

Modern Values: Liberal Man and Natural Man.

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# MODERN VALUES

## LIBERAL MAN AND NATURAL MAN

### NEED FOR SPIRITUAL REBIRTH

EVENTS of the last four years must surely have shattered any complacency about the nature of man which the scientific developments of the nineteenth century and the accompanying decline of religious belief had encouraged. Indeed, the danger may well be now the other way. Mr. Nicholson in his survey of twentieth-century literature\* quotes an amusing passage from Miss Rose Macaulay's "Told By an Idiot," in which she tells how:

One evening shortly before Christmas, in the days when our fore-fathers, being young, possessed the earth—in brief, in the year 1879—Mrs. Garden came briskly into her drawing room from Mr. Garden's study and said in her crisp, even voice to her six children, "Well, my dears, I have to tell you something. Poor Papa has lost his faith again. It seemed then no more of a family misfortune than if poor Papa had mislaid his hat again. To lose faith was to lose a set of dogmas which put one's mind at rest much as a hat shielded one's head from the wind. But to have to go bareheaded, if uncomfortable for a time, was not a disaster. It might even let some fresh air in. And, of course, there was no question of poor Papa going to the dogs. The moral law seemed to him and his family so self-evident that, in Mr. Nicholson's words, "they had no doubt that it would stand by itself without any dogma as a scaffolding."

We may be as dubious of traditional dogma to-day as the more "progressive" Victorians were, but we are beginning to see that human conduct is very closely related to the view of life which men hold and that so far as the dogma of material progress and of the inevitable perfectibility of Man was substituted for the traditional reading of his nature, it has led to a moral decline, even if in some ways to material betterment.

#### CONFESSION BY STYLE

This is the thesis underlying Mr. Nicholson's stimulating book. A thesis is often fatal to criticism. It is certainly so if it is preconceived and literature is used as an illustration. Mr. Nicholson assures us that it is not so with him and that he has not attempted to measure modern literature by a Christian yardstick. At the same time he declares his aim quite honestly. His book, he says, is not fundamentally literary criticism at all, but an inquiry into the assumptions as to the nature and purpose of Man which underlie much of modern writing. Yet in poetry, drama and fiction with which alone he is concerned, it is, as he acknowledges, by style and by choice of medium even more than by explicit professions of faith or opinion that writers reveal their real beliefs. Acting on this he does perforce practise literary criticism of a kind, and his method throughout is to let his assumptions declare themselves either by quotation or through summaries of their poems or novels provided by himself. The temptation here, of course, is to select what serves his purpose or to reduce a writer's meaning to the dimensions his thesis requires. This he does not do, and his continual summaries of the plots of stories by modern novelists, though necessary to his purpose and quite skilfully done, are apt to suggest the extension lecturer. His style, too, though refreshingly lively and unpedantic, is at times rather casually colloquial, as when he writes of Shaw's Major Barbara that she indulges in a habit common to other Shavian women (Candida, Lady Cicely Weynflete, &c.), the habit of taking men to pieces with a pin. She is doing it, moreover, in such a school-marmish and self-righteous manner that we wouldn't mind if Bill gave her an answer on the jaw with her own tambourine.

#### TWO DOCTRINES

However, it is, perhaps, all to the good that so serious a theme as his, a theme in which nothing less than the destiny of man on this earth is involved, should be treated without solemnity. It certainly strengthens our confidence in Mr. Nicholson's own outlook. There is nothing grim in it, it includes more of life, not less, than the views which he criticizes. These views are personified for him in two doctrines of Man which have been very common in modern literature and which he names Liberal Man and Natural Man. He sees the first of these dominating the outlook of writers at the end of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. And he chooses Hardy and Housman, Shaw, Galsworthy, Bennett and Wells, as in different ways the perplexed or confident assenters to the doctrine of Liberal Man. At a first glance there might seem to be little enough affinity between Hardy and Wells or Housman and Shaw. The suggestive comparison which Mr. Nicholson draws between Housman and Fitzgerald is on the face of it much more convincing. But Housman's nostalgia can be

traced back, he suggests, to the same belief in the natural goodness of Man which inspired in Wells a vision of Scientific Utopias. The only difference was that both Hardy and Housman were too critical to reconcile the current belief in the natural goodness of Man with what they saw around them. And, having no belief in a world of transcendent being in relation to which Man's life had meaning, Housman could only view Man as the sport of a Nature in some sense malignant:

And how are you to face the odds?  
Of man's bedevilement and God's?

#### POET OF MATERIALISM

Many readers may consider such explanations arbitrary and far-fetched. And it is true enough that writers are primarily what they are because they are made that way. But they are, too, subject to the climate of their age and to the context of its prevailing belief. To this extent Mr. Nicholson's study of these writers in the light of his doctrine of Liberal Man is revealing and the more so when, as with his treatment of Bennett, he keeps it in the background and is content to show it working implicitly in a writer's choice of subject and the quality of his style. Bennett's characters, he says, except for vague suggestions, have purpose only in the social pattern. It is an over-statement, but does not prevent him from appreciating him well as what he calls "the true poet of materialism."

The protagonist of the writers who subscribed from 1910 onwards to the doctrine of Natural Man is for him Lawrence. Lawrence is a dangerous writer to fit into any thesis, and Mr. Nicholson recognizes this. He knows the incontrovertible power of Lawrence's writing.

All sense impressions, all experiences, things seen and heard or felt and imagined, seemed to react on Lawrence like a jab on a raw nerve. The reader got the sensation direct on his own fingertips, like a blind man reading Braille. The Natural Man, too, as Lawrence conceived him, was no mere breathing, eating, lustful, fighting animal as in Mr. Ernest Hemingway's earlier work. He was a Man who had recovered his mystical significance but through the blood and sex, the psychic and non-human. Lawrence repudiated a moral scheme which made a character consistent. He found such a scheme dull, old and dead. And he had reason to do so in the modern world of moribund religion and material ends. Yet he himself sought release only in a mystical materialism. In his disgust with a diseased humanity, however moral its mouthpieces, he longed for people to become possessed not by a divine but by an inhuman will or, as he put it, to be, "inhumanly, physiologically, materially, not to feel according to the human conception." He espoused Christianity because in striving to spiritualize life on the conscious level it had impoverished man's unconscious roots. Unlike other devotees of the Natural Man, then, Lawrence did not repudiate a world of transcendent being, but he reduced it to one of transcendent non-being. It was in this realm of sensational darkness that he longed to resolve the primal conflict between good and evil in which as a Puritan he so painfully believed.

#### CREATURES OF IMPULSE

But in his successors the materialism had no mystical pretensions. In the novels of Henri de Montherlant and the early Mr. Aldous Huxley the Natural Man is a sophisticated product of Western civilization, cynically intent on self-gratification and attached to others only for sensual pleasure. And inevitably so, since he regards himself as a creature of impulses, appetites, instincts and nothing else. In Mr. Hemingway's novels he is a tough, though often sentimental, animal, whose interests are love and war. They are, as Mr. Nicholson points out, incompatible and so he is continually frustrated. He is also essentially in bondage to life, one "that things are done to." This is even more pronounced in the people of Mr. Faulkner's novels. They do not understand, as Mr. Nicholson writes, "the motives by which they act, they find themselves involved in events which they had not wished to bring about." Like the girl in "Sanctuary" who "could hear silence in a thick rustling as he moved toward her through it, thrusting it aside and she began to say 'Something is going to happen to me,' they abandon themselves desperately to fate, to desires which they cannot control and will never be able to satisfy, because the world of values to which they could responsibly surrender has ceased to exist for them.

That is Mr. Nicholson's diagnosis. Obviously the novelists whose work he has chosen to exemplify it are apt to his purpose and an examination of a wider field might reveal a more complex situation. But

while he generalizes too easily, he does keep close to the style of the work he is considering as well as to his content. This is especially so in his appreciation of Mr. Hemingway and Mr. Faulkner, though his admiration of the tough style of the former may well seem excessive even with the proviso that a blunt technique reflects a blunt perception. But having defined, to his own satisfaction, the assumptions as to the nature of Man reflected in some of the outstanding writers of this century and by implication in many of their readers, he looks round for signs in literature of a more reliable view. And here perhaps it will be best to quote from the introduction to the third part of his book entitled "Imperfect Man."

Liberal Man and Natural Man [he writes] are both simplifications of the real nature of Man. He attempts to explain his being and purpose on one plane—that of progress or that of animal desire. The traditional view, however, is that Man has being on two planes, the material and spiritual; that his purpose is to be seen in relation to some will or plan which exists outside of himself; that his actions are to be judged in the light of transcendent values. This is the view which has persisted through the centuries of Western civilization. It is also the Christian point of view. It is not exclusively Christian, of course, as it was to be found before the birth of Christ and is held to-day by many unbelievers and is shared also by some other religions, such as Islam.

#### MAN NEEDS REDEMPTION

This is certainly a fair statement of the traditional religious view of man, provided that the phrase "some will or plan which exists outside of himself" is not read as meaning that the two planes do not interpenetrate. The eternal will is both in Man and beyond him or his imperfection could not be redeemed. But the basic difference between this view and the preceding ones lies in the recognition that Man needs redemption. The upholders of the view of Liberal or Natural Man in rejecting transcendent values rejected also the idea of Original Sin, which needed those values for its salvation. They identified progress with material becoming instead of with spiritual growth. "Becoming," to quote a modern writer, "is a real element in existence. But the actual world is fallen, for it is a world in which becoming is erected by the sinful spirit to the absolute, unconditioned value of the eternal."

The fruits of this misconception, which inevitably leads to a substitution of the mechanistic for the organic are all around us. Yet, often quite unconsciously, the traditional view of man has remained implicit in popular thought. So Mr. Nicholson believes and he sees signs of its re-emergence in literature. It would, indeed, be surprising if the events of the last four years had not enforced the view that man is an imperfect and sinful creature. The three writers, however, whom Mr. Nicholson particularly presents as combining the traditional view with a gift for technical experiment needed no war to instruct them in the nature of man. They are Joyce, with his Catholic background, Kafka, and Mr. Eliot. Kafka's two great novels, "The Castle" and "The Trial," are allegories of man's utter dependence on a divine grace which cannot be demanded or sought and of a divine purpose beyond human understanding to be served with the utmost humility. Doubtless in him the sense of sin, of guilt and self-disparagement, was excessive. But we have only to compare his hero's patient waiting for attendance on the Light, in which he believes, with Mr. Faulkner's characters' doomed abandonment to the sensational something which is going to happen to them, to measure the difference between human dignity and human dereliction. In all who hold the traditional view of man the balance between the acknowledgment of sin and the belief in redemption is apt to be precarious. Despite Mr. Nicholson's assertion we may doubt, for example, whether in "The Waste Land" the need for spiritual rebirth is as forcibly presented as the fact of man's fallen state. But in his later work Eliot has certainly made amends.

#### FEELING OF GUILT

Mr. Nicholson does not confine himself to these three writers. In his treatment of others, particularly of the younger poets, is rather scrappy, and although it may be true that through the work of most of them runs a feeling of guilt and a consciousness of responsibility to the generations of the future," it is doubtful whether many would consciously subscribe to the traditional religious view as he states it. It was, however, well worth stating. His book is essentially a criticism of life through literature. As such it is legitimate, though viewed merely from a literary angle it is often much too summary. But at a time when more than ever perhaps men need to build up a faith on true foundations, so clarifying an inquiry is of particular value.

\*MAN AND LITERATURE. By NORMAN NICHOLSON. Student Christian Movement Press, 10s. 6d.

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