

Marching Through Whatever

by James O. Tate

Defending Dixie: Essays in Southern History and Culture

by Clyde N. Wilson

Columbia, SC: *The Foundation for American Education*; 370 pp., \$24.95



This gathering of essays, studies, reviews, and occasional pieces is united by its subject and fused by the imagination and knowledge of the author. Clyde Wilson has responded not only to a host of opportunities as a professional historian and scholar but to sundry provocations as a lively contemporary who knows the implications of ideological distortions and of political logrolling. This Distinguished Professor has not said so explicitly, but I say that current and even emerging and future events have echoed and will echo what his sense of history has said to him, and have justified and will justify his examination of the past and its connections with the present.

Those connections are most striking not so much as deep continuities but as unaccountable absurdities. The funniest pages in this book, if these may be identified from among the strenuous competition, are those devoted to an episode in 2004 when nine Democratic presidential candidates were scheduled to appear at the Longstreet Theater on the campus of the University of South Carolina, a venue which had previously featured appearances by two presidents of the United States and a pope. Suddenly, it was discovered that the theater was named after the Rev. Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, president of a predecessor institution and others, author of *Georgia Scenes* (1835), defender of slavery on biblical grounds, and advocate of secession. The gathering of Democratic contenders was hastily removed to nearby Drayton Hall, the name of which not only had Old South connections but was located on streets with similarly contaminated names. There seemed to be a pattern here—a Southern pattern. The politicians were seeking Southern votes in the South, but the context had somehow to be airbrushed or gelded of all historical associations—the whole thing seemed to be more a men-

tal-health issue than a political matter, in the ordinary sense.

So we would have to be reminded that such an inane, if not insane, episode is related to others, such as the various censorious and uninformed attempts to ban the Confederate Battle Flag from public display. The issue has its own interest, but the reaction to, or spin regarding, the “issue” is even more compelling. George W. Bush, in South Carolina in 2000, said one thing about the flag issue and later did another. John McCain tried to pander to the apparent constituency for the flag and later claimed that he had lied about it. Dick Cheney was later involved in another grotesque episode involving the Confederate Battle Flag at a funeral. Though these actions cast quite a shadow on those individuals, what is more important is a pattern that must be seen as bizarre: the repeated manipulation of Southern votes by Republicans who hold Southern people and values in contempt. This little game has been revealed for what it is for quite some time. The end of such hypocrisy is in sight, and that is going to be too bad for Republican officeholders.

Of course, there has been some fun along the way. Clyde Wilson has good reason for emphasizing the South Carolina events, but there have been other stories as well. There was a call from several directions, including from national “conservative” publications, for the correction of the Georgia state flag to the pre-1956 version. But now that the matter has indeed worked out to the old state flag, too few are aware that its design is derived from “the Stars and Bars,” the flag of the Confederate nation. Oops!

How crude the political class is, after all, and how rude the columnists and talking heads who affect to cobble together a coalition that includes Southern votes but allows nothing to Southern interests or identity or history. And that is just the point of Wilson’s essays. He is defending Dixie because she is under continual attack. Now why should that be so, so many years after Appomattox, and even so many years after the centennial of the Late Unpleasantness, and the concomitant recapitulation of Reconstruction which is now so institutionalized that Southern senators today support its extension?

After all, demonization and hatred of the South are now presented in Southern universities as Southern history, politics, and literature; since the 1960’s, the radicalization of Southern institutions has

been part of a destructive, power-seeking ideology. Beating the South like a gong has been an effective political stance for a long time, and, if that were not so, then Clyde Wilson would have had that much less call to write as he has done of Southern history and culture. Covering theories and visions, politics and theory, the Revolution, the Civil War, the history of the country, the exfoliations of literature and the mass media, and the stories of heroes and rascals, he has written a book that is not for beleaguered Southerners alone but for everyone interested in what it means to be American, what it means to be free, and what it means to live in a community.

Jefferson Davis declared that the War settled the issue of the practicability of secession but not the principle, and that the issues of the constitutional crisis would sooner or later reassert themselves. He was right about that and a lot of other things as well. But to know all this, as would benefit many citizens of Boston and Minneapolis, not to mention Tuscaloosa and Biloxi, Professor Wilson’s tour of several horizons will prove of immediate and lasting value.

Contributing editor James O. Tate is a professor of English literature at Dowling College on Long Island.

The Recovery of Metrical Verse

by David Middleton

**Writing Metrical Poetry:
Contemporary Lessons for
Mastering Traditional Forms**
by William Baer
Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest Books;
264 pp., \$16.99



From before the time of Homer until the middle of the 19th century, almost all poets in the Western literary tradition wrote measured verse—that is, poems with a regular repeated rhythmical pattern. Then, in a little over a hundred years, from Walt Whitman through the 1960’s, a new form of writing (free verse) fully emerged that not only challenged metrical verse but almost replaced it. Thus, an art form that, for three millen-

nia or more, had accommodated and helped bring into being the poetic works of Homer, Vergil, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Yeats was in danger of being lost. Still, even during the heyday of the modernist revolt against traditional verse, a number of first-rate poets kept measured verse alive—W.B. Yeats (considered by many as the greatest poet of the modern period), Robert Bridges (poet laureate of England), Robert Frost (who famously compared writing free verse with playing tennis with the net down), and California-based poet Yvor Winters, whose shift from free to metrical verse in the late 1920's attracted such poets as Donald Stanford, J.V. Cunningham, and Edgar Bowers, many of whose own students played a major role in what is now called the New Formalist Revival. This new measured verse came into view in the late 1970's with the publication of the first collections by such poets as Timothy Steele, who studied with J.V. Cunningham at Brandeis University. Moreover, as Baer notes, during later decades of the free-verse ascendancy, other excellent poets such as America's Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, and X.J. Kennedy, as well as England's W.H. Auden and Philip Larkin, continued to write

metrical verse against the grain of the times. (So, incidentally, did many of the Southern Fugitive poets, such as John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson.)

William Baer, poet, translator, professor of creative writing at Evansville University in Evansville, Indiana, and editor of the *Formalist* (1990-2004), a poetry journal that published exclusively metrical verse, has now written a comprehensive handbook that begins with a concise history of measured verse in the Western tradition (especially verse in English) and then provides a complete guide to the technicalities of the craft—or, in medieval terms, the “mystery”—of writing metrical verse. Baer's book includes a brief history and an analysis of the limitations of free verse and a recounting of the development of the New Formalist Revival from the 1970's to the present.

Each chapter in *Writing Metrical Poetry* takes up one or another element of writing poems in which both syllables and accents are counted (*i.e.*, traditional accentual-syllabic poetry). These components include various metrical feet (iamb, trochee, spondee), line lengths (monometer through octometer), poetic forms and stanzas (quatrains, couplets, blank verse, sonnets, epigrams, limer-

icks, and nonsense verse such as Lewis Carroll's “The Jabberwocky”), imported forms such as the French villanelle, and lesser-known forms, including ones invented by a single poet, such as Gerard Manley Hopkins's 11-line curtal (*i.e.*, “curtailed”) sonnet. Brief attention is also given to other metrical systems—purely accentual verse (as in *Beowulf*), syllabic verse (such as the haiku), and the duration-based classical verse in which length, not stress, governs.

Baer writes in a lively, conversational, and humorous style that will make the book appealing to anyone who wants to write measured verse or who, as a general reader, just wants to understand better the nature of traditional poetry. Every chapter contains a generous sampling of passages and whole poems that illustrate Baer's points. Each of these samples is followed immediately by a comment from Baer explaining the significance of the sample. Exercises are also included. Most importantly, the book is filled with short “Notes on . . .” passages that address issues likely to confront any poet trying to master this craft. Such notes include ones on why poets must learn the technical language of metrical poetry, on the necessity of deep and wide reading, on the kind of freedom provided only by following the rules of verse writing, on the usefulness of constructive criticism, on the need for strict self-editing, on why consideration must be shown to the reader (not too many arcane allusions, please!), on the protocols of submitting verse for publication, and on a number of other subjects.

If all of this seems to make the composition of measured verse a daunting prospect, Baer reminds us that, as the poet Derek Walcott has stated, in writing such verse “the difficulty is the joy.” What we naturally expect of an athlete or a musician or a dancer—constant practice and a disciplined attention to technique—we too often fail to demand of our contemporary poets. The joy of applying heart and mind to learning the mysteries of this craft is summed up well by Robert Frost: “All the fun's in how you say a thing.” The subtle modulation of rhythm, rhyme, and other sound effects to highlight meaning makes accentual-syllabic patterning (combining Saxon and French linguistic traits) an unsurpassable mode of poetic discourse.

As Baer rightly states, the mastery of such a skill requires patience and diligence, but the result—that classical com-

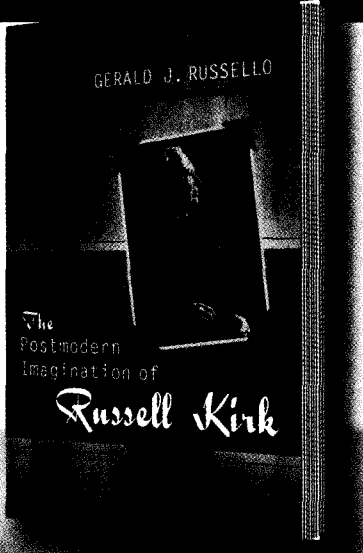
The Postmodern Imagination of

Russell Kirk

Gerald J. Russello

Author of *The Conservative Mind*, Russell Kirk (1918–1994) was a principal architect of the American intellectual conservative movement. This book takes a closer look at his works on such subjects as law, history, economics, and statesmanship to introduce a new generation of readers to the depth and range of his thought. By stressing the importance of Kirk's perception of imagination, Gerald J. Russello offers a new approach to understanding him, showing not only that Kirk laid the groundwork for the “new conservatism” of the 1950s and '60s, but also that his work evolved into a sophisticated critique of modernity paralleled in the work of some postmodern critics of liberalism. Russello has forged a lively and provocative work that will be a valuable resource for anyone seeking to understand Kirk or conservative thought.

264 pages, \$44.95



GERALD J. RUSSELLO

The Postmodern Imagination of
Russell Kirk

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bination of teaching and delight memorably presented—is of profound cultural significance. The great themes of poetry remain pretty much the same through history—love, war, nature, religion, death, adventure, philosophical speculation. What changes is the need for each new generation of poets to express these themes by generally employing the idiom of the times (an idiom sometimes rightly elevated and enhanced) and by mainly using what Coleridge called the *communis linguis*—words found and understood in all regions of a country and at all levels of human society. Such language allows the poet to filter the great universal themes through the familiar, sharable particulars of his own life, time, and place—Hardy’s Wessex, for example. And who among us is not moved by the simple yet powerful common language of Yvor Winters’ “A Leave-Taking,” in which he offers this poignant epigram on a stillborn son: “I, who never kissed your head, / Lay these ashes in their bed, / That which I could do have done. / Now farewell, my newborn son”?

In his discussion of the couplet and of that short pointed poem called the epigram, Baer reminds us that poetry can also be humorous. Much of this humor comes from wit sharpened by rhyme, rhyme being a device that most free verse avoids. Thus, we have Lord Jeffrey’s epigram-as-epitaph on Peter Robinson: “Here lies the preacher, judge, and poet, Peter, / Who broke the laws of God, and man, and metre.” Equally amusing is J.V. Cunningham’s jab at a modern relativist: “This Humanist whom no belief constrained / Grew so broad-minded he was scatter-brained.” Many readers of *Chronicles* may also appreciate a recent epigram (not included here) by Timothy Steele: “Words don’t match things, and authors are erased; / Reality reflects the theorist’s taste. / Yet, to the grief of all, the texts fight back, / Whether it’s *Hamlet*, *Emma*, or Iraq” (“A Short History of Post-structuralism” in *Toward the Winter Solstice*, Swallow Press, 2006).

Baer closes his book with an Appendix on the New Formalist Revival and with a compendium of quotations from poets ancient and modern on the nature and importance of measured verse. One center of this revival, Baer notes, was Baton Rouge, where, in the 1970’s, a group of graduate-student poets gathered around Donald Stanford, editor of the *Southern Review*, formalist poet, former student of Yvor Winters, and admirer of the po-

ems of Allen Tate. Among those “LSU Formalists” well known today are Wyatt Prunty of the University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee, and the late Alabama poet John Finlay. Here, and in similar circumstances, in small, informal groups or one by one, poets—like a scattered Gideon’s band—began to recover a greatly threatened 3,000-year tradition.

Poetry is the rightful possession of all human beings. It begins in the womb with a prenatal awareness of our mother’s rhythmical heartbeat and continues in our perception of the great rhythmic patterns of breath and sex, the comings and goings of the tides, and the coursings of the stars. (It is fascinating to note that Christ died, according to Matthew, crying out in the verse of a psalm, and that Socrates turned Aesop into verse as he awaited execution.) Poetry fills our lives from nursery rhymes, hymns, and ballads to the lyrics of popular music, Bible verses, and even proverbial sayings such as Ben Franklin’s “Early to bed, early to rise / Makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise”—or a modern wag’s retort: “Early to bed, early to rise / And your girl goes out with other guys.”

Such humorous poems as those quoted above are reminders that rhyming poetry is well suited to satire. Thus, metrical poetry—though certainly practiced by poets of all cultural and political persuasions—should be quite natural to the traditional conservative poet committed to defending what T.S. Eliot called “the permanent things.” As William Baer has stated elsewhere,

it’s . . . logical to expect that individuals who value tradition and order would tend to write their poems in the time-tested metric that has dominated English-language poetry from Geoffrey Chaucer to Richard Wilbur. Some, myself included, would even tend to see the underlying structure of meter as a poetic representation of the provident order of God’s universe.

Or, as Robert Frost once quipped about God telling Moses how to make verse, “Tell them Iamb, Jehovah said, and meant it.”

David Middleton, poet-in-residence and head of the Department of Languages and Literature at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana, is the author of Beyond the Chandeleurs

and *The Habitual Peacefulness of Gruchy: Poems After Pictures* by Jean-François Millet, both published by Louisiana State University Press.

The Hollow Men

by Fr. Michael P. Orsi

The Most Famous Man in America:
The Biography of
Henry Ward Beecher
by Debby Applegate
New York: Doubleday; 544 pp., \$27.95



Debby Applegate’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher*, treats a wide range of subjects: religion, politics, social upheaval, war, and clerical sex scandals. And, while such a list might sound as if it were referring to contemporary America, the events recounted here occurred a century-and-a-half ago. In chronicling Beecher’s life, Applegate, a professor of American studies at Yale and Wesleyan Universities, brings to light the era Beecher helped shape and makes clear to the astute reader that his influence remains with us today.

A son of the Rev. Lyman Beecher, a well-known Congregationalist preacher and professor, Henry Ward Beecher (1813-87) possessed impressive oratorical skills. He was pastor of one of the largest churches of his day, Brooklyn’s famous Plymouth Church, as well as a key spokesman for the antislavery cause. And he preached the so-called Gospel of Love, which placed him on the cutting edge of 19th-century liberal Protestantism. In many ways, Beecher was progenitor of the socioreligious phenomenon that would eventually be called the “mega-church” movement.

Beecher was reared a strict New England Congregationalist. However, the rigidity of his upbringing was challenged by two factors: an insatiable need for love (owing partly to the death of his mother when he was three years old) and his family’s migration to the less religiously restrictive Midwestern frontier, when his father became head of Lane Theological Seminary near Cincinnati. From these conflicting personal currents would emerge a highly personalized doctrine