It's time to embrace what is essentially and perennially human

The Permanence of Humanism

Bradley J. Birzer

In *The Professor's House*, one of the most sinfully forgotten novels by one of the most sinfully forgotten authors of the past century, Willa Cather presents a scene of simultaneous humanist wonder and bitterness:

> I don't myself think much of science as a phase of human development. It has given us a lot of ingenious toys; they take our attention away from the real problems, of course, and since the problems are insoluble, I suppose we ought to be grateful for distraction. But the fact is, the human mind, the individual mind, has always been made more interesting by dwelling on the old riddles, even if it makes nothing of them. Science hasn't given us any new amazements, except of the superficial kind we get from witnessing dexterity and sleight-of-hand. It hasn't given us any richer pleasures, as the Renaissance did, nor any new sins—not one! Indeed, it takes our old ones away. It's the laboratory, not the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world. You'll agree there is not much thrill about a physiological sin. We were better off when even the prosaic matter of taking nourishment could have the magnificence of a sin. I don't think you help people by making their conduct of no importance—you impoverish them.[1]

In this novel, so unjustly glanced over by our current crop of literary theorists, Cather uses the house as a representation of the mind

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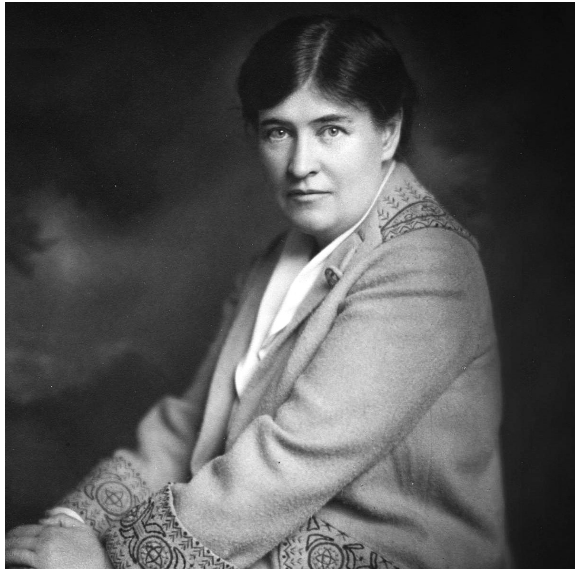
and soul of its protagonist. The cluttered and dusty memories of and in the house haunt the now retiring academic, Godfrey St. Peter. Has he done enough, or has he failed to do what was necessary? Are his sins those of omission or commission? His wife and daughters care only about the most superficial aspects of glamour, travel, and luxury, and his one prized student died in war overseas. What does he have to show for it all? Whatever his many failings, as the above passages reveals, he knows what matters most in life, the fact that he is human and that what he studies and loves is humane.

In so many ways, Cather is the true American artist of the twentieth century, resisting modernity and its many progressive temptations and detours. In almost every word she wrote—no matter how simplistic her style might seem, the depth of meaning is layers upon layers deep—she upheld the artistic and the humane against the sentimental and unmeasured. Whether it's through the buffoonish populists of *O Pioneers* or the intrepid fur trappers of *Shadows on the Rock*, Cather always injected truth and beauty into her fiction. Real literature, she claimed, must always reach for the highest level of artistry. Only then, she believed, could it have deeper meaning. To strive to make a political or philosophic point would only render literature worthless. But real literature will reveal true politics and true philosophy, at least as it resides in the deepest parts of the soul of the writer.

A decade after Cather passed from this earth, a relatively young, upstart man of letters, Russell Amos Kirk (1918–1994), founded this journal, *Modern Age*. A title at once mocking and yet respectful of the complexities of the ideologically rent world, trapped in the throes of violence and upheaval, Kirk's *Modern Age* appeared for the first time on July 19, 1957, sixty years ago this coming summer. Its purpose? To conserve the best of Western civilization and enrich the ideas of the world, to bring back, if not the Lamb of God, as even the skeptic Godfrey St. Peter might desire, at least the pagan *Logos* of the Stoics. "We are not ideologists; we do not believe we have all the remedies for all the ills to which the flesh is heir," Kirk assured his readers on page two of the brand new journal. After the shocking success of his published dissertation, *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk wondered exactly what it was he hoped to conserve. In his following books—*A Program for Conservatives* (1954), *Academic Freedom* (1955), and *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice* (1956)—as well as in this journal, Kirk believed the only thing worth conserving was the humane or humanist tradition, beginning with Heraclitus and reaching to and through the thought and poetry of T. S. Eliot. It was, Kirk believed, the noblest of traditions, encompassing the greats from Socrates to Cicero, from Augustine to Dante, from Petrarch to More, and from Burke to Tocqueville. After he had successfully become a household name by late 1953, he wanted to make his mark by conserving not merely "conservatism" but what he referred to as the "humane tradition" of the West. In his own day, thinkers as diverse as Paul Elmer More, Cather, Christopher Dawson, Nicholas Berdyaev, Sister Madeleva Wolff, Gabriel Marcel, Jacques Maritain, Frank Sheed, C. S. Lewis, Flannery O'Connor, and Étienne Gilson—with Eric Voegelin, Robert Nisbet, Leo Strauss, and Ray Bradbury as fellow travelers—embraced various forms of the humanities and humanism. If anything could offer a real alternative to the whirligig of the modern world, the humanities and humanism could. In true humanism, Kirk argued, the "past and present are one—or, rather, that the 'present,' the evanescent moment, is infinitely trifling in comparison with the well of the past, upon which it lies as a thin film."[2]

Given its importance to *Modern Age* and to the post–World War II conserva-



Willa Cather: a humanist model for our time

tive movement as a whole, it is well worth considering exactly what humanism is and who its fountainheads in the modern age (or, in reality, *against* the modern age) are. As it turns out, when it came to humanism in the English-speaking world, two men had served as the critical touchstones, solidifying reputations and ideas just as figures such as Willa Cather were publishing their first stories and articles. The first, Thomas Ernest Hulme (1883–1917), died during the Great War, exactly a century ago, while the second, Irving Babbitt (1865–1933), lived in spite of it. Each fundamentally shaped Kirk's greatest hero and exemplar, Thomas Sterns Eliot. Each also lived as the world shifted from the vast and easy machinery of the nineteenth-century to the complicated nuances of an ideological world of the twentieth. Neither rejected all the elements and benefits of modernity, but they certainly each cautioned against embracing it fully. It would be Eliot, however, and later Kirk, who best understood from these two fountainheads that the form of a thing is not always the essence of a thing. And, even if the form was modern, the essence might very well be ancient, medieval, and, perhaps, even Eastern. While the arguments presented by Hulme and Babbitt might now be dated, residing in that tangibly amorphous mass we call the past, the very form of their defense of the true against the innovative is as telling and relevant today as it was a century ago.

First conservative of the twentieth century: T. E. Hulme

At the end of 1943, the always irrepressible George Orwell (Eric Arthur Blair, 1903–1950) found himself perplexed by an entire school of thought in England that seemed, in some way and somehow, centered on the supreme poet-martyr of the Great War, T. E. Hulme. This might be, Orwell feared, much ado about nothing. And yet it wasn't nothing. Far from it. The "*Criterion* crowd"—T. S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Malcolm Muggeridge, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, and Aldous Huxley—all stood and sang together in the Hallelujah Hulme worship choir. Though he professed to despise labels, Orwell labeled them "the neo-reactionary school" and noted that through a soft and quiet influence, they had wreaked far more

damage upon the left "than anything that issues from the Individualist League or the Conservative Central Office." Their success, though, came merely from dampening and attenuating the human ideals of improvement. The neo-reactionaries, perhaps even more than had Hulme, frowned upon any progress in the human condition. Further, "it links up not only with Catholicism, Conservatism, and Fascism, but also with pacifism (California brand especially), and Anarchism." True reactionaries, Orwell argued, merely justified all things in this world by embracing "Other-worldliness" as an alibi while quietly earning through usury. These neo-reactionaries, however, actually believed what they were saying and writing. "Man is non-perfectible, merely political changes can effect nothing, progress is an illusion."[3]

Whatever one thinks of Orwell's attempt to define the "neo-reactionaries," he was certainly not exaggerating the influence of Hulme as a person, theorist, poet, leader, and martyr. If anything, Orwell underestimated how beloved a figure Hulme was, especially in memory. Eliot, certainly one of the greatest of twentieth-century men, understood the importance of Hulme in 1924. Eliot saw him as the *new man*—the *twentieth-century man*. In April 1924, he wrote: "When Hulme was killed in Flanders in 1917 . . . he was known to a few people as a brilliant talker, a brilliant amateur of metaphysics, and the author of two or three of the most beautiful short poems in the language. In this volume [the posthumous *Speculations*, edited by Herbert Read] he appears as the forerunner of a new attitude of mind, which should be the twentieth-century mind, if the twentieth century is to have a mind of its own." Hulme is, Eliot continued, "classical, reactionary, and revolutionary; he is the antipodes of the eclectic, tolerant, and democratic mind of the end of the last century."[4] The only true progress in the new century, Eliot continued, seemingly without hyperbole, will come with a recognition not just of Hulme as the great man but also with the very ideas that Hulme rediscovered and uncovered in the Western tradition. "A new classical age will be reached when the dogma . . . of the critic is so modified by contact with creative writing, and when the creative writers are so permeated by the new dogma, that a state of equilibrium is reached. For what is meant by a classical moment in literature is surely a moment of *stasis*, when the creative impulse finds a form which satisfies the best intellect of the time, a moment when a type is produced."[5] If nothing else, Eliot admitted, Hulme served as the personification and symbol of all that mattered, creating a rallying point around his martyrdom. "I think every reference to Hulme is valuable," he wrote privately in 1927, "more valuable, in a sense, than Hulme himself."[6]

Others offered praise just as effusively. Historian and Anglo-Welsh man of letters Christopher Dawson commended Hulme as much as Eliot had. Indeed, Dawson believed that Hulme, almost alone in his generation, understood the true and deep dangers of progressivism. As had St. Augustine, Hulme served as a nexus or a prophet at a significant transition in Western civilization. "It was only an exceptionally original mind, like that of the late T. E. Hulme, that could free itself from the influence of Liberal dogma and recognize *the sign of the times*—the passing of the ideals that had dominated European civilization for four centuries, and the dawn of a new order."[7] Welsh poet David Jones admired Hulme, while writer and editor Douglas Jerrold believed Hulme "one of the most considerable minds of the day."[8] Even a quarter century after Hulme's death, Wyndham Lewis ranked him as one of his four closest companions.[9] In 1948, the Jesuit periodical *America* proclaimed Hulme as the model—mostly in thought, if not in person—for a true Catholic literary revival in the twentieth century, should one

occur. The English poet offered a "charter," as the author put it, of Catholic arts and literature.[10] A writer in the *New York Times* in 1960 summed up Hulme's influence perfectly: "T. E. Hulme had modified the consciousness of his age in such a way that by 1939 his name had become part of a myth."[11]

After such praise for one man, the reader of *Modern Age* in 2017 might well wonder exactly what Hulme argued, especially considering that most thinkers have forgotten him one hundred years after his death in the trenches of northern Europe. In sum, though a humanist, T. E. Hulme believed that the school of thought had taken a dreadfully wrong turn during the latter half of the European Renaissance, focusing far more on the supposed glory of man rather than the humility of man as once understood from Socrates to Petrarch. "All philosophy since the Renaissance is at bottom the *same* philosophy."[12] Rather than humanism emphasizing man's place within the economy of grace—higher than the animals, but lower than the angels—it sought to emphasize the godlike aspects of man, especially when it came to his creative and artistic abilities. Yet it completely misunderstood man, seeing him—albeit unwittingly—as a mere cog in a vast and grinding machine.

Hulme published sporadically and haphazardly at best, and almost always in short articles and opinion pieces. Still, combine his published writings with his vast outlines and unpublished fragments and one can begin to find coherence in his many writings in his form of a "religious attitude" for humanism, or what would soon be labeled by Christopher Dawson a "Christian humanism." Three serious points emerge, and Hulme places himself rather directly in the line of St. Augustine, challenging Pelagius and his followers, all of whom "might easily be applauded at a meeting of *progressives*."[13]

First, Hulme feared the attempt by modernist thinkers to find "continuity" in all things. By this he meant that modernists had tried to meld forms of Darwinian evolution with systematic thinking. In the attempt of scholars and writers to link every single thing to every other thing, they conveniently and by necessity ignore what makes life most interesting, the gaps, the discontinuities, and the chasms. Instead, for the sake of continuity, they destroy free will and the possibility of real and actualized virtue. These progressives see the world as little more than a mechanism to be understood and, if possible, honed. In naming this continuity "progress," Hulme lamented, they created a false god but they also diminished the true glory of man, the man who must think, must choose, and must suffer against overwhelming odds.[14] And, even if the progressives would not go so far as to claim "progress" as their God, they certainly had made it "the modern substitute" for all orthodoxy in religion.[15] "Something quite *human*" becomes, then, an "*inhumanly* sharpened" weapon.[16]

Second, progressive philosophy—and especially the pragmatism of a William James as well as the English amateur philosophers—places so much emphasis on how everything leads to this point, and this point to the next, that man loses his sense of place and, more important, his sense of justice. Facts and immediate knowledge replace wisdom and attitude. Playing the "fool," philosophy in a progressive and mechanistic view of life becomes nothing more than a "conceptual clothing for the interpretation of life current in any particular period."[17] As a discipline, philosophy becomes Marxian as an ideology to justify any present thought, displacing the Socratic ethic as applicable to all ages and all persons. How, after all, can a man know what is right and wrong, what is good and ill, and what is beautiful and ugly should he become isolated from all men before him? A traditional and religious attitude, Hulme claimed, "gives us the assurance that values

are in some way permanent."[18] Monstrously, "personality" replaces "character" in progressivism, as no such thing as character can ever be understood if we live merely for the moment of transition. By believing in personality, man merely gives "rise to that bastard thing" and must accept, then, "all the bunkum that follows from it."[19] In reality, the "English amateurs," especially, professed nothing new, only something "racially empiric and nominalist."[20]

Third, in claiming that our moments of the here and now, the necessary transition from past to an idyllic future, the progressives believe that we approach "Perfection." Yet this perfection is not the ancient Aristotelian notion of perfection as a thing having attained its end, but instead a thing without flaw. Nothing, however, could be more demeaning for the dignity of the human person, Hulme feared. "We place Perfection where it should not be—on this human place." As such, Hulme continued, one must be "painfully aware that nothing *actual* can be perfect."[21]

The best solution for the problems of modernist and progressive thought and especially of post-Renaissance humanism was a simple return to pre-Renaissance humanism, a firm reminding of man's fallen state. Man "is endowed with Original Sin. While he can occasionally accomplish acts which partake of perfection, he can never himself *be* perfect." Thus, man can accomplish good in this world, but only through restraint and discipline. In this sense, a man must through humility recognize the order that is in nature if he means to live in a just fashion with his fellows.[22]

> It is quite as easy and natural for emotion and enthusiasm to crystalize around the idea of a constant world as around the idea of progress. An extraordinary solidarity is given to one's beliefs. There is great consolation in the ideas that the same struggles have taken place in each generation, and that men have always thought as we think now. It gives to religion a great stability, for it exhibits it as a permanent part of man's nature, and the nature of man being constant, it places these beliefs beyond all change. All the pleasure that one takes in old literature comes from the fact that it gives us this strange emotion of solidarity, to find that our ancestors were of like nature with ourselves.[23]

If scholars really want to look for "consistency," they should look at and to the "constancy of man" and his fallen nature.[24]

Babbittian longings

At roughly the same time that Hulme was formulating a pre-Renaissance humanism in the United Kingdom, Harvard University's Irving Babbitt was framing what would come to be known as the "New Humanism" or "American Humanism." To almost the same degree that Hulme had inspired an entire generation of the best men (and women) of letters in the United Kingdom, so Babbitt inspired at least one of his closest friends, Paul Elmer More, and generations of students in following his own teachings, all of which were really reminders of what had been lost or mocked throughout Western and world thought. One student remembered his undergraduate seminar at Harvard:

> At that time he had very small classes—meeting around a table. He came in with a bag bursting full of books, and took out a handful of notes which he arranged around him. . . . Began to sway in his chair, then leaped out upon one of them and poured a barrage of criticism upon some doctrine or some line

> of poetry, "to cast o'er erring words and deeds a heavenly show." Buddha, Aristotle, Plato, Horace, Dante, Montaigne, Pascal, Milton, etc.... He deluged you with wisdom of the world; his thoughts were unpacked and poured out so fast you couldn't keep up with them. You didn't know what he was talking about, but you felt that he was extremely in earnest, that it was tremendously important, that some time it would count; that he was uttering dogmatically things that cut into your beliefs, disposed derisively of what you adored, driving you into a reconstruction of your entire intellectual system. He was at you day after day like a battering ram, knocking down your illusions. He was building up a system of ideas. You never felt for a moment that he was a pedagogue teaching pupils. You felt that he was a Coleridge, a Carlyle, a Buddha, pouring out the full-stuffed cornucopia of the world upon your head. You were no longer in the elementary class. You were with a man who was seeking through literature for illustrations of his philosophy of life. You were dealing with questions on the answer to which the welfare of nations and civilizations depended. He himself seemed to know the right answer and was building a thoroughfare of ideas from the Greeks to our own day. You went out of the room laden down with general ideas that he had made seem tremendously important.... He related for you a multitude of separate and apparently disconnected tendencies to the great central currents of thought. You carried away also a sense of the need for immense reading. He had given you theses about literature, about life, which you would spend a lifetime in verifying.[25]

Of Babbitt's first generation of followers, none was more important than T. S. Eliot. Others included G. R. Elliott, Austin Warren, Gordon Keith Chalmers, Louis Mercier, Hoffman Nickerson, Norman Foerster, and Frank Jewett Mather Jr. Later, his admirers included Ray Bradbury, Milton Hindus, Robert Nisbet, Russell Kirk, George Panichas, and Claes Ryn.[26] Kirk, the founder of post–World War II conservatism, described Babbitt glowingly as "one of the sages of antiquity, along with Longinus and Quintilian."[27] He was certainly not alone in such praise. Lynn Harold Hough labeled him one of the five greatest thinkers of Western civilization, along with Aristotle, Cicero, Erasmus, and Babbitt's closest friend, Paul Elmer More.[28]

Even those opposed (sometimes virulently) to Babbitt make for impressive company: Dorothy Thompson, Albert Jay Nock, Lewis Mumford, Ernest Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, Granville Hicks, and H. L. Mencken. Thompson, who by the 1930s would become one of the most famous journalists in the world, once commented that "when she was in the hospital at the time her baby was born," reading an article by a humanist "was worse than having the baby."[29] Nock believed the humanists gave too much credence to the power of culture and possessed too much faith in a natural aristocracy. As Puritans, they also ignored the beauty of human passions.[30]

As with Hulme, Irving Babbitt worried that the nineteenth century in its material culture and its spiritual makeup had merely mechanized all humanity, creating a burden that would become crushing. "One sometimes asks one's self, in moments of despondency," he noted in his first published piece, "whether the main achievement of the nineteenth century will not have been to accumulate a mass of machinery that will break the twentieth century's back."[31] Though each intellectual breakthrough was brilliant in and of itself, those that predominated in the century had

focused on an increased understanding of particularisms, separating each field, idea, and person from the whole. Whether the thought of a Darwin, a Marx, or soon (in America) a Freud, each thinker increasingly narrowed his field of understanding while also deepening his understanding of that particular field in isolation from all others. Not surprisingly, muddled thinking about the whole also lowered the quality of writing, adding confusion to confusion. "The nineteenth century witnessed the greatest debauch of descriptive writing the world has ever known," he claimed in his 1910 book, *The New Laokoon*.[32]

Babbitt believed that Western scholars and writers had lost a "sense of proportion" as well as imagination, thus upending all that the medieval had achieved in the grand synthesis of Dante.[33] "By the overemphasis on sympathy the humanitarian shows that he has no sense of proportion," Babbitt wrote in 1915, "whereas the sense of proportion is the very essence and breath of life and humanism."[34] The predominant trajectory of post-Burkean thought had been toward "the accumulation" of knowledge, rather than its assimilation, and an unfortunate embrace of the most emotional aspects of the romantic period.[35] As with Hulme, Babbitt understood this change in the Western mind and character as ultimately preparing the ground for widespread violence of particularism against particularism. Unlike Hulme, however, Babbitt believed it necessary not to return to the "religious attitude" of the ancient and medieval worlds, but to bring to bear the Western liberal tradition of education as a whole—and even Eastern thinkers—upon all modern thought, thus finding inheritance rather than separation or revolution.

At every level, Babbitt saw himself as a reformer, not a radical. The true goal of the humanist, he wrote, was not to encourage impulse but to resist and restrain it, harnessing it for use with a higher or moral imagination.[36] As such, he hoped, the philosopher would become literary, and the men of letters must "become to the best of their ability philosophical."[37]

Armed with strong reservations about American nationalism and his overt opposition to any form of progressivism, Babbitt called for a reclamation of the word *humanist* against the romantic sentimentalists he believed had hijacked it.

> To make a plea for humanism without explaining the word would give rise to endless misunderstanding. It is equally on the lips of the socialistic dreamer and the exponent of the latest philosophical fad. In an age of happy liberty like the present, when any one can employ almost any general term very much as he pleases, it is perhaps inevitable that the term humanism, which still has certain gracious associations lingering about it, should be appropriated by various theorists, in the hope, apparently, that the benefit of the associations may accrue to an entirely different order of ideas. . . . We evidently need a working definition not only of humanism, but of the words with which it is related or confused—humane, humanistic, humanitarian, humanitarianism. And these words, if successfully defined, will help us to a further necessary definition—that of the college. For any discussion of the place of literature in the college is conditioned by a previous question: whether there be any college for literature to have a place in. The college has been brought to this predicament not so much perhaps by its avowed enemies as by those who profess to be its friends. Under these circumstances our prayer, like that of Ajax, should be to fight in the light.[38]

Significance for a twenty-first-century conservatism

In no way do I suggest that all modern conservatism came from the humanists and their allies. Indeed, when Russell Kirk wrote his magisterial *The Conservative Mind* in 1953, he was openly combining the humanism of Babbitt, More, and Hulme with the polite anarchism of Albert Jay Nock; the fabulism of G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and Ray Bradbury; the libertarianism of Isabel Paterson and Friedrich Hayek; and the agrarianism of John Crowe Ransom and Hilaire Belloc. Over the next several years, he would add Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, Robert Nisbet, and several others to his list of heroes and exemplars. Strauss figured so prominently in Kirk's thought, for example, that one of the primary purposes of this journal, *Modern Age*, was to defend Strauss from the myriad of attacks coming from the academy. Kirk wanted Strauss on the editorial board, but Strauss believed Henry Regnery too untrustworthy when it came to Zionism and refused to associate officially with him. In other words, Kirk's vision was not strictly of a Christian humanism but rather of an ecumenically religious and Socratic humanism. Additionally, it must be noted, and noted forcefully, that Kirk saw this journal as a bulwark against any form of bigotry: ideological, racial, or religious. With so many errors in the world, Kirk held such prejudices as not only unethical but practical wastes of time as well. Two of Kirk's greatest political heroes, Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan, would feel the same.

Given that Hulme and Babbitt lived through the rise of Marxism and Freudianism, fanatical ideologies, and the wiles of Friedrich Nietzsche, their humanism both makes perfect sense and reveals much about the need to transcend any one conflict or division in the world with a belief that transcends time and argues in favor of citizenship in the Ciceronian ideal of the cosmopolis. While soil matters, at least in terms of the classical virtue of temperance, it is only a thing, something to be used on the way to the good. It is material and plastic, a substance created by the good to allow us to live and survive in a world of material and time. Our true loyalties, as Cicero and those, like Kirk, who followed him argued, are with all humanity, from Adam to the last man. Our real citizenship resides elsewhere, and we are merely sojourners in the here and now. Indeed, it must be stressed vehemently that the very essence of the humanities exists to promote what is essentially human, not accidentally so.

That Kirk created *Modern Age* at the height of the Cold War makes sense as well, given that he believed his humanism could conserve the best of Western civilization against the communists and other ideologues of the world, including democratic ones. Modernity itself embraced words and ideas as something separate from their contexts, exaggerating a thing against its relations and fellows. It focused on the specific at the expense of the universal, thus, as Babbitt said, losing any meaningful sense of proportion. The communists had made a religion out of community, and the fascists a religion out of the nation. Neither community nor the nation is evil, but in isolation each becomes a grotesque thing of horror, and the human person becomes its plastic material, thus subverting proper order.

As we now have seen the first two decades of the twenty-first century, however, we must also see that our need for a humanism to conserve the dignity of the human person has not in the least lessened. As I type this, the American national security state is the largest and most intrusive in our history. There are so many agencies protecting the American population that no overview or oversight of them all is possible. They have multiplied hideously since 9/11. Despite the

rise of Homeland Security, the Transportation Safety Administration, and so forth, there is no tangible evidence that the American people are any safer than they were prior to 9/11. Given the pervasive attitude that the enforcement of safety depends on centralized authority, the weakening of the will of the people to claim its right to defend itself might very well mean that we are, actually, less safe than we were before the rise of the national security state.

Over the past several decades, we have also witnessed the rise of angry and impulsive emotion as a form of bullying and propaganda. On our radios and TVs and across the Internet, people fail to check the expression of almost any feeling. Instead, the public arena has become one not of reason and measured tones, but of reaction and righteous anger, of soundbites and slogans. Not surprisingly, then, populism has once again become a major force in politics and entertainment, with personality having become nothing but a grotesque display.

Racial tensions are as high as they have been since the 1970s. Someone in the 1980s might well have seen Bono's lyric "in the kingdom come, when all the colors bleed into one" as idealistic, but he would not have seen it as unreachable and absurd. In 2017 the pleadings of that aged Irishman seem, sadly, somewhat quaint. Our identity politics have unleashed the fury of all, and righteousness—by all races—has become superior to civility. Because race is not even a real category, our civilization most likely will move past this ridiculous stage of bigotry, but there might be significant violence and misunderstandings before the end has arrived.

Abroad, Islamic fundamentalists slaughter wantonly, and Russia and China are making aggressive moves in their respective regions. Indeed, our situation in 2017 looks far more like what it would have looked to T. E. Hulme than it did to Kirk. We fight not against organized ideologies but against fundamentalist chaos. Perhaps the only real difference between 2017 and 1917 is that the United States now possesses a powerful and widespread, if extremely flabby, empire. We have troops—at various levels—stationed in nearly 150 of the almost 200 countries in existence. We possess the greatest navy the world has ever seen, but we lack direction, focus, and will.

Granted, it's a serious difference, but it does not lessen our duty to conserve the best of what has come before in preparation of what is to come. Perhaps, as Cather's St. Peter suggested, we might once again reclaim the Lamb of God and the magnificence of sin. If so, there are no better models in the modern age than Hulme and Babbitt on how to proceed from here. ☨

NOTES

1 Godfrey St. Peter in Willa Cather, *The Professor's House* (1925; repr., New York: Vintage, 1990).
2 Russell Kirk, *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice* (Chicago: Regnery, 1956), 176.
3 George Orwell, "As I Please," December 24, 1943, in *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), 63–64.
4 T. S. Eliot, "Commentary," *The Criterion* 2 (April 1924): 231.
5 Eliot, "Commentary," 231–32. He was, Eliot believed, "the most fertile mind of my generation." That fertility came in a variety of ways. For Eliot, who had never actually met Hulme, the man served more as a symbol than anything else, an evolving one that could fit the needs of the twentieth century. See T. S. Eliot, London, to Allen Tate, Paris, February 22, 1929, in Allen Tate Papers (C0106), Box 19, Folder 53, Princeton University; and T. S. Eliot, *The Varies of Metaphysical Poetry*, edited and introduced by Ronald Schuchard (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 2. On never having met Hulme, see Eliot to Victor Gollancz, December 30, 1959, quoted in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, vol. 5 (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), 728fn2. Herbert Read remembered that Hulme served mostly as an affirmation and inspiration for Eliot's already formed ideas when he first read him. See Herbert Read, "T. S. E.—A Memoir," in Allen Tate, ed., *T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work* (New York: Delacourt Press, 1966), 18.
6 Eliot to Read, January 28, 1927, in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, vol. 3 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 394. On Eliot a disciple of Hulme, see W. E. Collins, "Beyond Humanism: Some Notes on T. E. Hulme," *Sewanee Review* 38 (1930): 335; and T. S. Eliot, "Second Thoughts on Humanism," *Hound and Horn* 2 (June 1929): 339–50.
7 Christopher Dawson, "Christianity and the New Age," in *Essays in Order* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1931), 159 (emphasis in original).
8 William Blissett, *The Long Conversation: A Memoir of David Jones* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1981), 106; and Douglas Jerrold, *Georgian Adventure* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), 67.
9 Wyndham Lewis to Leonard Amster, ca. August 1940, in W. K. Rose, ed., *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1963), 275.
10 Michael F. Moloney, "T. E. Hulme and Catholic Letters Today," *America* 79 (Sept. 25, 1948): 569–71.
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