Response to Symposium

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In response to this rich collection of essays, all animated by an enquiring spirit and a serious respect for the conservative position, I find myself somewhat at a loss for words. My little book on conservatism, subtitled, in its American imprint, 'an invitation to the great tradition', was intended to be the briefest possible summary of a vast and important body of thought. I was aware that I could not do justice to the many conservative arguments, some of them both profound and of enduring relevance, and I was aware too that I would have to take short cuts, and to leave out of consideration many writers whom others would think to be more important than some that I have included. What surprises me, however, is that so short a guide should have prompted such far-reaching arguments in response to it. My intention in this brief reply is to point to aspects of my work that were missing from my little book, and which should, I think, be brought into the debate that it was intended to catalyse.

Several writers have queried whether my over-arching vision of conservatism, as a 'qualification within liberal individualism', really does justice to the abundance of conservative thought, and to its foundations in a metaphysic of the human condition. Thus Eno Trimçev suggests that, in contrast to the empirical conservatism that I expound and defend, there is a metaphysical conservatism that is far older and more solidly based in the science of being. He mentions Heidegger, Patočka and Voegelin among moderns, along with the original political thinkers of ancient Greece. Conservatism of this metaphysical kind is a theoretical pursuit, part of the search for knowledge, which may have little to do with daily politics, but much to offer by way of clarifying our place in the world. My response is to admit the criticism. There are indeed metaphysical questions to which I need an answer, and which my emphasis on the dialectic between conservatism and liberalism leaves out of account. And a chapter to this effect would have certainly been a useful addition to the book.

And such a chapter would have offered an answer to two other commentators also. It would have enabled me to respond to Kevin Mulligan's view that there is an unacknowledged proximity between my vision and that of Max Scheler, and to Nathan Robert Cockram's view (echoing Trimçev) that there is a far older and more metaphysical foundation to be offered for the conservative vision than the argument (associated with Smith, Hume, Burke, Hayek and others) from the tacit nature of social knowledge. Cockram associates this metaphysical foundation with George Parkin Grant, whose *English-Speaking Justice* was, in fact, a powerful influence on my original account of conservatism, in *The Meaning of Conservatism* (1979). In response I say only that Grant's path towards the Platonic realm is one that I have always hesitated to take, on account of a principle that I first announced in *The Meaning of Conservatism* and to which I have adhered, one way or another, ever since, namely the principle of the Priority of Appearance.

Politics occurs in the realm of seeming, not in the realm of being, and belongs to the social construction of the *Lebenswelt*, an enterprise that is touched upon by Kevin Mulligan in his insightful comparison with Scheler. Like Scheler I am a personalist, one who believes that what we humans fundamentally are is what we are for each other, in the person-to-person encounter. And, as Mulligan rightly perceives, this is the underlying theme of my recent work, notably *The Soul of the World*. This is why I feel such affinity for Sartre, despite his politics, and why I believe that the real content of what I am trying to say about the social and political condition of the world, cannot be summarised in philosophical argument alone.

Noel O'Sullivan is aware of this and therefore refers to two works that are not, strictly speaking, works of philosophy, namely *On Hunting* and *The Disappeared*. His account of my thinking is strongly influenced by his reading of the autobiographical fragments that I have let slip from time to time, *On Hunting* being one of them. What he says about that book is certainly interesting, though maybe he does not sufficiently acknowledge that it was written, as the life described in it has been lived, in a spirit of irony. Political philosophers tend to write of people as abstractions—

for instance as the rational choosers of game theory, or the classes and masses of Marxism. Those are respectable topics, of course. But when trying to blue-tack the fluttering fabric of politics to your bedroom wall you have to use individuals, imagined in their particularity, and burdened with their perceptions. Nothing else makes the fabric stick. That is what Sartre did in *La Nausée* and Nietzsche, in a very different way, in *Ecce Homo* and the *Anti-Christ*.

On Hunting describes my exit from the academic world into the green fields of England, learning to love my country properly for the first time. And like everything I have loved, the leftists immediately stepped in to destroy it, as though they had been waiting all along for me to make a move in this direction. (All conservatives, it should be remembered, are incipiently paranoid.) Responding to the malicious ban on hunting I became a bit more of a liberal. I understood what motivates the left in modern politics, namely the hatred of privilege, and also the hatred of those who possess it. I understood too that we have no real protection against the left, other than the culture of liberty. Nietzsche saw the problem clearly, in his analysis of *ressentiment*. But being a raging narcissist, he did not bother to look for a political solution. On the whole liberals don't see the need to stand up for ancient liberties—not even, as we have seen recently, the liberty to speak your mind. They tend to sympathise with leftists, and see liberty not as an intrinsic good, but as a necessary means to impose a culture of equality. What Burke had in mind in defending the 'little platoons', and what Hegel had in mind in distinguishing civil society from the state, have both slipped from the liberal agenda. Liberals see the social contract as a way of transferring individual sovereignty to the all-knowing, all-powerful and benevolent state, which will then use its power for the benefit of everyone, foxes included.

You get used to hatred in time, but one reason why I have had to endure more than my fair share is the issue of immigration—towards which political philosophy has turned a blind eye. The story is well enough known. I was editor of the *Salisbury Review*, the only journal founded explicitly as a journal of conservative thought. I received an article from an exasperated headmaster in a Yorkshire school, relating the immense difficulty he experienced in integrating children from a rural Pakistani background into the classroom, and providing them with the knowledge and skills that he was duty-bound to deliver. I published the article, and that was the beginning of the end of my academic career.

What the headmaster, Ray Honeyford, said was true and now universally acknowledged to be so. No one knows what to do about it. However, in common with Pierre Manent and others, I think that the underlying issue is the test case for the intellectual integrity of contemporary conservatism. Kieron O'Hara rightly complains that, in my final chapter, I identify only this and political correctness as the issues to be addressed—though he acknowledges that I discuss some of the other things that are important to him, notably environmental philosophy, elsewhere in my writings. But I want to insist that, if conservatism is to be about realities, then the arrival of the Islamic worldview in the heart of our settled nation states, founded as they are on national rather than religious loyalty, is one of the matters that will define, for us living now, exactly what conservatism can mean in the future.

That brings me back to *The Disappeared*, which is the story of a Northern English city, not a million miles from that where Honeyford was a teacher, nor a million miles from Rotherham, whose sorry tale of sexual abuse it strives to encapsulate. Writing this story was my way of confronting what Samuel Huntington skates over in *The Clash of Civilisations*, and what is merely caricatured in Rawls's attempt to marginalise our many 'conceptions of the good'. It took me back to another of my topics, again absent from this 'invitation to the great tradition', namely sexual desire and its place in a fully personalised and political world.

Nicholas Capaldi asks the real conservatives to stand up, and I applaud the gesture. But it is in this area that they are most reluctant to do so. What *do* we think about sex, the family, sexual liberation, and those vestiges of the 'ethic of pollution and taboo' which keep coming to the surface, as in the MeToo movement, and as in the cases of sexual abuse in cities like Rotherham? The abusers described in *The Disappeared* regard their victims as being in a state of pollution or *najāsa*. Losing their purity the girls have nothing more to lose. Abuse, in such circumstances, ceases to be considered as abuse and becomes instead a kind of ritual re-enactment of the victim's loss of status. The story I told was about purity—the story of one girl's bid to retain it, another's to regain it, and of their abusers' sister, in her bid to defend it to the death. But purity is not a concept that features in liberal political philosophy. And this marks an interesting distinction between liberals and conservatives. Liberals have no idea what to say about purity and pollution; conservatives know what to say, but daren't.

Writing fiction you are looking at the other who is also you. This is a part of seeing what is at stake in politics.

Self-knowledge begins from knowledge of the Other, and this is one of the lessons that has come down to us from Hegel, and one of the reasons why he is, for me, the peak of conservative philosophy. Efraim Podoksik issues a mild reproach that I have not considered the other German thinkers on whom the indigenous conservative tradition depends—Stahl, Müller, von Haller—and argues that, set on the scale that those authors define, Hegel does not offer much in the way of conservative avoir-du-poids. That may be true, but unlike them Hegel provides a way of conceptualising the modern world that has proved invaluable to all of us, conservatives, liberals and socialists alike.

There are thinkers with interesting conclusions but few philosophical arguments, like Russell Kirk. And there are those, like Hegel, with real arguments that might lead as easily in a liberal or socialist as in a conservative direction, but on whose conceptions the mind can feed. My 'invitation', being short, had to choose between them, and that explains why I was so selective in the chapter devoted to the continentals. There is nothing in that chapter on Italy, despite Croce and Pareto, and nothing anywhere in the book on the Czechs—Masaryk, Patočka, Havel, three of my favourite thinkers. As for the Russians—Soloviev, Berdyaev, etc.—it seemed best not to mention them. That way I did my bit for Russian paranoia.

There is an important point to be made, however, that is not made so far as I can see by any of the commentators, and which again concerns the literary, rather than the philosophical side of the conservative vision. Many of those whom I identify as central figures in the tradition are not, strictly speaking, political philosophers—certainly not in the manner of Hobbes or Locke. Johnson was a poet, a critic and an astounding cultural presence. Burke was a politician and a master of political rhetoric. Chateaubriand was a world-historical figure comparable to Goethe. And on the continent the conservative virus was injected into the political organism largely by such literary figures, whose spiritual influence spread rapidly through the culture, reminding people of what they fundamentally are. Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, for example, contains no philosophical arguments, no exhortations, no recipes for the rescue of humankind. Yet it conveys more vividly than any philosophical discourse the reasons why France exists and deserves to exist, as a real first-person plural. As Trimçev reminds us, my emphasis on the 'we'—the pre-political unity that makes politics possible—unites me with such figures from the romantic movement. And to discuss the matter fully would take me into a cultural hinterland where conservatism elides into liberalism and both into the mystical adulation of the self. Maybe the reader should be glad that I didn't go there.

In conclusion, though, it should be said that the commentators are right to recognize the shortcomings of my book, and to criticize me, as several do, for not saying as much as I should say about the global economy, and about the rise of a new kind of capitalism that seems to confer sovereignty on multinational businesses, and to downgrade the nation state to the status of a mere petitioner before the geeks and nerds on their cyber-thrones. Things are moving fast, and it could be that my potted history is a history of a vanished way of thinking. That may also be because thinking itself has vanished, in a world where people don't think but tweet instead. I would like to believe, however, that it is liberals and reactionaries, rather than true conservatives, whose voices fill the twitter-sphere, and that the few sanctuaries remaining are occupied by quiet conservatives who both know the truth, and are resolved not to complain about it on Twitter.