

The Part-Time Sage of Ithaca



The contemporary American conservative movement needs, on the showing of this book, to know far more than it does about the *past* of American conservatism—of American conservatism, the *Federalist* as over against Burke's *Reflections*, and of the *entire past* of American conservatism, including its immediate past as well as its more remote past; *and* to make some sharp and too-long postponed choices amongst the myriad, often-conflicting emphases of the various conservatisms, the various manifestations of resistance to the emergent Liberal revolution that have presented themselves in the course of American history. Put otherwise: *some* of the positions that American opponents of that revolution have adopted must go: this one because it is too sharp a departure from the wisdom of the Framers on a point so *fundamental* that it cannot be compromised; that one because it is "dated," and no longer relevant in the struggle against Liberalism; that one yonder because it flies in the face of an unambiguous and manifestly irreversible decision of the American people to move in this direction rather than that one; this one *or* that one because, all questions of fidelity to the Framers entirely to one side, they are clearly incompatible and cannot *both* be retained. Now: one of the paradoxes we are up against, given the present state of the literature of our topic, is that one of the most useful books we have, for the purpose just indicated, Clinton Rossiter's *Conservatism in America*,¹ is a book whose author pretty certainly never intended contemporary American conservatism any good, whose major counsels to contemporary American conservatism are, variously, prescriptions for self-betrayal and suicide, and whose major theses of an analytical character (to which we must give at least brief notice in the present chapter) are, demonstrably, incorrect—whether because tendentious politically or, as is usually the case, based on bad political theory. One would prefer, for all the latter reasons, to exclude it from consideration in these pages, but one cannot: Rossiter has done his homework, and done it mainly on American materials, about which he writes with affection and enthusiasm and in essentially American

terms; any way you slice it, therefore, his book provides a sorely-needed counterbalance to the writings of Russell Kirk, and becomes, if only for that reason, a "must" item in the literature. Nor is that all: *one* way to slice it, at certain crucial points, is to shake the product of his homework loose from his tendentiousness and his bad political theory, and exploit it for sound conservative purposes, which is what I shall attempt to do in much of what follows (particularly with respect to his treatment of 19th century American conservatism). Another way to slice it is by coming to grips with some of its major errors and fallacies, and using them as springboards to a correct appraisal of the issues at stake. Still another is to seize upon the occasional point on which, on the showing of this book, he is right—even if for wrong reasons and, painful as it may be to confess our indebtedness to him, learn from him—as we shall do, for example, with his treatment of 19th century *laissez faire* conservatism, the best we shall find until we come to the implications, for contemporary American conservatism, of the teachings of the True Sage of Woodstock. That is why we call him the Part-time Sage—not, as he for the most part deserves, the Pseudo-Sage—of Ithaca, though as indicated we shall not overlook him in the latter, his vocational not his avocational, his work-a-day not his moonlighting, capacity.

a) Rossiter's version of the *conservative creed* bears marked similarity to Kirk's. According to Rossiter, whose propositions we "turn around," where necessary, in order to make them formally parallel to Kirk's, the Conservative believes:

- 1) That the nature of man is immutable but *mixed*, that is, capable of civilized behavior but potentially given to wickedness, unreason, and violence.
- 2) That men are equal in that each possesses a precious soul and an inviolable personality, but naturally unequal in other respects.
- 3) That liberty takes precedence over equality in the hierarchy of human values.
- 4) That social classes are both inevitable and necessary, so that "most attempts at levelling" are both foolish and futile.
- 5) That the good society needs an aristocracy, which both rules and serves.
- 6) That majority-rule is both fallible and potentially tyrannical.
- 7) That all forms of power (social, economic, and, most especially,

political), *because majority-rule is fallible and potentially tyrannical*, should be diffused and balanced.

8) That the "rights of man" are rights that a man *earns*, not rights that he has given to him.

9) That a man earns his rights by performing his duties, which include service, effort, obedience, cultivation of virtue, and self-restraint.

10) That the institution of private property is of the first importance, alike from the standpoint of liberty, order, and progress.

11) That inherited institutions, values, symbols, and rituals are indispensable to the good society, and sacred.

12) That religious feeling plays an essential role in the life of the individual, and organized religion an essential role in the life of society.

13) That human reason is fallible, and of limited reach.

14) That the mission of education is to civilize, discipline, and conserve.

15) That history, conceived as mysterious, tragic, but characterized also by grandeur, is the surest guide to wisdom and virtue.

16) That there are immutable principles of universal justice.

17) That the community, which is wondrous and divinely-ordained, takes precedence over the whims and rights of any individual, and that *therefore* both individualism and collectivism are to be rejected as means of reconciling liberty and authority.

18) That the marks of a good man are: reverence, contentment, sensitivity, patriotism, self-discipline, and the performance of duty.

19) That the marks of a good society are: stability, unity, equity, continuity and the confinement of change.

20) That the marks of a good government are: dignity, authority, legitimacy, justice, constitutionalism, the recognition of limits.

21) That Conservatism, as here defined, is absolutely necessary to the existence of civilization.

Such a creed, let us say at once, is a marked improvement over Kirk's (with which the reader will perhaps find it instructive to compare it, point by point), but shares with it certain basic faults, namely: It includes a number of points that clearly are *not* issues between conservatism and liberalism (because they are accepted by many if not most Liberals), that can be salvaged, for purposes of a conservative creed, only (as we have insisted with regard to similar emphases

in Kirk's creed) by putting them forward as propositions whose *denial* conservatives can be counted on to resist, and that as they stand, give the creed overtones of a *moralism* that contemporary American conservatives will be well-advised to avoid. It is, like Kirk's, remote from the realities of the present major clashes between conservatism and liberalism, and it states badly, or prejudicially, some of the issues that in fact ought to be stressed in such a creed.

At the same time, it approaches nearly enough, in *some* of its emphases, to a correct statement of a conservative creed, to be worth reworking, as follows:

Item 21 (conservatism is necessary to civilization) must go out on grounds of triviality: it merely commits conservatives to conservatism on the one hand and to the probably not controversial proposition that civilization is a good thing. Item 18 must go (a good man is reverent, sensitive, patriotic, dutiful, etc.) as a piece of gratuitous moralism. Item 15 (the mystery, grandeur, and tragedy of history, and history as the "surest guide to wisdom and virtue") must go, along with Item 13 (human reason is fallible, and of "limited reach")—the first because it would reduce conservatism to one of the many forms of "historicism," which, along with relativism and positivism, it is the task of conservatives to oppose, the first *and* second (reason is fallible, etc.) because they deny the conservative commitment to *reason* as the surest guide to wisdom and virtue (some conservatives, to be sure, would place Revelation above reason as a guide, but my thesis is that they *must* not, *as* conservatives, press the point). (I do not suggest, of course, that the conservative regards reason as *infallible*, merely that, for political and social purposes, that is where I understand him to place his bets.) Item 17 (the community takes precedence over the rights and whims of the individual) must go because it is the answer to a nonsense question, to which conservatives have no business giving any answer at all, the "choice" between the community and the individual being always the product of bad political theory. (Item 17 could, however, be salvaged by confining it to the notion: conservatism rejects both individualism and collectivism—not merely as a means of "reconciling" liberty and authority, which the conservative does *not* regard as in necessary conflict, but in and of themselves and on grounds of reason.) Item 3 (liberty takes precedence over equality, etc.) must go because, from the standpoint of American conservatism at least, the question of which takes prece-

dence, liberty or equality, arises only on a tendentious, post-Lincolnan definition of "equality;" (Item 3 could be salvaged by being made to read: Liberty takes precedence over egalitarian reforms; but that point would appear to be sufficiently taken care of in Item 4.) Item 9 (a man earns his rights by performing his duties, or, as the conservative would prefer to say, forfeits his rights by *not* performing his duties) must go, like Item 18, on grounds of gratuitous moralism. Item 11 (inherited institutions, etc., are indispensable) must go because it is a caricature of the conservative position, which as a matter of course cannot commit itself to the sacredness and indispensability of *all* inherited "institutions, values, symbols, rituals, etc.," or to the view that any criteria other than those of reasonableness are ultimately relevant in arriving at a judgment concerning the sacredness of *an* institution, "value," symbol, ritual. (The item can perhaps be salvaged by making it read: That the Conservative believes a *good* institution is rendered the *more* sacred by having been handed down from the forefathers.) Item 8 must go (but cf. Item 9) because it is simply *not* a conservative belief: conservatives believe that men are *endowed* with natural rights.

This leaves us with the items that must, in order to be acceptable as items of an *American* conservative creed, be restated:

Item 16 (there are immutable principles of universal justice), though unexceptionable as far as it goes, must be expanded to read: That there are principles of universal justice, which man discovers through *reason*, that is, through the procedures of *natural law speculation*. (Rossiter and Kirk are alike in their curious avoidance of the phrase "natural law," and, therefore, in failing to stress the conservative's commitment to natural law.) Item 19 urgently wants restatement in *American* terms, so that it will read as follows: The goals of *our* society should be "to form [an ever?] more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the general Welfare, and secure the blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity"—that is, use the language of the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States (one hesitates to commit American conservatives to a general theory, applicable in other countries, as to what societies should be like). Item 20, similarly, must be made to read: That the best form of government for the *American* people is that stipulated in the Constitution of the United States, and explicated and justified in the *Federalist*; it is based, *inter alia*, on separation of

powers, division of powers, limited power, and constitutionalism. Item 1 should read: That the nature of man is sufficiently constant to warrant certain firm propositions about him, namely that he is capable of both good and bad, both reasonableness and unreasonableness, both civility and barbarousness; sufficiently capable of good and reasonableness and civility to deserve the means to his self-protection, sufficiently capable of bad and unreasonableness and barbarism to warrant the separation and limitation of power that characterize the Constitution of the United States. (Why commit conservatism to the view that the nature of man is "immutable"?) Item 2 should read: That, despite the great and indisputable natural inequalities among them, all men *are* created equal, and are entitled in some respects but not in others to equal treatment; at the very least, all men have an equal claim to justice. Item 4 should be freed of any reference to "classes," which is and throughout the history of the tradition always has been regarded as inappropriate to the climate of American politics, and be made to read: That it is the business of government in the United States to promote a just not an equal distribution of rewards and privileges. Item 5 should be freed of any reference to "aristocracy," as also inappropriate to the climate of American politics, and made to read: That the people, in choosing the representatives who are to exercise the powers granted to office-holders under the Constitution, should seek the "best" men. Item 6, which more than any other is a caricature of the conservative position, should be freed of all suggestion of a special conservative animus against "majorities," and be made to read: That political power, no matter by whom exercised, is potentially tyrannical, that is, capable of injustice, that is, of invading natural rights, and should therefore be restrained. Item 7 should read: That because men are capable of injustice, that is, of invading each other's natural rights, the most desirable state of affairs—politically, socially, economically—is one in which power is diffused. Item 10 should read: That abrogation of the rights of property, save as this may be clearly necessary for the purposes set forth in the Preamble to the Constitution, is *theft*, and thus a violation of natural law. Item 12 should be freed of any reference to the role of religious feeling in the lives of individuals, which under the original interpretation of the First Amendment is *not* a proper concern of a conservative political movement in the United States, and be made to read: That organized religion plays a valuable role in the life of

American society, and should be regarded with favor even by those American conservatives who are not themselves believers. (Thus bringing the item in line, as we shall see, with Rossiter's own teaching concerning conservatism and religion.) Item 14 should read: That the proper function of American educational institutions, both public and private, is to inculcate upon their charges a belief in the *conservative* creed.

I make the following claim for the amended creed, as compared with Rossiter's: that it helps render intelligible, as his does not, the actual points of controversy in the continuing struggle between conservatism and liberalism in the United States.

b) *Conservatism and change*. Kirk, as we have seen, is at least tempted to make of attitude change *the* differentia between conservatism and radicalism-liberalism, and is saved from doing so, if saved at all, merely by his confusions as to what that attitude is. Rossiter has no comparable confusions to save him: conservatism is, for him, one point on a spectrum—leading from “revolutionary radicalism” through “liberalism” through “conservatism” through “standpattism” through “reaction” to “revolutionary reaction”—of attitudes toward the “existing order” on the one hand and “change and reform” on the other. “Conservatism” is “discriminating defense of the existing order against change and reform.” Conservatism's next-door neighbor, “liberalism,” therefore, is a matter of “reasonable satisfaction” with the existing order, of determination *not* to “betray its ideals” or “undermine its institutions,” but also of receptivity towards any “thoughtful plan to improve the lot of men,” of optimism concerning the probable success of such plans, of, for the purposes of such plans, but *only* for the purposes of such plans, choosing “change over stability, experiment over continuity, the future [!] over the past [!].” Conservatives and liberals, by clear implication here and expressly elsewhere in the book, agree then on fundamentals, that is, on the “ideals” and typical “institutions” of the existing order; indeed every liberal is in considerable degree conservative, and every conservative, since his defense of the “existing order” is merely “discriminating” not absolute, is in considerable degree “liberal.” At first blush, indeed, one gets the impression that Rossiter's conservatives and Rossiter's liberals don't disagree at all because they have nothing to disagree about (“no line separates one camp from the other, but somewhere between them

stands a man who is at once the most liberal of conservatives and most conservative of liberals”). But there *is* a difference, which if we look hard enough we can finally detect: even in the presence of a “thoughtful plan to improve the lot of men,” the conservative is pessimistic about its chances of success, prefers “stability over change, continuity over experiment, the past [!] over the future [!].” How silly it all is, even on the face of it, we may see by recognizing that it leads unavoidably to the conclusion: the conservative is pessimistic about change, the liberal optimistic, but somewhere between them stands a man who is the most pessimistic of optimists and the most optimistic of pessimists. His statement, in short, reduces *itself* to the absurd; it acquires meaning only in the light of his clear political purpose, namely to emasculate contemporary American conservatism by transforming it, through appropriate incantations, into liberalism.

There is, of course, no objection to Rossiter's setting up arbitrary definitions for such words as “conservatism” and “liberalism,” provided he gives due notice to his readers and provided, having set up the definitions, he subsequently sticks to them, and does not pretend to be using terms in their normal acceptations—just as, shall we say, there would be no objection to his calling the dimes in his son's piggy-bank dollars, provided he does not subsequently try to trade two of the resulting “dollars” for a parimutuel ticket. But these things, clearly, Rossiter is *not* prepared to do. His book is, for example, larded with quotations, indispensable for his argument, from the writings of men who know that what conservatives and liberals disagree about is, precisely, *fundamentals*, that the struggle between them is a struggle over the very destiny of these United States, and that the point at issue between them is *not* whether “changes and reforms” are likely to be successful—men, that is to say, who use the terms “conservatism” and “liberalism” even as my readers and I do. And this is perhaps as good a moment as any for disposing, once and for all, of all definitions of conservatism that equate it with one sort or another of negative attitude toward “change” *as such*. Or, to say that otherwise: for making it clear why conservatives, perhaps especially contemporary American conservatives, must not be understood as being somehow committed to keeping things as they are.

The relevant considerations are these:
A) “Conservatism”—any given conservatism—no doubt emerges,

in the first instance, as sheer opposition to change, any change, in whatever direction. In any young society or organization, that is to say, young enough to be finding itself confronted for the first time with members who have become dissatisfied with this or that aspect of its charter, its activities, its procedures, and wish to "change" it, there will be other members, whom there is no objection to speaking of as "the satisfied," who will resist the would-be reformers, and will, in doing so, make good an etymologically reasonable claim to be the society's "conservatives." That is the grain of truth in the notion that conservatism is opposition to change, which, accordingly, people come by quite honestly and naturally; and, if all societies and organizations were forever young, one could just leave it at that. But societies are *not* forever young, and once they have passed from childhood into adolescence or, worse still, from adolescence into maturity, the situation is by no means so simple, and for several fairly obvious reasons: First, the proponents of change may, in due course, have won on this or that point, so that their reform passes over into the "established order," in which case two possibilities present themselves. Either, on the one hand, the defeated "conservatives," refusing to accept their defeat with good grace, become "irredentists" on that point (that is, grit their teeth and say: we are going to reverse this change); or, on the other hand, the defeated "conservatives" swallow hard and, so to speak, "adopt" the reform, even though yesterday they may have been opposing it on the most "stridently" principled grounds. Now: whichever of these things happens, the kind of simplicity that, e.g., Rossiter would like to have obtain in these matters goes out the window: in the one case we have the "conservatives" proposing change, in the other case we have the "conservatives" defending a different "established order" from that which they were defending yesterday—or, to face the new situation in *all* its horror, some of yesterday's conservatives may do the one and some the other and yet all of them, because agreed on all other matters, remain together in one and yet the same "movement." Moreover, the reformers may win again, and yet again and yet again, with the "conservatives" again going this way or that way or dividing over which way to go, and perhaps dividing along different lines than the time before. Evidently, at some point, the question "Who are the conservatives?" becomes frightfully complicated. In short, it is easy to say,

when we are thinking of the time before Adam delved and we span, who the conservatives were and who the liberal (the serpent, of course); but after the Fall, it may be for the most part a matter of definition—as we may see most clearly, perhaps, by reminding ourselves that the "conservatives" in the Soviet Union today are the Communists, or perhaps even the allegedly defeated Stalinists, such as poor, poor Molotov, or poor, poor Malenkov.

B) Let us now make our model a little more complicated, by introducing, besides the dimension of "change," the two dimensions: that of the founding fathers, and what let us call the "principles," the constitutional morality, of the founding fathers, which is by no means necessarily based upon a teaching inimical to change, and may, indeed, be based upon a teaching that enjoins change in such and such a specified direction, or as may be required for achieving such and such a purpose or, in the jargon of our social sciences, "maximizing" such and such "a value," or good. And let us ask, Who *now*, who in a society with a *tradition* reaching back to the fathers and to the principles laid down by the fathers, who in this more complicated model are the conservatives? The question is, I think, easy to answer: the conservatives are the carriers of the principles of the fathers, the (within that society) *traditionalists*, who can be counted on to resist *not* "change" as such, but change in a direction contrary to or forbidden by the principles of the fathers, change the case for which involves an appeal to *new* principles. Not all organizations, not even all societies, perhaps, have "founders" in the sense intended; and not all societies that do trace themselves back to an act of "founding" possess, as a heritage from the founders, principles; but in one which does, we can make a kind of sense of the idea of conservatism that is impossible in other organizations and societies (in which attitude toward change as such does seem to be the only criterion we can use in defining conservatism), but do so only by adopting *fidelity to the principles of the founders* as the dimension to keep an eye on.

Having admitted the complication of "principles," several interesting possibilities, each involving a further complication of our model suggest themselves: First, questions may arise, with the passing of time, as to the *meaning* of the principles of the founders, which may or may not have been so ambiguous as properly to give rise to such

questions; and the day may come when the "conservatives" are being accused by their opponents of, for example, "misinterpreting" or "misconstruing" them, or are being told by those opponents that *they*, not the conservatives, are the "real" conservatives, the "true" heirs of the founders; or when, worse still, some of the founders are being played off against others of the founders, and disputes rage as to what founders were the "real" founders. At such a time, evidently, save as sound scholarship may adjudicate the issues, the idea of conservatism becomes beclouded by the same kind of indeterminacy that we encountered when we were using "attitude toward change" as our criterion, and we are tempted to say that the answer to the question "Who *now* are the conservatives" is, "It is anybody's guess."

Secondly, somewhere along the line an individual or group may attempt, with greater or lesser show of success, a *new act of founding*, intended to correct the original founders on this or that point on which, it is alleged, they were wrong, or ill-advised, or failed to think forward to some new situation that has presented itself. If the society has a constitution, for example, that constitution may be amended, in strict accordance with procedures laid down by the original founders, with or without the acquiescence of those who, hitherto, have deemed themselves the carriers of the tradition. Here, then, several possibilities present themselves: the new act of founding becomes generally accepted and is, so to speak, "absorbed into" the tradition—as at least seems to have happened with the Bill of Rights thrown up by the First Congress (though I shall have something more to say about that at a later point in this book), expelling that in the tradition with which it is uncongenial. Or the nation remains divided concerning the merits of the new act of founding, or—as seems to have happened with many of the clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment for nearly 100 years after its adoption—the new act of founding, failing to become effective, is subordinated to the original act of founding, and the tradition, save in outward appearance, remains unchanged. Now: in none of these cases do any difficult questions arise as to "Who are the Conservatives?": the Conservatives are those who cling to the principles of the Founders, either in their original form or as amended by general consent. But it is quite otherwise if we think forward to, *e.g.*, a moment when a dead-letter new act of founding picks up support and begins, or appears to begin, to become

effective, or, again, *e.g.*, when, confronted with the mounting consequences of a new act of founding, and finding them unpalatable, a considerable group in the society appeals over the heads of the new founders to the old, demanding a return, however tardy, to first principles. Here all we can say, until the issue is somehow decided, is that we are dealing with a society which is in full crisis: it is uncertain about its tradition and, if we may borrow an anticipatory phrase from the True Sage of Woodstock, is therefore confused even about its own identity. *And* that the question, "Who are the Conservatives?" again, if the defenders of the new act of founding choose to call themselves that, becomes indeterminate, though it could *perhaps* be argued that those who demand a return to "first principles," to the original act of founding, are the conservatives; and, similarly, that where an older "tradition" and a newer "tradition" are in competition, it would be less confusing to speak of the older as *the* tradition.

Now: one of the theses of this book is: Abraham Lincoln and, in considerable degree, the authors of the post-civil-war amendments, attempted a new act of founding, involving concretely a startling new interpretation of that principle of the founders which declares that "All men are created equal"; that the real consequences of that new act of founding could not become apparent until a great political movement, built upon a demand for universal application of the revised principle, gained sufficient power to begin to bring them forth; and that the developing struggle between contemporary American conservatism and the Liberal Revolution is, correctly understood, a struggle between those who are determined to "make good" Abraham Lincoln's new act of founding on the one hand, and those who demand, with greater clarity with each passing day, that the new act of founding be set aside in favor of the principles of the original founders. Of all that, more later.

The distinction between "conservatism" and "Conservatism." Rosster describes his book as a "quest for understanding of American conservatism" with a lower-case "c"—a study of "the principles that have governed our *conservatives* in the past, that appear to govern them in the present, and that ought to govern them in the future"; and it is, he believes, a quest that the "conservatives" who need to know more than they do about the "nature, logic, and principles of conservatism" ought themselves to undertake (p. 3). "[A] high-minded *conservatism*," he believes, "is America's most urgent need

for the years ahead." The "conservatism" of which he speaks is not, however, to be confused with "Conservatism" with an upper-case "c", which though it was a "major force in [American] politics and culture throughout the first half-century of the Republic" (pp. 17-18), and has "continued to appeal to a talented minority of thoughtful Americans (p. 18), yet 'has no standing as a complete system of thought among any sizeable group in this country'" (p. 18). "Conservatism" with an upper-case "c" is the "school of political thought" whose classical expression is Burke's *Reflections* and whose chief American spokesman has been John Adams. American "conservatism" is "conservative" not "Conservative"; in order to understand the former, however, we must first come to grips with the latter (p. 18)—to the exposition of which, accordingly, Rossiter devotes his Chapter I ("The Conservative Tradition"), which leads up to the creed we have examined above (pp. 61-62).

What exactly is the distinction between "Conservatism" and "conservatism"? Not, apparently, that between Burke on the one hand and even those Americans, Adams for example, who were "closest" to Burke—were *that* the distinction we should, on the showing of this book, have to welcome it, and adopt it as our very own. Not that, because "Conservatism" once "flourished" in the United States (p. 16)—was, indeed, "a major force in politics and culture throughout the first half-century of the Republic" (pp. 17-18). Adams, if I read Rossiter correctly, was a "Conservative" not a "conservative." It is not, either, the distinction between the Right-wing political theorists on the one hand and the Right-wing men of action on the other: there are "Conservatives of the tower," "Conservatives of the field," "Conservatives of the market-place," and "Conservatives of the Assembly" (p. 25). And it is not, finally, the distinction between such and such thinkers, including Burke but also thinkers other than Burke, whom we could identify by glancing at Rossiter's footnotes, and yet other thinkers of similar but not identical tendency—Rossiter does not document his discussion of "Conservatism," but rather goes exasperatingly on, "The Conservative this," "The Conservative that," page after page almost forever (pp. 16-98, *passim*). There are no moments, moreover, when one wonders whether Rossiter himself understands the distinction, as when, having "proved" that "Conservatism" agrees with Liberalism on many points because

Burke was a Whig not a Tory (pp. 55-56), he can write: "And if Conservatism has turned more liberal over these hundred and fifty years, Liberalism has turned more conservative" (p. 56).

If the identity of Rossiter's "Conservatives" is shrouded in mystery, so too, it seems to me, is that of his "conservatives." They have, we are told, been for "at least a hundred years"—that is, since Lincoln?—the prisoner of "the American tradition" (which, of course, is a Liberal tradition) (p. 64), whereas formerly they were—what? "Conservatives"? Masters not prisoners of the American political tradition? We can only guess. There are, by contrast with "Conservative" principles, "conservative" principles (p. 71)—*e.g.*, "traditionalism" (p. 71), unity (p. 72), loyalty (p. 72), constitutionalism (p. 72)—all of which, however, as Rossiter sees at once, having got them down, must be "Conservative" principles, too (p. 73); indeed he would call them "Conservative" but that the American mind has displayed "contempt" for the Conservative faith, *e.g.*, again "religion and the higher law" (*ibid.*), which "resemble articles of the Conservative faith" but are, it seems, merely "conservative" (*ibid.*). Roger Williams, John Wise, and Benjamin Franklin were "conservatives [but not Conservatives] in many of their ideas and methods" (p. 86). The Puritan oligarchs, the conservative Whigs, and the American Tories, were "conservatives" (p. 101). The American revolution was "conservative" in "nature" (p. 105). Sometimes "conservatives" seem to be merely the "men on the Right" of American politics (p. 106). The framers of the Constitution were "conservatives" (p. 106), and the Constitution itself was a "triumph for conservatism" (p. 108). And the teaching of the *Federalist* papers is "authentic conservatism"—not, by clear implication, "Conservatism" (p. 109), though it is "flatly committed" to a "central proposition of the Conservative tradition" (p. 110); and, as if that were not by now confusing enough, we learn a moment later (*ibid.*) that "The *Federalist* is conservatism—we may fairly say Conservatism—at its finest and most constructive" (p. 110). The distinction, it becomes increasingly clear, is a distinction without a difference. Yet, if we read the two sentences that immediately follow that just quoted, we can see that Rossiter has in his hands the elements of a distinction that is, demonstrably, of the first importance for our subject-matter. In the *Federalist*, he goes on, there is "no talk of elites or a sharply-limited suffrage; there is no talk of men who are

or can be angels. There is voiced throughout its pages the conditional hope that men who are properly educated, encouraged, informed, and checked can govern themselves wisely and well." He seems, indeed, on the point of saying that which, on the showing of this book, we should like to hear him say, namely: that Right-wing thought in America crosses, in the 1780's, perhaps we can even say during the Philadelphia Convention itself, a Great Divide; the *Federalist* is different from previous Right-wing thought in America, *different even from the previous thought of its own authors*; it is Right-wing thought taking its bearings in a new situation, where certain things have happened that are clearly irreversible, and that Conservatives, as realists, must try to make the best of, must cease to quarrel with. Here there is a distinction *with* a difference, since henceforth the gap between American conservatism and Burke—and, on beyond Burke, the other "Conservative" thinkers of the pre-democratic age—becomes, so to speak, official. It is not merely that the *Federalist* does not "talk of elites" or of "sharply-limited suffrage"; the big difference is that, in crossing the Divide, conservatism in America has adjourned *sine die* its quarrel with *democracy*. And if one were going to make Rossiter's distinction between Conservatism and conservatism make sense, that is how one would go about it: conservatism is Conservatism purged of its bias against genuine self-government, genuine democracy. But Rossiter, who for reasons of which we must speak later thinks of conservatism as inherently anti-democratic, is cut off from seeing it that way.

Let me, with all that in mind, now call out into the open an issue that we have, so to speak, been pushing forward throughout the foregoing pages, namely: By what criteria do we evaluate a creed that puts itself forward as *the* conservative creed—Kirk's, or Rossiter's, or now, Rossiter's as revised by Kendall? By what warrant have I dared to say, in criticizing Rossiter's creed, this is a caricature, that is poorly stated, that yonder has no business in the creed at all, etc.? Or, more accurately, what are the objections to Rossiter's creed that I suppose my revised version able to meet? The main objection to Rossiter's, we are now in position to say, is that we are never told what conservatives where are supposed to have "believed" the items he includes; mine is not open to that objection because, to begin with, it is based on the *Federalist* and because, secondly, it is phrased with an eye to what, on the showing of this book, most American conservatives *must*

have believed throughout the period since the *Federalist*. We shall speak more, later, of how we determine "what most conservatives must have believed" over the period in question, and of the extent to which, and the reasons for which, the principles involved turn out to be pretty much those of the *Federalist*.

Notes

¹Rossiter, Clinton. *Conservatism in America* (New York, Knopf, 1955).