

Excellent Writers, Facile Thinkers

By RUSSELL JACOBY

Do conservatives write better than leftists?

Why I Turned Right: Leading Baby Boom Conservatives Chronicle Their Political Journeys (Threshold Editions), to be published this month, is a collection of essays by a dozen conservatives on their political peregrinations from left to right. Almost without exception, each essay is lucid and articulate. Would it be possible to assemble a counter-collection by leftists that would be equally limpid? Unlikely. Why?

Several answers suggest themselves. Leftists largely inhabit the academy, and the professoriate does not prize elegant writing. On the contrary, it distrusts clear prose as superficial. Oddly, English and literature professors led the way. A trip to Paris, a bottle of wine, a Foucaultian appetizer, and a Derridaian main dish, and they became convinced that incomprehensibility equals profundity.

Over the years the menu has changed, but the damage has been done. Leftist scholars continue to believe that clotted language confirms insight; to write well receives little regard. Consider the ringing conclusion of a recent manifesto of the radical intelligentsia, Eric Lott's *The Disappearing Liberal Intellectual*: "If patriotism itself is rethought as 'plural, serial, contextual and mobile,' in Appaduari's words, then postnationalist collectives of labor and desire might earn the devotion they deserve." Lott — yes, an English professor — crafted that sentence.

Compared to that, much conservative writing has a deft, light touch. Only one author in this collection is an academic; almost all are affiliated with conservative think tanks, which encourage readable prose for a reading public. Many are ex-academics, however, and abhor the university. Stanley Kurtz, a contributing editor of National Review Online, breathed freely once he "escaped" from the campus. "For the first time in years, I could speak my mind." For two decades at least, going back to Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, conservatives have effectively savaged the academic world. That polemical zeal marks this volume as well, especially Heather Mac Donald's reflections on studying literature at Yale with Paul de Man ("a story of a nightmare from which I did, at last, awake"). Indeed, their academic experience drove many of the contributors into a conservative orbit. Kurtz believes that university "one-sidedness and extremism" produced today's conservatives.

Could this be so? The classic anthology of political conversion, *The God That Failed* (1949), responded to sterner stuff. After joining the Communist Party, partaking of the anti-Nazi resistance, witnessing the Spanish Civil War, and finding himself interned in France, Arthur Koestler moved to the right. Today's more timorous souls run home when they see a Che Guevara T-shirt or catch a little feminist claptrap. Peter Berkowitz, of the Hoover Institution, underlines the significance of a "collective dirty look" directed at a conservative professor during a Harvard gathering. Oh my! Mac Donald tells of de Man's

star graduate assistant, a true believer, who responded with "a strangled laugh" to the heretical comment that people could actually communicate. Kurtz draws the conclusion: "The food, clothing, and music in elite universities were a whole lot nicer than in the Soviet Union, but the intellectual setting was barely better." That dissent spelled incarceration in the USSR and a cold shoulder in the U.S. academy does not register on these specialists in freedom.

Kurtz refers to the elite universities that housed these conservatives — the Dartmouths, Harvards, and Stanfords of the country. Nothing here about public universities, much less community colleges. "I watched with horror as the multicultural yahoos took over the humanities. ... The criterion of excellence ... was forever abolished," writes Mac Donald of her Yale experience. Has Mac Donald ever checked out the curricula at community colleges, where most students are enrolled? There is no curriculum. Moreover, the humanities are eroding everywhere, which is not caused by the yahoos but by Yahoo or, rather, by the market forces so beloved by these conservatives. Students increasingly demand professional and preprofessional education. But hoi polloi merit hardly a glance from these conservative arbiters of excellence.

Rank elitism can be refreshing in a democratic society, and it's on exhibit here. Dinesh D'Souza recalls his Dartmouth dinners of wine, speechifying, and good cheer. "There was an ethos here, and a sensibility, and it conveyed to me something about conservatism that I had not suspected." P.J. O'Rourke came from a solidly conservative family but spent 10 years chasing sexy leftist women before returning to a good life and wife. He once asked his grandmother what was the difference between Republicans and Democrats. "She said, 'Democrats rent.'" O'Rourke owns. He is clear about that. His essay is also funny, but perhaps — to return to the question of conservative lucidity — the light touch depends on light ideas. Whether in jest or not, O'Rourke boasts that he has no ideas. He may be right.

O'Rourke's only mission is to maintain the status quo; he hopes that nothing changes. Why should it? Things are sweet in his corner of the woods. His piece is called "The Unthinking Man's Guide to Conservatism." He tries hard to "nip in the bud" any notion of fairness in his offspring. When his daughter complains that something is "unfair," he upbraids her. "I tell her, 'Honey, you're cute. That's not fair. You're smart. That's not fair. Your parents are pretty well-off. That's not fair. You were born in America. That's not fair. You had better pray to God that things don't start getting fair for you.'" Amusing, but what is the upshot? Celebrate unfairness? Defend the fort? In a word: yes.

These guys are gunslingers with a for-me-or-against-me vision of the world. Richard Starr, deputy editor of *The Weekly Standard*, despises weakness and liberal complexity, which drove him to conservatism. Before Ronald Reagan's presidency, the United States reveled in "moral chaos and defeatism" as played out in the "surrender" in Vietnam, the spread of terrorism, and the Iranian revolution. He cites with disgust a speech by Jimmy Carter that emphasized the "limitations" and "constraints" of power. No restraint or limitation for gonzo Starr. "As history shows," Starr writes, "one country certainly can impose its system of society upon another through direct military intervention." Just

check out Iraq, if you have any doubts. Starr does not mention Iraq or George Bush. Why not? Too complicated?

And here we get to the pith of contemporary conservatism: It is not pretty. It consists of laboratory-grade hypocrisy and guns. Feigned beliefs that life is sacred and that government should get off your back define the hypocrisy. Starr jokes, "It was important for the baby boomers to secure abortion rights and the right to die — that way, they can kill off their offspring and their aging parents." A good line, but again, what is the upshot? Conservatives protect life and despise war? In a word: no. They salute the Iraq war. They defend torture. They care little for the losers in society. For them, the sanctity of life ends at birth; at least they show little interest in the suffering of the living.

For Joseph Bottum, the editor of *First Things*, anti-abortionism defines the whole of conservatism. One fine April day, he spotted through his window a happy toddler, a happy mother, and a happy dog and experienced a Norman Rockwell moment. He realized "the sudden, absolute conviction that babies are good." Some people — who? — believe the opposite, but now the world snapped into clarity. "Anything that participates in the murder of a child — anything that slices it into pieces or burns it to death with chemicals in the womb — is *wrong*. All the rest is just working out the details." Working out the details turns out to be simple. Once you uphold a "belief in the dignity of the human person ... on the one hand," you support Republican candidates "on the other hand." In other words, the "pro-life movement" bears responsibility for the whole Republican kit and caboodle.

The Republican incompetents who orchestrated the invasion of Iraq — several hundred thousand Iraqis dead and 3,000 Americans and counting — presumably cherish the dignity of intrauterine life. Adults are another matter. David Brooks, a *New York Times* columnist, judges the Iraq war, which he prefers to call "a foray" or an "effort" rather than a war, "one of the noblest endeavors the United States, or any great power, has ever undertaken." What are the others? Hiroshima? The bombing of Hanoi? To these conservatives, life is sacred before birth and expendable after. Almost. In the midst of a health system that visibly fails millions and elicits minimal concern from conservatives, a single brain-dead patient caused them to call a special meeting of Congress. Bush skipped a nap to fly to Washington and sign legislation to block the removal of the feeding tube from Terri Schiavo. From the Senate floor, Republican worthies offered comments about her health. O'Rourke identifies one of the two great conservative principles: "Mind your own business." He neglects to point out that few conservatives subscribe to it.

On the basis of this volume, conservatives are excellent writers — and facile thinkers. Perhaps the two go together. Prose may improve by avoiding complications. Starr pumps an aggressive America but does not mention Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Bush, or the Iraq war. O'Rourke advances the "mind your own business" proposition but says nothing about a government that flouts it. In fact, many subjects go unmentioned here: environmental degradation, increasing federal debt, privatization of Social Security, intensifying economic inequalities, health-insurance crises, immigration, civil rights. Too messy. These conservatives are best at puncturing liberal, especially academic,

balderdash. Apart from that, they uphold a minimal government but maximum government intrusion. They support the holiness of embryonic life and expanded graveyards for their wars. They are gifted at defending their gated communities with wisecracks — and then some. D'Souza tells us that as a new father he is more conservative than ever. "In fact, of late, I've been thinking I might need a gun."

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