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The Cultural Tradition

By FRANCIS NEILSON

The Era of Specialization

AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR, there were spasmodic attempts to revive interest in what has been called "culture." These efforts were put forth by men who had spent the better part of their lives in academic institutions. The movement did not get far, because a fundamental change had taken place in the system of education. An era of specialization in nearly all branches of learning had been creeping in slowly since the time of the so-called Industrial Revolution.

After the middle of the last century, the minds of students were taken up chiefly with the names of Watt, Eli Whitney, Arkwright, Fulton, Stevenson, and Hargreaves. These inventors seemed gradually to supplant the memory of Plato, Aristotle, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and many classical and medieval masters whose names had been heard almost daily in the classrooms. Active life was given over to the business of learning how to make a living, and the cultural tradition of many centuries was broken. The few dissenters were voices crying in the intellectual wilderness of what was called progress.

Matthew Arnold in England, Victor Cousin in France, and Goethe in Germany, made bold attempts to pick up the threads of cultural learning, but the strong tide flowing in the direction of mere material well-being was all against them. Moreover, incessant wars maimed each generation by taking the best of the youth for cannon fodder.

War seems to be the acid test of the culture of a people, and it is not at all surprising for us to learn from a well-known publicist: "One of the strangest phenomena of our scientific-mechanized civilization is the rapid decrease of the intellectual group that produced it." More startling, still, are the facts produced by Dr. Robert Cook in his book, *Human Fertility*. He says:

In England a Royal Commission of experts in sociology and population concluded that the average intelligence quotient of the British people was declining about 2 points every generation. The same pattern exists in the United States, where the experts consider a similar decline a moral certainty. If this trend continues for less than a century England and America will be well on the way to becoming nations of nit-wits.

How anything different can be expected from the masses who seem to be gadget mad, who spend so many hours listening to the radio, watching television, and seeing the movies, is not easy to explain. Moreover, there seems to be no positive inclination to remedy these defects on the part of trustees of our institutions of learning, who for the most part are business men of great ability, but culturally illiterate.

Now there can be no doubt in the mind of anyone who will take the trouble to read a little history that employers and laborers prospered materially and intellectually when the cultural tradition was maintained in the schools. One who is conversant with what the people of America and of England did three generations ago to make life happier for themselves suffers a pang of discouragement when he thinks of what the next two generations will be called upon to perform. Physically and spiritually no comparison can be made. After the Napoleonic Wars, the work done by the English masses, in their own interest, was an achievement we have no reason to hope will be emulated by the people of this generation.

Impediments to Literary Appreciation

IN NOVEMBER, 1951, George Trevelyan, the famous historian, who, until recently, was the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, gave the Presidential Address before the English Association. Among other remarks, he said: "Many readers today are unfamiliar with that part of history which consists of the names and legends of classical mythology, so largely employed in the poems of Milton, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson and Matthew Arnold."

During the past thirty years I have had many opportunities to learn, to my sorrow, that Dr. Trevelyan is perfectly right in his criticism. I could give a hundred instances, which would prove the truth of his remark. Take one. I was conversing with the son and grandson of my wife. The boy had been to a school of repute, and one of his studies in English Literature had been Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*. I asked him which of the soliloquies he preferred. He did not know what I meant, for the word was quite foreign to him. I then asked if his teacher had explained Hamlet's references to Niobe and to Hecuba. He was completely fogged—so much, indeed, that his father and his grandmother were quite angry with me for putting such "hard" questions to the youth.

Dr. Trevelyan says:

To me, history and literature have formed one study, one delight, woven together by a thousand crossing strands and threads. . . . Our grandfathers were brought up on the classics and the Bible. Both were history

and literature closely intertwined, and therefore formed a marvelous education, a much finer education than any which is at all usual today.

The courageous attempt made by Robert M. Hutchins at the University of Chicago to institute classes for the reading of the Great Books was a step in the right direction, but not a few of the faculty and the trustees showed no inclination to rally to its support. Indeed, I learned from some that it was merely a stunt and that it would not go far. These people were wrong in their estimate, for after a year or two, Hutchins had inaugurated classes to which adult men and women came to study the masterpieces of literature. Since then, the movement has spread, and courses are given in many cities throughout the country.

One of the stalwart supporters of the English cultural tradition passed away a few months ago. He was Lord (Alexander) Lindsay, formerly Master of Balliol College, Oxford, who, upon his retirement, became principal of the newly formed North Staffordshire University College. The obituary in *The New York Times* states:

. . . Believing that English University education had become too stereotyped, he required all first-year students to take a broad course of general studies before specializing. Merely intellectual training, he maintained, produces "the clever ass." Thus he described the "class of people who do not believe anything that cannot be proved by judgment or statistics."

Who has not known "the clever ass"? The man brilliant in one department of knowledge, who has never read the Bible, Shakespeare, or turned the pages of the Oxford Book of Verse; the expert in a particular branch of science, who could not for the life of him give you definitions of fundamental economic terms, or state the relationship of Democritus to the atom bomb.

The complaint made by shrewd observers that the informed person of thirty-five or forty is a *rara avis* now seems to be justified. Novelists frequently remind us of the shallowness of social affairs and that the days of the cultural coterie are gone forever. English writers complain that the gatherings at Holland House marked the end of an epoch. Some of the French lament the absence of a Madame du Deffand and Mlle. de Lespinasse. Alas, the brilliant specialists of this pushful age would have been dumb dogs in such society.

Yet, it is strange that these men of one vocation, destitute of an avocation, do not realize that, in this generation, our masters of astronomy and physics are men of wide learning. To mention only a few, Sir Arthur Eddington, Sir James Jeans, and Max Planck were highly cultured scien-

tists. Who can read Moszkowski's *Einstein the Searcher*, and fail to gather from it that his subject is a many-sided man?

These are examples that are ignored by the brilliant young specialists referred to by Lord Lindsay.

Culture and Perfection

THE PRESIDENT OF A UNIVERSITY told the writer that, at his social gatherings, many of the brilliant men were bored to death when the time came for conversation. Has this been the result of opening the higher schools to those whose only wish is to learn how to make a living? This is a question that is of the utmost importance, but the answer to it is not far to seek. Perhaps a course of study in the Great Books may do something to remedy the defects of university education. But it should be understood that culture is something more than a mere knowledge of the best that has been said and thought in the world, to use the phrase of Matthew Arnold.

It is over eighty years since *Culture and Anarchy* was published. The effect that it had upon the middle classes in England was one of deep perplexity and, to some extent, indignation, particularly in Nonconformist circles. These people missed Arnold's aim entirely. He intended to remind all sects that there was much more to life than the business of striving for comfort and living in suburban villas. He said to them:

. . . Culture, which is the study of perfection, leads us, as we in the following pages have shown, to conceive of true human perfection as a *harmonious* perfection, developing all sides of our humanity; and as a *general* perfection, developing all parts of our society (pp. xiii, xiv). . . .

This statement holds good today, and in our case it is one that should be taken to heart by every president of an institution of learning. Moreover, Arnold quotes Ernest Renan concerning our future, and, to some extent, the criticism was in the nature of a prophecy:

. . . The countries which, like the United States, have created a considerable popular instruction without any serious higher instruction, will long have to expiate this fault by their intellectual mediocrity, their vulgarity of manners, their superficial spirit, their lack of general intelligence (p. xxii).

The present desire of the people today to know something about the past has in it something of a rebuke for what is lacking in their education.

No one of cultural understanding imagines for a moment that a person can make of himself or herself a cultivated being merely by reading portions of the Great Books, and attending classes where questions are not permitted. This is a defect that should be remedied. The writer attended a

class that had been studying Pascal's *Pensées*. After the session, a woman complained because she could not find anyone to explain to her certain passages she could not fathom. However, she had discovered in the biographical essay, in the *Encyclopaedia*, that Pascal was a scientist and a mathematician. And she wondered how he could be so religious. Poor woman! Presumably she would have been unable to say why she imagined a scientist could not be a religious man.

This incident is one example of the shallowness of our system of education. In all probability, she would have been amazed to learn that Newton was more deeply interested in certain passages of the Book of Daniel than he was in his scientific work.

The story raises a rather perplexing question: how could any student attending these classes be expected to understand Pascal, and particularly the *Pensées*, unless he or she had some knowledge of the man himself and his period? The hinterland of Pascal as a scientist, the environment of Port Royal, and the controversies between the Jesuits and the Jansenists are a study in themselves.

Therefore, if no questions are to be asked, it must be assumed that the student will find, for himself, the answers to those problems posed by a reading of the *Pensées*. Surely this is expecting too much.

Moreover, there is another point that should be taken into consideration, and it concerns the values of elucidation while the theme is in the mind. If it had not been for the question and answer method of getting knowledge, Plato would not have been able to give us the *Dialogues*. Whether an anti-Socratic system is preferable may be left to intelligent thinkers to determine. Perhaps, as time goes on and the experience of these studies of the Great Books is widened, the teachers themselves will probably desire to plumb more deeply into the minds of the students, so that they may estimate the cultural value of the present system.

One of many thoughts of Pascal, which every specialist should consider, is as follows:

Since we cannot be universal and know all that is to be known of everything, we ought to know a little about everything. For it is far better to know something about everything than to know all about one thing. This universality is the best. If we can have both, still better; but if we must choose, we ought to choose the former. And the world feels this and does so; for the world is often a good judge.

In our pursuit of knowledge we should always be conscious that we are studying the thoughts and actions of men. Pascal kept this notion in mind. His opinion is worth remembering:

What a chimera then is man! What a novelty! What a monster, what a chaos, what a contradiction, what a prodigy! Judge of all things, imbecile worm of the earth; depository of truth, a sink of uncertainty and error; the pride and refuse of the universe!

Yet, everything should be done to encourage those who are assisting the movement by reading the Great Books. If it does nothing more than bring to the notice of our people the history of the golden past of thought, it will have achieved something worth while. But it should be impressed upon those attending classes that they are taking only a preliminary step toward a goal that will bring infinite happiness to them as they grow older. Furthermore, it should be made clear to the student that culture is a very big word. Indeed, it is four-dimensional, and every civilization has had its own culture marked indelibly, even in the ruins that are left for us to survey. And, yet, through the Great Books, we can learn that all have the same periods of growth and decay.

Culture in the Four-Dimensional Sense

WE HAVE REACHED A PERIOD in our history—that is, the history of Christendom—when every sane person should realize the time has come for taking soundings. It is safe to say that 90 per cent of the people of the world are living in dread. Although here we do not seem to be much concerned about the future, it is necessary to give a thought to what our position would be if further misfortune should fall upon the peoples of the Old World. The phrase, "It can't happen here," was repeated often by optimists in every civilization of the past. I daresay the cry was heard in Athens and, afterwards, in Rome. Yet, a creeping paralysis was at work undermining the foundations that culture had raised in its springtime and finally brought the wonders of both civilizations to ruin. One of the books in the courses is Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. And the student will find in it evidence of this paralysis, which may remind him that all is not well with us.

If he be an intelligent reader and grasp the central truth expressed by Pliny—"great estates ruined Italy"—he might be inclined to push his investigations further and compare economic, political and aesthetic developments in Egypt and Greece with what is taking place in our midst. Should he set out upon this quest, he will have begun to make a cultured person of himself. He will wish to know by what roads his progenitors have traveled to reach this point, and he will realize that, if he does not know, it will be impossible for him to learn what roads his heirs shall be obliged to tread.

The way of learning is long, and the farther the student travels along it, the farther the goal recedes. Soon after he starts upon the quest, he finds he has no particular end in view, for each day's work teaches him a truth he is ready to accept: the more he learns, the more he desires to know. The mountains of thought increase in height and bulk, as he leaves the valleys of his period, and he fronts the rise of the foothills of medieval learning. These widen and brighten the landscape and beckon him on. He does not falter, he feels no disheartening pang, for he has discovered already that there are precious stores of wisdom to be gained as the journey lengthens.

The writer has been asked many times by persons who have been attending the Great Books course to suggest some supplementary work in which they would find a comprehensive view taken of the culture and civilization of a people. The Oxford Press has published two books, *The Legacy of Greece* and *The Legacy of Rome*, that have been read with deep interest by my friends. Another one of fascinating interest is *The Nemesis of Nations* by Romaine Paterson. But the work I would commend for those who are really earnest in their desire to know something about culture in the four-dimensional sense is *The Decline of the West* by Oswald Spengler.

The work is to be recommended because it is the most stimulating thought-producer that has appeared in my lifetime. It shocks one into thinking deeply. It cuts from under our feet the fictions of nearly all our ideologies that have blurred our vision of the true state of affairs. It is a provocative work, to use the term of the blurb-writer, and as we need to be "provoked," to be shifted from our smugness, young people can do no better intellectually than to take *The Decline of the West* and study it as they read the Great Books.

No volume written by a modern is as explanatory as it is. Take, for example, a term constantly in use, that has led many of us astray. Here is what Spengler has to say:

"Mankind," however, has no aim, no idea, no plan, any more than the family of butterflies or orchids. "Mankind" is a zoological expression, or an empty word. But conjure away the phantom, break the magic circle, and at once there emerges an astonishing wealth of *actual* forms—the Living with all its immense fullness, depth and movement—hitherto veiled by a catchword, a dryasdust scheme, and a set of personal "ideals." I see, in place of that empty figment of *one* linear history which can only be kept up by shutting one's eyes to the overwhelming multitude of the facts, the drama of *a number* of mighty Cultures, each springing with primitive strength from the soil of a mother-region to which it remains firmly bound

throughout its whole life-cycle; each stamping its material, its mankind, in *its own* image; each having *its own* idea, *its own* passions, *its own* life, will and feeling, *its own* death. Here indeed are colours, lights, movement, that no intellectual eye has yet discovered. Here the Cultures, peoples, languages, truths, gods, landscapes bloom and age as the oaks and the stonepines, the blossoms, twigs and leaves—but there is no ageing “Mankind.” Each Culture has its own new possibilities of self-expression which arise, ripen, decay, and never return (I, 21). . . .

Here we find that notions seeded in our minds by our system of education of what culture is differ considerably from those of Spengler. That is why I have called it “four-dimensional,” because it has depth, height, length, and breadth.

Spengler’s “Culture” and “Civilization”

FURTHERMORE, WE MUST UNDERSTAND that the “culture” referred to by Spengler is something entirely different from “civilization.” The former refers to the springtime of a people, and the latter to the autumn. Spengler says, “The transition from culture to civilization was accomplished for the classical world in the fourth, for the Western in the nineteenth century” (I, 32).

This differentiation is somewhat startling, but if the reader have patience and steadily pursue the question, he will find light that will make the difference clear to him.

I distinguish the idea of a Culture, which is the sum total of its inner possibilities, from its sensible *phenomenon* or appearance upon the canvas of history as a fulfilled actuality. It is the relation of the soul to the living body, to its expression in the light-world perceptible to our eyes. This history of a Culture is the progressive actualizing of its possible, and the fulfillment is equivalent to the end (I, 104–5). . . .

In this declaration we find that Spengler is dealing with the term culture in its widest sense and has reference only to the spring and summer of a people. For us there is no culture to be expressed, for we have entered upon the autumn, when civilization has reached its zenith and begins to decline. There will be no more giants in the arts, in literature, in philosophy; nor do I think that science will produce an outstanding man. It is to be recognized that the specialist, *qua* specialist, works in a particularly narrow field. Da Vinci was a painter, an inventor, a sculptor, a physiologist, to mention only a few of his attainments. Michelangelo was an architect, a painter, a sculptor, and a poet. One might go through the list of the great artists since Giotto, and tabulate, in nearly every case, several masterly activities for each one. Looking over the scene for the past two

hundred years, it might be said that Goethe was the last of the cultural giants of Christendom.

When we use the term culture, we have little or no reference to the Spenglerian interpretation. Indeed, at best, it can mean only what Matthew Arnold attributed to it, and that is "to know the best that has been thought and said." The Great Books courses attempt to meet the desire of those who wish to make of themselves cultured men and women.

Ouspensky's Culture of Barbarism

WHEN I SAY that culture is four-dimensional, I mean that it has many different aspects. It is astonishing to learn that, no matter how far back we go in the most ancient records, a similarity of thought and action in the early stages of development can be traced. Fundamentals were alike in all regions. The depths of the philosophic mind were plumbed by Socrates and Jesus, and spiritually Akhenaton might have been a Galilean in his soaring quest for eternal justice.

In *A New Model of the Universe*, Ouspensky makes a thorough examination of the uses to which the term culture has been put since Sir James Fraser wrote *The Golden Bough*. To us, who use it so lightly, giving to it a narrow, modernistic definition, it is a shock to find the author of *Tertium Organum* carrying us over the border line laid down by Spengler and describing a barbaric form of culture which operates in civilization.

I much doubt whether Ouspensky read *The Decline of the West*, although he reveals frequently ideas of culture in the springtime sense with which Spengler has made us familiar. He startles us by indicating clearly that there is a culture of barbarism that destroys civilization. Indeed, he says:

The culture of barbarism grows simultaneously with the culture of civilization. But the important point is in that the two cannot develop on parallel lines indefinitely. The moment must inevitably arrive when the culture of barbarism arrests the development of civilization and gradually, or possibly very swiftly, completely destroys it (*loc. cit.*, p. 40).

Treating this problem historically, Ouspensky is in no doubt about his findings. He says: "All forms created by civilization undergo a process of change and adapt themselves to the new order of things, that is to say, subservient to barbarism." Moreover, he brings forward the notion that Dr. Nicolai expressed in *The Biology of War*, that fundamentally there is very little difference between the weapons used by the savage and those used by the civilized man:

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The savage killed his enemy with a club. Cultured man has at his disposal every sort of technical appliance, explosives of terrible power, electricity, aeroplanes, submarines, poisonous gases, and so on. All these means and contrivances for destruction and extermination are nothing but evolved forms of the club. And they differ from it only in the power of their action. The culture of the means of destruction and the culture of the means and methods of violence are the culture of barbarism (*op. cit.*, p. 39).

This must have been written before the First World War, for there are two introductions to the book: one is dated 1912, and the other 1914. Those who are not familiar with this work and *Tertium Organum* should study them and learn more about culture and civilization than can be gathered from a reading of the Great Books.

So many problems which the Great Books do not deal with are brought daily to the notice of the citizen that it is necessary for the cultured man to explore in other works for information that will enable him to gain a better notion of those matters with which he has to contend and which cause him the gravest anxiety.

I have already referred to the impasse that has been reached by the physicists and the astonishing change that has taken place since the mechanistic system has fallen into disrepute. We can scarcely pick up a newspaper or a magazine without finding an article which refers to Communism as if it were a practical system and one to be feared. Yet, we never learn from the writers of these essays what the nature of the dread system is. Probably most of the authors would be amazed at the number of varied notions about it that have been held by Socialists, Anarchists, and Fabians.

The fiercest quarrels have taken place among the mentors of the different schools of thought ever since Eduard Bernstein wrote his searching criticism of his colleague's work, *Das Kapital*. It is true that Marx's book is in the list of the great ones. Why it should be, I really do not know, because the main thesis of Marx—surplus value—was abandoned long ago by intellectual Socialists. English Fabians repudiated the theory of surplus value as long ago as the time when Sidney Webb wrote *Socialism in England*.

There is a work that might be studied to advantage, which deals with this subject in a particularly fascinating way. It is *The Life of the White Ant* by Maurice Maeterlinck. This book is so important that I think it is necessary to engage the attention of the reader by quoting at some length from it:

Their civilisation [that of the termites] which is the earliest of any is the most curious, the most complex, the most intelligent, and in a sense, the most logical and best fitted to the difficulties of existence, which has ever appeared before our own on this globe. From several points of view this civilisation, although fierce, sinister and often repulsive, is superior to that of the bee, of the ant, and even of man himself.

In the termitary the gods of communism become insatiable Molochs. The more they are given, the more they require; and they persist in their demands until the individual is annihilated and his misery complete. This appalling tyranny is unexampled among mankind; for while with us it at least benefits the few, in the termitary no one profits.

. . . A new form of fatality, perhaps the cruellest of all, the social fatality to which we ourselves are drifting, has been added to those we have met already and thought quite enough. There is no rest except in the last sleep of all: illness is not tolerated, and feebleness carries with it its own sentence of death. Communism is pushed to the limits of cannibalism and coprophagy.

I would urge all people who live in dread of what is taking place in the Soviet Union to turn to Maeterlinck's book and read it. It is indispensable knowledge for the cultivated man.

Physics and Metaphysics

BEFORE I LEAVE SPENGLER, I should like to suggest that young men who are taking a course in physics cannot do better than to read his chapter on "Nature-Knowledge," so that they may understand the drift toward metaphysics, which is plain to educated men. The recent pronouncements of Schrödinger, Niels Bohr, and Dirac—to mention only a few of the great scientists—are startling.

The chapter that I recommend was written more than twenty-five years ago, and much of it is prophetic as to the direction the physicists have taken. In this respect, our elementary schools lag far behind the thought of those whose names are famous as Nobel prize-winners. Erwin Schrödinger, in his little book, *Science and Humanism, Physics in Our Time*, says: "I consider it extremely doubtful whether the happiness of the human race has been enhanced by the technical and industrial developments that followed in the wake of rapidly progressing natural science" (p. 3).

A revolution has taken place seemingly without the knowledge of the schools, for it is an undeniable fact that the physicists are now entering the sphere of the metaphysical, gravely disturbed at the futility of much of their work.

It is good to know there are people, interested in the development of

world affairs, who pause daily for a while, wondering what is to become of their heirs. Such students of the fates of peoples as Spengler and Ouspensky are necessary to shake us out of our smug demeanor and to make us think deeply of political and scientific trends. They know there are few to meditate upon these problems, and fewer still to make effective protest against those who violate the sacred cultural tradition of Europe. Maybe it is too late for spiritual and intellectual revolt to change the conduct of affairs. What, then, can the few do to be saved—saved in the very selfish sense of living apart from the turmoil?

In our history there are many extraordinary records of those who practiced detachment, who withdrew from the historical scene and lived within cells of their own making. These were deep students who still clung to the tenets of Christian religion. They still believed the kingdom was not of this world, that they were powerless to stem the tide of soul destruction. These people lived a life of thought and were content to spend their days aloof from the fret and throb of the world, asking no more for their physical comfort than the bare means of sustenance. Yet, these were the men who preserved for us the great works of antiquity, the literary monuments of the Greeks and the Romans; they were the saviors of the pagan classics, which formed the treasures of the libraries of the monastic schools.

Perhaps it is almost impossible for a man, even of large means, to emulate these heroes of learning and retire from the busy scene. For now all are slaves of government, and toil for it whether they will or no. Therefore, it is only the few in our day who can look for respite in their declining years. The mass must keep their noses to the grindstone and survive as best they can as victims of the advertising agents of the gadget makers. There is little or no hope for them and, yet, if a revolution of the spirit were to take place, it might be possible for them to take refuge in a small room containing books that would yield the best that has been thought and said in the world.

Port Washington, N. Y.

A people which in its corporate capacity abolishes the natural relation between efficiency and reward could not possibly survive. Either it will expose itself to . . . slow decay, or it will be conquered and absorbed. . . .

MAX HIRSCH