

Avant-Garde and Kitsch

One and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such different things as a poem by T. S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song, or a painting by Braque and a *Saturday Evening Post* cover. All four are on the order of culture, and ostensibly, parts of the same culture and products of the same society. Here, however, their connection seems to end. A poem by Eliot and a poem by Eddie Guest—what perspective of culture is large enough to enable us to situate them in an enlightening relation to each other? Does the fact that a disparity such as this exists within the frame of a single cultural tradition, which is and has been taken for granted—does this fact indicate that the disparity is a part of the natural order of things? Or is it something entirely new, and particular to our age?

The answer involves more than an investigation in aesthetics. It appears to me that it is necessary to examine more closely and with more originality than hitherto the relationship between aesthetic experience as met by the specific—not the generalized—individual, and the social and historical contexts in which that experience takes place. What is brought to light will answer, in addition to the question posed above, other and perhaps more important questions.

I

A society, as it becomes less and less able, in the course of its development, to justify the inevitability of its particular forms, breaks up the accepted notions upon which artists and

writers must depend in large part for communication with their audiences. It becomes difficult to assume anything. All the verities involved by religion, authority, tradition, style, are thrown into question, and the writer or artist is no longer able to estimate the response of his audience to the symbols and references with which he works. In the past such a state of affairs has usually resolved itself into a motionless Alexandrianism, an academicism in which the really important issues are left untouched because they involve controversy, and in which creative activity dwindles to virtuosity in the small details of form, all larger questions being decided by the precedent of the old masters. The same themes are mechanically varied in a hundred different works, and yet nothing new is produced: Statius, mandarin verse, Roman sculpture, Beaux-Arts painting, neo-republican architecture.

It is among the hopeful signs in the midst of the decay of our present society that we—some of us—have been unwilling to accept this last phase for our own culture. In seeking to go beyond Alexandrianism, a part of Western bourgeois society has produced something unheard of heretofore:—avant-garde culture. A superior consciousness of history—more precisely, the appearance of a new kind of criticism of society, an historical criticism—made this possible. This criticism has not confronted our present society with timeless utopias, but has soberly examined in the terms of history and of cause and effect the antecedents, justifications and functions of the forms that lie at the heart of every society. Thus our present bourgeois social order was shown to be, not an eternal, “natural” condition of life, but simply the latest term in a succession of social orders. New perspectives of this kind, becoming a part of the advanced intellectual conscience of the fifth and sixth decades of the nineteenth century, soon were absorbed by artists and poets, even if unconsciously for the most part. It was no accident, therefore, that the birth of the avant-garde coincided chronologically—and geographically, too—with the first bold development of scientific revolutionary thought in Europe.

True, the first settlers of bohemia—which was then identical with the avant-garde—turned out soon to be demonstratively uninterested in politics. Nevertheless, without the circulation of revolutionary ideas in the air about them, they would never have been able to isolate their concept of the “bourgeois” in order to define what they were *not*. Nor, without the moral aid of revolutionary political attitudes would they have had the courage to assert themselves as aggressively as they did against the prevailing standards of society. Courage indeed was needed for this, because the avant-garde’s emigration from bourgeois society to bohemia meant also an emigration from the markets of capitalism, upon which artists and writers had been thrown by the falling away of aristocratic patronage. (Ostensibly, at least, it meant this—meant starving in a garret—although, as will be shown later, the avant-garde remained attached to bourgeois society precisely because it needed its money.)

Yet it is true that once the avant-garde had succeeded in “detaching” itself from society, it proceeded to turn around and repudiate revolutionary as well as bourgeois politics. The revolution was left inside society, a part of that welter of ideological struggle which art and poetry find so unpropitious as soon as it begins to involve those “precious” axiomatic beliefs upon which culture thus far has had to rest. Hence it developed that the true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to “experiment,” but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion and violence. Retiring from public altogether, the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high level of his art by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point. “Art for art’s sake” and “pure poetry” appear, and subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like a plague.

It has been in search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at “abstract” or “nonobjective” art—and poetry,

too. The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape—not its picture—is aesthetically valid; something *given*, increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself.

But the absolute is absolute, and the poet or artist, being what he is, cherishes certain relative values more than others. The very values in the name of which he invokes the absolute are relative values, the values of aesthetics. And so he turns out to be imitating, not God—and here I use “imitate” in its Aristotelian sense—but the disciplines and processes of art and literature themselves. This is the genesis of the “abstract.”¹ In turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft. The nonrepresentational or “abstract,” if it is to have aesthetic validity, cannot be arbitrary and accidental, but must stem from obedience to some worthy constraint or original. This constraint, once the world of common, extra-verted experience has been renounced, can only be found in the very processes or disciplines by which art and literature have already imitated the former. These themselves become the subject matter of art and literature. If, to continue with

¹ The example of music, which has long been an abstract art, and which avant-garde poetry has tried so much to emulate, is interesting. Music, Aristotle said curiously enough, is the most imitative and vivid of all arts because it imitates its original—the state of the soul—with the greatest immediacy. Today this strikes us as the exact opposite of the truth, because no art seems to us to have less reference to something outside itself than music. However, aside from the fact that in a sense Aristotle may still be right, it must be explained that ancient Greek music was closely associated with poetry, and depended upon its character as an accessory to verse to make its imitative meaning clear. Plato, speaking of music, says: “For when there are no words, it is very difficult to recognize the meaning of the harmony and rhythm, or to see that any worthy object is imitated by them.” As far as we know, all music originally served such an accessory function. Once, however, it was abandoned, music was forced to withdraw into itself to find a constraint or original. This is found in the various means of its own composition and performance.

Aristotle, all art and literature are imitation, then what we have here is the imitation of imitating. To quote Yeats:

Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence.

Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Miró, Kandinsky, Brancusi, even Klee, Matisse and Cézanne derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in.² The excitement of their art seems to lie most of all in its pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors, etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors. The attention of poets like Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Valéry, Éluard, Pound, Hart Crane, Stevens, even Rilke and Yeats, appears to be centered on the effort to create poetry and on the "moments" themselves of poetic conversion, rather than on experience to be converted into poetry. Of course, this cannot exclude other preoccupations in their work, for poetry must deal with words, and words must communicate. Certain poets, such as Mallarmé and Valéry,³ are more radical in this respect than others—leaving aside those poets who have tried to compose poetry in pure sound alone. However, if it were easier to define poetry, modern poetry would be much more "pure" and "abstract." As for the other fields of literature—the definition of avant-garde aesthetics advanced here is no Procrustean bed. But aside from the fact that most of our best contemporary novelists have gone to school with the avant-garde, it is significant that Gide's most ambitious book is a novel about the writing of a novel, and that Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* seem to be, above all, as one French critic says, the reduction of experience to expression for the sake

² I owe this formulation to a remark made by Hans Hofmann, the art teacher, in one of his lectures. From the point of view of this formulation, Surrealism in plastic art is a reactionary tendency which is attempting to restore "outside" subject matter. The chief concern of a painter like Dali is to represent the processes and concepts of his consciousness, not the processes of his medium.

³ See Valéry's remarks about his own poetry.

of expression, the expression mattering more than what is being expressed.

That avant-garde culture is the imitation of imitating—the fact itself—calls for neither approval nor disapproval. It is true that this culture contains within itself some of the very Alexandrianism it seeks to overcome. The lines quoted from Yeats referred to Byzantium, which is very close to Alexandria; and in a sense this imitation of imitating is a superior sort of Alexandrianism. But there is one most important difference: the avant-garde moves, while Alexandrianism stands still. And this, precisely, is what justifies the avant-garde's methods and makes them necessary. The necessity lies in the fact that by no other means is it possible today to create art and literature of a high order. To quarrel with necessity by throwing about terms like "formalism," "purism," "ivory tower" and so forth is either dull or dishonest. This is not to say, however, that it is to the *social* advantage of the avant-garde that it is what it is. Quite the opposite.

The avant-garde's specialization of itself, the fact that its best artists are artists' artists, its best poets, poets' poets, has estranged a great many of those who were capable formerly of enjoying and appreciating ambitious art and literature, but who are now unwilling or unable to acquire an initiation into their craft secrets. The masses have always remained more or less indifferent to culture in the process of development. But today such culture is being abandoned by those to whom it actually belongs—our ruling class. For it is to the latter that the avant-garde belongs. No culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income. And in the case of the avant-garde, this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of that society from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold. The paradox is real. And now this elite is rapidly shrinking. Since the avant-garde forms the only living culture we now have, the survival in the near future of culture in general is thus threatened.

We must not be deceived by superficial phenomena and local successes. Picasso's shows still draw crowds, and T. S. Eliot is taught in the universities; the dealers in modernist art are still in business, and the publishers still publish some "difficult" poetry. But the avant-garde itself, already sensing the danger, is becoming more and more timid every day that passes. Academicism and commercialism are appearing in the strangest places. This can mean only one thing: that the avant-garde is becoming unsure of the audience it depends on—the rich and the cultivated.

Is it the nature itself of avant-garde culture that is alone responsible for the danger it finds itself in? Or is that only a dangerous liability? Are there other, and perhaps more important, factors involved?

II

Where there is an avant-garde, generally we also find a rear-guard. True enough—simultaneously with the entrance of the avant-garde, a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: that thing to which the Germans give the wonderful name of *Kitsch*: popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc. For some reason this gigantic apparition has always been taken for granted. It is time we looked into its whys and wherefores.

Kitsch is a product of the industrial revolution which urbanized the masses of Western Europe and America and established what is called universal literacy.

Prior to this the only market for formal culture, as distinguished from folk culture, had been among those who, in addition to being able to read and write, could command the leisure and comfort that always goes hand in hand with cultivation of some sort. This until then had been inextricably asso-

ciated with literacy. But with the introduction of universal literacy, the ability to read and write became almost a minor skill like driving a car, and it no longer served to distinguish an individual's cultural inclinations, since it was no longer the exclusive concomitant of refined tastes.

The peasants who settled in the cities as proletariat and petty bourgeois learned to read and write for the sake of efficiency, but they did not win the leisure and comfort necessary for the enjoyment of the city's traditional culture. Losing, nevertheless, their taste for the folk culture whose background was the countryside, and discovering a new capacity for boredom at the same time, the new urban masses set up a pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption. To fill the demand of the new market, a new commodity was devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide.

Kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academized simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates this insensibility. It is the source of its profits. Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time.

The precondition for kitsch, a condition without which kitsch would be impossible, is the availability close at hand of a fully matured cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions, and perfected self-consciousness kitsch can take advantage of for its own ends. It borrows from it devices, tricks, stratagems, rules of thumb, themes, converts them into a system, and discards the rest. It draws its life blood, so to speak, from this reservoir of accumulated experience. This is what is really meant when it is said that the popular art and literature of

today were once the daring, esoteric art and literature of yesterday. Of course, no such thing is true. What is meant is that when enough time has elapsed the new is looted for new "twists," which are then watered down and served up as kitsch. Self-evidently, all kitsch is academic; and conversely, all that's academic is kitsch. For what is called the academic as such no longer has an independent existence, but has become the stuffed-shirt "front" for kitsch. The methods of industrialism displace the handicrafts.

Because it can be turned out mechanically, kitsch has become an integral part of our productive system in a way in which true culture could never be, except accidentally. It has been capitalized at a tremendous investment which must show commensurate returns; it is compelled to extend as well as to keep its markets. While it is essentially its own salesman, a great sales apparatus has nevertheless been created for it, which brings pressure to bear on every member of society. Traps are laid even in those areas, so to speak, that are the preserves of genuine culture. It is not enough today, in a country like ours, to have an inclination towards the latter; one must have a true passion for it that will give him the power to resist the faked article that surrounds and presses in on him from the moment he is old enough to look at the funny papers. Kitsch is deceptive. It has many different levels, and some of them are high enough to be dangerous to the naive seeker of true light. A magazine like *The New Yorker*, which is fundamentally high-class kitsch for the luxury trade, converts and waters down a great deal of avant-garde material for its own uses. Nor is every single item of kitsch altogether worthless. Now and then it produces something of merit, something that has an authentic folk flavor; and these accidental and isolated instances have fooled people who should know better.

Kitsch's enormous profits are a source of temptation to the avant-garde itself, and its members have not always resisted this temptation. Ambitious writers and artists will modify their work under the pressure of kitsch, if they do not succumb to

it entirely. And then those puzzling borderline cases appear, such as the popular novelist, Simenon, in France, and Steinbeck in this country. The net result is always to the detriment of true culture, in any case.

Kitsch has not been confined to the cities in which it was born, but has flowed out over the countryside, wiping out folk culture. Nor has it shown any regard for geographical and national-cultural boundaries. Another mass product of Western industrialism, it has gone on a triumphal tour of the world, crowding out and defacing native cultures in one colonial country after another, so that it is now by way of becoming a universal culture, the first universal culture ever beheld. Today the native of China, no less than the South American Indian, the Hindu, no less than the Polynesian, have come to prefer to the products of their native art, magazine covers, rotogravure sections and calendar girls. How is this virulence of kitsch, this irresistible attractiveness, to be explained? Naturally, machine-made kitsch can undersell the native handmade article, and the prestige of the West also helps; but why is kitsch a so much more profitable export article than Rembrandt? One, after all, can be reproduced as cheaply as the other.

In his last article on the Soviet cinema in the *Partisan Review*, Dwight Macdonald points out that kitsch has in the last ten years become the dominant culture in Soviet Russia. For this he blames the political regime—not only for the fact that kitsch is the official culture, but also that it is actually the dominant, most popular culture, and he quotes the following from Kurt London's *The Seven Soviet Arts*: “. . . the attitude of the masses both to the old and new art styles probably remains essentially dependent on the nature of the education afforded them by their respective states.” Macdonald goes on to say: “Why after all should ignorant peasants prefer Repin (a leading exponent of Russian academic kitsch in painting) to Picasso, whose abstract technique is at least as relevant to their own primitive folk art as is the former's

realistic style? No, if the masses crowd into the Tretyakov (Moscow's museum of contemporary Russian art: kitsch), it is largely because they have been conditioned to shun 'formalism' and to admire 'socialist realism.' "

In the first place it is not a question of a choice between merely the old and merely the new, as London seems to think—but of a choice between the bad, up-to-date old and the genuinely new. The alternative to Picasso is not Michelangelo, but kitsch. In the second place, neither in backward Russia nor in the advanced West do the masses prefer kitsch simply because their governments condition them toward it. Where state educational systems take the trouble to mention art, we are told to respect the old masters, not kitsch; and yet we go and hang Maxfield Parrish or his equivalent on our walls, instead of Rembrandt and Michelangelo. Moreover, as MacDonald himself points out, around 1925 when the Soviet regime was encouraging avant-garde cinema, the Russian masses continued to prefer Hollywood movies. No, "conditioning" does not explain the potency of kitsch.

All values are human values, relative values, in art as well as elsewhere. Yet there does seem to have been more or less of a general agreement among the cultivated of mankind over the ages as to what is good art and what bad. Taste has varied, but not beyond certain limits; contemporary connoisseurs agree with the eighteenth-century Japanese that Hokusai was one of the greatest artists of his time; we even agree with the ancient Egyptians that Third and Fourth Dynasty art was the most worthy of being selected as their paragon by those who came after. We may have come to prefer Giotto to Raphael, but we still do not deny that Raphael was one of the best painters of his time. There has been an agreement then, and this agreement rests, I believe, on a fairly constant distinction made between those values only to be found in art and the values which can be found elsewhere. Kitsch, by virtue of a rationalized technique that draws on science and industry, has erased this distinction in practice.

Let us see, for example, what happens when an ignorant Russian peasant such as Macdonald mentions stands with hypothetical freedom of choice before two paintings, one by Picasso, the other by Repin. In the first he sees, let us say, a play of lines, colors and spaces that represent a woman. The abstract technique—to accept Macdonald's supposition, which I am inclined to doubt—reminds him somewhat of the icons he has left behind him in the village, and he feels the attraction of the familiar. We will even suppose that he faintly surmises some of the great art values the cultivated find in Picasso. He turns next to Repin's picture and sees a battle scene. The technique is not so familiar—as technique. But that weighs very little with the peasant, for he suddenly discovers values in Repin's picture that seem far superior to the values he has been accustomed to find in icon art; and the unfamiliar itself is one of the sources of those values: the values of the vividly recognizable, the miraculous and the sympathetic. In Repin's picture the peasant recognizes and sees things in the way in which he recognizes and sees things outside of pictures—there is no discontinuity between art and life, no need to accept a convention and say to oneself, that icon represents Jesus because it intends to represent Jesus, even if it does not remind me very much of a man. That Repin can paint so realistically that identifications are self-evident immediately and without any effort on the part of the spectator—that is miraculous. The peasant is also pleased by the wealth of self-evident meanings which he finds in the picture: "it tells a story." Picasso and the icons are so austere and barren in comparison. What is more, Repin heightens reality and makes it dramatic: sunset, exploding shells, running and falling men. There is no longer any question of Picasso or icons. Repin is what the peasant wants, and nothing else but Repin. It is lucky, however, for Repin that the peasant is protected from the products of American capitalism, for he would not stand a chance next to a *Saturday Evening Post* cover by Norman Rockwell.

Ultimately, it can be said that the cultivated spectator de-

rives the same values from Picasso that the peasant gets from Repin, since what the latter enjoys in Repin is somehow art too, on however low a scale, and he is sent to look at pictures by the same instincts that send the cultivated spectator. But the ultimate values which the cultivated spectator derives from Picasso are derived at a second remove, as the result of reflection upon the immediate impression left by the plastic values. It is only then that the recognizable, the miraculous and the sympathetic enter. They are not immediately or externally present in Picasso's painting, but must be projected into it by the spectator sensitive enough to react sufficiently to plastic qualities. They belong to the "reflected" effect. In Repin, on the other hand, the "reflected" effect has already been included in the picture, ready for the spectator's unreflective enjoyment.⁴ Where Picasso paints *cause*, Repin paints *effect*. Repin predigests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a short cut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art. Repin, or kitsch, is synthetic art.

The same point can be made with respect to kitsch literature: it provides vicarious experience for the insensitive with far greater immediacy than serious fiction can hope to do. And Eddie Guest and the *Indian Love Lyrics* are more poetic than T. S. Eliot and Shakespeare.

III

If the avant-garde imitates the processes of art, kitsch, we now see, imitates its effects. The neatness of this antithesis is more than contrived; it corresponds to and defines the tremendous interval that separates from each other two such simultaneous cultural phenomena as the avant-garde and kitsch.

⁴T. S. Eliot said something to the same effect in accounting for the shortcomings of English Romantic poetry. Indeed the Romantics can be considered the original sinners whose guilt kitsch inherited. They showed kitsch how. What does Keats write about mainly, if not the effect of poetry upon himself?

This interval, too great to be closed by all the infinite gradations of popularized "modernism" and "modernistic" kitsch, corresponds in turn to a social interval, a social interval that has always existed in formal culture, as elsewhere in civilized society, and whose two termini converge and diverge in fixed relation to the increasing or decreasing stability of the given society. There has always been on one side the minority of the powerful—and therefore the cultivated—and on the other the great mass of the exploited and poor—and therefore the ignorant. Formal culture has always belonged to the first, while the last have had to content themselves with folk or rudimentary culture, or kitsch.

In a stable society that functions well enough to hold in solution the contradictions between its classes, the cultural dichotomy becomes somewhat blurred. The axioms of the few are shared by the many; the latter believe superstitiously what the former believe soberly. And at such moments in history the masses are able to feel wonder and admiration for the culture, on no matter how high a plane, of its masters. This applies at least to plastic culture, which is accessible to all.

In the Middle Ages the plastic artist paid lip service at least to the lowest common denominators of experience. This even remained true to some extent until the seventeenth century. There was available for imitation a universally valid conceptual reality, whose order the artist could not tamper with. The subject matter of art was prescribed by those who commissioned works of art, which were not created, as in bourgeois society, on speculation. Precisely because his content was determined in advance, the artist was free to concentrate on his medium. He needed not to be philosopher, or visionary, but simply artificer. As long as there was general agreement as to what were the worthiest subjects for art, the artist was relieved of the necessity to be original and inventive in his "matter" and could devote all his energy to formal problems. For him the medium became, privately, professionally, the content of his art, even as his medium is today the public

content of the abstract painter's art—with that difference, however, that the medieval artist had to suppress his professional preoccupation in public—had always to suppress and subordinate the personal and professional in the finished, official work of art. If, as an ordinary member of the Christian community, he felt some personal emotion about his subject matter, this only contributed to the enrichment of the work's public meaning. Only with the Renaissance do the inflections of the personal become legitimate, still to be kept, however, within the limits of the simply and universally recognizable. And only with Rembrandt do "lonely" artists begin to appear, lonely in their art.

But even during the Renaissance, and as long as Western art was endeavoring to perfect its technique, victories in this realm could only be signalized by success in realistic imitation, since there was no other objective criterion at hand. Thus the masses could still find in the art of their masters objects of admiration and wonder. Even the bird that pecked at the fruit in Zeuxis' picture could applaud.

It is a platitude that art becomes caviar to the general when the reality it imitates no longer corresponds even roughly to the reality recognized by the general. Even then, however, the resentment the common man may feel is silenced by the awe in which he stands of the patrons of this art. Only when he becomes dissatisfied with the social order they administer does he begin to criticize their culture. Then the plebeian finds courage for the first time to voice his opinions openly. Every man, from the Tammany alderman to the Austrian house-painter, finds that he is entitled to his opinion. Most often this resentment toward culture is to be found where the dissatisfaction with society is a reactionary dissatisfaction which expresses itself in revivalism and puritanism, and latest of all, in fascism. Here revolvers and torches begin to be mentioned in the same breath as culture. In the name of godliness or the blood's health, in the name of simple ways and solid virtues, the statue-smashing commences.

IV

Returning to our Russian peasant for the moment, let us suppose that after he has chosen Repin in preference to Picasso, the state's educational apparatus comes along and tells him that he is wrong, that he should have chosen Picasso—and shows him why. It is quite possible for the Soviet state to do this. But things being as they are in Russia—and everywhere else—the peasant soon finds that the necessity of working hard all day for his living and the rude, uncomfortable circumstances in which he lives do not allow him enough leisure, energy and comfort to train for the enjoyment of Picasso. This needs, after all, a considerable amount of “conditioning.” Superior culture is one of the most artificial of all human creations, and the peasant finds no “natural” urgency within himself that will drive him toward Picasso in spite of all difficulties. In the end the peasant will go back to kitsch when he feels like looking at pictures, for he can enjoy kitsch without effort. The state is helpless in this matter and remains so as long as the problems of production have not been solved in a socialist sense. The same holds true, of course, for capitalist countries and makes all talk of art for the masses there nothing but demagoguery.⁵

⁵ It will be objected that such art for the masses as folk art was developed under rudimentary conditions of production—and that a good deal of folk art is on a high level. Yes, it is—but folk art is not Athene, and it's Athene whom we want: formal culture with its infinity of aspects, its luxuriance, its large comprehension. Besides, we are now told that most of what we consider good in folk culture is the static survival of dead formal, aristocratic, cultures. Our old English ballads, for instance, were not created by the “folk,” but by the post-feudal squirearchy of the English countryside, to survive in the mouths of the folk long after those for whom the ballads were composed had gone on to other forms of literature. Unfortunately, until the machine-age, culture was the exclusive prerogative of a society that lived by the labor of serfs or slaves. They were the real symbols of culture. For one man to spend time and energy creating or listening to poetry meant that another man had to produce enough to keep himself alive and the former in comfort. In Africa today we find that the culture of slave-owning tribes is generally much superior to that of the tribes that possess no slaves.

Where today a political regime establishes an official cultural policy, it is for the sake of demagoguery. If kitsch is the official tendency of culture in Germany, Italy and Russia, it is not because their respective governments are controlled by philistines, but because kitsch is the culture of the masses in these countries, as it is everywhere else. The encouragement of kitsch is merely another of the inexpensive ways in which totalitarian regimes seek to ingratiate themselves with their subjects. Since these regimes cannot raise the cultural level of the masses—even if they wanted to—by anything short of a surrender to international socialism, they will flatter the masses by bringing all culture down to their level. It is for this reason that the avant-garde is outlawed, and not so much because a superior culture is inherently a more critical culture. (Whether or not the avant-garde could possibly flourish under a totalitarian regime is not pertinent to the question at this point.) As a matter of fact, the main trouble with avant-garde art and literature, from the point of view of fascists and Stalinists, is not that they are too critical, but that they are too “innocent,” that it is too difficult to inject effective propaganda into them, that kitsch is more pliable to this end. Kitsch keeps a dictator in closer contact with the “soul” of the people. Should the official culture be one superior to the general mass-level, there would be a danger of isolation.

Nevertheless, if the masses were conceivably to ask for avant-garde art and literature, Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin would not hesitate long in attempting to satisfy such a demand. Hitler is a bitter enemy of the avant-garde, both on doctrinal and personal grounds, yet this did not prevent Goebbels in 1932-1933 from strenuously courting avant-garde artists and writers. When Gottfried Benn, an Expressionist poet, came over to the Nazis he was welcomed with a great fanfare, although at that very moment Hitler was denouncing Expressionism as *Kulturbolschewismus*. This was at a time when the Nazis felt that the prestige which the avant-garde enjoyed among the cultivated German public could be of advantage to

them, and practical considerations of this nature, the Nazis being skillful politicians, have always taken precedence over Hitler's personal inclinations. Later the Nazis realized that it was more practical to accede to the wishes of the masses in matters of culture than to those of their paymasters; the latter, when it came to a question of preserving power, were as willing to sacrifice their culture as they were their moral principles; while the former, precisely because power was being withheld from them, had to be cozened in every other way possible. It was necessary to promote on a much more grandiose style than in the democracies the illusion that the masses actually rule. The literature and art they enjoy and understand were to be proclaimed the only true art and literature and any other kind was to be suppressed. Under these circumstances people like Gottfried Benn, no matter how ardently they support Hitler, become a liability; and we hear no more of them in Nazi Germany.

We can see then that although from one point of view the personal philistinism of Hitler and Stalin is not accidental to the political roles they play, from another point of view it is only an incidentally contributory factor in determining the cultural policies of their respective regimes. Their personal philistinism simply adds brutality and double-darkness to policies they would be forced to support anyhow by the pressure of all their other policies—even were they, personally, devotees of avant-garde culture. What the acceptance of the isolation of the Russian Revolution forces Stalin to do, Hitler is compelled to do by his acceptance of the contradictions of capitalism and his efforts to freeze them. As for Mussolini—his case is a perfect example of the *disponibilité* of a realist in these matters. For years he bent a benevolent eye on the Futurists and built modernistic railroad stations and government-owned apartment houses. One can still see in the suburbs of Rome more modernistic apartments than almost anywhere else in the world. Perhaps Fascism wanted to show its up-to-dateness, to conceal the fact that it was a retrogression; perhaps it

wanted to conform to the tastes of the wealthy elite it served. At any rate Mussolini seems to have realized lately that it would be more useful to him to please the cultural tastes of the Italian masses than those of their masters. The masses must be provided with objects of admiration and wonder; the latter can dispense with them. And so we find Mussolini announcing a "new Imperial style." Marinetti, Chirico, *et al.*, are sent into the outer darkness, and the new railroad station in Rome will not be modernistic. That Mussolini was late in coming to this only illustrates again the relative hesitancy with which Italian Fascism has drawn the necessary implications of its role.

Capitalism in decline finds that whatever of quality it is still capable of producing becomes almost invariably a threat to its own existence. Advances in culture, no less than advances in science and industry, corrode the very society under whose aegis they are made possible. Here, as in every other question today, it becomes necessary to quote Marx word for word. Today we no longer look toward socialism for a new culture—as inevitably as one will appear, once we do have socialism. Today we look to socialism *simply* for the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now.

1939

P.S. To my dismay I learned years after this saw print that Repin never painted a battle scene; he wasn't that kind of painter. I had attributed some one else's picture to him. That showed my provincialism with regard to Russian art in the nineteenth century. [1972.]

Read only till here

The Plight of Culture

T. S. Eliot has done a good deal to expose the superficialities accompanying the popularization of liberal ideas, but he has done so by attacking habits of feeling rather than ideas as such. And in the beginning his quarrel does not seem to have been so much with liberalism in particular as with deadness of sensibility in general. Only in the 1920s, after his religious conversion—and when he had begun to follow that precedent, set in the eighteenth century, according to which the eminent writer, finding in middle age that literature is not enough, aspires to the larger role of sage or prophet—only then did his position solidify into a consciously antiliberal one. But it was then, too, that Eliot's own sensibility began to show symptoms of the same malady he had been diagnosing. His weakness for attitudes he might honestly mean, but had not honestly come by, became more marked; and a note of involuntary parody crept here and there into his prose. He began to pronounce more frequently on social and political as well as religious matters—with a gravity that was increasingly prim, relieved by a facetiousness that became increasingly uneasy. He made statements in the reading of which one found it hard to believe one's eyes.

All this is by way of explaining just how seriously I think Eliot's latest book, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, should be taken. We are conscious of who its author is on every page, and for this reason are all the more shocked by certain things in it. That Eliot can be callow when away from literature is no news, but he has never before shown himself so callow, or even silly, as here.

The book abounds in such truisms as: “. . . it may be argued that complete equality means universal irresponsibility”

and "A democracy in which everybody had an equal responsibility for everything would be oppressive for the conscientious and licentious for the rest." A paragraph begins with the sentence: "The colonization problem arises from migration." Mention is made of the "oriental cast of the Russian mind" and of "vast impersonal forces." American movies are referred to as "that influential and inflammable article the celluloid film." A paragraph ending with the phrase, "destroying our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanized caravans," is apologized for as an "incidental flourish to relieve the feelings of the writer and perhaps a few of his more sympathetic readers"—in seeming unawareness of what a threadbare piece of journalistic cant that flourish is. We are more than shocked; we are dismayed by the following statement: "I do not approve of the extermination of the enemy: the policy of exterminating or, as is barbarously said, liquidating enemies, is one of the most alarming developments of modern war and peace, from the point of view of those who desire the survival of culture. One needs the enemy."

Yet, despite all that is inconsistent, mindless and even soulless in this book, it gives further evidence of Eliot's flair for the right issue at the right time. He faces up to a large problem that many more liberal or enlightened thinkers prefer to evade, and he states some of the limits within which this problem has to be dealt with. And when all his *gaffes* and the entire extent of his intellectual irresponsibility are taken into account, there is still enough left over to take seriously.

The title itself, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, is misleading, for Eliot simply hands down a definition and lets it go at that. Culture "includes all the characteristic activities of a people: Derby Day . . . the pin table . . . boiled cabbage cut into sections . . . nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar." And "what is part of our culture is also a part of our *lived* religion." As Eliot uses the terms,

"civilization" seems to be much more inclusive than "culture," but he also tends to make the two interchangeable, with consequences for himself and for his argument that are embarrassing.

In his introductory chapter he writes:

The most important question that we can ask, is whether there is any permanent standard, by which we can compare one civilization with another, and by which we can make some guess at the improvement or decline of our own. We have to admit, in comparing one civilization with another, and in comparing the different stages of our own, that no one society and no one age of it realizes all the values of civilization. Not all of these values may be compatible with each other: what is at least as certain is that in realizing some we lose the appreciation of others. Nevertheless, we can distinguish between advance and retrogression. We can assert with some confidence that our own period is one of decline; that the standards of culture are lower than they were fifty years ago; and that the evidences of this decline are visible in every department of human activity. I see no reason why the decay of culture should not proceed much further, and why we may not even anticipate a period, of some duration, of which it is possible to say that it will have *no* culture. Then culture will have to grow again from the soil; and when I say it must grow again from the soil, I do not mean that it will be brought into existence by any activity of political demagogues. The question asked by this essay, is whether there are any permanent conditions, in the absence of which no higher culture can be expected.

Eliot makes no further reference to a "permanent standard" of comparison, though it is "the most important question that we can ask." We are left to wonder how "Nevertheless, we can distinguish between higher and lower cultures . . . between advance and retrogression," and just where the "some confidence" comes from with which it is asserted that evidences of a decline in cultural standards are "visible in every department of human activity" today.

Surely, the preponderant evidence would show the opposite of *cultural* decline in science and scholarship, healing and

engineering, over the last fifty years. Most of the Western world eats better prepared food and lives in pleasanter interiors than it used to; and whatever the rich may have lost in formal graces, those less than rich are certainly gentler than they used to be. Eliot's assertion is not only exaggerated; it is also unnecessary. Had he confined himself to saying that standards were in decline on the highest levels of disinterested culture one would not have to take leave of common sense in order to assent, as I myself would do (though no better able than he to set up a "permanent standard" of comparison). And granted that there has been a certain improvement on the middle levels of culture, I am sure that we would all agree that no amount of improvement there can compensate for deterioration on its uppermost levels.

The weight of *Notes* is laid on a description of three of the "permanent conditions, in the absence of which no higher culture can be expected." Eliot does not propose that one set about immediately to establish or restore these; he doubts whether it will be possible to do so in the conceivable future; he hopes only to dissipate popular illusions about the effectiveness of *ad hoc* measures.

The first of the three conditions is an

organic (not merely planned, but growing) structure such as will foster the hereditary transmission of culture within a culture; this requires the persistence of social classes. The second is the necessity that a culture should be analyzable, geographically, into local cultures: this raises the problem of "regionalism." The third is the balance of unity and diversity in religion—that is, universality of doctrine with particularity of cult and devotion.

These are not "all the necessary conditions for a flourishing culture," but "so far as my observation goes, you are unlikely to have a high civilization where these conditions are absent."

Here again, Eliot's argument is better founded than it might look. Whether the second and third of the conditions he describes were present whenever and wherever culture flourished

in the past, can be disputed, but there is no question about the first condition. We have no record of any civilization, or urban culture, without class divisions. This happens to be the strongest point in the whole conservative argument. But it is no stronger than the precedents which support it, and if other precedents could be found that overrode these, then this point might be considerably weakened. And if this point were weakened, the discussion of the plight of contemporary culture would have to be extended beyond the limits to which Eliot confines it.

As it is, the limits within which liberals discuss the same problem are hardly any broader. Eliot's book reminds me of this once again, but it also reminds me of the omnipresence of Marx, without which Eliot himself would not have been able perhaps to formulate the conservative position as cogently as he has. Marx made the only real beginning in the discussion of the problem of culture, and neither conservatives nor liberals seem yet to have gone beyond that beginning—or even to have caught up with it. It is to Marx, and to him alone, that we have to return in order to restate the problem in such a way that it has a chance of receiving fresh light. Eliot's little book has the merit of sending us back to Marx and his beginning. And when we try to go beyond his beginning, we find ourselves still proceeding along lines that he laid down.

Marx was the first to point out that what made class divisions necessary to civilization was the low material productivity so far of even the most advanced societies. This is why the vast majority have had to work full time in order to provide both for their own necessities and for the leisure and ease of the minority that carried on the activities by which civilization is distinguished. Marx assumed that scientific technology—industrialism—would eventually do away with class divisions because it would produce enough material goods to exempt every one from full-time work. Whether he was right or wrong, he did at least appreciate the enormous change in the *shape* of

civilized society that technological revolution was bound to bring about in one way or another. Eliot, however, along with Spengler and Toynbee, implies that technological change, no matter how extensive, is powerless to affect the formal or "organic" basis of civilization; and that industrialism, like rationalism and hugeness of cities, is but another of the "late" phenomena that ordinarily accompany and accelerate the decline of culture. There is the further implication that when and if culture revives, it will have to be under the same conditions, by and large, as in the past.

Those who slight the technological factor in this way are able to do so with a certain plausibility because they generalize from a delimited, urban past that saw no sweeping changes in technology until quite lately. When we turn our eyes back four or five thousand years and more (with Alfred Weber and Franz Borkenau) to the remoter, pre-urban and early urban past, this plausibility fades. We discover not only that the effects of technological revolution have seldom been transient, but that technological progress has been cumulative and irreversible in the long run. And there seems to be no reason why industrialism should form an exception to this rule, even though it is so much more dependent on abstruse knowledge than any past system of technology.

We also discover that the first effects of technological innovation have usually been unsettling and destructive—politically and socially as well as culturally. Inherited forms lose their relevance, and there is a general breakdown until more apposite forms arise—forms that are usually unanticipated and unprecedented. This circumstance would be enough of itself to account for the present decline of high culture, without bringing in the surmise that Western civilization has now reached a "late" stage like that of Classical civilization under the Roman Empire.

The industrial revolution is not only the first *full-scale* technological revolution that civilization has experienced since its very beginnings; it is also the greatest and most thorough-

going one since the agricultural revolution that went on all through the Neolithic age in the Middle East and which was capped by the "metal" revolution that ushered in city life. In other words, the industrial revolution marks a great turning point in history in general and not just in the history of Western civilization. It happens also to be the most rapid and concentrated of all the technological revolutions.

This may help explain why our culture, on its lower and popular levels, has plumbed abysses of vulgarity and falsehood unknown in the discoverable past; not in Rome, not in the Far East or anywhere else has daily life undergone such rapid and radical change as it has in the West in the last century and a half. But at the same time there have been beneficial consequences, as I have tried to point out, which seem to be equally novel, at least in their scale.

Admittedly, the situation is so new, especially as affecting culture, that it defeats most generalizations based on familiar historical experience. But the question still remains whether it is really novel enough to have put into serious doubt that first condition which Eliot deems required for a high civilization, namely the "persistence of social classes." I think that the only answer to which this question is now susceptible is one that, as Marx says of historical "answers" in general, destroys the question or problem itself. If technological progress is irreversible, then industrialism is here to stay, and under industrialism the kind of high civilization Eliot has in mind—the kind known from the past four thousand years—cannot survive, much less be restored. If high civilization as such is not to disappear, a new type of it will have to be developed that satisfies the conditions set by industrialism. Among those conditions will be in all likelihood a classless society, or at least a society in which social classes no longer persist in the old way, since they will no longer be sanctioned by economic necessity. Marx, I feel, will be proved right in this part of his prophecy (which is not to say that the disappearance of traditional class divisions will bring about utopia).

But until this new industrial type of high civilization emerges, Eliot's conservative position will continue to be tenable. It is a fact that the source of the gravest threat the present technological revolution offers to the continuity and stability of high culture is a vastly accelerated rate of upward social—more accurately, material and economic—mobility. The traditional facilities of urban culture cannot accommodate themselves to a steadily growing *population*—not merely class—of newcomers to comfort and leisure, without suffering deterioration. To the very extent that industrialism promotes social welfare, it attacks traditional culture; at least, this has been the case so far. The conservative solution would be to check social mobility by checking industrialization. But industrialism and industrialization are here to stay. Their benefits are too well recognized by now for humanity to be turned from the pursuit of them by anything short of cosmic violence. Thus, we see that, however plausible the conservative diagnosis of the plight of culture may remain, the remedy implied in it has become highly unreal. One puts Eliot's book down with the feeling, finally, that it is a little beside the point.

The opposed solution, the socialist and Marxist one, is to intensify and extend industrialism, on the assumption that it will eventually make well-being and social dignity universal, at which time the problem of culture will solve itself of itself. This expectation may not be quite as utopian as are the proposals of the ideologues of "tradition," but it remains a very distant one. In the meantime, the hope of liberals—that the greater leisure made possible by industrialism can be turned to the benefit of culture here and now—seems more reasonable. But precisely in this hope, most liberals show the extent to which they, too, fail to appreciate the novelty of industrialism and the scope of the changes it makes in life. While it is generally understood that the quality of leisure is determined by its social and material circumstances, it is not understood that its quality is determined in even larger part by the quality of the activity that sets it off: in other words, that leisure is both

a function and a product of work, and that it changes as work itself changes. This unforeseen aspect of leisure is typical of what is unforeseen in general in the consequences of industrialization. For this and other reasons, the matter is worth going into at some length.

Before industrialism, the general feeling was that leisure was life's positive aspect and the condition for the realization of its highest ends, while work constituted its negative aspect. This feeling was all the more implicit and pervasive because it was so seldom put into words. At the same time, work was not separated nearly so unequivocally from leisure in terms of time or attitude as it is now, and this permitted some of the disinterested attitudes of leisure, and of culture itself, to carry over into and dilute work. How much less of an affliction work was rendered thereby is hard to say, but we can be reasonably sure that work used to take a lighter toll of the nerves, if not of the muscles, than it does now. If working people led more brutish lives in the past, it was due less to the absence of labor-saving devices than to the scarcity of material goods, which was itself due to the fact that they did not work hard enough—that is, rationally and efficiently enough.

On the other hand, the leisure that was enjoyed, along with comfort and dignity, by a relative few was rendered all the more positive—and the better able to be turned to the benefit of culture—by the fact that it was not felt as being so antithetical to work. Then as now, most of the rich spent their time away from interested activity in dissipation and sport, but these do not seem to have “killed” time or been so far removed from genuine culture as now. Everybody, including the poor, would have subscribed in principle, as not everybody would now, to what Aristotle says (in *Politics*, VIII):

. . . the first principle of all action is leisure. Both are required, but leisure is better than work and is its end. . . . Leisure as such gives pleasure and happiness and enjoyment of life; these are experienced, not by the busy man, but by those who have leisure. . . .

There are branches of learning and education which we must study merely with a view to leisure spent in intellectual activity, and these are to be valued for their own sake.

Perhaps the greatest change that industrialism (along with Protestantism and rationalism) has made in daily life is to separate work from leisure in a radical and almost absolute way. Once the efficacy of work began to be more clearly and fully appreciated, work had to become more efficacious in itself—that is, more efficient. To this end, it had to be more sharply separated from everything that was not work; it had to be made more concentratedly and purely itself—in attitude, in method and, above all, in time. Moreover, under the rule of efficiency, seriously purposeful activity in general tended to become assimilated to work. The effect of all this has been to reduce leisure to an occasion more exclusively of passivity, to a breathing spell and interlude; it has become something peripheral, and work has replaced it as the central as well as positive aspect of life, and as the occasion for the realization of its highest ends. Thus leisure has become more purely leisure—nonactivity or aimless activity—as work has become more purely work, more purely purposeful activity.

The shortening of working hours has changed little in this equation. The rich themselves are no longer free from the domination of work; for just as they have lost their monopoly on physical comfort, so the poor have lost theirs on hard work. Now that prestige goes more and more to achievement rather than to social status, the rich themselves begin to resent old-fashioned, undistracted leisure as idleness, as something too remote from serious reality, therefore demoralizing. The rich man may be less “alienated” from his job than the poor man, and may not work as hard or under as onerous conditions, but his soul is likewise oppressed by the rule of efficiency, whether he heeds it or not. Once efficiency is universally accepted as a rule, it becomes an inner compulsion and weighs like a sense of sin, simply because no one can ever be efficient *enough*,

just as no one can ever be virtuous enough. And this new sense of sin only contributes further to the enervation of leisure, for the rich as well as the poor.

The difficulty of carrying on a leisure-oriented tradition of culture in a work-oriented society is enough of itself to keep the present crisis in our culture unresolved. This should give pause to those of us who look to socialism alone as the way out. Efficient work remains indispensable to industrialism, and industrialism remains indispensable to socialism. Nothing in the perspective of socialism indicates that it will easily dissipate anxiety about efficiency and anxiety about work, no matter how much the working day is shortened or how much automation takes over. Nothing, in fact, in the whole perspective of an industrialized world—a perspective that contains the possibility of both good and bad alternatives to socialism—affords any clue as to how work under industrialism can be displaced from the central position in life it now holds.

The only solution for culture that I can conceive of under these conditions is to shift its center of gravity away from leisure and place it squarely in the middle of work. Am I suggesting something whose outcome could no longer be called culture, since it would not depend on leisure? I am suggesting something whose outcome I cannot imagine. Even so, there is the glimpse of a precedent; a very uncertain glimpse, it is true, but a glimpse nevertheless. Once again, it lies in the remoter, pre-urban past—or in that part of it which survives in the present.

In societies below a certain level of economic development, everybody works; and where this is so, work and culture tend to be fused in a single functional complex. Art, lore and religion then became barely distinguishable, in either intention or practice, from the techniques of production, healing and even war. Rite, magic, myth, decoration, image, music, dance and oral literature are at one and the same time religion, art, lore, defense, work and "science." Five thousand years of civilization have separated these areas of activity from one another

and specialized them in terms of their verifiable results, so that we now have culture and art for their own sake, religion for the sake of things unknowable (or, like art, for the sake of states of mind) and work for the sake of practical ends. It would seem that these things have now become separated from one another forever. Yet we discover that industrialism is bringing about a state of affairs in which, once again, everybody will work. We are coming full circle (as Marx predicted, though not quite in the way he hoped), and if we are coming full circle in one respect, may we not be doing so in others? With work becoming universal once more, may it not become necessary—and because necessary, feasible—to repair the estrangement between work and culture, or rather between interested and disinterested ends, that began when work first became less than universal? And how else could this be done but through culture in its highest and most authentic sense?

Beyond such speculation, which is admittedly schematic and abstract, I cannot go. Nothing in these ideas suggests anything that could be sensibly hoped for in the present or near future. But at least it helps if we do not have to despair of the ultimate consequences for culture of industrialism. And it also helps if we do not have to stop thinking at the point where Spengler and Toynbee and Eliot do.

1953

Art and Culture

CRITICAL ESSAYS

Clement Greenberg

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