From Washington across the American countryside, Britain to Budapest, and into the eastern edges of Europe, the politics of the West are sick and demand a diagnosis. This is the thesis around which political commentators of the Left and Right have rallied in the past five years—with increasing urgency in the past twelve months—for obvious reasons. Those who sympathize with the post–Cold War order of open trade and immigration see resurgent nationalist movements as a disease gnawing away at global stability, while others see disease in the order itself, with institutions so fatigued that a string of crises left them ripe for rebellion.

The Shipwrecked Mind, a slim new release from the humanities scholar Mark Lilla, is an ambitious attempt to understand this widespread political unwinding. The title refers to reactionary thinkers, who Lilla believes see themselves as having been passengers aboard the steady ship of civilization until it crashed and left them marooned, forever to shake their fists at the people and ideas that steered the ship astray. The book mentions neither Brexit nor Donald Trump by name; Lilla began composing it before those specific eruptions of the phenomenon that the book examines. But by setting his sights beyond the news-cycle fodder that fills up most political
Lilla traces reaction to its underlying *mindset*, rather than merely speculating about why it has blossomed in our time.

Lilla, who currently teaches at Columbia University, is a liberal of a modern sensibility and has little reason to sympathize with the trio of reactionary philosophers he chooses to examine. And yet, he provides a thorough exposition to each man’s body of work, giving readers enough material to form their own conclusions. His first case is Franz Rosenzweig, the German Jew who rose to prominence in 1921 after publishing *The Star of Redemption*, a grand critique of the Hegelian modernism that dominated the political culture of Europe in the decade following World War I. Rather than dispute the claims of the mechanical, secular worldview, Rosenzweig urged a withdrawal, and a return to the transcendence exemplified by historic Judaism. “If man was to return to himself and his God,” explains Lilla in his summary of Rosenzweig’s outlook, “he would have to undergo some sort of therapy: not by moving back in time but by learning to escape it.”

Nearly two decades after *The Star*, as war approached once again, a new generation of traditionalist thinkers emerged to build on Rosenzweig’s indictment of progressivism. Not only had modernity alienated man from his own identity, but it had also reduced all society to a competition for material aims, making cataclysmic war inevitable. Lilla places Eric Voegelin within this school of thought, describing how the German-born philosopher blamed the Nazi terror that he had fled on the sacrilization of the secular state, which began once Liberal Protestantism introduced the notion that the kingdom of God could be realized through social and technological progress. Voegelin devised the concept of the “immanent eschaton” (which Bill Buckley popularized in the 1960s) in his *New Science of Politics* in 1952. The book was widely considered inscrutable and has been largely forgotten, but the image of the immanent eschaton remains: the earthly paradise which seems so close that statesmen are willing to trample both nature and ethics to race toward it.
Leo Strauss is the first of Lilla’s chosen thinkers whom he believes to have influenced reactionary movements, rather than to have devised a theory that simply explained and justified them. Strauss is described as having pinned the blame for our downfall on Machiavelli. The Prince tempted philosophers to think of themselves as builders of the state, and they began to devise ideas that they hoped would advance the malleable “public interest”—with less and less care for individual rights. William Kristol, Paul Wolfowitz, and other modern neoconservatives all describe Strauss in somewhat differing terms, but Lilla is right to point out that the movement drew broad inspiration from Strauss’s story of squandered rights.

Lilla’s familiarity with his subjects keeps The Shipwrecked Mind consistently informative and interesting. The book may be the best available primer on the contents of reactionary writing, and readers will have little trouble applying its summaries of Rosenzweig, Voegelin, and Strauss to the reactionary movements of today. Lilla, however, has written not only to explain the reactionary mindset but also to debunk it, in the hope that its return to Western politics will be ridiculed and squashed. It is in this shift from exposition to attack that he loses his footing.

His first point of criticism is the supposedly facile structure of reactionary theories. He suggests that Strauss’s Natural Right and History “offered American students unfamiliar with any other account of philosophy’s history a just-so version of it, tracing our intellectual decline from the Golden Age of Athens to the modern Age of Iron.” (The phrase “just-so,” refers to Rudyard Kipling’s Just So Stories, which explain “the way things are” through simple children’s stories.) Lilla professes to know better than Strauss: “An ‘age,’ of course, is nothing more than a space between two markers that we place on the ticker tape of time to make history legible to ourselves.” Reactionaries, he suggests, have smoothed out the complex truth of history to make it fit their premade conclusions about mankind’s decline.

Of course, the notion that there is no such thing as an age—a stretch of history with a certain character to it—is so absurd that no one could ever truly hold it, least of all a scholar of political history such as Lilla. And, alas, his own words in an earlier work show that he is just as willing to make generalizations about the past as Strauss and Co., provided that they suit his own worldview. In The Stillborn God (2001), his critique of politics based on theology, Lilla describes one single moment that he believes to have permanently changed the nature of Western statecraft.

Before Hobbes, those who sought to refute [political theology] kept finding themselves driven deeper into it as they tried to solve the many puzzles of God, man, and the world. Hobbes showed the way out by doing something ingenious: he changed the subject.

The implication here is that Leviathan single-handedly made all of Europe forget about the divine right of kings for just long enough that Hobbes and his crafty Enlightenment cohort could get everyone hooked on thinking about how free men relate to each other instead. This interpretation of history is at least as simplistic as anything that Lilla points out in the writings of the scholars he
puts on trial, and he stands on shaky ground when he suggests that reactionaries are uniquely guilty of spotting narratives in history.

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His second sweeping criticism is that the reactionary mindset romanticizes life, exaggerating both the peaks of human achievement and the slope of our subsequent decline. Although a neutral presentation of reactionary ideas forms the bulk of the book’s discourse, Lilla concludes each chapter with a quip suggesting that the philosophers he examines were hopelessly naïve. In one flat example, he describes Rosenzweig’s notion of Judaism as timelessness as “a beautiful ideal, though steeped in pathos.” These brief and largely unsupported passages have the effect of reframing the entire chapter. Lilla’s smug dismissals make him come off much more like a child psychologist than a fair-minded expert—if at first he seemed to lend reactionaries a sympathetic ear, it was for the purpose of patting them on the head, declaring them ill, and dissuading readers from falling for their tall tales.

The West is indeed experiencing a resurgence of political reaction, and it would be a shame not to avail ourselves of Lilla’s work as we attempt to reorient to today’s political landscape. Anthropological studies of Trump supporters and profiles of Europe’s far-right parties cannot fully capture the character of the movement—eventually we will need to reckon with the actual vision of society that they are proposing, and Lilla’s survey of Rosenzweig, Voegelin, and Strauss is a good place to start. And yet, like Virgil leading Dante from purgatory toward paradise, Lilla’s biases prevent him from bringing readers all the way to an open-minded understanding of the reactionary vision. There are many valid criticisms that one might mount against those who take a fatalistic view of history, but their use of generalizations and their belief in the starkness of human life don’t discredit them any more than they discredit the firm believers of any worldview. Westerners may soon reject political reaction as Lilla hopes, proving today’s resurgent movements to have been short-lived oddities. But if so, we ought to seek a fuller awareness of exactly what we are rejecting.

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 35 Number 4, on page 92

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