

RHETORIC AND RANTING

In his autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), Adams tells us that he was born into one world in the nineteenth century and lived on into another. Born in Quincy, Massachusetts, in 1838, he lived to see the emergent twentieth century—a world in which a secular Dynamo replaced Venus and the Virgin, two manifestations of the transcendent that once animated Western culture (Venus a cultural force in the pagan world; the Virgin in Christendom). Adams saw unity, harmony, and beauty in the older world, but multiplicity, fragmentation, chaos, skepticism, and confusion in the new. The old world was an orderly and beautiful *creation*, for both the poet and the scientist; the new world was merely *matter in motion*, “colliding atoms,” “a chaos of anarchic and purposeless forces.”¹

Adams’s account of the past and the present is reflected in the work of one of the great founders of modern American conservatism, Richard Weaver. Both admire an older, more ordered world, with its distinctions and hierarchy, its religious art and architecture, its moral and spiritual vision. Adams was alarmed by the scientific and technological god of the new age, the Dynamo; Weaver by its offspring, the “gods of mass and speed.”² And both writers, like C. S. Lewis in “De Descriptione Temporum,” emphasize a

“Great Divide” or demarcation between the two worlds.³ They point to the scientific revolution and its physical, intellectual, and cultural fruits as major causes of twentieth-century confusions.

While Weaver sees the beginning of the end of that old world in the rise of nominalism in the fourteenth century, he still can espy in mid-nineteenth-century America an ordered and humane world, at least compared with twentieth-century America’s fragmentation and barbarism. Weaver’s essay “The Spaciousness of Old Rhetoric” sheds light on these two worlds, especially what the old world once possessed that the new world has lost. This essay from Weaver’s *Ethics of Rhetoric* (1953) analyzes the rhetoric of America’s nineteenth-century orators. We have forgotten most of them, as well as the occasions on which they spoke: Andrew Ewing in 1850 on the sale of public lands; Charles Faulkner in 1858 on the virtues of agrarianism at a Virginia agricultural fair; John C. Breckinridge (vice president of the United States) in 1859 on the occasion of the Senate’s move from the Old to the New Chamber; Rufus Choate in 1845 addressing the law school in Cambridge

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on the American Bar Association's essentially conservative function. Weaver also mentions Lincoln's First and Second Inaugurals and the Gettysburg Address—the only nineteenth-century oratory most of us will remember.

Examining these orations, Weaver finds what he calls *spaciousness*. This term designates a “high-flown” quality, a “grand style” full of both “historical and literary” resonances; a “freedom of purview” that allows the orator to speak with conviction on principles and beliefs held in common with his audience; an “aesthetic distance” and decorum that envisions the whole and does not trespass into crude familiarity, minute details, impertinent particulars, and obscene spectacles; a belief in “non-factual kinds of truth”; and a “polite style” that “sounds good” and respects “the powers and limitations of the audience.”⁴

Weaver contrasts each quality of the old oratory with the general practice and expectations of twentieth-century orators and audiences—and his observations regarding oratory in the mid-twentieth century are easily related to American oratory in the twenty-first century. Today audiences do not have enough time, patience, belief, or knowledge to appreciate the older orations. Even more than audiences in the mid-twentieth century, they prefer the “petty and contentious style”; they want “evidence,” not uncontested terms and propositions; they relish the personal, the particular, the spontaneous, the novel, the bottom line—not general truths, historical vistas, classical literary allusions, and pious and ceremonial rhetoric. As for the polite, old orator who respected his audience, they prefer the brash and crude speaker with his “slogans and catchwords” and his hurried and “syncopated style.”⁵

While Weaver does not illustrate the new oratory, he does mention two developments that have influenced it: modern journalism,

with its penchant for impertinence and spectacle (he names *Time* magazine as an offender), and our love affair with technological gadgets that give us instant photographic realism at the touch of a button.⁶ Here one thinks of Weaver's searing analysis of modern journalism, motion pictures, and radio in “The Great Stereopticon,” the fifth chapter of his seminal work *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948).⁷ Today's media only confirm what Weaver said of the media in the 1950s. Our media, and the consumerist industries that take advantage of them, have conditioned us to the sound bite, the photo op, the bumper sticker slogan, and the ranting political grotesqueries and rhetorical “food fights” of talk radio.

The electronic media invented and mass-marketed since Weaver's death in 1963 give us instant access to many and varied sources and types of information. As a result, we now find ourselves, in T. S. Eliot's phrase, “distracted from distraction by distraction.”⁸ The new devices do not encourage or foster long or steady views of a subject, such as we see in nineteenth-century oratory. Instead, the devices encourage or enable vices: a pornographic website is always only three clicks away. And one does not have to look for it for it to find you. The world, the flesh, and the devil have been around ever since the Fall; the Internet brings that unholy trinity much closer.

SHARED BELIEFS

According to Weaver, one of the beneficial aspects of the “spaciousness” of the older rhetoric, for orator and audience alike, is a happy “homogeneity of belief,” shared presumptions and attachments.⁹ Sharing beliefs and assumptions with his audience, the old orator did not have to prove or define every term or premise in his oration. Ironically,

what Weaver sees as an advantage, many today would regard as a crippling and false limitation. But to give Weaver's point a contemporary application, think of the difficulties we encounter today when we assume there are two genders, and only two, or that marriage and the family have some definite and normative meaning. If the speaker has to "battle for [his] position" at every turn, he will get nowhere.¹⁰

Actually, there is homogeneity of belief in certain progressive quarters regarding a series

But of what did this "homogeneity of belief" in nineteenth-century America consist? Weaver mentions three things: the Constitution, Christianity, and a belief that history teaches definitive lessons about political goods and possibilities. "Freedom and morality were constants; the Constitution was the codification of all that was politically feasible; Christianity of all that was morally authorized. Rome stood as an exemplum of what may happen to nations; the American and French Revolutions had taught rulers



Ranting political grotesqueries

of politically correct terms: *change, choice, tolerance, inclusiveness, and multiculturalism*, to name only five. If Weaver were with us today, he would probably add my short list to his list of modern "god terms": *progress, fact, science, modern, efficient, American*.¹¹ But Weaver's point and my own are still germane: traditionalists and progressives, conservatives and liberals, do not agree on a host of definitions, principles, and axioms; this makes fruitful discussion and debate difficult, if not impossible.

their necessary limitations."¹² There is a paradox here. Weaver mentions common convictions that radically limit moral and political choices. Yet Christian morality, the Constitution, history as political exemplum—the very forms that limit us also protect us from our lower nature, and free us to pursue the good in both personal and corporate ways.

Weaver elaborates on the spaciousness of the old rhetoric, pointing out that it is spacious in two basic ways: temporal and cosmological. The temporal spaciousness is

possible because orator and audience know and are comfortable with historical and literary resonances that reach back in time, all the way back to ancient Rome, even to Genesis. Weaver notes that this “‘continuity of the past with the present’ gave a dimension which our world seems largely to have lost.”¹³ Lost is that historical and literary memory that linked the generations and gave them shared knowledge, values, rituals, and traditions.

But the old rhetoric was also spacious in a cosmological sense. The old orators believed their world was connected to heaven or the transcendent. Discussing the personification and descent of Liberty from heaven in one of the old orations, Weaver refers to the “poeticized figment” that connected two worlds:

This is how the gods of classical mythology came down to hold discourse with mortals; it is how the god of the Christian religion came into the world for the redemption of mankind; it is how the *logos* is made incarnate. In other words, this kind of manifestation from above is, in our Western tradition, an archetypal process, which the orators of that tradition are likely to follow implicitly.¹⁴

Today one still sometimes finds orators and audiences comfortable with this archetypal connecting of two worlds. They tend to be Christian orators addressing Christian audiences, and they also tend to be ignored, marginalized, or scorned by hostile liberal elites.

VOICES OF THE POETS

What Weaver demonstrates with argument and illustration in this temperate essay and in the more critical and passionate *Ideas Have Consequences* and *Visions of Order* (1964),

our poets reveal with disturbing, terrifying images and symbols. Let me present a brief series of quotations from poems written between 1915 and 1942, with a few of my own comments appended. All the poems emphasize modern man’s alienation from both the past and a transcendent source of physical, moral, and spiritual order.

Wallace Stevens’s “Sunday Morning” (1915) presents an argument in verse rejecting Christianity and its consolations and calling for a new form of paganism: not the paganism of old that recognized, worshiped, petitioned, and sacrificed to various gods, but rather an utterly naturalistic, an utterly human paganism. The protagonist of the poem, longing for “imperishable bliss,” is given an ironic “revelation” at the end of the poem:

She hears, upon that water without
sound,
A voice that cries, “The tomb in Pal-
estine
Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay.”
(lines 106–109)

Somewhat dogmatically stated, the revelation is that Christ’s resurrection, the seal of God’s love for mankind and of our victory over sin and death, didn’t happen. The speaker of the poem tells us the way it is:

We live in an old chaos of the sun,
Or old dependency of day and night,
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
Of that wide water, inescapable.
(110–113)

In this utterly naturalistic world, there are no Platonic forms to seek or imitate, no First Cause, no Prime Mover, no teleology, no Creator, no providential design. And man’s fate? Like the pigeons in the closing

lines of the poem, we are destined to “sink / Downward to darkness” (120).¹⁵

Writing after the First World War and in the midst of the Bolshevik Revolution, William Butler Yeats wrote his prophetic “The Second Coming” (1919). The opening lines announce in images the demise of the old order of Christendom and set the stage for a new revelation:

Turning and turning in the widening
gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.
(lines 1–4)

The Christian order is disintegrating, and while it crumbles before our eyes, Yeats predicts in the closing lines an ominous and terrifying future: “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?” (21–22).¹⁶

A year later Ezra Pound, in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” (1920), gives us a brief history lesson in one quatrain. Modern Western man has abandoned both his pagan and his Christian heritage: “Faun’s flesh is not to us, / Nor the saint’s vision” (lines 49–50). And with telling metaphors, in the next two lines he chronicles our loss of contact with transcendent reality and sacramental rituals. The older covenantal signs and rituals linking man to God have been replaced by mundane information, entertainment, and politics: “We have the press for wafer; / Franchise for circumcision” (51–52). After the history lesson, Pound tells us what is left of Western civilization following the Great War:

There died a myriad,
And of the best, among them,
For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
For a botched civilization,
. . . .

For two gross of broken statues
For a few thousand battered books.
(88–91, 93–94)¹⁷

Western civilization lives, but mostly in museums and libraries, not in the hearts, minds, homes, and cities of America or Europe.

One year after Pound wrote “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,” T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* was published (1921). In the last section of the poem, Eliot, too, gives us a brief history lesson, showing modern man’s rapid loss of Western heritage and culture. With only four unpunctuated lines and only eight words, he writes:

Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal (lines 374–377)¹⁸

Our spiritual, moral, cultural, and legal inheritance from these great cities is “unreal,” or severely fragmented, so in our wasted land, if we are lucky, we can gather together only a few of the fragments to shore up the ruins.

Finally, to quote Wallace Stevens once again, he tells us in “Of Modern Poetry” (1942) that the old poets had their “scene” and “script” but that the modern poet is a “metaphysician in the dark,” creating out of his mind, and his mind alone, whatever order he perceives (lines 3, 4, 20).¹⁹ Having lost his heritage, the long story of orienting myth, creed, law, and axiom, every human being must make up his own order or uncritically follow the modernist wizards of Hollywood who produce the scenes, scripts, and celebrities of “The Great Stereopticon.”

These early-twentieth-century poets are telling us the same thing Weaver, Adams, and Lewis claim: we live in a world different from that of our ancestors, for we have lost contact with both tradition and the

transcendent, factors that made that older world larger, more *spacious* than our own. The Constitution, Christianity, and a long historical memory that served to exemplify the possible, the desirable, and the dangerous—these three things oriented nineteenth-century American public discourse. While these things are now occasionally studied in schools and colleges, most orators and audiences are ignorant of them, or think of them merely as window dressing.

THE MIND OF MINDS

The Constitution for Weaver's nineteenth-century orator (here Weaver quotes Vice President John C. Breckinridge) was "received from our forefathers": it was "vigorous and inviolate."²⁰ Modern presidents, legislators, and Supreme Court justices do not view that document the same way the Founders and nineteenth-century orators did. In *Planned Parenthood of Southwestern Pennsylvania v. Casey* (1992), a majority of the U.S. Supreme Court justices maintained that "at the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life." This sounds like all sail and no anchor. In the founding generation, and in the nineteenth century, the God-given inalienable rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" mentioned in the Declaration were circumscribed, anchored by historical memory, by prescriptive rights and duties, by revelation and common law. The latitude of the Supreme Court's definition of liberty is stupefying and frightening. To borrow from Wallace Stevens, this is metaphysics and politics in the isolated darkness of the individual's mind.

Now it is true that the Constitution has been amended, that earlier notions of liberty and equality have been expanded to include

minorities and women. These changes are compatible with Christianity and natural law. But if I may use a Weaver term in a different way, allowing every man to define reality any way he pleases, to be his own "metaphysician in the darkness" of his isolated mind—this is a bit *too* spacious. It suggests a theme from Dostoyevsky: if God does not exist, everything is permitted. Something more than human whim or the self-centered pursuit of happiness must guide us in establishing social and cultural norms, in setting limits to law and public policy.

At the conclusion of "The Spaciousness of Old Rhetoric," Weaver hints at what this something is in summarizing his essay and emphasizing its key point. The older orator's speech was informed by his epistemology: he believed "that true knowledge somehow had its source in the mind of minds, for which we are on occasion permitted to speak a part." The "age or the man who has a true conception of [knowledge] will have . . . the key to every other question."²¹

Weaver does not tell us much about this mind of minds in "The Spaciousness of Old Rhetoric." In other essays and books he does, and that mind tends to be Platonic. Weaver's Platonism is certainly evident in *Ideas Have Consequences*. Richard L. Johannesen, Renard Strickland, Ralph T. Eubanks, Marion Montgomery, Russell Kirk, and other scholars have emphasized the centrality of Platonism in Weaver's work.²² Ted Smith points out, however, that Weaver intended *Visions of Order* "to mark a retreat from the pure Platonism of *The Ethics of Rhetoric* to a more organic view of language and culture and a more explicitly Christian conception of reality."²³ Even if this is so—and I believe it is—Weaver is hesitant to speak straightforwardly about the Christian Logos, the mind of minds. He is clear in his rejection of pseudoscientific images of man. He is clear in his call for a "conversion" (or reversion)

to earlier religious and poetic visions of man. His anthropology is orthodox: He sees man as made in the image of God, but fallen, infected with original sin. But his Christology is vague, uncertain. God's gracious response to man's fall—"But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8)—this is not emphasized. It could be that for rhetorical reasons he advanced many of his arguments in *The Ethics of Rhetoric and Visions of Order* in secular terms, as he said he had done in *Ideas Have Consequences*.²⁴

Russell Kirk's succinct and clarifying comments on paganism, Platonism, and Christianity in *The Roots of American Order* explain why the pagan cults and pagan philosophy fell before the religion that captured and shaped the West:

The pagan mystery cults could not appeal for authority to a god made man who had risen from the dead; nor could those classical philosophers who had glimpsed the possibility of immortality. . . . What Platonism could not provide, Christian belief did: an incarnate model of the way that man should live, and a mode of participating in the life eternal. As Jesus had been resurrected, so would all those faithful to Him, raised in spirit at the Last Judgment; they would attain the crown of life, with new spiritual bodies. . . . What among the philosophers had been only a dim surmise and longing, became in Christianity a confident dogma.²⁵

What was abstract and ineffable in Platonism is tangible and historical in Christianity: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Anchored in history, the Christian mind of minds has a rhetorical purchase not available to the more dialectical Platonism.

What happens when we forget the Word who is within the word? The distraction of the new; the devolution from wisdom to bits of information. So Eliot prophesies in his Choruses for *The Rock* (1934):

The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experimen-
tation,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not
of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of
silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of
the Word.
All our knowledge brings us nearer to
our ignorance,
And our ignorance brings us nearer to
death,
But nearness to death no nearer to
God.
Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in
knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in
information?²⁶

Eliot's lyrics here sound like a commentary on the digital revolution. All the bits of information on the Internet are meaningless until they are integrated. The parts need to be seen in relation to the whole. Education, environmental concerns, economics, law, politics, and public policy—all these need to be connected to something. Eliot would connect them to the mind of minds revealed in the Logos, the Word made flesh and dwelling among us.

In "The New Provincialism," Allen Tate remarks that "technology without Christianity is . . . barbarism quite simply." Concluding his essay, Tate emphasizes the difference between two worlds in a passage that could have come from Weaver's pen. Sociologists and traditionalists may look at the

same history and literature (in Tate's essay the context is the history and literature of the Old and New South),

but with this difference—and it is a difference between two worlds: the provincial world of the present, which sees in material welfare and legal justice the whole solution to the human problem; and the classical-Christian world, based upon the regional consciousness, which held that honor, truth, imagination, human dignity, and limited acquisitiveness, could alone justify a social order however rich and efficient it may be.²⁷

That older world, with classical contributions winnowed over time by Christian doctrine and sentiment, sees itself in a much more spacious light, with illumination coming from the long past as well as from heaven. By contrast, the new world of the modernist sociologist is provincial, beginning “every day as if there had been no yesterday.”²⁸

What happens to human dignity when medicine and science are not restrained by the source of human dignity? We see the results: abortion enshrined as a fundamental “right” and widespread embryonic experimentation, lethal to nascent human beings. What happens when sentiments are separated from the true source of sentiment? Flannery O'Connor tells us: “In the absence of faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chambers.”²⁹ The godless regime will have its human sacrifices, and there have been millions upon millions of them in the bloody twentieth century. As René Girard has taught us, it is in Christianity that the drive for human sacrifice—

endemic in all the paganisms, and reborn in modern ideologies—is extinguished. For it is in Christianity that God sacrifices Himself for men, instead of men sacrificing each other for their gods.

Turning to Eliot one last time, let us note what he says about the source of law and truth and the practical political consequences of ignoring it:

As political philosophy derives its sanction from ethics, and ethics from the truth of religion, it is only by returning to the eternal sources of truth that we can hope for any social organization which will not, to its ultimate destruction, ignore some essential aspect of reality. . . . If you will not have God (and He is a jealous God) you should pay your respects to Hitler and Stalin.³¹

The men of America's founding generation put it in this axiomatic way: there is no liberty without law, no law without morality, and no morality without religion.

Human aspirations and actions in our day need to be seen in the light of tradition, but more so in the spacious light of a transcendent Good. We don't necessarily need the “high-flown” quality and the “grand style” in our rhetoric, but we do need the old rhetoric's *spaciousness*, a spaciousness permitting us to move back in time through history and tradition and to join our world to its Creator, Lawgiver, Redeemer, and Judge. Although most of our culture today has embraced a limited, flat, and barren world, this spaciousness is still available to us. Henry Adams and Richard Weaver point us back to the older spaciousness, but even more so do Tate, O'Connor, and Eliot. We should let the spaciousness of the mind of minds inform our mind, heart, speech, law, and public policy today.

- 1 Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton, 1918). See the chapter titled "The Dynamo and the Virgin" and pp. 289 and 431.
- 2 Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), vi.
- 3 C. S. Lewis, "De Descriptione Temporum," in *Selected Literary Essays by C. S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 1–14.
- 4 Richard Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), 165, 169, 173, 175–77, 182, 184.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 166, 172, 184.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 179.
- 7 One also thinks of earlier denunciations of a sensational press in Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1802) and Thoreau's *Walden* (1850). At the dawn of the nineteenth century and beyond, we find complaints against the popularization of vulgarity, inane violence, and reckless passion by means of mass-produced printed sources. A walk past news and magazine racks in grocery and bookstores shows just how much more sensational, offensive, and even pornographic the media is today. *Time* magazine in the 1950s is a model of decorum by comparison.
- 8 T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," *Four Quartets*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, 1971), 120.
- 9 Weaver, *Ethics*, 167.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 173.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 212–18.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 169–70.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 178. Lately I have heard a great deal of political and public policy discourse that does show some continuity of the past with the present. In discussions and reports on the deficit, the recession, taxation, and job creation, speakers and writers range back in time, but only to the Great Depression and, seemingly, our first president: Franklin Delano Roosevelt. For the traditional conservative, there is too much continuity here with the recent past and not enough with the founding era.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 181.
- 15 Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning," in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 5th ed., vol. 2, ed. Nina Baym (New York: Norton, 1979), 1168–71.
- 16 William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th ed., vol. 2, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: Norton, 2000), 2106–7.
- 17 Ezra Pound, "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," in *Norton Anthology*, 5th ed., vol. 2, 1239–46.
- 18 Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 48.
- 19 Stevens, "Of Modern Poetry," 1179.
- 20 Weaver, *Ethics*, 177.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 185.
- 22 See Richard L. Johannesen, Rennard Strickland, and Ralph Eubanks, "Richard M. Weaver on the Nature of Rhetoric: An Interpretation," in *Language Is Sermonic: Richard M. Weaver on the Nature of Rhetoric* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 7–30; Marion Montgomery, "Consequences in the Provinces," in Ted J. Smith III, ed., *Steps Toward Restoration: The Consequences of Richard Weaver's Ideas* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1998), 159–255; and Russell Kirk's foreword to Richard Weaver, *Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Time* (Bryn Mawr, PA: ISI Books, 1995), vii–ix.
- 23 Ted J. Smith III, preface, *Visions of Order*, xiv.
- 24 Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 185.
- 25 Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1991), 154–55.
- 26 Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 96.
- 27 Allen Tate, "The New Provincialism," in *Essays of Four Decades* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 539, 544–45.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 542.
- 29 Flannery O'Connor, "A Memoir of Mary Ann," in *Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Library of America, 1988), 830–31.
- 30 René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).
- 31 T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1976), 50.