

## A Cultural Forecast

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### I

We are becoming more or less familiar with the assumption that our immediate cultural prospects are not good. It is the motive of most of the “literature of revaluation,” or, as Mr. H. L. Mencken prefers to call it, the Katzenjammer literature of the period. As far as the fact is concerned, we may face it frankly. There seems no doubt that it will be a long time before the humane life, as the ages have understood the term, will prevail among us – before our collective life and its institutions will reflect any considerable spiritual activity. Our present collective life, in its ideals and aspirations as well as in its actual practice, is admittedly conducted upon a very low spiritual level. One has only to imagine Plato or Virgil, Dante or Rabelais, contemplating it – souls preeminent in the knowledge and practice of the humane life – and one has no trouble in arriving at the verdict that would be passed upon it by the best reason and spirit of mankind. Moreover, there are no discernible tendencies showing promise of a better state of things, at least within a period short enough to give the question more than an academic interest for our day. Those of our grandchildren, if any, who shall feel within them any vague promptings towards the humane life will be unlikely to find the general current setting that way much more strongly than it does at present.

On the score of fact and truth, therefore, one has nothing against the prophets who keep assiduously telling us all this. Their attitude towards the truth, however, and, by consequence, their attitude towards our present representative society, seem a little uncritical. Most of them appear to expect more of our civilization than it can possibly give them; and their disappointment takes shape in irritation and complaint. This seems historically

to have been the chief trouble with the evangelizing spirit, and the chief reason why evangelists themselves usually got no great way in the practice of the humane life, and were, on the whole, rather unpleasant persons to have around. Criticism reckons with the causes of things, and it duly apprehends the length of the course which matters must run under their propulsion, or even under the force of inertia after those causes are no longer operative. Hence, criticism invariably judges social phenomena according to the strength and inveteracy of the causes that give rise to them. In our early days, for example, about a century ago, a representative of Cincinnati's light and learning said to Mrs. Trollope, "Shakespeare, madame, is obscene; and, thank God, we are sufficiently advanced to have found it out." Criticism does not stop with remarking that this man's view of both Cincinnati and Shakespeare was very inept, and that he should have done better. Criticism, properly employing the scientific imagination, examines the beginnings and development of Cincinnati's social life, considers its general character and quality, and its only marvel is that any person bred there should have even heard of Shakespeare, or felt it appropriate to have any opinion at all about him, even a silly one. Again, everyone remembers the great fuss that was made last year over the Treasury Department's confiscation of some imported classic, I have forgotten which one; or only the other day, over Mayor Thompson's opera-buffa performances in the Chicago libraries. But considering the progress of our cultural life as exhibited consecutively in the great work of Mr. Beard, or as shown by Mr. Bowers, Mr. Sandburg, Mr. Allan Nevins and Mr. Paxton Hibben, in their study of special periods, criticism can only regard it as by some kind of miracle that the humane life exists at all among us, or that our cultural prospects are even as cheerful as they are.

## II

For the humane life does exist among us, and as far as one person's observation goes, it reaches a higher individual development all round among us than in any other society I know of. The reason why our cultural prospects are so poor is not, as is sometimes very superficially said, that there is no

culture here. On the contrary, the best culture that I have ever seen, judged by its fruits – culture taking shape in lucidity of mind, intellectual curiosity and hospitality, largeness of temper, objectivity, the finest sense of social life, of manners, of beauty – was in the United States. The aggregate of it is much less, relatively, than elsewhere; but scanty, frail, and unproductive as it is, I have never seen better.

Nor is there any more value in the equally superficial observation that Americans do not much care for culture. What people, left to their own devices and preferences, ever did much care for culture? The general diffusion and prevalence of culture, as far as it has gone, has always been an effect of the high culture of certain classes. In Europe, where people care more for culture than we do, one cannot help observing how largely the love of it is traditional, and how much of the technical apparatus of culture, on which their own culture is patterned, and by which their love of culture is both stimulated and regulated – how much of all this has come to them by way of sheer legacy. Take out the cultural vestiges and traditions of about three royal courts, and anyone travelling through France can easily reckon the mighty shrinkage of French cultural apparatus and the slowing-down of the general tradition's momentum. The approach to culture is laborious and discouraging, and the natural man dislikes work and is easily discouraged. Spiritual activity is too new a thing in the experience of the race; men have not been at it long enough to be at ease in it. It is like the upright position; men can and do assume the upright position, but seldom keep to it longer than necessary – they sit down when they can. The majority have always preferred an inferior good that was more easily acquired and more nearly immediate, unless they were subjected to some strong stimulus which for collateral reasons made the sacrifices demanded by culture seem worth while. Matthew Arnold quotes the learned Martinus Scriblerus's saying (being far from books at the moment, I must quote from memory) that the taste for the bathos is implanted by nature deep in the soul of man, and that it governs him "until, perverted by custom or example, he is brought, or rather compelled, to relish the sublime."

The Church in the Middle Ages could, and did, exercise this power of perversion. It never has had half enough credit for the cultural effect of what it did, even though, for reasons of its own, it did not do all it might have done. The royal courts could exercise the same power, and many of them did, like that of Francis I, for example, and some of the Bavarian kings. Sometimes they cooperated with the Church, thus directing two powerful forces towards the same end. The Church and the court were in a position, not only to organize spiritual activity of various kinds, but also to give it a prestige that made effective headway against the natural taste for the bathos. With these assistances and recommendations, culture got over its initial obstacles, and later could make its own way, relying upon its own power of attraction. The Belgians were always a musical people after their own fashion, and a very good and interesting fashion, but the Elector of Bavaria, Max-Emmanuel, when Governor of the Netherlands, organized music as a function of the civil service, thus giving it a prestige whereby the Belgians were brought “to relish the sublime” in that art, as they still do, and would probably for some time continue to do, even if the royal patronage of music were withdrawn. It is not generally understood, I think, that a very extensive organization of spiritual activity once took place on our continent, in the Mormon polity under Brigham Young; and though it remained in force so short a time, traces of its effect are still plainly to be seen.

Now, it is the lack in America of any influence that by common consent can exercise just this power of perversion, which makes the outlook for culture so unpromising. The person who looks wistfully at culture must go forward practically alone against the full force of wind and tide. Such culture as we have is solitary and uninfluential, existing fortuitously, like stonecrop in the interstices of a much-trodden pavement. One can imagine nothing more disregarded, disparaged, more out of the general run of American affairs. By general consent culture has no place in our institutional life; not in the pulpit, not in the public service or in journalism, notoriously not in our colleges and schools, not in our literature – such of our literature, at least, with rare and very interesting exceptions, as gets itself easily published and considerably read. Here again, however, criticism, while regretting the

fact, can see nothing unnatural in it, and nothing susceptible of immediate change. Our whole institutional life is carried on with a view to objects and purposes which are not those of culture; and the complete alienation of culture from its processes is, therefore, quite to be expected. It is simply a fact to be remarked, not a condition to be complained of. In other civilizations the natural taste for the bathos has been, by common consent, severely modified through processes of perversion; but in ours it has been glorified, by common consent, into unapproachable dominance.

To the eye of criticism, some of the consequences of this are interesting. With the natural taste for the bathos everywhere unrestrained and rampant, there is hardly anyone among us who suspects the existence of impersonal critical standards, much less feels it incumbent on him to pay them any respect. A European would see at once, for instance, why a ruler like Frederick the Great, whose position raised him above pettiness and self-interest, with advisers like von Humboldt and Schleiermacher, would be likely to devise a better system of secondary schools than could be worked out by some local school-board appointed by a mayor. An American would not see it so easily; ten to one he would say the local board would do better, as more likely “to give the people what they want” – more likely, that is, to meet the grand average of local taste for the bathos. Thus, there really exists no sense among us of what is first class, second class, third or fourth class, or of what makes it so. Everyone has noticed that our reviewers bestow exactly the same order of praise on a fourth-class work of art – a book, for example – that they do upon a first-class work. I have now before me, for instance, some reviews of a new novel; and two or three of the writers – men of some pretensions, whose word goes a long way with readers, I understand – could not be more earnestly reverential if they were speaking of Cervantes’s masterpiece. I have not read the novel, and it may be very great, of course, but really can it be that great? With all my best wishes for the author, I fear not. Many fourth-class books indeed deserve high praise; we all have read such books with pleasure, and with no less pleasure because we knew all the time that they were fourth-class books, and knew why they were such, and knew that the pleasure we were getting out of them was of an

entirely different order from that which we get out of first-class books. A fourth-class book is not *ipso facto* to be disparaged, for it may be very good indeed; but neither is it to be spoken of in the same terms that one would use of a first-class book, and no writer with any critical sense – no writer, that is, who was depending on something above and beyond a mere personal estimate of the work before him – would dream of doing so.

In this general critical insensitiveness, Americans remind one of those large worms of the species called Eunice, I think, which will begin to eat their own bodies if they discover them lying in range of their mouth. Americans have no Philistine objection to a good thing; on the contrary, they often accept it. But they accept it without exercising any critical faculty upon it; without really knowing that it is good, or knowing what makes it so. Their estimate is purely personal. Until this is understood it seems anomalous, for example, that a work like that of Professor Adams should be a bestseller, as for some time it was. But they will also accept a bad thing with equal interest and with the same critical insensitiveness, especially if it bears some kind of specious recommendation. At the Opera-Comique, not long ago, I sat beside a very civil and pleasant stranger who turned out to be an American, through all that I could endure of the very worst performance of “Hoffmann” I ever heard in my life. After the first act my neighbour praised it with immense enthusiasm, which embarrassed me into silence. Finally, however, being obliged to say something, I said that, having heard the same opera so lately at Brussels, I supposed I was rather spoiled. “Ah, Brussels!” he said. “Well, now, that’s interesting. I overheard somebody saying that same thing out in the street, just as I was coming in. But I didn’t pay much attention to it, you know, because I sort of took for granted that the best performances must be here in Paris.”

It would be unfair to press this illustration too far, because very few Americans nowadays, especially if they live in New York, have a chance to hear even a tolerable performance of “Hoffmann.” But without any unfairness, the reader will have no trouble in getting the implication. A visiting European would have been likely to know that the performance we heard was bad; he would have known why it was bad; and the fact of its being

given at the Opera-Comique in Paris would have had no weight with him whatever. The great majority of Americans (without prejudice to the gentleman who sat beside me) are quite devoid of this critical faculty. What they encounter under some special set of altogether unrelated circumstances they are predisposed to accept and applaud, quite unaware that there is a strict impersonal standard set for such matters, and that, according to this standard, the thing they are accepting may be rated very low indeed. This uncritical attitude appears in every department of spiritual activity, and indulgence in it is unchecked by any organized influence of any kind.

Indeed, every organized influence is actively on the other side; it is on the side of the cultural taste for the bathos. When Francis I or the Elector Max-Emmanuel or Richelieu set out to make some partial and indirect recommendation of the humane life – to show in some measure what a good, desirable, and satisfactory thing it is – he had a fairly clear field. He did not find the natural taste for the bathos immensely fortified by innumerable mechanical accessories, and flattered by all the arts of salesmanship employed in disposing of them. This is the crucial difference, from the standpoint of culture, that criticism observes between the times, say, of the Elector Max and those of Albert I. When the Elector Max established the Monnaie, he had hardly any competition to meet. There was no horde of commercial enterprisers busily encouraging the popular taste for the bathos to believe that it was good taste, just as good as anybody's, that its standards were all right, and that all it had to do was to keep on its natural way in order to come out as well as need be, and to realize as complete satisfaction as the human spirit demands. This is the kind of thing which Albert I, in continuing the Elector Max's tradition, has to meet; and in America where there has never been any authoritative tradition, and no power capable of establishing one, this is the kind of thing which goes on in greater strength and larger extension than anywhere else in the world.

### III

This is the condition that really determines the forecast which criticism is obliged to make for culture in America. The situation, viewed *in limine*, is clearly quite hopeless; and criticism makes this forecast, I repeat, without blame, and, as I shall show presently, without despair or depression. What is the use of recommending the satisfactions of spiritual activity to people who are already quite satisfied amid the inconceivable multiplicity of mechanical accessories and organized promotions of spiritual inactivity? Tell them, as our prophets and reformers do, that the natural taste for the bathos is educable and improvable, and that they ought to do something about it in order to attain the highest degree of happiness possible to humanity, and they reply, "You may be right, but we are not interested. We are doing quite well as we are. Spiritual activity is hard work; nobody else is doing it, and we are getting on comfortably without any work. We have plenty of distractions to take up our time, plenty of good company, everybody is going our way and nobody going yours." What can one answer? Nothing, simply – there is no answer.

There never was a time of so many and so powerful competitive distractions contesting with culture for the employment of one's hours, and directly tending towards the reinforcement and further degradation of the natural taste for the bathos. One has but to think of the enormous army of commercial enterprisers engaged in pandering to this taste and employing every conceivable device of ingenuity to confirm and flatter and reassure it. Publishers, newspaper-proprietors, editors, preachers, purveyors of commercial amusement, college presidents – the list is endless – all aim consciously at the lowest common denominator of public intelligence, taste, and character. One may not say that they do this willingly in all cases, but they do it consciously. But this is not all. Usually for social reasons or, one may say, for purposes of exhibition, the natural taste for bathos still largely pays a kind of acknowledgement to the superiority of culture. This acknowledgment takes the form of a willingness, or even a desire, to assume the appearance of culture and counterfeit its superficial qualities. Commercial enterprise has

seized upon this disposition and made as much of it as it can, thereby administering to the natural taste for the bathos the subtlest flattery of all. Thus in literature, education, music, art, in every department of spiritual activity, we have developed an impressive system of passive exercise in culture, a system proposing to produce a sound natural development while the mind of the patient remains completely and comfortably inert upon its native plane of thought and imagination. The apparatus of this substitutionary process is well known to everyone; the “outline” of this or that, the travel bureau, the lecture bureau, the Browning club, the Joseph Conrad club, and so on. Its peak of organization, by the testimony of William James, is reached at Chautauqua. Thus the pursuit of an imitation or Brummagem culture is industriously sophisticated by brisk young college professors with an agreeable gift for miscellaneous volubility, and effeminized by the patronage of women’s clubs. I have every wish that this last observation shall not be misunderstood. Whatever may have been the case at the beginning, I feel sure that if the work and influence of women were now subtracted from our society we should after a short time have very little of a civilized environment left. The cartoonist’s count against the male of the species, I think, is a true one – I know it is true against myself – that, left to his own devices, he contentedly lapses into squalor. All I suggest is that the natural taste for the bathos knows no distinction of sex. The uncritical attitude towards affairs of the spirit is common to women and men. Among us, spiritual activity, or the counterfeit of it, has always been popularly regarded as lying quite exclusively in woman’s province; indeed, our economic system has already brought men pretty well down to the anthropoid level by condemning them to incessant preoccupation with the mere means of existence. Hence our apparatus of culture and our management of it are peculiarly susceptible to the feminine variant of the natural taste for the bathos. Perhaps one sees a fair example of this susceptibility, and the fruits of it, in our development of music, with its relatively great interest in the personality of artists, and its slight interest in the programmes that the artists execute.

It must never be forgotten – one cannot be insisting on it at every paragraph in an essay of this length – that culture has not for its final object the

development of intelligence and taste, but the profound transformations of character that can only be effected by the self-imposed discipline of culture. An appearance of culture, effected by no discipline whatever, but only by docility in following one's nose, cannot bring about these transformations. It is not to be doubted, I think, that Americans will soon have a very considerable nodding acquaintance with the best in literature and in the other arts, which is the working apparatus of culture; many influences, mostly commercial, already conspire to promote this. But the transformations of character, which are the only fruit of culture that make it worth serious recommendation, are not to be brought about in that way. It is one thing, for the sake of collateral purposes unrelated to culture, to desire this nodding acquaintance and to undergo the passive exercise necessary to get it; and it is quite another thing to desire the transformations of character attainable only through culture, and to submit to the discipline of culture necessary to effect them.

Probably everyone who is more or less occupied in the works and ways of culture runs across an occasional spirit, usually young and ardent, who desires the fruits of culture and welcomes the discipline that brings them forth. Sanguine persons argue from this phenomenon that matters look brighter, bidding us think of what the grandparents of these young people, and the society that surrounded them, were like. Criticism, however, measures the strength of the opposite pull on these young people of the present day, discriminates carefully between real and apparent culture, as between leaves and fruit; it looks attentively into the matter of motive directed towards either, and it is obliged to regard this sign of promise as misleading. Superficially it is perhaps impressive, but actually it has little significance. I get letters from many such young spirits, and as so many come to an inconspicuous person like myself, I sometimes wonder how many come to persons whose relations with culture are in a sense official. I have two such letters this morning – what is one to say? The worst of it is that my correspondents mostly tell me they are not poor and that they have no responsibilities which would prevent their doing measurably what they like. Apparently they have enough in their favour; it is the imponderabilia that

are against them. There is no trouble about telling them what to do, but one is all the time oppressed by the consciousness of delivering a counsel of perfection. How can one say to these correspondents, “Well, but the farther you progress in culture, the farther out of the current of affairs you put yourself, the more you are deprived of the precious sense of cooperation with your fellows; and this is a rather hard and forlorn prospect for a young person to face”? The author of the *Imitation* said with great acuteness that “the fewer there be who follow the way to heaven, the harder that way is to find” – and, he might have added, the harder to follow. It is not to be wondered at that these youthful spirits so often abandon themselves to a sterile discontent, and to a final weary acceptance of such slender compromise as the iron force of the civilization about them may yield.

Sanguine persons also get encouragement out of the “revaluation-process” that they see, or think they see, going on in America, and hope for great things from it. Criticism again, however, after taking stock of this process as benevolently as it can, must regard their hopes as illusory. The pretended signs or symptoms of revaluation mean actually nothing of the kind. The present popularity of a certain type of historical and biographical writing, for instance, argues nothing for culture. It does not imply any unusual energy of aspiration, or indeed anything necessarily but a vagrant and vulgar curiosity. A very brief view of the most popular books of this type is enough to show this clearly; one may see at a glance that their success is a success of scandal. So much may be said for the type of social study presented in pseudo-critical essays, and in the fiction produced by what one of my friends describes as “cheeky reporters with rather nasty minds.” Criticism does not pause to discuss the collateral effects of this body of literature, but merely observes that it does nothing for culture, and that any expectations based upon its popularity had better be given up. We all know that this literature is almost invariably approached for the sake of a kind of delectation which criticism must regard as extremely low. One approaches it to have one’s own vague malevolences, suspicions, repugnances, formulated and confirmed, and then reflected back upon one’s own consciousness by force of a clever and specious style. How many readers can one imagine approaching

Mr. Sinclair Lewis's novels, for instance, or Mr. Mencken's essays in any other spirit than that of Little Jack Horner? So far, then, from tending towards the transformation of character through culture, our whole body of "revaluation-literature" really withstands and retards it.

Hence, too, the "revaluation-process," of which this literature is taken as symptomatic, appears to be greatly misapprehended; and this misapprehension, again, assists in the sacrifice of one generation at least, and, for all that can now be seen to the contrary, of several.

#### IV

Criticism however, as I said, observes these untoward facts, observes even these lamentable sacrifices, without depression or despair. It is aware that culture and the humane life have one invincible ally on their side – the self-preserving instinct in humanity. This ally takes its time about asserting itself, but assert itself finally and effectively it always does. Ignorance, vulgarity, a barbaric and superficial spirit, may, and from all appearances will, predominate unquestioned for years in America, for ages if you like; no one can set a term on it. But a term there is, nevertheless, and when it is reached, men will come back to the quest of the humane life because they cannot do without it any longer. That is what has always happened, and it will happen again. Probably no one in that day will be able to tell just what has moved them; the general currents of life will simply reverse themselves and set in the opposite direction, and no one will be able to assign any better reason for it than that humanity could not any longer put up with their running the way they were. Perhaps by that time the political entity which we now know as the United States will have disappeared; one sees no reason to attach any peculiar permanence to it over any of the other political entities that have come and gone. Criticism, indeed, attaches very little importance to the bare question of the future of culture in the United States – *sub specie æternitatis* what is the United States? Criticism knows well enough what the future of culture will be, and it may tentatively observe that the prospects in one place or another, for a few generations or a few

centuries perhaps, seem to show this-or-that probable degree of correspondence with that future; but it interests itself no further. Virgil and Marcus Aurelius had no nationalist conception of culture; anxiety about Roman culture was the last thing to enter their minds. Socrates and his friends did not inflate themselves with notions of the humane life as an Athenian property; they turned over all that kind of bombast to the politicians and publicists of the period, and threw in some rare humour for good measure, to keep it company. Their course is the one which criticism suggests as sincerely practical for Americans of the present time. Contemplating the future of culture in no set terms of nationality or race or time, they recognized the self-preserving instinct of mankind as on its side, and did not worry about it any further. On the contrary, they approached their own age with the understanding, equanimity, humour, and tolerance that culture indicates; and instead of expecting their civilization to give them more than it possibly could give them, instead of continually fretting at their fellow citizens, blaming, browbeating or expostulating with them for their derogations from the humane life, they bent their energies, as far as circumstances allowed, towards making some kind of progress in the humane life themselves.