

HUMANISM

ARTHUR ARNOULT, O.P.



PERHAPS no word in our language has been so thoroughly bandied about of late as the word Humanism. Doubtless in the world of letters and thought to-day there is a valid use for the terms "humanist" and "anti-humanist," but the merry manner in which certain of our American thinkers, critics and writers are belaboring each other about "who is entitled to which label," makes one wonder whether it is possible clearly to understand the thing or not.

A coterie of distinguished scholars calling themselves humanists, lead by Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More and Norman Foerster, has recently appeared in force, contemporaneously it might be said with kindred spokesmen abroad, who make bold to challenge the disorders and anarchy of our age with an energetic call to order and sanity, to "standards" based on the best the world has seen.¹ Immediately their defiance is taken up and answered by a host of young writers, promptly classified as anti-humanists, who have distinguished themselves so far, not only by attacking the ideas of Babbitt, More and their followers, but by questioning the very right of these men to call themselves humanists.² Add to this the contention of Harry Elmer Barnes, that to be a bona fide humanist you must be prepared to play stump the leader with Professor Barnes (as teacher and leader), and the ordinary layman begins to suspect that something like confusion is being heaped up. It is not the purpose here to confine Humanism to any particular set of ideas or beliefs, but rather to discover, if possible, side by side with the historical sense, the meaning which some of the moderns, particularly Irving Babbitt,³ have striven to attach to the word.

¹ vid. *Humanism And America*, Essays on the Outlook of Modern Civilization, Norman Foerster, Ed. (New York, 1930).

² vid. *Critique of Humanism*, Brewer and Warren, Pub. (New York, 1930).

³ Babbitt is undoubtedly at the center of the humanistic movement. According to Norman Foerster, "he has done more than anyone else to formulate the concept of humanism and gain for it an ever-widening hearing." "Preface," *Humanism And America*, p. vii.

It is surprising to discover that even the humanism with which history has made us familiar almost defies definition. Near the close of the fifteenth century it was assumed as a name to designate a revived admiration for and study of Greek and Roman antiquity. It grew out of the thought that the study of the classics could alone make one a man. The adherents of this movement, for the most part, as not infrequently happens in the enthusiasm of a new pursuit, soon arrayed themselves against the received system of the schools, not only in the study of the classical languages, but even in philosophy, and eventually in theology. As the historian DeWulf says, "The admirers of Ciceronian diction soon conceived a profound disgust for the worn-out forms of decadent scholasticism, and exploited its weakness . . . its heavy and cumbersome phrases were all taxed with 'barbarism'; its works on grammar and rhetoric were despised. . . . Soon the subject-matter and the form were included in one common reprobation, and it was inferred that men incapable of writing were equally incapable of thinking."⁴

This general attitude of mind finds portrayal on perhaps broader lines in Edward Kennard Rand's *Founders of The Middle Ages*. Rand, a Professor of Latin in Harvard University and, incidentally, a colleague of Irving Babbitt, thus describes a humanist: "A humanist is one who has a love of things human, one whose regard is centered on the world about him, and the best that man has done; one who cares more for art and letters than for the dry light of reason and the mystic's flight into the unknown; one who distrusts allegory; one who adores critical editions with variants and variorum notes; one who has a passion for manuscripts, which he would like to discover, beg, borrow or steal; one who has an eloquent tongue which he frequently exercises; one who has a sharp tongue, which on occasion can let free a flood of good billingsgate or sting an opponent with epigram."⁵ Here are characteristics easily recognizable in such historically great humanists as Rudolph Agricola, John Reuchlin, Marius Nozalus of Modena, Erasmus and the

⁴ DeWulf, *History of Mediaeval Philosophy*, New York, 1926, Vol. II, p. 266.

⁵ Rand, *Founders of The Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 1928, p. 102.

Englishmen Colet, Fisher and Sir Thomas More,⁶ though most of these men did not "steal manuscripts or indulge in cultivated billingsgate." For that matter, a man might be lacking in more than one of the features in the above description, and yet be a humanist for all that.

It would not be difficult to show, for instance, that St. Ambrose, St. Jerome and St. Augustine, to mention only a few among the early Fathers, were humanists—Christian humanists, though, as Rand points out, they did not have the necessary "leisure" to be humanists all the time. They saw clearly, however, that in many ways Christianity was the "heir of a not inglorious past which somehow had a meaning for the present," and whatsoever of goodness, of honesty and of truth they found in their study of pagan culture they unhesitatingly turned to the uses of the Church and the needs of their times. That they gave to the arts solely a relative value, as handmaids of the Church, is no argument that their "programme was not humanistic"; since even for Cicero, admittedly the prince of humanists, they (the arts) merely "led the way either to the life of the statesman or to the contemplative life of the philosopher."

So far, humanism has been accepted in its historical meaning, *i.e.*, as denoting a general attitude of mind. It has often had a more limited sense. Messrs. Babbitt, More, Elliot, Foerster, and others, to whom reference has already been made, are the latest to assert their right to be called humanists. These modern humanists are opposed to all forms of naturism, which means that they are opposed to all the current mechanistic, animalistic interpretations of human nature and their expression in letters, in art, in philosophy or in life itself. Commenting on the extremes to which modern art has drifted, Paul Elmer More says, "Art may be dehumanized, but only in the sense that, having passed beyond the representation of man as undifferentiated from animals, it undertakes to portray them as complete imbe-

⁶ The names of Fisher, More and Colet are irrevocably linked with the revival of polite learning in England. The erection of Christ's College and St. John's College at Cambridge was due to the inspiration of Fisher. Thanks to him also Erasmus became a professor at Cambridge. Of his palace it is said that "in regularity it resembled a monastery and in science a University." At the same time, Colet and More, who accorded Erasmus such a warm welcome in England, were without doubt two of the outstanding scholars of their time. *vid. G. Constant, La Reforme en Angleterre*, (Paris, 1930), pp. 116-153.

⁷ Rand, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

ciles.”⁸ He continues in the same strain, “The submergence of the humanistic conception of man as a responsible creature of free will has been accompanied by an emergence of the romantic glorification of uncontrollable temperament; this has been supplanted by a realistic theory of subjection to the bestial passions, and this, at the last, by an attempt to represent life as an unmitigated flux, which in practice, however it be in literature, means confinement in a mad-house.”⁹

For these men, however, the limit has been reached. They want again, not only in literature and in art, but in life itself, self-restraint, decency, poise. Poise is the high virtue of humanism and results from moderate and decorous living, from living according to the maxim “nothing too much.” To achieve it one must avoid, among other things, prodigies, feats of strength (flagpole sitting and other endurance contests), and, in general, cease trying to get “as many pulsations as possible into the given time.” It must not be thought that at this time the new humanists present a completed and well rounded system of thought. Disgusted with naturalism, they are yet “looking for a new set of controlling ideas capable of restoring value to human existence.”¹⁰

It is worthy of note that almost all of these men, some of them professional scientists, have at some time or another voiced their opposition to the pretensions, the false claims, of science, as having aided and abetted the distorted view of human nature that will not allow man to rise above the brute. For this reason they have been charged with being the enemies of science. They insist, however, that they have no quarrel with science as such, but only with a science that has overstepped its due bounds. Louis Trenchard More, dean of the graduate school and Professor of physics in the University of Cincinnati, commenting on this attitude says, “no humanist would deny that science has a legitimate field of its own when investigating the phenomena of the objective world and attempting to find law and order in the flux of events.”¹¹ It is the false claims of the pseudo-scientists, “who by mere verbal analogies have linked the study of man’s intellectual and spiritual nature to the physical world of matter and motion” that humanism is out to expose and, in the

⁸ P. E. More, “The Humility of Common Sense,” *Humanism And America*, (New York, 1930) p. 63.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Norman Foerster, *Preface*, op. cit., p. vi.

¹¹ L. T. More, “The Pretensions of Science,” op. cit., p. 3.

name of true science, disown. It insists that the phenomena of intellectual life cannot be measured quantitatively, and in this it has the support of more than one reputable scientist not attached to the movement.

This in no wise affects the underlying belief of the new humanism—that the “proper study of mankind is man and that this study should enable him to perceive and realize his humanity.” Since this was also a basic assumption with the humanism of the Renaissance period, it is not hard to see that one is somehow related to the other and perhaps derived from it. The sixteenth century humanists, says Irving Babbitt, fed up on what they conceived to be an excess of divinity in the mediaevals, and preferring to it the humanity of the great classical writers, “were thus encouraged to aim at a harmonious development of their faculties in this world rather than at other-worldly felicity. Each faculty, they held, should be cultivated in due measure without onesideness or overemphasis, whether that of the ascetic or that of the specialist. ‘Nothing too much’ is indeed the central maxim of all genuine humanists, ancient and modern.”¹² The mediaeval humanist reacted against what seemed to him an excess of divinity; the new humanist is reacting against an excess of animality. Both it appears, have arrived at the same conclusion—that to attain the ideal of completeness of life, of a human nature well rounded and perfect on all sides, it is necessary studiously to avoid the overemphasis either of man’s supernatural or of his natural side.

The humanist, at least the new humanist, conceives man as living on three planes: the natural or lowest level, which is the plane of instinct, appetite, animal passions or affections; the human level, which is in a sense created by the will and knowledge of man, works upon the natural man and is governed by reason, the special human faculty; and thirdly the supernatural level, which is the plane of spiritual beings. “The content of the middle term will frequently tend to be invaded by the others” so that it is possible to have naturistic humanists or religious humanists. But a “pure” or “mere” humanist will energetically maintain the distinction between man and nature, and man and the divine. The idea is that before setting out to be superhuman man ought to make sure that he is human. And even though many humanists frankly doubt the possibility of ever achieving

¹² Irving Babbitt, *An Essay at Definition*, op. cit., p. 26.

"pure" or "mere" humanism, at least Irving Babbitt thinks it can be realized.

All humanists are lovers of the "Golden Mean" and staunch defenders of the maxim "nothing too much." At the same time they are aware that their law of measure is not always easy of application. The difficulty lies in "bridging the gap between the general precept and some particular emergency." As they freely admit, to make the adjustment between that which man perceives as something permanent in himself and that which is changing both within and without himself, a strenuous effort is required. For this reason, in an age almost, as one might say, peculiar for its spiritual indolence, it appears unlikely that any such purely human ideal could be effective. But on the other hand, inasmuch as humanism does urge man not freely to surrender to the "mere expansiveness of his emotions and desires" but to work inwardly upon himself and to strive constantly to rise if only to a "higher range of satisfaction," there is some reason to hope that at least this is a real break with naturalism.

The new humanist is not a humanitarian. A humanitarian is generally supposed to be one who believes in the all-sufficiency of his own innate powers and looks to the perfectibility of human nature, independently of supernatural aid, as his great moral and social dogma. But a humanitarian is much more—or less, if you will—than that. He is the disciple of both Bacon and Rousseau, and prattling a great deal about "humanity," the "Brotherhood of Man" and "human progress," he favours a surrender to temperament and emotions together with the utmost expansion of scientific knowledge as means best calculated to serve these ends. These are the very tenets of Harry Elmer Barnes, to mention only a single instance, and strangely enough, this is what he calls humanism. It is *naturism* pure and simple, the child of pseudo-science, and the humanism of Babbitt, More and Elliot is deadly opposed to it—opposed to it not only because it is destructive of morals, because it throws out all proportion in life, but also for the reason that it is highly unscientific. Moreover, Babbitt remarks, experience proves that "in the natural man as he exists in the real world and not in some romantic dream-land, the *will to power* is more than a match for the *will to service*."¹³

The new humanist admits, on "positivistic grounds," a vaguely defined duality in the make-up of man, and holds that

¹³ *op. cit.* p. 35.

the higher part must control the brute in him. Babbitt dwells much on the existence of what he calls "the higher will," which he affirms as an experienced fact. While loosely comparing it to divine grace, he defines it as "the higher immediacy which is known in its relation to the lower immediacy—merely temperamental man with his impressions and emotions and expansive desires—as a power of control (*frein vital*).” It is, he declares, related to Aristotles "energy of soul," which the latter describes as a kind of inward working. Boiled down to its consequences, this means, according to Babbitt, that, unlike the epicurean who tempers his present pleasures only that they may not be injurious to his future ones, "one should not be content with transitory pleasures at all, but should be striving constantly to rise from a lower to a higher range of satisfaction." At first blush this seems like exercising self control merely for the sake of control and thus to be identical with stoicism. But it can not be dismissed as simply as that, for, as we are immediately assured, "the real humanist consents, like Aristotle, to limit his desires only in so far as this limitation can be shown to make for his own happiness." The objection to this, however, is that it constitutes a man (who is naturally inclined to favour his own desires) the authority and judge in deciding when to exercise the will to refrain.

The humanists think to get around this by appealing to "standards." A man must have standards in order to exercise self control. How and where is he going to find them? Not merely by searching into tradition, they answer, "for the wisdom of the past cannot be brought to bear too rigidly on the present." But then, in attempting to point out whence these standards are to be had, they seem to be beating the air. It is the haziest, if not the weakest spot in their argument, and undoubtedly the principal reason for suspecting that they have very little of a positive nature to offer. To quote Mr. Babbitt again, "One may say, therefore, that standards result from a cooperation between imagination and reason, dealing with the more specifically human aspects of experience, and that these standards should be pressed into the service of the higher will with a view to imposing a right direction on the emotions and expansive desires of the natural man. The supreme goal of ethical endeavor, as Plato pointed out long ago, is that one should come to like and dislike the right things." With what has gone before, this may be interpreted to mean, that, by a

study of the best that man has done in the past, we will acquire knowledge that will enable the higher will, with the help of reason, to choose that which is unchanging in the midst of change, and to select in the midst of wavering emotions and desires that which is proportionate to the abiding part of man and is, therefore, good, true and beautiful.

Humanism, in that it expresses a faith in the existence of a "universal centre" or "norm" for all mankind which will function as a pattern for imitation, has apparently this much in common with religion. But it is not, at least in the minds of its present protagonists, a substitute for religion. As far as it goes it may be sound, especially in the sense that it is not opposed to religion. The question yet to be answered is, how far will it go in practice. Mr. Babbitt asks, "Why should not the humanist devote himself to his own task—that of effecting an adjustment between the law of measure and the ever novel emergencies of actual living, and at the same time refuse to take sides too decisively in the great debate between the naturalists and the supernaturalists?" And the answer suggested by the facts of past experience is—"because whatever a man may be in theory, in practice he is ultimately either a naturalist or a supernaturalist."