

# THE MODERN TEMPER

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AFTER the first worldwide conflict of the twentieth century, in a climate of unlimited revolt and merciless doubt, America had a new era of the mind; an extraordinarily self-conscious literature made evident the analytical and "hard-boiled" qualities to which the era pretended. The ideological leaders were novelists, poets, social scientists, political theorists, economists, and psychologists. The majority of these had spent years abroad and become familiar with the intellectual currents on the continent. They were aware of the fateful events taking place. In respect to art and cultural history, they were revolutionists. But despite the intellectual rind of that era having the semblance of extraordinary toughness, the core was a spiritual pulp. The principal theorists and artists desired to be considered fiercely realistic. They had, nevertheless, a narrow and mean conception of human life and the universe in which the human race lives. On occasion, they made half-hearted attempts to anchor their ideas and art in native soil; not every one was an expatriate. In their ranks were the men who wrote *The Great Gatsby* and *Conquistador*. Yet the work they produced—the majority, that is—did not display specifically American qualities. The brilliant post-World War I stylists cut their roots and abandoned the storehouse of American tradition. Their culture was an acquired European veneer, and an anti-traditional veneer to boot. The group included a number of accomplished stylists—I think of Hemingway, MacLeish, and John Dos Passos. But they inspected their native ground with eyes whose powers were distorted by prolonged residence abroad or the worship of alien doctrines. There weren't any writers who penetrated to the heart of the American scene and who, like Mark Twain, brought alive American romance and grandeur. In this modernist group was a cold eye and a cold heart.

In America an era of the mind is not a totally new thing. High thought has existed since the beginning of the American experiment. To a remarkable degree it has been present in the realm of political thinking. Political thinking has constituted the finest intellectual achievement of the republic. The writings of John Adams, Fisher Ames, John Randolph of Roanoke, and John C. Calhoun have revealed to the world the scope and ower of the American mind. The same sagacity and force has

been revealed in American preaching. The thinking of the eminent divines such as the Mathers and Jonathan Edwards is of the first order. Theirs is the metaphysical intellect in its rarest excellence.

This metaphysical quality is the chief quality of the finest type of American mind. The extent to which the metaphysical intellect has been an underlying force in our national history is inadequately understood. Consider, for example, the Mormons: They crossed a continent in what they believed to be sure and certain knowledge of God's ordinance, and when they came to the end of their journey they built a mighty temple on the shores of Great Salt Lake. Strong in their hearts was a powerful impulse to transform the desert into a bountiful garden and implant in the hearts of the people the seeds of righteousness. In this country today are countless spiritual acres waiting to be cultivated by pioneers of the soul. Americans are spiritual pioneers at heart, and this is even yet true in spite of the growth of a wasteland in American life. Evidence of this is to be found in the establishment of the religious houses of the Trappist monks in Kentucky, Utah, and South Carolina. That Americans hunger for the fruits of the spiritual life is evident in the great activity of the denominations. Dean Inge has described America as a land of crank religions, but what is most important is that America is a land where interest in religion is not dead.

In the past, the philosophical habit has not been unknown on this side of the Atlantic—whether of the Vermont cracker barrel variety or the sort common to the schoolmen of the universities. The philosophizing of recent decades, however, (as exemplified in the writings of Max Lerner and other members of the Manhattan school) is unrelated to the mainstream of American thinking. The thinkers of this school lack background and familiarity with American traditions. Their insights are drawn from alien works. The Manhattan intellectuals respect many things: German philosophy, Russian economic experimentalism, and French literary theory. They do not respect American culture built on the foundation of Christianity—they rejected it as untrue and outmoded. To be conversant on the subject of socialism or sexual pathology has been, in recent years, an important part of intellectual fashion—much as a command of Latin was in former times. The doctrines of Keynes and his disciples dominate the economic “thinking” of American intellectuals. These doctrines are taught in our universities, taught to the exclusion of traditional free

economic beliefs. Truly, the gravediggers of Christian civilization are the high priests of the false savants.

Modern thinkers have shown a determination to destroy traditional institutions, as though the hope of the human race on this earth were a complete breakdown of all that which our generation has inherited and the centuries have preserved intact. The Manhattan intellectual, who is representative of our era, is an abolitionist on an unprecedented scale. Religion, civil law, personal morality, political and social institutions—all are under attack. Each generation discovers a measure of truth in its experience, but not in any single generation (certainly not in this arrogant and vainglorious generation) is every particle of truth discovered and the sum total of past error brought to light. Though America has been washed by waves of newness in every department of life, the republic is not one whit greater in stature than it was in our grandsires' time. The metaphysical quality lives on in our hearts and minds, but it has been buried beneath the mound of follies which comprise modern thinking.

Our metaphysical quality and philosophical habit are positive goods when related to sound tradition. When the relation is disturbed, the republic is, as Lord Macaulay asserted, all sail and no anchor. Americans are fortunate in possessing as basic traditions the eighteenth century libertarian concepts. This tradition has been neglected in our time, shunted aside with the Christian tradition of great antiquity and eternal significance. In recent years, Americans have witnessed the erection of an imposing but fundamentally debased philosophical structure. The Empire State building in New York City is a colossal edifice, but its fabulous dimensions are insufficient reason to regard it as a great building. This is precisely the situation in regard to modern American philosophy, indeed all modern philosophy.

The breakdown of our national institutions is to be perceived in the wearing away of public responsibility and private morality, and in the departure of men of refined breeding from the conduct of affairs of state. The destructive modern philosophers whom I particularly refer to are Laski, Dewey, Russell, and Veblen. One prays that the gullibility of one age is not automatically transmitted to the next age. Indeed we have some reason today for believing that modernist ideas are declining in influence and authority. This turning away from the extremes of liberalism (branded as a "failure of nerve" by Dewey)

is an encouraging sign. It constitutes a rejection of false and uninspired philosophy.

If, for instance, Wendell Phillips was a social theorist of great keenness, and was among the most influential intellectual agitators America has produced, it is nonetheless true that his influence had a short life. Thus there is hope for us in our era.

One of the chief characteristics of recent American philosophy is the striving for originality. Many writers seem to have the notion fixed in their brains that the function of the human intellect, the only function, is the production of original, clever views of society—whereas its basic task is the transmission of laboriously acquired truths. The authority of newness is tremendous in America. Hence contemporary theorists have an aura of glamour, and the great thinkers of antiquity are shorn of their rights and due respect. Whitehead, albeit an able contemporary thinker, has been worshipped by moderns. Plato is little read nowadays, and rarely accorded the respect his achievement merits. Moderns refuse to bear the burden contingent upon traditional belief—they prefer whatever is the easy way. They are content to imbibe the spiritless spirit of the age—the curious nothingness-worship which is prevalent in so-called intellectual circles.

Americans have need of recalling that for centuries mankind has lived on inherited spiritual and intellectual capital, though each generation has added a bit to the general store of knowledge and wisdom. It may be true that in certain epochs of history there was an excessive amount of ancestor-worship and the inherited stock of ideas was treated as sacrosanct. But in this era, men metaphorically dig up their ancestors and burn them on a pile of Marxian and Freudian faggots. Thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Jaspers have brought to light strikingly interesting ways of considering mankind and the universe. But the majority of intellectuals forget (if they ever knew) that the existential approach was known to Saint Augustine and the fathers of the church many centuries ago. The Victorian darkness, the proverbial iron ring of intellectual orthodoxy said to have existed in the nineteenth century, never actually existed. To mix metaphors, one can say that a straw man has done first-rate service as a whipping-boy. Certain beliefs and rites have long been regarded as holy, and if human life and high human values are to survive these very beliefs and rites must continue to be regarded as holy. It is perfectly all right to have tempests in the teapot of philosophy, providing the tempest does not

become so furious as to result in the destruction of the teapot. In the case of western civilization, there is no replacement for the teapot in our possession. The civilization of what passes for Christendom is, admittedly, weak at a number of crucial spots. But the essentials can be preserved only so long as the race proceeds advisedly, cautiously, and with a sense of the holy elements in life. Human progress lies in the opposite direction from revolt. Rather does it lie in patience, care, and the conservative virtues.

Nowadays American intellectuals are ruled by fear—fear of being called reactionaries. In consequence of this, there are few persons in reaction against the cult of revolt in morality and the arts. Some of the very people supposedly in opposition to cultism are terrorized by their own suspicions that the outcome of their own endeavors—fearful lest what they say or do be proved contrary to the course of history, as though there were a fixed textbook unfolding of history. There are very few individuals on the order of Dean Inge, individuals who possess integrity and the courage to take a stand against cultists and who will work for enduring values, eternal values.

Given this tragic situation, it is evident that philosophical achievement will be fruitful and honest only in those places where the liberal orthodoxy has been forced to retreat. Fortunately, places do exist where changes have taken place in recent years. Some of the liberal disciples have of late been slipping away a little. The world envisioned by the modernist liberals prior to the end of World War II was a clean, well-lighted, uniform sort of place wherein the men we recognize today as Soviet barbarians were enlightened progressives who were introducing reforms and thereby sparing the masses the tyranny of the middle class. The socialist ideals were a banner in the sky in those far-off sunny days of liberal dreaming and were a sign of international solidarity between Manhattan intellectuals and Spanish leftists. But the term liberal has today come to have the connotation of illiberal.

A new type of American, the liberal-bred barbarian, is emerging in this country. This type is motivated by a destructive impulse, is pushing, without traditional values and traditional restraints, and is, in sum total, the little roadside man who represents the triumph of crackerdom. The democracy of our era is a democracy of the lowest common denominator. The price paid to attain this has been the sale down the cultural river of aristocratic, traditional, and Christian values.

The Protestant churches in recent years, embarrassed by their connection with the business elite of the eighteen nineties, have sought the praise of the modernist liberals. These churches (or, more properly, cliques within them) have come to serve mass prejudices and mass Know-Nothingism. The social value of the work done by the respective churches has been the value test applied by the churches themselves to their own institutions and practices. One frequently hears a minister say "Pay no attention to a man's creed, and you will be a good Christian." Indeed the phrase "without regard for creed" is one of the prime catch-phrases of our era. It is very strange that the churches attack creed. The early Christians were creed conscious, an anti-social group in the midst of the pagan Roman world. Had they not been creed conscious, they would have been lost in the welter of pagan religions and heretical sects—and the centuries between Saint Paul and our own day would have constituted the reign of paganism. We face the danger of being lost in paganism and heresy in the twentieth century. The Christian religion may be lost among the ethical culture groups, the democracy-worshippers, and modern movements seemingly so noble in aim. Truly, the churches have abdicated responsibility in presenting answers to metaphysical questions. They offer discussions of social conditions at the very moment in history when they have the greatest duty of centering their efforts upon vexing spiritual problems. Unfortunately, the trend nowadays is to pay less and less attention to tradition and logic. Attention is diverted to raw experience, but the study of experience is fruitless where there exists no underlying theory. It was generally understood in the past that individual, social, and spiritual growth consisted in acquiring the learning and wisdom stored up in the days that were gone. Our own day prefers the comfortable notion that whatever has gone is useless baggage.

There has come to be an orthodoxy among American intellectuals, dissent from which is considered reactionary. It consists in believing that our inherited culture is unscientific and worthless. This notion is, of course, disproven by the facts of the modern world—the anti-reason bias, the distorted music and painting, terroristic literature, and political science of undiluted coercion. This modern age has a ridiculous perspective. But moderns are deaf to criticism of their own brand of humbug. The colossal press-agentry of the modernist cult institutions has the effect of obliterating the influence of the handful of per-

sons who recognize the significance of tradition and the continuity of values. The moderns make a great show of arrogance concerning welfare state schemes, use of coercion and suasion; but, inwardly, they quake when they face the central fact of the universe—namely, that each individual is suspended over a spiritual deep of seventy thousand fathoms. They are unable to offer any hope or faith. Without faith, and with multitudinous materialistic cults as a substitute for faith, charity has been lost. Hence kindness and decency have all but completely disappeared from modern fiction. These qualities have been liquidated by the modern philosophy which lays down the requirement that mankind establish a new order upon a floating cloud above a bottomless deep.

The modern age has made an attempt to base its philosophy on the cosmic supremacy of nothingness, the void without shape, form, or meaning. It has seized upon the profound sense of alienation and nothingness in terrible earnest, describing this consciousness as the sole significant fact in man's experience. No longer is mankind or each individual a repository of the divine spirit of the universe. No longer is the universe held to be created in time. Nor in the modernist view does it fit within the scheme of beginning, middle, and end—a Creation, Coming of the Savior, and Last Judgment. Modernists have squeezed the universe at both ends. They have squeezed man out of it. Time and space have been described as an endless gulf without near or distant shore. But man is real and man is metaphysical; each man knows his "I" exists and that his soul exists. There is today, as always, the everlasting desire to understand the eternal purposes. Man desires to know and be known in a deep spiritual sense, to encounter the soul greater than the human soul, the love of which human love is but a fleeting shadow, the reason from which the puny reason of man derives its spark of light. There still is in this world a strong belief that man's sense of uniqueness and the immortality of man's soul has not crawled out of the empty wastes, and that man has been begotten of an infinitely greater, infinitely powerful, infinite being.

The orthodoxy of doubt and despair, which is the main-current in American intellectual circles, is not a wholly new creation. It has been known to sweep across other eras and other lands. But never before has it so dominated the intellectuals, leaders of a great nation, a nation possessed of strength and security. The situation is doubly tragic in that the current has impelled the new type of democratic man and struck

a responsive chord in his being. It would seem that the absence of institutional life in America is one of the reasons for this state of affairs. The avalanche in the direction of unreason has not been arrested in our republic because of the paucity of restricting institutions and stabilizing forms. The nature of our commercial customs, the features of mass advertising, and the cult of equality have caused the numbers of the disenchanting to swell every year. When a society holds out to all its citizens an impossible ideal of equality (it is impossible because the nature of man is so constituted that men are unequal in gifts and, especially, the sense of obligation), it is logical that resentment arises.

The appeal of modern Americans is to experience. Distrustful of tradition and logic, Americans are apprehensive about everything save personal experience of a very simple kind. Yet the fact is that one is unable to observe and weigh experience without some knowledge of what is worthy of observation. It is one of the great ironies of our era and land that the underlying American metaphysical quality causes men and women to elevate poverty of faith in tradition and the continuity of values into a positive faith. Experience reveals nothing (so the mental processes of the modernist works, and nothingness—when the absurdity of it is realized—is looked upon as the bedrock of our world.

This mode of thought fixed root and branch in modernist methods and institutions. Embodied in it are the characteristics of the modern temper. It works evil quite independently of its falsehood as a philosophical point-of-view. It carries along with it a spirit that attaches itself to novelists and playwrights. Thus a comparison of modern writing with the great works of the past shows the obvious shortcomings of the former. Taking it as an accepted fact that the super-reality of religion is nothingness, it is but logical that human action, choice, and reason are considered meaningless stabs into endless, empty darkness. The twentieth century is not the era for great literature which reveals the human race in its full dignity and proud possession of God-given powers of courage and endurance. The intellectuals who speak of themselves as the most wise of living men are human beings who profess belief in a void. But one cannot expect that a tree, the very existence of which is denied by the person whose duty it is to tend it, to bear fruit equal in richness and health-endowing powers with the fruit of the tree which is tended by believers in the Kingdom "that was, and is, and ever shall be."