

Against Culturalism

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Listening yesterday to Professor Eco's sensible and genial remarks and thinking about their drift—that the universities perform a function not so different after all from the mass culture; that the distinction between high-academic and mass culture anyway is one of degree and not of kind; that the memberships overlap and we seem well enough able to take this in stride—I was struck, as Americans often are, by how different my experience of culture is from that of a European of the intellectual class. Eco was attacking with broad irony what must have seemed to him the louder side in a debate we Americans have all grown used to. Academic moralists regularly tell us how shallow academic culture is because, being a product of an elite, it does not represent the democratic yearnings of the populace. Meanwhile, in the culture at large, prospering satirists excoriate the public for its disappointment of the humanist ideal, and tax even the universities for having too far countenanced the vulgar taste. Eco dealt out jovial scorn to moralists of the second sort, and it was natural for us to take pleasure in his choice of targets.

Very likely his remarks would meet the same warm response from an audience at CBS or Time-Warner. But it seems to me that moralists, of both the media *mission civilisatrice* and the academic-populist varieties, miss a point about American life, and that, under the charm of a scholar mature enough to split the difference, we are in danger of missing the same point ourselves. All the pleasant talk about broadening the scope of intellectual culture, about mingling high and low more freely—like the talk one hears from the opposite side, about letting refinement do its proper work—assumes that plenty of Americans are born and bred to a high culture which it is possible to inherit. Only on that assumption does it make sense either to want people to inherit it more securely or to point out the desirability of breaking out of it at last. And yet, as anyone can tell you who has studied this country or who grew up here, we do not have a high culture of any considerable depth, visibility, potency, or real standing. America does not have, and never did have, a high culture one can break out of. It is—it was for all the Americans in this audience—something we had

to break into. How does that circumstance affect the argument about the place of a university in a democratic culture, the argument to which Eco chose to give a European turn in this American setting?

Professor Eco brought us news from Theodor Adorno. It came in the form of a personal anecdote, but it was news all the same. More than any critic of the modernist period, Adorno was associated with the proposition that the mass societies—the commercial democracies as much as the totalitarian dictatorships—were evolving means for the enslavement of human consciousness, from which only a few works of art offered an exemption by their power simply as acts of witnessing. Hard as it was, this seemed a plain proposition. But Eco now reports that Adorno, after his return from America, conceded once in informal colloquy that were it possible to cover the ground again, he might revise his gloomy prophecy of the forties. Adorno (says Eco) saw the new mass media in a softer light thanks to their positive role in fostering post-war German democracy.

These words from beyond the grave, I confess, made me actually nostalgic for the old, unrepentant Adorno. The difficult author of *Minima Moralia*, *Prisms*, and *The Jargon of Authenticity* believed it was possible to read a culture by discerning what he called “the logic of its *aporias*.” There were, he thought, certain truths a culture could not speak, certain realizations it could not afford to make, whether from the success of its repressions or the sheer leveling power of its unconscious idiom. The work of the critic was to render these unspoken motives articulate to the point of becoming analytic. To what end? Let me adapt Adorno’s thought to a pragmatic vocabulary he would have deplored: to the end of creating a live option for thinking among persons capable of thought, and doing so in accord with an assumption of their humanity, without the constraints of their particular culture and its particular barbarisms. This directive seems to me more fruitful for democracy and for education than any conceivable blend of tolerance and skepticism in the attempt to unify the functions of high culture and the mass media. For such blendings may leave us wondering how much they help us to think.

Granted, this is nothing to worry about if you define thinking as the acquisition of information, or the coming to consciousness of cultural forms, or the development of a ready comprehension of alternative lifestyles. But what if thinking is something different—a separate kind of power, though of course partly learned, since it depends on knowing the difference between what you know and what you do not know? I am led to consider this possibility from a suspicion induced by repeated encounters with the word “culture” in its mass, ethnic, religious, national, and personal-lifestyle senses, in recent academic publications where all alike were treated with equal reverence. Cul-

ture, these texts were telling me, permeates my life and anticipates my feelings, it penetrates the interstices of thought so entirely that I need do nothing for *it* to enforce and to grant all. Every move I make, every breath I take—culture. It occurred to me during the last such encounter that the idea of culture now appears to many of our university adepts to carry the same luminous weight, extent, moral significance, and incantatory power with which the idea of God must have presented itself to an eighteenth-century theologian vindicating the Argument from Design, or with which the idea of Nature declared its impalpable truth to a nineteenth-century transcendentalist of the second generation.

In relation to the possibilities of thought, the academic Argument from Culture began by having the charm of impersonality. It has long since passed into the conscious evasion that characterizes bad faith. It is the not-me that justifies and excuses me by joining me to some—to any—“us.” We may not know what culture is, but we cannot imagine living without it. The anxiety is understandable. To the extent that we fail as believers in culture, what else will give a digestible meaning to our unsponsored efforts at thought? Some people have known for a long time, those of us in the study of literature were tipped off around a decade ago, and in the spring of 1993 the *New York Times Magazine* made it official with a profile of the new historicism in literary studies. The answer to our demand for a meaning that informs us fully in every part of ourselves vacated by culture is: history.

Because Umberto Eco's good mood about our unified culture put me into such a funk, I searched for a thinker even gloomier than Adorno to round out these comments, and I found an aphorism by Elias Canetti, who in *The Human Province* has this to say about history:

History preserves something different from any earlier forms of transmitting the past. It is hard to determine what. . . . It provides for the perpetuation of all religions, nations, classes. For even the most peaceful among them have at some point drawn blood from someone, and history faithfully screams it to high heaven. . . . The most disgraceful forms of belief, which everyone ought to be ashamed of, are kept alive by history as it proves their age. No one has ever felt obligated to it except for a few thin priests, and they would have had an easier time without history. . . . It seems to me as if history used to be better or at least more innocuous in the days when it got lost from time to time. Today it is shackled to itself with the chains of writing. . . . How powerful the Heracles who could strangle it! Even death will be

overcome more easily than history, and the first and only exploiter of a triumph over death will once again be history.¹

Considered as God-terms, culture and history have a good deal in common. Both express the human desire to see ourselves known completely as good citizens of our age. But that desire can be realized only at the cost of consciousness, a cost admittedly without a meaning in the ranks of the thin priests.

Like Eco, I have thought hard about cholesterol. He said, in a stroke of wit, that it was odd that people complained so much about the humanists making fast publicity for Madonna when nobody complained about the scientists making fast publicity for cholesterol. Both objects of discourse, he implied, ought to be endured as time-wasters, essentially harmless to the public mind. There is this difference, however, that Madonna will be kept alive by history; and if I have Canetti right, a possible sentiment on that subject is: so much the worse for her. The point we Americans, ancients among the moderns, shall have to continue to make as best we can to the younger civilizations of Europe is just how little our experience has proved mass culture to be an exception to the rule of monumental culture. It is the latest and most binding instance of the rule. Its promoters, the lobbyists for the bought interest in popular art, share with the exponents of art-through-the-ages the piety of mere survival. The difference is a matter of degree, though in a sense not intended by Eco: the processing of more images, more quickly, into a history that starts ever sooner after the performance.

1. Elias Canetti, *The Human Province*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 5-6.