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ESSAY:

The Method of Culture

BY

  
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## THE METHOD OF CULTURE.

To man are committed the destinies of the world. Through his agency it is to be emancipated from (vice, passion and sensuality.) Slowly but surely he is solving the problem of the attainment of frictionless social conditions; gradually he is making (the higher development) an object of laudable ambition and (worthy of industrious striving.) Minds have become restless and clamorous for (mental) food; the stronger appetite has changed its seat from the stomach to the brain-cavity. Men are now being convinced that through their intellects their salvation from (fleshly) idolatries is to be wrought. The desire for learning has become irrepressible; and so, education (is made) a passion which forgets food and drink and raiment, everything but mind-perfection and pursuit of knowledge. By degrees (the universe) is growing nobler and the decrease of evil is compensated (for) by the influx of new intellectual power. The better part of mankind is regenerating the world and wherever a man of thought appears, there sensual pleasure and wanton desire find an energetic and uncompromising combatant. (Long, long) has the advocate of intellectual living as the highest mode of earthly existence labored for recognition and converts. Men of every age have reviled and scoffed at this seeming fanatic, who would have them derive their enjoyments from the training and exercise of their brains. Nevertheless the spirit which animated him lived on, denouncing the frivolous pursuit of material wealth and the vanities of life (to the sacrifice of mind and immortality.) The future has partially unfolded the realization of his fondest dreams and prophecies. To-day his doctrines are embraced and reverently followed by the men who regulate the affairs of the world. The scholar, the student now have an acknowledged superiority. Brains and intellect are the insignia of power, the avenue through which all things must pass to become current and useful. In short, we have been metamorphosed into a race of thinkers, and he who is not a thought-producer is debarred from our social communion. And further, mental progress has brought in its train as a natural consequence, social progress. (Society, the state, the individual have experienced the beneficent results of this intellectual interference with their affairs and so are moved to charter colleges, establish schools and fill them with youths of impressionable minds.) Educa-

tion almost everywhere receives a favoring eye and through its manifold influences we will elevate life into a nobler and happier sphere. Education is the means; culture, the end.

The function of the intellect is with careful discrimination to appropriate and assimilate knowledge, refining and reproducing it in other forms. However, our stupidity or, perhaps, our proverbial perverseness has somewhat warped the punctilious obedience due this law. The mind has been divorced from its predestined office and is transformed into a mere unguided machine or else its faculties are constrained to engage in ignoble and nefarious occupations. Thus the brains of many are simply absorbents and their contents depend wholly upon the conditions of their existences. Some convert them into garrets, storing them with rubbish and useless, lamed furniture; others into museums of antiquity, receptacles for ideas long-forgotten and passed out of current circulation. The mind is active and athletic, endowed with latent vigor. Its health is regulated by its food and unless there be a proper selection, intellectual distemper and mental debility arise. Too strong fare is as injurious as too weak. The mental nourishment must also possess the virtue of variety. For the same diet makes a man a mere echo; his conversation becomes a rigmarole; his life, a monotonous repetition. He who covets brain-power must care more for his intellectual health than for the regular action of his digestive apparatus; his mind should be the object of more solicitude than his stomach.

The scheme of culture is the acquirement of mental symmetry, of uniformity of the divers powers of the intellect. It essays neither to exaggerate nor to neglect. It is the product of carefully directed study and selective education, requiring a generosity toward some thoughts and ideas and revulsion toward others. Judicious care and prudent choice must ever guide the true student so that his stock of knowledge may be an harmonious compound. The brain is consecrated to the sublime and noble only. All occupants that breed antagonism are interlopers and their admission into the thought-chambers necessitated an abrogation of the laws of intellectual living. Consequently omnivorous readers and book-worms never attain culture. They violate its fundamental principle. It is this exercise of the powers of selection that magnifies the capacity of intellect, enlarges its scope and puts within reach workable material to be smelted, refined and moulded into such forms as personal desire suggests. By psychological processes it is made our own but not

until we have stamped each fact with our individuality and re-issued it to the world.

The common practice of unalloyed absorption of facts is utterly at war with the spirit of culture. The man who devotes his energies to making his brain a mere repository for facts and who is incapable of deducing new ideas and fresh thought from them, is worth no more to the world than the space he fertilizes when his body re-combines with earth. We need no compendiums of facts bound in flesh and blood; our book-shelves hold encyclopedias. Culture is synonymous with broad mental activity and is the unbroken fruition of healthy thought-germs. The facts may be shoots plucked from other people's gardens yet in their transplantations they found a new vigor and additional hardiness. It is not pilfering to take these slips and re-plant them in our own soil, granting them a change of climate and, perhaps, conditions for more efficient growth. Facts are but seedlings of thought and he, who by assiduous attention and diligent cultivation gives them life and beauty and utility, merits the credit for their higher development and more lovely existence. Every thought has an expresser as well as an author and they are, by no means, necessarily identical. Truth is everywhere apparent but extremely few have genius sufficient to corral it in language. And, when it is uttered, each soul still holds it free and asserts his right to make it his benefit and use.

Culture is diametrically opposed to a rigid specialism. The sphere of knowledge is incomprehensible; so vast, indeed, that one brain is able to contain but little of the existent learning. Hence, in order to obviate scattered and diffuse intelligence, to prevent a smattering acquaintance with knowable things, the tendency of the present is to limit one's energies to research upon a single line. It is justifiable, its devotees claim, because time is wasted, mental vitality is dissipated and the age is none the wiser if persons ramble instead of concentrating their efforts on a particular branch of study. The theory is fairly good but the practice is abominable. When a man barter his soul to this dogma, unfortunately, he sells himself without reserve. Even in his own intellectual pasture-ground he is tethered by a very short rope and beyond the confines of his allotted territory he is unacquainted and can do naught else but play the part of an ignoramus. Like Dr. Holmes' naturalist, who first studied Nature, then animals, later insects, and finally spent a lifetime in investigating the habits of a solitary species of beetle, he sneers

at liberalism of thought, broadness of culture and is skeptical with respect to the importance of subjects outside of his own ever-contracting circle. Such an abject creature does not possess even common-sense, which, in truth, is infant culture, intuitional education. He who is susceptible of the contagion of specialism is incapacitated for any other duties and by cloistering himself unwittingly blesses the world and frees men from undesired association with him. His constitution is not submissive to culture. His notions always remain few and trite, become so dry and parched that future germination and reproduction are impossible. He is a man of one idea and this he continually inflates, hoping to evolve a new fact. Blowing soap-bubbles makes them larger in size but never alters their composition.

The human mind has a certain capacity for knowledge. It is a fine piece of wisdom for the young soul to keep pouring into it carefully winnowed thoughts, whose prime qualification is future usefulness, until the brain is more than full of precious streams of ideas; then the soul's plethoric condition will command an overflow of any surplus. He who is anxious to communicate knowledge barely for the sake of display shows plainly the shallowness of his mental acquirement, the ankle-depth of his soul-nature. He is a plane surface and his intellectual compass is easy to calculate. He has a panorama of thoughts and ideas, perhaps interesting at the first view, but completely devoid of attractiveness to him who happens to be a second time a spectator. He never introduces new scenes to entice future visits, but each examination evinces the entire length and breadth of his resources. Much rather to be preferred is the kaleidoscopic man whose thoughts may be sparse yet each exhibition of them finds them differently expressed and by their varied combinations they almost assume the appearance of new and original ideas. However, neither of these characters is cultured. The powers of creating ideas and of fecundating latencies of thought and feeling are the essentials of the broadly educated man.

The beginning of wisdom is a consciousness of ignorance, of intellectual poverty. Simultaneously love of truth and desire for mental improvement spring up, which lead the aspiring mind to the true reservoirs of knowledge. The educational forces of the world, past and present, are bound up in its books and the intimate relationship of literature and culture naturally calls forth an inquiry into their mutual sympathies. Literature is the warp; culture, the woof. They completely interlace one

another, the quality of each materially determining the character of the fabric. The web they form is the highest mode of existence the world knows, the broad, liberal intellectual life of the author or the patron of books and learning. They are indissolubly united. Literature cannot be without culture; culture, without literature. No one can be cultured unless he be literary in tastes and inclinations. Culture is the result of literary cultivation. In books is reposed the world's accumulation of learning from creation's time until to-day; they comprise and represent to us the intellectual beauty of all ages. Literature is the imperishable record of mind-power, the embalment of culture for eternal good and guidance. The literature of each epoch is the high-water mark of its civilization; for, peace or war, prosperity or calamity, religious attentiveness or the prevalence of atheism wonderfully affect the merit of books produced and radically rule the trends of thought. And so, with individuals the genuine character of their lives is reflected in their literary achievements. We know Shakespeare's mind, his secret thoughts, his highest activities. We do not care to know his externalities, but seek acquaintance rather with his inmost nature, his immortality, which, preserved in his literary accomplishments, he has transmitted to us and to all time. This, the main-spring of his being, the provoker of his sublime thoughts and feelings, is his culture. The story of his education and periods of intellectual striving would show its method; absolute dependence upon past performance and upon Nature. Past performance is literature; Nature, his individuality, or better, his personal power in interpreting her manifestations.

Literature is seed-thought for future generations. It represents the best intellectuality of the grandest men who have ever lived. One century is the instructor of its successor. The experiences of yesterday govern the events of to-day. The Present receives its impetus to thought from the ideas of the Past. And thus literature, containing the experiences and the history of human endeavor, serves as an ever-flaming torch to guide the morals, thoughts and acts of men. By its lofty teachings and impulses to the right and noble it is perceptibly reforming the ways of the world. When all men are taught to love books and to think, in short, to be rational beings, then will the state and society be rid of jeopardizing influences and gross immoralities. The student of literature always despises baseness and depravity. Seldom are the brains of a scholar sacrificed to enslaving passion and sensual desire. The hope of

the world is enveloped in present and forthcoming literatures. They have an unmistakable potency, as this literary element of our life measures the political prosperity, the moral status and the intellectual power of the universe. Thus it re-asserts itself as the symbol of culture. As water by mere contact with the mill-wheel moves mighty shafts and pulleys, so does this unending stream of literature provide motive power for the mental machinery of all who but allow the influence of its current to touch them directly. Ideas, thoughts, opinions, all original, will spring up spontaneously and the faculty of discovering the truths and unities of Nature, of explaining her phenomena will be added unto them.

Culture does not insinuate itself upon us. It must be sought and dearly bought. Its deep attractiveness, its meliorating influences make it the *ultimatum* of worldly attainment. The privileges it confers, the peace and happiness it gives, the full exercise of well-balanced faculties it encourages, make it the glory of the scholar, the blissful realization of the student's hopes. The world has been preservative of her standards of culture. Such brains as thought well and accomplished somewhat of good survive and are perpetuated by the impartial judgment of centuries. No compositions of passing glory or ephemeral fame have been transmitted. Books must bear an inward testimony of everlasting usefulness or else be discarded and forgotten. Time makes no mistakes. In spite of the varying trends of thinking, the changing views of the true object of life, and the advance of enlightenment, some works of literary art have stood the test of widely different opinions and met the demands of the world in opposite phases. The pure, the celestial natures of many ideal, cultured men still have existence and continue to disseminate their irresistible incentives to mental elevation and to redeem the minds of men from sensual employments and enervating pursuits. They still sway power and as long as literature is known their immortal intellects will undoubtedly help to better the mental and moral aspects of the universe. Their undying fame is the result of their culture, and in the embodied culture they have given us, they have founded fountains of benevolent influences whose pure, unrestrained flowings spread out and whomsoever they touch becomes chaste, devoid of base desires and carnal longings. If we could trace the growth of culture from its beginnings and follow it through all its ramifications, we would find, no doubt, its essence deep-rooted in these master-minds, whose entire lives were spent in perfecting its outward expression or literature.

Communion with literature is the most efficient method of culture. He who would court this higher, intellectual life must study literature and with an earnest energy and engaged eye examine the world's literary treasures, permitting his soul to absorb the reflection of each gem, to be permeated with the edifying rays of each bright ornament. Here is the everlasting, undefilable wealth of the universe. Not the property of a favored few, but scattered broadcast with a profuseness almost verging upon prodigality, it becomes an almoner to the destitute of knowledge, a physician to the mentally weak and misdirected.

Culture is not a sensuous æstheticism. It presupposes morality. An ethical purpose is the first ground for a book's existence and the primary reason for intellectual aspiration. The mind and heart are linked together and are comrades-in-arms in the battle against vice and sensualism. Catholicity of spirit, steadfastness to thoughtful convictions, harmonious conceptions of the Divine Spirit, and above all, a deep, unswerving faith in the religion of love ever characterize the true man of culture. He sees the origin of things and assigns God as the pre-eminent cause of every display of Nature or the presence of every existing object. Unselfish and sympathetic, he makes it his mission to drive away the mists of ignorance, and low, polluting lusts, which beleaguer the masses, and to lift man to his proper estate. Culture, combating carnal appetites, overthrowing prejudice, dismantling false and vicious ideas, is the van of the beneficent forces at work in the world. Disparaging the mean and corrupt, eliminating all vitiating influences, it constantly aims to refine and ennoble. As a sunbeam glancing into a darkened room discloses countless motes in the air, so culture reveals to man his many infirmities; and besides, not content with revelation, it provides an infallible cure for all weaknesses by incitement to higher efforts and more lasting usefulness. The signs of the times indicate the rightful recognition and due supremacy of culture. One by one the bonds which hold the world to an ignominious thralldom are being snapped asunder and man is emerging into that pure air where the attainment of full intellectual stature is possible. The higher we go the nearer we are to God. The age of redemption is come. The sky is o'ercast and clouds of promise, continually being re-enforced, skirt the horizon, gathering strength for copious showers. The drought of ignorance and iniquity has long oppressed the people but now the earth is to be cleansed and refreshed, and the atmosphere purified. Under this revivifying in-

fluence the universe will teem with benevolences, awakening into an existence where love and not hate is present, where manliness replaces brutality, where spirituality overcomes sensuality, and where culture overwhelms and puts to flight mental neglect and intellectual shallowness. Then the prayers of the author, the scholar and the student will have been answered, and the re-appearing sun will smile upon a world, pure, free and tranquil.



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