

Weekly Forum

Views and Reviews

THE FUTURE OF OUR CULTURE

By LESLIE PINCKNEY HILL

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Whatever anyone might say here today ought to be important. A first commencement of the university under its bright new auspices, and under the assured leadership which is here, ought to set up a standard which tradition itself might honor. The university has come into being under a name which signifies the inward light of the spirit working through the creative power of a great personality. And that great personality has reared to it here a center of learning, a university, which is to be an enduring monument to its meaning.

It would be impossible on this high occasion not to ponder what James Hardy Dillard would have us say and think here today. Himself an exemplar of the finest American culture, nothing, I may presume to imagine, could please him more than to have us considering here seriously and pointedly the future of culture in our land, and the favored part that Dillard men and women may have in its advancement. Dr. Dillard's Charlotte home is graciously dominated by the spirit of the incomparable Jefferson. In the catholicity of his thinking, in the unbelievable versatility of his personal gifts and powers, and in the depth and enduring significance of his public influence Thomas Jefferson stands gigantic still in the front rank of our cultural leaders. The University of Virginia is one embodiment of that leadership. Dr. Dillard's at home there. He understands why Jefferson chose for the university motto: "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." If he and Jefferson and Cardinal Newman were this day in the spirit drawn apart from our confused modernity to enlarge upon the idea of a university they would be of one mind in the judgment that the ultimate test of it must be its service to culture in promoting truth and the fruits of the truth in the conduct of the educated man in all human relations. That, therefore, is the great subject with which I must briefly engage you. I wish to look at the civilization of this moment and see what part culture has in it, what Dillard university in particular has to say about it.

Scholarship today is beginning to distinguish between civilization and culture. That distinction helps me to bring the important word I wish I might speak within reasonable bounds. If civilization preserves the whole past record of the race in literature, art, trade, war and peace, culture is concerned with the values of that record to human betterment. If civilization stands on foundations laid by the past, and is busy with the opportunities and responsibilities of the present, culture is appraising the result and pondering the future. If civilization is tied up with laws that change with a changing society, culture insists upon principles in which there is neither variableness or shadow of turning, upon the "eternal verities." If civilization is that which conditions a man outwardly, culture must be the driving and motivating power of a man's life from within. And, finally, if civilization comprises everything in the whole spread of life—the good, the indifferent, the bad—culture keeps itself under Matthew Arnold's counsel, steadily in the presence of the best.

Always culture is centered in the man. Henry Thomas Buckle, outrunning our Dewey and Watson by more than a hundred years, understood the two forces from which spring all events in the human world—on the one hand nature modifying man, and on the other, man modifying nature. His amazing mind, burnt out in its fortieth year, was ravished by the contemplation of that intellectual and spiritual energy of man which is the sole condition of all progress and which surpasses all the bounty of nature. He glorified in the power of man's mind and heart to rise above all circumstance. He gave us a marvelous story of the long struggle of man up from the grip of the blind forces within, as well as without, until there emerged the one thing that survives time itself, man's genius, man's conquering spirit which is the end of culture. And man was Emerson's chief concern. "I own," says he, "I have little esteem for governments . . . I set the private man first. He only who is able to stand alone is qualified to be a citizen." Civilization as government, in Emerson's view, needed to be watched, lest it blight the freedom of the individual and thereby make an end of culture. The meaning of culture and what might happen to it engaged all his devotion.

Now I accept this general idea of culture as being that inward and essential element of civilization which a university must magnify. I also approve Emerson's emphasis upon the ability of a man to stand alone. He is not indicating here the isolated man, but the man who in the midst of life keeps unscarred his personal independence and integrity. He is the man of culture whom to lose is to shut out the light of the world. Society itself has given us the signs and marks of this man, wherever and whenever he may appear. Man is independent and self reliant, able to stand alone, society says, only when he knows, feels and lives the best that the mind and heart of the world have achieved and expressed. We know that this best, in its most communicable form, comes to us in great literature. Here, better than in any other medium, a man finds what the prophets, the teachers and the poets, in all lands and times, have conceived to be the end of human existence. "Literature," says Barrett Wendell, "is the lasting expression in words of the meaning of life." The man of culture, knowing that life is essentially a spiritual experience, exalts spiritual values. Knowing that the meaning and end of his existence must be discovered at the last within himself, he centers his energies in the calm and resolute determination to safeguard the integrity and strength of his spirit against every assault of time or circumstance. He sees things, in Spinoza's phrase, "sub specie aeternitatis," under the form of eternity. In the truth he finds poise, assurance, enduring satisfaction. He draws comfort and reinforcement from every other kindred spirit. He is a stock to all meanness and guilty conscience. That is why Phocion was moved by the serenity of Phocion's countenance, why no one could leave John Woolman and be the same.

(Continued Next Week)