

Tradition, Innovation, and *Modern Age*

I now have the privilege of being the editor of *Modern Age*. It's not my responsibility to make *Modern Age* great again. From its founding by Russell Kirk to its superb guidance by my immediate predecessor, R. V. Young, *Modern Age* has been the leading culturally conservative quarterly in our country. There will be some changes under my watch, but they will be gradual and in accord with the traditional purposes of the quarterly. One goal will be to expand our readership by being more intentional in filling the cultural niche in the world of conservative newsstand (and digital) journals in our country.

“Cultural” is meant to be a comprehensive category, incorporating all the best that has been thought, said, performed, and done. It's not the “humanities”—as opposed to the social sciences or the hard sciences. *Modern Age* will continue to be very, very short on charts and data, and it's not a place where sentences begin with “studies show.” But it is still a conservative thought that science, in the original sense of *scientia*—or knowledge

of the way things really are—can be found not only in reports of scientific research but also in treatises, dialogues, novels, confessions, prayers, plays, poetry, music, speeches, and so forth and so on. Joseph Ratzinger reminded us that theology is a science, and Walker Percy said that diagnostic novels are scientific, too. The category “cultural” overcomes the alienating and unrealistically abstract distinctions between the social

sciences and the humanities, philosophy and tradition, nature and history, and even Anglo-American empiricism and Continental existentialism (and its various “post-modern” children). Just as *Seinfeld* was a show about nothing, *Modern Age* is a journal about everything. Nothing is alien to us.

For us conservatives, “cultural” points toward the authentic realism, a comprehensive understanding that incorporates all that we know to be true about the greatness and misery and the joys and struggles of human beings—those open to the truth and born to trouble. There are, in one sense, many cultures, and we conservatives cherish the multicultural world of genuine moral and intellectual diversity that graces our country and our planet. And it’s through the experiences of being embedded in particular living cultures that we have some access to the “universal culture” of educated and responsible men and women across time and space, as well as the universal culture of the City of God. That doesn’t mean that being conservative means being theoretical; the particular person or particular way of life shared by persons can’t be subsumed into some theory.

Well, all that might seem too pretentious and too ambitious to be genuinely conservative. Part of my intention is to think conservatively in a way that will include all the conservative schools of thought and modes of expression around today. We’re open to anyone who eloquently tells the truth about who we are and what we’re supposed to do. Does that mean there are no definite limits to what can be called culturally conservative? Not at all! It’s fairly easy to begin by saying what being conservative is not.

For one thing, conservative thought is emphatically unideological. So it is very suspicious of all words ending in “ism”—such as Marxism, Darwinism, progressivism, globalism, libertarianism, and even conservatism. The point of ideological thought is to reduce each of us to less than he or she

really is in order to make us easy to comprehend and control. Ideological reductionism generates a corresponding fanaticism. All means necessary, the ideological thought is, must be deployed to secure an unprecedented future—a world in which we will be perfectly happy without having to endure the alienated obsessiveness of having to be good, a world full of unlimited privileges without corresponding responsibilities. So the family, religion, and the “state,” with all the love and work required to sustain them, will wither away. Ideological thinking typically conceives of the individual as less than he or she is in order that we all can, in some indefinite point in the future, become more than we really are.

For much of the twentieth century, and still today, the core of conservative thought has been a critique of ideology. It’s true enough that nobody much accepts the whole teaching of Marx anymore. The more pervasive and less rigorous ideology these days is progressivism, which is all about being on “the right side of history.” Progressivism is sometimes about the march toward bigger and better government. But it’s more likely to be something like the progress away from repressive authority toward unfettered personal autonomy. Progress toward justice and freedom, the thought is, has authoritatively discredited the societies and intellectual achievements of the past. And so education in politics, literature, religion, and so forth has to be just as cutting edge and resolutely forward looking as education in technology and the sciences. What conservatives call tradition, progressives call the legacies of oppression. What conservatives call manners, progressives call patriarchal stereotyping. What conservatives call the personal identity we’ve been given by a relational God and a purposeful nature, progressives call outmoded and illusory barriers to autonomous self-expression.

For conservatives, history doesn’t have

right or wrong sides, and things are typically getting both better and worse. Technological progress, which we should regard as both a wonderful gift and a revelation of our freedom, typically has relational costs. And, as the dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn told us, it's a huge challenge to free will these days to live well with the collateral damage of the unlimited progress of technology. Not many conservatives believe that most of us have the option of going back to Wendell Berry's farm, and perhaps there's not even much future for the virtues associated with "skilled labor." But the point of the whole development of Western civilization couldn't possibly be a world in which so many do little more than lose themselves in the degrading diversions of the screen. These are hardly the best of times when it comes to knowing and discharging the responsibilities that accompany our relational privileges. And it might be harder than ever to be in love in the present or accepting of death.

Because our high-tech world is full of preferential options for the young and their proudly disruptive innovations, it's easy to forget what conservatives know: it's impossible to think clearly or act confidently without reliance on established personal authority, the authority embedded in tradition. Tradition provides us the guidance—the interpersonal world—with which we can know and love together, and our tradition provides us multiple points of access to unfashionable sources of wisdom about, for example, love and death. It gives us help we couldn't possibly provide for ourselves in knowing ourselves. The Bible, Plato's *Republic*, and Shakespeare's plays all make claims to "know man," and what Shakespeare knows, a literate person discovers, he wouldn't have known without careful attention to the Bible and Plato.

Now, as Kirk described in detail, American tradition is a large and somewhat amorphous array of heritages. He borrowed

from the remarkable Orestes Brownson the thought that our written Constitution is less fundamental than our providential constitution, than what we've been provided by Greek politics and philosophy, Roman law, Christian revelation, Anglo-American common law, the Enlightenment, and so forth. The moral and intellectual diversity of our tradition is deployed by conservatives both in thought and in the art of living to fend off the one-dimensional despotism of progressivism.

Although conservative thought and faith aspire to universal truth, conservatives don't think that practical life—a particular community—is best guided by an overarching theory or even a wholly binding tradition. It's conservative to privilege sustainable relational life over any and all intellectual or individualistic pretensions. Kirk called himself a "bohemian Tory," a Stoic, a Catholic, and much more. He was much more concerned with how to live well as a privileged and responsible person in a particular time and place than with the coherence of any particular doctrine or mixture of doctrines. The mixture of bohemian and Tory, we can say, is deeply conservative; significant personal freedom and even ironic enjoyment depend on a settled life or sense of place. And the bohemian Stoic tells the more somber and beleaguered Stoics—even Marcus Aurelius himself—to lighten up and be happy with the unbought gift that is life. The future of being or even the environment is not in our hands.

Conservatives are always quick to discern that a worthy and sustainable moral and political world depends on claims for intellectual liberation and heroic greatness being chastened by the complexities of "real life." Conservatives often note that our Declaration of Independence was much better than the Enlightenment theory of Mr. Jefferson, precisely because his original draft was amended by the more Christian members

of the Continental Congress. Legislative deliberation and compromise secured a place for the providential and judgmental God of the Bible in our understanding of who we are by nature as beings with inalienable natural rights. Our Founders built better than they knew, because they built as statesmen, not theorists, taking into account all the real possibilities presented by our providential constitution. Conservatives tend, in general, to be “fusionists,” to put together what’s true about various doctrines and practices to capture all that’s true about persons sharing a life in a particular part of our world.

The classic form of conservative fusionism mixes libertarianism with traditionalism. In one way, that mixture is singularly American, insofar as the traditional impulse to revere our wise and virtuous Founders produces a narrative of American decline from their “classical liberalism” down the road to nanny-state serfdom. Hayek—like the “originalist” constitutional theorists today—preaches that a real or classical liberal is the true American traditionalist. And the greatest living conservative thinker, the English writer Roger Scruton, observes that the conservative curbs the liberationist and reductionist pretensions of liberalism without rejecting the Enlightenment achievements of the separation of church and state, representative government, and the free economy. For a true conservative, libertarianism and traditionalism both suffer from the extremism of all “isms.” Libertarianism presents an unrealistic view of the free individual as absolutely sovereign or unencumbered by relational duties. Traditionalism slights the obvious fact that those who inhabit a vital tradition don’t associate their way of life with some generic “ism.” The truth is that free persons depend for their personal significance on a stable and enduring “lifeworld.”

So we can say that conservatives oppose progressivism with the intention of mending, not ending, the real achievements of liberal-

ism. And in the tradition of Kirk, Scruton, and many others, we conservatives distinguish between conservative liberals, with whom we often agree and certainly admire, and liberal conservatives, who we are. A liberal conservative makes the realistic observation that liberal political and economic life depends on “conservative sociology,” and so they think of the family, religion, citizenship, and so forth as indispensably functional. Conservative institutions—often called mediating structures—must be cultivated for the benefit of the maximum possible individual liberty. Conservative liberals often push civic education, because a country that secures individual liberty has no future without literate and loyal citizens. A conservative liberal deploys conservative means for liberal ends.

Liberal conservatives, by contrast, think of liberal means as serving conservative ends, serving not “the pursuit of happiness” in some abstract way but the real happiness found by persons in dignified relational life. That means we ask about, say, religion not whether it’s functional but whether it’s true. The attempt to dispense with the question of truth actually makes faith and “organized religion”—not to mention higher education—much less functional. And the true limit on government is the truth about who we are as more than merely economic or political beings, as unique and irreplaceable persons with particular relational destinies. We conservatives don’t say that citizenship is just another form of rent-seeking but rather a real privilege all Americans enjoy that has corresponding responsibilities. We’re for civic education and “civic engagement” too. But it’s also true that each of us is more than a citizen, and in that sense liberal education is for everyone. It’s in that liberal conservative spirit that we are open to the truth and beauty of the best that has been thought and done in our long, diverse, and profound tradition. It’s in that sense that we say that

one point of personal freedom is culture or civilization in full.

At this point, you're free to dismiss all the above as questionable or worse, and still be an avid reader of and frequent contributor to *Modern Age*. This issue begins with six quite different understandings by leading conservative public intellectuals on conservatism's prospects today. They are a bit more immediately political than I originally envisioned. That's because, of course, of the momentous event that was the unexpected election of Donald Trump. How Trump's populism stands in relation to conservatism is already a point of endless contention, and there's no way our authors could have ignored that. It's important to note, though, that it is close to impossible to tell whether any of them actually voted for Trump. *Modern Age* takes no stand on the partisan controversies of our time and will generally stand one step or more back from our parties and elections. A conservative view is that reasonable people often, with good reason, disagree, and that's why there's no substitute for free institutions that encourage genuine deliberation and compromise.

There's also Carl Eric Scott's astute explanation of how a cultural conservative might

understand the accomplishment of the Nobel laureate Bob Dylan. Conservatives are at least as ambivalent about Dylan as they are about Trump, but that doesn't mean they should be allowed not to think about his cultural influence for better and worse.

The wide-ranging selection of engaging reviews of books that matter can't be reduced to a single formula, so let me express my pleasure instead that Samuel Goldman has signed on to work with me as literary editor. The issue also features the work of another distinguished addition to our editorial team: poetry editor James Matthew Wilson both lays out his vision for the place of poetry in our journal and provides two memorable poems of his own.

Future issues of *Modern Age* will consider the crisis of liberal education today, conservative thought in Europe, conservative explorations of the accomplishments of high culture and our popular culture, the tradition of constitutionalism, and much, much more. I don't want you to think for a moment that there's not room for whatever contribution you can make, and I look forward to your ideas and submissions.

—*Peter Augustine Lawler*