THE FRAGMENTATION OF CULTURE

By DERMOT MORRAH

In the famous shield of arms borne by the University of Oxford the central place is occupied by a book with seven seals. About it are set three golden crowns; and upon its open pages is inscribed a text from the psalms: *Dominus Illuminatio Mea*.

Which things are an allegory. Although the image of the seven-sealed book is taken directly from St. John's Apocalypse, the University has attached to the seals a significance of its own. They stand for the traditional discipline common to all the mediaeval *studia generalia*, consisting of the literary *trivium* of grammar, rhetoric and dialectic and the scientific *quadrivium* of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music; the sum of the two being the seven liberal arts, which those of us who possess the University's certificate that we are masters thereof are licensed to teach, by virtue of her *jus ubique docendi*, in all the academies of Christendom. The three crowns represent the three 'superior' faculties of divinity, medicine, and jurisprudence; and the motto on the open page is a declaration that all the lamps of learning are lit by a light from beyond the world. The interpretation of the whole is that no student will be permitted to embark upon any of the three specialised studies unless he has first qualified himself by mastering the contents of the book of the arts, which is a single volume that cannot be approached save by opening each and all of its seven seals; and that the specialised faculties and the general body of the arts are alike to be governed by their direction toward a supernatural end.

This great conception, of a broad basis of knowledge common to all men dedicated to the learned life, shared equally by the scientists, the doctors of medicine, by the counsellors in secular government, the doctors of laws, and by the spiritual leaders, the doctors of divinity, is the foundation of the unity of culture in the middle ages. It is true that the first and greatest of the intellectual rebels of the new Europe, Peter Abelard, endeavoured in his youth to set it aside, and precipitated his first quarrel with authority by presuming to lecture in theology before he had 'incepted' in the arts. But the repudiation of this exception
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proved the rule; and it was in fact Abelard's disciples, carrying on his pioneer work through many channels, who established and extended the international republic of learning that controlled and unified the culture of the age. By virtue of their citizenship in that republic the wandering scholars could travel from end to end of Europe and find themselves everywhere on terms of easy intercourse with their peers; a Nicholas Breakspear of St. Albans could become legate to the Viking north and eventually pontiff of the universal Church; a Stephen Langton chancellor of the University of Paris, Cardinal of the Roman curia, and finally Primate of All England and effective head of the King's government without ever passing out of the intellectual atmosphere common to all three environments.

This discipline of learned men is not the whole culture of a civilisation, and the culture of the middle ages was not the monopoly of the men—all of them technically churchmen—who were trained in the seven liberal arts. Chivalry, the culture of the lay gentry, is just as much a part of the integrated civilisation of the time, and as indispensable an element in its literary and artistic achievement. But there, too, the essence of the knightly code was a process of initiation in youth which was common to the whole class, into whatever branch of worldly activity its members might eventually expect to graduate. The men of the sword spoke the same language

all over Europe, in almost as significant a sense as did the scholars; and the two castes were inseparably linked, for it was the intellectual leadership of the one, trained everywhere upon the same foundations, which fostered and sustained the international character of the other. As to the popular masses, in an age when the vast majority still drew their livelihood directly from the land, their share in the general culture necessarily derived from uniform rudiments, the immemorial and intricate art of the tillers of the soil.

The Renaissance in one sense broke up the unity of culture by introducing the conception of unlimited obligation to the sovereign state, and so undermined its international character. Within the nation, however, it furthered a more organic culture, by breaking down the social barrier between the successors of the clerks and of the knights. By the seventeenth century in England the ancient system of the *trivium* and the *quadrivium* had been revivified and transformed by the infusion of the new learning, and had been developed into what is in all its main features identical with that which Victorian schoolmasters would call 'the grand old fortifying classical curriculum.' But although it had changed and in many directions broadened out, it still retained the essential feature of the mediaeval system, which was not a group of distinct disciplines among which a young man might choose according to the demands of the career he expected to follow, whether as soldier or politician, landlord or parson, merchant, diplomatist or man of letters, but a uniform preparation conceived to be the necessary foundation for any man aspiring to live among cultivated people in a high civilization. The men who were responsible for the extraordinary flowering of culture at unity with itself in the England of the Restoration and the Augustan age—Wren and Sydenham, Locke and Newton, Congreve, Addison, Swift and Pope, Kneller and Purcell, Ken and Sancroft, Shaftesbury, Halifax, Marlborough, Godolphin, Bolingbroke—a group having as diverse a
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genius as the records of any nation over a like period can show, had all enjoyed essentially the same education. They had all studied, and the more literary minded of them knew intimately, Homer and Virgil, Plato and Aristotle, Thucydides, Livy and Tacitus—indeed the whole body of the standard classical authors. They had also learnt mathematics 'according to Cocker' and Euclid. And from this identity of the intellectual background derived a capacity to appreciate one another's contrasted achievements; all was expressed in terms of the common stock of fundamental ideas, so that the divines had no difficulty in understanding what the poets were trying to convey, and the playwrights could keep in touch with the additions that the scientists were making to the fund of knowledge.

This community of culture survived but little impaired until the end of the nineteenth century. That one Victorian Prime Minister should translate the Homeric poems and another write three volumes on their historical interpretation did not show out-of-the-way erudition, but only the cultivated tastes of exceptionally industrious and gifted members of the governing class. The breakdown of the cultural climate in which that kind of achievement was normal only began in our own time, but having begun has proceeded rapidly. It is closely associated with the decay of the classical curriculum as the sole avenue of approach to higher education in all its branches; but it extends far beyond that. In presidential addresses to the Classical Association remarks on the disappearance of Latin quotations from public life are so much common form that they have long since ceased to make anybody's flesh creep. But last year's president, Lord

Soulbury, added a significant corollary to the familiar theme. After speaking of a somewhat startling illiteracy of which an important London newspaper had been guilty, he went on:

> 'These aberrations are an indication of a cultural depression which has for a long while been growing steadily more intense. Indeed, it is over seventy years since Jebb pointed out that a poetical quotation as an effective instrument had already been abandoned, although it was, as he said, in skilful hands a really powerful weapon of parliamentary debate. But it is futile to quote from ancient *or modern* authors if the audience is unfamiliar with the context or association of the passage. Most of the members of the Athenian Assembly knew their great poets by heart; but I doubt whether that can be said of many of our Members, and the days when all educated Englishmen knew a great deal of Virgil and Horace and, perhaps, Homer *and certainly most of the best English poetry*, have vanished.'

Anyone who is accustomed to read Hansard frequently can testify that Lord Soulbury's lament is justified. The habit of literary allusion has practically disappeared from Parliament; and the most plausible reason is that those speakers who are capable of using it are well aware that it would not be understood. It seems that, in an assembly that was for centuries considered representative, not of learning but of the best and broadest humane culture of the country, members have not merely lost the bond of mutual understanding that came from familiarity with classical literature; they have ceased to have a common cultural language founded in any literature at all.
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Another example of the cultural impoverishment of modern society may be derived from Mr. Douglas Jerrold's recent brilliant introduction to English history, in which he sets out to interpret for the general reader the mass of new discovery about the early middle ages which has accumulated since the time of Freeman and Green. He is seen at once to be embarrassed by the presence of a barrier between himself and his readers by which the historians of that generation were not troubled. They could take for granted a general familiarity with the background of the ancient world against which the development of Roman and Anglo-Saxon Britain had to be viewed; Mr. Jerrold has to devote long chapters to its elucidation. Having to demonstrate—what to the Victorians was self-evident—that early England is only intelligible as an organic part of western Christendom, he has to embark upon lengthy disquisitions about the origin and nature of Christianity, the understanding of which was communicated as a matter of course in an earlier age through the systematic religious instruction to which all were subjected.

Now the educated class of the last century acquired their familiarity with the general body of great literature and art, which was their medium of intercommunication on the higher level of thought, as a derivative of their training in the classical tradition, of which they regarded their own culture as a continuation. The clogging of the channels of cultivated intercourse began with the displacement of the classics from their privileged position in education. There were two large reasons for this revolution. The first was the impact of the new knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge, on the universities and schools. Manifestly no man could be considered educated who had not some acquaintance with the characteristic

intellectual activity of his own age; room had to be made in the curriculum, and the classics, which constituted more than half of it, had to give way. But the manner of the adjustment did not correspond to the need it was supposed to meet. After all, this situation was not new in history. The schools and universities of the Renaissance were also called upon to adapt themselves to a sudden and copious influx of new streams of learning. Humanism, based upon a freshly revealed Greek literature, impinged upon scholasticism, based upon the works of the Latin fathers. But it was not allowed to break up the unity of culture. What happened was that a new system of training was worked out, in which the old curriculum of the *trivium* and *quadrivium* was transformed by the infusion of humanist ideas; and that system controlled the upbringing of the whole educated class. But nothing of the kind happened on the later occasion. Instead of a fusion of the old classical with the new scientific discipline to provide a body of elementary instruction common to all cultivated men, we see a growing tendency for minds to be formed in youth on divergent lines of study, some classical, some 'modern,' some scientific, not only within the same social group but within the same school.

All enlightened schoolmasters fight against this tendency; but the evil that is here envisaged is not quite what they mean by 'over-specialisation.' A man who has made a thorough study of the whole of ancient civilisation, its language and its history, its literature and its art, is not a narrow specialist; neither is another man who has taken a broad view
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of the wide range of the modern natural sciences, or a third, who is at home in the literatures of England, France, and Italy, or even Arabia and Persia. But these men, if not otherwise equipped, are not fellow-members of the same culture; their intellectual attainments may be of the highest value to each of them personally, but are only of social significance in proportion to the area in which they overlap.

The second main influence that has undermined the universality of classical studies is the immense expansion of the classes claiming to benefit by a liberal education. A ladder of advancement has been rightly provided that may lead from the elementary school to the university; but the inevitable corollary is that no branch of study can be regarded as indispensable, as a qualification for entering the higher grades, if its foundations are incapable of being laid in schools which the majority of the pupils are expected to leave at an age of only fourteen or fifteen. The classics, because of their inherent difficulty—which is one of their positive virtues as an instrument of intellectual discipline for those whose education can be planned on a leisurely timetable—fall under this definition; and therefore they are bound to lose their place as the essence of a general education. This is the more respectable of the two reasons for their decline; but it is not a reason for acquiescing in the contemporary fissiparous tendencies, instead of trying to devise a new equipment of fundamental knowledge, more practically attainable under modern conditions than the classical, which can be the medium of intercourse over the whole of the new educated class.

For the civilised tradition of education has always treated it as a process of initiation into the heritage and the values of the entire system of culture into which the recipient has been born. It is different from and the necessary preparation for, that other admirable thing, the pursuit of learning—which is for the few, whereas education is for all. Let it be granted without argument that the new regimen of divergent courses of study from an early age for pupils of different tastes and ambitions may cause knowledge in all its departmental branches to be

carried farther and faster than it can in a society that insists that all minds be thoroughly steeped in its own characteristic atmosphere before the most powerful of them are allowed to concentrate themselves upon particular lines of original investigation. Such knowledge, however, merely through being possessed by certain persons or groups, contributes nothing to culture, which is a social and not an individual possession, a way of life and not a body of information. This is the reason why, as Mr. T. S. Eliot has lately argued, culture must be diffused over a whole society by a class and not by an *élite*; that is, by a natural group, based on family relationship, and not an artificial group, based on the selection of individuals. Therefore the bleak conception of a classless society is the ideal of minds in revolt against civilisation.

The paradox of recent times is that, while collectivism has gone far to dominate politics and economics, individualism has been steadily advancing in education. We share more and more of the things that make up the material environment of life, less and less of the things of the mind and the spirit. Consequently, as our civilisation becomes outwardly more efficient it becomes inwardly more jejune. Many people are now increasingly conscious of this melancholy truth, in its application to
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our national society. We are being challenged to consider whether it prevails, and if so whether it can be transcended, in its application to a larger community. We have embarked on the daring adventure of trying to recreate the supra-national society of western Europe, the society that once possessed a spiritual unity founded upon the values of the Hellenic civilisation as transfigured by Christianity. As we endeavour to revive the body of this ancient society, the memory of what was once its spirit is fading from among us. The success of our new experiment depends on our ability to set in the place of the old Christian Hellenism some body of ideas and beliefs not less exalted and exalting, which yet can be in its entirety the common possession of each individual participant in the ideal civilisation to which we aspire.