MODERN AGE
A QUARTERLY REVIEW

Melvin E. Bradford: Adiós, A Dios . . .

Frederick D. Wilhelmsen

READERS OF *MODERN AGE* will permit my beginning this obituary tribute to Professor Melvin Bradford (1934-1993) on a personal note. We saw one another on an almost daily basis for more than a quarter of a century during the academic year at the University of Dallas. Our offices were down the hall from one another. We met at times for conversation and dinner at his house or mine and the conversation was indeed splendid. Every week we spoke by telephone and sometimes these conversations lasted an hour or more. Bradford was selective in his use of modern technology. A master of the phone, he nonetheless wrote everything with a pen, and then his prodigious contribution to the world of learning was typed by his wife on an old Remington that ought to be in a museum.

Whenever I raised an issue with him, he would respond by raising a half dozen other issues, but he always brought all of his enormous erudition back to the original subject and everything he had to say illuminated the topic I had first broached. Nothing that Bradford thought about was thought in isolation. Everything was orchestrated within his vast historical knowledge. Although his powers of analysis were well known—we need only think of his Faulkner scholarship—his powers of synthesis were even superior.

In illustration I cite these examples:

He pointed out to me the importance of Clan McDonald's position on the right wing in battle and the demoralizing effect worked on the foot soldiers when the clan was denied this honor at The Battle of Cullodon Moor in The Rising of the 45.

He instructed me on the subtle differences between societies organized in clans and the medieval feudal system: the former was based on blood and the latter on contract. Typically, he preferred the former.

In a discussion on guilt and its source, he illuminated the Roman political experience by demonstrating how guilt was familial in Rome and not individual dur-

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ing the Republic of which he was so fond. Disgrace was brought down not on the sinner but on his family, which was made responsible for any retribution for these evil acts. Bradford's learning was as gargantuan as was his bulk.

Bradford's sudden death shocked the entire academic and political communities that best knew him. The precarious state of his health had for years convinced him of the possibility of an early death. This foreboding accentuated a deeply somber aspect of his personality, one marked by a kind of Roman *gravitas* mingled with Southern elegance. All of this was mixed together with a sense of humor kindly in its essence, one that never cut or hurt. But his end came far sooner than any of us expected. I will not speak here of his last days and of his telephone conversation with Thomas Landis from his hospital bed in Midland, Texas, hours before his death in which he said that he was ready for the last venture and that he bore malice towards no man. These and other anecdotes have been published in eulogies and reminiscences known to us all and recorded in *The Southern Partisan*, the University of Dallas *Tower*, and in columns written by Pat Buchanan, Bill Murchison, and others. Suffice it to say that Bradford died the believing Christian that he was. Faith came to him hard: there was a deep swath of skepticism that covered his heart and that made him comfortable with David Hume. But the skepticism was conquered.

In assessing his life I must remember that he came to the University of Dallas in the fall of 1967 as an assistant professor of English. He had already taught at Northwestern State University in Louisiana and earlier at Hardin-Simmons University. Those early academic posts were followed by a fellowship at Vanderbilt University, where his mind and sensibility were annealed in the wisdom of the Southern Agrarians. Behind him was his sea duty with the United States Navy as a Flag Lieutenant in 1956-7. I always wondered why ships and sailing had little impact on my friend despite his experience during the Korean war.

Clearly Bradford was a man of the soil and any judgment we make of him must be rooted in the Southern land he loved so profoundly. He mourned the death of the Southern yeoman and in many ways, although not in all, he was sympathetic to the Distributism of Belloc and Chesterton. Bradford worked well with cattle on his father's ranch and he was a horseman until well into middle age. His large white southern hat was a trademark, but his attire and bearing were always modest. Outside of the intimacy of his own home, I never saw him without coat and tie, both always dark in color and unassuming. "I am nothing more than a schoolmaster," he would say with a kind of wry irony which was always turned on himself, never on others.

In all the assessments made of his life's work we must remember the deep piety with which he held the Southern Agrarians. He had known them all, both their persons and their works, and he was well launched into a book on Donald Davidson when he died. To the original Agrarians who wrote and signed *I'll Take My Stand* more than half a century ago, we must add the name of Melvin E. Bradford.

His writing career was immense. When people are now made full professors with a half dozen slender essays and possibly one slim volume, Bradford's written performance—if sprinkled through a baker's dozen lesser men—would have made of them all professors and more. His reading was voluminous, his house so full of books that it was difficult to move around the place on foot; one often had to jump gingerly over piles of journals, manuscripts, unpublished dissertations, correspondence, and—possibly—his cat, George.

Everything Bradford read was synthe-

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sized in the catalyst of Tradition. When men today are urged in graduate school "to concentrate on the text," I must remember Bradford, who, when reading what was in front of his nose was simultaneously integrating it with dozens of other texts and with life itself. I have capitalized the word "Tradition" deliberately because the heart of Bradford's brush with reality *was* Tradition. His understanding of that word was amazingly analogical.

Although Bradford read more than anybody I have known—I made the judgment seriously, after having pondered it carefully—he was no partisan of some "Great Books" theory of education which would abstract a dozen or so texts from the context of history. Both Adler and Hutchins gave off the stench of rationalism for Bradford, and his well-known objection to the school of Leo Strauss at Chicago was summed up by him for me one day not three months ago: "It is so easy to be a Straussian. All you need to know are a handful of books and you are absolved from the burden of history, as well as from its glory."

No Luddite, Bradford could watch television from time to time because in no way could it corrupt his sensibility. He possessed what Hilaire Belloc called "the visual imagination" (which comes only from much reading meshed with living in the world as it is), and he often delighted in laying out the strategy and tactics of this or that battle fought in The War Between the States. His reading of Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" cannot be surpassed. But the visuality was internal as well as external. His magnificent essay on Oliver Cromwell is the best instance of which I know of gnostic fanaticism battling and conquering sanity in a man who paced the floor for months before he decided to kill the king. Bradford was there, inside Cromwell, as he was there at Gettysburg surveying the tragedy of Pickett's charge.

Bradford was a rhetorician as well as a literary critic, an historian, and a failed politician. On principle he preferred the rhetorical to the dialectical mode and his profound distrust of reason divorced from reality gave birth to his *A Better Guide than Reason* (1979). That better guide, he insisted, was inherited tradition. All future students of the thought of Melvin Bradford must attend to precisely what he meant by "Tradition." An enemy of the univocal—he abominated Descartes—his notion of Tradition was a sinuous and analogical term, less a concept than a vision. Tradition included books, and he had read them all. But tradition incarnated as well a style of life clothed in the way men and women dressed; the skills and arts which filled their lives; the songs they sang at sunset; the food they ate and the way they prepared it; the craft of burying their dead; the ballads bursting forth in their taverns; the trees they grew breathing up from the soil. Significantly, he was interested in fence posts: they revealed the people who put them up, those made of wire and those made of wood.

His central political concern was the salvation of this Republic, which salvation will be impossible without the incorporation once again of the Southern vision of existence, a vision basically Christian in its inspiration. In his later years Bradford confronted the increasing secularization of the United States. In several studies he proved that the Founding Fathers were, by a vast majority, believing Christians. The sacred cow of a "separation of church and state" was, in his own words, "a gigantic swindle perpetrated by judges."

Thanks to his immense scholarship and his increasing preeminence in the world of letters, he was nominated for the chairmanship of The National Endowment for the Humanities by President Ronald Reagan. He garnered the support of a dozen or more senators but his candidacy was shipwrecked on the shores of partisan fanaticism. This fa-

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naticism came principally from within the ranks of the "neo-conservatives." The story has been told more than once, and here I raise it only to note that Bradford seemed untouched by the enmity he aroused and the cowardice of men who had originally sponsored his nomination. A dangerous dinosaur from a past epoch to a press hostile to his person and convictions, he took his defeat with the good cheer animating his life. At that time he once said to me: "I need to put on a white sheet, hover over television and yell 'boo'!" That would have pleased them all in Washington!

His excursion into politics, if only briefly, was not motivated by ambition or a thirst for power. It was an act of piety towards his father, who expected him to play a public role. His appointment, years after the campaign of Governor George Wallace, to the Fulbright commission permitted him to exercise a salutary influence on the distribution of grants for study and teaching abroad. Bradford successfully raised money for Pat Buchanan's campaign in Dallas and presided at a public dinner in Buchanan's cause. All of his life he played a prominent role in the Sons of the Confederacy who honored him at his funeral. But he will be remembered principally as—what? The foremost Faulkner scholar in America as literary critic? The historian of the lives of the Founding Fathers? The historian of Venice and the Hanseatic Republics? The rhetorician who bent his many talents to the defense of the good life? The chronicler of the *res gestae* of the Old South? But clearly, our friend was a man of many parts, and no narrow academic specialization could ever do justice to the sweep of his achievement.

Melvin Eustace Adonis Bradford has now gone to the Incarnate God in whom he believed. Let these words of mine be a testimony to a magnificent companion-in-arms. Good-bye, dear friend: I never had a better: large heart: great head: *Adiós*.

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Paul Valéry:
The Politics of Method

Steven Alan Samson

Paul Valéry (1871-1945) seems to be an unlikely subject for a study in political thought. His credentials as a political commentator are not immediately apparent. Seemingly remote from the controversies of his day, Valéry was an exemplary "art for art's sake" poet who sometimes left an impression of sterile intellectuality. A man who cultivated clarity and austerity of thought, he sought always to refine his sensibility, tempering especially those passions which generate political opinions and partisanship. Wary of the mythic element in history and politics, he remarked that "in the beginning was the Fable." Yet he was far from being detached, either in his love for France or in his loyalty to the idea of Europe. He carefully observed and analyzed the events of his day, taking note of unsettling trends in a handful of essays that span almost fifty years.

Valéry's reputation as one of the great innovators of modern poetry is secured by a fairly small output of verse. The bulk of his writing is prose: plays, dialogues, critical essays, and letters. These works receive considerably less attention, however, than his poetry; and perhaps most neglected of all are the finely crafted pieces on politics and history.

As a writer, Valéry has been credited with considerable originality, but he admired mastery more and considered it to be simply a question of technique. He strove to revise—and so control—his creative inspirations until all that remained of accident was art. Intuition is untrustworthy; artificiality is preferable to unruly experience. So said the public Valéry.

His fanciful creation and alter ego, Monsieur Teste, "was content to think and above all *to observe himself thinking*."[1] This most improbable being, born of Valéry's dreams of reason, was an adept in the art of selective forgetting, retaining what he needed for tomorrow.

> This man had known quite early the importance of what might be called human *plasticity*. He had investigated its mechanics and its limits.[2]

A youthful Valéry similarly set out to discover the laws of "method": the *ostinato rigore* of an ideal Leonardo. He asked a question put earlier by Nietzsche: What is a man's potential? What sort of mobility is possible in a godless universe? While Nietzsche invoked the *Übermensch*, Valéry directed his attention to the latent powers of the conscious mind, man's "Ego" or "universal self." He did not regard this self as an abstract entity, however; its attributes resemble those of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's living "noosphere." It is the human drama itself.

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