Paul Elmer More: America's Reactionary

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LONG AGO, *THE NATION* HAD a conservative editor. Paul Elmer More edited the already venerable magazine for five years just before the First World War. On joining *The Nation*, More was already an entrenched conservative; indeed, he preferred the term "reactionary." While at the magazine, he wrote 600 articles. At his departure, he was well along the path that would lead him at last to Christianity. Perhaps if Henry Adams had forgone France, he would have come up with a title such as "The Virgin and the Dynamo" for an essay on America's pre-eminent progressive magazine and its Paul Elmer More.

More occupies a unique place in *The Conservative Mind*. He was as reflective as any figure in Kirk's volume, yet his life and literary biography were marked by a restlessness that seems characteristically American. The Americans in Kirk's book, in the main, were not the restless sort. Figures such as Santayana and T. S. Eliot stood out in their cultural milieux for their impassivity and stoicism, not to mention their Europhilia. Several of Kirk's minds were involved in the hurly-burly of public debate—More's forbear at *The Nation*, E. L. Godkin, and More's sometime colleague at Harvard, Irving Babbitt—but these, some critics contend, were never able to write a truly lasting book. More was described by Mencken as "our nearest approach to a genuine scholar"; More may well have exceeded Mencken as an editor, too.[1]

More did enjoy one advantage that enabled him to become a serious scholar: he married late. That is to say, after he had mastered Sanskrit (and of course, the classical languages). He was not, however, born rich, or, like certain other heroes in Kirk's book, to a dynasty in decline. But More did understand at an early age that a life of leisure was advantageous to the scholar. He managed—not entirely unlike Kirk himself—by the age of 33 to be in possession of a small manor house (in New Hampshire), from which he would bring forth many volumes of scholarship over three decades.

More is one of the most significant Platonists that America has ever produced; one of our most important Christian eschatologists; and one of our most accomplished literary editors and essayists. But he arrived as one of America's most eminent men of letters by way of disillusionment with America's intellectual institutions.

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I

Paul Elmer More was born in Saint Louis in 1864. He attended that city's Washington University, and for a few years after graduation did a bit of everything. He took a *Wanderjahr* in Europe, taught school, and published poetry. By his late twenties, More began to turn against his own romantic side. As a young man he had been "steeped in the rankest romantic literature of Germany," as he recalled later in life—but he was wise enough soon to be "acutely aware of the mischief done me."[2] The antidote was to go to graduate school, where More could study something difficult, otherworldly, and profound. His field would be Oriental languages, in particular Sanskrit.

More attended Harvard, and his brief experience there only convinced him to establish himself as a scholar on his own distinct terms. On the positive side, More met Irving Babbitt at Harvard. Babbitt mentored More, weaning him off sentimental novels and philosophy by directing his reading in the classics. Babbitt, More said, "was born in Horace's cradle."[3] Babbitt also imparted his notorious intransigence to More. Babbitt's withering contempt for modern languages, his disdain for "pertinence," his insistence on the idea of decline—these all became More's own hallmarks. In time, this intransigence would gain More, as it had Babbitt, many young disciples. But mentoring such young persons proved to be more in line with Babbitt's talents—who was a lifelong professor—than More's.

More quit graduate school after three years without taking a degree. As any number of his subsequent essays—supremely, "Academic Leadership" of 1914—show, the "new" Harvard and the maturing Paul Elmer More were not a perfect fit. More happened into a Harvard that was in the throes of its most intensive reorganization ever. The school's president, Charles Eliot, had introduced a far-reaching modernization program by which students would choose their classes, new disciplines and habits of thought would be respected, and graduate study would be professionalized. None of this agreed with More. He wrote in 1914:

> In one of his annual reports some years ago, President Eliot...observed from the figures of registration that the majority of students still at that time believed the best form of education for them was in the old humanistic courses, and *therefore*, he argued, the other courses should be fostered. There was never perhaps a more extraordinary syllogism since the *argal* of Shakespeare's grave-digger.[4]

This is not to say that More was a democrat; far from it. Simply, a university hectoring its students to get up to speed with the times was not More's vision of the humanistic ideal. Nor was "the Ph.D. octopus" (a coinage of William James, in an adolescent growth spurt at Harvard when More was there).

More walked away from Harvard in 1895 because it was striving mightily to conform with the spirit of the age—to be relevant, in today's parlance. The negative impression More had of the reformist and reforming university seems to have begun a process of crystallization by which More rendered intelligible the flawed spirit of western civilization. Specifically, More came to regard with suspicion any attempt of the intellect to achieve satisfaction, or oneness, with life. The reformist university was only the crudest example: intellect made to serve democracy and an "evolving" society, with nary a thought as to the possible incommensurability of the life of the mind with the mandates of the practical. But other examples that More would turn up were not so prosaic. He would damn not only romantic literature—as well as nearly all literature in one's native tongue—but even, for harboring a stealthy optimism, the system-making of medieval scholasti-

cism and the ratiocinations of Neo-Platonism.

These conclusions would come in time. For the decade and a half after his departure from graduate school, More made his way as a litterateur, writing essays on literary themes for journals and taking up the mantle of editorship. The sheer magnitude of his output in these years is astounding. A sample of his writings fills eleven volumes of what came to be known as the *Shelburne Essays* (1904-1923). Moreover, he served as editor of three major literary organs, culminating in his post with *The Nation*, an astonishing, one might say rather American, achievement of the pinnacle of success in one's field.

II

More's literary tastes, as one biographer not incorrectly observes, ran towards the squeamish. But as Francis X. Duggan has further noted, "...the immorality More most objects to, the most serious offence an artist can commit, is not the obvious one of obscenity or suggestiveness, but a falsification of human nature, the denial of moral responsibility."[5] More's essays generally come to the defense of the classic English authors who display, as More put it, a "deep-rooted sense of moral responsibility"—Shakespeare, Johnson, Trollope, Newman—while making room for those lusty writers of France and America who cannot help but be a little too honest.[6] More wrote important *hommages* to Balzac and Whitman, and asked if Americans were frightened to admit how representative of them the latter was. More, who collected enemies, was often called a prude. An essay on Whitman, however, turns the tables:

> [Whitman] lacked the rare and unique elevation of Emerson...but as a compensation his temperament is richer than the New England poet's, and his verbal felicity is at its best more striking. I do not see why Americans should hesitate to accept him, with all his imperfections and incompleteness, and with all his vaunted pedantry of the pavement, as one of the most original and characteristic of their poets....[7]

In 1914, More reprised his decision of 1895 to quit the big eastern institution and dedicate himself in seclusion to producing scholarship. He retired from *The Nation*, this time to the town of Princeton, New Jersey. In this period, More came into his own as a scholar of great profundity. The literary criticism to which he had dedicated himself in the previous decade and a half repays rereading, to be sure, but as Francis X. Duggan again concludes:

> He is not...so important a critic as others we might name; his criticism has not changed our conception of what literature is, as the criticism of Coleridge and T. S. Eliot has. More is a critic of another sort; like Lewis Mumford and F. O. Mattheissen, he reads literature of the past to see what it means to him and his age, and in doing so discovers new meanings for us all.[8]

Literary criticism furthermore can aspire only to so much. Literature is a work of imagination, not, strictly speaking, reason. Literature can communicate great truth by stirring the imagination, but its very form runs the risk of encouraging sentimentality. Philosophy, on the other hand, by making use of the harder faculty of reason, is more adept at getting at truths that are more difficult to understand. And difficult truths may be the most important ones.

More came to these conclusions as he set aside literary criticism for a series of meditations on the western philosophical tradition that would become the crown jewels of his *oeuvre*. It is important to note that More's decision to delve into the "harder" discipline of philosophy did not derive from the fashionable intellectual trend at the time that lionized "hardness" and "tough-mindedness." At the turn of the century, William James and others had been warning scholars that

they were not sufficiently acclimated to the emerging world around them. The habits of thought that underlay the bourgeoning United States, the argument ran, were evolutionist and progressive. Scholars could continue to confine themselves to ethereal speculation on the classics and other traditional subjects only at their peril. They risked losing pertinence in a fast-changing world if they did not adopt the "tough" and "hard" dispensation of the scientist, if not the street-fighter. This indeed was the *Zeitgeist* that Charles Eliot endeavored to enforce at Harvard during More's years there.

More turned to the rigors of philosophy after 1914 for much the opposite reason. He was wholly unimpressed with the results of importing the scientific habit of mind into humanistic pursuits. In "Academic Leadership," which may be seen as his statement of intention to get serious about classical philosophy, More wrote:

> ...I must say frankly that, after dealing...with manuscripts prepared for publication by college professors of the various faculties, I have been forced to the conclusion that science, in itself, is likely to leave the mind in a state of relative imbecility. ... [S]uch men in the majority of cases, even when treating subjects within their own field, show a singular inability to think clearly and consecutively, so soon as they are freed from the restraint of merely describing the process of an experiment.[9]

More preferred his humanists as classicists. The very difficulty of mastering classical languages and arguments had the effect of "lifting one's self out of the familiar rut of ideas into so foreign a world."[10]

Here, More was not slipping into romantic excitement. To the contrary, he was on the verge of elaborating a vast philosophical history that took the West to task for forgetting the lessons of Plato. In a series of books on Plato and the Greeks from the late 1910s and 1920s, More developed his contention that any form of philosophical monism amounts to error. By monism, More meant those habits of thought—such as Rousseauianism and Darwinism in the modern period—that offered comprehensive explanations of the workings of life and the world. More conceded that monistic explanations have a certain allure (indeed, the allure of certainty), but insisted that monism be resisted in the interest of realism. The hard state of affairs is that related in so laborious a fashion (via dialogue) by Socrates: that the truth resides in a One above us all; that approximation to, but not unity with, that One is all that is available to us—and that, through a difficult process. This is a far cry from the tough-mindedness of the "educationists" (More's sneer) of the progressive American university.

In More's account of the West's philosophical history, Plato's lessons were forgotten almost immediately. Even Plotinus, the most influential of Plato's admirers, was guilty of thoroughgoing monism. He made the One explicitly connected to the realm of creation via a chain of causes. Plotinus left an impress on early Christianity, which in its Western version became distracted by notions of sin, repentance, and works-righteousness—implying, once again in monistic fashion, that reconciliation of the entire order of creation is conceivable if only one figures out how to act properly. Even evidently spiritualistic developments in Christian history, such as scholastic theology, betrayed the rationalist's optimism, a sure indicator of monism.

Not that More found Greek philosophy, even in its pristine Platonic form, wholly satisfactory. He considered the philosophical anthropology implied in Plato too pat, for in Plato, man's faculty of reason enables him to ascertain aspects of the divine logos. As More wrote in the final volume of *The Greek Tradition*:

> Man is logical not only by possession of the faculty of thought...but he is endowed also

with the faculty of language, by which he embodies his ideas in symbolic sounds and signs and sends them forth to live a kind of life of their own. Thus it is that logos communes with logos, and a man knows himself not to be solitary in a friendless world, but member of a great society of kindred souls.[11]

But this offended More's sense of realism. Human beings do not commune in thoughtful recognition of each other, except in the rarest of circumstances: witness the example of Socrates himself. More knew that he needed a philosophical account of evil. He also needed instruction, on rejecting Plotinus, concerning the divine's purposes in replicating itself in an inferior order of creation. These problems were leading More to Christianity, specifically to meditation on Christian ideas of divine incarnation. As T. S. Eliot said of More's writings—and Eliot was most impressed with *The Greek Tradition*: "More's works are, in the deepest sense, his autobiography."[12]

III

By the completion of *The Greek Tradition*, More had become something of a hit. He had always been an influential writer, as editors of *The Nation* typically are. But in the 1920s, he became identified as the spearhead of a movement: the "New Humanism."

Yet More was uncomfortable with this association. He had written articles and books ardently against the grain, but had never done anything intentionally to foment a school of followers. More's temperament was one of isolated contemplation—remarkable for a writer who was so good at making deadlines.

The New Humanism was an effort by a group of young literary critics to bring criticism back from the brink of psychological and sociological foundationalism. Academic criticism especially had devolved into a race to uncover the sordid personal "reality" behind an author's literary "product." Reading such criticism had become a singularly unpleasant (and often unedifying) experience. This sort of criticism had grown directly out of Progressivism's impulse to uncover "interests" and "squalor" behind everything successful in business and government. New Humanists such as Irving Babbitt or New Critics such as Allen Tate sought to reclaim the humanistic content of literature by paying attention to manifest ideas and keeping discussions of context to a reasonable minimum.

More's wholly unprogressive criticism from the years of the *Shelburne Essays* served as a model for New Humanist endeavors, as did Babbitt's classicist diatribes from the lectern. More took seriously thoughtful and talented critics such as Tate, but he was wary of the throngs of college students who were declaring themselves for the New Humanism. More himself taught at Princeton and (on Babbitt's invitation) at Harvard in the 1920s, but he dismissed Babbitt's and his own marked popularity as merely faddish. It is true, however, that More's criticism of the university from before the Great War had now won the day. The pragmatism of the 1910s was in a disreputable state in the 1920s, blamed for having failed in such eminently worldly endeavors as preventing war and securing a decent peace. Students were enraptured by the New Humanism in the 1920s because it represented a road not taken in the generation before.

The momentum of his own work, however, was leading More into further and further isolation. On completing *The Greek Tradition* in 1927, he dedicated himself to theological matters for the last decade of his life. His theological reflections are indeed a fulfillment of his life's work, a return (and More would not approve of the Neo-Platonic association) to the Godhead after an ascent from literature and then philosophy.

More's dissatisfaction with Greek concepts of the soul had been growing for

some time. In the final volume of *The Greek Tradition*, he dismissed Aristotle categorically: "a static impersonal theology must be set down as one of the grandiose confusions of human thought."[13] Moreover, More had been rereading the Hebrew prophets, comprehending the importance of the "revelation of the living Logos" not only in the Word but in the Incarnation. Here, More moved away from Plato, finding it necessary for man not only to bask in the light of divine wisdom, but to partake in the divine essence in spiritual communion. Amending earlier views, More wrote that "calling man 'logical'" implies that men "...were designed to be members of the great society of holy beings, angels and archangels, whose life consists in the joyous contemplation of the spiritual things."[14]

Though More's eschatology crossed the threshold from the pagan Greek to the Christian, his view of evil retained a classical coloring. For More, "slackness" was responsible for keeping men uninterested in the beatific vision and the call to holiness. Laziness and vanity, and other attitudes and moods that keep persons focused on the low affairs of the here and now, were enough to overcome the innate tendency to seek communion with God. The Incarnation, aside from canceling the debt of the fall, is also a ringing reminder to persons to wake up and be true to themselves in religion. Sloth is the most notorious spiritual vice in More's Christian eschatology. Sloth was even responsible for the intellectual errors of modernity, the sloth that has permitted man the fantasy of comprehensive understanding. "For More," as Byron C. Lambert has written, "the chief failing of human thought throughout history was its habitual tendency to find 'perfect' explanations for all man's persistent problems."[15]

More did not live to see the "perfections" of totalitarian utopianism. One wonders if he would have kept to his view of evil had he lived to observe all the predations of the twentieth century. Indeed, More's identification of "slackness" as the root of moral turpitude, whatever its Greek overtones, does suggest the frame of mind of the American burgher at about 1900. More, however, did not linger on this question, choosing in his last years, while not becoming quite a confessing Christian, to cast his thoughts towards things eternal. In one of his final pieces, which he left unfinished at his death, More quoted this beautiful passage from Newman:

> ...at length [this world] floats before our eyes merely as some idle veil, which notwithstanding its many tints, cannot hide the view of what is beyond it;—and we begin, by degrees, to perceive that there are but two things in the whole universe, our own soul, and the God who made it.[16]

IV

"Paul Elmer More is forgotten today," wrote Byron C. Lambert in *Modern Age* in 1969.[17] This judgment remains essentially correct; More is not now enjoying any kind of vogue aside from that engendered by the appreciative essay in *The Conservative Mind* itself. It is not, however, correct that More's principles and commitments are bygone. The latter half of the twentieth century probably witnessed the greatest rediscovery of Plato since the Renaissance. And while More might not have had that much in common with Leo Strauss and his followers, there have been other salient strains of Platonism that are of a sense and spirit congenial to More's own. Paul Oskar Kristeller, forced out of central Europe in the 1930s, presided over a remarkable flourishing of Plato scholarship in the United States for four decades. In reading the Kristeller of the 1970s, one is transported to the More of the 1910s:

> [W]ithin the humanities, the intellectual historian has to defend himself against the claims, often excessive and intolerant, of

the social historian, the literary critic, and the analytic philosopher. There is a widespread quest for broad syntheses and a contempt for details and nuances, while specialization is constantly deplored but practised, as it has been ever since the twelfth century at least.

> ....The world of scholarship, once called the republic of letters, is or should be autonomous.... If it yields to political or social pressures, it does so at its own risk, and must consider the price it pays and whether that price is worth paying. For it is our task as scholars to preserve and keep alive what is valuable in our cultural tradition....

And again:

> Many people now seem to feel that submitting to the truth, factual or rational, and to valid standards of conduct and taste, is a restriction of their freedom, and that the best defense of this freedom is to deny that there is any valid truth or standard. Such views were expressed more subtly by the sceptical philosophers of antiquity and of later times. I do not share them, and rather believe with many respectable philosophers that the submission to truth and to valid norms is what constitutes our true moral freedom.

> I must confess in the end something that may be inferred from my previous statements. I am at heart a Platonist, on the issue of rhetoric, as on many, though not all, others.[18]

One may also notice that More's concern for moral "slackness" was reprised in the postwar pessimism of F. A. Hayek and Whittaker Chambers. For Hayek and especially Chambers, the congenital optimism and sunny disposition of Western peoples, particularly Americans, were the wrong things to bring to the fight against Mephistophelian communism. Relentless application of will ultimately saw the West through the danger zone and put this fear to rest. More was not a political writer, but this is a development he would have appreciated, on practical, philosophical, and spiritual grounds.

Paul Elmer More prompted Russell Kirk to this conclusion in *The Conservative Mind*: "Nothing else in American letters, for union of constancy with power of execution, equals More's intricate countermine to radical naturalism in philosophy...."[19] As the twenty-first century wears on, we shall, in all likelihood, need something like More's countermine. Who can say what will happen in politics and society (or for that matter, in literature)? But surely, we shall have to deal with exponents of science and technology making inordinate claims about philosophy and religion—in the manner of "consilience" and so forth. There will be no shortage of "ethicists" who hold up the latest news from the laboratories as warrant for abandoning traditional forms of speculation on human nature and the purposes of life. It is then that we will have need of More. It is because More writes from so wholly different a perspective than this that he remains worth reading today.

1. Francis X. Duggan, *Paul Elmer More* (New York, 1966), 148. **2.** Letter to Robert Shafer, quoted in Duggan, *Paul Elmer More*, 19. **3.** *Ibid*. **4.** *The Essential Paul Elmer More*, ed. Byron C. Lambert (New Rochelle, 1972), 243. **5.** Duggan, *Paul Elmer More*, 57. **6.** Quoted in Duggan, *Paul Elmer More*, 50. **7.** Quoted in Duggan, *Paul Elmer More*, 63. **8.** Duggan, *Paul Elmer More*, 7. **9.** *The Essential Paul Elmer More*, 241. **10.** *Ibid*. **11.** *The Essential Paul Elmer More*, 46-47. **12.** Quoted in Duggan, *Paul Elmer More*, 115. **13.** *The Essential Paul Elmer More*, 49. **14.** *The Essential Paul Elmer More*, 52. **15.** Byron C. Lambert, "Paul Elmer More and the Redemption of History," in *Modern Age: The First Twenty-Five Years*, ed. George A. Panichas (Indianapolis, 1988), 210. **16.** *The Essential Paul Elmer More*, 40. **17.** Lambert, *op. cit*., 204. **18.** Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources* (New York, 1979), 12-13, 258-259. **19.** Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, Seventh Revised Edition (Washington, D.C., 1986), 442.