

## RECONSIDERATIONS

# *A Prefatory Note*

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THE FIRST "RECONSIDERATION" inaugurating an ongoing feature of *Modern Age* appeared exclusively in the Fall 1995 issue; it was entitled "The Case of Georges Bernanos" and written by Thomas Molnar. Since then a goodly number of reconsiderations have been regularly published in these pages, of which the following two—Lee Congdon's on the historian John Lukacs and R.V. Young's on the American literary critic and theorist Stanley Fish—are the latest installments. Before Molnar's piece came out, there were earlier valuative essays, not specifically designated as reconsiderations, for instance, Nancy Maveety's on "Liberalistic Order: The Work of Gottfried Dietze" (Fall 1989) and John W. Osborne's on "Ruskin's *Unto This Last* (1862)," which the essayist himself had designated in his sub-title as "A Reconsideration" (Winter 1992).

From a conservative perspective, a reconsideration has some distinct purposes that differentiate it from other literary writings commonly found in a quarterly review. In essence, the reconsideration of a particular writer, theme, or idea, whether currently known or neglected, seeks to review, reassess, reexamine a subject's significance, relevance, or place, and impact, in civilized thought and humane civilization, ancient or modern. It aims, too, to introduce a reader to the essential lines of thought and orien-

tation of a subject, and in effect to enrich and to deepen one's critical understanding and appreciation, as well as to clarify and to interpret a subject in the midst of changing habits and disappearing principles.

What the late British teacher and critic F.R. Leavis declared in his important book, *Revaluation*, first published in 1936, with regard to the critic's central responsibility, is equally applicable today: "I think it the business of the critic to perceive for himself, to make the finest and sharpest relevant discriminations, and to state his feelings as responsibly, clearly and forcibly as possible."

A reconsideration must primarily begin with an incipient and clear recognition and implementation of the criteria, the standards of discrimination, as Leavis reminds us, that distinguish the authentic, entailed properties of the critic's "common pursuit of true judgment." A writer who integrates these criteria is bound to strengthen both the aims and the authority of a reconsideration that enables a reader to measure and to discern the deeper values of an essay intent on providing a critical overview of a particular subject and at the same time establishing its enduring significance in relation to contemporary social, political, intellectual, religious, and economic conditions and circumstances.

The two reconsiderations found in this issue of *Modern Age* exemplify, both in concept and in practice, exactly what needs to be addressed in a revaluative project, and especially to afford the reader what is the all too rare opportunity and the freedom that are now woefully lacking in the contemporary intellectual and academic community in which the dicta of ideology are uniformly treated as holy writ. The inevitable consequence of this corruptive process is the erosion, if not the general annihilation of critical discourse, let alone the quality of honest exposition and commentation.

If, regrettably, critical thought today becomes more and more extinct in periodical literature, one must hope that an essay in reconsideration can help save something of the old criticism in an Arnoldian sense in the mainstream literary climate that outrightly denies (and, yes, even rages against) not only the defense of values and standards but also the belief that "ideas have consequences."

Where today can one expect to discover challenging essays like Irving Babbitt's "English and the Discipline of Ideas," or Paul Elmer More's "Criticism," or T.S. Eliot's "The Function of Criticism"? Into what "vacuum of disinheritance," one must cry in lament, have journals like *The Dial*, *The Bookman*, *The American Review* gone? How are we to be spared from the reigning hierarchs of postmodern theory and empirico-critical doctrines? These are pivotal questions that need to be asked and answered in the form of dialogue if our one-dimensional cultural proclivities are not to be totally triumphal in sealing (and certifying) decline and decadence in American life, literature, and thought.

As the following two reconsiderations confirm, the critical spirit of scrutiny and evaluation has to be kept alive if we are not to disappear in the intellectual wastelands. The socio-cultural conditions that, in the late 1940s, Richard M. Weaver

marked in "a world which has lost its center" with "the lowering of standards" and "the adulteration of quality" are even more pronounced today. This is a world in which "the loss of those things which are essential to the life of civility and culture" translates into barbarity and ignorance. Weaver further asserts: "The tendency to look with suspicion upon excellence, both intellectual and moral, as 'undemocratic' now shows little sign of diminishing." If anything, our present situation is even more endangered as "armed doctrines" pitilessly assault right reason and order.

In "The Reactionary Loyalties of John Lukacs," Lee Congdon brings the reader into beneficent contact with an independent-minded historian and a creative and humane thinker, "a European American, a European Hungarian," who is not beguiled by the blandishments of ideology or the siren-calls of the "terrible simplifiers"; who remains steadfast in his loyalty to Eurocentric and logocentric foundations; who refuses to hide or suppress his moral apprehension of the accelerating decline of Western civilization. In Lukacs one meets a living historian who reveres "the remembered past" and the ethical and human values passed down through the ages and points the way to piety and wisdom.

Standing in the great tradition of Tocqueville and Burckhardt, he combines probity and courage in his "censorial inspection" of modern progressivists and positivists; in his opposition to the ravaging forces of historical determinism, materialism, mechanism; and in his emphasis on the need for religious understanding in the concomitant search for historical understanding, or as Congdon writes in the two last sentences of his discerning reconsideration regarding Lukacs's basic preoccupations: "It is to help others to remember, or to come to know, an earlier and better time. Most important, it is to be a faithful believer in what is clearly a post-

Christian age, for Christians are now the paradigmatic reactionaries.”

If John Lukacs can be described as a defender of the Permanent Things, the American literary theorist and critic Stanley Fish can be described as a postmodernist enemy of the Permanent Things. In point of fact, R.V. Young, the author of the second reconsideration, uses this descriptive title: “Stanley Fish: The Critic as Sophist.” Fish is everything that Lukacs is not: a charter member of the deconstructionist club; an arch-priest of sophisticated equivocation; a denier of literary paradigms, principles, moral truths, and intellectual foundations; a masterly spinner of deceptions, artifices, skepticisms—and confusions. His cleverness, as Young adroitly shows, can hardly “cover up his ultimate attempt to prove that two and two are not four.”

In his own inimitable ways, Fish is a supreme modern representative of Burke’s opprobrious triad of “sophisters, calculators, and economists” whose “malign consequences” are incalculable. What Young reminds us, above all, is that what Fish does best is “to make an absolute out of the relative.” The “critic as sophist,” we are starkly reminded, is the antipodes to “the critic as conservator.” Nominalism, in short and in effect, is his bible in a profane age in which what has historical meaning, time-less, time-tested, time-honored, is unmitigatedly effaced;

and in which transcendental “visions of order” are trapped by what Fish terms “the authority of interpretive communities” as an “enigma of change.”

No two essays read side-by-side can better vindicate the basic purposes and meaning of a reconsideration than Lee Congdon’s and R.V. Young’s. Each essay spurs the reader to discover the source of distinctions that are the stuff of character and culture and at the very heart of a humane civilization and of liberal education. Each makes us acutely aware of the unending struggle between forces and ideas that define the human condition and the directions it takes: the moral and spiritual and noetic quality it attains, or fails to attain, in its societal forms and shapes. The essayists do not flinch, too, from their critical task in alerting us to those hard realities that must be faced in recognizing the fragility of civilized discourse and excellence.

An inescapable fact, as we reflect on the content of each reconsideration, is that the spirit of destruction, of nullification, presents clear and present dangers to the need for order in the state and in the soul. The need to resist actively “the forces of disintegration” at every step of the way is an important lesson we learn from the two reconsiderations that follow in these pages of *Modern Age*, a conservative quarterly review troubled by the continuing consequences of a morality of drifting.