CONSERVATIVE CRITICS OF THE BOURGEOISIE

James Matthew Wilson

Of all the accusations likely to be leveled against the traditional conservative, whether from the egalitarian Left or the neoconservative Right, the most generally biting will be that of his harboring an "elitist" contempt for the bourgeois masses of the modern West. The conservative cannot deny the charge outright. Andrew Lytle reportedly spoke of his vocation as a writer in terms of constant war; but who, he was asked, was the enemy? "The bourgeoisie!" proclaimed the ninety-year-old "last Confederate" novelist.

The creative destruction of bourgeois capitalism and the secular individualism of bourgeois liberalism have been the primary causes of the disintegration of traditional communities and customs. And to the extent that the radical Left has at times wreaked even greater destruction, the conservative recognizes that the Left constitutes the exasperation and extension of bourgeois notions rather than a sui generis ideology. The conservative's arguments begin always with a backward glance, and from the past he generally draws the critical vocabulary by means of which he understands the present. That language is almost invariably preliberal and antiliberal, and to the extent that liberalism is a bourgeois philosophy, the conservative will necessarily appear antibourgeois.

And yet such language may seem to conceal a nonetheless stubborn fact. The conservative is almost invariably bourgeois himself and bears as a conscious duty the preservation of the institutions and sensibility by means of which he lives in and understands the world. Does the conservative look back to a preindustrial aristocratic society with unmitigated longing, or does he, like Tocqueville, chiefly understand the aristocratic and feudal societies of Europe as having provided a prototype of organic order and political and spiritual achievement?

As I write these words I sit in the dim library at Piety Hill, the ancestral home of Russell Kirk (1918–1994), a Michigan man of letters and traditional conservative with whom I have, since late youth, instinctively identified and whose famous career

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has been an exemplar for my own toil. Kirk's retirement to the central Michigan village of Mecosta after the publication of his landmark book *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* in 1953 was a protest against the modern order and an avenue to reclaiming something ancient. Before his return to Mecosta, he had been teaching for several years as a professor at Michigan State College (later University), but when the sales of the book gave him some financial independence, he resigned from "Behemoth University," swearing off his involvement in the technocratic university that was more interested in training wage slaves for the industrial economy than initiating students into the study of truth, goodness, and beauty. He would later ridicule the requirement that he should teach by "Socratic method" sections of fifty or more students, jockeying the students in a race "through a fat, dull textbook, all the way from primitive man to President Truman, a blur of Good Guys and Bad Guys: the best possible vindication of Alexander Pope's admonition that a little learning is a dangerous thing."

For Kirk, boarding a bus to Mecosta and swearing off academia became a means of living in continuity with his ancestors. This was literally the case, as he took care of his aging maiden aunts and, eventually, his parents; life in Mecosta put him in enduring contact with family tradition. Living modestly he was able to pursue a writing and lecturing career less ensnared by the modern market than he would have even in the academy. But one may query the implications of Kirk's retreat. Was setting up house on the ancestral lands in Mecosta a sort of bourgeois "farce," in Karl Marx's terms, parodying the lost rites of aristocratic homes stewarded across generations under a family's name?

Kirk cultivated ambiguity on this point. His accounts of life in Mecosta were unpretentious and modest—involving the pleasures of exploring the lakes and woods of central Michigan and the honest work of fixing up the family properties to make them habitable, and converting an old Dutch barn (a former factory for cigarette rollers) into a library. But these country occupations echo his many accounts of visits to ancestral homes of the Scottish and English aristocracy. In his critical biography of T. S. Eliot, *Eliot and His Age* (1971), Kirk describes the decline of a "great Scottish house" as a measure of the decline into welfare state and anticulture in the postwar period—a decline he could watch himself, being a guest of the noble lord. In other books, he would recount his visits with Canon Basil Smith in the parlor of another ancient house, a "venerable setting of culture" destined to "vanish away as if the Evil Spirit had blasted it."

Conversely, in the opening pages of *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk commands the reader to take a walk through contemptible modern Dublin to see how far the age has declined:

> You come to an old doorway in a blank wall. This is the roofless wreck of an eighteenth-century house, and until recently the house was still here, inhabited though condemned: Number 12, Arran Quay, formerly a brick building of three stories, which began as a gentleman's residence, sank into the condition of a shop, presently was used as a government office of the meaner sort, and was demolished in 1950—a history suggestive of changes on a mightier scale in Irish society since 1729. For in that year, Edmund Burke was born here.

Burke had been a Rockingham Whig, a sympathizer with the American Revolution and the great voice of justice against colonial exploitation in India. But he was also

the founding father of modern intellectual conservatism and, upon gaining an income, had sought to found a noble house—the debts of which unsettled his last years. Although Burke had been born into the bourgeois age, and the ancient houses Kirk visited had survived and even been integrated into it, one can scarcely avoid noticing that—for Burke, and later for Kirk—ancient houses served as fragments of a fading and better age. They stood aloof, partisans of a lost grandeur and in rebuke of our pert bourgeois modernity.

Sitting a few feet from where some of the above quoted sentences were written, I am especially conscious of the risk the conservative must always run of waxing nostalgic for the preindustrial aristocratic society that nurtured and developed the great intellectual and spiritual achievement of Western civilization. The genius of the West was first conceived within the aristocratic polis of Athens; it in some ways developed in the custody of the gentleman, soldier, farmer of ancient Rome; and it flowered with almost unrepeatable brilliance in the growth of the mystical body in medieval Christendom. Cultural historians have made it a truism that the rise of the first middle classes in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries sowed the seeds of decay of this tradition.

By the time Francis Beaumont (1584–1616) wrote his *Knight of the Burning Pestle*, the modern bourgeoisie had become sufficiently powerful and conscious of itself that it could be at once the object of ridicule as small-minded, obtuse, and usurious—and the object of ridicule as the locus of nostalgia for an age before its pragmatic, bustling enterprises came to dominate public and private life in the emerging states of Europe and America. In Beaumont's play, the bourgeois are not only obnoxious bores crowding the actors from the stage; they are also the implacable public demanding brave tales after the fashion of *Don Quixote*.

In the pages of Kirk, one may be tempted to think him also the scourge of the bourgeois age that made his career possible. But Kirk is in fact finding brilliant and adequate historical symbols of a venerable past against which to measure the present; his writing as a whole seems to overflow with a general admiration and enchantment before the good things of life, whether they be ancient aristocratic houses or the humor of a contemporary hobo (who became the Kirk family's butler!), and so his contempt for much in our age cannot be so easily dismissed as antibourgeois nostalgia. But other conservative writers, some of whom influenced Kirk, were less obviously generous to the society that bore them.

Many of the most significant modern conservative writers and scholars have cast a critical gaze upon the legacy of the West and its ostensible decay at the hands of a rising tide of acquisitive middle men—butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers (as W. B. Yeats demeaned them), bankers, merchants, and manufacturers (as we know them). The career of most of these figures spans the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth—that period when antibourgeois feeling was so widespread that it produced myriad alternatives to the bourgeois liberal order, including the formulation of modern Catholic social doctrine, on the one hand, and the ideologies of communism and National Socialism on the other.

It would be remarkable were one to read with admiration and awe the work of so many great thinkers and not inherit their distaste for the advent of bourgeois society. But indeed, with certain qualifications, their best readers have not. And one of the reasons for this immunity lies in appreciation

of a peculiar truth: the most severe critics of bourgeois culture have been, with certain major exceptions, members of the bourgeoisie. The most perceptive critics of the American middle class have been, like Kirk, its own members. In some instances this criticism has amounted to a kind of self-hatred, a death wish, but by and large such critics have faulted the modern middle class for harboring suicidal tendencies of its own. To attack bourgeois liberalism has been, then, part of an effort to save the West not only from decay but from suicide. Presumably, then, it has been a project undertaken out of charity rather than contempt.

Let us survey several of the figures to whom I refer, beginning with German and French thinkers, then turning to Ireland and Anglo-America. It is to the early-twentieth-century sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) that most persons rightly turn for a vocabulary to explain the ambiguities of the bourgeois age. Weber's account of the Protestant spirit proposed that the modern bourgeoisie had "disenchanted" the world, reducing the realm of God's creation from a stage of intelligible beauty and drama to a raw quarry of use-value. The Protestant ethic prized work at one's mundane vocation above all else and so disciplined the soul to be always focused on productivity and economy in the exploitation of the material world. Further, the Protestant sect, in opposition to the Catholic Church, was exclusive; it did not extend to the borders of society. Consequently, in order to stay within the white clapboard chapel of the chosen few, one had to submit to a rigorous social discipline that included a morality ordered to ongoing and restless productivity. In brief, a desiccated philosophical materialism begets a joyless moral materialism.

More compelling and cutting figures than Weber have developed these notions. Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) accepted the rise of equal social conditions as ineluctable, even as he criticized them from a perspective deeply sympathetic to the aristocratic society of his ancestors. He saw the rising morality of democratic societies as middling and unheroic but well suited to allow society to function after the breakdown of the hierarchy of personal authority. True freedom and the most noble virtues could not be sustained in modern society, he saw, but nonetheless he admired the rise of the bourgeois family with its tender bonds of affection, and he theorized that a decentralized federalism, such as that found among the various democratic communities of the United States, made possible an attractive analogue to the extensive and well-distributed hierarchy of social authority found in the feudal age.

In the opening pages of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville gestures toward the unhappy course of modern liberalism in France. There the Catholic Church had allied itself with the *ancien régime* and so had taken an antagonist's role in the struggle for liberal equality. It need not be thus, Tocqueville speculated; the church could become a powerful ally of democracy and equality, as French Catholic ultramontanes, such as Hugues Felcitë Lamennais, would propose late in Tocqueville's lifetime. Tocqueville does not consider, however, the inherent hostility to the church of French liberalism, which was frequently perceived as—and proved to be—a fundamentally anti-Catholic movement. The French bourgeoisie, as the source and voice of liberalism, became increasingly identified with anticlerical atheism and Protestantism over the course of the nineteenth century.

The French neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882–1973) was born into a family of secular Protestant liberals. His grandfather had indeed helped found the

liberal Third Republic, which would eventually effect a policy of *laïcism*, or secularization, that sent Catholic religious into exile and unraveled the ancient thread of educational and devotional practices that had kept France worthy of the honorific "the oldest daughter of the Church." The rise of secularization ran into serious obstacles in the aftermath of the First World War, however, when Catholic France, allied with secular monarchists such as Charles Maurras, reasserted itself. By the 1930s France seemed on the verge of civil war between liberal republicans and Catholic monarchists. To be Catholic was, in a sense, to be antibourgeois.

Maritain's first encounter with Catholicism came in the form of Leon Bloy's outrageous and histrionic novel *The Woman Who Was Poor*. In its pages Bloy (1846–1917) depicted a handful of pious, ascetic, and intellectually compelling Catholics living in a modern France whose secular soul ran like sewer water through streets of hedonistic filth, pandering greed, and drunken worldliness. Following a convention taken from realist novels of the period, the bourgeoisie appears as the incarnation of moral and philosophical materialism, of hen-pecking hypocrisy and systemic violence, of gossip and superficial snobbery, designed to martyr the impoverished saints of modern France. Having devoured the adjectival phantasmagoria of Bloy's prose, Maritain and his wife met Bloy and soon begged him to baptize them into the church.

Maritain's early philosophical and critical essays—collected as *Théonas* (1921) and *Antimoderne* (1922)—reproduced Bloy's critique of the liberal French bourgeoisie, following him in viewing modern France as the arena for the contest between a philistine, secular, and Positivist party of "progress," and an intellectually and artistically vital Catholicism of yesterday, today, and always. The bourgeoisie was decadent not because it was sensible and restrained but because it leveled the ancient edifices of the sacred and the traditional to subject all things to acquisitive appetite and worldly power. For Maritain this moral materialism demanded secularism—endless acquisition and endless progress; and so a return of the monarchy, and with it an aristocratic society, seemed but one possible element in his larger quest to reconvert France to its ancient faith.

His 1925 book, *Three Reformers*, was a work of destructive intellectual history, dissecting the thought of Martin Luther, René Déscartes, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the sources of modern egoism, rationalism, and emotionalism. With a curious irony, Rousseau had originated the philosophical critique of the bourgeois order as lukewarm, oppressive, and disenchanting, favoring instead the noble savage born free of the civilization of professions and counting houses. But Maritain had transformed that critique: it was not civilization he opposed, only the secular bourgeoisie that had sought to destroy the church as an obstacle to greed and thoughtlessness. Maritain dedicated the work to that most intimate symbol of the secularizing liberal bourgeois forces in France, his mother.

But we cannot reduce Maritain to a Catholic medievalist slashing at the modern regime of business and capital with the rapier of a practical monarchist. With the rise of the totalitarian ideologies in the 1930s, he became the first and most influential theorist of Christian democracy. His *Integral Humanism* (1936) maintained his critique of secular liberalism and of the Left more generally, observing, "Atheist communism is only bourgeois deism turned the other way round." But it also sought to affirm the bourgeois morality that made modern democracy tenable, calling for a new sanctity

or asceticism that would leaven rather than lighten bourgeois self-discipline. Liberal individualism was destructive, he argued, but it contained a potent seed of truth regarding the dignity of the human person. Maritain began to advocate Christian personalism, which held that it was "essential to the temporal common good to respect and serve the supratemporal ends of the human person." An adaptation of certain corporate theories of the economy and state found in Italian fascism and the craving for justice for the poor supposedly inspiring communism could serve as means of reforming the laissez-faire liberal state so that it would be a place hospitable to the supernatural destiny of every human being. From the beginning, his mission was to redeem rather than to destroy the bourgeois order.

We may find similar stories in the lives of many modern figures from the turn of the last century. W. B. Yeats (1865–1939), a product of stout middle-class Anglo-Irish Protestants, spent much of his life in a carefully constructed diatribe against his fellow bourgeois. By means of his poetic genius, he managed to mythologize his ancestors sufficiently so that all the Anglo-Irish became the lineal and cultural aristocracy of Ireland; only Irish Catholics could be truly middle class. While Maritain was combating Protestant bourgeois philistinism in France, therefore, Yeats stood in fur coat and pince-nez to attack the Catholic bourgeois philistines of Ireland. He wished the Anglo-Irish to reassume their traditional leadership roles as the reincarnation of Italian renaissance patrons, while he wished the Catholic Irish to shed the tattered cloak of modern monotheism and recover their buff poverty and pagan superstitions—those qualities that made Ireland so picturesque and mystical in the eyes of a foreigner.

I find it impossible to describe Yeats's career sympathetically in the abstract, but when I read his poems and prose I find there a fantastic and stirring vision of life as drama that amounts to no mere fiction but a profound insight that the tragic and comic significance of human life often gets concealed in the age of the marketplace. I suspect that Yeats would have been comfortable with my factitious mockery so long as he had won my imagination, for, in one of his last poems, "The Circus Animals' Desertion," he confessed

> when all is said
> It was the dream itself enchanted me:
> Character isolated by a deed
> To engross the present and dominate
> memory

Although Yeats's posthumous *On the Boiler* (1939) testifies to a soul anxious to deploy state power and the latest theories of eugenics to stem the decline of the West into a bourgeois bog, his most sustained criticism was of the undramatic, disenchanted character of most modern persons' lives. Could they be engrossed by his poetic dreams, one suspects, his complaints might end.

With greater subtlety, the American writers T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) and Allen Tate (1899–1979) combined the Catholic antiliberalism of Maritain's France and the aesthetic vision of life found in Yeats with their own ancestral traditions. Eliot, hailing from a family of Boston Unitarians, was well positioned to appreciate that his family had shared in what traces of aristocratic high culture the northeastern region of America had ever known. But he also detailed with a philosopher's lucidity the role his high bourgeois people had played in the hollowing out of modern life, as is made especially clear in his

discussion of the dissolvent "Boston Doubt" in his essay on Henry Adams. The modern Bostonian was not a violent unbeliever but rather someone who admired and lamented the loss of those beliefs that alone justified the trials of human existence. Indeed, Adams and fellow Boston atheist George Santayana were themselves potent critics of American bourgeois culture; in Eliot's view, they were also its victims, unable to give the belief of their minds to the ancient and medieval civilization they praised in their prose.

Having immigrated to England at the start of the First World War, Eliot saw this homeland of his ancestors as retaining some traces of the rich traditional culture that preceded the industrial revolution. Modern England was no less a waste land than the rest of the Western world, he saw, but he found there fragments that could be shored against the ruins. He evidently prized the attenuated ecclesiastical and aristocratic traditions of England, and his early poetry would satirize the philistinism of Boston (*Prufrock and Other Observations*) and the bloodless vanity and lust of urban London (*The Waste Land*). In his first verse play, *The Rock* (1934), he would paint an unflattering portrait of English suburbs as home to a secularized, atomized, listless population, sprawled out along ribbon roads, disconnected from their neighbors and traveling in thoughtless isolation in the cabs of automobiles.

Much in the fashion of Yeats, Eliot believed the working classes still retained a coherent culture even as modern capitalism and technology had stripped away the vitality of the middle class. In his essay on the music hall personality Marie Lloyd, Eliot prophesied, "With the decay of the music-hall, with the encroachment of the cheap and rapid-breeding cinema, the lower classes will tend to drop into the same state of protoplasm as the bourgeoisie." Like the Melanesians, Eliot suggested, we may all die "from pure boredom," when

> every theatre has been replaced by 100 cinemas, when every musical instrument has been replaced by 100 cheap motor-cars, when electrical ingenuity has made it possible for every child to hear its bed-time stories from a loudspeaker, when applied science has done everything possible with the materials on this earth to make life as interesting as possible.

The practical energies of the bourgeoisie were spreading comfort and convenience across the whole of society, and the more "interesting" life became, the more empty and dull it felt.

But Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism led his social critique to grow at once sharper and more sympathetic. He viewed the capitalist order as having replaced a sound, or limited, and moral economy with one of endless production and spending. He saw that the liberal order, with its inherent individualism and exiling of all beliefs that mattered to the private realm, was undermining the stability of communities conforming to the order of nature and pursuing the Good. Further, he viewed the modern project of creating a deracinated, meritocratic elite as an assault on the function of family as the chief transmitter of Christianity and culture across generations. His solution to these problems was not the elimination of a free market or the restoration of a rigid class system but only a reconversion of society to a meaningfully orthodox Christianity and an insistence that our temporal way of life conform to our supernatural end. This, in practice, would include a call to asceticism, a renewed appreciation for celibate religious life, a reformation of modern usury into more responsible direct investment, and an effort to reconcile mobile

meritocracy with the enduring authority of the family.

Allen Tate offered a similar critique. Tate has been vilified (along with the rest of the American South) for his veneration of the agrarian society of his ancestors. In some critics' views, he seemed to pose as a southern cavalier in exile, when in fact he was the unhappy and neglected scion of ne'er-do-well parents who seldom stayed in one rented apartment for more than a year at a time—if even that long. Tate helped organize the agrarian symposium *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) and contributed an essay that sought to account for the virtues and failings of the historical South. He argued that the culture and manners of the South had been estimable and were indeed preferable to those that had come to prevail in the industrialized North.

But the South had been prey to mercantile instincts from its origins and would abase itself before the industrializing capital offered by northern investors if it did not, as it were, refound its culture. The old South had been "a feudal society, without a feudal religion." It clung to ancestral European traditions by disposition but also believed in the "large-scale exploitation of nature . . . to advance the interests of *trade as an end in itself*." Intimately familiar with Eliot's work, and soon to become a great admirer of Maritain's, Tate saw that the only alternative to a modernity founded on secular liberalism was one founded on the tradition and beliefs of Roman Catholicism.

The biography of many traditional conservatives, including Russell Kirk, reveals that the renewal of tradition frequently involves conversion to Rome. Tate saw the modern world as the disenchanted raw material of Protestant capitalism. With Yeats and all antibourgeois critics, the middle-class Tate defined the solution to modern market mediocrity as a recovery of older social and intellectual forms. But, once again, the essential problem was not the historical bourgeoisie viewed as a class but only its secularizing rejection of religious principles. The middle class was either irreligious or inadequately religious. Tate would insist upon the social necessity of Roman Catholicism decades before his personal conversion (which came in 1950).

It is worth considering here the analogous case of John Crowe Ransom (1888–1974). Ransom had cofounded the southern agrarian movement but had rallied to the specifically southern aspects of the movement more than had the slowly Romanizing Tate. While Tate had thought a Catholic South would have been a tradition wholly worth defending, Ransom saw the primitive "Old Time Religion" of the region as a vital part of its rural traditions. In *God without Thunder* (1930), he defended the rural southern Protestants ridiculed in the wake of the Scopes Monkey trial (1925), because their precapitalist way of life left them humble before the traditional myths of a powerful and threatening natural world. Christian fundamentalists were, in Ransom's account, attuned to nature precisely because they personified it and feared its wrath. His volume defended these fundamentalists by harnessing the comparative theory of myth-as-cultural-archetype that liberal Protestants often used to soften without quite abandoning their faith. The liberal said that Scripture was a myth with moral significance, and so we should still value what we no longer quite believe. Ransom said, to the contrary, the moral significance of the Old Testament told us that nature was a "tempest bursting," that, indeed, "the whole world was villain, / The principle of the beast was low and masculine." We would do well to halt our

industrializing activities in awe before it. Religion was a "check on action" that operated whether God existed or not.

Much like Yeats, Ransom attacked the whole of modern bourgeois life, not just its philistine secularism, in his role of imaginative poet. And like all the figures I have mentioned, Ransom came from the class he reviled. The culture that had made it possible for him to become a well-known poet, a Rhodes scholar, a professor of literature at Vanderbilt University and Kenyon College, was the culture he denounced as imperialist, rationalist northern (that is to say, foreign) industrialism.

But whereas Tate, Eliot, and Maritain clearly trained their sights on the secularizing tendencies of the modern bourgeoisie, Ransom had left himself no room for such restraint. His contributions to *I'll Take My Stand* had given no quarter. Perhaps in consequence, after his initial agrarian enthusiasm, he began slowly to soften and, eventually, to recant his critique. Writing in his literary magazine, *The Kenyon Review*, in 1945, Ransom considered the consequences for Germany of the recent peace, and observed,

> I find an irony at my expense in remarking that the judgment just now delivered by the Declaration of Potsdam against the German people is that they shall return to an agrarian economy. Once I should have thought there could be no greater happiness for a people, but now I have no difficulty in seeing it for what it is meant to be: a heavy punishment.

He proceeds to mention all the things we should have to do without in an agrarian economy—including, pointedly, literature professors and literary reviews.

This irony, this retraction, makes explicit what seems evident in the positions of most of these critics. Namely, they were the beneficiaries of the largess of the bourgeois world, and precisely because of the consciousness they had been afforded by education and some semblance of leisure, they were able to see that the forces that made prosperity possible were eroding a great many cultural traditions that they viewed as good. Great literature had been produced by the aristocratic societies of the West. A child of the middle classes, given some education, could not help but admire it, and in admiring, he might reasonably desire that the conditions that made such achievements possible be defended or restored.

A totalized regime of industrial capitalism would wipe out those conditions entirely and take along with it a place for the bourgeois professors who wished to enjoy, teach, and perhaps continue the great cultural works of the past. But an end to the bourgeois age would be only slightly less disastrous. In his review of Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*, Ransom took Kirk to task for inadequately appreciating the great and irreversible economic role the modern state had taken in society. He thus implicitly accused Kirk of an aristocratic nostalgia that had no serious economic theory but merely looked "toward the Leviathan of modern business" with "a dull hatred." And yet Ransom's abandonment of his agrarian conservatism and acceptance of the growing federal business-and-welfare state made him a friendly critic of Kirk's Burkean conservatism. On his view, Kirk advocated conservative reconcilement to the modern liberal settlement, and history showed that "conservatives, whose acceptance comes after the event, have confiscated their enemies' political estate and administered it very well." Conservatives might be superior stewards of the bourgeois culture whose advent they first resisted.

Ransom followed a similar path as that

which he, with some reason, attributed to Kirk. He came to accept that the world that had made it possible for him to become a poet and professor was probably the *only* world that would allow him to remain a poet and professor. I detect a similar realization in the other antibourgeois critics I have discussed. They did not condemn the modern order in its entirety but attempted to root out those impulses in bourgeois culture that led to contempt for the Catholic Church and for the "enchanted" order of Christendom. They did so as good, but alienated, bourgeois.

In the wake of the rise of the anticulture of the 1960s, the descendants of such figures find themselves in a reversed position. We have noted that certain species of this antibourgeois critique (specifically that developed from Rousseau by Marx and Nietzsche) led to the rise of the communist and National Socialist mass movements early in the last century. Further, Sigmund Freud and the rise of psychoanalysis proved a more subtle and enduring enemy to bourgeois society—one that gained acceptance by the vast majority of the Western middle classes over a number of decades. Psychoanalysis led the bourgeois to view themselves as manically driven to efficiency and productivity, and as needlessly enslaved to punitive social constraints; their strict customs were signs of sexual repression and a judgmental suspicion of better "adjusted" primitive cultures and the lower classes. If the bourgeois ethic seemed, to the critics I have discussed, a threat to sincere religious belief precisely because of its implacable concupiscence, in the post-Freudian world the bourgeoisie has come to believe it does not indulge its appetites nearly enough. Far from undermining devotion, the bourgeoisie had supposedly clung to an infantile religion, stubbornly resisting the enlightened nihilism of contemporary Marxist intellectuals and neoliberal technocrats.

In the past several decades, conservative critics of modernity have attended with greater consciousness to this development. If the bourgeoisie once appeared as working to smother the religious foundations of human life, leveling them for textile mills and factories, its restrained and dignified morality, its traditional veneration of the nuclear family, and sincere-if-circumscribed religious faith has come to be viewed as a development rather than a supplanting of older social forms. Tocqueville's qualified admiration of democratic society has won out over Leon Bloy's visceral disgust with secular liberalism.

A serious qualification to this pronouncement should be made, however. This same bourgeois culture has only inconsistently preserved the morality that was central to its ascent. The bourgeoisie that protected the nuclear family's integrity after its rejection of the intergenerational "clan" also brought about the phenomenon of no-fault divorce, unmarried cohabitation, and other sorts of license that have measurably undermined its prosperity. The slackening of its once "censorious" morality has trickled down and wreaked havoc among the poor in Europe and America. If the conservative critiques of the bourgeoisie summoned it to a more sincere and religiously profound morality, contemporary leftist and therapeutic attacks have sought to dissolve the class's culture entirely, and these voices on the Left often emerge from within bourgeois culture as did the conservative ones. This only bolsters the conservative claim that the bourgeois West was risking "suicide," whether in its soft policies on communism during the Cold War, in the rapidly increasing sexual licentiousness of its culture in the wake of the sixties, or in the exponential growth of the welfare/

warfare state during recent presidential administrations.

While one can occasionally point to conservative thinkers such as John Crowe Ransom who seemed at one point to reject modernity altogether, most conservatives were never so extreme and so need hardly recant any early extremism as Ransom had to do. Most of them appreciate their status as beneficiaries of the enterprising spirit of the bourgeoisie, which—as Deirdre N. McCloskey has brilliantly demonstrated in her ongoing *Bourgeois Era*—may be the single greatest transformative force in human history. Russell Kirk merely argued that a real love for cultural diversity would entail differences of class and the persistence of varied and uneven traditions, and that a world that made room for such things would likely be materially poorer (which is to say, more moderate in how it squandered its inheritance), but would be far happier and denser with the ferment of communal traditions. It would be a world worth exploring and would make for a difficult life nonetheless worth living.

Bloy, Maritain, Eliot, and Tate contended that Christianity should not serve as simply a set of moral boundary stones on antisocial behavior, but should be an animating force in social life, regardless of one's class. And Yeats and Ransom, whatever the unavoidable difficulties we may find in some of their ideas, were not far off the mark in observing that, while bourgeois society had made possible their own particular artistic vocations, it had often undermined the dignity of the human being as an imaginative creature destined to live life not as a repetitious grind of labor and consumption but as a drama worth the playing.

The most controversial voices of contemporary conservatism have sustained these criticisms while attending more conscientiously to a defense of bourgeois civilization. Patrick J. Buchanan (b. 1938) has spent much of his career since leaving the Reagan administration advocating for the American middle class against both the anti-Western Left, with its program of dissolving American culture in a demographic tsunami of immigration and "multiculturalism," and the corporate welfare state brought into being by the Republican and Democratic establishment. Just as Eliot and Tate were accused of being fascists prey to nostalgia in their day, Buchanan faces accusations of racism and anti-Semitism every time he speaks of the cultural integrity of the American nation or questions American foreign policy. His arguments for a robust economic nationalism that will secure what is left of America's manufacturing powerhouse, meanwhile, gets passed over in silence. His is a middle-class conservatism to the core but is typically denounced as pat right-wing extremism. Kirk endorsed Buchanan against George H. W. Bush in the 1992 primaries—the last before Kirk passed away.

Paul Gottfried (b. 1941), a philosophical historian and social critic, stands out as another prominent conservative defender of bourgeois society. Indeed, Gottfried's Hegelian analysis of Western history alerts us that the moral discipline and integrity of the middle class is specifically under attack in the age of the managerial state. In his many books and articles, Gottfried has consistently tried to bring the American middle class to consciousness that a regime of administered social welfare, global projection of American force, and anti-Western social engineering under the façade of "multiculturalism" has all but reconfigured American society, decimating its principal institutions.

Gottfried stands apart from those figures mentioned above. He has, for instance, never been accused of anti-Semitism—which

would seem appropriate, since he is Jewish. His defense of the bourgeoisie draws very little from Catholic social thought, which he has dismissed as "boilerplate." Above all, however, his writing displays a kind of relentless, driving suspicion that sees threats to the (at best) beleaguered Western tradition everywhere. In a trilogy of books, Gottfried has made a detailed account of the contemporary West's "secular theocracy," which amounts to a perversion of traditional Christianity. According to Gottfried, our society has been commandeered by a politics of guilt, in which the doctrine of original sin is projected onto historical European "imperialist" culture and must be redeemed by the administrative priesthood of "multiculturalist" bureaucrats who seek to dissolve every tradition and community by immersing it in an inane ideology of diversity. Mass immigration, affirmative action, and political correctness are the sacraments of our age.

His argument makes for sorrowful, and sometimes monotonous, reading in which there are no heroes: Christians play into the hands of secular liberals; observant Jews undermine the free exercise of religion for Christians; Kirk and his fellow traditional conservatives delude themselves into believing there is any Western tradition left to be saved; and behind every corner lies a perfidious neoconservative waiting to damage a true conservative's career or ruin a reputation. Having said this, I do not doubt the incisiveness of Gottfried's criticism, and I would underscore that, for all his systematic gloominess and occasional paranoia, his books should be required reading for anyone who cares about the principles of self-government, intellectual liberty, or bourgeois morality.

In Buchanan and Gottfried, one finds almost none of the historical critique typical of the earlier figures I have discussed—and rightly so. They have seen that the bourgeoisie is not so much the threat to a decent civilization and a robust culture but rather is the chief threatened party in an era dominated by a global elite committed to dissolving every social bond in the name of creating a mobile, cosmopolitan, and docile "protoplasm" out of what was once the tightly knit and deeply rooted middle and lower classes. For the elites, antibourgeois critiques are no summons to reflection, reform, and a recovery of tradition—as they were for Eliot, Maritain, and others. Rather, they are just one more ideological tool in the long project of reducing human beings to workers and consumers incapable of enduring customs or stubborn beliefs.

And yet the sort of sometimes wistful, often profound, and always cheerful account of traditional society that writers like Kirk provided may be precisely what our moment requires. American and European politics are presently dominated by two barely distinguishable parties—the party of global commerce and the party of global administration, who have done a frighteningly good job of convincing the middle class that there are only two goods worthy of our zeal: increased discretionary consumption or increased uniformity of consumption. Now more than ever we need to be reminded that human beings are capable of adhering to truths more lasting than the hour, of loyalties and attachments to their families and neighborhoods rather than to the malign abstractions of "social justice" or "global consciousness." What most of the figures I have discussed advocated was what Kirk called an "imaginative conservatism," one capable of seeing everyday life as a divine drama, one alert to the fantastic achievements of past ages, in relation to which we ought to view ourselves as rightful

heirs rather than liberated slaves. Above all, the imaginative conservatism of Kirk and Eliot, the Catholicism of Bloy and Maritain, summon us not to a loosening of bourgeois discipline or an abandonment of its powerful work ethic but instead to an elevation of these real goods such that they would be put to a still greater end.

These earlier conservative critics of bourgeois culture have generally sought to do, in other words, what Tate's criticism of the old South did, to deepen and enrich the foundations of a society they already cherish as it is and would redeem through filial love. That task has grown still more difficult when the exemplary and driving class of the modern world is under threat from every side and from within.

It would be a vain hope to think some political program or party might save it, but one may take heart in a particular detail. To this place where I write, Piety Hill, over the course of many years, young students came knocking at the door of Russell Kirk in search of wisdom about what he called, with Eliot, the permanent things. Kirk's widow tells me of the many faces that passed through their living room, sometimes staying for an hour, or for a meal, and sometimes for days. They eventually added on a red brick Italianate wing to the old clapboard house to accommodate all the passersby or, rather, the pilgrims.

Kirk did not appear on television or shout acerbic slogans over the radio. He did not seek political office (beyond brief service as a local justice of the peace). Rather, he wrote books that coupled insights into the limited but redeemable nature of man with depictions of the ancient places and noble persons who have populated our shared history. After such things, even the heart of a middle class boy will pine; and in that sensation, he will discover at once the frustrating limitations of the bourgeois age but also the substance that may broaden, deepen, and renew it. Conservative critics of that age, thus, are neither wan peddlers of nostalgia nor snobs with a preference for "iron clothing," leveling a rusted sword at the ignorant masses. What they offer cannot so easily be dismissed, for they restore to us a sense of purpose, tradition, and community without which our daily round would be in vain. ■