

# The Reign of Pure Quantity and the Parody of Quality: Reflections on René Guénon's Intimations of Post-Modernity

By Patrick Laude

**R**ené Guénon's critique of the modern world constitutes, on the one hand, a formidable set of diagnoses based on a radical interpretation of modernity as a civilizational "anomaly" and "monstrosity", and as a breakaway from traditional and metaphysical principles, and, on the other hand, a prospective, arguably "prophetic," series of prognoses that delineates the development of the final stages of the current historical cycle of mankind. Guénon's diagnostic is based on a recognition of the necessity of "scandal" in the economy of the whole. In the *Crisis of the Modern World*, Guénon expresses this inevitability of subversion as follows:

We shall therefore begin by showing that the characteristic features of this age are in fact those that the traditional doctrines have from all time indicated for the cyclic period to which it corresponds; and in so doing we shall make it clear that what is anomaly and disorder from one point of view is nevertheless a necessary element of a vaster order, and an inevitable consequence of the laws governing the development of all manifestation.<sup>1</sup>

The conjunct assertion of cosmic and historical negativity and its integration within a higher, or wider, positive context that accounts for its existence without abolishing its very negativity, bears witness to a metaphysical perspective free from the two pitfalls of pseudo-mystical "indifference" on the one hand, and polemical absolutization of error and evil, on the other hand. In other words, a discerning consideration of the universal Good allows one, according to Guénon, to better understand partial evil both as fundamentally evil and essentially partial, if one may say so. Discernment calls for an implacable critique of "scandal"

<sup>1</sup> *The Crisis of the Modern World*, Sophia Perennis, Hillsdale, New York, 2001, p.6.

while being aware of its limited character, an awareness that alone may guard one from becoming enmeshed in its spiralling "logic." It is within such a context that, in order to highlight the anomalous character of the modern world, Guénon sets out a vision of history characterized by fundamental fractures that mark an increasing materialization of mankind's perception of the world, but also a material hardening of the crust of the world itself, as expressed in "the purely material character (of the modern world) that makes of it a veritable monstrosity."<sup>2</sup> Thus, the subjective and objective facets of the cosmic and historical downfall are inseparable, since reality is ultimately one, or since what is "within" reflects what is "outside," and conversely. For example, the development of the scientific outlook goes hand in hand with a modification of the texture of terrestrial reality, and translates into a thicker "sealing" of the walls separating the material from higher, psychic and spiritual, degrees of reality. This is but one example of the onto-cosmogonic law according to which manifestation entails greater and greater separation, fragmentation and objectification.

Given the definiteness and cogency of most of Guénon's critical analyses, one question that may be raised is that of their epistemological foundations. Whereas the description of the current symptoms of the spiritual malady of the modern world and the analysis of its causes pertain to an interpretation of modern trends and phenomena in light of traditional principles, the status of the "prophetic" aspects of Guénon's critique of the modern world is more difficult to determine since it appears to involve a measure of speculation that is only partly relatable to observation. By and large, the readings of the "signs of the times" that are at work in Guénon's opus may be deemed to combine traditional data pertaining to eschatology, such as drawn from scriptural and traditional sources, and intellectual speculations based on a meditation of the internal "logic" and likely consequences of past and current developments. As for the traditional components of Guénon's meditation, they are usually far from being explicit; in fact, they are most often allusive, if not utterly unstated. Thus, the substance of the argument is grounded on the application of principles and observations to prospective development while traditional references remain mainly illustrative or symbolic. The "prophetism" that has been sometimes attributed to

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.

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