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Culture, Self, and Style

William H. Gass



Professor Gass's remarks were delivered at Syracuse University on October 27, 1979, as part of the symposium "The Study of Culture."

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Like a wreath, *culture* is a word we place upon the brow of a victor. It would be a little late now to try to pick it clean of prejudice and praise, to make a neutral scientific word of it, scatter the laurel leaves, defoliate the bays; for it has gone to Groton and has advanced degrees; it has heard Bach and had long, lingering love affairs, punctuated by the pleonasms of poetry; it has trudged through the Pitti Palace amidst the sweat of August days, suffered hangovers from history, seen Spain ablaze; no use—no use indeed—for it has got a grant from the NEA and looked for a parking place in Paris; it has stood a spoon in double Devon cream, committed sodomy in one of the several manners recommended by de Sade, read too many doubtful German books; no, no indeed, no use to return it to the nursery; it has had what we call an "upbringing"; it will never be the same.

Yet, when I repeat Emerson's journal entry ("Culture is one thing, and varnish another. There can be no high culture without pure morals. With the truly cultivated man,—the maiden, the orphan, the poor man, and the hunted slave feel safe"),¹ does the phrase "without pure morals" pass so smoothly by, or has the chalk squeaked, and sent a shiver through us? How innocent of Emerson—who has denied the Fall of Man and yet will wait out Civil War, who thinks Goethe represents a cultivated nation, and whose holocausts are all in the Book of Revelation—to think of culture in these terms. How provincial of him, too, to believe not only in purity but in morals. There, among the Concord prudes, he dares to assert the nobility of man and to cry out, expansively, for "initiative, spermatic, prophesying, man-making words."

Matthew Arnold felt he had to defend the term from those who thought culture consisted of the standard smatter of classical Greek and the composition of twiddly little critical reviews, so that it consequently meant a condition of smart-assed self-indulgence in what was essentially a shallow and trivial spirit. But when Arnold, instead, says

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journal*, entry for December 1868.

that the aim of the man of culture is “to make reason and the will of God prevail,” however prudently he proceeds to note our fallibility concerning the knowledge of God’s will and the dictates of reason, and even when we learn that God is something like the aims and order of nature, the word *prevail* still carries a cold chill to the chest where they say the heart hides; because cultivation sometimes goes in narrow rows, and to give power to the scholar or the connoisseur, to persons whose work lies literally in and under their own hands, is to give it to those who are likely to have a wholly false sense of it, when power is directed toward others, because political affairs cannot be worked like words or conducted like an orchestra. Perfection, which Arnold held to be an essential element in culture, is not a sensible political pursuit, nor is a scorn for the practical an ideal attitude, or that lingering envy of the active, so often found in round-shouldered souls, the best goad.

Once the property of stuffy moralizing men of letters (Emerson, Arnold, Eliot), the word *culture* is now shared by anthropologists and sociologists with about the same grace and good feeling as quarreling kids. In *Notes towards a Definition of Culture*, Eliot passed over only a few pages before mentioning E.B. Taylor’s *Primitive Culture*; and Frazer and Weston were, as we know, intimates of his mind.

Anthropologists or not, we all used to call them “natives”—those little, distant, jungle and island people—and we came to recognize the unscientific snobbery in that. Even our more respectable journals could show them naked without offense, because their pendulous or pointed breasts were as inhuman to us as the udders of a cow. Shortly we came to our senses and had them dress. We grew to distrust our own point of view, our local certainties, and embraced relativism, although it is one of the scabbier whores; and we went on to endorse a nice equality among cultures, each of which was carrying out its task of coalescing, conserving, and structuring some society. A large sense of superiority was one of the white man’s burdens, and that weight, released, was replaced by an equally heavy sense of guilt.

No more than we might expect a surgeon to say “Dead, and good riddance” would an anthropologist exclaim, stepping from the culture just surveyed as one might shed a set of working clothes, “What a lousy way to live!” Because, even if the natives were impoverished, covered with dust and sores; even if they had been trodden on by stronger feet till they were flat as a path; even if they were rapidly dying off; still, the observer could remark how frequently they smiled, or how infrequently their children fought, or how serene they were. We can envy the Zuni their peaceful ways and the Navaho their “happy heart.”

It was amazing how mollified we were to find that there was some functional point to food taboos, infibulation, or clitoridectomy; and if we still felt morally squeamish about human sacrifice or headhunting, it is clear we were still squeezed into a narrow modern European point of view, and had no sympathy, and didn’t—couldn’t—understand. Yet when we encountered certain adolescents among indolent summery seaside tribes who were allowed to screw without taboo, we wondered whether this enabled them to avoid the stresses of our own

youth, and we secretly hoped it hadn't.

Some anthropologists have untied the moral point of view, so sacred to Eliot and Arnold and Emerson, from every mooring (science and art also float away on the stream of Becoming), calling any belief in objective knowledge "fundamentalist," as if it were the same as a benighted Biblical literalism; and arguing for the total mutability of man and the complete sociology of what under such circumstances could no longer be considered knowledge but only *doxa*, or "opinion."

It is part of our culture to recognize at last our cognitive precariousness. It is part of our culture to be sophisticated about fundamentalist claims to secure knowledge. It is part of our culture to be forced to take aboard the idea that other cultures are rational in the same way as ours. Their organization of experience is different, their objectives different, their successes and weak points different too. The refusal to privilege one bit of reality as more absolutely real, one kind of truth more true, one intellectual process more valid, allows the original comparative project dear to Durkheim to go forward at last.²

It is a part of our culture to recognize these things (a vital point to which I shall return); but the characteristics Mary Douglas cites do not necessarily lead to the liberal cultural relativity which, with rhetoric and a curious conviction, she recites, since a man who stands precariously upon a swaying wire may still be standing there; and to be sophisticated about the difficulties of obtaining certainty may merely make you, like Descartes, all the more resolute, though wary, in your pursuit of them. That our "objective" knowledge may be only probable does not make it impossible; that others have other goals does not minimize or subjectify mine; nor is it entirely without irony that one observes how, after thirteen hundred years, someone is still uttering the propositions of Protagoras, Proclus, and Prodicus with such moral fervor. If anthropology teaches us about the diversity of cultures, the history of philosophy instructs us on the eternal recurrence of arguments and points of view.

2. Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays on Anthropology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. xvii-xviii.

We remembered our missionaries, too, and how they had belabored many a naked, native, babe in the woods with our beliefs and tamed savages the way the jungle itself was leveled to make roads; how Christianity converted treacherous yellow gooks into serving maids and houseboys who could be trusted with our bowls and Bibles, table water, knives. On our boats we brought them smallpox, syphilis, psalms, sin, our alphabet, and beads. First we conquered and then we Schweitzered them, and it's not clear which was worse. Now, of course, we come in smoothly smiling corps of peace, with medical marvels and plant poisons and tractors to terrorize and tame the earth. We teach. Our opinions are all about techniques. We carry economic notions in our carpetbag of tricks, engineering information, and industrial disease.

Our historians, considered as students of the cultural past, have been hauled up short as well. They had been too patronizing, or too idolatrous. We saw in the German worship of the Greeks a dangerously sentimental worship of themselves. The smug sense that men were pretty much alike, and probably English anyway, clouded even the

customarily clear-eyed views of Hume. It did not come as a surprise that Mind marched toward the Absolute *auf Deutsch*, or that the West was like an aging lecher casting about for virgin lands and populations to debauch. Optimism cock-a-doodle-dooed in the face of the farmer's ax, and pessimism dove like a loon into an empty lake.

Our habit was to expect too much and then mope at the little we received. Schiller expected great things from the French Revolution, and when he didn't get them got cross. Emerson watched America disappoint him with a wrathful and finally a weary eye. Because the sixties didn't permanently alter the nature of man, life, and the state, the seventies were sullen.

So formerly we were ardent aristocrats or racists or patriots or profiteers or priests; or we were sorry we were white and had motorcars, and hoped the refrigerator hadn't ruined our palate with frozen peas, the electric razor our get up and go, and TV our intelligence. We couldn't study other cultures fairly because of the biases of our own; and we couldn't understand ourselves because, as Tocqueville's success had presumably shown, we were too close to ourselves for clarity, too concerned with ourselves to be dispassionate, too intimate for innocence, too much in hate and love. Culture, in short, has had a bad conscience. Writing about it confesses to a past or present prejudice.

But the fact that there are social causes for our ideas and attitudes surely should not surprise us; it is a truth which ought to be at least gently embraced. There are psychological and economic causes as well, and numerous other claimants. Nevertheless, if our language is indeed the limit of our world, then we must find another, larger, stronger, more inventive language which will burst those limits like the paper hoop the clown breaks, and not lie unburning, weightless, unashamed upon some doltish tongue or commonplace page. A culture remains imprisoned within itself so long as it is content with its pat, traditional ways, so long as it rests on *those* laurels, wears *that* wreath. Its finest wines will soon sour, its herds decline, a moral blindness like that which gripped Thebes will settle like a plague upon it if the city, the country, the culture is not soon passionately and persistently concerned with acts and ideas that, while having causes and conditions, transcend them in search of justification and some rational ground for change. It is just here that knowledge of the startling and perplexing variety of life creates the sophist's salutary doubt about the universal rightness of this hearth and heaven, this flag and spear. We seek for something that rests on a better base than our own bones and local being, on an anatomy we all share: our heavy, swollen, bilateral brains—the home of the human, if there is any.

With a truly cultivated man the hunted slave feels safe. In response to our gods, we may pull the hot heart out of a bleeding chest only so often and remain right. A culture morally and functionally fails which does not let its crazies, its artists and its saints, its scientists and politicians, claim, on occasion, a higher law than its own congresses can pass, its traditions permit, or its conscience conceive.

Culture is one thing, varnish another. In Port Moresby, I saw men and women who had presumably ventured down from their tribal homes in the hills squatting along the road with a can of Coke in one hand and a little cellophane covered cupcake in the

other. The local hotel where I stayed was staffed by young men in dress suits and bare feet, and there were TVs in every room just as there are in Australia, although there was no transmitter on the island and a gray screen was all you could receive.

Many of the people spoke Melanesian pidgin, a language which perfectly expresses the collision of cultures. The diet of the natives was soft, Western, and sweet, yet one had to feel their Stone Age stomachs turning: *bel i tantanim*, they might have said in that lingo which is all broken habits and bent psyches, merchandise and trading, a *mélange due* to men who *bilong longwe ples*.

I felt what I thought they should feel, not because I had a basket of facts to sell to any passing hypothesis like fruit along the highway but because I have always been convinced that culture was not something men created like a quarter candy bar or corner cupboard; it was not one of those external goods—glory or money—against which Aristotle has so eloquently argued. You could not even imagine it away, as Hobbes thought, putting war and a state of nature in its place. It had no onset, like puberty, and man hadn't evolved into culture as you might take stairs to another floor. Nor did it seem to me that humanity was a creation of culture the way management, the coach, and the team define a linebacker so completely within his task; if they have their way, all off-field life is left out. Rather the relation was as Socrates suggested in the *Crito*: that of son to father or arm to man, both instrument and organ, integral yet not supreme; or, as I should prefer, as the tongue I wag stands to the language it cannot help but wag in, if it wants to wag at all.

Culture not only contains our written and spoken languages but also is itself a larger language: a set of rules and directives, orders and ordinances, which enable our actions to become significant, which bind us together in the same system of signs. In short, culture creates a grammar, a malleable syntax, to smooth and straighten the stammer of our life. We learn this language, so it is not a part of our natural growth the way breasts are, or body hair; and although there are many kinds of culture and many languages around the world, it is necessary that we learn at least one, else we remain inhuman, incomplete, unformed. Greeks may have been provincial to identify the human—the civilized—with themselves, and barbarism with the Persians, but they were right to recognize that one had to be something: a Cypriot or Spartan, a Cretan or Corinthian; because a culture makes our natural abstractness concrete. It causes consciousness to become French or Javanese or German; and only when consciousness is fully formed and furnished is it fully human. So any sense of the self that does not see that self as a literal *embodiment* of society—of tradition and time, climate and space, condition and aim—is woefully inadequate.

Culture is no less natural to man than any other organ, and it has grown together and alike with the body and the brain to its present size and complexity, its elastic capabilities, its diversified effects. So if one is going to think of culture as an implement or an enemy, then it is a tool which is attached to us like a nipple or a phallus; it is within us like a defect in the genes.

We are born defenseless, we always say; naked, without the teeth of the tiger, the poison of the snake, the instincts of the spider, or the chameleon's camouflage; and it is true that nature is not nearly definite or directive enough, regarding neither our own human nature nor nature's nature. If we spilled ourselves directly, there would be nothing but a blot, and that would be precisely because our nervous systems are too complex for simple reflex, for bell and slaver. The anteater is one word. His craving for ants is concrete, and he usually has the sense to be born near the tents and tepees of his taste. Our stomach is abstract, our thirst is general, our longings as vague and universal as the atmosphere. We would copulate with black and brown, with animals and moist mud, with hands and mouths, with the appropriate hollow and pointed parts of vegetables and trees. We wake to a world we cannot understand, but the levels of life beneath us have no need for understanding. They do not make things up. They do not play in bands. They do not look for their life in the stars. They do not thumb through arty books for advice on how to fuck.

Here we have all this hair on our heads. It gets dirty. It knots. An ape would know how to groom it. We could just let it flop. We could just cut it close and scrub it a lot:

The female of the human species, just after the age of puberty has passed like an embarrassed blush, when the hair is at its healthiest and full of zing, cuts it all off to weave a wallet for her marriage money. How clever of this creature, whose body chemistry at her first menstruation incites this behavior at just the right time.

Clearly, nothing like this can be seriously said of us. However, that does not mean we take no interest in our hair. On the contrary. How we cut and comb and dress it, how we fangle it up or tease it, wig it or dye, becomes a significant part of our cultural language. The stimulus with its response is replaced by a sign with its significance.

Indeed we can count the steps which establish a style. If we did our hair in honey one day, in grease another; if we put it up in the morning for a while and let it down at night, only to alter everything in an instant like the dispersal of a cloud; if we sometimes cut it when we were grieving and other times weighted strands with stones; if, in short, we had no habits, had no principles of selection, no order of action, only acts which were random and willy-nilly, then we would have no language, because our behavior would not fit into a system. It would be inhuman; that is, it would be without significance beyond its immediate provocation, as we might bind up our hair because it gets in our eyes when we hunt. Yet the questions quickly come: why not cut it short instead? why tie it up? with a leather band? in a compound knot? around a feather or a bone? or bury it beneath a hat?

Similarly, if we ate, when hungry, whatever was conveniently at hand: onions one day, nectarines the next; if we always took the brisk straight way to the satisfaction of our needs, as if nature peeled the grapes it hung above our heads, we could not say we had a culture because culture fills in the blanks, narrows choice, decides, defines; it makes our actions like a line of type.

One might want to say that ants, bees, baboons, have a society; yet

until their behavior did more than merely feed or protect or propagate them, but had, in addition, social significance and sensitivity, one could not correctly speak of the presence of a culture.

Still, if we want to compare a culture to a language, then we must be prepared to set out over a terrain not so much untraveled as trampled into featureless confusion, and with the disturbing knowledge that our guide is a metaphor already overworked and mutinous. So if our interest is in the price a self has to pay to become a self in such a system of unwhistled signals and covert sighs, if our concern is for the place of the self, its purposes and possibilities, among society's conventional symbols and habitual signs, then it might be more advantageous to study not the simple but the complex, not the crude and rudimentary but the highly refined, not the common but the special—culture in its finest expression, its fullest realization—rather than the cheap kitsch that clutters the street, embarrasses the eye as it shames the feelings, sweetcakes and cokes the stomach, and affrights the mind.

Early in the development of Henry James's late novel *The Golden Bowl*, we accompany an impoverished and clownishly named Italian prince, Prince Amerigo, on a shopping expedition with the lovely Charlotte Stant, an Italian-born American who is infatuated with him. The meeting is clandestine, and its purpose is the purchase of a gift for Maggie Verver, the woman whom the prince plans to marry. At last they arrive in the antique shop where they will be shown a goblet cut from a single crystal and covered skillfully in gold, a gilding which not only enhances the beauty of the bowl but also hides a flaw in the quartz. However, first the dealer sets out a few smaller items in this singular sentence:

Of decent old gold, old silver, old bronze, of old chased and jewelled artistry, were the objects that, successively produced, had ended by numerously dotting the counter, where the shop-man's slim, light fingers, with neat nails, touched them at moments, briefly, nervously, tenderly, as those of a chess player rest, a few seconds, over the board, on a figure he thinks he may move and then may not: small florid ancients, ornaments, pendants, lockets, brooches, buckles, pretexts for dim brilliants, bloodless rubies, pearls either too large or too opaque for value; miniatures mounted with diamonds that had ceased to dazzle; snuffboxes presented to—or by—the too-questionable great; cups, trays, taper-stands, suggestive of pawn-tickets, archaic and brown, that would themselves, if preserved, have been prized curiosities.³

Whatever it was that compelled Henry James to write fiction, whatever fancies or feelings he had which he felt he had to express, the fact is that the blank page yields him nearly every freedom. Facing it, the author can only be impressed by its duplicitous generosity. Allowing everything, it facilitates nothing. James does not have to write; he does not have to write fiction; he does not have to write a novel; he does not have to write *The Golden Bowl*; yet he must imagine that he must. The sentences he composes with such consummate attention to detail, such musical skill, such morally perceptive art, do not answer

3. Quotes from Henry James taken from *The Golden Bowl* (London: Methuen, 1905), p. 76.

any questions; they furnish no one with useful schoolboy information; nowhere do they urge the instant purchase of gelid pastes and chemical powders; nor do they comprise a cry like “ouch!” however prolonged. No one is addressed. The novel’s composition has no occasion, no external justification. It counts as cultural surplus. Its existence is arbitrary in that sense; it has been wholly *willed*. Yet James has no novel in his head which his words then make sensible. The work works to fashion itself in the same moment it is shaping Henry James and James is devising it.

The passage of which I have quoted part is an important piece of the book and is in the language and conventions of the European novel; it is also in the language of late James—well in. It is written in the tradition of Austen and Eliot, in English of the upper class, in English with a few American singularities and tones; so if we were to distinguish, as Saussure did, between a language considered as a whole and a particular speech or bit of writing in it, we should be obliged to notice that our specimen is an example of more than one tongue, or rather that, at the very least, it is a language within a language which is yet within another, and so on. The English language is mighty and general; Jamesian English is particular and special. *The Golden Bowl* itself is unique.

As we enter the sentence, we observe first of all that the sounds of the words, normally rather arbitrary and accidental properties of what we want to convey, are the object of the greatest care, and that patterns are produced quite different from the ones which syntax requires; and these organize and direct its course. The letters *o* and *l* predominate, as they do in the phrase “the golden bowl.” The word *old* is reiterated, as it ought to be in a shop full of antiques, and the metals are announced which have always named the legendary ages of man: “old gold, old silver, old bronze.” The shopman is playing a game with the prince and his companion, exactly as James is with us. He is making his moves, and each object he displays is defective in some slight way. He shows them “dim brilliants, bloodless rubies . . . diamonds that had ceased to dazzle.” The expression “small florid ancients” is itself, and nicely, just a little florid. The pauses, the hesitations in the passage, mimic the movement of the tradesman’s hand, which touches the various brooches and pendants and pearls “briefly, nervously, tenderly.” The action of the language and the action of the hand lie on parallel and resembling planes. The shopkeeper lovingly offers Charlotte and the prince a counter full of things. James lovingly gives us a list of words: “cups, trays, taper-stands.” As readers we are placed in the position of the prince. He sees these bibelots. We read these words. The one *is* the other. The prince’s instructed eye, and James’s immaculate judgment, wittily remark the vulgar limitations of the stock as the rich list continues, wrapped in the elegant warmth of its own sound, the delightful shimmer of its irony:

A few commemorative medals, of neat outline but dull reference; a classic monument or two, things of the first years of the century; things consular, Napoleonic, temples, obelisks, arches, tingly re-embodied, completed the discreet cluster; in

which, however, even after tentative reinforcement from several quaint rings, intaglios, amethysts, carbuncles, each of which had found a home in the ancient sallow satin of some weakly-snapping little box, there was, in spite of the due proportion of faint poetry, no great force of persuasion.

James returns to his brilliantly reflective form as one still hungry goes back to the buffet, but now the concern of the sentence is the nature of the prince's and Charlotte's attention:

They looked, the visitors, they touched, they vaguely pretended to consider, but with scepticism, so far as courtesy permitted, in the quality of their attention.

A style could scarcely be more a mirror of its own effects; and the wonderful result is that our picture of the prince and his companion is held within the words like an image in clear, unruffled water, where the deep bottom of the stream lies brightly on the surface as though it were a reflection fallen from above and not one which has risen from below. In the next breath, James is defining the moral nature of his indiscreet couple's discreet perception, the exactness of which is fully adequate to the scrupulosity of the principals in question.

It was impossible they shouldn't, after a little, tacitly agree as to the absurdity of carrying to Maggie a token from such a stock. It would be—that was the difficulty—pretentious without being "good"; too usual, as a treasure, to have been an inspiration of the giver, and yet too primitive to be taken as tribute welcome on any terms.

The nervous nicety of word, the salesman's hesitant manipulations, both the shift of our attention as readers and that of the characters, and finally the quality of their sensitivity and ours, of course, as we follow and affirm it, not to omit the author's deeper discriminations as he composes the entire scene, are combined to provide us with an almost daunting example of what a culture crystallized within a style can do.

A sentence is a length of awareness. Henry James makes us conscious of that. Its pace, its track, its jittery going back, its gush, its merciless precision—whatever the qualities are—its pruderies, its pride in its own powers, its Latinate pomposity or raucous yawps, constitute a particular expressive presence. Still, we must take account of what this swatch of unvoiced sound—this mind in its moving—is made of: language and custom and cultural object, history and belief, status and sensation, thought and need, feeling and dream.

It is entirely appropriate that what the prince and Charlotte are shopping for is a symbol: an object that shall convey, in its worn and somewhat aged elements, a complex geometry of human implications and recognitions, glimpses which pass through the gloriously gilded surface and the clear ring of the crystal toward its half-hidden inner flaw, that weakness waiting to show itself in any human whole. Henry James's characters live in a system of social relations so complex and connected, so culturally developed and refined, that his sentences can keep up only by being equally complete in the plump ripe resonance of their meanings. For if his famous injunction—to be one on whom nothing is lost—is to be matched by his art,

then no element of language, either at the level of worldly referent, abstract concept, or material sign, can be overlooked; just as a gesture, mute as a wave in a waste of ocean, becomes, in the right place, an anguished sign of parting, a conveyance of private feeling into public knowledge; or, as Rilke writes, perhaps the motion of the wave is like “a plum-tree bough some perching cuckoo’s hastily vacated.”

Observing a birthday, celebrating Christmas, keeping the Sabbath holy, are activities which are fairly free of natural law. They are also like the blank page. They await definition. We needn’t eat three meals a day, either; we needn’t have an egg for breakfast; we needn’t be so finicky about the time it cooks; we needn’t put it in a faience cup, the small end up; we needn’t crack it with a silver knife; we needn’t accompany it with coffee, taken black. We needn’t, but there are cultural constraints against roast duck with cherries, against pemmican and raw snake, against *coq au vin* before we really are unslipped and awake.

Even the simplest society has to keep its members in some sort of rhythmic step. And ours? When would we open our restaurants? What would they dare to serve? Would we eat from our hands, from a trough, out of wooden bowls, off of china plates? furtive and alone as in a public john? in friendly bunches? in hostile bands?

Culture draws an apparently arbitrary and vagrant line between our desires and their eventual satisfaction, setting up arbitrary obstacles like a row of hurdles in front of a dash man. Freud sometimes felt it was a substitute reality, at once false and overly demanding, because culture is totally nosy; it is not a neighbor but the neighborhood; it cares about everything: about the character of containers, furnishings, clothes; about the difference between a cup and a mug, a grin and a sneer, a chaste kiss and a lewd one, about the social superiority of wine to beer. Its judgments stratify as well as any high rise. It considers charreuse to be a dime-store hue, something to wear with painted toes and teased hair and not a color to swallow coffee from, since it seems to sicken that thick and normally lightless brew. Culture wants silent sips. It interposes objects and implements between ourselves and our food. The head should not be bent too narrowly above the bowl or the rice shoveled roughly in. It wants to disguise and supplement the brutality of our biology. So its requirements go on and on.

One does not whistle between bites or, while still at table, talk about catching the syph in Singapore or getting sick and throwing up in Saigon. There are also definite limits at a meal to the permissibly sleezy and obscene. One does not spit, shout, or gargle. One does not come to dinner nude, or in a blood-spattered butcher’s apron, or without shoes. One smiles a lot. Talk is correct, and silence is suspect and rude. At other guests one does not throw wet pellets of bread. On the other hand, one does display charm and wit, qualities as social as the obscene or the syph. One pays the host and hostess a compliment on the warmth of their hospitality, the wisdom of their wines, the excellence of their food, but one does not lick the platter clean.

Yet as we watch that devious, wandering, hazardous line develop, we can see the unfolding form, the slow unbudding beauty of it, because our coffee is more than coffee

now, to the right nose; it is part of a social ceremony, a ceremony which allows us to discern much in saying more: color and region and richness of bean, the cup in our palm like a warm hand as we shape another metaphor and sexual sign; and held in common, too, the deep taste, the heartening smell of the blend, the stimulating effects of the caffeine.

James feared that democracy might render society too featureless for fiction; but the human mind demands division and difference, hierarchy and opposition—just as Saussure insisted language does—in order to establish the identity of its words and semantic strategies. A grimace, a gesture, a sign (for instance, the one that means money, or is a good-bye wave, or a small moue of disappointment) must be able to mark itself off from any other of its kind (*honey, phony, funny*, or the fanning hand which says, “Hi, there! here I am!” or the wrinkled nose which tells us it smells the fat in the fire). We learn to read the natural world in the same way, because our culture instructs us about the manifold meanings of rivers and mountains, valleys and plains, of cypresses and fountains, of yews and plane trees and bays. In a sense, culture has completed its work when everything is a sign. That is the secret of Swedenborg, if anybody cares.

What follows is a famous example, the quietly beautiful opening of *A Farewell to Arms*:

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves.

The parallel between fallen troops and fallen leaves is obvious enough—the dusty road and the clear stream—but it reminds us that the novelist treats nature like a page of the person and without in the least having to attribute to it human cares and needs. The novelist has never had any other subject than society in the fullest sense. If we want to know what Virginia Woolf's words are about (normally a naive question), we must answer that they render cultural signs, configurations which she also manipulates with the same artful concern for sensuous meaning, system and design, as her sentences. James, Mann, Chekhov, Joyce, Faulkner, Melville, Flaubert, Beckett, Tolstoy, Proust—they invent, they imagine, they compose in two languages, simultaneously. This is not to pretend that Samuel Beckett is a novelist or yet a playwright of manners in the old sense, or to suggest that the writer's real job is to give us the lowdown on our chapfallen civilization, that “old bitch gone in the teeth.” Yet what are the objects which Winnie hauls out of her capacious black bag at the beginning of Beckett's *Happy Days* but leftovers from our markets and our shops, fragments from our life, the insanely productive commercial world? There is a toothbrush, pair of spectacles, mirror, lipstick, nearly empty bottle of red medicine, a feathered brimless hat,

a magnifying glass, revolver. There is violence, self-love, vanity, a concern for appearance, distortion and blindness, sexual allure, fear. Upon some of these objects—the bottle, the brush—there is writing, and Winnie tries to make it out:

Loss of spirits . . . lack of keenness . . . want of appetite . . . infants . . . children . . . adults . . . six level . . . tablespoonfuls daily . . . the old style! . . . before and after . . . meals . . . instantaneous . . . improvement.

*Full guaranteed . . . genuine pure . . . Fully guaranteed . . . genuine pure . . . Fully guaranteed . . . genuine pure . . . hog's . . . setae . . . Hog's setae.*⁴

4. Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), pp. 13, 17–18.

A brush that scrubs the teeth with hog's hair, a syrup that soothes: they talk; they mean almost too much, now that they've become pure props. Winnie is already half archaeological as she lies there buried beneath a wooden earth to above the waist; and shards from old pots could not have been dug from the ground with more meaning than her pistol is drawn out or her parasol waved. As relics, like the clichés which Winnie mouths, they resonate without first ringing; they are memorabilia become memory itself; and through the fertility of this sterile *dreck*, Beckett demonstrates once again the true immortality of things—an immortality which lies in the manifold inescapabilities of signs.

Our expressions, choices, gestures, not only turn us inside out; they also regulate and organize our mind, just as the body which must learn not merely to run but to hurdle as well develops new habits for its muscles, new expectations from its movements, new perceptions of the cinder track, new hurts, new fears.

Imagine, for a moment, that I have chosen to express my distress at the death of a friend by weighting down lengths of my hair with stones. Not only does meaning—my mourning—spread like a metaphor through every strand of my behavior, my actions are, themselves, an analysis of my emotion. What was purely mine is, in that sense, shared; and what was purely private is, at the same time, felt as a feeling among friends. Of course, if it became customary to grieve in this fashion, I'd have invented a style; but in the beginning I would have to consider carefully the cultural significance of long hair, of braids, death, grief, and stones; in short, the internal harmony between my actions and my feeling. Because how else could the meaning of my performance be read, *prima facie*, without some aptness of imagery, some contextual congruence, some intrinsic directions?

Eventually, of course, I might only need to mimic my original motions while my feelings were on vacation, or even buy an already weighted, oiled, and braided mourning wig. However, every additional detail, every fillip (deciding on imitation stones wrought artfully of gold, for instance; determining the thickness of the braid, the nature of the tie, the bow, the proper pattern to be formed by parted hair across the field of the skull, and so on; the substitution of sad small bells for the stones—as a paper bag and talc might stand in for sackcloth and ashes; and as the ritual grows, the angle of the bowed head, the darkly mascara'd eyes, the shuffling gait, the periodic

moan), any alteration would revivify the significance of the whole; it would, in effect, revise the feeling I was claiming and, with my ritual worries, celebrating.

We wear our rue with a difference, and I would wear my wig in my own way, too. The fact that culture completes us as persons by creating a common consciousness, so that the little decorated dish I ritually touch my tongue to signals my satisfaction with my food and will serve to say I'd like to lick the platter clean—this fact does not have as an inevitable consequence the disappearance of my individuality behind a costume of convention in the instant I raise that radiantly polished plate to gaze at my features, and *blanc* meets *blanc* like the juice of two grapes; for even if each table setting has one, and even if each person feels obliged by custom to complete the gesture, nothing prevents me from being a Nureyev of this little rite, since only I may know how far one ought to stick the tongue out, whether to dart it, or loll, where to hold the gleaming plate, what expression to put on my otherwise empty face. Of course, it is true that most people are not so immediately discernible as separate selves in any society, no more than are deer in the herds, and that anonymity is as rampant as heart disease, and hypocrisy is epidemic; nevertheless, a closer look will always discover a Bambi, will find on the leader scars left by teeth and spears.

Most patches of English, like patches of sky, are like other patches of English. Lawn is like lawn, weeds are like weeds to the discouraged eye. Only variations in subject matter or location serve to distinguish them, and even on that count not always very well; yet if we pretend that a paragraph of Henry James is one expression of the Jamesian manner in its late and tangled entirety, the way his style in turn is an example of the English language in pressed, in extended use—as *langue* stands to *parole*—why then it might profit us to go on and suggest that my mourning rites, my cowbelled hair and blackened ears, are attached to me as I am attached to the larger body of my culture.

It is a mixed attachment, certainly, of kind and of degree because my ears belong to me more firmly than their blackening. Hair can be cut, but not so easily its habit of growing. I can leave some of my history behind me like wrappings of my lunch blown down the highway; I can leave *some*—and some of my upbringing too, and friends, and job. I can give up living in the city, taking the *Times*. I can shed habits like taking tea at bedtime, observing the holidays, or having sex only after washing the car in the park. I can shed some. But the habit of acquiring such habits can't be washed off like dust. I can flee society at full speed; indeed, I can utter a loud vow of silence, but I can't forget the language I refuse to speak; I can't set a match to a batch of friends, those patches of English—*latch* and *swatch* and *klatch*—and forget them like dates.

Each of us has the capacity to compose sentences in the English language—even novel ones are easy for us (“George, please put the pastrami back in the glove compartment”); a very few may be able to write as well as Henry James, or Hemingway in that passage; but none of us can mimic the precise moves of their minds without mockery, or ape the qualities of their styles without becoming one, or try to reach

the special level of their artistry without falling into parody and ridicule along the way. Their work cannot be successfully counterfeited, even by another genius. *The Beast in the Jungle* could not possibly be by Beckett. *Happy Days* could not possibly be by Barth. Out of the same long list of words we all use, with the same rules available, the same sounds, each artist achieves an intrinsic uniqueness; and this is because what the culture can accomplish, by and large, is in their care and, through their skill, perfected. *Perfection*: that is Matthew Arnold's word.

Yet in one sense this perfection is not perfection at all but its opposite. If I make a bowl so beautiful that no one dares to use it, I have separated it from its kind, as I might cut out a stallion from its herd; I have denied it its function, which might have been that of serving me my mashed potatoes. Because images line its side as on Keats's urn, it has become wholly cultural.

James's language no longer communicates in the ordinary sense because it communicates too much, too carefully; because it is conscious of its own character, as the highest culture must be, if it is ever to be critical of itself; and these sentences are incredibly critical; they demand the impossible; they want every element related, every relation enriched, every meaning multiplied, every thought or sensation they contain, every desire or revelation, every passion, precisely defined and pushed to its finest and fullest expression. That is why they are celebrations—these sentences—not informations, placations, injunctions, improvements, vacations for the body or mind. They are, indeed, as particular and well wrought as we are, for we in our way are works of art and celebrations too; because the consciousness we possess, our power of discrimination, our general command of fact, and the fact that with us the orphan, the maiden, the hunted slave, is safe; our sense, then, for the natural and the moral law, our tact, our taste for Poussin, Corbusier, and Bach: are not these capacities and conditions—so fragile and easily snuffed out—are they not the most men and women in their mutual history have made of themselves?

Ah, but to speak so—isn't that to betray the smug provinciality I warned of earlier? What a bouquet made of old blooms from jolly old Bloomsbury! what pampered, rose-sniffing estheticism! what familiar decay: the lesbians of Pierre Louÿs play with their pillows and sing songs about breasts and eyes and scented hair. But to speak in this way is not to talk about decay; it is to talk about excellence.

"Human beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past," Lytton Strachey once wrote. "They have a value which is independent of any temporal process—which is eternal, and must be felt for its own sake." Lytton, however, is just a skinny bent plant in Virginia Woolf's garden, a debunking brat who peeked up Queen Victoria's skirt: feminist, socialist, pacifist, pansy—back when it was painful to be but *one*. Culture can bring you to such a pass.

Consciousness is all the holiness we have. It ought to move ever upward, and not always on hot air; it ought to become continuously more inclusive, more knowing, more self-regarding, as though Paul Valéry held the mirror; it ought to be tender and plastic; its thoughts and figures ought to dance; it ought to

be more searching, more rambunctious, more daring, more intense; and yet our only record of that accomplishment lies in a few golden bowls, a few songs and sentences (it may seem like many, sometimes—crammed shelves, full museums, packed record racks—yet there are only a few, really, relative to the rest), just a few chants and fugues, a scattered number of buildings and bridges and tombs, some sacred places and performances, here and there a spread of paint upon a wall so sublimely shaped it makes us ashamed of our eyes and fingers, our own slow skills; and then some histories, too, wealthier in their accounts than the events they recite, as well as a set of imaginative and ambitious theories, so sharp, so clear and clean of design, it's as if the mind had whistled in its wonder at the world.

We can be as relative as most anyone would want. We can recognize the beauty and sadness in Beckett, in Kazantzakis and Kawabata equally; but if we want to say that cultures “work us up” in any way in the manner of the masters, then we shall have to distinguish between trash and art, the kitschy and the classic, and single out in men and women, too, those who have taken a shortcut to the completion of their natures. About the right life, style has much to teach; method—blessed method—much. It is a way of arriving at and discerning value. The cultures I should like to count as highest, then, are those which enable the people they shape not only to see deeply in, but to see widely without; to become as individual, as conscious, as critical, as whole in themselves, as a good sentence. Not so simple. Certainly not easy.

Yet it is simply not enough to live and to be honey happy, to hump and holler, to reproduce. Bees achieve it and they still sting, still buzz. To seek the truth (which requires method), to endeavor to be just (which depends on process), to create and serve beauty (which is the object of style)—these old ha ha's, like peace and freedom, are seldom aims or states of the world these days but only words most likely found in Sunday Schools, or adrift like booze on the breath of charlatans, preachers, politicians, teachers, popes; nevertheless they can still be sweet in the right mouths and name our ends and our most honorable dreams.

There is, then, meaning contemplated, meaning we repeatedly return to, meaning as good to hold in the mouth as good wine; and there is also its opposite, and here the analogy with language may help us find the enemies of culture which culture itself creates, because language allows anonymity as well as distinction; it has its signs which say GENTS, its fast foods, its wetting dolls, its drivelly little verses which sentimental sogs send as sops to other sogs, endless paragraphs and pages and entire books which anyone could have written and probably did: guidelines and directions and directories and handbooks and all sorts of reports and memos and factual entries and puffy bios of politicians and punks, stars of stage, screen, field, and whorehouse, and petty lies and dreary chat and insinuating gossip and the flatterous tittle-tattle of TV talk shows with their relentlessly cheery hosts, and vomitous film scenarios and wretched radio gabble and self-serving memoirs and stilted forms and humiliating applications, contracts, agreements, subpoenas, and private eye/romantic/western/spy and sci-fi/fantasy fictions, and dozens of dirty gumshoe did-him-ins and wise guy all-about, how-tos, and why-nots, and fan mags and digests

and Hardy Boys and Nancy Drews and clubby hobby gun and body-beautiful books and the whole copiously illustrated pulp and porno scandal pushers from the hard-core soft-on press; and indeed machines might have made them, and one day will, with the same successful sameness as sheets of toilet tissue, similarly daisied, similarly scented, similarly soft, are presented to the uniformly smiling crack of all those similar consumers.

Even that is not the triumph of culture's bottom end: it is the glassy plastic drinking cup. Scarcely an object, it is so superbly universal Hegel might have halloed at it. Made of a substance found nowhere in nature, manufactured by processes equally unnatural and strange, it is the complete and expert artifact. Then packaged in sterilized stacks as though it weren't a thing at all by itself, this light, translucent emptiness is so utterly identical to the other items in its package, the other members of its class, it almost might be space. Sloganless, it has no message—not even the indented hallmark of its maker. It is an abstraction acting as a glass and resists individuation perfectly, because you can't crimp its rim or write on it or poke it full of pencil holes—it will shatter first, rather than submit—so there is no way, after a committee meeting, a church sup, or reception (its ideal locales), to know one from the other, as it won't discolor, stain, craze, chip, but simply safeguards the world from its contents until both the flat coke or cold coffee and their cup are disposed of. It is a descendental object. It cannot have a history. It has disappeared entirely into its function. It is completely what it does; except that what it does, it does as a species. Of itself it provides no experience, scarcely of its own kind. Even a bullet gets uniquely scarred. Still, this *shmotte*, this *nebech*, is just as much a cultural object, and just as crystalline in its way, as our golden bowl, and is without flaws, and costs nothing, and demands nothing, and is one of the ultimate wonders of the universe of *dreck*—the world of neutered things. It *is* perfect (again, Arnold's word).

Nevertheless, the perfections of this plain clear plastic cup perversely deny it perfection. Since it is nothing but its use, its existence is otherwise ignored. It is not worth a rewash. It is not worth another look, a feel, a heft. It has been desexed. Thus indifference is encouraged. Consumption is encouraged. Convenience is encouraged. Castoffs are multiplied, and our world is already full of the unwanted and used up. The rim encounters the lip like the edge of a knife. That quality is also ignored and insensitivity encouraged. It is a servant, but it has none of the receptivity of artistic material, and in that sense it does not serve; its absences are everywhere. Since, like an overblown balloon, it has as much emptiness as it can take, it is completely its shape, and because it totally contains, it is estranged from what it holds. Thus disassociation is encouraged. Poured into such a vessel, wine moans for a certain moment and then is silent; its color ebbs, its bouquet fades, it becomes pop; yet there is a pallid sadness in its modest mimicry of the greater goblets, in its pretense to perfect nothingness, in its ordinary evil, since it is no Ghengis Khan or Coriolanus but a discreet and human functionary, simply doing its job as it has been designed and directed and disappearing with less flutter than leaves.

Our culture hesitates between these two polarities of pure end and even purer means, between utility and consecration, and it dreams of men who are worthy to be ends in themselves, who will take any trouble to be free of the shackles of ease and convenience, who truly treasure the world; and it desires men who will be willing to be mowed down in anonymous rows if need be, used up in families, in farms and factories, thrown away on the streets of sprawling towns, who want to pass through existence so cleanly, no trace of them will be ever found. It is not an easy dilemma because, of itself, use is as innocent as aspirin, and the damage it does, it does not: we do. Yet use is naturally annihilation. Ideally, it is to disappear without remainder. Confronted by its pale translucent face, can the maiden, the orphan, the poor man, the hunted slave feel safe? Only so long as their safety has its uses. Only until the stock gives out. Not when there is no difference between plastic cup, its instant coffee, and swallowing mouth.