

## *Weaver the Liberal: A Memoir*

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TWENTY YEARS AFTER his death in Chicago in 1963 Richard M. Weaver was recognized formally as worthy of rank with the Nobel laureate T. S. Eliot by the establishment of grants in his name, as well as in Eliot's, by the Ingersoll Foundation. The grants in Weaver's name are for scholarly achievement; those in Eliot's for poetry. Weaver's place in the conservative pantheon now seems firmly established, and his continuing presence now credibly recognized. By at least one writer he has been regarded as the *fons et origo* of modern American conservatism.

Eliot's fame was established first by *The Waste Land*, which was all but obligatory reading when Weaver and I were undergraduates together at the University of Kentucky. We could read only the surface of Eliot's poem, of course, and were unaware of any possible turn by Eliot toward Anglicanism and the critical essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." As students would be expected to do, we enjoyed a parody of Eliot's poem, "The Moist Land."

Weaver's wide notice was not to occur until he had published *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948), which called forth nearly venomous responses from Howard Mumford Jones and others. Weaver bothered to reply to Jones in the *New York Times*, a reply which I read just at the time he sent me a copy of *Ideas Have Consequences*, inscribed "in long friendship." By that time we had been separated by some years as

well as the distance between Chicago and San Francisco.

Weaver and I were to become officers of the Liberal Club at the University of Kentucky in 1929. Weaver was then barely a sophomore and I was a freshman. He later rejected this early liberalism in the essay "Up from Liberalism" (1959).<sup>1</sup> More than ten years beforehand I had been called a "tired liberal" by my friend Ralph Barton Perry, Jr. Weaver's essay was devoted principally to the disgrace of modern education and especially to his own undergraduate education at the university. Through my close association with Weaver in the classes we shared, as in the much more active association with him as a member of the university debate team, I came to know him well. Traveling on the debate team, we were away from campus sometimes as much as two weeks at a time. While I feel no special competence in Weaver's later and substantial written work and though I read much of it at the time through his courtesy, there may be certain clues to his later rejection of liberalism which can be indicated. I have been asked at times by persons interested in Weaver's stance and especially in his theory of rhetoric to account for the suddenness of his rejection of liberalism. Whatever I have to say here may be slightly more fruitful for such an inquiry than I was able to offer when I was asked without serious consideration of the matter. A memoir is, and must be, a very spe-

cial history, subject always to qualification.

When I came to know Dick Weaver in Lexington, he had come from Lincoln Memorial University at Harrogate, Tennessee. His family was in Lexington, his mother a member of the Embrys who owned a genteel clothing establishment in the city, then still a very sleepy and almost Southern town, the center of the horse-breeding set in "the heart of the bluegrass," resisting industry and change and claiming, along with the heritage of James Lane Allen, a "genteel tradition." When Weaver wrote "Up from Liberalism," it was the university which was the focus of his attention: the influence of faculty members whom he called "social democrats" and by implication meliorists. He thought of most of them as "Midwesterners," and indeed many of those we had as teachers were from other states, to the north and west.

The young philosopher John Kuiper, who came to replace the retiring "Soc" Terrell, was from Michigan. His philosophy was a mild organicist Idealism, much indebted to S. A. Alexander. Some time later, when we were seniors, I lent Weaver my copy of *Space, Time, and Deity* (the Gifford Lectures for 1911), a weighty two volumes, but they came back with no comment I remember. Kuiper was also deep into logical theory going back to Bertrand Russell's *Principia* . . . but not to Peano and Frege. Our teacher in political science was Amry Vandenbosch, another native of Michigan, an authority on Dutch colonial policy, and later a consultant to the State Department on colonial policy at the formation of the United Nations.<sup>2</sup>

Our debate coach, William R. Sutherland, was also from Michigan. Known as "King" by those close to him, he and two other bachelors shared an apartment where Jefferson Davis had lived while he was a student at Transylvania University. Sutherland was a man of good size and enormous presence, a sometime actor, and a consummate player of roles in class. He was an excellent tactician in debate. We rarely lost one either by judges' decision or

by audience vote, which Sutherland preferred.

Sutherland had contempt for what has come to be called the "establishment." He flayed the corporations and would gladly have been the inventor of the phrase "malefactors of great wealth." (I did not know for some time that the saying was Teddy Roosevelt's.) He fondly asserted that in the encyclopedias "military intelligence" came after and hence below animal and human intelligence. Regarding Coolidge with total disdain, he clearly foresaw the tragedy which would befall Hoover in 1929. He scorned anyone who quoted Hoover as an authority on anything except relief programs and was then totally scornful of Hoover's failure to take such measures in America after 1929. He loved confrontations in ideas, and since he believed that advertising was corrupting America, he would have flayed Bruce Barton to the elder Hutchins at Berea, where Barton was an important patron.

Sutherland's brashness led him to overreach himself. We often debated foreign teams, usually from England, in the years 1928-1932. In my first year at the university he chose two freshmen, myself and another from the Midwest, along with Weaver, to debate with three young ladies from Cambridge, Oxford, and the University of London, who were skilled in the British manner of debate. They had great irony and superb understanding. At the last moment Sutherland's nerve failed him, and he withdrew the other freshman and replaced him with a senior soon to enter the law school. Weaver saved the day for us, overmatched as we were. He was incisive in his usual manner, and the young ladies were kind enough to say at a reception after the debate that we were fine and that Weaver was brilliant, the best they had met in the United States. We lost the debate, held in an auditorium in the town, by audience vote: it was a loss which Weaver attributed to the desire of the audience to be courteous to visitors.

Sutherland did far more to shape our education than did our formal classes, and if the stigma Weaver attached to "social

democrats" was to be placed on any one "Midwesterner," it must surely be on Sutherland. He insisted that we read Aristotle's *Logic* thoroughly, but then he sallied obliquely toward Bogoslovsky's "functional logic," which we dismissed as useless. I preferred the clarity of Aristotle; the muddleheaded Bogoslovsky, who was a precursor of modern semanticists in a way, sank out of sight. Much of the incisive scorn in Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences* derives from Sutherland's love of flaying contemporary fallacies. He insisted that we read such books as Anatole France's *Penguin Island* and Voltaire's *Candide*, but I cannot see now that Weaver retained much of the irony in them. I believe it was Eliseo Vivas who said the chapters "The Great Stereopticon" and "The Spoiled Child Psychology" were the key to much of Weaver's writing then. I read these with a sense of almost total familiarity with the attitudes and the subject matter. Many of the parts of these chapters derive, perhaps at some distance, from Sutherland.

When Weaver described himself in those days as—in Péguy's words for himself—"gloomy, ardent, stupid," Weaver was mistaking a certain public awareness of him for the absolute truth. He was surely ardent, a term I would not question. But I knew him as anything but gloomy, especially on our long-night's carousings, when he was utterly human and joyful. Nor could he be called stupid, though I know that in his own estimation he considered himself later as profoundly mistaken in those days.

The "mistake" was surely the Liberal Club and Weaver's later association with the Socialist cause in the days when Norman Thomas campaigned against both Franklin D. Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover. In 1929 an organizer for the League for Industrial Democracy came to the campus, and the formation of the Liberal Club was an outgrowth of that visit. The field agent was on campus in the spring, and by the fall the club was, in Weaver's letter to the newspapers, "independent" of the LID. The aim of the LID, taken from its very

early pronouncements, was "production for use and not for profit," which was indeed radical. In the public press in those days "radical" was a common pejorative term for left-leaning organizations, though "communist" was also a common term. The Liberal Club became known almost immediately on campus as the primary opposition to military training, which was considered at that time to be required in all land-grant institutions. Replying to a notice in the local newspapers, Weaver wrote that the club had no official connection with the LID, that it had made no formal complaint about military training, and that it had not considered inviting Norman Thomas to the campus.<sup>3</sup> While these statements may have been literally true, they reflected the key interests of the organization, which was by that time almost wholly Weaver's own. My brief term as president of the club expired quickly; I was merely a front man, ineffectual and even implausible. Weaver as vice-president was the real executive. With some help from Sidney T. Schell and myself, he wrote a pamphlet outlining the aims of the organization; it was distributed at the next basketball game.<sup>4</sup>

As the Depression deepened, the president of the university, Frank L. McVey, asked the officers of the Liberal Club to visit him in his office. Our opposition to military training was becoming public, and the search for subversive organizations was increasing. McVey explained to us that these were difficult days for the state and for the university, that funds would possibly be restricted, and indeed that salaries might be suspended because of budget difficulties. And indeed they were. McVey feared that our views and our actions might bring on opposition in the Legislature. He did not censure us for our views, nor did he hint at any disciplinary action. He asked us merely to be aware of the possible consequences of what we were doing.

McVey himself was one of the "Midwesterners." Having come to the university from North Dakota, where he had been an economist and president, he had a very broad and tolerant view of liberal educa-

tion. John Rothenstein, who was later to be Sir John Rothenstein and director of the Tate Gallery in London and who taught art history for awhile at the university, remarked later that the conversation at Maxwell Place, the president's home on campus, was as good as any he heard in the United States. In addition to continuing his interest in the debate program and extending invitations to Maxwell Place after our important debates, McVey invited us on occasion to meet with visiting lecturers. When very hard times came upon us, he provided lodgings at Maxwell Place for certain members of the debate team who would have been forced to leave the university without that assistance.

It may be for these reasons that McVey was tolerant of our activities in opposing military training. Since the military officers attended our meetings regularly, along with reporters from the student newspaper, they were fully aware of everything we thought and did. But the club began to lose strength, and some later officers resigned.

In the dreary summer of 1931, when Weaver and I had become upperclassmen, our interests had diverged. The Liberal Club had weakened, and we debated less frequently. In the meanwhile I had undertaken a six-month apprenticeship as a scenic designer with the last stock company to perform at the old Lexington Opera House, once called "the best one-night stand in America." Weaver was more and more absorbed in upper-division studies in literature, and I was becoming more absorbed in art classes. Yet we were to become close in that summer, since we undertook to replace Nicholas Williams, who had written a column in the student newspaper which he called "Looking over the Magazines."

Rereading these columns now, I have some difficulty in determining which columns were mine and which were Dick's. The one item about which there is now no doubt is a notice by Dick of *I'll Take My Stand*, the manifesto of Agrarianism from Vanderbilt, which was surely a portent of Dick's future. I was reading *The Dial* in-

tently, and I had come on Kenneth Burke's translation of Spengler's *Untergang* . . . before I knew the translation by Atkinson. We discussed this ponderous theory of history endlessly, but I do not think either of us realized the full consequences of this "decline" of the great civilizations for the theory of progress. Weaver and I also continued to discuss the "monkey trial," the trial of John T. Scopes for the teaching of the theory of evolution in the Tennessee schools. We had heard much of this trial from Sutherland some three or four years after the occasion, and Dick still preserved his interest in it. When I read his later incisive treatment of the trial in the *Ethics of Rhetoric*,<sup>5</sup> I found that he mentioned Darrow, our hero then, very little, and Dudley Field Malone considerably more.

A piece on Theodore Dreiser, considering the review of Dreiser's work by an English reviewer, was surely Weaver's. In it he noted that the reviewer had called Dreiser not so much an American tragedy as a "Teutonic muddle." By the time Dreiser came to the coal fields of Kentucky, however, Dick had given up political activism, and so far as I can determine he never went to the troubles in "bloody Harlan," where Dreiser was indicted for criminal syndicalism as well as on a morals charge.

As the campaign for the presidency drew near in 1932, Weaver and Schell transferred their interests, as I did mine, to the political arena. The Liberal Club now seemed nearly innocuous, a mere campus affair, and we turned to the national scene. Weaver became the secretary of the local Socialist party, and Schell became one of the state organizers. Party headquarters were opened in a vacant store in town, of which there were any number. Weaver described the party meetings in "Up from Liberalism" as including academic people, teachers and students, who were "politically inexperienced and temperamentally not adapted to politics." There were also townspeople whom he described as "eccentrics, novelty seekers, victims of restlessness." It was indeed a time to be restless. Unless Weaver intended to include

them among the eccentrics, he apparently failed to recognize the old-time Wobblies or their like and the old-time Socialists from the time of Eugene Debs, who were quite distinct. Since I had grown up in a railroad town before coming to Lexington, I had known hoboes and Wobblies or their kin, and I could recognize them. When they called everyone "comrade" at meetings, such familiarity must have stung those who were newly impoverished; I believe they stung Weaver. They were the first breach, perhaps, in his coming defection from active politics. Weaver admitted that he was shocked by the suggestion of hillbilly bands at rallies, and he came to realize that he should not have expected "tone" at Socialist meetings and rallies. It was, as he came to realize, a part of his awakening from active liberalism.

None of us was prepared to expect anything from the patrician Roosevelt, or anything from Hoover, who was surely unable to cope with crisis at home. When Norman Thomas appeared at the city auditorium, he drew a respectable audience; but he was introduced by Schell as "Comrade Thomas." I remarked then that such an introduction would cost Thomas any number of votes in the region. I cannot recall that Weaver was at that meeting, but I felt the futility of the whole affair, though all of us voted for Thomas.

When Weaver was graduated, he had an outstanding undergraduate record, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, and except for a perverse low mark in military science, would have been graduated with the highest honors. He sought a fellowship in various schools, especially in North Carolina. Finally he went to Vanderbilt at Nashville. By 1934 I was preparing to go to California with an elusive offer of work in Hollywood, which failed to mature. I decided to take the southern route in mid-winter, stopping for awhile at Vanderbilt to visit Dick. He invited me to sit in a class with him, with John Crowe Ransom, who was reading Keats that morning. I have never heard a more luminous presentation of poetry. Ransom was a man of indelible charm. I understood at once the different

milieu in which Weaver found himself at Vanderbilt, away from the "social democrats." I had no knowledge then, or know now, of the more militant side of Agrarianism, especially Donald Davidson's, but with Weaver's intensity he was ready for it. The militancy I believe Ransom later abjured.

When Weaver sent me a copy of *Ideas Have Consequences* after I had returned from San Francisco, I was surprised at his Platonism, of which I had had no hint in our undergraduate days. Working as a supervisor with the WPA Federal Arts Project in San Francisco, I had gone through the routine communications from Washington, which commended social realism in murals and "art for the people." I found Weaver's Platonism too convenient a peg on which to hang ideas, though it was nearly the oldest peg. When I met Dick in Chicago, I told him as much; in turn he tackled me on my own ground, as he was never unwilling to do with anyone. He asked whether I could agree that modern art was "empirical." I was happy to do so, since I was aware that Aristotle had defined art as "the imitation of nature in her manner of working."

When I found that Dick had studied Greek, surely to understand Plato more fully, I realized that he was serious. I began to understand later why he believed that his study of Spanish and German at the University of Kentucky was wasted. The study of the classics would reinforce his scorn for *ad hoc* solutions, his belief that elective education was misdirected education, and that all empirical study without the guidance of principle was the destruction of America.

On one or two occasions I have been asked to "explain" Weaver's change from liberalism in more depth than Weaver himself did. What I have said here, in a memoir considerably lacking in documentation, is to point if only indirectly to those factors which in complex interrelations could provide a foundation for a more thorough accounting. Weaver was Southern. Sometimes this could take on a raucous or even foolish quality, as on that miserably cold

day when he and a colleague of ours on the debate team asked Tennessee to drub Kentucky at football, which was a dangerous ploy that day. Dick for the moment misplaced the Mason-Dixon line. There were times, too, when I felt that he merely tolerated the fact that both my grandfathers had fought in the Union armies. His Southern dispositions were merely reinforced at Vanderbilt and given more force when he defected from "Social democracy" as he had known it at Kentucky.

Weaver's distaste for liberal activism was apparent to me in his last days at Kentucky. The Wobblies were without "tone," and he was late in recognizing that causes are functions of people,<sup>6</sup> not of *ad hoc* ideas. I recognized it, but I tolerated it in Kentucky and later in San Francisco, in very dreary days. It must be recognized that Weaver was a man of ideas, but his did not include instrumentation or pure empiricism, of which he remarked somewhere that the fallacy in empiricism was that it could tell us what we are experiencing. But there is no more pure empiricism than there are pure ideas.

All transcendentalists are institutionalized finally in the Church. I did not keep in touch with Weaver in the years before his un-

timely death. Instead, the next time I was in Chicago I met his friend Eliseo Vivas, who was like Weaver rejecting that touch of liberalism which derived from Dewey's aesthetics and his instrumentalism in general. I continued to admire Weaver though I could not share his Platonism. I regret that the modern *ad hoc* conservatives have not found a philosophy to support their maneuvers so cogently. Weaver had a dogged integrity. Our differences and our distances over the years did nothing to diminish my respect. It was a shock when I heard that my college chum had died alone in his rooms in Chicago.

<sup>1</sup>"Up from Liberalism," *Modern Age*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Winter 1958-1959), 21-33. Reprinted in *Life Without Prejudice and Other Essays* (Chicago, 1965), pp. 129-55. <sup>2</sup>Vandenbosch still recalls the day when Molotov appeared at San Francisco with a bodyguard. It was a world he hardly recognized. To call him one of the "social democrats" would be to stretch the term, though he was a long-term friend of Senator Paul Douglas, of Illinois. <sup>3</sup>Letter to the *Lexington Herald*, November 8, 1929. Preserved in the papers of President McVey. I am indebted to Charles G. Talbert for pointing out this letter. <sup>4</sup>The pamphlet was ephemeral; I can find no trace of it. <sup>5</sup>*The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Chicago, 1953), pp. 27-54. <sup>6</sup>"Up from Liberalism," p. 23.