Looking for Culture in All the Wrong Places

A surprising thing has happened in the wake of George Bush’s electoral defeat: conservatives have discovered culture. For 12 years, while the Republican party controlled the presidency, professed “conservative” policy-makers churned out book after boring book about “presidential power” and the best means of increasing it. Holding on to the reins of the presidency, loading the federal bureaucracy with neoconservatives, making appointments to federal courts, and eventually recapturing the Congress—these were seen as the steps to political renewal in this country. Culture, if it was discussed at all (and when it was not seen merely as a codeword for the positions of the “Religious Right”), was viewed as a political weapon to be used at election time to capture the votes of those “Middle Americans” to whom, it was presumed, cultural issues still mattered.

Now that the Republicans are out of power at the national level, however, the conservatives have turned their attention to culture. They have decided that liberal control of the culture is the reason Republicans, while winning the presidency, have failed to produce any significant political change. The battle, they now claim, must be fought on the cultural front, if it is to be fought at all.

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The National Humanities Institute has been mentioned favorably in several recent articles and books. William K. Kilpatrick's *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong: Moral Illiteracy and the Case for Character Education* is one such book which has received considerable public attention. Clearly influenced by the work of Irving Babbitt, Kilpatrick argues that moral education is an essential element of a child's upbringing. Unlike many commentators who have offered superficial discussions on the need for "values" in education, Kilpatrick does not believe that students should be indoctrinated in an abstract system of moral principles. True moral education, he argues, must first stimulate the imagination. When students are presented with history and literature which is well-written and presents moral characters in a favorable light, they will react positively. As Kilpatrick writes, "The hero in a fairy tale wins the child to the side of virtue because the hero is the most attractive figure in the story."

In two important chapters Kilpatrick acknowledges his debt to the National Humanities Institute and to the writings of Irving Babbitt. The first chapter, "Beauty and the Beasts," discusses the role that aesthetics plays in the formation of the imagination, and ultimately in the formation of moral character. Using Nazism as an example, Kilpatrick explains how aesthetics, in the hands of immoral characters, can be used to pervert the imagination. But, he points out, "Just as art can lead us into illusion, it can lead us back to reality. Good art—art that is faithful to the human condition, and not escapist, illogical, or cynical—can put us in touch with what [National Humanities Institute Chairman Claes Ryn calls] 'the ethical standard within experience.' Good art provides a revelation of ethical reality."

In the second chapter, entitled "Myth Wars," Kilpatrick discusses the differences between two types of imagination, the moral and the idyllic. This distinction is a main theme in the writing of Babbitt, and a main theme of NHI's publications. Kilpatrick argues that much of popular culture today is captivated by an idyllic or escapist imagination. True moral education requires breaking the bonds of this imagination and stimulating the moral imagination in students (and, one might add, the culture at large). *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong* is published by Simon & Schuster, and can be ordered through any bookstore.

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**Important Education Book Influenced By Babbitt, NHI**

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Mr. Joyce argued that conservatives "tend to forget that culture is far more than [the intellectual, the analytical, and the rational]. Culture is also image, story, myth, vision, picture. It is poetry [and] prose; it is fiction [and] nonfiction. [It] speaks to the spirit and emotions as much as to the mind." There is nothing wrong with this statement, as far as it goes; indeed, if it were changed to read that "Culture is first of all image, See WRONG PLACES, page 4

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The clarion call of the new cultural war recently was issued by Bradley Foundation President Michael Joyce at the National Review Institute's Conservative Summit. What he said, as reported in the press, is instructive. While conservatives may finally be moving in the right direction, it is clear that they still do not understand the depth of the cultural crisis, nor how to deal with it.
Wrong Places / From Page 3 etc.," it would be a summary of what the National Humanities Institute has stressed since its founding. The problem, however, is what Mr. Joyce and others consider to be the most important battles of the cultural war. "Conservatism can stand with the average citizen against the intrusive institutions of liberalism that seek to dominate

**Urgent Reminder**
The National Humanities Institute depends upon financial contributions from our friends and supporters in order to continue working to revitalize education and culture. The Institute operates on a tight budget and does not have a reserve fund. Though we have expanded our program recently in response to a critical need, our ability to conduct our activities and to publish in a timely manner is continually hampered by inadequate funding. If you have not yet donated this year, please help to whatever extent you can as soon as possible. Donations are tax-deductible.

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[W]hat [Mr. Joyce] and others consider to be the most important battles of the culture wars are (at best) rear-guard attempts to slow down the decay of society, or they are (at worst) the actions of a cynical populism which hopes to expand its voting base by fighting "the powers that be." These actions have as little to do with the revitalization of culture as treating the symptoms of an AIDS patient has to do with curing him of the disease. It is necessary, but by no means sufficient, to treat the symptoms; one can treat the symptoms and still lose the patient to the disease.

Where in these battles are the "image, story, myth, vision, picture"? Fighting zoning boards and condom-pushers does not require any real knowledge and appreciation of Western culture, nor does it require an imagination which draws upon the best which that culture has to offer. By choosing to fight only these kinds of battles, conservatives indicate their reluctance or inability to undertake the hard, and more fundamental, work necessary to revitalize culture. That work must begin on a personal level, through one's acquaintance with the images, stories, myths, visions, and pictures of Western civilization, through an education which is not only intellectual but moral. This work means the stirring of imagination and the development of habits that are sometimes painfully acquired but eventually rewarding and liberating; it means the development of aspirations which are humanistic rather than merely economic or political, and which require much preparation and sacrifice. Only by improving one's own life, only by making that which is best in Western civilization a part of one's living past, will the renewal of society begin.

The effect of mere words and battles against entrenched bureaucracies cannot begin to compare to the influence that one truly civilized man may have on those whose lives he touches. As John Lukacs noted a quarter of a century ago in *The Passing of the Modern Age*, "... Charles Peguy wrote that the true revolutionaries of the twentieth century will be the fathers of Christian families. ... It is not impossible that the true revolutionaries of the twenty-first century will be the fathers of decent and civilized children. Their families will not be exclusive, like those of the nineteenth century: but they will be culturally self-sufficient." At the end of the twentieth century it is our task not only as parents but as writers, teachers, artists, and clergy to bring civilization alive in ourselves. Through our example the rising generation might come to understand better the images, stories, myths, visions, and pictures of Western culture. Else there no longer will be a Western culture; the melt-down now so depressingly apparent on all sides will have reached its denouement.