, and the conservative Lincoln, but surely not for wholesale importation of Burke or de Maistre.” And elsewhere he declared that the “prudent Federalists . . . must henceforth serve American conservatism as a kind of collective Burke.”

This is curious reasoning. The Federalists have a justly important part in American political reflection, two centuries after their call for a Constitutional Convention. Yet the Federalists cannot well supplant Burke as a source of political wisdom, in part because the Federalists themselves drew upon Burke and in part because what the Federalists said is less relevant to the distresses of the world at the end of the twentieth century than is the bulk of Burke’s writings after 1789.

For the Federalists were concerned, necessarily, with constructing a practical frame of government for a particular time and people, rather than with first principles of politics, applicable in some degree to any age. I do not mean that there is no advantage in deriving one's convictions from one's national ancestors. Some real continuity survives between the America of 1797, say, and the America of today. Yet the passage of the centuries does make a difference in national character and national needs. And if only homegrown products are fit for American consumption—why, we must prefer Jonathan Edwards as a theologian, say, over Saint Augustine, because Edwards was born in New England and Augustine in Roman Africa. Or—intending no disrespect—Mary Baker Eddy must supplant Jesus of Nazareth if we were to adopt Rossiter's chain of reasoning.

The Federalist Papers form a work of high political prudence, well-argued and worthy of close attention still. The federal system of government, brought into existence by those politicians' arguments, has done much for the American people. As the United States slides toward centralization, the ideas of the Federalists grow still more deserving of renewal, by way of caution and check.

Yet the problems of modern society transcend simple questions of governmental structure. An appeal to the pristine purity of the Constitution of the United States will not suffice as a bulwark against the destructive power of ideology. To Burke, rather than to Washington or Hamilton or Jay or Madison or even John Adams, we must turn for an analysis of the first principles of order and justice and freedom.

As for pertinence to our present discontents, even *The Federalist Papers* cannot arouse imagination and conscience as can *Reflections on the Revolution in France* or the *Regicide Peace*. For Burke is urgently concerned with the grim continuing revolution of our time of troubles, while *The Federalist*, in essence, is an argument simply for settling the governmental arrangements of America near the end of the eighteenth century. One still can read with profit Washington's Farewell Address, the production (with Hamilton's assistance) of a strong and prudent man. But it is impossible for the United States of today to follow the counsels on foreign policy commended by President Washington at the end of his tenure: circumstances have altered irrevocably. Burke's understanding of the comity of civilized nations and his plea for combination against revolutionary fanaticism apply to the present circumstances of the United States, on the contrary: Burke is little "dated."

Being myself a disciple of the Federalists, I respect their practical wisdom. Nor am I of the opinion that political theories and institutions can be transferred abstractly, without qualification, from one land to another; I agree with Daniel Boorstin that "the American Constitution is not for export." It certainly would be impossible, and in a variety of ways undesirable, to establish in America a facsimile of eighteenth-century English society. Heraclitus and experience have taught us that we never step in the same river twice.

But Burke is not *outside* the American experience; rather, as his statue reminds us, he stands in the grander tradition and continuity—the legacy of our civilization—of which American life and character

form a part. And Burke himself, helping to form American society, has been an influence upon this land and this people from the 1760s to the present. To seek political wisdom from Burke is no more exotic for Americans than it is to seek humane insights from Shakespeare or spiritual insights from Saint Paul. The founders of this Republic, after all, participated in political and legal institutions very like those that Burke defended; they shared Burke's climate of opinion; they read the books that Burke read. One does not set up William James and Josiah Royce, say, as better philosophers than Aristotle or Aquinas on the ground that the first pair were born on the western side of the Atlantic and the second pair on the eastern.

Some part of the institutions and the social order which Burke knew has passed away, quite as the America of our time is markedly different from the seaboard republic of Adams and Jefferson. Because we cannot restore—even if we would—either Georgian England or Jeffersonian America, the test of the relevance of a political philosopher to the challenges of our own time is not merely a question of whether his lot was cast in a bygone Britain or in a bygone United States.

In many respects the great American nation of today is more like the imperial Britain of 1797 than like the isolated infant Republic of 1797. Because Burke addressed himself to matters that transcended nationality and generation, he endures as an important political thinker whom men of our time oppose to Karl Marx. Would anyone argue seriously that the writings of the Federalists, philosophically considered, may suffice to withstand the grim power of totalist ideology and to direct the affairs of this gigantic twentieth-century America, no longer insulated against the opinions and the arms of the Old World?

Burke, with his prophetic gifts, perceived the shape of things to come in this bent world of ours. His passionate refutation of leveling ideology and totalist politics has lost nothing of its force with the passing of two centuries. What he said of the Jacobins is yet more true of the Marxist ideologues in our rough era. "I have laid the terrible spirit of innovation which was overrunning the world." Those are the words of Napoleon, whose coming Burke predicted. Yet it was Burke, rather than Bonaparte, who in truth exorcised the fierce specter of revolutionary fanaticism.

No other statesman or writer of the past two centuries has been more prescient than was Burke. In my mother's day it was as a great rhetorician and leader of party, rather than as a man of thought and imagination, that Burke was studied. The specialization of our twentieth-century educational system intensified this division: the political historians hesitated to discuss Burke because he was a man of letters, the teachers of literature because he was a philosopher, the professors of philosophy because he was a statesman; and so round the circle. The very breadth of genius may cause neglect. Yet perhaps it has been as well that a proper understanding of Burke has been reserved for these years of ours. For once more we find ourselves in an epoch of concentration, in which thinking men and women endeavor to restore order and justice to a bewildered society. "I attest the rising generation!" Burke cried, at the

end of his prosecution of Hastings. Indeed he did win over the rising generation of Britain, about the year of his death; and today's rising generation of Americans is influenced by the mind of Burke (directly or indirectly), as thirty years ago many of America's rising generation fell under the influence (directly or indirectly) of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Burke's adversary. Burke's moral imagination may yet defeat Rousseau's idyllic imagination near the end of the twentieth century.

To suggest, in conclusion, the relevance of Burke's convictions to our present troubles, let me quote a passage from a letter of Burke, written on June 1, 1791, to the Chevalier Claude-François de Rivarol. Burke is discussing the illusions of poets and philosophers:

I have observed that the Philosophers in order to insinuate their polluted Atheism into young minds, systematically flatter all their passions natural and unnatural. They explode or render odious or contemptible that class of virtues which restrain the appetite. These are at least nine out of ten of the virtues. In place of all these they substitute a virtue which they call humanity or benevolence. By these means, their morality has no idea in it of restraint, or indeed of a distinct settled principle of any kind. When their disciples are thus left free and guided by present feeling, they are no longer to be depended on for good or evil. The men who today snatch the worst criminals from justice, will murder the most innocent persons tomorrow.

Amen to that. Burke's "Parisian philosophers" of two centuries gone live on as today's self-proclaimed "intellectuals," with their incessant talk of "compassion" and their advocacy, among other things, of the inalienable right to expand the empire of unnatural vices. From age to age we human beings fight the same battles over and over again, under banners bearing various devices. To resist the idyllic imagination and the diabolical imagination, we need to know the moral imagination of Edmund Burke. And that is why we know Burke for one of those dead who give us energy.



Essay II:

The Age of Sentiments

From *Redeeming the Time* (ISI, 1996)

Our civilized world is passing out of one age and into another epoch. The age that is passing has been called the Age of Discussion. The age that we are entering I call the Age of Sentiments. Most people are aware of this change only vaguely, if at all. As Disraeli put it, “Prevailing opinions generally are the opinions of the generation that is passing.”

This profound alteration of the climate of opinion is not merely related to changes in the mass media: it is *caused*, in considerable part, by such changes in the mass media; and particularly by the triumph of television.

The phrase “the Age of Discussion” I take from Walter Bagehot’s chapter by that title, in his book *Physics and Politics*—published in 1869, two years after passage of Britain’s Reform Bill. The genial and perceptive Bagehot, the best critic of his own time, understood well that during the nineteenth century the old order of things was being effaced—swept away by the nineteenth-century triumph of what Bagehot called Discussion. In effect, the Age of Discussion was the Age of Liberalism, which nowadays is fallen into the sere and yellow leaf. It was not so much democracy that undid the old social and moral order, Bagehot argued, as it was Discussion. Democracy itself, for that matter, was a product of Discussion, in ancient times and in modern: democracy arose first in towns of Greece and Italy where Discussion prevailed. Near the close of the eighteenth century, Discussion began to work as a tremendous

social force, converting modern nations into states close-knit and sensitive to novelty, as Athens and Florence had been.

Discussion it was that broke the cake of custom in Christendom, that engulfed what Burke called prejudice and prescription, that subverted men's ancient aversion to relinquishing the ways of their ancestors. Modern democracy was the fruit, rather than the seed, of this eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Discussion; so was that view of the civil social order called Liberalism. As Bagehot put it, "Since Luther's time there has been a conviction more or less rooted, that a man may by an intellectual process think out a religion for himself, and that, as the highest of all duties, he ought to do so. The influence of the political discussion, and the influence of the religious discussion, have so long and so firmly combined, and have so effectually enforced one another, that the old notions of loyalty, and fealty, and authority, as they existed in the Middle Ages, have now over the best minds almost no effect."

This is the Private Judgment against which John Henry Newman inveighed in Bagehot's time. Bulwer-Lytton, in that era, had exclaimed, "Democracy is like the Grave—it perpetually cries, 'give, give,' and, like the grave, it never returns what it has once taken." Walter Bagehot, referring to Bulwer-Lytton's analogy, remarks that this simile is equally apt for Discussion. "Once effectually submit a subject to that ordeal," in Bagehot's words, "and you can never withdraw it again; you can never again clothe it with mystery, or fence it by consecration; it remains forever open to free choice, and exposed to profane deliberation."

Just so. Now private judgment and free discussion, the indispensable postulates and chief supports of nineteenth-century democracy and liberalism (not that those two are identical), were made possible in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by a cheap press, speedy communication, popular access to firearms (a subject deserving of a lecture by itself), and urban concentrations of population; thus the chief European nations, and America, too, obtained the advantages of the ancient city-states, but also were exposed to the dangers of public opinion as it had been known in ancient Greece and Italy.

Discussion and private judgment, rather than the physical suffering that Karl Marx predicted, have goaded modern people to experiment and alteration during the past two centuries. Marxism has won its zealots not so much because of positive suffering—after all, suffering has been the lot of the majority of mankind ever since Adam and Eve—but because Marxism has been a new mode for protest and private judgment. Is the voracity of Discussion indeed insatiable as the appetite of the grave? If so, then are permanence and continuity impossible for modern society?

In our latter days of the Age of Discussion, most of the world has fallen to crushing tyranny, with almost no discussion permitted; or into anarchy and endless civil war, in which all discussion seems fruitless. Discussion appears to have swung full cycle: commencing in one authoritarian domination, and ending in an authoritarian domination far more merciless. It has not come to that in these United States—not yet; but though we may be spared tyranny and anarchy, it does not follow that somehow

we can prolong greatly in America that Age of Discussion which has vanished, or is now vanishing, from the rest of the world.

* * *

Presently I shall return to some analysis of the symptoms of dissolution of the Age of Discussion. Permit me to explain, just now, what I mean by my other phrase “the Age of Sentiments.”

Words are tools that break in the hand; and this word “sentiments” is employed loosely in a variety of ways. I use it in the signification attached to it by those friends David Hume and Adam Smith, about the commencement of the Age of Discussion. That is, the word “sentiment” implies “higher feeling” or “emotion”; psychologically, an emotional judgment. Think of Pascal’s famous phrase, “The heart has reasons which the reason cannot know”: there’s the gist of it.

In the definition of the old *Century Dictionary*, “*Sentiment* has a peculiar place between *thought* and *feeling*, in which it also approaches the meaning of *principle*. It is more than that *feeling* which is sensation or emotion, by containing more of *thought* and by being more lofty; while it contains too much *feeling* to be merely thought, and it has large influence over the will: for example, the *sentiment* of patriotism; the *sentiment* of honor; the world is ruled by *sentiment*. The *thought* in a *sentiment* is often that of duty, and is penetrated and exalted by *feeling*.”

For David Hume and Adam Smith, sentiments exerted greater power, and indeed were better guides, than reason—though Hume remarks in his *Principles of Morals* that sentiment and reason usually coincide. I suppose we may say that for Hume and Smith a sound sentiment is a moving conviction; but a conviction derived from some other source than pure reason. You will note that I employ *sentiment* not as a term of derision, but as a term of description.

I have digressed at this length in order to define my terms—being of a philosophical habit of mind—so that we may try to understand the large transition of society, conducted by mass media, which we are experiencing in this present decade. When I say that we are passing from the Age of Discussion to the Age of Sentiments, I am not preaching a comminatory sermon: I am doing no more than describing a process, probably ineluctable. A good deal has been written on this subject, but not precisely in the fashion I am about to present to you. Just now I offer you two vignettes that may clarify my meaning.

Four decades ago I first saw the ancient city of Verona, where Catullus was born. Having settled at my hotel, I made my way afoot to the Piazza delle Erbe, which in Catullus’ time was the Roman forum, and is still the busiest place in Verona. It was Saturday evening. For some two thousand, five hundred years,

I reflected, the people of Verona have gathered in this square, talking endlessly at its cafes while the centuries crept past: one of the world's veritable centers of Discussion. In the Piazza delle Erbe I would be part of the great continuity of talk.

But I was astonished to find the Piazza delle Erbe utterly dark, that Saturday night. I had read somewhere that Verona was rather a melancholy place—so Chateaubriand described the city at the time of the Congress of Verona, I believe—but this total silence and emptiness of the great square was overwhelming. Many cafes lined the piazza; the doors of all were shut; and no Romeo, no Juliet, nor any other native of Verona was to be seen. Could any place in Italy have sunk into such apathy on a Saturday evening?

I walked slowly round the Piazza. As I proceeded, I found that a little light escaped from behind the shutters of the cafes. I peered in: every cafe was crowded with people sitting at little round tables and sipping drinks; but nobody was uttering a word. One and all, they were watching television sets—which miracle, I learned next day, had come to Verona not long before. A week of television had put an end to twenty-five centuries of civilized conversation in Verona.

Demon TV's empire is universal. Some years after my experience in the Piazza delle Erbe, I was exploring the Orkneys, in company with a friend. Not long after docking at Kirkwall, we took dinner in the best hotel of that quaint city, in the midst of which stands the Norman cathedral built in this remote northern fastness about the year 1137. When we had finished our dinner, the headwaiter told us, "Gentlemen, I know ye're not staying in the hotel; but if ye wish, ye'll be welcome to watch television in the writing-room."

Tony and I were no enthusiasts for television; but somewhat puzzled at this civil gesture, we entered the writing-room. Formerly there must have been a score of desks here, and corresponding chairs, intended for the diligent use of commercial travelers—a dying breed. But that old furniture had been thrust out, perhaps into the wild seas; and the desks were supplanted by uncomfortable little metal folding chairs, crowded close together. Every chair in that long darkened room was occupied by an Orkneyman—staring, one and all, at a television set. Television had arrived in Orkney only that week. Of the long, long winter nights at Kirkwall, since the cathedral was consecrated to the murdered Saint Magnus, men had foregathered by Kirkwall firesides for telling of tales and much argumentation—so developing the Scottish intellect. For all those centuries, Kirkwall had talked; hereafter, Kirkwall would view. The Age of Discussion had given way to the Age of Sentiments, even in the Orkneys.

Sentiments are feelings; hereafter the folk of Verona and the folk of Kirkwall will feel more, perhaps; certainly many of them will think less. I confess to being by education, at least, more a man of thought than of feeling. I may be regarded as a survivor—perhaps a captain in the rear guard—of the Age of Discussion. Like the Celts of the twilight, we survivors from the Age of Discussion go forth to battle often, but to victory never. The rising generation say unto us, "We *feel* that human rights are being violated

in Cloudcuckooland” –not knowing it, not thinking it, but *feeling*. Policy becomes the art of applying intuitions. Soon the rising generation will murmur, very possibly, “We *feel* that two and two make four”—not knowing it, not thinking it, but *feeling* that mathematical truth. It may be said that this is harmless. Aye; but what if they come to feel that two and two do *not* make four? Are all sentiments infallible?

We veterans of Discussion’s rear guard are beaten down, horse, foot, and dragoons. Serious periodicals, weekly, fortnightly, monthly, and quarterly, were the meat and the drink of the Age of Discussion, beginning (in Britain) with *The Edinburgh Review* and *The Quarterly Review*. I began writing for such serious periodicals—*The South Atlantic Quarterly* and *The English Journal*, first of all—when I was a sophomore in college; I have grown gray in their service. On either side of the Atlantic, those magazines have fallen dead even as I have served them. *Requiescat in pace, Dublin Review, Fortnightly Review, World Review, Pacific Spectator, Church Quarterly Review, Measure, New English Review*, and many more that printed my lucubrations; some of you were very old when you were slain, and some quite young; but young or old, there was no room for you in the dawning age that prefers effusions to lucubrations.

Into the Age of Sentiments there will survive some serious periodicals, and some decent books, and here and there obscure comers where a few people earnestly discuss some matters that cannot well be swept into oblivion. Yet this remnant of genuine thinkers and readers and talkers may be very small. The immense majority of human beings will *feel* with the projected images they behold upon the television screen; and in those viewers that screen will rouse *sentiments* rather than reflections. Waves of emotion will sweep back and forth, so long as the Age of Sentiments endures. And whether those emotions are low or high must depend upon the folk who determine the tone and temper of television programming.

Such are my general sentiments about television as evocative of sentiments. In my own household, I pursue a policy of war to the knife—or rather, war to the wire cutter—against the television set. When some people learn that no television is tolerated in our tall Italianate house, they inquire, wondering, “But what do you do about your daughters?” And we reply, “We give them tools.” “What kind of tools?” “Why, tools called books.”

Occasionally TV has reared its hideous head at Piety Hill. Clinton Wallace, our hobo butler, was permitted to keep a well-worn portable TV in his bedroom. This I thrust into the cellar the day we buried Clinton.

Some months thereafter, on returning home late at night, I saw lights burning in every room of our house, but encountered no living soul. It was very like the mystery of the derelict *Marie Celeste*. At length I penetrated to a remote quarter of the cellars, and there I found my spouse and all our household huddled round the forbidden TV, watching the late news—or, more particularly, viewing a rather ordinary snowstorm in Manhattan. I dispersed them in wrath. Then, taking a pair of powerful wire-cutters, I did fierce things to the set, and flung portions of it into trash cans.

In the fullness of time, nevertheless, one of the Ethiopians who dwelt with us, young Sahle Selassie Makonnen, secretly repaired the mutilated contraption, installing it in his room—which did not improve his collegiate studies. When I was about to confiscate this shabby article of contraband, it vanished again. Presently a secret agent of the gentler sex informed me that our eldest daughter, Monica, had contrived to transport the set somehow to the topmost room of the foretower of our archaic house, and there sometimes turned it on.

Monica being out of the house when I learned this, I climbed the ladder to the summit of the foretower, with some difficulty forced open a small octagonal window, and flung the accursed set to its destruction. To my chagrin, the confounded thing caught in a gutter, and there hung like Mahomet's coffin, invisible from most points of view.

Our civilized world is passing out of one age and into another epoch. The age that is passing has been called the Age of Discussion. The age that we are entering I call the Age of Sentiments. Most people are aware of this change only vaguely, if at all. As Disraeli put it, “Prevailing opinions generally are the opinions of the generation that is passing.”

Yet wondrous to relate, our housekeeper, Mrs. Cole, descried the suspended television; and the strong-willed Annette, my wife, sent my stalwart assistant scrambling over the roofs to retrieve it. At my stern command, my assistant immured the set in the crawl-space under the front portion of his cottage; and there it may rest until the Last Trump. Monica thinks her parents odd, particularly in their attitude toward television. Once she inquired why I couldn't be like other dads, who “get a six-pack and sit down to watch the game on TV.”

Perhaps our daughters will grow up amenable occasionally to Discussion; not wholly subservient to Sentiments. If so, they will be members of a band about so numerous as that which fled from the Cities of the Plain. Yet in the fullness of time they may inherit the earth: for intelligence and imagination will tell in the long run—even in a television studio, even in a university.

I suppose I have made it clear that I am dragged kicking and screaming into the Age of Sentiments. It is painful enough to be governed by other people's reasoning, without being governed by their sentiments. Yet it should not be thought that I bow down in worship before the late Age of Discussion. For the most part, the Age of Discussion was an age of shams and posturings. I promised to say something about the dissolution of the Age of Discussion; to that I turn now.

That vaunted Age of Discussion has fallen apart because it never had much vitality in it. For most men and women are little interested in abstractions, and so grow bored speedily with discussions: their talk is of bullocks, or of Toyotas. There have existed, true enough, some periods in some regions when Discussion was fairly general, even to a fault—Scotland late in the eighteenth century (well, Edinburgh, anyway), or the seventeenth-century Massachusetts of my ancestors (among the godly there, at least). But these have been oases in a wasteland of complacency or of violence; and even in Scotland and New England during such periods, the serious talkers may not have been the more pleasant for the insistence that “Life is real; Life is earnest! And the grave is not its goal.” It cannot be certified that their relish for Discussion made them into better people; or that it brought to pass a world of fuller freedom and justice and order.

In fine, there never was an age in which the majority of men and women participated actively in a public process of discussions—though occasionally the majority may have entertained the illusion that they so participated. Actually, in all ages public opinion is formed by those unknowable individuals whom Dicey calls the real molders of public opinion—those strong-willed persons, each with his little circle of friends and acquaintances round him whose opinions prevail over the minds of his associates. At the very height of Bagehot's Age of Discussion, relatively few persons formed their own considered judgments. Rather, they were presented with wise or foolish opinions on many subjects, by clergymen, newspaper editors, eminent politicians (in a time when public addresses counted for far more than they do today); and they conformed to those quasi-authoritative opinions, especially if those particular opinions seemed to coincide with the private interest of the conforming. “Discussion,” in fine, always has amounted to discussions among a relatively few people; the rest conform to the doctrines of one faction or another.

In the twentieth century, first the cinema and then the radio began to compete with the old agencies for forming public opinion; and their appeal was to the Sentiments, not to Discussion. I can recall listening with a certain juvenile horror, during the early 'Thirties, to the strident voices of such radio-commentators as Gabriel Heatter and Boake Carter, frantically defaming and misrepresenting everything and everybody; and I marveled that the Republic could survive such lunatic or malign

shapers of public opinion, until it occurred to my youthful reflective faculty that these radio zealots tended to cancel out one another, setting error against error; besides, the public soon learns not to act upon the admonitions of a person who daily cries “Wolf, wolf!”

In departing from the Age of Discussion, then—and the flight from Discussion grew rapid, once radio triumphed in every home—we have left behind much pretense and many Hollow Men. Also, it is sadly true, we have lost some promise and wisdom by our departure into Sentiments. One of the last noble endeavors to redeem the Age of Discussion was that of my old friend T. S. Eliot, in his quarterly magazine *The Criterion*. Aspiring to help to save the world from suicide, Eliot got up, at great expenditure of his own time and energy, this excellent review; and to it there contributed the more important serious men of letters and scholars of the ‘Twenties and ‘Thirties. The bound volumes of this magazine remain available in the better institutional libraries; and if you will take the trouble to browse through those volumes, you will find that the contents have lost little of their interest and pertinence with the passage of the decades. It was Eliot’s fond hope that his journal would be read by public men of importance, whose policies might be affected thereby. But the circulation of *The Criterion* never exceeded a few hundred copies, despite the lip-service given to the magazine in many quarters; and I never have discovered evidence that “the Criterion Crowd” succeeded in influencing a single eminent politician—even though the journal was international in character and circulation. For Eliot made this gallant assault on public apathy at the tag-end of the Age of Discussion. Like Pompeius Magnus, T. S. Eliot stamped his foot—but no legions rose at his summons. Nobody worth mentioning, among public men and the masters of the mass media, remained much interested in Discussion, by the ‘Forties. The Age of Sentiments already had won the field. In that Age of Sentiments, nevertheless, T. S. Eliot’s name remains grand: for Eliot himself understood the Sentiments; and it is the Sentiments, including religious sentiments, that his poetry evokes.

Turn we at last, then, to some defense of the Age of Sentiments. For, as Eliot put it, there are no lost causes because there are no gained causes; and perhaps we may do something in the cause of order, private and public, through the instruments of the Sentiments.

* * *

Just how despicable the general character of television programming is today, everybody already knows; I shall not labor the point. The sentiments imparted by the typical television station are sentiments of avarice, gluttony, sloth, anger, lust, pride, and envy. Most of the cable networks are worse than the commercial stations. The sentiments imparted by the educational or “public” television stations are more commendable; but often the introduction of sentiments by such media is dull and erroneous, vestiges of the methods of the Age of Discussion.

Is it conceivable that the medium of television might yet be employed to wake the sentiments associated with the Seven Gifts of the Holy Ghost: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, righteousness, fear of the Lord? Does such an endeavor sound perfectly absurd, given the present abhorrent state of television programming and the appetites, natural and unnatural, of the average sensual man in these closing decades of the twentieth century?

Actually, in all ages public opinion is formed by those unknowable individuals whom Dicey calls the real molders of public opinion—those strong-willed persons, each with his little circle of friends and acquaintances round him whose opinions prevail over the minds of his associates.

Even through television, may emotions be evoked to help restore order in the soul and order in the commonwealth? My friend Malcolm Muggeridge, so successful in his television appearances, declares fervently that no good can come out of television. In our Age of Sentiments, how do we try to restore some order amidst what Eliot, in “Burnt Norton,” calls “the general mess of imprecision of feeling?”

It will not do to use the deteriorated equipment of the Age of Discussion. I mean that the didacticism of the classroom lecturer is altogether unsuited for television. Every program must work upon the emotions, rather than upon the rational private judgment: the method must be that of drama, with the ethical end of Greek drama. The creator of the drama should appear little, if at all. What television does is to create impressions, not to engage in discussions; and to rouse sentiments, not to impart encyclopedic information.

In any age, unless we are to be vanquished utterly, we must take up the tools—the weapons, if you will—effective in that age. In the Age of Sentiments, television has become the great mover and shaker. I remind you that there persist in human nature both bad sentiments and good sentiments. Repairing once more to the *Century Dictionary*, we need to bear in mind that sentiment is more lofty than mere feeling; and that there exist such sentiments as patriotism, honor, and duty. Sentiments of that order may yet be raised up in the Waste Land—conceivably through the innovating weapon called television.

An age moved by high sentiments can be more admirable than an age mired in desiccated discussions. Those who fancy that the philosophical and political notions of John Stuart Mill can suffice to govern the pride, the passion, and the prejudice of man, wander bewildered in a ghost realm of yesteryear, and must perish. Is it a fantastic aspiration to endeavor to employ television as a means for our regeneration?

One may apply certain lines from “East Coker”—

*There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.*

At any rate, as Henry Adams was given to saying, the fun is in the process. To the studios, men of high sentiments!



Essay III:

A Culture's Road toward Avernus

From "Essays on Our Times," *The Institute for Cultural Conservatism* (July, 1988)

Our inherited culture is involved in great difficulties: I suppose that most educated people nowadays will assent to that statement. Forty years ago, not long after the Second World War, I encountered often people who waxed indignant at my venturing to suggest the possibility of cultural decadence among us. It is otherwise now.

Sometimes, true, I come upon men and women too well satisfied with our world, and with their diversions—rather nasty diversions, not infrequently—therein. Yet these are not what I call tranquil people: instead they bring to mind a poem of two lines by Adam Mickiewicz:

Your soul deserves the place to which it came,
If having entered Hell, you feel no flame.

Our present discontents and distresses are not the subject of this essay; my subject just now is the cause of the descent of modern culture toward the pit of decadence. So a single paragraph from my friend Malcolm Muggeridge's essay "The Great Liberal Death Wish" must suffice here as a succinct analysis of our plight.

"As the astronauts soar into the vast eternities of space," Muggeridge writes, "on earth the garbage piles higher; as the groves of academe extend their domain, their alumni's arms reach lower; as the phallic cult

spreads, so does impotence. In great wealth, great poverty; in health, sickness; in numbers, deception. Gorging, left hungry; sedated, left restless; telling all, hiding all; in flesh united, forever separate. So we press on through the valley of abundance that leads to the wasteland of satiety, passing through the gardens of fantasy; seeking happiness ever more ardently, and finding despair ever more surely.”

Just so. Some years ago, I was sitting in the parlor of an ancient house in the close of York Minster. My host, Canon Basil Smith, the Minster’s Treasurer then, a man of learning and of practical faith, said to me that we linger at the end of an era: soon the culture we have known will be swept into the dustbin of history. About us, as we talked in that medieval mansion, loomed Canon Smith’s tall bookcases lined with handsome volumes; his doxological clock chimed the half-hour musically; flames flared up from his coal fire. Was all this venerable setting of culture, and much more besides, to vanish away as if the Evil Spirit had condemned it? Basil Smith is buried now, and so is much of the society that humorous, high-minded Yorkshireman ornamented and tried to redeem. As we sat beside his fireplace, I thought him too gloomy then; but already much that he predicted has come to pass.

On the occasion of my last visit to him, indeed, there had occurred a small but significant incident that is related to my concept of why our culture seems in the sere and yellow leaf. The bells of York Minster had pealed over the city for centuries, every Sunday morning. But in the year of my visit, the proprietor of Young’s Hotel, across a medieval street from the Minster, had complained that the bells disturbed the slumbers of his guests who had been heartily at their potations the preceding night. With a meekness of a sort not enjoined by Jesus of Nazareth, the bishop and chapter had agreed not to ring those confounded bells on the Sabbath. The decaying “sensual culture” (as Pitirim Sorokin would call it) had triumphed over a remnant of an enfeebled “idealistic culture.” That process continues; with increasing speed, in Britain, America, and elsewhere. The dismissal of the sacred: that rejection lies at the heart of our difficulty. But I run on too fast. If we are to arrest the decay of our culture, first we must diagnose the malady called decadence.

In the ten-volume *Century Dictionary*, published at the beginning of this century, we find this succinct definition of this word decadence: “A falling off or away; the act or process of falling into an inferior condition or state; the process or state of decay; deterioration.” The term “The Decadence”, in historiography, specifically refers to the closing centuries of the Roman empire. Is twentieth-century civilization suffering from ills very like those of fifth-century Roman civilization? But, postponing an answer to that inquiry, let us pursue our business of definition.

In Britain, forty-two years ago, D. R. Hardman, parliamentary secretary to the ministry of education, spoke candidly of the decline of culture. “The age of industrialism and democracy had brought to an end most of the great cultural traditions of Europe, and not least that of architecture,” he told an audience of teachers. “In the contemporary world, in which the majority were half-educated and many not even a quarter educated, and in which large fortunes and enormous power could be obtained by exploiting

ignorance and appetite, there was a vast cultural breakdown which stretched from America through Europe to the East.”

T. S. Eliot commented on Hardman’s sentences, in his cautionary way, “The exploitation of ignorance and appetite is not an activity only of commercial adventurers making large fortunes: it can be pursued more thoroughly and on a larger scale by governments.” Indeed it has been so pursued by many governments, worst of all in the Third World, since 1946: that is one of the principal marks of our decadence.

It is my argument that the elaborate culture we have known stands in grave peril; that our civilization may expire of lethargy, or be destroyed by violence, or perish from a combination of both evils. We who think that life remains worth living ought to address ourselves urgently to means by which a restoration of our inherited culture may be achieved.

But back to definition! A lively if dismaying book on the subject is *Decadence: A Philosophical Inquiry*, by C. E. M. Joad, published at London in 1948. Professor Joad writes that a society or an individual that has become decadent has “dropped the object”; or, in less abstract terms, in a decadent state people have lost any aim, end, or object in life: to decadent folk, life has no significance except as mere process or experience; they live as dogs do, from day to day. The essence of the decadent understanding of the human condition, in Joad’s phrases, may be found “in the view that experience is valuable or is at least to be valued for its own sake, irrespective of the quality or kind of the experience, and in the appropriate beliefs about life, morals, art, and society which entail and are entailed by this view, together with the scales of values and modes of taste associated with these beliefs.”

Joad sets down certain characteristics of a decadent society: luxury; skepticism; weariness; superstition; preoccupation with the self and its experiences; a society “promoted by and promoting the subjectivist

analysis of moral, aesthetic, metaphysical and theological judgments.” Anyone who does not recognize the acuteness of Joad’s analysis here—why, he must lead a life singularly sequestered.

The mordant wit of C. Northcote Parkinson, in *The Law of Longer Life*, published ten years ago, is directed toward the history of social decadence. Parkinson distinguishes six stages, historically regarded, through which civilizations pass on their way to dissolution. Here are those stages, very briefly put:

First, political over-centralization, as in Babylon, Persepolis, Rome, Peking, Delhi, Paris, and London.

Second, inordinate growth in taxation, which becomes “the means of government interference in commercial, industrial, and social life... Taxation, taken to the limit and beyond, has always been a sign of decadence and a prelude to disaster.”

Third, “the growth of a top-heavy system of administration.” A great characterless political machine develops. “Those who are theoretically men of power have surprisingly little real authority, being caught up in a machine which moves slowly in some unintended direction.”

Fourth, “promotion of the wrong people.” In the labyrinth of political bureaucracy, “To have original ideas would be a bar to success. This situation is probably inevitable and eternal but the same tendency, in a decadent society, rubs off on other people....The whole society, as well as the whole organization, becomes lethargic and cumbersome, routine-ridden and tame.”

Fifth, “the urge to overspend.” After years and decades of excessive public expenditure, “Lacking the courage to reduce its expenditure, lacking the means of improving the revenue (the taxes having hit the ceiling), the government incurs a vast debt and loads it on to the shoulders of some future generation.”

Sixth, “liberal opinion”—that is, a feeble sentimentality which weakens the minds and the wills of a great part of a nation’s population. “What concerns our argument is not that the world’s do-gooders are mistaken but that their attitude is decadent. They are moved by sentiment rather than by reason and that is itself a symptom of decay. Still more to the point, their interest is solely in the present and for them, too, the future is merely the end.”

Hard truths! Hardman says that the triumph of industrialism and democracy have led to cultural decadence—in architecture and the visual arts, comparable to the sudden transition in such concerns from the early years of the reign of Diocletian to the late years of the reign of Constantine. Joad says that a state of mind called subjectivism has done the mischief to culture, particularly in obsession with “the self and its experiences.” Parkinson, having in mind principally political structures, says that decadence comes to pass through lack of political vision and resolution. All three writers, I believe, are painfully correct.

And yet no one of these three, it seems to me, has touched directly on the principal cause of the ruinous decay of great cultures. The writer who describes that principal cause most movingly is Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in his address on receiving the Templeton Prize, in 1983. I give you this one passage:

“Over half a century ago, while I was still a child,” Solzhenitsyn said, “I recall hearing a number of older people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: ‘Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.’”

For culture comes from the cult. For the past three centuries, the cult of our civilization—that is, the Christian religion—has been declining in power. The principal reason for this decay has been the growth of the anti-cult of scientism, which is by no means the same thing as natural science. The religious rationalism of John Locke has trickled down, among a great many of the educated or half-educated of our own time, to perfect indifference or positive hostility toward a transcendent religion. And so the culture itself, the core of which was faith, begins to fall to pieces.

A cult is a joining together for worship—that is, the attempt of people to commune with a transcendent power. It is from association in the cult, the body of worshippers, that human community grows. This basic truth has been expounded in recent decades by such eminent historians as Christopher Dawson, Eric Voegelin, and Arnold Toynbee.

Once people are joined in the cult, cooperation for many other things becomes possible. Systematic agriculture, armed defense, irrigation, architecture, the visual arts, music, the more intricate crafts, economic production and distribution, courts and government—all these features of a culture arise gradually from the cult, the religious tie. And especially a web of morals, rules for human conduct, is the product of religious beliefs.

Out of little knots of worshippers, in Egypt, the Fertile Crescent, India, or China, there grew up simple cultures, for those joined by faith can dwell together in relative peace. Presently such simple cultures may develop into complex cultures, and those intricate cultures into great civilizations. American culture of our era is rooted, strange although the fact may seem to us, in tiny gatherings of worshippers in Palestine, Greece, and Italy, thousands of years ago. The enormous material achievements of our civilization have resulted, if remotely, from the spiritual insights of prophets and sages.

This historical truth came home to me, decades ago, when I was strolling through the Chicago Institute of Art. I came upon a halfdarkened corridor in which, on either side, was displayed an exhibit of miniature models of medieval buildings, composing a town. And at the far end of the exhibit, in a case dominating the display, was the model of a Gothic cathedral. The placard below that building read much as follows: “This exhibition fitly culminates in the great church, the center of all human activity, the mother of architecture and the other arts, the core and source of civilization.” I was at that time a fairly thoroughgoing secularist, never having been baptized, let alone a communicant of any church.

The legend beneath the miniature cathedral, nevertheless, struck me with some force: first, because it was posted in a building maintained by public funds (what of the first clause of the First Amendment?); second, because what the legend said was historically true, though never put to me so visually before. Civilization, the civilization we have known, is the child of the church.

How is it that we human beings, in our savage state two-legged wolves, subject only to our ravening egos, moved by lust, avarice, envy, and other deadly sins—how is it that we are able to dwell in a civil social order, most of us abstaining from violence and fraud? Because we have acquired moral habits. But what authority lies behind the habits, giving them sanction? Without religious convictions, we would be so many Cains, every man's hand against every other man's, and society could not cohere. Out of the cult comes moral order; without which even the simplest culture could not come into being.

But suppose that with the elapse of centuries, faith diminishes and the cult withers. What then of a civilization that has been rooted in the cult? For an answer to that uneasy question, we can turn to a twentieth-century parable. G.K. Chesterton instructs us that all life being an allegory, we can understand it only in parable.

The author of my parable, however, is not G.K. Chesterton, but a very different person, Robert Graves, whom I once visited in Mallorca. I refer to Graves' romance *Seven Days in New Crete*—published in America under the title *Watch the North Wind Rise*.

In that lively book, we are told that by the close of the "late Christian Epoch" the world will have fallen altogether under a collectivistic domination, a variant of Communism. Religion, the moral imagination, poetry, and nearly everything else that makes life worth living will have been nearly extirpated by nuclear war and ideology. A system of thought and government called Logicalism, "pantisocratic economics divorced from any religious or national theory", rules the world—for a brief period.

In Grave's words, "Logicalism, hinged on international science, ushered in a gloomy and anti-poetic age. It lasted only a generation or two and ended with a grand defeatism, a sense of perfect futility; that slowly crept over the directors and managers of the regime. The common man had triumphed over his spiritual betters at last, but what was to follow? To what could he look forward with either hope or fear? By the abolition of sovereign states and the disarming of even the police forces, war had become impossible. No one who cherished any religious beliefs whatever, or was interested in sport, poetry, or the arts, was allowed to hold a position of public responsibility. 'Ice-cold logic' was the most valued civic quality, and those who could not pretend to it were held of no account. Science continued laboriously to expand its over-large corpus of information, and the subjects of research grew more and more beautifully remote and abstract; yet the scientific obsession; so strong at the beginning of the third millennium A. D., was on the wane. Logicalist officials who were neither defeatist nor secretly religious and who kept their noses to the grindstone from a sense of duty, fell prey to colobromania, a mental disturbance..."

Rates of abortion and infanticide, of suicide, and other indices of social boredom rise with terrifying speed under this Logicalist regime. Gangs of young people go about robbing, beating, and murdering, for the sake of excitement. It appears that the human race will become extinct if such trends continue; for men and women find life not worth living under such a domination. The deeper longings of humanity have been outraged, so that the soul and the state stagger on the verge of final darkness.

Yet in this crisis an Israeli Sophocrat writes a book called *A Critique of Utopias*, in which he examines seventy Utopian writings, from Plato to Aldous Huxley. “We must retrace our steps,” he concludes, “or perish.” Only by the resurrection of religious faith, the Sophocrats discover, can mankind be kept from total destruction. In an isolated colony of children, the Sophocrats who have supplanted the Logicalists succeed in reviving an ancient and elaborate religion, springing from the primitive soil of myth and symbol; and thus the human race escapes extinction.

Graves really was writing about our own era, not of some remote future: of life in today’s United States and today’s Soviet Union. He tells us that culture arises from the cult; and that when belief in the cult has been wretchedly enfeebled, the culture will decay swiftly. The material order rests upon the spiritual order.

The restoration of learning, humane and scientific; the reform of many public policies; the brightening of the corners where we are—such approaches are open to those among the rising generation who are looking for a purpose in life.

So it has come to pass, here in the closing years of the twentieth century. With the weakening of the moral order, “Things fall apart; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...” The Hellenic and the Roman cultures went down to dusty death after this fashion. And since the seventeenth century, Christian doctrine has been losing its hold upon the mind and the heart of the peoples of what is now called the West and once was called Christendom. From time to time, some reinvigoration of Christian belief has occurred, in forms so widely varying as Wesleyan enthusiasm at the end of the eighteenth century and

the influence of Chateaubriand's book *The Genius of Christianity* early in the nineteenth century; but in general rationalism, skepticism, and the indulgence of will and appetite have tended to win the field.

A great many books have been published on this large subject of the decline of the influence of religious convictions; I cannot well enter upon details here. For the moment, I must state merely that my own study of such concerns has led me to conclude that a civilization, a culture, cannot survive the dying of the belief in a transcendent order that brought it into being. For an understanding of the character and importance of religion far more profound than the "fundamentalism" so commonly assailed in the newspapers and by persons like Norman Lear, I refer you to such twentieth-century scholars as Mircea Eliade, Rudolf Otto, Christopher Dawson, and Jaroslav Pelikan.

Now how are we to account for the widespread decay of religious impulse and religious conviction? (Here I remark that the survival of churches as humanitarian or political organizations merely does not signify that religious faith has survived.) It seems clear that the main cause of the loss of the idea of the holy is the attitude called "scientism"—that is, the popular notion that the revelations of natural science, over the past two centuries or longer, somehow have demonstrated the obsolescence of religious beliefs; have informed us how men and women are naked apes merely; have pointed out that the ends of existence are production and consumption merely; that happiness is the gratification of sensual impulses; that notions of the resurrection of the flesh and the life everlasting are superstitions of the childhood of the human race. Upon these scientific assumptions, elevated to an ideology by John Dewey and his colleagues, public schooling in America is conducted nowadays; implicitly or explicitly.

This view of the human condition has been called—by C. S. Lewis, in particular—reductionism: it reduces human beings almost to mindlessness; it denies the existence of the soul. This attitude, somewhat clumsily called "secular humanism" often, is scientific, but not scientific: for it is a far cry from the understanding of matter and energy that one finds in the addresses, during recent years, of Nobel prizewinners in physics, say. Popular notions of "what science says" are archaic, reflecting the assertions of the scientists of the middle of the nineteenth century; such views are a world away from the writings of Stanley Jaki, the cosmologist and historian of science, who last year was awarded the Templeton Prize for progress in religion. As Arthur Koestler remarks in his little book *The Roots of Coincidence*, yesteryear's scientific doctrines of materialism and mechanism ought to be buried with a requiem of electronic music. Once more, in biology as in physics, the scientific disciplines enter upon the realm of mystery.

Yet the great public always suffers from the affliction called cultural lag. If most people continue to fancy that the vulgarized scientific theory of a century ago is the verdict of all serious scientists today, will not the religious understanding of life continue to wither, and civilization continue to crumble?

Perhaps; and yet, scientists being to the modern populace what priests were to the medieval populace, scientific techniques and speculations might themselves undo the reductionist notion of the human condition, and restore general awareness of the transcendent.

The Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh and the life everlasting, for instance, was inexplicable in terms of natural science when Saint Paul enunciated it; and to nineteenth-century men of science it was a teaching plainly incredible. Yet we now know that the nineteenth-century of understanding of matter—including the human body—was mistaken. Twentieth-century physicists instruct us that you and I are composed of negative and positive particles of electricity, as is all other matter; that, in short, we are energy, rather than solid substance; and that energy may be neither added to nor destroyed—merely transmuted. What once has been assembled, and then dispersed, may be assembled once again. Conceivably these bones may rise again.

When one joins to this understanding the recent studies of the Shroud of Turin, believed to be the burial wrapping of Jesus of Nazareth, a startling supposal may come to mind. Members of the team of American scientists and technologists who studied the Shroud in recent years find themselves utterly unable to give any explanation of the image of a crucified man that appears upon the Shroud: they do not know how it might have been produced; it is like a photographic positive. Did nuclear fission have a part in the production of this image? Was indeed the energy of the Christ transmuted, to reappear in recognizable form beyond the jaws of death?

Here I have offered merely a supposal; it may be that we never will penetrate farther into the mystery of the Shroud. Yet it is conceivable that through study of the Shroud, or through some other work of modern science, the whole understanding of matter and life that has long prevailed among the educated may be radically altered; that through scientific speculation a Sign may be given; that once more the mass of men and women may come to believe in a transcendent realm of being. Should that occur, the cult which sustains culture would move humanity again. Cultures sometimes have been renewed, over the centuries, by the revival within them of a life-giving body of belief.

But such an event being in the hand of God, if it is to occur at all, meanwhile some reflective people do what they can to reanimate the culture, whether or not the cult may be reinvigorated. For they see about them already the evidences of what must occur, if there is no cultural renewal. These are some of the consequences of cultural decadence, sufficiently evident in the United States as the end of the twentieth century approaches:

The decay of popular faith in a moral order, so that no one may be trusted.

The diminishing of a willingness on the part of the individual to make sacrifices for the common good—so encouraging an individualism that shrugs at love of country.

Obsession with creature-comforts and the accumulation of wealth—often wealth that serves no purpose for its possessor, as if he were the dragon Fafnir lying upon his hoard of gold: “Let me rest: I lie in possession!”

A frantic pursuit of sexual pleasures, including those of the wilder shores of lust, which lead only to personal satiety and frustration, and to ghastly social diseases.

A swift decay of manners—though, as James Russell Lowell put the matter, “It is manners that keep the bowie-knife from our throats.”

A failure of political imagination, so that our cities have become great wens of abomination, most of them, and foreign affairs are conducted confusedly, and the greater domestic problems of the civil social order—among them, the growth of a formidable proletariat—receive no consistent competent attention.

A lunatic eagerness for the violent sensations of the moment, regardless of consequences tomorrow—most notoriously, in reckless addiction to narcotics that burn out brain and body.

A horrifying increase in the commission of what used to be called capital crimes, and in the perpetration of frauds.

A weakening of even the nuclear family, the fundamental human institution, and the widespread neglect or abuse of children.

The degradation of the democratic dogma, as shown in the character of many public men, the increasing of centralized power, and the lack of intelligent popular participation in politics—so that in time we may have our American Caesars.

The mediocrity, or sometimes inanity, of our educational structure, from kindergarten to graduate school—about which many complain, but with respect to which no noticeable improvements occur.

Why enlarge this catalogue? Involved in partisan disputes about this season’s ephemeral difficulties, we find next to no time in which we might address the deep-seated afflictions of our culture.

It is my argument that the elaborate culture we have known stands in grave peril; that our civilization may expire of lethargy, or be destroyed by violence, or perish from a combination of both evils. We who think that life remains worth living ought to address ourselves urgently to means by which a restoration of our inherited culture may be achieved.

“Redeem the time; redeem the dream,” T. S. Eliot wrote. It remains possible, given right reason and moral imagination, to confront the age’s disorders boldly. We need not go down to dusty death meekly. The restoration of learning, humane and scientific; the reform of many public policies; the brightening

of the corners where we are—such approaches are open to those among the rising generation who are looking for a purpose in life.

Such a restoration, painstaking labor, cannot be accomplished by the ideologue, the violent revolutionary. Conceivably the politics of this country, to the end of this century and beyond it, may be much more concerned with the reinvigoration of culture than with the economic issues which have dominated elections, most of the time, for the past six decades and longer. And whether or not modern people are given a Sign from on high, those men and women who are concerned for the moral order, and for the civilized order derived from moral habits, need to repair to the sources of wisdom—to religious insights.



Essay IV:

The American Mission

From *Redeeming the Time* (ISI, 1996)

Does the nation called the United States of America possess a mission, providentially ordained? If so, does America have the ability and the courage to pursue that mission, at the close of the twentieth century?

Four decades ago, during the Eisenhower era, we heard much talk about the “American Century”; and there was printed much discussion—some of it superficial, and the rest not conspicuously imaginative—about American national goals. Since then, American expectations often have been chastened. If it remains possible that this still may become the American Century in the eyes of future historians, what is America’s mission?

Let us repair, with this question in mind, to Orestes Brownson, who was born in 1805 and died in 1876. Lord Acton, possessed of one of the better intellects of the nineteenth century, believed that Orestes Brownson was the most penetrating thinker of his day. That was a high compliment indeed, for in the United States it was the day of Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, and a half-dozen other men of the first rank—not to mention the great Victorians of Britain. Brownson was a considerable political philosopher, a seminal essayist on religion, a literary critic of discernment, a serious journalist with fighting vigor, and one of the shrewder observers of American character and institutions.

Although a radical in his youth, Brownson became after 1840 a formidable defender of the permanent things. He was the first writer to refute Marx's *Communist Manifesto*.

"In most cases," Brownson wrote in 1848, replying to Marx, "the sufferings of a people spring from moral causes beyond the reach of civil government, and they rarely are the best patriots who paint them in the most vivid colors, and rouse up popular indignation against the civil authorities. Much more effectual service could be rendered in a more quiet and peaceful way, by each one seeking, in his own immediate sphere, to remove the moral causes of the evils endured."

Without Authority vested somewhere, Brownson told the Americans of his age, without regular moral principles that may be consulted confidently, justice cannot long endure anywhere. Yet modern liberalism and democracy, he continued, are contemptuous of the whole concept of moral authority. If not checked in their assaults upon habitual reverence and prescriptive morality, the liberals will destroy justice not only for their enemies, but for themselves. *Under God*, Brownson emphasized, the will of the people ought to prevail; but many liberals and democrats ignore that prefatory clause.

Brownson was an outspoken champion of the American Republic. His book entitled *The American Republic* was published the year after the end of the Civil War; it contains his most systematic exposition of the idea of the American Mission.

Every living nation, Brownson wrote in that book, "has an idea given it by Providence to realize, and whose realization is its special work, mission, or destiny." The Jews were chosen to preserve traditions, and that the Messiah might arise. The Greeks were chosen for the realizing of art, science, and philosophy. The Romans were chosen for the developing of the state, law, and jurisprudence. And the Americans, too, have been appointed to a providential mission, Brownson declared. America is meant to continue the works of the Greeks and the Romans, but to accomplish yet more. The American Republic has the mission of reconciling liberty with law.

Brownson was a champion of ordered freedom. Yet America's mission, he added in 1866,"is not so much the realization of liberty as the realization of the true idea of the state, which secures at once the authority of the public and the freedom of the individual—the sovereignty of the people without social despotism, and individual freedom without anarchy. In other words, its mission is to bring out in its life the dialectical union of authority and liberty, of the natural rights of man and those of society. The Greek and Roman republics asserted the state to the detriment of individual freedom; modern republics either do the same, or assert individual freedom to the detriment of the state. The American republic has been instituted by Providence to realize the freedom of each with advantage to the other."

So America's mission, as Brownson discerned it, was to present to mankind a political model: a commonwealth in which order and freedom exist in a healthy balance or tension—in which the citizen is at once secure and free. This reconciling of authority and liberty is the central problem of politics. As the

German scholar Hans Barth points out, Edmund Burke is the most important political thinker of modern times precisely because Burke understood the necessary tension between the claims of order and the claims of freedom. In America, Orestes Brownson discerned this cardinal problem of politics better than did anyone else.

The reconciling of authority and liberty, so that justice might be realized in the good state: that mission for America is not yet accomplished, a century and a quarter after Brownson wrote; but neither is that mission altogether forgotten. *Under God*, said Brownson in his emphatic way, the American Republic may grow in virtue and justice. A century later, the word “under God” would be added to the American pledge of allegiance.

The American Republic has the mission of reconciling liberty with law.

Yet also, during the past three decades, the influence has grown of those Americans who would prefer to stride along without any divinely-ordained mission—who believe, indeed, that the American Republic could do famously without bothering about God. The Supreme Court of the United States has tended to side with these militant secularists, correctly styled “humanitarians” by Brownson. Humanitarian liberals, Brownson wrote in his *American Republic*, are the enemies—if sometimes the unwitting enemies—of true freedom and true order.

“The humanitarian democracy,” Brownson said, “which scorns all geographical lines, effaces all individualities, and professes to plant itself on humanity alone, has acquired by the [Civil] war new strength, and is not without menace to our future.” Brownson declares that the humanitarian presently will attack distinctions between the sexes; he will assail private property, as unequally distributed. “Nor can our humanitarian stop there. Individuals are, and as long as there are individuals will be, unequal: some are handsomer and some are uglier, some wiser or sillier, more or less gifted, stronger or weaker, taller or shorter, stouter or thinner than others, and therefore some have natural advantages which others have not. There is inequality, therefore injustice, which can be remedied only by the abolition of all individualities, and the reduction of all individuals to the race, or humanity, man in general. He [the humanitarian] can find no limit to his agitation this side of vague generality, which is no reality, but a pure nullity, for he respects no territorial or individual circumscriptions, and must regard creation itself as a blunder.”

This humanitarian, or social democrat (here Brownson uses these terms almost interchangeably), is by definition a person who denies that any divine order exists. Having rejected the supernatural order and the possibility of a Justice that is more than human, the humanitarian tends to erect Envy into a pseudo-moral principle. It leads him, this principle of Envy, straight toward a dreary table land of featureless social equality—toward Tocqueville’s “democratic despotism,” from which not only God seems to have disappeared, but even old fangled individual human beings are lacking.

A truly just society is not a democracy of degradation, Brownson argues. The just society does not reduce human beings to the condition of identical units on the dismal plain of absolute equality. The just society will not speak in the accents of envy, but will talk of order, duty, and honor.

In any particular country, Brownson maintains, the form of government must be suited to the traditions and the organic experience of the people. In some lands, therefore, the form of government will be monarchy; in others, aristocracy; in America, republicanism or democracy *under God*. America must not contest the sovereignty of God, which is absolute over all of us. The American government must secure to every citizen his freedom. And from such freedom comes the justice of which Plato wrote in his *Republic*, and Cicero in his *Offices*: the right of every person to do his own work, free of the meddling of others.

Such is the character of true social justice, Brownson tells us: a liberation of every person, under God, to do the best that is in him. Poverty is no evil, in itself; obscurity is no evil; labor is no evil; even physical pain may be no evil, as it was none to the martyrs. This world is a place of trial and struggle, so that we may find our higher nature in our response to challenges.

It is America’s mission, Brownson told his age, to offer to the world the example of such a state and such a society, at once orderly and free. A year after Brownson published *The American Republic*, Marx published *Das Kapital*. Among the more interesting concepts in that latter work I find this confession by Marx: “In order to establish equality, we must first establish inequality.” Marx means that to make all men equal, we must first break the strong, the energetic, the imaginative, the learned, the thrifty; they must be broken, indeed, by the dictatorship of the proletariat. Then, having established by force a universal mediocrity, we may enjoy the delights of total equality of condition.

The American mission, Brownson knew so early as 1848, is to show all nations an alternative to the dreary socialist sea-level egalitarian society of equal misery. To that high duty, Brownson earnestly believed, the American nation has been appointed by divine providence.

Do Brownson’s phrases ring strange in our ears? Yes, they do, in some degree. And why? Because the humanitarians—that is, the folk who take it for granted that human nature and society may be perfected through means purely human—have come to dominate our universities, our schools, our serious press, most of our newspapers, our television and our radio. The thought, and the very vocabulary, of this

Republic have fallen under the domination of humanitarian ideology. Why, the churches themselves, or many of them, have been converted into redoubts of humanitarianism, issuing humanitarian fulminations or comminations against such public men as still stubbornly maintain that politics is the art of the possible.

Some popular revolt against humanitarian dogmas is obvious enough today. As George Santayana put it, it will not be easy to hammer a coddling socialism into America. It is still less easy to eradicate altogether the influence of religious belief in the United States—hard though the humanitarian zealots have been laboring at that task. Yet whether traditional Americans retain coherence and intellectual vigor sufficient to undo humanitarian notions and policies—why, that hangs in the balance nowadays. The tone and temper of American thought and public policy have drifted, for the last three decades at least, toward the humanitarian goal of a materialistic egalitarianism, toward what Robert Graves calls the ideology of Logicalism: that is, a social Dead Sea without imagination, diversity—or hope. It is not that the humanitarians have been especially numerous: rather, their work has been accomplished by small circles of intellectuals, centered chiefly in New York City. Yet ideas do have consequences. America's media of opinion increasingly have reflected the assumptions of that humanitarianism which Brownson denounced in his day.

So America's mission, as Brownson discerned it, was to present to mankind a political model: a commonwealth in which order and freedom exist in a healthy balance or tension—in which the citizen is at once secure and free. This reconciling of authority and liberty is the central problem of politics.

Some of the unpleasant consequences of humanitarian intellectuality having become apparent to a large part of the American public, that public has begun to react at the polling-booths. (A human body that cannot react, I venture to remind you, is a corpse.) Also there has occurred some healthy reaction

intellectually against humanitarian ideology. Yet this reaction comes late, and is relatively feeble as yet: consider, for instance, the continued domination of book-publishing by humanitarian liberals; or the prejudices of most professors; or the fewness in numbers of those theologians and church leaders of intellectual powers who boldly assert that Christianity and Judaism are transcendent religions, not instruments for the destruction of society's cake of custom.

How does this contest between the American humanitarians and the American traditionalists affect the question of the American mission? Why, part of this struggle is a competition between two very different concepts of what the American mission ought to be. I have outlined already the traditionalists' understanding of the American mission: that is, to maintain and improve a Republic in which the claims of freedom and the claims of order are balanced and reconciled—a Republic of liberty under law, endowed with diversity and opportunity, an example to the world. There exists also a humanitarian, or social-democratic, understanding of the American mission, which already has brought upon us disastrous consequences, in domestic policy and in foreign policy. Permit me to suggest the character of this humanitarian notion of America's mission, with a few illustrations of its practical effect.

The thought, and the very vocabulary, of this Republic have fallen under the domination of humanitarian ideology.

The words “humane” and “humanitarian” mean quite different things. The humanitarian believes in brotherhood: that is, “Be my brother,” he says, “or I’ll kill you.” He aspires to assimilate others to his mode and substance.

The humanitarian, whose roots are in the French Enlightenment (full of enlighteners, but singularly lacking in light, Coleridge says), suffers from the itch for perpetual change. Change in what direction? Why, change away from superstition (by which he means religion), from old customs, from established constitutions, from anything that is private (property especially), from local and national affections, from the little platoon that we belong to in society. And change toward an arid rationalism, toward emancipation from old moral obligations and limits, toward a classless “people’s democracy,” toward collectivism and total equality of condition, toward a sentimental internationalism (a world without diversity), toward concentration of power. The aim of humanitarianism—that is, the ideology which denies the divine and declares the omnipotence of human planners—is singularly inhumane. Were it

possible for the humanitarians to accomplish their design altogether, humankind would be reduced to the inane and impoverished state foretold by Jacquetta Hawkes in her fable “The Unites.”

To understand the humanitarian mentality, American variety, to which I refer, we may turn to Santayana’s novel *The Last Puritan*. In that shrewd and moving book, we encounter a minor character, Cyrus P. Whittle, a Yankee schoolmaster, a “sarcastic wizened little man who taught American history and literature in a high quavering voice, with a bitter incisive emphasis on one or two words in every sentence as if he were driving a long hard nail into the coffin of some detested fallacy.... His joy, so far as he dared, was to vilify all distinguished men. Franklin had written indecent verses; Washington—who had enormous hands and feet—had married Dame Martha for her money; Emerson served up Goethe’s philosophy in ice-water. Not that Mr. Cyrus P. Whittle was without enthusiasm and a secret religious zeal. Not only was America the biggest thing on earth, but it was soon going to wipe out everything else: and in the delirious dazzling joy of that consummation, he forgot to ask what would happen afterwards. He gloried in the momentum of sheer process, in the mounting wave of events; but minds and their purposes were only the foam of the breaking crest; and he took an ironical pleasure in showing how all that happened, and was credited to the efforts of great and good men, really happened against their will and expectation.”

An enduring Pax Americana would be produced not by bribing and boasting, but by quiet strength—and especially by setting an example of ordered freedom that might be emulated.

Here we have the American humanitarian in a nutshell. For the humanitarian, America’s mission is “to wipe out everything else”—to destroy the old order in all the rest of the world, the old faiths, the old governments, the old economies, the old buildings, the old loves and loyalties. And in the delirious dazzling joy of that consummation, the American humanitarian forgets to ask what would happen afterwards.

The influence of this evangelical humanitarianism, this very odd passion for doing good to other people by virtually or literally effacing them, is not confined to one American party or one American class. One

thinks of President Wilson, sure that he could make the world safe for democracy by resort to arms—and succeeding, as he saw himself toward the end, merely in delivering eastern Europe into the hands of the Bolsheviks. One thinks, too, of the designs for Americanizing Africa that Colonel House put into Wilson’s head—but which never came to pass.

Or one thinks of President Franklin Roosevelt’s privately-expressed detestation of the French and British systems, and of his intention (frustrated by events) to make all of Africa (after an expected victory at Dakar) into an American sphere of influence. One thinks, too, of the courses of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson in Indo-China, and of their illusion that American-style democracy, middle-of-the-road parties and all, could be established instantly in Vietnam and neighboring states—if only persons like President Diem were swept away, by such means as might be thought necessary.

I have heard this humanitarian doctrine about America’s mission expressed from a Washington platform (which I shared) some four decades ago by the president of the Chamber of Commerce of the United States. If only all the peoples of the world, he said in substance, could be induced or compelled to abolish their old ways of life and become good Americans, emancipated from their ancient creeds and habits, buying American products—why, how happy they all would become!

And these humanitarian doctrines were preached forty years ago by an eminent official of the American labor movement—who confessed indeed that this humanitarian Americanizing might take a century or more of turmoil, and must include the destruction of all existing ruling classes, the driving of handicraft producers to the wall, and the overwhelming of all old religions. But (borrowing a phrase from Robespierre) you can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs, you know, he reminded his readers. And think of how happy everybody everywhere will be when everything but an amorphous Americanism is wiped out!

Such is America’s mission as perceived by the humanitarian. Yet there remains that very different kind of American mission for which Brownson hoped. Probably Brownson’s concept of a national mission was derived in part from Vergil’s idea of *fatum*—that is, fate, destiny, mission.

In the age of Augustus, the poet Vergil aspired to consecrate anew the mission of Rome. He did not prevail altogether against the pride, the passion, and the concupiscence of his time: no poet can do that. Yet had there been no Vergil, rousing the consciences of some men of the Empire, the imperial system would have been far grosser and more ruthless than it was. Had it not been for Vergil, the society of the early Empire might have been consumed by its own materialism and egoism. Vergil perceived at work in Roman civilization a divine mission—a purpose for which the Christian adjective is “providential.” Communicating that insight to the better minds of his age and of succeeding generations, Vergil made of *Romanitas*, the Roman culture, an ideal which in part fulfilled his prophecy of Rome’s mission.

By *fatum*, Vergil meant the Roman imperial destiny—Rome’s duty, imposed by unknowable powers, to bring peace to the world, to maintain the cause of order and justice and freedom, to withstand barbarism. For Vergil, this mission was the true significance of Rome’s history.

So it was with Brownson’s idea of the American mission. The achieving of that mission seemed remote about the time when Brownson described his principle of “the dialectical union of authority and liberty.” We have not yet achieved that mission. But today, America has arrived, probably, at its maximum territorial extent, its maximum population (or nearly that), and its height of political, military, and economic power. We Americans, like the Romans of the age of Augustus, must make irrevocable choices. At that time, Rome had either to renew the idea and the reality *offiatum*, or else to sink prematurely into private and public corruption, internal violence, and disaster on the frontiers. Just so is it with us now.

Then what is America’s mission in our age? It remains, as Brownson put it, to reconcile liberty with law. The great grim tendency of our world is otherwise: sometimes toward anarchy, but more commonly toward the total state, whose alleged benefits delude. This is no easy mission, even at home: consider how many people who demand an enlargement of civil liberties at the same time vote for vast increase of the functions and powers of the general government.

**The American mission, I maintain with
Brownson, is to reconcile the claims
of order and the claims of freedom: to
maintain in an age of ferocious ideologies
and fantastic schemes a model of justice.**

And this mission is more difficult still in the example the United States sets for the world. If we are to experience a *Pax Americana*, it will not be the sort of American hegemony that was attempted by Presidents Truman and Eisenhower and Kennedy and Johnson: not a patronizing endeavor, through gifts of money and of arms, to cajole or intimidate all the nations of the earth into submitting themselves to a vast overwhelming Americanization, wiping out other cultures and political patterns.

An enduring *Pax Americana* would be produced not by bribing and boasting, but by quiet strength—and especially by setting an example of ordered freedom that might be emulated. Tacitus said that the

Romans created a wilderness, and called it peace. We may aspire to bring peace by encouraging other nations to cultivate their own gardens: in that respect, to better the Augustan example.

So much for the precepts of Vergil and Brownson. Either, in the dawning years, we Americans will know Augustan ways—or else we may find ourselves in a different Roman era resurrected. It might be the era of the merciless old Emperor Septimius Severus. As Septimius lay dying at York, after his last campaign, there came to his bedside his two brutal sons, Geta and Caracalla, asking their father how they should rule the Empire once he had gone. “Pay the soldiers,” Septimius told them, in his laconic fashion. “The rest do not matter.”

In such servitude, lacking both order and freedom, end nations whose mission has been false, or who have known no mission at all. To borrow phrases again from *The Last Puritan*, Americans always were consecrated to great expectations. Adherents to the old traditions of America know that we are not addressed to vanity, to some gorgeous universal domination of our name or manners. Nor are we intended to play the role of the humanitarians with the guillotine. The American mission, I maintain with Brownson, is to reconcile the claims of order and the claims of freedom: to maintain in an age of ferocious ideologies and fantastic schemes a model of justice.



Essay V:

The Great Mysterious Incorporation of the Human Race

Remarks delivered at a conference in June 1990 at the campuses of Seattle Pacific University and Seattle University and subsequently published in *Permanent Things*, edited by Andrew Tadie and Michael Macdonald (Eerdmans, 1995).

The title of these remarks I owe to that great rhetorician Edmund Burke. By “the great mysterious incorporation of the human race” he meant the intricate continuity which joins the dead, the living, and those who will be born; he meant, too, the community of souls, transcending time; and he meant that nothing in the civil social order is either wholly old or wholly new, for Providence has arranged that change as the means of our preservations.

The men and women of letters whose talents and virtues we celebrate in this symposium were champions of the Permanent Things; and they knew themselves to be shareholders in the great mysterious incorporation of the human race, and so they live far longer than this mortal envelope endures. Not one of them is still here below; but they are those dead who give us energy; and if any human creatures were made for the resurrection of the flesh and the life everlasting, surely these men and women were. Of Chesterton, Eliot, Lewis, Sayers, Tolkien, and Waugh, I knew only Eliot personally;

and most people today have never looked upon the face of any of these talented writers. Here I give you some lines of moving verse by a Southern gentleman and scholar of the generation that is passing— by Professor George Burke Johnston, of Blacksburg, Virginia. His poem is entitled “On the Death of J. R. R. Tolkien.”

Many a citizen of Good Queen Bess
Must have desired to see and touch the hand
Of Edmund Spenser, free of Faerie Land
And must have felt a pang of deep distress
On hearing such a meeting could not bless
His fellow wanderer on this dark strand;
Then must have turned with signs from vision planned
Back to the pulsing lines’ infiniteness.
We who walked Middle-Earth in Tolkien’s time
And yearned in vain to meet him eye to eye.
Now that his sailing from Grey Havens ends
The hope of meeting here, may praise in rime
His word-lore, in this Age unlike to die
And in the Fellowship be sealed his friends.

Though we cannot see the faces of the men and women whose poetry and prose we so cherish, by an act of the moral imagination we may evoke them to renew our minds and consciences. They may delineate for us the Permanent Things, a phrase borrowed from T. S. Eliot. By “the Permanent Things” he meant those elements in the human condition that give us our nature, without which we are as the beasts that perish. They work upon us all in the sense that both they and we are bound up in that continuity of belief and institution called the great mysterious incorporation of the human race.

Can the great writers of the first half of the twentieth century —the fabulists of that age, if you will—help to redeem our time? Eliseo Vivas tells us that it is one of the marks of human decency to be ashamed of having been born into the twentieth century. The writers whom we honor here set their faces against the errors and vices of the century: as they and we were swept down by a flood toward the Dead Sea, those writers refused to sing Hallelujah to the river god. By the ghostly power of these great dead, may the literature of our bent culture be renewed?

As I put it in my book *Eliot and His Age*, “though here and there some stalwart Gerontion still writes, or some hopeful new talent starts up, for the most part we encounter literary ephemera, or else the prickly pears and Dead Sea fruit of literary decadence.” Yet it does not follow as the night does day that there may not occur a renewal of high literary talents, illuminated by the moral imagination.

Permit me to suggest certain causes of our literary decadence; and then to speculate on whether, and how, it may be possible to conceive of a regeneration of humane letters.

I commence with a passage from the earliest of T. S. Eliot's better-known essays, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," published in 1917. Here he touches upon emotions expressed in poetry, a subject pertinent to the present dismal endeavor of various writers to probe pruriently into Eliot's private life:

It is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting.... The emotion in his poetry will be a very complex thing, but not with the complexity of the emotions of people who have very complex or unusual emotions in life. One error, in fact, of eccentricity in poetry is to seek for new human emotions to express; and in this search for novelty in the wrong place it discovers the perverse.

That last sagacious sentence may be applied to more than "poetry" in the sense of verse. Consider the very numerous schools of divinity or theology in this land, many of them richly endowed with capital assets, although not so lavishly supplied with spiritual insights. Handsome scholarships continue to attract young persons to these institutions, and those persons continue to pour out dissertations in the discipline of theology. Some element of originality is demanded in doctoral dissertations; but few young men and women, especially in our time, are capable of first-rate original contributions to the divine science, having been reared in an intellectual climate of vulgarized Darwinism and vulgarized Freudianism. What to do?

Is it conceivable that after eight centuries of achievement the English language may cease to be the instrument of great poetry and prose?

Why, the thing to do is to search for novelty in the wrong place, and discover the perverse in new aspects of an alleged "theology": liberation theology, black theology, chicano theology, feminist theology, theology of animals, gay theology, deconstructive theology, rock theology, Lord knows what else. Often the first trumpet-blast proclaiming these new discoveries in the god-science is a denial of the dogmata upon which the old theology was founded. The perverse offers its rewards, for a time—although

presently yet other and more startling shapes of the perverse must be unveiled, Dinos of the insatiable appetites being king when Zeus has been overthrown.

So it is with the writing of books in our bent world. A great many young people aspire to the condition of authors, both for emoluments and for celebrity. Whole departments—nay, schools—of “creative writing” proliferate; writers’ workshops and colonies provide supplementary pay to college instructors serving on their staffs; community colleges offer courses in “How to Write the Novel” and “Writing Articles for Profit” for the edification of housewives and ambitious tool-and-die makers. Meanwhile it grows increasingly difficult to find any publisher who will bring out an author’s first novel; probably the novel itself is a dying form of the literary art.

Then what is the would-be writer to do? Why, devise some literary novelty; to impress a publisher, take up a fresh form of perversity—although such innovations may be difficult to imagine, the changes already having been rung on the bells of morals and politics by well-paid literary men still in the land of the living. Let me turn again to T. S. Eliot, writing in 1933 about the attractions of Marxism for a New York writer:

The literary profession is not only, in all countries, overcrowded and underpaid (the few overpaid being chiefly persons who have outlived their influence, if they ever had any); it is embarrassed by such a number of ill-trained people doing such a number of unnecessary jobs; and writing so many unnecessary books and unnecessary reviews of unnecessary books, that it has much ado to maintain its dignity as a profession at all. One is almost tempted to form the opinion that the world is at a stage at which men of letters are a superfluity. To be able therefore to envisage literature under a new aspect, to take part in the creation of a new art and new standards of literary criticism, to be provided with a whole stock of ideas and words, that is for a writer in such circumstances to be given a new lease of life. It is not always easy, of course, in the ebullitions of a new movement, to distinguish the man who has received the living word from the man whose access of energy is the result of being relieved of the necessity of thinking for himself. Men who have stopped thinking make a powerful force.

Those sentences were written more than half a century ago; the public that used to be called “the common reader” has diminished since then, and employment for persons with literary aptitudes is confined more and more to editorial labors for trade journals, “dumbing down” already dull manuals for school-textbook publishers, and copywriting for advertising agencies. Under such circumstances, the inducements to prostitution of literary skills loom large.

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In a prosperous Michigan town about six years ago, I gave the dedicatory address at the opening of a new public-library building. That structure was very well equipped with the newest gadgets of library science. Just inside the entrance, close to the circulation desk stood racks of paperbacks, hot off the press, hundreds of them in their glossy multicolored illustrated stridency. It was clear that many of them were pornographic; others pretended to be. They were placed in this conspicuous situation so that “young adults” —that is, teenagers—might be attracted to them. “The great thing is to get the kids reading; it doesn’t matter so much what they read.” So apologists tell us. If the kids didn’t read, where would graduates of library schools find employment?

The purposes of reading for Eliot were different, as he explained in *After Strange Gods*, his lectures at the University of Virginia in 1933:

The number of people in possession of any criteria for discriminating between good and evil is very small; the number of the half-alive hungry for any form of spiritual experience, or what offers itself as spiritual experience, high or low, good or bad, is considerable. My own generation has not served them very well. Never has the printing press been so busy, and never have such varieties of buncombe and false doctrine come from it. “Woe unto the foolish prophets, that follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing! O Israel, thy prophets have been like foxes in the waste places. . . . And the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Son of man, these men have taken their idols into their hearts, and put the stumbling-block of their iniquity before their face: should I be inquired of at all by them?”

Imagination it is that shapes society—moral imagination, or idyllic imagination, or diabolic imagination. The writers whose works we celebrate here were endowed with the moral imagination.

It is not necessary that, in the name of the public libraries’ boasted “freedom to read,” the rising generation be brought up on a diet of literary foulness which loathsomely misrepresents human nature and incites to gross acts of aggression or degradation. This mockery of freedom of choice has arisen only in recent decades. I remember with much affection the beautiful little library-room at Starkweather

School, in Plymouth, Michigan, where I was a pupil. Of its hundreds of books on those handsome shelves of oak, every one in some degree was a Bright Book. Funds being limited in our railroad town, those books had been selected with much care by the school's principal, a woman of considerable presence and knowledge, and by the chairman of the school board, a bank manager who happened to be my grandfather. That library was kept open all summer, too, so that we children could read on our front porches, which we did, down there by the railroad yards. Instructed by certain heroic tales, notably the versions of Arthurian legends by Sidney Lanier and Howard Pyle, we boys battered one another with wooden swords after having garbed ourselves in cardboard armor: it was no bad preparation for the dawning age. Nobody pored over pornography, that kind of "freedom to read" not having been thoughtfully provided for our delectation.

Now what are we to make of the potboiling writers who tum out the pornography that becomes the daily literary diet of too many boys and girls, often with unhappy moral and psychological consequences for them, and with disagreeable consequences in society generally? Perhaps it may be said in lefthanded defense of such scribblers that they do not pretend to be serious writers; they are in the game merely for the money. What then of the people who write Dark Books on principle, it seems, and often are praised in major book-review media for the latest display of their original insights into delightful human depravity?

Edmund Fuller described such folk in 1958, in his book *Man in Modern Fiction*:

What some writers have lost is not an external framework of values, not just this or that set of value concepts. They have lost the basic vision of the nature of their own kind. They not only do not know *who* they are, which is problem enough; they also do not know *what* they are—and that is the ultimate tragedy; for man not to know the nature of man. Indeed, if he knows not what he is, is he any longer man, until he has re-learned himself?

Such writers are original in the sense that until the end of the eighteenth century no writer presumed to employ the language that the authors of the Dark Books habitually use, and no writer before Sade took so lunatic a view of the human person. Today, a good many such writers make real money by shocking the public by ingenious impudicities; but the love of money is not the sole root of their evil: some of them earnestly desire to degrade, to pull down, to destroy—the satanic impulse. Once people begin to call themselves intellectuals and cease to believe in the existence of Satan, the power of the Dark draws in about them.

What many writers of our present hour thrust upon us is a perverse vision of the Abyss—in which spectacle they rejoice, or pretend to rejoice. In the lines of the York Mystery plays, "There shalt thou naught but sorrow see, and sit by Sathanas the fiend." As some of you know, I write mystical tales—taking ordinarily the form of ghost stories. My stories, too, offer glimpses of the Abyss; but they do not rejoice in damnation. In very recent years I have observed in anthologies of "horror stories"—anthologies, I mean, in which some tale of my own was included—a pervasive pseudo-eroticism of a

most disagreeable nature. I say “pseudo-eroticism” because one encounters in those stories sexuality without love, sexual violation instead of fulfillment, sniggering descriptions of cruelties and perversions. The erotic impulse is bound up with love of life; but what we find in these horror stories is appetite for gory death. Like the learned researches of Alfred Kinsey, these stories might convert Casanova into a Puritan: they make sexuality seem utterly repellent.

So runs the current in one genre. A depraved literature reflects a growing depravity in a society generally; but also it nurtures that larger depravity and defiantly attempts to justify it. Sir Thomas Gresham instructs us that bad money drives out good. So it is, more and more, with the reading of our rising generation.

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During what I have called the Age of Eliot—the period from the middle twenties to the middle sixties—Britain, France, and the United States were endowed with a remarkable number of able writers, and some great ones. I knew certain of them—Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Roy Campbell, Robert Speaight, George Scott Moncrieff, Max Picard, Robert Graves, Donald Davidson, Bernard Iddings Bell, Albert Jay Nock, Richard Weaver, Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy. They no longer live; and their places have not been filled.

Of course, we still have among us some distinguished men of letters: I think of Andrew Lytle, Cleanth Brooks, Czeslaw Milosz, Malcolm Muggeridge. But they are older than I. There are some sound writers now rising to influence. Yet I know of no able critic who would venture to maintain that the literary arts in the English language stand in a healthy condition during these closing years of the twentieth century.

Or is this period of ours an interregnum, a pause, an interval between one era of high literary achievement and another era of a different character but of comparable worth? Cultures do suffer from fatigue and cease to wake the imagination; or they sometimes are broken by great changes, not necessarily military. There came a time, in the fifth century of the Christian era, when polite literature in the Latin language ceased to be written—totally ceased; there had come a time, three centuries earlier, when imaginative and original literature in classical Greek had dried up.

Is it conceivable that after eight centuries of achievement the English language may cease to be the instrument of great poetry and prose? It comes to mind that Italian, which rose to influence throughout Europe during the Renaissance, has lost the dominion it enjoyed in the times of Dante, Aristo, and Tasso. Yet what language might supplant English—now the commercial and diplomatic tongue internationally, having supplanted French—as the chief body of literature during the twenty-first century?

Or is it conceivable that the literatures of all nations may be flung into the dustbin, humane culture being overwhelmed by materialism, the total state, and the full intellectual affliction which Robert Graves, in *Seven Days in New Crete*, denominated Logicalism? May getting and spending usurp the whole of life, and may “literature” be reduced to mere diversion during an idle hour—on a beach, say, when television is unavailable—and that diversion of rather a nasty character, *a la* Huxley’s *Brave New World*?

Before we turn to some reflections upon alternatives to this dismal prospect, let us look briefly at causes of our literary decadence. Some causes are obvious to everybody. The coming of elaborate diversions—television in particular—led the majority of people away from most forms of reading. When the weekly or monthly magazine ceased to appear in middle-income houses, middlebrow culture became wholly subject to Demon TV.

The participants in a tolerable literary culture, moreover, have been much diminished in number by the loss of standards in public instruction, from kindergarten up through graduate school. In my book *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning* and elsewhere, I have described the consequences of the wretched anthologies used in nearly all American schools during recent decades. Young people who have been introduced to almost no good books during their school years are bewildered when they emerge from the dungeons of free and compulsory public instruction: they lack literary norms.

Another cause of literary decadence has been the centralization of writing and publishing, which has tended to reduce diversity and discussion in the realm of letters, has put powerful influence into the hands of very small circles of writers, reviewers, and publishers, has ignored the literary interests of a great part of the population, and has forced those outlanders to conform their tastes to the notions prevalent in the literary capital. In these United States, the hegemony of New York literary circles and publishing firms is nearly absolute. Eliot said once that the worst form of expatriation for an American writer is residence in New York City. Yet it is New York’s book reviews in major newspapers and magazines that determine the fate of nearly every new book published in this country. A major reason why the writings of nihilists and people possessed by the diabolic imagination sell well is that the New York book-review media consistently puff up such books and authors, apparently on principle, in part, a principle politically perverse.

The underlying cause of decadence, in any society, has been the decay of religious belief and the religious imagination. Culture arises out of the cult; and when the cult’s belief has altogether evaporated, after some lapse of time the society disintegrates. One may turn to the pages of Toynbee, of Voegelin, of Dawson for historical confirmation of this.

“Decadence” is the loss of an object, an end, in existence. Literary decadence commonly is bound up with a general intellectual and moral disorder in a society—resulting, before very long, in violent social disorder. The decay of literature appears often to result from a widespread decay of the religious imagination, from a rejection of the ancient human endeavor to apprehend a transcendent

order in the universe and to live in harmony with that order. That rejection is conspicuous in the nihilistic writers of our day.

Religious assumptions about the human condition having been abandoned by the writer, the moral imagination starves. And presently that moral imagination is supplanted by the diabolic imagination, infecting both the best-educated and the worst-schooled classes in our society.

Upon this corrupted imagination the clever charlatan and the writer who relishes the diabolic can prey. Unscrupulous originality thus terminates in a universal boring nihilism—or, yet more catastrophic than the pose of nihilism, the common collapse of all standards, of all authority visible or invisible: the ruin of culture, the ruin of life.

And now, after having loosed upon you all those noxious things out of Pandora's box, am I about to lift the lid a final time and release Hesiod's ironic consolation—*delusory* hope? A doubtful hope, perhaps; but not a deluding one that never can be gratified.

Civilizations commonly pass through alternating periods of decay and renewal in the course of their history. One may trace this process in most literatures that have a continuity extending over some centuries. It is not unreasonable to hope for a renewal of our civilization—from causes, perhaps, as yet not possible to specify—and a concomitant reinvigoration of the influence of great literature, even the appearance of new great literature.

Even if it is true that a literature decays when the religious apprehension of life is lost and when the moral imagination has withered, there may be observed nowadays certain phenomena of green shoots springing up in the Waste Land.

It seems worth remarking that for the past three decades the most popular series of books for children, available everywhere, has been C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*.

It seems worth remarking that for nearly the same length of time, the authors most popular with teenage boys who read have been J. R. R. Tolkien and Ray Bradbury, writers possessed of moral imagination.

It seems worth remarking that for the past decade, the writer most popular with teenage girls (or with those given to reading morally imaginative books, at least) has been Madeleine L'Engle, a fabulist of the high dream.

All life is an allegory, and we can understand it only in parable, G. K. Chesterton tells us. The rising generation increasingly turns to fable for its reading—and to fantasy more than to science-fiction: one has only to look at the paperback racks of any popular bookshop. Most of that fable is far inferior in substance and style to the books of Lewis, Tolkien, Bradbury, and L'Engle, true; nevertheless, this great

mass of paperback fantasies is evidence that young people want something more genuinely imaginative than the pseudo-serious boring books or the pornographic rubbish that have been pressed upon them.

As the political inclinations of the present rising generation are notably or notoriously different from the frantic politics of college students twenty years ago, so literary preferences of the youthful—those of them who read seriously at all—seem to be shifting. And the young do not stay young: they become dominant within a few years. As Disraeli put it, prevailing opinions generally are the opinions of the generation that is passing. When it becomes clear that the public's taste has altered greatly, even New York publishers make changes in their lists; why, even New York review media, after some uneasy interval, condescend to review books they would prefer to ignore.

Thus it seems worth noting that the two American writers of recent years most seriously discussed by serious literary critics nowadays are Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy—both Christians endowed with moral imagination, both political conservatives, both Southerners and defenders of the traditions of the South. Also it seems worth noting that the European man of letters, Solzhenitsyn aside, who is most honored among us is Czeslaw Milosz, whose prose and poetry are suffused with the tragic sense of life.

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In the dawning era of the twenty-first century, it may come to pass that an old orthodoxy will seem happily attractive to the surviving friends of humane letters. It may be that the recovery of norms will be more exciting than surrender to the perverse. It may be that the Permanent Things, those norms and standards and institutions and beliefs and customs and conventions that enable us to live as moral beings, will be respected more in the observance than they ever could in the breach.

It may be that once more the literature of the English language will be strongly marked by that ethical end which rose up so strong in Ben Jonson and Samuel Johnson and many another great writer. It may be that the fabulists, the creators of allegory and parable and fable and poetic fiction, will supplant those authors of our day who see man as the Naked Ape.

It may be that even those in journalism—and even the clerisy of the twenty-first century—will come to apprehend the great mysterious incorporation of the human race. Those in newspaper and classroom and pulpit will acknowledge the truth that we moderns are dwarfs standing upon the shoulders of giants; they will learn to look backward toward their ancestors so that they may look forward to their posterity. They may swallow the hard old truth that men and women are more than the flies of a summer; that generation does link with generation; and that a principal means for that connection among the dead, the living, and the unborn is our inheritance of humane letters.

It may be that the third century of the American Republic will become a regenerate Augustan age.

Or it may be that future generations, having cast out the literature of affirmation, will come to read nothing but technical manuals, comic books, and obscene fantasy. What direction our society may take, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, must depend upon the energies and the imagination, for good or ill, of the people who only in recent months have entered upon the duties and opportunities of the bent world of the nineties.

Eugene Ionesco, creator of the theater of the absurd, received in 1985 the Eliot Award of the Ingersoll Prizes. In accepting the prize, the old dramatist expressed clearly for the first time his purpose in prancing absurdities across the stage. “If I have shown men to be ridiculous or ludicrous,” he said, “it was in no way out of any desire for comic effect, but rather to proclaim the truth . . . to show what man may become when he is cut off from all transcendence.”

These words, like the literary preferences of the more thoughtful among the rising generation, offer us hope for a regenerate literature that regards human beings as standing somewhat closer to the angels than to the naked apes. The votaries of the ephemeral things are blown about by every wind of doctrine; the enthusiasts for mere appetite are confuted, in the long run, by the great mysterious incorporation of the human race, which exacts severe penalties from its defeated adversaries. Imagination it is that shapes society—moral imagination, or idyllic imagination, or diabolic imagination. The writers whose works we celebrate here were endowed with the moral imagination. Let us read them through, all over again, and then draw the sword of imagination, and endeavor to redeem the time.

Pens are most dangerous tools, more sharp by odds
Than swords, and cut more keen than whips or rods.

So we are instructed by old John Taylor, the Water Poet, in *News from Hell, Hull, and Halifax*. So we friends of the moral imagination in humane letters are formidably armed as were our preceptors from the first half of this dying century. In letters as in life, abide by the counsel of Edgar:

Take heed o’ the foul fiend: obey thy parents; keep thy word justly; swear not; commit not with
man’s sworn spouse; set not thy sweet heart on proud array....

Keep thy foot out of brothels, thy hand out of plackets, thy pen from lenders' books, and defy the foul fiend.

The foul fiend denominated Screwtape has besmirched a great many of the books of the twentieth century. Set him at defiance, cast him into the outer darkness, far beyond the confines of the republic of letters, and posterity may celebrate the victory of high-spirited writers over the vegetative and sensual errors of their time.





Russell Kirk, historian of ideas, was one of the most influential authors and speakers of the twentieth century. His landmark book *The Conservative Mind*, an intellectual genealogy of great British and American thinkers, demonstrated that a vital and respected conservative tradition was central to the American experience. Throughout his thirty-two books on topics ranging from political thought and history to cultural criticism and higher education, Dr. Kirk sought to renew and transmit those enduring norms and principles he called the Permanent Things. For his contributions to America's tradition of ordered liberty, Dr. Kirk received the Presidential Citizens Medal from President Ronald Reagan.

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