

INTRODUCTION

Henry Regnery has earned a distinguished and lasting place in the annals of American publishing. As a longtime independent publisher—he founded the Henry Regnery Company in 1947—he sought to make available to the reading public the works of great writers that might otherwise not have appeared in print. For him the power of words and the responsibility of writers were absolutely interdependent, and the books that appeared under his imprint amply illustrated the truth of this criterion. The books he published were essentially, though not exclusively, conservative in orientation, and focused largely on acute philosophical, educational, literary, religious, socio-political, economic, and cultural issues, especially as these related to the modern era in the years directly following World War II. Some of the European and American authors whose writings he published were those of religious thinkers like Max Picard, Romano Guardini, and Gabriel Marcel; of educational commentators like Robert M. Hutchins and Mortimer Smith; of literary artists like Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and Roy Campbell; of socio-political critics like Montgomery Belgion, Raymond Aron, and Ernst Jünger; and of literary and cultural critics like Eliseo Vivas and Richard M. Weaver. It is worth adding here that Henry Regnery's *Memoirs of a Dissident Publisher* (1978) endures as a valuable autobiographical document in the history of publishing and also of conservative thought.

It was the publication, in 1953, of Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* that perhaps marked the highest degree of vision on the part of the Henry Regnery

Company. No other book in modern intellectual and political history has had more impact on the destiny of the conservative movement in the United States or more affected the direction of the conservative political imagination. “Kirk not only offered convincing evidence that conservatism was an honorable and intellectually respectable position, but that it was an integral part of the American tradition.” Thus writes Henry Regnery in a long essay on Russell Kirk’s achievement and significance included in this volume of selected essays composed and published during the past three decades. This essay includes a detailed and often fascinating narration of the publishing history of *The Conservative Mind*, as recited by the publisher himself. The essay, which contains incisive commentary on other books subsequently written by Kirk and published by the Henry Regnery Company, concludes with these words:

In a disorderly age he has tirelessly and eloquently made clear the necessity and sources of order; against the false prophets who proclaim that all values are relative and derive from will and desire, he shows their immutability; and to those who believe that man is capable of all things, he teaches humility and that the beginning of wisdom is respect for creation and the order of being.

These preceding words give to us the measure of the major and intrinsic concerns of the essays that Henry Regnery devotes to other American conservative figures found in the first two sections of this book and whose works he also published. As in the Kirk essay, the separate essays on Albert J. Nock and on Richard M. Weaver, as well as a joint essay examining particular books

by James Jackson Kilpatrick, Felix Morley, and James Burnham, seen in the special context of an “emerging conservatism” in the 1950s, exhibit the kind of critical seriousness and percipience exemplifying the other essays in this book. In the essays that immediately follow, he gives witness not only as a publisher of books of high civilizational value, and which testify incontestably to his standards of discrimination, but also as a writer who possesses literary talent and critical axioms, and who addresses himself to the same urgent problems of the modern world that the books he published also addressed. Indeed, what makes this book especially stimulating is to have on view here the lucid, fertile ways and workings of a mind concerned, critically and judgmentally, with the world of books and ideas, with the men who create books and shape ideas, and with epochal events in modern history which impinge on our common humanity and which, in the end, incite the books and the ideas that speak of the modern human condition. It is this fundamental, overarching concern which gives this book its unity of outlook and helps define its aims and values.

The essays in this book, it can be said, chart an intellectual journey in the modern world, and invite the reader to take part in the journey. A reader who accepts this invitation will be the richer for it; indeed, a younger generation of readers will find in these essays, individually and collectively, a trustworthy guide who, above all, ably describes the temper of the period following World War II and of events during and after the war that “represented the final triumph of liberalism.” The lead essay in this book, “This Liberal Age,” should be required reading for younger readers shaped and conditioned by the sham promises of

new and fair deals, let alone the new morality, and the new age that “terrible simplifiers” have long been laboring to establish in place of first causes and first principles. Henry Regnery’s keen historical sense, no less than his moral sense, cannot but have a restorative effect on readers endlessly exposed to the liberal tales of a terrestrial paradise. In an age in which specious ideologies thrive, such an encounter is bound to give needed shock to the mind.

For an author the search for historical truth must be a disinterested endeavor, even when, as he admits, this search becomes yet another lost cause. “Whether writing and publishing the historical truth brings any immediate practical results or not,” he writes, “if we believe in anything, we must believe that the truth is worthwhile for its own sake. If a free society is to survive, is to have any meaning, men must be made accountable for their activity, we must know what our leaders did, said, and agreed to do in our name.” These words, in fact, faithfully express his aims as a publisher of books, as well as a writer himself of essays, questioning decisions made by political leaders, like Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, that helped shape the peace after 1945. And both as the publisher of books like Charles C. Tansill’s *Back Door to War* (1952) and George N. Crocker’s *Roosevelt’s Road to Russia* (1959), and as the writer of a two-part essay, the longest in this book, “Historical Revisionism and World War II,” he presents the case for historical revisionism with conviction. In an era when ideology and political correctness control and manipulate the academy, the world of newspapers, publishers, and reviewing practices, and increasingly the

electronic media, Henry Regnery's example of dissent has much corrective value.

A Few Reasonable Words, the title given to this book, catches the spirit of the author's preoccupations, and of the subject and themes the essays as a whole center on throughout. It is a title entirely appropriate for a writer who deliberately avoids ideological extremes, who counsels clear and disciplined thought, who speaks in sensible terms and tones, always forcefully but also always restrainedly. The title also crystallizes the moral measure of an author who presents to his reader a selection from the various essays he has written over the years, possessing as he does both a keen historical sense and an active moral sense. In this respect, a reader would do well to ponder especially the short essay, originally given as a commencement address in 1960, "The Responsibility of the Educated." In title and content, this essay augments and sharpens the main title and direction of the book, and ultimately points to the author as a man of prudence and of probity, those quiet virtues underpinning the entire book itself.

Reasonable words and responsible acts are mutually necessary: are, in fact, what a world in disarray desperately requires if a humane civilization in a modern setting is not to dissolve altogether. "The Responsibility of the Educated" is an essay that provides a reader with a cogent purview of the author's basic position, of the values and principles that he affirms and that he counsels as an antidote to our present troubles. Here he speaks out with much feeling and candor, in the vital context of "What I Believe." It is an essay that essentializes Henry Regnery's position and beliefs. In it we hear the conjoining voice of a determined publisher,

committed writer, and concerned American citizen alerting his listeners to instances of poor leadership and, in turn, poor decisions that have incalculable consequences in the life of a nation and also the course of history. Citing the dismal story and aftermath of the Yalta, Teheran, and Potsdam conferences (and of the great personages taking part in them), he goes on to lament the fact that the educated, then and now, have not fulfilled their responsibility in speaking out against vacillating governmental policies and political programs and agendas that lack moral roots and convictions. Above all, he stresses that our national leaders have not lived up to the standards of the Founding Fathers who knew that

...history was a struggle for power, for existence, for advantage, that life itself is struggle, and that to see it otherwise is rank self-deception. But they also knew that the task of civilization is to bring, in so far as it is possible, order and justice out of the chaos of the struggle for existence. They knew that man is imperfect, that human institutions are equally imperfect, and that to expect perfection from the one was as futile and deceptive as to demand perfection from the other.

The last two sections of the book reveal a distinct literary dimension, as the author concentrates on gifted individuals who comprise his representative men, so to speak: in short, men whose ideas, values, and standards he esteems and recommends to readers. The essays in these sections give an added dimension to those that precede in the form of reminiscences, tributes, and critical appraisals. He thus adds to the socio-political and historical aspects of the earlier essays a more evocative tone and a more sapiential thrust. Through his

representative men he seeks primarily to convey paradigms of character, of thought, of attitude that reinforce and refine his inclusive emphasis on the intellectual and moral uses of responsibility. A spirit of affirmation prevails here, and the men whose lives and attainments he respects and salutes often serve as a counterpoise to some of the conditions and circumstances he has delineated in the earlier essays and sections. One will readily discern, too, how these men act as inspiring guides and good influencers in Henry Regnery's own life and work, helping him to appreciate more fully and deeply higher concepts of character and culture, of culture and society, and of art and thought. These representative men, it can be said, instill loyalty to first principles, now often dislodged or abandoned by our intellectual and political leaders.

That the author is a man of measure—of restraint, reserve, reticence—is clearly observed in the essays as a whole, both in style and in content. Romantic excesses and indulgences, which he doubtlessly connects with a vulgar liberalism, repel him. For Henry Regnery, Goethe's belief that in limitations one first shows himself the master is a central and impelling belief. Indeed, the crisis of modernity, as his essays demonstrate, often stems from a rejection of the law of limitations—a rejection fanned in turn by the insistence that everything is possible. The dispassionate note that one encounters in his writings must not, however, be seen as overruling any expression of emotion or strong sympathy. Two essays, in particular, the autobiographical essay on "Hermann Schnitzler," originally written as a testimony of gratitude, and an appreciation of "Richard Strauss," which views the German composer as a classic of our time, illustrate,

respectively, his capacity for human affection and intense aesthetic rapport. The first of these essays confirms the undying truth of an ancient Greek poet's declaration that a man counts it a great joy if he but have the shadow of a friend. The second salutes an outstanding modern composer of symphonic poems and operas, and celebrates a life that "came about as close to complete success and fulfillment as is permitted to man, flawed and imperfect creature that he is." The essay on Schnitzler, it should be noted, shows the author's literary sensitivity at its best; and that on Strauss, his lifelong musical interests. Clearly, he wrote these essays with considerable personal joy, which is certain to touch and transform a reader.

The men whose lives Henry Regnery honors in memory are, as he makes plain, also men of our time who were able to resist, in civilized and creative ways, the modern spirit of doubt, change, disillusionment, destruction, decadence. In their examples he asks us to find the strength and the courage we need to contend with the sickness of the modern world. No less compelling, in this respect, is his short but trenchant tribute to the Swiss-German philosopher and metaphysician, Max Picard. It was Hermann Schnitzler who first introduced him to Picard's writings, of which the Regnery Company eventually published, in English translation, *Hitler in Our Selves* (1948), *The Flight from God* (1952), and *The World of Silence* (1953). The beautiful and wise soul which he recognized in Picard (whom he visited on several occasions, which he vividly re-creates in his tribute) conflates with Picard's writings and ideas.

Henry Regnery's own decision to become a full-time publisher owed much to his wish to publish Picard's *Hitler in Our Selves*, a book which helps explain the catastrophe that overtook European civilization, and which diagnoses its breakdown. Though essentially concerned with Nazism as a German phenomenon, this remarkable, prophetic book sees Hitlerism as a terrifying portent and symptom of the general crisis of modern man, especially the spiritual chaos into which modern civilization has fallen, with its attendant discontinuity, fragmentation, destructiveness, apostasy, and the despotism of worldliness. Henry Regnery writes that, by publishing Picard's books, he was giving Americans "the opportunity to come under the influence of an extraordinary man who has something to offer we very much need." Clearly, Picard's books have considerable relevance in the present time, when there is no longer any point of orientation and when the Hitler in our selves now transmutes into the nihilism in our selves. If his circumspect comments do nothing more than alert a reader to even one of Max Picard's books, they will have done a good deed.

The men, both Americans and Europeans, whom he admires and celebrates, are men who had a common calling, a common vocation: to tell us truths about our modern world, about ourselves, and about our origins. Henry Regnery sees their writings and thought not only as gifts to a modern world in dire need of moral direction and renewal, but also as a fervent defense of civilized values. In a long and per-cipient essay on the results of their "creative friendship," for example, he elucidates in detail how T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wyndham Lewis in the first half of the twentieth century responded to what the latter spoke

of as “the threat of extinction to the cultural tradition of the West.” It is exactly this threat at an ever-increasing scale which concerns Henry Regnery and shapes the thrust of his essays in their parts and in their whole, in general and in particular. That this threat has also become even more pronounced and pervasive in the years since the end of World War II is, in fact, what especially troubles and preoccupies him in this book and what gives to it a far greater sense of urgency and timeliness. In no way, however, does the possibility of the total annihilation of our sacred patrimony, and thus the final victory of those whom Russell Kirk aptly identifies as “enemies of the permanent things,” daunt him. Despite the debasement and deterioration that he sees in our midst, he does not succumb to despair, he refuses to surrender to the kingdom of enmity. His faith in the principles of order and the dignity and value of human life, and his affirmation of the higher meaning of existence, do not desert him, whatever the threats of the “antagonist world,” to recall Edmund Burke’s phrase.

For Henry Regnery the union of what can best be termed the critical spirit and the creative spirit is essential to a civilized society, and to the idea of order. Such a union deters sloppiness, chaos, excess, debasement. It is the luminous presence of this union, however transient it was, that he observed in his book *Creative Chicago* (1993), particularly as found in the achievement of Louis Henri Sullivan, one of America’s greatest architectural geniuses. When this union thrives, vision finds its fulfillment in what Sullivan calls “the beneficence of power”—of power and responsibility, one could add. But when such a union falters, the losses to civilization can be disastrous, even fatal. In *A Few*

Reasonable Words the author particularly examines figures of achievement and significance in the light of how each assumes the responsibility of vision and choice. Yet he is profoundly and invariably aware of the hard, tensive realities that grip life, and does not fail to warn of what takes place when the critical and the creative spirit is sundered, and how the rhythm of disintegration, in one's self and in the world, besets the human situation. Still, it is characteristic of his attitude and outlook that the negative is subordinated to his emphasis on human effort, on aspiration, on ascent. In this connection, Simone Weil, whose celebrated essay on "*The Iliad, or The Poem of Force*," he read with deep admiration when it was first translated into English by Mary McCarthy and published in Dwight Macdonald's magazine *Politics* in November 1945, provides the appropriate note here: "The world is a closed door. It is a barrier. And at the same time it is the way through."

The essays in this book bear witness to the author's constancy of faith and purpose. And those whose writings and ideas he illuminates in his essays exemplify the dynamics of this constancy. Thus, with George F. Kennan, American statesman and sage, and the subject of the penultimate essay in this book, Henry Regnery, quoting from Kennan's *Around the Cragged Hill: A Personal and Political Philosophy* (1993), registers his own "basic preferences...for the small over the great, for the qualitative over the quantitative,...for the discriminate over the indiscriminate, and for the varied over the uniform, in most major aspects of social life." And with Kennan he also agrees that, "if we are to have hope of emerging successfully from the great

social bewilderment of this age, weight must be laid predominantly upon the spiritual, moral, and intellectual shaping of the individual.” That which elicits his greatest attention and respect, as *A Few Reasonable Words* reveals again and again, is the example of a writer and his work patiently striving, often in the face of powerful ideological opposition, to achieve the fulfillment of vision and thus to portray the human spirit at its highest point of excellence. Particularly alarming to him is the suppression of life-values in the interest of ideology, in short, of corrupt politics and morality emerging in the garb of the “New Order” and the “New Man.”

Appropriately, *A Few Reasonable Words* concludes with an essay on Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who possesses the inner courage and creative faith that Henry Regnery admires in a dissident writer who, refusing to capitulate to totalitarian rule, insists that we need “to subordinate our interests to moral criteria.” Indeed, the essay on Solzhenitsyn returns us to the first essay in the book, “This Liberal Age,” by reminding us of the power of the liberal left and of its disdain for a writer like Solzhenitsyn who has a prophetic calling to which he remains absolutely loyal as he shatters the illusions of the apologists for a bankrupt Marxism-Leninism, as well as of the social engineers and utopists who endlessly strive to create a new heaven and a new earth. Solzhenitsyn, he contends, has always presented a “problem” to the liberal mind, desperate in its effort to replace man’s vision of God with the vision of man without God. In Solzhenitsyn, he sees the might of the word in the struggle between good and evil. In him, too, he sees the example of a writer who accepts not only the moral responsibility of his calling, but also the full consequences of that acceptance.

Of the fourteen essays included in *A Few Reasonable Words* eleven of them were originally commissioned for publication in *Modern Age: A Quarterly Review*, between the years 1971 and 1995. With Russell Kirk, it will be remembered, Henry Regnery was instrumental in the founding of *Modern Age* in 1957, and he has steadfastly maintained interest in its purposes and direction. In his recently published *The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict* (1995), Kirk memorably recalls the challenges and the difficulties of an undertaking aspiring to inform and persuade. "Certain Modernist excesses incited...[us]," he recalls, "to found a periodical comparable to the vanished *Bookman* and the *American Review* that might publish reflections on the permanent things and offer some intellectual resistance to a reckless neoterism.... *Modern Age* was intended to become, in considerable part, an American protest against the illusions of Modernity; and so it has remained." Henry Regnery's book must be read, then, in light of what Kirk has to say about the mission and ethos of *Modern Age*. His essays, in the form of both articles and reviews, validate the importance of a quarterly review in the intellectual community, and particularly at a time when *les clercs* have disowned their charge. In their content, above all, the essays further illustrate, by enlarging and enriching, the worth of a journal of opinion, of dissent to be more exact, in providing a focus of ideas and a center of resistance for those disturbed by the drift of modern civilization in the last half of the twentieth century.

We live in a time of history when morality of mind, let alone moral virtues, is not held in high regard; and when the trivial and the tawdry are predominant

tendencies in the social and cultural life of a nation and its people. To our peril, we stubbornly refuse to recognize the transcendent power of morality which José Ortega y Gasset invokes in words that have increasingly fallen into silence: “For morality is always and essentially a feeling of subordination and submission to something, a consciousness of obligation and service.” Henry Regnery has steadfastly refused to be a part of this silence. *A Few Reasonable Words* depicts the resoluteness and integrity of this brave man of thought. In the essays here, written in a crisp, direct, unadorned style, without any affectation or pretension, an appreciative reader will discover those exceptional qualities, or endowments, that are intimately associated with morality of mind: in short, the insight and the sapience, the critical intelligence and the courage of judgment that characterize the keen-sighted few who labor for the survival of humane values of civilization.

—George A. Panichas