

MODERN AGE

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The Conservative Scholar in the Twenty-First Century

WHAT CONSTITUTES THE ROLE, as well as the mission and the responsibility, of the conservative scholar in the twenty-first century? This is the epochal question that the contributors to the symposium featured exclusively in this “Millennium Issue,” of *Modern Age*, seek to answer. It is a vexing question and demands probing thought.

Living as we do in a time of history when discriminating critical thinking, let alone standards of discrimination, is endangered by anarchic tendencies, it is of supreme importance that conservative scholars will persist in opposing these regnant tendencies as they prevail in the academy, and in American society and culture as a whole. It is also of importance that conservative scholars pursuing their calling in the twenty-first century will give their witness without surrendering to impatience or to anger as they see all around them the widespread consequences of intellectual and social disorder.

There can be no substitute for right reason and for steadfast faith in the struggles that lie ahead of us in the third millennium. We must keep a cool head and steer carefully, to recall Joseph Conrad. If we panic in confronting those whom Russell Kirk calls “enemies of the

permanent things,” we may lose everything. The power of these enemies is manifestly enormous, but it is essentially material and dialectical power—the power of “armed doctrines.” Such power is ultimately artificial and empty, as the collapse of Marxism-Leninism in Soviet Russia must surely remind us. Dissidents like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, unyielding in their moral and spiritual principles, it is now clear, ultimately won out in their efforts. Their example should inspire conservative scholars to hold fast to their tenets as they contend with enemies whose machinations demand unflagging resistance.

It is equally imperative, as this symposium shows, that we know the ground on which our struggles occur, the face of the enemy we are fighting, his weaponry, his ideological fanaticism, his language, in short, his full power and dominion. This is certainly an awesome spectacle to behold, and for the weak of heart it can prove disheartening. Screams of terror in the crucible of fire will do nothing to alter substantially the situation that inevitably presents itself. Only a qualitative and purposeful awareness of cruel realities will toughen us for the continuing battle between those who revere the

dignity of life and “the idea of the holy” and those enlisted in the long revolutionary campaign since 1789 to finalize “the abolition of the past” and “the abolition of man.” The stakes in such a struggle are so high that there can be no “failure of nerve,” no retreat, not even respite from the heat of combat.

Somehow we must discern in the challenges those very opportunities that will permit us to redeem the time. For the conservative scholar this means alertness, lucidity, loyalty, discipline. Tact and tactic cannot be compromised, if our acceptances, affirmations, and definitions are to be clear-sighted and emphatic. Without doubt, the radical changes and realignments, the restructuring and repositioning that have been rapidly taking place in American society and culture since the end of World War II have affected the traditional basis and orientation of one’s function as a conservative scholar. Defining this function in direct relation to the pressures and tensions, and to the realities and possibilities of time and place is an inescapable requirement. The forces, of progressivism, needless to say, will not weaken in their ideological zeal; indeed, they will be adopting new forms and tactics, even new faces, as they press on with their agenda in the new century. Their efforts will continue to influence our socio-economic and our socio-cultural experience, even to a heightened degree, given the extended and pervasive influence of the media elites, especially the electronic media, accelerating as they do immoral-amoral attitudes that determine the *Zeitgeist*.

We are going to have to deal more and more, then, with an absolute relativism in all aspects of life, still another formidable example of the power of deformed ideology and the clear and present dangers it presents. These dangers, in the form of a fifth column, present even greater threats to the inner life, which traditionally we have associated with

religious and spiritual essences. Revolutionary and radical advances have been transforming the outer conditions of human existence, and they are now relentlessly targeting the order of the soul, with the express purpose of erasing it completely. The subtlety and the totality of this revolutionary thrust must never be underestimated. Its ferocity and ambitions have no limits, and whenever and wherever limits are defied the human situation is subject to new explosions. It is incumbent on the conservative scholar to detect the sundry techniques and ambitions of the forces of innovation, which are in reality forces of corruption.

This symposium reminds us that the conservative scholar has a stewardship to fulfill—to bear witness to the truth and holiness of things, to the Tradition, to the Permanent Things, to axiomatic principles, written and unwritten; and to defend these against a secularism that incessantly profanes whatever it touches. He will need to guard against not only the seductions of “the empire of might” and the extremisms and malformations spawned by mad ideologies, but also the heresies and betrayals that can besmirch the conservative mind and mission. That is to say, the conservative scholar must never forget that principles precede programs of action; that, without a metaphysical bedrock of principles, actions in the public square lack moral substance, are in effect mere appendages of secular expansionism. For the conservative scholar in the twenty-first century, then, the ethical challenge he must face has both inner and outer “tensions of existence” that are not easily relieved or resolved.

The conservative scholar has to be perfectly clear about the nature of the struggle between “the transcendent ordering principle” and an “immanent secular rationalism” that wears different masks to fit conditions and circumstances of life and history. Indeed, as our vacuum of disinheritance grows bigger and

deeper, this struggle will call for redoubled efforts on the part of the conservative scholar who seeks to affirm the meaning of man and of history, the meaning of the soul, in the midst of the skepticism and cynicism that make human experience an easy target of nihilism, which is "the root of the revolution of the modern age." The conservative scholar has the urgent responsibility to himself and to his auditors to be clear in his definitions and stalwart in acceptations, in order to perceive and to withstand "the multiplication of false Christs and false Antichrists." He needs, in other words, to identify categorically any eruptions of falsity that contort "the world as an organic whole."

The following words of the Russian intuitivist philosopher and religious thinker Nikolai Lossky, written more than seventy years ago, help to define the task of the conservative scholar in the twenty-first century: "The task, then, that lies before our generation is not to construct everything anew, but, by solving certain special problems, to find new points of view that introduce order and harmony into the precious heritage bequeathed to us."

Lossky's words go to the heart of the difficulty facing conservative scholars in the next century, for as this symposium makes unmistakably clear a unifying spirit of composure and reconciliation is not easily obtainable in a political climate in which the alliance of extremisms advances with unalleviating zeal. Not a single writer in this issue denies the reality of the dilemma of conservatism. Indeed, the essays here begin with the inherent recognition of a regnant secularism and nominalism that dictate the terms of debate, or of social and cultural warfare, between the power of grace and the power of gravity; between the need for order and the spirit of revolution; in short, between the defenders and the enemies of the Permanent Things.

The acute conditions that now prevail

in the body politic nevertheless must also inspire the challenges that conservative scholars will encounter in the twenty-first century, free of any cynicism that clouds one's sense of "the truth of things." One common and essential moral lesson that the symposiasts impart is that the conservative scholar must maintain at all costs perspective and comprehension, and at the same time make judgments rooted both in his discrimination and in his definitions of character and culture. Neither self-doubt nor mordancy can be allowed to supplant the quality of perseverance that arms our principles and beliefs in the long struggle ahead of us, free of the snares of illusion or delusion. We need to navigate safely amidst the shoals of the skepticism and pessimism that can eviscerate our confidence and commitments, our stewardship, to repeat, in the process withering the moral sense and the sense of history that give us our centrality, our focus, our virtue of measure.

Seriousness of purpose and responsibility undergirds the essays that follow and infuses their ethos, their foundational thought and criteria. To defend and to preserve our sacred patrimony against any leveling process are needs that the symposiasts see as constant. Thus, the conservative scholar in the next century must resolutely identify and interpret what his mission signifies in terms of bearings and directions. As one symposiast writes: "As guardian and teacher of the distinctively human institution of the tradition of language, the teacher and the scholar of language must hold high the banner of language and tradition, of standards that are historical and human." Understandably, then, a deep concern with canon and text interweaves some of the essays here, as prompted by the insidious encroachments of decadence in higher learning, with all the resulting anomalies and abnormalities that have literally seized the

academy and that are spawned and propagated by a professoriate in alliance with “degenerate moderns.” We need to specify these encroachments and the terrible damage they have caused to the educational system in general, particularly to the idea of the university. At the same time, we need to develop a strategy of renewal enabling us to slow down the advances made since the 1960s by educators subservient to ideology.

These words by still another symposiast are well worth pondering as we examine the educational situation in which we find ourselves hostage: “Maintaining an allegiance to the possibility of truth; making informed distinctions and recreating standards; resisting the impulse toward theory and the allure of ideas ungoverned by lived experience; searching for unity amid diversity; active remembering—these are some of the primary tasks and opportunities for conservative scholars as they assess the present state of literary studies and anticipate the new century.” In seeking to enact the possibilities of renewal, adumbrated in the preceding statement, we can hardly forget that the job is an enormous one when we stop to consider that, in the meantime, still another generation of Americans has been afflicted by the drug of ideology prescribed by an imperial educational system that is instinctively hostile to humane and spiritual values, and that ever since the 1940s has programmatically intruded into the souls of students at all grade levels. The truth of Eric Voegelin’s words regarding the pattern of disorder that permeates higher education endures: “The protagonists of the Western deculturation process are firmly established in our universities.”

Both in looking back and in looking ahead, this symposium reminds us that generations of Americans have been captured by the dogma of liberal ideology. There is a multiform captivity crystallized in the desacramentalization of life.

In this process moral virtues, religious certitudes, the disciplines of tradition, and humane values have been unilaterally displaced by relativistic, empirical, and nihilistic attitudes. Conditions of disorder lead to a process of corruption that finally transforms into decadence. To be sure, rapid advances in science and technology have visibly improved the quality of material life, but as several of the symposiasts disclose, the science of biology and the growing acceptance of “biological reductivism” are especially grave threats to any concept of transcendent reality and of historical and moral meaning.

It seems only yesterday that Simone Weil conveyed this prophetic observation: “...the scientism of today...has lost all its rigidity but by a strange paradox is still as narrow as ever. It is perfectly compatible with anti-nationalism, with anti-intellectualism, with surrealism—in fact with absolutely everything except what is authentically spiritual.” Simone Weil, in fact, wrote these words over fifty years ago, even as “the progress of science” marches on in ways that confirm her greatest fear: “To find a place in the budget for the eternal is not in the spirit of our age.”

Several generations of Americans now testify to the dire consequences of the absence of any “budget for the eternal.” Their non-recognition of moral values; their readiness to dispose of covenantal and historical truths; their acceptance of collectivist entities and practices; their disdain for any hierarchy of order, of idea, of authority; their automatic worship of the world in time and space; their acceptance of “strange gods”; their habitual confusion of good and evil: these are representative symptoms of an engineered desacramentalization at every level of our civilization—social, political, cultural, intellectual, economic.

Conservative scholars, of course, as even a quick glance at the back pages of

Modern Age will show, have long and arduously been diagnosing the symptoms of disorder with steely precision and forcefulness, and with courage of judgment. Their diagnoses of the crisis of modernity, in fact, characterize a basic purpose of *Modern Ages* since its founding in 1957. This symposium, then, seeks to fulfill the editorial intentions designated in the inaugural editorial published in the first issue of the journal, under the title "Apology for a New Review": "Our purpose is to stimulate discussion of the great moral and social and political and economic and literary questions of the hour, and to search for means by which the legacy of our civilization may be kept safe."

The foremost task that now faces the conservative scholar is one of recovery. How are we to recover from staggering losses and dispossessions that have brought us to the present juncture? How are we to restore to a new generation of Americans a reverence for first principles and a "grammar of assent" savagely undermined by "armed Doctrines"? How are we to rekindle the faith of conservatives whose moral vision has been so much badgered by heresies from without and schisms from within? What new measures must we employ to keep safe the legacy of our civilization? How are we to formulate social-political policies and programs according to moral imperatives? What new steps must we take to convert our conservative expectations into actualities?

These are questions ("more of the same," as one writer dejectedly puts it) that need to be confronted in the twenty-first century. That they are also intricate, troubling questions made more so by what we see etched on the scoreboard of past conditions and circumstances cannot be dismissed. Principles of conservatism, several symposiasts counsel, must be applied even more dynamically in facing, for example, environmental challenges and heightened foreign policy is-

ues and decisions in a new century of accelerating global change and social instability. That we are running out of time is a frequent iteration. Hence what we now need, desperately, is for a new generation of conservative scholars "to move conservative political and moral thought to a new level of coherence," consonant with the "need to describe more fully how and where the world of conservative ideas and that of political action are to intersect." Clearly, though we need to preserve beneficent conservative principles, we are being told in urgent terms that in the twenty-first century these principles must become more intimately and actively fused with exclusionary political definitions and functions that will authenticate the conservative cause in a frenzied postmodern age.

Needless to say, *Modern Age* can hardly provide solutions to the problems that the symposiasts see as quintessential to the role of the conservative scholar in the twenty-first century. This journal can only do what it has always done: to foster dialogue in the realm of ideas; to encourage debate among reasonable men and women; to define the legitimate needs of life, literature, and thought from a conservative perspective anchored in the wisdom of the ages and in the guidance bequeathed by men and women dedicated to the proposition that "change is not reform." Patience and prudence are virtues that *Modern Age* will continue to prescribe, whatever the exigencies and the petitions of the moment happen to be. *Modern Age*, then, will continue to provide aids to reflection. Without patience and prudence, without reflection, the conservative scholar is apt to lose his focus and to impugn his meaning, and thereby even to fall into the hands of the "terrible simplifiers" who have created the void in which we find ourselves in this the first winter of the year of Our Lord two thousand.

—George A. Panichas