

CULTURE, DEFINED AND QUALIFIED.

BY T. HENRY CARTER.

THE word "culture" and its less fashionable synonymic "cultivation" are derived, the former directly, the latter through the French, from the same Latin root, meaning originally no more than the tillage of the soil, and hence applied figuratively to the corresponding process in the human mind. "Cultivation" used to be the term oftenest heard some years ago, at least on the other side of the Atlantic. Mr. Richard Grant White, the eminent etymologist, even stigmatizes "culture" as an odious word, though without giving any other reason than its novelty. Perhaps, coming from Boston, he got more of it than was good for him. For my own part, I confess with him to a preference for the older term. If one hears a person described as "a man of cultivation" one feels inclined to take for granted that he is a gentleman, while "a person of culture" one apprehends, is more liable to turn out a humbug or a snob. The dictates of fashion, however, are not to be questioned or criticized, and "culture," not "cultivation," is to be the theme of our discourse this evening.

In the widest sense culture, as applied to human beings, may be defined as, "Any process by which man is raised above the conditions imposed upon him by the necessities of his nature." This, I think, is agreeable to sense and Matthew Arnold, but it would not suit everybody. To supply a definition of culture, not open to criticism, is not a simple matter. Thus one well known authority lays it down as, "That which makes an intelligent being more intelligent and tends to make reason and the will of God prevail," while another writer, scarcely less eminent and polished, lays down the law after this sort:—

"Perhaps the very silliest cant of the day is the cant about culture. Culture is a desirable quality in a critic of new books and sits well on a professor of belles lettres, but, as applied to politics, it means simply a turn for small fault finding, love for selfish ease and indecision in action. The man of culture is, in politics, one of the poorest mortals alive. For simple pedantry and want of good sense no man is his equal. No assumption is too unreal, no end is too unpractical for him. But the active exercise of politics requires common sense, sympathy, trust, resolution and enthusiasm,—qualities which your man of culture has carefully rooted up lest they damage the delicacy of his critical olfactories. Perhaps they are the only class of responsible beings in the community who cannot with safety be entrusted with power."

We need not here stop to discuss the propriety of this summary, but, having quoted the extremes of definition, we will take our own for granted and proceed:—

The only necessities felt by man in his lowest condition are those of food and shelter. When these are supplied the upward impulse begins to assert itself and the adoption of clothing may be held to mark the first step in culture.

Wants supplied become in time necessities, and, as culture supplies man's wants, it adds, with the expansion of his ideas, to the number of them. When man is clothed he advances to ornament; and feathers and paint mark his second step in culture.

We will not wait to trace at length the development or evolution of culture, but merely note that what are really the typical expressions of a forgotten culture may be thoughtlessly regarded as examples of its absence. Nobody, for instance, nowadays regards as a person of culture a prize-fighter or ballad singer. Yet such, with their congener, the juggler, represent the very summit of culture in the heroic age, and similarly the Spanish matador, and even the Indian medicine man, though worthy to be abolished before superior civilization, mark, in their way, steps in later cultivation.

Leaving out the culture of plants and of the lower animals, though a cultured orchid or a cultured retriever is an object we might fain linger over, we come down, or rather come up, in the long process of evolution, to what is commonly understood as culture among civilized mankind in our own day. This we find to be the same in principle as that of the rudest epoch—the raising of ourselves above what is merely necessary to health and comfort in our surroundings, and the gradual modification or softening of the brute heritage represented primarily by the passion for war. Is this striving then—for it must involve effort—worth our while, if we include as necessities amusement, society and personal ease, and exclude from our notion of warfare the necessary contests of

the stock exchange and dry goods counter? I think it may be shown to depend upon what are our aims and objects.

If Mr. Gladstone and his recent discoveries in political economy are to be followed, the opinion of the masses ought in all cases to be consulted and accepted as final, and this opinion is by no means always given in favour of culture. Yet, whether these ignorant and infallible people are sure to be right or not on matters of taste, there is little doubt that they possess an unerring instinct for the detection of nonsense and cant in any question or matter in which their political principles and prejudices are not involved. If then they sometimes appear to show a hostility to culture, it would follow, what might, in fact, be taken for granted in the nature and constitution of things, that there is a true culture and a sham culture, and that the latter is sometimes more apparent and obtrusive than the former.

Nobody deliberately proposes to follow what he knows to be false; how then is true to be known from spurious culture, the sterling coin from the base counterfeit?

The difference between a silver spoon and a plated one, or between an oil painting and a chromo, is apparent to the meanest capacity, but to apply similar distinctions to processes of the mind is not so simple, for there, amid the endless complexity of human motive, the true and false, like the wheat and the tares in the parable, are ever liable to be more or less mingled. The worst sham culture will take in its little five per cent. of truth's unleavened bread, and rare is even the truest culture that is not disfigured by a tincture or flavouring of twaddle. Still, despite these drawbacks, we can usually make shift to pronounce an opinion upon the culture of our neighbours. The question is: What about our own? If we have decided, as I think it may be shown, that culture is worth our pains, how are we ourselves to eschew the evil and choose the good with a reasonable confidence of being in the right track? It seems to depend upon motives, as I have said, or what one might call a minor kind of faith. The follower of false culture—to take him first and get rid of him—is misled by a petty ideal (if he has any ideal at all and is not merely running after fashion and novelty). He has, perhaps, found that he cannot play the violin or poker and, as he must get himself talked about or perish in the attempt, he makes a rush at general culture, as a vesture in which he may masquerade without the disagreeable apprehension of being found out. Thus, if he has a taste for wine (which is not improbable) and is also, say, of a mathematical turn, he may get up all the different brands, colours and flavours, find out about Tokay, hock and hermitage, and eke matters out with a casual reference to Jupiter's satellites or the properties of oblate spheroids. In the same way, if he affects the collecting of coins or egg shells, he can tell you all about the medals of Augustus and Valentinian, throw in a speculation on bacteriology and wind up with some severe reflections on the discipline of Siberian prisons or any other convenient enormity that is sufficiently far off. If he can contrive to get himself suspected of atheism he scores a point, but if not, it will do nearly as well to commit popery. Far different from him who has walked alive with truth, his design is not to improve himself but to startle his neighbours, not to become well informed so much as to seem so. By dint of assurance he may manage to get himself accepted at his own valuation, and flourish for a time like him whom the psalmist observed spreading himself like a green bay tree. It is even possible for him to possess the gift nearly allied to genius itself, of not getting found out at all, but most often he is relegated to his proper place by the unscientific, yet pretty accurate sizing up of public opinion. Some untoward incident betrays him when least expected, like the policeman killed by the accidental discharge of his duty, and, sooner or later, he sinks under the reputation of a bore. But before condemning even such a character we must be on our guard against judgments dictated by spleen, bearing in mind that the habit of sneering criticism is easier to get into than to get out of. "There is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty." He is doing well that can gauge the depths of his own heart, and none can sound the heart of another.

"O my soul come not thou into their secret, unto their assembly, mine honour be not thou united; for in their anger they slew a man, and in their self will they digged down a wall." Such was the denunciation of the dying Jacob, not

against human error but against the uncompromising and indiscriminate upholders of virtue. After all, there should be no objection to a rational degree of conceit. Your man who has no conceit about him—you want to button up your pockets when he comes round. He is liable to have a note at four months somewhere about him that he wants your signature on the back of.

The man of true culture presents to the character we have been criticising thus mildly, and in the aggregate, a strong, but not immediately apparent contrast. His talents, if he has any, may be about the same, his intellectual habitat not dissimilar, but his aims and methods are different. His culture, so far from being to his advantage, is just as likely to be a hindrance to his success in business and in society; yet, though he knows to his cost that it is as well, from a worldly point of view, not to be too cultured, he is not concerned to resist the subtle fascination. His objects in pursuing culture are threefold,—

Firstly—That he may more fully appreciate the true and beautiful.

Secondly—That he may develop and make the best use of his powers, and in so doing contribute in his small way to carrying out the designs of his Maker.

Thirdly—That he may be able to sympathize more fully with kindred spirits and with the joys and sufferings of mankind in general.

He has his reward and finds in culture a consolation under disappointment and a refuge from the storms of fate; a glory that shall not fade away or die into the light of common day. And if his investment should not turn out to pay from the standard of dollars and cents, in the satisfaction of the better and nobler aspirations it opens up an ever widening field, from the pastures of which the toiler after wealth for its own sake, lading himself with the thick clay, and the still shallower devotee of frivolity are destined, from the nature of their pursuits, to remain strangers.

Commercial travellers, it is to be feared, do not read the bible; and one reason for this abstinence is to be sought in the fact that they find a copy of the sacred scriptures upon every toilet table in the hotels they frequent. Similarly a good many not very profound people think culture too cheap and easy to be worth going out of their way about. If the prophet had bid them do some great thing they might have done it, but when it involves no more than a little extra civilization it does not seem worth while—(like the Highlander, when they wanted him to take a bath). Others will say,—"the people I am thrown among are not friendly to culture, they don't understand it; for my own part I like it ever so much, but I don't want to be left to my own devices." "Silence," says Confucius, "is a friend that will never betray," and those who cannot stand a little of it had better give their spare time to getting up their waltzing and small talk and leave culture alone.

But in fact culture, no more than cookery, can be acquired in six easy lessons. A \$2 subscription to the "art amateur" is not going to do the work. Not only effort is necessary but also enthusiasm, a determination which can rise superior to privation and outweary disappointment.

When the celebrated Dr. Schliemann was a half-starved boy in a dry-goods store he considered for a time what service he should render to culture when he should be able to afford it, and decided upon the design of disentering the ruins of ancient Troy. At twenty-one he had advanced as far as thirty-two pounds a year and continued faithful to his early project. At thirty-eight he retired from business with a fortune, which he spent in accomplishing those discoveries which will ever make his name illustrious.

Or hear the experience of Yoshida, the Japanese proto-martyr to progress, only a few years ago. He was ugly and laughably disfigured with the small-pox; and while nature had been so niggardly with him from the first, his personal habits were even sluttish. His clothes were wretched. When he ate or washed he wiped his hands upon his sleeves, and, as his hair was not tied more than once in two months, it was often disgusting to behold. With such a picture it is easy to believe that he never married. Such was his passion for study that he even grudged himself natural repose, and when he grew drowsy over his books he would, if it were summer, put mosquitoes up his sleeves, and, if it were winter, take off his shoes and run barefoot on the snow. His handwriting was exceptionally villainous; poet though he was, he had no taste for what was elegant, and in a country where to write beautifully was not the mark of a scrivener, but an admired accomplishment, he suffered his letters to be jolted out of him by the press of matter and the heat of his convictions. This man, having determined to penetrate the