

himself into a bad mood. The best restorative would be a long hiatus of silence, humility, and self-doubt—a decade, perhaps, or at least a few years, of hesitation.

Reviewed by GEORGE MCKENNA

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### *A Neglected Prophet*

**Gustave Le Bon: The Man and His Works**, Introduction, first translations into English, and edited extracts by Alice Widener, *Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1979. 316 pp. \$8.00.*

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGIST, military tactician, philosopher, scientific theorist, statesman, and prophet, Gustave Le Bon (1841-1931) was a man of myriad talents and heterogeneous achievements. Alice Widener's selections, gracefully translated and attractively presented, help to repair a conspicuous gap in our knowledge of this influential and, at times, contradictory thinker. Although Le Bon was trained as a physicist, his significance for the cultural historian lies in his reflections on and diagnoses of the conscious and unconscious forces which shaped the character of modern civilization prior to and during World War I. Yet Le Bon not only gives us access to the ideological forces which underpinned the creation of the modern socialist state or activated the energies of countless multitudes to die under the banner of some dubious and threadbare mythology. His writings also have a special pertinence to our own situation and to the irrational, atavistic forces which perpetually threaten the foundations of Western Democracy.

Perhaps Le Bon's greatest contribution in the realm of social psychology lies in the assiduity with which he has explored the influence of crowds and crowd mentality in the shaping of modern society. For Le Bon the excitation of irrational and inflated

hopes by a skillful and dynamic leader constitutes the greatest threat to the values, standards, and inherited ethos preserved by the discerning and dedicated few for the ennoblement of the dull and derelict many. The dissolution of those values which sustained Western society in the past—self-determination, "internal discipline," an ability to accept ambiguity with grace and to withstand incertitude with faith in one's inner resources—all seemed, for Le Bon, to be threatened by the illusory and bankrupt ideals which socialism in particular and collectivism in general promised to those who, "unadapted to industry, the trades and the arts...form an ever increasing army," and who, incapable of "the initiative and habit of self-government," desire "nothing less than the destruction of the civilization of which they believe themselves to be the victims."

Foremost among those qualities which animate crowds, for Le Bon, is a susceptibility to quasi-mystical hopes that are capable of transforming a passive body of citizens into a mob activated by the most strenuous ideals of self-sacrifice in the pursuit of false utopias and spurious images of grandeur. Hence, for Le Bon, "it is easier to rule people by exciting their emotions than by protecting their interests." The perennial proclivity of man to submit to unconscious collective compulsions, mass suggestion, and ancestral superstitions remains, for Le Bon, an ineradicable attribute of human nature. However, for Le Bon, humanity cannot survive without propitiating some impersonal, transcendent, and mystical force. The threat which continually faces modern society is the malleability of an indiscriminate multitude to a "mysticism" which, under the guise of a nationalist myth or an impracticable ideal, sanctions an atavistic reversion to mass sadism. Revolutions, Le Bon believes, inevitably have as their counterpart such a reversion, but since "it is in pursuing an illusion that man often has achieved progress he did not seek," the possibility of achieving a balance between an "affective" diplomacy which flatters mass sentiments

and an "intellectual" scrupulousness which soberly assesses the limits of political or social action is extremely problematic. A slight tip in the balance and "the blood-dimmed tide is loosed." As Le Bon observes: "It sometimes takes generations in a people to acquire morals and only a few years to lose them."

What "myths," then, does Le Bon propose to fill the vacuum left by a discredited faith in individual effort and supernatural hope? Like Matthew Arnold, who recognized the vulnerability of a society "wandering between two worlds," Le Bon asserts that "the old religions are in sight of death and those that must replace them are yet unborn." The fact is that, apart from his precipitate and questionable rejection of traditional religious values, Le Bon has nothing to offer as a substitute to a society that indiscriminately seeks after strange gods and, in the realm of both politics and faith, succumbs to the inarticulate and mediocre. The mesmerizing promises of a socialist utopia, the loss of traditional standards, the rise of a sensational and lubricious mass culture—against all of these forces that threaten to distort and deface the image of man and to create a world devoid of inner substance and meaning, Le Bon can only propose a belief in dispassionate logic and a vague and ill-defined faith in "the unknown soul of things."

Though Le Bon accurately reflects the malaise that was to lead to the rise of socialism, the triumphs of the Third Reich, and two world wars of unspeakable devastation, did he also, in his strange mixture of mysticism and science, prepare the way for precisely those forces which would destroy that civilization which it was his ostensible purpose to protect? Unfortunately Le Bon's desire to stem the tide of socialism, to redeem the individual from the anonymity of the crowd, was not counterbalanced by equivalent insights into the dangers of affirming that the intellectual superiority of some individuals makes them intrinsically more worthy than ungifted persons. Le Bon's attempt to refute the socialist notion that no one man is "the

equivalent of a hundred thousand men" by reversing the proposition is merely the opposite side of the same coin and, when translated into political terms, equally reprehensible. This is not a conservatism which respects the irreducible integrity of the individual or which recognizes, in Yeats' words, that "no human soul is like any other human soul, and therefore the love of God for any human soul is infinite, for no other soul can satisfy the same need in God." It is a tasteless attempt to claim that the scientists and inventors whom Le Bon esteems are "worth far more" than men of less conspicuous gifts. It is one thing to affirm an aristocracy of the spirit, as Arnold does in *Culture and Anarchy*, but another thing to indulge in invidious comparisons between the more and less gifted.

Le Bon's vague panegyrics on "mystical logic," his celebration of an "elite" that is never clearly defined, his morality that too frequently smacks of social Darwinism, his militaristic bias, and his questionable generalizations on racial characteristics are not the most salutary ingredients for a moralist commenting on the age of Hitler and Mussolini. Mrs. Widener observes that Le Bon was sedulously studied by Lenin, Hitler, and Mussolini and opines that "the dictators put his great psychological discoveries to misuse while almost all so-called defenders of what Le Bon so eloquently described as 'the glory and charm of our civilization' left his discoveries in disuse." In her overzealous estimate of Le Bon's writings, she fails to distinguish that which is of permanent value in Le Bon's thought from that which is specious. The reader thus finds himself reacting not only to Le Bon's questionable generalizations but also to Mrs. Widener's exaggerated claims. Despite Le Bon's historical significance, there is much in this volume that is dangerously muddled and obtuse. Mrs. Widener's unwillingness to reflect on the reasons why Le Bon appealed to the most infamous of modern leaders, or to point out the shortcomings of a philosophy which lends itself with disturbing alacrity to political distortion, is a grave omission.

Le Bon's narrow scientism (he wished to supersede the classical system of education in France with a new curriculum composed of mechanics, science, and technology) has dangerous consequences in an age where the loss of an image of man based precisely on that education which Le Bon disdains has left us with more technical apparatus than we have the moral wisdom to assimilate effectively. Furthermore, when Le Bon observes that "if nature had not been pitiless toward the weak, the world would have been peopled by monsters, and no civilization would have dawned," the implications are there to be drawn and we have a quasi-scientific sanction for the selective breeding and sterilization programs that flourished on the operating tables of the Third Reich.

Although Le Bon accurately recognizes that human nature is chiefly activated by aspirations after a nebulous ideal, he pulls the rug out from under any ideal which can withstand the illusions of secular humanism and of political utopianism. All ideals for Le Bon are "illusions," insubstantial vagaries which man unconsciously cultivates to preserve the species from suicide. Socialism is merely "the last illusion that is still vital" for Le Bon; and although he regards it as the most pernicious of illusions, what substitute can be advanced when "not truth but error has always been the chief factor in the evolution of nations"? Since all religions are reduced to the same level, what can the clear-sighted individual whom Le Bon so esteems, the intellectual "elitist" who places his faith in ratiocination and the "temples of pure science," oppose to the secularized religion of socialism? Clearly, nothing. In one observation Le Bon groups Ghenghis Khan and Napoleon in the same category as Buddha and Jesus, excusing the former to some degree because unlike the latter they did not "exert on the human soul a far profounder despotism."

Throughout this volume, which contains selections from *Psychological Laws of the Evolution of Peoples*, *The Crowd*, *The Psychology of Socialism*, *The Evolution of*

*Matter, Opinions and Beliefs*, Le Bon discloses epigrammatic brilliance and insight, but he remains a contradictory, disturbing, and even at times facile diagnostician of the modern age. In reading his works we are reminded of an observation by the equally brilliant but perhaps more profoundly perceptive French aphorist, Amiel: "An error is the more dangerous in proportion to the degree of truth which it contains."

Reviewed by STEPHEN I. GURNEY

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### *Beyond Philosophy?*

**Mystical Reason**, by William Earle,  
*Chicago: Regnery/Gateway, Inc., 1980.*  
*xv + 203 pp. \$6.95.*

TO MINDS WHOSE teeth have grown soft from the positivistic gruel that has been forced down the throats of Anglo-American philosophers for the past seventy or eighty years, this book will be inedible. On the other hand, to minds long since determined that positivism and its kind are, at best, attractive side dishes that give the appearance of being nutritious but merely cause indigestion, the book will be a welcome relief. It marks, as do Professor William Earle's books generally, a return to philosophy viewed as the love of wisdom rather than a compulsion for clarity as an end in itself.

To be more precise, this book is a return to the idealism of Hegel conjoined with the rationalism of Descartes and Spinoza approached by way of the phenomenology of Husserl. This is not to say that Earle is an historian but rather that he draws inspiration from these sources for his own philosophical vision. He seeks to reinstate intuition, imagination, and passion to philosophy; to restore the sublime and the mysterious to a discipline that has become cold and lifeless. Earle seeks to restore