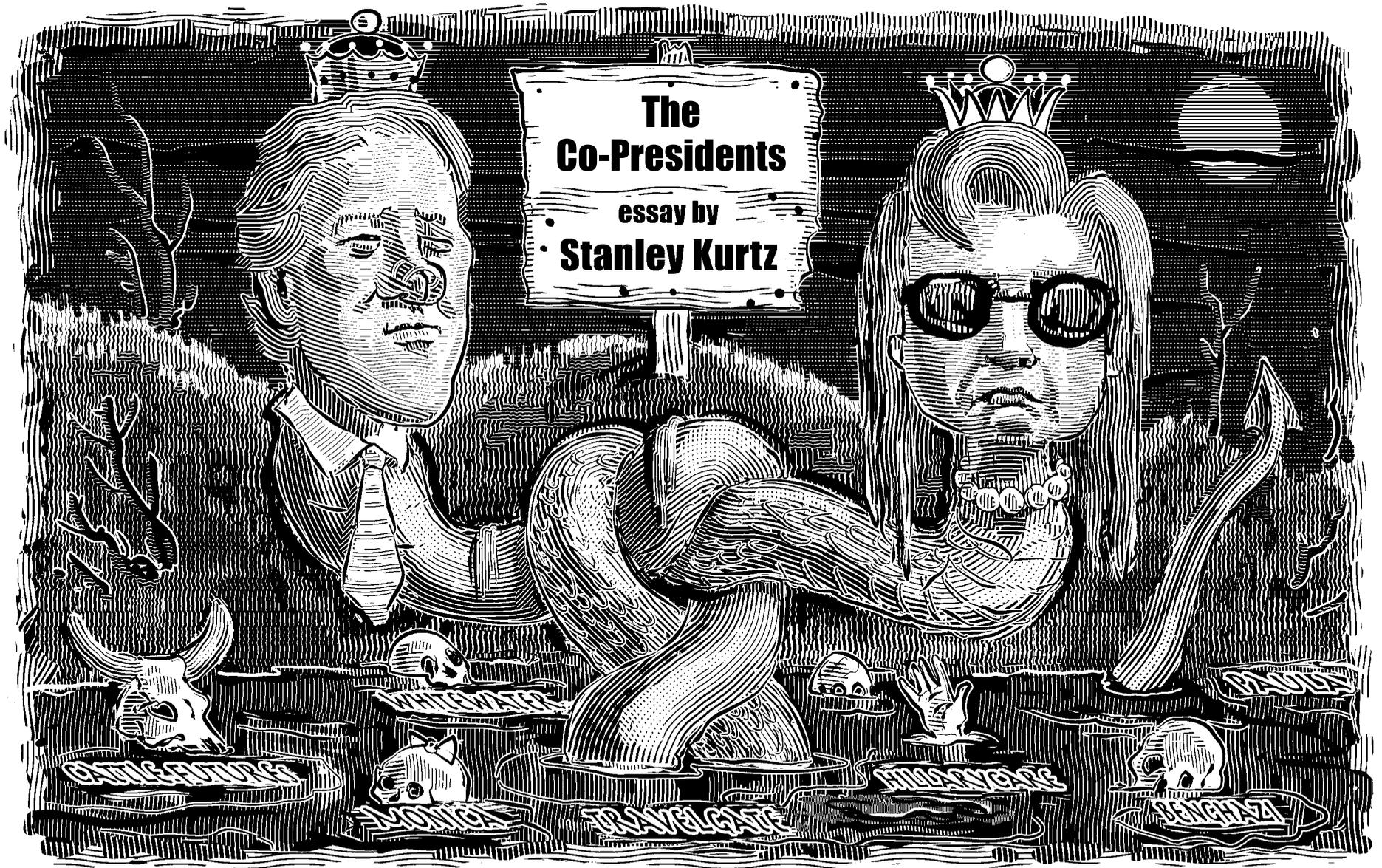


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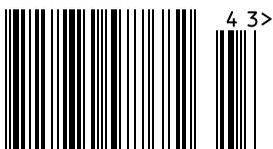
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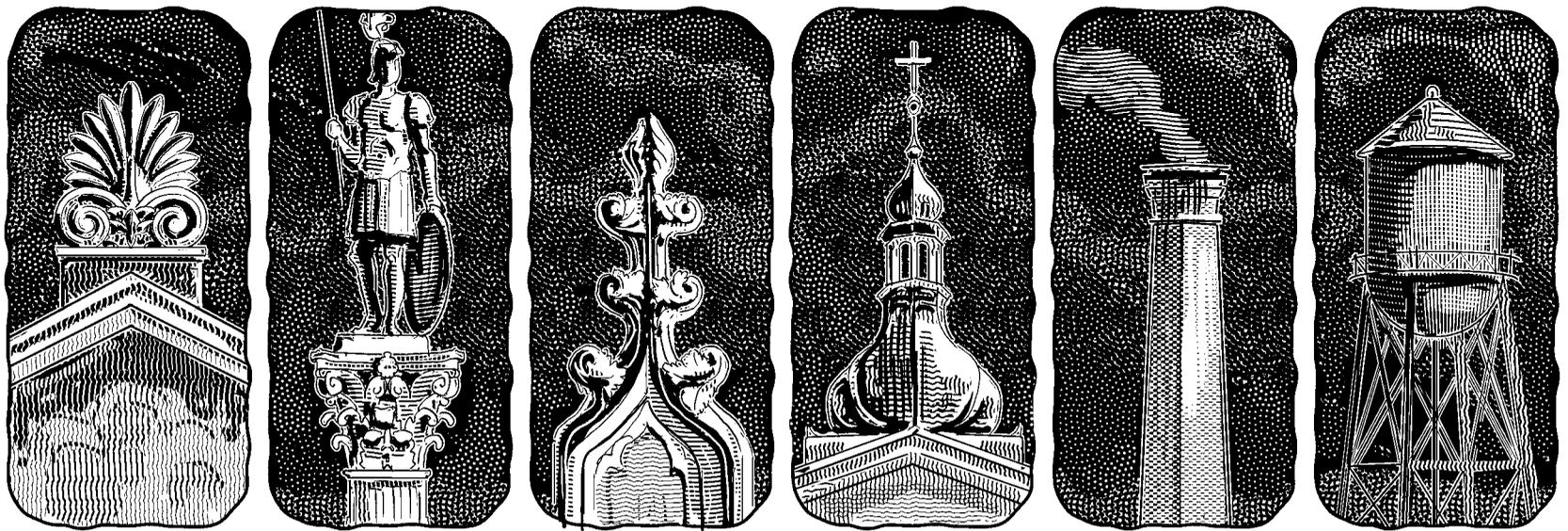
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Book Review by Ralph C. Hancock

## CITY LIMITS

*Metamorphoses of the City: On the Western Dynamic*, by Pierre Manent, translated by Marc LePain.  
Harvard University Press, 384 pages, \$39.95



PIERRE MANENT'S *METAMORPHOSES OF the City: On the Western Dynamic*, continues a life-long reflection on the meaning of modernity. Full of riches and the arresting formulations we expect from the justly renowned French political philosopher, his new book traces the foundations of modernity all the way back, surprisingly, to Greek antiquity.

In good classical fashion, Manent begins with the very surface of things: modern man knows he is "modern." In fact we have willed to be, and we continue to will to be, modern. But because we never quite arrive at the modernity that beckons us, the meaning of our commitment remains elusive. The project of modernity bespeaks an astounding confidence in our powers, yet the very meaning of our humanity remains a mystery.

Other scholars, most notably Leo Strauss, whom Manent engages from time to time in these pages with admirable candor and discernment, have proposed coming to terms with modernity by uncovering its foundations in the grand philosophical projects (published, though not necessarily altogether public) of Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes and, before them, of course, Niccolo Machiavelli. Like Strauss, then, Manent seeks a source for modernity deeper than natural science and the Protestant Reformation. But unlike the great restorer of political philosophy, Manent seeks to go behind Machiavelli to the beginnings of the *political* project itself, to the very first *project* of politics, in ancient Greece. In this respect Manent's latest approach resem-

bles the attempt made by Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger to bring the Western spirit full circle by proving that what is most modern in us was already present, implicitly, in the Greek spirit.

THE RETURN TO THE GREEKS IN SEARCH of the political origins of the modern project necessarily tends to reduce the importance of the ancient/modern distinction, which seemed so important to Leo Strauss and, for that matter, has figured so prominently in Manent's oeuvre hitherto. Manent is explicit here about leaving behind his earlier, Tocquevillian, exaggeration of the modern difference, insisting that it is to the original Greek "*production of the common*" that we must look in order to understand how we got here: "I saw more and more clearly the forms of our common life unfolding from the first and master form as so many reverberations of this original conflagration, as so many metamorphoses of this primordial form."

Not that Manent neglects, by any means, the distinctiveness of the modern situation. On the contrary, he frames that difference brilliantly in several contexts, sometimes leading the reader to wonder whether, or to what degree, he really disagrees with Alexis de Tocqueville and Strauss on the character of modernity. In the introduction, for example, he presents modernity as a failed effort to reconnect word and action. Martin Luther had reduced human action to the act of faith in a divine Word, for example, and Machiavelli had

fused word and deed so as to make possible the most audacious and terrible action. But these attempted reconciliations had led instead to an even more extreme alienation of word and act: the pretended exemption of the modern state from the vagaries of speech and opinion, a superiority first asserted in the Reformation form of state religion, but now asserted in the neutral, agnostic, and secular form of political correctness, according to which unpleasant speech "is willingly considered...as the equivalent of the worst action imaginable," precisely because "[o]ne no longer expects that speech will be linked to a possible action."

Meanwhile, explains Manent, the "construction" of a united Europe proceeds without any substantive defense or explanation, and a popular referendum against this drift, "the most solemn word that a people can formulate," makes no difference at all. "We are witnessing a more and more profound divorce between the process of civilization and the political structure." One is reminded of Tocqueville's eloquent warning of an imminent abolition of the "laws of moral analogy," a condition in which "the natural bond that unites opinions to tastes and actions to beliefs has been broken." In such a condition, opinions fall out of sync with concrete ends, producing a world where "nothing is linked," and human beings lose their hold, not only on a common morality but on the very distinction between true and false.

For us Moderns to recover our bearings would thus seem to require some kind of heal-



ing of the wound opened up between word and action. But such a healing, it appears, cannot close the gap completely. It was the Christian Word that first promised a perfect unity between life and Word, although the fulfillment of such unity was deferred to another world. Machiavelli (and in another sense, Luther) opened up the modern era with the promise of relieving human beings of this deferral; four centuries later, “the regimes called ‘totalitarian,’” writes Manet, sought a solution to the tension between word and deed that would combine “the energy of the civic operation and the exactitude of the religious proposition.” Of course the result was disastrous, “monstrous.”

**T**O RE-CONNECT WORD AND DEED IN this world, yet without attempting the fusion promised by world-transformative ideologies, Manent proposes yet another return to “the things themselves.” This is the subject of the first part of this book, “The Original Experience of the City.” But his return is neither, like Strauss’s, a return to the original nature of the political regime from the standpoint of philosophy, nor, like Heidegger’s, a return to the dawn of metaphysics from the standpoint of its technological end. Taking the Baron de Montesquieu as a kind of guide, Manent proposes a new science of *political forms*, a term that he distinguishes rigorously from the *regime*. Montesquieu revealed the limits of the Greek, that is, the Platonic-Aristotelian political science of the regime, which were the limits of the *polis* itself; he devoted great attention to nation, empire, and religion, all political forms larger than the classical city. It was the inherent limitations of the city-state that gave rise to the *metamorphoses* of political forms over the next two millennia.

Still, while seeming to take Montesquieu’s side against the classical political philosophers, Manent is on guard against the vulnerability of Montesquieu’s political, or rather social science. Like Montesquieu he seeks a science that can guide us beyond the *polis*, but unlike Montesquieu he is determined that this should be a *political science*, a science of the government of men by men—not a sociology and not a satire culminating in philosopher-kings, either.

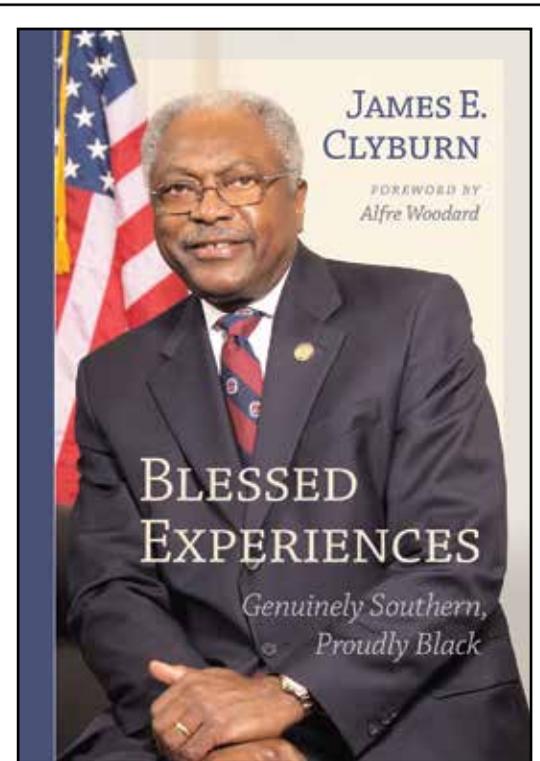
To be more precise, according to Manent there are three fundamental meanings of “nature,” and three corresponding natures of the city. The *tragic* perspective considers nature as what is native, that is, according to birth, and thus explores the city’s conflict with the family from which it springs. In the *philosophic* perspective the city appears in relation to its end, human happiness, an end, however, that lies somewhere beyond the city, whether in heaven or in Plato’s Academy. But in the properly *political* understanding, the city is considered in itself, apart from its origin or its purpose, in

its inherent principle of movement, “the movement of its life that leads it naturally to death.”

The life and death of the city are naturally articulated around the movement, that is, the opposition between the few and the many. In a luminous reading, Manent shows that, already in the camp of the Greeks in the first books of the *Iliad*, we find all the elements of the classical articulation of the city. And behind the visible struggle between the few and the many, we already see a figure who adumbrates the limitations of the city, that is, Odysseus, that “nobody” whose nameless prudence, somehow detached from any particular community, prefigures what Manent calls the “One,” the possibility of a comprehensive unity that will expose and transcend the limits of the city.

**M**ANENT’S *METAMORPHOSES* IS A marvelously rich, venturesome, and wide-ranging exploration of the changes in politics as this dynamic overcomes, without entirely leaving behind, the city. Every chapter opens up a new world to explore and proposes original possibilities that would disrupt existing interpretive schemes. Naturally the author is not able to explore all these possibilities, fully, or to draw all the threads together into a whole and finished fabric. Nevertheless, the book does outline a unified perspective on the history of the West and on the impasse into which this history has led. At the deepest level, Manent’s perspective reveals two polarities in Western politics—between the few and the many, and between the One and the All. The tension between the few (the rich) and the many (the poor) constitutes the natural life of the city. By contrast, the One-All polarity emerges historically in the boundless ambitions of Rome, finds theological expression in Christianity, and continues to haunt modern secular humanism.

The ancient tension between the few and the many is *natural* and so will always be with us; it continues to work beneath the surface in modern democracies despite their inherent tendency towards unity and universality. Manent offers a close and brilliant reading of a key moment in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality* to show that Rousseau’s story of the invention of politics pointedly represses the role of the few, of reflective action on behalf of a concrete idea of the whole or the common good; thus he arrives at the pure formalism of law as self-commandment and general will. Aristotle, of course, provides the classic account of politics as centered on the clashing self-affirmations of the few and the many, each faction with its own account of honor and dignity. And Manent certainly appreciates, up to a point, Aristotle’s subtle and refined account of the essentially partisan character of the natural political regime. Aris-



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totle sees politics as the domain par excellence of *proairesis* or deliberate choice; it is in political life, in deliberations regarding the good of the whole, that “human life gathers itself,” as Manent puts it, under such notions as “self-sufficiency, perfection, happiness, and beauty.”

In his narrative, this aristocratic gathering of deliberate though clashing choices gives way over the course of Western history to the emerging power of the One as guarantor of the All into which both the few and the many disappeared: “In the eyes of the One, all became the people, all were equal.” But the cost of the suppression of the natural factions was not the simple victory of equality, the ascendancy, let us say, of the dignity of the common man. Instead, modern society embodies simultaneous extremes of equality and inequality, and we aspire at once to universal compassion and to unbridled competitiveness. “In brief, all are equal and everyone has his price.”

**M**ANENT OBVIOUSLY DEPLORES THIS joint reign of extreme equality and extreme inequality, but he also depicts it as a fateful culmination of the city’s metamorphoses. Aristotle’s center simply could not hold. Aristotle’s interpretation of the natural purpose of politics, in which he moves from the idea of “a complete and self-sufficient life,” to “deliberate choice,” and then to “happiness” constituted by “noble actions,”

is a “leap” that Manent cannot approve. Instead, he leans rather toward Montesquieu’s description of the various purposes of various cities (expansion, war, religion, commerce, etc.) and notes that Aristotle himself hedges his teleological argument with a critical “according to us,” referring it seems to the doctrine of Aristotle’s own school, or perhaps more broadly to the shared assumptions of his city or civilization. Manent questions Aristotle’s “leap,” and so sympathizes with the liberalism of Benjamin Constant or of the Declaration of Independence, which, he says, are “squarely skeptical, or worse” of Aristotle’s high-minded solution. The historical movement toward the One-All configuration is not only to that extent democratic (based on skepticism regarding Aristotle’s deliberately aristocratic affirmations) but also flows ineluctably from the dynamic of the city itself, since the very life of the city resides in the finally unanswerable claim of the many to share in the city’s goods.

The true city comes into being, or rather strives to exist, through the effort of the many to have a share in the city of the few. In this sense politicization is identical with democratization, the city with democracy, more exactly with the *movement* toward the democratic regime. [Emphasis added.]

**I**N PART TWO OF *THE METAMORPHOSES*, “The Enigma of Rome,” Manent traces this democratic dynamic inherent in political life through the rise and ascendancy of Rome, and through the echoes of Rome in Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Montesquieu. He argues that classical Greek thought ignored the One, seeing monarchy finally as a mere extension of aristocracy. This limited vision underlies Leo Strauss’s failure to see that political form is more fundamental than regime, that Caesarism is not a subdivision of classical monarchy, and that human transcendence could not be contained within the classical city. The bursting of the limits of the classical city, audible in Roman thought in the irresistible appeal of ideas of equality, monotheism or cosmic monarchy, and universal history (in which the wisdom of the best city definitively transcends the wisdom of the best man), opens up a long “Ciceronian moment,” in which authors from the Romans through Machiavelli search for a political form that can contain, or perhaps rather channel, the energies that exploded the classical city. The emergence of a new political form—the nation-state—marked the end of this centuries-long moment, but by no means the end of the dynamic unleashed by the original project of politics.

Central themes of Part Three, “Empire, Church, Nation,” include Christianity’s relation to Judaism and Greek philosophy, as well

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as the rise of the modern state as a response to the unprecedented political problem posed by Christianity. Philosophy, Judaism, Christianity, and modernity are four different vectors of movement beyond the closed city of classical antiquity. To envision a truth above the city is at the same time to embrace an idea of humanity reaching beyond the city's borders; to reach higher is at the same time to extend wider. The first three movements propound a distinctive idea of what is highest, that is, divine, and therefore, despite their universalist ambitions, presuppose a separation among human beings: the philosopher, the elect nation, and the City of God are separated by the very content of their universalism from the rest of humanity. Only modern humanism achieves full universality on the horizontal plane, but this is accomplished by abandoning the content of that universality, collapsing the vertical dimension altogether. The high has collapsed altogether into the wide, the alliance between the One and the All has been consummated, but what is left is an All bereft of purpose and thus of content. Humanity is at least in principle unified...but what can it do? What substantive purpose can it propose to itself? The definitive overcoming of the limits of the city as defined by the qualitative claims of the few against the many has left the All, the Totality of Humanity, without rival, but with nothing to say that can be translated into real, meaningful action.

**W**HO OR WHAT COULD YET MEDIATE between God and man so as to hold open the vertical dimension of universality and thus give words some purchase on deeds? At times Manent seems to gesture towards pre-Reformation Christianity as the most proximate source of an effective mediation. He proposes the Church as a city, an actual community, a new political form, which in principle can hold together the Immense and the lowly. And yet, in other contexts, he recognizes "the intrinsic and perhaps insurmountable difficulty of any Christian statement about politics," and observes that Augustine "incites us to desire to enter into the city of God, but it is not certain that it helps us much to orient ourselves in the cities of people."

We are left, then, with no practical alternative to "the mediating nation," which could not have taken shape without the content supplied by a national religion: "the nation is the mediator between the subjective freedom of the [Protestant] Christian and the sovereign grace of God." It is not obvious to him how the neutral or secular state can subsist without the content once supplied by religion; the state now sees itself as a mediation of humanity, but it has no content to offer as a definition of humanity.

Manent's stunning insights into the democratic dynamic of history, the tremendous

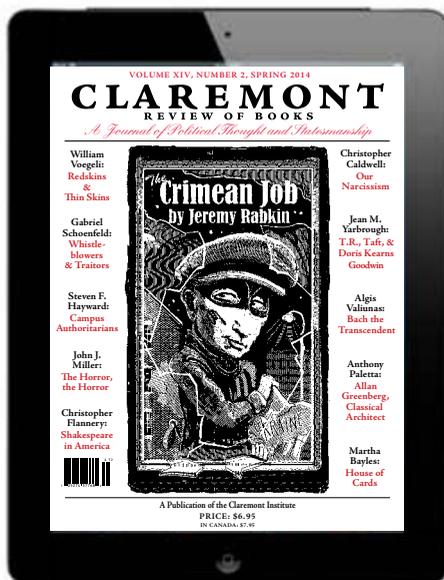
power of the ideas of universal freedom and equality under a unified God or a unified Science, recall Tocqueville's own "religious terror" before the democratic revolution that was transforming the world before his eyes. Manent's admirably dispassionate account of the fragility of the classical city and of the aristocratic philosophy that attempted to refine and extend the city's proud assertion of human dignity confronts us once again with Tocqueville's question: how to interpret and preserve human greatness in an increasingly flat, homogeneous, and pantheistic world. Manent is not to be faulted for proposing no alternative to the modern nation-state, which he shows to be a very imperfect and vulnerable half-way house between the city and the politically empty idea of universal humanity. What would a higher partisanship on behalf of human dignity look like today? If Aristotle's solutions are now no longer plausible, then how might philosophy articulate openness to a higher good so as to support and inform responsible choice in our times?

*Ralph C. Hancock is professor of political science at Brigham Young University; president of the John Adams Center for the Study of Faith, Philosophy, and Public Affairs; and the author, most recently, of The Responsibility of Reason: Theory and Practice in a Liberal-Democratic Age (Rowman & Littlefield).*

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