

The New Humanism in Its Time and After

The New Humanism: A Critique of Modern America, 1900-1940, by J. David Hoeveler, Jr., *Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1977. xiii + 207 pp. \$12.50.*

THE CENTRAL BELIEF of the New Humanists was that man was a dual creature possessed of a lower or natural and a higher or spiritual self; only by disciplining the lower to the higher could he lead a truly human life. All the significant moral, intellectual, and social ills of the modern world, whatever form or name they take, the humanists traced to a denial of the higher self, to a freeing of the lower from the restraints of moral law embodied in tradition. Throughout their long lives Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More and, as the years went by, a number of younger disciples fought this enemy—Babbitt from Harvard for forty years, More for the same length of time as literary journalist, teacher, and independent scholar. What they advocated instead was the responsibility of the individual, intellectual and moral discipline based on tradition, the governance of society by a natural aristocracy whose training was the responsibility of the university: in short, conservatism.

Readers unfamiliar with the New Humanist movement and with the details of American intellectual and social history in the early twentieth century may wish that Professor Hoeveler had been more detailed in his discussion. In his first chapter he summarizes the course of the movement, but his study is primarily a summary analysis of the substance of the humanist critique. Other chapters treat the underlying philosophy of humanism, its critical standards, and its positions on literature, education, politics and society, and religion. All are illustrated by discussions of particular figures and controversies. Hoeveler relies mostly on the works of Babbitt and More, who founded and led the movement, and he makes more of Stuart P. Sherman and Norman Foerster than of Frank J. Mather, G. R. Elliott, Robert Shafer, and

Gorham B. Munson, some of whom he hardly more than mentions. Others, like Prosser H. Frye and Alan R. Thompson, he doesn't even name. Similarly, though he mentions some of the periodicals that supported the humanists or attacked them, he makes no attempt to describe systematically the rôle of these journals. Among the opponents of the humanists he gives fullest treatment to H. L. Mencken, Van Wyck Brooks, and John Dewey; he also discusses a few others. T. S. Eliot, part humanist and part critic of humanism, he treats at length. But although he calls the New Humanism "a significant chapter in the intellectual history of the United States," his work is less a history than "a comprehensive intellectual portrait" of the humanists.

I do not wish to fault him for not doing what he never intended. Though much of what he says can be found in studies of individual humanists or of aspects of the movement, this is the first comprehensive study of its kind, and it is easy to argue the needlessness of his having offered a greater amplitude of historical detail. The humanist position on virtually all questions is contained in the writings of Babbitt and More; the most important departures from or special emphases within it can be seen in Sherman, Foerster, and T. S. Eliot; and the controversy between the humanists and their opponents is adequately illustrated in the treatment of typical figures. Furthermore, because the writings of the humanists are often marked, as Hoeveler notes, by a philosophical aloofness from specific current issues, they can be adequately understood apart from the minutiae of historical context.

Nevertheless, Hoeveler's book is sometimes sketchy, especially in its Epilogue, which is intended to "illustrate how different aspects of the New Humanist critique were shared by other individuals and groups." Those discussed are the Southern Agrarians (John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and Robert Penn Warren), the "neo-orthodoxy" of Reinhold Niebuhr, and the new conservatism of American politics following World War II. The choice of these three individuals and groups seems arbitrary, if not haphazard. Austin Warren, in "The 'New Humanism' Twenty

Years After" (*Modern Age*, Winter 1958-59), lists a number of writers and movements in whose work humanist elements can be seen and many of whom had direct connection with the humanists. Among those not also mentioned by Hoeverler are, in literature, Yvor Winters, R. P. Blackmur, Francis Fergusson, and Warren himself, and in education (Warren's categories obviously overlap), F. O. Matthiessen, Louis J. A. Mercier, and Douglas Bush at Harvard; Norman Nelson and Warren Rice at Michigan; Gordon Chalmers at Kenyon; and a variety of "neo-Aristotelians" at Chicago and elsewhere, including Jacques Maritain in France. Hoeverler need not accept Austin Warren's tracing of humanist influence, but in view of his contention that in education alone did the humanists have any significant practical success, his failure to show more fully the scope of that success is a failure to do full justice to his subject. The only success he discusses is Foerster's at Iowa, although he treats various critics of American higher education whose criticism resembled that of the humanists. Perhaps it is his concern with creating a "comprehensive intellectual portrait" that has kept him also from identifying some of the scholarly achievements of individual humanists not directly a part of their critique of American society.

Hoeverler's study correctly analyzes that critique and, except as I have already said, correctly assesses the movement's strengths and weaknesses. His explanation of why the New Humanists had no more success outside of education than they did is that, however acute their diagnoses of the intellectual and social ills of the modern world, they were so totally antagonistic to all the dominant trends and aspirations of American life that they discouraged any significant sympathetic response and that they did not, in any event, offer corrective programs of their own. Looking back on them now, we might easily conclude that their principles foredoomed them. In literature, for instance, they wrote at a time when the work of Henry James, Proust, Mann, Gide, Joyce, Eliot, and Yeats (add D. H. Lawrence, Pound, Stevens, Faulkner, Woolf, and whoever else) was riding the modernist wave, buoyed partly

by the discoveries or theories of Darwin, Freud, Jung, Einstein, Bergson, and the Cambridge anthropologists; yet the humanists saw nothing in it of significant value. Among the major humanists, only Sherman showed any sympathy even toward the realistic movement in American literature. The humanitarianism and individualism they opposed in politics and society seem to have had an equally irresistible momentum, but their influence and their inspiration as social critics continues. No literary critic today invokes the patronage of Babbitt and More (although they, I believe, would approve the work of Wayne Booth and perhaps have contributed toward it), but though Hoeverler names only Barry Goldwater, William Buckley, Jr., and Peter Viereck (and discusses only the last) in his treatment of the new conservatism, readers of *Modern Age* can easily supply the names of social and political critics and philosophers who do.*

The strong moralism of the New Humanism might suggest that it was closely tied to religion, but the humanists disagreed considerably on the importance to humanism of religion. As humanists they held that the duality of human nature was an empirical datum, a fact that the experience of mankind had always recognized, but especially toward the end of the movement disagreements arose among them, and these were seen even by some of the humanists as critical to the integrity of the movement. Some, either antagonistic to religion or believing that it had lost its authority in the modern world, thought what Babbitt called a "critical and positive" humanism sufficient; others respected and could practice religion, but believed that humanism did not logically require it; others thought that without religion humanism must collapse. Babbitt and Foerster exemplify the first group, More the second; and T. S. Eliot, insofar as he is a humanist, the third. Indeed, "with a few exceptions," Austin Warren says in "The 'New Humanism' Twenty Years After," "the second generation of humanists have become not only religious but Christians—Anglicans or Catholics." Hoeverler, after summarizing the arguments, concludes that although a self-reliant humanism may be a precarious one, religion is

not necessary to humanism. With T. S. Eliot (in "Second Thoughts About Humanism") and Allen Tate (in "The Fallacy of Humanism"), I disagree. If the "higher self" is not supernatural it is natural, and however much the humanists might enshroud it in mystery, as Hoeveler says they did, it is open to rational understanding, and humanism becomes a naturalism. Eliot argues that the human mind doesn't invent spiritual realities, it merely recognizes them; they must come either from below or from above. Those who believe the former, he says, are naturalists; those who believe the latter are supernaturalists, and only religion can nourish their belief. My disagreement with Hoeveler may only mean that those who read the New Humanists from a distance of half a century and more can no more agree on this important point than they could themselves.

Reviewed by FRANCIS X. DUGGAN

*A recent critique of democracy indebted to Babbitt and More but without their antipathetic tone is Claes G. Ryn, *Democracy and the Ethical Life: A Philosophy of Politics and Community* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1978). Mr. Ryn is a native of Sweden, where the New Humanists have always had adherents. For another example of Swedish interest see Folke Leander's philosophical monograph *The Inner Check: A Concept of Paul Elmer More With Reference to Benedetto Croce* (London: Edward Wright, 1974).

A Roman Haruspex

Signposts for the Future, by Hans Küng,
New York: Doubleday and Company, 1978.
204 pp. \$7.95.

A STUDENT recently asked me how revolutions break out. I secretly thanked those faculties which have begun giving separate courses on "revolutions," so that a debate may commence on the issue, hence a more articulate answer than what historians have so far proposed. But since I had to reply to the inquiring student, I said that two elements are usually present in a

pre-revolutionary situation: the authority (king, church, government, party, despot) whose confidence in its own legitimacy has been undermined and is thus shaky, and the radicals whose intellectual audacity breaks down the moral underpinnings of that legitimacy. Thus the revolutionary is an audacious man (or group) who dares to say and do things nobody has yet said and done.

This is not a very deep analysis, but it is sufficient to pinpoint the rôle of a Mirabeau in the tennis-court episode. Less flamboyant than Mirabeau, Hans Küng has been playing a similar rôle in what Father Yves Congar called the "October revolution" in the Catholic Church. If Congar's expression is correct, then Küng played that rôle *vis-a-vis* the "Kerensky" of the late Pope Paul VI. Küng is, of course, not only a flamboyant but also a banal man, verbose, an inextinguishable source of exasperating platitudes. But our age is banal, even when it commits evil, so why not when it sponsors revolutions.

Küng is addicted to writing bulky books, and if the present volume is relatively slim, it is because it contains only essays, lectures, press conferences, interviews, and debates put together by the American publisher: the dimensions are not Germanic. In every text, however, several bombs explode, although the resulting devastation does not alter the impression of general greyness. Here are some examples: the interviewer of the *Lutherische Monatshefte* asks Küng whether he would not feel better in the skin of a Protestant theologian? Küng: This temptation never occurred to me. But it is true that as the significance of ecumenism grows, that of one's own denomination diminishes. Küng again: I do not like the word "papacy," I prefer "Petrine ministry." Or: The essential distinction between "Catholic" and "Protestant" no longer lies in doctrinal differences but in the diversity of basic attitudes since the Reformation. Küng: Internal reforms of the Catholic Church are necessary in regard to the style of Church leadership, election of bishops and popes, compulsory celibacy, ordination of women, freedom of conscience in questions of morality.

There are many more such casually pro-