

The New Criterion

Notes & Comments September 2021

Meditations at the crossroads

On The New Criterion's fortieth anniversary.

The New Criterion • Roger Kimball introduces the September issue

Aniversaries provide natural occasions for reflection, looking backwards to the milestones that have passed as well as forward to the tasks ahead. As The New Criterion embarks on its fortieth year of publication, we are prompted to engage in a brief exercise of review and renewal.

We suspect that both elements will figure prominently in the yearlong series on “Western civilization at the crossroads” that we inaugurate in this expanded anniversary issue. Written by the historians Allen C. Guelzo and James Hankins, “Civilization & tradition,” the first in a ten-part series by divers hands, is adapted from a forthcoming textbook on the history of Western civilization. If one were inclined to sum up the moral of this introductory essay, one might concentrate on the title and say that its message is that civilization depends on tradition, that which is handed down, *traditum*, from the past.

That might seem to be a simple or an obvious point. Of course civilization depends upon a thoughtful—which means, in part, not uncritical—nurturing of the traditions out of which it arose. But when one considers what a deep and concerted attack there is in Western societies on the multifarious deposit of the *traditum*, then one is reminded that it is often the simplest questions that take us most deeply into a subject. Guelzo and Hankins adduce various prerequisites for the perpetuation of civilization, “Above all,” they stress, preservation of the

moral and spiritual resources that generate loyalty to recognized authorities and allow individuals to actualize their full potential as human beings. The spiritual resources of a civilization provide those who share them with an identity that transcends the identity belonging to individual peoples united merely by common descent (the premodern meaning of “nation,” *natio* in Latin). They produce a common culture that may last many centuries and even outlive the collapse of civilizational order.

It is sobering to recognize the extent to which we have been making withdrawals on the spiritual account of our civilization without assuring that corresponding or reparative deposits were being made to offset the losses and shore up that common, or once-common, culture.

We are all familiar with charges of Western hubris. Such unjustified triumphalism, we are told, has tainted the West from the very beginning. It reached a peak in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ("Imperialism!") and has continued to blight the West, especially those portions under the influence of the United States, ever since.

It is said that Roman generals enjoying the pageant of a triumph always had a slave standing beside them in their chariot as they processed through the streets amid the cheering multitude. "Remember you are mortal," the slave would whisper, "remember this cannot last." Doubtless there was something salutary in this admonitory practice, but the hoary, even clichéd, trope that the West is imperfect, sinful, not what it was cracked up to be, looks increasingly silly in an age when the most enervating failures are not ordinary hubris but the rancid variety that depends upon forgetfulness, on the one hand, and unearned contempt, on the other. "In recent times," Guelzo and Hankins observe, "we have seen spread through our schools and institutions an improper and uncivilized humility, a malicious form of humility indistinguishable from self-hatred. This is a humility that humiliates, that seeks to blind Westerners to their magnificent traditions and to rub their noses, like misbehaving dogs, in their worst offenses." Spinoza, following Euclid, would end his propositions with the label Q.E.D., *quod erat demonstrandum*: here is the thing that was to have been demonstrated. The institutions superintending our education might as well substitute the letters "blm" or "crt," indicating that their work of mockery or destruction has been accomplished.

When asked about the fundamental mission of *The New Criterion*, we often say that it is twofold. There is a critical or polemical side, through which we call attention to the many naked emperors and their epigones parading about. The current issue includes several examples of the genre, from Victor Davis Hanson's elegiac survey of the discipline of classics, to Anthony Daniels's gimlet-eyed analysis of the Frankfurt School Marxist and influential Sixties guru Herbert Marcuse, to Keith Windschuttle's meticulous exposure of the many lies and fabrications that were stitched together to form the suave persona of the oleaginous literary critic and self-styled Palestinian impresario Edward Said. The second part of *The New Criterion's* mission is restorative. Even as we aim to expose the fraudulent, corrosively demotic, and tendentiously political, we endeavor to nurture that indispensable adjunct to civilization, memory. William Faulkner was right: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." A central part of what *The New Criterion* is about involves dramatizing that truth and animating the presence of the past for our readers. The current issue also includes a variety of contributions to that task of battling cultural amnesia, from Andrew C. McCarthy's reflections on the terrorist attacks of 9/11 on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of that heinous event, to Gary Saul Morson's reconsideration of the great Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev and Dana Gioia's discussion of the nature and influence of Charles Baudelaire's heady, self-consciously modernist poetic achievement.

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hroughout our nearly four decades of
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New Criterion's work has generally received

the most notice, admiring or appalled depending on who was issuing the response. The acerbic and forthright tone in which we have been wont to dispatch the objects of our criticism has been the source of much offense (though also much pleasure). But Nietzsche, we think, was correct: one does not refute a disease. And so, confronted with something that is absurd, meretricious, or simply pathological, we have responded less with arguments than with condign satire, exposure, or ridicule. The preening and preposterous spectacles that are the annual convocations of the Modern Language Association and other academic junkets, exhibitions by the latest art world freak, the hysterical—we do not mean “funny”—performances by the woke and pampered denizens of various other institutions that have degenerated into malign caricatures of themselves: to this gigantic outpouring of nullity, pretension, and bloated intellectual distress from the cloaca maxima of emunctory fatuousness we have responded with the astringent resources of the cultural pathologist, providing an accurate inventory of symptoms and metaphorical tissue analysis.

Guelzo and Hankins zero in on one important feature of civilization that is blithely ignored by its spoiled and rancorous beneficiaries. “These attacks on Western civilization,” they note, “illustrate a sad truth about all civilizations at all times: their fragility.” Indeed. What took decades or even centuries to build up can be destroyed virtually overnight. Then—too late!—is it discovered that it is much easier to tear down than to build up.

It is in this context that we have often had occasion to quote the observation by the political philosopher James Burnham that “Suicide is probably more frequent than murder as the end phase of a civilization.” What Burnham warned about, and what we are still conjuring with, is the seductive toxin that involves an awful failure of understanding which is also a mortal failure of nerve—a failure, that is to say, to grasp and inhabit those “spiritual resources” that Guelzo and Hankins identify as providing a “common culture” and shared identity.

“Suicide,” Burnham acknowledged, is “too emotive a term, too negative and ‘bad.’ ” But it is part of the pathology that Burnham describes that such objections to the West are “most often made most hotly by Westerners who hate their own civilization, readily excuse or even praise blows struck against it, and themselves lend a willing hand, frequently enough, to pulling it down.”

Almost everywhere one looks, standards of taste, intelligence, and moral discrimination trace a course of perilous decline. Education? Study after study shows that our public schools are a disaster. A shocking number of high school students are unable to read, write, or calculate effectively. They are furthermore impoverished by a breathtaking lack of general historical knowledge. By the fifth grade, students know all about “gender fluidity,” but many seniors cannot quite remember who George Washington or Winston Churchill was—they were racists, weren’t they?—nor can they name the correct half-century in which the Civil War was fought. Meanwhile, most of our colleges and universities have become repugnant scenes of political grievance-mongering, polysyllabic posturing,

and tenured irresponsibility.

It is the same with popular culture. Every season, movies, television, pop music, and other forms of mass entertainment get a little cruder, a little dumber, a little more mindless. The occasional bright spots only illuminate the depressing morass that surrounds us. The arts? Wedded to a bankrupt conception of the avant-garde, many of our most conspicuous arts institutions seem to have given up on aesthetic excellence in order to pursue the inanities of “progressive” gestures. Public manners and morals? Forget it. Even to ask the question is to answer it. Add to all this the widespread ignorance of our own political traditions and institutions—even of the fundamental tenets of our constitutional democracy—and one arrives at a recipe for cultural catastrophe.

At least since Oedipus met King Laius on the road from Delphi to Thebes, the image of a crossroads has signaled a dramatic and morally fraught turning point. In our own times, the literary critic Lionel Trilling spoke of “the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet.” Taking the term “literature” broadly to mean cultural endeavor generally, Trilling’s image provides a good description of the field of action we inhabit at *The New Criterion*. In his deep though curiously titled book *Physics and Politics*—it has nothing to do with physics, and politics enters only obliquely—Walter Bagehot traces the course of civilizations from savagery to “the age of discussion.” We are not permitted to describe savage societies as “savage” any longer, which is one reason that Bagehot’s book is no longer read with the intensity it deserves. But the censorious dictates of political correctness cannot obscure Bagehot’s calm and commanding observation that “government by discussion” — “slow government” — is both “a principal organ for improving mankind” and “a plant of singular delicacy.” The question of how best to nurture this delicate plant is Bagehot’s central concern. It is also ours. Part of the answer lies in facing up to the unpalatable realities about power that make civilization possible. The other part lies in embracing what Bagehot calls “animated moderation,” that “union of life with measure, of spirit with reasonableness,” which assures that discussion will continue without descending into violence or anarchy. It seems like a small thing. But then achieved order always does—until it is lost. **W**elcome you to the beginning of our fifth decade.

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 40 Number 1 , on page 1

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