

FIRST THINGS

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political candidates who promised to resist integration and eventually encouraged the decisive shift of the state from Democrat to Republican loyalty, enthusiastically endorsing Ronald Reagan. At the center of this part of his story Wuthnow places W. A. Criswell, the pastor of the largest Baptist church in Texas, First Baptist Church of Dallas. Criswell was a vigorous opponent of integration during the years the civil rights movement was gaining ground, often preaching that the place of Ham in God's plan of salvation meant the races were to be kept separate. He later acknowledged he had been wrong to oppose integration but he continued to be the standard bearer for conservative causes.

Criswell's story is one of the many ways Wuthnow helps us understand how the Baptists, people who allegedly thought religion and politics should not mix, worked to make Texas the standard bearer for the religious right. When, in 1980, Reagan addressed the Baptists assembled in

Dallas, stating that he understood they could not endorse him but he could endorse them, Baptists dropped all pretense that they were not political. The politics of the Southern Baptist Convention and, in particular, the political takeover of the Convention by Paige Patterson and Judge Pressler in the 1980s, Wuthnow persuasively shows, played a decisive role in making Texas a Republican state.

Patterson and Pressler were men that played for keeps. They not only led a populist insurgency against the leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention, they also began to develop institutions that would ensure the long lasting effect of their conservative agenda. That Patterson became dean of Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth is an indication that these men recognized they are in a long fight. The clergy trained at Southwestern have shaped and will shape the future by being established in churches across Texas. The enemy is out there, as the *Roe v. Wade* decision makes clear. Equally to be opposed are the feminist and homosexual agendas.

I have only been able to mention a few of the characters that populate Wuthnow's story. It seems, therefore, small-minded to criticize him for missing some that might have made his narrative more complex. I am thinking of people like Ernie Cortez, an organizer whose faith shapes his leadership of the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation. Calling attention to Cortez would not fundamentally change Wuthnow's story line, but it would suggest that there are in Texas more progressive movements that have some religious support than Wuthnow's account suggests.

I am grateful to Wuthnow for helping me better understand the world that produced me. But all readers will, I believe, find amid the details that make this such a rich book an important account of the complex role religion has played and continues to play in American life. ■

What Critical Vision?

by James Matthew Wilson

Rocket and Lightship: Essays on Literature and Ideas

BY ADAM KIRSCH

NORTON, 320 PAGES, \$26.95

If T. S. Eliot were our exact contemporary, he would, as a critic of literature and culture, find much of his labor in need of being done again. Or, rather, he would see it continued in the remarkable, growing achievement found in the essays of Adam Kirsch. In Kirsch's new collection, *Rocket and Lightship*, one hears echoes from the deep well of shared sympathies between the late poet-critic and his successor, along with whispers of the fragmentary, kabbalistic style of Walter Benjamin, that testify to the ambiguous direction in which Kirsch drives Eliot's legacy in these nineteen essays.

Eliot's endeavor was to reveal the banal contradiction in which most of us live, unable either to face the depravity of our fallen condition or to accept the religious yearning that shapes our wills. For Eliot, the modern problem is that the pretenses of the natural sciences cow us until we feel "convinced of too little" and fear that we may be nothing more than the incidental products of material causes. In reaction, we conjure up a range of weakly defined and largely insincere beliefs to hide this fear from ourselves.

As Kirsch reminds us in his introduction, Matthew Arnold was the first great apologist for culture as salvation from modern nihilism and from the utilitarian ethics and therapeutic individualism that had rushed in to fill—or, rather, conceal—its void. But, in Eliot's

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judgment, Arnold's gift was restricted to a hectoring rhetoric, and he lacked the critical disinterest essential to understanding his subject. Eliot forced a fuller confrontation: Do we believe in religion and in literature? Or do we believe in neither, as when we turn literature into ersatz religion? Do we refer to changeless divine ordinances in justifying liberal society, or has liberalism elevated the will of the state to an absolute? Is culture an ontologically distinct order, or a mere extension of natural forces?

The author of two books of poems and several more of criticism and biography, Kirsch is a more natural prose writer and a more patient reader of others' work than his great predecessor in the poet-critic tradition. His review essays are also more direct in making their arguments, more docile in the service of reviewing—that is, of judiciously paraphrasing—the authors he discusses, and more convincing in their conclusions. That said, they are less daring in countering the banal contradictions of our own age, and they offer as a response to the modern problem a way of being that Eliot would have seen as the problem's reinstatement rather than its resolution.

In Kirsch's first collection of essays, *The Modern Element* (2008), he provided a satisfying survey of contemporary poets. The major theme of that volume was the refusal of most such writers to honor their art form as a craft with an integrity all its own, because they were so beholden to the idea of art as a mode of therapy and self-exposure. Kirsch's perceptive verdict is that most contemporary poets fail both as artists and self-analysts; their work makes jagged, obscure gestures that jettison formal achievement in order to simulate the unfiltered movements of the mind. The appearance of rawness or candor is just that, an appearance: The poem does not actually deliver the one good

for the sake of which the poet had dispensed with so many others, such as "courtesy," clarity, and craft.

In *Rocket and Lightship*, Kirsch's attention turns from poetry and "Freudian" therapeutic aesthetics to the legacies of Darwin and Nietzsche in modern *belles lettres*. The scene he unfolds is of an age overawed by the reductive materialism of those philosophers and scientists who would treat Darwinian evolution as a universal explanatory tool. We see, for instance, that attempts by Denis Dutton and others to explain art in terms of natural selection amount to little more than a reductive confusion of categories made persuasive only by the abuse of a doubtful authority.

In "Darwinism at 150," Kirsch shows that the great naturalist's successors have failed to grapple with the moral legacy of their master. It is true that the rise of philosophical materialism inspired by Darwin has "meant moral disaster" for our society, but the successors of Darwin, because of a peculiar inconsistency, fail to comprehend why. As did Darwin, they continue to take for granted major premises of Christian morality and so do not follow to its logical conclusion Darwin's scribbled maxim "Never use the word higher and lower."

If biological mechanisms lie at the root of reality as we know it, then every attempt to speak of good and evil, better or worse, is to project onto the meaningless flux of things mere superstitions—ghosts produced by our machines. That most of our ideas stand in tension with the theory of natural selection should suggest that some other principle lies nearer to the heart of reality. "Evolution can tell us—or try to tell us—how we became what we are," Kirsch concludes, "it cannot tell us what we should be, or even what we want to be." It is not what biologists know that Kirsch contests but rather what they do not know they do not know.

The continued authority of philosophical materialism in our day hinders our awakening to the realm of spiritual freedom for which Kirsch argues in these first essays. Because many of us can no longer imagine a world impregnated with meaning beyond that of natural selection and survival strategies, the modern West has become increasingly mired in the attractions and the emptiness of prosperity.

Our mainstream public intellectuals fret over the emptying out of human beliefs and the flattening of their aspirations, but they are as much the victims of this malaise as anyone. Here Francis Fukuyama is representative of his peers. He sees, as Kirsch argues, that "ideas matter" and that great civilizations require great beliefs, but he does so like an uncomprehending outsider. The ideas out of which religions and cultures are constructed appear to him as necessary but "irrational . . . a collective delusion." Fukuyama ends up falling back on Darwinian principles to defend this necessity, but Kirsch has already shown that this will not do. The "truth about the spirit can only be demonstrated in works of the spirit," he writes elsewhere. Biological evolution cannot account for culture or for the life of civilizations, and it certainly cannot inspire their rebirth.

Kirsch is equally compelling in his assessment of those philosophers who would help us recover from cynicism by investing human action with salvific powers. Peter Sloterdijk repeats the confusion of Herbert Spencer and others in the Victorian era who put their faith in technological progress, hoping that it will liberate us to undertake "spiritual regimens," exercises in self-mastery that, so Sloterdijk implausibly contends, was the only essential content of the religions in which we no longer believe. Alternatively, Slavoj Žižek speaks for many in our day when he reduces the intellectual life to hip comedy. We cannot imbue

technology with religious meaning, however. And, in the case of Žižek, amid the laughter and acclaim, we overlook the wanton recasting of revolutionary violence as the sole revelation of the real: Žižek longs for blood as a substitute for the presence of God.

Kirsch is most ambitious and insightful in these early essays, where he not only discovers the weaknesses of contemporary intellectual life but reminds us of the realm of the spirit where culture and religion have their rightful seat. The essays that follow constitute a series of explorations regarding how the intellectual life might be conducted in our generally secular, materialist, and cynical age.

Eliot's critique of Arnold, and of Irving Babbitt and other contemporaries, was that they tried to compensate for the "death of God" by "substituting" literature and culture for religion. In his letters, Eliot specifically states that he saw in the bloodless moralism of his childhood Unitarianism and in the intellectualism of "free-thinking Jews" just such untenable substitutions. American Protestantism, he knew firsthand, had withered, changing from the communal worship of a God who is also our lawgiver to entirely private and individual sentiments about morality. Culture and political ideology became palliatives for the wounds left by the loss of Church and faith.

Kirsch offers a different possibility. In his several studies of Jewish writers, including Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Cynthia Ozick, Saul Bellow, Marcel Proust, and Chaim Nachman Bialik, the anomalous character of Judaism as sacred and secular, as religious and ethnic identity, blurs the distinction between religion and culture in ways that Eliot perhaps could not appreciate. Modern experience shows that the strength of Jewish identity and practice does not necessarily weaken with a loss of faith in God's covenant. In a

sort of inversion of Protestant secularization, in modern Judaism a strong sense of communal allegiance and a persistence in ancient rites, and even in the practice of reading the world in the light of a divine code, perdure, its meaning only incidentally recast by the individual's unbelief.

Benjamin's career illustrates this. Kirsch depicts it as a brilliant failure in its effort to conjoin sacred and secular by blending Marxist historical materialism and Jewish mysticism into a hermeneutics of culture where every stray object, the bric-a-brac of the modern city, is encoded with eschatological significance and awaits his interpretation. If Benjamin's ambitions split at the seams—as he himself thought they did—they at least head in a fruitful direction, comparing favorably with the work of Susan Sontag, whose most famous essay protests "against interpretation." Uncomfortable with her own intellectuality, Sontag could oppose the interpretation of art only by providing an overly intellectualized interpretation of the refusal to interpret.

Bellow and Bialik provide more auspicious instances of Jews who make the modernist leap of faith in art as "an independent source of value," who seem to worship it as an alternative to a historical faith often marginalized in the Christian West. But they ultimately grounded that faith in the "absolute authority" of the divine. "To write as Bellow does," with his sense of the spirit shaping bodily life, and with his view of novel writing as a gift to eternity, "one must believe in a kind of divinity," Kirsch observes. Together, they appear as simpler, more-consistent men than Benjamin and more at home in an intelligible world than Sontag. That is not their only achievement, however.

The two writers, Bellow and Bialik, remind us that every writer works not for the perpetuation of the species, or even for the long but

finite reward of worldly fame, but so that a work of art may be "registered in the eye of God." Literature "operates on the premise that humanity can be transcendent" but that it is not the source of its own transcendence. Where Eliot saw degenerative substitution in the modern veneration of culture, Kirsch perceives the salutary interweaving of the divine and the worldly. The experience of Judaism suggests a prolongation of the sacred under the appearance of the secular and "free-thinking." It expresses in a distinct fashion Eliot's bold claim that culture is an extension of religion: The artist's true audience is the Lord of eternity. Such observations are themselves tentative and fragmentary. Though they guide Kirsch's impressive and reliable critical eye to the heart of things, he seems still far from working out their full meaning.

Eliot's and Kirsch's careers as critics present a striking parallel. Both followed a book of magisterial literary criticism with one that goes beyond the bounds of art to explore the human condition and the nature of the intellectual and spiritual life. But here a difference arises. When Eliot published his (*For Lancelot Andrewes*), he was a recent Christian convert who argued from an insistent but fructifying orthodoxy. Kirsch has succeeded in vindicating the life of the mind, in its spiritual and religious integrity, but the positive position he sketches with the help of Bellow and other Jewish writers is, at best, incomplete. Further, he makes enough concessions to the therapeutic and materialist creeds of our day (as in his essay on E. M. Forster) that it is hard to tell how much room he has left himself to develop his position.

Kirsch writes with special sensitivity and power about the work of David Foster Wallace, who struggled to overcome the "meta-fictional trick"—the delighting nihilism of the postmodern novel—in order to attain a genuine vision of

meaning and salvation for the human person. The closest Wallace came, before his suicide, was a repetition of Kant's account of moral reason as a self-validating authority. Kirsch overcomes the lonely individualism of this solution through his embrace of literary and Jewish traditions as communal, cultural realities registered in the eye of God. But in other respects he also remains mired just where Kant left us two centuries ago: with confidence in the superiority of spiritual freedom to the determinism of nature, yes, but with only the vaguest sense of that freedom's purpose. One hopes that in the critical and poetic work that lies ahead, he will be able to pursue a path that leads beyond a vindication of art and the spirit to a definite realization of their powers. What work of art, what critical vision, we want to know, will prove worthy in God's sight? ■

BRIEFLY NOTED

*Redeeming "The Prince":
The Meaning of Machiavelli's
Masterpiece*

BY MAURIZIO VIROLI
PRINCETON, 208 PAGES, \$26.95

In *Redeeming the Prince*, Maurizio Viroli, professor emeritus of politics at Princeton University and now at the University of Texas, adopts a bold strategy: He dares to take Machiavelli at his word.

Viroli says that the most important chapter in *The Prince* is the last, "Exhortation to Seize Italy and to Free Her From the Barbarians." Here, Machiavelli calls for a leader to rise up against foreign oppressors to create an Italy whole and free. This is the project of the *Prince*, Viroli argues,

and it is a project so beautiful that any means are appropriate to secure it.

This is an audacious claim because the Exhortation is usually regarded as the worst and least interesting chapter in the book. For those who love Machiavelli for his cynicism, the fervor, patriotism, and piety in the Exhortation is puzzling. Was Machiavelli forced to include it? Was he merely shilling for a job? Is this some kind of trick? *Is somebody being esoteric?*

Viroli says no. When a book is as spare and carefully constructed as *The Prince*, it is unwise to dismiss any of it as superfluous. It's especially unwise to dismiss its final chapter as meaningless, because, of course, this is the book where Machiavelli advises all men to "look to the end" for ultimate guidance.

"Looking to the end" is the literal translation of what has become the bumper-sticker version of Machiavelli, the assertion that "the ends justify the means." Looking to the end is not permission to do anything: It demands consideration of the worthiness of the goal. The worthiness of Machiavelli's goal—Italian liberation—is what redeems the prince, in Viroli's view, and so he argues that *The Prince* is not a guidebook for evildoers.

Machiavelli is indeed a great admirer of liberators, and he doesn't promote slaughter for slaughter's sake. Nevertheless, a prince must "know how to enter into evil" when necessary. But Viroli does not do that. He mostly skips the darker inner workings of Machiavelli's book.

But here the wickedness in *The Prince* is all the more conspicuous for its absence. If you want to make the argument that the book is primarily good and not objectionable, you must address what is objectionable in it, forcefully. You would need to reach down, wrestle with its most fetid parts, and rip them out for all to see. Because it declines to do this, *Redeeming the Prince* fails to live up to its task.

Viroli emphasizes that Machiavelli's ideal is not the tyrant but the liberator—such men as Moses, Cyrus, and Theseus. Of course these men are the ideal, just as Machiavelli says it is ideal "to be both loved and feared." But you can't always have everything.

Redeeming the Prince is a worthy history of Machiavellian criticism, and Viroli rightly insists that Machiavelli's passionate desire for a liberated Italy animates the entire text. But *The Prince* is a captivating book because of its ugliness. To sanitize the barbarity within it robs it of its power. It contains what tyrants know and the rest of the world ignores at its peril: the undeniable efficacy of unopposed evil.

—Kate Havard is a research analyst at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies.

*The Hope of the Family: A Dialogue
with Gerhard Cardinal Müller*

BY GERHARD LUDWIG MÜLLER
EDITED BY CARLOS GRANADOS
IGNATIUS, 86 PAGES, \$10.95

Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller has resisted attempts by his fellow cardinals to allow divorced and remarried Catholics communion. A German prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Rome's "doctrine czar," as the media often crudely describe him), Müller is, like his predecessor Joseph Ratzinger, painted as a fanatical *Panzerkardinal*.

In the short but brilliant *Hope of the Family*, a book-length interview with Spanish journalist Carlos Granados, Müller shows that in the case of divorce, Catholic doctrine mercifully protects the most vulnerable: the children. He notes provocatively that, while Pope Francis often (rightly) discusses material poverty in developing countries, the "orphans of divorce" in Europe and America suffer a spiritual poverty that may be even more painful.