

# Thoughts of a Dissident Critic

G E O R G E A . P A N I C H A S

READERS OF *Modern Age*, since its inception some twenty-five years ago, have been made continuously aware of the crisis of American culture and literature, and, more specifically, of what can be described as the binary crisis of a crass contemporaneousness and an accommodating failure of nerve of our writers, both novelists and critics. This crisis, which is a part of a total crisis of the whole world—religious, moral, social, intellectual, political, economic—intensifies and deepens in scale and consequence. By and large, journals of opinion, general and specialist alike, ignore or even fuel the disordering symptoms of this phenomenon: the abysmal loss of values, the strange and false gods worshipped in the name of escape and fantasy, and the full-scale flight from a commitment to “first principles.” Very few journals, or commentators, have disclosed any degree of courage of judgment in diagnosing these symptoms. Even the belated, heavily endowed and publicized forms of a so-called neoconservative protestation now emanate from borrowers and imitators who will not acknowledge the pioneering efforts of *Modern Age*. Those efforts are an incontrovertible part of the historical record and testify to the permanent and heroic worth of the contribution made by “a conservative review” to American culture and society. From the very beginning, then, *Modern Age* has exemplified what Edmund Burke calls “the dissidence of dissent” by refusing to be indifferent to moral meaning and decision, to choice of character, to counsel of conscience. And, it should also be noted, in disclosing and explicating this dissent, “in venturing far out,” as Kierkegaard would put it, *Modern Age* has had to find and encourage its own contributors and to make and sustain its own reputation.

Thus to reread Albert Fowler’s assessment, in the Fall 1957 issue of the newly

founded *Modern Age*, of J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), or J.M. Lalley’s scrutiny of Mary McCarthy’s *The Group* in the Winter 1963-64 issue, is to be made keenly aware of the kind of dissident valuations that go against the grain of literary opinion in America; that refuse to give the convenient and comforting critical endorsements that remain the staple of a powerful liberal literary and academic establishment. The latter, it might be further noted as a symptomatic illustration, deftly denigrates, either with a scornful silence or an articulated contempt, Irving Babbitt’s conception of the *honnête homme* while at the same time it sings the praises of Herbert Marcuse’s tawdry vision of “Erotic Man.” Clearly a “sham liberalism” has for too long prevailed in the American intelligentsia. To question its “smatterers” or to defy its fiats, the extreme forms of which now appear in a dehumanizing nihilistic “deconstructionism,” has its perils even for the hardest critical and academic dissidents. “Modernistic phantasies” and “utopian dreaming,” in Eric Voegelin’s phraseology, not only multiply but also dominate at all levels of American life and throttle the humane critical spirit and function. The need, then, for a critical dissidence and in turn for a critical corrective to an unrestrained modernity remains as urgent as a willingness to hear the voices “from under the rubble” warning of the spiritual malaise that enfeebles the West.

In his critique of Salinger’s novel Fowler points to the moral deficiencies and relativistic orientation, the dogmatic naturalism and the romantic impressionism that identify the modern imagination and, one should add, criticism. What Fowler says about Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (and about its young rebel Holden Caulfield, who is supposedly in search of virtue and truth) underlines those standards of selection and judgment that

are absent from American criticism and the absence of which, as seen in the modern American adherents of Rousseau in fiction, reinforces the delusion that man is naturally good and society naturally evil: "Salinger's stand for the individual and against the world, for the heaven of inner desire and opposed to the hell of outward circumstance, brings up the question posed by the disciples of naturalism how deep the split is between moral man and immoral society." In this representative, if, to liberal critics, seditious, critical observation Fowler discloses the qualitative judgment that one now seldom finds in American criticism. It is the kind of critical dissidence that, were it minimally practiced or occasionally recognized, even if rarely accepted, would lessen the desiccating effects of "the dehumanization of art." But in literature and in the academy it is "the triumph of sports and games," as Sr. Ortega y Gasset puts it, that is so painfully dominant. And it is "sports and games," in their anatomical or histological detail, as Lalley shows, that one finds in Miss McCarthy's *The Group*, a novel which is about the lives of eight Vassar College alumnae of the Class of 1933 and which critics like William Barrett and Granville Hicks lavishly acclaimed for its understanding and compassion. The weaknesses of this novel are both intrusive and pervasive, for reasons that Lalley makes devastatingly clear: "As an artistic effort," Lalley writes, "the novel must be accounted an almost total failure. The reason is that Miss McCarthy's interest in her fictive classmates does not go much beyond a sharp eye for what they wear and eat and drink, the sort of furniture they acquire, and what she imagines to be their behavior in bathrooms and bedrooms—and, where occasion requires, in church." The critical stringency in Lalley's review, it hardly needs saying, goes counter to the brilliance and distinction so often ascribed to Mary McCarthy, "our only real woman of letters," as *Newsweek* has anointed her with journalistic aplomb. An artist often praised for a prose style that possesses "classic fluidity and precision," her

achievement has been much overrated and over-rewarded not only with prizes and grants, but also with several honorary degrees, including one from the University of Aberdeen, that most venerable of Scottish educational institutions.

In offering their critical dissent, both Fowler and Lalley honor and dignify the function and responsibilities of the critic. They also desiderate the reciprocal relations in theory and in practice between a moral criticism and a moral imagination. But as with so much of the things of value, the "permanent things" as they are termed in their metaphysical ground of truth, the moral centrality that one should be able to find and identify and connect *with*, in the twin realms of the imagination and of criticism, has been increasingly abandoned in literary and academic quarters to nihilistic impulses and theorizings, the *doxai* that are certified in the name of post-modernism and post-structuralism, the new order that supersedes universal moral order and marks "the end of the modern world," to use here Romano Guardini's prophetic phrase. Indeed, the two phenomena which Guardini feared most, "the not-human man and the not-natural nature," are the foundations upon which contemporary society and culture are being erected. The nihilistic forms of such a society obviate the moral standards that define and inform the concepts of *humanitas* and of *humanus religiosus*. It is the ruthless and incessant distancing from and rejection of these standards and concepts, in their traditional and sacred moorings, that no doubt impel the minority moral perspective that critical dissidents like Fowler and Lalley disclose in their critical pursuit and that shape and sharpen the critical discriminations and criteria of their estimations of contemporary American fiction. In a word, such a critical dissidence is not fashionable in progressivist literary and academic circles, where it is largely treated with contumely. But that is to say, too, that the transcendent "historic sense" which Fowler and Lalley incorporate into the critical function is what also endows it with the clearer

faculty of vision that belongs to a morality of ascent. "The higher the ends," Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn writes in *The First Circle*, "the higher must be the means! . . . Morality shouldn't lose its force as it increases its scope.

Critical permanencies, or universals, as they are evoked by Solzhenitsyn, perhaps our greatest living dissident, are what contemporary creators and critics invalidate. In this connection, as Professor Stephen I. Gurney has recently declared, "it will be the thankless task of future literary historians to determine whether it was the repressive tactics of a totalitarian regime or the boneless liberalism of a derelict critical mafia which was most effective in creating the present debased state of letters." In its literary form, the process of invalidation—the invalidation of moral value, theme, distinctions, and meaning—culminates in the movement known as de-constructionism. (Its allied social and political equivalents are, of course, readily identifiable in the technologico-Benthamite syndrome that Dr. F.R. Leavis has bravely focused on.) More than twenty-five years ago, in the very first issue of *Modern Age*, in the inaugural essay "Life without Prejudice," Richard M. Weaver anticipated the nihilistic directions of this movement in the course of pointing to the "traditional distinctions, whether economic, moral, social, or aesthetic, [which] are today under assault as founded on a prejudice." American critics would be well advised to re-frequent and meditate on that remarkable essay if only to understand what ultimately comprises the burden of the critical practitioner. Paradigms of critical thinking, and in effect of critical prejudices, are what are most needed today. When Weaver stresses, then, "life without prejudice, were it ever to be tried, would soon reveal itself to be a life without principle," he is also drawing attention to a criticism without principle and, in effect, a criticism in crisis: that criticism, for example, that props up a Salinger or a Mary McCarthy in ways that make their insignificance and deficiencies all the more shocking.

In its literary reviewing and articles *Modern Age* has steadfastly adhered to a moral, sapiential, and dissident criticism that contemplates ends and affirms the need for roots of order and for what Simone Weil calls "the needs of the soul." For the fact remains that the critical function has been absorbed by the monolithic liberal dialectic of the modern world that rejects serious standards of thought and judgment and endorses the general will in all its perversions. Centerless and rootless attitudes gain widespread and influential acceptance as critical authority wanes. Particularly in the realm of education, this disintegrating pluralistic process has had irreparable effects, for if critical authority no longer commands a fundamental role in the disciplining contexts of criteria and sensibility, and of value and significance, how can the educational task itself continue without being crippled? Indeed, education today all too often aborts the humanistic need to "assert itself as a major 'spiritual power,' higher than the press, standing for serenity in the midst of frenzy, for seriousness and the grasp of intellect in the face of frivolity and unashamed stupidity," as Sr. Ortega declared over fifty years ago in his remarkable treatise on higher education, *The Mission of the University*. This posited "spiritual power" has been sacrificed to the sloppy dictates of collectivist sensibility, to the requirements of, for example, "group thinking" and "audience response," of polls and trends, and of talk shows, anchormen, bestsellers, and editorial and op-ed pages. Is it any wonder that even an occasionally troubled novelist can complain that he is no longer able to locate a center of values, and that there is no light to guide him? The vacuum, which these writers decry, is the vacuum of the disinherited modern mind; and the moral imagination is its manifest and much-suffering victim.

## II

THE PRECEDING THOUGHTS ARE occasioned by the publication of Professor John W. Aldridge's most recent study, *The*

*American Novel and the Way We Live Now*,<sup>1</sup> in which fulfilling the responsibilities of the office of the critic distinguishes the main concern of the author. We are indebted to Aldridge for reminding us of major critical and cultural issues that are ignored or dismissed by so many other critics and academics alike. His book forces us to examine three nagging questions: What is wrong, radically wrong, with current cultural conditions? What is wrong with the literary imagination? What is wrong with the critical function? These questions, as they are formulated and treated in the book, are interdependent; Aldridge is continuously aware of how each of these questions ultimately belongs to an inseparable entity. To ask one of these questions inevitably leads to asking the other two. Aldridge's handling of these questions is essentially prescriptive; he does not fall into the esoteric enticements and the solipsistic snares that claim the loyalty of many academic critics writing (and teaching) today. His selective and illustrative discussions are impelled by and frankly addressed to the state of American society as a whole. He speaks as a critic who analyzes the particularities of a civilization in disarray and who conveys valuations commensurate with his honesty and sensitive intelligence. He judges and writes as a critical dissident. One reads him with an increasing sense of respect, for one clearly finds in Aldridge's critical discriminations an implicit integrity. Journalistic habits of mind and peripheral academic interests, regnant cheapness and deadening specialisms, as these proliferate in the house of intellect, never get in Aldridge's way. He is intent on penetrating to the heart of some very crucial matters that affect literary and cultural conditions. Intensity of purpose, of judgment, stamps each paragraph and page of the book. This is the intensity of a determined seriousness that tells us that the critic has thought deeply on what he has read and observed. The critical function, as one discovers in Aldridge's book, has a moral function, which, paradoxically, many teachers and critics reproach as the height of critical dissidence.

The main critical idea that Aldridge posits is that contemporary American novelists disdain a realistic reflection of life. Closely associated with this idea is another one: that the novel has lost its authority as an art form and as a means of reflecting and educating public consciousness. This loss of reality and of authority can now be measured in terms of the imagination's turning to, and concomitantly degenerating into, a search for salvation through escape from the living community. Contemporary novelists not only celebrate romantic fantasies, aberrations, and illusions, but also surrender whatever vision they have to the secular decrees of demystification and fragmentation. Aldridge goes on to observe that contemporary fiction also underlines the attempt to replace one's membership in an older form of community with group membership subject to spurious standards endlessly formulated by the behaviorists and social scientists. In literature as in life, Aldridge emphasizes, the "solipsistic preoccupations of the imperial self" thrive; an enervating narcissism identifies a devalued and disconnected existence in which transcendental meaning is rejected or subordinated to "life in entropic terms." Aldridge sees Joseph Heller's novels revolving around a "nihilistic perception" of human existence and destiny, even as he sees William Gaddis dramatizing anarchical attitudes and habits. American fiction inevitably recreates the disorder of "the way we live now": a soulless, mindless state of being. This debasement, as Aldridge also shows in the fiction of Jerzy Kosinski, emerges from the need "to substitute for the moral anarchy of the void the autocracy of personal law, the tyranny of the imperious self." The entropic process of chaos finds in Thomas Pynchon a prime example of a novelist who, though he possesses high literary intelligence, is preoccupied with the thermodynamic dissolution of life. An apocalyptic naturalism ultimately determines and undermines Pynchon's conception of the human social order.

In the longest chapter of the book, "The Troubles of Realism," Aldridge examines

the novels of Alison Lurie, James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, and Saul Bellow. Each of these writers, he believes, has attempted to grapple, honestly and realistically, with the stuff of contemporary American society. "And each has experienced frustration," Aldridge adds, "or the need to make some creative adjustment or compromise in the face of the recalcitrance of those materials." Lurie exhibits a deficient comprehension of ambiguities in academic life, and Baldwin sentimentalizes his vision of the black experience. Mailer and Bellow, on the other hand, are more successful in their attempts to confront the dominant realities or unrealities of American society. It becomes only too clear in Aldridge's study that the positive strengths found in these attempts hardly outweigh inadequacies of American fiction: "Our novels have usually lacked what the best of European fiction has traditionally possessed in abundance: the power to deal directly with abstract concepts of being and to depict ideas as concrete modes of dramatic action to be experienced with all the force of physical sensations." In arguing that American novelists lapse into "the banality of evil," Aldridge points to William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* as an example of what contemporary American fiction and life lack most: "a coherent metaphysical view of the moral nature of existence." Aldridge's charge that the American literary and cultural situation is limited to the specific and particular and dismissive of the universal is not, of course, an original charge, as any reading of the critical writings of Babbitt or Paul Elmer More will reveal. Still, it is bracing to have the views of the neo-humanists brought up-to-date; to have re-confirmation of what happens when the imagination has neither an ethical nor a moral center and is subservient to the flux of relativism, culminating in what Babbitt describes as "the outward push of expression" and "the fatality and finality of temperament."

Aldridge's critical arguments enforce the pertinence of Christopher Lasch's observation in *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979): "As for art, it not only fails to create the il-

lusion of reality but suffers from the same crisis of self-consciousness that afflicts the man in the street." Centering on what he calls "the novel as narcissus," Aldridge cites John Barth's fiction as an example of relativistic thinking, as well as of anti-realism. Barth, in *The Floating Opera*, expresses his mechanistic view in the form of these dialectical propositions, which Aldridge quotes: "I. Nothing has intrinsic value. II. The reasons for which people attribute value to things are always ultimately irrational. III. There is, therefore, no ultimate 'reason' for valuing anything. IV. Living is action. There's no final reason for living. V. There's no final reason for living (or for suicide)." No "propositions" could better summarize the bankruptcy of the imagination! And no "propositions" could better crystallize the process of putrefaction that assaults all meaning of life! In contemporary fiction, for those who can recognize the frightening significance of Aldridge's findings, what we unrelievedly encounter is the diabolism that D.H. Lawrence equates with "impure abstraction, the mechanisms of matter," and that, earlier, William Blake imaged as "the Cities of the Salamandrine men" and "the Empire of nothing." Aldridge's examination of the modern writer's relation to and conception of society alerts us to the perversity of estrangement and dread: "But if writers feel—as many now seem to do—so completely estranged that they can perceive their society only as a nightmare aberration, a condition of malevolent conspiracy, or a mass of undifferentiated humanoids, then obviously they will not be able to engage it imaginatively with very much vigor or profundity."

"The Empire of nothing": that is the symbolic definition of modern society as "machination" and the penal colony in which, as Aldridge reveals to us, the artist now finds himself both as the executioner and the executed. Aldridge will be faulted for not augmenting his diagnosis of the writer and society with programmatic and popular solutions. The critic's task, it should be stressed, is diagnostic, and his purpose should be that of conserving values

and defending standards, out of which solutions should, ideally, emerge. We are, in matters of life as in matters of criticism, too deeply immersed in the art of living rather than in the knowledge of life. That is our curse of pragmatism, and that curse makes it impossible for us to discern between good and evil, between that which is above and that which is below, between the sacred and the profane. Overcoming this curse is the lot of the dissident critic, as Aldridge so impressively shows. To be able first to respond to the voice of one's critical conscience in the contexts of valuing what needs to be valued marks the beginning of a solution. An F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) who can confess, for instance, that "my generation of radicals and breakers-down never found anything to take the place of the old virtues of work and courage and the old graces of courtesy and politeness," can give us great literature in ways that the contemporary novelists Aldridge assesses simply cannot. Though Fitzgerald could say that "life is essentially a cheat and its conditions those of defeat," he could also remain dedicated to the "fundamental decencies." Those "fundamental decencies" today are being flouted not only in the republic of arts and letters but also in "Big Dan's Tavern," in New Bedford, Massachusetts, early in 1983, by those men who grabbed and dragged a woman to a pool table, where she was raped for over a period of at least two hours, to the accompanying cheers of other men who were watching.<sup>2</sup> Barth and his confreres would doubtlessly view such an atrocity as a perfunctory offshoot of the dialectical propositions in *The Floating Opera!*

### III

I WANT TO CONCLUDE by way of a personal note. In 1971 I reviewed in *Modern Age* Aldridge's volume of social and cultural history, *In the Country of the Young*, under the title "The Cult of Mediocrity." In this book, he examined the declining state of American civilization and in particular indicted "the children of affluence and permissiveness." Hard-hitting and

unsparing, this book gives unpopular opinions, searingly analyzing, as it does, those manic and diseased conditions in the sixties that identified the plight of American life at all levels and led me to conclude my review with the bleak and symbolic words, "Meta-barbaric man now dances and fornicates in the streets, and the remnant, protesting but 'very small and feeble,' waits to be called." That epitomizing sentence, and my entire review praising Aldridge's intellectual honesty and courage, I recall quite vividly, did not go well with some of my liberal colleagues in the profession. Those who read the review, or heard about it from other sources, reacted with a kind of disdainful silence. It is of the kind that tells you that you have violated some unwritten but powerful code that says that only the liberal ethos is what academe prescribes and protects, any violation of which is an unforgivable act. That liberal attitude, I realized, did not tolerate the very principle of toleration that liberals claim is their exclusive legacy.

Invariably, and very painfully, I was made to feel that any statement critical of the liberal position, an entrenched and self-perpetuating party-line in itself, made one *persona non grata*. Quite clearly I was stamped as a "conservative" teacher and critic, consigned to a small band of cranky traditionalists: those who, in terms of national honors and munificent foundation grants, find doors shut against them. Indeed, even in terms of prestige, it was made clear to me by direct or indirect means, an academic who appeared in, say, *The New Republic* or *The New York Review of Books* had reached a pinnacle of national visibility and power in the profession. In this, too, the liberal sway has always been formidable. Politically and professionally the liberal position has always paid off. A neutralist position, in fact, was far more preferable to the conservative; it was by far the more tame of the two. When, too, my volume of essays in literary criticism, culture, and society, *The Reverent Discipline*, was published in 1974, the liberal response was completely predictable. To start with, the title of my

book was viewed apprehensively, especially when placed alongside a *Negations* (Herbert Marcuse) or a *Soul on Ice* (Eldridge Cleaver), to which books enormous critical space in the review media was shamelessly devoted. One reviewer, in fact, glibly wrote in the *Library Journal*: "These essays rest on a broad base of scholarship and learning, and it's hard to imagine finding more serious writing about literature anywhere. Nevertheless, the unremitting moral earnestness and intellectual conservatism won't be to everyone's taste, especially if a title like *The Reverent Discipline* automatically makes you feel a little irreverent." And one of my own senior colleagues, a liberal especially liberal in his confusion, saw fit one day to accost me in the commons room by condescendingly declaring he had somewhere seen a notice of my book that he believed—derision stressfully etched in his "believed"—identified *The Reverent Discipline* as a kind of religious commentary with Hellenic and humanistic essences, which, with God, he went on for my edification, with a note of final triumph, had *died* long, long ago—no longer fit for or necessary to the modern world. However disturbing and discrediting these aspersions may appear to be, I have learned, with a patience born in isolation, that they cannot be allowed to deter one's devotion to the Idea of Value. What I wrote in *The Reverent Discipline*, in the following passage, remains for me a steady-ing principle of acceptance and commitment central to the creed and office of the critic as conservator:

Reverence has hidden depths which conceptual thought cannot reach, but of which it has immense need. Reverence is a paradigm that sanctifies and saves. Reverence connotes other possibilities of response and attention, of knowledge and presence. It is discovery, discovery of another dimension. It is the finest offshoot of the revelation of order.

The liberal attitude, mean and insidious in itself, was crystallized for me, with a bitterness beyond words, during a scholarly

conference at a great mid-western university where I was invited to give one of the two main addresses. My subject, I insisted, would be Irving Babbitt and Simone Weil as moralist thinkers, and my insistence, I later found, carried a heavy price in terms of consequences. I shared the platform with a famous luminary who, giving the first paper and in the course of discussing Edmund Wilson, used the occasion to quote Wilson's miscreant views of neo-humanism and of Babbitt in particular. The scholarly audience delighted hugely in the invectives against Babbitt, and no doubt expected more of the same from my own paper. That was not forthcoming. As my analytical defense of Babbitt and Simone Weil gained in momentum and, I hope, in sincerity, so too did the displeasure of the luminary sharing the platform with me and that of the amazed and obviously irritated academic audience to whom Babbitt and Simone Weil embodied a dissentient moral force. The irritability of my audience, I sensed, was characterized by a tension and fidgetiness, by utter surprise, and, at the end, by uncivil whispers, which became almost belligerently vocal as I concluded my address with these words:

Men, Babbitt declares, "tend to come together in proportion to their intuitions of the One. . . . We *ascend* to meet." And Simone Weil insists: "Faith is above all the conviction that the good is one." As critics they refined their world view in the face of the active hostility of the times in which they lived—the hostility that, then and now, personifies *la trahison des clercs*. Irving Babbitt and Simone Weil resisted and challenged the vaunting powers of betrayal and disbelief with a vigor and conviction arising from the affirmation of the moral and spiritual *ethos* that achieves permanence among impermanent things. Their example, both as presentation and as interpretation, testifies to a double mission: The critical pursuit of truth and the search for salvation.

Upon the conclusion of these remarks, the obviously alarmed moderator of the proceedings, motivated by tact or tactic, but contrary to general policy, dispensed with the usual question period, claiming that my lecture would best be pondered silently by those in the audience—this action for me again being just another clever facet of the conspiracy of silence that liberals practice with considerable success. As we all then proceeded rather uncomfortably from the lecture hall, the luminary who had cleverly ridiculed Babbitt via Wilson was surrounded by laughing and joking academic lackeys. One very distinguished elderly scholar, I now recall, passed by me, not saying anything, but, with downcast eyes and a nodding gesture of his head, discreetly signaled to me a form of approval—as he, too, then went on to join the majority pack ahead, still laughing and gesticulating. Later, too, one kindly lady, a professor of music, I think, asked me whether I was the “religious philosopher” who had dared to disturb some of the academics at the conference. Still later, one of my friends, a famous septuagenarian man of letters, told me, in *sotto voce*, with a pained tone of paternal concern, that in giving my lecture on Babbitt and Simone Weil and in delineating their moral views (as was reported to him through the academic grapevine) I had been “imprudent.” That charge, for me, was perhaps the most cutting of all. For how, I kept asking myself, how can one be incautious with truth? Kierkegaard’s announced principle, “severity first—then mildness,” has always seemed to me a better part of truth. At any rate, my good friend’s admonition made me realize more than ever how pervasive and poisonous the liberal network is in American intellectual life; how much it controls and shapes the ethos of professional life and creates, harms, or destroys professional reputations; how perilous it is for one to defy it and, in defying it, to expect retribution in subtle or, as I also found, unsubtle forms.

I had seen and felt at first hand the liberal clout. It is always there, this Enemy, this Legion: always ready to strike out at

those who do not subscribe to its iron clad doctrines and its enlightened and advanced views and tactics; always ready to apportion its ridicule and hostility; always ready to sow its smear tactics. Only yesterday, it seems, on my way to an afternoon class in World Literature, to lecture to some of my undergraduates, I encountered one of my liberal colleagues who noticed that I was carrying Irwin Edman’s Modern Library edition of Plato’s Dialogues. “I see you are teaching Plato,” he said, his eyes fastening on me with hate, his mouth pursed cruelly. “That fascist!” snarled this self-admiring spokesman for the “doctrines of the multitude,” as I made my way in the labyrinthine grove of academe, in the meanwhile reflecting on the insight and wisdom of Socrates’ words to Crito: “Then, my friends, we must not regard what the many say of us: but what he, the one man who has understanding of just and unjust, will say, and what the truth will say.”

The destructive actions of my academic colleagues are, I know, egregious but by no means unusual; yet they underline characteristic liberal habits of mind in academe that, in time, become accepted general policy. Nowhere is this policy more evident than in the making of professorial appointments, especially in the humanistic disciplines. Academics with a conservative and traditionalist bent are either ignored, punished, or denied a fair hearing when it comes to being considered for some coveted university chair. The academic democratizers of standards and society, the quantifiers, the mercenaries, the nihilists are accorded the greater privileges and honors. The moles of academe perpetuate the *chic* liberal position that has led to the wildest disruptions and most blasphemous distortions of basic principles and beliefs for which the present generation of students is paying the demeaning price of illiteracy as the lowest and commonest standard. In the educational realm, as in that of the imagination and of criticism, we are reaping the results of what the late Gordon Keith Chalmers once spoke of in the contexts of a “disintegrated liberalism”: “The general object of educa-

tion has become more and more to condition the mass attitude toward specific social improvements, and enthusiasm for these reforms has diverted energy from the ancient and central task of converting the reason—of converting it from the knowledge and love of what is mean to the knowledge and love of what is worthy." These wise words appear in Chalmers' *The Republic and the Person*, a great book published in 1952 by Henry Regnery, a great "dissident publisher." What Chalmers emphasizes in this statement, and throughout his book, reminds us that American leaders, educators, critics, and creators have shunned spiritual greatness. They are the real "Irresponsibles."

Since 1952, the disciplining spiritual idea of critical humanism has been fast disappearing from the American social and cultural scene. This disappearance attests to the beleaguering of genuine conservative ideas and to the general distrust of the "conservative mind" as a working constituent of American life. If, politically speaking, there is now present on a national scale a conservative mood, that merely points to a newly gained respectability. But respectability and viability are often no less antipodal than appearance and reality. "In America, the majority raises formidable barriers around the liberty of opinion," Tocqueville wrote. Basically the liberal power-centers remain as intractable and unchanged today as they were back in the time of Whittaker Chambers' "witness" to the "conflicts of faith": Faith in God or Faith in Man? These conflicts have not abated in either their intensity or their terror. The same kind of resistance to Chambers' view of Faith—Faith in God—as constituting "the central problem of this age" persists. Chambers' warning that "communism is what happens when, in the name of Mind, men free themselves from God," is as much disregarded today as it was when it was first conveyed more than thirty years ago. His is truly a dissident's warning that the liberal intelligentsia, ensconced in high places of power, scoffs at with unconscionable gusto. The liberal *Zeitgeist*, as a dismayed and

embattled Chambers found, is powerful, venomous, unforgiving, monolithic. Those who are brave enough to challenge its formulas and dogmatism, who have the courage to see its decadences, must necessarily choose to exist as dissidents in "a world split apart." This is their marginal fate, but also their power and glory. For if one chooses to be what I term a dissident critic, he is a partisan in the unceasing struggle between moral relativism and moral truth, between the absence and the presence of the moral sense. "If you do away with this struggle," writes T.S. Eliot, "and maintain that by tolerance, benevolence, inoffensiveness and a redistribution or increase of purchasing power, combined with a devotion, on the part of an élite, to Art, the world will be as good as anyone could require, then you must expect human beings to become more and more vaporous."

"The world outside Communism, the world in crisis, lacks a vision and a faith." So writes Chambers in his "Foreword in the Form of a Letter to My Children," in *Witness*. A dissident statement to make back in 1952, it remains equally dissident today. No liberal, no relativist, could utter such words. Only a true spiritual dissident, in a world in which, as Yeats wrote, "the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere," would be selfless enough to make such a statement of indictment that emerges from the very depths of value and meaning. At first glance, Chambers' is a simple statement, ostensibly mild and unthreatening in its significance. But when it is pondered and repeated in a metaphysical sense, and then repeated and pondered in an historical sense, its significance is totally arresting. For it adverts to what is a consuming crisis in a world which "lacks a vision and a faith." In its own way it is an apocalyptic judgment filled with warning and foreboding; a dissident judgment that forces one to view "the world outside Communism," there to espy a demonism which consumes or annexes whatever it encounters in the shape of weakness and disloyalty, and of confusion and indiscriminate. Chambers' words,

his "witness," his *agon*, seen in their prophetic unity, point to the *realpolitik* of disorder that so overwhelms Western civilization. It is precisely the absence of faith, in short, of a religious sense, that stultifies the imagination that Aldridge assesses with a frightening accuracy of insight. Without faith, without a moral impulse, the imagination dies. This necrosis precludes not only the full possibility of human existence, but also the value of order and the order of value.

The need for critical dissidence is especially urgent at a time of history when the liberal temper ossifies in an indulgent process of general softness and slovenliness and a disappearance of honest standards. "Liberalism is the refuge favored by intellectual cowardice," Weaver observes, "because the essence of the liberal's position is he has no position." Intellectual cowardice, in time, disintegrates into intellectual hedonism, to gauge by the eclipse of the moral function in criticism and in the imagination, as well as in the

socio-political system as a whole. No doubt this disintegration is what Julien Benda had in mind when, back in the twenties, he condemned modern intellectuals as traitors extolling particular systems of morality and scorning universal morality. That betrayal has hardened into what is now, dialectically and procedurally, defined policy and standard practice. An orthodoxy of enlightenment, as the cumulative result of the idea of progress through aggression, remains imperious in its power and influence. A critic who dares to disobey its ordinances or to trespass the frontiers of its tyranny registers a moral choice of dissent. His task, seen and affirmed as such, is defiant, dangerous, surveillant, and censorial. "Watch ye, stand fast in faith, quit you like men, be strong." Saint Paul's words help to remind us that, in confronting the malodorous conditions of contemporary civilization, the dissident critic has hardly begun the work of his ministry.

<sup>1</sup>John W. Aldridge, *The American Novel and the Way We Live Now* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). <sup>2</sup>This is the same New Bedford for whose economically deprived "mill hands" and influential fellow traveler of the thirties, Malcolm Cowley, accused the neo-humanists of showing no compassion. What evidence, one must inquire, do we have of Cowley's compassion for the countless victims of Stalin's purge trials and liquidations? The answer to this question is provided by Arthur Koestler, in *The*

*God That Failed* (1949): "How our voices boomed with righteous indignation, denouncing flaws in the procedure of justice in our comfortable democracies; and how silent we were when our comrades, without trial or conviction, were liquidated in the Socialist sixth of the earth. Each of us carries a skeleton in the cupboard of his conscience; added together they would form galleries of bones more labyrinthine than the Paris catacombs."