THE HIGH LIGHTS OF HUMANISM

v. 9

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THE sundry irreverent used, not long ago, to describe the American professor as a busy collector of foot-notes to nothing in particular. All plagues from drought to locusts (which are parasites) were just so many trifles to which he might be likened. One may admit that, under the stress of educational theory and practice, the professor did cover pretty nearly all the territory between thesis quiblets and class-room vaudeville. Not very many seasons past teachers of composition in a southern university were required to concentrate upon Anglo-Saxon texts—ostensibly with a view to keeping the foreign element out of the student style! And only omiscience could tell the extent to which the triumphant steam-rolling advance of novelties through the American mind is attributable to the absolute need of something that would keep the junior from Kokomo awake and sure that his "thinking" was being challenged.

But fundamental college leadership in America has nevertheless been going steadily toward something more valuable than scholarly bibliographies or current insight. This effort to attain to a philosophy, a theory of life, not merely academic or fatuously glib, is very apparent in the movement which chooses to be called humanism. However little of what Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More and their associates have written may actually figure in the popular intellectual menu, it has influenced many university men, is now more widely talked of than ever, and constitutes a challenge to which not a few are listening. Significantly enough, the first lucid summary of the movement appears in French, to the literature and civilization expressed in which humanism is closely allied. Le Mouvement Humaniste aux Etats-Unis, by Dr. Louis Mercier (Paris: Librairie Hachette) is so good and comprehensive a study that one might almost term it more useful and convincing than the books it discusses. It seems right on all essential matters, and may be recommended most highly to everyone who can read its lucid if compact prose.

The word "humanism" was originally adopted by Professor Babbitt to define a general theory of right education. It means, first of all, the formation of self in accordance with the "best that has been known and thought in the world." Here two demands are imposed—a right attitude of mind and heart toward either those sides of life which tend to set in motion overpowering currents of sentiment or "communion with nature," or those other sides which encourage the intellectual aristocrat to curse the age and retreat to his ivory tower; and, secondly, a "disciplined selection" of such values as are genuinely part of the perennial human tradition. Naturally enough, acceptance of these demands means discipline, which is not to be disregarded as unimportant since through it the individual averts decay and defeat from society.

This last consideration—the social significance of an intellectual aristocracy—gradually became the matter of greatest importance to Irving Babbitt. The work to be done by the humanist is not so much the increase of learning as the inculcation of obedience to the law of human life. Whenever a civilization gives way to its instincts, or whenever the crowd is divorced from its best men, punishment—nemesis—follows. Society must therefore be induced to accept the "frein vital," the curb it places upon its enthusiasms and desires, regardless of how much pleasure is sacrificed. Almost as a matter of course the model proposed by humanism is that Greco-Roman civilization best exemplified by France. It is obvious, however, that the doctrine of "frein vital" incorporates, though with a new emphasis, the New England conscience. And not the least interesting part of Babbitt's writing deals, it seems to me, with the problem of restating colonial theocracy in terms of modern intelligence.

In a series of books which one may define as demonstrations of the necessity for a disciplined and respected aristocracy, Babbitt is primarily the critic of contemporary chaos. This is attributed to errors inherent in the direction taken by civilization at a time —the renaissance—when discovery of the magnitude of the universe seemed to dwarf the stature of man. Were not the laws governing this immeasurable network of energies superior to any constitution the human being might propose for himself? After having accepted an affirmative reply, mankind arrived at two consequent points of view—the utilitarian humanitarianism of Bacon, and the sentimental humanitarianism of Rousseau. In other words, civilization decided to seek either dominance of nature or surrender to nature. Both were mistaken choices, for the reason that, as Emerson says, one law is the law of things, another the law of men.

But what is the law for men? This query has been most effectively answered, from the humanistic point of view, by Paul Elmer More. Although best known as a critic, More has been a constructive thinker interested, since the very beginning of his career, in maintaining the distinction between good and evil. In his case the Puritan conscience is a direct personal heritage, and the meaning of his work may be summed up as an effort to maintain that conscience while abandoning the gloomy religious philosophy with which Calvinism had associated it. He began with a study of Hindu thought, emphasizing as his chief discovery that the mandate of conscience resides in man, is even the essence of his being. Then there followed an earnest investigation of Platonism, reflected in what are

probably the best of the More books. Here are restated those protests against a civilization based upon surrender to impulse or upon mastery of purely material forces, those appeals to the discipline of the individual as the only method of achieving social harmony, which resemble so closely the moral teaching of Babbitt.

Both have been willing to concede the value of religion as a help to achieving the only kind of progress which matters; but while Babbitt developed his teaching wholly apart from the concerns of faith, More went on to trace the relations between Platonism and Christianity and to write (in Christ the Word) a very impressive defense of the Christian assumptions. It is not my object here to compare humanism with Christianity. And yet it is obvious that its repudiation of diverse libidos, its attitude toward conscience and its appeals to the tradition of human civilization are essential traits of Catholic doctrine. As a matter of fact, both Babbitt and More have respected the work of the Christian Church, even if they do not admit the legitimacy of its claims or dream of joining the forces of humanism with the communion of saints. On the other hand, it seems to me that a Christian point of view would differ radically from the humanistic outlook in several important respects. What these are may be gathered from the following observations on the system, which are, however, put forward as purely "humanistic" opinions.

Is it not quite as impossible to conceive of a society that would place the primary emphasis upon discipline as it is to think of the cosmos as being, essentially, a complex of laws? In both cases the matter of greatest importance is surely the operative power. From time immemorial the most astonishing aspect of the cosmos has been (as P. Expeditus Schmidt so clearly shows) not design but being. The creative causes even now spill over the brim of restrictions as merrily as they did in the days of dinosaurs and innumerable volcanos. Though all the heavens show forth the power of their Maker, we somehow become more conscious of this when a comet happens along. And if one goes from the purely material to the purely spiritual realm, one finds Christ placing the emphasis not upon discipline—not upon the letter—but upon the life. The essence of all His attacks upon the Scribes is, indeed, summed up in the phrase, "I am the Life." Nor can we forget the multitude of the symbols He used to express this vitality—the mustard seed, the tree bringing forth fruit, the woman in travail.

In between these levels, where humanistic interests properly lie, it seems to me exceedingly precarious to adopt any other kind of standards. Modern philosophy, as we see it now, has involved a great effort to keep the world from drying up, intellectually speaking. On the one hand the mechanists were bent upon reducing everything to "laws"; on the other, the extreme intellectualists abandoned themselves hand and foot to "general ideas" from which all that men needed to know could be deduced. And so the achievement of Bergson, of Max Scheler and of the Neo-Thomism which is faithful to that "humility in the face of reality" which distinguished the Angelic Doctor, has been to restore that "freshness of the face of earth," that confidence in intuition, which is somehow part of the real meaning of life. But for the humanist (and I am thinking here of some passages in Professor Babbitt's writings) "intuition" is almost always "instinct," enjoyment of nature apart from the exercise of reason is dangerous, and mysticism is usually defined as a "surrender." A man who is always self-controlled, in the Babbitt sense, would never do anything foolish. But on the other hand he would not preach to the birds, nor burst into merry laughter, nor (after the fashion of Brother Juniper) plant the cabbages upside down.

These several matters are important, it seems to me, for the same reasons that art is important. And one may be permitted to doubt whether, despite so much that is excellent particularly in the Shelburne Essays (More's critical encyclopedia) and in the earlier work of Stuart P. Sherman, the combined forces of humanism have given any notable impetus to art. Is it not obvious that modern literature has been romantic not because the French Revolution happened along, but because a more or less romantic attitude toward life entered the western world with Christianity? Neither the Celt nor the Saxon has ever fully understood the harmony of Apollo; and though the sources of their Dionysaic energy have sometimes been adulterate or even vile, a little of that which Saint Bernard summed up in a memorable phrase—"Desiderio desideravimus in sacrarium tuae familiaritatis ingredi"—has persisted none the less. Art has been, ultimately, the voicing of our hunger for more than humanistic certainties. We have sought safety in our very uneasiness. Satiety, we have been bold enough to believe, might be achieved through ecstasy. And I for one believe that this current cannot be waved back with a gesture—even so imperial a gesture as that of the genuinely noble American thinkers under discussion here, or of their compeers in other lands.

And yet the corrective and healing values of the humanistic position are very evident to an era so conscious of chaos. The work of Babbitt and More ought to enter into the intellectual synthesis any American makes of culture or conviction. A Christian will find in it confirmation of much that seems to him abidingly sure, however aloof from him its authors may occasionally be. Certainly few points of view one might adopt in confronting the world as it is would be more salutary than this cardinal principle of the More doctrine: "One knows that the battle for the good and the beautiful, and for justice in the social order, must be fought in the heart of the individual, and that progress toward the ideal cannot be made excepting through mastery of self by every son of the human race."