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Matthew McManus

The Rise of Post-Modern Conservatism

Neoliberalism, Post-Modern Culture,
and Reactionary Politics

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Dedicated to Marion Nadezhna Trejo with love.

FOREWORD

The expected mark of competent books, articles, or introductions concerning post-modernism is an opening set of cautions, qualifiers, and anticipatory retreats from definition. Post-modernism after all, has long been a witching term, and one that undoubtedly calls for such lists. It is, conversely, a mark of ignorance to use it too boldly, or to deploy it without restraint. Much like other relics pillaged from the shrines of academic discourse—words like *culture* and *ideology*—*postmodernism* is no longer the sole possession of specialists; today it is rather more portentous. Rather than perform the usual rites, I suggest that the reader pretend to have found all required provisions here, such that I may go on to spin other yarn.

In this volume, Matthew McManus dissects the forked tongue of post-modernism while extending the definition to recent phenomena, particularly its deployment as rhetorical strategy by nationalists. Although the term was once limited in association to Parisian academics, McManus demonstrates its aptitude in describing the contemporary trolls of neoliberalism—Brexiters and Eurosceptics, xenophobic nationalists, and brazen politicians who refuse to be cowed by political correctness. How then did a pathogen cooked up in the lecture halls of Paris 8 come to contaminate the spiritual aquifers of rural Kentucky? What is the connection between “deconstruction” and the erection of a massive fence in the Great Hungarian Plain?

The connection between the two is thoroughly examined by McManus in the following pages, and while I shall defer most of the discussion to the author, there's one particular similarity worth emphasizing, even when comparing narratives as dissimilar as those of UKIP on the one hand and the 60s' post-structuralists on the other. First, their identities are defined by the transgression and disruption of a particular, local status quo. Second, this disruption has a distinctly narrative structure.

In some cases, post-modern transgressions are gleeful and satiric, exemplified by political animals like Roger Stone. In other cases it comes with bereavement, as in the later reflections of Jean Baudrillard. Of course transgression alone is by no means a criterion of the post-modern. As McManus argues, it is "profitable and edifying to examine post-modernism as a culture which has emerged in tandem with the neoliberal societies of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries" (78). If we should, with McManus, label it a culture, it is then a culture of disruption. More than that, as I shall argue here, it is a disruption of a history as inherited by particular politics. My method in this introduction is thus a historiography of such disruptions in the post-modern genre, a narrative of rising action whose climax remains to be seen.

Whereas *news* is rhetoric of the present, *history* is rhetoric of the past. The quiet correlate of *fake news* (the 2017 Word of the Year, according to the American Dialect Society) is *fake history*, which has perhaps not yet received the analysis it is due. In this context *history* is an imagined but contentious territory, an absent object of appeal and desire. Nationalists, for their part, often use history as a store for pernicious rhetoric—the Third Reich was the *third*. This is no *reductio ad hitlerum*. Of course, these three events are not even superficially symmetrical, but the wanton heroism of nationalists is nothing if not self-serving. For their parts, Marine Le Pen and her party eagerly solicit comparisons with Joan of Arc, and thus any critical responses may be rendered as further persecution of the Lord's unassuming instrument. Elsewhere still we hear the pangs of nostalgia echoing in slogans like *Make America Great Again*, as the past becomes a sort of guarantor of right action (political correctness is the *true* slavery). History here is strapped to the Procrustean beds of malapert sloganeers, their truths are appeals to imagined worlds, story worlds—the rites of ancestor worship for ancestors who never lived.

Here we must draw the distinction between two fundamentally incommensurable conservative narratives. There is, on one hand, the rhetorical veneration of “Western values.” This is usually presented as an appeal to the greatness of the Western tradition as the progeny of Jerusalem and Athens, to both the moral authority and universal desirability of Judeo-Christian values. More often than not, these are invocations used to defend the status quo from a perceived threat. The most popular personae of the “Intellectual Dark Web,” Jordan Peterson and Ben Shapiro, defend their Western values by deriding and antagonising leftists, liberals, neo-Marxists, post-modernists, identity politics, and whomever else is conspiring against liberal democracy on any given day (and McManus examines these claims and others more thoroughly at the end of Chapter 1). For the most part, these “provocateurs” theorise from the perspective of *Intro to Political Philosophy 101*, and only faintly echo the sources of their conservative slogans. For example, arguing over which “-ism” is the greatest danger to free speech on YouTube is a far cry from Leo Strauss’s plea for a liberal education which “consists in the constant intercourse with the greatest minds, [and] is a training in the highest form of modesty.”¹ Although eulogies to “Judeo-Christian morality” can be criticised for various forms of Eurocentric historiographical naiveté, this veneration of *The Great Tradition* is at least partially justified—if poorly argued—in the telling title: *The Right Side of History: How Reason and Moral Purpose Made the West Great*. This position is conservative, and yet remains rooted in the historical sense.

The second conservative narrative, post-modern conservatism, abandons the pretences of the historical sense, and if these figures can be said to make any arguments at all, they are the emotionally charged invocations of pithy conflicts, martyr complexes, and mythological explanations of what can be done to bring chaos to heel. History, here, is not Cicero who comes to guide us through the hell of mass culture (as it was for Strauss and other Western values apologists), but the ascendancy of heroes in cosmological conflicts. The post-modern conservative narrative resembles a theogony replete with nefarious titans—such as the mainstream media, globalist elites, Islam, the deep state—which are faced by salvific heroes: politicians like Wilders, the self-proclaimed reincarnation

¹Leo Strauss. “What Is Liberal Education?” In *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays* by Leo Strauss, ed. H. Giddin (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1989) at pg 319.

of Charles Martel; Le Pen, the spiritual descendent of Joan of Arc; Steve Bannon has compared himself to Napoleon, and Trump's proudest moment seems to have been the slaying of the mighty gorgon, Hillary, in 2016. Tellingly, they appeal not to ideas, but to war heroes—the *winners* of grand-scale civilisational conflicts in which the *Volk* triumphed (so you have heard it said). Unsurprisingly, they defend monuments and narrative as sources of Western identity in lieu of values. Post-modern conservatives in this context are Nietzschean mythmakers, beyond good and evil, and the historical sense Strauss appealed to is deposed.

Among the Europe's anti-immigration nationalists, the defence of something like Christendom from the unholy alliance of the secular globalist elites and the invasion of North African or Middle-Eastern Muslims is a rallying cry. Here Christendom is, narratively speaking, the gilded figure of primordial unity, one now under threat. The decline of these bonds, according to Benedict Anderson's account of nationalist *imagined communities*, "drove a harsh wedge between cosmology and history. No surprise then that the search was on, so to speak, for a new way of linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together" (36).² Post-modern conservatism accomplishes this linking with myths. Although most of Anderson's account of nationalism deals with the advent of nationalisms—both right and left—in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we can observe the schism here between those conservatives who appeal to values, and conservatives who appeal to conflict; the latter thumbs its nose at contingency and historical fact, opting instead for a reunification between fraternity, power, and time. It's odd to see the return of the mythology of Christendom in the post-truth era. As McManus notes in his second chapter, conservatives, such as the Bushes, "occasionally flirted with traditionalist language, and were ... vocal in pushing for the advancement of ethno-cultural projects. But by and large globalization carried on unabated, the liberalization of culture advanced with increasing rapidity, and nationalist rhetoric fell by the wayside" (86). Flirtation is an apt description here, for while the Bush admins may have used terms like "crusade" to denote their political and military goals, these were structured as arguments based on testable evidence (in principle, if not in practice). Even if evidence was fabricated, and even if the administration lied, their lies at least held to the structure of

²Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: Verso, 1991).

consensual truth, there, in the world. Post-modern conservatism on the other hand disregards even the structural appearance of truth—for example, this crowd “was the largest audience ever to witness an inauguration, period”—and conservative narratives of the anti-immigration, nationalist genre seek to disrupt this specific contingency, and to replace it with *Volk* mythology, a forgotten class now marching under the banners of reincarnate heroes. It is this distinction that lies at the heart of McManus’ analyses of post-modern conservatism.

Of course, mythological narratives and imagined communities are *eo ipso* neither post-modern nor conservative. However, if Enlightenment political philosophy (in its Kantian genre at least) were definitive, we should be surprised to see that the West, made great by reason and moral purpose (according to Ben Shapiro) today harbours such a reinvigorated mythos post-disenchantment of the world by modern science. This is where we find the other side of the post-modern coin that of the post-war left. Under the auspices of postmodern critique, it may be the case that we had too much faith in Western rationality to begin with; according to Nietzsche, Western rationalism is yet another story (albeit the most efficacious story ever told). Similarly Max Horkheimer, after Germany’s great lapse into the tribal mythology of Nazism, argued that the definition of human as a rational individual, proved unable to survive the disruptions of the modern world; the result is that “the illusion that traditional philosophy has cherished about the individual and about reason—the illusion of their eternity—is being dispelled” (87).³ The Petersons of our political landscape blame “postmodernism” for this development, but the return to tribal mythologies is a symptom which was already diagnosed by post-modern theorists, which originates in Western rationality’s self-*méconnaissance*.

Jacques Derrida, for example, is a horseman of post-modernism. His critique of Hegel’s historical realisation of concepts informs doubts about the inevitability of reason in history because Hegel relies on certain suppressions of the way meaning actually functions for peoples and traditions. Not that Hegel’s historiography is incoherent, but that it is made coherent by the articulation, which is actually a misrecognition of rather unstable elements (though this misrecognition has, with some exception, been very useful to “the West”). Derrida writes that

³Max Horkheimer. *Eclipse of Reason* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2004).

“the passage through the certitude of oneself and through lordship as the independence of self-consciousness was itself a phase of play...and includes them not in terms of knowledge, but in terms of inscription; meaning is a function of play” (260).⁴ The un-self-conscious effect then, is that Hegel’s notion of self-consciousness depends upon the very recognition he seeks to lay out in his historiography: “freedom” is a mode of interpretation, and for Derrida, “Hegel’s own interpretation can be reinterpreted against him” (260).⁵ While it is a common false claim that post-modernism reduces all narratives to the same level of arbitrary play, it does introduce a certain cynicism into all narratives, which is to say all histories.

Hegelian histories always give reason a chance, and thus, faith can be maintained even in the bleakest times. After all, Minerva’s owl flies at dusk. Not everyone agrees in the model for this development, however. In 1988 (several years before he would commit suicide), Guy Debord wrote a short book looking back on his 1967 *Society of the Spectacle*. Like Derrida, the means of inscription, which is to say the medium of history, is indelible to its meaning. For Debord, narrative connects history to politics. He writes (in the past tense) that “history’s domain was the memorable, the totality of events whose consequences would be lastingly apparent. And thus, inseparably, history was knowledge that should endure and aid in understanding, at least in part, what was to come: ‘an everlasting possession,’ according to Thucydides.”⁶ History, Debord suggests, was eradicated by mass media, which produce only an “eternity of noisy insignificance” in a deluge of images, sounds, and slogans.⁷ This deluge has also destroyed politics, or in his more polemical metre: “in Greece history and democracy entered the world at the same time. We can prove that their disappearances have also been simultaneous” (20). The extent to which such lamentation is warranted is a matter of perspective. However, it opens onto a number of topics relevant

⁴Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

⁵Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

⁶Guy Debord. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (New York, NY: Verso, 1998) at pg 15.

⁷Guy Debord. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (New York, NY: Verso, 1998).

to a discussion of post-modern conservatism, namely: the disruption of a particular experience of time, or the historical sense; the role of mass media in this disruption; and the portentous effects of these shifts on politics. At last, we are getting to something of a thesis here. The advent of post-modern conservatism and the attenuation of the historical sense is something somehow related to an environment of communication, rather than a condition of an amorphous territory of “thought.”

THE HISTORICAL SENSE

History, in Debord’s perhaps rosy estimation, was *once* a measure of the importance of events, until it was annihilated by spectacle. It was something we held in common, and for that reason it was a source of collective wisdom required for grand narratives, but also for the realisation of ideals or long-term goals. In contrast, “When the spectacle stops talking about something for three days, it is as if it did not exist. For it has then gone on to talk about something else.”⁸ The Hegelian territory of the “world of learning,” which believes that history deserves to be known, wears ever thinner when knowledge participates in spectacle only as “breaking news” laden with gossip, opinion, and a general disregard for the historical sense espoused by traditional conservatives. Post-modern conservatism and its imagined ego cults depend in no small part upon pithy slogans, the appropriation of history through symbols, transgression for its own sake, and disinformation. Although it does not create these conditions, it is proving to have new vitality within them. Under such conditions, we have to once again dust-off the settled arguments that Enlightenment writers like J.S. Mill, Kant, and the Federalists laid out against intolerance, the dangers of self-incurred tutelage, and the susceptibility of the masses to demagoguery.

The historical sense provides narrative continuity for individual and social identities; we might call it “rootedness.” Nietzsche for his part sought a reinvigoration of a historical sense, on the condition that it offers energy for life: “History belongs to the preserving and revering of the soul...by tending with loving hands what has long survived [one]

⁸Guy Debord. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (New York, NY: Verso, 1998) at pg 20.

intends to preserve the conditions in which he grew up for those that will come after him—and so he serves life.”⁹ There are, for Nietzsche, three types of history, and each can be used to preserve or destroy a collective *élan vital*. Already in 1875, Nietzsche argued that modern history had grown harmful. Intellectuals gorged on knowledge for its own sake, and did not properly narrativise it in service to life: “Our modern culture is nothing living just because it cannot be understood at all without opposition, that is: it is no real culture at all, but only a kind of knowledge about culture, it stops at cultured thoughts and feelings but leads to no cultured decisions” (24). This provides something of an impetus for the advent of post-modern reactions: there was too much history or an *inevitable* history, without enough *story*. Together the whiggish heralding of a globalist, neoliberal status quo has made life stale, and some tragic hero or artist would inevitably arrive to shake it up—the dialectical return of heroes, martyrs, and the clash of civilisations.

Post-modernism of the Derridean genre, with an energy derived from disruption, is critical history, and the critical historian “must have the strength, and use it from time to time, to shatter and dissolve something to enable him to live” (20).¹⁰ There are risks to such critical-mindedness as well, as Nietzsche notes, once the “past is considered critically...one puts the knife to its roots, then one cruelly treads all pieties under foot. It is always a dangerous process, namely dangerous for life itself: and men or ages which serve life in this manner of judging and annihilating a past are always dangerous and endangered men and ages” (22). Like Derrida, post-modern conservatives are also a symptom of a critical age, however reductive, inane, intolerant, and stupid—by any inherited methodological standard we may hold them to—they nonetheless do offer renewed vitality in politics.

In Charles Taylor’s estimation, which McManus rearticulates throughout Chapter 2, histories are part of a social imaginary, a local milieu of identities and narratives which play a role in subjects’ general sense of the possibilities of the future, both in terms of individual agency and social change, that is, an imagined community.¹¹ Taylor uses the concept

⁹Friedrich Nietzsche. *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1980) at pg 19.

¹⁰Friedrich Nietzsche. *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1980).

¹¹Charles Taylor. *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

of social imaginaries as means of comparing historically or geographically dissimilar societies. It describes a pre-theoretical self-understanding (146), or the affordances and limits of identity formation. He summarises the social imaginary as “the ways in which [people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations” (171). The *imaginary* aspect of history is a “matter of identity,” particularly “the contextual limits to the imagination of the self—and of the social imaginary: the ways we are able to think or imagine the whole of society” (156), including its future. While critical history sets out to deconstruct harmful biases of a tradition, the broader purpose of social imaginaries concerns the construction of identities, which is particularly relevant during periods of rapid disruption—like the one in which we find ourselves. As Debord argues, this disruption is in part technological, and influenced by the play of images, but at bottom *identity requires a story*.

There is an implied communality and constructivism in the social imaginary postulate. It refers to a general milieu; a constellation of narratives, images, concerns and anxieties that together shape the boundaries of identity-formation by social situations. Each represents a future coming into focus—one in which we are as yet unsure of our place. Post-modern conservative apparatuses cast their followers in unambiguous roles:

1. We are to follow them into transgressing the rules of political correctness
2. We shall charge them to take back the land from the bureaucrats and political elite
3. We shall support their purification of the land, purging illegals and Muslims and
4. Support their defence of the land with walls, both procedural (for immigration) and physical.

There is no ambiguity to such plans. They are not open to rational, discursive analysis or argumentation—all of that business takes too long anyway, and cannot be sustained in our communication environment today.

I argue with Debord that the destruction of the historical sense is an event brought about by the medium of history and a shift in

historiographical communication. In our context, social media has wrought the disruption. Just as the wide geographic success of Nazi nationalism would be unthinkable without affordable radios as *Volksprodukte*, it is difficult to imagine the success of post-modern conservatism in our age without the filter bubbles of social media. *All* conservative demagogues and social media celebrities can now speak directly to their followers, and all of the followers of such narratives can retreat to private enclaves beyond the public sphere, as McManus argues in Chapter 1. From a theoretical perspective, what we observe here is a technological disruption of the historical sense, which is based in literacy, by anti-historical digital media: feed-based social media attempt to replace the past as quickly as possible with the latest scandal, the newest story, and breaking news. McManus correctly notes that

attempts to argue against the vulgarity of his mannerism or the cruelty of Trumpian policies were ineffective, since the mediums used to promote Trumpism were unamenable to such literate forms of dispute. They were drowned out in the sensationalism of hyper-partisanship and spectacular political entertainment.

Post-modern conservatism is as much a media event as a political one, something their political opponents seem not yet to have grasped to the same degree. Feed-based media thrive where there is rapid feedback, an over-indexation on image instead of long-winded argumentation, and appeal to the hot immediacy of the present.

Let us briefly evaluate the relationship between the historical sense and media, and why it seems incommensurable to return to the cool, gentlemanly, discursive space of the common public sphere. The disappearance of the historical sense as that which provides ethical consensus is at issue here, yet the capacity to manipulate opinion with media, especially opinion that can be converted into legislative power, has always been a goal of political agents. Even before Facebook was accessible by the general public in 2006, the *New York Times* reported that “while the Internet is efficient at reaching supporters, who tend to visit and linger at political sites, it has proved to be much less effective at swaying voters who are not interested in politics,” and quoted a campaign advisor as saying “The Holy Grail that everybody is looking for right now is how can you use the Internet for persuasion.”¹²

¹²Adam Nagourney. “Politics Faces Sweeping Changes Via the Web.” *The New York Times*, April 2, 2006. www.nytimes.com/2006/04/02/washington/politics-faces-sweeping-change-via-the-web.html.

Feed-based social media are this Holy Grail: the recommended videos of YouTube, the Twitter feed, and Facebook's News Feed create entire worlds of content based on what individual users already want to believe. As many alarmed journalists note, a consequence of the efficacy of automated reactions to content is the threat of popularising false or misleading information, for content need not be *true* for its visibility to be increased either by humans, bots, or inorganic manipulation (including buying reactions or followers). "True" here is defined as a corroborated consensus (coincidentally, "consensus" resembles a social contract, a general will, as what a community considers *true* is relatively stable through time). That is, information can be validated outside the system. However, in an ecology defined by the Facebook News Feed, exaggerations or even intentional falsehoods are likely to be *more* seductive than the truth, and thus are likely to be ranked higher. Filter bubbles generate communication circuits—and in-group narratives—that are virtually impervious to correction from the public sphere.

The displacement of corroboration as an informational procedure is a direct result of the affordances of social media and its algorithms, which certainly do not promote the progressive emergence of self-conscious history. Instead scandal, conflict, violence, and other norm-deviant behaviour are much more likely to become normalised: social feeds resemble offline reality less and less over time. Reactionary politics, the proliferation of strange conspiracy theories, and weird lies are incentivised more than carefully considered (i.e., time-consuming) argumentation—character limits reinforce this trend. As post-modern conservative politicians have realised better than their neoliberal counterparts, the primary goal of feed-based social media is return traffic, not a rational or historically sensible user base. These behaviours are considered dangerous to some because they threaten the Enlightenment values at the heart of status quo political institutions, and it is precisely this status quo that has failed from the post-modern conservative perspective. Truth is rather less important than popularity. The result has been something of a moral panic over the disruption of norms, as well as a breeding ground for trolling, hyperbole, tribalism, and reactionary politics—a media environment in which post-modern narratives thrive, if only for their unambiguous distinctions and sloganised simplicity.

Rewarding reaction rather than responsibility generates the conditions for widespread behaviours of actors who "game" the system, viz. the spread of false and misleading information. The virtual indifference of the social media platforms to truth resulted in much speculation

over the role of Facebook's News Feed in the outcome of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. In the post-election weeks, articles appeared online such as *The Guardian's* "Facebook's failure: did fake news and polarised politics get Trump elected?,"¹³ and *Wired's* "Here's How Facebook Actually Won Trump the Presidency."¹⁴ These articles argue that Facebook not only "helped generate the bulk of the campaign's \$250 million in online fundraising" (Lapowsky), but also that "the bitter polarization of the social network over the last eighteen months suggests Facebook is actually doing more to divide the world" (Solon). The following year, *The Atlantic* published the article "What Facebook Did to American Democracy" which claims "that the very roots of the electoral system—the news people see, the events they think happened, the information they digest—had been destabilized."¹⁵ Each of these articles argues that, in the months leading up to the 2016 Presidential Election, there was a widespread circulation of patently fake news and conspiracy theories on Facebook: ranging from the conceivable falsehood that the Pope had endorsed Donald Trump, to the bizarre story that Hillary Clinton was involved in a child sex ring in the basement of a pizza shop (known as pizzagate). The summary case made by these journalists is that the very basis of democratic institutions may be fundamentally undermined by the operations of feed-based social media platforms. Beyond fake news and conspiracy theories, even those stories that are contrary to the goals of particular communities could be pushed out of visibility by strategic downvoting by automated programs. The capacity to influence communication on this scale is an indirect cause of the incommensurability of the historical sense with our changing media ecology, as online social media makes all information suspect, in principle.

Now forced to compete with the information value of social media systems, even established broadcast news corporations are compelled to find ways to artificially increase the seduction value of their content—this

¹³Olivia Solon. "Facebook's Failure: Did Fake News And Polarized Politics Get Trump Elected." *The Guardian*, November 10, 2016 www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/nov/10/facebook-fake-news-election-conspiracy-theories.

¹⁴Issie Lapowsky. "Here's How Facebook Actually Won Trump The Election." *Wired*, November 15, 2016 www.wired.com/2016/11/facebook-won-trump-election-not-just-fake-news/.

¹⁵Alexis C. Madrigal. "What Facebook Did to American Democracy." *The Atlantic*, October 12, 2017. www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/10/what-facebook-did/542502/.

includes airing post-modern conservative narratives. Everyone must play the same game, or be condemned to invisibility. They maintain a figurative veracity through the traditional tenets of journalistic integrity, while working around it with numerous strategies, such as hosting talking heads with deviant viewpoints to express their opinions—with the disclaimer that they do not reflect the viewpoints of the organisation—op-eds, expert panels, and debates abound as news, a hyperreality. In effect, postmodern conservatism is legitimised, as mouthpieces like Stephen Miller, Kellyanne Conway, and Sarah Huckabee Sanders are invited to present “their side of the story.” Concurrently, these debates and bad-faith obfuscations are *themselves* news. In this media ecology, events are replaced with opinions *about* events, and the most compelling narrative wins the day, as in the sophists’ symposia.

This is not a case of a few bad actors telling stories, rather, it signals the return of the effectiveness of narrative at a grand scale; it was for this potency that Socrates banished mythmakers, the poets, from the republic of philosophy long ago. For the character of Socrates, myth and poetry are threats to the stability of both the soul of man and the society in which he lives. The tenth book of *Republic* opens with Socrates’ statement: “of the many excellences which I perceive in the order of our State, there is none which upon reflection pleases me better than the rule about poetry... [that is] our refusal to admit the imitative kind of poetry, for it certainly ought not to be received.”¹⁶ Socrates ensures his partner in dialogue that he does not wish to expel the poet simply because he does not enjoy poetry, for even he has an “awe and love of Homer.”¹⁷ Rather, he suggests it is necessary because “a man is not to be revered more than the truth.”¹⁸ If the poet and the passions he inspires are not directly supervised by reason, represented by the philosopher-king caste, it is preferable to banish the poet from civil life altogether.¹⁹ In the post-modern conservatives, who certainly revere their leaders and mythmakers more than truth, we find the

¹⁶Plato. “The Republic, Book X.” *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Matins, 2007) at pg 30.

¹⁷Plato. “The Republic, Book X.” *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Matins, 2007).

¹⁸Plato, “The Republic, Book X.” *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Matins, 2007).

¹⁹Plato, “The Republic, Book X.” *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Matins, 2007) at pg 37.

fulfilment of that which Nietzsche hoped for (or its obscene inversion): the reversion of Platonic metaphysics and the dawn of new myths.

Post-modern conservatism figures as incredulity towards metanarratives: the narrative of globalists, that neoliberalism will forever be the only game around, or that an ambience of tolerance and respect should rule in society. As opposed to more traditional conservative voices, they withdraw from the story that “the West is best,” replacing it with simpler “the West is us.” A rift opens between cause and effect, what was once and is again filled by the yarns of tribal elders and the poets Socrates banished. Heroes once again tame the primeval chaos, as the Hegelian wheel turns over once again. This disruption is political on its face, and technological in its mouth, but its beating heart is the age-old conflict over the historical sense, and that is what is at stake today. For the historical sense, there has always been weal and woe, and whether it shall survive the present moment remains to be seen.

Writing for the tempered intellectual class, McManus offers progressives something of a genealogy, a cross-disciplinary narrative with no shortage of evidence both from history and the contemporary news media. This history explains how we arrived here, and charts where we may now go to put this *panikon deima* behind us. Progressive liberalism, for its part, also writes narratives, and the writing of this book, it seems to me, is propelled by a deep respect for historical sensibility. McManus concludes with something of unctio for progressives who want to challenge the rise of post-modern conservatism which is mainly to “support policies which will garner the public greater opportunities to make meaningful deliberations and decisions” (293). Phrased another way, he suggests something akin to guaranteeing individuals some narrative control in political processes, such that they do not need to turn to the latest self-proclaimed reincarnation of St. George to war on their behalf. Another of McManus’ suggestions is also a plea for narrative, noting that “the EU lacks a distinct political culture and recognizable participatory institutions which enable citizens to feel involved in the project...Shifting this should be a special priority for progressives” (294). Once more, it seems that the way to compete with the trolls who stamp on the historical sense is not to provide more reasons, but to tell better stories, stories that do provide both responsible history and, thereby, a direction for the future.

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Toronto, Canada

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