

National Humanities Bulletin

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Editor's Comment

Scott P. Richert



Looking for Culture in All the Wrong Places

A surprising thing has happened in the wake of George Bush's electoral defeat: conservatives have discovered culture. For 12 years, while the Republican party controlled the presidency, professed "conservative" policy-makers churned out book after boring book about "presidential power" and the best means of increasing it. Holding on to the reins of the presidency, loading the federal bureaucracy with neoconservatives, making appointments to federal courts, and eventually recapturing the Congress—these were seen as the steps to political renewal in this country. Culture, if it was discussed at all (and when it was not seen merely as a codeword for the positions of the "Religious Right"), was viewed as a political weapon to be used at election time to capture the votes of those "Middle Americans" to whom, it was presumed, cultural issues still mattered.

Now that the Republicans are out of power at the national level, however, the conservatives have turned their attention to culture. They have decided that liberal control of the culture is the reason Republicans, while winning the presidency, have failed to produce any significant political change. The battle, they now claim, must be fought on the cultural front, if it is to be fought at all.

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NHI Notes . . .

This year marks the fortieth anniversary of the publication of *The Conservative Mind* by Dr. Russell Kirk, the Treasurer of NHI. To celebrate this anniversary, the Philadelphia Society will hold a special meeting in October at the Dearborn Inn in Dearborn, Michigan, next to Greenfield Village. While attending college, Dr. Kirk spent his summers working at Greenfield Village, one of this country's premier historical sites. This year also brings the appearance of Dr. Kirk's two latest books. *America's British Culture*, published by Transaction Books, discusses the great debt of the United States and its institutions to British tradition. It also exposes "the fraud of multiculturalism." *The Politics of Prudence* is a wide-ranging col-

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Wide-Ranging Discussions. NHI President Joseph Baldacchino (left) and NHI Chairman Claes Ryn recently met with former President



Richard Nixon at his home for an evening of discussion that focused on politics, foreign affairs, and the state of American culture.

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Important Education Book Influenced By Babbitt, NHI

The National Humanities Institute has been mentioned favorably in several recent articles and books. William K. Kilpatrick's *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong: Moral Illiteracy and the Case for Character Education* is one such book which has received considerable public attention. Clearly influenced by the work of Irving Babbitt, Kilpatrick argues that moral education is an essential element of a child's upbringing. Unlike many commentators who have offered superficial discussions on the need for "values" in education, Kilpatrick does not believe that students should be indoctrinated in an abstract system of moral principles. True moral education, he argues, must first stimulate the imagination. When students are presented with history and literature which is well-written and presents moral characters in a favorable light, they will react positively. As Kilpatrick writes, "The hero in a fairy tale wins the child to the side of virtue because the hero is the most attractive figure in the story."

In two important chapters Kilpatrick acknowledges his debt to the National Humanities Institute and to the writings of Irving Babbitt. The first chapter, "Beauty and the Beasts," discusses the role that aesthet-

ics plays in the formation of the imagination, and ultimately in the formation of moral character. Using Nazism as an example, Kilpatrick explains how aesthetics, in the hands of immoral characters, can be used to pervert the imagination. But, he points out, "Just as art can lead us into illusion, it can lead us back to reality. Good art—art that is faithful to the human condition, and not escapist, illusory, or cynical—can put us in touch with what [National Humanities Institute Chairman Claes] Ryn calls 'the ethical standard within experience.' Good art provides a revelation of ethical reality."

In the second chapter, entitled "Myth Wars," Kilpatrick discusses the differences between two types of imagination, the moral and the idyllic. This distinction is a main theme in the writing of Babbitt, and a main theme of NHI's publications. Kilpatrick argues that much of popular culture today is captivated by an idyllic or escapist imagination. True moral education requires breaking the bonds of this imagination and stimulating the moral imagination in students (and, one might add, the culture at large). *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong* is published by Simon & Schuster, and can be ordered through any bookstore.

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lection of essays on such subjects as the varieties of modern conservatism, politics and literature, economics, and foreign policy. . . . NHI President **Joseph Baldacchino** wrote about the need for historically concrete approaches to the revitalization of Western culture in his article "The New 'Public Order'" for the Fall 1992/Winter 1993 issue of *Humanitas*. . . . NHI Chairman **Claes Ryn** continues to receive much acclaim for his book *The New Jacobinism*, most recently in the Spring 1993 issue of *Modern Age*. He has been interviewed on radio and television talk shows, including the program "Time-Out," which is syndicated to cable stations across the country. His article "Universality and History: The Concrete As Normative" appears in the Fall 1992/Winter 1993 issue of *Humanitas*. At the national meeting of the Philadelphia Society in early April, Professor Ryn delivered a spirited critique of the spreading ideology of equality on a panel concerning "Current European Culture: Model or Enemy?" Drawing on the experience of his native country, Dr. Ryn argued that the decline of Western civilization in the twentieth century would have been more precipitous had it not been for the reservoir of moral, cultural, and intellectual capital left by the class society. On April 13, Ryn's essay "Tide of Lawlessness," a discussion of the moral and cultural roots of social decay, was featured on the front page of the Commentary section of *The Washington Times*. . . . NHI Academic Board member **Paul Gottfried** has brought out a much expanded and revised edition of *The Conservative Movement* in the Twayne Social Movements Series published by Macmillan. Among Professor Gottfried's articles are "The Sovereign State at Bay" in the Summer 1992 issue of *Society* and "On the Sovereign State" in the Spring 1992 issue of the *Journal of Liberal Studies*. He also has an essay on Hobbes in the Winter 1992 issue of *Modern Age* and an essay on anti-Semitism in the April 1992 issue of *Chronicles*. . . . Dr. **Thomas Ryba**, a member of the editorial board of *Humanitas*, delivered a paper, "Postmodernism and the Spirituality of the Liberal Arts," at the International Schoenstatt Conference. His paper "Religious Phenomenology as Natural Scientific Description: The Unrecognized Alternative" was delivered at the American Academy of Religion. At the American Philosophical Association he gave a paper on "Death, the Afterlife, and the Metaphysics of Presence."

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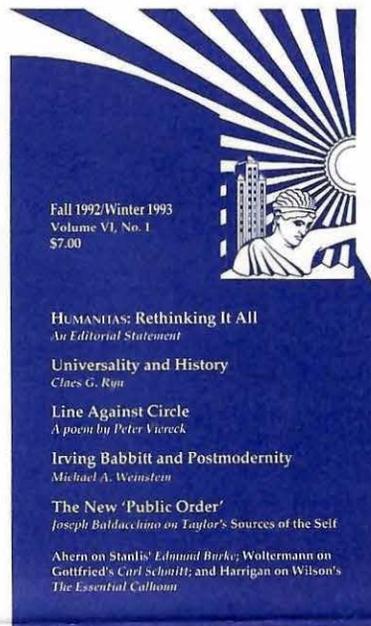
The clarion call of the new cultural war recently was issued by Bradley Foundation President Michael Joyce at the National Review Institute's Conservative Summit. What he said, as reported in the press, is instructive. While conservatives may finally be moving in the right direction, it is clear that they still do not understand the depth of the cultural crisis, nor how to deal with it.

Mr. Joyce argued that conservatives "tend to forget that culture is far more than [the intellectual, the analytical, and the rational]. Culture is also image, story, myth, vision, picture. It is poetry [and] prose; it is fiction [and] nonfiction. [It] speaks to the spirit and emotions as much as to the mind." There is nothing wrong with this statement, as far as it goes; indeed, if it were changed to read that "Culture is *first of all* image,

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Presenting *HUMANITAS*, the twice-yearly journal published by the National Humanities Institute.

HUMANITAS



Academia is increasingly dominated by partisan ideological groups that stifle open inquiry. *HUMANITAS* resists the imposition of conformity and seeks to revitalize the humanities, including the social sciences. Interdisciplinary in scope and philosophically oriented, *HUMANITAS* opposes the facile classification of ideas in political terms and goes beyond an obsolescent left/right distinction. It views the humanities at their best as expanding and deepening our understanding of human life—its glories and failures, happiness and suffering. The journal seeks to clarify the conditions for realizing man's higher potential.

Not bound by conventional categories, *HUMANITAS* charts a philosophical course for rethinking the relationship between ever-changing historical experience and that which gives meaning to human existence. The journal is edited by **Claes Ryn**, Professor of Politics at the Catholic University of America and author of such books as *Will, Imagination and Reason* and *The New Jacobinism*, and **Joseph Baldacchino**, President of the National Humanities Institute and author of *Economics and the Moral Order*.

The Editorial Board of *HUMANITAS* consists of **John W. Aldridge**, **Jude P. Dougherty**, **Paul E. Gottfried**, **Milton Hindus**, **David Hoeveler**, **Russell Kirk**, **Forrest McDonald**, **Walter Mead**, **Jacob Neusner**, **Robert Nisbet**, **George A. Panichas**, **Thomas Ryba**, **Peter J. Stanlis**, **Stephen L. Tanner**, **Peter Viereck**, and **Michael A. Weinstein**.

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etc.," it would be a summary of what the National Humanities Institute has stressed since its founding. The problem, however, is what Mr. Joyce and others consider to be the most important battles of the cultural war. "Conservatism can stand with the average citizen against the intrusive institutions of liberalism that seek to dominate

Urgent Reminder

The National Humanities Institute depends upon financial contributions from our friends and supporters in order to continue working to revitalize education and culture. The Institute operates on a tight budget and does not have a reserve fund. Though we have expanded our program recently in response to a critical need, our ability to conduct our activities and to publish in a timely manner is continually hampered by inadequate funding. If you have not yet donated this year, please help to whatever extent you can as soon as possible. Donations are tax-deductible.

Donors of at least \$35 will receive free subscriptions to *Humanitas* and the NATIONAL HUMANITIES BULLETIN. Because our obligations have grown substantially and resources are limited, the Institute regrets that it no longer can provide free distribution of *Humanitas* to individuals whose contributions are not current.

[him]. The street vendor who battles licensing and zoning boards. . . . The middle-class family that braves the ridicule of the social-service professionals in order to challenge the distribution of condoms to their children. The public-housing tenant who seeks . . . to govern his own project. . . . Let us make their stories our stories. . . . [G]iven the structure of power in America, it is time we realized that [conservatives] are the counterculture. [Conservatives] are the real revolutionaries."

But the cited actions are not revolutionary; they are (at best) rear-guard attempts to slow down the decay of society, or they are (at worst) the actions of a cynical populism which hopes to expand its voting base by fighting "the powers that be." These actions have as little to do with the revitalization of culture as treating the symptoms of an AIDS patient has to do with curing him of the disease. It is necessary, but by no means sufficient, to treat the symptoms; one can treat the symptoms and still lose the patient to the disease.

Where in these battles are the "image, story, myth, vision, picture"? Fighting zoning boards and condom-pushers does not require any real knowledge and appreciation of Western culture, nor does it require an imagination which draws upon the best which that culture has to offer. By choosing to fight only these kinds of battles, conservatives indicate their reluctance or inability to undertake the hard, and more fundamental, work necessary to revitalize culture. That work must begin on a personal level, through one's acquaintance with the images, stories, myths, visions, and pic-

tures of Western civilization, through an education which is not only intellectual but moral. This work means the stirring of imagination and the development of habits that are sometimes painfully acquired but eventually rewarding and liberating; it means the development of aspirations which are humanistic rather than merely economic or political, and which require much preparation and sacrifice. Only by improving one's own life, only by making that which is best in Western civilization a part of one's living past, will the renewal of society begin.

The effect of mere words and battles against entrenched bureaucracies cannot begin to compare to the influence that one truly civilized man may have on those whose lives he touches. As John Lukacs noted a quarter of a century ago in *The Passing of the Modern Age*, ". . . Charles Peguy wrote that the true revolutionaries of the twentieth century will be the fathers of Christian families. . . . It is not impossible that the true revolutionaries of the twenty-first century will be the fathers of decent and civilized children. Their families will not be exclusive, like those of the nineteenth century; but they will be culturally self-sufficient." At the end of the twentieth century it is our task not only as parents but as writers, teachers, artists, and clergy to bring civilization alive in ourselves. Through our example the rising generation might come to understand better the images, stories, myths, visions, and pictures of Western culture. Else there no longer will be a Western culture; the meltdown now so depressingly apparent on all sides will have reached its denouement.

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