

*J. S. Erskine*

## BELATED ENLIGHTENMENT

FORTY YEARS AGO that eminent scholar, Edward Sapir, wrote an interesting essay in which he contrasted the happy meaningfulness of life within a culture with the aimlessness of life in our civilization. He did not suggest, as few would, that we should turn back to the Middle Ages when work was still creative and not merely an impersonal means of earning money, and he had only a faint sympathy for those who, withdrawing from the rat-race of gaining and spending more than their fellows, cut themselves off from human intercourse. It may be permitted, however, to stand sufficiently apart to see our civilization in perspective in this age when again "to be young is very heaven" and to be old is, thanks to pensions, not very hell.

A culture is an integrated human society in which all activity is meshed and rationalized into purpose, where each person has his responsibilities and his satisfactions. His life may be laborious and hungry and await a final day when, as among Darwin's Fuegians, the young men will shake him from his tree and smoke him to death over the cooking fire; but in the meantime he will do the like to his elders in contented knowledge that this is the way things must be and that life is good.

At its beginning a civilization is a culture, a society with a territory and a manner of making a living, linked by a body of custom and belief which provides assurance of past, present, and future. To grow into a civilization it must have productivity sufficient to relieve a ruling minority from the bondage of labour and to finance specialists, trade, and the growth of cities. In the early stages of civilization the ruling minority will be warriors, usually but not necessarily foreign conquerors, and the development of middle classes of specialists and traders may tend to draw in foreigners and accentuate the class divisions of a structured society. The building up of civilization is helped by this specialization of élites at the expense of the agricultural poor, but each élite in turn digs its own grave by building up its power until it destroys all possible successors and so prevents further progress, or is dragged down by these same successors. So, class by class, power descends the steps

of the social pyramid, and the intelligence which has risen to the opportunities of each domination is skimmed away and discarded.

Art is effectively a part of religion, if one may stretch the term "religion" from a stereotyped creed to a body of ideas and ideals bridging the gap between life as it must be and the demands of the whole man. When the society is bonded into a culture, art focuses social attention upon the important things in behaviour, upon fire or stone tools or the sacred animals that provide food or the all-important identity of the tribe. By the time civilization develops, something more is needed, so the old religion is moulded to new purposes. The sacred animal becomes the god of an agricultural people; a tribal god who has been leading his own people towards the destruction of mankind becomes the ruler of many peoples to whom his traditional behaviour is wholly inapposite. So, as civilization grows, we see art changing to bridge the widening gap between accepted religion and current behaviour.

Here is no question of truth in its scientific sense of "definable reality", for we are dealing with the future, with the values and purposes of life. Animals have instincts, innate stereotypes of behaviour that have served innumerable past generations with success, their version of religion and morality. Man, too, has his instincts and is happiest and healthiest when following them, but they stem from a distant past and are usually inapplicable to either existent or ideal conditions. Religion is a learned pattern of behaviour built up over many generations and neither innate nor based upon individual experience.

The earliest society of which we know adequately the religion, history, art, and literature is Athens, a city-state with a bronze-age tribal religion linking the traditional gods and the city. At first the most sacred images of the gods were olive-wood statues draped in human clothes, crude figures but adequate focuses for prayer while faith remained intact. With the Athenian Empire rose the Parthenon with the gods of Pheidias, superhuman magnificent patrons of the city. Another century and the gods had shrunk into the graceful humans of Praxiteles, appealing to the instincts rather than to reverence. Then portraits of real people carried the art into the empire of Rome; but now both the gods and the city were absent.

The theatre developed side by side with statuary. The recitation at the grave of a legendary hero was transformed into the great tragedies of Aeschylus, contemporary with the Parthenon. Here in the old school of thought supermen and gods acted out their fates in a gripping religious ceremony, yet in his greatest play the villain was the high god Zeus, and our sympathies go to Prometheus, the defiant champion of mankind. Before the end of the

century Euripides was in open rebellion against the gods. His tragedies, though favourites with the intellectuals, were with great regularity denied the prize by the people. Then came the comedies of Menander, trivial tales of sentiment, and the gods disappeared altogether. In Rome the theatre passed from imitations of Euripides and Menander to the more popular form of chariot races and gladiatorial combats, instinctive pleasures.

These developments in art followed those in thought. The farmers and the older generation loved the sense of security that unchanging custom gave them; in the city the young, and the intellectuals who were young in attitude, saw that the old customs were out of touch with the needs of the changing present. Now the philosophers taught openly a new world order in which the gods played no part, and a new morality based upon reason or selfishness and not upon custom. Man was becoming the measure of all things. Indignant conservatives hunted Anaxagoras out of Athens, executed Socrates, drove Euripides and Aristotle to Macedon. Even so, the clock was not turned back. Power had dropped from king to eupatrids to hoplites to the rowers of the fleet, and the arrogant emotionalism of democratic government plunged the country into unjustifiable wars and ruinous measures of poor relief.

The breakdown of the old religious pattern had turned a few to the pursuit of a deeper and more apposite formulation of social morality and cosmic structure, but it had released many others from the straitjacket of custom. The conservatives, not understanding the philosophers, since they could have understood them only by becoming philosophers themselves, tarred both groups with the same stick and did not realize that their own cause was already dead. The future, though not that of Athens, lay with the philosophers. From Socrates came Plato and from him the Stoics who produced the civil-service religion of the Roman Empire and later the structure of the Christian hierarchy, and the Cynics who paved the way for the Christian championship of the poor and the downtrodden; and from Aristotle, after a thousand years of neglect, came the mental stimulation of the scholastics and eventually science. That century of enlightenment in Athens, a little primitive city, stirred the world more than any century before or since.

From our great distance we can see what was happening. Each step that power took downward in the social hierarchy ruptured the religious along with the social structure and demanded a re-thinking of the pattern. This released a new freedom of thought and selfishness of action which called forth a religious reaction to preserve order. Each step downward gave power

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to a greater number, and each brought it nearer to the complete selfishness in which religion, culture, and society cease to exist. Could it have been prevented? The world is, or used to be, full of cultures not changing appreciably. Suppose that the Athenian conservatives had triumphed over Solon, Cleisthenes, and Pericles and had prevented the downward steps toward the democracy of a trading state. They could have done it by establishing a dominant military caste, like that of Sparta, which remained old-fashioned and with a rigid morality but gave nothing to the world. Suppose that they had accepted the leadership of the philosophers. By the time of the *Laws* Plato had turned in despair towards Sparta as a model. Only static societies can be planned ahead.

In Rome, the heir of classical civilization, we find the same downward steps of power, from king to senate, from patricians to plebeians, but Rome was an inland city without natural defences, so that its organization remained military and trade was secondary to tribute. The downward steps of power produced new developments both military and administrative, but its belated enlightenment had no outstanding unfolding of the human spirit. Lucretius, the nearest approach to an individual thinker, was a recluse, out of step with his society. The Romans did not lack intelligence, but their ideals were limited—Rome first, power always, money after the days of the great conquests. Six centuries earlier Assyria had led a similarly military nation to the conquest of empire and had burst like a bubble after its first great defeat, for the core of the empire was composed of enslaved foreigners. Rome did better by incorporating the conquered and eventually being ruled by them. One can follow the migration of power (and literature) through the Empire. In the first century B.C., leaders and writers were chiefly Roman; in the first century A.D., they were from Italy; in the second century from Spain; in the third from Africa; in the fourth largely from Thrace; in the fifth from Germany beyond the Empire.

Our own civilization began with many advantages. The tradition of Rome remained, and the prestige of the Church stood unquestioned throughout western Europe. German conquerors accepted Christianity but retained the ideals and morals of Wodenism which provided fighting strength while the Church gave culture and organization. There remained also the tradition of primitive Christianity to make life hopeful to the downtrodden and enslaved. By the time of Charlemagne the system had developed into a dual organization of nobles and churchmen in separate but interlocking hierarchies. Trade with the more civilized East was rebuilding the cities and their guilds, and civilization had begun.

From the point of view of the Sermon on the Mount all violence is evil, but in practice no society has ever been able to exist without it. Early Christianity, still under the shadow of its founder, spawned Ananias and Simon Magus, and the divine retribution brought down upon them was violent. Underdog religions, such as early Christianity, Taoism, Buddhism, and Cynicism, could remain submissive only so long as they lacked responsibility. The Machiavellian alternative for princely behaviour, based upon the practice of selfish scoundrels such as Cesare Borgia and Ferdinand of Aragon, could lead only to autocracy, mistrust, and war, but there was an alternative in moral behaviour for rulers. Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, and Stoicism were top-dog religions designed for rulers responsible for their subjects. All were misused at times, since selfishness is among the human instincts, but they all moderated the evils of government.

Almost every feature of the Renaissance appeared sporadically in many parts of Europe before the whole blossomed in profusion in the Italian city-states. Changing commercial practices were undermining the accepted religious patterns. Christians were lending money at interest and trading with the heathen. Now there was money to support art and scholarship and no scruples against mining the forgotten wealth of pagan Greece, so that the new art, while religious in subject, had classical conceptions of beauty. Donatello's David is worthy of Praxiteles and as un-Christian.

The conservative reaction against the paganism of the Renaissance did not come from the Papacy, which had fallen under the control of the merchant families. The reaction found its leaders lower in the social scale, among well-educated churchmen with a hunger for power. Savonarola purged Florence of its worldliness by means of a militia of boys, anticipating Mao's Red Guards. Luther claimed his right to refuse obedience to the Pope and his prince's right to refuse obedience to the emperor, but demanded the destruction of peasants who asserted their own right to freedom.

In spite of reactions the Enlightenment went on, appearing for short periods in one country after another as change enriched new classes. In general, art, music, and literature flourished best under autocratic regimes, science and philosophy under conditions of freedom. Philosophers paid lip-service to religion but rarely incorporated it into their intellectual structures. Scientists could be religious, like Newton and Pascal, or uneasily aware that their observations encroached upon the world-view of the Church, like Copernicus and Darwin.

Each burst of enlightenment seems to have given way to a revival of

religion, each a little more personal and less social than the last. The reason is obvious. Religious behaviour is stable and predictable, rational behaviour is not. The religious man, too, has the self-confidence which comes with a sense of righteousness. The new religion always differs somewhat from the old, for it is tailored to the measure of the rising class. Once it has reached dominance, however, it will necessarily change its morality to that of the ruler, intent upon increasing or retaining power and so resistant to change. On a mental map one sees these waves pulsing inward towards the cities, upward in the social structure. Today the jarring sects of Christianity may seem to be on an equal footing and separated chiefly by habit and by meaningless liturgical differences, so feeble that they are vanishing, but most of them represent former social classes that felt themselves strangers in the existing order and so rebuilt their pattern of the world nearer to the heart's desire.

At present our society is capitalistic, in the hands of the manipulators of money and the managers of great industries which develop towards monopoly, at which point their power must inevitably be bridled. The great trade unions, rivalling capitalism in wealth and power, are the obvious heirs to dominance. Once the union movement had the dreams of Owen's co-operatives and Marxian Communism and the evangelistic piety of many of its leaders to give it constructive purpose; today it has shifted to the ruler's morality and seeks only to win and monopolize a greater share in the commercial plunder of the world.

It has, however, touched off a new belated enlightenment. The rise to affluence of a new mass class has given us arts based upon the mass media which must please millions or disappear. We have a popular literature of sex and violence, popular entertainment in professional sport, mass-produced education in which "socializing" (i.e. standardizing) is more important than mental development. The lock-step progression is attuned to low-average ability, and the measurement of success is based chiefly upon the regurgitation of material, since that is possible even for those who cannot understand what they are doing. The school "drop-outs", which so agitate educators, are chiefly of two groups, the very slow or the practical to whom the pseudo-academic curriculum is meaningless, and the above-average who have been bored for years by its triviality.

Throughout the history of civilization, societies have been becoming more viable. In sixth-dynasty Egypt, the first step downward of power from king to local governors seems to have led to many collapses from disorganization. In Athens power dropped as far as the *demos*, perhaps ten per cent of

the male population, before it ceased to develop. Today the majority of the people have a small voice in controlling the government, although the management of the country is wholly beyond their understanding. The institutions of government are designed to act as substitutes for an intelligent ruling élite, but they tend to rigidify society into a police state.

The drop in intelligence is a critical factor. The ruling classes, each in its turn, had won their position by ability, some of it inheritable, and each in turn had been swept away. As the hierarchic pyramid is descended, each level is probably less innately intelligent and certainly more numerous, and the judgement of a group varies in intelligence in inverse ratio to its numbers. At some point intelligence will, like morality and religious bonding, fall below the minimum necessary for the efficient management of the civilization, and only force remains operative.

The human brain increased in average size by about ninety per cent in the million years from early Pithecanthropus to Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon man, and since has decreased about eight per cent. Dobzhansky asserts that "cranial capacity and brain size, are, however, not reliable criteria of 'intelligence' or intellectual abilities of any kind." If one accepts this statement at face value, we have no direct evidence that man is more intelligent than his lemur ancestors. While one must admit that hat-size does not make a sound intelligence test, one may suspect that consistent increase in brain-size owes something to the fact that a hunter making a living during the ice age needed more intelligence than an eater of fruit and slow game in the tropical savannah of Java, and a decline to the fact that an agricultural peasant needed less and a pensioner of the welfare state much less. Eugenists assert that intelligence quotient (which is a measurement no more reliable than brain-size) is falling in North America at more than one per cent per century.

Earlier civilizations displaced the peasant by slave labour; we have substituted the machine, and with automation the machine-tender is being rendered obsolete along with the Man with the Hoe. Unionized labour will therefore tend to be politically undermined by the growth of the unemployable, the most rapidly increasing section of the community, the modern equivalent of the hippodrome crowd of Rome and Constantinople. What can be done? The remedy in Crete and Greece seems to have been the mass emigration of the more efficient, which left those lands almost empty. Rome stripped its empire of grain to feed the city. Belisarius stabilized the Eastern Empire by slaughtering thirty thousand rioting citizens in the Hippodrome. Already we are faced by savage riots of the hopeless in the great cities. Governments are

called upon to accept responsibility for all the citizens, and especially for those citizens, such as murderers, who have shown least responsibility for their society.

The remedy does not lie with science, for the ruling classes cannot be expected to grasp or to act upon scientific conclusions. The remedies suggested by the eugenists are sound enough as far as heredity is concerned but would be unacceptable and ineffective without a social pattern into which they fitted. That is the task of religion, the planning of satisfactory relationship of man to man and to the society as it is coming to exist. Especially it must give hope, order, and meaning to the lives of the disinherited, since the only alternative is the ancient remedy of Malthus and Darwin, an unwelcome and wasteful process, the struggle for life and the non-survival of the majority.

## GREEN THRUST

*Douglas Lochhead*

It is almost warm this morning,  
this April Saturday. In the weeping  
gardens a touch of beginning blue,  
of scilla. Sparrows are bold enough  
to reach for a drink in the fountain  
and the flags to welcome warmth  
and spring are legions of laundries  
waving stiff salutes when the wind goes.

Wind, a thrush on new found land,  
the sun gives enough to make a promise  
for all things, all things to come  
like scilla, and the green thrust  
begun.