

## ***THE FEMININE HUMANISM***

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**C**ulture is the accomplishment of human qualities. Even if we speak about the “humanness” in general and about humanity, although we can not imagine the destiny of the individual outside the social context in which he lives, it is equally true that the objective super-personal cultural reality could not exist without the real support of the individual. Their influence is reciprocal: the sense of individual lives is determined by the sense of the objective historical cultures, but in their turn they are enlivened by the individual-

ities, that turn intentions into account. Without the echo waken within individual consciousness, objective culture would be hollow abstraction. The proof can be found in the primitive cultures, where the objective cultural forms (customs, institutions) are strong, but they stay unchanging inasmuch as they are exterior to living mentality. They are still forms, superposed to human being, unable to bloom because they no longer live within the souls. It goes the same with cultural imitations, which are abstract products, equally illusory and non-viable.

The problem of humanism is actually the problem of the subjective aspect of culture, for, although we usually mean by humanism a precise cultural epoch, the one at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a closer look at the history of culture will show that some of its stages are cyclically repeated, and the tendency of comparing the cultural reality with the quality of the individual returns every now and then. There are epochs, even in European culture, which, leaving the individual and human life aside, have deviated culture from its mission, i.e. human accomplishment, and gave it different aims. Leaving aside the more or less deformed aspects of culture, we will notice that the humanist epochs are characterized by an essential and fundamental trait, common to classic Antiquity, Christian humanism, the Renaissance, as well as the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries: it is the cherishing of man. Through this, the very humanistic epochs represent the expression of culture that has reached the consciousness of its mission. They are epochs of reflexive thinking and culture control.

Socrates and Plato's humanist philosophy was built on the old cosmogonies and philosophies of culture. The theological discussions of the middle centuries lead to the humanist philosophy of the first Renaissance, focussed on human life. The 17<sup>th</sup> century turns its look from the scientific endeavor to reveal the universe towards human nature and the fate of social man. I would say that Humanism is an appeal to the order of the day, in a culture whose attention was dissipated over side interests. Being a complex cultural phenomenon, we can not grasp all its aspects, but we want to stress the fact that history proves a precise rhythm in the returning of this cultural stage in which the interest for man is manifested alongside with the necessity of revising its methods of both knowing and manifestation. Socrates, as well as Plato, but also Descartes and Kant have set the bases of a theory of knowing, of a particular kind of logic and ethics.

The humanist epochs are also characterized by a search for balance between the individual and the collectivity, be it the restricted society of the city, like in antiquity, or the indefinite society of humanity, like in the Renaissance, or even the national community of modern states. Human dimension is revealed in the very defining of this relation between the individual and the community. In such epochs, culture attains a new degree of maturity, exactly by the balancing of its objective creations and the subjective character of man. What is the contribution of woman in the historical tendency of defining the human, on the one hand by the reconciliation of the

beast-human with the angel-human and on the other hand by a balance between the individuality and the collective?

The man, keen on what is going on around him, watchful about danger and the conquest field (be it the land, the secrets of nature or the supernatural) has invented abstraction as a weapon for fighting the unknown. In it, man inserts and classifies his experience. Man has increased his power of objectivization and has built a world of permanent relations and laws above the real world. He has split reality, analyzing it and rebuilding it in a superior synthesis. He has understood the concrete through law, and the real through the ideal, in which he has found his supreme means of knowing. Woman acted differently: she has sunk into the living milieu of concrete realities, identifying herself with it. Her natural mission of giving birth and raising children obliges woman to come into a direct and immediate relation with things, animals and people. She has no time to repeat experiences and no time of analyzing events, looking for the constitutive elements of a phenomenon. She has to give soliciting life immediate, permanent and different answers, and for this she has to cover reality as a living whole. Woman has created a consciousness of herself, and has developed intuitive apprehension. When this is missing, the primitive woman is lost. But even in the advanced stages of culture, the lack of this feminine aptitude is not deprived of painful effects.

For objective culture has been built on the balance of the two tendencies. The inner rhythm of culture is influenced down to its slightest vibrations by the difference and the complementarity of the two sexes. History evolves within the antithesis of values. Any of them is partial and requires the other in order to be fulfilled. Action and reaction, as well as their historical summing, turn culture into a super-individualistic complex which, yet, has to be lived by the individual in order to be real and has to awaken the unique and special reflex of every man of culture. Culture is shaped only from the accomplishment of this balance. At least, this is how European culture developed.

Yet, man's social supremacy has led to the belief that the original form of culture would consist in the theoretical determination of the world, that the purely intellectual aspect of the spirit would prevail over the other. Naturally, for an individual, the objective world is a coherent ensemble of meanings, but they can not be solved only theoretically, intellectually, since, for instance, life can not be dissolved into theory. The object of knowing is something more than just a theoretic ensemble. The spiritual act can not be knowledge alone, it can also be intuition, that is another form of grasping the real, different from the rational, analytical one. Thus, the spiritual attitude of a woman is closer to the concrete, to the individual, and is it necessary for the balance of culture as well. As long as we needed to know natural phenomena exclusively, the abstract method could suffice. But, when knowledge approaches the phenomenon of life, it has to change its method.

The man of culture is being built on his correlation with the world outside him, which is not univocal. "Reality" is an interpenetration of the different

objective strata, but it also depends on the historical condition, that is the cultural past, as well as on the individual quality of consciousness that contemplates it. Humanization is the very expression of this correlation, ever more intense, ever more vast, between the Ego and the non-Ego, between objective culture and the Ego. But this correlation can only be apparent as long as there is just theoretical, rational knowledge. Undoubtedly, this is a reliable guide for all the other human means of correlation with the real; reason is a defender against any error in valorizing the significations of the real or in the attitude of the spirit. It would therefore be a sin against culture itself to diverge from any form, whether direct or indirect, of the rational method of intellect. Yet, the human and the human measure, require that the cultural Ego should get on different other ways in correlation with integral reality. In other words, the cultural Ego is larger than the intellectual Ego.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century is a proof of this statement. In this century, when the methods of knowing have been critically revised and a balance between man and society has been established, man stays the center of cultural universe, but being permanently projected along two infinite horizons: nature on the one hand, object of research for physics and mathematics, sur-nature, on the other hand, pondered in the deep-seated act of faith. Pascal is the brilliant example of the collaboration between the two attitudes, science and faith, which go through his century and are embodied as the living shape of culture by several personalities of the epoch, of course, less intensely and less tragically, though no less truly than in Pascal.

By comparing this period of typical humanism with the culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we will notice a gap in the spiritual context, the attention of the 19<sup>th</sup> century being concentrated exclusively on Nature, under its diverse forms and the theoretical method being exclusively applied to all phenomena. Therefore, the problem of life being totally included in the mechanism, it was not only physiology, but also psychology and moral that were subjected to the same method of investigation, the positivist-rationalist one. The culture of this century bears the mark of positivism and materialism. And yet, the great discoveries of pure science were obviously the work of idealism!

The cultural atmosphere of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which we are going to try to clear up, could not support the idealist enthusiasm, but had to bring the creative impetus down to the materialist level of technicality. "Man" was overwhelmed and crushed by the universal mechanism. It was exactly the means that were supposed to make his life easier and encourage the impetus towards humanity that enchained him, making him their prisoner. This state of things, which some felt only exteriorly, as an economic crisis, awoke within limpid consciousness a tragic fear. The apocalyptic vision of the "robot", of the mechanism-man, is a warning in a culture that has forgot its sense.

Bergson's philosophy is, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the symptom of a return to this sense. By liberating psychology from the mechanical standpoint, the problem of life and spirit emancipates itself from the positivist methods it had been approached with.

One consequence of the balance fracture that has been accomplished is the disintegration of 19<sup>th</sup> century man by his ever more complete specialization which he is subject to. This is, obviously, an unbeatable necessity in an epoch of great scientific and technical flourishing, for a single human mind is incapable of grasping the whole of science. Sure, we seem to be facing an unsolvable problem here. Yet, specialization is only dangerous inasmuch as it would be incompatible with the integrity of human form. What a difference between the “honnête homme”<sup>1</sup> of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and today’s cultivated man! The former used to be the converging point of all the currents of his culture; the latter stays a fragment of an exterior whole.

One reaction against the threat of disintegration has come up: collaboration has deepened, by attempting a “sur-individual” synthesis within the specialists’ meetings in congresses. Another, more general and more vital reaction seems to be the ever clearer tendency of the 19<sup>th</sup> century towards individualism. It is as if the interdependence of specialists, on the one hand and the total independence of the individual, on the other hand, could have been a healing for man’s cultural disintegration!

Another aspect of this reaction against disintegration seems to us the ideal of the superman, the one that is today replaced by the individualist tendency. The superman betrays the invention of an epoch thrilled by the presentiment that man vanishes away out of measurelessness and shapelessness and trying to save him from nothingness by quantitatively increasing his qualities. For both in individualism and in the superman the quantitative standpoint is dominant. The individual, being single, opposes multiplicity although, normally, the relation between the individual and the collective should be similar to the one from one whole to another whole. The tension between the individual and the collective also shows a mechanical point of view, in which man is considered as a number. By comparing the individualist as well as the superman of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the “honnête homme” of the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a type of integral man, we are struck by an obvious difference. The “honnête homme”, although a social person by excellence and also a man of universal culture, is nevertheless defined by his inner unity, that is, by the balance attained by all objective values – in his subjective form and organization. We come to the conclusion that here, it is not the individual, as opposed to the collective, but man as a whole and since it is a whole, that directs the life of culture. There is here a qualitative relation between the collective and the individual, while the superman is defined by a power relation, i.e. a quantitative relation with the collective. It is clear that the attempts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century at preventing culture dehumanization are made by means exterior to the human, by quantity, by mechanical ways and they suppose the infinite, which is an abstraction, a virtuality. Certainly, progress is a logical explanation in the field of matter, but at the organic level, it corresponds to growth, which can no longer be ascribed to a quantitative infinite, it requiring a qualitative medium. The confusion between mechanical progress and organic growth is manifest in the culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the replacement of mystery, a vital hypothesis, with the unknown, a mechanical

hypothesis. The unknown is the legitimate form taken by mystery when it comes to objective knowledge of nature, but this is not valid for man, for life problems and those of the creative Ego, the summum attained by life are expressed by mystery itself. Not only that we would deny the means of the intellect or the critical approach of the rationalist-idealist philosophy, but we should also have the courage to acknowledge that the centuries of creative culture have postulated at the end of a long chain of rational explanations a living source, the mystery, which could no longer be approached by analysis, but by the attitude of adhesion, which is faith. This is why neither Plato nor Descartes, not even Kant contented themselves with the hypothetical-rational method, they consolidated it into an "*anipoteton*", which is a faith. On the contrary, the narrow materialism and intellectualism that accompanied it cut culture off this fertile source, which is mystery, chasing it, in the name of reason, not only from the enlightened area of exact science, but even from the realm of life and consciousness. Man is destined exclusively to the exterior progress into the unknown. In this way, the source of the inner evolution has been dried out.

The unknown, as element of an equation, is a projection of the intellect, a hypothetical explanation from inside the act of knowing. However hard it may try to become independent from reason, like the object pole of the subject, the unknown will never be able to become an entity, it will remain an element of the equation, whose equivalent is knowledge. The mystery can not be replaced by the unknown, because it is outside the equation of knowledge, it can only be annulled; but where mystery is no more nothingness arises. The consequence of a culture which, by mechanizing man, de-humanized and sterilized him by abolishing mystery, bursts out today for all of us, in the crisis of a generation obsessed by nothingness. Yet, the life of a culture is struggling, looking for ways out, be they the wrong ones. This is why today, in order to escape nothingness, some choose the way of crime, others that of death, or the way of eternal expiation, whereas some chose the normal way of faith. The thirst for the absolute, so legitimate in life, is quenched by any source promising life. And if we see it entering the scientific field, troubling its purely rationalist waters, we have to understand that we are living the turmoil of a world which, after having been subjected to matter and abstraction, finds itself in the hopelessness and frenzy of a disoriented generation. Whoever has listened to the heartbeats of humanity within the last quarter of century knows that the odd pulsation tormenting it is the thrill in front of nothingness. It is neither poverty, nor the economical crises that made culture sick, but the lack of faith in the absolute sense of life. Relativism, so legitimate as it is within the field of knowledge, is illegitimate in the field of creation and life.

The complex phenomena that pervade today's culture: woman emancipation, class emancipation, youth emancipation, are all symptoms that betray a deviation of humanist culture from its normal orbit. A lack of orientation, a bewilderment, a "*sauve qui peut*"<sup>2</sup> is to be felt in all of them. We are living the atmosphere of a shipwreck. The way, alongside with all its horrors,

should be a reason to think over for all of us. I think it should not be regarded just as a social phenomenon, determined by economical and political reasons, but, since today the war is total, it supposes an exasperated spiritual state. It is up to history to judge from its own perspective all the losses suffered by our civilization with the new discoveries of the possible culture in this catastrophe, in spite of the paradoxical appearance of this hope.

After this long analysis, we wonder which is, on the one hand, the contribution of woman to this lack of balance and, on the other hand, what should be woman's reaction in order to set the actual culture straight?

We consider that most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the result of feminine carelessness. Both science and its rationalist-idealist method, a male work for milleniums, would not have deviated from their humanizing orientation if female genius had stayed faithful to its mission of life creation and organization. By imitating man, by further intensifying within her own self the powers of abstracting which are latent in both sexes, then solving the problem of her human dignity by independence, i.e. by a male method, the woman of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has unwillingly contributed to the disappearance of the differences between the male type and the female one, constituting in fact, by complementarity, the balance of a real culture.

Woman masculinization has not been achieved so much by her intellectual training, as it is wrongly thought, for the development of the mind is a means of humanization for both sexes – neither has it been deepened by her professional work – with balanced elements – but it was mainly the result of the intimate disintegration of feminine ideal. First by childish gestures, then by man-opposing attitudes, woman thought she could find her liberty, and along with it, her human dignity, following the way of man's life. The phenomenon finds an explanation in a degeneration of woman's rôle in the community, which would deserve a study for itself – yet the result of woman's reaction was different from the expected one. For woman emancipation, although apparently healing her crisis of dignity, has pushed her into a false and much more dangerous dependency, that of imitation. Woman took refuge from man's tyranny in the male ideal and this latter straying would be much worse than the former. This liberty that woman is in search for, by estranging from her own nature and her millenium-old cultural orientation, is another symptom of the most visible and most worrying crisis culture has gone through. For leveling the lifestyles will take cultural atmosphere in which the germs of the future are developing completely out of the feminine influence which, in the epochs of great culture, balanced the tendency towards abstraction and the love for the concrete, succeeding in giving theoretical ideals a vivid, real form inside individual consciousness. Alongside with the diminishing of the feminine style of life, we also witnessed a diminishing of the form of individual unity, which defines the scholar. The intimate "form" is a shield for the individual against estranging, also defending him from the dashing instincts or the mechanizing routine. It is only through "his intimate form" that he has the power to dominate the exterior currents, also assimilating them.

The principle of matter and machine applied to the human, the de-humanization tendency, which is manifest in the social conceptions that turn man into a number of an infinite series of numbers constituting the “collective” – can not be explained otherwise than by the dissolution or at least by the weakening of the interior form, during two or three generations that have been brought up within a masculine ideal.

In order to save culture, which is essentially humanist, woman has the immediate duty to regain, this time perfectly clear-mindedly and having a keen sense of her cultural responsibility, her eternal mission: the forging of man and of human milieu. In prehistoric times, woman created the first conceptions of truly human life, by founding the family and thus putting an end to the promiscuity of the horde, by founding the city, which refrained the wandering urge of the primitive, by land cultivation, thus organizing work and therefore turning it into one of the essential conditions of culture.

Along the centuries woman continued – openly or secretly – to exert her form-giving influence upon the male creative power. Humanism never ceased – even in the most barbarian epochs – as long as woman preserved her solid instinct, leading her towards life as a life-giver, life-preserver and life-forger. The slave, lovingly looking after her master’s baby, teaching it how to wash, to cross and play was, unknowingly, a humanizing factor.

Socrates in *Symposium* confessed that his knowledge of life and the world, as it came from his foregoing philosophers was fragmentary, and the initiation in the mysteries of wisdom was due to Diotima, the priestess of Mantinea. The father of philosophic criticism thereby acknowledged that man’s rationalist research remained unfulfilled when not guided by the light coming from the mysterious depths of life. This is to be found inside woman’s soul: whenever Diotima initiates the questioning adventurer, her mind creates not only chimeras, but also undying realities. Woman is responsible for the reality that is being prepared today. Irrespective of the conditions she finds herself in modern life – either in the family or in public life – woman has the opportunity to exert her forging power. And if in normal times it is enough for a woman to be an enlightened teacher, in times of danger for the culture she is bound to prove her forging genius, revealing to man the zone of mystery he has forgotten and helping him to create his intimate human form, neither as an individual, nor as a superman or an abstract number, but as a personality.

(1943)

## NOTES

1. “Honest man” – French in the original. Note of the translator.
2. “Every man for himself” – French in the original. Note of the translator.

(A. B.)