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tive thought, shorn of its errors and irrationalities" deserves a "respectful hearing" that is topsy-turvy as the fact that the author is the nation's most eminent historian on the left.

Genovese, Distinguished Scholar-in-Residence at Emory's University Center in Atlanta, is alluding not to the free-market conservatism of Georgia's Newt Gingrich but to a traditional conservatism that has its origins in the antebellum writings of men such as John C. Calhoun. It is a conservatism that grants pride of place to community, hierarchy, and order, a conservatism that looks with horror upon today's visions of individual freedom, whether those of liberals or conservatives. It achieved its second wind with the Agrarian movement, which included writers and poets such as Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren and produced the famous manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), and was continued by scholars such as Richard Weaver (1910-63) and M. E. Bradford (1934-93). Today, it is preserved in two intellectual magazines, *Chronicles* and *Southern Partisan*, and partially represented in the political arena by Patrick Buchanan.

This older southern conservatism is a tradition nearly as hostile to the market as it is to socialism and communism. Against the homogenizing and leveling influences of the national state and international finance capitalism, the southern conservatives have held up a vision of regional autonomy, "small property," and "Christian individualism." They are appalled by most of what modernity has wrought. "There is ground for declaring that modern man has become a moral idiot," Richard Weaver wrote in 1948. "For four centuries every man has been not only his own priest but his own professor of ethics." Genovese finds many flaws and a few things to admire in these arguments, but he is rightly drawn to the traditionalist idea of egalitarianism, which is based on moral skepticism rather than the usual utopian assumptions about the goodness of man. Most southern conservatives would agree with C.S. Lewis's judgment that "mankind is so fallen that no man can be trusted with unchecked power over his fellows."

The power of the southern conservatives' cultural critique is not matched by their political program, which suffers from internal philosophical gridlock. Those who in the past opposed segregation, for example, did little to promote integration because of their commitment to community rights, "and their particular communities . . . were implacably hostile to black demands," Genovese notes. Today, they fear international capitalism but, because of their distrust of the national government, they are reluctant to propose effective means of regulating it. Genovese believes that the southern conservatives could have "surprising strength" in national politics. Such a conservatism, traditionalist in economics and morality, may hold lessons for the Left, but it is hard to see how it has much to offer a larger public apart from an admirable but finally inchoate longing for community.

### Arts & Letters

**THE RUIN OF KASCH.** By Roberto Calasso. Trans. by William Weaver and Stephen Sartarelli. Harvard. 385 pp. \$24.95

*The Ruin of Kasch* is literary but not a novel, historical but not a history, philosophical but not formal philosophy. Its author, Roberto Calasso, is a distinguished Milanese publisher and the author of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* (1993), and here he has composed an extended meditation on the downward course of civilization and the emergence of the modern world.

*Kasch* makes its own genre, albeit one quintessentially European in tone and feel. (Had Calasso been around, and of different views, he might have been hired for the *Encyclopédie*.) Calasso follows, at least in this work, the mind's leaps rather than the footprints of earthbound narrative. He thus devotes only nine pages to the legendary African kingdom of Kasch, but the tale resonates forward and back through every chapter as an example of what happens as we move from apparently primitive to apparently enlightened practices. What such a

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transition entails Calasso traces through his random (but artfully so) disposition of the text, and that apparent randomness comes to mirror the disconnectedness of modern consciousness itself, which Calasso believes has severed all ties to a larger sustaining realm.

Calasso builds much of his case around Charles Maurice de Talleyrand (1754–1838), the French statesman who leaped from regime to regime and from era to era with a cat's ease. Before the French Revolution, Talleyrand was a very worldly Catholic bishop, and he later observed that those who never knew the ancien régime would never know the sweetness of life. Yet Talleyrand went on to support the Revolution and then to serve the Directory, Napoleon, and finally the restored House of Bourbon. Talleyrand presides as master of ceremonies here because he achieved a wholeness despite historical ruptures and discordancies; even his deathbed reconciliation with the church managed to round the circle of his various life interests.

In addition to Talleyrand, Calasso's cast includes—and this is a mere sampling—French kings and Vedic seers, Plato, Marx (Karl, though Groucho might easily have found a place), Jeremy Bentham, Hegel, Max Stirner, Charles Baudelaire, Pol Pot, and Cecil B. De Mille. The list suggests a larger degree of playfulness than the book generally manages. For Calasso writes in a tone of icy and ironic omniscience that one might call Olympian but for a suspicion that he would prefer something a bit higher. Himalayan, say. Consider: "If we really must find a distinction between what can be said of the Modern and everything that we encounter in previous ages, might it not perhaps be a certain ability . . . to ignore limitations even when explicitly defending them—to invade every off-limits area, perhaps on the pretext of guarding it against all violations?"

This is pure Calasso. The observation is striking (and may even be true), and the pair of hedging *perhaps*'s is entirely in character. But the sentence only finally appears on page 293 of a book that has labored mightily, up to that point, precisely to find a distinction between the modern and what came before.

Under the circumstances, the "If we really must" is maddening and provokes an exasperated "Well, whose idea was this anyway?" No matter: the reader who takes to the extraordinary mind will readily forgive the manner.

**THE WESTERN CANON: The Books and School of the Ages.** By Harold Bloom. Harcourt Brace. 578 pp. \$29.95

A reader could grow hoarse talking back to this book—at times in annoyance, more often in admiration. Bloom teaches literature at both Yale and New York universities, and *The Western Canon* is his summation of a lifetime of reading great literature as well as watching what he considers its growing debasement in the universities and schools.

Bloom has always been a critic provocateur. As such, he attaches three appendices that identify what's canonical down through the 19th century and a somewhat diffident fourth appendix about the 20th century that he calls "a canonical prophesy." It is these lists, which go on for 36 pages and are, by turns, traditional, quirky, and tentative, that have made the book controversial. They also have diverted attention from *The Western Canon*'s larger achievement.

For the Greeks a *kanon* was a rod or bar used to keep things straight. Today, the word *canon* has been stripped of its original and all subsequent meanings but one: the body of work that has kept the study of literature fixated on the writings of dead, mostly white, mostly European, mostly male authors. Antagonists of Bloom's idea of a canon now command the academy—feminists, Marxists, Afrocentrists, New Historicists, Deconstructors—all of whom he ridicules for their insistence that literature must serve political and social ends. "One breaks into the canon only by aesthetic strength," he argues, by "mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction."

In the beginning and concluding chapters, Bloom mourns the current loss of concern for preserving a tradition of great literature.