

Rediscovering the Heroic Conservatism of Richard M. Weaver

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[Part One]

POST-WAR AMERICA, and indeed the post-war world as a whole, witnessed one of the most prolific periods of social and political philosophy since the Enlightenment. Dramatic social, political, and economic change transformed a generation and demanded a philosophical framework which made that change intelligible. One of the most influential of these movements was the “new conservatism” which began with Peter Viereck’s *Conservatism Revisited* (1949) and Russell Kirk’s *Randolph of Roanoke* (1951), and his magisterial *The Conservative Mind* (1953).

One of the most significant and eloquent voices of the new conservatism was Richard M. Weaver (1910-1963). Often identified as being on the fringe of the new conservatism, Weaver is counted among the “Southern Agrarians” (along with Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and John Crowe Ransom), sympathetic to the new conservatism but removed in his rejection of Edmund Burke as the founding father of conservative philosophy. According to Viereck, Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) dates the “birth of a deliberate international conservatism...in the same way that the birth of international Marxism is dated

by the *Communist Manifesto*.”¹ Russell Kirk declared that “the true conservative is a disciple of Burke”; hence, to be a conservative was to be a Burkean.²

In *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (1953), however, Weaver not only rejected Burke as the source of true conservatism but also derided him as a liberal and contended that, “a man’s method of argument is a truer index in his beliefs than his explicit profession of principles,” and that although Burke may be “widely respected as a conservative” he suffered from an addiction to the argument from circumstance, a mode “philosophically appropriate to the liberal.”³ If the rejection of Burke was surprising, however, it paled in comparison with Weaver’s apparent praise of Abraham Lincoln as the ideal conservative, a choice bound to alienate Weaver from the Southern Agrarians as well as the new conservatives.

This has been the standard treatment of Weaver and of Weaver’s *Ethics* for more than a half century. It is also a misinterpretation which has inappropriately narrowed contemporary understanding of Weaver and the originality and significance of his thought. What follows is a re-reading of Weaver’s work. A closer reading of the *Ethics* reveals a much more complex argument than has been realized, and a more complex understanding of Weaver’s rhetorical and political phi-

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losophy. While Burke remains, for Weaver, the paradigmatic liberal, it is not, nor was it ever, Lincoln who epitomized the conservative but rather the heretofore forgotten John Milton.

A longstanding and widely, if not universally, held assumption is not easy to refute, nor should it be. The editors of *Modern Age*, appreciating the complexity of the argument which is developed herein, have consented to publish this paper in two successive parts. Part one addresses the Burke-Lincoln dichotomy by arguing that a careful reading of the *Ethics*, especially when read in the light of Weaver's other writings, does not support that view. Rather, Weaver developed a tripartite ethical system characterized by the rhetorics of Burke, Lincoln, and Milton. Part two revisits Weaver's ethical, rhetorical, and political philosophy in this light. Positioning Milton as the central figure in Weaver's thought not only has significant impact on how Weaver is understood but also raises serious questions and criticisms with which contemporary conservatives have yet to grapple.

The Case Against Lincoln

The standard treatment of Weaver begins with his categories of argument, a structure he developed in a series of writings including the article "Looking for an Argument" and the essays "Language is Sermonic" and "Responsible Rhetoric," although the fullest treatment is in his composition handbook, *Rhetoric and Composition* (1967). It is in the *Ethics*, however, that this typology of argument is first developed, and while his system has several gradations, Weaver consistently argued that the highest and most ethical form of argumentation was grounded in definition, or genus, an argument from "the nature of a thing" or its "fixed class,"⁴ while the lowest and least ethical form of argument was grounded in circumstance, "the nearest of all arguments to purest

expediency" which "attempts only an estimate of current conditions or pressures."⁵ The argument from genus, Weaver argued further, is the mode most appropriate to the conservative, while the latter mode is indicative of the liberal.

Weaver, typical of his "unorthodox defense of orthodoxy,"⁶ refused to "conform to any faction for the sake of popularity." Underscoring an "impartiality that does not spare his friends,"⁷ he elected to use Abraham Lincoln as the model of the argument from genus and Edmund Burke as the epitome of the liberal mode based on circumstance. Consequently, many concluded that Weaver believed Lincoln to be a true conservative and praised him for his rhetoric and his philosophy.

A careful reading of the *Ethics* does not bear out this conclusion. Indeed, most of the statements which attribute such high praise to Lincoln are from Weaver's commentators and critics, not from Weaver himself. His language on this matter is curiously circumspect for one who characteristically paid close attention to language and who argued elsewhere in the *Ethics* that a writer must always be on guard against the friction created when a system of grammar says "one thing while the semantic meaning and the general organization are tending to say another."⁸

Weaver never said Lincoln is a conservative. Rather, he said that a discussion of Lincoln's rhetoric was offered as "a study which is important...as showing upon what terms conservatism is possible"⁹; that, "[w]ith the full career in view, there seems no reason to differ with Herndon's judgment that Lincoln displayed a high order of 'conservative statesmanship'"¹⁰; that "[t]hose who prefer the argument from definition, as Lincoln did, are conservatives in the legitimate sense of the word"¹¹; and, finally, that "the First Inaugural Address will give us the conservative's view of pragmatic jurisprudence."¹²

It would be easy to dismiss Weaver's circumspect language, including the use

of grammatical structures he specifically warned against,¹³ as academic hair-splitting. Alone, Weaver's language indicates little more than that he did not practice what he preached. Looking outside the *Ethics*, however, further complicates the claim that Weaver supported Lincoln as a rhetorical and political figure.

The *Ethics* is not the only place where praise of Lincoln can be found. Elsewhere, Weaver called Lincoln a man "of Southern nurture"¹⁴ and on another occasion, "a Kentuckian by birth,"¹⁵ and yet again as being "alone among Americans of the nineteenth century [who] rose to the tragic view of life."¹⁶ In an essay in praise of Lincoln's contemporary and *Southern Review* founder, Albert Taylor Bledsoe, Weaver quoted Bledsoe's characterization of Lincoln as

...the ideal man to lead the "Northern Demos" in its war to subjugate the South. "For if, as we believe, that was the cause of brute force, blind passion, fanatical hate, lust of power and greed of gain, against the cause of constitutional and human rights, then who was better fitted to represent it than the talented but low, ignorant and vulgar, railsplitter from Illinois?" Lincoln was the "low-bred infidel of Pigeon Creek" in whose eyes "the Holy Mother" was "as base as his own."¹⁷

It is difficult to take seriously the conclusion that Weaver praised Lincoln's philosophy. In his essay, "Two Orators," Weaver upheld Robert Young Hayne (1791-1839) while condemning Daniel Webster (1782-1852), and it is important to observe that Weaver specifically identified Lincoln with Webster's rhetorical style.¹⁸ One of the most famous passages from Lincoln's oratory, if not the most famous epistrophe in the English language, is the conclusion to the Gettysburg Address wherein Lincoln said "a government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from this earth." Weaver identified Webster as the source of this particular passage which is

especially significant in terms of Weaver's insistence that resonances, or "the use of terminology or even syntax associated with revered persons, ideas, or institutions,"¹⁹ signal a particularly subtle and powerful appeal to authority. If Webster, whose rhetoric was a source of inspiration and authority for Lincoln, is a base orator, it does not seem logical to conclude that Lincoln was noble.

In his most dramatic criticism, Weaver charged that Lincoln "assumed virtually unlimited power during the Civil War and so established precedents which any future 'strong man' could use for his own purposes."²⁰ He linked these precedents with New Deal liberalism and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and also compared Lincoln with Roosevelt, calling both "reputedly great idealists."²¹ Thus it appears doubtful that Weaver understood Lincoln as his ideal orator.

Making the Case for Milton

In arguing that Weaver's ideal orator was John Milton, two statements of fact, or what the Latins would have called *narratio*, must be noted. First and foremost, Weaver is a Platonist and one of the strongest arguments for Weaver's Platonism is the careful attention he gives to Plato's *Phaedrus* in the opening chapter of the *Ethics*. The second fact is that Weaver was not only a conservative but also that conservatism was, at the time the *Ethics* was written, a concept in flux. These two facts are important to bear in mind in reading the *Ethics* since Weaver's Platonism provides a lens through which the work must be read, while the dynamic nature of conservatism suggests something of Weaver's motives and purposes in writing in the first place.

One of the difficulties in interpreting the *Ethics*, and in understanding Weaver, is the failure to grasp the end toward which the work is written. Based upon Weaver's other efforts during this period

and his general tendencies, it is not unreasonable to suspect that his aim was to articulate a definition of conservatism. While contemporary discourse tends to treat ideas of liberalism and conservatism as clearly defined constructs,²² more than a half century of industrialization, urbanization, centralization, technological change, and two World Wars spurred a re-thinking of the nature of man and his place in the universe. The new conservatism was part of that re-thinking.

Conservatism is difficult to define. It is often understood as having no central or clearly definable concept but rather as a position without independent status and essentially as a rejection of liberalism and thus defined by liberalism rather than a philosophical position in its own right.²³ The new conservatism was, in many ways, an attempt to articulate a center around which a self-defining conservatism could orient itself and, with few exceptions, found that center in Edmund Burke.²⁴

Weaver did not treat Burke consistently. His argument that Burke epitomized the liberal mode of argument is clear without either the tentativeness or the grammatical friction found in his statements regarding Lincoln. Weaver also associated Burke with the argument from circumstance, but elsewhere called him “a great master of rhetoric.”²⁵ In “The Southern Tradition,” Weaver appears to have accepted Kirk’s claim that “the true conservative is a disciple of Burke,”²⁶ and he concludes that “Burke is one of the great prophets of conservative society.”²⁷

Elsewhere, however, Weaver expressed deep concern with the attempt to ground conservatism in Burke. At a University of Chicago roundtable in 1955 Weaver distinguished between what he called “temperamental conservatives and reflective conservatives,” the latter type based upon conviction “with reference to certain concepts of the good, with reference to certain means that should be taken to-

ward realizing those concepts of the good”; at “the center of their position is the conception of society as a structural thing.”²⁸ Weaver was, furthermore, deeply concerned with the dangers of a split between the two types of conservative, as he indicated in a 1955 address to The Conservative Society of Yale Law School:

...we would not want to see developing a group of mere traditionalists on one side and a group of “radical” conservatives on the other—radical in the sense of following a theory to some extreme and getting out of touch with life. They might find it increasingly difficult to work together and even to communicate.²⁹

Weaver wrote the *Ethics* within the context of the “new conservative” movement increasingly influenced by a Burkeanism of which he was distrustful because of Burke’s assumption “that tradition throws a veil over the origin of many of our institutions,” an approach to politics that, Weaver believed, was a “weakness we cannot afford,”³⁰ and also because Burke’s disdain for principle deprived conservatives of a foundation from which to argue. The *Ethics* is Weaver’s effort not only to define conservatism but also to demonstrate it.

It is not surprising that Weaver would be obsessed with the proper definition of conservatism. He described himself as being “inclined to the speculative side” of conservatism and “that a conservative is something of a definer.”³¹ The *Ethics* should be read as an extended definition, the appropriate method of argument to employ if the “true meaning of [a] term is distorted in the public mind” and necessary to establish an ideal meaning in contrast with the meaning which merely “reflects existing facts.”³² An extended definition would be the tool employed by “[p]hilosophers and advocates of political reform” who “often find it needful to state what a term means as an ideal conception rather than as a generalization

about a present situation.”³³ A proper definition of conservatism, one that provides the conservative with an effective and well-articulated position from which to argue, was imperative for Weaver insofar as in the traditionalism of Burkean conservatism he saw the downfall of the movement, a danger he clearly articulates in the *Ethics*.

An often ignored and yet important portion of the *Ethics* was devoted to Weaver’s analysis of the Whig Party of the nineteenth century and his diagnosis of the party’s downfall. Therein, he made clear an unambiguous comparison between the Whigs and his contemporaries in the Republican Party, including the tendency of both parties, in the absence of principle, to be forced to rely upon “personalities in the hope that they would be sufficient to carry it to victory”³⁴—for example, the election of military heroes such as a William Henry Harrison for the Whigs and a Dwight David Eisenhower for the Republicans—rather than principled conservatives. The rapid decline of the Whig party to political irrelevance was a direct consequence of its inability to define itself with respect to the exigencies of the day.

At the core of Weaver’s political philosophy was the rejection of the liberal-conservative dichotomy. He did not believe that liberalism was the great danger humanity faced. That danger came from collectivism. In two separate essays, “The Middle of the Road: Where It Leads” (1956) and “The Middle Way: A Political Meditation” (1957), Weaver attacked conservatives who sought the middle ground in “the most fundamental conflict dividing the world today, whose sides may be denominated ‘individual freedom’ and ‘collectivist dictatorship.’”³⁵ Those who, like Burke, seek the middle way are “uncomfortable with ideas and the oppositions which these entail.”³⁶ The effort to negotiate between two extremes is, Weaver said, the “liberal dilemma.”³⁷

In the “absence of a philosophy or an attempt to evade having a philosophy” the conservatives would inevitably end up “willing to settle by splitting the difference between themselves and the enemy.”³⁸ Weaver called this tendency to split the difference between the extremes of principle “middle-of-the-roadism”:

Middle-of-the-roadism is too often nothing more than a shying away from all logically clear alternatives because the acceptance of a logically clear alternative exposes you to criticism. You have a position. Tocqueville points out that all great political parties have resulted from adherence to basic principles. A great party that tries to substitute compromise for this, or that tries to find its stay in glamorous personalities, is on the way out. That policy proved fatal to the Whig Party in this country and to the Liberal Party in England, and I leave you to your own surmises about the present Republican Party.³⁹

Burkean conservatism, uncomfortable with ideas, philosophy, and metaphysics, and defining itself in relation to its opposition, epitomized middle-of-the-roadism and liberalism. Repeatedly Weaver warned that if the Republican Party followed the example of Burke it would end up in the same state as the Liberal Party of England and the Whig Party of nineteenth-century America: politically impotent. “Dodging issues and watering down solutions is not merely the way to failure; it is the way to extinction.”⁴⁰

Weaver’s rejection of a simplistic liberal-conservative dualism in favor of a tripartite structure is, moreover, grounded in his Platonism and demonstrated in his analysis of Plato’s dialogue, *Phaedrus*:

Students of this justly celebrated dialogue have felt uncertain of its unity of theme, and the tendency has been to designate it broadly as a discussion of the ethical and the beautiful. The explicit topics of the dialogue are, in order: love, the soul, speechmaking, and

the spoken and written word, or what is generally termed by us “composition.” The development looks random, and some of the passages appear *jeux d’esprit*. The richness of the literary art diverts attention from the substance of the argument.⁴¹

It is interesting to note this observation in the light of statements made by Weaver’s critics. He is regarded as “fundamentally an essayist” whose works “are loosely thematic and cross-referential,”⁴² even reviews of the *Ethics* depict it as “a collection of nine essays loosely grouped around its subject.”⁴³ Russell Kirk remarked of the *Ethics* that its “nine chapters...range enormously over time and topic.”⁴⁴

Weaver’s initial observation on the *Phaedrus* is a warning against reading it literally,⁴⁵ a warning he argued Plato conveyed through the allusion to the myth of Boreas and Oreithyia. The *Phaedrus* is about transcendence of the particular, and a literal reading of it will, at best, produce a “boorish sort of wisdom...while the truth flies off on the wings of imagination.”⁴⁶

Parallels between Weaver and Plato are interesting but, when taken seriously, suggest that if Plato is for Weaver an *authority*, then it would be reasonable to suspect that Weaver would emulate Plato’s style and would offer modes of argument, terminology, and syntax that Plato used. In the same way that Lincoln’s emulation of Webster indicates his true sentiment, Weaver’s Platonic inclinations ought to be manifest in his writings. If Plato intended his work to be read metaphorically and thus referred his reader to a great myth, accompanied by a general warning against literalism, it does not seem altogether unreasonable to conclude that Weaver, who begins the *Ethics* interpreting a great myth, figuratively accompanied by a warning against literal reading, intended that the subsequent work be interpreted figuratively. Moreover, the *Phaedrus* provides a template from which to understand the whole of

the *Ethics* since they treat the same subject: rhetoric.

The primary concern expressed in Plato’s *Phaedrus* is the nature of rhetoric, and specifically the three types of orator: the neuter speaker represented by the non-lover; the base speaker represented by the ignoble lover; and the noble speaker represented by the noble lover. It is important to note that in discussing these three types of orator Weaver follows the same pattern established by Plato in the *Phaedrus*. The non-lover is addressed first, followed by the ignoble lover, and the discourse concludes with the noble lover. In the same way, Weaver treated the rhetoric of Burke, whose faults are precisely those faults that Weaver attributes to the neuter speaker. The semantically purified speech of the non-lover “offers the serviceability of objectivity,”⁴⁷ whereas Burke’s argument from circumstance “stops at the level of perception of fact.”⁴⁸ The neuter speaker is bound to a language “whose structure corresponds to physical structure,”⁴⁹ while the argument from circumstance is bound by expediency. The argument “merely reads the circumstances—the ‘facts standing around’—and accepts them as coercive.”⁵⁰

After *Phaedrus* performs the speech of the non-lover, Socrates responds by arguing that love is an evil, that lovers seek to dominate and exploit the objects of their love and keep them weak and dependent. Immediately upon finishing, however, he cries:

If Love is, as he is indeed, a god or a divine being, he cannot be an evil thing; yet this pair of speeches treated him as evil. That then was their offense toward Love, to which was added the most exquisite folly of parading there pernicious rubbish as though it were good sense because it might deceive a few miserable people and win their applause.⁵¹

Weaver made a convincing case for Lincoln as the noble rhetor, but even the

apparent sincerity of his argument is insufficient to support the conclusion that Weaver believed Lincoln to be the conservative ideal or even that he intended for those who read the *Ethics* to accept that conclusion. Weaver no more supported Lincoln than Plato endorsed cruel and wicked love. In the same way that Plato moves from the non-lover to the wicked lover, Weaver led his reader from the dispassionate neuter oratory to the base and ignoble speech.

Weaver's "iron logicity...dispassionate reason and sober dialectic"⁵² conceal an artistic depth which allowed Weaver to say *both* that Lincoln exemplified the argument from definition, the basis (but not the totality) of ethical rhetoric, and that Lincoln is the ignoble rhetor without contradiction. Lincoln's failure, like that of Socrates's when he denounced love as an evil madness, is not rhetorical but dialectical. His sin was in ably advancing a false vision of the good.

In the second chapter of the *Ethics*, Weaver elaborated on the nature of dialectic and rhetoric using the famous trial of the high school teacher John Thomas Scopes in Dayton, Tennessee, in 1925. Weaver argued that the prosecution against Scopes was dialectically secured: there was a law which had been duly passed by the body empowered to do so regarding a matter over which that body's authority was sovereign and Scopes did violate that law—while the defense was rhetorically more potent, arguing that the law was a bad law. Thus the dialectically secured position won the trial but lost the greater struggle. The lesson for the conservative was that a dialectically secured position—being right—was not enough in the war against totalitarian collectivism. The same theme sustains *The Southern Tradition at Bay* (1968): a dialectically secured philosophy is undermined and swept away by a rhetorically potent but false vision.

Carefully reading Weaver's examples

of Lincoln's supposedly conservative rhetoric reveals arguments and adherence to values Weaver systematically rejected as anathemas of conservatism. With respect to human nature, Weaver offered examples of Lincoln's speeches including his Address to the Springfield Lyceum, his speech on the National Bank, his speech before the Washingtonian Temperance Society, as well as his advice to young lawyers. In each case, Lincoln argued from a view of human nature as "inherently evil,"⁵³ driven by "personal ambition;"⁵⁴ he also argued with "a visible regard for human passion and weakness"; his definition being "completely unsentimental."⁵⁵

While Weaver agreed that human nature was inherently evil, he "was concerned with human nature in its totality."⁵⁶ If the Platonic influence—particularly the Platonic definition of human nature present in the *Phaedrus*—is ignored, it would be easy to overlook the distinction between Weaver and Lincoln on human nature:

In the beginning of our story we divided each soul into three parts, two being like steeds and the third like a charioteer. Well and good. Now of the steeds, so we declare, one is good and the other is not, but we have not described the excellence of the one nor the badness of the other, and that is what must be done. He that is on the more honorable side is upright and clean limbed, carrying his neck high with something of a hooked nose; in color he is white, with black eyes; a lover of glory, but with temperance and modesty; one that consorts with genuine renown, and needs no whip, being driven by the word of command alone. The other is crooked of frame, a massive jumble of a creature, with thick short neck, snub nose, black skin, and gray eyes; hot-blooded, consorting with wantonness and vainglory; shaggy of ear, deaf and hard to control with whip and goad.⁵⁷

The myth of the charioteer⁵⁸ is one of Plato's most enduring images and therein

Plato clearly establishes that the soul, *i.e.* human nature, is not singular and constant, as Weaver's Lincoln depicted it, but torn between its noble and base natures. According to Socrates, the failure of his first oration, the speech of the evil lover, is that he presents only one side—the evil side—of the lover and treats as “an invariable truth that madness [of love] is an evil, but in reality, the greatest blessings come by way of madness, indeed of madness that is heaven-sent.”⁵⁹ Weaver echoed this duality in “How to Argue the Conservative Cause”:

The desire to have more, to enjoy more, to become more comfortable is not the only driving force in human nature. There is alongside this, though sometimes buried, a desire to sacrifice, to be hard on oneself. This may sound paradoxical to some, but then human nature is not a simple question.⁶⁰

In each case that Weaver cited, Lincoln argued from a single narrow conception of human nature and advocated restraining the evil of human nature by conjoining duty and interest. Weaver summarized Lincoln's position on the National Bank as being rooted in the assumption that “we always find the best performance where duty and self-interest thus run together”⁶¹ and, regarding Lincoln's advice to young lawyers, that, “Lincoln saw the yoking of duty and self-interest as a necessity of our nature.”⁶² It is difficult to believe that Weaver, who argued in the first chapter of *Ethics* that, “rhetoric at its truest seeks to perfect men by showing them better versions of themselves, links in a chain extending upward toward the ideal, which only the intellect can apprehend and the soul have affections for,”⁶³ would later say that Lincoln's practice of arguing from humanity's lowest nature, emphasizing the baseness of man, was ethical in practice.

With respect to Lincoln's second argument based on “the definition of man,”

Weaver provided several examples, most of which centered upon the issue of slavery:

The American civil conflict of the last century, when all its superficial excitements have been stripped aside, appears another debate about the nature of man. Yet while other political leaders were looking to the law, to American history, and to this or that political contingency, Lincoln looked—as it was his habit already to do—to the center; that is, to the definition of man. Was the negro a man or was he not? It can be shown that his answer to this question never varied, despite a willingness to recognize some temporary and perhaps even some permanent minority on the part of the African race. The answer was a clear “Yes,” and he used it on many occasions during the fifties to impale his opponents.⁶⁴

Weaver determined that Lincoln “could never be dislodged from his position that there is one genus of human beings.”⁶⁵ Yet this position is not only in conflict with Socrates's argument in the *Phaedrus*, that an ethical rhetoric must “classify the types of discourse and the types of soul, and the various ways in which souls are affected, explaining the reasons in each case, suggesting the type of speech appropriate to each type of soul, and showing what kind of speech can be relied on to create belief in one soul and disbelief in another and why”⁶⁶ but also in conflict with essential elements of Weaver's conservative philosophy. In *Visions of Order*, he wrote:

For the past several centuries there has been a growing tendency to collapse hierarchy and in consequence to deny, ignore or abolish proper distinctions among human beings. These distinctions, or discriminations, have been of many kinds, answering to differences in age, in sex, in education, in occupation, in way of life, in degree of commitment to transcendental goals, etc. In periods of high culture, there is interest in diversity as well as in sameness, and society uses the standards of many qualities to measure and identify, not merely the single

standard of quality to weigh. This fact expresses a belief that there are qualities, faculties, and vocations that distinguish human beings in ways that have to be respected.⁶⁷

In "Life without Prejudice," Weaver connected this deconstruction of distinction with the "ceaseless campaign of the communists to make every people a mass" through the eradication of distinctions.⁶⁸ Lincoln's use of a single standard, while certainly an argument from definition, which is the conservative's mode of argument, did not make him conservative nor did it mean that, for Weaver, Lincoln was ethical. Weaver prepared the reader for this in the opening chapter of the *Ethics* when he writes:

It is impossible to talk about rhetoric as effective expression without having as a term giving intelligibility to the whole discourse, the Good. Of course, inferior concepts of the Good may be and often are placed in this ultimate position; and there is nothing to keep a base lover from inverting the proper order and saying, "Evil, be thou my good."⁶⁹

Weaver was able to use Lincoln as an example of conservative rhetoric and of the evil orator because the latter judgment requires transcending the surface meaning of the text and apprehending

Weaver's higher truth. While it would seem that the text and the transcendent text are in conflict with one another, Weaver was able to avoid this dilemma to the degree that Lincoln was wrong only in the sense that he was not entirely right. In *Visions of Order*, Weaver pointed out that, "It is of course the essence of fanaticism to seize upon some fragment of truth or value and regard it as the exclusive object of man's striving."⁷⁰ Weaver's Lincoln argued from definition, which made him the exemplar of conservative and ethical rhetoric, but because his definitions were partial and broke down "proper distinctions," Lincoln was simultaneously the evil rhetor. Lincoln's failure was not rhetorical but dialectical. Without a dialectically secured position, there can be no ethical rhetoric.

If Burke represents the neuter rhetor, the seeker of the middle ground who lacks reference to an articulated position, and if Lincoln is the base rhetor, a rhetor whose position is clearly articulated but dialectically unsound and thus advances a false vision of the world, it stands to follow that John Milton, the only other candidate available in the *Ethics*, is Weaver's ideal and the noble rhetor. Such a conclusion demands a substantial change in how Weaver is generally perceived not only in the new conservatism but also in political philosophy.

1. Peter Viereck, *Conservatism from John Adams to Churchill* (Princeton, 1956), 10. 2. Russell Kirk, "Ethical Labor," *The Sewanee Review* 62 (1954): 490. 3. Richard M. Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Davis, Calif., 1985), 58. Henceforth this work will also be cited as *Ethics* in the text. 4. Richard M. Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, 56. 5. *Ethics*, 57. 6. Bruce A. White, "Dialectic Rhetorician," in *The Vision of Richard Weaver*, ed. Joseph Scotchie (New Brunswick, N.J., 1995), 113. 7. Kirk, 487. 8. *Ethics*, 116. 9. *Ethics*, 86. 10. *Ethics*, 111-112. 11. *Ethics*, 112. 12. *Ethics*, 113. 13. In the chapter immediately following Weaver's treatment of Lincoln's rhetoric, titled "Some Rhetorical Aspects of Grammatical Categories" (115-142), he

observed that, while some might suggest that his exposition on grammar is nothing more than a catalogue of prejudices, "there is such a thing as a vector of forces in language" and a rhetorical effect "may sometimes be obtained by crowding or even breaking a rule" (141). 14. Richard M. Weaver, "Aspects of the Southern Philosophy," in *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver*, ed. George M. Curtis and James J. Thompson (Indianapolis, 1987), 193. 15. Richard M. Weaver, "The Southern Tradition," in *Southern Essays*, 217. 16. Richard M. Weaver, "Lee the Philosopher," in *Southern Essays*, 179. 17. Richard M. Weaver, "Albert Taylor Bledsoe," in *Southern Essays*, 157. 18. A similar connection between the rhetorical

style of Webster and Lincoln is established more clearly by Garry Wills, in *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York, 1992), who argued Lincoln “always held that Webster’s flowery reply to Hayne was ‘the grandest specimen of American oratory’” (148). **19.** “Looking for an Argument,” 214. On the subject of resonances and their place in Weaver’s understanding of rhetoric, see also Charles K. Follette, “A Weaverian Interpretation of Richard Weaver” (unpublished dissertation, University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, 1981), 228-230. **20.** Richard M. Weaver, “Review of Amaury de Riencourt, *The Coming Caesars*,” in *In Defense of Tradition*, 606. **21.** Richard M. Weaver, *Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Time* (Wilmington, Del., 1995), 105 (emphasis added). **22.** This line of argument is developed further in the second installment. **23.** See, for example, Ludwig Freund, “The New American Conservative and European Conservative,” *Ethics* 66 (1955), and Francis G. Wilson, “The Contemporary Right,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 1 (1948). **24.** See the work of Gerry Brown, “Democracy, the New Conservatism, and the Liberal Tradition in America,” *Ethics* 66 (1955); Russell Kirk, “Ethical Labor” and *The Conservative Mind, from Burke to Santayana* (Chicago, 1953); Willmoore Kendall and George W. Carey, “Towards a Definition of ‘Conservatism,’” *The Journal of Politics* 26 (1964), and Peter Viereck, *Conservatism and Conservatism Revisited: The Revolt Against Revolt* (New York, 1949). **25.** “Language is Sermonic,” 354. **26.** Kirk, 490. **27.** Richard M. Weaver, “The Southern Tradition,” in *Southern Essays*, 211. **28.** Stuart Gerry Brown, Aaron Director and Richard M. Weaver, “Who Are Today’s Conservatives?” *The University of Chicago Round Table*, #881, in *In Defense of Tradition*, 458. **29.** Richard M. Weaver, “The Prospects of Conservatism,” in *In Defense of Tradition*, 474. **30.** Richard M. Weaver, “How to Argue the Conservative Cause,” in *In Defense of*

Tradition, 510. **31.** “Prospects of Conservatism,” 474. **32.** *Rhetoric and Composition*, 30-1. **33.** *Ibid.* **34.** *Ethics*, 81. **35.** Richard M. Weaver, “The Middle Way: A Political Mediation,” in *In Defense of Tradition*, 543. **36.** “Middle Way,” 542. **37.** “Middle Way,” 543. **38.** Richard M. Weaver, “The Middle of the Road: Where it Leads,” in *In Defense of Tradition*, 536. **39.** “Prospects of Conservatism,” 472. There is herein a striking parallel to Lysias’ speech on the attributes of the non-lover, that he will not excite comment (232b), but also Weaver’s description of the neuter speaker: “The way therefore to avoid public comment is to avoid the speech of affection and to use that of business....” *Ethics*, 9. **40.** “Middle of the Road,” 538. **41.** *Ethics*, 3. **42.** Bernard K. Duffy and Martin Jacobi, *The Politics of Rhetoric: Richard M. Weaver and the Conservative Tradition* (Westport, Conn., 1993), xi. **43.** Harold A. Larrabee, “The Ethics of Rhetoric,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 51 (1954), 447. **44.** “Ethical Labor,” 488. **45.** Similar conclusions have been reached by other commentators upon the *Phaedrus*. William S. Cobb has argued, for example, that any literal reading of Plato invariably ignores the obvious “literary and dramatic qualities of Plato’s dialogues” (*The Symposium and the Phaedrus: Plato’s Erotic Dialogues*, 6). **46.** *Ethics*, 4-5. **47.** *Ethics*, 8. **48.** *Ethics*, 57. **49.** *Ethics*, 8. **50.** *Ethics*, 57. **51.** *Phaedrus*, 243a. **52.** Kirk, “Ethical Labor,” 487. **53.** *Ethics*, 87. **54.** *Ethics*, 88. **55.** *Ethics*, 90. **56.** Young, 10. **57.** “*Phaedrus*” (253c-e). **58.** Here, again, Weaver’s instruction to consider the mythic quality of Plato and of the *Phaedrus* should be remembered. **59.** “*Phaedrus*.” (244a). **60.** “Conservative Cause,” 510. **61.** *Ethics*, 89. **62.** *Ethics*, 90. **63.** *Ethics*, 25. **64.** *Ethics*, 90-1. **65.** *Ethics*, 95. **66.** “*Phaedrus*,” 271b. **67.** *Visions of Order*, 93. **68.** Richard M. Weaver, “Life without Prejudice,” in *In Defense of Tradition*, 89. **69.** *Ethics*, 23. **70.** *Visions of Order*, 15.