

# MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



## Modern Age: *Forty Years Later*

THIS ISSUE MARKS the fortieth anniversary of *Modern Age: A Quarterly Review*, of which Russell Kirk (1918-1994), visionary man of letters, was the founding editor. May his memory be everlasting.

In the years that have passed since the first issue appeared in the summer of 1957, bringing with it a deep sense of excitement, anticipation, and hope, and challenging as it did the liberal *Zeitgeist*, many and profound changes have occurred both in the American community and in the American psyche. Clearly we are no longer the people or the nation we were back then. One needs only to peruse those quarterly issues that, since 1957, have appeared with consistency and continuity, to perceive what those radical changes have enacted. History will attest also to the mission and ethos of this quarterly in its effort to measure and to judge the epochal events and changes that have transpired.

From the very beginning *Modern Age* sought to examine the conditions of modern existence from a moral perspective; to conserve and to pass on our great patrimony and tradition; and to speak out, boldly and honestly, when moral truths and first principles, which ultimately define civilized order, have been violated. *Modern Age* has never hesitated in its loyalty to the “perma-

nent things,” which are the bedrock of civilization. In an age of compromise and expediency, this journal has refused to join the forces of change at any price—has refused, in effect, to surrender to the power of the world or to the process of corruption. The need for roots and the need for order have been for *Modern Age* fundamental needs for the inner and outer condition of individual and community.

With Irving Babbitt (1865-1933), the principal leader of the American intellectual movement known as the American Humanism, or the New Humanism, *Modern Age*, from its inception, chose to “prefer to the wisdom of the age the wisdom of the ages.” As such, *Modern Age* has opposed the -isms of radical democracy that favor “the general will”—progressivism, materialism, relativism, egalitarianism, naturalism, utilitarianism, expansionism. It has stood, first, last, and always, for the imperative of standards, for restraint, for limits, for the discriminating faculty, in short, for qualitative life and thought. Lacking these, confusion and decadence emerge, at all levels, and sham vision and sham leadership thrive, as standards and traditions of the past are wantonly assaulted and displaced by what is relative, pragmatic. The long view, so to speak, is

shunted aside in order to accommodate prodigal experimentation, especially as concocted and legislated by social engineers and secular utopists. A brutal secularization is everywhere evident, while the religious idea, the life of the spirit, in particular, is increasingly minimized or cynically repudiated. Our concern, now in this acutely reductionist phase of Western civilization, is not with either the character of man and woman or the character of culture and society, but with whatever satisfies and fulfills our immediate whims and impetuosities.

We choose to forget, and we are even encouraged and led to forget, by all those agents and agencies that shape and regulate habits, attitudes, opinions, belief, conduct, that there is no problem that cannot be thwarted, or reformed, or circumvented to our liking and satisfaction. We are regularly, if not programmatically, advised to create and live in a dreamworld, even if that dreamworld is itself an abyss of negations. Countless Americans today are captives of a dreamworld in which no comfort, no sin, no urge, no desire, no illusion, no heresy, no right is denied or curtailed—and absolutely no limit cannot be exceeded. What we have seen during the past forty years is precisely the ascendancy and, yes, the sovereignty of this dreamworld and all its idols. The deification and worship of this dreamworld heralds a new civil religion as it is formulated and presided over by a collective secular priesthood embodied in what one insightful commentator designates as an “alliance of elites,” in short, all those social, political, advanced economic, and intellectual groupings that accept and affirm the social gospel of a new social and moral order. Dostoevsky, it should be recalled, portrayed these groupings as the incarnation of the Man-God.

*Modern Age*, forty years later, as this issue emphatically underscores, remains “a forum of reflective conservatism,”

which seeks not only to preserve the legacy of our civilization but also to keep alive the distinctions between temporal values and external values in a society which indiscriminately surrenders to the creed of liberal relativism—that alluring creed which the essays in this issue call into question. Indeed, the writings that follow exemplify what, since 1957, contributors to *Modern Age* have steadfastly asserted, with a prophetic energy: that, as a people, we persist in being, in Simone Weil’s words, “geometricians in regard to matter,” rather than “geometricians in the apprenticeship of virtue.” The costs of this persistence are costs that *Modern Age* has long been scrutinizing in their moral, social, and cultural ramifications. In no way, as a reader will readily see, do the essays here indulge in self-congratulation or self-admiration. They simply press on with the purposive task of *Modern Age* since the start: the need for self-examination on the part of Americans in pursuit of the “promise of a millennium.” This promise, as *Modern Age* has sought to show, is often confluent with the “drama of atheistic humanism” as it unfolds with almost methodical regularity, if not a furious passion. The contributors to the present issue present their critique of this drama in its latest American phase in which the surrender of our souls seems to be unconditional.

A reader of this commemorative issue would much benefit from a full and simultaneous reading of Russell Kirk’s remarkable memoir, *The Sword of Imagination* (1995), especially those pages in which he recounts the founding of *Modern Age*. His account helps one to gauge the singular editorial aims and the unique critical orientation of *Modern Age* as these have been defined during the past forty years. We learn here that a young Russell Kirk was deeply inspired by such vanished intellectual magazines as the *American Review* (1933-1937), which analyzed contemporary life and letters

from a traditionalist perspective, and, earlier, *The Bookman* (1895-1933), a monthly magazine of criticism which assessed literary subjects on the basis of conservative criteria. Kirk, with the collaboration of Henry Regnery and David S. Collier, sought to remedy the absence of serious journals such as the two mentioned with the publication of a quarterly magazine featuring carefully thought out writings that transcended the journalistic and the commercial, and that also countered a pervasive gnostic modernism and leftist-horizontalism governing the American intellectual community. In essence, *Modern Age* was founded as a corrective to this absence.

More specifically, this "conservative quarterly," Kirk declares, aimed to publish "reflections on the permanent things," and thus resist a "reckless neoterism" and a "modernist mentality" from gaining unchallenged dominance over American life, literature, and thought. In this dominance Kirk detected the repudiation of the past and the divine. In short, *Modern Age* was conceived as a "forum for reflective, traditionalist conservatism," and as an "alternative to liberal relativism." In some important ways, in fact, the editorial ambition of the new journal was restorative in nature, or as Kirk also writes: "...the notions of Modernity brought upon the whole world a ruin worse than that which fell upon Roman civilization in the fifth century. That hard truth, along with the search for means of redemption from Modernity, became the preoccupation of *Modern Age*." That preoccupation, as this new issue variously corroborates, remains constant. As Kirk states: "*Modern Age* was intended to become, in considerable part, an American protest against the illusions of Modernity, and so it has remained."

This issue of *Modern Age* continues, then, the appointed work of its founders, with the complete commitment, respon-

sibility, and diligence that here characterized the journal's editorial principles from the beginning. Its writers have been men and women who affirm its moral function as a bulwark against the "enemies of the permanent things," as well as against the endless shifting and drifting of those who, in Tocqueville's words, are "swayed by sensations and emotions, and not by principles." What distinguishes these writers is a shared critical perception of the interconnecting problems that face modern civilization as these are singled out by Babbitt: "When studied with any degree of thoroughness, the economic problem will be found to run into the political problem, the political problem in turn into the philosophical problem, and the philosophical problem itself to be almost indissolubly bound up at last with the religious problem." The essays that follow richly illustrate, from complementary critical angles, the validity of Babbitt's statement.

Here, too, the diagnostic focus is on the crisis of modernism in direct relation to the contemporary American scene, which the writers in the following pages explore with anxiety and urgency. Their critical explorations should prompt readers not only to look at our situation in more realistic ways, but also to become more aware of the realities of the total situation. In the end these writings invite a reader to reflect on matters that affect the lives of the American polity and the destiny of the nation. The contributors to this special issue of *Modern Age*, in effect, pay close attention to an insidious process that Jacob Burckhardt saw the French Revolution unleashing: "authorization to perpetual revision." Identifying, evaluating, and ultimately containing the epochal consequences of this process in our time is of major concern to each of the contributors.

One would be hard-pressed to find in

periodical literature today more cogent and vigorous critiques of the rhythm and temper of American life. Throughout the tone is judicious; the appeal is to right reason, to the need to avoid the entrapments of secular dogmata and to transcend the afflictions of "deformed ideologies." The essayists, as will be seen, do not shrink from their duty to alert the reader to the conditions and circumstances of our situation. But if negatives are necessarily specified, with critical severity, possibilities and potencies are also pointed out. A redemptive and reparative dynamic is ultimately a major and impelling quality of the essays. A reader, it is to be hoped, will come away from these with a renewed sense of understanding and a tough and inspired willingness to recognize and to wrestle with the grave problems now besetting, if not imperiling, American civilization.

It is worth noting here that the band of writers, a "worthy company" indeed, that has been contributing regularly and loyally to *Modern Age*, keeping the journal alive and vibrant these past four decades, has largely included scholars, critics, and teachers from the major academic disciplines and from American colleges and universities, large and small. On various occasions graduate students as well as non-academic expositors have also contributed essays and reviews. These writers have made their contributions not for academic prestige or advancement, or for personal enhancement, but rather for the furtherance of the function and the ethos of *Modern Age*. Some writers, in fact, have made

their contributions in spite of their institutional affiliation, in spite of "the orthodoxy of enlightenment" that subsists, *de rigueur*, in academic circles. In this respect, their writings have disclosed a dissident quality that defies academic hucksterism and the liberal party-line. They have not been deterred by a hostile environment or by antagonist publicists and celebrities who wield inordinate power and influence in the press and publishing world, in the broadcast industry, and in the electronic media.

Patiently, steadfastly, bravely, *Modern Ages*, past and present, have sought to fulfill the high office that Babbitt pinpoints in these words: "It is the critic's business to grapple with the age in which he lives and give it what he sees it needs." Cynics will no doubt scoff at this claim, or reject its importance, or at the very most concede that the dissident value of *Modern Age* is merely one of resonance in the fight for lost causes. But one who takes the time to study the content of this latest quarterly issue will in the end connect with the minds and thoughts of writers whose "visions of order" hold out the possibility of "redeeming the time."

The editorial notes preceding the following essays and reviews seek to alert a reader to their overall critical meaning, their constituent essence and strength, and also to cite an individual writer's credentials and association with *Modern Age*.

—George A. Panichas

[George A. Panichas first appeared in *Modern Age* in the Winter 1965-1966 issue, with a review of *Double Measure: A Study of the Novels and Stories of D.H. Lawrence*, by George H. Ford. In 1971 he became an editorial advisor and in 1978 an associate editor. With the Fall 1984 issue he became editor. It was at the personal invitation of Eliseo Vivas and Joseph M. Lalley that Dr. Panichas began his long association with *Modern Age*.]