

# MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



## A SYMPOSIUM ON THE STATE OF THE HUMANITIES

### *Strategies of Reduction*

THE ESSAYS in this issue of *Modern Age* make up a symposium on the viruses presently infecting the various disciplines within the humanities. With papers on political science, philosophy, classics, literary theory, and history there is no need for me to belabor what I mean here by the humanities. But I have also included law as one of the related fields gathered under the general rubric of humane letters because constitutional law *and* jurisprudence *and* legal history belong there—that is, if the lines of inquiry which inform these studies are selected and applied properly, in a more than instrumental spirit, for the sake of their own intrinsic importance. The same might be said for some sociology or anthropology, just so long as not too much is claimed for the science involved in such studies. Professor George Carey's commentary on the scientific study of politics makes the point that should be made with reference to conventional sociology and anthropology as products of a certain self-validating system, either behavioral in nature or rooted in a few axioms from physiology and biochemistry. Hence in a preliminary diagnosis of

assorted toxins presently operative in the intellectual bloodstream of the American academy I am content with seven essays as sufficient to demonstrate how corrupt the life of the mind is becoming in those subjects where we cannot easily quantify our distinctions, but must instead fall back upon other forms of measure once widely accepted in most works of learning. As editor for this set of essays I will not argue the case for what my contributors wish to say; such an apologia would constitute presumption. But I do affirm the emphasis and the choice of themes embodied in their handiwork.

Some of these essays treat a particular discipline with respect to its own internal organization as a mode of investigation and a subject; others focus on the pedagogy of a particular field, the way in which its master spirits replicate themselves and transmit their *habitus* to succeeding generations. Both approaches suit well the purposes of the symposium in revealing what has changed the humanities since Friedrich Nietzsche and his followers began to deny that reason had any authority and consciousness any relation to the reality

beyond its boundaries: since the arbitrariness and insufficiency of language to those ends it is supposed to serve was discovered and the irrelevance of literary forms asserted.

As readers of this publication may remember, I am not a devotee of rationalism in its aggressive, scientific, and reductionist incarnations. But as the rhetorician, the summary figure among humanists of various kinds, has always insisted, intentional irrationality is not the only alternative to rationalism. Nor is there upon examination more authority in Lacan, Culler, and Derrida than in Aristotle and Richard Weaver. The traditional rhetorician, concerned with both the nature of subjects and with established ways of teaching them, cannot inhabit the solipsistic, closed universe of deconstruction or the absolutely politicized universe of discourse that is the new literary and social history.

Here as elsewhere I follow an interpretive practice which goes with the rhetor's task. In considering most questions the rhetor starts with certain untested propositions, the given of authority or time-tested experience. And when reasoning from such a basis, he can identify some arguments, with confidence, as more reasonable than others, even though the absolute *ratio* is an attribute of God alone. As rhetorician, I assume that the wise man will consult reason in confronting the world in its irreducible variety, that he will have respect for historical experience and reverence for postulated or revealed truth. While reflecting such a mixture the various disciplines within the humanities may address one another, conduct their own business, merge momentarily and not "derail" so completely in myopic exclusivity as to be outside of what it means to be human while pretending to an understanding of that condition. Because obstruction and obfuscation are now the business of so many practicing humanists, we can understand

those critics of such a parody of learning who sometimes think that humanists no longer have a place in the university which they originally created.

Without the check upon their hubris of the bygone authority of the rhetorician/mediator—the humanist with a sense of the purpose of their studies, their relation to a common good; the humanist who assembles the various reports on what the elephant is like—the distortive impulses inherent in each of these ways of knowing takes them over. With no balance from the general sense of how educated men have always behaved imposed upon them from the outside, the component parts of humane letters cannot in theory and contemporary performance be evaluated against some larger, more inclusive measure. Nor can their special competence be easily kept in mind. Instead, in the context of fashionable nihilistic reductionism, the domination of a legitimate perspective on human experience by one insight made available through that perspective ends in a nadir with only peripheral relation to its source. Something of that process is traced in each of these essays, proving to us once again how convoluted and pointless the modern mind has become: afraid of its own insignificance, all too aware that man is a contingent creature, yet easily seduced by pride, forgetting in impious exhilaration how "our little life is rounded with a sleep."

Legal studies are perhaps a good place to illustrate the process I describe. Justice, we easily agree, is the good of the law. But the justice of the philosopher is not the justice of jurisprudence. Indeed to give citizens what the law promises may seem to be the opposite of what we believe is just. But to substitute some other justice that is invented contrary to the process for lawmaking itself as specified in a nation's history, character, and fundamental law, for the legitimate stat-

ute and what men know that it provides, is, *however just to the philosopher, an injustice*. Furthermore, as James Iredell of North Carolina warned us almost 200 years ago (in *Calder v. Bull* [1793]), rule by politicians and political judges who pretend to the status of moral reformers and make law out of their sense of “natural justice,” is probably going to result in tyranny and/or violent revolution, not in the kind of protection which belongs to the rule of law. Hence the concluding sentence in Eugene B. Meyer’s essay—“I just hope they [young lawyers] don’t try to do good”—is directly to the point of this collection: the danger of values insisted upon outside of their proper context, which in the case of law is the justice of the law.

The lesson of Mr. Meyer’s discourse can be abstracted from Professor R. V. Young’s remarks on deconstruction or Professor Charles A. Moser on curriculum revision and the bias against historical explanation. We must concede that concentration on the milieu to which any text is originally addressed may lead us away from asking how it continues to be of interest. Meaning in a play, poem, or work of fiction is an attribute of its form, not directly explicable from attention to the life and times of its author. But it is also true that structure (or fable) and language in the poet’s handiwork belong to the particulars of his place and experience—that he addresses the ages by speaking for and with his own time. To pretend that texts are made for the contemplation of the gods is egregious nonsense—like the new Ph.D. program in “Human Sciences” proposed, according to Moser, at George Washington University.

The hobbyhorse with political science is, as I mentioned earlier, the notion of science itself, though theories of useful engagement run it a close second.

With history the virus is probably the notion of a social history, with an ideological cutting edge which presumes that the past (or our sense of it) must be

destroyed or revised. That, as Professor Grady McWhiney tells us, there is little room for the historian who is also a Southerner in such a situation is therefore not surprising, since the Southerner’s origins mark him as historic man and tell him also why it is better to belong to the Party of Memory than to the Party of Fond Hope.

With classical languages the modernist objections are to philology itself, since the implications of that discipline reinforce our literary inheritance from Greece and Rome, the basis of the hated “canon” of authoritative texts that, as a set, affirm our unashamed preference for Western civilization over other kinds. The great offense of the classical scholars is that they do real work, and encourage students to do the same. The study of language, as Professor E. Christian Kopff suggests, is obviously prescriptive in character, resistant to abstractions. However, we must turn to philosophy to understand the basic errors lurking behind the complaint that Classical studies are out of date. William A. Frank’s essay on the choice of contemporary philosophy between the way of Alasdair MacIntyre and that of Richard Rorty in the aftermath of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and linguistic philosophy brings us to the generic problem of our symposium. That the range of possibilities can be reduced to “the way of Nietzsche or that of Aristotle” is less shocking than it sounds in that it suggests the continuing possibility of philosophy—along with its need for strategies of response in refuting its mortal adversaries. There is perhaps too much classical skepticism in my system for me to embrace Thomism. But in the dilemma as framed by Professor Frank, I come down with Aristotle and Aquinas, as must the rhetorician and the humanist *per se*, though they may learn more from the *Ethics*, *Politics* and the *Rhetoric* than from the *Prior and Posterior Analytics*.

Thus the component parts necessary to an overview of the current state of the humanities are present in these essays, though we leave to the reader the task of assembling the connections. The old disciplines implied a fixed and constant human nature, a limited but knowable human condition, and an authoritative explanation of the business of every species of learning. In returning these kinds of knowing to a sense of their rightful roles in the house of intellect, we engage

in a moral exercise, offering some check upon the variety of the forms of pride that have led the disciplines away from their proper channels. Because diagnostics are the first stage toward treatment and recovery, these seven essays are salutary. For they call up the examples of an inheritance to be valued not merely because it is ancient but rather because it is clearly indispensable to civilized men and women.

— *M. E. Bradford*

# *Political Science: A Split Personality*

*George W. Carey*

ALONG WITH MANY others, I believe that American universities have degenerated, particularly since the late 1960s, and that they will continue to do so at an accelerating rate. It is also my view that political scientists, even “mainstream” political scientists, have contributed their fair share to this decline, if only by lending respectability to a constellation of related “forces”—*e.g.*, neo-Marxism, the radical Left, extreme feminism, the counterculture—that, both on and off the campus, have spent considerable effort to undermine the university, the curriculum, as well as the traditional notions of what constitutes the mission of higher education, primarily in the humanities and social sciences.

That is a broad indictment, to be sure. Nevertheless, in what follows, I am not concerned to detail the contributions of the political science profession to these destructive forces. Nor, save toward the end, am I particularly concerned with its shortcomings as a discipline, and then only as they relate to my central points. Instead, by way of showing the foundations for this indictment, I want to deal with the dynamics and the nature of the profession, particularly in its development since World War II. In this endeavor, I want to identify those factors that have, by and large, rendered politi-

cal science an ally—albeit, in some cases, an unwitting ally—of those movements that threaten our universities. This undertaking will also enable us to anticipate what its stance and role are likely to be in the crucial battles over the character and status of the university that loom on the horizon. This focus and my concern should become abundantly clear as I proceed.

We can fruitfully begin with one salient fact about the political science profession that cannot be gainsaid: the vast majority of its practitioners are very liberal, particularly those at our larger and more prestigious universities. The rumor that a member of Princeton’s political science department voted for Reagan is probably just that, a rumor. The political spectrum of most political scientists, like that of their liberal brethren in the media, is highly skewed: liberals are viewed as “centrists”; conservatives, as “radical rightists” whose counterparts on the left are communists. Or, to view this from another angle, a sizable minority of the profession—perhaps, even a majority—is very sympathetic to the positions and goals that the general society associates with the “fringe” elements of the far left. A significant percentage would identify with the values and ends of the New Left, and most, probably a