

Cultured Conservatism

Why aesthetics is at least as important as politics

In the literary journal Image: Art, Faith, Mystery, Gregory Wolfe presents the essays, poems, criticism, paintings, and photographs of a wide variety of religiously informed writers and artists—too wide a variety, for many conservatives. Annie Dillard, Denis Donoghue, Ron Hansen, Mark Helprin, Kathleen Norris, Richard Rodriguez, and Larry Woiwode all sit on the journal's editorial advisory board. Many of his critics, Wolfe admits, would prefer that Image be a "highbrow outpost of the culture wars." But he has determinedly charted an independent course.

Before he started Image with his wife, Suzanne, Wolfe was a child of the conservative movement. He attended Hillsdale College, where he studied under Russell Kirk, and later served as one of Kirk's assistants at Piety Hill. He then migrated to the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, where he edited the Intercollegiate Review. He left ISI in 1989 to found Image. But he never turned against the brand of conservatism he imbibed from Kirk; rather, he acted on what he took to be its most important cultural insights.

Jeremy Beer: *Image* celebrated its 20th anniversary last year. Has its course surprised you?

Gregory Wolfe: The major surprise is that we're still around. When we started, I imagined we might only last a few issues—enough to make footnote 279

on page 400 of some scholar's cultural history of the late 20th century. ("This short-lived literary journal attempted to show that art and faith could still interact powerfully à la Dante and Milton.") At the time of starting *Image*, I wasn't entirely sure this was still happening. My own education was profoundly influenced by 20th-century writers who grappled with faith, particularly T.S. Eliot and Flannery O'Connor, and I posited that people like that should be continuing to produce material, even in the postmodern era, but I wasn't sure. As it happens, we're sending issue 65 to the printer this week.

Beer: To what extent do you think *Image* helped create those kinds of writers, if nothing else by providing space?

Wolfe: Part of what we do is to make certain things believable. I came across a throwaway line from a book review by one of the great critics of the 1930s that said, "This book is worthy. It adds to the stock of available reality." The minute that phrase entered my brain, I knew what it was all about. How much reality is available to a culture at any given time? What are the blinders? What is considered possible and not possible? One of the missions of *Image* is to enlarge the stock of available reality in a way that enables people to say, "Oh! I can do that?" Some people have been willing to come out, to borrow some language, thanks to what *Image* has done. These things build on each other, and one

organization becomes part of a larger movement.

Beer: I like that phrase, "enlarge the stock of available reality." It's related to another phrase—"openness to mystery"—that you've used to describe what you're trying to create. You've talked about how reason, imagination, and faith have to be integrated for us to achieve that kind of openness. What are the main factors that you see in American life today that keep that from occurring?

Wolfe: My education in this area was profoundly influenced by my mentor at Hillsdale College, Russell Kirk. He argued that two forces were diametrically opposed: ideology and imagination. The ideologue is somebody who has a closed system of abstract certainties about the world that results in pride and a loss of connection to reality. So the ideologue has to impose his vision on the world more by violence than by persuasion.

Imagination is an awareness of reality outside of ourselves and our limited natures, the difficulty of being able to comprehend not only the mysteries of the universe, but even the full ramifications of political and social action. Imagination cultivates a sense of our contingent nature as human beings and seeks humility before that mystery—that is what I understood Kirk to be saying was the conservative virtue. Humility before the world's complexity meant that the conservative was someone who

refrained from large abstract social plans and an arrogant approach to the world.

That's precisely what literature and the arts teach: the world is an ambiguous place, and art and literature are needed to cultivate the imagination's awareness of how tricky it is to get things right. Most conservatives have forgotten this: they have chosen ideology over imagination and power over persuasion. That's why they mostly just talk to themselves.

Beer: You told me once that you thought of yourself as prosecuting a strategy of "deep conservatism" with *Image*. Do you worry about attracting people with genuinely conservative instincts in the Kirkian sense?

Wolfe: I do. Kirk was a paradox. He was very old-fashioned, yet if you look at the people he befriended in the literary world of the 20th century, many were avant-garde, high modernist writers and artists—not only T.S. Eliot, but people like Wyndham Lewis and Roy Campbell. He used to joke that he couldn't read modern literature, but he wrote a great book on Eliot and had an instinct for how changing artistic styles and forms were needed to keep alive unchanging principles, whether of religious faith or fundamental philosophical, political insights into the nature of man. He joked about not reading anything after Sir Walter Scott, but these were the people he befriended and wrote about, so I decided to do that in my own way.

One of the things I run into in the conservative movement today is the notion that there is only one aesthetic style appropriate to a conservative vision—neoclassicism. I find that to be simplistic, this notion that all poems must be sonnets and all buildings must

have Greek columns. Conservatives have a much more calcified attitude toward the arts than they should. They should be more Burkean in their understanding of how culture changes. They should remember that culture, in order to preserve the mystery of perennial truths, needs to seek new forms. This goes back to the issue of contingency and humility: no single style can encompass all of reality. Eliot wrote "The Waste Land" as a series of fragments that reflected modern fragmentation, and some conservatives have damned him for that. Yet if you read the poem carefully, you will see how those fragments point to a wholeness that can heal the divisions of modernity. Eliot, the non-classicist, imaginatively inhabits modernity but subtly undermines it, demonstrating a truly conservative vision.

Beer: It's not just that there is a calcification among conservatives in terms of preferred forms, there is also a kind of "movementization" of conservatism, whereby only things that have received stamps of approval from official figures are fit subjects for discussion. It's not that conservative intellectuals stopped reading anything after Sir Walter Scott, but when it comes to fiction, they certainly have stopped reading anything after Walker Percy.

Wolfe: Yes, which you might say leads to a shrinking of the stock of available reality. "Movementization" is certainly one of the things that drove me away from conservatism in terms of my day-to-day life. I was born into it: my father was working at the Foundation for Economic Education in 1953, when William F. Buckley, fresh out of Yale, stopped by and said, "I want to start a journal called *National Review*." So you can imagine the world I inherited: I went to Hillsdale

College, worked for the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, went to Philadelphia Society meetings, and was enriched by that world but was also, in the end, put off by the cliquishness and incestuousness of it.

Ideology ultimately becomes self-referential. It becomes less about engaging the culture and more about beating the tribal drums, which can be an effective way to raise money and consolidate power but remarkably ineffective in changing the world around you. From Kirk, I got the feeling that you should go out and find out who people are—he who is not against us is for us. That's where imagination comes in. We should be constantly scanning the world for people whose vision is congenial, if not in lockstep. In movement conservatism there's a constant undercurrent of deciding who's in the fold and who isn't, but my argument is, "Dammit, the fold should be bigger."

Beer: Was the "capture the politics" strategy that influential conservatives like Buckley put into place the fatal error? Would they have been better off abjuring politics, at least at the national level, for a cultural strategy that focused on encouraging and educating artists, writers, editors, novelists, publishing executives, musicians, and the like? Could such a strategy have achieved a significantly different kind of success?

Wolfe: It's a question of balance and priorities. I would never advocate that people should be apolitical. But conservatism taught me that, in the long run, culture shapes politics far more powerfully than politics shapes culture. I found that the very nature of politicization was inimical to the task of building and sustaining order. It thrived on a narrative of decline and its strategy was destructive rather than constructive.

I am not about to say that things haven't gotten bad in Western civilization over the last 100 years, but on the other hand, one of the things a deep conservatism knows is that things are always going to hell in a handbasket. It knows how to balance tearing down with building up. I once wrote a piece called "Why I Am a Conscientious Objector in the Culture Wars." The argument I made was that if both sides were so busy spraying toxic chemicals on each other's crops, by the time they were through, nothing would be able to grow.

What moves people's hearts? The great stories and images that enable them to discover who they are. The political process involves debate about how we understand ourselves, but the meaning of the terms used in that debate is generated through art and culture. If you reduce everything to technocratic and political/economic terms, you also lose the capacity to move anyone. That's why I was drawn toward the effort to renew the twin wellsprings of culture, art and faith.

Beer: I think it is easy to misunderstand this argument about the limitations of declinism as a point of view. It seems to me the way to characterize your view is not that certain goods can't be lost or attenuated, but that declinism without hope, without a recognition that things are always getting partly better too, can be deeply destructive. In fact, it sounds like this almost drove you to despair as a young conservative.

Wolfe: I'm a pretty sturdy guy, but there came a point where I had the equivalent of a nervous breakdown—or perhaps a "vocation breakdown." There was a moment when I realized that as much as I liked witty satire and withering cri-

tiques, I couldn't sustain a life on that. I had to create, and I had to live in a certain kind of hope.

It's not about withdrawing into an ivory tower or a palace of art and saying, "I don't care about the battle of ideas or concrete political action in the world." But it does come down to asking when political movements become enclosed ideological enclaves without a living, breathing interactivity with the larger world.

Beer: In a recent editorial in *Image*, you made a distinction between "activist making" and "contemplative knowing" as a dominant way of being in or finding meaning in the world. It seems that for all their complaints about politicization, conservatives and Christians seem to share the modern preference for activist making.

Wolfe: In astrophysics, there is a notion that somewhere there is a huge force of gravity called "The Great Attractor," and a bunch of galaxies are all caught in that force. I think human lives are drawn to gravity wells of vision, and they really do change the way people act and think in the world. For example, without St. Francis or Dante, it would be impossible to understand the medieval world and its vision—its marvelous balance between heaven and earth, the eternal and the mundane. Why should our time be any different?

Beer: There needs to be an attractor force, and that doesn't come about through politics and activist making. Is this prejudice in favor of making rather than knowing reinforced by the new digital and online technological forms we have? I'm thinking of the common Internet acronym "TLDR" (Too Long, Didn't Read). Doesn't that suggest that a deep

antipathy to contemplation is inscribed in the heart of these kinds of communication technologies, or am I committing the conservative sin of being overly skeptical?

Wolfe: No, I think that's a real concern. As someone who edits a literary quarterly in the age of Twitter, imagine my angst about what I do for a living. I'm very sympathetic to arguments made by critics like Neil Postman in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and, in a more contemporary context, Sven Birkerts's *The Gutenberg Elegies*, which defends the contemplative interiority that literary reading develops—and what it can do for the individual and for society as a whole.

It's important that one not become a Luddite and turn one's back on technology but find ways to hedge it around with cautionary fences. For *Image*, that means the blog on our website is a kind of un-blog—not 200-word blurts of bloviation but 800-word meditations. We're trying to run with the reality of the technology but provide some contextualizing to counter its worst dangers.

Beer: You wrote in your recent editorial dealing with the Booker Prize-winning novel *Wolf Hall*: "In a very real sense we are all Henry VIII today, autonomous individuals who fear the claim of tradition and transcendence as inherently oppressive." Doesn't that point precisely to how modernity operates in a unique way to close us off from mystery and the real?

Wolfe: Yes, absolutely. The competing definitions of what liberty or freedom might mean have gone in one very powerful direction—toward the autonomous individual. There are a lot of things that tend to back that up, including an economic system that is essentially geared

toward making individual desire the sum and substance of reality. We talk about liberty yet don't realize just how ambiguous the concept is. We have conservatives and liberals both touting an individualistic understanding of liberty that denudes human beings of the kind of obligations and connections outside of themselves that in my opinion help to generate real freedom.

Beer: You're involved in Communion and Liberation, the Catholic lay movement that grew out of Father Luigi Giussani's work in Italy in the '50s and '60s. What can non-CL folks, Catholic or otherwise, learn from that movement about how to fruitfully engage their communities and neighbors?

Wolfe: The first thing that struck me about CL is that the people I met were decisively over the dilemma I had found myself in for so long. They seemed to not be burdened by the need to critique everything, they didn't seem to be dominated by the narrative of decline. They seemed to have a kind of life and energy and hope that I found refreshing. So much of the conservative world, whether the world of politics or religion, is essentially a culture of critique.

Here I felt like I had stumbled into an Alpine ski party at 3 a.m. when the grappa had gone around the room a few too many times. The vitality and inner freedom in these people was amazing to me. I was intrigued because I also sensed a great devotion to tradition, and I didn't know how those things worked together.

It came down to learning Father Giussani's fundamental insights. The simplest way to put it is that faith is fundamentally about presence. It's about an encounter with the divine. In a way, this connected to my conservative background and vision of the world: the

encounter with reality generates meaning and order. Great literature and art and true worship are about how to keep that encounter alive so that it continues to generate order within us.

The cultivation of human companionship—of people who share this experience, as opposed to their ideological subscribing to a set of bullet points—becomes a truer form of fidelity to the tradition that has bound people together over the centuries than the other expressions that have reduced it to abstraction and "orthodoxy." For me, CL provided a nexus for all these different things to come together: the positive versus declinist mentality, the concreteness that art asks of us as opposed to the abstraction of ideas.

Beer: Perhaps we could end by saying that despite all his work on behalf of the imagination and his reading and essays about even avant-garde artists, maybe the worst decision Russell Kirk ever made was to put the canons of conservatism into bullet points.

Wolfe: He was a great communicator, and it's important to care about communicating to people, but I think that was a temptation he probably should have resisted. ■

Jeremy Beer is former editor in chief of ISI Books, which is publishing Gregory Wolfe's forthcoming collection of essays, Beauty Will Save the World.

Rapping with the Chairman

The American Conservative's *Chase Madar caught up with the embattled Republican National Committee chairman as he flew to Pebble Beach to promote his new book, fulfill speaking engagements, and raise money.*

Michael Steele: I think it should absolutely be up to the individual. Or, barring that, up to the states. But only for pregnant women, definitely. And it should be banned entirely, because this goes beyond personal choice. That's my position—always has been, always will be. That answer your question? How do you like me now?

I haven't asked anything yet.

The Pack Rats! I've always thoroughly enjoyed them. Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr. And Dean Martin! Truth is, I'm just like everyone else, living paycheck to paycheck, chartered jet to chartered jet, listening to the Pack Rats. Got that?

OK, so you like the Rat Pack. What else is in your iPod?

My iPod is a big tent, a real cross-section. Grandmaster Flash, love him. But I'm old school. Dean Martin. Oh yeah, and Richard Wagner? With the *Götterdämmerung*? Tell me, did Siegfried just sit there and let Wotan push him around? Hell no, he smashed Wotan's spear up good! And that's pretty much