

Obdurate Adversaries of Modernity

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IT WAS NOT WITHOUT irony, thirty years ago, that I clapped the name *Modern Age* upon a new quarterly. It had been my intention at first to entitle the magazine *The Conservative Review*; but friends had dissuaded me, fancying that the Tower of Siloam might tumble upon editor and publisher, should they be so temerarious as to proclaim openly their attachment to the permanent things. Next I had inclined toward *The Federal Review*; but Henry Regnery suggested that people would think of the Federal Reserve Board. *Modern Age* our periodical became, in sardonic defiance of the fads and foibles of the twentieth century.

At the beginning of this century, dictionaries of the English language defined *modernity* as "The quality or state of being modern; modernism in time or spirit"—appending to this definition, in brackets, "Rare." *Modernism* then was a literary term chiefly, signifying some novel word, idiom, or expression. Eight decades later *modernity* and *modernism* have been erected into terms political and sociological, implying neoterism on principle; preference for change over permanence; exaltation of the present era over all previous epochs; hearty approval of material aggrandizement and relative indifference toward a moral order; positive hostility, often, toward theism. About the time when the first number of *Modern Age* appeared, *modernity* and *modernism* were terms of approbation in most quarters. The Modernists of the twentieth century have been the intellectual heirs of the Utilitarians of the first half of the nineteenth century and of the Positivists of the latter half of that century—even though few Modernists read Bentham or Comte attentively.

During the 1980s the Modernists whom the *Modern Age* people opposed have begun to lose their ascendancy over the media of communication and the universities and decision-making political posts—challenged by Christians, political conservatives, and empirical critics. The terms *materialism* and *mechanism* have ceased to charm imaginative men of science, however much the crowd remains subject to those illusions; and the quasi-ideology of modernity is drubbed in print, even though modernist assumptions still form public policy in West and East. (Consider, for instance, a strong essay by Frederick Turner, "Escape from Modernism," in *Harper's*, November 1985; for the past half-century, articles in *Harper's* have been forerunners of large alterations in middlebrow opinion and political measures in America.) During the past thirty years, *Modern Age* has kept up a desultory fire against the Modernists in politics, in morals, in economics, in humane letters, in philosophy; it has published the thought of men and women who were unashamed of the wisdom of their ancestors. If during the twenty-first century civilization enters upon an imaginative Post-Modern era (rather than a Post-Christian era), *Modern Age* may be remembered for the seed it sowed in lonely fields. (I am not mixing metaphors: the *Modern Age* people have endeavored to engage in both combat and cultivation.)

Certain Modernist excesses incited me, early in the fifties, to try to found a periodical, somewhat comparable to the vanished *Bookman* and the *American Review*, that might publish reflections on the permanent things and offer some intellectual resistance to a reckless neoterism. T. S. Eliot's *Criterion* and, more recently,

the short-lived Chicago quarterly *Measure* had been such journals; they had expired several years before Henry Regnery, David Collier, and I set our faces against the Modernists.

One Modernist act of aggression, now presumably forgotten by nearly everyone but me, was a lengthy assault in the pages of *Partisan Review* upon one of the books of Leo Strauss. The narrow snarling hostility of that truly *partisan* reviewer was representative enough of Modernist intellectuality. Strauss's strong attachment to classical philosophy and his drawing from the deep well of the past were detested by the Modernists. Might it not be possible to bring into existence a counterpart to *Partisan Review*, in which ideas and institutions not born yesterday might be discussed temperately?

Another Modernist article, published in *The Twentieth Century* of August 1951, roused my temper and set me to thinking of a new magazine. This was "The New American Revolution," by David C. Williams, director of research for the Political Action Committee of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. A passage from Williams's piece—by no means the most arrogant passage—must suffice here:

The Agents of this new revolution are the numerous officials, business men, technicians, and trade unionists whom the American Government is sending abroad. . . . American business men have the task of convincing their European counterparts that it pays to modernize, and to produce for the masses rather than the classes. They can assure their European friends that it is possible for them also to achieve as a group the position of highest prestige in their communities, displacing landowners, civil servants, and officers of the armed forces from their traditional places of honor.

Williams's brand of Modernity appealed deliberately to cupidity, class envy, and the itch for change. In Asia, Williams predicted, American technology would "break down the traditional bonds of caste and family which prevail" and "drive the handicraft producers to the wall."

Such an understanding of modernity was not confined to spokesmen for the CIO: a few years later, just as the first number of *Modern Age* was about to appear, I shared a Washington platform with the gentleman then president of the United States Chamber of Commerce, who read a speech written for him by a person whose opinions seemed to be identical with those of David C. Williams. Modernity meant standardization, centralization, effacing of custom and convention, popular shoddiness. The banner under which Modernists of this variety march today bears the legend "Democratic Capitalism." Modernism is not confined to any especial party, faction, or class: rather, it is a cast of mind and character. The Modernist mentality, aspiring to universal dominion, ranges from cosmology to sexuality; and everywhere it is overweeningly arrogant.

Three books, published during the decade before the first number of *Modern Age*, particularly helped me to apprehend the significance of the cult of modernity and impelled me to take up the cause of the wisdom of yesteryear. All three are long out of print, I believe, at least in their English translations; all three are by European writers.

The first of these to appear was *What Ails Mankind?* (1947), by the French peasant-philosopher Gustave Thibon; its subtitle is *An Essay on Social Physiology*. Thibon looks upon the Modernists with pity and loathing. A passage of his on the mission of the conservative was at the back of my mind when we began to publish this quarterly. There exist two distinct forms of the conservative mentality, Thibon tells us:

One is that of the impotent and the satisfied, and this kind of conservatism, due to inertia, is by far the more widespread of the two; people hold onto what is because they have lost all ability to renew and build; lacking in the slightest motive virtue, they deify an acquired momentum. But the other kind of conservatism is conservative *wisdom*—that of Pascal, for example. It does not close its eyes to the defects of tradition and the

established order; it well realizes that many things *ought* to be changed; it is merely sceptical as to man's creative capacities in general and as to the results of upheavals coming from below in particular. . . . My quarrel with all "progress" of the scientific or the revolutionary type (they are fundamentally the same thing) is that it carries the infection into the interior of the social body under the pretence of curing a sore on the skin.

I re-read Thibon still. The second book in this anti-modernity list is a slim volume by a psychologist, Charles Baudouin, published in English translation in 1950: *The Myth of Modernity*. The wars of 1914 and 1939, Baudouin writes, undid in men's minds the myth of Progress—which was supplanted by the myth of Modernity:

The myth of Modernity seems to give humanity reasons for fleeing from itself; reasons for unhappiness, inasmuch as the man who runs away from himself is an unhappy man. . . . The modern man . . . is multiplying his sensations to the point of distraction. But it soon appears that he becomes his own dupe. Not only is he quickly wearied, as we have seen, seeking only to find repose in stripping himself bare. But the readjustment has not even waited for him to do so before coming into play. It may be detected at every step of his frenzied career. It follows the man like his shadow.

A point emphasized in Baudouin's little book is that the Modernists delight in the "clean sweep"—the obliteration of memorials of the past—notably in their uglification of once-beautiful cities. It remained for Lyndon Johnson's urban "renewal," in full swing a decade after the first number of *Modern Age* appeared, to apply the Modernist doctrine of the clean sweep to American towns great and small.

A year after the English translation of Baudouin appeared, Regnery published in the United States a translation of Max Picard's moving book *The Flight from God* (first published in Switzerland in 1934). The Modernist, repudiating the divine as he repudiates the past, is the man of the Flight. Picard sketches the Modernist's falseness:

Man is proud of being a manufacturer, and proud that he must engage in a specific kind of manufacture for each situation. Love, kindness, fidelity, his manufactured products, seem to him novel, as if they had had no previous existence. And love, fidelity, kindness, all these, do not seem really to be there; rather, it is as though they were making a first or a final appearance, as in a theatre. A man on a long journey may suddenly open his suitcase and take out a few tiny pieces of wood with which to perform tricks for his fellow-travellers: in just this way, love and fidelity are taken out of the suitcases of the Flight, shown off in an extravagant and dramatic fashion, then made to vanish again; and one continues to wear an expression suggesting that there is a great deal left in the suitcase; and so one can continue the Flight in peace.

For the most part, however, love, fidelity, kindness do not even exist as poorly manufactured articles, for they are only *discussed*. In reality, love, kindness, fidelity, do not show themselves, not even for the brief moment when the Flight has need of them; they show themselves only in discussion and idle chatter, and are swallowed up in them. Only this endures in the Flight: discussion.

Endless discussions, endowed by governmental bodies and tax-exempt foundations, are the festivals of Modernity: valueless discussions about "values," for instance, ending in a consensus that values cannot be defined. It was not this sort of modernist fatigued and pointless discussion that *Modern Age* was meant to advance.

A fourth powerful book on this theme was published in 1959, two years after the first *Modern Age*, but the essays composing that book were appearing, chiefly in Australian periodicals, at the time my colleagues and I were making plans for our quarterly. This book is *The End of Modernity: Essays on Literature, Art and Culture*, by James McAuley, the editor of the Australian magazine *Quadrant*; it has never been published in the United States, which fact suggests how thoroughly the prejudices of Modernity govern the book-publishers of Manhattan. With McAuley,

who came to visit me at Mecosta, I felt a stronger sympathy than with any other editor of the past three decades. The following passage from his chapter "What Must Be Developed?" may suggest why.

McAuley here is discussing the raptures with which Modernists received the announcement of President Truman's "Point Four" program:

But the truth is that a terrible price is exacted for development along the lines of Western modernism. It is necessary to insist on this in spite of the fact that whoever insists on it is at once accused of indifference to the physical wretchedness of millions of people who need food, housing, clothing, hygiene, medicine and other basic necessities.

The result of Western modernism is regularly a psychic bewilderment and impoverishment, which literacy, schooling and training do not prevent but may rather increase. Corresponding to "the reign of quantity" inaugurated by economic development is a loss of quality. Life loses its metaphysical support, its meaningful pattern, its inwardness. The world of industrial progress is a world of disinherited beings, cut off from the deepest sources of human satisfaction, restless and jangled, driven by unstilled cravings through a course of life without meaning or direction. Ritual and art and symbolism no longer feed such lives. Women become estranged from their own natures and lead disoriented existences. Work is drained of its normal interest and satisfaction; leisure is given over not to recreation but to commercialized distraction.

The adversaries of Modernity, in short, were raising their voices some forty years ago in Switzerland, France, Australia, and other countries; *Modern Age* was intended to become, in considerable part, an American protest against the illusions of Modernity; and so it has remained for three decades.

Increasingly the adversaries of Modernity have been vindicated by events. The ghastly disintegration of American cities, the ruin of our educational apparatus, and the triumph of squalid oligarchs in most of the world are phenomena closely related to the Modernist mentality that has gov-

erned the policies of great powers. A Swedish writer, Tage Lindbom, assesses the consequences of the Modernity that has prevailed since the Second World War:

We have now to deal with a secularized generation for which material existence is everything and spiritual life is nothing. It is a generation for which all that is symbolic becomes ever more incomprehensible. It is a generation which no longer lives in a viable society, but in an institutionalized world where state, administrative, and industrial apparatuses raise themselves in front of the human person like an enormous pyramid. It is a generation which is in the process of eliminating from its consciousness the notion of the family. . . . It is now an affair of a generation which, in its ensemble, is incapable of discerning truth from lies, the true from the false, the good from the bad. The time of harvest is come for the Kingdom of Man.

Lindbom's book, published in translation in 1983 by the Mercer University Press, is the only one of the several I have named that remains in print. Modernity, or the Flight, has means to silence its adversaries.

Yet somehow—by special providence, it has seemed at times—*Modern Age* has survived for thirty years and has done something to rear up a Remnant who do not submit in mind and conscience to the spirit of the age and who even have begun, just perceptibly, to alter the American climate of opinion.

"One of the rules of the psychological-literary game of our time is to oppose 'life' to 'morality,'" Thibon writes. "I say again that this dichotomy will make our descendants laugh." Those descendants conceivably may laugh harder still at the notion of twentieth-century folk that their era was the culmination of human striving, when in truth the notions of Modernity brought upon the whole world a ruin worse than that which fell upon the Roman civilization in the fifth century. That hard truth, along with the means for redemption from Modernity, has been the preoccupation of *Modern Age* for these thirty years.