HUMANISM, PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

by

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The word *humanist* was introduced into our language at the beginning of the sixteenth century to denote a scholar engrossed in human studies, that is, in the study of men and of man. The word *humanism* (like most other-isms) was introduced at the beginning of the nineteenth century to denote the tradition and cult which the humanists had inaugurated three centuries earlier; for the nineteenth century liked to take stock of its tendencies. Thus *humanism* ought to mean the study of humanity. But we shall find that the word has changed its meaning more than once because those who use it have also changed. Its history illustrates and explains the transition through which culture is passing.

In the Middle Ages there was no need for such expression. It was hardly worth studying man since his short and precarious sojourn on earth was bound to end sooner or later in the Last Judgment Day, and his real existence would begin thereafter, as a spirit blessed or blighted with immortality. Life at best should be a *commentatio mortis*. So all serious study was devoted to theology, that is, to ascertaining the will and purposes of God, and how to efface the taint of Original Sin. The *human* studies were confined to jurisprudence, a little anatomy and physiology, fragments of Aristotelian science preserved in Latin and later in Arabic translations; even the arts were subservient to Ecclesiasticism.

It was confidently expected that the world would come to an end in 1000 A. D. When Europe had once been released from that nightmare, people began to open their eyes and look around them with more confidence. The Normans led the way. They spread all over Europe; they spread as far as the Holy Land;

they created the typically medieval architecture; and founded the no less typical scholastic philosophy. Civilisation kept pace with culture and money began to talk. In other words, people gradually learnt how to think much more about this transitory, mortal existence, and to make the best of things before they died. Consequently, they also began to mix much more with each other; to combine or compete for the prizes of life. Was it, then, not inevitable that they should take as much interest in the nature of man as in the attributes of God and value *human* studies no less than theology?

The gradual transition from devotionalism to self-expression needs explaining; and since we ourselves belong neither to the tenth, thirteenth or sixteenth century but to the twentieth, it is as well to discuss the phenomenon in the terms of modern science. Everybody knows that Spencer and Darwin used to describe life as adaptation to environment; that is, animals survive by developing the qualities and members best adapted to their circumstances. For instance, giraffes grow long necks, bears grow thick fur. But these evolutionists did not add that when you study this principle among civilised human beings, you find that their essential environment is composed of other human beings. They live not by getting food from the earth, but by getting money or, it may be, help and encouragement from each other. Almost every human activity involves contact with other human beings, in fact the whole of our working lives is spent in intercourse. So it becomes a biological necessity to understand our fellow creatures; and this adjustment is all the more difficult because each son and daughter of Adam is something of a puzzle — a type which never the less defies typification. Yet over and over again our success, even our lives, may depend on knowing by intuition what is passing in somebody else's mind.

We are not only a puzzle to each other but to ourselves. In any trial of skill, cunning or endurance, a ghost slips in between us and our object; that is, our other selves, an elusive personality that escapes the control of our reason flies off at a tangent, often suprising our sober judgment with fears, regrets, or enthusiasms of which we thought we were incapable. That ghost is so slippery and unsubstantial that we cannot catch and

hold him fast. He is like Proteus. But we can «snap-shot» him, or some one very like him in the irrational or irresponsible behaviour of other people. In fact, every touch of eccentricity is a touch of nature which makes the world kin, So we must study other people, not only because we have to deal with them, but because we have to deal with ourselves.

By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, men of culture were fully alive to this necessity, without stating it so clearly to themselves. Boccaccio was fascinated by the inexhaustible comedy of life; Chaucer could draw portraits of all the social types around him, and yet discover each one's individuality; Langland (in *The Vision Concerning Piers Plowman*) had envisaged human nature diversified yet disciplined in a social structure; Dante could detect even in Hell and Heaven, the essential elements of our immortal spirit; and it should be noted that Roger Bacon had elaborated the modern idea of science. But the progress of culture was retarded for one hundred and fifty years by various disasters and catastrophes; and then, at last, towards the end of the sixteenth century, conditions once more became favourable.

Now there is very little doubt, that under ordinary circumstances, the so-called renaissance would have been a rebirth or rather a birth of scientific knowledge. Science was in the air, and modern Europe would have entered upon an age of logic and research, and the typical attitude of mind would have been what in the eighteenth century was called Voltairean, in the nineteenth utilitarian, and in the twentieth Shavian.

But, as everybody knows, almost by accident, the literature of the Ancient World, began to be discovered in earnest. Every man of learning went mad over Greek and Latin manuscripts (like Poggio Bracciolini); the old monastic libraries were ransacked for these literary treasures, and the invention of the printing press completed what the bibliophiles had begun.

And with good reason, Modern Europe discovered in these dead languages one of the secrets of life. They discovered just what they were looking for: the study of man for his own sake — the portrayal of his vices, virtues, wisdom, folly, passions and apathy — a whole culture founded on the text *homo sum, nihil humanum a me alienum puto;* above all, the cult of

personality, that is, the study of how human beings express themselves, give free vent to their individuality, eccentricity and idiosyncrasy; and do so, because they do not worry about a future life. It appeared to these harrassed, suppressed moderns that the ancients were bent on being their complete selves, because development means happiness.

Thus humanism (which ought to mean the cult and study of human nature and character) came into existence; and it so happened that the approach to humanity was more easily made through ancient literature than through modern experience. In that sense, Herodotus is probably the best exponent of humanism. He professed to record the events leading up to the Persian Wars, but he was always stopping by the way to record any irrelevant detail such as the trouble Rhampsinitus had with his treasure chamber, or the devices by which Mycerinus tried to prolong his life. In fact, one almost forgets Greek history in this inexhaustible exhibition of human heroism: resourcefulness and idiocy. Humanists in our sense of the word first appear with Pausanias in Greece and Cicero in Italy.

That type of scholar was bound to appear, sooner or later, in modern Europe, because character-portraits and memorabilia were all concealed in two intricate and erudite languages, which to all intents and purposes were dead. They had to be revived and learnt. Philologists, emendators, palaeographers, grammarians, archaeologists, bibliographers had to arise and pave the way. This treasury of human nature necessarily fell into the hands of academicians, experts, specialists; and the more these technicians studied classical Greek and Latin, the more they became absorbed in the subtleties of style, the problems of literary form, the exact interpretation of unusual words and the other obscure allusions without which many an interesting passage cannot be understood. So the study of Greek and Latin became less and less a study of human nature and more and more a study of printed books. For instance, the great Erasmus, one of Europe's most gifted wits and humanists, spent half his life working on elementary grammar. J. B. Mayor, one of the most capacious brains in the nineteenth century, devoted nine closely packed and printed pages in his monumental edition of Juvenal, to the elucidation of *Verso pollice*. Browning's fantastic study of

the seventeenth century humanist in *The Grammarian's Funeral*, is probably not so very far from the truth.

Such investigations are justified, beyond any question. Most certainly there ought to be a group of scholars dedicated to this duty of textual emendation and literary interpretation — trustees of erudition who preserve our heritage and hand it on from generation to generation, enlarged and illuminated. Moreover, this specialised study is doubly valuable, because it also sharpens the faculties, refines the understanding, trains the memory. A classical scholar has to be a logician, scientist and poet in one. So much so, that the ability to master two such intricate and subtle languages was once considered to be the best preparation for the battle of life, and hence the study of classical expressiveness became the chief element in a liberal education. So generations of clever boys, especially in England, were taught first of all to master the verbal subtleties of Thucydides and Horace; then the generous sentiments of Homer, Sophocles and Virgil; then the philosophical idealismus of Plato and the analytical genius of Aristotle. Thus equipped they would be equal (it was argued) to any emergency in this crowded machine-driven modern world. The acquisition of literary data has proved so attractive that university professors of English literature follow in the footsteps of the classicists, and study our modern authors, great and small, with the same minute and (it must sometimes be confessed) undiscriminating care. For instance in 1908 it was resolved to issue a complete edition of all Milton's writings and a whole group of scholars have been engaged on the task up to the present time, collecting even portions of letters and notes on the margins of his books.

Nevertheless, it is unquestionable that classical literature teaches you first how to think and secondly how to think nobly; and thirdly how to think about the most gifted race which this earth has produced. But those who want to understand the present and provide for the future, are bound to ask whether even so admirable a training is enough for the rising generation and if we can judge from the verdict of the last thirty or forty years, *it is not.* There seems to be a feeling that literature even when accompanied by all the intellectual dexterities

of philological study, is not a sufficiently enlightened commentary on life. It ignores the most absorbing problems of the age. The young man who rises in the small hours of the morning to read some great poet, then has to close his book and address himself to one or more of the thousand complexities or our industrial civilisation, insecurely founded on machinofacture; or at least he cannot keep those problems from entering his head and possessing his thoughts. Besides every one now, as before, has to reckon with himself; and modern learning has accustomed us, when dealing with human nature, to look behind the scenes, and to catch some glimpses of the immemorial history of evolution behind us. According to science, we have existed as vertebrates for several million years, as men for about half a million years, as civilised beings for barely a thousand or two, in the modern sense of the word for about two hundred years. Thus our modern habits and acquirements are a superficial disguise which complicates, diversifies, often perverts and always conceals the true nature beneath it — vital instincts and urges now twisted into so many unnatural and often insignificant forms.

Such is the verdict of biology and zoology. Even if disregarded, the younger generation must sooner or later have to listen to the verdict of physiology and bio-chemistry which tell you that your disposition, aptitudes and temperament are profoundly influenced by the conditions which exist within you but are quite outside the control of your will; for instance, the state of one's ductless glands, or the vermicular motion of the intestines. These are not mere matters of curiosity. If men of science are right, our happiness and efficiency depend on understanding what they tell us. Our usefulness to society and to ourselves may ultimately depend on juices secreted within our system and circulated in our blood.

Whether men of science are right or wrong, does not matter. The point is, their theories are now a part of our intellectual atmosphere; they contribute to our idea of man; they are a new chapter in the Book of Humanism. The movement was started, most persuasively, by Darwin, Huxley, Haeckel, Nietzsche, Bergson and S. Butler, of whom all, except Haeckel, were endowed with a natural aptitude for humanism and in

another age would have developed into artists, authors or metaphysicians. Since their time, the book market has been flooded with books on popular science, written by such first rate men as Jeans, Julian Huxley, Haldane, Sullivan, Crowther, and Hogben. These popularisations sell by the hundred thousand; that proves that they supply a popular need; so it is significant that all discuss a new conduct of life based on what we know of the origin of man, the physiology of the human body, the activity of microbes, the fertility of the soil, the mysterious and apparently unlimited powers of chemistry. At the last meeting of the British Association, it was claimed that science ought to be a state department since without science there can now be no state.

And all this time, the humanists in the old sense of the word, take no note of science whatever. They may, perhaps, study literature in a more scientific spirit, with more accuracy of method. But they seem to believe that art is the best way to truth. So can we blame the younger generation if they shake their heads, dissatisfied with a humanism which leaves the greatest issues of life untouched? It may be urged that literature should be retained as an honourable relaxation from the crude of elemental facts of existence. No doubt. But if one looks back thoughtfully to the time when the classics began to take possession of culture, one sees that the Renaissance dawned when Europe stood at the cross-roads, hesitating between the older erudition based on authority and the newer based on experiment and research; and that while Greek and Latin then seemed to partake of both tendencies (and was therefore at that time all the more acceptable that both literatures have since proved to be more allied to authority than to investigation. All great art compels assent; it speaks as if its words were final; as if its presentations were inspired.

> Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty; that is all
> Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Meanwhile the air is full of voices which whisper secrets and suggest that the commonest and least admirable human traits are really clues to immemorial mysteries-secrets which explain nature or improve our condition. For the science which

tells you the history of your own tonsils and appendix, also tells you how to cut them out and cast them from you, and also tells you of a thousand other ways in which our lives can be made happier and more efficient.

Yet it is difficult to believe that science, however necessary to the world, can ever take the place of humanism. It will be noticed that one half of science is theoretical. It consists in explaining our human defects. We still retain the vices and diseases of animals. We have outgrown our environment but have not yet grown up to the environment we ought to create. To that extent the mystery of human nature is solved. But to explain is to excuse. We reconcile ourselves to our destiny by looking backward, instead of looking forward. In the meantime, we lose our sense of spiritual grandeur; the visions of something within us, greater than ourselves, and revealed in flashes, under the influence of art and religion.

The other half of science is practical. Hundreds of imaginative philosophers are busy contriving what has lengthened man's life, shortened his pain and doubled his efficiency. It is impossible to be too grateful. Yet one cannot help feeling that these inventions raise the standard of living, but lower the objects for which we live. They proceed as if earthly comfort and convenience are the only purpose of existence. Yet the older humanism gave us more spiritual motives. It even suggested that the biggest prize in life was not radio nor even radium, but the sense of righteousness. Now and then, in moments of exaltation, under the influence of music, poetry, painting or statuary, we used to feel that there was some truth in that intimation, that there were certain depths in human nature, just a little more than human, and that these spiritual possibilities needed cultivating just as carefully as our ductless glands and the vermicular motion of the intestines.

If such be the conclusion of the whole matter, we need a new humanism equally sympathetic to science and art. Unhappily there is not at present the slightest sign of such a consummation.
