

Conservatism and the Creative Spirit

LYNN HAROLD HOUGH

Creative genius arises from the tensions between enduring duties and the exigencies of the age, a Christian humanist writes.

THE RADICAL DESTROYS what is evil and the conservative maintains what is good: this statement of the matter, though useful, is an oversimplification. For the radical destroys much that is good while he is rooting out the evil, and the conservative often keeps things alive that do not deserve immortality. Thus both the radical and the conservative need corrosive criticism, as well as appreciation. This distinction, nevertheless, ought to be made: the radical often develops a passion for indiscriminate destruction; while back of the conservative instinct there is a sense of enduring values which must not be annihilated. Therefore a conservative is more likely than the radical to keep alive the creative spirit.

If we call the roll of the creative writers of the world, we do not go far before we come upon this truth. Homer was the creative spirit incarnate, and yet the writings which bear his name became a veritable Bible to the Greeks because, behind all his creative artistry, there looms a sense of patterns by which it is well that men should live. The creative quality is possible only against a background of

permanent principles loyally held, so that what gives the Homeric poems their immortality is their glowing portrayal of what deserves to survive.

Vergil sets out more deliberately to tell an heroic story in such fashion as to describe the principles upon which a mighty empire may rest secure. Vergil has tenderness and sympathy; but all the sympathy with the rich variety of human experience is held subordinate to that devotion to duty by which men and nations attain greatness. At this point the readers of Vergil meet the tensions that give the *Aeneid* its nobility.

Milton's *Paradise Lost* is the description of a battle between lawless adventure and loyal obedience. This struggle it is which makes the poem magnificently creative. Without the God who has the right to claim obedience, there would be no field for the work of the truly creative spirit. If the tragedy of lawlessness appears in sombre splendor in *Paradise Lost*, the glory of obedience won through ordeal dominates *Paradise Regained*.

Dante's *Divine Comedy*, with its vast portrait-gallery of souls, is the highest

creative achievement of the Middle Ages: each soul displaying the laws which give life its tensions, its tragedy, and its splendor.

Shakespeare sets English life and English history to the harmony of creative achievement. He succeeds because his art is governed by that sense of moral sanctions which makes life meaningful. Shakespeare does his work by implication; he does not need to assert ethical sanctions, for they are so deeply interwoven in the processes of life that they have become, in his plays, substance rather than thesis.

For it is only in a world of solid sanctions that life and the adventure of existence can have real meaning. Those sanctions lacking, we may have pulsations of emotion and vibrations of biological impulse; but we have no true significance. When life loses its stabilities, the glory and the tragedy of human nature depart. The great writers of the world attest that permanent standards are essential to the triumph of the creative spirit.

This is as true of wit as it is of tragedy. The relationship of wit to the conservative tradition is integral. Aristophanes' impudent wit was employed to conserve the ways which had made Athens great. Life devoid of tradition: this is what Aristophanes demolishes by reduction to absurdity. His laughter is meant to make old ways secure and new follies ridiculous.

Another example: Erasmus was the greatest wit in Europe in his age. His *Familiar Colloquies* made Europe one great fireside, with Erasmus talking on the hearth. And Erasmus took up the task of laughing evil things out of existence, securing reform through wit, not by the sword. Men trusted Erasmus because he did not try to smash the world while he was improving it. His darting wit would have been impossible but for his great loyalties. Out of these loyalties grew his Christian criticism of life. The sanctions

of the Christian religion gave subject and motive to his free intelligence.

In Erasmus, as in many spirits of the highest order, the creative genius exists just at the point where freedom and stability meet. From the conservative temper comes the stability that sustains the daring movements of a mind in which freedom never sinks into anarchy.

Now it may seem that law is concerned with order, not with creation; and, true enough, legal systems easily can degenerate into hard conventions. And yet without underlying laws, that necessary tension between freedom and stability could not be: that tension without which there would be no enduring meaning in life or art. Law itself is the basis of creative thought and action, although lifeless convention is an insight gone stale.

When Aristotle collected one hundred and fifty-eight Greek constitutions as a basis for his study of law, he was preparing to apply the tests of actual experience. When he analyzed the control of the few, of the many, of the owners of property, and of the tyrant, he asked always how every type of control really operated in the living experience of mankind. Judging laws by their power to promote the good life, Aristotle sought to conserve those standards without which life lacks significance. It is not surprising that Aristotle also wrote a great work on poetry; or that Cicero, the wittiest of Romans, was also Rome's greatest orator. Cicero was at his best when he reflected upon the moral foundations of private life and of the state.

So, too, when Montesquieu wrote *L'Esprit des Lois*, he saw legal sanctions in the light of genuine human experience: in their relation to national governments, the manners of the people, the climate, religion, commerce. Law takes on meaning as it is related to the creative impulses in humankind. In Aristotle, Cicero, and Montesquieu, a humane study of law is a

direct source of creative achievement.

And literary criticism, likewise, becomes creative in proportion as it recognizes enduring laws. Longinus saw the Sublime as the echo of a great soul; he knew that loveliness must have a basis in character. Sublimity, he wrote, is founded upon human character at a peak of moral excellence. Longinus, like other great critics, perceived the relationship of great writing to the good life, as well as its relationship to aesthetic principle. A work of art presents something universal so as to exhibit it in a new light. In criticism and art, when a universal principle is forgotten, literary and artistic chaos follows. The universal principle—Aristotle's doctrine of catharsis, for instance—gives permanence to the creative impulse.

Civilization and its achievements are a balance between stability and freedom: a freedom in law, not a freedom from law. Thus conservation is the basis of adventure.

Yet the confusion of our age has led many men to worship intellectual anarchy and moral license. Nowadays it is easy enough to obtain some considerable degree of intellectual leadership by apologizing for surrender to false emotions. This affliction may be traced to the nineteenth century, and earlier. Søren Kierkegaard, for instance, making his own disordered emotions the basis of his claim to guide other men, discarded the orderly processes of disciplined intelligence for the hot pressures of his private fancy. Using paradox to escape intellectual responsibility, he found the meaning of life and religion in the flame of a vivid experience—an experience unregulated by the moral traditions of mankind. About his writing clung a subtle megalomania. And after the calamities and frustrations of two wars, the mind of Europe, moving psychopathically, turned to Kierkegaard as guide and friend. For a cure, it turned

toward one manifestation of its own disease.

Thus the Existentialists severed their living connection with the intellectual, moral, and spiritual experiences of men. They exalted their own disillusion into a philosophy; the gem-like glow of immediate sensation took command of thought and action. When they tried to defend their positions, the Existentialists had to call in the methods of the disciplined intelligence that they had discarded in favor of their private obsessions. And when, in some cases, Christianity was too strong for their private confusion, they made a curious reconciliation: they gave bad reasons for good conclusions. But most Existentialists sought to rejoice in a mapless universe, having exchanged God for a moral chaos.

Existentialism, it is true, was in part a reaction against earlier errors. The glorified abstractions of Hegelian thought required a recall to living experience. But to throw away the sense of intellectual structure in order to rid one's self of unreal abstractions was a catastrophic mistake. Nowadays the large logic of the understanding and the authority of permanent moral sanctions must be restored to their just place, if life is to be worth living in the modern age.

For repudiation of the intellectual and moral past of the race must lead—unless checked—to the destruction of everything that gives life meaning and value. This modern disastrous repudiation has not been confined merely to circles of sophisticated intellectuals. It has entered into popular thought and action in an infinite variety of ways. The plain and reliable map of life which—despite his irony—Lucian desired so many centuries ago: this is precisely what the average man in the modern age desperately needs, but lacks. A freedom degenerated into anarchy leaves a man's mind confused, his conscience unstable, and his heart dissatisfied.

And therefore it is not surprising that conservatism is to have a new hearing among us.

Marxism, though purportedly leading men toward a just and comradely society, really is the apotheosis of private and public destruction. The compulsion which must be exercised in a state like Soviet Russia is death to the creative spirit. At its best, the Marxist society is mechanical and mathematical; at its worse, monstrously cruel. Utopia realized is Hell realized. In such a society, the streams of creative energy are lost in parched sands. For the tension between stability and freedom is destroyed by a new and hideous total stability: a stability founded on false assumptions concerning the nature of man.

Even in milder forms than Communism, the planned society has a way of becoming the dull society. Preoccupied with social formulas, man seeks in vain for the stuff of creative artistry. It is true that some features of planning exist in a good

society, quite as there are mathematical aspects in every well-rounded life. But if private or public life is really well rounded, social formulas must be servants, not masters. Social planning is not the be-all and end-all of life.

The intelligent conservative does not mistake formlessness for emancipation, as the Existentialist does; nor does he confound system with achievement, as the Marxist does. The conservative knows that in religion, truly understood, the creative spirit finds a support of immense value. At the very moment when religion sets about its task of sustaining the soul of civilization, religion also undertakes the work of nurturing the creative spirit. In religion, as in education, the test of truth is the power of those permanent principles which give motive to creative thought and creative act. Conservatism and creative energy belong together; they never can exist apart. Perhaps an understanding of this truth is the most pressing need of our bewildered age.