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## THE UGLY AMERICAN: PHASE II

EVER SINCE the appearance of the novel *The Ugly American* and the movie by the same name, the term "ugly" has been forced to join the swelling ranks of poison words, words used to defeat reason and fair play. It is time that the word "ugly" is defended, for it is a valuable word, and it would be unfortunate if it were removed, like "liberal" and "sympathizer", from the art of conversation.

There are five approaches to the word and its contexts that might be taken with advantage: first, its origin and historical use; second, the nature of the word; third, contemporary illustrations, good and bad, in Thailand; fourth, an analysis of attitudes and cultural differences; fifth, an interpretation of the word and its uses as Buddha might have expressed it.

### *Origin and Historical Use*

Originally, in the Old English and Scandinavian settings, the word was used not only to describe something fearsome or dreadful but also to convey a feeling of awe. It suggested that something portentous was about to happen. This connotation is nowhere better dramatized than in *Beowulf*.

For purposes of making this point clear, it is essential to recount the plot of the poem, which is quite simple and falls into two parts. In the first part of the poem it is related how Hrothgar, King of the Danes, had a magnificent mead-hall built which he called Heorot. The sounds of rejoicing and the evidences of prosperity angered the ugly monster Grendel, which inhabited a nearby fenland. For twelve years, night after night, Grendel raided Heorot and killed several warriors. News of the plight of the Danes reached the land of Hygelac, King of the Geats; Beowulf, his nephew, a young man of great strength, resolved to win fame by conquering the monster. At Heorot he grappled with the bloodthirsty visitant and wounded him mortally. On the following night there was great rejoicing in Hrothgar's court. Hrothgar praised Beowulf but warned him against the enemy

"pride". Later, when the feast was over and the warriors had retired, Grendel's mother came to seek revenge. She carried off a favorite noble, and the King again appealed to Beowulf. The hero tracked the monster to a pool of sinister activity, plunged in, and finally emerged victorious from an underwater struggle to the death. After being suitably praised and rewarded by the Danes, Beowulf returned to his home, related his adventures, and received new honours.

In the second part of the poem, the hero, now old and King of the Geats, had to face a third monster. A treasure-guarding dragon, enraged because a fugitive slave stole something from his hoard, laid waste the country. Beowulf, model of kingship now and showing no vestige of pride, advanced single-handedly towards the enemy to defend his people, only to be destroyed.

As a story, *Beowulf* is essentially a diptych, a hinged portrait of a hero as a young man and of an old leader of his people in his last and thoroughly noble deed. The theme is heroism, and the inevitable end of such heroism is death. But what dies? The poem suggests that it is pride, that Beowulf as an old man finally does a beautifully noble thing—not to win fame but to save his people. Thus when the hero was a young man his enemies were excessively monstrous and ugly, as they must be in order to make Beowulf extremely heroic and courageous. Of his heroism he is justifiably but dangerously proud. Then when he is an old man and pride has been vanquished, the monster easily slays him.

### *The Meaning of "Ugly"*

What is the meaning of a paradox in which pride as a young man is allowed to live and unselfishness as an old man is caused to die? The answer comes in parts: first, in the announcement of something awesome; second, in the foreshadowing of things even more portentous; third, in the lure of a resolution. Beowulf and Grendel symbolize the opposing forces of all great struggles; the conclusion of their fight will result in death, but what will death bring? That answer resides at some point beyond the story, for although the narrative forces are brought to a point of rest with the death of Beowulf, representing the emendations by Christian monks of the ruder celebrations of earlier scribes, the implications are as yet unsettled. It is as if the writers were saying that Beowulf and Grendel are only parts of greater forces at work, the struggle for national unity by the Anglo-Saxons and the struggle for the settling of conflicts between Christian and non-Christian attitudes. If this is true, then a rare taste for truth prevailed in this great myth of European peoples: that no force can be allowed a clear-cut victory in life, for unity is always a goal just beyond attainment, a goal toward which people must

unceasingly strive. In simpler and more personal terms, a proud hero is just as much a threat to peace as an ugly monster. Modern psychology would call Beowulf and Grendel extensions of each other. In other words, for man to be at peace he must slay the ugliness in himself.

In any struggle, then, between the hero and the monster, between the beautiful and the ugly, there is something not only dreadful but awesome that we encounter, *as if we were about to stumble on a greater truth*. It is this call of the unknown that causes us to reflect on a man's valour and strength, on the conflicts between good and evil, and on the tragic inadequacies of natural virtues unsupported by a life of grace.

There are some startling correlations between the Beowulf theme and that of our times. Americans are certainly crusaders for peace and freedom. However, there has been in their foreign policy and service an element of the pride of Beowulf. This is due to their status as victors after World War II, to their subsequent efforts to upgrade world economy, and to their activities in international leadership. American intentions have been noble and sincere, but their habits have sometimes revealed them as people sold on themselves. That phase, Phase I of the Ugly American, judging by the standards and programmes of qualified and dedicated foreign-service officers today, is in the process of dying.

All over the world Americans have been pulled down from pedestals. The pride of Americans has been particularly under attack: pride in individualism, dering-do entrepreneurship, and improvisation. The youthfulness and brashness and arrogance of Americans have been exposed. But meanwhile other stronger and more important American characteristics have asserted themselves: teamwork, scholarship and research, and the slow but gradual constitutionalizing of the rights of men. This is Phase II, that of the maturing American.

The very fact that Americans are no longer pictured as saviours but are labelled "ugly" and hanged in effigy indicates several important developments in the maturing process. First, Americans have been forced to take a long and careful look at themselves. Second, they have committed themselves to a struggle to the death. Third, they hope that what will die will be their pride in sovereignty and selfish interests and not their belief in the dignity and glory of mankind. If this hope is realized, then Americans will have done a beautiful and noble thing—not to win prestige or to slay the enemy, but to help to save humanity from planned suicide.

This point about maturation has been the theme of all great religious literature, from the advice of Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-Gita* to the teachings of II Isaiah in the

Old Testament, but it is nowhere so poignantly presented as in that classic tale "The Ugly Duckling." The story was written by Hans Christian Andersen as a tender explanation of the life process for all young people who fret about their lack of personal charm in adolescence. The parable of the ugly duckling and the beautiful swan has other parallels in nature, such as the development of the caterpillar into the butterfly. By classic definition the soul or psyche has been identified with the butterfly; hence, the flight of the butterfly represents the maturation of the psyche. These morals drawn from the adjustments of nature reveal that beauty is a matter of growth, ugliness is an attitude that can be overcome, and descriptive words are unnecessary when equality is present. Is one swan more beautiful than another? or in a stage of discovering himself? Nature holds up a mirror: by growing up to what we are and can be, by joining the fight against hunger, disease, poverty, and illiteracy, by discovering the truth about inequalities, by finding out how much the same we are and not how different we are, do we lose our status as heroes or villains?

*Illustrations: Americans "Ugly and Noble"*

There are many Americans who are in the process of examining the nature of name-calling, since the present conflict is largely a war of mass-media and propaganda. They have had a picture of the enemy as mass-media has described him, like Grendel: vile, unsightly, repulsive, monstrous. They have seen the challenge. They have considered the awesome truth that lurks in the wilderness. But what has surprised them has been to find out that they are the monsters. The ugly persons are Americans!

It is one of the deepest ironies of the American foreign service in the twentieth century that the writers of the novel *The Ugly American* intended to reveal a point similar to the one that has been argued here, that the physically ugly American in the story is the only really noble person. It is an irony with tragic implications because the point was precariously balanced in the novel, completely omitted from the movie, and ignored in conversation. The writers of the novel failed to make their point because they were primarily concerned with exposing ugliness and not enough with the delineation of character. The O. Henry and Bret Harte technique of covering a good heart with a bad face is a cheap substitution for character-building. The characters in the novel are largely flatly-drawn; there are some good ones, many bad ones, but no development of the implications hidden in the title, no resolving the paradox through the evolution of character.

The producers of the movie ignored the implications. They reverted to a crude Beowulf-Grendel theme, that of a hard-drinking two-fisted American ambas-

sador fighting a friend turned monster. The movie has neither the virtue of the novel, which attempted to explore a point, nor of the epic, which resolved a point.

Conversation and articles about Americans, the foreign-service contract people, and tourists tend to follow the practice of omission that the producers of the movies pursued: the failure to present an ugly American who becomes a noble one. On the conversational level the word "ugly" carries with it not the awesome overtones of a problem to be solved but the slandering under-currents of a cold war.

For example, everyone has his examples of ugly Americans: that tourist couple, decked out in Hawaiian shirts, baggy pants, and pith helmets, crashing the cordon of Thai farmers and Bangkok police, ignoring the ritual of the Ploughing Ceremony (Harvest Festival), flouting all codes of decent human behaviour, acting as if they didn't know better, in order to sneak up on the King and Queen to take their picture; that Foundation grantee, made self-important by a fat two-year contract, announcing after one survey that the North-East is a wasteland, that it is economically unsound to develop the farmland there, that it would be easier to relocate the farmers in other more suitable farming communities or to transfer them into industry; that businessman, intelligent, aggressive, successful, drinking more and more heavily, devoting all his personal relationships with the Thai to the same goal. . . .

These are pictures of ugly Americans that cannot be denied; yet it cannot be proved, on the other hand, that the attitudes exposed are exclusively or even dominantly American. This is a point that neither the novel nor the movie made and that conversation ignores. These are attitudes of people found everywhere, the attitudes of observers who hold themselves aloof from, or demonstrate ignorance about, the situation in which they find themselves. There must be "ugly Thai", "ugly Chinese", "ugly Cambodians", as well as ugly Americans.

But the authors of the novel and the movie failed to foresee the slanderous misuse of the word that conversation delights in today. What is needed, then, is another kind of study, another novel, another movie, one that shows that although many American habits deserve the label "ugly", habits are not people, and people may grow up. What is needed is a story without poison words, one that shows the transitoriness of "ugliness", one that explains that all people are destined to be ugly in international affairs, just by being strangers, by being different—but that, as they begin to know one another (as more and more Americans, for example, find themselves immersed in the process of learning from their Thai friends), the differences seem less and less important and the common task of developing human potential more and more immediate.

To illustrate, there are several USIS (United States Information Service) posts

in Thailand where the Branch PAOs are doing quiet, valuable service—providing libraries of books, magazines, papers, and films for local citizens, arranging lectures and travel grants for Buddhist monks and government officials, conducting field trips into the remoter areas for research, welfare, and education. What is so impressive is the working relation they have with their Thai assistants and counterparts. The American asserts that he could not run his office without his assistant; the counterpart declares that the American has brought a new dimension of kindness and a wealth of practical ideas to his community. There are similar bonds to be observed between Peace Corps personnel and the Thai they work with. The ugly ducklings have turned out to be swans. But, like the swan who swims away with his brethren and like Beowulf who dies in a truly unselfish act, the good ones have no need to say much. They call no attention to themselves; they go about their business in unassuming and efficient ways. And if they do ugly things, they busy themselves correcting their faults. Most important, they are in the business of disseminating information, of taking the false labels off truth instead of putting them on and covering it up.

#### *Attitudes and Cultural Differences*

These Americans have another way of looking at life, at other people. They bear the attitude of men who neither worship nor condemn differences. To make this point clear, let us start with the reasons why foreign-service officers leave home in the first place, and why they would want to go to South-East Asia.

Each culture tells man that, if he wants to belong to it, he must first get out of his own environment and grow up. Therefore, to set sail in any sense, to see the world, to take a junket, to launch a business, to cruise around the corner, is to encounter headwinds, even typhoons—perhaps to be beached on the shifting sands of experience. There is more to sailing than playing shuffleboard on the high seas. Moreover, once he leaves the womb of his birth he is forever a wanderer, and the harbours he seeks are frequently foreign to him: strange tongues, peculiar customs, different climates. At one point or another in his odyssey, because he is a stranger, he is bound to be “ugly”. He finds out that he is taller or shorter, lighter or darker, richer or poorer, freer or more restricted. Of course, the trouble comes when he is either insensitive or too sensitive, *when he cannot get beyond the differences*. Sometimes this trouble festers and develops into cultural aberrations and hence dramatizes *the tragedy of existence, which is that men with so much potential for loving should focus it all on themselves*.

It is also ironical that the only way we can find out how we need each other

is to find out how apart we are, how inferior or superior we are, how ugly or beautiful we are. The inability to understand the equality of inequality is what explains the tragedy and the irony. Headed for fellowship, some men find only anarchy. They seem unable to get beyond their unselfishness. *They have not yet fallen in love with and devoted themselves to something other than themselves.* In this matter of anarchy society is partly responsible, for one of the duties of mankind is to hold up to each man his mirror of belonging, to let him see that his difference is his badge of identification with others. It is just not enough to say that if one wants to belong he must first get out. The reasons for getting out must be explained.

American society has provided reasons on two levels: one, to support the economy and the space programme at home; the other, to develop human potential everywhere. It is this latter task to which the FSO is drawn in South-East Asia. He believes that as men should reach across the vast distances of the various universes for understanding, so should they seek to communicate with the thousands of tongues extant in a world in which one-third of all the people who have ever lived live right now.

When he is first outside American soil the FSO is inclined to think culture is measured more by what men are not, more by how different they are rather than by how much alike they are. He thinks of himself and his culture as a mariner uses a drawing compass. When the legs of the compass are plumb-tight, one against the other, the instrument is useless, the ship lost. When the legs are opened the compass can be used to define an arc, to trace a journey, to sail and touch a thousand island points of difference. The life of the FSO is made up of these different islands of experience, much as the islands of the Pacific make up the nature of the Pacific.

But there is another figure that the compass cuts. Every job, every experience, every point of contact is but the base of another man's operation. Any plotting with the compass takes the FSO right into the territory of his neighbour and requires from him another level of understanding. Culture, therefore, he discovers, is not only defined by differences, not only by dependence on one's native language, education, and opportunity; culture is also defined by attitude, by what one does with his native equipment when he is in someone else's backyard. *Man's quest for meaning and belonging inevitably brings him to that point where he must identify himself with or withdraw from the people he meets.* In this respect culture is eventually measured by how much alike men are. For example, if he withdraws, the journey for a while is over and he is beached on the island of his last experience. If he identifies, however, he does not lose his freedom; he asserts it. Only a man confident in himself can look upon another as that man would be wished to be looked at. Even

more is required: not seeing another man from his point of view, but looking at nature, at all life, from some common point of view rather than from that of vested interests. *It is a characteristic of loving, the seeing of life as the result of a sense of oneness.*

Therefore, to have made a circle with a compass as the FSO has done is to have made one kind of map of the human condition in the search for unity. If the tracks of all living creatures could be added to this imaginative map, the record would be complete, with contingent ambiguities and paradoxes. It would be as if some Power had taken all the compasses in the world and had plotted all the passages, swivelling from one point to another, describing independent and unique circles of experience, yet leaving deliberate evidences of men's incompleteness, of their need for each other.

The FSO's attitude toward life parallels another attitude, the current scientific one at home, which identifies protoplasm as the essential matter of all animal and plant cells, and describes the gelatinous substance called colloid as a jelly made up of very small, insoluble, non-diffusible particles, all hooped together to define mass but independent enough to remain suspended in a fluid medium without settling to the bottom. Science has made no analogy from this information, but one seems to be invited. Could it be that science, too, believes that men are more than slabs for burials at sea? That we are more than lumps of lostness dumped into the deep, accompanied only by the chill reading of a biblical passage and the rattling of drums? Could it be that like the colloid we refuse to sink to the bottom? That though our bodies perish, we refuse to die? That we have a soul, a heart, a personality? That we are more than matter? That like the colloid we have our independence, our existence, our destiny? Yet, also like the colloid, we belong to something other than ourselves, for our independence, our separateness, our very difference is what makes the oneness of life. We are not only the distance, shape, and distinctness of life; we are also the substance.

If this be a feasible analogy, then a very old truth has been reaffirmed. Greek philosophers made the discovery twenty-five hundred years ago: "the many are also the one." The Chinese sages three thousand years ago identified this principle as the Tao, but also declared that unity was a name that could not be named. They therefore polarized the Tao into the yang and the yin: sky and earth, rock and water, male and female. Five thousand years ago the Hindus called their concept of oneness "Brahman", best translated into English as the neuter "That." But since the impersonality of "That" (Unity) was difficult for men (particularity) to comprehend, Hindu metaphysicians devised some touchstones to be followed, thus describing the



indescribable. Hence the origin of the Hindu trinity: Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma, the gods of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. These were the tangible gods to whom the soul of men could be bared.

It was precisely this signifying of a "spiritual substance", the naming and chopping up the life process, that led Buddha to break away from Hinduism. In one of his most startling pronouncements on the development of the psyche, he declared that man has no soul. This was not a cynical observation. What he meant might have been something like this: man has no soul if he means to categorize, divide, and separate life into hostile forces.

It was a way of saying that man was in danger of losing his feeling for the oneness of things. I was, moreover, a direct attack on the semantic slippage of his contemporaries who had divided Brahman up into component parts, who made a distinction between the spiritual and the material and then proceeded to talk about the soul as if it were an object.

### *The Attitude of Buddha*

Buddha was one of the first of a long line of distinguished semanticists who argued for a more careful use of language. He wondered why people derived so much pleasure from name-calling, from using poison words, from subtle slander: "There goes a fallen woman"; "He's another ugly American." Buddha thought it more accurate to say, "There goes a woman" or "Another American." He believed that judgments were men's attempts at playing God, or the Devil. Judgments were divisive things, opinions too easily turned into biases. If life were a process, who was man to think he could arrest it with a labelling technique?

Basically, though, Buddha was not so much interested in what ugly things men said about each other; he was concerned with what one man could do to ferret out the ugliness in himself. Always practical-minded, he developed his no-soul doctrine not for argumentation but for clarification. True enough, the doctrine denies the separation of body and soul; but it equally denies the existence of devils and angels. This common-sense approach to the dangers of divisiveness helped man to see himself, not the terribleness or the goodness of his acts, but the transitoriness of those things which are not really him.

Buddha was less interested in categorizing life than he was in respecting it. He so loved the world that he refused to box it in with labels. His technique was one of unlabeling, of revealing the flow of life, the cyclical movement of all things, good and bad, factual and fictitious, ugly and beautiful.

It is therefore impossible to read much Buddhist literature or to live long in

Thailand without catching its sense of the transitoriness of all things finite, and its profound acknowledgement of the perpetual perishing of every natural object. That is what gives the Buddhist description of the natural world its poignancy and melancholy.

Buddha's no-soul doctrine and his observations about the impermanence of all life are, expressed verbally, far different from beliefs in an imperishable soul and substantive judgments as to what is ugly or beautiful. But if we can get to where the words lead us, to some view of life that is common to all, then we can see that Buddha was talking about that quality of looking that is in the eye of the beholder. He was not arguing a point; he was trying to illustrate how man may be in most control of himself. He refused to be an advertising agent because labels are what lead to either the worshipping or condemning of differences. He believed in individuality, and in mind as the identity of man, but he pointed out the danger of blasphemy in assuming any superiority. We should not try to arrest life's moments, to wrap up the ones we would like to cart away with us and discard the ones we consider ugly.

Buddha emphasized the ephemeral character of human life so that men could be free of illusions about themselves. Wisdom, for him, was more the absence of self-seeking than the active doing of good. According to him, the voyager undertakes his pilgrimage so that he will encounter those who will make him acutely aware of differences, thus providing the maximum opportunity to be himself, to merge with others in the mainstream of life, and to book passage home.

Buddha characteristically made no defence of man. Man may be ugly, but that too will pass away.