

THE CLASSICAL TRADITION IN EDUCATION

STANLEY B. JAMES

THE spectacle to be witnessed to-day of nations arming themselves on a scale inconceivable to previous generations is not, to the lover of peace, the most disturbing feature of the modern situation. Armaments are material things and, in the nature of things, short-lived. A change of heart on the part of the peoples concerned would find in them no insuperable barrier to a régime of international co-operation. A far more serious obstacle to the realization of pacific ideals is to be found in the ideologies with which the mind of youth is being permeated. There is growing up a generation whose most impressionable years are being passed in an atmosphere of racial or class fanaticism. Nor is it merely a question of atmosphere. Education has become the instrument of the ideologists. Even before boys are old enough to handle the dummy weapons supplied them for military exercises, their minds are being moulded in accordance with the purpose of aggressive dictators and taught to think along lines which must inevitably lead to war. Even if it were possible to scrap the armaments and pay off the enormous debts incurred in creating them, this mentality will remain, a menace for an incalculable number of years. Those concerned have been quick to see and eager in appropriating the power wielded by the schoolmaster. Materialists though they may call themselves, they are keenly alive to the need of insuring the continuance of their policy by creating a type of spirituality favorable to it. They know well that the guns they are multiplying will be useless unless behind them are men duly indoctrinated. Short as has been the time during which these educational processes have been in operation, the results are already beginning to show. There exists now a vast battalion of youth keyed up to the enthusiasm demanded by their masters, and showing a capacity for heroism which speaks well for the efficiency of their training. For the sake of the Idea which has been infused into their minds, they are willing to submit to a Spartan discipline and to endure hardships equal to those of actual war. They have sacrificed individuality, the amenities of civilization and future prospects, and found in so doing an intoxicating exaltation of spirit. For them devotion to the Cause is a religion, and a

religion which has the support of more than emotional fervour; it derives strength from the whole character of their education; it is a religion *plus* a philosophy and the required view of history. It is necessary to take cognisance of this cultural preparation for a specific reason. The factor is one with which the peoples not affected in this way must learn to deal.

It is now that we realize the weakness of that utilitarian education which has so largely displaced the older tradition. The interest of English-speaking folk in commerce and industry, and the large demands made by the modern technique of these things, have tended to reduce education to a preparatory training for a career in the fields indicated. To a considerable extent it is the material success of the individual which supplies the dynamic; whatever does not minister to this is regarded as a distraction and referred to with contempt. The dearth of employment and the high grade of technical skill now necessary in order to make one's way in the world accentuate the claims of this utilitarian view. We cannot even say that those in our schools and colleges are, in any great numbers, inspired by enthusiasm for science as such; it is only in its practical application to the needs of a mechanistic age that science is held to be of value.

However much we may dislike the ideologies mentioned, it is impossible to deny that they have shown themselves capable of engendering a spiritual fervour inconceivable in connection with our own more prosaic view of education. This latter fails to kindle that devotion to a "Cause" which lifts the individual out of himself and bands him with his fellows in defence of certain beliefs. It is incapable of tapping those incalculable spiritual resources resident in human nature. Loyalty to an Idea superior to the individual is an asset which no material prosperity can counterbalance. Moreover, in the long run, an exclusive regard for material prosperity defeats its own ends. The egotist pursuing wealth as a primary object becomes devitalized, and incapable of resisting the onslaught of organized conviction. In the struggle for existence which lies before the nations, it will be faith and solidarity that will win. Within the present century we have seen the appearance in the front line of world affairs of small minorities possessed only of a militant creed and an abundance of courageous resolution. The lesson is one which should not be lost on the practical materialist contemptuous of ideas.

There was a time when pioneering conditions favored the creation of a race of hardy individualists. The prairie supplied the discipline which made the men who staked it out forceful person-

alities. Because they encountered danger and endured poverty as the price of adventure, they were spiritually superior to the flabby townsman who took no risks that would endanger his financial and social position. But those conditions are passing, and the age of individualism with which they synchronized is passing, too. The circumstances which gave stamina to the English-speaking peoples are changing rapidly. The drift is to the towns in whose crowded streets we experience physical contact without any corresponding unanimity that can bring us together on a higher level.

It is to be feared that an appeal to the creed of democracy as the ideology of our people must prove ineffective. On analysis it appears too negative for our purpose. Resenting some oppressive tyranny, men have found inspiration in the cause of freedom, but, the tyranny defeated, the cause of freedom resolves itself into an alliance of those who agree to disagree. To-day we require something more positive and inspiring than our utilitarian and individualistic philosophy in order to fight these racial and class ideologies. In this connection the fact that they are united in opposition to the traditional culture of Christendom is suggestive. Whatever their antagonisms, they are agreed in their repudiation of the civilization derived from ancient Greece and Rome, that civilization which is represented in poetry by Vergil and Dante and Shakespeare.

I have called it "the classical tradition", but I do not mean by that to set it in opposition to science. The scientific interests included in the term, however, are those which are of a cultural rather than a practical character. Curiosity concerning the physical world was one of the things which Rome passed on to the world it had conquered and, if other studies superseded it in medieval times, it was on the old foundations that the revival of scientific study built. In pleading the claims of the classical tradition in education, I am far from adopting the narrow outlook of those who would banish science in favor of a literary and philosophical curriculum.

The culture of the ancient world was an all-round thing. That, in fact, was one of its chief characteristics; otherwise it could never have endured through centuries of increasing complexity. It was Rome's great achievement to have combined in one orderly whole the contributions of many races. Its own sphere of activity was that of government. In cultural matters it showed a surprising willingness to learn from others and, with its genius for order, what it learned it synthesised. The extent of its conquests, cover-

ing orient and occident and including northern Africa, produced a type particularly rich in diverse elements. It was the catholicity of its culture which made it so perfect an instrument as the agent of a Religion which claimed dominion over all races.

Arising out of this we may note the vitality and adaptability of Roman civilization. The legalism and conservatism which might have petrified it were prevented from so doing by the restless spirit of Greece. But though it gave a home to Greek influences, it imposed its discipline on them. It was this combination of Greek centrifugalism and Roman centripetalism that gave to this civilization its unique union of firmness and plasticity, which enabled it to appropriate the contributions of the peoples it conquered without losing its own identity. The coming of Christianity, though it meant a temporary eclipse of learning as a sacrifice to the higher authority of religion, imparted a power of self-renewal which enabled it to survive, so far as its essentials are concerned, to our own day.

A culture so catholic as this, and containing a principle of life so potent as that indicated, need not, if mankind appreciates its value, fear such opposition as that encountered at the present time. A thing so universal should be immune against the sectarianism of race and class; a thing so adaptable can easily rebut the charge that modern conditions have rendered it obsolete.

May we not go further, and endorse the claim made that what I have called "the classical tradition" represents more than a particular type of civilization and culture, and in fact gives us the norm of these things? It is no less than this which was asserted by J. H. Newman. In his book, *The Idea of a University*, he wrote:

The civilization of modern times remains what it was of old, not Chinese, or Hindoo, or Mexican, or Saracenic, or of any new description hitherto unknown, but the lineal descendant, or rather the continuation, *mutatis mutandis*, of the civilization which began in Palestine and Greece. Considering, then, the characteristics of this great civilized Society, which I have already insisted on, I think it has a claim to be considered as the representative Society and Civilization of the human race, as its perfect result and limit, in fact; those portions of the race which do not coalesce with it being left to stand by themselves as anomalies, unaccountable indeed, but for that very reason not interfering with what on the contrary has been turned to account and has grown into a whole. I call then this commonwealth pre-eminently and emphatically Human Society, and its intellect the Human Mind, and its decisions the sense of mankind, and its disciplined and cultivated state Civilization in the abstract, and the territory on which it lies the *orbis terrarum*, or the World.

The meaning of this is quite clear. What the ancient Mediterranean civilization gave us has a prescriptive right to be considered the norm for human society. The synthesis effected during its formative period has universal and permanent value. It is from this source that the stream of progress flows; there are indeed springs of water unconnected with it, but they can achieve real importance only by becoming tributaries of what is truly the main course of cultural progress. In contending for our western tradition, therefore, we are contending for something more than our particular variety of culture; we are contending for culture in the broadest sense of the term; the alternatives ultimately are barbarism and chaos. The Cause is not that of a race or group of races, nor is it that of a certain class such as the bourgeoisie or the proletariat; it is the Human Cause. Opposed to the orderly development of this Romano-Greek civilization are only crude revolts which can come to nothing, unauthorized experiments inspired by sectional egotism incapable of creative effort and excelling only in criticism and destruction.

These statements can be verified by observation, for the modern world has gone far enough in its revolt against the common standards hitherto recognized by civilized man to give us samples of what we can expect if it should prove successful. The cult of ugliness in art, the confusion in literature and the relaxation of morality everywhere in evidence give no promise of evolving out of their confusion an orderly state. The only indication of such a thing is the régime which is confessedly based on a materialistic philosophy and interpretation of history, and which therefore must sooner or later lead to the entire suppression of that spiritual element on which human progress depends.

If the revolt in question was confined to a few faddists, we might be content to ignore it and to continue steadily developing the resources of our cultural heritage. But this is not the case. On the contrary, the movement is comparable to that of the barbarians who overthrew Rome, and to the invasion of Europe by Arab hosts in later centuries. That being so, our tactics must adapt themselves to the situation. An army marching through friendly country can afford to be careless in maintaining the line of communication with its base of supplies; but an army surrounded by foes must, above all things, see that it is not cut off from the source whence comes its food and munitions. It is like that with a tradition. If that tradition be commonly accepted, it can be left to look after itself; the forces of progress can press forward without harrassing thought of the rear. But if it is being violently and

persistently attacked, it may be necessary to retreat on what is essential to its existence. In other words, twentieth century humanism must to-day spare no effort to revive acquaintance with the classical tradition. To ensure the future against the vandalism which threatens our hereditary culture, the rising generation must be trained in and inspired by the ideals which have served us so well in the past. Over against the ideologies of the "barbarians" we must place the ideology which has weathered over two thousand years of human history.

To do this involves sacrifice. Education conducted on utilitarian lines can promise material rewards; its appeal to self-interest is obvious. Those who, in place of a bread-and-butter education, would offer a genuine culture must be prepared to act for a while as a minority, finding their strength for so doing in the glory of the Cause they are called to serve.

That brings us back to the point from which we started. We noted the existence of movements which had the power to stimulate an heroic enthusiasm against which our utilitarianism and individualism must prove impotent. For youth to accept discipline, it is necessary that some more spiritual and social motive than that of self-advancement in commerce and industry should be offered. The learning of Latin and Greek, and the study of ancient history viewed as pedagogic tasks dictated by a seemingly irrational and obsolete tradition, is not likely, in the light of past experience, to prove very exciting. But let the meaning of that tradition and its relation to present-day conflicts be made clear, and it should not be impossible to invoke on its behalf the same heroic temper as is displayed by the battalions of youth regimented under the banners of barbarism. If it is possible to secure enthusiasm for falsified history and perverse politics and economics, if the slogans of destruction can thrill the hearts of boys and girls and induce them to suffer a harsh regimentation, is it not reasonable to suppose that the Cause of Human Civilization, now under fire, should have equal power?

The argument that the narrower issues of race and class make a more powerful appeal by reason of their very narrowness is fallacious. The universality of the Cause named is not inconsistent with a sane particularism. The Civilization we are called to defend is bound up with the traditions of every people, and in defending it they are at the same time defending their own native rights. If the Italian upholds Dante as a genius representative of western culture, he is also upholding him as a characteristic product of his own race. If the English-speaking patriot glories in Shakespeare

as a poet having universal claims, he does not forego the natural pride he may take in him as one of his own kin. To be the champion of a human culture does not necessitate the sacrifice of provincial sentiment.

The cultivation of the studies named is no mere question for pedagogues. It is not an academic matter. It is related to the burning controversies of the hour, and is intimately connected with the events emphasized in big headlines in our newspapers. The schoolmaster finds himself to-day in the very centre of the battle which is deciding the fate of mankind. He will be betraying his trust if he does not invoke, on behalf of the culture which he is professionally engaged to impart, the interest which arises from this fact.