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## ***Left and Right Eclecticism: Roger Kimball's Cultural Criticism***

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Roger Kimball, managing editor of *The New Criterion*, has recently received extraordinary praise in America. He has been hailed by Irving Kristol as 'among our most intelligent, thoughtful, and provocative cultural critics', and by Frederick Morgan as 'one of the ablest and most philosophically skilled critics on the current scene'. According to John Simon, Kimball is 'uniquely qualified to deal with literary and philosophical matters alike'. William J. Bennett, William F. Buckley, Harvey Mansfield, John Ellis, and the late Allan Bloom are among the many who have lauded Kimball's books.<sup>1</sup>

In 1996 Claes G. Ryn questioned the quality and the philosophical depth of American conservatives' concern for culture in his article 'How the Conservatives Failed "The Culture"'.<sup>2</sup> In his view, an unhistorical, abstract way of thinking, inspired mainly by Leo Strauss, had eclipsed the older 'cultural conservatism' of writers like Russell Kirk and Peter Viereck, which in turn had deep affinities with the earlier tradition of cultural criticism represented by Irving Babbitt and the New Humanism. Ryn often has argued that the ahistorical rationalism of much American conservative thought should be corrected by the simultaneously Burkean and

*Cultural conservatism eclipsed by unhistorical thinking.*

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes appear on the covers or dust jackets of Kimball's books.

<sup>2</sup> *Modern Age*, No. 1, 1996. See also Ryn's article on Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, 'Universality or Uniformity', in No. 1, 1988.

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classicist humanism of Babbitt, supplemented by the historicist and epistemological insights of modern idealism, especially as represented by Benedetto Croce. Kimball, along with Buckley, Bennett, Kristol, Bloom, *et al.*, clearly has his roots in the form of American conservatism criticised by Ryn. The nature of the praise for Kimball, as an eminent example precisely of a *cultural* critic with *philosophical* qualifications therefore calls for a closer look at his work.

### ***Eclecticism Revisited***

Kimball's *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*, first published in 1990 by Harper Collins, is one of the best known of the many critiques of the predicament of American higher education in the grip of what Kimball, with a term borrowed from Frederick Crews, calls 'left eclecticism': 'not identical to Marxism, exactly', but representing 'any of a wide variety of anti-establishment modes of thought'. In the new, thoroughly revised edition,<sup>3</sup> Kimball follows the development through the nineties, adding new trends to the eclectic whole. Along with neo-neo-Marxism, it now comprises structuralism, poststructuralism, Lacanian analysis, deconstruction, women's studies, black studies, gay studies, queer theory, critical legal studies, new historicism, cultural studies, and Afrocentrism (and the list is not exhaustive). Kimball himself is not tenured; he analyses the attitude of the new academic establishment which, in the name of a new professionalism formed in accordance with the canon of left eclecticism, looks down upon 'free' intellectuals like himself. Formerly, persons with Kimball's views could also be part of the professoriate; now, Kimball thinks, they are increasingly marginalised and not even accepted as independent writers. Many readers, Kimball recounts, protested against the dark picture he presented and wondered if the situation was really as bad as he depicted. In the new edition, he answers that it is even worse. But it might be more accurate to say that the situation is indeed as bad as Kimball reports, as far as he does report it, but that he does not tell the whole story: there are still many professors with academic integrity who do not run with the pack.

*The Long March: How the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s Changed*

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<sup>3</sup> Chicago: Ivan R. Dee (1998).

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*America*,<sup>4</sup> and *Experiments Against Reality: The Fate of Culture in the Postmodern Age*,<sup>5</sup> are collections of articles previously published in *The New Criterion*. Together, they provide a progressive deepening and broadening of the analysis initiated in *Tenured Radicals*. *The Long March* looks partly beyond the academy to the general culture of the sixties, following the counterculture from the emergence of the 'Beats' in the fifties and through the sixties, and often rounds off with a look at the fates of the leading figures in the last decades of the twentieth century. Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Norman Mailer, Herbert Marcuse, Wilhelm Reich, Norman O. Brown, Susan Sontag, Timothy Leary, Eldridge Cleaver, Charles Reich, and Paul Goodman come in for close scrutiny. Kimball here also attempts a deeper historical and philosophical analysis of the nature of cultural revolutions and of the underlying worldview of hippiedom and student radicalism. *Experiments Against Reality* looks beyond America and explores even deeper strata of modern culture. The theme indicated in the title, even when further specified as the separation of postmodern culture from high modernism as well as from traditional humanism, and as a critique of the former, is broad, yet some chapters still seem tangential to it. In the first part Kimball gauges the merits and the stature in contemporary criticism of figures whose work to some extent challenges or constitutes an alternative to the drift of Western culture towards postmodernism as well as to left eclecticism and the cultural revolution. Among them are T. E. Hulme, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, W. H. Auden, and Robert Musil.<sup>6</sup> None of the leading figures analysed in *The Long March* is today acknowledged as a thinker of the first rank; most are even forgotten. The same may perhaps soon be true also of the professors dominating the pages of *Tenured Radicals*. But in the second part of *Experiments Against Reality*, Kimball tackles twentieth- (and some nineteenth-) century thinkers and writers who are still widely recognised as truly important or whose works are still firmly established at the centre of academic and cultural debate: J. S. Mill, Nietzsche, Sartre, Foucault, Cioran. As with the figures

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<sup>4</sup> San Francisco: Encounter Books (2000).

<sup>5</sup> Chicago: Ivan R. Dee (2000).

<sup>6</sup> Generally these chapters are review essays of new biographies or critical editions; *en passant*, Kimball detects much sloppy scholarship.

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'Productive'  
and 'unpro-  
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in *The Long March*, Kimball focuses not only on the sordid and sometimes nefarious aspects of their works but also of their lives.

During the same period as when these three books were being released, Kimball also coedited with Hilton Kramer, editor-in-chief of *The New Criterion*, no less than three collections of essays from that journal: *The Future of the European Past* (1997), *The Betrayal of Liberalism: How the Disciples of Freedom and Equality Helped Foster the Illiberal Politics of Coercion and Control* (1999), and *Against the Grain: The New Criterion on Art and Intellect at the End of the Twentieth Century* (2000). The substance of 'left eclecticism' is analysed at length in all of these books.

It is a common practice routinely to revile the phenomenon of eclecticism as symptomatic of a lack of originality, dependence on the work of others, a deficient sense of logical coherence and critical discrimination, and often simply bad taste. Yet it is an open question whether the word should not be viewed as having two different meanings: eclecticism in a 'productive' as well as in the usual 'unproductive' sense. In the 'productive' sense, it could stand for thinking which, though not wholly original and composed of elements collected from many different sources, nevertheless combines these elements in a way that is not merely mechanical but which makes sense as a meaningful and consistent whole. For instance, by drawing on many historical layers and various strands in one or more cultural traditions, a traditionally minded thinker may discover, extract, collect, and piece together an essentially coherent wisdom of the ages, and thus perform a valuable task of transmission, preservation, renewal, and explication without adding anything substantially new or any dramatic reinterpretation of his own. This was the aspiration of both Solomon and Cicero. Eclecticism of this traditionalist variety may imply lack of originality, and it certainly implies dependence on the work of others, but at least the etymological meaning of the term<sup>7</sup> allows for its use as a designation of practices that do not exclude logical coherence, critical discernment, and good taste.

I believe the left eclecticism analysed by Kimball can be said to be another instance of eclecticism in the 'productive' sense. Good taste may not always be evident, it must be admitted, but on Kimball's own showing, left eclecticism at least displays a fair

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<sup>7</sup> *Eklegein*, 'pick out', from *ek*, 'out', and *legein*, 'choose'.

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amount of consistency and unity of purpose. If this is not immediately evident, a historical perspective must be introduced.

### ***The Problem of Historical Explanation***

Kimball is too modest with regard to historical explanation, partly, it seems, because he has an insufficient conception of what it entails. Why do cultural revolutions, such as that of the sixties, happen? Since *The Long March* consists of previously published essays, Kimball can, in the later essays, reply to criticism against the earlier ones. Mark Lilla held that for Kimball “the cause of the Sixties was quite simply . . . the Sixties. They just happened, as a kind of miracle, or antimiracle—Why . . . did such a profound revolution take place in America when it did? Let us call this the Tocqueville question”. In my opinion, Kimball’s reply is not entirely satisfactory. Part of the answer, Kimball writes, is ‘what we may call the “Tocqueville answer”’: Tocqueville wrote that “When great revolutions are successful . . . their causes cease to exist, and the very fact of their success has made them incomprehensible”. All manner of sociological, technological, and demographic phenomena have been adduced to “explain” the rise of the counter-culture’, but

the truth is, as Irving Kristol observed, “the counterculture was not ‘caused’, it was born. What happened was internal to our culture and society, not external to it.”—Accordingly, the real task for a cultural critic is not etiological—there are a never-ending series of incomplete answers to the question “Why?”—but diagnostic and, ultimately, therapeutic.<sup>8</sup>

Although it is hardly evident why something that is internal to our culture can not be a cause of one of its developments, the question of the special kind of causality that is at work in history is admittedly a difficult one. Yet birth can also be said to be caused, and Kimball’s historical grasp of the intellectual and cultural forces that underlie and blossom in the sixties revolution is firm enough to make us suspect at least that the ‘Tocqueville answer’ is not the whole truth. In cases like this, we are also confronted with the question of the relation between explanation and understanding. ‘It is possible’, Kimball writes in a passage of a strangely narrow perspective,

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<sup>8</sup> *The Long March*, 270-271.

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to trace the origins of certain aspects of the counterculture back to the late nineteenth century and figures like Marx and Nietzsche, or to locate its origins in the upheavals of the Jazz Age of the 1920s. But those periods, important though they have been historically, furnish antecedents rather than the real origins of the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. The distinctive energies and origins of that revolution, though doubtless fed by countless additional influences, lie in the 1950s and the emergence of the Beats.<sup>9</sup>

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Fortunately, Kimball's analysis turns out to be much less restricted than this. Rousseau figures much more frequently in his essays than Marx and Nietzsche, and he correctly analyses tenured radicalism, hippiedom and the counterculture, and postmodernism in terms of romanticism. (With some historical precision, Irving Kristol also located the cradle of the counterculture not only in romanticism in general, but in the Bohemia of early nineteenth-century Paris.) The historical forces that Kimball accurately describes are all part of a broad, deep, and singularly unitary dynamic of modernity, the analysis of which, with the help of adequate conceptual distinctions, yields what may be as good an example as we may ever hope to find of historical explanation, although it may also be impossible to determine where it has rather contributed to a deeper understanding. Historical understanding as such involves historical explanation and understanding of historical causality, even as historical explanation and the recognition of historical causality presupposes historical understanding. And diagnosis and therapy require all of this. It is not to the late but to the early nineteenth century (and to the late eighteenth and in some respects even to earlier times) that the origins of the counterculture must be traced. Even if this involves a 'never-ending series of incomplete answers', it could be that, the more we are able to include in an intelligent way, the better our explanation and understanding will be. Nor, I believe, is it merely 'aspects' of the counterculture that thus can be traced, but its most central impulses and motivational drives. This origin is hardly 'additional'; rather, it is the origins that Kimball regards as 'distinctive' that are additional, but they are so only in the sense of being new sprouts on the same tree of utopian longing and limitless desire. In the dynamic in question, which was analysed at an earlier stage by Irv-

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

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ing Babbitt,<sup>10</sup> is it possible to separate the Jazz Age, Marx, the romantics, or Rousseau as nothing but antecedents of mere historical importance from its subsequent manifestation in the Beats and the sixties? History in general cannot be isolated that way. It lives in the present, whether we are aware of it or not. This is confirmed by the fact that Kimball does not at all follow in his practice these theoretical considerations.

It is in this historical perspective that the fundamentally unitary character of the modern dynamic clearly emerges, strangely unambiguous in its very ambiguity. And when this character is firmly grasped, it may also be seen that deconstruction, radical feminism, queer theory, neo-neo-Marxism, etc.—the whole farrago of isms and campaigns in contemporary academia as more often than not combined in various proportions by the tenured radicals—is best described either as eclecticism in the 'productive' sense, or, if this usage be not allowed, as something other than eclecticism. As Kimball is well aware, countercultural hippieism as well as the much broader phenomenon of postmodernism can simply be added to the list.

It follows from what I have already said that there are indeed 'original' thinkers within this current. 'Original geniuses' were after all among the most characteristic products of romanticism. But those who take a forward part can be seen to make new additions to and contribute new expressions of the common, broadly romantic enterprise, new variations and manifestations of a shared, underlying sensibility, tendency, and orientation. Kimball's books leave the reader with a nauseating sense of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Yet it is unavoidable that, not least in the contemporary mass-university, the 'original' thinkers have followers in droves, the vast majority of whom are necessarily mere epigones. Some may indeed display originality in how they newly combine such influences, and it is the dominance of such multifarious composites that motivates Crews's and Kimball's use of the term eclecticism. But these original eclectics themselves have epigones, and such epigones seldom present more than a lugubrious rehash and potpourri of their idols. In the sense that consistency, coherence, and good taste rarely if ever (considering the material to choose

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<sup>10</sup> Many scholars, including Jacques Barzun and Morse Peckham, have extended romanticism over the whole of the nineteenth century, well into the twentieth, or even, and, as I believe correctly, up to the present.

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*Romantic  
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tency.*

from) characterise such eclecticism, it may not fit the description of eclecticism in the productive sense. But then again, consistency, coherence, and good taste are not on the agenda of the form of romanticism that we are here considering.<sup>11</sup> In its very lack of consistency, the smorgasbord of today's academic and non-academic counterculture is, as it were, consistent. This side of the movement reaches its theoretical, or atheoretical, apogee in the relativism of postmodernism, capping the iron lawlessness of a development not only set in motion but prefigured in almost every detail two hundred years ago. The cultural and anticultural phenomena arraigned by Kimball, as combined in some typical tenured radical or countercultural writer, are coherent in the sense that romanticism can at all be said to be so. Although their kaleidoscopic combination is often rather the result of a natural development guided by the irresistible forces of the modern romantic dynamic than a deliberate selection, I propose that the outcome may be described as eclectic in the 'productive' sense. No component really contradicts another in the sense of belonging outside the shared romantic worldview.

### ***The Coherence of Wisdom***

With regard to the quality of the ingredients and of the whole emerging from their union, productive eclecticism can be of very different kinds. The coherent romantic eclecticism diagnosed by Kimball is far beyond the pale of and incompatible in essence with a coherent classical humanist eclecticism. Kimball is himself to a considerable extent an eclectic in the 'productive' sense of, say, Matthew Arnold. The whole concept of a liberal arts education and the concomitant idea of a Western canon, as defined by Kimball, is in itself a quintessential instance of 'productive' eclecticism, and in *Tenured Radicals*, especially in the Postscript, Kimball eloquently defends this form of eclecticism, albeit without using the term, which he reserves for castigation of the enemy. Standing up for, among other things, the Arnoldian principle that humanistic education should be concerned with the best that has been thought and written, the traditional values of Western thought and culture, the achievements of the Western moral and intellectual

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<sup>11</sup> Eclecticism of the inconsistent or paradoxical kind is of course a conspicuous, indeed a programmatic, feature of postmodern architecture.



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tradition, and the high culture embodied in the classics of Western art and thought—this is clearly a kind of eclecticism. Kimball supports former Secretary of Education Bennett’s Arnoldian report on higher education, *To Reclaim a Legacy*, according to which the humanities “tell us how men and women of our own and other civilizations have grappled with life’s enduring, fundamental questions” (here the eclecticism is—temporarily—even more inclusive). ‘In [Bennett’s] view, the goal of the humanities should be a “common culture” rooted in the highest ideals and aspirations of the Western tradition’; “the virtues of pluralism should not allow us to sacrifice the principle that . . . each college and university should recognize and accept its vital role as a conveyor of the accumulated wisdom of our civilization.”<sup>12</sup> Turning against multiculturalism, Kimball, with Bennett and Arnold, defends

the idea that, despite our many differences, we hold in common an intellectual, artistic, and moral legacy, descending largely from the Greeks and the Bible, supplemented and modified over the centuries by innumerable contributions from diverse hands and peoples. It is this legacy that has given us our science, our political institutions, and the rich and various monuments of artistic and cultural achievement that define us as a civilization. . . . Western civilization, far from being a narrow ideology, is a capacious register of human achievement. . . . [I]t is this legacy, insofar as we live up to it, that preserves us from chaos and barbarism.<sup>13</sup>

Multiculturalism, as depicted by Kimball, is one of the components of left eclecticism; it opposes not only the eclecticism of a traditional Western liberal education, but any principle of unity, being ultimately a mere pluralism of chaos. As thus described, it corresponds to the dissolution of postmodern relativism that represents the inevitable last stage of romantic extremism.

It may be that ‘productive’ eclecticism of Arnold’s kind is not an instance of eclecticism in the sense of an arbitrary, superficial picking and choosing from multiple sources, but a much more spontaneous confluence with an inner logic of its own. Once a great mind gets a firm hold on some substantial fragment of timeless wisdom, it may be argued, he is naturally drawn to expressions of the same insight in other sources or traditions. He has awakened an inner drive and achieved an inner orientation that leads him safely on to confirm and broaden his insight with the

*Humanist and religious eclecticism unified by shared ethical discipline.*

<sup>12</sup> *Tenured Radicals*, 76-77.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

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accumulation of expressions of wisdom that, however disparate their sources may be in time and space and genre, still correspond to the truth that is now personally alive in him. The distinctions of gender, race, class, nationality, age, and language, the humanist or religious person may value as adding to the richness and beauty of life, and he may in no way seek to abolish them. Yet across them all, and *through* them all, he readily recognises his soul-mates and their works. It is not only that readers of a late work in the Western canon, when they have sufficiently mastered it, by being thus introduced to literary qualities or ways of thinking and seeing, are, despite all differences in form and content, naturally prepared for and lead on to the older works in the canon, or vice versa. Even more than this: the appreciation, or the practice, of true ethical discipline in the Western classicist tradition can lead to appreciation of the corresponding discipline of Confucianism. Deep penetration of the Christian religion often leads to respect for and understanding of the rigorous practices and the faith of other religions. In the presence of true manifestations of the highest common values, the genuine religious humanist joins a truly universal community.

*Left eclecticism unified by abhorrence of limits.*

Finding true wisdom has nothing to do with an arbitrary, careless collage. But if the term 'eclecticism', with its connotations of superficiality, is inappropriate in this case, I believe it is also inappropriate in the case of left eclecticism, and for similar reasons. The left eclectic has a distinctive orientation of character and sensibility, which draws him irresistibly on to appropriate new modes of thought that are new manifestations of the same disposition. It is no mystery that Rousseauism gave birth to Jacobinism, that romantic pantheism fostered naturalism, materialism and Marxism, that the various forms of psychoanalysis as well as radical feminism and sexual emancipation could be enlisted in the revolutionary cause, that gay studies and queer theory grew out of sexual emancipation, that not only Nietzscheanism and Heideggerianism but the whole romantic revolution culminated in post-modernism, etc. It is clear that in today's liberal democracy, the limits to the expansion of left eclecticism are wholly arbitrary and constantly pushed further.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kimball informs us that Allen Ginsberg was a supporter of the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA), 'an organization devoted to encouraging homosexual pedophilia'; *The Long March*, 42.

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Yet some of the ingredients and developments of left eclecticism may indeed on the surface seem to be heterogeneous and opposed to each other. Kimball highlights the revolutionary postmodernism of the extremist quarterly *October*, but also notes parenthetically the radicals' disapproval of postmodernism's 'reactionary' use of ornamentation in architecture. For the Marxist Frederic Jameson postmodernism is the facade as well as the logic of today's global capitalism.<sup>15</sup> Yet both Marxism and postmodernism are, on a deeper analysis, branches of the same romantic tree. And if postmodernism is linked to global capitalism, the latter, although somewhat exaggeratedly conceived by the Marxists as an expression of pure libertarianism, also can be romantic in its faith in the goodness of man which, if only set free, naturally brings forth a spontaneous order.

#### ***Tension in the Western Canon***

Kimball's opponents could, I guess, argue with some plausibility that what he represents is a 'right eclecticism'. His is often, but not always, a commonsense approach, and his position includes all that can possibly be considered to belong to the Western tradition as outlined in the above quotation: religion, morality founded upon it and upon classical humanism, the objectivity of aesthetical values, science, and political liberalism tempered by the other traditions. As taught according to the ideal of the liberal arts, the capacious register does contain some elements that are in certain respects conflicting, and some, it could be argued, must be taught as such in order to convey the scope of the higher and lower potentialities of human life. All is not taught as true, some is merely illustration or exemplification. But I believe it is basically true to say that, on a certain level and with some necessary qualifications, there is a unity of the Western mind which can be taught as reasonably coherent and as embodying objective insights and values.

Kimball is well aware that his opponents regard his defence of the ideals of objectivity, of disinterested scholarship, of respect for rationality, of advancement according to merit alone, of the idea that the value of a work of art is determined by its intrinsic qualities, as mere ideology, in the Marxist sense, as a mask for distinc-

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<sup>15</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).

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tive interests. There is a characteristic tension in Kimball's advocacy of objectivity and of value-judgements and comparisons of quality, to some extent of traditional hierarchies, as strictly non-political. The terminal point of modern liberal rationalism's search for objectivity was the positivistic ideal of value-free scholarship, involving the distinction between facts and values. Thinkers like Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss showed this ideal to be untenable and to signify the self-dissolution of this whole movement. For Voegelin, the original German context and terminology of the modern discussion of values and their relation to facts was suspect, and his search for true objectivity led him all the way back to the insights of a classical and Christian *Ordnungswissenschaft*, of which the Anglo-American culture of common sense was in his view a residuum. This kind of objectivism—which others would not hesitate to call a value-objectivism—did have implications for politics or at least for the fundamental principles of society. Kimball, constantly reiterating a defence of democracy and freedom based on the Western humanistic, moral, and religious tradition, and warning untiringly of the threat posed against them by left eclecticism, would not deny this: 'the humanities have traditionally instilled a sense of the value of the democratic tradition we have inherited . . . it is in this respect . . . that the humanities *do* have a political dimension'.<sup>16</sup>

Value-  
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misses deeper  
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But there is in this defence of liberalism and democracy rather than order, a formalistic or 'proceduralistic' streak which corresponds rather with positivistic value-neutrality than with genuine value-objectivism, and which, I believe, makes Kimball's position insufficient for the purpose of defending a universality that speaks to the concerns of all, and of providing a common good that transcends sexual, ethnic, and racial identity. Kimball's admiration for the formalism of the 'new criticism' of the fifties, with its exclusion of the moral dimension of the literary work, is another aspect of the same problem. He reminds us how the literary revolutionaries of the sixties rallied successfully to the defence of unrepentant murderers who caught their literary or political imagination. But he forgets how the formalist literary establishment of the preceding decade succeeded in averting the trial for high treason of the unrepentant fascist Ezra Pound and finally getting him released.

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<sup>16</sup> *Tenured Radicals*, 39.

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The truth is that Kimball's register is too capacious to be unambiguously classified as eclecticism in the 'productive' sense. His attitude to modern science is evidenced in the following overtly scientific passages which I believe to be simply false: *Science a false universal.*

[S]cience offers us not just "another" perspective on the world but, in a way that can be precisely specified, a higher, more precise, more objective perspective than that provided by ordinary language. This is not to deny that the view of the world furnished by scientific rationalism is deeply reductive; indeed, it is reductive in principle, excluding as far as possible any reference to the fluctuating, uncertain realm of values and sense perception—the very power that science has given us to predict, manipulate, and control reality shows that its truths, though reductive, are genuinely universal.<sup>17</sup>

### ***The Ambiguous Legacy of Enlightenment Rationalism***

Kimball, who in other places is so eminently aware of the ambiguous legacy of enlightenment rationalism, does not seem to realize that such formulations make the unity of the Western tradition that he defends, what I call his 'productive' eclecticism, burst at the seams. The abandonment of the commonsense position for scientism is completely at odds with the luminous wisdom of other passages—which, one is happy to note, are by far the most prevalent. In these he denounces the 'radical demystification' in the name of which the 'assault on the traditional goals of higher education proceeds'—the idea that 'by shedding inherited beliefs, traditions, and prejudices one thereby frees oneself for more genuine insight'—but which results instead in 'its own particularly sterile forms of remystification'.<sup>18</sup> He cites Chesterton to the effect that 'in the modern world "the virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone. Thus some scientists care for truth; and their truth is pitiless. Thus some humanitarians only care for pity; and their pity . . . is often untruthful."' <sup>19</sup> He quotes with approval Joseph Schumpeter, who 'was uncannily right about the dangers bourgeois capitalist societies harbor within themselves', and who observed that

"capitalism creates a critical frame of mind which, after having destroyed the moral authority of so many other institutions, in

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>19</sup> *The Long March*, 22.

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the end turns against its own; the bourgeois finds to his amazement that the rationalist attitude does not stop at the credentials of kings and popes but goes on to attack private property and the whole scheme of bourgeois values.”

‘In this sense’, Kimball writes, ‘the cultural revolution is not so much anticapitalist as a toxic by-product of capitalism’s success’.<sup>20</sup> Examining the student revolt of the sixties, he at least mentions that some wonder whether there might not be something wrong with the then-dominant liberalism:

One of the central dramas concerns the fate of liberalism itself. The disheartening spectacle of liberal university administrators abasing themselves and their institutions before law-breaking radicals signalled not simply a failure of nerve. Even more troubling, it expressed a profound crisis in the fundamental principles upon which higher education in Western democratic societies had always rested. Whether this bespoke an essential weakness in liberal ideology or only a failure of particular men faced with difficult decisions is perhaps an open question. Critics of liberalism will note that liberalism’s tendency to let tolerance and openness trump every other virtue renders it peculiarly impotent when faced with substantive moral dilemmas: absolutized, “tolerance” and “openness” become indistinguishable from moral paralysis.<sup>21</sup>

Possibly, there is an advance in insight from *Tenured Radicals*, or at least its first edition, to the essays printed in *Experiments Against Reality*. The latter are also more consistently Burkean than the essays in *The Long March*, which was published the same year. The unwieldy, scientific element of Kimball’s eclecticism seems no longer to make him lose sight of the truth that

to the extent that Enlightenment rationalism turns against the tradition that gave rise to it, it degenerates into a force destructive of culture and the manifold directives that culture has bequeathed us. Like so many other promises of emancipation, it has contained the seeds of new forms of bondage. Philosophy has been an important casualty of this development. It is no accident that so much modern philosophy has been committed to bringing us the gospel of the end of philosophy. Once it abandons its vocation as the love of wisdom, philosophy inevitably becomes the gravedigger of its highest ambitions, interring itself with tools originally forged to perpetuate its service to truth.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 248-249

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-106

<sup>22</sup> *Experiments Against Reality*, 24; an excellent statement of these increasingly common insights is the British philosopher Anthony O’Hear’s *After Progress: Finding the Old Way Forward* (1999).

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In his essay on J. S. Mill and J. F. Stephen in *Experiments Against Reality*, Kimball criticises Mill's form of liberalism which is probably liberalism's most typical form, one in which romanticism and rationalism are firmly wedded. This critique is an exemplary display of Burkean wisdom. In Kimball's books it is not always in his own formulations that the crucial insights are best expressed or that arguments reach their climax, but he is good at finding the right quotations and expounding on them. In the essay on Mill and Stephen, he draws upon Maurice Cowling and Gertrude Himmelfarb. Here, Kimball not only expounds but expands brilliantly. Like Russell Kirk, he sides unambiguously with Stephen against Mill's *On Liberty*, and for the same reasons. The insights in question have been expressed before, in America by Kirk, among others.<sup>23</sup> But not only do they need to be constantly repeated; they also need to be brought to bear on the changing present. Kimball performs the task with bravura.

Much in Kimball's books bears eloquent witness to his absorption of traditional wisdom and his possession of deep insight regarding fundamental truths about man, society, and culture. Only because of such wisdom and insight can the profiles of modern intellectuals like Sartre, Foucault, and Cioran, or of the contemporary art world, be rendered with such clarity and truth as in Kimball's short essays in *Experiments Against Reality*. In such sections, his work signifies a considerable improvement on the kind of conservatism criticised by Ryn. Yet as we saw elsewhere, traces of 'unproductive' eclecticism remain. His view of scientific truth simply does not comport with the substance of the other traditions he endorses. The result is an eclecticism which is clearly incoherent, although no bad taste is evident. Kimball's essayistic style elegantly blends his seriousness with irony in a way that makes its frequent informality appropriate for the high-toned urbanity that *The New Criterion* opposes to New York's radical chic.

*Kimball's scientism clashes with his more profound insights.*

### ***Classical Liberalism and Reductionist Abstractions***

A main inspiration for *The New Criterion*, obviously, is T. S. Eliot. Kimball rightly defends Eliot's high modernism as the necessary awakening from the shallow romantic humanitarianism and progressivism of the Victorians. Like Russell Kirk in his study

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<sup>23</sup> Kimball once cites Kirk; *The Long March*, 281.

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of his friend, *Eliot and His Age* (1971), Kimball seizes on Eliot's classicism and (Anglo-)Catholicism, although he is more interested than Kirk in the formal aspects of his work. Countless radical modernists who ignored, misunderstood, or played down Eliot's conservatism could still admire the form of his advanced art. Today, Kimball notes, Eliot's critical reputation suffers under postmodernism with its obliteration of the distinction between high culture and popular culture and its general 'evaporation of seriousness'.<sup>24</sup> But Eliot was severe and uncompromising in his rejection of the nineteenth century, and his position does not harmonise with some aspects of Matthew Arnold's educational program, as Kimball is to some extent aware. There is an eclectic tension between Kimball's democratic, basically optimistic, inclusive, Victorian ideal of liberal education and Eliot's traditionalist rigour, and this tension becomes even more obvious perhaps in Kimball's essay on the reactionary classicist and virulent critic not only of romanticism but of humanism ever since the renaissance, T. E. Hulme. Of course, Kimball's essays should be regarded precisely as essays, tentative and explorative, and not as philosophical treatises. But if Kimball is indeed 'one of the ablest and most philosophically skilled critics on the current scene', if he is 'uniquely qualified to deal with literary and philosophical matters alike', one could legitimately ask that some resolution of the mentioned tensions be worked out and clarity and consistency achieved. It is a little hard to see how this will be possible for Kimball with the philosophical resources now at his disposal. What is needed, among other things, is a distinction between different forms of romanticism.

But these eclectic tensions are not important in comparison with the one caused by Kimball's version of liberalism in relation to modern rationalism and his view of science: an aspect of the Victorian ideal which distinguishes him not only from Eliot or Hulme but from Burke. At times he seems to regard Socrates as a direct precursor or cause of modern science, thus, *mutatis mutandis*, making the same mistake as Nietzsche and the postmodernists: lumping together the classical metaphysics of Socrates and Plato with the modern rationalism of Descartes and modern science as forms of one monolithic logocentrism.

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<sup>24</sup> *Experiments Against Reality*, 67.



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With the other contributors to *The Betrayal of Liberalism*, Kimball defends ‘classical’ liberalism and believes that it is only because of its betrayal that its representatives are today ‘conservatives’. Important as it is, his concern with contemporary liberalism’s propensity for coercion and control makes him overlook the problems of ‘classical’ liberalism—which is still in many respects a modern phenomenon, a product of the enlightenment—and its relation to conservatism more strictly defined. Kimball tends to see classical liberalism and at least British and American conservatism as identical and to point to Edmund Burke as evidence. But the passages I have cited testify to the need to look deeper into the nature of classical liberalism to lay a firmer foundation for criticism of liberalism’s transformation.

*‘Classical’ liberalism’s flaws presaged those of contemporary liberalism.*

Burke reacted against the reductionist and other abstractions and the too open-ended liberalism and rationalism from which they sprang—a liberalism and rationalism that had turned against the traditions and cultural contexts in which the values of Western culture were embedded and which nurtured and protected inherited freedoms. The destructive effects of reductionist abstractions, ‘higher, more precise, more objective’ and ‘universal’, ‘excluding as far as possible any reference to the fluctuating, uncertain realm of values and sense perception’ are today becoming ever more obvious. An increasing number of thinkers who care about the values of freedom, science, reason, and the sound working of the market economy are rediscovering and appreciating anew the necessity of the Burkean counterbalance. But far too many seem unable to relinquish the basic error of elevating reductionist abstractions from their limited pragmatic use in science and technology to the level of a higher truth. Kimball is but one example of this trend in contemporary thought. Such thinkers do not see that formal democratic proceduralism and a reason and objectivity that turn abstract reductionism into higher truth are *part of* the betrayal of liberalism.

*Formal democratic proceduralism part of the betrayal of liberalism.*

The left eclectic’s allegation that the establishment of a canon in humanistic studies is fundamentally undemocratic implies, Kimball writes, ‘that political democracy is essentially inimical to authority, tradition, and rigor in its cultural institutions. At bottom, it is another way of suggesting that “being democratic” means abandoning any claim to permanent intellectual or cultural

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achievement'.<sup>25</sup> But Kimball's own eclecticism makes it impossible for him effectively to answer this. There is a sense in which a canon is undemocratic and in which being democratic does mean abandoning achievement. What is needed is a distinction between different forms of democracy, a distinction which cannot be reached, however, without a deeper and subtler philosophical and ethical analysis of human life and a more consistent and rigorous historical, humanistic, and religious outlook.

Kimball's view of liberalism and of its relation to science also precludes a deeper understanding of the relation of Western civilisation to other civilisations. Of course the Western canon should be central to education in the West, but construing the essence of Western culture in terms of scientism as well as in terms of the older traditions makes Kimball's claims problematic for representatives of other cultures. Science is indeed a precious product of Western culture, and its value and its applications are certainly universal, but modernist, reductionist scientism is not. Too much of Kimball's pleading plays into the hands of the shallow, rationalistic imperialism of democratism and scientism. There is indeed a universal humanity, but it cannot be apprehended by means of reductionistic abstractions. Kimball knows this intuitively, but as long as he thinks that such abstractions constitute 'a higher, more precise, more objective perspective', it is impossible to reach a deeper understanding of universality. Advocacy of modernist rationalism precludes a more creative response to the problems of multiculturalism on a national and global scale, as well as to other elements of left eclecticism.

### ***The Counterculture, Conservatism, and the Fifties***

Kimball has been criticised for idealising the fifties and for being unable, for that reason, to understand the legitimate grievances of the sixties revolutionaries. This he denies on the basis that he begins his story of the cultural revolution with the Beats who made their reputations precisely in this decade. The reply is hardly satisfactory in view of his descriptions of the fifties as 'an era . . . of tremendous prosperity, excellent public education, and potent national self-confidence',<sup>26</sup> and of American society in the late forties and early fifties as

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<sup>25</sup> *Tenured Radicals*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> *The Long March*, 160.

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vibrantly alive . . . confident, prosperous, and dynamic . . . domestic life in the United States had never offered young people more real freedom, economically, socially, or intellectually. Universities were newly galvanized and cultural life generally was marked by a seriousness of purpose and level of accomplishment that have never been regained.<sup>27</sup>

With regard to cultural and intellectual achievement, 'America in the 1950s looks like fifth-century Athens in comparison with what came afterward'.<sup>28</sup>

Such descriptions should be compared with the more Burkean or Babbittian comments on contemporary culture in the works of Bernard Iddings Bell, Russell Kirk, or Peter Viereck from that same decade. How strangely similar their perspective is in some respects to that of the hippies a decade or two later that Kimball excoriates: 'the myth . . . that America in the 1950's was a sterile, soulless society, obsessed with money, stunted emotionally, negligible culturally and intellectually', '[t]he idea of America as a materialistic wasteland'.<sup>29</sup> Jason Epstein wrote that

"the country seemed to have fallen into a frenzy of self-destruction, tearing its cities apart, fouling its landscapes, poisoning the streams and skies, trivializing the education of its children, and not for any substantial human happiness . . . but for higher profits and rapidly increased economic growth . . . . What we were experiencing was the familiar philistine expansionism . . . this time attached to a formidable technology whose alarming possibilities were as yet unclear, but which was even then depressingly out of human scale and growing larger and more autonomous every day."<sup>30</sup>

Kimball's view of the fifties makes the cultural revolution more of a mystery than it really is. Though citing Irving Kristol on the sixties, Kimball barely admits, with him, that

the counterculture of the 1960's was in part a reaction against a society that had become increasingly secular, routinized, and crassly materialistic. In this respect, too, the counterculture can be understood as part of our Romantic inheritance, a plea for freedom and transcendence in a society increasingly dominated by the secular forces of Enlightenment rationality.

For Kimball the point is that Kristol notes a danger

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

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that the counterculture, in its attack on secular materialism, "will bring down—will discredit—human things that are of permanent importance. A spiritual rebellion against the constrictions of secular humanism could end up . . . in a celebration of irrationalism and a derogation of reason itself."<sup>31</sup>

These same problems were discussed at length two hundred years ago, and I believe they were then also to a considerable extent answered. Of course there was something spurious about the counterculture's call for "dread, awe, wonder, mystery . . . magic", "non-rational thought", "a higher, transcendent reason" (Charles Reich),<sup>32</sup> "a new society . . . of spiritual grandeur . . . Something soulful. A moral advance" (Paul Berman). Most of it was clearly the product of what Folke Leander called 'lower' romanticism.<sup>33</sup> Its bogus character is revealed when such desiderata are combined with proclamations that "[a]uthority, schedules, time, accepted customs, are all forms which must be questioned. Accepted patterns of thought must be broken"—clearly this demand comprises not only the customs and patterns of rationalistic materialism, but the older Western tradition as well. The non-rational thought turns out to be "drug-thought" and "impulses";<sup>34</sup> "the meaning of liberation is that the individual is free to construct his own philosophy and values, his own life-style, and his own culture from a new beginning".<sup>35</sup> The allegedly higher, transcendent reason was in actuality subrational rather than suprarational.

What Kimball does not recognize is that there is a legitimate place for awe, wonder, mystery, magic, and soulfulness, that there is indeed a higher, transcendent reason—that there is, to use Leander's terminology, a 'higher' romanticism, which, in modern times, has credibly and responsibly defended all of this. The extremist politics routinely and thoughtlessly favoured by most counterculturalists will not bring these things, nor indeed are they

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23; One of the few passages where Kimball indirectly admits that there are problematic aspects of the fifties is in the quotation above where, following Schumpeter's analysis, he writes that in one sense 'the cultural revolution is not so much anticapitalist as a toxic by-product of capitalism's success'.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 183-184, 187.

<sup>33</sup> I discuss Leander's analysis of romanticism at length in my article 'Irving Babbitt and Personal Individuality', *Appraisal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2000.

<sup>34</sup> *The Long March*, 184.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

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the solution to the problems enumerated by Epstein. Still, Kimball's indictment is much too sweeping. It is unlikely that all traces of a higher romanticism were completely absent in the sixties. The fascination with fantasy and myth was an impulse that under more favourable circumstances could have been channelled into a cultural conservatism of the kind represented by Russell Kirk. A traditionalistic don like J. R. R. Tolkien enjoyed his greatest success with the youth of the sixties.

It is the full historical and cultural significance of some of the phenomena of the counterculture, or the counterculture as *symptom*, that simplistic defenders of the dominant culture of the fifties tend simply to miss. In a Swedish article, 'Motkultur eller nyskapande traditionalism?' ('Counterculture or Creative Traditionalism?'),<sup>36</sup> Claes G. Ryn brings to the study subtler conceptual tools. With a further development of Ryn's approach, it would be possible, I believe, to reach a deeper understanding of the counterculture. Perhaps one could even suggest that the counterculture may have contained some seeds of a creative traditionalism. With proper cultivation—which would necessarily involve replanting in more fertile intellectual soil—those seeds could still perhaps be made to blossom and contribute to a proper cultural renewal.

*Counter-culture contained higher as well as lower potentialities.*

### ***Rationalism, Romanticism, and Idealism***

The fundamental eclectic tension in Kendall's thinking has its basis in the fact that he does not, like Irving Babbitt, see clearly that the two wings of the modernist movement, although superficially opposed, are mutually supportive and interdependent. The Rousseauistic, sentimental, utopian, romantic strand and the Baconian, rationalistic, empiricistic, reductionistic, and scientific strand have in common that they both deny the higher levels of human life as understood in the classical and Christian traditions: the level of ethical humanism and the level of transcendent religion. In some forms of romanticism, and not least in the sixties version of a spirituality of artificial ecstasy and sexual liberation, dubious idealism and base materialism can be seen to coexist. Ultimately, both wings concentrate exclusively on the naturalistic level of external nature and the physical and psychical life of man.

*Scientism and lower forms of romanticism fundamentally alike.*

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<sup>36</sup> In *Tankar om det goda samhället (Thoughts on 'the Good Society')*, Carl Johan Ljungberg & Tyrgils Saxlund, eds. (1979).

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Kimball ignores the extent to which modern scientism has been enlisted by the totalitarianism that he warns against and the degree to which it is used by the left eclecticism which he sees as preparing the way for totalitarianism whenever it can reinforce its campaign of destruction against the values of the older traditions of the West.

Another reason why Kimball's eclecticism does not reach inner consistency is that he does not have access to the more sophisticated understanding of perception, experience, and the interplay of human faculties of modern idealism. Kimball's common sense is enough to refute successfully the dangerous postmodern sophistry, anti-foundationalism, and social constructionism of a Richard Rorty or a Stanley Fish. Considering the limited space he sets aside for this task in comparison with professional philosophers, Kimball does the work with balance and precision.<sup>37</sup> Still, there are aspects of the problems involved that his method does not permit him to see.<sup>38</sup> The condition of postmodern relativism is in one important aspect a product of as well as a contributing factor in the dissolution of the premature objectivity of positivism. A return to positivism is no longer a viable option. In my view, elements of philosophical idealism properly defined, can contribute to the much needed alternative that takes us beyond the dilemma of a largely illusory objectivism on the one hand and a sophistic relativism on the other.

Modern idealism is indeed risky intellectual terrain, and Kimball rightly alerts us to the dangers of romantic pseudo-idealism. Some versions are indistinguishable from the form of romanticism that is the basis of left eclecticism. They express not least the pantheism and monism which in the course of the nineteenth century transmogrified into pure materialism. Some have contributed to totalitarian conceptions of the state and to communism. As Kimball is well aware, some have displayed 'a disdain for empirical reality that can easily be enlisted by tyranny'. He cites Tzvetan Todorov's comparison with the torturer O'Brien's words in Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*: "You believe that reality is something objective, external, existing in its own right . . . But I tell you, Winston, that reality is not external. Reality exists in the human

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<sup>37</sup> See especially *Tenured Radicals*, ch. 6, and *Experiments Against Reality*, 1-24.

<sup>38</sup> Some of these are discussed in Claes G. Ryn's Introduction to the second edition of his *Will, Imagination, and Reason* (1997).

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mind and nowhere else.”<sup>39</sup> Other forms have engendered a nihilistic subjectivism. Some have ended in or have in their deliquescent state at least contributed to postmodern relativism.

Other aspects of modern idealism, however, must be counted among the indispensable gains of modern thought, and as one with ‘higher’ romanticism. The instability of Kimball’s eclecticism bears witness to the fact that these aspects of modern idealism are necessary to save the unity of the Western tradition. They emphasise the experiential whole from which the exclusively scientific perspective is merely an abstraction and demonstrate that ultimate reality must correspond to the fullness of this experience (which includes moral and religious experience). They refute naturalistic reductionism to the extent that this is possible for human thought. It was within some moderate forms of modern idealism during the nineteenth century that the key issues of the relation between the two wings of the modern movement and their relation to classicism and Christianity, as well as the relation between conservatism and liberalism, were fruitfully discussed and the problems involved received some credible solutions. The distinction between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ romanticism can help us find our way back to this neglected avenue of modern thought. For Kimball—who equates universality with rationality and objectivity with science,<sup>40</sup> who is unreserved in his praise for John Locke, and who is a follower of the Australian philosopher David Stove who in his book *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies* (1991) dismisses modern idealism as ‘A Victorian Horror-story’—the avenue is as yet closed.

Still, in many respects, Kimball’s criticism of left eclecticism, including the cultural revolution and postmodernism, is admirable and much needed. Some elements of left eclecticism must indeed be uncompromisingly opposed. But Kimball’s own point of departure, his critical intellectual instruments, and his alternative, would benefit from revisions and additions. A right eclecticism that comprises the problematic components that provoked a partly legitimate left eclecticism, risks making things worse. We must move outside the whole modern dialectic—in which the Rousseauian sixties turned against the Baconian fifties in the same

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<sup>39</sup> *Tenured Radicals*, 58.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

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*Needed: a  
creative  
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way that the early romantics had turned against the Enlightenment—in order to be able to discern a deeper common orientation and to find a workable alternative. But as we begin to resist the whole underlying dynamic, we reach a deeper understanding of the partial truths of the historical expressions of this dialectic. We need traditionalism indeed, but it must be a *creative* traditionalism. As the editors of this journal have suggested,<sup>41</sup> some cross-fertilisation and some fresh productive syntheses would be welcome. We need to go beyond a too facile classification of ideas in political terms and beyond a left-right distinction that may in some respects be obsolescent. We should be prepared to reach beyond customary sources. Some intellectual daring may do more good than 'safe' respectability.

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<sup>41</sup> 'HUMANITAS: Rethinking It All. An Editorial Statement', *Humanitas*, Vol. VI, No. 1, 1992-93.