

Demeure is the second main book by François-Xavier Bellamy, a 33 year-old French philosophy teacher who also dabbles in politics and is rapidly establishing a reputation for himself in his homeland as a lead critique of the “liquid society” which characterizes our post-modernity.

The title is lost in translation; indeed the whole book would be untranslatable into English – hence this brief review to at least draw the attention of English speakers to it. *Demeure* can be read as the imperative of *demeurer*: to remain; equally, as a noun, *demeure* means a home, a dwelling. The word-title therefore contains a description – an “abode” – and an injunction – to “abide”. To a French reader, at least from the more traditional strands of society, which are sociologically most likely to read this book, it will immediately evoke a scene from the famous Blake and Mortimer comics series, where, in an Egyptian-themed episode, Prof. Mortimer, a physicist embodying all the traits of eternal England (at least as fantasised by the French), seeks to mesmerize a cobra by shouting “in the name of Horus, remain!” (*par Horus, demeure !*). By the foreign reader this – as indeed much of Bellamy’s work – is almost bound to be missed, no matter how good their French: nonetheless the work – and perhaps even more so its author – deserve to be read internationally, because what it, and what *he*, have to say is of universal significance.



Even though the name of the French President, Emmanuel Macron, is never cited, the book can probably be read without doing injustice to the author as his response to the events of 2017, when a candidate known only to the few got himself elected under the banner of a new movement calling itself *En*

Marche (“onward”, “on the move”, “marching on”), which later succeeded in getting no fewer than 308 of its members, many of whom with no prior political experience whatsoever, elected to Parliament. This landslide victory humiliated both of France’s historically dominating parties on the right and left of centre; Bellamy himself lost to a *marcheur* in his home city of Versailles, a highly symbolic defeat in possibly the one constituency in the country where his antimodern – *vieille France* (old-school) – stance would have most appeal.

To remain or to march on? The book’s entire argument is that modernity ushered in a new relationship with movement, with the change that time brings about, which structurally favours *moving over remaining* (pp. 58-9). Indeed as modernity works out the consequences of its own premises, the argument goes, moving on has become a self-justifying injunction: one has to march on because the dominant progressivist ideology sees tomorrow as definitionally better than yesterday. This, the author argues, creates a “changeitis” which renders us unable to appreciate the present for what it is, to be grateful to the past for what it has bequeathed us, and to think purposefully about what we want the future to be: a future which, in the one-liner this reader found most forceful, “does not, absolutely does not, exist” (p. 118): tomorrow will be what we make of it, and history is not already written, be it through a Marxist-like “course of history” or the (already very dated) liberal assumption that history has reached its endpoint.

In an ambitious, perhaps over-ambitious, effort, the author strives to locate “macronitis” in the context of 2,500 years of European philosophical developments, harking back to the controversy between Parmenides and Heraclitus, and singling out Galileo as the one key turning point (p. 48): if the earth really does rotate around the sun then, in a real sense, nothing

ever stands still and there only ever is an *appearance* (an illusion) of stillness, when the observer moves in the same direction and at the same speed as the object of his observation. Motionlessness has become, quite literally, impossible: from now on there can be “no such thing as resting” (p. 54).

Against this, the author does not argue for a contrarian type of “remainism”, which would be not only impossible – since we are indeed moving – but absurd (“nothing is as stupid as the injunction to ‘move’, except perhaps the injunction to ‘not move’” [p. 156]: one has to wonder, though, what the apostle Paul would have made of this, who enjoined the church in Corinth to “stand firm [and] let nothing move” it [1 Cor. 15:58]). Rather, Bellamy argues that the relentless quest to change for change’s sake ends up destroying itself – since without fixed points no movement is even conceivable – and, even more fundamentally, tearing apart our own humanity, which is meant to dwell appreciatively in a present itself shaped by the past, not seek relentlessly to get over its own condition.

Demeure joins a growing international body of literature that can be described as harshly critical of modernity, seen as an unravelling process which is fundamentally *dehumanising*. In an Anglophone context, one immediately thinks of Alasdair MacIntyre’s seminal *After Virtue*, which locates the root of all modern evils in the “Enlightenment project” (behind the Enlightenment, in many ways underpinning it, stands the post-Reformation effort to quell religious strife by outsourcing the quest for the “good life” to civil society: from then on – and this might well be the defining marker of liberal modernity – governments would restrict themselves to being umpires between conflicting worldviews, between which they would no longer seek authoritatively to arbitrate (hence,

perhaps, the shift from substantive to procedural concerns in the law, especially visible in the Anglo-American tradition)). A book in the same vein is Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed*, published last year in the United States. Unsurprisingly perhaps, most of these attacks on modernity (not sharply distinguished in these writers' mind from postmodernity, which is seen, if implicitly, as a natural outgrowth of the previous stage of evolution) have come from a Catholic perspective.

In this respect, it is very striking that there are two words that Bellamy seems most reluctant to use: *liberalism* and *Christianity*. His book is effectively a Catholic criticism of liberalism, in the broad philosophical sense of the term: a doctrine which, from *Mirari Vos* in 1832 to *Laudato Si'* in 2015, has been repeatedly condemned by the Magisterium of the Roman Church. But never is this explicitly articulated in the book.

The author is too thoughtful for either of these omissions to have been anything short of deliberate. Bellamy seems desperate not to be boxed off as another Christian grumbler bemoaning the days of old, a desire all the more comprehensible since he hails from France's foremost royal city, a place still identified today in the public psyche (not always, one must admit, without good reason) with the Ancien Régime. He wants, desperately wants, to engage all sections of society on themes which are central to the country's, indeed to humanity's, future as organised polities.

Bellamy is profoundly antiliberal and should, to this reviewer's mind, make no apologies for it. It is unlikely that he would have much to find fault with, for instance, in Deneen's book, which highlights the never-ending drive of liberalism to "liberate" man from alleged constraints (the latest being

sexed bodies) imposed on him by nature or culture, and restricting his fulfilment, believed to lie in an ever-greater degree of autonomy: do what you will, *be* what you will, as long as this does not harm – at least not too directly, not too evidently, not too short-termishly – your fellow and equally self-centred denizens, all similarly driving for autonomy maximisation. Yet, the author conspicuously avoids the term, replacing it with such euphemisms as “modernity”. Is it because liberalism is typically associated in a French context with free-market politics and the right wing of the political spectrum, and Bellamy is loath to antagonise the very sort of people who are most likely to vote for him? Such an explanation would be disappointing but it cannot be ruled out. Indeed, through an odd twist of fate, the author has recently been propelled to the top spot on the right-of-centre party *Les Républicains*’ list for the European elections of May 2019. This is as puzzling as it is amusing, for Bellamy does not appear to share the least of the convictions (perhaps more accurately, the lack thereof) of his new party-mates: he seems to have agreed to jump in, when no one else wanted to, for the platform this will give him to reach out to the people: “*Il faut absolument parler aux hommes*” – “we absolutely must talk to the people” – he repeats like a mantra, citing a letter Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote shortly before his death. (One can only surmise that the “Republicans” are too confused to have noticed this gaping discrepancy between them and him, desperate that they were to find anybody with half a brain and half a political line to lead them.)

The second topic which Bellamy skilfully steers clear of is religion. Apart from a few very general and uncontentious references to faith, God (as in, the God of the Bible) is utterly absent in those 270 pages. Here, the author is on record for saying that Christians ought not to bring their faith into the political arena, and ought instead to argue on the basis of

“shared reason”. While well-meaning in an age where European multicultural, multiethnic, multi-religious societies (a term now perhaps better used in inverted commas) are increasingly collapsing into self-referential communities – indeed tribes – the stance is, in this reviewer’s mind, profoundly misguided. Bellamy wants to come across as a secularist, forgetting (or at least appearing to forget, for he is no fool) that secularism is itself a by-product of Christianity. To put the same point differently, it is rather immaterial whether or not one brings God into the picture (and arguably it is wise not to) so long as most people agree on the basic tenets of a common worldview. In decades past it would probably have been fair to say that we in the West lived in a world where God had been given his P45 (for back then He was still a “he”) but belief in a created order – a physical, societal and moral order – remained. Yet it is abundantly clear that this is less and less and less the case as the 21st century prepares to embark on its third decade.

“Shared reason” can, perhaps, give us a common procedure through which we can argue on the basis of agreed facts and beliefs (although even that is not clear: Luther, for instance, famously believed that God was not bound by the laws of logic); but it cannot give us these facts and even less so these values. Comes a point where we reach apodictic premises which one has to either intuitively accept or reject without being able to go further back in the chain of reasoning. For a long time this was rather unproblematic since most people would have agreed that, whether or not God existed (*“etiamsi non esse Deum”*, as Grotius put it in a move quite possibly more significant than any of Galileo’s), abortion was *self-evidently* evil, marriage was *definitionally* between a man and a woman, and charity towards the weak and the poor *incontrovertibly* a good thing. Yet, as the worldview inherited from the Christian Church continues to unravel before our

very eyes in the West, it is not clear what the likes of Bellamy can respond to those who, in a toddler-like fashion, will want to challenge everything he says with a simple “Why?”.

“Because I say so” is the answer all parents ultimately have to resort to when their child asks one too many times, “Why?”: similarly, once all secular arguments have run out, can Christians really avoid resorting to the “because God says so” line as the only way to break the tie between human opinions?

To take but one example of, arguably, a contradiction inherent in the book, the author first tells us that it is impossible to derive what is good from the observation of what *is* (which he calls, after others, the “naturalistic fallacy”). That from an *is* no *ought* can derive is often referred to in the English-speaking world as “Hume’s guillotine”. So far so good: some have tried to bridge the gap but this reviewer would agree that it is unbridgeable. Yet, later Bellamy tells us that medicine’s proper role is to restore the “natural” homeostasis of our human bodies, not take it out of its pre-ordered parameters: grafting a new arm to an amputee is acceptable medical practice, grafting a third one to an able person is not (p. 142). Yet, apart from appealing to common assumptions of the past – which would be another logical fallacy: to assume that what was believed then must for that reason be believed now – it is not clear how this does not, precisely, take nature as being normative: we ought not to be grafted a third arm, or reach for immortality, or develop artificially our memory “beyond any known natural limit” because there are, well, observable *natural* limits. (*Limite* is, incidentally, the name of a new integral ecology magazine, which Bellamy has been supporting since the start). How this does not amount to deriving the “ought” of medicine’s acceptable efforts from the “is” of nature’s patterns is beyond this reviewer’s grasp: perhaps unconsciously, Bellamy takes our natural limitations

as norm-producing – probably because this is what, until very recently, we all did without giving a second thought to it. Yet, so fast have our assumptions been transformed that it is likely a majority of people in the West today would be unwilling to accept this premise: *why*, would the lesbian woman ask (supported by hordes of well-meaners and most of the mainstream media), should my craving for a child be limited – be *constrained* – by nature, by what my ancestors thought, or by anything else standing in the way of my desire – my visceral desire? Why, why, why: parents get infuriated by toddlers because, in truth, they have no answer to their challenge; the child’s question is unanswerable because he does not accept the same system of authority as his parents. In a sense, our post-Christian contemporaries have become coherent with their own (stated or unstated) premises: if humans are the ever-evolving product of “chance and necessity”, if there is no pre-existing order in creation which we have no mandate to change, if indeed creation has not been created, why should the current stage its evolution happens to have reached have any claim on us? Only two retorts would then seem to be available. Either one must argue that a third arm, immortality, a Dantean memory, etc., are “bad” based on the dominant, utilitarian basis of “morality” (if that word can still be used when it now also seems to be rooted in the *is* of how people happen to have come to see the world). This is a place where Bellamy should fear to tread – both because it is incompatible with his most basic philosophical tenets and because he will in any event lose the battle on that turf.

Or else one has to start from God-given first principles, which are held to be normative *because God says so*: thou shalt not get a third arm grafted onto you, because thou wert designed as the pinnacle of creation, by a perfectly loving creator, with two. (Admittedly such a step raises enormously difficult

issues of its own, which can hardly be explored in the present context; nonetheless the basic point can be made simply: without appealing to a higher norm than “shared reason”, there is no way to break the tie between human opinions). From this reviewer’s perspective it is hard to see how our shared discussion – which indeed must be shared if we are to avoid the further tribalisation of society – can avoid returning to first principles, to *the* First Principle. That masks should, at long last, come off, is in fact one of the few encouraging features of the age we live in: it is becoming more difficult each day to be a pagan while enjoying the benefits of a Christian worldview; and that is as it should be.

In one sense (and this is in no way a criticism) *Demeure* is profoundly unoriginal. What it expresses, and brings up to date in a particular context, is the Christian – in particular the Catholic – view of the world, as expressed in a Magisterium of the Church which, as mentioned, has repeatedly condemned what Bellamy calls “modernity” (but the Church calls “liberalism”). In another sense, though, precisely because believers – or at least serious believers – have become such a tiny fraction of the population, the book stands out quite profoundly in the context of France’s contemporary intellectual debate. With a great turn of phrase and remarkable lucidity, the author puts on the table a take on the world which has perhaps never reached the general public before, not even that of card-carrying Catholics. Like his previous book, *Les Deshérités* (“The Disinherited”), tackling the transmission crisis in modern education, it is turning out to be a best-seller (insofar of course as such things could ever be described as “best selling”: compared with J.K. Rowling, one must subtract a few zeroes).

The media are unsurprisingly at a loss what to make of him, that is to say, where to pigeon-hole him on the political

spectrum. Since Catholicism has sadly (yet, one must confess, not altogether without good reason) become synonymous with right-wing politics, and given that the author is quite evidently – hard though he might try to keep it to himself – a committed believer, the temptation is strong to class him as being on the hard right. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Bellamy is neither right- nor left-wing, neither conservative nor progressive, neither liberal nor socialist. He is a Christian who tries hard to work out the consequences for the world he observes around him of the first principles his mind has assented to. The very fact that we do not have any “-ism” to describe this political worldview is an encouraging indicium that he is on the right track.

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The author is without doubt one of the most remarkable, indeed one of the most endearing, figures in the French intellectual debate. What will happen to him over the next ten years or so is something everyone with an interest in public affairs must watch: it is almost certain that he will go places; the question is, *what* places? He seems to believe he can reach out to the people, and thus transform society, through the medium of politics, godless and lawless though the latter has become. The present reviewer is not optimistic about the chances of this happening, probably because his outlook on modern society is a few shades darker than the author's: the ministry of the word, if indeed this is the best way to serve the world, will have to take other forms. But Bellamy is not one to be even remotely tempted by what Rod Dreher calls the “Benedict option”, of retreating into metaphorical monasteries of uncompromised faith communities having largely seceded from wider society. Profoundly misguided though he believes the author's attempt to redeem the world through (party) politics is, the present reviewer cannot help

but wish all the very best to a young man who, unlike most everyone else, feels compelled to act – and act he does with all his heart, soul, strength and mind. The enormously talented Mr Bellamy is *trying*, and even the most reformed Christian can opine that this will one day be credited to him as righteousness.

E.D.