

IN DEFENSE OF TRADITION

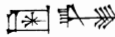


RICHARD M. WEAVER

In Defense of Tradition

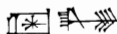
Collected Shorter
Writings of
Richard M. Weaver,
1929–1963

EDITED AND WITH
AN INTRODUCTION BY
TED J. SMITH III



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The cuneiform inscription that serves as our logo and as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word “freedom” (*amagi*), or “liberty.” It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

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Introduction

TED J. SMITH III

On Wednesday, April 3, 1963, the quiet routine of the College of the University of Chicago was disrupted by reports that Professor Weaver had failed for a second day to meet his classes. Those who knew him well received the news with surprise and concern. A fixture on the campus for almost two decades, Weaver had acquired a reputation for a devotion to teaching that was remarkable even where those duties were still taken seriously. He was also well known, even notorious, for the regularity of his daily activities. On a typical day, he would arrive at his office in the early morning, teach two classes, and depart at exactly 11:30 for lunch at the Commons. After lunch he would walk to his apartment to write a few pages and take a nap before returning to campus to teach his afternoon class and attend to other academic chores. At 5:30 he went back to the Commons for dinner, walked home, and worked until 9:30. Though it was a source of merriment among some members of the university community, Weaver was proud of this strict regimen and often noted with approval the story of the citizens of Königsberg setting their watches by Immanuel Kant's perambulations in the town square.¹ For a man such as this, only the gravest necessity would compel him to miss classes without notice, and when a telephone call to his apartment went unanswered, the concern of his friends changed to alarm. Their worst fears were confirmed that afternoon, when word came that Richard Malcolm Weaver was dead at the age of 53, the victim of a heart attack, alone at night in his bed.²

1. Wilma R. Ebbitt, "Richard M. Weaver, Friend and Colleague," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, St. Louis, March 19, 1988, pp. 1-2.

2. There is some confusion about the exact date of Weaver's death. A news release distributed by the University of Chicago (number 63-178, dated April 4, 1963) states that he died on Wednesday, April 3, the day his body was discovered, and that date appears in nearly all contemporary obituaries, official documents (including his death certificate), family

There followed the usual and proper rituals of a civilized community. The flag in front of the university's Administration Building was lowered to half-staff, and on the afternoon of April 10 a memorial service was conducted in Bond Chapel by the Rev. John Pyle of the campus Episcopal Center. By then, Weaver's body had been returned to Weaverville, North Carolina, where funeral services were held at the United Methodist church on April 7. He was buried near his father in the Old Weaverville Cemetery, just a few blocks down Main Street from the house he had shared with his mother, Carrie Lee Embry Weaver, his brother Embry, his sister Betty, and her son Larry, then twelve years of age.

More lasting tributes to his memory took the form of a small number of published eulogies. The first, written by Mark Ashin, a colleague of Weaver's on the English staff, appeared in the campus newspaper on April 5. It was followed some months later by two pieces in the *Georgia Review*, one by Wilma Ebbitt, a close friend and colleague at Chicago, the other by Ralph Eubanks, a professor of rhetoric and public address at the University of Arkansas who had brought Weaver there in 1961 to speak in the university's Distinguished Lecturers series. Weaver's passing was also noted in several conservative publications with which he had been associated during the last decade of his life. Foremost among them are the memorials by Russell Kirk in *National Review*, by Eugene Davidson in *Modern Age*, and by the editors of the *New Individualist Review*.³

correspondence, and subsequent accounts of his life. It also appears on his headstone. However, the obituary in his hometown newspaper, the *Asheville Citizen*, states that Weaver failed to meet his classes on April 1 and 2, and that when police found his body on April 3 they estimated he had been dead for two days. This account is corroborated by a power of attorney executed in North Carolina on April 6, 1963, which lists his date of death as April 2, and by the recollections of several of his colleagues at the University. It is also partly confirmed by a memorandum written on April 4, 1963, by Weaver's brother-in-law, Kendall Beaton, which notes a conversation with Alan Simpson, then Dean of the College of the University of Chicago, in which Simpson said Weaver had last been seen alive in class on April 1. When all of the evidence is considered, it seems almost certain that Weaver died sometime during the night of Monday, April 1, most likely in the early morning hours of April 2. Accounts also differ on whether Weaver's body was discovered by police alerted by concerned colleagues or by a maid who entered the apartment to clean his rooms. The official cause of death was listed as coronary thrombosis; no autopsy was performed.

3. Mark Ashin, "A Tribute to Richard Weaver," *Chicago Maroon*, 71/87, April 5, 1963, p. 1; Wilma R. Ebbitt, "Richard M. Weaver, Teacher of Rhetoric," the *Georgia Review*, 17/4,

These tributes are of interest because they mark the first of many attempts to assess the significance of Richard Weaver's work. As would be expected, all are suffused with admiration, respect, and a sense of great loss. But viewed from the vantage of time, their assessments of Weaver's achievements seem narrow and restrained. For example, the memorials written by Weaver's colleagues cite few of his accomplishments as a scholar and focus instead on his qualities as a teacher of composition and rhetoric at the undergraduate level. Only Ralph Eubanks characterizes him as "one of the ablest cultural critics of our times, and a brilliant rhetorical theorist," and only he calls attention to Weaver's considerable body of scholarship on Southern history and culture. Similarly, while Russell Kirk does note mildly that *Ideas Have Consequences* "was one of the first works in the revival of conservatism in America—and surely the first to find a wide and devoted audience," Eugene Davidson's quiet appreciation offers no general evaluation of Weaver's impact, and it is left to the editors of the *New Individualist Review*—a student publication produced by the University of Chicago chapter of the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists—to conclude that "Few men have been as important in the intellectual renaissance of American conservatism as Richard M. Weaver."

The tributes are also valuable because they provide the first detailed view of Weaver's life and character from the perspective of those who knew him. That view is neither very flattering nor, in some important respects, very accurate, but it has become widely known and accepted through long repetition. On some points, all of the eulogists quite rightly agree: Weaver was a kind, courteous, and principled gentleman of the old school, thoughtful and deliberate in his speech, powerful and incisive in his writing, and deeply committed to the restoration of truth and order in contemporary society. In pursuit of that goal, he adopted a strict regimen in his daily activities, kept largely to himself and his work, and lived a life of high seriousness and austerity. Beyond these points, however, the accounts diverge, and inaccuracies of fact and emphasis begin to appear.

One set of problems concerns the precise nature of Weaver's connection

Winter 1963, pp. 415–18; Ralph T. Eubanks, "Richard M. Weaver: In Memoriam," the *Georgia Review*, 17/4, Winter 1963, pp. 412–15; Russell Kirk, "Richard Weaver, RIP," *National Review*, 14/16, April 23, 1963, p. 308; Eugene Davidson, "Richard Malcolm Weaver—Conservative," *Modern Age*, 7/3, Summer 1963, pp. 226–30; and "In Memoriam Richard M. Weaver," *New Individualist Review*, 2/4, Spring 1963, p. 2.

with Weaverville, North Carolina, a town settled by and named for his ancestors. According to Eubanks, Weaver “was born and brought up at Weaverville”; Kirk also places Weaver’s birth there and adds touchingly that for “most of his life he saved money to buy a little house there, for a day when college teaching should end.” In fact, however, Weaver was born in Asheville, North Carolina, and brought up in Lexington, Kentucky. Except for some summer vacations, he did not live in Weaverville until 1953, when, after only a few years of saving (thanks to the generous help of his old friend William Maury Mitchell), he purchased the house at 100 South Main Street that became his home for the rest of his life.

Eugene Davidson in his eulogy also emphasizes the Weaverville connection but uses the point to transform Weaver into a full-fledged agrarian traditionalist distrustful of modern technology and indissolubly linked to the land. In one widely known passage, Davidson reports that Weaver “plowed his land in Weaverville, North Carolina, with a horse-drawn plow; he never used a tractor.” He then notes that had Weaver lived but a little longer, “he would have been again in Weaverville for the plowing and harrowing and weeding of the land,” and concludes that “despite his years in Chicago, Dick remained a countryman.”⁴ In fact, however, Weaver lived all his life in towns and cities—Asheville, Lexington, Nashville, Auburn, College Station, Baton Rouge, Raleigh, Chicago, and Weaverville—and never, aside from visits to relatives, on a farm. In Weaverville, “his land” consisted solely of the house on two acres a block from the town center he had purchased in 1953, and his farming was limited to growing a large backyard vegetable garden and tending a few peach, quince, and crabapple trees. There is no evidence Weaver ever plowed the garden himself, preferring to hire someone else to do the job, and it is very doubtful that he ever had it plowed by a horse (or mule, in other versions of the story); certainly it was not a regular occurrence. He did sometimes speak to friends about plowing fields with a horse, apparently on some visit to a farm, and it may well be that he said or implied that he still used such methods. But none of the surviving members of his family, including a brother and a nephew who

4. Eubanks, p. 413; Kirk, p. 308; Davidson, pp. 227 and 230. Davidson also notes (p. 227) that Weaver “flew only once in his life” and enjoyed it, but “never flew again.” In fact, there is proof that Weaver flew on several occasions in the last few years of his life and was doing so with greater frequency as demands on his time increased and train service deteriorated.

lived in the Weaverville house at the time, can remember seeing a horse or mule at work on the property, and the nephew recalls that the garden was plowed “many times” by a hired man with a tractor.⁵

More serious problems arise in the depiction of Weaver’s lifestyle and personal relationships. There is no question that he lived a quiet and retiring bachelor’s existence in rented rooms near the Chicago campus and that he impressed most people as reticent and self-contained. But there has been a persistent tendency to emphasize and embellish these facts almost to the point of caricature. Thus Mark Ashin’s tribute, although not unkind in tone, makes Weaver’s reserve a principal focus of discussion. In the space of nine short paragraphs, Ashin twice claims that few on campus knew Weaver well, speculates that “perhaps he was seldom able to tell [his students] how much he liked them,” and asserts that even those who admired and respected him “were kept at a distance by his reticence, his sense of decorum, his rather formal courtesy, and by a calm stability which seemed to invite neither offers of aid nor the exchange of confidences.” In Russell Kirk’s memorial—by far the most widely distributed and influential of the early eulogies—the portrait is darkened to suggest a kind of stunted reclusiveness.⁶ “Solitary by nature,” Kirk wrote, Weaver “inhabited a single room

5. Among those who recall discussions with Weaver about plowing with horses are P. Albert Duhamel, Henry Regnery, and William R. Smith. Family members who deny that the garden was plowed with a horse or mule include his cousin Josephine Osborne, his brother Embry Weaver, and his nephew Larry Ludlam. From personal interviews conducted by the editor with P. Albert Duhamel, Boston, Massachusetts, May 17 and November 11, 1994; Henry Regnery, Chicago, Illinois, November 1, 1992; William R. Smith, New Paris, Pennsylvania, July 13, 1994; Josephine Osborne, Weaverville, North Carolina, August 11, 1995; Embry Lee Weaver, Weaverville, North Carolina, August 11, 1995; Larry Embry Ludlam, Asheville, North Carolina, August 13, 1995. It should also be noted that Weaver wanted to buy a house in Asheville, not Weaverville, but purchased the one he did primarily to please his mother.

6. In addition to appearing in *National Review*, Kirk’s eulogy was reprinted under the title “Richard Weaver” in his *Confessions of a Bohemian Tory*, New York: Fleet, 1963, pp. 193–96, and in abridged form under the title “Richard M. Weaver, RIP” in *The Individualist*, 2/2, September 1963, p. 2. This somewhat negative view was strongly reinforced in Kirk’s “Foreword” to Weaver’s posthumous *Visions of Order*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964, p. viii, in which he quoted Canon Bernard Iddings Bell, a mutual friend, as follows: “‘Richard Weaver distresses me,’ Canon Bell said to me one day, only half in jest, ‘he grows more like a little gnome every day.’”

in an obscure hotel near the University of Chicago,” “dined frugally in the cafeteria of International House or in some little hash house,” and “lived chaste and withdrawn.” We are also told that “[s]ome of his closest Chicago friends did not see him for a year at a time” and that he “never traveled.” The image is then extended to the realm of religion:

Weaver attended church only once a year, I believe—and then a high Episcopalian service. Somehow the solemnity and mystery and ritual, strongly though he was attracted by them, overwhelmed his soul; such a feast would last him for another twelve months. Frugality even in religious observance was woven into his character.

While these observations may faithfully reflect the impressions of their authors, they do not provide a very accurate picture of the reality of Richard Weaver’s life and character. The fact is that Weaver had a fairly wide circle of friends and socialized frequently. This is acknowledged, for example, by Eubanks and Davidson, who both note his conviviality,⁷ and even by Ashin, who mentions that Weaver’s correspondence was “staggering” and that he was “always writing letters to friends and strangers” on the ancient portable typewriter in his office. It also happens that Weaver was an avid and rather frequent traveler. In the late 1930s, for example, he twice drove groups of friends from Texas A&M to Monterrey, Mexico, and he spent much of the summer of 1938 in Paris; in the few years preceding his death, he took a driving tour of the Rockies with his mother and brother, and he gave speeches or lectures in venues ranging from New York, New Jersey, and Washington, D.C., to Oklahoma, Arkansas, Utah, and Washington state. Regarding his religious observances, it may be that occasionally Weaver attended Episcopal services in Chicago—the University Hotel, where he lived during most of the 1950s, was located less than a block from the high Anglican Church of the Redeemer, where his friend Canon Bernard Iddings Bell, the Episcopal chaplain at the University of Chicago, sometimes officiated—but there is clear evidence that he also attended Methodist and Presbyterian services with some regularity when he was at home in Weaverville.⁸

7. Eubanks, p. 415; Davidson, p. 230.

8. The best evidence comes from several small notepads from the early to mid-1950s which were found among Weaver’s papers. Among other things, he sometimes used them to record his expenditures, and a number of entries show small amounts spent for “church.”

Nor is there anything very remarkable about Weaver's living arrangements in Chicago. It is hardly surprising that, as a bachelor who spent each summer away from campus, he rented furnished rooms and took his meals in restaurants. Precisely where he slept and ate was determined partly by convenience and availability, but largely by his financial circumstances and family obligations. When he arrived at the University of Chicago in September 1944, Weaver had spent more than a decade in graduate studies and a succession of low-paying temporary teaching positions. His new job did offer a comparatively generous annual salary of \$2,800,⁹ but the appointment was only at the rank of instructor and only for one year; not until 1948 did he receive a promotion to assistant professor and his first multiyear contract, and not until 1951 did he enjoy the security of tenure. Further, by 1944 Weaver had accepted primary responsibility for the support of his mother, a widow of 70 with few means and not in the best of health. Until 1953 he helped to maintain her in various apartments, usually in North Carolina; he then installed her (along with two of his siblings and a nephew) in his Weaverville house, where in addition to lodging he provided her with a car, domestic help, and, as her health declined, paid companions and nurses. Given these obligations, Weaver had little choice but to lead a modest and frugal existence in Chicago during the academic year: he was, after all, trying to maintain two separate households on a single academic salary. Although he accepted his situation with good grace—there is, for example, no hint of bitterness or complaint in his correspondence with family and friends—it would be wrong to think that he was fully satisfied with it. To the contrary, as his financial position improved during the last decade of his life, he modified his lifestyle accordingly. Beginning in the early 1950s he adopted the habit of eating at least one meal a week (usually on Friday) in a better-quality restaurant. In 1957, long troubled because his living arrangements did not allow him to repay the hospitality of his friends and colleagues, he joined the private 1020 Club on Lake Shore Drive not far from the Loop so that he could entertain his guests at dinner.¹⁰

9. The benefit of the higher salary was undercut by the fact that Weaver, like all newly appointed Chicago faculty at the time, was given a so-called "4E" contract which stipulated that any outside income he earned had to be surrendered to the university. See William H. McNeill, *Hutchins' University*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 127 and 163.

10. See, for example, the letter from Weaver to William C. Mullendore dated January 8, 1957, in which Weaver asks Mullendore to dine with him at the club, which he describes as "a

And by the end of his life Weaver had replaced the “single room in an obscure hotel” with a bright and modern efficiency unit (composed of a living room, bedroom, kitchen, and bath) in the Sylvan Arms Apartments near campus.

The fact that the early eulogies are sometimes inaccurate or misleading in their depictions of Weaver’s life and often rather restrained in their evaluations of his work does not detract from their value as candid, thoughtful, and sympathetic accounts of the impressions he made on several of his friends and colleagues. But it is worthwhile to ask why such defects are so common in these (and many subsequent) accounts. At least three major factors would seem to be involved, the first of which is Weaver’s celebrated reticence. Although not averse to conversation, he seldom spoke of either his personal life or his work in progress, and almost never in any detail. This meant that even those closest to him during his years at Chicago knew little beyond what they could observe, and there has been a consequent tendency to attribute undue significance to the few personal comments he made.

The second factor is the pronounced compartmentalization of Weaver’s activities. The most basic and rigid division was between his professional life in Chicago and the wider world and his private life among family and friends in North Carolina, to which he returned at every opportunity. There is no evidence that any person knew him well in both settings; regardless, it is clear that all of his early eulogists knew him only in a professional context. But his professional life was itself highly compartmentalized. Although Weaver’s writings are bound together by an underlying philosophical perspective, they divide easily on the basis of subject matter into four fairly distinct and self-contained groups: Southern literature, history, and culture; political conservatism and the critique of modernity; rhetorical theory; and pedagogical materials in English composition and rhetoric. From the earliest stages of Weaver’s career, his different groups of writings have tended to attract separate audiences, each only dimly aware of the existence of the others and the larger body of his work. The result has been

club for artists and writers established by the former Mrs. Adlai Stevenson.” The letter is located in Box 3 of the William C. Mullendore Papers at the Knight Library of the University of Oregon and is quoted by permission.

a tendency, clearly evident in the early eulogies, to marked parochialism in discussions of his life and work.¹¹

The third factor, closely intertwined with the other two, involves several of Weaver's publishing practices. Russell Kirk was only expressing a common view when he noted near the beginning of his memorial: "Dr. Weaver wrote slowly, though with power; so he will live only through two books—*Ideas Have Consequences* (1948) and *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (1953)—[a] textbook in composition, and some pamphlets and periodical pieces." It is true that Weaver was not a prolific writer, but his output was actually much greater than his contemporaries could have known. One reason was that his shorter writings—of which at least 125 were published during his lifetime—appeared in an unusually broad range of outlets, including newspapers and newsletters, popular magazines such as the *Commonweal* and *National Review*, encyclopedia yearbooks, educational pamphlets, and scholarly books and journals in a diversity of academic fields. But the more important reason was that a great deal of Weaver's work remained unpublished at the time of his death. Included in this body were final drafts of two book manuscripts plus several chapters from a third, an advanced revision of his composition text, and almost a score of completed essays, verbatim texts of significant speeches, and near-final drafts of various works in progress.

Because of these factors, it is doubtful that anyone at the time of Weaver's death—not even his family or his closest friends and colleagues—had a full understanding of who he had been or what he had accomplished. Since then, the gradual accumulation of knowledge about his life and work has been matched by an extraordinary and continuing expansion of his reputation and influence. In marked contrast to the limited claims of some of the early eulogists, Weaver is now widely recognized as one of the most original and perceptive interpreters of Southern culture and letters, one of the century's leading rhetorical theorists (along with I. A. Richards, Kenneth Burke, Richard McKeon, Chaim Perelman, Stephen Toulmin, and

11. As one indication of the degree to which Weaver's professional life was compartmentalized, several of his closest colleagues at the University of Chicago have said they were completely unaware until well after his death of his extensive network of friends in Chicago associated with *Modern Age* and the conservative movement. See, for example, the interview of Wilma and David Ebbitt conducted by the editor in Newport, RI, on August 16, 1997.

Jürgen Habermas), and a founder of modern conservatism, among whose adherents he shares with Russell Kirk the role of principal defender and advocate of moral and philosophical traditionalism. Only in the field of pedagogy has his influence waned, but that is less a function of the merit of his ideas than of the wholesale abandonment of the ideal of educating students in the knowledge and service of truth.

One impetus for the heightened appreciation of Weaver's work has been the publication of a number of the writings he left in manuscript form. *Visions of Order*, a set of essays on politics, culture, and rhetoric completed in 1958 and submitted to the Louisiana State University Press in 1961, was finally issued in 1964. It was followed three years later by the second edition of his writing textbook, *Rhetoric and Composition*, which he was completing at the time of his death. In 1968 Arlington House published *The Southern Tradition at Bay*, a defense of Southern culture based on a highly original analysis of Southern letters in the postbellum period. Having initially written it as his doctoral dissertation at LSU, Weaver revised the manuscript for publication in 1945, but abandoned the project after it was rejected by the University of North Carolina Press the following year. Finally, eight unpublished essays and speeches edited by various hands have appeared in print since 1963.¹²

Weaver's reputation has also benefitted from the continuing dissemination of his published works. Three of his five books—*Ideas Have Consequences* (1948), *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (1953), and *The Southern Tradition at Bay* (1968)—have remained in print more or less continuously since their initial release, and *Visions of Order* (1964), which went out of print in 1978, was reissued by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute in 1995. In addition, three collections of his shorter writings have been published posthumously: *Life Without Prejudice* (1965), a set of eight essays and speeches on politics and culture; *Language Is Sermonic* (1970), a group of eight book chapters, essays, and speeches on rhetoric; and the fourteen essays (one of them actually the transcript of a lecture) comprising *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver* (1987). Finally, at least twenty-four of his book chapters and essays have been reprinted in a total of thirty-six different publications since 1963.

12. See the Bibliography for a comprehensive list of Weaver's writings ordered chronologically by date of first publication.