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Roger Scruton, 1944–2020

On the life and work of the brilliant and tireless philosopher.

Over the years, I several times had the honor of introducing Roger Scruton at events organized by The New Criterion, Encounter Books, and other like-minded enterprises. I was looking forward to many more such occasions, just as I was looking forward to many more contributions from his pen for The New Criterion. (His first was in October 1982, our second issue; his last was in March 2017.) Alas, where I had been used to welcoming Roger now I must bid farewell. On Sunday, January 12, I got the sad news that he had died earlier that day, just a few weeks shy of his seventy-sixth birthday. The culprit, as is so often the case, was cancer, a malady with which he had been diagnosed some six months earlier. He wrote me in August that he was ill, and that it was serious. Still, I had no notion that he was in extremis.

Roger's friend Daniel J. Mahoney will have more to say about his work and legacy in our March issue. Here, I should like to add just a few words about his capacious presence. The many tributes that have poured in from across the globe bear witness to the fact that Roger's death robs the Anglosphere—and not only the Anglosphere—of one of its most incandescent, wide-ranging, and sympathetic intellects, though I hasten to stress that Roger was much more than just another public intellectual.

Specifying precisely what Scruton was and did is no simple task. The usual lists are like menu items as distinct from the meals they describe. Let me start with some epiphenomena.

In June of 2016, a slight but nagging irregularity in the moral metabolism of the universe was rectified when Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II conferred upon Roger the honor of Knight Bachelor. From here on, and about time, Professor Scruton would sally forth as Sir Roger. I think the designation has a nice ring to it.

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One of the reasons that his friends rejoiced at the news of Sir Roger's honor was the thought of the pain it would surely give to his many enemies in the academy and the media. *Schadenfreude*, the Psalmist almost said,

cometh in the morning. With respect to Scruton, however, the feelings of glee were part of a larger satisfaction in the spectacle of justice finally being done. For many years—nay for several decades—Scruton had been treated as a pariah by the confraternity of intellectuals and pseudo-intellectuals whose follies and misadventures he anatomized with unforgivable clarity and penetration. Senior professors wrote to Roger's publishers demanding that they cease publishing his books. "I may tell you with dismay," wrote one guardian of the academic cartel, "that many colleagues here [i.e., in Oxford] feel that the Longman imprint—a respected one—has been tarnished by association with Scruton's work." Scruton was denied academic preferment, rendered all but unemployable by the university establishment. He was roundly excoriated by the press on both sides of the Atlantic. And for what?

Part of the reason is suggested by the title of one of his books, recently reissued as Fools, Frauds and Firebrands, a brisk and deliciously mordant act of intellectual fumigation that left the work and reputations of a dozen prominent philosophical mountebanks in smoldering ruins. As Scruton put it in Modern Philosophy (1994), his magnum opus, "A writer who says that there are no truths, or that all truth is 'merely relative,' is asking you not to believe him. So don't." Such impertinence was not to be borne, and the academic establishment did everything it could to ostracize him.

It was not only Sir Roger's critical acumen that infuriated his enemies. There was also his energy and range of accomplishment. Happiness, Aristotle observed, consists in *energeia*, the active exercise of the soul's faculties in accordance with virtue. A glance at Scruton's curriculum vitae is a testament to the astonishing range and *élan* of that activity.

It includes some fifty books, some on philosophy, others on art, architecture, politics, and the spiritual predicament of modern man. He was also the author of a handful of beautifully wrought novels, most recently *The Disappeared*, a haunting tale of moral cowardice in the face of Islamic triumphalism.

Beyond the printed page, Sir Roger was for many years, at great personal peril, a lifeline to Central European freedom fighters who struggled against the jackboot of Communist tyranny. He worked long and hard in the 1980s in samizdat enclaves to help smash the tyrannous yoke of Communism, and was duly followed, harassed, and roughed up by the secret police for his efforts. No wonder that semi-recumbent Oxford don felt a publisher's good name might be "tarnished by association with Scruton's work." It is gratifying to note that Sir Roger's final honor, which came just weeks before his death, was the Commander's Cross with the Star of the Order of Merit of Hungary, awarded in the presence of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Hungarian Embassy in London. As Orbán noted, while the Soviet Union existed, Sir Roger "wasn't just opposed to communism philosophically: he was an ardent and active ally to anti-communist forces in Central and Eastern Europe."

Sir Roger was also an eloquent apologist for pleasure. Like Walter Bagehot before him, he understood that "the essence of Toryism is enjoyment." True pleasure, pleasure rightly understood (as Tocqueville might have put it), is at bottom a conservative prerogative. It is also an ancient one, as the author of Genesis acknowledged when he observed that God made the world and "saw that it was good." Perhaps this is the place to note Roger's distinguished writing about two of the central pleasures of his life: wine and fox hunting. It is (to use a locution dear to our Marxist friends) no accident that Jesus's first recorded miracle was the transformation of the base liquid water into the precious nectar of wine—and good stuff, too, by all accounts.

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Sir Roger was a philosopher, yes, but just saying that is not saying much. Nor does it really help to say that he was a dazzling conservative polemicist, quick on his feet and gifted, as only the English seem to be, with a sublime rhetorical fluency as entertaining and illuminating as it was incisive.

I delighted in witnessing his polemical nimbleness—it could be devastating—but unlike many able debaters there was an essential gentleness about Sir Roger that tempered and complicated his ferocity. An obituary in *The Times* touched on one element of this gentleness when it quoted his observation that "Left-wing people find it very hard to get on with right-wing people because they believe that they are evil. Whereas I have no problem getting on with left-wing people because I simply believe that they are mistaken."

That largeness of spirit was part of what stood behind Sir Roger's gentleness. Another part flows from the fact that not only was he a philosopher, a lover of wisdom, but he also was a *philokallist*, a lover of beauty. The allegiance to truth that wisdom requires may have been his highest intellectual criterion; beauty, and the human sympathy it feeds upon and encourages, was his constant concern.

Words and wine were not his only avocations, however. Music also loomed large in his life. He wrote and directed operas and served as an organist in a local village church in Wiltshire, England, where he mostly lived the last decade or so of his life. He wrote a long book about the aesthetics of music and others about Wagner, an abiding passion. Back in the late 1980s, my future wife and I went to a dinner party at Roger's flat in London. Alexandra, an able musician herself, noticed an orchestral score of an opera by Janáček open on the piano. She was amused by the pretension, but that was before she knew about Sir Roger's own operas.

At heart, Sir Roger was a teacher. He served as mentor to countless students, formally in various university settings, in America as well as Britain, and informally, and perhaps more productively, in retreats at his beloved hundred-acre country haven, Sundey Hill Farm, which someone baptized "Scrutopia," much to his delight.

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Like his wife Sophie, he was an avid rider to hounds. The two met, as I recall, when he took a tumble and was tended by a beautiful young woman twenty-eight years his junior who happened to be riding nearby. Anyone doubting that Providence enjoys spiritual continuities take note: Sir Roger bought his first riding kit from his friend Enoch Powell when the great classicist and politician—a man with whom Sir Roger had much in common—gave up the saddle. (The jacket was a little too small, Sir Roger later reported, with a tendency to split along the seams.)

Sir Roger was also something of an intellectual entrepreneur. For the first eighteen years of its life, he edited *The Salisbury Review*, a small but potent conservative journal named for the Third Marquess of Salisbury (1830–1903), who had pointedly observed that good government consisted in doing as little as possible.

Sir Roger wrote several times about his political maturation, most fully, perhaps, in "Why I became a conservative," in *The New Criterion* in 2003. There were two answers, one negative, one positive. The negative answer was the visceral repudiation of civilization he witnessed in Paris in 1968: slogans defacing walls, shattered shop windows, and spoiled radicals. The positive element was the philosophy of Edmund Burke, that apostle of tradition, authority, and prejudice. Prejudice? How awful that word sounds to enlightened ears. But Sir Roger reminds us that prejudice, far from being synonymous with bigotry, can be a prime resource in freedom's armory. "Our most necessary beliefs," he wrote, "may be both unjustified and unjustifiable from our own perspective, and . . . the attempt to justify them will lead merely to their loss." Burke saw with penetrating insight that freedom was not the antonym of authority or the repudiation of obedience. "Real freedom," Sir Roger observed, "concrete freedom, the freedom that can actually be defined, claimed, and granted, was not the opposite of obedience but its other side. The abstract, unreal freedom of the liberal intellect was really nothing more than childish disobedience, amplified into anarchy."

Sir Roger's absorption of Burke marked the onset of political maturity, the emancipation from fantasies of groundless emancipation whose name is "utopia," Greek for "nowhere." Prominent in Sir Roger's thought is the Burkean theme that the pursuit of utopia (or call it "socialism" if you prefer a modern title) always ends badly. The recognition of that truth comes not all at once, and depends less upon intellectual acknowledgment than spiritual awakening. Sir Roger came bearing news about permanent things, one part of which is the evanescence of human aspiration. Hence the governing word "loss," which looms large in his vocabulary. There is a sense in which conservatism is anti-Romantic, since it is constitutionally suspicious of the schemes of perfection Romanticism typically espouses. But there is another sense in which conservatism is deeply Romantic, since it recognizes and embraces the ineradicable frailty, the ultimate futility of things human. "And so," Sir Roger wrote, "I acquired the consciousness of death and dying, without which the world cannot be loved for what it is. That, in essence, is what it means to be a

conservative." Which is to say that without the consciousness of loss, there is nothing a conservative would find worth conserving. It is only by facing up to necessary loss, Sir Roger noted, that we can build on the dream of ultimate recuperation.

—*Roger Kimball*

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