E. M. Forster - Does Culture Matter?

Culture is a forbidding word. I have to use it, knowing of none

better, to describe the various beautiful and interesting objects

which men have made in the past, and handed down to us, and

which some of us are hoping to hand on. Many people despise

them. They argue with force that cultural stuff takes up a great

deal of room and time, and had better be scrapped, and they

argue with less force that we live in a new world which has been

wiped clean by science and cannot profit by tradition. Science '

will wipe us clean constantly, they hope, and at decreasing inter-

vals. Broadcasting and the cinema have wiped out the drama,

and quite soon we may hope for some new invention which will

wipe out the cinema industry and Broadcasting House. In this

constant scrubbing, what place can there be for the Branden-

burg Concertos, or for solitary readings of Dante, or for the

mosaics of Santa Sophia, or for photographs of them? We shall

all rush forward doing our work and amusing ourselves during

the recreation hour with whatever gives least bother.

This prospect seems to me so awful that I want to do what I

can against it, without too much attempt at fair-mindedness. It

is impossible to be fair-minded when one has faith — religious

creeds have shown this — and I have so much faith in cultural

stuff that I believe it must mean something to other people, and

anyhow want it left lying about. Faith makes one unkind: I

am pleased when culture scores a neat hit. For instance. Sir

Richard Terry, the organist of Westminster Cathedral, once

made a remark which gave me unholy joy: speaking to some

young musicians at Blackpool, he told them that they could be

either men or crooners when they grew up, but not both. A

storm in a cocktail resulted. The bands of Mr Jack Payne and

Mr Henry Hall fizzed to their depths, and the less prudent

members in them accorded interviews to the press. One crooner

said that he and his friends could knock down Sir Richard and

his friends any day, so they must be men. Another crooner said

that he and his friends made more money than Sir Richard’s

friends, so they must be musicians. The pretentiousness and

conceit of these amusement-mongers came out very strikingly.

They appeared to be living in an eternal thi dansant which they

mistook for the universe, and they couldn’t bear being teased.

For my own part, I don’t mind an occasional croon or a blast

in passing from a Wurlitzer organ, and Sir Richard Terry’s

speciality, madrigals, bore me; nevertheless, the music repre-

sented by him and his peers is the real thing; it ought to be

defended and it has the right occasionally to attack. As a rule,

it is in retreat, for there is a hostility to cultural stuff today which

is disquieting.

Of course, most people never have cared for the classics, in

music or elsewhere, but up to now they have been indifferent

or ribald, and good-tempered, and have not bothered to de-

nounce. “Not my sort, bit tame,” or “Sounds like the cat being

sick, miaou pussy,’’ or “Coo, he must have felt bad to paint

them apples blue” — these were their typical reactions when con-

fronted with Racine, Stravinsky, Cizanne. There was no to-do —

just “Not my sort”. But now the good humour is vanishing, the

guffaw is organized into a sneer, and the typical reaction is

“How dare these so-called art-chaps do it? /’// give them some-

thing to do.” This hostility has been well analysed by Mrs

Leavis, in her study of the English novel. She shows that, though

fiction of the best-seller type has been turned out for the last two

hundred years, it has only lately realized its power, and that

the popular novelist of today tends to be venomous and aggres-

sive towards his more artistic brethren — an attitude in which he

is supported by most of the press, and by the cheap libraries.

Her attitude leads to priggishness; but it is better to be superior

than to kow-tow. There was once a curious incident, which

occupied several inches on a prominent page of The Times, A

popular comedian had been faded out on the air, and the B.B.C.,

generally so stiff-necked, were grovelling low in apology, and

going into all kinds of detail in extenuation of their grave offence.

When they had done, the comedian’s comment was printed; he

professed himself appeased and consented to broadcast in the

future. I wonder how much fuss a poet or a philosopher would

have made if his talk had been cut short, and how many inches

of regret he would have been given.

Incidents like this, so trivial in themselves, suggest that the past,

and the creations that derive from the past, are losing their

honour and on their way to being jettisoned. We have, in this

age of unrest, to ferry much old stuff across the river, and the

old Stuff is not merely books, pictures and music, but the power

to enjoy and understand them. If the power is lost the books,

etc., will sink down into museums and die, or only survive in

some fantastic caricature. The power was acquired through

tradition. Sinclair Lewis, in Babbitt, describes a civilization which

had no tradition and could consequently only work, or amuse

itself with rubbish ; it had heard of the past, but lacked the power

to enjoy it or understand. There is a grim moment at a medium-

istic stance, when Dante is invoked. The company knew of

Dante as the guy who got singed, so he duly appears in this

capacity and returns to his gridiron after a little banter, with a

pleased smirk. He has become a proper comic. And it would

seem that he is having a similar if less extreme experience in

Soviet Russia. He has been ferried across there, but he is con-

demned as a sadist; that is to say, the power to understand him

has been left behind. Certainly Dante wrote over the gates of

Hell that they were made by the power, wisdom and love of

God:

Fecemi la divina Potestate,

La somma Sapienza c il primo Amore,

and neither the Middle West nor the Soviets nor ourselves can

be expected to agree with that. But there is no reason why we

should not understand it, and stretch our minds against his,

although they have a different shape. The past is often uncon-

genial as far as its statements are concerned, but the trained

imagination can surmount them and reach the essential. Dante

seems to me a test case. If people are giving him up it is a sign

that they arc throwing culture overboard, owing to the rough-

ness of the water, and will reach the further bank sans Dante,

sans Shakespeare and sans everything.

Life on that further bank, as I conceive it, is by no means a

nightmare. There will be work for all and play for all. But the

work and the play will be split; the work will be mechanical and

the play frivolous. If you drop tradition and culture you lose

your chance of connecting work and play and creating a life

which is all of a piece. The past did not succeed in doing that,

but it can help us to do it, and that is why it is so useful. Crooners,

best-sellers, electrical-organists, funny-faces, drcam-girlj and

mickey-mice cannot do it — they throw the weight all to one side

and increase the split. They arc all right when they don’t take

themselves seriously. But when they begin to talk big and claim

the front row of the dress circle, and even get to it, something is

wrong. Life on that further bank might not be a nightmare,

but some of us would prefer the sleep that has no dreams.

Cultivated people are a drop of ink in the ocean. They mix

easily and even genially with other drops, for those exclusive

days are over when cultivated people made only cultivated friends,

and became tongue-tied or terror-struck in the presence of anyone

whose make-up was different from their own. Culture, thank

goodness, is no longer a social asset, it can no longer be employed

cither as a barrier against the mob or as a ladder into the aristo-

cracy. This is one of the few improvements that have occurred

in England since the last war. The change has been excellently

shown in Mrs Woolf’s biography of Roger Fry; here we can

trace the decay of smartness and fashion as factors, and the

growth of the idea of enjoyment.

All the same, we are a drop in the ocean. Few people share

our enjoyment so far. Strictly between ourselves, and keeping

our limited circulation in mind, let us put our heads together

and consider for a moment our special problem, our special

blessings, our special woes. No one need listen to us who does

not want to. We whisper in the corner of a world which is full

of other noises, and louder ones.

Come closer. Our problem, as I see it, is this : is what we have

got worth passing on ? What we have got is (roughly speaking)

a little knowledge about books, pictures, tunes, runes, and a little

skill in their interpretation. Seated beside our gas fires, and

beneath our electric bulbs, we inherit a tradition which has lasted

for about three thousand years. The tradition was partly popu-

lar, but mainly dependent upon aristocratic patronage. In the

past, culture has been paid for by the ruling classes; they often

did not know why they paid, but they paid, much as they went

to church; it was the proper thing to do, it was a form of social

snobbery, and so the artists sneaked a meal, the author got a

sinecure, and the work of creation went on. Today, people are

coming to the top who arc, in some ways, more clear-sighted

and honest than the ruling classes of the past, and they refuse to

pay for what they don’t want; judging by the noises through the

floor, our neighbour in the flat above doesn’t want books, pic-

tures, tunes, runes, anyhow doesn’t want the sorts which we

recommend. Ought we to bother him? When he is hurrying

to lead his own life, ought we to get in his way like a maiden

aunt, our arms, as it were, full of parcels, and say to him: “I

was given these specially to hand on to you . . . Sophocles,

Velasquez, Henry James. . . . Pm afraid they’re a little heavy,

but you’ll get to love them in time, and if you don’t take them

off my hands I don’t know who will . . . please . . . please . . .

they’re really important, they’re culture.”

His reply is unlikely to be favourable, but, snubbing or no

snubbing, what ought we to do? That’s our problem, that’s

what we are whispering about, while he and his friends argue

and argue and argue over the trade-price of batteries, or the

quickest way to get from Balham to Ealing. He doesn’t really

want the stuff. That clamour for art and literature which Ruskin

and Morris thought they detected has died down. He won’t

take the parcel unless wc do some ingenious touting. He is an

average modern. People today are either indifferent to the

aesthetic products of the past (that is the position both of the

industrial magnate and of the trade unionist) or else (the Com-

munist position) they are suspicious of them, and decline to

receive them until they have been disinfected in Moscow. In

England, still the abode of private enterprise, indifference pre-

dominates. I know a few working-class people who enjoy cul-

ture, but as a rule I am afraid to bore them with it lest I lose

the pleasure of their acquaintance. So what is to be done ?

It is tempting to do nothing. Don’t recommend culture.

Assume that the future will have none, or will work out some

form of it which wc cannot expect to understand. Auntie had

better keep her parcels for herself, in fact, and stop fidgeting.

This attitude is dignified, and it further commends itself to me

because I can reconcile it with respect for the people arguing

upstairs. Who am I that I should worry them? Out-of-date

myself, I like out-of-date things, and am willing to pass out of

focus in that company, inheritor of a mode of life which is wanted

no more. Do you agree? Without bitterness, let us sit upon

the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings, ourselves

the last of their hangers-on. Drink the wine — no one wants it,

though it came from the vineyards of Greece, the gardens of

Persia. Break the glass — no one admires it, no one cares any

more about quality or form. Without bitterness and without

conceit take your leave. Time happens to have tripped you up,

and this is a matter neither for shame nor for pride.

The difficulty here is that the higher pleasures arc not really

wines or glasses at all. They rather resemble religion, and it is

impossible to enjoy them without trying to hand them on. The

appreciator of an aesthetic achievement becomes in his minor

way an artist; he cannot rest without communicating what has

been communicated to him. This “passing on” impulse takes

various forms, some of them merely educational, others merely

critical ; but it is essentially a glow derived from the central fire,

and to extinguish it is to forbid the spread of the Gospel. It is

therefore impossible to sit alone with one’s books and prints,

or to sit only with friends like oneself, and never to testify out-

side. Dogmatism is of course a mistake, and even tolerance and

tact have too much of the missionary spirit to work satisfactorily.

What is needed in the cultural Grospel is to let one’s light so shine

that men’s curiosity is aroused, and they ask why Sophocles,

Velasquez, Henry James should cause such disproportionate

pleasure. Bring out the enjoyment. If “the classics” are adver-

tised as something dolorous and astringent, no one will sample

them. But if the cultured person, like the late Roger Fry, is

obviously having a good time, those who come across him will

be tempted to share it and to find out how.

That seems to be as far as we can get with our problem, as we

whisper together in our unobtrusive flat, while our neighbours,

who possess voices more powerful than our own, argue about

Balham and Ealing over our heads. Remember, by the way,

that we are not creative artists. The creative artist might take

another line. He would certainly have more urgent duties.

Our chief job is to enjoy ourselves and not to lose heart, and to

spread culture not because we love our fellow men, but because

certain things seem to us unique and priceless, and, as it were,

push us out into the world on their service. It is a Gospel, and

not altogether a benign one; it is the zest to communicate what

has been communicated. Works of art do have this peculiar

pushful quality; the excitement that attended their creation

hangs about them, and makes minor artists out of those who have

felt their power,