

# *The Heretical Remnant and Modernist Religion*

*Marion Montgomery*

*Marion Montgomery*, novelist, poet, and critic, taught for many years at the University of Georgia. He began his long association with *Modern Age* as the author of a short story, "The Bear Paw," which appeared in the Spring 1959 issue. How do we confront, Montgomery asks in the eloquent essay which follows, "the multiple reductionisms of what is now the dominant religion, modernism"? This religion, he shows, is propagated by both the intellectual community and the public servants, in short, by substitute philosophers and priests. Subjectivity, personal sovereignty, the spectacular, autonomous intellect are some of the major tenets of this religion, which discard any sense of moral responsibility. The idea of community, in turn, is reduced to sheer mechanism, as human meaning is devalued and the human being is viewed as a biological robot. It is the task of what Montgomery calls the "heretical remnant" to resist strenuously and continuously the forces that breed disorder and decay, in the soul and in the community.

MOST DISTURBINGLY within the parameters of the locally decaying community, a person intending good citizenship is hard pressed to reconcile himself to social encounters as governed by the positive laws of community. What we seem to discover about that positive law, as the cause of our growing discomfort with it, is that it is increasingly evolved under the authority of autonomous intellect, the pride of preëminence. Intellect is freed of any moral obligation transcendent of its own sovereignty; yet it recognizes the advantage of order to its own convenience and makes pragmatic compromises. Its concession is to a social convenience, to the principle of the greatest convenience of the greatest number, setting aside the old concern for a just

society—except as that old concern may be appealed to as residually present in uneasy subjects. It is not a principle which self-liberated intellect subscribes to, but only as a pragmatic convenience to self-sovereignty. The beleaguered remnant still holds to the contrary, if tenuously. It is obligated to justice through a binding law based in the nature of human existence, law understood as counter to the desire for autonomous freedom as the highest calling of the particular, individual intellect.

It is out of the implicit dissociation of law and freedom that violence at last erupts at such cost to our common social conveniences. It is a violence seemingly justified by what is taught directly or indirectly about human nature by the

intellectual community—by the arguments of the academy and the practices of public servants. What the young learn, all too eagerly, is that the individual's personal rights are sovereign and transcend the rights of community as once formalized and ordered toward a just society. Subjectivity as a sovereign principle transcending all other principles makes the individual the only absolute, from whom any concession to social order among persons in community is an ambiguous concession without obligation, since everyone has the right to do his own thing, whatever that thing may be. The decay of community in relation to the rise of personal sovereignty, with the moral obligation of the person increasingly set aside: that has been the emerging pattern of intellectual history in the West, at least since Descartes, the consequences of which emerging pattern we are now forced to deal with, but with pragmatic concerns that have lost anchor in moral responsibility of one person to another.

Slowly we acknowledge a truth about the nature of society as we experience it: when law is set in opposition to human freedom as a governing intellectual principle, in order to justify intellect itself as autonomous, the autonomous intellect finds itself increasingly under siege and less free—not more free. There follows a desperate necessity to enforce a general freedom through ever more constrictive positive laws, as with the current agenda of the “politically correct.” The encounters of violent transgression of positive law become the common fare of the evening news, which is taken up with selection largely intended to tease satiated curiosity—a variety of assaults, rapes, and murders that are frightening and titillating at a public level. They are also the source of speculative concern at the more formal intellectual level of think tanks and at conferences. As for the practical advantage of violence in

the public arena, aside from convenience in periodic political campaigns or in maintaining official agencies, consider their economic advantage to the media. It is not all profit, however. For so inured have citizens become to the graphic images of twisted, wasted bodies at home and abroad that news commentators are caught up in a lively competition for our tired attention at some expense to themselves. Otherwise they will fall in the ratings and not be, in that mystical naming, “Number One,” perhaps our secular substitute for *I AM THAT I AM*. We witness something of that aura as an appeal to athletic teams or media news services or political parties. To be Number One is the transubstantiation by statistics of some entity whereby it is empowered politically or economically—and in respect to the media, both politically and economically.

We were speaking of the secondary uses of actual public violence as made economically and politically convenient by the separation of freedom and law, conspicuously evidenced by the media. The selection of images in rapid blips on the evening news, as opposed to the afternoon's or late evening's violent soap-opera drama, is also made according to the bizarre, given this satiated audience. This is a challenge to the pandering ingenuity of the news media. For there is not only our jaded minds to stir, but also a plethora of violent events to choose from, in relation to the competition for our attention in drama or docu-drama. One almost feels pity for the news reporter on the evening television news who must range from Los Angeles to Bosnia to Somalia to Rwanda in quest of disturbing images. The spectacular is the matter, the bizarre excised from complex reality and presented as if delectable sushi from the human sea.

The spectacular has become the operative principle to the news media, particularly television, a consequence

of our conditioning to the bizarre. By that conditioning, nightly exacerbated through our senses riveted by images, we can endure the obscene placidly. By *obscene* we here name that which is properly—that is, in a society ordered beyond a presumption of subjective desire as absolute—“off-stage.” We here recall the Greek understanding, whereby the tragedian denied the audience an intrusion upon a grief too excruciating and personal to justify a public intrusion. For us, however, the term *obscene* means little more than what was once called *vulgar* or *sordid* or *unmannerly*. It is this confusion of the *vulgar* and the *obscene* which gapes at us from grocery-store tabloids in blazing headlines, but is also given serious op-ed attention in the pages of the *New York Times*.

Meanwhile what is truly obscene is sometimes presented to us in a serious mode, often with a simpering tone of compassion in the talking head, as when the reporter thrusts a microphone in the face of a grieving mother and asks her what it feels like to have her nine-year-old murdered in a drive-by shooting. As for my term *spectacle* in relation to the *obscene*: *spectacle* is that complex of accidents inherent in event—in a drive-by shooting, for instance—accidents conveyed to us through our perceptions. We see the child’s body, and the commentary on the event itself is the face of the grief-and-anger-stricken mother. Now *through* *spectacle* we may or may not discover the realities circumscribing actions, but we once knew that we had to move *through* and not remain arrested in *spectacle* itself, as if *spectacle* were sufficient to understanding. That is the awkward position of our reporter intruding upon the grieving mother, forcing her to confront us with her tear-stained, anguished face—the surface of grief. If we can not move through *spectacle*, we shall be unable to distinguish an event in respect to its accidents of circumstance

as truly a tragedy (or comedy, for that matter) beneath those accidents of circumstance.

Because we have allowed ourselves to be conditioned to accident as if it were essence, we respond to *spectacle* (the sensual dimension of accident) without distinguishing. We feel somewhat uncomfortable as a witness to a mother’s grief, when we should properly feel anger at the reporter for his intrusion upon her and for his making us a party to that intrusion. Just how disoriented in our sorting by judgment we know from one species of *spectacle* which is a daily news fare: a drunken teenager on the local bypass crashes into an innocent family and kills them. There is often a fillip, disorienting us even more because we have lost intellectual discrimination. The drunk teenager—killer of parents and children—escapes unharmed, making this wreck among many wrecks thereby newsworthy, at least for this evening. What more proof need we that accident is the essence of event? The newscaster will speak of the wreck as a “tragedy,” by which term he means to summon us to a sympathy with strangers to us—the slain family. He would rouse in us a sense of pathos in which we are to be left suspended and helpless before the world’s randomness. The term *tragedy* has long lost its meaning, its anchor in a person’s character. Could we but recover the question of whether a failure of character in response to circumstances—the abandonment of moral responsibility by the imprudence of the drunken teenager—we might be returned to the nature of and importance of tragedy. We might be turned to some rescue from the vagueness of mere feelings as the response of last resort to the mystery of life itself. It is even possible that, in that turning, we might regain some intellectual purchase in such old concerns as that mystery of justice in relation to mercy.

The simple surface of irony—the driver escapes while the (more and less) innocent family perish—ostensibly seems sufficient to the evil, though the growing activist anger of Mothers Against Drunk Driving has become such a political force as to alert us somewhat to the possibility that there is a moral responsibility in the drunk driver himself. Perhaps his is a failure of the virtue of prudence, out of that inclusive temptation called pride. For it is pride ultimately that translates intellect, by the ownership of a 300-horsepower automobile and a fifth of Jack Daniels, into an unearned confidence in the immortality of the body. We have and shall hear discussions of such circumstantial accidents on our talk-shows, provided that they are bloody enough and strange enough in accidental detail; and provided that such a problem can be sandwiched in among the more spectacular topics of sexual deviance—addressed with the seriousness of a scholastic debate to disguise titillating intent. Talk-show hosts and hostesses are our popular substitute, a product of our progress as a civilization, for Plato's Academy or the scholastic arena at the University of Paris in the thirteenth century—if one needs here some comparative measure in the history of Western thought.

In the interval between our encounters with these substitute philosophers and priests, servicing a passive public spirit, we are prepared for the topics of tomorrow's public confessionals conducted by a Geraldo, a Sally Jessy Raphael, an Oprah Winfrey. The evening news accumulates reports of physical destructions of persons and things in the public sector, as opposed to the specialized samplings of talk-shows. Watching the news, we begin to realize uneasily that the perpetrators of spectacular violence are being implicitly and sometimes explicitly elevated as victims in the concert of media programming.

On the news the identity of a minor must be protected lest as a juvenile he be irreparably damaged psychologically. It is unjust to name him publicly as having murdered a victim randomly chosen. Of course, if he did so and found only two dollars in the victim's pocket, that detail becomes of considerable media interest. And if he appears next week on a talk show, in the role of victim of the general world, his celebrity status requires that his name be given and his actions detailed in proof that he is indeed a victim of society.

Such adolescents as criminals are certainly victims in some sense, in that they lack access to the principles proper to them as persons. In evidence of that lack, they usually are unable to distinguish between taking a human life and stripping a stolen auto or ransacking a family's home. They lack, our modernist orthodoxy argues, a sufficient conditioning. But it is not easy to blame academic institutions for our incapacity to judge actions which the young criminals exhibit. At our most specific, we may only blame that vaporous thing, society. The academy cannot be responsible, since it long since abandoned any pretense to responsibility for intellectual judgment as a moral requirement to intellectual action. Nor should we as adults be surprised by our uncertainty in responding to these strange adolescent victims as responsible persons. We should not, since our intellectual community has been so thorough and successful in the relocation of the ends of human existence for us, ends contained and defined by the material world. To satisfy animal appetite, on a scale from the gross to the subtly sophisticated and rarefied, is the goal, whose slogan is "to each his own" appetite. The concept of *person* as implying moral responsibility for overt actions has decayed, except as it may be used in its residual presence as an old memory in us in order to stir us to ac-

tions in favor of one or another politically correct program.

If life, especially human life, is an accident evolved from the accidents of a mechanistic, material universe as we have been taught to believe for 200 years, it will require a very sophisticated metaphysician of this new orthodoxy called modernism to distinguish one materially existing thing from another. How shall we ever order either justice or mercy to the collisions of existing things in that context we still call, in a somewhat antiquated term, *society*? It becomes problematic, philosophically at least, whether any response of any sort can be called either reasonable or unreasonable. And so citizenship in society—except as requiring a meshing of individuals as determined mechanisms to the convenience of a mechanistic civil order—is called in question. To a teenager disoriented by such a reading of persons in community, the fancy automobile or expensive watch he wants because it feels good to want it and will feel better to have it—that thing speaks a more attractive “life” than the life of the oppressor of his desire from whom he takes it.

To possess the watch or car is to self-confer a value beyond the randomly biological thing, especially that biological thing, the murdered original owner. Shooting such a thing means little more than throwing down an empty beer can—the horror of our growing recognition of this dimension of social life causing a growing panic in us. But perhaps the saddest dimension of all, in this perspective upon human existence as now generally valued, is just how little value the juvenile attaches to his own existence. We are arrested in wonder when such a person values a watch above all else and is indifferent to whether he himself shall live or die in seizing the watch. Without the watch or the automobile, he does not believe that he exists. It is as if he has

become by osmosis an unreflecting extension of Jean-Paul Sartre.

And even if what remains of our legal system, in its concern for law and order, seizes upon such an adolescent and charges him with murder, his defense as victim is readily at hand, mouthed by him in protest. If he were indoctrinated with philosophical terms, he would declare himself *determined*, to be a sort of psychopathic machine. Very likely, he can cite chapter and verse to prove his point, at least in a summary echo of our orthodox doctrine. Behold: the latest summary of the meaning of the human creature, according to the geneticist Richard Dawkins. Professor Dawkins establishes by genetic science that we are but “lumbering robots” who are created by our genes in both “body and mind.” One may wonder from what perspective Dawkins speaks to the question, if his own mind is robot. But nevertheless, the clever violent teenager, who is at least as quick of wit as his elders, need only assert on such authority, now much honored by our society: “My genes made me do it!” And if he cannot do so, his court-appointed defender is increasingly versed by his schooling in what is believed irrefutable evidence that man is an accidental effect of the great god Gene.

It comes as a moment of comic relief, given such intellectual confusion in our community, to have recently highlighted with high-serious concern the plight of a teenager in Singapore. Michael Fay, an American citizen 18 years old, is sentenced to a “caning” for random vandalism. The United States State Department, and even the President of the United States, speak out in alarm and protest. Concurrent with this international incident, rich produce to columnists and letter writers and talk-show gurus, is the intentional vandalism in the central African country Rwanda, where thousands and thousands of persons are randomly

slaughtered. Meanwhile, back at home, the daily press catalogues the indifferent slaughter or destruction of material “things”—biological robots and other objects on home grounds. Concurrently there are continuing reports of legalized destructions, perfected more or less in those laboratories of abstract positive law: our courts. There, justice seems a concept increasingly reduced to desperate impositions of order, externally applied for pragmatic convenience—whether economic, or social convenience, or both. On the one hand, there are severe obligatory penalties, as with the enforced incarceration of drug criminals. But on the other hand, from the same courts are issued orders to free prisoners duly sentenced from established judgments against them by their peers. The jails are overcrowded and we must not be cited by Amnesty International as an inhumane society because we deny material comforts to hapless inmates.

Thus justice may be reduced to the conveniences of traffic flow. Law, which was once considered intrinsic moral obligation to ordinate behavior by the simple virtue of existing as a person—as a responsible intellectual and spiritual creature—that law is now judged as an antiquated concept, to be expunged from consciousness altogether, along with a belief in the existence of conscience itself. Little wonder that the relation of social order to the execution of judgment based in law becomes increasingly ambiguous. Law seems increasingly ambiguous in its justifications if one attempts to look through it as an abstract, imposed form to the desperate realities of community upon which that abstraction is imposed. What one discovers in the attempt is that law is increasingly geared to community understood as merely a mechanism. Little wonder that law, once considered in its essential nature as supporting the virtues inherent

in human nature, dissipates through the acid of our cynicism.

The problem with our signs, of which the law is an important category, is the signs’s relation to the things we approach through them. That was a concern to Eric Voegelin, among others. Voegelin warned us as vigorously as he could that our important signs have become opaque. Here we add that when our signs become opaque, they serve those distortions of reality whose effect is the increasing disorder of community, though as often as not they will be defended by their manipulators as used *in the name of order*. For the opaque sign gives back to its user, by a refraction of his image projected toward the world through feeling, his own image as larger and more significant than the world itself. It emphasizes to him as *just* his desire for personal conveniences against the world. That is, his objects of desire are inherent “rights” to him, even inalienable rights. His image, reflected by enlargement to himself in his signs, reassures him of the “justness” of his moral autonomy, self-defined, as the only absolute.

One might put it that our opaque signs become the private spectacle of the individual’s self-centered love. The relation between the alienated individual consciousness and its distorted image of itself is the common circumstance to the individual among us. By that commonality of self-love, community is disallowed, despite pretenses to community. We lament the disparity, in a variety of clichés, perhaps the most inclusive—certainly in relation to our opaque signs—the lament that we lack “communication” one with another. That is a common lament in this age in which the technology of communication is suffocating at best. We are threatened now with information highways faster than the speed of mind itself, so that mind is likely to find itself in circumstances like

the particle in super colliders. The promise of rescue seems to be an intellectual amnesia called "Virtual Reality."

Self-love is seldom recognized as the cause of our loss of communion, or at least it is seldom addressed directly for what it is: self-love. It is erosive of communion because it requires as its only justification the self's actions with no point of reference beyond the self. Indeed, the *self-centered* is decisive even when we act through structural compromises as a social group. For we act through positive laws divorced from natural law, in the interest of autonomous freedom. Thus society dominantly supports the *self* in its perversions of love, and so establishes an antithesis to community, as if the antithesis were in fact the one principle of community itself. Nevertheless, given a growing recognition of chaos in our signs—contradictions in positive laws, for instance, and the things signs are intended to witness—a cry for orderly justice in our social relations begins to rise above the brass trumpets and drums of modernist ideology. There nevertheless continues the centrifugal collapse of community itself, whose most local effect is the centripetal collapse of each self upon itself. In a discordant musical accompaniment, there continues the crash of automobile and house windows as we are increasingly under siege by a new species of vandal—our home-grown variety.

Those vandals, operating in the name of their own absolute freedom—a doctrine trickled down from the preachings of the intelligentsia against any inherent moral obligation of the person other than self-love—confront us embarrassingly in the persons of those clever offspring of our established intellectual gnostics. The community of intellectuals, indeed, finds itself increasingly hard pressed to deal with its own ideological spawn as vandals. It is a problem, if they are to maintain their self-justifying prin-

ciple of absolute autonomy of intellect, the doctrine most central to modernist orthodoxy. At every level of society, that abstract principle—autonomous intellect—derived from a desire for absolute freedom, is known by its ashly fruits. Within the blighted social body grows a disquiet, despite its members being declared robots by one species of sign-jargon or another. There is unrest under the pressure of false forms falsely imposed—in our present concern, the false forms of the "politically correct."

Nevertheless, at this moment there continues a fundamentalist faith in modernist orthodoxy, advanced by the political and the academic disciples of modernism. By such fundamentalist insistence, there also rises a confusion of "rights" of one sort of another, whose justifications as rights can only be made on the untenable principle of the autonomous existence of each individual "robot" as a sovereign entity, in its relation to both nature and society. That can be the only meaning to the perverse idea of absolute freedom. And from that perverse conclusion it must follow that anarchy is the only defensible position in the political and social arenas. Given modernist orthodoxy, political and social anarchy is the only defense needed of the absolute freedom of the individual biological accident, the integer called, with a mixture of pathos and arrogant celebration, the alienated individual.

This pseudo-freedom—this supposed intellectual autonomy—is called *freedom*, as *anarchy* is called *democracy*. Freedom is the name under whose banner wars are now being fought, in the academy in particular, as well as in congresses and parliaments, in city councils—wherever two or three are gathered together in the name of modernist orthodoxy. But this pseudo-freedom as an alchemist sign can only be discovered more and more ineffective, since the enemy to its intent—an enemy it

either avoids or engages by renaming it in *ad hoc* actions of desperation—must overwhelm it in the issue. That enemy to autonomous intellect, to the desire for absolute freedom, is reality itself: the way things and people are in truth despite the best laid arguments of geneticists or social scientists. Autonomous freedom, according to its own arguments, is a principle contradictory of the witness of reality itself, a dream derived in desperation from the discomfiting assumption of man as an accident of an accident.

If man is a creature (or rather a mecha-

nism, a biological robot), determined by a larger machine called “nature,” then freedom as the metaphysics of modernism stands invalid, however confidently it predicts our liberation from mechanism. How confusing, then, the contention that man is robot, both body and mind. It is a conclusion possible only from outside the purportedly closed system called *life*. It is a conclusion that alerts us, as heretical remnant, to the continuing necessity of confronting the multiple reductionisms of what is now the dominant religion, modernism.