

# MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



## *Restoring the Meaning of Conservatism*

[Part Two]

THE SUMMER 2005 ISSUE of *Modern Age* featured a commentary on “Restoring the Meaning of Conservatism,” which makes an appeal for holding fast to those principles that best define conservatism’s “moral exemplification of our conservatism” and its struggle to resist increasing “violations of our reverent tradition and legacy.” Clearly, the corruption of the fixed signification of the word conservatism has reached those dangerous extremes that compel Professor Claes G. Ryn to insist in word and in print on the need “to make conservative intellectuals understand that a conservative is *conservative* of something, of something historically evolved and manifested.”

In the Fall 2005 issue of *Modern Age*, Professor George W. Carey, in his essay “The Future of Conservatism,” was to confront forcefully some of the conditions and attitudes of political policy and partisanship that undermine the canons of a traditional philosophical conservatism. In this present issue of the journal, what can be called the escalating problem of conservatism, that is, its altered meaning if not deformations, is variously delineated in three essays: “The Revolutionary Conservatism of Jefferson’s Small Republics,” by Arthur Versluis; “Restoring the

Heroic Conservatism of Richard M. Weaver,” by James Patrick Dimock; and “The Perils of America’s Progress,” by Stephen Bertman.

The high importance of just what conservatism means and is, and of how precisely are we to define and preserve its essential properties, are crucial matters that preoccupy *Modern Age* and that cannot be either ignored or discarded at this epochal juncture of American political history and of the state of American conservatism—when so much is at stake and so much is in danger. To be sure, some readers may rightly ask, “Will what is written in these pages regarding the significance of conservatism in our time make any difference in what finally happens to conservative faith and thought in the twenty-first century? Can we in any way move beyond the black marks on the page, beyond the writings of conservative scholars who are concernedly evaluating the new trends and the evolving exigencies of conservatism?”

Undoubtedly there are those among us who will say that there is nothing substantial that can be done to renew the meaning of a philosophical and reflective conservatism in a defiantly antinomian milieu, when triumphalist

neo-Jacobin power-centers, possessing unlimited funds, are unchallengeable and unthwartable. In short, it is too late, we are told, to correct pernicious conditions and circumstances, and therefore it is sensible to accede to our fate or at least to dampen our attempts to stem the tide of change as it overpowers us. These doubts are understandable, especially when seen in the context of a majoritarian democracy, and of the raw power and influence applied by an unprincipled postmodernism that ostensibly constitutes a dominion of might that cannot be defeated. But if doubts are understandable, they need not be an obstacle to right reason, will, and imagination; nor need they be deterrents to dissent exemplifying the courage to be. Indeed, we must not give way to the tyranny of doubt, as the writers singled out here for their relevance and insight bravely testify.

Inevitably, conservatism has its appointed critical function to perform in the form of what Burke calls "censorial inspection," that is, to scrutinize sociopolitical and cultural conditions as they exist in the contemporary world and, given the extremisms that too often govern modern consciousness, to prescribe reasonable correctives. This is hardly an easy or popular function at a time when manifold decadences accumulate to disrupt the order of the community and the order of the soul, and when romantic, utilitarian, expansionist, and utopian proclivities of mind and conduct prevail; when, too, we live in a hubristic age when time-tested traditions and time-honored customs continually capitulate to "unintelligent innovations," to quote Irving Babbitt's words, and to aberrations and apostasies of increasing ferocity that are consonant with existence in a vacuum of disinheritance.

Both in the realm of literature and of thought we can observe signs of devolution, even as these signs are heightened and glorified in the press, in publishing, in

the entertainment industry, in the electronics media, in political parties. Sadly, one does not detect decisive evidence of judgmental critical warnings against or censure of the entire process of devolution in which we find ourselves victimized. Indeed, what we do hear all around us are the braying voices and false prophecies that celebrate arrogance, and moral disarray, repudiating all inner checks, civilizing reticences, and human dignity. Indeed, dignity and order are now words and values that are everywhere being insulted and scorned. And yet, this disturbing scene (at the very edge of barbarism) rushes on and without critical admonition or adjudication, and without regard to moral standards or conscience.

A general unleashing of disordering elements meets with little resistance, which makes the critical function of conservatism all the more imperative to enunciate more clearly and more urgently and responsibly a need for *metanoia*, for deliberation, for inner searching. It is precisely this moral dimension of the critical function of conservatism that has to be grasped and communicated openly and bravely. When, too, a postmodern alliance of opportunists and nihilists and quislings aggressively annexes whatever bars its way, it is the task of conservatism, uncompromised and uncompromising, to fulfill its critical function, in dissent and in continuity. Such a need is paramount in a time when the critical function is absent, or deconstructed, or surrendered to ideologues of different stripes. *Modern Age* will persist in pursuing and illuminating the paramountcy of this need, this task.

Some years ago a respected nationally syndicated columnist, asked to comment as to the merit of the work of *Modern Age*, pointed to the resonances that it evokes, and to the ideas it conveys and that are in time assimilated or at least considered in the total intellectual situation. This is a viable judgment, to be sure, but in the end

it falls short of perceiving the full critical potential of a conservative quarterly like *Modern Age*, or for that matter that of a critical quarterly, which as the poet and critic Allen Tate has reminded us, has as its main task “not to give the public what it wants, or what it thinks it wants, but what—through the medium of its most intelligent members—it ought to have” by exposing inferior ideas to “the criticism of the superior ideas.” One can hardly or truthfully assess the mission of this journal from a perspective gauging effectiveness in terms of numbers and level of popularity, however conditioned we are to measure accomplishment quantitatively.

Symptomatically, too, we ascribe excessive weight to the intellectual weeklies and literary supplements of the eastern establishment, impelled as they often are by ideological presuppositions and by being conversant with and acceptive of the opinions, tastes, and tactics of an idolatrous *Zeitgeist*. Echoes and vibrations simply do not capture the inspiration and

the integrity of content or define the moral worth of *Modern Age*. No, it is decidedly inadequate to cite “resonances” as being the chief asset of this journal. The value-system of commercialism and journalism cannot set, or be allowed to set, social standards and cultural paradigms.

What must not be forgotten is that, from its founding by Russell Kirk, in 1957, *Modern Age* has been dedicated to reaching an educated public in need of intelligent discourse and “forming a community of consciousness and responsibility,” and, above all, demonstrating that “even a very small public may be...disproportionately influential,” to employ here the language of the English moralist teacher-critic and editor F. R. Leavis. Hence, it should not go unnoticed that the editors of *Modern Age* believe emphatically that the restoration of the meaning of conservatism must transcend all doubt and fear, and is not only possible but also real and realizable.

—George A. Panichas