

# *The Crisis of Modernity: An Introduction*

THIS THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY issue of *Modern Age* addresses itself to the theme of the crisis of modernity and to what this crisis entails and dramatizes. The essays included here summon the reader not only to reflect on the totality of the crisis of modernity, its beginnings and its endings, but also, in T. S. Eliot's words, to "have strength to force the moment to its crisis." It is hoped that the process of reflection will prompt the reader to consider matters of urgent importance and at the same time advance the pursuit of judgment in the active context of critical discrimination and decision. It is also hoped that this reflection will induce what the ancient Hebrew prophets termed "the searchings of heart" and an eventual return to "the old paths" from which modern man has long been straying. Undoubtedly, too, the reflection occasioned here will require the kind of concentration and self-examination that will be disturbing and sombering—and illuminating. It cannot be otherwise when one is asked to inspect matters that relate to the human condition, to human destiny, and to universal and ultimate questions.

That the reader will necessarily be called upon to enact the virtue of courage—"for the sake of what is noble, for that is the aim of virtue," as Aristotle asserts—is an axiomatic corollary of any critical scrutiny of the constituents and complexities of the crisis of modernity. If the following essays contribute in any manner to the critical process of elucidation and adjudication, then the immediate purpose of this special issue of *Modern Age* will have been entirely worthwhile. And if these essays additionally encourage the reader to reaffirm belief in the reality of human dignity and the higher meaning of man, then

the larger purpose of this issue will have been most gratifyingly achieved. Indeed, it will be no less gratifying if this issue also helps to diminish a general reluctance to pursue the most pressing philosophical questions that, as Claes G. Ryn stresses in his essay, are supremely important to the long-range development of moral, intellectual, and authentic culture.

The diagnostic, censorial elements in the essays are, to be sure, hard and daunting. For some readers they will perhaps evoke Robert Frost's sonnet "Once by the Pacific" (1926), which ends with these troubling words:

It looked as if a night of dark intent  
Was coming, and not only a night, an age.  
Someone had better be prepared for rage.  
There would be more than ocean-water  
broken  
Before God's last *Put out the Light* was  
spoken.

These are prophetic lines that for some readers no doubt will immediately echo equally prophetic lines in earlier poems like Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" and William Butler Yeats's "Second Coming." And in that echo—that same "terrifying echo" that E. M. Forster, in his novel *A Passage to India* (1924), speaks of as the "ou-boum" of meaninglessness afflicting life and the universe—we hear and recognize the peculiarly modern voice of fearful concern and of anguished apprehension. Frost's words also underline the special, endemic destiny of modern man "waiting without hope," "waiting without faith," as Joseph Conrad expresses it. This is the waiting to which Martin Heidegger assigns the peculiar terror of "a double Not: the No-more of the gods that have fled and the Not-yet of the god that is coming."

Poets, prophets, and priests of the modern age have been unusually consentient in describing the individuating conditions of modern civilization, "the ache of modernism" as Thomas Hardy labeled it. Clearly, many of the visual and aural images that one finds crystallizing in so much of modern literature inevitably render, and even define, those qualities of life that, cumulatively, contain the drama of the crisis of modernity. That drama is not one that is ineradicably bleak and hopeless, though bleakness and hopelessness are pervasive aspects of modern life that cannot be easily eradicated, as some existentialist thinkers have been at pains to show. It is a drama of human predicament that makes the crisis of modernity so uniquely revealing and fascinating, as well as frightening. It is, in the end, a dynamic crisis that moves threateningly from one pole to another, from the "brave new world" to "the end of the modern world."

"All is possible. All is in doubt." These stark declarative sentences, as we often hear them quoted in discussions of modern life, trenchantly tell us something of our condition and "the fate of man in the modern world." They are sentences that easily (and if perhaps too neatly) capture the double rhythm of modern life, its faith and its faithlessness. They contain words, in fact, that graphically etch the undulant movements of modern history and embody man's promise of greatness—the glory that is invariably at the center of man's vision of possibility—and also man's experience of littleness—the horror of man's spiritual emptiness.

A transcendental supportive value-system, as these essays demonstrate, is nonexistent in a world in which the search after new and strange gods characterizes modern man's unceasing yearnings. "Every truth we may think complete will prove itself untruth at the moment of shipwreck," declares Karl Jaspers. No words perhaps better capture the indissoluble contradictions of being or better point to the higher context of the measure of worth, the "divine paradigm," that mod-

ern man has lost or rejected. Dispossession and disinheritance constitute a formidable pattern of the crisis of modernity and its tangential process of the desacralization of life. Our modernity, if only to affix here its fatal signature of power, persists in building its "crystal palace" and solidifying its "empire of might," the overarching symbols of a world that, in Eric Voegelin's terminology, is caught up in a "tension of existence" that discloses "the disorder of society" as "a disorder in the soul of its component parts."

Conditions of life and belief have been so swiftly and drastically altered in the modern age that it is now possible to comprehend only the basic elements of the crisis of modernity. "Faith dies and unfaith blossoms like a flower," Sophocles observed many centuries ago. If our crisis is a total crisis, our comprehension of it cannot at this disruptive and directionless stage of history be total, not only because we are still active participants in the drama of our modernity, but also because we are inadequately equipped to see life steadily and to see it whole. The culture and the society that we have molded in the past five hundred years of a modernity in transition, as it were, preclude an organic sense of things that produces either spiritual unity or harmony. "What distinguishes the modern faith from that which is premodern," Dante Germino notes in his essay, "is the loss of a common center in the psyche." Today even the wish to transform the rage that Robert Frost cruelly identifies often lacks metaphysical grounding in and the support of first principles.

In a very large sense the ongoing crisis of modernity must also remind us of the advanced stage, *ne plus ultra*, of what, in the early years of the twentieth century, T. E. Hulme, the English critic and philosopher, identified in a famous essay as the opposing forces of "romanticism" and "classicism." Hulme's description of the two antagonists remains cogent and apt:

Here is the root of all romanticism: that

man, the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities; and if you can so rearrange society by the destruction of oppressive order then these possibilities will have a chance and you will get Progress.

One can define the classical clearly as the exact opposite to this. Man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by tradition and organisation that anything decent can be got out of him.

The essays in this issue of *Modern Age* deftly and powerfully suggest to us that the debate between those affirming possibilities and those counseling limitations is the debate between old enemies going back to the earliest beginnings of human civilization. That debate now goes on with even more perilous implications, as the essayists here disclose, some of them with "fear and trembling," others with unsparing critical diagnosis, and all of them with a distinctly shared awareness that the modern house we have built, as Irving Babbitt declared more than a half century ago, is "an immense and glittering superstructure on insecure foundations."

Above all, then, these essays enable us to see that the antagonisms Hulme depicts are today certainly much sharper and far more strident. It is the extreme degree and the absolute magnitude of the consequences of the crisis of modernity that arrest us. The late Richard M. Weaver, a founding father of *Modern Age*, considerably helps us to fathom the full shock of modernity in all of its teleological significance when he writes in *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948):

The darkling plain, swept by alarms, which threatens to be the world of our future, is an arena in which conflicting ideas, numerous after the accumulation of centuries, are freed from the discipline imposed by ultimate conceptions. The decline is to confusion; we are agitated by sensation and look with wonder upon the serene somnambulistic creations of souls which had the metaphysical anchorage.

Weaver's words should return us to the apocalyptic vibration of D. H. Lawrence's

declaration in his novel *Women in Love* (1920), "There is a phase in every race . . . when the desire for destruction overcomes every other desire." At the same time Weaver's words force us to look ahead to our present time and condition, to discern there a massive "crisis of consciousness in all spheres" that takes us beyond confusion and destruction, even beyond modernism, to what is at once stasis and metastasis—to that entropic stage that Thomas Molnar singles out in his essay when he writes: "Nothing has reference any more; the microcosm has been detached from the macrocosm, literature from myth, art from symbolization, science (gnosis) from sacred knowledge, astrology, alchemy."

The modern mind, as it becomes painfully evident, scorns the law of measure and expels the transcendent virtues of order, which as Frederick D. Wilhelmsen asserts in his essay are the mark of Wisdom. Distrusting intangible things, the "permanent things," it pursues in unrelenting ways a "positivistic empiricism," affirming and indeed legislating what Michael Polanyi speaks of as the "idea of unlimited progress, intensified to perfectionism, [which] has combined with our sharpened skepticism to produce the perilous state of the modern mind." The spiritual and moral effects of this orientation—a "fictitious orientation," as Ortega y Gasset would say—pervade the conditions of life both in the East and the West.

These effects can be observed worldwide. Thus, on a concretely external level, it is worth noting, a present-day visitor who travels in Soviet Russia seldom hears the sound of bells ringing out from the towers of the Christian Orthodox churches, most of which have been closed in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, or transformed, like an eighteenth-century chapel on the bank of the Moskva River, into the headquarters for a motorcycle club, or, like one of the most beautiful cathedrals in Leningrad, the Kazan, into a museum featuring exhibits of atheism and religious "superstition." Church

bells do ring in Russia, but only on special holidays and just briefly—"a sad little ring," according to one Russian religious believer, who adds: "It makes me feel that Moscow is a ruined city."

The visible extent of our spiritual ruin, as well as the internal ruin in the souls of men and women living in the modern world, requires here no detailed comment, which is amply conveyed with authority and insight in essays found in the second section of this special issue, "Confused Alarms of Struggle and Flight." And in any case, the symbolic essences of religious conditions in Soviet Russia have their own way of focusing on conditions in the "secular city" extending far beyond the confines of a Leningrad or a Moscow. Visitors to, say, the city of Baltimore, Maryland, will not fail to notice grand old churches now turned into bingo halls or ingeniously renovated as condominium buildings, or "communities," as that sacred word has been transposed by those who have neither spiritual nor logocentric allegiances.

The spectacle of the crisis of modernity accentuates *hubris* in all aspects of life, literature, and thought. "Without humility, all the virtues are finite," Simone Weil warns. "Only humility makes them infinite." But such a warning is often dismissed as irrelevant by those slavish avatars of change who, Russell Kirk tells us in his essay, possess a modernist mentality that, "aspiring to universal dominion, ranges from cosmology to sexuality; and everywhere it is overweeningly arrogant." This mentality, variously assessed in the essays in the first section of this issue, "In Search of Definitions," harbors what the Russian religious philosopher N. O. Lossky, in a neglected but profound book, *The World as an Organic Whole* (1928), speaks of as "the ontological content of the kingdom of enmity": "The ultimate source of all the imperfections in the kingdom of enmity is the false purpose it sets before itself—the purpose of becoming the Absolute." Those modernists who choose to be members of such

a kingdom represent, Lossky further observes, the "exclusive self-affirmation of a dissentient being directed against the Absolute and the kingdom of the Spirit [and] is accompanied by exclusive self-affirmation of an infinite multitude of its own parts against one another."

Lossky helps us here to turn our attention to the dual process of disconnection and dissolution that characterizes some of the most alarming conditions of modern existence. The incalculable danger of this process as it has enveloped civilization has been a subject of the deepest concern in *Modern Age* since its founding in 1957 and was again forcefully registered in a major "editorial restatement," "In Continuity" (*Modern Age*, Winter 1984), the essence of which is found in the following paragraph:

The discipline of continuity revolves around fundamental certitudes: revolves around enduring principles of order and life and faith. The struggle between those who speak for continuity and those who assert change and expedience at any cost is the struggle between the substance of value, of verity, and the onus of fragmentation. That there are specific values of thought and behavior to be passed on, continued; that there are basic moral imperatives and constants that need to be preserved and organically implemented; that there are ancient edifices and sacred texts, ideas, and laws (written and unwritten) to be honored and sustained in the midst of the assaults of change, of the lure of experimentation and innovation that all too easily become a quick fix—these are some of the disciplines of continuity that create the character of civilization, of a culture, of a people. It is too often forgotten that these disciplines are precisely what make possible creativity itself and that instance, in the best active sense, the "rage for order."

The dialectical lures and joys of discontinuity portray the super-temporal directions, if not predispositions, of those in positions of leadership who contribute to and shape the ethos of modern life. Such leadership often assumes the guise of enlightenment and formulates, *ex cathedra*, public policies and programs that "encour-

age" progress and growth and in due course lead men and women on "the path to a bigger and better society." For those who foment the *Zeitgeist* of unlimited change and expansion—"pistol-shot transformations," as they have been imaged—discontinuity signifies infinite opportunity, "the wave of the future" that merges with "the wave of new technologies." An inescapable consequence is that in much of modern life, as Father Stanley L. Jaki states in his essay, a "mastering of the realm of quantities" is accompanied by the disappearance of a sense of purpose and values. Not the principle of unity but the laws of multiplicity are those that are propagated *ad infinitum*. And everywhere we find unchecked enthusiasms for and the legislation of "the opportunities thrown up by discontinuity," which are hurled in the faces of those who seek to preserve "the discipline of continuity" as a front-line defense against what Joseph Conrad discerns as "moral anarchies and cynicisms and betrayals."

But surely it is not Conrad's fears that are recorded these days, insofar as his fears are not viewed in the mainstream of things. And no matter where one turns one is confronted by the new creed of discontinuity, which, it is boasted, can turn established truths on their heads! Evidence of the promulgation of this creed of change and opportunity increasingly occupies center-stage. Here let us take as a notable example the inaugural address of the 234th session of the Royal Society of Arts, recently delivered in London by the incoming Chairman of the Council. It is hardly surprising to discover in this address the innately liberal rhetoric that seeks to move men to action but that also, as Richard Weaver warns, renounces "an ethics of rhetoric." "I confess to finding discontinuity exciting," the new Chairman intones. "It opens up new possibilities. The old order has to change. Old conditions no longer seem to count for much. What used to be insurmountable road blocks are now only obstacles, to be removed or got round." He goes on to conclude the paragraph introduced by the preceding quoted

sentences with words that verge boldly on a kind of quasi-theological animadversion especially appropriate to a technologico-Benthamite world: "Discontinuous change, for me, is a great opportunity for that new life which alone makes death tolerable."

These preceding words, as quoted, further demonstrate the sharp relevance of Weaver's censure of the "downward tendency" of words of "false or 'engineered' charisma"—words that "sound like the very gospel of one's society, but [that] in fact . . . betray us; they get us to do what the adversary of the human being wants us to do." What the exponents of discontinuity present us with is not merely a crisis of language that is an integral part of the larger crisis of modernity, but also the pattern of mutability and fragmentation of life that Anthony Harrigan views in his essay "The Acceleration of History": "When we tear down, eliminate, or exclude what has gone before, we undermine our personal and civilizational base, eradicate important values and sanctions, and leave ourselves exposed, vulnerable, and empty."

Echoing Harrigan's apprehension of "the crush of the external contemporary world," Frederick Glaysher in his essay assists us in focusing in concrete terms on "the unprecedented dislocation from nearly everything Western civilization had once stood for." He shows the spiritual desuetude that is at the center of modern life, "the tragedy of the interregnum: man caught between a dead world and one incapable of being born." Indeed, and without making any concession to those millenarians who would command us to live in the "cave of illusion," the essays as a whole iterate that modern experience all too often consists of "encounters with nothingness," the darksome phrase Jerome A. Miller uses in his essay.

The writers who give their witness in these pages are doubtlessly "adversaries of modernity" who indict commonly held notions that the modern era has been the culmination of human striving and accomplishment, when in truth these notions

have led to debasement and disintegration. "That hard truth," Russell Kirk writes in the concluding sentence of his essay, "along with the means for redemption from modernity, has been the preoccupation of *Modern Age* for these thirty years." Kirk's conditional phrase, "along with the means for redemption from modernity," deserves patient attention as one reflects on the essays in this anniversary issue measuring the extent and sounding the depths of the crisis of modernity.

If the testimony of these writers is grim and harsh, and if their tone and mood are sometimes sad and even elegiac, the prescriptive counsel, the moral gravity, the intellectual seriousness implicit in their testimony have as their omega-point the

moral imperative of redemption: that modern man is still capable of recovering his spiritual vision and that, like the blind man of Christ's miracle, he can again "see men as trees, walking." It is Matthew Arnold who should be allowed here to speak the last words:

—Then through the great town's harsh,  
heart-wearying roar,  
Let in thy voice a whisper often come,  
To chase fatigue and fear:  
*Why faintest thou? I wandered till I died.  
Roam on! The light we sought is shining  
still.  
Dost thou ask proof? Our tree yet crowns  
the hill,  
Our Scholar travels yet the loved hillside.*

—George A. Panichas