Kirk among the Historians: Myth and Meaning in the Writing of American History

I. No Ruined Castles

America is the land of progress, speculative, contingent, pragmatic, experimental, traditionless. An American conservatism, accordingly, is oxymoronic, blundering, graceless, and embarrassing in a society devoted to change and forgetful of the past. "The storybook truth about American history," began Louis Hartz in *The Liberal Tradition in America*, is that the country "was settled by men who fled from the feudal and clerical oppressions of the Old World. If there is anything in this view...then the outstanding thing about the American community in Western history ought to be the non-existence of those oppressions, or since the reaction against them was in the broadest sense liberal, that the American community is a liberal community."[1] In 1953, two years before the appearance of *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Russell Kirk, then an unknown professor at Michigan State College (later University), had published *The Conservative Mind*. Kirk not only announced the existence of a vibrant Anglo-American conservative tradition, but, as his publisher Henry Regnery declared, he gave "coherence and integrity" to the postwar conservative movement in the United States.[2]

Seeking to make conservatism relevant to the modern world, Kirk had set himself a formidable task. At the time he wrote, most students of American history had made feeble attempts to understand the nature and significance of conservative thought, if they bothered to acknowledge conservatism at all save as an aberration from liberal values and standards. Even when Americans appeared to embrace a conservative political and social philosophy,

as in the defense of traditional rights during the struggle for independence, they remained liberals at heart. Louis Hartz's view was indicative. Colonial history, he argued, had not been a gradual process of evolution toward ordered liberty. On the contrary, "since the first sailing of the *Mayflower* [Was there more than one?] it had been the story of new beginnings, daring enterprises, and explicitly stated principles" more in the spirit of Jeremy Bentham than in that of Edmund Burke. "The result," Hartz continued, "was that the traditionalism of the Americans, like a pure freak of logic, often bore amazing marks of antihistorical rationalism,...a symbol of the emancipated mind at work."[3] In 1944, the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal summarized the case against an American conservatism, writing that "America is...conservative.... But the principles conserved are liberal and some, indeed, are radical."[4]

Although eloquent and original, Kirk's act of restoration was not *sui generis*. Before the Second World War the New Humanists, primarily Irving Babbit, Norman Forster, and Paul Elmer More, and the Southern Agrarians, including Donald Davidson, Andrew Nelson Lytle, Frank Lawrence Owlsey, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and John Donald Wade, had already undertaken to fashion a conservative critique of American society and modern life. During the 1950s, M. Stanton Evans, Willmoore Kendall, Robert Nisbet, Albert J. Nock, Eliseo Vivas, Richard M. Weaver, and a host of others sustained that effort.[5] Yet, Kirk's approach was different. He positioned himself, albeit awkwardly at times, within the cosmopolitan tradition of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American historical scholarship. Like Kirk, Charles H. Haskins, Henry C. Lea, Alfred T. Mahan, John L. Motley, Francis Parkman, and William Henry Prescott, though writing about subjects as diverse as medieval politics, religion and science, the importance of sea power, the history of the Netherlands, and the European conquest of the Americas, had emphasized the continuity between the Old World and the New and evoked a shared legacy of European, especially English, and American convictions, values, ideas, and ideals. However impres-

sive the work that it inspired, this sense of continuity, which suggested that the guiding principles of the American republic were of distant and antique origin, never came to dominate the study and writing of history in the United States. For most historians, Europe resounded with an abiding sense of failure and tragedy that was remote from the American experience.[6] With the growing desire of Americans for isolation from Europe after the First World War, the cosmopolitan view receded further into the shadowy background of historiography.

An important stimulus to the retreat from cosmopolitan history lay in a widespread acceptance of American exceptionalism. During the nineteenth century, George Bancroft provided what is still the most cogent expression of this view.[7] The advance of national unity and the triumph of democratic liberty distinguished the American past. Endowed with a unique providential mission, America, Bancroft affirmed, became the instrument through which God acted in history to ensure the unbroken progress of humanity. Even when Bancroft confronted slavery, the one potentially tragic element that threatened to upset providential designs, he concluded that it was foreign to the true and natural character of America. Corrupted, degraded, and brutalized by long contact with Africa and by centuries of warfare against Islam, the Spanish had fastened slavery upon the New World. In their cupidity, the Spanish and other Europeans were responsible for slavery, a vestige of Old World wickedness and debauchery; the guilt was wholly theirs.[8] American slavery thus represented no dilemma for Bancroft, who never seriously examined how, in a land devoted to liberty, slavery had taken root and flourished among a free people. Slavery, he discovered, even brought unanticipated rewards and consolations. "In the midst of the horrors of slavery and the slave trade," Bancroft intoned, echoing the proslavery ideologues, "the masters had, in part at least, performed the office of advancing and civilizing the negro."[9] Devoid of avarice, selfishness, injustice, and tragedy, America continued to perform its work of redemption, saving the rest of mankind from its follies and its sins.

Long before the European discovery of the New World, the event with which Bancroft's grand saga of America begins, a growing volume of literature already extolled the faraway and mysterious land across the sea and beyond the horizon as a world free from the materialism, luxury, greed, corruption, and sinfulness of Europe. In the European imagination, America was a "virgin land," a place of renewal and regeneration where men could solve all lingering problems and satisfy all human desires. Weary of the "useless historical burdens" of Europe, the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote in 1827:

> *America, you're better off than we are*
> *Than our aged land, the Continent....*
> *(Amerika du hast es besser*
> *Als unser Kintinent, das alte....)*

There were no "ruined castles" ("keine verfallene Schlösser") in America to preserve memories of the senseless conflicts of a failed past. For the German philosopher G. F. W. Hegel, America was "the Land of Desire for all those who are weary of the historical Armory of old Europe." ("Amerika, Land der Sehnsucht fur alle die welche die historiche Rustkammer des alten Europa langweilt.")[10]

This extensive literary tradition, based on a combination of classical and Christian sources extending at least from Homer and Hesiod to Thomas More and Tommaso Campanella, enabled the American to conceive of himself as the "New Adam." Unencumbered by the fear, superstition, and rapacity of a moldering civilization, the quintessential American was a wise innocent dwelling in an earthly paradise. A happy farmer, content to enjoy the blessings of a simple rural life and the bounty of his own labor, the American was at the same time a hardy, self-reliant, and adventurous pioneer, supremely confident of his ability to reform an oppressive and evil world.[11] "What then is the American, this new man?" asked J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). "He is neither an European nor the

descendent of an European.... He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his antient *[sic]* prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds.... The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions."[12]

According to this interpretation, the American War of Independence constituted a rejection of, and an escape from, the old order and the creation of a "Novus Ordo Seclorum," a new order for the ages. The Revolution was not, as Kirk would have it, motivated by a conservative impulse to restore the fundamental rights of Englishmen that were under siege. Gordon Wood revitalized the exceptionalist thesis in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. Proposing to reveal how the United States achieved its unique status and identity, Wood clarified his intentions in the subtitle: "How a Revolution Transformed a Monarchical Society into a Democratic One unlike Any That Had Ever Existed." The Revolution "did more than legally create the United States; it transformed American society.... Almost over night," Wood proclaimed, Americans became "the most liberal, the most democratic, the most commercially minded, and the most modern people in the world."[13] In an exchange with critics published in the *William and Mary Quarterly,* Wood defended his conclusions about American exceptionalism:

> That all white men were equal in 1776 was something revolutionary and new under the sun. In my book, I wanted to get that point clear; for once the claim of equality by all white males was established in the eighteenth century (no mean feat since it took a few thousand years of Western history to accomplish), then the other claims to equality could follow and, relative to the total span of Western history, although not to our brief American past, follow rather rapidly.[14]

Wood tells the story of liberal progress in America and the West in which the American Revolution, the American Founding, and

the rise of American democracy constitute the turning points. His is not a "history" focused on the past. Rather, for Wood, the significance of events that happened to take place in the eighteenth century is the extent to which they anticipated and made possible a liberal, progressive future.

Kirk, by contrast, was engaged in tracing and nurturing "the roots of American order," which he located outside of America itself in Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, and London.[15] For Kirk, America was neither unique nor separate from the rest of the world, as many American historians deemed it to be. The sense of novelty, abundance, and equality that suffused American life during the first half of the nineteenth century, however, enhanced this sense of distance from the Old World. "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe," lamented Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1837 at the end of his famous address on "The American Scholar." "The Spirit of American freedom is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame." Detached from all restraints and antecedents (history, family, community, and faith), the American had to become a self-made man, the autonomous and exclusive source of virtue, morality, conscience, identity, and meaning. "We will walk on our own feet," Emerson intoned, "we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds."[16] This image of America and the American as self-made became so pervasive that even such a cosmopolitan historian as Henry Adams could not evade its influence. "As an independent people, with half a continent to civilize," Adams wrote in his magisterial *History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison* (1889-1891), the Americans "could not afford to waste time in following European examples, but must devise new processes of their own.... Stripped for the hardest work, every muscle firm and elastic, every ounce of brain ready for use, and not a trace of superfluous flesh on his nervous and supple body, the American stood in the world a new order of man.... Compared with this lithe young figure Europe was actually in decrepitude."[17]

Frederick Jackson Turner severed "the roots of American

order," arguing that the distinctive character of the United States arose not out of the European past but from unconquered nature, the boundless wilderness, and the expansive frontier. "The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization," Turner maintained in "The Significance of the Frontier," the memorable address that he delivered before the American Historical Society on July 12, 1893.[18] From the frontier, Turner believed, the United States had derived the attributes that characterized the first century of its existence, independence, freedom, democracy, unity, and individualism, as well as those that defined the American character, strength, practicality, exuberance, confidence, and determination. The West, he wrote, embodied:

> that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes from freedom, these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier.[19]

The settlement of the West was the central drama of American history. At the confluence of savagery and civilization, the frontier generated a constant renewal, a perpetual rebirth that reinvigorated the United States. Indebted to the West for their sense of national identity, the American people could reassure themselves that the nation of which they were so proud was uniquely their own and not the bartered legacy of the Old World. "Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World," Turner concluded, "America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them." The frontier provided "a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the

past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and its ideas, and indifference to its lessons, have accompanied the frontier."[20] As long as the frontier exited, America would never succumb to the lassitude, decadence, and corruption that had engulfed Europe.

II. The Dawn of the Gods

The so-called Progressive historians, of which Turner was an early exemplar, assumed rather than proved the detachment and isolation of the United States from Europe and the human condition. Enthralled by incidents of conflict and change, they tended to ignore or depreciate the continuities that had also shaped the American past. If conservative historians analyzed the sustained emergence and development of important ideas and critical institutions, the Progressives surveyed the diverse contests for power that took place between entrepreneurs, workers, farmers, women, immigrants, and the like, all of which, they insisted, were indispensable to social progress.

In Charles and Mary Beard's *Rise of American Civilization*, this progress grew from the secular forces of history rather than from the divine hand of God. The focus on history as the agent of change, however, prompted the Beards to highlight not American accomplishments but American struggles. They did not think that Americans had realized the full potential or established the ideal character of the United States at some moment in the past, but that they must aspire to do so in the future. Although the outcome of this endeavor remained uncertain, the Beards were optimistic that America would in time fulfill its mythic destiny. If, as the Beards surmised, the progress of the United States toward social democracy implied the progress of civilization itself, then, they reasoned, "it is the dawn, not the dusk, of the gods."[21]

The generation of historians who came of age after the Second World War and at the inception of the Cold War, the contemporaries of Russell Kirk, regarded the United States as a pillar of strength and morality in an otherwise perilous and depraved world. The ascendancy of the United States, though, was far from

complete. International developments soon exposed the limits of American supremacy. To prepare Americans for the long battle against communism, consensus historians determined to unify national sentiments. They rejected the Progressive interpretations of Turner, the Beards, Carl Becker, and Vernon L. Parrington, who had viewed economic and political conflict among antagonistic social groups ("the people" versus "the interests") as the defining attribute of the American past. Convinced that Progressive historiography had distorted and simplified reality by imagining dissension and confrontation where none existed, consensus historians adduced that such disputes as did occur had taken place within a structure of general agreement. Observing the absence of decisive ideological conflict in the American past and indicating the emergence of an accepted set of fundamental ideals, beliefs and principles in the present, Richard Hofstader anticipated the appearance of consensus history. The historians of the consensus school suggested that pragmatism, compromise, and accord were the hallmarks of the American political tradition.[22]

Yet, Hofstader had no wish to reassert American chauvinism, indulge in the wearisome veneration of the American past, or create a "literature of hero-worship and national self-congratulation."[23] He aspired, rather, to investigate and understand the commonalities that had existed between the Federalists and the Jeffersonians, the Jacksonians and the Whigs, northerners and southerners, Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives. In the introduction to *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It,* Hofstader wrote that he had accentuated consensus rather than conflict because he hoped to eliminate the favoritism that the Progressives had displayed, a partisanship that caused them continually to rehearse the debates of the past without either resolving or elucidating them. "It is the nature of politics that conflict stands in the foreground," Hofstader began, "and historians usually abet the politicians in keeping it there." By nature, human beings were partisan creatures. "Finding certain broad resemblances between their own problems and those of an earlier age," Hofstader noted, they "take sides with the campaign-

ers of former years; historians, who can hardly be quite free of partisanship, reconstruct the original conflict from the surviving ideas that seem most intelligible in the light of current experience and current convention." They recapitulate old quarrels, making no advance over the initial dispute and, in all likelihood, misrepresenting the conditions under which it had taken place. "The issues of the twentieth century are still debated in the language of Jefferson's time," Hofsadter complained, "and while the conflicts of Jefferson's day are constantly reactivated and thus constantly brought to mind, the commonly shared convictions are neglected."[24]

The opponents of Progressive history shared with Kirk the condemnation of "utopian politics" and the acceptance of "principles arrived at by convention and compromise...and tested by long experience."[25] Although numerous scholars have remarked on the conservatism of the consensus historians, their differences with a conservative of Kirk's variety far exceeded the similarities. The adherents of the consensus school, after all, vindicated the liberal values that they saw governing American life: self-reliance, free enterprise, economic individualism, beneficent acquisitiveness, and popular democracy. In the middle of the twentieth century, at precisely the moment when the "main political realities in American history" were no longer "essentially different from those of Europe," the consensus historians compared America to Europe in order to reassert the singularity of the United States.[26] American uniqueness thus became for them an explicit, distinct, and manifest category of analysis. In the influential *Liberal Tradition in America,* Louis Hartz explained that "any attempt to uncover the nature of an American society without feudalism can only be accomplished by studying it in conjunction with a European society where the feudal structure and the feudal ethos did in fact survive. This is not to deny our national uniqueness…but actually to affirm it. How can we know the uniqueness of anything except by contrasting it with what is not unique?"[27] The consensus historians thereby subtly eroded the conservative tradition, advancing a new paradigm of Ameri-

can exceptionalism in which they replaced conflict and progress with unity and continuity.

III. A Heap of Broken Images

Consensus history carried within it the germs of its antithesis and the seeds of its dissolution. The democratic, egalitarian social order of the United States ironically produced false hopes and unrealistic expectations, and, for all that, a conformist mentality. As Wilfred McClay has admirably demonstrated, an assortment of liberal thinkers during the 1950s feared that such irrational longings and affinities drew American society perilously close to totalitarianism. These thinkers identified a "soft" totalitarianism in the atomized mass society of alienated individuals, which they thought prevailed in the United States, corresponding to the "hard" totalitarianism that they associated with Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia.

By the 1950s, confusion had already begun to disorient American historiography. Epistemological skepticism and uncertainty prompted historians to adopt the theories, concepts, and methods of the social sciences in order to escape the taint of subjectivity and to make the study of history more scientific.[28] Only the scientific method, it seemed, could furnish accurate and credible generalizations. The accomplishments of the *Annales* school in France and the History Workshop in England inspired the new social and cultural history in the United States, the practitioners of which also sought to write "history from the bottom up." Concentrating on the "inarticulate," workers, immigrants, minorities, and women, the new social and cultural historians criticized the elitist assumptions of their intellectual forebears. The consensus of the postwar years began to unravel. "By the end of the 1960s," wrote John Higham, "the study of national character and the respect for national myths was collapsing, not only in history but also in the other social sciences. The principal writers of consensus history were falling silent.... An intellectual revolution, the kind of upheaval that postwar historians had tried to disprove, overturned their work."[29]

According to the new social and cultural historians the vision of a liberal American past, which the consensus school had promoted, was contrived and coercive. Their own egalitarian and democratic agenda focused the critical attention of the new social and cultural historians on the monolithic, authoritarian tendencies of American society and roused them to seek instances of genuine liberty, community, diversity, and resistance to oppressive authority. "This is what so much of recent historiography is primarily about," declared Lawrence Levine, "not the plight of the victims but the culture, the thought, the *lives* of people we have previously neglected—people who exerted cultural power, the importance of which we are just now beginning to appreciate."[30]

The contributions of the new social and cultural historians have vastly enriched American historical literature, enhancing the understanding of neglected, marginal, and often vulnerable groups. Abandoning the bourgeois and patrician view that history chronicles only the lives and deeds of influential minorities and elites, the new social and cultural historians recognized a variety of persons as historical agents: workers and immigrants, women and blacks, prostitutes and slaves, the crowd and the masses, the downtrodden and the poor. Writing in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville already perceived the need to penetrate beneath the surface of events to the opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and sentiments of ordinary men and women. In an age of democracy, Tocqueville noted, causes of "a secondary and accidental nature are infinitely more various, better hidden, more complex, less powerful, and hence less easy to sort out and trace, whereas the historian of an aristocratic age has simply to analyze the particular action of one man or of a few men amid the general mass of events."[31] The debate over the new historiography, Levine avowed, centers on the extent to which historians "should widen our historical net to include the powerless as well as the powerful, the followers as well as the leaders, the margins as well as the center, popular culture as well as high culture."[32] The customs, mentalities, and cultures of separate groups, argue the new social and

cultural historians, deserve a separate history. Yet, they have displayed little inclination to reconnect those histories into a unified interpretation for, as Laurence Veysey wrote, "the parts are seen as the realities, the whole as an artificial construction sustained by politicians and financiers."[33] In this revision of the past, those who wielded power contrived artificial systems designed to sustain their status and privileges; those who were subjugated fashioned genuine cultures that offered a refuge against total domination.

The celebration of diversity and the insistence on pluralism have thus given rise to fragmentation and disarray. Historians can no longer agree even about what constitutes the proper subject of history. Some welcome as liberating the breakdown of older narratives and paradigms. Spurning demands for a new synthesis and rejecting the ideal of unity, Allan Megill, for instance, finds himself "profoundly suspicious of attempts to overcome the fragmentation, of attempts to restore (at some higher or more sophisticated level) the synthesis.... Let us be warned: all calls for synthesis are attempts to impose an interpretation."[34] Postmodern theory has lent an élan to the growing uncertainty about the nature of historical knowledge. For postmodernists, any interpretative synthesis is, by definition, partial and exclusionary. A mere construct, it cannot be normative, and efforts to establish it as such are distorted, constraining, unstable, and false.[35] Historians cannot coerce the past to fit a single "paradigm."

As a consequence, averred the folklorist Henry Glassie, "every narrative, blatant in its incompleteness, must come upon the mind as an artifice, a willed confection, always questionable.... Not only is every tale partial and artful, but there is no obvious order in the past, no single construct that can satisfactorily encompass the change and sameness that any account requires for accuracy."[36] Questioning the foundations of Western rationalism, Glassie devised a historical world that is amorphous and indeterminate, possessing neither shape nor form, neither order nor cohesion. History, "too complex to be contained in one structure" is "transitory." It is, Glassie imagined, as "described by

the Buddha, so complicated in its fluid intermixtures of cause, so multiplex in its over-lappings of temporal rhythms, that origins dissolve into oblivion, connections ramify toward infinity, and only the predicament of the moment as understood by a flawed mortal can determine which pieces of the past are pertinent."[37]

If Glassie's poetic evocation depicts the postmodern consciousness of history, then what can human beings know of the past or themselves? Are men doomed to the condition of perpetual infancy or utter barbarism, as George Santayana discerned, with instinct uninstructed by experience and untamed by reflection? Postmodern theorists, of course, do not think so. Their reason for studying the past is to liberate the present from it, to verify that all custom, tradition, and inheritance, all institutions, values, and beliefs are imperious social and intellectual constructs in the service of power. As such, those constructs lack validity; they not only can but also must be subverted and abolished. "There are histories patently designed to charter society," Glassie commented, "to explain and reinforce the status quo through master narratives of places and peoples.... But from any single account, most is missing. Women are missing, and poor men, dark people, common labor, painful routines, little joys.... Disorderly, fragmentary, malleable, history leaves room for diverse participation."[38] The study of the past, and, indeed, life itself are then little more than a text that never quite means what it seems to mean. Because "readers" may, nay must, formulate their own meanings by combining fragments of the text and varying their context, language becomes absurd, truth a linguistic convention, and reality at best a mental construct, at worst an incoherent mirage. Everything, ultimately, is unknowable. Such a vision offers no solace, inspiration, or hope to a people experiencing a vague, but acute, psychic uneasiness, the symptoms of which include the fragmentation of knowledge, the anarchy of the private, the regimentation of the public, and feverish activity without cease or purpose.

Among many postmodern thinkers the purpose of studying history is overtly political and ideological: to erase the sad

chronicle of past exploitation and tyranny. History unbinds men from the past and promises limitless freedom and endless opportunity. All that human hands and minds have made other hands and minds can dismantle and disperse. Instead of drawing men out of themselves and the welter of their times, instead of inviting them to escape the present and to judge themselves and their world according to "the lamp of experience," the postmodern conception of history fastens almost exclusively on the needs, commitments, enthusiasms, and passions of the moment. In sensibly repudiating the illusion that historians can produce a definitive transcript of the past, postmodernists have gone too far, assuming a skeptical, ironic, and relativist point of view that renders all truth subjective and unknowable. Every opinion becomes equal and is entitled to respect as long as no one insists that it is "true." "So long as [historians] have…no coerced orthodoxy," contends Peter Novick, "I see no reason why we cannot peacefully coexist.... Those who think as I do are content, in our historical work, to be suggestive, and we don't worry about being definitive.... Others are, in a sense that seems to me deluded, but not pernicious, concerned with 'moving toward the truth' or 'getting it right.'"[39]

This perspective has not only bred anarchy in the study of history, it has also provoked nihilism. The problem that historians confront at the beginning of the twenty-first century is not so much the reconstruction of a historical synthesis but the restoration of historical coherence and meaning—even allowing that coherence and meaning are necessarily contingent, partial, and incomplete. Frank Ankersmit's haunting comparison of recent historiography to dying leaves scattered by the autumn wind illustrates the predicament.[40] Reflecting on the fragmentation of Western civilization, and the attendant mayhem and impermanence that accompanied it, T. S. Eliot anticipated the contemporary disintegration of history as the source of culture and identity in the modern world—a disintegration that postmodernists have nearly carried to fulfillment:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow

Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images....[41]

IV. Order and History

Has the postmodern impasse, "like a tedious argument of insidious intent," led historians down "cunning passages" and "contrived corridors" toward the abyss?[42] Did the "discipline of history cease to exist" during the 1980s, as Peter Novick alleged in his study of the guild?[43] Such questions ignore, or perhaps betray an indifference to, Russell Kirk's distinction between ethical and ideological history, which transcends the concerns and activities of professional historians. Ideological history, like ideological politics, was anathema to Kirk. "Terrible simplifiers," ideologues were fanatics who clung to their dogmas in contempt of evidence and experience. Historians at least ought to be more prudent, thoughtful, and circumspect. It was their office to invigorate and nurture the moral imagination. If such a renewal occurred, Kirk speculated that the study of history might turn the world from the abyss; that eventuality, though, was far from certain. For ideological historians had renounced their office when they abandoned the quest for truth. They may still have regarded history as a source of knowledge, but for them knowledge meant the power to advance a militant creed, by violence if necessary, and to bend the world to their will. They ceased to rely on history as a font of wisdom capable of ordering society and the soul.

In Kirk's analysis, the ideological historians of the twentieth century were the intellectual and spiritual heirs of the doctrinaire philosophers of the eighteenth who had fancied that they could deliver mankind from ignorance and superstition. Rejecting belief in original sin, they taught that men, through their own efforts, could fashion a heaven on earth. The *philosophes* convinced themselves that, if inspired:

> man's private intellectual faculties...could suffice to dissolve all mysteries and solve all problems.... Religion must be discarded as mere superstition, old political forms must be swept away as irrational and oppressive, the natural goodness of man must be enabled to prevail—through an appeal to Reason. If properly cultivated, every man's private rationality could emancipate him from the delusion of sin, from ways of violence and fraud, from confusion and fear.[44]

This optimistic, progressive, a-, and even anti-, historical vision was, Kirk showed, alien to the original meaning and purpose of America.

When true to their origins and their history, Americans had more in common with Edmund Burke's vision of human nature, which complemented the historical understanding by challenging both objectivity and relativism and also by placing mankind again at the center of the historical and Christian drama. Men may not live by history alone, but for Burke it was plain that they could not live as men without a knowledge and understanding of the past. The accumulated experience and inexhaustible wisdom drawn from the past afforded what order there was to life on earth. "Ignore the enormous bulk of racial knowledge, or tinker imprudently with it," Kirk warned, "and man is left awfully afloat in a sea of emotions and ambitions, with only the scanty stock of formal learning and puny resources of individual reason to sustain him."[45] Kirk explained that Burke had linked historical and religious consciousness by adjoining the temporal to the divine order. In Burke's view, God operated in and through history, that is, in and through human affliction and failure, to reveal, however fractionally and episodically, His providential design. Rejuvenating historical consciousness, therefore, required access to discretion, prudence, and judgment, to the qualities that Burke called "intuition," "habit," and "prejudice." Unlike the *philosophes* and other progressives since their time, Burke contemplated the dark, complex, and mysterious recesses of the soul, an exploration that often had more in common with classical mythology and Chris-

tian theology than with modern historical writing.

Rooted in the rationalist and scientific optimism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, American historiography has long rested on the assumption that men would automatically progress toward a better future, if only the oppression and injustice of the past could be remedied. There is a deeper, more adamant, and at times more desperate, insistence within the American soul that Americans were the people chosen to have a future—chosen, that is, not to fulfill history but to transcend it. This conviction derives in part from the Puritans, for whom history was teleological, moving inexorably toward the end of the world and the Day of Judgment. Once shorn of its religious content, however, this ideology of secular progress served only to erode traditional sources of virtue and identity, such as work, religion, family, community, and self, by assuming the boundless capacity of technology to gratify an expanding array of desires. But the longer events deferred this American utopia, the more dissatisfied Americans became with life as it is, and the harder they tried to distance themselves from the corruption of the Old World and to establish a city upon a hill in the New. The unqualified acceptance of millenarianism, Kirk admonished, was treacherous, more likely to bring "a devouring conflagration...than a torch of progress."[46]

Kirk agreed with Reinhold Niebuhr's diagnosis of "the irony of American history," for he knew too well the calamity that messianic passions had visited upon men in their determination to achieve universal happiness.[47] Incontrovertibly historical, human life was not given to fulfillment and perfection. According to Christian eschatology, history does not and cannot solve the basic problems of human existence. "This truth," Kirk wrote, "may be more readily understood in the troubled twentieth century that [*sic*] it was in the nineteenth. Under tribulation," he continued, "men come to realize that they are feeble and imperfect, if they try to stand by themselves. They recognize their failings—what the Hebrews called their sinfulness."[48] In Christian thought the future does not promise greater security, happiness, and virtue.

Evil never disappears, and, in fact, may grow as individuals and societies move from innocence to experience, from simplicity to sophistication, from weakness to strength. The illusion of progress may obscure decadence, corruption, and immorality as human power, arrogance, and self-absorption evolve and mature. Most ancient and modern philosophies denied or masked the Christian interpretation of history. The ancients deprived history of meaning, substituting in its stead the eternal cycle of recurrence by which human beings escaped flux and instability. Modern thinkers often ignored or diminished the evil inherent in history and conceived of history itself as the source of redemption. History thereby became the means not only of understanding but also of completing human destiny, and of maintaining it under human control.

In opposition to the utopian dogma of progress, Kirk emphasized the continuity that linked past and present. Spurning both a facile optimism and a facile pessimism, he nonetheless saw ample reason for hope. Equipped with familiar and durable customs, habits, traditions, institutions, and morals, Americans could look forward to the future with expectancy, and might still impede, and perhaps reverse, the "progress" toward a brave new world that was at once "rich and dehumanized."[49] If, on occasion, Kirk was too sanguine about American prospects, it was because he refused to adopt a wholly ironic interpretation of American history or to yield utterly to despair at present circumstances. His heightened sense of tragedy notwithstanding, Kirk was no cynic, malcontent, or fatalist. On the contrary, he believed that the creation of a healthy social order was not the act of radical skepticism but of "imaginative affirmation."[50] A country still in the making, America had flourished. "Whatever the failings of America," Kirk noted, "the American order has been a conspicuous success in the perspective of human history."[51] The United States had bestowed a greater measure of freedom and justice on a larger number of its citizens than most societies, past or present, have effected, and had done so without suffering revolutionary upheaval and violence.

Dangers arose if Americans, forgetful of their origins, neglected or severed the roots of order from which their way of life had grown. Although Kirk hoped for, and may even have permitted himself to expect, the best, he took nothing for granted. America did not have to prosper or survive; the continued blessings of good fortune depended on Americans' engagement with, and devotion to, their birthright. "In America, order and justice and freedom have developed together," Kirk pointed out, "and they can decay in parallel fashion" unless scrupulously cultivated, protected, and improved.[52] If, however, Americans should cease to revere their traditions and to value their inheritance, or if they should become hostile to them, they would "form a 'lonely crowd,' alienated from the world in which they wander."[53] Kirk avoided the extremes. He resisted the misguided zealots who sought to impose order by decree and to preserve it by force. They denied the prospect of achieving ordered liberty and supposed that men, in their wickedness, obeyed no authority save intimidation and terror. This caricature of order was nearly as intolerable as anarchy, and it would not endure. Kirk similarly denounced the intemperate radicals who, by whatever means and at whatever cost, demanded the immediate accomplishment of earthly perfection. Such a revolutionary aim necessitated the creation not only of a new government and a new society but also of new men. Alluring but false, the myth of revolution promised more than freedom from tyranny and injustice; it heralded the triumph over the human condition itself.

Kirk never mistook the City of Man for the City of God. "There is no man but historic man," he proclaimed, and history afforded little consolation to men in their search for meaning and purpose. A bewildering array of tensions, conflicts, and disparities marked the history of American society and Western Civilization. It is the human condition to live amid such tumult, Kirk believed, for he dismissed as folly or worse all efforts to gain redemption from history within history itself. Contrary to modern assumptions, the future did not ensure relief from the ambiguities of historical existence. New tyrannies proved more

brutal than the old ones they had replaced. At the same time, the rapid spread of human freedom engendered unforeseen perils, as isolated men, estranged from the discipline and succor of community, fell prey to fear, anxiety, resentment, and hatred, becoming ready instruments in the hands of charlatans and demagogues. This sinful worship of human power had, in God's own good time, brought "retributive providential judgments," leaving in doubt the survival of civilization if not the fate of mankind. Without a contrite awareness and a pious acceptance of human limits—an awareness that came only with the evolution of religious consciousness—"there can exist," Kirk wrote, "no order in the soul and no order in the state—indeed, no history that can be recorded without a shudder."[54]

A nation originally conceived as an alternative to, and an escape from, the Old World, the United States has been particularly susceptible to destructive millennialist ambitions. Unique among the nations of the earth, America was the New Zion, poised to redeem the world. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many American historians, to say nothing of American statesmen and diplomats, continued to espouse these progressive ideals and exceptionalist delusions. Even now these convictions survive intact, although the religious beliefs to which they owe their existence have almost completely disappeared. Kirk demurred. Human beings, he made clear, had every reason to fear the consequences of undertaking providential missions. In place of such messianic pretensions, Kirk substituted the tragic vision of Christianity, which located ultimate meaning beyond time, which required a humble submission to God, and which comprehended the predicament of man, especially of modern man, from the vantage point of a faith that alone can triumph over despair.

Kirk entertained no illusions that men could extricate themselves from history or resolve the dilemmas of life within history. He thus dissuaded them from accepting the distortions and lies of false messiahs who preached that certainty, power, virtue, and happiness were the exclusive domain of one or another ideological commitment. Invoking the eternal ground of existence, Kirk

aspired to temper pride without destroying hope, to make human toil and suffering meaningful, and thereby to prompt men to accept their historical responsibilities. To achieve those ends, he urged upon the American people the necessity of preserving the civilization they had inherited. In *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk intended to aid that process by conserving "the spiritual and intellectual and political tradition" of America and the West—a tradition meaningful even though incomplete, provisional, contingent, and imperfect.[55] The times may be catching up with Kirk. More Americans seem at last to see themselves as the stewards and conservators of what remains of civilization in the West, and to sense that theirs is, and has always been, a historical, not a utopian, project.

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NOTES

1. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1955) 3.

2. Henry Regnery, "The Making of *The Conservative Mind*, in *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, 7th ed. (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1995) i.

3. Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition*, 48-49.

4. Gunnar Myrdal, *The American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944) 7.

5. See Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion*, 2nd ed., rev. (New York: Vintage Books, 1962) 225-26.

6. To cite but one example, Parkman's *Huguenots in Florida*, the first volume of his series on French exploration of the New World, begins: "The story of New France opens with a tragedy." *France and England in North America*, Vol. I (New York: Library of America, 1983) 21. See also David Levin, *History as Romantic*

Art: Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, Parkman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959) and Richard C. Vitzthum, *The American Compromise: Theme and Method in the Histories of Bancroft, Parkman, and Adams* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974).

7. George Bancroft, *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent*, 10 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1837-1875). See also Levin, *History as Romantic Art*; Vitzthum, *The American Compromise*, 12-41; Russell B. Nye, *George Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944) 157-59; Dorothy Ross, "Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Historical Review* 89 (October 1984), 909-28.

8. Bancroft, *History of the United States,* Vol. I., 159-64.

9. Bancroft, *Ibid.*, Vol. III, 408. For a discussion of Bancroft's views on slavery, see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966) 21-24.

10. Quoted in John Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness: The Remembered Past* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1994) 363.

11. For discussions of the images and meanings attached to America, see Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950); R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966); Hugh Honour, *The New Golden Land: European Images of America from the Discoveries to the Present Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975); James Oliver Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980); Ray Allen Billington, *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981).

12. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 43-44.

13. Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992) 6-7.

14. "Forum: How Revolutionary Was the Revolution?" *William and Mary Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (October, 1994), 707.

15. See Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, Third Edition (Washington, D. C.: Regnery Gateway, 1991).

16. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in Robert E. Spiller, ed., *Five Essays on Man and Nature* (Northbrook, IL: AHM Publishing Corporation, 1954) 58-59.

17. Henry Adams, *History of the United States during the Administration of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Library of America, 1986) 53, 109. On the idea of the American self and the self-made man, see John G. Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man: Changing Concepts of Success in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); Wilfred M. McClay, *The Masterless: Self and Society in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

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19. Turner, "Significance of the Frontier," 566.

20. Ibid., 566-67.

21. Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, 2 vols. (New York: The Macmillan Company 1927) Vol II, 800.

22. Richard Hofstader, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973; originally published in 1948).

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24. Ibid., xxxviii-xxxix.

25. Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, xvi.

26. John Lukacs, "American History: The Terminological Problem," *The American Scholar* (Winter 1992), 18-19.

27. Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition*, 4.

28. See, for example, Richard Hofstader, "History and the Social Sciences," in *The Varieties of History*, Fritz Stern, ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973; originally published in 1956), 359-370 and Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pt. 2.

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31. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* J. P. Mayer, ed, George Lawrence, trans. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), Vol. II, 494.

32. Levine, "The Unpredictable Past," 8.

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35. See Eric H. Monkonnen, "The Dangers of Synthesis,"

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38. Ibid., 965, 964, 966.

39. Peter Novick, "My Correct Views on Everything," *American Historical Review* 96 (June 1991), 702.

40. Ankersmit, "Historiography and Postmodernism," 149-50.

41. T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land" (1922), in *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1962), 29-30.

42. The lines are from T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Gerontion" in *Ibid.*, 3, 20.

43. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 628. See also David A. Hollinger, "Postmodernist Theory and *Wissenschaftliche* Practice," *American Historical Review* 96 (June 1991), 688-692.

44. Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, 349.

45. Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 38.

46. Ibid., 9.

47. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner's, 1952), 16. See McClay, *The Masterless*, chapters 6 and 7 and "The Continuing Irony of American History," *First Things* 120 (February 2002), 20-25.

48. Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, 15.

49. Ibid., 9.

50. Ibid., 475.

51. Ibid., 470.

52. Ibid., 7.

53. Ibid., 473.

54. All quotations from Russell Kirk, "History and the Moral Imagination," *The University Bookman* 44/2 (Winter 2006), 59.

55. Quoted in Regnery, "The Making of *The Conservative Mind*," iii.