

The Decline of Conversation

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I

The more one thinks of it, the more one finds in Goethe's remark that the test of civilization is conversation. The common method of rating the civilization of peoples by what they have got and what they have done is really a poor one; for some peoples who have got much and done a great deal strike one at once as less civilized than others who have got little and done little. Prussia, for example, was relatively a poor State a century ago, while fifteen years ago it was rich and active; yet one would hardly say that the later Prussia was as civilized a country as the Prussia of Frederick's time. Somewhat the same might be said of Tudor England and modern England. The civilization of a country consists in the quality of life that is lived there, and this quality shows plainest in the things that people choose to talk about when they talk together, and in the way they choose to talk about them.

It can be taken for granted, I suppose, that man has certain fundamental instincts which must find some kind of collective expression in the society in which he lives. The first and fundamental one is the instinct of expansion, the instinct for continuous improvement in material well-being and economic security. Then there is the instinct of intellect and knowledge, the instinct of religion and morals, of beauty and poetry, of social life and manners. Man has always been more or less consciously working towards a state of society which should give collective expression to these instincts. If society does not give expression to them, he is dissatisfied and finds life irksome, because every unused or unanswered instinct becomes a source of uneasiness and keeps on nagging and festering within him until he does something about it. Moreover, human society, to be permanently satisfactory, must not only express all these instincts, but must express them all in due balance, proportion, and harmony. If too much stress be laid on any one, the harmony

is interrupted, uneasiness and dissatisfaction arise, and, if the interruption persists, disintegration sets in. The fall of nations, the decay and disappearance of whole civilizations, can be finally interpreted in terms of the satisfaction of these instincts. Looking at the life of existing nations, one can put one's finger on those instincts which are being collectively overdone at the expense of the others. In one nation the instinct of expansion and the instinct of intellect and knowledge are relatively over-developed; in another, the instinct of beauty; in another, the instinct of manners; and so on. The term *symphonic*, which is so often sentimentally applied to the ideal life of society, is really descriptive; for the tendency of mankind from the beginning has been towards a functional blending and harmony among these instincts, precisely like that among the choirs of an orchestra. It would seem, then, that the quality of life in any society means the degree of development attained by this tendency. The more of these instincts that are satisfied, and the more delicate the harmony of their interplay, the higher and richer is the quality of life in that society; and it is the lower and poorer according as it satisfies fewer of these instincts and permits disharmony in their interplay.

American life has long been fair game for the observer. Journalistic enterprise now beats up the quarry for the foreigner and brings it in range for him from the moment the ship docks, or even before; and of late the native critic has been lending a brisk hand at the sport. So much, in fact, has been written about the way we live, how we occupy ourselves, how we fill up our leisure, the things we do and leave undone, the things we are likely to do and likely to leave undone, that I for one would never ask for another word on such matters from anybody. As a good American, I try to keep up with what is written about us, but it has become rather a dull business and I probably miss some of it now and then, so I cannot say that no observer has ever made a serious study of our conversation. In all I have read, however, very little has been made of the significance of the things we choose to talk about and our ways of talking about them. Yet I am sure that Goethe's method would give a better measure of our civilization than any other, and that it would pay any observer to look into it. For my own part, ever since I stumbled on Goethe's observation – now more

than twenty years ago – I have followed that method in many lands. I have studied conversation more closely than any other social phenomenon, picking up from it all the impressions and inferences I could, and I have always found that I got as good results as did those whose critical apparatus was more elaborate. At least, when I read what these critics say about such people as I know, especially my own, they seem to tell me little with which I was not already acquainted.

II

Speaking as Bishop Pontoppidan did about the owls in Iceland, the most significant thing that I have noticed about conversation in America is that there is so little of it, and as time goes on there seems less and less of it in my hearing. I miss even so much of the free play of ideas as I used to encounter years ago. It would seem that my countrymen no longer have the ideas and imagination they formerly had, or that they care less for them, or that for some reason they are diffident about them and do not like to bring them out. At all events the exercise of ideas and imagination has become unfashionable. When I first remarked this phenomenon I thought it might be an illusion of advancing age, since I have come to years when the past takes on an unnaturally attractive color. But as time went on the fact became unmistakable and I began to take notice accordingly.

As I did so a long-buried anecdote arose to the top of my mind and has remained there ever since. I am reminded of it daily. Years ago Brand Whitlock told me the story of an acquaintance of his – something in the retail clothing way – junior partner in a firm whose name I no longer remember, so for convenience we will make acknowledgments to Mr. Montague Glass and call it Maisener and Finkman. Mr. Finkman turned up at the store one Monday morning, full of delight at the wonderful time he had had at his partner's house the evening before – excellent company, interesting conversation, a supreme occasion in every respect. After dinner, he said – and such a dinner! – “we go in the parlor and all the evening until midnight we sit and talk it business.”

Day after day strengthens the compulsion to accept Mr. Finkman as a type. This might be thought a delicate matter to press, but after all, Mr. Finkman is no creation of one's fancy, but on the contrary he is a solid and respectable reality, a social phenomenon of the first importance, and he accordingly deserves attention both by the positive side of his preferences and addictions and by the negative side of his distastes. I am farthest in the world from believing that anything should be "done about" Mr. Finkman, or that he should be studied with an ulterior view either to his disparagement or his uplift. I am unequivocally for his right to an unlimited exercise of his likes and dislikes, and his right to get as many people to share them as he can. All I suggest is that the influence of his tastes and distastes upon American civilization should be understood. The moment one looks at the chart of this civilization one sees the line set by Mr. Finkman, and this line is so distinct that one cannot but take it as one's principal lead. If one wishes to get a measure of American civilization, one not only must sooner or later take the measure of Mr. Finkman's predilections, but will save time and trouble by taking it at the outset.

As evidence of the reach of Mr. Finkman's influence on the positive side, I notice that those of my American acquaintance whose interests are not purely commercial show it as much as others. Musicians, writers, painters, and the like seem to be at their best and to entertain themselves best when they "talk it business." In bringing up the other instincts into balance with the instinct of expansion, such persons as these have an advantage, and one would expect to see that advantage reflected in their conversation much more clearly and steadily than it is. Where two or three of them were gathered together, one would look for a considerable play of ideas and imagination, and one would think that the instinct of expansion – since one perforce must give so much attention to it at other times – might gladly be let off on furlough. But I observe that this is seldom the case. For the most part, like Mr. Finkman, these people begin to be surest of themselves, most at ease and interested, at the moment when the instinct of expansion takes charge of conversation and gives it a directly practical turn.

One wonders why this should be so. Why should Mr. Finkman himself,

after six days' steady service of the instinct of expansion, be at his best and happiest when he yet "talks it business" on the seventh? It is because he has managed to drive the whole current of his being through the relatively narrow channel set by the instinct of expansion. When he "talks it business," therefore, he gets the exhilarating sense of drive and speed. A millstream might thus think itself of more consequence than a river; probably the Iser feels more importance and exhilaration in its narrow leaping course than the Mississippi in filling all the streams of its delta. By this excessive simplification of existence Mr. Finkman has established the American formula of success. He makes money, but money is his incidental reward; his real reward is in the continuous exhilaration that he gets out of the processes of making it. My friends whose interests are not exclusively commercial feel the authority of the formula and share in the reward of its obedience. My friend A, for example, writes a good novel. His instincts of intellect, beauty, morals, religion, and manners, let us say, all have a hand in it and are satisfied. He makes enough out of it to pay him for writing it, and so his instinct of expansion is satisfied. But he is satisfied, not exhilarated. When, on the other hand, his publisher sells a hundred thousand copies of another novel, he is at once in the American formula of success. The novel may not have much exercised his sense of intellect, beauty, morals, religion, and manners – it may be, in other words, an indifferent novel – but he is nevertheless quite in Mr. Finkman's formula of success and he is correspondingly exhilarated. He has crowded the whole stream of his being into the channel cut by the instinct of expansion, and his sensations correspond to his achievement.

Thus by his positive action in establishing the American formula of success, Mr. Finkman has cut what the Scots call a "monstrous cantle" out of conversation. Conversation depends upon a copiousness of general ideas and an imagination able to marshal them. When one "talks it business," one's ideas may be powerful, but they are special; one's imagination may be vigorous, but its range is small. Hence proceeds the habit of particularizing – usually, too, by way of finding the main conversational staple in personalities. This habit carries over, naturally, into whatever excursions Mr. Finkman's mind is occasionally led to make outside the domain of the

instinct of expansion; for his disuse of imagination and general ideas outside this sphere disinclines him to them and makes him unhandy with them. Thus it is that conversation in America, besides its extreme attenuation, presents another phenomenon. On its more serious side it is made up almost entirely of particularization and, on its higher side, of personalities.

These characteristics mark the conversation of children and, therefore, may be held to indicate an extremely immature civilization. The other day a jovial acquaintance who goes out to dinner a good deal told me a story that brings out this point. It seems he had just been hearing bitter complaints from a seasoned hostess who for years has fed various assorted contingents of New York's society at her board. She said that conversation at her dinner-table had about reached the disappearing-point. She had as much trouble about getting her guests into conversation as one has with youngsters at a children's party, and all the conversation she could prod out of them nowadays, aside from personalities, came out in the monotonous minute-gun style of particular declaration and perfunctory assent.

"She's right about that," my friend went on. "Here's a precis of the kind of thing I hear evening after evening. We go in to dinner talking personalities, no matter what subject is up. The theater – we talk about the leading lady's gowns and mannerisms, and her little ways with her first husband. Books – we hash over all the author's rotten press-agentry, from the make of his pajamas to the way he does his hair. Music – we tell one another what a dear love of a conductor Kaskowhisky is, and how superior in all respects to von Bugghaus, whose back isn't half so limber. Damned quacks actually, you know, both of them! Good Lord! man, can you wonder that this country killed Mahler and put Karl Muck in jail?"

"Well, we sit down at the table. Personalities taper off with the end of the soup. Silence. Then some puffy old bullfrog of a banker retrieves his nose out of his soup-cup, stiffens up, coughs behind his napkin, and looks up and down the line. 'Isn't it remarkable how responsibility brings out a man's resources of greatness? Now who would have thought two years ago that Calvin Coolidge would ever develop into a great leader of men?'"

"Guests, in unison, acciaccato – 'Uh-huh.'"

“Next course. Personalities pick up a little and presently taper off again. Somebody else stiffens up and pulls himself together. ‘Isn’t it splendid to see the great example that America is setting in the right use of wealth? Just think, for instance, of all the good that Mr. Rockefeller has done with his money.’

“Guests, fastoso – ‘Uh-huh.’”

My lively friend may have exaggerated a little – I hope so – but his report is worth an observer’s careful notice for purposes of comparison with what one hears oneself. His next remark is worth attention as bringing out still another specific characteristic of immaturity.

“But what goes against my grain,” he continued, “is that if you pick up some of this infernal guff and try to pull it away from the particular and personal, and to make real conversation of it, they sit on you as if you were an enemy of society. Start the banker on a discussion of the idea of leadership – what it means, what the qualifications for leadership are, and how far any president can go to fill the bill – how far any of them has ever gone to fill it – and all he’ll do is to grunt, and say, ‘I guess you must be some sort of a Red, ain’t you?’ A bit of repartee like that gets him a curtain call from the rest every time. It’s a fine imaginative lot that I train with, believe me! I have sat at dinner tables in Europe with every shade of opinion, I should say, and in one way or another they all came out. That’s what the dinner was got up for. How can you have any conversation if all you are expected to do is to agree?”

III

It is a mark of maturity to differentiate easily and naturally between personal or social opposition and intellectual opposition. Everyone has noticed how readily children transfer their dislike of an opinion to the person who holds it, and how quick they are to take umbrage at a person who speaks in an unfamiliar mode or even with an unfamiliar accent. When the infant-minded Pantagruel met with the Limosin who spoke to him in a Latinized macaronic jargon, he listened awhile and then said, “What devilish language

is this? – by the Lord, I think thou art some kind of heretic.” Mr. Finkman’s excessive simplification of life has made anything like the free play of ideas utterly incomprehensible to him. He never deals with ideas, except such limited and practical ones as may help get him something, and he cannot imagine anyone ever choosing, even on occasion, to do differently. When he “talks it business,” the value of ideas, ideals, opinions, sentiments, is purely quantitative; putting any other value on them is a waste of time. Under all circumstances, then, he tends to assume that other people measure the value of their ideas and opinions as he does his, and that they employ them accordingly; and hence, like my friend’s banker, when some one tries to lead up into a general intellectual sparring for mere points, he thinks he is a dangerous fellow with an ax to grind.

This puts the greatest imaginable restraint upon conversation, a restraint which betrays itself to the eye of the observer in some rather odd and remarkable ways. I have been much interested, for example, to see that the conversion of conversation into mere declaratory particularization has lately been taken up in a commercial way. One reads advertisements of enterprising people who engage to make you shine in conversation. They propose to do this by loading you up with a prodigious number of facts of all kinds, which you can fire off at will from the machine-gun of your memory. On this theory of conversation, a statistician with Macaulay’s memory is the ideal practitioner of social amenities; and so indeed, with Mr. Finkman’s sensibilities in view, he would be.

Another odd manifestation of this restraint is the almost violent eagerness with which we turn to substitutes for conversation in our social activities. Mr. Finkman must not be left alone in the dark with his apprehensions a moment longer than necessary. After such a dinner as my debonair friend described, it is at once necessary to “do something” – the theatre, opera, cabaret, dancing, motoring, or what not – and to keep on doing something as long as the evening lasts. It is astonishing to see the amount of energy devoted to keeping out of conversation; “doing something” has come to be a term of special application. Almost every informal invitation reads, “to dinner, and then we’ll do something.” It is even more astonishing to see that

this fashion is followed by persons whose intelligence and taste are sufficient, one would think, to put them above it. Quite often one finds oneself going through this routine with persons quite capable of conversation, who would really rather converse, but who go through it apparently because it is the thing to go through. When this happens, one marvels at the reach and the authority of Mr. Finkman's predilections – yet there they are.

My friend was right in saying that conversation is managed differently in Europe. I was reminded of this not long ago, when the German airship made its great flight to this country. Everyone remembers the vast amount of public interest in this event, and how the pilot of the airship, Doctor Eckener, was feted and fussed over from one end of the country to the other. Three or four days after the landing, a friend of mine, a German banker, asked me to luncheon at his house. There were four of us – Doctor Eckener, his assistant, our host, and myself. We talked for something over two hours, largely about music, a good deal about the geography and history of the region around Friedrichshafen, and for half an hour, perhaps, about European public affairs. From first to last, not one word was said about the flight of the airship or about the business of aviation or the banking business. The conversation was wholly objective and impersonal; each one spoke his mind, and none of us felt any pressure towards agreement. I remember that I myself put out some pretty heretical opinions about the structure of music-drama. No one agreed with me, but no one dreamed of transferring to myself the brunt of his objections to my opinion.

This kind of thing gives the impression of maturity, and, as far as my experience goes, it is as common in Europe as it is uncommon here. There has been much comment lately upon the attraction that Europe exerts upon certain American types. I am led to wonder if it be not perchance the attraction of maturity. Children may be delightful, may be interesting, may be ever so full of promise, and one may be as fond of them as possible – and yet when one has them for warp and filling, one must get a bit bored with them now and then, in spite of oneself. I have had little to do with children, so I speak under correction; but I should imagine that one would become bored with their intense simplification of life, their tendency to drive the

whole current of life noisily through one channel, their vehement reduction of all values to that of quantity, their inability to take any but a personal view of anything. But just these are the qualities of American civilization as indicated by the test of conversation. They inhere in Mr. Finkman and are disseminated by his influence to the practical exclusion of any other. I can imagine, then, that one might in time come to be tired of them and to wish oneself in surroundings where man is accepted as a creature of “a large discourse, looking before and after,” where life is admittedly more complex and its current distributed in more channels – in other words, where maturity prevails.

One is impressed, I think, by the way this difference is repeatedly brought out in ordinary conversation in Europe and America – in the choice of things to talk about and in the way people talk about them. I am impressed by it even in conversation with children, though as I said, due allowance ought to be made for the fact that my experience with children is not large. Yet even so, I do not think it is special or exceptional. I have a friend, for instance, whom I go to see whenever I am in Brussels, and it is the joy of my life to play at sweethearts with his three daughters who range from seven to sixteen. My favourite is the middle one, a weedy and nonchalant charmer of twelve. She does not impress me as greatly gifted; I know several American girls who seem naturally abler. But in conversation with her I detect a power of disinterested reflection, an active sense of beauty, and an active sense of manners, beyond any that I ever detected in American children; and these contribute to a total effect of maturity that is agreeable and striking.

IV

An observer passing through America with his mind deliberately closed to any impressions except those he received from conversation could make as interesting a conjectural reconstruction of our civilization as the palæontologists with an armful of bones make of a dinosaur. He would postulate a civilization which expresses the instinct of expansion to a degree far beyond anything ever seen in the world, but which does not express the instinct of

intellect and knowledge, except as regards instrumental knowledge, and is characterized by an extremely defective sense of beauty, a defective sense of religion and morals, a defective sense of social life and manners. Its institutions reflect faithfully this condition of excess and defect. A very brief conversation with Mr. Finkman would enable one to predicate almost precisely what kind of schooling he considered an adequate preparation for life, what kind of literature he thought good enough for one to read, plays for one to see, architecture to surround oneself with, music to listen to, painting and sculpture to contemplate. It would be plain that Mr. Finkman had succeeded in living an exhilarating life from day to day without the aid of any power but concentration – without reflection, without ideas, without ideals, and without any but the most special emotions – that he thought extremely well of himself for his success, and was disposed to be jealous of the peculiar type of institutional life which had enabled it or conduced to it. The observer, therefore, would postulate a civilization marked by an extraordinary and inquisitorial intolerance of the individual and a corresponding insistence upon conformity to pattern. For in general, it is reflection, ideas, ideals, and emotions that set off the individual, and with these Mr. Finkman has had nothing to do; he has got on without them to what he considers success, and hence he sees no need of them, distrusts them, and thinks there must be a screw loose with the individual who shows signs of them.

There is a pretty general consensus among observers that this picture corresponds in most respects with the actual civilization of the United States, and many of them deplore the correspondence. I do not deplore it. It seems to me important that Mr. Finkman should have room according to his strength, that he should be unchecked and unhampered in directing the development of American civilization to suit himself. I believe it will be a most salutary experiment for the richest and most powerful nation in the world to give a long, fair, resolute try-out to the policy of living by the instinct of expansion alone. If the United States cannot make a success of it, no nation ever can, and none, probably, will ever attempt it again. So when critics denounce our civilization as barbarous, I reply that, if so, a few generations of barbarism are a cheap price for the result. Besides, Mr.

Finkman may prove himself right; he may prove that man can live a full and satisfying inner life without intellect, without beauty, without religion and morals, and with but the most rudimentary social life and manners, provided only he has unlimited exercise of the instinct of expansion, and can drive ahead in the expression of it with the whole force of his being. If Mr. Finkman proves this, he will have the laugh on many like myself who at present have the whole course of human history behind our belief that no such thing can be done. But this is a small matter. The important thing is that we should then have a new world peopled by a new order of beings not at all like ourselves, but by no means devoid of interest on that account. So, whether the result be in success or in failure, the great American experiment – for just this is the great American experiment – seems to me wholly worth while.