

The First Fifteen Years

THE CURRENT ISSUE of *Modern Age* marks the fifteenth anniversary of its founding. Fifteen years is not a long time, even for a magazine, but for a quarterly devoted to the serious discussion of ideas and issues to have survived that long without compromising its position nor losing sight of its original purpose is worthy of some notice.

It was Russell Kirk who provided the impetus for the founding of *Modern Age*, and David Collier who brought his concept of a new journal to realization. The success of Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*, which had been published in 1954, seemed to show that a journal devoted to the issues of the day from a frankly conservative position might find a place for itself and make a modest contribution to the quality of life and thought in our country. As Russell Kirk put it in his "Apology for A New Review" in the first issue, "*Modern Age* intends to pursue a conservative policy for the sake of a liberal understanding." He went on to say, however, "We are not

ideologues. . . . With Burke, we take our stand against abstract doctrine and theoretic dogma. But, still with Burke, we are in favor of principle."

In the short span of its existence *Modern Age* has published many outstanding articles, has discovered and encouraged new talent, and, under the wise and patient guidance of Joseph Lalley, has developed a distinguished book review section. Its book review section may in some ways, in fact, be its most notable contribution; in no area of journalism are a fresh approach and critical standards more needed than in book reviewing, which has long been almost completely dominated by a tired, but equally intolerant liberal dogmatism.

The first issue of *Modern Age* offered articles by Richard Weaver, Felix Morley, Frederick Wilhelmsen and Ortega y Gasset, and book reviews by Francis Russell and Russell Kirk. Following issues brought articles by such writers as Wilhelm Roepke, Eliseo Vivas, Wilmoore Kendall, Francis Wilson, Harry L. Barnes, Thomas Molnar,

Donald Davidson, Austin Warren, Raymond English, Peter Stanlis, Bertrand de Jouvenal, Kenneth Colegrove, Frank Meyer, James Burnham, Philip Mosely, Stefan Possony, Stephen Tonsor, Ernest van den Haag, Mario Pei, Edward Wasiolek, Gerhart Niemeyer, John Dos Passos, and Karl Wittfogel.

Of the many distinguished book reviews that have appeared in *Modern Age* one likes to recall, for instance, Joseph Lalley's witty, perceptive and devastating review of Mary McCarthy's *The Group*, or the skillful way in which he deflated, in a review of one of its studies, the presumptuousness of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. There have been many others: Stephen Tonsor on William H. McNeill's much acclaimed *The Rise of the West*—"history written by a bureaucrat for future bureaucrats"; Eliseo Vivas on a book on the philosophy of Bertrand Russell and a book by Mortimer Adler, in which review some much needed distinctions are made by a man with a truly philosophic mind; Klaus Epstein with the objectivity of a true historian on Hans Rothfels' *The German Opposition to Hitler*, a subject the liberals invariably strike out on; Felix Morley reviewing two books on the art of propaganda; C. P. Ives combining, quite appropriately, in one review books on the Warren Court and the War on Poverty; and finally, Chesly Manly setting the record straight on a number of points concerning which Dean Acheson's memory, when writing his autobiography, failed him.

Modern Age has not, needless to say, attained either the affluence or the circulation of its neighbor *Playboy*, but affluence and circulation, however desirable, are transitory assets; those connected with *Modern Age* like to feel that its concern is with the permanent things. In a paper given in Brown County, Indiana, just about the time *Modern Age* was started Richard

Weaver described the conservative as "a realist who believes that there is a structure of reality independent of his own will and desire. . . . this structure consists not merely of the great physical world but also of many laws, principles, and regulations which control human behavior." To define this "structure of reality" and to relate the issues of the day to it is one of the primary objectives of *Modern Age*; that such an endeavor is even more needed today than it was fifteen years ago, however imperfectly and inadequately carried out, scarcely needs saying.

—HENRY REGNERY

Sins of Commission

ONE WAY of dealing with our grave domestic crises, such as the steadily rising incidence of crime, the swelling tide of revolutionary violence and the progressive dissolution of sexual moralities, is to appoint a presidential commission to investigate the problem, explain its causes and show how they can be removed. Usually, after the expenditure of a good deal of money in gathering testimony from various self-acknowledged experts, subsidizing "in-depth" studies by professional researchers and the services of report-writers well rehearsed in sociological jargon, the commission is able to arrive at some exquisitely simple conclusion. Thus the Kerner Commission found that the epidemic of rioting, arson, looting and vandalism in some dozens of American cities was traceable to a single factor which it called "white racism." *Parturient montes!* Again, the Scranton Com-

mission was assembled to find out why on earth so many college and university students have taken up such odd extracurricular activities as the fouling up of administration offices and classrooms, the looting of files, the blowing up of buildings and power stations, the burning of banks, the blocking of interstate highways, the throwing of rocks, bottles and less mentionable missiles at police and militiamen, calling stridently all the while for the overthrow of this Republic. This time the commission found that the fault and most of the blame lay with the elected authorities, including the President who appointed the commission, for having failed to recognize "the emergence of a new youth culture" as the result of having made higher education available to everybody.

Still another commission, appointed by Lyndon Johnson, was asked to determine whether the flood of pornographic books, photographs, movie films, naked theatrical productions and tableaux has had anything to do with rise in sexual crime. After the expenditure of some millions of dollars a majority of the commission reported that it could find no connection whatever between the two phenomena and went on to recommend that all remaining restraints on the pornographic trade be repealed. This recommendation apparently applies to materials that are without redeeming social significance, since traffic in the redemptive kind had already been taken under the protection of the First Amendment by our wide-minded Supreme Court. Whether by coincidence or otherwise, the publication of the report was followed by a series of news dispatches out of Denmark, showing that in that country after virtually all varieties of pornography and virtually all forms of sexual behavior, public and private, natural and unnatural, had been legalized the number of arrests for sexual offenses had dramatically declined! The as-

sertion in the majority report that no statistical evidence had been uncovered to show that "exposure to explicit sexual materials plays a role in the causation of delinquent behavior among youth or adults" was generally applauded by librarians, book publishers, editors and some criminal lawyers. A few recalled the apothegm of the late Mayor Jimmy Walker of New York that "no girl had ever been ruined just by reading a book," an assertion that had overlooked at least one instance to the contrary—the sad and famous case of Francesca di Rimini.

The findings and recommendation of the commission, however, were bitterly attacked by two of its own members, both clerics, a Protestant and a Jesuit. In a dissenting report they charged that the evidence on which the findings were based had been inadequate, inaccurate and "manipulated," and that evidence pointing toward an opposite conclusion had been slighted or ignored. Certainly, the findings of all three of the Presidential Commissions here cited have been at considerable variance from those of the Congressional Committees that have been investigating the same problems, though these on the whole have received less publicity; indeed, in one curious instance a committee of the House of Representatives has been enjoined by a court from publishing its report, an indication that though the powers of the three branches of our government may be separate, some are now less separate than others.

The production and distribution of pornographic materials is said to be just about the fastest growing industry in the United States and its entrepreneurs to be piling up impressive fortunes. Whether this is a cause or only an effect of the progressive erosion of the traditional moral norms and the disappearance of most of the wonted proprieties, would be hard to determine; but there is no doubt that obscenity

—which may be defined as anything offensive to civilized sensibilities—is becoming more and more a factor in our politics as well as in our literature and art. Perhaps there should be still another commission to determine whether there is an interrelation between the three forms of social aberration which have claimed the attention of the commissions mentioned. There is some reason to think so. It was at Berkeley that obscenities of speech and conduct were adopted as a means of subverting the bourgeois establishment and its culture, and it was Berkeley that set the pattern for the other student insurrections throughout the United States. If it was the uprising in the Watts district of Los Angeles that set the pattern for the incendiary anarchy in Newark, Detroit, Washington, Baltimore and elsewhere, it was Berkeley, in the opinion of many, that set the pattern for Watts. Professor Lewis Feuer tells us that

the average Californian . . . sensed the effects of the Berkeley studentry “mobil-

izing” and violating laws and rules, the scenes of angry speakers, the students defying policemen and claiming the warrant of a higher ethic, the massive meetings, the arousing singers. No ordinary lawbreakers these, but students at California’s highest university. Disobedience, violation, the flouting of the democratic process, resistance to law, were given the sanction of the community’s intellectual elite. If the educated, the learned, the intelligent, approved of violating the law in a democratic society, then this path was so much the more indicated for those less fortunate and less endowed. Berkeley was the intellectual precursor for Watts.¹

As for the Presidential Commissions, *A fructibus eorum cognoscetis eos!*

— J. M. LALLEY

¹*The Conflict of Generations* (New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1969).