RUSSELL KIRK AND "ANTI-CULTURE"

In his recent National Review article, "Anti-Culture at Public Expense," Russell Kirk has had to constrict enough ideas for a major essay into a single page. This admittedly allows little enough space for the working out of terminology or necessary qualifications. But even accepting these limitations it is impossible to see the greater part of this article, which among other things attacks the study of popular culture and the Bowling Green University Center in particular, as anything but ill advised, misinformed and anti-intellectual. For, in essence, Kirk denies the necessity of studying the total cultural matrix.

Although Kirk makes a few valid if innocuous points, his thesis that the (admittedly vague) outcry for educational "relevance" almost invariably leads to "anti-culture," and, presumably, absurd "gut" courses, is a dubious one. Yet it is when he begins to equate "anti-culture" with the study of popular culture that the confusion of his argument becomes apparent. Kirk obviously is confusing the object of study, which he more or less judges aesthetically, with the study of the object, which proceeds more or less along historical-sociological lines; he is confusing the indiscriminate lapping up of subliterature with the objective determining of its importance as a cultural phenomenon. Further, he rather hysterically misconstrues the aims of popular culture scholars. They seek to call attention, within the scope of liberal arts education, to a vast and neglected body of historical and social scientific source material. He views them rather as a band of mobile, marauding "Huns" who are out to replace the humanities curriculum with Agatha Christie thrillers and underground tabloids.

Kirk never precisely defines his notion of culture, but it seems quite clear that he uses the term as it is commonly used today, to designate "high" culture, the concert hall, the museum, Art, Poetry. His conception seems disastrously restrictive and non-anthropological, staunchly humane, but woefully unscientific. If we are to gain the fullest possible insight into any aspect of human experience, naturally we must try to study every observable factor bearing on that aspect. And if we choose to define culture more broadly than does Kirk--as social scientists we must do just that--we cannot limit our study of culture to only that which jibes with our personal or even collective visions of cultural ideals. To cite an obvious analogy, riots and assassinations are as inimical to what we construe as the best traditions of our culture as are bad art and tasteless underground upheavals. Yet no historian would presume to ignore such social upheavals. Russell Kirk is free to study whatever aspects of culture to which he chooses to devote his energies. But for him to impose his narrow definition upon Bowling Green or any other university is plainly unacceptable. For Kirk the university may be a place solely for the contemplation of the finer products of the intellect. But for many of us it is the place for carefully working out a fuller picture of man and his possibilities, all his possibilities.

Were Kirk's educational strictures to find ready acceptance, the position in which folklorists would find themselves is obvious. We would have to to out to the field and stay there, not daring to bring back the humble artifacts "the masses relish" (or did relish) to the university for analysis. Probably the Russell Kirk who escorted Richard Dorson to Mecosta, Michigan, would not think of lumping folklore and pop culture into the same category. Yet these two fields, though certainly distinct, have much in common.

In the main, both deal with social strata "below" that which produces the great intellectual and artistic products upon which most critical attention focuses. The "products" of both pop and folk cultures, when judged aesthetically, must be judged in terms of aesthetics that differ from that used in dealing with the masterpieces produced by "official" art. And we don't doubt that there are many critics who would judge a Negro folktale or an obscene joke as worthless as a detective story or the East Village Other. Furthermore, the materials of folklore and of what we would today term popular culture have often interacted. One cannot effectively view the "Child" ballad without knowing also the printed broadside tradition. Yet, as A. L. Friedman repeatedly points out in The Ballad Revival, folksong scholarship has suffered much from the fact that earlier investigators (blinded by narrow, Kirk-like visions of cultural importance) neglected the broadsides because they were "vulgar," urban and cheaply printed. Finally, Kirk's attitude is unfortunately reminiscent of the seventeenth century denigrators of antiquarian research. Men such as John Earle, Bishop of Salisbury, and the dramatist Shackerley Marmion soundly satirized the antiquarian preference for raw original source material over the polished and often inaccurate chronicles and historical commentaries. Yet without the antiquarian movement, much valuable data might have waited years for assembling or might have been lost. And of course antiquarianism spawned modern folklore studies, in England at least. An epitaph or the notation of a superstition seem not so terribly different from a menu or a girlie magazine.

It seems ironic that Kirk should single out a course in detective fiction for some of his wrath. One might expect that a conservative thinker would rightly recognize the detective novel as the last stronghold of classic plot structure, a point Somerset Maugham hinted at in his well known remark that crime fiction was the only place one could still be sure of finding a real story. But apart from this the detective story surely enjoys a pedigree that renders it as worthy of study as other minor genres or periods of literary activity. Oedipus Rex has been called a murder mystery and Dorothy L. Sayers (admittedly better known for her Lord Peter Wimsey stories than her translations and scholarship) traces the form to Biblical literature. No less a figure than Poe gave the form much of its modern impetus and one certainly can argue that writers like Arthur Conan Doyle, William Wilkie Collins, Dashiell Hammett and Georges Simenon are, in their way, writers of much talent and imagination. The French, of course, bestow a fairly prestigious annual award, the Prix de quai des Orfevres, for littérature policiere. A similar case can be made for the posters Kirk seems to begrudge collection, for artists as great as Toulouse-Lautrec and Picasso have deigned to try their hand at this medium of expression.

But of course this is not the point. The point is that no aspect of culture should need a pedigree before we are allowed to study it, at public expense or private, so long as our study promises to yield insight into man, his social organization, or his ideas, however pedestrian we may judge some of them. And, though regret it we may choose to do, his pedestrian ideas are often the most influential. All the more reason to understand them. But in trying to do so we may well develop an unprecedented respect for the power of the comic book, the radio serial, the lowly baseball card to show us much about ourserlves. We may even come to realize that these artifacts have developed an integrity and strange beauty of their own.

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NOTES for QUERIES

Even folklore has gotten into the by now celebrated Edmund Wilson-MLA American editions controversy. In "Professional Standards and American Editions: A Response to Edmund Wilson," the MLA's pamphlet countering Wilson's New York Review of Books attacks, Gordon N. Ray had commented: "This /Wilson's/ attack derives in part from the alarm of amateurs at seeing rigorous professional standards applied to a subject in which they have a vested interest. Here, at least, the issue is not in doubt. As the American learned world has come to full maturity since the Second World War, a similar animus has shown itself and been discredited in field after field from botany to folklore. In the long run professional standards always prevail." Asks Wilson (in a letter to the New York Review, June 5, 1969, p. 36): "What does he mean by this? Percy's Reliques in which Bishop Percy allowed himself a pretty free hand in revising the text of his old English ballads, is a more valuable and more important book than F.J. Child's enormous repository for which he took down and published so many inept and illiterate versions, so many tiresome repetitions of the same ballad."

The October, 1969, Ramparts (p. 14) reports that Zimbabwe African Peoples Union and African National Congress guerrillas operating in Rhodesia had decided that it would be politic to consult local Maswikeros (fortune tellers) on their chances of success, until one of their units was betrayed after such a consultation.

The FORUM editors were delighted to learn that their letter supporting Senator Ralph Yarborough's bill to establish an American Folklife Foundation had been read into the Congressional Record by Senator Yarborough. We hope that the attempts to establish this foundation continue.

EDITORIAL (Cont'd from p. 118)

Russell Kirk is an influential and respected spokesman for the conservative viewpoint and his ideas generally merit careful consideration. Thus "Anti-Culture at Public Expense" is all the more disturbing. We sincerely hope that he will reassess his position. And we hope that his article will not mislead any "swinish horde"---one thing you can say for Kirk; his biases certainly aren't middle class---into misconstruing the nature of the legitimate social research that is being carried on at Bowling Green. Any concerted interference with such social scientific investigations would be anti-knowledge and anti-culture indeed.