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550

The Mystic Chords of Memory: Reclaiming American History

By Wilfred M. McClay

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002-4999
U.S.A.
202/546-4400

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Wilfred M. McClay

I am delighted to be with you this afternoon and to have a role in the Heritage Foundation's worthy project of commemorating Russell Kirk's many contributions to American intellectual life. My own task today is to explore the subject of historical consciousness in America—a subject about which, strange to say, Russell Kirk actually did not write a great deal, at least not addressing the subject directly. But he didn't need to. His entire life and work were nothing less than an extended elaboration of that very theme. Historical consciousness seemed to have been infused into the air he breathed and mixed into the soil of the ancestral land in which he chose to live. No place or thing, however ordinary, was too humble for him to grant it the dignity of a story.

One notices this historical tendency even in Kirk's language. It has a most peculiar lilt, which often charms and sometimes startles the reader with its unexpectedly fanciful and antique echoes. (As an example of the latter, I remember being shocked when I read Kirk describe a leading social critic as an exemplar of "defecated intellect"—shocked, that is, until I looked the word up, and saw that Kirk used the word in an older and more etymologically informed sense than my own, strictly scatological understanding.) What struck many readers as mannered or affected diction in Kirk was actually something quite different. It was evidence of his strong conviction that words, like people, are living things, bearing living pasts deserving of recognition and respect. That was typical of him. He had the ability to make even the dullest things gleam with the luster of historical imagination. With all due respect to Governor John Engler, who inaugurated this series of lectures, who would have thought that Michigan could ever be made a name to conjure with? Yet Kirk made his many readers curious to see his beloved "stump country" and to explore the tiny burg of Mecosta. Although his Gothic and Romantic tastes drew him to old European cathedrals, Roman ruins, and other such haunted sites, he was not prone to sigh, in the perennial complaint of American writers such as Hawthorne and Henry James, that America was too new or raw or commerce-minded to be the stuff of art. On the contrary, Kirk knew how to see monuments, and ruins, everywhere he looked.

What others called "junk" Kirk thought of as "cultural debris," which is a short way of saying that Kirk took a long view of the disorders of our contemporary American world, seeing them in light of the thousand follies and disorders that have come before us in the human procession. Historical consciousness gave him a broad, capacious vision, which always insisted that the civilization we enjoy has deep living roots. Those roots of American order extend back in time not only to 18th-century Philadelphia, but further back, to London, Rome, Athens, and Jerusalem. Virtually everything he wrote testified to his intense awareness of the immanence, inescapability, and indispensability of the past, and not only the past of the previous generation or two, but the distant past—the past of the Law and the

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Wilfred M. McClay is Associate Professor of History at Tulane University.

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Prophets, of Solon, Cicero, Augustine, the English constitution, Montesquieu, Burke, Lincoln.

Kirk's career, then, went against the American grain, and it did so in two different ways. In the first place, he was an intellectual genuinely at ease in America. He may have fancied himself a Bohemian Tory, but he was never that most tiresome of bores, "the alienated American intellectual," a restless species that grazes in herds of independent minds. He knew he was fortunate to live in a country free and prosperous enough to permit him a career as an independent writer, and he never forgot that fact. But at the same time, he was never an uncritical celebrant of American culture. He loved his country, but he did not idolize it. Instead, he held it accountable to a transcendent standard, against which he often found it seriously wanting.

In particular, Kirk lamented the deification of progress, the cult of absolute equality, the advance of the Leviathan state, the licentiousness of the autonomous self, the transvaluation of values, and other such modern abstractions that have transformed and eroded the American republic. While he vehemently opposed ideology in all its forms, including conservative ideology, he at the same time lamented Americans' fixation upon short-term, practical, problem-solving, results-oriented, and utility-maximizing thinking in place of a deeper reflection upon the proper ends of things. Kirk, then, was trying to do something characteristic of traditionalist conservatives: fight on two fronts at once. He was defending the American way of life against its cultured despisers—while at the same time challenging many elements of that way of life by holding it up to its classical and Judeo-Christian antecedents. He comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable—and sometimes they were the same people.

Kirk was not the only one to act this way. Many American conservatives feel caught in a similar bind. Most of them are dyed-in-the-wool patriots, and yet they wonder whether the very America they so ardently defend is only too willing to sell its birthright for a mess of pottage—or, for the more ideologically inclined, a pot of message. Even here at Heritage, which is a very busy, worldly place, teeming with clever people and clever ideas addressing themselves to the immediate concrete policy questions and debates of the day, one is likely to encounter that very American question: Of what use is historical consciousness?

The dangers inherent in this characteristically American attitude are wonderfully illuminated by a joke I heard the other day, which with your indulgence I will retell—not only because it bears directly upon the point, but because storytelling seems a very Kirkean way to get at a Kirkean truth.

The tale begins with a tourist, wandering through the back alleys of San Francisco's Chinatown, where he comes upon a little antique shop, filled with curious pieces of statuary and other art objects. What especially catches his eye is a beautifully wrought, life-size bronze statue of a rat. He asks the elderly shopkeeper for the rat's price.

"The rat costs twelve dollars," says the shopkeeper, "and it will be a thousand dollars more for the story behind it."

"Well, you can keep the story, old man," responds the tourist, "but I'll take the rat."

After buying the rat, the tourist leaves the store, carrying his newly acquired statue under his arm. As he crosses the street in front of the store, he sees two live rats emerge from a sewer drain and fall into step behind him. He looks nervously over his shoulder and starts to walk faster. Soon more rats appear and begin to follow him. In a few minutes rats are coming out of every sewer, basement, vacant lot, and landfill, forming themselves into swarms

and packs and massing in step behind him. People on the street point and shout at him as the pursuing rats force him into a trot, and then a dead run. But no matter how fast he runs, the rats, now squeaking and squealing grotesquely, stay right behind him. By the time he reaches the water's edge, the line of rats trailing him extends back for twelve city blocks. Finally, in desperation, the tourist leaps as high as he can up onto a lamppost and hugs it by one arm while, with the other, he flings the bronze rat far out into the waters of San Francisco Bay. To his amazement, the hordes of rats race right by him and follow the statue, surging over the breakwater and leaping into the Bay—and then promptly drowning.

Whereupon the tourist hurries back up to the antique shop. When he appears at the door, the shopkeeper smiles knowingly and says, "Ah, yes, sir. So now you've seen what the statue can do, and you've come back to find out the story?"

"No, no, no," replies the tourist excitedly. "Now I want to buy a bronze statue of a lawyer!"

There's nothing more rich with cultural meaning than humor. Clearly the main point of this joke is its hardwired animus toward lawyers. But there's another point, too. The tourist in this story is a man interested only in immediate results, and things, and in what those things can be deployed to do. He couldn't care less about "knowing the story." And the punch line assumes that we pretty much agree with him. If the statue eradicates lawyers, who cares how it works? A picture may be worth a thousand words, but no story is worth a thousand bucks. Such is the characteristic American attitude toward the past—You can keep your story, old man; I'll take the rat. But the tourist makes a completely unwarranted universalistic assumption—that all bronze statues from this shop will have the same effect. How can he know that, until he has heard "the story?" His lack of interest in "the story" is not only philistine; it is foolish. Hasn't he learned that you get what you pay for? Yet this is the sort of mechanistic attitude, which has rightly been called "crackpot realism," that Kirk always had to battle—as do all of us who care about the American past and about the state of our historical consciousness. For you can't really appreciate the statuary of American political and institutional life, or know the value of American liberty and prosperity, unless you pay the price of learning the story.

Of course, we also now have another, very different, problem: that the older "story" of the American past is increasingly regarded, especially by our academic historians, as nothing but a story of rats, which is another way of saying that the struggle to reclaim historical consciousness in contemporary America has to occur on two different fronts, too. It is one thing to believe the past is unworthy of our attention. It's another thing to assert that it is unworthy of our respect. We now confront both of these attitudes at once, and it is hard to say which is the more threatening. It is alarming to have our suspicion confirmed, most recently by a Department of Education survey of 22,000 American schoolchildren, that our young people are learning next to nothing about American history. But it is equally alarming to contemplate what passes for historical study in the academy, the arena in which our leaders are educated. There the reign of identity politics and political correctness has, if anything, only fortified its hold in recent years. It sometimes seems that, to paraphrase the old blues song, if it wasn't for bad history, we wouldn't have no history at all. Indeed, it is a melancholy thing to reflect, as I sometimes do, that the only consolation to be had for the execrable courses our students endure is the fact that they won't remember them after they graduate. Unfortunately, though, they may not remember any of the good stuff either.

It's time, then, to recover some fairly basic truths. Historical consciousness is to civilized society what memory is to individual identity. One cannot say who or what one is—one can't say one is anyone, or anything, at all—without some selective retention of experience

and source of continuity. One cannot learn, use language, pass on knowledge, raise offspring, or even dwell in society without the aid of memory. Without memory there are no workable rules of conduct, no standard of justice, no basis for restraining passions, no sense of the connection between an action and its consequences. There can be no sense of the future, as a moment in time we know will come, because we remember that other tomorrows have come, too. And there can be no recognition of the sacred, no act of consecration or devotion to the unseen—for nothing exists but the proximate and the sensate. A culture without memory will necessarily be barbarous, no matter how technologically advanced and sophisticated, because the daily drumbeat of artificial sensations and amplified events will drown out all other sounds, including the strains of an older music.

In our day, even the academic study of history has begun to yield to such barbarism. For an increasing number of younger historians, the whole point of studying the past is to "prove" that all our inherited institutions, beliefs, conventions, and normative values are arbitrary—mere "social constructions" in the service of ignoble power—and are therefore utterly without legitimacy or authority. In this view, it is absurd to imagine that the study of the past could have any purpose beyond serving the immediate needs of the present—and anyone who thinks otherwise is either disingenuous or stupid. The very idea of being enlarged or drawn out of ourselves by encountering the strangeness of the past—and the strange familiarity of the past—now seems quite beside the point.

Kirk's view of the matter was different, first of all because, for him, the past was a land of enchantment, pervaded with flitting shadows and ghostly presences. But it was also the source of what little real solidity there is to be found in the world. The study of the past, he believed, should cause us to recognize the ways that the past has authority over us. For historical consciousness, as he understood it, is not merely an awareness of the past and of one's own connection to it. It is the cultivation of respect for what cannot be seen, for the invisible sources of meaning and authority in our lives—for the formative agents and foundational principles that, although no longer tangible, have made possible what is worthy in our own day. To borrow from the language of religious faith, the tutelage of historical consciousness teaches us what it means to walk by faith, and not only by sight.

We see, then, that historical knowledge and historical consciousness are two very different things; and the acquisition of historical consciousness, properly understood, will have to be something different from the academic study of history—though the latter does not preclude the former. The acquisition of historical consciousness means learning the discipline of memory, which is far more than a matter of personal memory—though that is, of course, where it begins and ends. Historical consciousness means learning to appropriate into our own moral imagination, and learning to be guided by, the distilled memories of others, the stories of things we never experienced firsthand. It means learning to make these things our own, learning to look out at the world we experience through their filter, learning to feel the living presence of the past inhering in the seeming inertness of the world as it is given to us. Of course, discernment between and among memories is of great importance. Not all are worth preserving, and not all are reliable. Here is where the practice of professional historians has been especially valuable, in preserving so much that would otherwise be lost and in ferreting out the evidence for certain propositions while uncovering the faulty basis for others. But the advocate of historical consciousness is likely to give preference to those memories whose importance and reliability have been established not merely by a select committee of the American Historical Association, but also by the passage of time. To repeat, historical knowledge and historical consciousness are different things, and the latter can never become the province of a historical priesthood.

An outside observer cannot easily tell when an individual's vision of reality itself has been transformed. No one else can see with another person's eyes, feel with another person's heart. But let us imagine a visitor to the battlefield at Gettysburg who knows the history of that battle and war, knows the text of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and knows something of subsequent American history—not only knows these things, but has digested and internalized this knowledge. That visitor will experience something very different on his visit from what an uninformed eight-year-old child will see. What the educated observer sees when he gazes at the modest grassy bump of Cemetery Ridge will be, in a sense, more real than what the unimpressed young child sees, even though they are looking at the same thing. Such an example undercuts the positivistic notion that we live in a world of inert facts to which we impute values. Insofar as we are historical, remembering creatures, we inevitably participate in the meanings that we apprehend—a mysterious form of participant knowledge that is, as John Lukacs argues, something very different from mere subjectivity.

Part of what makes our visitor different, too, is the fact that he comes to Gettysburg as a part of what sociologists call a "community of memory." His reactions are not determined merely by his idiosyncratic impressions, though he may well have had some, or by his extensive knowledge, however detailed it may be. Instead, he is one of many people who remember what happened in that place, and in some way he is connected to all of them, to all who are bound together by remembrance of that story. In the end, communities and nation-states are constituted and sustained by such shared memories—by stories of foundation, conflict, and perseverance. The leap of imagination and faith, from the thinness and unreliability of our individual memory to the richness of collective memory, that is the leap of civilized life; and the discipline of collective memory is the task not only of the historian, but of every one of us. Historical consciousness draws us out of a narrow preoccupation with the present and with our "selves," and ushers us into another, larger world—a public world that "cultures" us, in all the senses of that word.

Historical consciousness is, then, part of the cement that holds America together and makes us willing to strive and sacrifice on her behalf. One might think of the Gettysburg Address as an exemplary text in this respect, since it sought to give meaning to the suffering of the present precisely by reference to the visionary sacrifices of the Founders. Instead of deconstructing the past in the name of the present, it reinterpreted the present by reference to the past.

An even better example, however, is Lincoln's first inaugural address, from which the haunting phrase in my title, "The Mystic Chords of Memory," is taken. To understand what sort of appeal Lincoln was making with these words, we need to recall the setting in which the address was given in March of 1861. In the wake of Lincoln's election to the presidency in 1860 without the support of a single Southern state, seven states from the Deep South had already left the Union, and the crucial border states were on the verge of doing so as well. The Union that Lincoln so greatly cherished seemed to be dissolving before his eyes. With this inaugural speech, Lincoln began his attempt to counter this disintegration. He made it clear that, so far as he was concerned, the union of states under the Constitution could not be broken, for it was meant to be a perpetual union, rather than being revocable at the whim of a single state or combination of states. The speech takes a variety of turns, offering legal, political, moral, and prudential reasons for its case. Its tone is by turns both conciliatory and stern. But with its final clinching paragraph—added (it is said) at the suggestion of William Henry Seward—the speech soars to immortal heights:

> I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

It is a rich, complex, intricately balanced sentence, built around a delicate musical image. The "chords of memory" will eventually be "touched" by our better angels—one can almost envision them plucking the strings of a harp—and once those memories have been made vibrant, they will elicit other sympathetic vibrations, the intervals and overtones that energize and "swell the chorus of the Union." These are "mystic" chords, which means that they must come from a divine, mysterious source; and these mystic chords somehow have the power to link "every battlefield and patriot grave" to "every living heart and hearthstone" in the land. When they are sounded, the mystic chords have the power to connect past and present, inner and outer, private and public, household and polity, locality and nationality in a single harmonious whole. During times of confusion and crisis, such as the nation was then facing, it could find composure and direction in recalling the Spirit of '76 and the Founders' heroic sacrifices. Citizens will draw strength and comfort from associating their love of the nation with the same warm devotion that attaches them to their own hearths.

For Lincoln, though, the battlefields and patriot graves deserved our reverence not simply for sentimental reasons, or out of reverence for our ancestors' great sacrifices, but because of the cause for which they sacrificed. It would not have been enough had they merely died for the 19th-century equivalent of baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet. They died, as Lincoln expressed it in the Gettysburg Address, in order that government of the people, by the people, and for the people "shall not perish from the earth." They died, he asserted, to sustain the possibility of a nation "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." The mystic chords of memory, then, also draw us back to first principles and to an understanding of America as a nation self-consciously founded, at a distinct moment in time, with particular ends in view. From this perspective, the United States is a nation with a uniquely creedal sense of national identity—a nation, as Chesterton put it, with the soul of a church. In this view, one becomes an American less by *descent* than by *consent*.

Thus, Lincoln's oratory offered two different effects of invoking the mystic chords of memory—first, as reminders of an inherited way of life and, second, as reminders of a set of universal propositions. This duality is at the heart of a longstanding debate about the nature of American institutions, and indeed it now presents itself at the heart of contemporary debates about multiculturalism, immigration, and national identity. Is America a transnational nation, founded upon certain abstract and universalistic principles which it both exemplifies and promotes? Or is it a civilization built upon a series of specifically Western European, and largely British, historical accretions with language, laws, customs, conventions, institutions, and belief systems arising organically out of those particular legacies? Such questions are exceedingly difficult to answer with finality, and the balance between them may remain contested for as long as the United States stays in business as a country. It is hard to imagine either one of the perspectives they represent ever being excluded from our sense of national identity.

Now let me turn to the possibility of "reclaiming" the American past, alluded to in my subtitle. What is meant by this? First, a recognition that genuine historical consciousness ought to be the common possession of all. Quite simply, a democratic nation needs a democratic history. By this I do not mean the sort of fashionable history that ignores politics and constitutions and intellectual elites and insists upon viewing the past exclusively "from the bottom up." There is in fact a kind of unconscious scorn buried in the assumptions behind such writing—as if political and intellectual history is beyond the common people's means, and as if no one could be expected to be interested in anything that does not involve them directly. Surely, however, such assumptions are false. Instead, we need to encourage serious historical writing that is sufficiently accessible to shape and deepen the public mind.

Here, too, one will need to battle on two fronts, challenging both the ignorance of the public and the malfeasances of the scholarly establishment. The American public has to want to reclaim its history, and it will have to be willing to work at it and overcome the tendencies so well illustrated by the rat joke. But that willingness will come far more easily if something can be done about the combination of political ideology and professionalization that has enveloped historical writing in recent years. The dangers of ideology are fairly obvious; but the dangers of exclusive professionalization are nearly as great. Though the professionalization of historical writing has been a source of many great improvements in our historical knowledge, it has wounded our historical consciousness. The time may have come to rethink the matter.

The recent dust-ups over the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian and the National History Standards are revealing in this respect. In both cases, the American public reacted decisively, and negatively, to what it saw as efforts by anointed experts to hijack the American past and transpose the mystic chords into a minor key. What has been most notable in both episodes has been the surprised and outraged reactions of the historical profession (or more precisely, of its spokesmen). The responses have run the gamut: astonishment, shock, fury, wounded dismay, dripping condescension. And I regret to say that even now I do not think my colleagues quite grasp what has happened to them. It has long been fashionable in academe to talk about who "owns" history and to make very democratic noises whenever the matter is under discussion. But all the while, it seems as if the professional historians have not doubted that *they* own it, or at least deserve to, and if one could take control of the American Historical Association and other professional organizations, one could transform history in a manner nearer to one's heart. They now have discovered that what flies in the hermetic world of academic scholarship will not fly with the great American public. In the Enola Gay episode in particular, the use of a public, and publicly funded, commemorative exhibition to put forward a revisionist interpretation of the American war effort in 1941-45 crossed a line, and the public would not tolerate it. And they were right not to.

Let me hasten to add that I am not saying history ought to be all comforting myth. Nor am I suggesting that historians should never challenge conventional wisdom. On the contrary; we badly need such challenges. But surely this does not mean historians enjoy *carte blanche* protection against being themselves challenged in turn, particularly when they choose to address sensitive public issues. Indeed, the public has a responsibility to offer such counterchallenges, whenever appropriate, to test and ventilate the findings of academicians. That is part of what it means to have a democratic history and democratic discourse. Yet it was precisely the mounting of such challenges that most offended the historical clerisy: The *effrontery* of all those World War II veterans, thinking they knew something important about the war that had escaped the attention of the Smithsonian's baby-boomer curators! The future may well bring many, many more such acts of effrontery as the public's

patience with the follies of higher education wanes—and, may it be hoped, as their interest in reclaiming the past waxes.

It will, however, take more than challenging academic revisionism to accomplish much along these lines. The two fronts I spoke of before symbolize two problems that are, in fact, mutually reinforcing. Revisionism would have little power in a country that was less ignorant of its past. The docu-slanders of Oliver Stone would be laughed out of court. So would the childish fantasies of *Dances with Wolves*. Hence, in engaging the second front, we must resist the temptation to blame others, to play the game of anti-anti-Americanism, and instead face up to our weaknesses.

In this connection, it seems to me that Russell Kirk was right to stress that technological progress and the unhindered market are not the answer to everything. Notwithstanding their many blessings and benefits, one cannot ignore the pathologies and casualties they engender—and the loss of historical consciousness has been one of them. We live in a culture of such ceaseless, turbulent change—economic, social, technological—that for many of us it seems almost ridiculous, and certainly quixotic, to be speaking of chains of continuity linking generations past with generations to come. Indeed, the emerging postmodern understanding of the self counsels that it is fruitless, and even unhealthy, to seek continuity and consistency within one's *self*. Better to be a protean self, hanging loose, refashioning one's identity as changing circumstances dictate. Postmodernism is itself symptomatic, the *reductio ad absurdum* of a pervasive tendency within our society. It may be crackpot realism of the worst sort to think we can go on this way very much longer, particularly if it is true that the social problem at the bottom of all others—the disintegration of the family—is ultimately a problem of discontinuity between the generations.

Our popular culture conspires in a thousand ways to reinforce our sense of discontinuity and generational isolation. Consider, to take but one example, what has happened to professional sports in our time. When I was a boy, professional sports formed a central part of my life. They provided a tremendous source of common experience linking me not only with my own friends, but with my father and mother and members of their generation. I had a typical American boy's fascination with baseball statistics and delighted in my then-extensive knowledge of them. I did not realize it at the time, but those statistics were also a source of historical consciousness. For to enter seriously into the world of baseball statistics is to become aware of a world much larger and longer than your own, to see all major-league baseball players competing in one great continuum of slugging percentages, earned-run averages, and stolen bases. One becomes a kind of historian. I learned to care not only about the active players I followed, like Boog Powell and Brooks Robinson, but about long-gone players my parents had followed, like Dizzy Dean, Stan Musial, Joe DiMaggio; and that was a wonderful bond between us. I will always have a soft spot for the St. Louis Cardinals, even though I grew up following the Baltimore Orioles, because the Cardinals had been my parents' team when they were young.

I do not have any such soft spot, however, for the Indianapolis Colts. Nor do I expect to care much about the Baltimore Browns football team. When I was a boy, I was well aware that professional sports was a business. But I could never have imagined the degree to which it is now little else. We now have not only the free agency of players, but the free agency of franchises; and the rules, materials, schedules, game sites, players—everything about the game—are considered plastic and subject to revision. This is the triumph of utility-maximizing over all else, and I cannot help but think professional sports will ultimately be undone by it. In my own case, there is no magic left, and I am relieved that my own son has no interest in professional sports. Another chain of continuity broken.

Even so, there will always remain the irreducible lure of seeing excellence in performance, a healthy antidote to the cult of victimization and self-pity that has swept our culture. But one cannot feel that lure without first having a consciousness of the larger historical context which so engaged me as a boy, that universe of statistics and records. After Cal Ripken, Jr., broke Lou Gehrig's consecutive-game record this past year, he spoke some very simple but hauntingly appropriate words which captured this fact perfectly. As you may remember, there was some feeling that Ripken ought not break the record, that to do so robbed Gehrig of his distinction. But Ripken knew that the opposite was true: that he best honored Gehrig by competing with him. If Gehrig were looking down on this, Ripken said, he would not be thinking about the record; he would instead reflect that here was "an example of what is good and right about the great American game." It was a simple, wonderful statement—one that, in its own way, sounds the mystic chords of memory, stretching from every batter's box and bleacher seat to every hearth and TV room in this broad land. It recognizes that a determination to achieve and a reverence for the past are by no means opposites. But of course, Ripken would never have used the words he did had there not been so much that is neither good nor right about the great American game in its present condition.

I have delved into the example of baseball, but I could have picked any number of features of our popular culture—our popular music, our extreme geographical mobility, our disintegrating families, our declining churches and voluntary associations, our mania for the bulldozer and the wrecking ball. Indeed, I think there is a growing recognition of these problems across the intellectual spectrum. It is important, however, to formulate the problem rightly. It is not the *commodification* of all things (to use a trendy, overused word) but the *fungibility* of all things, which is to say their *impermanence*, that afflicts us—the fungibility of marriages, lovers, jobs, habitations, even genders. It is not just that all things are for sale, but that in the process all things are being made commensurable and interchangeable, and therefore ultimately homogeneous. An odd goal for a world that professes to prize diversity but is in fact frightened by it.

All of which should give added force in our minds to Kirk's permanent emphasis, in season and out of season, upon "the permanent things." But it should also remind us that the recovery of historical consciousness is not merely an intellectual matter, a matter of rereading the great books and reemphasizing the roots of American order, as Kirk called them. It is also a very concrete matter, a matter of taking stock of the way we live, of what our pastimes and pleasures, our families and our marriages, our habits and our aspirations all say about our sense of connection to the past—and, therefore, about ourselves. Karl Marx insisted that the past did not deserve our reverence; it was nothing but a snare. "The tradition of all the dead generations," he declaimed, "weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living." He was wrong about that, as about so much else. But too many of us live, whether we know it or not, as if we believed he was right. Perhaps it is time for that to change.