

VISIONS of ORDER: PREFACE

On Thanksgiving Day, 1954, Richard Weaver wrote to Richard Cornuelle of the Volker Fund to request support for a proposed new book. After summarizing the arguments of his two earlier works—*Ideas Have Consequences*, published in 1948 by the University of Chicago Press, and *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, published in 1953 by the Henry Regnery Company—Weaver offered this description of the project:

I now feel that I want to attempt a third book which might, in a sense, complete the other two. It would bring together the problems of order, community, tradition, and expression in some more comprehensive view than either of the others, and I should hope that its analysis might go deeper. It is my feeling that no one has yet adequately exposed the forces of disintegration which threaten so much of modern life. Most social science surveys of the subject impress me as practically useless because they leave too much out of account and they are too timid. And while I would not presume to do the definitive job, I think that I could push the inquiry a little further.¹

The ultimate result of this initiative was a slim volume entitled *Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Time*. First published by the Louisiana State University Press in March of 1964, more than nine years after it was proposed and eleven months after Weaver's untimely death of heart failure at the age of 53, the book had little immediate impact. It received substantial reviews in only five nationally distributed publications, and of these only two were wholly favorable. Sales began slowly and never really improved. By mid-1974, a full decade after its release, combined sales of the hardback and paperback editions totaled less than 3,000 copies.² By 1978, both editions were out of print.

Possible reasons for the book's disappointing performance include ineffective marketing by a press more oriented to academic than popular audiences, less than enthusiastic reviews in conservative publications such as *National Review* and *Modern Age*, and the fact that the book was released at a time when the attention of many potential readers was focused on the dramatic events of the Goldwater presidential campaign. But perhaps the most important reason was the belief, still widespread, that Weaver was working on *Visions of Order* at the time of his death and had left the book unfinished. One prominent source of this belief is Eliseo Vivas, who claimed in his review of the book in *Modern Age* that Weaver "left it in manuscript and had no opportunity to make final revisions."³

The truth of the matter is quite different. Weaver's 1954 request to the Volker Fund was rewarded with a \$4,500 grant which allowed him to take leave from the University of Chicago and spend the entire 1955-56 academic year working on the book. (It is worth noting that, aside from a single quarter of release time in 1951 to finish *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, this was Weaver's only sabbatical in 29 years of teaching.) Despite a five-month interruption in 1956-57 to see his textbook *Composition* into print, Weaver made steady progress on the project, and in October 1957 he reported to Kenneth Templeton of the Volker Fund that "the book...is now virtually completed" and listed chapter titles almost identical to those in the published version.⁴ By the end of the following summer the first draft was finished, and Weaver turned his attention to the long and frustrating task of finding a publisher.

The manuscript was sent first to the Henry Regnery Company. But after keeping it "for a very long while—something like a year," they returned it.⁵ This prompted "one more revision" of the text, after which Weaver concluded that "it is now in about as final form as I can put it"⁶ and resumed the search. In August 1960, on the advice of his old friend Fred Wieck (then director of the University of Michigan Press), he offered it to Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, but with similar results.

At last, in January 1961, an inquiry to the Louisiana State University Press was answered with a warm invitation to submit the manuscript for review. This Weaver did, despite warnings from a friend that LSU could not provide the professional support he needed, and despite repeated pleas from Henry Regnery for his company to be allowed to reconsider the manuscript. But Weaver did not respond to LSU immediately. Instead, he took more than two months to conduct an exhaustive review of his work and to solicit criticisms on one of the chapters from a friend.⁷ In the end, however, he decided to change only the proposed subtitle of the book (from the rather forbidding *Essays toward a Metaphysics of Culture to Essays on the Cultural Crisis of Our Time*). On April 4, 1961, he dispatched the manuscript to Baton Rouge.

With *Visions of Order* in the hands of an apparently sympathetic publisher, Weaver was able to resume work on two other major projects, a revised edition of *Composition* and a new book contrasting the historical cultures of the American North and South. Neither would be completed before his death. Meanwhile, at the LSU Press, the first two reviews of *Visions of Order* were highly favorable. Weaver was notified of this in November of 1961 and told that only one more review would be needed. But the third review was negative, and action on the manuscript was suspended for almost a year. Only after a change of directors at LSU Press and the receipt of a fourth (and favorable) review in March 1963 was a decision made to proceed with publication. But Weaver was never notified of that decision, and he died without learning the fate of his book.

This brief history suggests at least two important conclusions. First, it is clear that *Visions of Order* was conceived in 1954 and largely written between 1955 and 1957. Further, all of the available evidence indicates that there were no substantial revisions to the manuscript after August of 1960 at the latest. This means that the book is best seen as an expression of Weaver's views in the mid-1950s, not, as is commonly supposed, at the end of his life. This point is crucial to any accurate understanding of the progression of Weaver's thought. In particular, a 1960 letter shows that *Visions of Order* was meant 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.⁸ Weaver's writings in the last five years of his life must therefore be seen as products, not precursors, of that change.

Second, it is evident that the manuscript submitted to the LSU Press in 1961 was anything but unfinished. After completing the first draft in 1958, Weaver revised and refined the text repeatedly over the next three years, and on two occasions (in August 1960 and April 1961) he stated explicitly that he had taken the work as far as he could. Thus, whatever one's final opinion of the merits of his arguments might be, those arguments must be seen as the product of long and thoughtful deliberation by an intellect of considerable magnitude and should not be lightly dismissed. This is true even (perhaps especially) in the case of Weaver's iconoclastic attacks on egalitarian democracy, forced racial integration, the cult of the automobile, modern warfare, public education, and the theory of evolution, all

of which have been the target of superficial criticisms by those unwilling to address his larger claims.

Weaver's purpose in *Visions of Order* is to show that the restoration of Western culture is both possible and desirable. In order to establish those claims, he constructs a case at two distinct levels of analysis. At the first (and largely dialectical) level, he uses a definition of the essential nature of culture and an analysis of the dominant forces in contemporary American society to show that certain key features of the modernistic worldview lead inexorably to the disintegration of culture. Given this diagnosis, he can then indicate what actions would be needed to effect a recovery. At the deeper (and largely rhetorical) level, he offers an eloquent defense of the idea of culture and a foundational critique of modernism, both grounded in a traditional Western conception of the "nature and proper end of man."

Weaver presents his case in a series of eight freestanding essays, which are formed into a coherent whole by a subtle and elegant pattern of organization. At its most basic level, that pattern divides the series into two groups of four essays each. The first quartet (chapters 1-4) provides a deductive analysis of the nature of culture and the causes of its decline in America and the West. The second quartet (chapters 5-8) rounds out the case by exploring certain themes suggested by the initial analysis. Here Weaver offers contrasting studies of how an overemphasis on status can result in cultural despotism while the subordination of status to function has spawned the barbarities of modern "total war," followed by searching critiques of progressive education ("the greatest single threat to our culture") and those scientific theories that have served to diminish man.

Despite its limited initial success, *Visions of Order* has attracted a large and growing body of admirers over the last three decades, particularly in the academic fields of cultural studies and rhetoric.⁹ This should not be surprising. The book includes several of Weaver's best essays (especially "The Image of Culture" and "The Cultural Role of Rhetoric") and its analyses of the nature of culture, the limits of science and technology, and the relationship between rhetoric and dialectic are of profound and lasting significance. In addition, many of the ideas in *Visions of Order* display a kind of heuristic richness which invites their application to other areas of inquiry. For example, the discussion of the problems that arise when a culture attributes "immanence" to its forms is directly relevant to one of the most vexed questions of pluralism: At what point is it permissible for a pluralistic culture to suspend tolerance and act in opposition to a rival culture? In Weaver's terms, tolerance ends, and the defense of pluralism begins, when the rival culture attributes immanence to its forms. Or again, Weaver's discussion of the destructiveness of dialectic in the form of science functions equally well as a foundational critique of ideology, and his analysis of the trial of Socrates may help explain why the adoption by American journalists of a Socratic posture marked by cultural neutrality and systematic skepticism has sparked a massive popular revulsion against the press.

Even granting these qualities, however, it must be acknowledged that much of *Visions of Order* is devoted to a critique of contemporary culture. It is therefore legitimate to question how much relevance a critique of the modernist culture of the mid-1950s can have for the postmodern world of the mid-1990s. After all, the book was written before television's rise to dominance; before the endless procession of movements seeking new and special "rights"; before the "War on Poverty" and the construction of the American welfare state; before the

quintupling of violent crime and illegitimacy; before widespread drug use and abortion-on-demand, Vietnam and Watergate, consumerism and environmentalism, affirmative action and political correctness; before the sexual revolution, the information revolution, and the worldwide repudiation of socialism. In a very real sense, *Visions of Order* is the product of a different and more innocent age.

But Weaver took aim at the root of things, and despite the enormous changes in American society and culture over the past generation, there are only two significant instances in which his analysis has been superseded by events. The first of these involves the attempt by social scientists to apply empirical methods to the study of human language and behavior, which was a principal target of *Visions of Order*. This effort collapsed in the late 1970s, due largely to the inability of its proponents to provide satisfactory responses to humanistic criticisms like those that Weaver had advanced. The second instance concerns the determination to "conquer" nature, an attitude of modernism that Weaver reviled as hubristic and impious. However common this attitude might have been in the 1950s, it was quickly suppressed by the triumph of environmentalism in the decades immediately following.

In most other matters, *Visions of Order* stands as a monument to Weaver's prescience. The central focus of the book is the decline of traditional Western culture and its transcendent view of man in the face of relentless attacks by the forces of secular rationalism. That decline has now produced a massive popular reaction and a spreading *Kulturkampf* that is centered squarely on the conflict of worldviews that *Visions of Order* describes. Similarly, Weaver's attacks on the "revolutionary" program of progressive education and his claim that "the world for which the progressivists are conditioning their students is not the world espoused by general society, but by a rather small minority of radical doctrinaires and social faddists" might once have seemed extreme and shrill. But many now endorse such views as an accurate description not only of primary and secondary education, but higher education as well. And in that realm, it is not difficult to see a direct connection between the anti-authoritarian, child-centered practices of progressive education and the emergence of a kind of postmodern "scholarship" in which the search for truth has been supplanted by mere interpretation and the worth of a scholar is determined less by his intellectual achievements than by his membership in some favored group. Nor is it difficult to see, given Weaver's discussion of the organic unity of real cultures, why the effort by the intellectual Left to erect a "multicultural" society on the ruins of forced integration must also end in failure.

In short, for those many now committed to the restoration of American culture, *Visions of Order* can serve as an invaluable guide. Aside from the addition of a preface, this reprinted edition is identical to the original in all respects. The "Foreword" was written in December 1963 by the late Russell Kirk. It is altogether fitting that Dr. Kirk was asked to perform the task. It was on his suggestion that Weaver approached the Volker Fund for support in 1954, and there are many similarities in their views of the plight of Western civilization.¹⁰ It is also fitting that the Intercollegiate Studies Institute should be the publisher of this new edition. Weaver served for many years as a member of the Institute's board and as an associate editor and frequent contributor to its journal, *Modern Age*. It now remains for those who have followed to realize his vision.

TED J. SMITH III
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA
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Endnotes

1. Letter from Richard Weaver to Richard Cornuelle dated Thanksgiving Day, 1954, acquired from the estate of Mrs. Polly Weaver Beaton. In addition to the specific items quoted, this discussion has been informed by documents in the collected papers of Cleanth Brooks (housed at Yale University), Donald Davidson (at Vanderbilt University), William C. Mullendore (at the University of Oregon), and Henry Regnery (at the Hoover Institution), documents in the files of the Louisiana State University Press, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute and *Modern Age*, and correspondence provided by Louis H. T. Dehmlow, the late Russell Kirk, and the family of Frank S. Meyer.
2. The full text of *Visions of Order* was also reprinted in the Conservative Book Club's *Omnibus Volume 6*, published in 1966.
3. Eliseo Vivas, "The Mind of Richard Weaver," *Modern Age* (Summer 1964), 307.
4. Letter from Richard M. Weaver to Kenneth S. Templeton dated October 16, 1957, in the Richard Malcolm Weaver Papers at Vanderbilt University. Quoted by permission.
5. Letter from Richard M. Weaver to Kenneth S. Templeton dated August 30, 1960, acquired from the estate of Mrs. Polly Weaver Beaton.
6. *Ibid.*
7. The friend was Eugene Davidson, editor of *Modern Age*, who commented on Chapter 6, "A Dialectic on Total War." He recommended only minor revisions.
8. See the letter from Richard M. Weaver to Dean Terrill dated September 3, 1960, in the Richard M. Weaver Library Collection at Hillsdale College.
9. See, for example, Eugene D. Genovese, *The Southern Tradition* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), and Bernard K. Duffy and Martin Jacobi, *The Politics of Rhetoric: Richard M. Weaver and the Conservative Tradition* (Westport, CT, 1993).
10. See, especially, Kirk's *America's British Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1993), which can almost be read as a companion volume to *Visions of Order*.