

Beauty Will Save the World

Toward the end of my undergraduate days, I came across a passage in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Nobel Lecture* which I found startling and even a bit disturbing. Solzhenitsyn begins his address on the nature and role of literature with a brief, enigmatic quotation from Dostoevsky: "Beauty will save the world." Solzhenitsyn confesses that the phrase had puzzled and intrigued him for some time. And yet, he told the distinguished audience, he had come to believe that Dostoevsky was right.

For a young college student, possessed of a boundless confidence in rational debate and political action, the implication that beauty alone could harbor such redemptive powers was unsettling, to say the least. It was the kind of idea one would expect of an Oscar Wilde or some other *fin de siècle* decadent; it seemed perilously close to a hedonistic endorsement of "art for art's sake." What of Truth and Goodness, the other two "transcendentals"? And yet here were two great Russian novelists, known for their stern, prophetic, and intensely moral sensibilities, as well as their stark depictions of nihilism and human degradation, applauding the redemptive force of beauty.

But the phrase stuck in my mind, and found corroboration in my studies of the role of the imagination in the social order. Like Solzhenitsyn, I have been won over by Dostoevsky's wisdom.

Whereas I once believed that the decadence of the West could only be turned around through politics and intellectual dialectics, I am now convinced that authentic renewal can only emerge out of the imaginative visions of the artist and the mystic. This does not mean that I have withdrawn into some anti-intellectual Palace of Art. Rather, it involves the conviction that politics and rhetoric are not autonomous forces, but are shaped

by the pre-political roots of culture: myth, metaphor, and spiritual experience as recorded by the artist and the saint.

My own vocation, as I have come to understand it, is to explore the relationship between religion, art, and culture in order to discover how the imagination may "redeem the time."

In the process of discovering this vocation, conservatism played a somewhat paradoxical role: it both inspired and hampered my search. On the one hand, conservative thinkers helped me to understand what culture is, and they introduced me to the riches of our Western heritage. But on the other hand I found that conservatives were so deeply alienated from modern culture that they had retreated from any serious engagement with it. This retreat, it seems to me, has had damaging consequences for the long-term success of the conservative mission.

For a time, I concurred with most conservatives in their wholesale rejection of modern culture. But eventually I saw this as a very un-conservative position to take. A culture is a delicate, organic thing; however ill it may become, we simply cannot stop caring for it, shutting down the life-support machines. When a civilization truly dies, it cannot be easily resurrected.

In what follows, I'd like to retrace a few of the steps that led to my sense of vocation and current ambivalence about the conservative attitude toward culture and redemptive power of the imagination.

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Literature in The Waste Land

I was singularly fortunate in having two distinguished conservative scholars, Russell Kirk and Gerhart Niemeyer, as teachers throughout my undergraduate years. They took me—a raw youth very much caught up in the ephemera of the present—and provided me with a past. By grounding me in the Western tradition, they taught me, in M.E. Bradford's phrase, the importance of "remembering who we are." Only then was I prepared to return to the present. Armed with that knowledge, I become aware that the crisis of modernity was not merely the work of Democrats and Communists, but the product of a deeper spiritual malaise.

The essence of modernity, according to Kirk and Niemeyer, is the denial that man can know and conform to the transcendent order, and that he must therefore construct his own order, as an extension of his mind. The motto of the modern project was first uttered by Francis Bacon, who said that "knowledge is power." Later, Karl Marx would proclaim: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." The political expression of modernity, of course, is the ideological regime, founded on a rigid system of abstractions which are imposed on society by force.

But totalitarian regimes are not the only expression of ideology, or else the dissolution of the Soviet Union would signal the end of modernity. As Kirk, Niemeyer, and other conservatives, such as Richard Weaver, have pointed out, ideology also infects Western liberal societies. Though it can take many forms—logical positivism, radical feminism, deconstruction, and so on—ideology involves a fundamental alienation from being.

While ideology often claims the certainties of an absolutist intellectual system, its effects on the actual experiences of individuals tend to produce feelings of alienation and dislocation. The modern project, which began with the elevation of the self and the assertion of its nearly limitless power, has resulted in a world in which the individual self is a precarious fragment, without ties to true community or allegiance to legitimate authority.

Of course, the alienated self, wavering between dreams of power and bouts of *angst*, is the subject of most of modern art and literature. Given my love of literature, it was the work of the poets, novelists, and playwrights who explored the fallout of modernity that most attracted me. From Niemeyer I received insights into the novels of Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn, Arthur Koestler, and Thomas Mann. And from Kirk I was introduced to T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wyndham Lewis—a group of extraordinary writers who were once known as the "Men of 1914."

The figure of Eliot, however, loomed largest in my mind. Eliot was not only the subtlest chronicler of the modern malaise, but also the most reliable guide out of the morass. In poems like "Gerontion" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" Eliot portrays, in dramatic monologues, the alienated, detached, and despairing modern self. Eliot's *The Waste Land* gave the age its appropriate metaphor. Yet even in this poem of spiritual aridity, Eliot reveals his struggle for spiritual healing, listening to "What the Thunder Said." From the images of hell and limbo in the early poems, Eliot moves on to the experience of purgatory in *Ash Wednesday*. Finally, *Four Quartets* speak of the irradiation of grace into the world, and of redemption through suffering. This final masterpiece records the journey of the isolated self toward integration, which includes a renewed sense of the presence of the past, and fleeting glimpses of union with God.

What gave added excitement to studying Eliot with Kirk was that he had *known* Eliot and Eliot's friends, Wyndham Lewis and Roy Campbell. I have always been fascinated by the literary and intellectual communities formed by writers with similar insights into their age, such as Samuel Johnson's "Club" and C.S. Lewis's Inklings. These meetings of the minds seem to me to be the essence of living culture, models of artists-in-community engaged with the challenges and opportunities of their time. Even though Kirk had known these writers only in their later years, I felt somehow touched by their vital presence, a fellow participant in their imaginative endeavors.

Modernity vs. Modernism

But there was a contradiction in my thinking at the time that slowly worked itself up to the surface of my mind. Like many conservatives I extolled Eliot as the supreme critic of the modern waste land, which had produced art and literature characterized by chaos and fragmentation, squalor and ugliness, egotism, sensual excess, and an obsession with primitive paganism as opposed to Western Christianity. Yet I counted among my heroes Eliot and Wyndham Lewis, whose works were prime examples of the aesthetics of High Modernism. How could these facts be reconciled?

When I compared Eliot's works to those of Stravinsky and Picasso—two modern villains in the conservative hall of infamy—I could not help noticing striking similarities. All three employed the technique of fragmentation of time and space. One could plausibly argue that Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a Cubist poem, a series of disjointed angles and multiple perspectives. Both Eliot and Picasso were aware that technology and ideology had fragmented our perception of reality; in their art, they used that fragmentation as a starting point, and sought to move through it to new visions of unity.

Another example of the conservative attack on "modern art" concerns the issue of paganism. Here too I found that the reality was more subtle than the caricature. Just as Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* evoked a pagan ritual and Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* used African tribal masks, so Eliot in *The Waste Land* brought in primitive vegetation myths, as well as the insights of Buddhism and Hinduism. I found that all three artists were interested in paganism precisely because it seemed to possess the awe, sacramentality, and reverence for mystery that had been drained out of late nineteenth-century bourgeois liberal Christianity.

As it happens, Stravinsky, like Eliot, went on to become an orthodox Christian and a self-described "classicist." Picasso did not make such a pilgrimage, nor did his life reflect a depth of spiritual understanding or moral rectitude. But to deny the imaginative insight Picasso possessed on the basis of his

intellectual and moral failings, I came to realize, was both petty and closed-minded. Similarly, when I read D.H. Lawrence I found a penetrating critique of technology and the modern dichotomy between mind and body. Yet I have found that most conservatives prefer to dismiss Lawrence on the basis of his ideas about sexual liberation. Though it may seem a truism to most people, it eventually dawned on me that one can learn from an artist or thinker who asks the right questions, even if one may disagree with many of his answers.

Thus I was forced to account for the fact that many conservatives had succumbed to philistinism. Why did they utter these blanket condemnations of "modern art"? Why would anyone demand that art—a subtle medium, characterized by the indirections of irony, ambiguity, and hidden meaning—preach the "truth" directly? Why categorize artists and writers as good or bad in terms of ideology, rather than of imaginative vision?

The root of the problem, I believe, is a misunderstanding of, or aversion to, the nature of the imagination itself. Part of this can be traced to the Puritan and pragmatic strains in the American character. Conservatives have, by and large, focused their energies on political action and the theoretical work necessary to undertake action. The indirection of art, with its lack of moralizing and categorizing, strikes the pragmatic mind as being unedifying, and thus as inessential. Insofar as the great artists and writers of the past are admired, it is for their support of some idea, rather than for the complex, many-sided vision of their art.

The artist, like anyone else, is a representative of his time. His role, to paraphrase Hamlet, is to reveal "the form and pressure of the age." By "pressure," Shakespeare means impression or stamp. While it is true that some art can portray the ideal, the primary burden of art is to grapple with the reality of the present. Only by engaging the present can art achieve universal meaning. Modern artists create works that reflect modern conditions; they explore modernity, as it were, from the inside. The least imaginative of them reflect mere surfaces—such artists deserve censure. But the great artists drama-

tize the conflicts of their time, embedding meaning deep within their works.

It was Eliot himself who formulated the best response to those who want art merely to depict idealized forms of beauty. "We mean all sorts of things, I know, by Beauty. But the essential advantage for a poet is not to have a beautiful world with which to deal. It is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom, and the horror, and the glory." Eliot's perception is the natural extension of Dostoevsky's prophecy that "Beauty will save the world." Just as Christians believe that God became man so that He could reach into, and atone for, the pain and isolation of sin, so the artist descends into disorder so that he might discover a redemptive path toward order.

When it comes to culture, most conservatives are not conservative at all. As Burke, the father of modern conservatism, understood, the outward forms of society must change over time, but in such a way as to preserve the essence or underlying truth of human nature. So it is with art. Artistic styles begin in revolution (even the Gothic was a shock to the early Middle Ages), but such revolts are against a style which has ossified and lost touch with meaning. Eliot, Picasso, and Stravinsky wanted to break out of a lifeless and complacent materialism. They wanted art to be able to do more than describe the surface of things or provide uplifting images of an ideal world. They wanted to shock, not merely to be sensational, but in the sense that the artist can help us see the world anew, as if the for first time, with a shock of recognition.

Ironically, I found that Richard Weaver, with whom I agreed so thoroughly on most issues, represented the modern-art-is-degraded school of thought. In the chapter of *Ideas Have Consequences* entitled "Egotism in Work and Art," Weaver presents the classic notion of the West as experiencing a straight line of descent from the high point of the Middle Ages to the nadir of the twentieth century. His dismissals of Romanticism, Modernism, and jazz appear to stem naturally from his critique of modernity. But even Weaver seems oblivious to the notion that artists can burrow inside the reigning

worldview, however decadent, and emerge with insights that offer visions of order. He can satirize the self-indulgence of Shelley's "I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed," but he says nothing of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's attempts to recover a sense of the self's relation to transcendence. And his critique of jazz as mere incoherence is a colossal misconception of the high level of order embodied within improvisation.

Most conservatives think of culture as a museum, rather than as an organic continuity. They are all in favor of promoting the classics, but when it comes to contemporary culture, they have simply opted out. To be sure, the modern era has been cursed with a tremendous amount of shoddy, obscene, and meretricious art; certainly the scandalous and the sensational works by the Mapplethorpes, Warhols, and the Serranos have come to represent the art of our own time. One can argue, I think, that High Modernism reached its limit, and that it had to go the way of all artistic styles. But, to quote an ancient dictum: *abusus non tollit usus*. The abuse of a thing does not nullify its proper use. If conservatives would look about them, they would see that our century has also been blessed with a tremendous amount of superb art. It is another truism that art tends to flourish when civilizations are in crisis.

Politicization or Imagination?

There is another aspect to the conservative abandonment of culture I find distressing: the increasing politicization within the conservative movement. I have witnessed a movement which began with the insights of thinkers like Kirk into the primacy of imaginative vision, or what Weaver called "the metaphysical dream," turn into a highly politicized phenomenon in which there is more discussion of means than understanding of the ends of human existence.

Despite the gains which conservatives have made since 1980 in politics and economics, they have made precious little progress in the realm of culture. In other words, conservatives have not had much of an impact on the major cultural organs, such as the leading newspapers and magazines, nor have they made their presence felt in

literature, criticism, and the visual and performing arts. Samuel Lipman's recent lecture at the Heritage Foundation, "Can We Save Culture?" (reprinted in an abridged form in *National Review*, August 26, 1991), has called attention to this problem. Though Lipman does not penetrate deeply enough into the causes of the conservative retreat from culture, I strongly agree with his description of the symptoms and his concern.

As Lipman argues, liberals have always known the importance of culture; conservatives have left culture in their hands by default. That is why the neoconservatives, who are ex-liberals, have produced *The New Criterion*, the only serious journal of the arts emerging from a conservative perspective. The problem I have with *The New Criterion* is that its *raison d'être* is ultimately political. It is bound together primarily because its contributors object to the excesses of the Left's cultural agenda. In other words, it does not arise from a shared aesthetic vision founded on a philosophical and theological understanding of human nature. On the other hand, I have to admit, with a good deal of chagrin, that traditionalist conservatives have been so beset by philistinism that they have produced no alternative of their own.

While such a state of affairs is distressing, it also implies that opportunities abound for conservatives—if they are willing to make the necessary investment of heart and mind. They cannot continue to trim the upper branches of politics while the roots of culture wither and die from inattention. Conserva-

tives, above all, must once again put contemplation before action, or else their energies will be wasted.

In addition to the teaching I have done, my own efforts center around a quarterly publication which I am preparing to launch into the world, *Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion*. The purpose of *Image* might be summed up in the words of a character in Mark Helprin's recent novel, *A Soldier of the Great War*. An Italian professor of aesthetics, a man who has been scarred by the cataclysms and tragedies of the modern world, tries to explain the power of art.

My conceits will never serve to wake the dead. Art has no limit but that. You may come enchantingly close, and you may wither under the power of its lash, but you cannot bring back the dead. It's as if God set loose the powers of art so that man could come so close to His precincts as almost to understand how He works, but in the end He closes the door in your face, and says, Leave it to me. It's as if the whole thing were just a lesson. To see the beauty of the world is to put your hands on the lines that run uninterrupted through life and through death. Touching them is an act of hope, for perhaps someone on the other side, if there is another side, is touching them, too.

If art cannot save our souls, it can do much to redeem the time, to give us a true image of ourselves, both in the horror and the boredom to which we can descend, and in the glory which we may, in rare moments, be privileged to glimpse.