

# MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



## Preface

WE LIVE at a time of history when negations dominate human existence and inevitably reflect disorder in both individual and collective life. And inevitably they are symptomatic of the ongoing crisis of modernism in the twentieth century. Negations ultimately embody the configurations of denial and repudiation which characterize the "antagonist world." The opposite to and absence of affirmation, negations discard certitudes, moral paradigms and values, and accepted standards of order and tradition. Increasingly, too, they buttress the doctrine of nihilism, the essence of which Friedrich Nietzsche, one of the prophets of our destiny, catches, when he declares: "[T]he highest values are losing their value. There is no goal.... There is no Truth, no 'thing in itself.'"

Resistance to this doctrine dictates a constant state of vigilance which Holy Scripture sees as the need to abjure "the counsel of the wicked" and those who "walketh disorderly." As the consequences of the disorder of soul and society multiply, the battle against negations is often of such a consuming magnitude that the beleaguered spirit of affirmation appears to be in steady retreat. There is, as a result, insufficient opportunity for the contemplation of what is good and just and holy. Caught up as we are in the war with negations, with that bleak exist-

tentialist conclusion that life means nothing more than "draining one's own self dry without a sense of thrust," we often forget that affirmations have a presence every bit as powerful and urgent as negations; that to fail to give witness to the spirit of affirmation signifies that the grip that negations have on us leads to an affliction from which there is no recovery. We need, then, to affirm and identify those transcendent and redemptive values that negations strive to extirpate. In the very midst of our struggle to oppose the negative, we need to recognize the factors of affirmation that redeem the time.

We have to be reminded that we cannot climb out of the abyss of negation without reference to the spirit of affirmation, and to what defines and exemplifies it. Courage is imperative in facing negations in all of their guises. A higher courage, however, is imperative in opposing affirmation to negation. We need, in other words, to revere the spirit of affirmation in its concrete forms—and with the concrete evidence—that subdues modern habits of doubt and denial, of rejection and renunciation. These forms contain the voice of affirmation which encourages us to secure higher life-meaning and life-purpose and to reach a higher moral ground. Especially in a time of trouble and confusion, when we increasingly glo-

rify the tawdry, the trivial, the vulgar, even the diabolic, we have a pressing need to encounter values and to treasure experiences that dramatize the truth of Martin Buber's words: "The spark that leaps from him who teaches to him who learns rekindles a spark of that fire which lifted the mountain of revelation 'to the very heart of heaven.'" We have, in short, the need of testimonies of gratitude which instruct and inspire us and also show how the inner life transforms the outer life in the quest for human dignity and order.

Attacks on the sanctity of life proliferate and are symptomatic of the irreverence which becomes both attitude and habit. In literature, in education, in culture, in film, in the press and the electronic media we see example after example of irreverence. What is noble and virtuous is routinely subordinated to crass, sensational, and profane processes. Scorning moral and ethical precepts, we make heroes of those who debase character, conduct, restraint, belief. Traditional concepts and patterns of heroism are deconstructed; exemplars of time-honored and time-tested principles and values are supplanted by "the people of dissolution," to use Max Picard's phrase. In the meanwhile a sham heroism and a sham value system advance, even as mediocrity slips into bankruptcy. Excellence, as word, as idea, and as quality of character, erodes and is replaced by decadence in the infamous forms proclaimed by "terrible simplifiers" in positions of power and influence. Teachers who profess the moral virtues, in especial, are shunted aside by those who have lost or are indifferent to the life of the soul.

Ours is an age which exalts the cult of personality and heroizes men and women *not* for their beneficent influence, leadership, and wisdom, but for their ephemeral impact and chic value—unthinking, uncaring, empty, to be valued for the

immediate, the momentaneous. Our judgments and choices, hence, are often shaped by reductivist, temporal, and meretricious criteria. The fear of discriminating thought increases. We denigrate the idea of value; and we countenance false heroes clever in the technique of accommodation. It becomes painfully obvious, to judge by current conditions, that we neither seek for nor emulate the attributes of greatness—inherent nobility or dignity of mind, character, action, or expression.

It is the chief purpose of this special issue of *Modern Age*, devoted to "Testimonies of Gratitude," to show that the power of negation does not go on unchallenged or unanswered. Indeed, it need not prevail when there are those amongst us who ratify the spirit of affirmation, and attest to the enduring truth of Ralph Waldo Emerson's belief that "great men exist that there may be greater men." To some readers of these testimonies it will no doubt come as something of a surprise that encrusted habits of doubt and denial do not have the last word and are, in fact, as imperfect, vulnerable, and deceptive as a Maginot Line. These testimonies have an astonishing way of telling us that we do not have to surrender, or resign, ourselves to negations which overwhelm the good and ordain its extinction. Too often we choose to remain, in the words of one writer, "loyal to our fears," and, in effect, to be afraid of or indifferent to the need for kindling a moral vision of transcendence. Thus perhaps even worse than accepting the doctrine of negation is the bent of moderns to be neutral to it and to become its abject captives.

We must, then, struggle not only against negations with all their brutalizing and killing power, but also against the lures of a negative order of life in which we are chained to fear and dread. This is, surely, a double burden of our mortality in this post-modern stage of the

desanctification of human meaning and purpose. To lessen the weight of this burden, as well as to go beyond feelings of human worthlessness and hopelessness that negations nourish with unremitting, insidious force, we must be willing to take part in the triumphs of the Spirit. These are precisely the occasions which the writers of the following testimonies of gratitude celebrate and present as gifts to the reader. The seeds of transfiguration can be found in these gifts, which yield to us the bread and wine of life and the light of the world, and awaken us to the possibilities of existence—and salvation.

That we need not travel the *via negativa* is the unifying theme and message of these testimonies, in each of which, whether as a profession or a confession of gratitude, the writer conveys something of memorable value to a reader in pursuit of moral and ethical directions, as well as of ways of enhancing the noetic faculty. In many ways these testimonies can also serve as texts for meditation. Each essay here has its singular merit and interest; each reveals how one's life is changed forever by an encounter with some aspect of human greatness, which in effect becomes both mystery and miracle; each emphasizes that in these encounters what really matters is the spirit of the encounter and of the paradigm that has been given and absorbed, from whatever source, whether of unusual prominence or of humble station. These testimonies honor individuals, mentors, inspirers, teachers, and heroes (as well as ideas, places, books) whose spiritual, intellectual, moral, and cultural lessons hold a lasting place in the human mind and heart and soul. A theme common to all these essays is best expressed by the words "Remember and be glad."

Whether they provide a collective paradigm of good influence or individual portraits of exemplars—those mature

and wise individuals whom Aristotle speaks of as the *spoudaioi*—these testimonies give witness to a beneficent force at work in the journey of life. The reader becomes the happy recipient of some special quality, or charisma, which each testimony salutes. Nothing could be more satisfying for a reader than to discern "blessings of goodness," to enter into their enactment, to assimilate their values and virtues. In tone, in temper, in orientation, these essays inspire the awe and wonder and gladness that surmount the mean and discordant notes one hears in so much of modern human existence. Human encounters and relationships, we will discover here, need not culminate in dissonance, in the howlings and ravings that the "armies of darkness" discharge, and in the negativism that shrouds modernity.

In these testimonies honesty and humility are axiomatic, and in the voice that calls out to us and in the experience that shimmers, we meet and embrace the spirit of transcendence. Indeed, each testimony renews the meaning of human value; an act of affirmation, in effect, turns into an act of restoration. Simplifications, deceptions, and illusions have absolutely no footing in these testimonies. What makes them so arresting and heartening is the feeling of grateful remembrance and of lasting recognition of what one owes to one's benefactor, to the beneficences imparted, the lessons learned, the values never forgotten. Again and again these testimonies underscore the profound obligation one has to a great influencer or benefactor. It is especially refreshing to find how a debt of gratitude is accorded a place of paramount importance at a time when the claim to rights has reached such a selfish and shrill magnitude. Far too many people, alas, seem to live on the prospect of compensations and thereby pay homage to the Prince of this world.

The writers of these testimonies nudge

us to take note of the “dues of gratitude,” which they themselves record here with wonderful amplitude, generosity, thankfulness, loyalty. As such they also commemorate, as memory and milestone, the gift of blessings which in the end transpose into luminous moments of grace—the grace that, as one Hebrew sage declares, is like a paradise in blessings. Such moments become epiphanies in the soul and mark a turning point in one’s life, and point the way. These are also moments that assume a super-tem-

poral dimension and incarnate the “permanent things.” They teach us that the might of the negative is not invincible. Above all, these testimonies, in accenting the sapiential power of affirmation, make us more deeply aware that, in the words of the philosopher N.O. Lossky, “the kingdom of harmony is nearer to us than we think, but under the influence of false theories and one-sided concentration of attention upon other aspects of the universe we imagine it to be completely alien to us.”

—George A. Panichas