

Beast or Angel? by René Dubos

(Scribners; 226 pp.; \$8.95)

God or Beast By Robert Claiborne

(Norton; 260 pp.; \$7.95)

Martin Green

These two books have a good deal in common, in subject as well as title. Both defend man against the imputations on his character made by books like *The Territorial Imperative*, by Robert Ardrey, and *The Imperial Animal*, by Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox, books which define man as a killer because of his evolutionary heritage. Dubos and Claiborne themselves, therefore, discuss that evolutionary heritage in order to reinterpret it. Both base their defense of man's character, and their consequent optimism about his future, on his power to choose what he will be. And they are conscious of each other as allies. Dubos has written a Foreword for Claiborne, of which the first paragraph is taken from his own book, in which Claiborne is compared with Pico della Mirandola, who in the early Renaissance "expressed the genius of humanism by affirming that man has it in his power to remain beast or to become angel."

This is to say that both Dubos and Claiborne are scientific humanists. Their contribution to our climate of opinion is to point us to man's dignity and nobility, his achievements and his potential, and to do so from the vantage point of scientific knowledge. It is of course one of today's paradoxes that we have no *humanist* humanists now. Knowledge of the humanities, for some time now, has not been a vantage point from which to decry human dignity, nobility, and such. Humanists have reached their own consensus on such subjects, a pessimism with some very dreary side

effects; for instance, it energizes very low feelings about the pursuit of knowledge. One of the *Scientific American's* editors recently told of being presented as such to Pauline Kael, who said, "I know nothing about science," with what sounded like complacency to him; and when he said, "Whatever happened to that idea of people knowing something about everything?" she replied. "Ah, a Renaissance hack." For humanists today humanism in that traditional sense has come to seem a lie. This means that scientific humanists face a great challenge. They have something large to say which their audience doesn't want to hear. This is in many ways an ideal situation for a writer.

What is not ideal about it is that there are always nonaudiences eager for "something large." There are always people who will pay to hear large truths enunciated, and will applaud at the end, having heard only comforting truisms. This is the Charybdis of scientific humanism—the Scylla being a stony refusal to listen at all—and it explains why these two books, and others like them, are on the whole disappointing.

Dubos and Claiborne are not of course identical twins. They represent, respectively, the mandarin and the philistine versions of that humanism. Or, to use a British analogy, Dubos is distinctly officer-class, while Claiborne is an NCO, hearty, jovial, down-to-earth, and getting earthier by the page. Or Dubos is the college president at commencement, while Claiborne is the coach at the game. In any case, they belong together.

Dubos is an eminent microbiologist and experimental pathologist, who has written several books of scientific humanism. His previous titles include *Reason Awake*, *So Human an Animal*, and *A God Within*, and this one is replete with references to Pico della Mirandola, Rabelais, Montaigne, Plato, and the whole humanist tradition. It was commissioned by a director of the French publisher Gallimard, and is described by *Publishers Weekly* as "a beautifully written essay . . .



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by a wise and mellowed man." Well, we all know what that means, don't we? All of us except the nonaudiences, who will gravely nod their way through it without hearing a word. It means an after-dinner speech passing itself off as a book. And the book's designers have told us much the same, by printing it in extra-large 'type, with extra-wide margins on sumptuous paper. It looks like a classic already.

One doesn't want to dismiss a book without giving it a hearing, but there is really nothing to listen to here. It is the fault of the genre as well as of the individual author. Scientific humanism stresses relaxation rather than rigor. It handles everything by its most banal side. Thus when Proust is mentioned, what we are told about him is that he "needed the acoustic isolation of a cork-lined room to recapture the

teeming past, the *temps perdu*." When Dubos ventures a genetic explanation (of physical types in the Middle Ages), he leaves out the genetics. And after fifty pages of sentences like "The village idiot can enjoy life on the village green but has little chance of functioning well on Broadway," and "The I-Thou relationship rarely follows from technological communications," how can the reader respond but with *fou rire*?

Claiborne's book has a great deal more content to it. It could indeed be classified as popularized science rather than scientific humanism. But the two genres are closely related: The officer was often an NCO in his youth; and one of the risks of eloquence for the statesman of science is that one often hears the Cockney impudence, the breezy philistinism, of his youth echoing

around it. Thus when H. G. Wells, Isaac Asimov, Arthur Clarke, C. P. Snow (Herman Kahn in a different way) talk of human nobility and humanist values, one is often disastrously reminded of their earlier Cockney impudence, as debunkers of humanism.

Claiborne writes as a debunker here, but a debunker of antihumanist mythologists. Besides Ardrey and Tiger and Fox, he takes on B. F. Skinner, and Elaine Morgan, and Desmond Morris, and others. But he does so in the name of humanity. In his last chapter he talks at length, and very sensibly, on what man might choose to make his future tolerable, and is ready to define his own options—politically he would like something between Sweden and Dubcek's Czechoslovakia, and so on. Thus he specifies the choices man is free to make much more fruitfully than Dubos does. And he argues against his scientific enemies on scientific grounds. He used to be an editor of *Scientific American*, and as a piece of scientific journalism this book has much to be said for it.

However, it is also a piece of scientific humanism, both because of the larger argument about the dignity of man and because Claiborne brings himself into the book a lot. And as such this book, like Dubos's, suffers from not being aimed at the living center of its audience, though Dubos could be said to aim too high socially, while Claiborne aims too low. Let me give you an example of his style in his Preface. Having described some books which make modern man into "a first class son of a bitch," he gives us a footnote to "Modern woman has also gotten her lumps from these pop evolutionists, though in rather different ways." This style is maintained relentlessly throughout the book, and its effect is to distract the reader's attention from the argument. Its subliminal message is "We don't need refinements or rigors of thought here, because a little common sense will do—at least the common sense of a wonderful human being like me."

Moreover, it seems that the author as well as the reader is dis-

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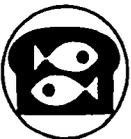
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tracted from his argument by this performance. He refuses to accept the limitations of his own position, calling his enemies bio-theologians as if he were not just as much one himself. More exactly, they are all moralists, who use evolution as the sanction and rationale of their moralism, just as theological moralists used revelation. The *exempla* Claiborne draws from evolution are more traditional and comfortable than theirs, but the argument between him and them and the reader's choice between them all must depend exclusively on *how* they use it. That is the issue, not *that* they use science for nonscientific purposes. If Ardrey is a bio-theologian, so is Claiborne. The difference is only that Ardrey finds in nature a sanction for man's aggressiveness which Claiborne denies. He finds instead a sanction for man's eroticism. And since the latter is his main concern, we might examine his treatment for it as an example of what I call the misdirection of his scientific humanism.

The theorists he is most concerned to controvert here are the feminists, so before beginning he "puts on the record" his own dealings with women, which have been, it turns out, full of hearty enjoyment for all concerned, even though these were intelligent and forceful females. We meet his mother and sister and daughter, as well as two wives and various girl friends. His proudly casual reference to his divorce and remarriage makes one realize how the resonance of such references has changed recently; nowadays divorce is a necessary qualification for a marrying man. Mailer is our superhusband, and Claiborne is, in this matter of sexology, a poor man's Mailer.

From every example of sexual psychology he draws the same rib-nudging moral, "*Vive la différence.*" Thus he tells us that young male langur monkeys play more actively and noisily than females, despite getting negative reinforcement from their group. "Boys, it appears, will be boys. Or as my sister put it, after some months of comparing her baby

son with his two older sisters, 'Little boys are just the same as little girls—but much, much more so!'"

And when he turns to homosexuality, he rebukes those who sneer at homosexuals, and ridicules the idea of calling such practices perversion. But he insists that they are practically unknown among primitive tribes, and totally unknown—because lacking all evolutionary function—among primates. Thus he deprives the homosexual of all that "bio-theological" sanction for his eroticism which he lavishes on the heterosexual. His message is the scoutmaster's "You can do it if you like, but don't you think it's a pretty silly way for a full-grown boy to behave?"

Above all, Claiborne's jokes about homosexuals are the old jokes—by their fruits shall ye know them, I always say—and he anchors himself so anxiously in the haven of heterosexuality that one feels the bleak climate of the fifties howling round

one again. He jokes incessantly about sex, but the point of the jokes is always to reinforce male chauvinist drives, and reading him one comes to feel nostalgia for Betty Friedan. It is so recently we escaped from that all-smothering snow of cracker-motto sexual propaganda, and yet this book seems to announce a return already.

Thus this book also will not do as scientific humanism. If we cannot tolerate the Olympus of Dubos's empty truisms, neither can we wallow in Claiborne's ignoble heartiness. Are we to be driven back again to anguish, angst, alienation, and all *those* rhetorics? Is there no way for scientists to come to the relief of humanists, to bring their life experience, so different socially and imaginatively as well as intellectually, into cooperation and interaction? If not, we shall soon suffer from an antihumanism as entrenched and pompous and cliché-ridden as the old humanism.

The Architecture of War by Keith Mallory and Arvid Ottar

(Pantheon; 308 pp.; \$6.95 [paper])

Michael Mandelbaum

Since the Trojan Horse, warfare has spurred architects, engineers, artists, and inventors to heights of creative ingenuity. Archimedes, Leonardo da Vinci, and Albrecht Dürer all devoted their considerable talents and energies at one time or another to thwarting the ambitions of the enemies of their particular political communities. The first half of the twentieth century in Western Europe was one of the bloodiest periods in recorded history, and accordingly it gave rise to a wide variety of buildings and gadgets designed to serve the needs of armed aggression. Two Englishmen have assembled a handsome scrapbook of some of them, which will hold special interest for the student of the

military history of the period but will also be intriguing to the layman. The photographs, maps, and diagrams, and the informative text of *The Architecture of War*, tell the story of the infiltration of the genie of industrialism into the venerable human institution of organized violence.

A back-cover blurb says that "military architecture in its various manifestations both reflected and influenced the course of warfare to a surprising degree." But the intimacy of the relationship should hardly be surprising, since war is a branch of politics, and the means of war are therefore the concrete embodiment—both literally and figuratively—of foreign policy. Britain's preoccupa-