

A Further Testament

More Lives Than One, by Joseph Wood Krutch. *New York: William Sloane Associates, 1962. 371 pp. \$5.00.*

THOSE WHO REMEMBER the impact of Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Modern Temper* in 1929 will be delighted that this civilized mind has now resurveyed the world from a perspective of nearly seventy years. More precisely, as the title intimates, he has described three worlds, the provincial Knoxville of his boyhood, cosmopolitan New York and Europe, where he passed his professional years, and the desert of the Southwest, where he makes his home in retirement and writes as an amateur, but very knowing, naturalist. As a peripatetic philosopher, he has learned much from all three, and the reader will find a rewarding combination of anecdote and reflection.

Much of the book is keyed in one way and another to the philosophy first expressed in *The Modern Temper*. That work was written with a poise which denotes matured power—Mr. Krutch recalls that each chapter somehow “miraculously presented itself.” It was not so much a profession of faith as of outlook, and it was pes-

simistic, or at least it was widely regarded as such in booming 1929. Yet what the author had pointed out was that modern science, along with a good many abetting philosophers, was describing an inhuman world in which it was impossible for man to feel at home. The physical world was without source of value, yet man could not live without values. There was no longer possibility of tragedy; for this man now appeared too minuscule. Meaning could not be sought in love, since all attention was now affixed to its biological role. The modern temper was thus a dilemma, in which the human being could no longer find sanction for the values that had previously sustained him nor resign himself to an existence that was without value. These were unrelenting conclusions to draw in an era which had staked its all on faith in Progress, and we are not surprised to learn that someone wrote the author and asked him why he did not hang himself.

That he did not feel like acting on that gloomy advice we have the record of three more decades of successful and relatively contented life to show. In the interval Mr. Krutch has altered his views somewhat, although not in a way to repudiate the indictment carried by *The Modern Temper*. He continues to feel that the mass of "educated" people have rejected those ideas and values on which Western civilization was founded. He continues to feel, furthermore, that our sense of impending catastrophe of civilization grows out of a correspondent loss of faith in humanity. However, he no longer believes that consciousness, free will, and morality are mere figments of the imagination. His present creed is a kind of atheistic pantheism, in which man holds a unique position because he is at the highest level in nature's mysterious impulse toward the "higher." This may seem a rather bare theology, yet some very significant principles can be drawn from it, or at least

can be made compatible with it. For one thing, such a view permits him to affirm a standard nature of man, which is a basis for judgments of value.

Difficult as the inquiry into the question "what is normal for man" may be, full of pitfalls as past history shows it, we must make it. And even the most casual consideration of the question seems to me to provide at least a few very general answers.

One is that most men at most times—all happy men I believe—have assumed (as we tend to deny) that Good and Evil, Justice and Injustice, the "higher" and the "lower" are, however difficult to define, realities beyond merely prevailing custom. Human nature thus makes us inveterately and "normally" makers of value judgments. A second constant is that human nature does not incline us to be pure materialists. Men have sought God as the ancient Hebrews did, or, like the Greeks, beauty and wisdom. Below these levels they have sometimes put the highest value on glory, courage, personal prowess, or military success and have believed that comfort as well as security were well sacrificed for them. Even the belief, in some savage societies, that a large collection of human heads is the thing most to be desired testifies to the fact that to believe something more worth having than material wealth is nearly as universal as the belief that some things are good and bad. A society which, like ours, defines the Good Life as identical with the High Standard of Living is running counter to a fundamental characteristic of the nature of man.

Moreover, he had developed a sense of sympathetic kinship with nature, strikingly symbolized by his turning his back upon cities. Friends were incredulous when he announced his intention of leaving the

urban East for the Arizona desert. Would he not miss the theaters and universities and all that make city life stimulating? The answer was no; he was glad to have had these; but he had had them; and at his place at Redding, Connecticut, he was already experiencing a feeling of solace from nature, a positive satisfaction in knowing that there were around him living and growing things not of his planting or instigating. Undoubtedly in the case of some persons this anticipation of happiness in a more primitive environment would have proved self-deceptive; but for him it has been realized in the form of improved health and renewed zest.

Not the least interesting story in this autobiography is of Krutch's high resistance to communism, even when this was appearing in the sheep's clothing of liberalism. Anyone knowing only the outward features of his career might well ask how a person of his individualistic and realistic turn of mind could have remained associated with the *Nation* for twenty-eight years. Part of the explanation is that during Krutch's first years with it, and while Oswald Garrison Villard was editor, there reigned a liberalism of the old-fashioned kind—a liberalism which means what it says when it speaks of tolerating difference of opinion. With the departure of Villard and the mounting political fanaticism of the Thirties, his position grew uncomfortable. He speaks of himself as feeling like an "Old Pagan," bewildered by the conversion of many friends and colleagues to a strange new faith which had nothing in common with what they had previously stood for. But he himself remained unaffected; he could never accept the dogmas of the left. "I think I always tended to resist even the first beginnings of that sympathy with the Communist philosophy which was already tinging many Liberals." There were ingrained in his nature a pessimism and an

"anti-utopianism," which made him say to every scheme for a brave new world: "that won't work either."

He sums up by affirming his belief that human nature either is "truly permanent" or that it cannot be changed radically short of "many millenia." There, whether he would care to admit it or not, speaks a true conservative. Once during a discussion of such matters, Freda Kirchwey came at him with a question as to how he had ever arrived at such a low opinion of human nature. "By introspection," was the reply. A humanist does not romanticize human nature; he simply believes that we have to work with what we have. By 1937 Krutch ceased to have any editorial responsibility for the *Nation*, although he stayed on as drama critic until 1952.

Mr. Krutch realizes that much of his happiness has been owing to the pluralism of our American society. What the Communist ideologue denounces as "the glaring inner contradictions of the capitalist regime" is in effect our greatest blessing. The fact that we are neither wholly this nor wholly that, that we accept democracy in some spheres of life and reject it in others, that we put up with centralized direction on one level and resist it with all our might on others means elbow room for everybody and a chance of happiness for the individualist. The latter can nearly always find a nook or cranny where he is protected by some autonomous interest which the theoretically rationalized state would certainly wipe out of existence. The moral seems to be that our freedom is a result of our unwillingness to sacrifice everything to freedom in the abstract.

For all his civility, one can detect in Krutch a certain disdain for those who have suffered more intensely than he has under our mechanized chaos. I find a touch of aloofness toward some subjects that tempt me to rhetoric. And some may feel that he

has got only a little way beyond the Humanism of the Twenties and Thirties. But what can be said in recommending him to the judicious reader is that his candor and power of criticism have kept him from being taken in by imposing theories out of psychology, sociology, and political science. "They have attempted to explain myself to me and I reject the explanation." A critic of letters should also be a critic of life, and in this respect too he has been one of the wiser spirits of his generation.

Reviewed by RICHARD M. WEAVER