

# *This So-Called Modern Age*

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*The cult of Modernism lives by the illusion that life is an irreversible escalator.*

IF WORDS WERE GIVEN us to conceal our thoughts, they can also be used to avoid the painful process of thinking at all. Most successful politicians know how to take advantage of this. When the Sikhs were demanding independence from India, their leaders complained about nothing more bitterly than a law forbidding them to shout slogans. 'Slogans,' they said, enunciating a profound truth, 'are an important method of forming public opinion.' The Russians certainly agree with them. Every May Day a long list of appropriate slogans is issued from Moscow for the use of the faithful all over the world. The West is in no position to sneer. English politicians may be comparative amateurs, but from election slogans ('Fair shares for all!') to National Savings posters ('Ten Million People Can't Be Wrong!') they show themselves willing enough to use words for their emotional rather than their rational effect, to beg the question rather than to clarify it.

This is so notorious a feature of political language that it may soon defeat its own ends. Even the least sophisticated are beginning to translate 'We had a useful exchange of views' into 'We couldn't agree about anything', to notice a strange resemblance between ruthless terrorists and heroic resistance-workers, to recognize terms like 'great democratic leader' or

'Fascist hyena' as mere expressions of approval or disapproval, not really meant to convey descriptive information at all. The last twenty years have subjected our verbal currency to galloping inflation. New clichés become worthless almost as soon as coined, and a number of valuable concepts have been hopelessly debased. There is, after all, a quite legitimate manoeuvre known as 'a tactical withdrawal to prepared positions.' But in what words can a commander now plausibly describe it?

The art of practical politics, particularly in an age of ideological conflict, involves persuading people in the mass; and, as any advertising agent knows, this is best done by non-rational means. Thucydides explained long ago how words are liable to suffer a sea-change at such times. The manipulation of words by politicians is therefore understandable, if not exactly praiseworthy. It is much more deplorable when these emotive uses of language are carried over into what purport to be serious discussions of political, moral, or aesthetic principles. A sad number of apparently respectable judgments and arguments have been founded in every age on mere fashionable jargon; and the nature of that jargon is highly instructive for a student of the society which produced it.

One of the more significant jargon-groups of our own time is that dealing with our position in the process of history. 'Modern' and 'contemporary' are the most popular key words, but their peculiar usage needs to be understood in the light of more general ideas about 'progress.'

Far too many people who should know better still use the words 'progressive' and 'reactionary' as though they had a clear ob-

jective meaning. This is usually a dodge to avoid awkward questions. Unless we know where I came from and where I am going to, the mere statement 'I am progressing' has a purely emotional use permitting of no rational discussion. If I happen to have started in the wrong direction, the only progressive route will be backwards. Among the tributes paid to a public figure who died recently was this simple eulogy: 'He believed in progress.' Everyone seemed quite satisfied that this was a compliment, but what on earth did it mean? 'Believed in' presumably means 'trusted', 'approved of.' 'Progress' presumably means 'change for the better.' If the sentence means that he thought every change a change for the better and therefore approved of it, it says little for his discrimination. If it means he approved of those changes which were changes for the better, it becomes purely tautologous and seems hardly worth saying. The real point of the sentence is that it avoids all dangerous commitment on the subject of what changes the man did think changes for the better. There could be no disagreement because the mind was given nothing to bite on.

This blanket idea of progress as something vague, undefined, but always going on, colours much of our thinking. It reveals itself in remarks made by people who would firmly disavow it as a philosophic or historical concept. It is a legacy from the shattered theory of inevitable human advancement. That this theory is shattered few people would deny. How many of us, looking in the mirror, really believe that our own noble selves embody all the finest aspirations of our ancestors? How many of us feel confident that, even if our civilization escapes disaster, the future must certainly be better than the past? The mental foundations which are needed to make 'progress' an agreed and relatively meaningful term no longer exist and perhaps never did exist: but the implications of the word survive with an unhealthy life of their own.

These implications have been further

supported by a mere mechanical analogy, born in the nineteenth century—that age of great engineers—but by no means uncongenial to the twentieth. There is a strict sense in which mechanical sciences do progress. Each new machine is an improvement on the last: that is to say, it does more or does the same thing more efficiently than its predecessors. But this truth about machines cannot be transferred to politics or theology or morals or poetry: only an age as materialistic as ours could be deceived into thinking it might be.

This false analogy produces strange lines of argument. You see them in every newspaper applied to all kinds of subjects. 'The Church should have a more up-to-date attitude towards marriage': which only makes sense if you assume that a change in the prevailing attitude towards marriage is necessarily a change for the better, thereby implying that the Church's unchanged attitude must be wrong. 'The world is not listening to the theologians to-day—they have no message for it': which implies that when people stop paying attention to a set of propositions, those propositions are thereby shown to be untrue, for theological propositions if true can hardly be called irrelevant. 'The distribution of naval prize-money is an anachronism and will not take place again': the fact of its being an anachronism evidently saves us the trouble of deciding whether it also happens to be a good thing. 'Out of date ideas' and 'out-worn dogmas' are ten a penny. I've often wondered how a dogma wears out: from too much use like an old shoe?

The same fallacy is woven into much of popular history. In school text-books, documentary broadcasts, and magazine articles there is usually an underlying assumption that to say which side won is to say something about which side ought to have won. In a generation which has seen what we have seen, this attitude is dismaying, but the simplest experiment proves it. Anyone to-day who announces his disapproval of votes for women or the repeal of the combination laws is more likely to be told he is

out of date than answered with arguments, a kind of trial by ordeal which is surely no compliment to the suffragettes or the trade unionists. The questions may have been permanently settled, but most of the arguments remain, neither better nor worse than they were when the issue was still in doubt.

The 'progressive' fallacy is flattering and comfortable: it appeals to our laziness of mind. We therefore build myths which support it. Where our ancestors looked back to some lost paradise, we look forward to some utopian future. When the Romans used the word 'priscus' they meant it as a term of praise, signifying the nobler fashions of an older day. When we use the term 'old-fashioned' we mean it to be pejorative. Our form of compliment is to call a thing 'modern.' In popular usage, especially popular commercial usage, modernity is not only considered desirable, but an infallible proof that the thing concerned is the best available.

An article by that well-known British radio and television 'personality', Mr. Wilfred Pickles, provides a remarkable example of this. After reading the letters of Robert Louis Stevenson, Mr. Pickles says, he realized 'what a lot we are missing in this so-called modern age.' 'So-called modern age' is a pregnant phrase indeed, but poor Mr. Pickles was driven to it. He regards 'modern' as a term of unhesitating praise. When he wishes to say something derogatory about the age in which we live, he cannot therefore call it modern: but in ordinary speech the age in which we live would clearly be called modern. He solves his dilemma by casting doubt not on the essential goodness of modernity but on the essential modernity of the age. Words stand prettily on their heads, but Mr. Pickles knows his readers will understand exactly what he means.

It would be naive to claim that 'modern' should mean neither more nor less than its dictionary definition—'of the present time.' In practice, 'modern' and its sister word 'contemporary' are used to mean some-

thing much more limited but almost as precise. When I talk about 'modern philosophy', everyone knows what I mean, even though Thomists and idealists continue to exist at the present time. When I talk about 'contemporary furniture' no one thinks I mean to include the deep leather armchairs and imitation Chippendale which are still being made.

As descriptive adjectives these are useful enough: unfortunately they carry with them those evaluative implications which confuse so much thinking about 'progress' through time. 'Modern' and 'contemporary' have become terms of praise. 'The modern trend' takes on a sinister resemblance to 'all right-thinking men'. 'Contemporary taste' comes to mean something very like 'what the experts say.' And a label-loving public rejoices at being saved the trouble of making up its own mind.

Once begged, the question is turned into a rule: 'One must be contemporary.' Why must one be contemporary? Because, whatever the charm of previous styles, the only good work which can be produced now must be in contemporary styles on a contemporary theme. The artist needs roots in his own time.

Contemporary themes are strangely limited. At first glance, one might suppose that such subjects as young love or spring or simple piety must always be contemporary; but that isn't enough. A poet who wrote in the fashion of 'Maud' or 'The Hounds of Spring' or 'Hymns Ancient and Modern' would not be contemporary. Contemporaneity involves a negative condition: it implies something which definitely could or would not have been done by a previous generation. This comes out most clearly in the talk of architects, those keen admirers of modernity. 'We must use contemporary materials,' they say, and among contemporary materials they do not include materials such as wood or brick or straw thatch which are only contemporary in the naive sense of being still available at the present time. The materials they mean are such things as concrete, plastics,

glass, and steel. This is apt to produce a circular argument. Architects must use certain materials because they are contemporary and these materials are called contemporary because modern architects are using them. There is, of course, another reason for using such contemporary materials: they tend to be cheaper. Like Britain's defence cuts, the ubiquity of contemporary materials would sometimes be more acceptable if it were presented frankly as an economy instead of being justified on the ground of their peculiar beauty or suitability to the *zeitgeist*.

An odd example of architects' dogma was provided by *The Architectural Review* in the captions beneath two photographs of mock-Tudor houses. One of the houses was merely pathetic—imitation beams painted on whitewash: the other was well built and might almost have passed for genuine Elizabethan. But strange as it may seem, *The Architectural Review* preferred the first house to the second. The reason apparently was that the second house, being a better piece of mock-Tudor, was therefore considered the more damnable, much as a competent burglar might be considered more dangerous than a clumsy one.

When pressed to explain further, the modernist usually says that 'contemporary' materials and 'contemporary' styles are the only natural ones for a contemporary craftsman. If he goes outside them, he can only be copying. This is an argument which needs a good deal more foundation than it is normally given. Why should it be more natural and less imitative for a modern architect to work in the concrete shoe-box style rather than the Stockbrokers' Tudor style? Why should it be better for a new playwright to model himself on Mr. John Osborne than on Sir Arthur Pinero? Why is it ever less possible to do original work in one style than in another?

This note of arrogance underlies much of the 'progressive' jargon. The modernists take it for granted that all right-

minded persons or at least all young right-minded persons (for they have little confidence in the right-mindedness of the old) must agree with them.

To take a mild example from an eminently respectable source, here is an extract from the publicity issued by the Victoria and Albert Museum when the new windows for Coventry Cathedral were being exhibited there:

'The artists have broken right away from the representational style of so much stained glass, and have abandoned false ideas of transparent picture making and pale piety, for glowing semi-abstract panels which they consider to be as appropriate to the age as the Cathedral itself. These may well prove controversial, but the individual artist in stained glass can receive nothing but encouragement from this great contemporary expression of his craft.'

The metaphysical thesis that glowing semi-abstract panels are in some mysterious way 'appropriate' to the age is surely not so self-evident that the assent of every other artist in stained glass can be presumed. An individual artist who happened to like transparent picture making might surely find this great contemporary expression of his craft extremely discouraging.

The same kind of thing is very frequently said about poetry. The editor of a recent anthology of English verse, for instance, was praised because 'his taste is genuinely contemporary' and will therefore 'make contact especially with young people.' Although 'contemporary' in this sense is meant as and understood to be a limiting descriptive label, the possibility is never entertained that young people might not have 'contemporary' tastes.

Mr. Kenneth Tynan, in his review of *Look Back in Anger*, carried this assumption to its ultimate ridiculous limit. 'I agree,' he said, 'that *Look Back in Anger* is likely to remain a minority taste. What matters, however, is the size of the minority. I estimate it at roughly 6,733,000, which is the number of people in this

country between the ages of twenty and thirty.' And that, as Euclid would say, is absurd.

Absurd but not unusual. Too many people have been claiming to 'speak for their generation': newspapers, radio and television encourage them to do so. Apart from the intrinsic improbability of supposing that any one person represents the tastes and views of an arbitrarily selected quarter of the adult population, these self-appointed spokesmen are rather unsuitable even to make the attempt. According to the fashionable theory, they have to be in revolt against something. This is convenient for journalists who like to find clear-cut disagreements dividing one generation from another but it happens to be the reverse of the truth. If anything, young people have a tendency to conservatism. Unconventional behaviour is more embarrassing to them than to their elders. There is a powerful sociological play to be written about a family in which the younger members are desperately trying to restrain their parents from making wild, radical innovations.

Our present batch of angry young men may be only a temporary phenomenon, but the theory behind them is always with us and always inimical to rational argument. By maintaining the fiction that each new generation is pressing forward to a better world beyond the vision of its purblind elders, it excuses the distinctive work of that generation from the possibility of criticism or the need of defence. Whenever a poet writes particularly incomprehensible verse, or a painter makes pictures which the uninitiated think ugly, there is always someone to blame the public rather than the artist. 'Genius often goes unrecognised in its own time,' we are told. 'This artist cannot be judged by traditional standards.' It does certainly happen (though not as often as some people would have us suppose) that work which was ridiculed when it first appeared comes to be recognised later as having great merit. But in practice this is a possibility which

has to be ignored if there are to be any standards of judgement at all. Every hack writer could otherwise say without fear of contradiction: 'You may not like my poems; but in fifty years' time I shall be recognized as being greater than Shakespeare.' Anyone who felt like disposing of a tiresome relation could fall back on an unanswerable ethical position: 'You may think murder immoral; but this is really the higher morality, the morality of the future. In fifty years' time everyone will agree with me.'

Human judgements are fallible and liable to be reversed, but human beings must act on the assumption that their judgements are correct. If our descendants do disagree with us, it by no means follows that they will disagree in a 'progressive' direction. They are just as likely to laugh at us and agree with our great-grandparents. The critic who recently condemned a poet because 'he did not advance poetry at all' was simply confusing mechanical with non-mechanical arts.

This mechanical metaphor has worked itself very deep into the fabric of our thought. It engenders a picture of human life as a kind of irreversible escalator with standards of behaviour and critical values taking the place of advertisements on the wall. The higher you go up the escalator, the more beautiful and truthful the advertisements become. The young are always looking ahead, but as they grow older their gaze is steadily drawn backwards.

As a historical or philosophic theory, this has even less validity than the social contract theory; but, like the social contract theory, it seems to be attractive and has had far-reaching effects. It protects the sham and encourages unreasoned judgements. It is less healthy than the backward-looking philosophy of the ancients because it flatters our self-esteem and blunts our capacity for self-criticism. Worst of all, it betrays every right principle by suggesting the pernicious doctrine that 'we must move with the times', whether the times be bad or good.