
George A. Panichas *Conservator Extraordinaire*

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Restoring the Meaning of Conservatism: Writings from *Modern Age*, by George A. Panichas. *Foreword by Jeremy Beer*. Wilmington: ISI Books, 2008. 301 + xxxiv pages. \$28 cloth. \$18 paper.

This collection of writings by George A. Panichas, all of which appeared in the pages of *Modern Age* between 1965 and 2007, is a testament to the author's major contribution to conservatism for over four decades. During this period Dr. Panichas worked tirelessly as a scholar and editor, serving from 1984 to 2007 as editor of *Modern Age*, commenting widely on the religious, philosophical, and social issues of the moment, and engaging in extensive correspondence, all the while pursuing his own literary scholarship centered on such writers as Lawrence, Conrad, and Dostoyevsky. Panichas is the author or editor of 20 books, and perhaps a hundred or more essays, reviews, and occasional pieces (38 of which appear in this collection). More importantly, and what no mere enumeration of his accomplishments can suggest, Panichas is a scholar of a sort now endangered by university politics: one who, scorning the narrow partisanship and conformity of academe, has spent a lifetime of unflinching devotion to the pursuit of wisdom alone.

This pursuit has led Panichas on an arduous intellectual and

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moral journey during which he has mastered an impressive range of literary, philosophical, historical, and religious texts. Grounded in this extensive learning, Panichas brings his entire moral, intellectual, and spiritual being to the central task of criticism, an activity that he has termed the “courage of judgment.” Indeed, what Panichas intends by “restoring the meaning of conservatism” has everything to do with a spiritual sense of wholeness, unity, and purpose. “We need to begin with the spiritual premises before we can even begin to deal with, or hope to alter, the political framework of life” (xxii), Panichas writes in the preface to this collection, and surely this is wise advice to conservatives at this troubled moment in our national history. Along with the spiritual basis, and necessarily accompanying it, is the assumption of personal moral responsibility, a matter that forms a major focus of many of Panichas’s essays.

Significantly, and in spite of the book’s title, Panichas prefers to speak of himself as a “conservator” rather than a conservative, and the former is clearly the more exact designation in regard to Panichas’s lifelong labor. As a conservator, he is everywhere a proponent of continuity, as he stresses in the “Editorial Restatement” printed in the winter 1984 issue of *Modern Age*, the year after he took on his duties as editor. Through several restatements, in 1998 and again in 2007, Panichas continued to define the focus of the journal in the unchanging terms of moral engagement propounded by its first editor, Russell Kirk. As Panichas wrote in the spring 2007 issue, “For five decades *Modern Age* has remained constant and vigilant in character and commitment despite the piercing winds of change, the clash of opinions and of civilizations, the schemes of ideology, and the convulsive appetite for the abnormative, the paranormal, the antinomian” (26). The realization that Panichas’s own contributions to the journal span four of those decades should cause one to consider just how important his personal contribution has been.

Yet, while *Modern Age* has remained steadfast in its defense of traditional conservatism, much has changed in American society during the past half-century. Panichas often registers this change in his urgent warnings regarding the rise of the restless, irresponsible spirit of neo-Jacobinism, Gnosticism, materialism, and egalitarianism. This deathly spirit is accompanied by the rise of materialist ideologies, often of a hard leftwing persuasion,

and particularly so in American and English universities. Within humanities departments, the few traditionalists who remain are frequently subject to ridicule and attack, which is to say that these departments are ruled by hard-core ideologues who have no intention of extending to conservatives the academic freedom that they assert so keenly for themselves. This essentially totalitarian policy is what the Left has in store for American society as a whole when and if it gets its way culturally and politically.

Given these facts, many of Panichas's essays take on an elegiac tone, grieving for the freedoms and open-minded institutions that once flourished in the West. There is little doubt, as Panichas documents in "Aspects of Tragedy, Ancient & Modern," that we live in what philosopher Eric Voegelin has called a condition of "existential deformation"—a faithless, antagonist culture that is capable neither of genuine tragedy nor of genuine delight. The demoralized denizens of this nihilistic culture seem also to be incapable of a sense of shame, and with the demise of this most ancient of moral sensibilities a Pandora's box of barbarism is opened up. As Panichas writes, "To feel shame is something that hardly crosses the minds of Americans or that discomfits their conscience" (174).

Although Panichas is saddened and deeply troubled by this condition, he has never abandoned hope of a restoration of genuine conservatism. Like earlier "conservators," including Edmund Burke, T. S. Eliot, Richard Weaver, and Russell Kirk, Panichas feels compelled to register his objections to the "enemies of the Permanent Things," but this vigilance is driven by a positive philosophy of faith and hope. As Panichas notes in "Testimonies of Gratitude," "we often forget that affirmations have presence every bit as powerful and urgent as negations; that to fail to give witness to the spirit of affirmation signifies that the grip which negations have on us leads to an affliction from which there is no recovery" (250). This powerful statement of the "spirit of affirmation" reveals the depth of Christian love underlying all of Panichas's efforts. Quoting Romano Guardini, Panichas stresses the essential truth that "In reverencing God's name we reverence also the holiness of our own souls" (280). Ultimately, it is this reverence, this humility before God, and this faith in the goodness of life that are at the heart of Panichas's long and productive career, and that also underlie the sort of conservatism that he has

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defended so admirably over the course of the past four decades. It is for these qualities as well that we should value Panichas's new collection and benefit from its many chapters of wisdom.