

# MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



## *The Road To Littleton*

THE RECENT SHOOTING and murder of students by students in Littleton, Colorado, has caused many Americans to search for answers to the reasons for another savage outbreak in a presumably civilized nation. Even in the media elites, celebrities of every ilk have assumed a vatic stance in appraising the condition of American society, and in prescribing some viable form of therapy. To view members of the film industry giving their testimony is an especially arresting phenomenon. After all, for too many years now, and with astonishing frequency, the films that devour the minds and poison the imaginations of young people have been filled with violence of an inestimable magnitude. Television has been no less a culprit in unleashing endless examples of violence.

In present-day America we have been witnessing an incessant pattern of one violent crisis after another provoking still another author of a best-seller, or host of a TV talk-show, or a televised town meeting, or educational, or political, leader enlisted in a frantic pursuit of solutions to our grave situation. It is certainly no less arresting to see the incumbent president of the United States, the first to be impeached for misconduct in office since

Andrew Johnson, and also the first to be cited for contempt of court, proffering reflections on violence for voters' consumption. And, as usual, the great liberal press has routinely supplied editorial opinions on the state of things from a routinely liberal purview.

We must begin to wonder, in the midst of all this busy work, what is the upshot of all the soul-searching, and what exactly is the value of the anguish being exhibited. Where, one must ask, are the true words of insight and wisdom to be found—words that should arouse our moral sense and lead to moral renewal? But to read the history of our violent past and present accurately, and to consider the plethora of responses and discussions, is to discern that what is manifestly, and symptomatically, missing is the element of moral probing as it issues from and relates to the "Permanent Things." That is to say, what we do hear generally has no moral centrality, but revolves, as always, around the pat thinking and remedies of social engineers and behaviorists who ultimately ignore and often disdain any spiritual perspective. As always, their testimony dominates the scene, dictating opinion and giving prescriptive advice.

Clearly their testimony refuses to delve into or to rely on axiomatic metaphysical principles, to recognize in any way the need for moral soundings of what accounts for the happenings at Littleton, and, in short, to gauge more fully what has for too long been transpiring on the road to Littleton. Clearly these are the selfsame experts whose prescriptions are cleverly packaged and programmed so as to mask the conditions of a regnant nihilism and anarchy in American life that periodically produce a Littleton. These are the "terrible simplifiers," in commanding positions of power and influence, who have in fact contributed to the crisis of modernity as it is instanced in still another Littleton.

The road to Littleton is a long road that has been built, mile by mile by mile, by those who deny first principles and first causes, and who insist that human nature must be shaped in ways appropriate to a secular society. For them, in short, everything, including the explosion at Littleton, must be measured empirically, technically, in uncompromising anticipation of a new age, a new heaven and a new earth. Their assessments of Littleton, hence, mirror a world view that has its political agenda and ultimately its ideological expectations as these are formed by political dogmas and abstract ideas categorically opposed to biblical and classical verities, and to any linking of the "inner order" of the soul to the "outer order" of society.

Most of what we have been hearing about Littleton, in short, reflects a separation of those two orders; it is testimony that is untrustworthy, partisan, false. Such testimony can hardly get to "the heart of the matter" as long as it fails to perceive social disorder in direct relation to spiritual disorder. If we are to understand the meaning of Littleton we must first understand the nature of our moral and spiritual affliction. But that is something not about to happen in a soci-

ety and culture worshipping strange gods. Insofar as we refuse to acknowledge the needs of the soul, we refuse to admit that what has happened at Littleton is an intrinsic part of our refusal. No nation that chooses to deny the needs of the soul escapes eruptions like Littleton. The history of nations and of empires confirms this truth, but only if we have the courage to learn from the past. And most of what we hear about Littleton underlines a total disregard of the truths of history since we have progressively relativized the absoluteness of truth.

The atrocities committed at Littleton should remind us that the dehumanization and the desanctification of life in the modern age ultimately give rise to habits of mind and attitude entirely removed from moral imperatives and spiritual constants. We legislate, it seems, the lexicon of impiety at every level of our national life, particularly and most importantly in our educational institutions, no less than we absolve democracy itself from fulfilling any standards. Our schools, colleges, and universities inevitably mirror the absence of moral, religious, and spiritual standards. Indeed, both curriculum and text are adapted to nihilisms that finally rule not only the classroom but also the formation of character. The road to Littleton is paved with disorder.

The most recent examples of American *angst* must in the end be seen in the context of the confusion and the irresponsibility that characterize "democracy and leadership" in this century. We are clearly unwilling or unable, or both, to go to the heart of our problem—the disorder of commonwealth and of soul that our terrible simplifiers, as "enemies of the permanent things," have been creating with total abandon. Thus to go from wanton presidential misconduct to premeditated acts of brutality is not really a long journey. There are manifest and distinct connections here that need to be noted and understood. The

absence of moral authority must end in moral anarchy. Until Americans confront these profound connections, until they become fully aware of the profane gnosticisms that tyrannize the human community and the human soul, our *angst* is meaningless and ineffectual. But that we can be made to discern these connections is no easy matter when one stops to think of the kingdom of enmity in which we find ourselves imprisoned, at all levels of individual and collective life. It seems, in fact, that we travel on the road to Littleton with eyes that do not see, with hearts that do not feel, and with minds that do not comprehend. This is the inevitable tragedy of life in "a world split apart," the world we have been creating in which reverence is transformed into blasphemy, and prodigality is encouraged and enshrined everywhere, from top to bottom.

It is the things of the world that have become our *ersatz* religion as we persist in travelling on the road to Littleton, and in which we abjectly place our faith and our future. Utopist dreams, panaceas, and illusions often orchestrated and dramatized by the electronic media, and in tune with the dreams of social engineers, dominate our thinking and imagination. That everything is possible and everything is permitted are recurring messages that mould and define our decisions and actions. Shamelessness no less than irreverence thrives at all levels of national life and polity. The moral sense is totally derided, language is twisted and distorted, standards are dislodged, obligations and duties are sneered at, moral virtues are renounced, sins are conveniently excused, traditions are scuttled in the headlong drive to restructure a society in which individual conscience and character play no role. Nothing must be put in the way of the satisfaction of appetites and passions of the moment. Self-will and self-assertion transcend all authority and give birth to all

forms of illicitness. The attempt to blow up a high school in Colorado testifies, in its own way, to the diabolisms that mirror the spirit of the age. But can the desire to ignore the consequences of our displaced beliefs and our false illusions ever really and finally be shunted aside? This remains for all Americans the question of questions.

Not all the presidential commissions appointed to study the causes and effects of a society of violence, or the sundry social-political therapies tendered by experts and commentators, can possibly measure the moral crisis of American civilization. And until we begin to acknowledge the needs of the soul we shall have to resign ourselves to new catastrophes and new afflictions. And as long as we insist on our rights and not our obligations we shall be slaves of the things of the world. The list of obligations towards the human being, Simone Weil reminds us, corresponds to the list of human needs such as order, responsibility, hierarchism, honor, truth. "Obligations alone," she writes in *The Need for Roots* (1952), "remain independent of conditions. They belong to a realm situated above all conditions, because it is situated above this world." The terrible simplifiers in seats of power will continue to spurn the validity of Simone Weil's words, placing as they do their absolute faith in the things of the world and not in the Permanent Things. What the terrible simplifiers in our time insist upon, regardless of the disasters that occur around us, is that we must seek at any cost for a new human destiny appropriate to the deification of man—the man-god, the superman, about whose advent in the modern world Fyodor Dostoevsky, the great prophet-novelist, has some frightening revelations in his novel *The Devils* (1871-1872), as spoken by the fanatically rebellious atheist Kirillov: "There will be a new man, happy and proud.... There will be a new life, a new

man; everything will be new... then they will divide history into two parts: from the gorilla to the annihilation of God, and from the annihilation of God to...the transformation of the earth.' "

The road to Littleton illustrates precisely the "annihilations" which Dostoevsky envisioned. That road will continue to go through the heart and the soul of America as long as we fail to ask of ourselves and of our nation hard and basic questions that must be asked, and answered, if we are not to suffer new ordeals. These are questions that should ignite moral self-examination. Who are our true "shepherds of being"? What moral paradigms should inspire us in the process of aspiration and ascent? What texts are worthy of our meditation and judgment? What traditions, values, canons require our attentive respect? For too long we have allowed modern-day ideologues to formulate answers to these questions, in the framework of their particular schemes for a "Gnostic millennium." "The death of the spirit," Eric Voegelin reminds us, "is the price of progress.... The more fervently all human energies are thrown into the great enterprise of salvation through world-immanent action, the farther the human beings who engage in this enterprise move away from life of the spirit. And since the life of the spirit is the source of order in man and society, the very success of Gnostic civilization is the cause of its decline."<sup>1</sup> The prophecy of Dostoevsky and the diagnosis of Voegelin are, to be sure, frowned on by those who seek for the total transformation of American civilization in the name of infinite progress.

The road to Littleton will continue to twist and turn, continue to extend its tentacles indiscriminately, as long as we refuse to see that social and political disorder is rooted in moral and spiritual disorder. And as long as we refuse to attend to the condition of the soul, as well as rule out its essential place in the

life of man and the nation, the explosions that occur on the road to Littleton will have no end. Messianic ambitions will continue to override moral imperatives and the old morality of character and culture that Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, Richard Weaver, and Russell Kirk have viewed as the matrix of American society and culture. Needless to say, the voices of these great American sages and visionaries will continue to be drowned out by the zealots who comprise what Claes G. Ryn rightly calls "The New Jacobinism," with its "own discernible tenor and moral-intellectual momentum and direction"—"a common denominator, an organizing and structuring force in the stream of ideas, sentiments, and practice that is transforming Western society."<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly, every new crisis will prompt new calls for national introspection; yet as one writer has observed, "Every inward probe of Americanness runs off a cliff immediately."<sup>3</sup> The road to Littleton, alas, has no exit for reflection, no place to rest, and allows no time to change course. This road, in T. S. Eliot's words, is our "place of disaffection," and embodies the "inoperancy of the world of spirit." As long as we travel on such a road, we shall remain vulnerable to the engines of destruction and malignity.

—GEORGE A. PANICHAS

1. *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago and London, 1952), 131. 2. *The New Jacobinism: Can Democracy Survive?* (Washington, D.C., 1991), 15. 3. Peter Schjeldahl, "The Art World," *The New Yorker*, May 17, 1999, 94.