

## Up from Postmodernism

*Postmodernism Rightly Understood:  
The Return to Realism in American Thought*  
by Peter Augustine Lawler.  
Rowman and Littlefield, 1999.

Peter Augustine Lawler's office at Berry College in Georgia is legendary for its disorder, looking for all the world as though a whirlwind had passed through. And so it has: Lawler is an intellectual force. The author of a fine study of Tocqueville (*The Restless Mind*, 1993), Lawler writes about American political thought and practice, and about the political dimensions of literature and religion. He is gentle in manner and tough in spirit, good humored and deady serious, a cultural conservative with a distaste for the administrative state who also disdains individualism—and the “soft despotism” of consumerism—precisely because he is a champion of individuality and self-government.

*Postmodernism Rightly Understood* marshals Lawler's essays on Francis Fukuyama, Richard Rorty, Allan Bloom, Walker Percy, and Christopher Lasch into a sustained comment on recent American political thought, a critique linked to the hope for a “return to realism.”

As Lawler indicates, the modern project—the mastery of nature for “the relief of man's estate”—comes with ambivalences included. Most of us cherish modernity's successes in the effort to free

humankind from ills and discomfort and mortality, yet we are bound to be aware that power over nature entails power over human beings: the mastery of nature involves the risk of being mastered. And psychologically, the modern premise—the separation of human consciousness from nature, and hence, from the body—presumes and promotes selves that are divided, locked in an internal state of war. Progress undermines old barriers, opening the way for sentiments of humanity, but those sympathies are relatively diffuse and unexacting, while human beings have demonstrated a remarkable capacity for defining the inconvenient other as non-human: the last hundred years, Walker Percy wrote, have been “the most sentimental and most murderous of centuries.”

Postmodernism *conventionally* understood, with its debts to Martin Heidegger, rejects modernity's version of rationalism, its pursuit of objective truth, its confidence in science and technology. But it also am-

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plifies the modern rejection of authoritative limits in nature, defining the human condition as “groundless,” without foundations. In this sense, as Lawler argues, conventional postmodernism is really *hypermodernism*, the belief that human beings can master the world through language, itself understood as humanly created, a product of consciousness that, in decisive respects, makes or “constructs” reality.

By contrast, Lawler’s “rightly understood” postmodernism turns from modern rationalism to a more classical rationalism, one that replaces mastery as a goal with the quest to understand nature, limits and all. Rejecting modern dualism, Lawler’s “realism” regards consciousness as natural, linked by language to the world of which it is a part and capable of comprehending it. Above all, Lawler sees humans aware of mortality and mystery and yearning for meaning, an impulse that points toward the divine. And Lawler argues that the human givens, however frustrating, also offer an assurance: just as human nature resists utopian projects—including totalitarian attempts to reconstruct humanity—it guarantees that human beings can never finally become “last men,” content with creature comforts at any “end of history.”

For Francis Fukuyama, by contrast, the collapse of Soviet Marxism and the triumph of liberal democracy pointed to a world without a conflict of ruling ideas, and hence—in Fukuyama’s neo-Hegelianism—no basis for idealism. Relationships would become increasingly global and diffuse, while citizens, in addition to well-being, would enjoy a dignity derived from rights: the “spirited part” of the soul, Fukuyama thought, would be satisfied by the “universal and homogenous recognition of citizen by citizen.”

Lawler attends to this argument, bloodless at best, only because it enjoyed a consid-

erable vogue; he brushes it aside to turn to the more profound theorizing of Alexandre Kojève, the interpreter of Hegel (and supporter of Soviet communism) on whom Fukuyama relied. Following Rousseau, Kojève held that *by nature* human beings lack speech and therefore lack a self-conscious sense of mortality and time. These things have resulted from some nature-disrupting accident, so that history and civilization, the realm of freedom and the itch for the immortal are disorders, naturally speaking, and the source of human unhappiness. But human beings, Kojève argued, cannot simply return to nature; time and mortality and discontent are in them for good, so that any “end of history” can only be a momentary lapse in the human struggle for power. As Lawler observes, Kojève’s teaching shows that there is no end to the dynamics and dangers of the modern project short of the “death of death,” mastery raised to the ultimate power.

Richard Rorty, a sunnier spirit, theorizes in a surprisingly similar way. Human beings are largely self-created: they depend on and reflect the inherited structures of language and culture, but these “foundations” are in fact not givens, but so many contingencies. In principle, Rorty holds that there are no limits to the possibilities for democracy, abundance, and human solidarity, and no certainties—presumably, not even mortality—immune to human creativity.

Yet as Lawler points out, Rorty’s relativism undermines any basis for the criticism of existing society. In fact, Rorty is inclined to regard liberal democracy as itself a kind of ironical “foundation”: human beings, now too aware of the contingency and historicity of norms and truths, can never “go back” to the pre-modern modes of thought which are the only viable alternative to liberal democracy; hence, liberal democra-

cy's relativist openness may enable its basic ideas to persist largely unchanged.

Rorty, predictably, was a sharp critic of Allan Bloom, but as Lawler points out, a comparison of their views reveals a paradox. Rorty, whose sympathies lie to the left, offers little philosophic basis for the criticism of bourgeois society, a position that finds much better support in Bloom, popularly identified as a conservative. More-

over, as Lawler observes, both Bloom and Rorty are elitists. In Bloom this is obvious: the philosopher is relatively unique; most human beings are satisfied with material well-being, only weakly moved by great issues or a consciousness of the human condition unso- laced by illusion. Yet Rorty actually disagrees with very little in that view: most human beings remain within the terms of language and culture,

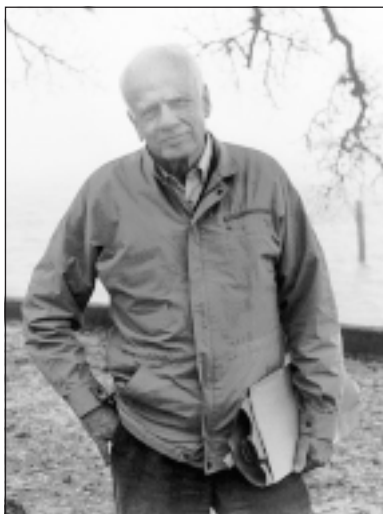
so that creativity in history depends on "strong poets," and on the ironists capable of facing the contingency other humans can't bear. Of course, Bloom's philosopher, whose goal is understanding, differs from Rorty's transforming poet, but both thinkers, Lawler argues, are too inclined to discount the yearning and the moral courage of ordinary human beings. Lawler's realism, in fact, speaks the true language of "strong democracy."

It is not surprising, then, that Lawler admires Christopher Lasch's egalitarianism. Lasch saw in modernity a growing inequality between mental and physical labor, and with that, a tendency toward rule by an expert class. The claim of this elite to rule turns on its ability to provide for the desires

of the consuming public; such an elite can pander and degrade, but it cannot call for noble sacrifice. The expert elite offers a life as empty as its rule: "hyperreality," in one sense, seems to be the triumph of mental labor over physical limits and materials. But human beings have bodies, and the new technologies weaken our ties to places and people and crafts, leaving us increasingly isolated in what amounts to a doomed effort to deny mortality. Lasch, like Orwell, looked to the working and lower middle classes, more at- tached to traditional ways, as some protection against the new order, and Lawler shares a mea- sure of that hope.

Walker Percy, how- ever, is Lawler's true prophet, a champion of "Thomistic realism" for whom language is natu- ral—a defining charac- teristic, in fact, of what is naturally human—and the high road for humanity's proper aspi- ration for the truth. Like Lawler, Percy emphasizes human consciousness of the mystery of existence, the awareness of de- pendence and limits and mortality. The characteristically modern ideal of the "au- tonomous self" is a form of self- denial, a flight—like the endless pursuit of diversion in contemporary America—from what we really know about human life.

Percy and Lasch have their differences, and Lawler does not neglect them, but they share a disdain for easy answers to the prob- lems of the human soul, and particularly for the therapies that amount to consumer- ism for the mind. They disdain treatments limited to symptoms and behaviors and the quick fixes offered by drugs and chemicals. And they are alarmed by the broader ten-



Walker Percy (1916-1990)

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dency to free us from our burdens rather than helping us to bear them. Both endorse long-term talk therapy, which Dr. Tom More, Percy's character in his novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome*, calls "psyche-iatry," and Lasch identifies with the "original intention" of psychoanalysis. Speech, that decisively human faculty, offers the best chance of reconciling human beings to their own limits, and to developing their capacities for love and work.

A similar cautious confidence is at the heart of Lawler's theorizing. On the face of things, it would not be hard, after all, to make a case that Lawler understates the extent to which Americans are content with their consumerist existence, administered in alliance with the market, ruled by the

goal of satisfying private desires. In any case, as Lawler observes, both Locke and Marx knew the division of mental and physical labor, with its ascending inequalities, to be "characteristic of a free, modern society." Lawler's argument, in other words, prescribes a transformation of contemporary habits, a transformation of the very foundations of modern politics. Lawler, no utopian, does not spell out any detailed alternative: he prefers the critic's "no" to the idealist's "yes." Yet Lawler's thinking does rest on an affirmation, a faith in human longing and in the liberative power of speech. Lawler's admirable book—provocative, shrewd and lovingly democratic—is a clear trumpet amid the cacophonies of the time.

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