

# Russell Kirk on the Moral Imagination and Literary Studies

Darrell Falconburg

*This paper explores Russell Kirk as a conservative thinker who has insight not only into political thought but also the purpose of literary studies. As a man of letters, Kirk wrote extensively on the role of literature in shaping and passing down the moral imagination. Indeed, Kirk developed and applied Edmund Burke's concept of the "moral imagination" to the purpose of reading literature. This concept of the moral imagination, coined in Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France, suggests that the purpose of literature is closely related to the universal quest for meaning, tradition, and a greater understanding of human nature. For Kirk, literature has an important ethical purpose for both the human being and the commonwealth, and hence it cannot be reduced to the narrow-minded concerns of ideology. At its best, great literature passes down the moral imagination, thereby teaching persons what it means to be human and uniting them to a tradition that contains the wisdom of generations.*

## INTRODUCTION

Dr. Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (1953) earned him the reputation of a leading public intellectual of the twentieth century and a father of post-war American conservatism. As the *New York Times* wrote four years after his death in 1994, Kirk traced the history of conservative thought in Anglo-American civilization, thereby giving conservatives "an identity and a genealogy" that "catalyzed the postwar movement."<sup>1</sup> After publishing his magnum opus, Kirk earned a living primarily as an independent man of letters, authoring twenty-six non-fiction works, three novels, three collections of short stories, and thousands of essays and book reviews.<sup>2</sup> Today he is acknowledged as one of the most important conservative thinkers in American history, for without him, the conservative movement in this country would not have developed and flourished in the way that it did.

However, I do not here explore Russell Kirk's contributions to the American conservative movement, as great as they may be. Instead, I explore the relationship between Kirk's conservatism, the imagination, and literary studies. It should be noted that scholars

---

<sup>1</sup> Patricia Cohen, "Leftist Scholars Look Right at Last, And Find a History," *The New York Times*, April 18, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/18/arts/leftist-scholars-look-right-at-last-and-find-a-history.html>.

<sup>2</sup> For these statistics and more background on Kirk, see Lee Trepanier, "Reflections on Russell Kirk," *Humanitas* 32, nos. 1 & 2 (2019): 5-13.

## PIETAS

have already written about the role of imagination in Kirk's conservatism.<sup>3</sup> Some literary scholars have even considered him to be related to the long history of imaginative writers who emphasize moral elements in literature.<sup>4</sup> Building on the insight of these scholars and others, I further consider Kirk's ideas about the purpose of reading literature. Although he did not put it this way, Kirk wanted to read literature without imposing onto the text the array of ideological "isms" that serve as "lenses" of literary interpretation. Instead, Kirk suggested returning to a more traditional approach to reading, one that allows the great authors to speak to us, giving us the wisdom that they, in their turn, received from reading those who went before them. For Kirk, great literature passes on the moral imagination, thereby conveying what it means to be human and uniting those who are living to a tradition that contains the wisdom of generations.

### RUSSELL KIRK'S IMAGINATIVE CONSERVATISM

Before exploring Russell Kirk's idea of the moral imagination in relation to literary studies, a clarification should be made about the nature of Kirk's conservative thought. Kirk's conservatism was something more than a mere political expression, for it went beyond practical politics and drew from the wellspring of the moral imagination. Even Kirk's magnum opus, *The Conservative Mind*, which gave new life and vigor to the conservative movement in America, was not intended to be a manifesto of policy positions. Instead, as

---

<sup>3</sup> For a handful of the most notable treatments of Russell Kirk's life and contributions to conservatism, see George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (1976; repr., Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2017); James E. Person, *Russell Kirk: A Critical Biography of a Conservative Mind* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1999); W. Wesley McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004); Gerald J. Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007); John M. Pafford, *Russell Kirk* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); For the most recent book-length treatment of Russell Kirk's life and thought, see Bradley J. Birzer, *Russell Kirk: American Conservative* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> For example, James Vanden Bosch, "Moral Criticism: Promises and Prospects," in *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal*, ed. Walhout and Ryken (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 26, claims that Kirk can be counted among the "moral critics" of literature. Furthermore, Benjamin G. Lockerd connects Kirk's idea of the moral imagination to the history of literary theory. Within his paper, Lockerd does not suggest that Kirk is innovating or creating a literary theory per se. Instead, Lockerd claims that Kirk's theory of imagination has much in common with the literary theories of thinkers like C.S. Lewis and others. Kirk's theory of imagination led him to believe that good literature "trains the heart" and helps guard readers against the "defecated rationality" of thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau. For more, see Lockerd, "Introduction," in *Eliot and His Age: T.S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* by Russell Kirk (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2008); "Introduction," in *Enemies of the Permanent Things: Observations of Abnormality in Literature and Politics* by Russell Kirk (1984; repr., Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2016); "The Truth of Beauty," *The Imaginative Conservative*, July 5, 2016, <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2016/07/truth-beauty-educating-moral-imagination.html>.

## RUSSELL KIRK ON THE MORAL IMAGINATION AND LITERARY STUDIES

Kirk said, it was a way to “wake the moral imagination through the evocative power of humane letters.”<sup>5</sup> Western civilization is in a crisis, but the solution is not to be found in political action alone. Although practical politics have a role, the deeper solution lies in the renewal of a religious and cultural conservatism that seeks to reinvigorate Western culture through the humanities.

In fact, it is impossible to understand Kirk’s conservatism without first acknowledging the role of imagination in informing his political thought. Referencing Russell Kirk’s imaginative conservatism, James M. Wilson writes that “its representative figures have been great writers; it emphasizes what Kirk called the imaginative nature of reality and moral judgment; and it ultimately reconciles reason and morality within the field of the dramatic, the poetic, the beautiful.”<sup>6</sup> The conservative emphasis on the imaginative nature of reality goes at least as far back as Edmund Burke, the founding father of Anglo-American conservatism, who wrote a treatise on aesthetics in 1757 called *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. For Burke, political thought is grounded on an understanding of aesthetics, and conservatism is grounded on a love of the beautiful. As Wilson puts it, Burke’s greatest insight was his recognition in the modern world of a “fundamental unity of being and beauty” as well as “reality and aesthetics.”<sup>7</sup> In this way, it is important to remember that Kirk, following Burke, understood that conservatism is both political and imaginative.

Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind*, the greatest single expression of his conservative thought, was not a program of policy positions to be held by readers. To the contrary, it was a biographical list of mostly British and American theologians, philosophers, poets, statesmen, and men of letters who shared belief in what Kirk called the six “canons” of conservatism. Such thinkers included Edmund Burke, the first thinker described in Kirk’s magnum opus, as well as thinkers like John Adams, Alexis de Tocqueville, Orestes

---

<sup>5</sup> Russell Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Conservative Classics, 2002), 166.

<sup>6</sup> Wilson’s article is autobiographical, yet it is helpful for anyone interested in the subject of Kirk’s conservatism and its relationship to literary studies. As a poet and literature professor, Wilson does an excellent job making thoughtful connections between conservatism, the imagination, and literary studies. Kirk is referenced in a few locations in Wilson’s article, and Kirk’s shadow is present throughout. See James Matthew Wilson, “The Drama of Cultural Conservatism,” *The Point*, September 3, 2010, <https://thepointmag.com/politics/the-drama-of-cultural-conservatism>. This article was incorporated into Wilson’s important book on this subject, which discusses the relationship between conservative thought and beauty. Wilson’s book deserves serious attention from anyone interested in the relationship between intellectual conservatism, aesthetics, and literature. For more, see James Matthew Wilson, *The Vision of the Soul: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Western Tradition* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, “The Drama of Cultural Conservatism,” *The Point*, September 3, 2010.

## PIETAS

Brownson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Henry Newman, Irving Babbitt, George Santayana, and T.S. Eliot. Kirk's initial six canons went as follows:

- 1) Belief in a transcendent order, or body of natural law, which rules society as well as conscience. Political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems....
- 2) Affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of human existence, as opposed to the narrowing uniformity, egalitarianism, and utilitarian aims of most radical systems....
- 3) Conviction that civilized society requires orders and classes, as against the notion of a "classless society." [...]
- 4) Persuasion that freedom and property are closely linked: separate property from private possession, and Leviathan becomes master of all. Economic levelling, [conservatives] maintain, is not economic progress....
- 5) Faith in prescription and distrust of "sophisters, calculators, and economists" who would reconstruct society upon abstract designs. Custom, convention, and old prescription are checks both upon man's anarchic impulse and upon the innovator's lust for power....
- 6) Recognition that change may not be salutary reform: hasty innovation may be a devouring conflagration, rather than a torch of progress."<sup>8</sup>

Nowhere does Kirk argue that conservatism should be reduced to a narrow list of policy positions, and nowhere does he recommend political action as the first and most important way to renew Western culture. Rather, the above canons of conservative thought represent the culmination of the "wisdom of humanity." The conservative, like Burke, is someone who

---

<sup>8</sup> Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway Editions, 2019), 7-9. Kirk's initial publication of this book in 1953 did not include a chapter on T.S. Eliot. This was added in the second edition of the book which replaced Santayana with Eliot in the subtitle.

## RUSSELL KIRK ON THE MORAL IMAGINATION AND LITERARY STUDIES

defends ancient wisdom, who says old things in new ways to “fit the time.”<sup>9</sup> Kirk’s conservatism did not reject practical politics, but it also did not look to it as a savior of civilization. Practical politics, Kirk knew, must be supplemented with works of imaginative and cultural renewal. To borrow the words of Bradley Birzer, conservatism served as “a means, a mood, and an attitude to conserve, to preserve, and to pass on to future generations the best of the humane tradition” rather than to defend a particular political agenda or party.<sup>10</sup> Kirk was certainly a political thinker, but he did not begin his political thought with policy solutions to immediate problems. Instead, like Burke and others within the great tradition of Western politics, he first considered the nature of society, culture, and human nature.<sup>11</sup>

Given the nature of Kirk’s conservatism, it is no surprise that he had much to say about the purpose of reading great literature. Kirk frequently addressed the issue of a modern West that stands in peril, as well as the duty of teachers of humane letters to promote imaginative renewal. The West is in crisis in part because those currently living have neglected their responsibility to conserve and renew the inherited body of humane letters that nourishes human life with the wellspring of the moral imagination. In this way, Kirk’s comments on the purpose of reading were put forward within the context of an imaginative conservatism that sought to preserve the best of Western culture. His views on literary studies were, at their core, an extension of his conservative thought and of his belief that the moral imagination should be defended by conservatives in the modern world.

### RUSSELL KIRK’S MORAL IMAGINATION AND LITERARY STUDIES

Central to Russell Kirk’s political and literary thought is his concept of the “moral imagination.” This phrase was first used by the eighteenth-century statesman Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) to describe what was under assault by the society-wrenching ideology of the French revolutionaries. Burke is best known as a

---

<sup>9</sup> Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Birzer, *Russell Kirk*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Russell Kirk was a political thinker, but his political thought was deeply influenced by the wellspring of the humanities. As Edward E. Ericson writes, “When Kirk describes the purpose of *The Conservative Mind*, he says that ‘he meant to wake the moral imagination through the evocative power of humane letters’ and thus that this book, though often approached as a political manifesto that gave rise to a whole movement, the American conservative movement, in fact belongs to the category of *belles lettres*. And so, he describes himself as ‘more poet than professor.’ He is, in sum, a literary man—or, in an older term seldom used nowadays, a ‘Man of Letters.’” For more, see Ericson, “Solzhenitsyn, Russell Kirk, and the Moral Imagination,” *Modern Age*, October 8, 2014, <https://isi.org/modern-age/solzhenitsyn-russell-kirk-and-the-moral-imagination>.

## PIETAS

political thinker, yet he was likewise someone who placed imagination at the forefront of his political thought. When discussing either his conservatism or views on literature, Kirk often referenced Burke's *Reflections*, clarifying that his own idea of the moral imagination had its origin with Burke. As such, it is fitting to cite at length one of Kirk's favorite excerpts from Burke:

All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a *moral imagination*, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.

On this scheme of things, a king is but a man, a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal, and an animal not of the highest order. All homage paid to the sex in general as such, and without distinct views, is to be regarded as romance and folly.... On the scheme of this barbarous philosophy, which is the offspring of cold hearts and muddy understandings, and which is as void of solid wisdom as it is destitute of all taste and elegance, laws are to be supported only by their own terrors, and by the concern which each individual may find in them from his own private speculations, or can spare to them from his own private interests.<sup>12</sup>

Burke associated the moral imagination with the “sentiments which beautify and soften private society.”<sup>13</sup> It is by means of the imagination that a person can understand reality and find both beauty and meaning within it. Moral principles embody themselves in historical circumstances and in a tradition, and it is by means of the imagination that such principles are intuited. Without the moral imagination, a human being will not be able to know who he really is—a person whose existence in political society is a historical and moral existence. The human being, Burke taught, is not merely the free and rational individual of the *philosophes*. A person without the moral imagination will be deprived of the enduring truths that give order and meaning to human life and, in the end, will become miserable. Eventually, as Wilson puts it, a person without the moral imagination will become cut off from “tradition, community, order, intellect, and the sacred.”<sup>14</sup>

Commenting on this excerpt from Edmund Burke's *Reflections*, Kirk defined the phrase “moral imagination” as the “power of ethical perception” which can see beyond “the barriers

---

<sup>12</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L.G. Mitchell (1790; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 77-78.

<sup>13</sup> Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 77-78.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, “The Drama of Cultural Conservatism,” *The Point*, September 3, 2010.

## RUSSELL KIRK ON THE MORAL IMAGINATION AND LITERARY STUDIES

of private experience and momentary events,” especially as this power is “exercised in poetry and art.”<sup>15</sup> The moral imagination can thus be understood as the ability to intuit the relationship of the self to both the past and the transcendent, informing persons that there is more to reality than personal experience and private rationality. Since it unites persons to the past and to God, the moral imagination promotes “right order in the soul and right order in the commonwealth.”<sup>16</sup> The moral imagination is not the gift of one person, nor is it something that can be attained if a person relies only on his own individual experience or rationality. It is instead the work of “centuries of human consciousness” across space and time.<sup>17</sup> Without the moral imagination, Kirk implied that persons will be unable to discover the meaning of their life or the human flourishing that they seek.<sup>18</sup> One might even say that Kirk’s conservatism as well as his entire life work was, at its core, an attempt to reawaken the moral imagination in the modern world.

Jonathan Jones unpacks the phrase moral imagination in a 2009 article in *First Things*, further clarifying the term as it is frequently used by Kirk. Jones’s definition is helpful for anyone who wishes to better understand what Kirk meant by the phrase:

It can be defined as a uniquely human ability to conceive of fellow humanity as moral beings and as persons, not as objects whose value rests in utility or usefulness. It is a process by which a self “creates” metaphor from images recorded by the senses and stored in memory, which are then occupied to find and suppose moral correspondences in experience. An intuitive ability to perceive ethical truths and abiding law in the midst of chaotic experience, the moral imagination should be an aspiration to a proper ordering of the soul and, consequently, of the commonwealth. In this conception, to be a citizen is not to be an autonomous individual; it is a status given by a born existence into a world of relations to others. To be fully human is to embrace the duties and obligations toward a purpose of security and endurance for, first and foremost, the family and the local community. Success is measured by the development of character, not the fleeting emotions of status. Thinking “sacramentally,” (meaning humans are connected with a sacramental order of creation, a configuration of the mind in communion with the divine and beyond the rational) this is a sense that nature was created in such a manner that humans can draw “true analogies,” wisdom inaccessible by scientific method. Lived experiences, registered in memory and conjured through other experiences, can be interpreted

---

<sup>15</sup> Russell Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction: Reflections on the Moral Imagination,” in *Redeeming the Time*, ed. Jeffrey O. Nelson (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2006), 71.

<sup>16</sup> Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 71.

<sup>17</sup> Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 71.

<sup>18</sup> Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 71.

## PIETAS

through imagination so that memories may become images, analogous to the experience.<sup>19</sup>

Central to the moral imagination is the recognition that human beings are more than mere political or economic agents participating in elections or the economy. It is for this reason that Kirk warned conservatives against “over-indulging their fascination with economics,” and it is thus no surprise that Kirk’s career was not concerned exclusively with legislative or economic causes.<sup>20</sup> The moral imagination reminds persons of the “ethical truths” discernable amid seemingly chaotic experiences. It reminds them that they are not “autonomous individuals” but instead spiritual beings in communion with each other and with God. Jones implies in his definition that the moral imagination helps persons to live fully human lives, remembering that they are lower than the angels yet higher than the animals in a great chain of being. The moral imagination drapes persons with the power of ethical perception that unites them to one another and to eternity.

According to Birzer, Kirk’s idea of the moral imagination was inseparable from “the mythologies” passed down from generation to generation. The great storytellers of the West had built on each other, drawing from a source higher than any one of them, from a source “unknown and perhaps unknowable.”<sup>21</sup> As Kirk himself put it, the moral imagination was the gift of writers like “Plato and Vergil and Dante,” all of whom drew from centuries of human consciousness and expressed the moral imagination afresh from age to age.<sup>22</sup> Birzer notes that Kirk could have added “Sophocles, Aristotle, Thucydides, Tacitus ... Cicero, Hesiod, Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope, Chesterton, Lewis, Tolkien, O’Connor, and Bradbury” to this list of thinkers who passed on the moral imagination with particular vigor, who gave their generation a “sense of wonder.”<sup>23</sup> It is worth emphasizing here that the majority of these

---

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Jones, “Defining the Moral Imagination,” *First Things*, July 1, 2009, <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2009/07/defining-moral-imagination>.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted by Gleaves Whitney, “The Swords of the Imagination: Russell Kirk’s Battle with Modernity,” *Modern Age* 43, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 316.

<sup>21</sup> Birzer, *Russell Kirk*, 241-42.

<sup>22</sup> Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 71. It is worth noting that Kirk does not consider Plato a “projector of fantastic schemes, but instead a man intent upon opening other men’s eyes to the higher realities of human existence.” Rather than being an advocate for political utopianism, Plato is considered by Kirk to be a man who “endeavored to renew the vitality of Greek society by deepening its religious understanding.” He sought to recover “order in the soul” and “order in the polis,” and is thus considered one of the great authors who passed down the moral imagination. For more, see Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), 75-77.

<sup>23</sup> Birzer, *Russell Kirk*, 241-42.



## RUSSELL KIRK ON THE MORAL IMAGINATION AND LITERARY STUDIES

thinkers who passed down the moral imagination were storytellers, either historical or imaginative. Kirk would agree that it is largely through stories that the moral imagination is passed down, for it is in stories that meaning and universal truths are communicated. What many conservatives perceive as the decline of Western civilization, in other words, is inseparable from the decline of the story.

Kirk knew that great literature cultivates the moral imagination, yet bad literature cultivates worse kinds of imagination. He therefore contrasted the moral imagination with two others: the idyllic and the diabolic. The first of these, the idyllic, is promoted by bad literature and literary theory tainted by ideology. The idyllic imagination can be understood as the ideological imagination, the kind formed by political fanaticism and the desire for utopia.<sup>24</sup> The idyllic imagination was coined by Irving Babbitt in reference to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Enlightenment political philosopher whose writings influenced aspects of the French Revolution. For Kirk, Rousseau's idyllic imagination can be defined as the kind which "rejects old dogmas and old manners" and "rejoices in the notion of emancipation from duty and convention."<sup>25</sup> Although Kirk did not put it this way, it might be added that the idyllic imagination belongs to those who reduce the purpose of reading literature to discovering material or political forces behind the creation of a literary work. In other words, the idyllic imagination belongs to literary critics whose primary interpretive lens is that of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. These critics wish to strip literature of its capacity to convey universal truths about human nature and the place of the human being within the cosmos. Instead of valuing a piece of literature for its beauty and truth, such critics wish to deconstruct a text from the standpoint of an "ism."<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> For Kirk, "ideology" is not a synonym for "ideas" or "principles." Ideology is a precise term to describe the political fanaticism and political "abstraction" denounced by Edmund Burke and thereafter by the Anglo-American conservative tradition. The ideologue, according to Kirk, believes that society can be transformed into a utopia by means of positive law and central planning. Rather than looking to historical experience and imagination, the ideologue theorizes abstract ideas and tries to engineer society accordingly. In contrast, conservatism is not an ideology but instead an approach to understanding the civil social order. For more, see Kirk, "The Drug of Ideology," in *The Essential Russell Kirk*, ed. George A. Panichas (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2007), 348-49.

<sup>25</sup> Kirk, "The Perversity of Recent Fiction," in *Redeeming the Time*, 72.

<sup>26</sup> Kirk criticizes Marxist critics and writers for devoting their talent "almost exclusively to the service of state propaganda and the Communist Party's interests." Marxist critics of literature, like other literary critics with the idyllic imagination, do not believe that literature can reveal universal truths about reality or human nature. Instead, the function of literature for the Marxist critic is to "reflect the class struggle and the mission of the writer to advance the cause of the proletarian revolution." Such critics replace the search for truth with an attempt to impose a political ideology onto the text. See Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things: Observations of Abnormality in Literature and Politics* (1984; repr., Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2016), 72-73.

## PIETAS

Second, the moral imagination can be contrasted with the diabolic, a concept discussed by T.S. Eliot in *After Strange Gods*. As something distinct from the moral imagination of Western civilization and the idyllic imagination of Rousseau, the diabolic imagination delights in the perverse, subhuman, violent, demonic, sensational, and pornographic.<sup>27</sup> Referencing Eliot, Kirk wrote that the diabolic is the imagination of authors and critics who have no ability to discriminate between good and evil. The diabolic imagination strips human beings of their dignity, convincing them that they are not made in God's image. Instead, as Gleaves Whitney puts it, the diabolic imagination teaches that human beings are merely an accident, a mere "collocation of atoms" who are "striving for pleasure and shrinking from pain." If the idyllic imagination is captured in the thought of Rousseau, says Whitney, then the diabolic imagination is captured in the thought of Marquis de Sade.<sup>28</sup> According to Kirk, the diabolic imagination is what controls popular television and media, making many films and popular images "nastily pornographic."<sup>29</sup> In the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, modern men and women cannot escape pornographic portrayals of sex, sensational violence, and despair in popular literature and the media. Describing the triumph of the diabolic imagination, Kirk quoted W.B. Yeats: "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned."<sup>30</sup>

With this idea of the moral imagination in mind, as well as the idyllic and diabolic, it is possible to see how the moral imagination relates to the purpose of reading great works of humane literature. For Kirk, the purpose of literary studies is the "expression of the moral imagination."<sup>31</sup> Put differently, "the end of great books is ethical—to teach us what it means to be genuinely human." Here Kirk conveyed the layered and vital task of humane letters in the formation of society and the human being. He did not, of course, believe that literature should be reduced to being a means of moralizing without regard for the quality of the writing itself, as critics of Kirk's moral vision of literary studies might assert. Instead, conveying the moral imagination through great works of literature requires beautifully and skillfully depicting human nature. For Kirk, cultivating the moral imagination is a far more noble purpose for literature than the many idyllic or diabolic purposes underlying many books

---

<sup>27</sup> Kirk, "The Perversity of Recent Fiction," in *Redeeming the Time*, 72.

<sup>28</sup> Whitney, "The Swords of the Imagination: Russell Kirk's Battle with Modernity," 317.

<sup>29</sup> Kirk, "The Perversity of Recent Fiction," in *Redeeming the Time*, 72-73.

<sup>30</sup> Kirk, "The Perversity of Recent Fiction," in *Redeeming the Time*, 73.

<sup>31</sup> Kirk, "The Perversity of Recent Fiction," in *Redeeming the Time*, 73.

## RUSSELL KIRK ON THE MORAL IMAGINATION AND LITERARY STUDIES

published today, such as engaging in political awakening or providing sensual pleasure. This ancient humanistic purpose of literature was acknowledged by virtually all men and women of letters before the twentieth century. “Until very recent years, men took it for granted that literature exists to form the normative consciousness,” wrote Kirk. Literature exists “to teach human beings their true nature, their dignity, and their place in the scheme of things.”<sup>32</sup>

James Vanden Bosch writes in *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal* that Kirk’s idea of the moral imagination relates to a traditional school of “moral criticism.”<sup>33</sup> According to Bosch, all “moral critics” share one fundamental concern. That is, they are concerned with the universal moral value of literature and, relatedly, with how literature moves a person to act in his or her daily life. As Bosch puts it, they care to one degree or another about “the moral standard employed, the effects of literature upon an audience, and the nature of literature.” Although he did not himself develop it, Kirk’s writings on the moral imagination and literary studies mirror a traditional school of moral criticism. He was concerned with the moral principles communicated through a piece of literature, and he was also concerned with the effect, whether good or bad, that literature will have on readers.<sup>34</sup> For Kirk, to have a good effect on readers, literature should teach persons about the human experience. Thus, great works of literature are intended to humanize—to convey universal knowledge about “what it is to be fully human.”<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, the names “humanism” or “humanities” imply this humanizing purpose of great literature. Kirk noted that Irving Babbitt pointed out that the word humanities is derived from the Latin *humanitas*, an “ethical discipline, intended to develop the truly human person, the qualities of manliness, through the study of great books.”<sup>36</sup> The humanities are about human beings, especially their nature and the abiding questions about which they have always wondered. As Paul Krause defines it, the humanities range from the higher discipline of philosophy, the handmaiden of theology, down to the lower disciplines of literature, history, language, and the fine arts. Properly understood, the humanities are something that conservatives seek to preserve. Again, as Krause writes, conservatism seeks to preserve the

---

<sup>32</sup> Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 73.

<sup>33</sup> James Vanden Bosch, “Moral Criticism: Promises and Prospects,” in *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal*, ed. Walhout and Ryken (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 26-27.

<sup>34</sup> Bosch, “Moral Criticism: Promises and Prospects,” in *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal*, 34.

<sup>35</sup> Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 74.

<sup>36</sup> Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 74.

## PIETAS

best of culture. Yet anyone who loves culture must also love the humanities, which are the wellspring of culture. The death of the humanities, including great works of literature, really does mean the death of one's cultural patrimony, and it ultimately means the "death of the human."<sup>37</sup>

Quoting William Hamilton, Kirk therefore held that "man as an end" is the object of humane literature.<sup>38</sup> In this way, Kirk placed the human being as an end in himself rather than a means to an end. The primary purpose of reading great literature, wrote Kirk, is the "cultivation of the person's own intellect and imagination, for the person's own sake."<sup>39</sup> Great literature does not promise a good career or lots of money, yet it does teach what it is "to be a true human being, living within a moral order." According to Kirk, "great humane literature, joined to the religious impulse, has brought about what Pico della Mirandola called the 'dignity of man.'" Great literature reminds persons that they are "only a little lower than the angels," that they are made with dignity, and that they are worth cultivating for their own sake.<sup>40</sup> According to Kirk, such literature has a positive effect on civilization because it "searches the human heart" and finds in it "laws of moral existence" that separate human beings from the lower animals.<sup>41</sup>

In suggesting that literature reveals universal truths about what it means to be human, Russell Kirk's thought mirrors a traditional literary theory with roots stretching all the way back to the ancient world. In his *Poetics*, for instance, Aristotle wrote that literature "is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of

---

<sup>37</sup> Paul Krause, "In Defense of the Humanities," *The Imaginative Conservative*, July 14, 2019, <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2019/07/defense-humanities-paul-krause-timeless.html>. It should be noted that Kirk was steeped more in history and literature than in philosophy, even if philosophy is a "higher" discipline in a common Western understanding of the humanities. Kirk's mind was more historical and literary than it was purely philosophical. It is imagination, not reason, that has primacy in Kirk's thought. Kirk did, however, have an admiration for "philosophical historians" like Eric Voegelin, Christopher Dawson, John Lukacs, and others who combined "historical fact" with "a philosophical approach to the past." Such thinkers, as Gerald Russello puts it, attempted "to plumb the mysteries of the human condition." For more, see Russello, "Russell Kirk's Historical Imagination," *The Imaginative Conservative*, February 6, 2015, accessed online, <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2015/02/russell-kirks-historical-imagination.html>.

<sup>38</sup> This was said within the context of a discussion on the purpose of liberal education in general, but the statement applies aptly to the purpose of reading literature as well. See Kirk, "The Conservative Purpose of Liberal Education," in *Redeeming the Time*, 42.

<sup>39</sup> Kirk, "The Conservative Purpose of Liberal Education," in *Redeeming the Time*, 43.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Russell Kirk, "Humane Learning in the Age of the Computer," in *Redeeming the Time*, 127.

<sup>41</sup> Kirk, "The Perversity of Recent Fiction," in *Redeeming the Time*, 75-76.

## RUSSELL KIRK ON THE MORAL IMAGINATION AND LITERARY STUDIES

the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singular.”<sup>42</sup> Literature, then, uses the particulars of a story to instruct persons about universal moral laws. Like Aristotle, Kirk understood that literature gives readers models of human nature, using the examples of greater and lesser characters to show something timeless about what it means to be human. Benjamin Lockerd argues that Kirk’s idea of the moral imagination mirrors an often-forgotten school of literary theory that includes thinkers like Horace, Aristotle, Dante, Sir Philip Sidney, T.S. Eliot, C.S. Lewis, and others, all of whom believe that there are universal moral truths that literature helps readers to discern.<sup>43</sup> Although Lockerd does not use the phrase “moral criticism” to describe Kirk’s approach to literature, he makes an argument like that of Bosch. Although Kirk did not himself develop any sort of literary theory, his ideas about the moral imagination and humane literature certainly do mirror the school of “moral criticism” developed by some of the above-mentioned thinkers.

In suggesting that literature is great when it imparts moral truths to readers, it is important to clarify that the moral effect is not the only one by which we judge the quality of a literary work. That great literature “delights and instructs” was implied by Aristotle and, centuries later, stated explicitly by the Roman poet Horace.<sup>44</sup> Literature must also be beautiful and aesthetically excellent or else it will fail to engage readers. Kirk acknowledged the importance of aesthetic excellence in literature, establishing himself as an accomplished fiction writer, penning three full-length novels and numerous short stories. It can be argued that Kirk’s fiction is another of his attempts to renew the moral imagination in readers. For whatever reason, some people are surprised to learn that Kirk had success in the literary world, leading Kirk to note in his memoir *The Sword of Imagination* that many readers assumed there were “two scribbling Russell Kirks: one who wrote grave historical and political works and essays for the literary and scholarly journals, and another who wrote *Old House of Fear* and published uncanny tales in *London Mystery Magazine* and in *Fantasy and Science Fiction*.”<sup>45</sup> Yet for those who understand the role of imagination in his political thought, Kirk’s literary endeavors come as no surprise. Kirk did not earn success in the literary world because he

---

<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, *On Poetics (De Poetica)*, ed. Mortimer J. Adler and Philip W. Goetz, trans. Ingram Bywater, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 8, in *The Great Books of the Western World: The Works of Aristotle* (repr., Chicago, IL: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1990), 686-87.

<sup>43</sup> Lockerd, “The Truth of Beauty,” *The Imaginative Conservative*, July 5, 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Horace, *Ars Poetica*, *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69381/ars-poetica>.

<sup>45</sup> Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination*, 251.

preached conservatism through fiction but rather because his fiction was compelling. As Kirk put it, “imaginative persuasion, not blunt exhortation, commonly is the method of the literary champion of norms.”<sup>46</sup>

Great literature delights because it is beautifully written, skillfully showing what it means to be human. The writer may sometimes “write much more of what is evil than of what is good; and yet, exhibiting the depravity of human nature, he establishes in his reader’s mind the awareness that there exist enduring standards from which we fall away; and that fallen human nature is an ugly sight.”<sup>47</sup> It is often the case, in other words, that great literature shows ugliness and evil, yet not in celebration of them. Beneath such depictions of the grotesque and evil in our fallen nature is a disclosure of the reality of moral norms. Kirk knew that great literature helps readers see the truth about their own condition, even if their condition is fallen. A particularly striking example in the twentieth century comes from Kirk’s favorite contemporary writer, T.S. Eliot, whose poem *The Waste Land* describes the waste land of modern life. This poem shows fragmented images of the modern world, but beneath these fragmented images is a timeless depiction of the nature of man. Kirk explains this point in *Eliot and His Age*, claiming that “human nature is constant” and that “the same vices and the same virtues are at work in every age.”<sup>48</sup> Kirk would have agreed with Sir Roger Scruton who, in reference to *The Waste Land*, wrote that there is a universal nature to beauty. The human being needs beauty to feel at home in the world, said Scruton, and he or she needs beauty to see beyond this world to a place where our “immortal longings and our desire for perfection are finally answered.”<sup>49</sup>

It should be noted that Kirk emphasized the relationship between great literature, the moral imagination, and religious belief. In particular, the moral imagination opens readers up to religious belief, revealing to them the moral struggle of human existence. As Lockerd points out in his introduction to *Eliot and His Age*, Kirk “considered the idea that sound

---

<sup>46</sup> Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 75.

<sup>47</sup> Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 74-75.

<sup>48</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T.S. Eliot’s Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (1971; repr., Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2008), 69.

<sup>49</sup> Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 145. Beauty and the moral imagination are also the topic of a recent article by Jared Zimmerer, “Beauty, Order, and the Moral Imagination: The Aesthetics of Russell Kirk,” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 24, no. 4 (Fall 2021): 88-115, who argues that Kirk can be considered someone whose writings consistently allude to the role of imagination and beauty in human life.

## RUSSELL KIRK ON THE MORAL IMAGINATION AND LITERARY STUDIES

religious belief makes for good imaginative writing but found the relationship between the two more complicated.” The good writer shows readers what it feels like to adhere to a religious belief, and he often shows these beliefs by embodying them, like Dante did, in the literature itself.<sup>50</sup> For example, the moral imagination reminds readers of the reality of Original Sin. Yet the idyllic imagination of Rousseau often views human nature as perfectible, unaffected by the reality of sin. As Lockerd suggests, the idyllic imagination promises that earthly utopias can be brought about by “rational ideological programs,” yet such promises almost always result in disorder and violence. The moral imagination, in contrast, passes on a less utopian view of human nature and a more realistic portrayal of human existence in literature. Recognizing that fallen humans cannot be perfected, it does not promise an earthly utopia by means of political action and revolution.<sup>51</sup>

Flannery O’Connor, like T.S. Eliot, is another contemporary writer whose moral imagination was not friendly to utopianism. According to Kirk, O’Connor agreed with T.S. Eliot that the poet’s advantage “is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom, and the horror, and the glory.”<sup>52</sup> O’Connor was not a progressive or sentimentalist, nor was she a fan of utopian political programs that promise Heaven on Earth. “A good man is hard to find,” said Kirk, quoting the title of one of O’Connor’s stories, for in “Adam’s fall we sinned all.”<sup>53</sup> Man’s fallen nature cannot be reversed by tearing down old institutions, customs, and traditions in search for a future utopia. Fallen man, stained by pride and original sin, cannot save himself through political activism or overthrowing an old order. Evil in the world should be resisted, but resistance to such evil will only find success when persons once again make God the center of their existence. Like Eliot, O’Connor depicted the reality of man’s nature and the decaying condition of the modern world, and, again like Eliot, she knew that religious faith is needed for man’s earthly existence to be tolerable. Above all, she knew a fundamental truth about the human being that Kirk developed throughout his life: that order in the soul and order in the commonwealth develop in parallel

---

<sup>50</sup> Lockerd, “Introduction,” in *Eliot and His Age: T.S. Eliot’s Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* by Russell Kirk (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2008), xx-xxiv.

<sup>51</sup> Lockerd, “Introduction,” in *Eliot and His Age*, xx-xxiv.

<sup>52</sup> Kirk, “Criminal Character and Mercy,” in *The Essential Russell Kirk*, ed. George A. Panichas (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2007), 341.

<sup>53</sup> Kirk, “Criminal Character and Mercy,” in *The Essential Russell Kirk*, 342.

## PIETAS

fashion. Without moral order in the soul, in other words, there can be no order in the commonwealth.

For Kirk, the moral imagination and its relationship to literary studies is complex and a worthy subject of consideration. Yet Kirk's views on literature and the moral imagination are not just something fit for academic writing or commentary but are something of even greater value when lived out, when they shape real people and enrich their actual lives. In addition to writing about great literature, and in addition to writing imaginative literature himself, Kirk often read aloud to his visitors and his family. In a tribute after her father's death, Cecilia Kirk Nelson wrote that her father understood the significance of stories. In particular, she wrote that great stories "feed man's imagination," even if they do not always mean to. Although stories are "primarily to entertain, good stories simultaneously embody an understanding or a glimpse of truth. In conveying wisdom and providing insight, they reveal what it means to be human." Cecilia's father was able to awaken in her the moral imagination at a young age by immersing her in humane literature, thereby teaching her "the enduring qualities of human nature." In addition, great literature was able to impart to her a "cultural legacy" that included the "wisdom of generations."<sup>54</sup>

Cecilia's comments about the purpose of great literature mirror the views of her father. In his pamphlet "Humane Literature for Young Readers," Kirk reiterated that great literature has no guarantee of bringing about "material success or earthly power."<sup>55</sup> What great literature guarantees is far more important and meaningful, instead providing greater knowledge about "what it means to be a real man or a real woman." Put differently, it "helps us to develop into full human beings." Kirk encouraged readers to consider the preface to Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen," in which Andersen discusses the splintered mirror of distortion and mockery. If we raise one or two generations deprived of the moral imagination that great literature nourishes, then civilization will soon be victim to the freezing Snow Queen's palace. As Kirk put it, if men and women "have languished too long in that permafrost, not even little Gerda's sacrificing love may redeem them."<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Cecilia Kirk Nelson, "A Literary Patrimony," *Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal*, November 13, 2011, <https://kirkcenter.org/best/a-literary-patrimony/>.

<sup>55</sup> Russell Kirk, "Humane Letters for Young Readers" (1979), *The Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal*, <https://kirkcenter.org/kirk-essay-humane-literature-for-young-readers/>.

<sup>56</sup> Kirk, "Humane Letters for Young Readers" (1979), *The Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal*.



## RUSSELL KIRK ON THE MORAL IMAGINATION AND LITERARY STUDIES

### RUSSELL KIRK, TRADITION, AND LITERARY MORALS

Russell Kirk's idea of the moral imagination has a complex and noteworthy relationship with literary studies. Yet it is important to remember that Kirk's ideas about literary studies were put forth within the context of a conservative thought that valued the moral imagination. For Kirk, the conservative is someone who seeks permanence rather than reckless change in society. Unlike the progressive, conservatives today do not look forward to the glories of a perfect future. Instead, the conservative relies on "custom, habit, and established institutions."<sup>57</sup> As James M. Wilson puts it, modern Anglo-American conservatives view themselves as "voices of truth, goodness, and beauty drowned by the tide of modern revolution."<sup>58</sup> In a certain sense, then, Kirk's idea of the moral imagination helps establish a conservative and non-ideological approach to reading literature.

Indeed, Kirk's ideas about the moral imagination and literary studies provide a critique of the present assumption that ancient wisdom cannot speak to the modern world. Wilson describes the conservative underpinnings of Kirk's political and literary views:

It was Burke's genius to recognize in the modern context this fundamental unity of being and beauty, reality and aesthetics, which partially explains what he intended in coining the phrase, "the moral imagination." He saw the modern world coming into being along simpler lines—a mechanical rationalism, a utilitarian ethics, a "procedural" aesthetics that valued only force and efficacy, neglecting custom, ritual and all other accouterments of received traditions. The conservative tradition has itself constituted the punctuated, uneven development of these insights in the face of liberal modernity's continuous march toward a society without a past, a rational order disencumbered of inheritance, a rationalism that knows nothing of the heart much less of the intellect's higher aspirations. Burke, thus, gave us "culture," a concept by which modernity could be critiqued for its failure to receive the sacred cultus of the past and its failure to cultivate with care the legacy of past and present in hopes of securing it for future generations. While any people may have a culture, it is the conservative who truly understands what "culture" means.<sup>59</sup>

Hence, Kirk's idea of the moral imagination was a response to the march toward what many perceive as a utopian future, yet what is really a dystopian world without a cultural inheritance. The utopian, who seeks to engineer society and separate the current generation

---

<sup>57</sup> Kirk, "Permanence and Change" (1989), *The Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal*, <https://kirkcenter.org/kirk-essays/kirk-essay-permanence-and-change>.

<sup>58</sup> Wilson, "The Drama of Cultural Conservatism," *The Point*, September 3, 2010.

<sup>59</sup> Wilson, "The Drama of Cultural Conservatism," *The Point*, September 3, 2010.

## PIETAS

from the past, risks endangering the “patrimony of civilization.”<sup>60</sup> Such persons want to rush forward to a future without the misery and injustices of the past, and they want to do so by tearing down old norms and institutions. Almost three decades after Kirk’s death, “woke” and “cancel-culture” fanaticism is increasingly common, promising an earthly utopia and seeking to dismantle the Western canon. Yet the “rash endeavor to break through into an imagined future of universal happiness” is a dangerous one, for utopian revolutions result, eventually, in widespread misery. The “abstract cult of Progress,” which holds that the new is necessarily preferable to the old, represents a threat to the survival of a culture.<sup>61</sup> Great literature, however, stands athwart the cult of Progress by uniting modern persons to a tradition. Kirk knew there are times of historical progress, and he would most certainly concede that the modern world has in many ways progressed. But there are also times of decline, especially in the spheres of religion and culture, and such decline inevitably comes when a civilization forgets ancient wisdom.

Kirk’s idea of the moral imagination relates to Edmund Burke’s idea of an “eternal society.” For Burke, what we call “society” includes all people who are born into a particular place and who find themselves in a web of relationships that extend across time. Again, one of Kirk’s favorite lines from Burke’s *Reflections* is worth quoting at length:

As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher nature, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place.<sup>62</sup>

By uniting the present and past as well as the visible and invisible world, the moral imagination helps to ground persons in a tradition, one that is contractually binding on all parties. As Kirk put it, commenting on Burke’s *Reflections*, “this immortal contract is made between God and mankind,” as well as “between the generations that have perished from the earth, and the generation that is living now, and the generations that are yet to come.”<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Kirk, “Permanence and Change” (1989).

<sup>61</sup> Kirk, “Permanence and Change” (1989).

<sup>62</sup> Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 96-97.

<sup>63</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 17.

## RUSSELL KIRK ON THE MORAL IMAGINATION AND LITERARY STUDIES

This contract is like a “covenant” binding upon all, and nobody has a right to break it. If someone does break it, then everyone in society suffers as a result. Indeed, Burke held that society is not merely made up of individuals who are currently living. Instead, society is made up of those “who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born.”<sup>64</sup>

If someone breaks this eternal contract between the dead, the living, and the unborn, then the consequences will be severe. As Burke warned, if this law of continuity is broken, “nature is disobeyed, and the rebellious are outlawed, cast forth, and exiled, from this world of reason, and order, and peace, and virtue, and fruitful penitence, into the antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, confusion, and unavailing sorrow.”<sup>65</sup> This is the punishment of the modern world, remarked Kirk, precisely because we moderns have “thrown away the literary heritage of the past” and have “broken with the moral and social prescription of traditional civil social existence.”<sup>66</sup> The continuity of great literature is one of the most important influences that unite one generation to another. Yet most teachers of literature have forgotten or rejected this important influence of literature, wrote Kirk, and hence they have ceased to acknowledge their duty to promulgate an inherited body of learning. The eternal contract has been broken due to what may be called the “treason of the English teacher.”<sup>67</sup>

Kirk’s idea of the moral imagination therefore relates to a point made by T.S. Eliot in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. Eliot believed that great writers have the whole of past literature in their bones, and they are aware of the “larger mind which transcends the private mind.”<sup>68</sup> Eliot’s moral imagination was shaped by his adherence to literary tradition – to the “mind of Europe” and to the mind of his own country. Eliot held that the great author writes “not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.”<sup>69</sup> An author’s significance relates not just to giving voice to those who are living but also to those who are dead. Tradition, which can also be called the historical sense, is a “sense of the timeless as well as

---

<sup>64</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 17.

<sup>65</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 62.

<sup>66</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 62.

<sup>67</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 62. Here Kirk is probably alluding to Julien Benda’s *La Trahison Des Clercs* (1928), translated into English by Richard Aldington and titled *Treason of the Intellectuals*.

<sup>68</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 48.

<sup>69</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 48.

## PIETAS

of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together.” It is this historical sense that the great author successfully captures. In writing great literature, an author with the moral imagination realizes that he does not write in a historical vacuum as an autonomous individual. Instead, a great author writes in relation to the eternal society, which links God and mankind, as well as each generation, to each other.<sup>70</sup>

Indeed, it is worth repeating that Kirk’s understanding of the purpose of literature was greatly influenced by T.S. Eliot. Even *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, Kirk’s book on literature and politics, gets its name from Eliot. In the title of this book, Kirk references the “permanent things” of human existence, the unchanging patterns and norms of human nature that are necessary for civilized life. Following Eliot, Kirk believed that:

There are certain permanent things in society: the health of the family, inherited political institutions that ensure a measure of order and justice and freedom, a life of diversity and independence, a life marked by widespread possession of private property. These permanent things guarantee against arbitrary interference by the state. These are all aspects of conservative thought, which have developed gradually as the debate since the French Revolution has gone on.<sup>71</sup>

When Eliot and Kirk defended the permanent things, they defended the needs that must be met if human civilization is to flourish. It is the task of the modern conservative, equipped with the moral imagination, to defend the permanent things of human existence. Kirk taught that conservatives believe in moral standards and in the existence of an enduring moral order. It is thus the aim of the modern conservative to conserve the permanent things, in part by means of preserving the literary and religious heritage that has been handed down from past generations. Eliot’s powerful influence on Kirk can be seen by the fact that *Eliot and His Age* was among the books that Kirk was most proud of. It was Eliot, after all, who “perceived his age more poignantly than did anyone else in the republic of letters” and who established himself as “the principal champion of the moral imagination in the twentieth century.”<sup>72</sup> Kirk’s genius was not only his political thought but also his insight into culture and literature, which was influenced significantly by Eliot.

---

<sup>70</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 48.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted by Lee Edwards, “The Marriage That Shaped American Conservatism,” *The Intercollegiate Studies Review*, August 20, 2019, <https://isi.org/intercollegiate-review/marriage-shaped-american-conservatism/>.

<sup>72</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 4.

## RUSSELL KIRK ON THE MORAL IMAGINATION AND LITERARY STUDIES

Kirk often described the importance of literature and the related role of teachers in transmitting ancient wisdom to new generations. As Kirk put it, the Western world must once again realize the “necessity of an elevated and uninterrupted literary tradition to sustain civilized existence.”<sup>73</sup> Without literary influences that promote continuity between present and past, civilization will soon fall apart. Kirk quotes Burke, claiming that in only a few generations civilized culture will “crumble away, be disconnected into the dust and powder of individuality, and at length dispersed to all the winds of heaven.”<sup>74</sup> Hence, Kirk asserts that it is the “high duty” of men and women of letters as well as of teachers of literature to remember the social importance of the Western literary tradition. In fact, Kirk argued that teachers of literature have a greater duty than even the politician in preserving the eternal society. It is literature, not practical politics, that provides the “cement of society” upon which old and new generations can together stand. Literature transmits “to every rising generation, century upon century, a body of ethical principles and critical standards and imaginative creations that constitutes a kind of collective intellect of humanity, the formalized wisdom of our ancestors.”<sup>75</sup> This is especially true in our current Western world where political and religious institutions no longer provide civilizational continuity. In a time when political and religious institutions are weakened, the responsibility of teachers of humane letters grows even greater, since they become, at times, one of the only means through which old wisdom is transmitted from one generation to another.<sup>76</sup>

Kirk also identified a relationship between literature, the moral imagination, and the natural law. According to this view, literature is an important way to reawaken an imagination that is aware of moral truths beyond the realm of private opinion. Along with revealed religion and received custom, literature reawakens the imagination to a “normative consciousness,” to the laws of human nature, which remain permanent. There are, in other words, standards against which behavior can be measured, and these standards extend beyond the subjective opinion of a single person or generation.

---

<sup>73</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 61.

<sup>74</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 61.

<sup>75</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 63.

<sup>76</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 6.

## PIETAS

Kirk's definition of "norm" clarifies what great literature helps pass down:

When I write of a "norm," I do not mean a "value" merely. A value is the quality of worth. Many things are worthwhile that are not normative. When most writers nowadays employ the word "value" as a term of philosophy, moreover, they mean "subjective value"—that is, the quality of being worthwhile, of giving pleasure or satisfaction to individuals, without judgment upon the intrinsic, absolute, essential merit of the sensation or action in question; without reference to its objective deserts.... A norm has value, but has more than value. A norm endures in its own right, whether or not it gives pleasure to particular individuals. A norm is the standard against which any alleged value must be measured objectively.<sup>77</sup>

A norm, then, is not simply an opinion or a belief held by many people. To the contrary, it is a universal moral truth, passed on from one generation to the next, ignored by many writers in the modern world who try to put their worldview on the unstable ground of multiculturalism and moral relativism. Norms are truths that are timeless, universal, and sanctioned by a source higher than private opinion. For Kirk, there are certain moral laws for human beings that exist independent of personal opinions. "Though men may ignore or forget the norm," suggested Kirk, "still that norm does not cease to be, nor does it cease to influence men."<sup>78</sup> These universal norms are learned over time, not invented by an individual's private rationality or decreed because they have social utility. They are not merely the "fabrications" of previous generations but instead are the universal body of truths that have been discerned through the generations.<sup>79</sup>

Great literature awakens the moral imagination by showing persons the human experience and the norms of human nature. "By definition," said Kirk, "human nature is constant." The nature of the human being does not change, and it cannot be perfected by means of utopian political programs. "Because of that constancy," wrote Kirk, "men of vision are able to describe the norms, the rules, for mankind."<sup>80</sup> As Benjamin Lockerd points out, Kirk upheld the natural law tradition in moral philosophy, which maintains that some actions are consistent with our unchanging human nature and that other actions are not.<sup>81</sup> Lockerd continues: "Kirk names some of those norms: charity, justice, freedom, duty, temperance,

---

<sup>77</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 8.

<sup>78</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 3.

<sup>79</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 3.

<sup>80</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 29.

<sup>81</sup> Lockerd, "Introduction," in *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, iii.

## RUSSELL KIRK ON THE MORAL IMAGINATION AND LITERARY STUDIES

prudence, fortitude. In a healthy society, individuals will attempt to live by these permanent norms of moral action, and the laws of the land will give support to citizens as they make that attempt.”<sup>82</sup> As Kirk wrote, “there exist law for man and law for things,” and in a healthy society these natural laws are recognized by citizens and legislators alike.<sup>83</sup> It is in part from a literary tradition that persons receive the moral imagination and, along with the moral imagination, knowledge of the laws of human nature.

### CONCLUSION

Russell Kirk was a conservative man of letters, and it is for his influence on the American conservative movement that he is usually remembered. Those familiar with the history of American conservatism know that Kirk played an important role in the resistance to progressivism in the twentieth century. Indeed, *The Conservative Mind* and the intellectual movement that this book helped inspire would eventually bear political fruit in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Eventually, Reagan even bestowed on Kirk the Presidential Citizens Medal for his contributions to American life. Of course, the influence of Kirk can also be seen in other political events, including the 1964 campaign of Barry Goldwater and the 1992 campaign of Patrick Buchanan.

In addition, Kirk will also continue to be remembered for the ways he recognized the relationship between politics and imagination. The conservative, he taught, must defend the norms and standards that have been the concern of poets and literary men from Homer onward. Throughout his career, Kirk followed in the footsteps of Edmund Burke, the father of Anglo-American conservatism and a statesman whose politics were grounded on an imaginative understanding of life. Specifically, Kirk developed Burke’s concept of the “moral imagination” and applied it to the purpose of literary studies. For Kirk, literature takes on an importance of great magnitude, reminding people what it means to be truly human. Literature becomes an important source of the moral imagination—an important countercurrent to ideology, to utopianism, and to the various attacks on the human person presented in the modern world.

---

<sup>82</sup> Lockerd, “Introduction,” in *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, iii.

<sup>83</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 29.

## PIETAS

The moral imagination can be revived today through efforts to invigorate America's cultural and literary heritage. Such renewal is achieved by means of the arts and humanities, which serve to invigorate the imagination and combat the forces of cultural and political decay. In the Age of Augustus, for example, it was Virgil and his fellow poets who more than anyone invigorated the moral imagination in the Roman people, thereby combatting the forces of cultural and political disintegration around them. The renewal of the moral imagination must come prior to the renewal of the civil social order, since, as Kirk often remarked, order in the soul and order in the commonwealth are intimately related. The imagination of a people influences their sense of reality and of the meaning of life, thereby affecting the way that they think and act in the world around them. The imagination of a people therefore signals what will eventually become of the civil social order. As Kirk would say, "imagination, given time, does rule the world."<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 115.