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10/ RECENSIONE: Stephen SCHRYER, *National Review's Literary Network: Conservative Circuits*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024, 224 pp.

By Fulvia DELLAVEDOVA

National Review's Literary Network: Conservative Circuits is the title of the new book by Stephen Schryer, a scholar in the English department at the University of New Brunswick, Canada. Schryer's book, published by Oxford University Press in 2024, focuses on the literary works of authors and intellectuals who frequently contributed to the conservative magazine «National Review» since the late 1950s. Schryer analyzes the works of conservative authors including Hugh Kenner, Whittaker Chambers, John Don Passos, Guy Davenport, Joan Didion, Garry Wills, and Keith Mano. Schryer's book points out the influence that such literary works had on «National Review», founded by William F. Buckley Jr. in New York City in 1955, and American conservatism between the 1950s and 1980s. In addition, Schryer explores the contribution of conservative literary networks, especially those connected to «National Review», to American literary culture. As repeatedly affirmed throughout the book, according to Schryer, Buckley Jr. decided to give space to conservative writers' literary works in order to offer an intellectual conservative alternative to the perceived cultural dominance of the liberal élites in the media and academia in the United States. As shown by Schryer, both prose and poetry played a key role in the anti-liberal strategy of «National Review» and Buckley Jr.

National Review's Literary Network: Conservative Circuits dialogues with other recently published studies on literary and political conservatism in post-World War II United States. For instance, in *Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Modern Conservatism: A Literary History, 1945–2008*, published in 2021, Bryan Santin examines the relationship between literature and the conservative movement in the aftermath of WWII¹. In *Russell Kirk: American Conservative* (2015) and *Buckley: William F. Buckley Jr. and the Rise of American Conservatism* (2011)², Bradley Birzer and Carl Bogus respectively investigate the

¹ SANTIN, Bryan M., *Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Modern Conservatism: A Literary History, 1945–2008*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

² BIRZER, Bradley J., *Russell Kirk: American Conservative*, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 2015;

life, the work, and the influence of Russell Kirk and William F. Buckley Jr., two of the architects of the American conservative movement to whom Schryer dedicates the last chapter of his book³.

First, Schryer explores the deeply rooted anti-communism and anti-liberalism of the authors gathering around «National Review», who wanted the magazine to represent the conservative alternative to progressive venues such as «The Nation» and «Partisan Review», based in New York City and founded in 1865 and 1934 respectively. In the first chapter, Schryer focuses on the novels by the intelligence agent Whittaker Chambers and the novelist John Dos Passos, who are regarded as the authors who mostly contributed to establishing «National Review»'s reputation at the beginning of its foundation. Chambers's *Witness* (1952) and Dos Passos's *Midcentury* (1962) soon became literary points of reference for American conservatives by presenting a tradition-minded working class, oppressed and deceived by liberal intellectuals and leftist social movements. As emerges in Schryer's analysis, Bill Buckley conceives *National Review* as a manifesto of anti-communism and anti-liberalism. In the magazine's conservative strategy, post-World War II liberals are not considered radically different from communists. As reported by Schryer, Whittaker Chambers, in his memoir *Witness*, defines the Cold War as a conflict of faith and argues that liberals share the same vision as communists: «They have displaced God with man and pursue a political project aimed at reshaping the world in God's image»⁴. In Chambers's view, the only difference is that communists, other than liberals, are conscious of their revolutionary intent.

The second chapter addresses the role played by the Canadian literary scholar Hugh Kenner and his friend Guy Davenport in «National Review». In 1960, Kenner proposed to the magazine's editor-in-chief Buckley Jr. to be designated as the poetry editor. He also recommended Davenport as a regular reviewer of the magazine's culture and literary division. As explained by Schryer, Kenner and Davenport aimed to expand and renew the section dedicated to Books, Arts, and Manners by introducing modernist literature and poetry. Kenner proposed featuring modernist poets including Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Charles Tomlinson, Louis Zukofsky, Robert Creeley, and Thomas S. Eliot in order to cultivate a literary section in which modernism and conservatism were integrated. In Kenner's view, modernist literature should be central to the cultural and literary strategy of «National Review» and post-WWII conservatism against liberal dominance. However, Kenner's attempt proved unsuccessful. As Schryer points out, Buckley Jr. received frequent complaints from the subscribers and donors of «National Review» regarding the modernist shift of

BOGUS, Carl T., *Buckley: William F. Buckley Jr. and the Rise of American Conservatism*, New York, Bloomsbury Press, 2015.

³ Other recent studies analyzing the intertwining of American literature and political conservatism are: ROBIN, Corey, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011; HUNTINGTON, John S., *Far-Right Vanguard: The Radical Roots of Modern Conservatism*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021.

⁴ SCHRYER, Stephen, *National Review's Literary Network: Conservative Circuits*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024, p. 41.

the culture section. Interestingly, many of the magazine's conservative readers complained precisely about the perceived "institutional expertise" of Kenner and Davenport, who were seen as full members of the academic elitism so much criticized by post-WWII conservatism. Kenner's and Davenport's contributions were considered in contradiction with Buckley Jr.'s heavy criticism of the liberal academia as clearly expressed in his 1951 book *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of "Academic Freedom"*.

In the third chapter, Schryer discusses the political involvement of conservative contributors to «National Review» including Hugh Kenner, Joan Didion, and Garry Wills, in favor of Republican Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign in 1964. As stressed by Schryer, Goldwater was considered the right man at the right time, who embodied traditionally conservative values such as limited government and Christian principles. Kenner, Didion, and Wills idealized Goldwater as the politician who would protect the nation from racial dissidents and the rising movement for civil rights. However, Kenner, Didion, and Wills soon became disillusioned with the prominent conservative ideology within the Republican Party. Following the defeat of Goldwater by Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1964 presidential elections, Kenner, Didion, and Wills started changing their political positions. As pointed out by Schryer, our (former) conservative authors became particularly critical as figures like Ronald Reagan gained prominence in the conservative movement after Goldwater's defeat. In 1966, they opposed Reagan's campaign for governor of California, which was enthusiastically supported by Buckley Jr. and «National Review». In the second half of the 1960s, the Catholic journalist Garry Wills completely reversed his positions, condemning racial discrimination and embracing the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements. In the third chapter, contradiction emerges as a key element to take into account when seeking to understand «National Review»'s conservatism. While the third chapter focuses on the contradictory positions of conservative authors like Didion and Wills, the subsequent section explores the inherent contradiction in the novels of Keith Mano, a frequent contributor to «National Review» since the early 1970s. This contradiction centred on Mano's fascination with porn on one hand and his Christian faith on the one the other. Eventually, in the fifth and last chapter, Schryer addresses the often contradictory and hardly reconcilable positions of two fathers of «National Review» and post-WWII American conservatism, William Buckley Jr. and Russell Kirk.

The fourth chapter explores the literary works of Dr. Keith Mano, regarded by «National Review» as the great American conservative novelist throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Mano's novels, including *Bishop's Progress* (1968), *The Bridge* (1973), and *Take Five* (1982), address religious faith and Christian morals. At the same time, they often are sexually explicit and transgressive. The conflict between following strict moral guidelines on the one hand and addressing explicit content on the other was maintained in Mano's contribution to «National Review». As Schryer points out, Buckley's magazine has rarely been hospitable to pornography and usually adopted a skeptical

approach towards freedom of speech issues. However, as a contributor to «National Review», Mano was allowed to explicitly express his libertarian positions on pornography and sexuality, which he tried to reconcile with Christian moral principles. As stressed by Schryer, «Mano [...] fitted his libertarian defense of sexual freedom within a traditionalist conservative and anti-Communist framework. Rather than imaging the sexual revolution that *Playboy* helped inspire as a threat to the traditional family, Mano depicted it as a vehicle for the family's reconstitution on more solid ground»⁵.

Schryer devotes the fifth and last chapter to analyzing the literary works of the most prominent representatives of post-WWII American conservatism, Russell Kirk and William J. Buckley Jr. Building on Kirk's Christian gothic fiction and Buckley's spy novels, Schryer delves into the authors' similarities and differences, specifically addressing their divergent views about capitalism and academic freedom. While sharing Buckley's criticism against the liberal drift of academia, Kirk defends the value of academic freedom against the danger of subjugating the universities to the marketplace. On the other hand, Buckley Jr. explicitly endorses the «interference of the free market as a potential boon to post-secondary education»⁶.

While pointing out the contribution that conservative and eccentric authors like Kenner, Chambers, Dos Passos, Didion, and Mano offered to post-WWII American literature, Schryer does not shy away from observing the most controversial political positions supported by «National Review» and American conservatives. Schryer's book highlights the most despicable parts of Buckley's and «National Review»'s legacy, including the support for Southern segregationists and scientific racists in the 1950s and 1960s as well as the fierce opposition to the Civil Rights movement, regarded as a threat to white supremacy. At the same time, *National Review's Literary Network* draws attention to the inherent tensions and conflicts within the counter-system strategy endorsed by «National Review»'s authors. A good example is the editors' attempt to cultivate an innovative and anti-liberal literary culture by involving eccentric and experimental authors like Kenner and Davenport. As previously mentioned, such an attempt was far from appreciated by the traditionalist audience of «National Review» and disappointed most politically and culturally conservative donors. In this regard, Schryer cleverly observes that despite the attempt to present themselves as counter-system intellectuals in controversy with liberal élites, the literary expertise of «National Review»'s authors would be unthinkable outside of the academia's institutional environment.

National Review's Literary Network: Conservative Circuits is a significant and original contribution to the history of American conservatism and post-WWII literature. Except for the book *Postwar*

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 133.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 155.

American Fiction and the Rise of Modern Conservatism by Bryan M. Santin, published in 2021, the cultural impact of «National Review» and its authors had not been explored thoroughly before. This said, Schryer's book has a few minor weaknesses. The chronology is not always clear: in the introduction, Schryer affirms that the book would address the period between the 1950s and 1980s. However, not much is said after the late 1960s, when many of «National Review»'s contributors such as Kenner, Didion, and Wills progressively changed their political views and abandoned conservative ideology. In addition, Schryer's study on «National Review» could benefit from a critical analysis and comparison with other American conservative magazines between the 1950s and the 1980s, which advanced a different kind of cultural and political conservatism. For instance, it would be interesting to look at the neo-conservative magazines «The Public Interest» and «Commentary», edited at the time by Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz, and the rising paleo-conservative monthly «Chronicles», founded by the Rockford Institute in 1977.

Despite minor weaknesses, Schryer's arguments are clear, strong, and original. *National Review's Literary Network: Conservative Circuits* is an essential reading to understand the influence of «National Review»'s authors and intellectuals on the history of the magazine and conservative journalism in the United States. As Schryer points out, Buckley's magazine substantially contributed to developing the conservative circuits with which post-WWII conservatives challenged cultural and political liberalism. Schryer's book also helps recognize the inherent contradictions and divergences within post-WWII conservatism. As Schryer details in the second part of the book, Russel Kirk's traditionalist conservatism, which builds on the ideas of Edmund Burke, is very different from Buckley's individual conservatism. At the same time, the attempt of «National Review»'s most eccentric authors to advance modernist aesthetics to integrate conservatism and modernism did not fully succeed and encountered resistance from the magazine's traditionalist audience.

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