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CHAPTER ONE

THE STRIPTease OF HUMANISM

Western culture is marked at the present moment by a distinct slowing of momentum, or perhaps, more accurately, by a decline in purposefulness and an increase in cultural introspection. This temporary lull, this vacuum in thought and effective action, has been created by the convergence of three cultural trends, each emphasizing a loss of direction. The first is the erosion of the Christian basis of Western culture, an erosion with deep historical causes and clearly visible results. The second is the failure of optimistic humanism to provide an effective alternative in the leadership of the post-Christian culture. And the third is the failure of our generation's counter culture to demonstrate a credible alternative to either of the other two—Western Christianity and humanism.

The convergence of these three factors in the late sixties marks this period as especially important. What is at stake is nothing less than the direction of Western man. Only a few years ago the dismissal of Christianity was held to be a prerequisite for cultural advance. The decline of Christianity thus represented a cure for man's problems, not a cause. So with the dawning of optimistic humanism the decline of Christianity was welcomed. Its adherents would be the only losers.

But that was yesterday. And contemporary yesterdays have a habit of suddenly seeming a hundred years ago. Today the cultural memory of traditional values hangs precariously like late autumn leaves, and in the

new wintry bleakness optimism itself is greying. Now it appears that all of Western culture may be the loser.

My purpose is first to examine humanism, partially as a movement in itself but even more as a backdrop against which to appreciate the need for an alternative; then to chart the alternative offered by the counter culture with all its kaleidoscopic variety; and finally, to present a third way as a more viable option in the light of man's current situation. The weaknesses in both humanism and the counter culture are pointed out, not to negate much that has been extremely sensitive and intensely human, but to show the inevitability of their failures. The critique at least serves to illustrate certain mistakes that must not be repeated, and it highlights important questions and dilemmas with which further alternatives must grapple.

A third way is desperately necessary because the present options are growing more obviously unacceptable. And, in fact, there is a Third Way—one which is becoming increasingly welcome to a large number of sensitive searchers and free-spirited individuals who make up a major part of those dissatisfied with things as they are. This Third Way holds the promise of realism without despair, involvement without frustration, hope without romanticism. It combines a concern for humanness with intellectual integrity, a love of truth with a love of beauty, conviction with compassion and deep spirituality. But this is running ahead.

THE RISE OF OPTIMISTIC HUMANISM

We cannot appreciate the need for the Third Way unless we understand the present crisis of humanism, and this in turn requires a knowledge of its historical background. Sometimes the forerunners of modern humanism are said to be Confucianism and those branches of Buddhism which put an early and distinctive stress on man's responsibility to manage his own life without gods or religion. However, the first milestone on the journey of Western humanism was in the fifth century B.C. in Greece, where for the first time in Europe the use of objective reason freed science and philosophy from the shackles of superstition and religion. The Golden Age of Greece was brief but glorious, and its influence cast a long shadow over the Roman Empire and the classical

world. Yet with the advent of Islam and barbarism, except for small pockets of scholars the classical age was swept from the face of Europe.

The Renaissance was the second important milestone on the road to modern humanism, the eruption of the importance of man irreparably severing the intricate unity of the medieval web of life. Along dark, narrow streets appeared light, sunny arcades; beside the impressive heaven-directed Gothic architecture grew humanly scaled towns, buildings, squares and statues; instead of stiff figures and symbolic images, warm, fully-rounded human beings sprang to life on canvas.

The Renaissance was an intoxicating phase of humanism, an explosive confidence of the human mind, the celebration of art, morals, thought and life on an eminently human scale. It was Christendom's twilight toast to the dignity and excellence of man. Making flattering self-comparisons with republican Rome and the Athens of Pericles, the Florentines appointed themselves both executors and heirs of the classical heritage. The scale of Protagoras was to be their scale—"Man is the measure of all things." As Leon Battista Alberti, a typical early Renaissance thinker, expressed it, "A man can do all things if he will."²

It was during the Renaissance that the word *humanist* was coined. Initially it only defined a concern for humanity, and many early humanists saw no dichotomy between this and their Christian faith. Yet it was from the Renaissance that modern secular humanism grew, with the development of an important split between reason and religion. This occurred as the church's complacent authority was exposed in two vital areas. In science, Galileo's support of the Copernican revolution upset the church's adherence to the theories of Aristotle, exposing them as false. In theology, the Dutch scholar Erasmus with his new Greek text showed that the Roman Catholic adherence to Jerome's Vulgate was frequently in error. A tiny wedge was thus forced between reason and authority, as both of them were then understood.

It was in fact in a combination of the forward-looking thrust of science and the backward-looking stance of classicism (made possible through the new sources, improved texts and fresh interpretations) that the Renaissance found its leading intellectual impetus. Vasari, the Renaissance art historian, asked himself why it was in Florence that men

became perfect in the arts and then gave as his first answer: “The spirit of criticism.”³ It was this same spirit of criticism which continued to gather force until it crashed down on Europe in a landslide of unbelief. As the dust settled, the ensuing period was described as the Enlightenment, the eighteenth-century ferment of thought and action which is the third great milestone on the road to modern humanism.

The Enlightenment has its own unmistakable identity, but at the same time it also has an affinity with the Renaissance. Both directly appealed to classical antiquity, deliberately opposed Christianity and consequently accelerated the forces of modernity. But the Enlightenment, with its advantage of distance, could afford to view the Middle Ages through the eyes of the Renaissance, so that there was a detachment and an objectivity impossible for the earlier humanism. If the Renaissance humanists proclaimed a new world, it was because they knew that the old world was irretrievable. But for the men of the Enlightenment the joy of the new world was a result of the triumphs that were predictable from the progress of the scientific intellect. If the legacy of the Renaissance is humanism, then the contribution of the Enlightenment is paganism.

The eighteenth century came in on a wave of irony and satire, exalting the trivial, ridiculing the noble and attacking anything which previous centuries had been taught to believe, revere or love. It was the heyday of the ubiquitous critic, but the chief influence lay not with the popular writers and dramatists (such as Jonathan Swift and Oliver Goldsmith) but with the *philosophes*, the articulate, sociable, secular men of letters who were the heart and soul of the Enlightenment. In 1784, toward the end of the Enlightenment, Kant defined the era as the period of man’s emergence from his self-imposed minority. He offered as its motto, *Sapere Aude!* (Dare to know!). It was in the pursuit of this challenge that the powerful combination of British Empiricism and French Rationalism (both extended into the fields of science and political action) changed the face of Europe.

As this occurred, the break between reason and revelation was finalized, and the battle was joined in terms of “Hellene” versus “Hebrew,” light versus darkness, reason versus superstition, philosopher versus

priest and men of realism versus purveyors of myth. In this battle the impact of the Classical Age was not just antiquarian. The ancients were “signposts to secularism.”⁴ Across the fog of the Christian centuries, as they saw it, the *philosophes* tried to build a bridge to the Greeks and the Romans. They succeeded in bringing back a great prize—the spirit of criticism. They took pride in the omni-competence of reason, not just because they held reason to be all-powerful, but because they had developed an extreme anti-authoritarian temperament. They asserted their right to use reason to question anything.

As time went on the questions became more far-reaching and the criticisms more uncompromising. In the earlier stages many leading *philosophes* were deists, arguing against theism from a rigid concept of natural law; later on they were atheists, using the arguments of utilitarianism. Within the church, where there was spiritual life it was often inward-looking pietism with no cultural cutting edge, and where there was no spiritual life the bankruptcy was not decently disguised but brazenly advertised by a mixture of internal struggles, bland theologies and dull apologetics. Little wonder that it could be said that for men like David Hume “religion has lost all specificity and authority; it is no more than a dim, meaningless and unwelcome shadow on the face of reason.”⁵ As the eighteenth century came to a close, all the wisdom and all the wit apparently lay on the side of the Enlightenment. Man was demanding to be recognized as an adult, a responsible being. There is no denying that this was a momentous stage in the journey of the Western mind.

The eighteenth century went out amid wars of revolution and the nineteenth century was ushered in by the campaigns of Napoleon. To the perceptive this was symptomatic of the hidden logic of humanism, but to most men it was only a sign that an age of ideas was ripening into an age of application. Man was not only the measure of the world he knew but the measure of the world of which he dreamed. Relying on its application of reason and science, the nineteenth century could anticipate a rich fund from which to draw its buoyant idealism and robust social enterprise.

If there was any lingering doubt as to whether or not philosophy had transferred its support from theology to humanism, this was finally

dispelled for most people when the mechanistic world view of science provided an explanation of the origin and development of the universe. Astronomy and physics had already removed any need for God as a scientific hypothesis, but the turning point came in the nineteenth century when biology added its explanation. Simultaneously the evolutionary theory appeared to demolish Christianity and provide a scientific basis for the philosophy of progress already widely held. Technically, Darwin was not the originator of the idea of evolution but rather the first to give the theory a detailed scientific basis.

The cultural flow at the end of the nineteenth century became a series of whirlpools with many strange currents and cross-currents. From one side of the spectrum of religious thinking came Higher Criticism and liberal theology; from the other side came an extremely reactionary entrenchment within the church. (The Roman Catholics promulgated the dogma of papal infallibility in 1870, while in England Bishop Wilberforce achieved notoriety in his debate with T. H. Huxley.) This period saw the appearance of semi-religions like the Church of Christ, Scientist and the Theosophical Society, and on the secular front it witnessed also the birth of the modern humanist societies.

The Ethical Union was founded in 1896 to federate all the humanist secular societies then in existence. Three years later they launched the Rationalist Press. Both of these remained comparatively small until humanism was popularized in the mid nineteen-fifties. In 1963 they merged to form the British Humanist Association, itself linked with the wider International Humanist and Ethical Union. This marks the fourth milestone on the road to modern optimistic humanism.

Looked at another way, it could be said that after the first slow stage of “cosmic” evolution (inorganic) had come the second stage of “biological” evolution (organic). With the universe “decreated” (Simone Weil), and the West “unchristened” (C. S. Lewis), the third stage, “purposive psycho-social” evolution, could now begin. “We’re storming the gates of heaven!” cried German socialist Karl Liebknecht at the end of World War I.⁶ He need not have troubled. For most people, heaven had long since been evacuated and Man had come of age. “Man makes himself,” said Gordon Childe.⁷ “We see the future of man as one of his

own making,” said H. J. Muller.⁸ And Sir Julian Huxley remarked, “Today, in twentieth-century man, the evolutionary process is at last becoming conscious of itself. . . . Human knowledge, worked over by human imagination, is seen as the basis to human understanding and belief, and the ultimate guide to human progress.”⁹

If the earlier days of secularism sometimes represented a belligerent all-out anti-God campaign, then Swinburne’s “Hymn of Man” (“Glory to Man in the highest! for Man is the master of things”) was a typical text—a monumental defiance that was actually a mask for underlying insecurity.¹⁰ Modern humanism is more urbane and self-assured. Typical as a text for this is John F. Kennedy’s reputed dictum enlarging on Alberti: “All men’s problems were created by man, and can be solved by man.” The modern humanist at his best is a man highly educated, deeply aware, tolerant and far-sighted, with clearly defined policies, confident that his philosophy is a relevant way of life and determined to communicate it.

The mid-sixties were the high noon of optimistic humanism. The British Humanist Association, with its distinguished Presidents Sir Julian Huxley and Professor Sir Alfred Ayer and its dazzling intellectual representation, blossomed in public influence and political activity. Around it, the new universities mushroomed like institutional tracts erected on the same beliefs. The crowning proof of man’s capability seemed to be the triumph of the moon landing. The gigantic satellite launching towers were hailed by many as technological cathedrals built to the glory of modern man.

As a result, optimistic humanism gained its strength from the confidence that the entire field of human development was now possible within the humanist frame. Julian Huxley claimed that all problems could be solved by humanism and that the whole range of human living could be included within its scope. He predicted that philosophical problems like mind versus matter, social problems like the clash of the two cultures and even international problems such as war would soon be solved. Humanism, he said, would “heal the split between the two sides in the cold war.”¹¹

Also included was a new concept of religion, distinctively humanist because it was a religion without revelation. In the nineteenth century

Auguste Comte had proposed a Religion of Humanity complete with his own suggestions for sacraments, saints and rituals, organized into two thousand churches throughout Europe, with Comte himself the supreme leader. Huxley's version is far less papal and more in line with the urbanity of modern humanism. "Religion of some sort is probably necessary. . . . Instead of worshipping supernatural rulers, it will sanctify the higher manifestations of human nature in art and love, in intellectual comprehension and aspiring adoration."¹² Here is humanism at its highest and most hopeful, attempting to solve all problems and include all human living within its framework, guiding the progress and guarding the evolution of the human race by its own purposive direction.

Time, however, is gradually and cynically stripping this to its essential quaintness. Only the cold-blooded technocrat finds modern war less chilling or its solution nearer. The ideal of human nature "sanctified" in humanist art was already falsified, faltering under the sunken stare of an alienated Giacometti bronze, or strangled by the tortured canvases of Francis Bacon. Evolutionary optimistic humanism is in the process of being betrayed by its own idealism. The humanist artists as its antennae were already into a world which the humanist philosophers and scientists had not yet seen. As with all idealism, its tragedy is the blindness of its heroes; tuned into a world of illusions, they are only too vulnerable to reality.

THE SURFACING OF PESSIMISM

Now we can see an important point more clearly. Optimistic humanism was only one stream of secular humanism. Its reverse was pessimistic humanism, and if the optimism was characteristically strong in academic circles, it is now evident that pessimism was more prevalent in the wider reality of life. Pessimistic humanism was always there, like a subterranean stream, murky in its depths and dark in its apprehension of dilemmas. It is this subterranean stream that is now threatening to surface and usurp the dignity and dominance of optimistic humanism.

Again we must go back in history to realize the full importance of this surfacing pessimism. Its genius was to see that behind the apparent

stability of the nineteenth-century world in which modern humanism was born stood a different reality. Both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard were men who lived in passionate revolt against the smugness of the nineteenth century, particularly against the cheapness of its religious faith and the brash confidence of its secular reasoning, or generally against its shallow optimism, wordy idealism and tendency to conform. Such a smug world was not just false but dangerously foolish, if the true nature of reality lay elsewhere.

It is amazing that this subterranean pessimism was not taken more seriously earlier. But it was derided as the “Devil’s Party”—the poets, philosophers and prophets of chaos and catastrophe—and all too easy to dismiss.¹³ Some were ignored. Their repeated warnings were simply relegated to the status of cultural myth having only an innocuous respectability. In 1832 Heinrich Heine had said, “Do you hear the little bell tinkle? Kneel down—one brings the sacraments for a dying God.”¹⁴ Nietzsche’s later cry of the death of God and his searching diagnosis (“Everything lacks meaning. . . . What does nihilism mean? *That the highest values devalue themselves.* The goal is lacking; the answer is lacking to our ‘Why?’”)¹⁵ were not taken seriously either. After all, wasn’t Heine a poet, and wasn’t Nietzsche later deranged?

Other warnings were dismissed as only to be expected from the theory or temperament of their particular authors. Repeatedly in the 1930s, George Orwell depicted Western intellectuals as men who in blithe ignorance were sawing off the very branch on which they were sitting. Malcolm Muggeridge in his articles lanced open the “death wish of liberalism.” C. S. Lewis carefully made his exposures in “The Funeral of a Great Myth.”¹⁶ But the serious disquiet of Orwell, the humorous if testy honesty of Muggeridge and the gentle clarity and utter reasonableness of C. S. Lewis were before their time. They were predictable. They were ignored.

But the rising tide of disquiet cannot now be ignored. It is becoming the accepted mood of much recent judgment, as a hundred illustrations could quickly show. Writing in 1961 specifically on problems of Western culture, Frantz Fanon mocked, “Look at them today, swaying between atomic and spiritual disintegration.”¹⁷ In the same context,

Jean Paul Sartre challenged, "Let us look at ourselves if we can bear to, and see what is becoming of us. First we must face that unexpected revelation, the striptease of our humanism."¹⁸ These two men could easily be dismissed as pessimistic, prejudiced politically and philosophically, but the disquiet does not stop there. Coming closer to the heart of humanism and speaking almost as an heir to a distinguished humanist house, Aldous Huxley described himself this way: "I was born wandering between two worlds, one dead and the other powerless to be born, and have made in a curious way the worst of both."¹⁹ From the world of science John Rader Platt, the American biophysicist, said, "The world has now become too dangerous for anything less than Utopia."²⁰ Norman O. Brown, a man famous for the lyrical romanticism of his visions, admitted, "Today even the survival of humanity is a utopian hope."²¹

There can be no stable equilibrium between optimism and pessimism but only an uneasy oscillation between the two. Optimistic humanism is strong in its stress on the aspirations of man but weak in its understanding of his aberrations. Accordingly, it lacks a base for the fulfillment of the former and its solutions to the latter are deficient; thus its ultimate optimism is eternally romantic. Pessimistic humanism, on the other hand, insists on the absurdity of man's aspirations and speaks to the heart of his aberrations, but the price of its realism is the constant pull toward despair. This clear contrast throws further light on the current crisis.

FOUR PILLARS OF OPTIMISTIC HUMANISM

Optimistic humanism is being exposed as idealism without sufficient ideals. More accurately, its ideals are impossible to attain without a sufficient basis in truth, and this is just what its rationalistic premises are unable to provide. This is the key weakness of each of the four central pillars of optimistic humanism.

The first pillar is the belief in reason. Here optimistic humanism is forced to its initial leap of faith. It is impossible to prove by reason alone that reason has the validity accorded it by humanism, and the twentieth century has strongly undermined this confidence in two places. Modern psychology has shown that, far from being utterly rational, man has

motivations at a deeper level than his reasoning powers, and he is only partially aware of these forces. Much of what was called reasoning is now more properly called rationalizing.

Modern philosophy also has reduced the pretensions of reason. For man, speaking from a finite reference point without divine revelation, to claim to have found a “universal” is not just to be mistaken. The claim itself is meaningless. For most modern men, objectivity, universals or absolutes are in a realm beyond the scope of reason; in this realm there is only the existential, non-rational, subjective understanding of truth.

Both psychology and philosophy have thus clipped the proud wings of rationalism and the unlimited usefulness of reason by itself. By *rationalism* I do not mean “rationalism” as opposed to “empiricism” but rather the hidden premise common to both—the humanist’s leap of faith in which the critical faculty of reason is tacitly made into an absolute and used as a super-tool to marshal particulars and claim meaning which in fact is proper only to the world of universals.

The second pillar is the belief in progress. The orientation toward the future introduced into Western culture by Christian linear teleology was secularized by the Enlightenment. Ostensibly it had been given objective scientific support by the evolutionary theory. It was widely believed that nature was marching forward inevitably to higher and higher views of life (as expressed, for instance, in the philosophy of Herbert Spencer). But this is now being drastically undermined. Many point to evidence of an evolutionary crisis, somewhat tarnishing the comfortable image of inevitable progress with man at the center of the stage controlling his own evolution. Some even predict the extinction of the human species. The details of this we will examine in the next chapter. Here it is sufficient to note that current scientific doom-crying is making inroads into optimism; belief in inevitable progress is not supported by evidence of the past nor corroborated by the present situation and is hardly the united scenario of futurology. This means that optimistic humanism is less and less a belief supported by empirical data. It is becoming more and more an ideology, an idea which is inflated to the status of truth quite beyond the force of evidence.

The third pillar is the belief in science as the guide to human progress and the provider of an alternative to both religion and morals. If “evolution is good,” then evolution must be allowed to proceed and the very process of change becomes absolutized. Such a view can be seen in Julian Huxley’s *Evolutionary Ethics* or in the writings of Teilhard de Chardin. But in ever more areas, science is reaching the point of “destructive returns”; and the attempt to use evolution as a basis for morals and ethics is a failure. If evolutionary progress is taken as an axiom, then the trend towards convergence (social and evolutionary “unanimization”) becomes a value, as suggested by Teilhard de Chardin. But this militates against the value of individuality and can be used to support totalitarianism.²² Bertrand Russell was typical of a growing majority who admit that science can be no more than neutral and does not speak directly into the area of moral choice.

The fourth pillar is the belief in the self-sufficiency of man. A persistent erosion of man’s view of himself is occurring. The fact that man has made so many significant scientific discoveries points strongly to the significance of man, yet the content of these same scientific discoveries underscores his insignificance. Man finds himself dwarfed bodily by the vast stretches of space and belittled temporally by the long reaches of time. Humanists are caught in a strange dilemma. If they affirm the greatness of man, it is only at the expense of ignoring his aberrations. If they regard human aberrations seriously, they have to escape the dilemma raised, either by blaming the situation on God (and how often those most strongly affirming the non-existence of God have a perverse propensity to question his goodness!) or by reducing man to the point of insignificance where his aberrations are no longer a problem. During World War II, Einstein, plagued by the mounting monstrosity of man against man, was heard to mutter to himself, “After all, this is a small star.”²³ He escaped the dilemmas of man’s crime and evil but only at the price of undermining man’s significance. A supreme characteristic of men today is the high degree of dissatisfaction with their own views of themselves. The opposition to determinism is growing not because determinism explains nothing but because it explains too much. It is a clutching constriction on that which man feels himself to be. Arthur

Koestler attacks it as “ratomorphic,”²⁴ Viktor Frankl as “modern nihilism”²⁵ and Noam Chomsky as “the flat earth view of man.”

Mortimer Adler’s *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes* is one book which probes deeply in this area and is scrupulously objective in its extensive analysis.²⁶ He warns that if man continues to recognize no fundamental difference in kind between himself and the world of animals and machines, then his view of himself in terms of his moral dilemma or his metaphysical being must alter irretrievably. Anything left of contemporary concepts of morality and identity will be reduced to the level of the illusory, and the implications for individuals and for civilization are far-reaching.

Thus, in each of these four areas, although optimistic humanism appeals to the highest of man’s aspirations, it ignores the full reality of his aberrations. And by contrast, the pessimistic humanism of the existentialist majors on man’s aberrations (what it often calls alienations) and allows little place for his aspirations. So the optimist finds himself subscribing to a belief in man which it is increasingly difficult to substantiate. This very irrationality should make it anathema to the rational humanist but the belief cannot be discarded because little would be left of optimistic humanism.

It is a strange but undeniable fact that optimistic humanism appeals generally to a very small sector of society. In the Athens of Pericles it was partly a slave-based population that allowed the intellectuals the time for reflection. In the Italian Renaissance the new ideas were not broadly based and were often restricted to court circles, as at Urbino. During the Enlightenment, philosophers were generally from the privileged if not the aristocratic classes. This characteristic is also perceptible today. An article in the *Humanist Magazine* in 1964 was entitled, “What’s Wrong with Humanism?”²⁷ A long-time humanist complained that modern humanism was “clinically detached from life.” He urged, among other suggestions, a special commission to investigate the requirements of humanism as a popular religious movement with its own Bible, hymns and liturgy. To a world outside the rarefied air of academic, scientific circles such beliefs are too often dry and uninspiring. Can any more ironic and fatal accusation be leveled at humanism than the stinging charge that it is not a sufficiently human way of life?

Admittedly it is a value judgment, but it is difficult to avoid the strong suspicion that optimistic humanism gains its high view of man only by quarrying from its Christian cultural heritage. Thomas Huxley is reported to have sung hymns on Sunday nights with his agnostic friends whenever he was feeling his own private melancholy! It is another heavy irony of history that waning Victorian Christianity should have lost the struggle against humanism but succeeded in imposing on its enemies its own smug ethics. Beyond the waning of Christianity's own beliefs these ethics not only lingered but have been elevated into principle.

Borrowing from Christianity a high view of man, optimistic humanism, like idealistic Marxism, is really a Christian heresy. Marxism, whatever it proclaims in propaganda and ideology, betrays the value of man in practice for it elevates the state as an absolute over the individual. Optimistic humanism does the same with its stress on aspirations but silence concerning alienations. But time alone will show whether genuine moral solvency is possible for the humanists or whether they are just living parasitically on past reserves.

If the basis of optimistic humanism is so weak, why wasn't this exposed long ago? The answer to this question lies in the mid-Victorian mood of general self-congratulation into which optimistic humanism was born. A complacent smugness was widely prevalent. This was true of the church; both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism exuded a rare coziness of orthodoxy. It was true also of secular atheism, with its reassuring belief that reason and science were introducing a civilization that would expel all traces of barbarism even from the memory. The twentieth century was anticipated eagerly as the fulfillment of these hopes, and general social stability gave credibility to this myth.

Twentieth-century upheavals have cruelly blown this apart. Hard on the heels of World War I came the Russian Revolution, followed by the Depression and then World War II. With lightning speed the three great European empires of Russia, Germany and Austria disappeared, soon to be followed by the British Empire. With the emergence of communism and the acceleration of modern technology, explosive new forces were unleashed in the modern world. The very fabric of civilization seemed torn apart. It was at times like this, when social eruption

forced people to face the logic of their bankrupt base, that people accurately perceived the tenuousness of optimism's brave hold. If they were too optimistic in good times, they tended to be over-pessimistic in dark times, but these latter were the moments of truth.

All of this had been predicted by the Devil's Party. Nietzsche saw modern Europe falling into an abyss, and in the 1880s he prophetically warned of a new Age of Barbarism: "There will be wars such as have never happened on earth."²⁸ After World War I, a similar point was seized on by Franz Kafka: "The buttresses of human existence are collapsing. Historical development is no longer determined by the individual but by the masses. We are shoved, rushed, swept away. We are the victims of history."²⁹

Any powerful social disruption (such as the two world wars) has the effect of tearing away the social fabric and exposing the reality beneath. In the case of Western society, the cancer revealed had already been diagnosed by the pessimistic humanists.

Nonetheless, it has taken this last decade to provide the most sober moment of truth for many optimists. Koestler has described the sixties as the "Age of Climax"³⁰ and J. R. Platt as the "hinge of history," when momentous issues like the population explosion, the ecological and urban crises, the racial situation and the arms race have been recognized as exponential curves rising sharply. Added to this is the obvious shame arising from the contemptuous dismissal of Western humanism by the Third World. "Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them," Frantz Fanon cries to his fellow Third World revolutionaries, also warning that the United States, "that super-European monstrosity," is a horror in which "the taints, the sickness, and the inhumanity of Europe have grown to appalling dimensions."³¹

If the social disruptions had not come, the stability might have continued longer, but it would have been an Indian summer. They would have come eventually, and there is every indication that disruption is at our elbow daily as this century closes. So the subterranean pessimism, the Devil's Party, surfaces, speaking more prophetically and appealing more popularly in its accurate portrayal of modern anxiety, loneliness,

alienation and dread. A description of Thomas Mann could be an epitaph for our era: “He died undecided, hesitating between a desperate optimism and a weary pessimism.”³²

THE STRIPTEASE OF HUMANISM

This, then, is “the striptease of humanism,” a gathering crisis of optimism, an escape from reason, a surfacing of subterranean pessimism. Understanding it as the daily climate of our time, we can now analyze more closely certain features of its arrival and of its permanent residue.

First, there is the strong element of surprise. For any who had read Nietzsche, this should not have been so but in fact it was. In 1929 Freud remarked on this in *Civilization and Its Discontents*: “Man has, as it were, become a prosthetic god. . . . Future ages . . . will increase man’s likeness to God still more. But . . . present day man does not feel happy in his Godlike character.”³³ In 1951 Camus felt it still more keenly: “During the last century, man cast off the fetters of religion. Hardly was he free, however, when he created new and utterly intolerable chains. . . . The kingdom of grace has been conquered, but the kingdom of justice is crumbling too. Europe is dying of this deception.”³⁴

The situation is pregnant with irony: There is a crisis of disbelief as well as a crisis of belief. Some religious thinkers may be endlessly reporting the death of God (almost as their contemporary creedal confession), but the fact no longer seems heroic to the perceptive atheist. If the city of God has been razed, who is in need of a home now? Who feels the chill most keenly?

A second feature is the irreversibility of the exposure of humanism. It would be comforting to regard the present pessimism as a cycle, or swing of the pendulum, but there are various reasons why we cannot. For one thing there are new factors which prevent a reversal. Here we come to the difference between Oswald Spengler and Max Weber. Spengler thought the decline of the West was essentially what had happened before. Weber held that what was occurring had never happened before. It was different because, although there were similar symptoms, the “disenchantment of the world” by technology was new. So the situation was irreversible.

Others have pointed beyond these new factors to a certain logical inevitability which flows from the diagnosis of the death of God as a cultural fact. Nietzsche makes this point constantly but especially in his famous parable in *The Gay Science*. A madman enters a market place with a lantern, crying, “I seek God. I seek God.”³⁵ But the busy crowd is unconcerned at his outbursts and laughs at his comical antics. Turning suddenly on them, he demands, “Whither is God? I shall tell you. We have killed him—you and I.” But as they ignore the enormity of his announcement, he finally flings his lantern to the ground and cries, “I come too early. My time has not come yet. This tremendous event is still on its way.”

The death of God goes far beyond the decline of religious belief. It is as if man has drunk up the sea, sponged away the entire horizon and unchained the earth from the sun. God is dead. God remains dead, and all that for which God was once held responsible must disappear too, and this terrible game is played until the last throw of the dice. In the world without God man is not so much free as overwhelmingly responsible. David Hume had admitted, “I am first affrighted and confounded with that forlorn solitude, in which I am plac’d in my philosophy.”³⁶ Nietzsche’s alternative—the will to power—is more appealing, but reality lay nearer to an ominous significance which Sartre later called “total responsibility in total solitude.”³⁷ This was the new definition of man’s liberty without God.

The humanists claimed that they could retain Christian values and give them a validity independent of God. But Nietzsche dismissed this as impossible since Christianity was the entire undergirding of all Western civilization, not only of its religious beliefs but also of its social values and its fundamental view of man. He diagnosed, not progress, but a time of decadence whose logic is nihilism. There remains only the void. Man is falling. His dignity is gone. His values are lost. There is no difference between up and down. It has become chilly, and a dark night is closing in. For those who would not face the desperate extremity of the truth now exposed to them, he had nothing but scorn. Nietzsche agreed with Burckhardt in hating the “odious windbags of progressive optimism”³⁸ and saw only the horror of the abyss. If God is dead and “no

new god lies as yet in cradle and swaddling clothes,”³⁹ there is no alternative except to face the nihilism and then from the ashes of former values and ideals to exercise the will to power which creates the overman.

Some ignore this diagnosis as mere poetry. So perhaps we should look more closely at the issue. Does the death of God really relate, for example, to the rise of totalitarianism? From several different viewpoints it has been cogently argued that modern totalitarianism is closely connected to the death of God and the loss of absolutes.

Nietzsche argued that with God dead and man too weak to live without rules, inevitably the state—The New Idol—will be set up as an arbitrary absolute, forcing men to serve itself rather than God.⁴⁰ “God is my word for the ideal,” he observed. When equality is confused with conformity and taken to involve the renunciation of initiative, the general levelling leads at best to socialism, and at worst to a totalitarianism perpetuating man’s servility in the name of the state instead of God.

Dostoevsky argued only a little differently. In *The Possessed*, his blistering and prophetic expose of nihilism, Shigalov the revolutionary admits the unfortunate conclusion of his vision of the new society: “I have become entangled in my own data and my conclusions directly contradict my original premises. I started out with the idea of unrestricted freedom and I have arrived at unrestricted despotism.”⁴¹ Freedom with no form results in a reaction of form with no freedom. “Shigalov’s system” ends up where “one-tenth will be granted individual freedom and full rights over the remaining nine-tenths, who will lose their individuality and become something like a herd of cattle.” He would see latter-day twentieth-century socialism, perhaps, as a secular Tower of Babel held up by strict totalitarian control.

Camus takes a third position, arguing that modern egalitarianism is the secularization of the soul’s original equality before God. “Totality is, in effect, nothing other than the ancient dream of unity common to both believers and rebels, but projected horizontally onto an earth deprived of God.”⁴²

Despite entirely different premises, these three are each convinced that in the world after the death of God the rise of modern totalitarianism