

The Tale of Five Cities: Tension and Order

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Butcher's Crossing, John Williams' novel set on the Kansas prairies of the 1870s, follows Will Andrews as he leaves Harvard, along with the comfortable appointments of his father's Boston Unitarianism, as "too crowded with carriages and walking men."¹ He more than leaves Boston, he takes *flight*, freeing himself from the cribbing of society to re-enter nature. Of this need he reflects:

Sometimes after listening to the droning voices in the chapel and in the classrooms, he had fled the confines of Cambridge to the fields and woods. . . . There in some small solitude . . . the meanness and the constriction . . . were dissipated in the wildness about him. . . . [H]e was a part and parcel of God, free and unconstrained. Through the trees and

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¹ John Williams, *Butcher's Crossing*, 21. I discuss the novel in a similar way in my *Acedia and Its Discontents: Metaphysical Boredom in an Empire of Desire* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2015), 124–27.

across the rolling landscape . . . he had beheld somewhat as beautiful as his own undiscovered nature (45–46).

A powerful sentiment. You've experienced it, I suspect; I have. That longing for unity, a sense that all our strategies and labors are vanity, that there is something more *real*, more genuine out there beyond the settling we see all around. Surely we are meant for more, or at least more than the middling lives we see in our peers and fear for ourselves. Civilization corsets nature, and many of us, like Will, are unfamiliar with our own undiscovered natures. With Ralph Waldo Emerson we might wish for "the knapsack of custom" to fall off our backs, in order to find a "sanctity which shames our religions, and reality which discredits our heroes."²

Will arrives stained and tired in Butcher's Crossing, Kansas, aiming to join a buffalo hunting outfit. He wants *wildness*: "a freedom and a goodness, a hope and a vigor that he perceived to underlie all the familiar things of his life" (21). But McDonald, the local agent, won't take him on, and the buffalo are nearly hunted out, so Will hires Miller, a famed hunter who swears, despite all common wisdom, to know of a massive herd secreted in a hidden valley in Colorado. Even with winter approaching, Will agrees, and they set out, confident they'll return before the snows, rich with hides and wild vitality.

As he hoped, "he was leaving the city more and more, withdrawing into the wilderness" (48–49). Gazing out to the west, "the little town that held him seemed to contract as the dark expanded . . . when his eye lost a point of reference" (42). No more civilization, no more society with its strictures, expectations, and customs, no more order, but wildness, a purer, more beautiful nature.



There's another way to look at wildness, of course. In the opening pages of *The Roots of American Order*, Russell Kirk also provides the image of a man looking into the night "without a guide, thinking continually of the direction he wishes to go."³ Will Andrews looks into the night longing for wildness, but Kirk hopes for *order*, "the pattern by

² Williams, Epigraph to *Butcher's Crossing*, 5.

³ Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, 3.

which we live with purpose and meaning. Above even food and shelter . . . we must have order. The human condition is insufferable unless we perceive a harmony, an order, in existence" (Ibid.). Ultimately we need a spiritual order, but we also need a social order, and disorder in either is a wound, an abscess at the core of our being.

Kirk "examines the roots of order" nourishing the United States, those foundations which abide however neglected or taken for granted. Such roots are venerable in their antiquity, humming in their vitality, but oddly delicate, fragile, prone to wither unless tended. Kirk examines "two sorts of roots . . . the roots of the moral order . . . and the roots of the civil social order;" that is, of the soul and the republic, and each seem to depend on the other (Ibid., 5).

In spelling out the two threads, Kirk finds a "legacy of order received from the Hebrews; from the classical culture of the Greeks and the Romans; from the medieval world and . . . Reformation" from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and "from America's colonial experience" (Ibid., 5-6). This legacy of order takes us to five great cities without which we could not be what we are, or even perhaps be at all: Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, London, and Philadelphia.

Western civilization exists in and as the tension between the trajectories of these cities; and it is a tension, for the cities push us along different paths, even if those paths converge from time to time. Perhaps this tension explains why we've been such a dynamic and adventurous people, with scholars, statesmen, saints, explorers, and shopkeepers each clamoring that their way of life is best. We have somehow, so far, been able to say "yes" to them all, harnessing their unique energies into the genius of our civilization and its decency, opportunity, and freedom. A remarkable accomplishment, unlikely to be repeated, sustained only with great care. Five cities, then, five remarkable cities with which to spend a little time in study.



Like Will Andrews, Abraham's story begins with a departure from his father, his home, and his religion. As noted by Leon Kass, Terah, Abraham's own father, is unusual.⁴ He "was a radical, a man who left

⁴ Leon R. Kass, "Educating Father Abraham: The Meaning of Fatherhood."

behind the land and presumably also the ways of his fathers in search of something new. A severed link in his own cultural chain," who "set the example for Abraham's own radicalism. Cultural *dis*-continuity was part of the cultural teaching on which Abraham was raised" (Ibid.) Terah leaves Ur for Canaan, but fails to reach it or pass it on to his children: "one of his three sons (Haran) dies in his young manhood, a second (Nahor) refuses to follow his father on his journey . . . , and the third, Abram, leaves [Terah] behind in Haran where he lives alone for sixty years and dies without heirs to bury him" (Ibid.).

This is a story of fragmentation, rootlessness, and disorder. Terah has a kind of wildness, and such wildness cannot pass on the patrimony of culture. Consequently, Abraham is a "homeless, rootless, godless, childless son of a radical," yet is the father of three great religions and the source, in time, of Jerusalem (Ibid.). How did this come about?

By the end of the first eleven chapters of the Hebrew Scripture it's grimly obvious that humanity "left to its own devices, is doomed to failure, destruction, and misery."⁵ Murder, death, depravity, sexual crimes, genocidal impulses—every brutality of humans. Our undiscovered nature, to paraphrase Will Andrews, turns out not as beautiful as he may wish. Reading *Genesis*, one hopes for an alternative:

According to the text, God more than shares both the reader's dismay and the reader's hopes. He decides to take a more direct role in the matter, beginning with Abraham. God Himself, as it were, will take Abraham by the hand, will serve as his tutor, and will educate him to be a new human being . . . one who will set an example for countless generations, who, inspired by his story, will cleave to these righteous ways (Ibid.).

At least in some circles, it's customary to describe Abram's harkening to the voice of God as an act of faith, as if Abram already knew and loved God. The text doesn't say this. He might merely be ambitious. God promises land, a nation, a great name—fame—and divine support and favor. Pious, yes, but Abraham is also a man of great ambition with "some reason to believe that the voice that called him just might belong to a power great enough to deliver" (Ibid.). But as the story

⁵ Leon R. Kass, "Educating Father Abraham: The Meaning of Wife."

progresses, we see God instructing Father Abraham, and later his descendants. According to Kass, “God Himself undertakes Abraham’s education in order to address and to overcome the natural psychic and social human obstacles to righteous and reverent living” (“The Meaning of Fatherhood”).

For Kass, *only* God’s instruction overcomes the *natural* obstacles to human flourishing. As he sees it, “nature . . . has nothing to teach us about the human good: the descriptive laws of nature do not issue in normative Natural Law or Natural Right. As subject to the flux as everything else, we human beings have no fixed nature or special dignity.”⁶ In the early chapters of Genesis, the heavens and earth are utterly silent in helping us understand the human good, not speaking the possibility of justice but silently allowing the likelihood of Cain, the murderer, who is already so governed by fear that he is sure that “whoever finds me will slay me” (Gen. 4:14). In short order, his descendants boast of a perverted superiority to their ancestor, as when Lamech crows to his wives that if Cain killed his sevenfold, mighty Lamech has killed seventy-sevenfold. Soon after, God sends the deluge to wipe clean the face of the earth.

Later, God teaches his instructed people more definitively in the Ten Words given at Sinai. It’s easy to read these as abstract moral principles, but they’re much more political and pedagogical. Consider the first statement: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” Is this a commandment, a reminder, a claim of authority? One just might as well read it as a philosophical point, an opportunity for God to teach Israel something fundamental about their identity—and ours, whether we believe or not. God seems to claim “that there are basically two great alternatives: either to be in relation to the Lord, in Whose image humankind was created, or to be a slave to Pharaoh, a human king who rules as if he were himself divine.”⁷ Egypt is not merely a historical power but the permanent possibility of human bondage at all times and places whenever our very natural tendencies toward power and domination flourish. In that light, the ten words are much less abstract moral codes governing action and more a piercing insistence that humans are to be equal and free. “Have no other gods,

⁶ Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis*, 6.

⁷ Leon R. Kass, “The Ten Commandments: Why the Decalogue Matters.”

and do not worship images” for there are none, and to become subservient to them is to degrade yourself, and, very likely, to become mastered by the religious figures or craftsmen who control the god’s production. Nietzsche’s hatred of the priestly class has nothing on the LORD’s vitriol on handing over dignity to false masters. “Do not take the name of God in vain, and keep the sabbath” for there is no magic, and we are not masters of that which is good, beautiful, and true. We do not master it, we steward it as a great gift. Or, again, a double portion of manna comes on the Sabbath, reminding that we live by mercy if we live at all, so we should walk with gratitude in the world we did not devise – a statement true to this day (Ibid.).

And on they go. Abraham taught to be a father, and his children – us – taught *reverence*, limits, dignity, freedom, the value of the human who exists for her own sake and never as resource and grist for the powerful. Surrounded by pagans, ancient or modern, who view power, conquest, pleasure, domination, and the immortality of fame as highest goods, to them a voice cries out and Jerusalem’s foundations are laid; a leap in being occurs, a burst of human capacity unknown to those empires once more powerful in chariots and spears, but now gone, all their palaces long vanished into the dusts of time and the deserts. Where are the Hittites? Decayed, vanished. But Zion abides wherever men and women of good will obey the instruction to escape the bonds of Egypt. In that sense, then, we in the West have attempted to live in Zion and, perhaps, attempt it still.



Jerusalem is not Athens, for wonder finds little purchase in the Bible. Wonder provokes thought, a desire to understand for its own sake, for no reason other than knowledge itself. Aristotle tells us that all persons desire to know, and that this contemplative thrust is the divine in us. Such sentiments are not Biblical, where wisdom “comes not from wonder but from awe and reverence, and the goal is not understanding for its own sake but rather a righteous and holy life.”⁸ In wonder, however, as “in philosophy, in warfare, in the early sciences, in poetry, in grace of manners, in rhetoric, in high cunning” the Greeks surpassed

⁸ Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, 3.

Israel, surpassed “all civilized folk who had preceded them” and a good many who followed, including, perhaps, us.⁹

Odd that they were able to manage it, for their politics were a mess, the *polis* constantly writhing in intrigue and war and tyranny. Yet despite this political disorder, or more properly, precisely because of this disorder, as a revolt against it, genius emerged, a transformation of spirit, and the history-making epoch of reason was born.

While reason is the defining aspect of humanity in every time, the “genius of the Hellenic philosophers discovered reason as the source of order in the *psyche*” of the human.¹⁰ In doing so, the philosophers consciously engaged in a profound and personal resistance against the moral and social decay of their time. In our own time, philosophy too often mimics the sciences in a misguided vision of rigor. For the ancients, philosophy was a way of life, a set of practices and disciplines; philosophy was not, for them, the doctrines written down, but about living well and becoming a certain kind of person with a certain stance toward the world and self. Just as Jerusalem came to life when humans underwent a fundamental shift of consciousness, a leap of being, so too Athens, as a symbol of order, arose when reason was discovered as the “force and the criterion of order” — and such discovery was a remaking of one’s entire life, a *periagoge*, a conversion (Ibid.).

Consider the usual definition of the human as “rational animal.” We hear this, dulled by easy familiarity, and think of it as a genus-species taxonomy. But the symbolic force of the phrase “rational animal” means more, articulating a call, a demand of human authenticity. As rational animal, we experience ourselves in a persisting state of restlessness. It’s a strange thing, really. The dog gets enough to eat and goes to sleep; the human gets enough to survive and begins to wonder about meaning, giving up ease of sleep and ease of mind, sometimes agonizing about whether he has life right, has figured out meaning.

Perhaps you remember your first experience of wonder. Not curiosity, not that mere interest in knowing how something works or where it comes from, not the “why, why, why” of the two year old — although that’s on its way to real wonder. Remember wonder? That

⁹ Kirk, *Roots of American Order*, 51.

¹⁰ Eric Voegelin, “Reason: The Classic Experience,” in *Anamnesis*, trans. and ed. Gerhart Niemeyer, 89.

jolting realization of the deep and abiding mystery of *it all*? The mystery of yourself? Here you were! Halfway between birth and death, from nothingness to nothingness, with the Nothing drawing nearer at every moment. Still, in the face of nothingness, you *are*. Of all the possible somethings, why you? The rational animal “experiences itself as a living being and . . . conscious of the questionable character attaching to this status” (Ibid.). We discover ourselves as a *questioner*, and as a questioner in a reality beyond our mastery. The philosopher experiences herself as called, as *moved*, drawn by some unknown, but compelling force. And she feels this force as a kind of love, something akin to a mystical experience whereby reality reveals itself.

There is something normative to wonder. It gives direction, it makes demands. No one who has ever experienced the irruption of reason as a way of life feels indifferent to it, as if one could now choose to ignore the luminosity of being without committing a perversity, an impiety, a deformation of one’s own character—it would be like hacking at the core of your own integrity. The lame phrase “rational animal” hides the daring shout present in it, for it’s really a statement of human worth within cosmic order, an attempt to put words to the sense that the divine is somehow present to us; that our own reason participates or takes part in the glory.

There’s a story of a young student travelling to visit the venerable philosopher Heraclitus, excited to meet the man but disappointed to find him sitting in his little home, warming his aching joints by the stove. Heraclitus merely points at the stove and says: “there are gods here, too.” Everything is remarkable, if we would just see. And most remarkable of all is our own consciousness. Socrates had famously left his studies of natural philosophy—science—to turn to the really human things, to know himself, and to help others in the same. He knew that gods lived here too, even if many reject these gods. The Socratic dialogues are full of this tension. Think of all the interlocutors who encounter Socrates as a threat to their sense of self and *hate* him. Meno. Thrasymachus. Callicles. Polus. Meletus. To each of them Socrates presents nothing less than a new god—his *daimon* or spirit—and this new god really does usurp the minor Greek deities, but, more troubling, overthrows the idols that each person is ever prone to adore, namely, their own desires. Socrates offers another love, and he does his best to

seduce these young men, not to his embraces, but to an erotic and all consuming quest for the good. These men respond violently, spitefully. Their loves are decrepit, in desperate need of conversion, for ill men have poor judgment or taste, and men diseased in soul and mind, suffering from what Eric Voegelin calls a psychopathology, are sometimes far beyond the call of the logos (97).

Others find their way. Theatetus. Plato. Gorgias. Even, in the end, Thrasymachus. And none of them experience “rational animal” as a boring fact, let alone as an academic game of this or that abstraction; instead, they discover, as Eric Voegelin states, that “the man who asks questions, and the divine ground about which the questions are asked, will merge in the experience of questioning as a divine-human encounter. . . . [T]he questioning unrest carries the assuaging answer within itself inasmuch as man is moved to his search . . . by the divine ground of which he is in search” (95–96). And this divine ground reveals itself, is opened to us, “in the experience of unrest and the desire to know” (95).

Wonder, then, opens a new form of life, the life of reason, a life which refuses to accept anything other than the truth, anything less than the good, anything below the beautiful, and in so doing unleashes a force constantly resisting and rejecting the sirens of disorder, for we know that these disorders, these pathologies, unmake us, dishonor us, however pleasant they happen to be, and so we would rather drink the hemlock, celebrating our health even as the poison courses through our bodies and brings the chill of death. Socrates last words are those of the rational animal, for he has not capitulated, and he has followed wonder to the end. The joyful unrest of questioning was a new form of life, and the making present of a new order. Athens, which is with us still.



Rome is two cities, really, the city of man and the city of God. As the city of man, her contribution is a passion for *law*, which we’ll see again in London. But let’s consider the eternal city as God’s city, that is, as the Church.

The human, claims Kirk, is “the only creature possessing culture, as distinguished from instinct; and if culture is effaced, so is the

distinction between man and the brutes. . . .”¹¹ Culture, he reminds us, is derived from *cultus*, indicating both “tilling the soil and worshipping the divine,” and so “culture arises from the cult.”¹² Joined together in ritual and worship, the common emerges—“common cultivation of crops, common defense, common laws,” in short, the common wealth (Ibid.). Kirk continues, claiming that “out of little knots of worshippers, in Egypt, the Fertile Crescent, India, or China, there grew up simple cultures; for those joined by religion can dwell together and work together in relative peace” (“Civilization without Religion?” 109). In time, simple culture becomes intricate, lending itself even to the formation of great civilizations, and to the dependents on those great civilizations. Our values, as secularized as they may be in expression, are derived from the cults of long ago—“the enormous material achievements of our civilization have resulted, if remotely, from the spiritual insights of prophets and seers” (Ibid.). And civilizations which lose their religious bearings “have ended in slime” (113).

In our own context, this religious heritage has been incorporated in its own, perhaps uniquely American way. Certainly this is not the only way, but it is our own background and heritage, at least as Kirk interprets it. Given our heritage, says Kirk, there can be no doubt that “The United States is a Christian nation.”¹³ While not every American is a Christian, he does believe that “it is possible to write about a body of religious and ethical principle shared by the majority of Americans,” and that these principles “govern life in America” (Ibid.). Kirk is not some sort of theocrat. He clearly affirms and supports toleration of “all religious convictions, and toleration even of disbelief in any religion” (35), and certainly knows that positive law is not identical with either religious or moral principles. He’s claiming only that even the non-believer should recognize the religious history behind our form of life: “The whole pattern in which we live our lives is formed by certain religious assumptions about the nature of God and the nature of man. . . . The ideas of freedom, private rights, charity, love, duty, and honesty, for instance, all are beliefs religious in origin” (19).

¹¹ Russell Kirk, “Civilization without Religion?” in *The Essential Russell Kirk: Selected Essays*, ed. George Panichas, 109.

¹² Russell Kirk, *America’s British Culture*, 1.

¹³ Russell Kirk, *The American Cause*, ed. Gleaves Whitney, 17.

Rather than religious rule, Kirk asks us to note that “[c]ivilization grows out of religion: the morals, the politics, the economics, the literature, and the arts of any people all have a religious origin” (Ibid., 18). So what is it about Christianity, particularly in its medieval and Reformational varieties—Rome—which provides order to us still, even though the Church has been stripped of all its political power? And how does this differ from Jerusalem?

One cannot simply repeat Jerusalem once Athens has entered the conversation. This point was made powerfully by emeritus Pope Benedict XVI early in his pontificate:

... we can see the profound harmony between what is Greek in the best sense of the word and the biblical understanding of faith in God. . . . The encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance. . . . [B]iblical faith, in the Hellenistic period, encountered the best of Greek thought at a deep level, resulting in a mutual enrichment evident especially in the later wisdom literature. . . . From the very heart of Christian faith and, at the same time, the heart of Greek thought now joined to faith, [Christianity] was able to say: Not to act “with *logos*” is contrary to God’s nature.¹⁴

Theology, in the words of Thomas Aquinas, the greatest of medieval thinkers, was a science, open to reason, not a blind leap and certainly not an arbitrary act of will. No accident, then, that medieval theologians were called “schoolmen” and that the great universities of our civilization emerged under their care. Faith seeking understanding—*fides quaerens intellectum*—has a moderating effect on faith and expands reason beyond its finite bounds: both are humanized.

In addition to its reasonable faith, the Church proclaimed the fundamental goodness of all things, simultaneously freeing humanity from its sense of captivity to alien and hostile forces demanding placation but also rendering the world order capricious and unintelligible. For Christianity, the foundation of reality is personal—the triune communion of persons whom Christians identify as the Godhead—and persons are reasonable, good, and self-directed. Further, all things are *good*, of value. For the Greek philosophers, contingency meant unintelligibility, and only that which was eternal was coherent.

¹⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections.”

The doctrine of Creation challenges this, for everything other than God is utterly contingent—it need not be, for dust it was and to dust it shall return. As such, creation has value because it is a non-necessary gift. God need not have made anything. Since “the universe is the gift of the person of God, it follows that it is not indifferent to persons and their values . . . the very character and status of things will reflect their giftedness in their radical contingency and the received generosity inherent in them.”¹⁵ Because creation depends on the generous and ecstatic outpouring of God’s communion, all creation, and in a particular way the human person, carries and speaks this generosity in itself.

This Christian optimism, this sense of order and goodness and of a God so full of order that He bursts forth to pour His luminosity into creation, pervades both the majestic *summae*—the treatises on theology—and the cathedrals of the time. Henry Adams put it this way: “You must try first to rid your mind of the traditional idea that the Gothic is an intentional expression of religious gloom. The necessity for light was the motive of the Gothic architects. They needed light and always more light, until they sacrificed safety and common sense in trying to get it. They converted their walls into windows. . . .”¹⁶ The cathedrals pierced the heavens and the heavenly light filled the space, for God had already ennobled matter by becoming matter, by becoming a human. Not only was every human a daughter or son of God, but God had become one of them, a brother, and every human activity carried divine approval and sanctification.

Christianity is a humanism.



Rome, like London, is also a place of law. According to Kirk, the Romans possessed little of the creative facility of the Greeks, but the republic, when it lasted, provided stability unlike anything known to the Peloponnese. A people of law and institution, they bequeathed to their own time the *pax romana*, and a loathing of arbitrary rule. Even in its crumbling, the republic gave us Cicero, whose teaching was woven deeply into the education of 17th and 18th century leaders. In him, the

¹⁵ Kenneth L. Schmitz, *Recovery of Wonder: The New Freedom and the Asceticism of Power*, 31.

¹⁶ Henry Adams, *Mont-St-Michel and Chartres*, ed. R. J. Snell, 28.

American Founders found “powerfully expressed the idea of the law of nature,” the ideas that “true law is right reason in agreement with Nature” (*Roots of American Order*, 108).

Sometimes called the “higher law,” the idea of a law of nature is “universal, unchanging, and everlasting” (Ibid.). It is unalterable, and any human law which contravenes it is no law at all but merely an edict of power. No one—no Senate or Court—can free us of the higher law’s obligations, for it is valid always, and Senates and Courts invalidate themselves by going against this law. Human law is judged, not a judge, and the power of the sword is fundamentally accountable. No ruler is unruled, no human law its own measure, for all are held to the standard of the higher law. In the end, there is no liberty where there is arbitrary rule, but at the deep heart of reality order beats its steady pace, counting out and conducting rhythm for every chieftain, no matter how paltry or majestic their domain. Might does not make right.

It is this commitment which endures as our birthright from Rome. History and circumstance move ever forward, and it is the rare human law which survives unchanged over the centuries. For good reason, so we do not necessarily turn to the annals of the past to discover the best way to regulate trade or organize taxation—surely the management of outposts in Gaul differs substantially from the intricacies of our own commerce—so “the whole body of Roman law became imbued with the concept of a justice that is not man-decreed merely” (Ibid., 110). As one scholar described the lasting influence of Rome on western law systems, “but for natural law, the petty laws of a small peasant community of peninsular Italy would never have become the universal law of an international civilization.”¹⁷ Because Rome did teach natural law, “the great ideals of freedom and equality have found their way into the law-books after having found it into the hearts of men.”¹⁸

Since the natural law is not a static list of abstract rules but the moral imagination, the moral sense, the inner striving and reaching out for the good which governs reasonable creatures, it is always and already within the hearts of women and men. People not alienated from their own moral sense possess an apt disposition for humane and decent constitutions, both formal and informal. But since we are social and

¹⁷ A. P. D’Entreves, in *Roots of American Order*, 113.

¹⁸ Ibid.

historical, this disposition takes content only within the lived experience of a people over a long period. Societies in which the heart's deep longing for order was secured in stable institutional forms and law became lawful people. That the republic allowed this explains the nobility of its citizens, what we call "republican virtue." Humans with solid and decent law have a chance for human flourishing, and all flourishing includes *integrity*, the wholeness of self-possession. Kirk quotes Polybius on the incorruptibility of the Romans in contrast to other peoples. The Greeks, he says, manage a small sum of the public treasury only after many oaths and seals and witnesses, and still proceed to steal, whereas the Romans handle great amounts and perform the duty with "inviolable honesty" (*Roots of American Order*, 99–100).

The British, like the Romans, long enjoyed peace, order, and good government to a remarkable degree, and particularly cherished individual liberty. Perhaps most peculiarly British was the habit of avoiding ideology and perfectionism, choosing instead to "muddle along", confident that politics was about the art of the possible, not the attempt to bring about heaven on earth. As a result, *prudence* governed, a commitment to sound judgment formed and tempered by experience, convinced there was more truth in the actual and concrete than in the abstractions of theory. Tradition was valued highly, as were deference, public morality, modesty, property, and limited and reasonable expectations of what could be accomplished through politics. Such a system was little prone to shocks and violent upheavals—compare the mildness of the Glorious Revolution and Restoration in Britain compared to the French Revolution, which Burke considered ample evidence of the British mind's habit of preferring what was known to work over what might imaginably bring about paradise. Consider, too, the longevity of the Anglo-American system in its basic structures compared to the brevity of constitutions, brought on by endless tinkering and rewriting, found in other nations and forms of governance. Given such stability, free people can reasonably anticipate the future and make sober deliberations and plans for property, children, business, investment, inheritance, and thus emerge with all the customs and virtues of a free people. They become a nation of shopkeepers, as Britain was once described, with wide ownership of property and its attendant responsibility. Given the stability of land, family, and money, trust

emerges, and with it collaboration and voluntary associations. I think often of the party hosted by the Fezziwigs in Dicken's *Christmas Carol*. A prosperous man of business, Fezziwig is a happy, portly man who *gives* generously to the community of workers in his care. You don't imagine such largesse absent lawfulness, for generosity and community-mindedness is a mark of free people.

Britain enjoyed a stable if unwritten constitution, a devotion to the rule of law, and an organic and slowly developing common law and a heritage of freedom, including the gains of the Magna Carta (1215), Petition of Right (1628), and Bill of Rights (1689). The English-speaking peoples had relatively sane governance and the order and prosperity which followed, and they became a responsible and self-regulated people—they possessed the famed manners of old Britain. A free people with the virtues and capacities of free women and men. They knew how to have liberty, they were up to the task.

They had the courage to maintain their liberty, and to resist tyranny to the point of risking their honor, property, and lives to keep it. Such as these gathered in Philadelphia.



Unlike the French Revolution, the American was not governed by abstract theory; it did not insist on utopian dreams or attempt to create a social order from scratch. Instead, the Revolutionary leaders insisted merely on keeping the order already enjoyed: "they overturned English rule chiefly so that they might simply preserve the justice and order and freedom that the American colonies had long enjoyed" (Kirk, *The American Cause*, 48). It was a very British revolution. Almost not even a revolution so much as a demand to keep what had been, to retain what they already had. The American experiment took its place in the train of "many centuries of civilized experience," and was guided less by rationalism than the lamp of experience, of practical, already demonstrated principles (Ibid., 49). Freedom did not slip the bit, take its head from the governance of lawful order, for "without order, justice rarely can be enforced, and freedom cannot be maintained" (Ibid., 51). True freedom does not require liberation from the laws of God and men, nor is it the abstraction of a reified Liberty, requiring instead "the right of decent men"—men under a "disciplined, traditional, moderate, law

respecting freedom” —to “make their own principal choices in life” (Ibid., 62). In the American republic, freedom did not mean “the absolute right to do whatever we please,” but, rather, “certain old and valuable securities against having things done to them, by the state or by powerful men, which they would not relish having done to them” (Ibid., 63–64).

The Founders were steeped in the classics, in Cicero, Aurelius, Ovid, Plutarch, Thucydides, Polybius; of course they knew the Bible, and British history, the Scottish Enlightenment, Montesquieu, Blackstone, and Shakespeare. They were neither ignorant nor contemptuous of the past. Neither were they philosophers trying to found a paper utopia. Knowing history, they knew that society does not follow a blueprint, and that the best laid plans are inadequate to the messy business of governing actual people. Rather than abstraction, the founders, as in Patrick Henry’s famous statement, had “but one lamp by which” their feet were guided, “and that is the lamp of experience,” for there is “no way of judging the future but by the past.”

Kirk insists that the patriots of 1776 were not radicals but pillars of order —wishing to conserve rather than overthrow the order they knew and enjoyed. Like Burke, they believed that “nothing was more consummately wicked than the heart of an abstract metaphysician who should attempt to govern nations by speculative political dogmas.”¹⁹ Consequently, they did not follow a political “philosophy” so much as they followed experience, not their own experience alone, but the heritage of the glories and tragedies of history.

Not philosophers but gentlemen, says Kirk. The Constitution grew out of centuries of experience, as well as many, many compromises made by gentlemen to other gentlemen in order to arrive at a tolerable agreement, and a tolerable government. They possessed the spirit of former cities—Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, and London—as well as the spirit of cultivated and honorable gentlemen. And this spirit gave us Philadelphia, the fifth city, our own—not of course, merely the geographical location of today or the place of the Convention, but Philadelphia as America, as the experiment in which we find ourselves.

¹⁹ Russell Kirk, “The Framers: Not Philosophers but Gentlemen,” in *The Essential Russell Kirk: Selected Essays*, ed. George Panichas, 451.



Will Andrews abandons this experiment when he departs Boston. Rather than the five cities, he would have wildness, and wildness he finds. Upon leaving Butcher's Crossing, the hunting party rides for days across the vast plains. Will, unused to hard riding, finds the first day brutal, a searing pain of muscles and headache. And then a kind of numbness, a sleep, overtakes him on subsequent days. We're told that he "found himself less and less conscious of any movement," that the numbness was a loss of his own identity as he "felt himself to be like the land, without identity or shape" (Williams, 77). Miller, the boss of the party, becomes animal, "one with his horse," sitting in his saddle "as if he were a natural extension," and begins to speak less and less, merely "sniff[ing] at the land" as he searches for water (86, 78).

Despite the odds, they find the hidden valley, and it is filled with thousands upon thousands of buffalo. And Miller slaughters them, day after day after day. The great trick, we learn, is to "buffalo" the herd, to kill the leader, leaving the herd in confusion so that it does not run away, circling on itself, looping back into the kill zone from which the men can shoot, and shoot, and shoot. Miller fires until his rifle glows red, changes rifles and continues, leaving hundreds of corpses for the rest of the crew to skin.

Will has never experienced anything like this and is surprised that the "wild dignity" of the bison is gone. All that remains is the murderous "dance, a thunderous minuet created by the wildness" of the men (135). In the first big kill of 155 bison, he "came to see Miller as a mechanism, an automaton . . . and he came to see Miller's destruction of the buffalo, not as a lust for blood . . . or hides. . . . [H]e came to see the destruction as a cold, mindless response to [life]" (Ibid.).

Even though winter is upon them, Miller won't leave. They have many hides—thousands—more than they can transport, and prudence says it's time to go. But Miller won't. He doesn't even speak, becoming "totally intent upon his kill" communicating with "curt motions . . . and growlings deep in his throat." He stops washing and the black powder collects on his face like "a permanent part of his skin" (155–159).

Then the flakes. Just a few, causing the bison to go mad and men to grow fearful. They are soon snowed in, spending the first blizzard in rancid hides described like wombs, or maybe tombs, from which they

emerge on the third day as new men into a sea of white, snowed in, without shelter or food. They have returned to an undiscovered nature. Wild, but not beautiful.

Our own era is rife with Will Andrewses and Millers, those would shake off the yoke of our long civilization, either from a desire to return to an atavistic power or from a vain hope of creating heaven on earth. Forgetful of the past, they reject what they do not know, the received wisdom of Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, London, and Philadelphia, exchanging it for a mess of pottage. They are stupefied, shocked at the results. Without the lamp of experience, they have only their own disorder to guide them.

There are some—few, but enough—who have the courage to repent and return to the spirit of the West’s great cities. Like those gentlemen of Philadelphia, they wish to preserve the inheritance of order given by our ancestors. Perhaps you have such courage. But for your courage to be seasoned, you’ll need to take great draughts of wisdom from the wells of these five cities.

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