

MODERN AGE

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The Case for Tradition: A Prefatory Note

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IT IS MORE THAN FITTING that this issue of *Modern Age*, which features a symposium on "Tradition in Contemporary Life," also marks the tenth anniversary of this writer's appointment as editor. The ongoing concerns of the fourth editorship are signaled in the inaugural remarks published in the Winter 1984 issue under the title "In Continuity: An Editorial Restatement." In the ten years that have passed we have seen dramatic changes affecting life at all levels. The changes have been many and radical, obviously too many and too radical to examine in a prefatory note. Here it is enough to say that these changes are now boldly found in the incubus of deconstruction and in the specter of nihilism. And their consequences are found in the rhythm of disorder and nothingness that currently assails the whole character of life.

Inevitably the nature and the quality of modern life register the changes that have altered human meaning and destiny in our time. Our society and culture in particular mirror the dissipations that attend the breakdown of standards of value defining an ordered way of life. These are precisely the dissipations that Irving Babbitt, back in the 1920s and 1930s, diagnosed as the symptoms of what he termed "the disillusion of deca-

dence," "free temperamental outflow," "the quicksands of relativity." And clearly these dissipations have multiplied as Americans have indiscriminately surrendered to utopists' dreams and millenarian illusions. "This tendency to put on sympathy a burden it cannot bear," to recall Babbitt's prophetic admonition, "and at the same time to sacrifice a truly human hierarchy and scale of values to the principle of equality has been especially marked in the democratic movement, nowhere more so perhaps than in our American democracy." His words contain a truth that conditions today verify to a troubling degree. Anyone who bothers to reflect on them will see their direct relevance to the moral malaise which afflicts us. Indeed, all the signs of the crisis of modernity are etched in Babbitt's words.

It is altogether apparent that we have chosen to ignore a moral thinker like Babbitt. Instead, we have chosen to listen to "terrible simplifiers" and to pursue "strange gods" who promise to fulfill all our fantasies. Even as the present situation makes a mockery of these fantasies, we persist in ignoring the realities of our situation. Above all, we choose to scorn the "permanent things" that orient a higher human meaning and a higher spiritual

order. The history of modern American society is one in which the idols of romanticism and the lures of sentimentalism muddle thought and vision and now bring us to the last frontier of the secular process, in which the modern age transforms into the New Age, as its evangelists boastfully call it. The struggle between the dynamic of change and the principle of continuity is unending. "Let us guard with vigilance what we have received," Saint Athanasius counsels. These words of the great theologian and church father epitomize the problem and the challenge found at the heart of this symposium, as they do the unswerving editorial purposes of *Modern Age*, especially during the past decade when the "voice of tradition" and "guidance from tradition," to use John Henry Newman's phrases, have encountered mounting enmity. The following words from the editorial restatement that appeared ten years ago are worth quoting since they alert us to the burden of responsibility of those who hold to an organic view of the world and who are loyal to first principles:

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 a civilization, of a culture, of a people.

The preceding words underline the essence of this quarterly review. They also explain the publication of this issue on the subject of "Tradition in Contemporary Life." In this symposium, hence, one will find concentrated the quintessence of the editorial objectives of *Modern Age*, disturbing as these are to the modernist mind that rejects Joseph Conrad's conviction "that for life to be large and full, it must contain the care of the past and of the future in every passing moment of the present." What we have witnessed during this century is an escalating rejection of the reverence for tradition that Conrad speaks about. In our headlong pursuit of new beginnings we glorify "inventors of evil things," as Saint Paul describes them. The "permanent things," as the culmination and body of tradition, are shunted aside. Principles of unity and harmony are renounced as, more and more, we create a vacuum of disinheritance. Nowhere is this profane process better seen than in the debasement of modern art, language, and literature, in short, in non-oriented and non-organic tendencies impervious to the opposition of good and evil. The results speak for themselves, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has recently written: "... in the twentieth century the necessary equilibrium between tradition and the search for the new has been repeatedly upset by a falsely understood 'avant-gardism'—a raucous, impatient 'avant-gardism' at any cost."

The papers composing this symposium are not only diagnostic but also prescriptive, for surely, we have urgent need of guides who point the way to rediscovering and restoring the place of tradition in contemporary life. Their task is neither simple nor enviable in a period of history when distrust of the past, of anything and anyone testifying to a sacred patrimony, is pervasive. Any defense of the merits of the idea of conservatorship is subject to attack; and

anyone who ventures to defend tradition in contemporary life must have unusual courage. The word tradition joins other words of value and virtue now consigned to the post-modern dust-bin, as the re-writing, re-structuring, and re-ordering of human existence proceeds at a furious pace. Hell-bent on creating the "new man" of a "traditionless future," we permit little room for dissent. And yet, if intellectual nullity characterizes a pervasive condition in the academy, it is certainly not one that silences the contributors to this issue or deters them from accepting the special mandate Czeslaw Milosz defines in these words: "Those who are alive receive a mandate from those who are silent forever. They can fulfill their duties only by trying to reconstruct precisely things as they were and by wresting the past from fictions and legends."

Acceptance of this mandate signifies a willingness to wrestle with the problem of tradition in contemporary life, as well as with the problem of overcoming the fear of the tyranny of the past and "the pathology of traditions." Jaroslav Pelikan rightly tells us, in his *The Vindication of the Past* (1984), that we perceive "a living tradition" through "its capacity to develop while still maintaining its identity and continuity." But since we live in anomalous times, when the lines of continuity are steadily erased, and when any perception of tradition is finally controlled and regulated by the ruling ideology of change, it is tough to make a case for tradition. Inescapably, then, we have to confront the daunting power of a *Zeitgeist* post-historical and post-modern in temper. As such, the case for tradition must contend with an age that instinctively rejects limitations and blurs boundaries of right and wrong.

The ever-increasing loss of a religious perspective in the general consciousness of our age further deepens this difficulty. We have become so accustomed to living in chaos that we are unable to discern

even the smallest hints of tradition. Minimalism and trivialization can hardly command us to consider ultimate problems. The problem of "tradition in contemporary life" is finally inseparable from the larger "problem of tradition and modernization . . . [as] a fundamental part of the religious situation of modern times," to cite Paul Valliere's words from his excellent entry on tradition in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (volume 15; 1987). Unless we begin to identify the spiritual emptiness of modernization, we cannot begin to profess the values of tradition which the late Austin Warren, revered American man of letters, designates in relation not only to one's role in "society visible and invisible" but also to one's distinct awareness

. . . that all we are we owe; that we do not, and cannot, begin *ab ovo* and *de ovo* but are heirs to a great inheritance of tradition and wisdom, represented in the West by our joint indebtedness to the Greek philosophers, the Hebrew prophets, and the Christian saints.

Only when we have acknowledged the truths of Warren's words will we begin to understand the place of tradition in contemporary life. An age that venerates "the march of things" enforces a collectivity of solipsisms, confusions, equivocations. These combine to become our prison of self-delusion, from which it is hard to flee. An entire generation of Americans is now at ease in such a prison, which makes it all the harder to present the case for tradition.

The seductions of what William James calls the "great empirical movement" promulgate a philosophy of flux and multiplicity. Undeniably, the degree to which respect for tradition prevails in a nation is closely tied to the moral disposition of the people of that nation. In the absence or the repudiation of tradition the law of universal flux prevails and transforms human character. It seems

that nothing remains sacred any longer, that nothing has abiding value, that nothing has permanence of meaning, that nothing is worthy of being handed over from age to age, and from generation to generation. Thus, where the memory of human and communal values has been wiped out, the continuous "partnership in all science, all art, every virtue" that Burke upholds becomes inoperable. The main stream has been cut off and its life-giving values have been blunted forever. "It is in that stream," Sir Gilbert Murray insists, "that we find our unity, unity of origin in the past, unity of movement and imagination in the present; to that stream that we owe our common memories and our power of understanding one another, despite the confusion of tongues that has now fallen upon us"

To be sure, as Josef Pieper emphasizes, no tradition is unchanging, and yet no change can occur without the *traditio* that gives it flesh and blood. Tradition is not some rigid orthodoxism or reductive uniformity. "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living," Pelikan reminds us. The tradition that concerns the symposiasts in this issue of *Modern Age* is the sacred, living tradition that has been displaced by a soulless modernity which accommodates every blasphemous abrogation of our metaphysical moorings, of the idea of the holy, of those worthy signs of continuity and community. This is the tradition subjected to "the erosions of our signs by gnostic intent to power over being," as Marion Montgomery emphasizes. This symposium is not concerned with justifying or apologizing for tradition; the case for tradition that it makes is not an abstract or defensive one.

How are we to save the tradition that humanizes life, that undergirds the graces of civilization, that universalizes the virtues which define the sacredness of life? This is a major question this symposium

undertakes to answer, or at least to clarify at a time of history antagonistic to covenantal and metaphysical concerns. How are we to grapple with those powerful forces of modernism that are in ascendance and that seek to extirpate any transmission of a "deposit"? To cite the dangers of an imperial modernism, and of what happens when traditional foundations and moral determinants are eclipsed, is a major preoccupation of this symposium. The tone of urgency that one hears is inevitable, for there is much at stake. The symposiasts know that the case for tradition cannot be trusted to political theorists and their agendas, or to proselytizing exponents of modern techniques, or to fomenters of "political illusion." The symposiasts also know that deeper and greater threats to tradition are embodied in the wearing down of standards and in meretricious changes. Once the leveling process takes shape it is difficult to arrest, and the rhythm of disintegration solidifies. Resistance to such an insidious, destabilizing process requires constant vigilance, as Stephen J. Tonsor is careful to warn:

It is slow and unconscious change rather than ideological revolution which is the great danger to the integrity of tradition in the contemporary world. The erosion of tradition in the way in which a stone is worn away by the steady drip of water is the great danger of our age. It is not that new traditions, new language, take the place of the old, but rather that there is an impoverishment, a leveling off of life.

Unfailingly, then, this symposium focuses on the slow, systematic dissolution of tradition. Though total and final dissolution is not inevitable, it may well come, as Gerhart Niemeyer indicates, when public institutions and political leaders unilaterally embrace the sovereignty of might and power, at which point mankind will incarnate the double terror of Hobbes's "war of all against all" and de

Maistre's "nothing is where it belongs." As the teachings and authority of tradition undergo devaluation "the traditions of the anti-traditionalists," in George W. Carey's phrase, surface to replace time-proven and time-honored values. Clearly, the expansive appetites of modernist ideology leave less and less room for tradition or for its civilizing restraints. Indeed, as Thomas Molnar shows, it is the strategy of modernist ideology "to cut the channels to our foundation, show them to be masks for abject interests, and finally to demonstrate our abandoned condition, its loneliness and reason for despair."

As a product of a new ontology, the contemporary world represents the supreme reduction of modernism. In this process we behold the growing dissolution of man's moral substance and also of order of soul. A crisis in tradition, in these circumstances, has enormous implications for the order of society. Simone Weil detects the nature of these implications in the context of contemporary social life when she writes: "Nowadays, every attempt to turn men into brutes finds powerful means at its disposal." No words better record the disintegrative tempo of twentieth-century life "In this

valley of dying stars / In this hollow valley / This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms," to quote T. S. Eliot's lines evoking spiritual dispossession and deracination. If any sense of order, in the face of the growing terror of disorder, is to be maintained then the case for tradition becomes all the more crucial.

This symposium makes indisputably clear that the case for tradition in contemporary life demands unyielding attention. To get this attention—let alone to get serious acceptance of the worth of tradition, the underlying point of which, as James S. Cutsinger asserts, "is to transmit what we need in order to become what we are"—to get this attention is no easy task. It is the recognition of the irreducible reality of our disordered time and of the disordering spirit of our time that incites this symposium. Especially present in this recognition is the belief that, once the faculty of attention is engaged, the quality of effort is bound to assert itself and to have genuine effect. The symposiasts readily join Jacob Burckhardt in reminding us that "Every people is incomplete and strives for completion, and the higher it stands, the more it strives."