

R. Baxter Miller, ed., *Black American Literature and Humanism*. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1981) viii, 114 pp., \$9.00.

The seven carefully documented essays in literary criticism in this excellent short volume are possibly more lively and provocative than those ordinarily found in scholarly publications. The title, however, might well have been: eight black writers and the human condition. Definitions of humanism are varied though not contradictory, but the book is held together by reassessments of black literature which challenge many of the assumptions of previous critics.

A simplistic overview is that here one finds portraits of a people transcending their condition and surviving whole, meeting life's terms but never accepting them, refusing to allow the dehumanizing aspects of slavery and its aftermath to make them forget their own heritage, and refusing to allow violation of that self which determines the line between humanness and animality. There is general agreement on the power of music, of language, and the use of folk culture to transform suffering into art. "Intolerance comes from associating humanism with a particular class and its manners" as was the case of the New Humanists of the 1920s and the 1930s who "avoided free-thinking Jews and blacks."

One essayist writes of our fears which range from fear of the extraterrestrial to nations, groups, and races down to "individuals other than ourselves." Another discusses Langston Hughes's poetry and people who are "dependent on a little music that excludes the terror and woe of human existence." Hughes writes: "But softly/As the tunes come from his throat/Trouble/ Mellows to a golden note." An experience is recounted of a lone black American who is left waiting when a black African bus driver picks up whites only at a Johannesburg airport. Returning and apologizing, the bus driver asks, "What language do you speak when white people aren't around?" Mutual understanding was not difficult.

The opinion of Harvard's Howard Mumford Jones that Richard Wright's *Native Son* is a "one-dimensional book celebrating violence" is found unacceptable. Just the opposite, Wright's novel, like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, concludes that among other things, "mindless violence . . . is useless . . . and it cannot bring about social change." Much attention is given to the aesthetics and technical virtuosity of Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry about the poor. Even when she writes of another class of society, the "Men of careful turns, haters of forks in the road," her meaning is clear and her phrasing defies paraphrasing.

But the strongest challenge comes from the novels of Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Sarah Wright, and Zora Neale Hurston which say that not only is Christianity as practiced found wanting, but it has never been a major influence on black authors. Instead, black writers go beyond it to sources and cultures older than Christianity—to their own folk roots, and even to Egypt as well as to other African nations. In Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Moses is a powerful conjure man. The cryptic lines of the slave spiritual: "Pharaoh's army got drowned/O, Mary, don't you weep," were a slave favorite.

Finally, humanism is said to be concerned with a "morality that goes not only beyond Christianity, but beyond racial considerations . . . its emphasis is on human responsibility."

—Jean Bright  
Greensboro, North Carolina