CHAPTER 1

US Literature and the Modern Right at Midcentury
Conservative Modernism, Race, and the Cold War, 1945–1960

1.1 Introduction: Literary Guerrilla Warfare between Russell Kirk and Lionel Trilling

In the early postwar years, the most significant intersection between movement conservatism and American literature was Lionel Trilling's famous claim in the preface to *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) that liberalism in midcentury America constituted "not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition" (xv). While Trilling readily admitted the existence of conservative and reactionary "impulses," these impulses, he said, did not generally "express themselves in ideas but only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas" (xv). Although frequently referred to in the following years as an epic insult, Trilling's remark did not come from a place of boastful superiority. Trilling was concerned that liberalism's desire to rationally order society strengthened an "organizational impulse" whose chief unintended consequence was that well-intentioned government bureaucrats forgot "that the world is a complex and unexpected and terrible place which is not always to be understood by the mind as we use it in our everyday tasks" (xx). To counteract the liberal imagination's penchant for superficiality, for seeing problems in the social world as a string of technical problems and solutions, Trilling argued that liberals had to engage with the kind of literature "that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness [*sic*], possibility, complexity, and difficulty" (xxi). Here, Trilling followed openly in the intellectual footsteps of John Stuart Mill, who urged nineteenth-century liberals to absorb the disconcerting conservative implications of Samuel Coleridge's poetry (xvi). While it would be absurd, Trilling knew, to predict anachronistically Coleridge's positions on partisan issues in midcentury America, the point was that Coleridge's "powerful conservative mind" threw up a fundamental challenge to the general liberal

belief that injecting rationality into society could, in large part, cure the social ills caused by irrationality (xvi). For liberal readers in the postwar United States, modernist literature fulfilled the same function that Coleridge's poetry once did, since it tested liberal assumptions. Anglophone modernists, Trilling wrote, "demand of us [liberals] a great agility and ingenuity in coping with their antagonism to our social and political ideals" (301). The liberal imagination, Trilling believed, posited a social–clinical framework trading in metaphors of diseases and cures. But as a close reader of modernists like Joyce, Eliot, Faulkner, Woolf, Stein, and Hemingway, he also saw that the complexity of social problems might not be legible within this framework.

Upon the publication of Trilling's book, the young, unknown conservative scholar Russell Kirk took Trilling's declaration as an intellectual challenge. Kirk began his counterattack by highlighting the tension in Trilling's thought between liberalism and "great" canonical literature. As Kirk liked to point out, Trilling confessed that midcentury American liberalism was fundamentally at odds with the modernist giants of the twentieth century. "Our liberal ideology," Trilling conceded in *The Liberal Imagination*, "has produced a large literature of social and political protest, but not, for several decades, a single writer who commands our real literary admiration" (98). Kirk agreed wholeheartedly with this sentiment, seizing upon it and quoting it, along with similar remarks by Trilling, repeatedly throughout the fifties. "In Europe, the leading writers of the age," Kirk wrote, "reject the dogmas of liberalism and democracy" ("English Letters in the Age of Boredom," 13). To support this weighty declaration, Kirk quoted Trilling, who acknowledged: "No connection exists between our liberal educated classes and the best of the literary mind [*sic*] of our time. And this is to say that there is no connection between the political ideas of our educated class and the deep places of the imagination" (*Liberal Imagination*, 98–99). If Trilling had the gall to claim that liberalism constituted the sole intellectual tradition in the United States, Kirk thought, but could not smoothly integrate the most important literary minds into that narrative, perhaps the conservative intellectual counterattack should be mounted from inside the American literary tradition itself.

A year before publishing his iconic book for the conservative movement, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana* (1953), Kirk provided a rough sketch of this thesis in a short piece entitled "The Moral Conservatism of Hawthorne." Implicitly alluding to Trilling, Kirk opened the essay with the following sentence: "Conservatism in America, though so often defeated at the polls, always has held its head high among men of

letters" (361). Hawthorne, like Flannery O'Connor roughly a century later, challenged the optimistic liberals of his day, most notably Ralph Waldo Emerson and the transcendentalists, by reminding them of the importance of the past and the inescapability of original sin (362). With novels like *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Blithedale Romance*, Kirk argued that Hawthorne secured his place in American history as a conservative of abiding importance, for he "chastened American optimism by declaring that sin . . . is virtually constant; that projects of reform must begin and end with the human heart; that our real enemy is not social institutions but the devil within us; that the fanatical improver of mankind through artificial alteration is, commonly, in truth a destroyer of souls" (363). Although Kirk regarded Hawthorne as one of the strongest links in a long historical chain of American conservatives, he believed that the core of Hawthorne's thought was inspired not directly by an American-born thinker but indirectly by Kirk's own favorite archetype of Western conservatism, Edmund Burke (364).

The linkage Kirk made between Hawthorne and Burke in this essay prefigured the larger framework of *The Conservative Mind* and its central contention that the beating heart of conservatism was imaginative highbrow literature.[1] Synthesizing political treatises and literary works, Kirk constructed his breakout book as an extended response to Trilling's claim regarding the absence of a conservative intellectual tradition. Calling his tome a "prolonged essay in definition," Kirk hoped to answer the question: "What system of ideas, common to England and the United States, has sustained men of conservative instincts in their resistance against radical theories and social transformation ever since the beginning of the French Revolution?" (3). The answer was that Burke had invented what Kirk called "conscious conservatism" in response to the French Revolution, and that ever since, the conservative intellectual tradition in America had patterned itself off Burkean philosophy and its nineteenth-century British descendants who emphasized tradition, prejudice, custom, and organic social order (5). But whereas the British conservative tradition, according to Kirk, featured a consistent stream of prominent political statesmen, the record of noteworthy conservative politicians in the American tradition was spotty. For this reason, Kirk turned to numerous American writers of humane letters in *The Conservative Mind* to bolster his argument. Contra Trilling, a conservative intellectual tradition did, in fact, exist – but it resided in the high cultural canons of American literature.[2]

For Kirk and other traditionalist conservatives, the lack of American politicians whom they could deem properly "conservative" was a minor

problem, not a mortal threat to American conservatism. Throughout his life, Kirk tended to deemphasize the importance of practical politics, as he was known to quote George Gissing's aphorism that politics was a vulgar arena for the "quarter educated" (Birzer, *Russell Kirk: American Conservative*, 9). While movement conservatism under Buckley's leadership would eventually put a high value on gaining electoral power in the ensuing decades, the early movement tended to interpret – perhaps even willfully misinterpret – its exile from the halls of power as a beneficial augmentation of perspective. Formal political power was trivial when compared to the titanic ideological struggle playing out on the global battlefield of ideas. "Men of ideas, rather than political parties, determine the ultimate course of things," Kirk wrote in the introduction to *The Conservative Mind*, "and I have chosen my conservatives accordingly" (9). In his equally influential book *God and Man at Yale* (1951), Buckley made a similar declaration that would come to acquire axiomatic authority for postwar conservatives: "I myself believe that the duel between Christianity and atheism is the most important in the world. I further believe that the struggle between individualism and collectivism is the same struggle reproduced on another level" (xvi). Movement conservatives were embarking on a crusade, in their own minds, that was more profound than electing a conservative president or achieving a congressional majority; they were combatting twentieth-century totalitarianism by returning to the wisdom of their Anglophone ancestors, and their first line of defense in the battle was the Western literary canon. The major upshot is that in the immediate postwar moment, movement conservatives valued (what they imagined to be) the historical resilience imbedded in cultural capital acquired from the literary field over the seemingly transient nature of political capital gained through the electoral process.

1.2 Highbrow Literature as Cold War Weapon

Beginning with Kirk's efforts to uncover a living conservative intellectual tradition, conservatives in the postwar period stressed the importance of grounding that tradition in humane letters because their battle against totalitarian collectivism was rooted in a sharp distinction between traditional wisdom in the humanities and the mere technical knowledge that they believed undergirded materialist ideologies. In his confessional memoir *Witness*, the ex-communist-turned-conservative Whittaker Chambers lamented: "Men have never been so educated, but wisdom, even as an idea, has conspicuously vanished from the world" (506). For Chambers, the

central doctrine of Christianity was a source of wisdom that went deeper than everyday politics. While Christian wisdom could be found in the works of theologians like Sören Kierkegaard and Karl Barth, Chambers consistently identified Fyodor Dostoyevsky as the greatest conservative thinker of modern times (*Witness,* 506). In his definitive biography of Chambers, Sam Tanenhaus notes the deep influence that Dostoyevsky's novels, especially *The Possessed*, had on Chambers in the late forties and early fifties. After reading that novel half a dozen times, Chambers discovered the basic premise of his opposition to communism: the conflict between Christianity and atheism (Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography,* 333; 453).

The problem with postwar American liberals, Chambers and Kirk believed, was that they refused to grasp in these precise terms the existential crisis brought on by every form of totalitarianism, and thus liberals had assumed the role of unwitting accomplices in the slow slide toward global oppression. Instead of seeing conflicts through the aperture of great literary narratives, modern liberals continued to see conflicts through the lens of technocratic knowledge that Trilling had warned was too narrow. Toward the end of *Witness*, Chambers retells a moment during the second Alger Hiss trial when a liberal congressman had asked him about "the economic problem of Communism" (711). Avoiding a meaningless academic debate, in his eyes, about the materialistic differences between capitalism and communism, Chambers writes: "I answered, citing Dostoevsky [*sic*]: 'The problem of Communism is not an economic problem. The problem of Communism is the problem of atheism'" (712). Chambers's frustration with this kind of partisan shallowness is a reoccurring theme in *Witness*. Modern liberals, thought Chambers, could never quite bring themselves to believe that an ex-communist spy wasn't an overzealous political hatchet man. To see the Chambers–Hiss affair "as a manifestation of partisan politics," Chambers believed for the rest of his life, was to be "influenced by the traditional pattern of American politics at a time when that traditional pattern no longer holds . . . The explanation lies deeper" (741). The spatial metaphors Chambers employs here and elsewhere virtually always privilege depth over surface, and the "deeper" Chambers probed with his prose, the more he uncovered tragic Dostoyevskian dilemmas that revealed the irrational psychic forces that his one-time friend Trilling claimed were associated in "the literary mind with the dark unconscious and with the most primitive human relationships" (*Liberal Imagination,* 293).

In a frequently quoted passage from *Witness*, Chambers describes just such a tragic dilemma. Liberals, in their well-meaning desire to assuage

human suffering, have failed to comprehend how their ideological commitments represent a step in the wrong direction concerning the larger struggle between good and evil. As Chambers writes, these "men who could not see that what they firmly believed was liberalism added up to socialism could scarcely be expected to see what added up to Communism. Any charge of Communism enraged them precisely because they could not grasp the differences between themselves and those against whom it was made" (472–73). Though they may not have realized it yet, midcentury American liberals had become, for all intents and purposes, revolutionaries because they had placed their faith in man-made solutions over the wisdom of the Christian tradition. Any man should be called a "revolutionary," Chambers writes in the introduction to *Witness*, who is put "to the challenge: *God or Man?,*" and he responds with "the answer: *Man*" (13). For Chambers, this insight could not be reached through the structural logic of thirties dialectical materialism or any other materialist method; instead, it was primarily a metaphysical insight gleaned through literary form, which explains why the entire structure and theme of *Witness* is derived from Dostoyevsky's late novels.

With this Dostoyevskian template undergirding his memoir, Chambers hoped to offer a vision that would reorganize the entire political spectrum in the postwar United States. Following World War II, American politics had settled into an ideological consensus, at least according to prominent liberal intellectuals. In *The Vital Center* (1948), Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. offered the most potent articulation of this viewpoint, contending that the liberal welfare state was an infinitely better form of government than right-wing fascism and left-wing communism. Liberalism, as Schlesinger's guiding spatial metaphor suggested, was the sane middle ground between these two insane totalitarian systems on the Right and Left. By rooting himself in the Dostoyevskian novel, Chambers sought to show that the firm distinctions liberals made between postwar liberalism, German Nazism, and Soviet Communism were wish-fulfillment fantasies. Although Chambers failed to convince Leftists and liberals that the dominant political spectrum was categorically incoherent, his views were profoundly influential on the burgeoning conservatism movement, especially the connection Chambers drew between communism and fascism as manifestations of the Left. While reviewers like Philip Rahv routinely took issue with Chambers's conflation of "liberals, socialists, and party-line communists," they tended to ignore the larger point Chambers was making about fascism as the ultimate endpoint ("The Sense and Nonsense of Whittaker Chambers," 137). Reflecting on the Soviet purges of the

thirties and their reverberations in the American Communist Party, Chambers stated that at the time he believed he was just witnessing "the imprint of the peculiarly malevolent character of Joseph Stalin, his personal perversion of what in itself was good" (*Witness,* 248). Eventually, though, Chambers had a startling literary-style epiphany that triggered his break from communism. "The important point was not the character of Stalin, but the character of Communism," Chambers writes, for "Stalin was carrying [communism] to its inevitable development as the greatest of the fascist forms" (249). Later in *Witness*, Chambers put it even more bluntly: "The fascist character of Communism was inherent in it from the beginning" (460). For Chambers, the Dostoyevskian memoir-novel afforded him a bird's-eye view of this oncoming apocalyptic drama playing out on the stage of twentieth-century history. In short, Chambers inverted the classic Marxist teleology of history: Postwar liberalism was drifting toward communism because it shared the same materialist essence as Soviet Communism, which was itself always in the process of maturing into fascism as its final stage of development.[3]

Following the publication of *Witness*, Russell Kirk not only made the same claim regarding the basic continuity between communism and fascism but also stressed the importance that literary form played in seeing such a connection. Writing about Trilling and other liberals of the literary establishment, Kirk claimed that they were so "naïve" as to "maintain that the Fascist and Nazi regimes were inspired by 'conservative' elements and constituted 'reaction'" (*Conservative Mind,* 425). Only fellow conservatives like Chambers "understood that the Fascist and Communist systems were simply parallel afflictions from out the winter of our discontent" (426). A fascist heart resided at the core of communism, Kirk maintained, due to the secular-materialist foundations of both systems. Like Chambers, Kirk contended that this insight was best understood through a literary framework, specifically what Kirk called the "moral imagination," a phrase he borrowed and adapted from Burke. Although Burke mentioned the moral imagination only once in his writings, Kirk appropriated this term and used it as the starting point for his own expansive aesthetic theory. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke invoked the moral imagination while lamenting the destruction of social norms wrought by French Jacobins: "All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated

fashion" (171). On the one hand, according to Kirk, Burke was fully aware that the moral imagination was a social fiction, a genteel instrument of civilization that obscured the true "naked, shivering nature" of humanity. But, on the other hand, the development of the moral imagination via literature and the arts raised humans above their basest needs and desires, orienting them toward the higher emotions of empathy, ethics, and love. Once reason was cut off from older Christian sources of wisdom, Kirk believed, the justification was in place for killing naked, shivering humans in the name of progress.

However, if traditionalists regarded materialist ideologies like communism and fascism as deeply flawed because they reduced human beings to their basest desires in the name of material progress, that worldview also undermined the basic premise of capitalism beloved by libertarians in the conservative movement. Capitalism for traditionalists like Chambers, Kirk, and Peter Viereck was not an absolute good. For Chambers, an ex-communist still thinking in long-term historical stages, capitalism represented social change so transformative that it could practically be called "revolutionary." In a series of personal letters to Buckley in the fifties, Chambers wrote that he had even determined that capitalism was intrinsically incompatible with any definition of conservatism. "Conservatism is alien to the very nature of capitalism," Chambers declared, "whose love of life and growth is perpetual change" (*Odyssey of a Friend,* 229). While Chambers felt that he must "uphold capitalism in its American version," he could not in good faith equate conservatism with capitalism, writing: "I claim that capitalism is not, and by its essential nature cannot conceivably be, conservative" (228). According to this traditionalist position, to posit capitalism as the foundation of postwar conservatism, as Rand and other libertarians would, was to root conservatism in the same materialist essence as communism and fascism.[4]

Similarly, Kirk and Viereck saw capitalism not as a constitutive ingredient of conservatism, but as an economic system that was relatively better than other systems, but then only if capitalism could be harnessed to aid the preservation of a traditional society. In Peter Viereck's *Conservatism Revisited: The Revolt against Ideology* (1949), a book generally credited with reviving the very word "conservatism" in postwar American academic circles, Viereck rejected the purely economic definition of conservatism for the same reasons as Kirk. "The core and fire-center of conservatism," Viereck asserted, "is a humanist reverence for the dignity of the individual soul. This is incompatible with the fascist or Stalinist collectivism; incompatible with a purely mechanistic view of man; incompatible with a purely

economic view of history" (71). In *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk was especially troubled by the social changes wrought by industrial capitalism. After the invention of the automobile and Fordist manufacturing practices in the early twentieth century, Kirk claimed that "before long, men would begin to see that the automobile, and the mass-production techniques which made it possible, could alter national character and morality more thoroughly than could the most absolute of tyrants" (325). The deeply anti-conservative product of Fordism, Kirk summed up in a dramatic phrase, was a "mechanical Jacobin" (325). In his follow-up book *A Program for Conservatives* (1954), Kirk directed his critiques at laissez-faire economists like Ludwig Von Mises, the famous Austrian School philosopher-economist and libertarian hero of the postwar Right, writing: "Theirs is a doctrine which destroys itself in proportion as it is generally promulgated: once supernatural and traditional sanctions are dissolved, economic self-interest is ridiculously inadequate to preserve order. Prescription and prejudice are the defenses of justice and peace" (144). Shifting into his typical jeremiadic discourse, Kirk argued that if economists like von Mises failed to recognize that the free market does not itself create order, but rather thrives as a consequence of a traditionally ordered society, a totalitarian catastrophe would ensue: "Laugh them away [i.e., prescription and Burkean prejudice], and in come those forces of delusion and unrest which Marxism exemplifies today; men refuse to live by economic reasonableness alone" (144). Both Kirk and Viereck made use of the Dostoyevskian literary drama, outlined by Chambers in the late forties and the early fifties, to warn against a coming collectivist dystopia that would begin with the egalitarian collectivism of socialism but end inevitably with the horrific collectivism of fascism.[5]

From the beginning of the postwar era, the central rift between libertarian and traditionalist conservatives was about how much emphasis should be placed on capitalism versus tradition – summarized sometimes as "freedom versus order." From this perspective, postwar American conservatism was a historically contingent, makeshift alliance between Burkean traditionalists emphasizing social order, custom, and deep communal and religious bonds, and neoclassical liberals emphasizing liberty, limited government, and free-market capitalism. Although conservatives would eventually praise this alliance as a successful "fusion" of traditionalism and libertarianism brought about by the ex-communist and *National Review* writer Frank Meyer, the conservative movement's early documents show that this pseudo-synthesis remained philosophically contradictory, albeit pragmatically beneficial, as thinkers on both sides engaged in bitter

intellectual battles for roughly half a century. Ironically, Meyer made every effort to distance his ongoing intellectual project from the notion of fusionism, casting himself as a "libertarian conservative" who refused to accommodate American traditionalists descended from Burke. Instead of "abstractly 'fusing' two positions," Meyer wrote in a 1962 article entitled "Why Freedom" for *National Review*, "What I have been attempting to do is to help articulate in theoretical and practical terms the instinctive consensus of the contemporary American conservative movement. . . . That consensus simultaneously accepts the existence of an objective moral and spiritual order, which places as man's end the pursuit of virtue, *and* the freedom of the individual person as a decisive necessity for a good political order" (223). For Meyer, traditionalism shared the same ideological essence as "collectivist" ideologies like Nazism and Soviet Communism: All three ideologies "had a vision of how men ought to live and was determined to force that vision upon those subject to their will. If the state is endowed with the power to enforce virtue, the men who hold that power will enforce their own concepts as virtuous" (224). It is no coincidence, in light of this claim, that Meyer chose "Collectivism Rebaptized" as the title for his critical review of Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*.

Instead of labeling this "fusionism," it would be more accurate to say that Meyer sought to imbue libertarianism with the traditionalist concept of "virtue" in the hopes of restraining the potentially revolutionary implications of classical liberalism – namely, the principle of equality. In perhaps his most important essay "Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism" (1960), Meyer argued that conservatives "must draw upon those who called themselves conservatives in [the nineteenth century] but also those who called themselves liberals" (26). In Meyer's writings, conservatives found the theoretical core of postwar conservatism: it was a not just a "fusion" of a small band of relative political unknowns hostile to the New Deal but a much more curious combination of Burkean conservatism and classical liberalism. Put another way, if one accepted the conservative truism that the American and French Revolutions inaugurated modern politics, Meyer's postwar conservatism was something like a grand fusion of a premodern defense of inherited privilege and a modern defense of individual liberty.

In the best of all possible worlds, Meyer claimed, politicians and intellectuals would "distinguish between the *authoritarianism* with which men and institutions suppress the freedom of men and the *authority* of God and truth" (24). By "authoritarianism," Meyer meant eighteenth-century Europe's neofeudal nobility class, the suppression of a free-market