Gerald J. Russello, 1971–2021

Remembering the late lawyer, writer, thinker, and editor.

It is with great sadness that we mark the passing of Gerald Russello, who died at the shockingly young age of fifty last month after a yearlong illness. Gerald was a lawyer, and a distinguished one: he clerked for Justice Daniel J. O’Hern of the New Jersey Supreme Court and Judge Leonard I. Garth of the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit. But to note that professional affiliation is a bit like saying that Wallace Stevens was an insurance man. Like Stevens’s, Gerald’s professional career functioned as the enabler of what we like to think of as his real career as a writer, thinker, and editor.


Those literary bookends indicate a real but ultimately subordinate aspect of Gerald’s intellectual interests. Closer to the center were figures like Edmund Burke. Above all, Gerald was occupied with religious/literary thinkers like G. K. Chesterton (he was a member of the Chesterton Society), the artist-poet David Jones, and Russell Kirk. Gerald was a prominent part of the Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal, serving as editor of The University Bookman—the publication that Kirk started in 1960—from 2005 until his death. Gerald also found time to write or edit five books, including The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk (2007).

In “The unwritten constitution,” his contribution to our symposium commemorating the centenary of Russell Kirk’s birth in 2018, Gerald honed in on a debate about the ultimate foundations of the law that continues to be very much alive:
Kirk in his writings on the law understood that if the customs of a people change, then the law changes as well, even if written texts remain the same. So it was important for citizens to be mindful of and preserve those traditions that supported local government and established practices and understandings.

Without those attachments, self-government suffers. And those attachments are only partially attributable to reasoning from abstract rights. We have become too Lockean. We understand ourselves as rights-bearing, autonomous individuals entering the public square to which we give our contingent consent. It is unclear whether our constitutional structure can survive on such a thin basis, especially when our notion of the rights that an individual bears expands endlessly.

That last bit might have been torn from the front page of today’s newspaper, while the comment on Locke zeroes in on a lively scholarly debate. Gerald Russello was the most modest and decorous of men, but his intellect was bold, tenacious, and penetrating. RIP.