

enable the count to serve the same function, as curious and independent minds seek an alternative to our age's spiritual disorder and deformity. To his happy discoverers he will be a coach or trainer and a guide to greater thinkers than himself—and also a model: one who shows that it is possible to reject the platitudinous and mediocre assumptions of modernity, and to attain rationally founded opinions which are equivalent to the inherited, life-giving prejudices of persons bred in a pre-modern Christian culture.

1. *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual Militant* (Montreal and Kingston, 1988).

## ***Toward a Conservative Postmodernism***

ROBERT P. KRAYNAK

### **Postmodernism Rightly Understood:**

**The Return to Realism in American Thought**, by Peter Augustine Lawler, Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999. 208 pp.

ANYONE FAMILIAR WITH recent trends in academic and literary circles knows that the term "postmodernism" is generally claimed by intellectuals of the Left. Why it is popular on the Left is a bit of a puzzle because "postmodern" simply means "after modernity," an idea so vague and open-ended that it is hard to place on the ideological spectrum. Yet liberals and radicals obviously find it useful for advancing their favorite political activity—

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subverting established authorities and traditional literary canons in order to liberate the voices of the silenced and oppressed. In their view, the oppressors include nearly all the great figures of the Western tradition whom they accuse of using objective truth and reason to suppress dissenting opinions and to establish their intellectual hegemony. While the list of enemies begins with the Greek philosophers and medieval Christians, the primary opponent today is the Enlightenment and its notion of rationality and science. By subverting the Enlightenment, postmodernists hope to arrive at a new stage of history where all pretenses of truth and rationality are discarded and people assert their subjective wills in a world of multicultural identities. Such is the vision of the postmodern



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Left, as I understand it.

Conservatives, of course, are horrified by this sweeping condemnation of the Western tradition and the rejection of objective truth and reason. Yet the question of attacking the modern Enlightenment provokes genuine disagreement among conservatives. Some take the position that the best response to left-wing postmodernism is to rally around the Enlightenment—to argue that, even if it overstated the case for a narrow version of rationalism (emphasizing empirical science and critical reason), its political influence has been highly beneficial and, like or not, it is here to stay. Most neoconservatives adopt the first line of argument as the cornerstone of their public philosophy. They contend that the Enlightenment may have been overzealous in seeking to replace religion and custom with science; but its more moderate strands (particularly the Anglo-American Enlightenment) produced the doctrine of natural rights as well as capitalism and bourgeois civilization, which are largely responsible for the freedom and prosperity that we enjoy today. A variation on the neoconservative theme is Francis Fukuyama's argument about the "end of history," which states that modern liberal democracy and capitalism are irreversible historical trends because they satisfy the rational demand for the recognition of human dignity. Both neoconservatives and Fukuyama acknowledge many shortcomings of the modern age, but neither is willing to trade it in for vague promises of a postmodern future.

Obviously, there is some merit to this argument; and one wonders why it fails to resonate with left-wing postmodernists, especially since they are so thoroughly bourgeois and have such a big stake in the leisure and conveniences of bourgeois modernity. I suspect their resistance is partly due to the ingratitude that one often finds in spoiled children,

but it may also be due to elements of truth in the postmodern critique that cannot be ignored, even though the Left fails to grasp the depth of the critique and makes everything worse by attacking the whole of the Western tradition and embracing cultural relativism.

If my suspicions are correct, then what we need is a response to the postmodern challenge that develops its legitimate criticisms of the Enlightenment and bourgeois modernity but turns them into a conservative version of postmodernism. Such a position would be much more emphatic about the failures of modernity than neoconservatives have been (at least in their public pronouncements) and would look for solutions not in propping up the noble lies of the Enlightenment, but in recovering the permanent truths about man and society that lie hidden in the illusions and despair of modern life. Since many conservatives might be intimidated by such a risky and ambitious project, they can be grateful that Peter Augustine Lawler has shown them the way in his new book, *Postmodernism Rightly Understood: The Return to Realism*. It challenges religious and cultural conservatives to take postmodernism away from the academic Left and to develop it themselves—"rightly understood," of course. The point is not to outdo the Left in bashing modernity but to show that conservatives need not view the demise of the Enlightenment as a catastrophe to be avoided at all costs; instead, they can look upon it as an opportunity to return to premodern thinkers such as St. Thomas Aquinas, whose philosophy could be reformulated anew today. By this logic, conservative postmodernism is premodernism brought up to date.

In his preface, Professor Lawler mentions several figures who inspired him in this effort—Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Václav Havel, whose "anti-communist postmodernism" encourages spiritual

renewal in the wake of communism's collapse; and Leo Strauss, whose Socratic postmodernism encourages a return to Plato in response to positivism and historicism. But the greatest influence on Lawler is the Southern novelist, Walker Percy—a spiritual pilgrim and intellectual odd duck whose study of Charles Pierce, Darwinian evolution, and Flannery O'Connor's hill-billy Thomism eventually led him to convert to Roman Catholicism and to develop an unusual combination of modern science and Thomistic realism. Following Percy's lead, Lawler argues that the most troubling insights of the postmodern critique should not be avoided, even if they induce a certain despair, for they will enable us to see the truth about ourselves and prepare the way for a new age of Christian faith, solidly grounded on scientific and rational truths about the cosmos and man.

The format Lawler uses to make his case is a series of five essays on the modernist-postmodernist debate. The first is a brilliant critique of Francis Fukuyama's claim that modern liberal democracy is the last stage of history because it fully satisfies the human soul. The second essay questions whether the late Allan Bloom did not concede too much to Rorty's and Nietzsche's claim that modernity has produced self-satisfied "last men" who are no better than clever animals. After criticizing Fukuyama, Bloom, and Rorty for overstating how satisfied and peaceful modern men have become, Lawler turns to Walker Percy and Christopher Lasch to show that a more accurate reading of the modern soul would portray it as haunted by death, deranged by compulsive fears and desires, and contemptuous of therapeutic efforts to abolish pain and suffering. These themes are developed in the third and fourth essays on the philosophical and scientific background of Percy's "twentieth century Thomism" and his anti-utopian novel, *Thanatos Syn-*

*drome* (1987). The fifth essay is an appreciative analysis of Lasch's work, focusing on his devastating criticism of the "knowledge class" and his respect for the populist virtues of America's working class.

Though each essay is elegantly written, the five essays hang together nicely because of the way Lawler frames the unifying issue: the contrast between the illusions of the modern project in attempting to master nature and to abolish suffering (which Lawler calls Cartesianism or pragmatism) and philosophical realism which accepts the "reality" of suffering, sin, and death as limitations imposed by nature and by God and even sees them as sources of human dignity (a view which Lawler calls Thomism and also associates with Pascal, Tocqueville, and Socrates). The overarching thesis is that the failure of modernity to end suffering and fear of death confirms the permanent truths of moral and metaphysical realism: that man is a fallen but rational animal whose "self-conscious mortality" makes him unhappy and restless in this life while giving him a unique dignity in the cosmos and directing him to a supernatural destiny in the world-to-come.

As this overview suggests, two fundamental questions run throughout Lawler's essays that call for careful examination before judging the validity of his thesis. One is the empirical question whether modern man has sunk to the level of Nietzsche's "last man"—to the dehumanized condition of a peaceful and self-satisfied animal who lacks an awareness of death and a longing for eternity. Lawler denies that we have sunk so low. The second question is the issue of "returning to realism": If modern man has stubbornly refused to be dehumanized, does it follow that there exists a permanent truth about human nature that is best captured by Thomistic Christianity?

The first question arises in the open-

ing essays where Lawler develops the provocative argument that Kojève, Fukuyama, Bloom, Rorty, and Nietzsche all belong together in holding that the soul of modern man is basically satisfied with bourgeois life. Lawler is certainly correct in attributing this view to Rorty, who welcomes the deflation of human nobility and describes man as nothing more than a “clever animal,” though, as Lawler notes, even Rorty is somewhat inconsistent on this point because in his latest book, *Achieving Our Country* (1998), he contends that modern democracy replaces God with the deification of man. Lawler also reminds us that the original “end of history” argument by Alexander Kojève accepts the reduction of man to the Rousseauian condition of animal contentment. And he astutely observes that Fukuyama is less consistent than Kojève in welcoming the end of history while resisting the dehumanization of man. To avoid Kojève’s depressing conclusion, Fukuyama introduces a novel argument about satisfying the natural teleology of the human soul. But even while raising human fulfillment above animal contentment, Fukuyama maintains that liberal democracy and capitalism can satisfy all of man’s desires, thereby obliterating his real dignity as an imperfect creature who stands in need of God. In all three cases (Rorty, Kojève, and Fukuyama), Lawler argues convincingly that they ultimately seek and accept what C. S. Lewis has called “the abolition of man.”

In Bloom’s case, however, Lawler’s argument is less persuasive. Admittedly, as a student and admirer of Bloom, I was taken aback by Lawler’s claim that Bloom resembles Rorty. It is true that Bloom agrees with Rorty on the empirical level by describing the souls of today’s students as blank slates—as “flat-souls” utterly devoid of “eros” or passionate longing for immortality and greatness. The difference is that Bloom deplores this condition while Rorty welcomes it. But

Lawler takes the argument to a deeper level that is more disturbing. He claims that Bloom’s commitment to Socratic philosophy leads Bloom to deny that “self-conscious mortality” is a permanent condition which mature adults can accept as a badge of their human dignity. Instead, the Socratic philosopher tries to protect the ignorant masses from fear of death by feeding them noble lies about the afterlife; and the philosopher himself tries to live without fear of death by “practicing dying” through the unification of his mind with the eternal ideas. In both cases, the response to death is escapism, rather than living as a Christian might with the unhappiness of “self-conscious mortality” while awaiting true happiness in the world to come.

Lawler thus implies that Socrates and Plato were escape artists and that Christians possess superior moral and intellectual courage in the face of death and a deeper sense of the mysterious place of man in the cosmos. If one compares the dying Socrates, bemused and joking at the end, with the dying Christ, in agony and fear of abandonment, then Lawler is right in saying that death is more awesome to the Christian (a point that Nietzsche supports in criticizing Socrates’s lack of awe before death). Nevertheless, I think that Lawler is unfair to Bloom and to Socrates by linking them with Rorty’s triumphalist attitude of putting “death to death”—a phrase that Bloom himself uses to express the modern attempt to trivialize death and to abolish the longing for eternity. In my judgment, Bloom fought as resolutely as any religious believer against the “last man,” which he saw as the enemy of Socratic philosophy.

Lawler’s alternative to these misguided approaches is the Thomistic realism found in Walker Percy’s writings. Lawler derives several important lessons from *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Percy’s anti-utopian novel that shows the failure

of an experiment to alter chemically man's condition in order to abolish suffering and anxiety. Contrary to the therapeutic approach of modern psychologists and social engineers, man cannot be pacified; man is a disturbed creature haunted by death, a wayfarer and pilgrim who senses that he is not at home on earth nor anywhere in the cosmos. Percy teaches that it is better to accept restless anxiety, derangement, and unfulfilled longings as the permanent human condition rather than to try to cure them by therapy or philosophy. While resembling existentialism in this respect, Percy's teaching is intended to confirm the Judeo-Christian view of "man in trouble." For it treats the disordered human self and the existence and survival of the Jewish people as empirical "signs" of the Biblical God: The first is a sign of man's fallen nature, and the second is a sign of supernatural redemption ultimately fulfilled by the Incarnation. On this level, Percy is a Christian realist, although he sounds more like Pascal than Thomas Aquinas.

But Lawler contends Percy is a twentieth-century Thomist—a Catholic who thinks that modern philosophy and science offer new signs and evidence for the truth of the Christian faith. In particular, he believes that Charles Pierce's theory of language supported Aristotle's and Aquinas's view of man as a unique animal possessing *logos* or speech—a rational animal capable of sounds that link mind and reality. Percy also thinks that Darwinian evolution showed that man achieved his capacity for speech all at once about 50,000 years ago when the human brain suddenly expanded ("in the cortex, especially in areas around the Sylvian fissure"). This made man qualitatively different from the apes and, in Percy's eyes, provides the biological-historical explanation for the story of creation in Genesis: It shows that man became human by an apparent miracle when he acquired speech and the capac-

ity for conscious thought, art, science, and religion. Man is thus a unique being in the cosmos, a creature who is all alone while favored with a special dignity that suggests a divine image. In this novel way, Percy puts together the findings of modern science (in linguistics, evolution, and cosmology), the psychology of the disordered self ("man in trouble"), and wonder at the existence of the Jews as supernatural strangers to produce twentieth-century Thomism, a Christian apologetic in which reason points to revelation as its fulfillment and completion.

The critical question for me is whether this constitutes an adequate argument for a return to realism. In my judgment, it takes the first steps but remains radically incomplete. The strongest point is the novel case it makes for the truth of Christian anthropology—for the view of man as a fallen but rational animal with speech, whose awareness of death and sense of loneliness in the cosmos make him perpetually restless while pointing to his supernatural destiny in the world-to-come. We would do well if this version of Christian anthropology replaced the Enlightenment view of man and set the course for the postmodern future. But the argument as stated by Lawler is incomplete because it takes us to Pascal but not to Thomas Aquinas. The "realism" of Aquinas describes the natural universe as a divinely created hierarchy of Being with man and angels at the top, guided by a natural teleology of rational perfection. This view is rejected by Pascal and apparently by Walker Percy and Peter Lawler, who claim to be Thomists but are really Pascalianes haunted by "the eternal silence of the infinite spaces" and frightened by the prospect of being "lost in the cosmos." I would have no real qualms if all that they fought for were the superiority of Pascal's Christian postmodernism to the philosophy of Descartes and the modern Enlightenment. By claiming to be Thomists, how-

ever, they have raised the stakes for conservative postmodernism and committed themselves to the ambitious project of recovering the hierarchy of being and perfection that is central to the metaphysical and moral realism of Thomas Aquinas.

## ***The Agrarian Mood***

GLENN C. ARBERY

**Beyond the Chandeurs** by David Middleton, *Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999. 73 pages.*

AS THE EPIGRAPH to "At Franklin," the most ambitious poem in his new volume of poems, David Middleton quotes Donald Davidson's question from a letter to Allen Tate: "And where, O Allen Tate, are the dead?" Davidson, the Southern poet and critic, wrote sharply to his lifelong friend on February 15, 1927, about the soon-to-be-famous "Ode to the Confederate Dead." Praising it for being "sonorous and beautiful in a strict proud way," Davidson nevertheless told Tate "that when you deal with *things themselves*, the things become a ruin and crackle like broken shards under your feet.... And where, O Allen Tate, are the dead? You have buried them completely out of sight—with them yourself and me."

In his second collection, *Beyond the Chandeurs*, David Middleton's "quiet poems," as he describes them, present with remarkable steadiness the kind of vision that Davidson might have advocated: a traditional poetry that comes out of a shared, communal world. "*Things*

*trusted to our knowledge, use, and care / Within the givenness of what we are*" ("The Duck Hunt") still have an ample accessibility for the patient, attentive, and believing mind. Everywhere in these poems, Middleton shows himself calmly aware that contemporary life might be what Robert Frost calls a "diminished thing." But he faces the age's metaphysical poverties without the astringent ironies that he, like Tate, might easily have indulged.

In fact, more than seventy years after Davidson, Middleton mounts a poetic attack on the whole stance behind Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead." To readers outside the Southern tradition, his reasons for doing so might seem hopelessly out of touch—still another version of what Shreve McCannon, a Canadian in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), calls an "entailed birthright father and son and father and son of never forgiving General Sherman." But the reason that the Southern tradition retains its importance, the reason that such books as *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) continue to find new readers, has to do with an alternative to the vision of dehumanizing technological and economic globalization that the Southerners foresaw and feared. Tate, perhaps the most brilliant of the Fugitives who then became the Agrarians, wrote the most famous poem about the South and its past, but Middleton, like Davidson and many others since, finds that Tate imports into his account of the Confederate dead precisely those qualities of mind that the Southern tradition most hoped to avoid: abstraction from the "things themselves," narcissistic self-absorption, and the inability to trust in the common good of a shared world.

Tate's speaker in the "Ode" stands "*by the sagging gate, stopped by the wall,*" unable psychologically or spiritually to enter the graveyard, though he can "*praise the arrogant circumstance / Of those who fall / Rank upon rank, hurried*

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