

## 2 □ *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*

F. R. Leavis

And this function is particularly important in our modern world, of which the whole civilisation is, to a much greater degree than the civilisation of Greece and Rome, mechanical and external, and tends constantly to become more so.

(*Culture and Anarchy*, 1869)

For Matthew Arnold it was in some ways less difficult. I am not thinking of the so much more desperate plight of culture today,<sup>1</sup> but (it is not, at bottom, an unrelated consideration) of the freedom with which he could use such phrases as 'the will of God' and 'our true selves'. Today one must face problems of definition and formulation where Arnold could pass lightly on. When, for example, having started by saying that culture has always been in minority keeping, I am asked what I mean by 'culture', I might (and do) refer the reader to *Culture and Anarchy*; but I know that something more is required.

In any period it is often a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends: it is (apart from cases of the simple and familiar) only a few who are capable of unprompted, first-hand judgment. They are still a small minority, though a larger one, who are capable of endorsing such first-hand judgment by genuine personal response. The accepted valuations are a kind of paper currency based upon a very small proportion of gold. To the state of such a currency the possibilities of fine living at any time bear a close relation. There is no need to elaborate the metaphor; the nature of the relation is suggested well enough by this passage from Mr I. A. Richards, which should by now be a *locus classicus*:

But it is not true that criticism is a luxury trade. The rearguard of Society cannot be extricated until the vanguard has gone further. Goodwill and intelligence are still too

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little available. The critic, we have said, is as much concerned with the health of the mind as any doctor with the health of the body. To set up as a critic is to set up as a judge of values. . . . For the arts are inevitably and quite apart from any intentions of the artist an appraisal of existence. Matthew Arnold, when he said that poetry is a criticism of life, was saying something so obvious that it is constantly overlooked. The artist is concerned with the record and perpetuation of the experiences which seem to him most worth having. For reasons which we shall consider . . . he is also the man who is most likely to have experiences of value to record. He is the point at which the growth of the mind shows itself.<sup>2</sup>

This last sentence gives the hint for another metaphor. The minority capable not only of appreciating Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, Baudelaire, Hardy (to take major instances) but of recognising their latest successors constitute the consciousness of the race (or of a branch of it) at a given time. For such capacity does not belong merely to an isolated aesthetic realm: it implies responsiveness to theory as well as to art, to science and philosophy in so far as these may affect the sense of the human situation and of the nature of life. Upon this minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition. Upon them depend the implicit standards that order the finer living of an age, the sense that this is worth more than that, this rather than that is the direction in which to go, that the centre<sup>3</sup> is here rather than there. In their keeping, to use a metaphor that is metonymy also and will bear a good deal of pondering, is the language, the changing idiom, upon which fine living depends, and without which distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent. By 'culture' I mean the use of such a language. I do not suppose myself to have produced a tight definition, but the account, I think, will be recognised as adequate by anyone who is likely to read this pamphlet.

It is a commonplace today that culture is at a crisis. It is a commonplace more widely accepted than understood: at any rate, realisation of what the crisis portends does not seem to be common. [ . . . ]

It seems, then, not unnecessary to restate the obvious. In support of the belief that the modern phase of human history is unprecedented it is enough to point to the machine. The machine, in the first place, has brought about change in habit and the circumstances of life at a rate for which we have no parallel. The effects of such change may be studied in *Middletown*, a remarkable work of anthropology, dealing (I am afraid it is not superfluous to say) with a typical community of the Middle West. There we see in detail how the automobile (to take one instance) has, in a few years, radically affected religion,<sup>4</sup> broken up the family, and revolutionised social custom. Change has been so catastrophic that the generations find it hard to adjust themselves to each other, and parents are helpless to deal with their children. It seems unlikely that the conditions of life can be transformed in this way without some injury to the standard of living (to wrest the phrase from the economist): improvisation can hardly replace the delicate traditional adjustments, the mature, inherited codes of habit and valuation, without severe loss, and loss that may be



more than temporary. It is a breach in continuity that threatens: what has been inadvertently dropped may be irrecoverable or forgotten.

To this someone will reply that Middletown is America and not England. And it is true that in America change has been more rapid, and its effects have been intensified by the fusion of peoples. But the same processes are at work in England and the Western world generally, and at an acceleration. It is a commonplace that we are being Americanised, but again a commonplace that seems, as a rule, to carry little understanding with it. Americanisation is often spoken of as if it were something of which the United States are guilty. But it is something from which Lord Melchett, our 'British-speaking'<sup>5</sup> champion, will not save us even if he succeeds in rallying us to meet that American enterprise which he fears, 'may cause us to lose a great structure of self-governing brotherhoods whose common existence is of infinite importance to the future continuance of the Anglo-Saxon race, and of the gravest import to the development of all that seems best in our modern civilisation.'<sup>6</sup> For those who are most defiant of America do not propose to reverse the processes consequent upon the machine. We are to have greater efficiency, better salesmanship, and more mass-production and standardisation. Now, if the worst effects of mass-production and standardisation were represented by Woolworth's there would be no need to despair. But there are effects that touch the life of the community more seriously. When we consider, for instance, the processes of mass-production and standardisation in the form represented by the Press, it becomes obviously of sinister significance that they should be accompanied by a process of levelling-down.

[...]

It applies even more disastrously to the films: more disastrously, because the films have a so much more potent influence.<sup>7</sup> They provide now the main form of recreation in the civilised world; and they involve surrender, under conditions of hypnotic receptivity, to the cheapest emotional appeals, appeals the more insidious because they are associated with a compellingly vivid illusion of actual life. It would be difficult to dispute that the result must be serious damage to the 'standard of living' (to use the phrase as before). All this seems so obvious that one is diffident about insisting on it. And yet people will reply by adducing the attempts that have been made to use the film as a serious medium of art. Just as, when broadcasting is in question, they will point out that they have heard good music broadcasted and intelligent lectures. The standardising influence of broadcasting hardly admits of doubt, but since there is here no Hollywood engaged in purely commercial exploitation the levelling-down is not so obvious. But perhaps it will not be disputed that broadcasting, like the films, is in practice mainly a means of passive diversion, and that it tends to make active recreation, especially active use of the mind, more difficult.<sup>8</sup> And such agencies are only a beginning. The near future holds rapid developments in store.

Contemplating this deliberate exploitation of the cheap response which characterises our civilisation we may say that a new factor in history is an unprecedented

use of applied psychology. This might be thought to flatter Hollywood, but, even so, there can be no room for doubt when we consider advertising, and the progress it has made in two or three decades. (And 'advertising' may be taken to cover a great deal more than comes formally under that head.)

[...]

Mr Gilbert Russell, who includes in his list of books for 'A Copy Writer's Bookshelf' the works of Shakespeare, the Bible, *The Forsyte Saga*, *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, *Fiery Particles* by C. E. Montague and Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's *The Art of Writing*, tells us that:

Competent copy cannot be written except by men who have read lovingly, who have a sense of the romance of words, and of the picturesque and the dramatic phrase; who have versatility enough and judgment enough to know how to write plainly and pungently, or with a certain affectation. Briefly, competent copy is a matter not only of literary skill of a rather high order, but also skill of a particular specialised kind.

The influence of such skill is to be seen in contemporary fiction. For if, as Mr Thomas Russell (author of 'What did you do in the Great War, daddy?'), tells us, 'English is the best language in the world for advertising', advertising is doing a great deal for English. It is carrying on the work begun by Mr Rudyard Kipling, and, where certain important parts of the vocabulary are concerned, making things more difficult for the fastidious. For what is taking place is not something that affects only the environment of culture, stops short, as it were, at the periphery. This should be obvious, but it does not appear to be so to many who would recognise the account I have given above as matter of commonplace. Even those who would agree that there has been an overthrow of standards, that authority has disappeared, and that the currency has been debased and inflated, do not often seem to realise what the catastrophe portends. My aim is to bring this home, if possible, by means of a little concrete evidence. I hope, at any rate, to avert the charge of extravagant pessimism.

[...]

In the *Advertisement* to the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* I light on this:

An accurate taste in poetry, as in all other arts, Sir Joshua Reynolds has observed, is an acquired talent, which can only be produced by severe thought, and a long continued intercourse with the best models of composition.

When Wordsworth wrote that, severe thought and long-continued intercourse with the best models were more widely possible than now. What distractions have come to beset the life of the mind since then! There seems every reason to believe that the average cultivated person of a century ago was a very much more competent reader than his modern representative. Not only does the modern dissipate himself upon so much more reading of all kinds: the task of acquiring discrimination is much



more difficult. A reader who grew up with Wordsworth moved among a limited set of signals (so to speak): the variety was not overwhelming. So he was able to acquire discrimination as he went along. But the modern is exposed to a concourse of signals so bewildering in their variety and number that, unless he is especially gifted or especially favoured, he can hardly begin to discriminate. Here we have the plight of culture in general. The landmarks have shifted, multiplied and crowded upon one another, the distinctions and dividing lines have blurred away, the boundaries are gone, and the arts and literatures of different countries and periods have flowed together, so that, if we revert to the metaphor of 'language' for culture, we may, to describe it, adapt the sentence in which Mr T. S. Eliot describes the intellectual situation: 'When there is so much to be known, when there are so many fields of knowledge in which the same words are used with different meanings, when every one knows a little about a great many things, it becomes increasingly difficult for anyone to know whether he knows what he is talking about or not.'

[...]

The critically adult public, then, is very small indeed: they are a very small minority who are capable of fending for themselves amid the smother of new books.

[...]

The reader must have a great deal more done for him. Again we have to learn from America: the problem has been solved there by the Book of Month Club and similar organisations. The problem is now rapidly being solved here, where The Book Society has already been followed by The Book Guild.

'Out of the thousands of books published every year,' writes Miss Ethel Mannin for the Book Guild, '— there are between 12,000 and 14,000 — how on earth is the ordinary person to sift the sheep from the goats? Distinguished critics attempt to guide the public, but they are often so hopelessly 'high brow' and 'precious,' and simply add to the general confusion and bewilderment.

When the aims of The Book Guild were explained to me, therefore, it seemed too good to be true — an organisation which would cater for the *ordinary intelligent reader*, not for the highbrows — an organisation which would realise that *a book can have a good story and a popular appeal and yet be good literature* — be good literature and yet be absorbingly interesting, of the kind you can't put down once you've started, an organisation which would not recommend a book as a work of genius simply because it had been eulogised by some pedantic critic or other, but which would conscientiously sift really good stuff out of the mass of the affected and pretentious which is just as tiresome as the blatantly third rate.

[...]

[T]he attitude behind the word 'high-brow' is exhibited with commendable guilelessness by Mr George A. Birmingham (Canon Hannay) of The Book Guild. This

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reverend gentleman writes in *The Book Guild Bulletin* for July 14, 1930:

The detective novel writers have their own clientele, though they make no appeal to the young ladies who throng the counters of Boots' libraries and but little to the sheep-like crowd who follow the dictates of high-brow literary critics.

Lest the point should be missed he repeats it:

... not food for the Messrs Boots' young ladies or for the literary sheep whom I have already mentioned.

[...]

'High-brow' is an ominous addition to the English language. I have said earlier that culture has always been in minority keeping. But the minority now is made conscious, not merely of an uncongenial, but of a hostile environment. 'Shakespeare', I once heard Mr Dover Wilson say, 'was not a high-brow.' True: there were no 'high-brows' in Shakespeare's time. It was possible for Shakespeare to write plays that were at once popular drama and poetry that could be appreciated only by an educated minority. *Hamlet* appealed at a number of levels of response, from the highest downwards. The same is true of *Paradise Lost*, *Clarissa*, *Tom Jones*, *Don Juan*, *The Return of the Native*. The same is not true, Mr George A. Birmingham might point out, of *The Waste Land*, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, *Ulysses* or *To the Lighthouse*. These works are read only by a very small specialised public and are beyond the reach of the vast majority of those who consider themselves educated. The age in which the finest creative talent tends to be employed in works of this kind is the age that has given currency to the term 'high-brow'. But it would be as true to say that the attitude implicit in 'high-brow' causes this use of talent as the converse. The minority is being cut off as never before from the powers that rule the world; and as Mr George A. Birmingham and his friends succeed in refining and standardising and conferring authority upon 'the taste of the bathos implanted by nature in the literary judgments of man' (to use Matthew Arnold's phrase), they will make it more and more inevitable that work expressing the finest consciousness of the age should be so specialised as to be accessible only to the minority.

'Civilisation' and 'culture' are coming to be antithetical terms. It is not merely that the power and the sense of authority are now divorced from culture, but that some of the most disinterested solicitude for civilisation is apt to be, consciously or unconsciously, inimical to culture.

[...]

The prospects of culture, then, are very dark. There is the less room for hope in that a standardised civilisation is rapidly enveloping the whole world. The glimpse of Russia that is permitted us does not afford the comfort that we are sometimes invited to find there. Anyone who has seen Eisenstein's film, *The General Line*, will appreciate the comment made by a writer in the *New Republic* (June 4, 1930),



comparing it with an American film:

One fancies, thinking about these things, that America might well send *The Silent Enemy* to Russia and say, 'This is what living too long with too much machinery does to people. Think twice, before you commit yourselves irrevocably to the same course.'

But it is vain to resist the triumph of the machine. It is equally vain to console us with the promise of a 'mass culture' that shall be utterly new. It would, no doubt, be possible to argue that such a 'mass culture' might be better than the culture we are losing, but it would be futile: the 'utterly new' surrenders everything that can interest us.<sup>9</sup>

What hope, then, is there left to offer? The vague hope that recovery *must* come, somehow, in spite of all? Mr I. A. Richards, whose opinion is worth more than most people's, seems to authorise hope: he speaks of 'reasons for thinking that this century is in a cultural trough rather than upon a crest'; and says that 'the situation is likely to get worse before it is better'.<sup>10</sup> 'Once the basic level has been reached,' he suggests, 'a slow climb back may be possible. That at least is a hope that may be reasonably entertained.'<sup>11</sup> But it is a hope that looks very desperate in face of the downward acceleration described above, and it does not seem to point to any factor that might be counted upon to reverse the process.

Are we then to listen to Spengler's<sup>12</sup> (and Mr Henry Ford's<sup>13</sup>) admonition to cease bothering about the inevitable future? That is impossible. Ridiculous, priggish and presumptuous as it may be, if we care at all about the issues we cannot help believing that, for the immediate future, at any rate, we have some responsibility. We cannot help clinging to some such hope as Mr Richards offers; to the belief (unwarranted, possibly) that what we value most matters too much to the race to be finally abandoned, and that the machine will yet be made a tool.

It is for us to be as aware as possible of what is happening, and, if we can, to 'keep open our communications with the future'.

#### Notes

1. 'The word, again, which we children of God speak, the voice which most hits our collective thought, the newspaper with the largest circulation in England, nay with the largest circulation in the whole world, is the *Daily Telegraph*!' – *Culture and Anarchy*. It is the *News of the World* that has the largest circulation today.
2. *The Principles of Literary Criticism*, p. 61.
3. '... the mass of the public is without any suspicion that the value of these organs is relative to their being nearer a certain ideal centre of correct information, taste and intelligence, or farther away from it.' – *Culture and Anarchy*.
4. 'One gains a distinct impression that the religious basis of all education was more taken for granted if less talked about thirty-five years ago, when high school "chapel" was a

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6. *Ibid.*,  
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- religio-inspirational service with a "choir" instead of the "pep session" which it tends to become to-day.' *Middletown*, by R. S. and H. M. Lynd, p. 204. This kind of change, of course, is not due to the automobile alone.
5. 'That would be one of the greatest disasters to the British-speaking people, and one of the greatest disasters to civilisation.' – Lord Melchett, *Industry and Politics*, p. 278.
  6. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
  7. 'The motion picture, by virtue of its intrinsic nature, is a species of amusing and informational Esperanto, and, potentially at least, a species of aesthetic Esperanto of all the arts; if it may be classified as one, the motion picture has in it, perhaps more than any other, the resources of universality. . . . The motion picture tells its stories directly, simply, quickly and elementally, not in words but in pictorial pantomime. To see is not only to believe; it is also in a measure to understand. In theatrical drama, seeing is closely allied with hearing, and hearing, in turn, with mental effort. In the motion picture, seeing is all – or at least nine-tenths of all.' – *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th edn – 'Motion Pictures: A Universal Language'.
- The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, fourteenth edition, is itself evidence of what is happening: 'humanised, modernised, pictorialised', as the editors announce.
8. Mr Edgar Rice Burroughs (creator of Tarzan), in a letter that I have been privileged to see, writes: 'It has been discovered through repeated experiments that pictures that require thought for appreciation have invariably been box-office failures. The general public does not wish to think. This fact, probably more than any other, accounts for the success of my stories, for without this specific idea in mind I have, nevertheless, endeavoured to make all of my descriptions so clear that each situation could be visualised readily by any reader precisely as I saw it. My reason for doing this was not based upon a low estimate of general intelligence, but upon the realisation that in improbable situations, such as abound in my work, the greatest pains must be taken to make them appear plausible. I have evolved, therefore, a type of fiction that may be read with the minimum of mental effort.' The significance of this for my argument does not need comment. Mr Burroughs adds that his books sell at over a million copies a year. There is not room here to make the comparisons suggested by such documents as the *Life of James Lackington* (1791).
  9. '... indeed, this gentleman, taking the bull by the horns, proposes that we should for the future call industrialism culture, and then of course there can be no longer any misapprehension of their true character; and besides the pleasure of being wealthy and comfortable, they will have authentic recognition as vessels of sweetness and light.' – *Culture and Anarchy*.
  10. *Practical Criticism*, p. 320.
  11. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
  12. 'Up to now everyone has been at liberty to hope what he pleased about the future. Where there are no facts, sentiment rules. But henceforward it will be every man's business to inform himself of what *can* happen and therefore of what with the unalterable necessity of destiny and irrespective of personal ideals, hopes or desires, *will* happen.' – *The Decline of the West*, vol. I, p. 39.
  13. 'But what of the future? Shall we not have over-production? Shall we not some day reach a point where the machine becomes all powerful, and the man of no consequence?  
No man can say anything of the future. We need not bother about it. The future has



always cared for itself in spite of our well-meant efforts to hamper it. If to-day we do the task we can best do, then we are doing all that we can do.

Perhaps we may over-produce, but that is impossible until the whole world has all its desires. And if that should happen, then surely we ought to be content.' — Henry Ford, *To-day and To-morrow*, pp. 272–3.