Non- Fiction

Does Culture Matter?

-By E. M. Forster

Culture *is* a forbidden word. I have to use it, knowing of none better, to describe the various beautiful and interesting objects which men have made in the past, and handed down to us, and which some of us are hoping to hand on. Many people despise them. They argue with force that cultural stuff takes up a great deal of room and time, and had better be scraped, and they argue with less force that we live in a new world which has been wiped clean by science and cannot profit by tradition. Science will wipe us clean constantly, they hope, and at decreasing intervals. Broadcasting and the cinema have wiped out the drama, and quite soon we may hope for some new invention which will wipe out the cinema industry and Broadcasting House. In this constant scrubbing, what place can there be for the Broadcasting Concertos or for solitary reading of Dante, or for the mosaics of Santa Sophia, or for photographs of them? We shall all rush forward doing our work and amusing ourselves during the recreation hour with whatever gives least bother.

This prospect seems to me so awful that I want to do what I can against it, without too much attempt at fair-mindedness. It is impossible to be fair-minded when one has faith--religious creeds have shown thisand I have so much faith in cultural stuff that I believe it must mean something to other people, and anyhow want it left lying about. Faith makes one unkind: I am pleased when culture scores a neat hit. For instance, Sir Richard *Terry, the organist of West-minister Cathedral,* once made remark which gave me unholy joy; speaking to some young musicians at Blackpool, he told them that they could be either men or crooners when they grew up, but not both. A storm in a cocktail resulted. The bands of M. Jack Payne and Mr. Henry Hall fizzed to their depths, and the less prudent members in them accorded interviews to the press. One crooner said that he and his friends could knock down Sir Richard and his friends any day, so they must be men. Another crooner said that he and his friends made more money than Sir Richard's friends, so they must be musicians. The pretentiousness and conceit of these amusement - mongers came out very strikingly. They appeared to be living in an eternal *the dansant* which they mistook for the universe, and they couldn't bear being teased. For my own part, I don't mind an occasional croon or a blast in passing from a Wurlitzer organ, and Sir Richard Terry's speciality, madrigals, bore me; nevertheless, the music represented by him and his peers is the real thing; it ought to be defended and it has the right occasionally to attack. As a rule, it is in retreat, for there is a hostility to cultural stuff today which is disquieting.

Of course, most people never have cared for the classics, in music or elsewhere, but up to now they have been indifferent or ribald, and good-tempered, and have not bothered to denounce. 'Not my sort, bit tame', or 'sounds like the cat being sick, miaou pussy,' or 'Coo, he must have felt bad to paint the apples blue' - these

were their typical reactions when confronted with Racine, Stravinsky, Cezanne. There was no to do- just 'not my sort.' But now the good humour is vanishing, the guffaw is organized into a sneer, and the typical reaction is 'How dare these so-called art-chaps do it? I'll give them something to do.'

This hostility has been well analysed by Mrs. Leavis, in her study of the English novel. She shows that though fiction of the bestseller type has been turned out for the last two hundred years, it has only lately realized its power, and that the popular novelist of today tends to be venomous and aggressive towards his more artistic brethren - an attitude in which he is supported by most of the press, and by the cheap libraries. Her attitude leads to priggishness; but it is better to be superior than to kowtow. There was once a curious incident, which occupied several inches on a prominent page of *The Times.* A popular comedian had been faded out on the air, and the B.B.C., generally so stiff-necked, were groveling low in apology, and going into all kinds of detail in extenuation of their grave offence. When they had done, the comedian's comment was printed; he professed himself appeased and consented to broadcast in the future. I wonder how much fuss a poet or a philosopher would have made if his talk had been cut short, and how many inches of regret he would have been given. Incidents like this, so trivial in themselves, suggest that the past, and the creations that derive from the past, are losing their honour and on their way to being jettisoned. We have, in this age of unrest, to ferry much old stuff across the river, and the old stuff is not merely books, pictures, and music, but the power to enjoy and understand them. If the power is lost, the books, etc., will sink down into museums and die, or only survive in some fantastic caricature. The power was acquired through tradition. Sinclair Lewis, in *Babbitt,* describes a civilization which had no tradition and could consequently only work, or amuse itself with rubbish; it had heard of the past, but lacked the power to enjoy it or understand. There is a grim moment at a mediumistic séance, when Dante is invoked. The company knew of Dante as the guy who got singed, so he duly appears in this capacity and returns to his gridiron after a little banter, with a pleased smirk. He has become a proper comic. And it would seem that he is having a similar if less extreme experience in Soviet Russia. He has been ferried across there, but he is condemned as a sadist; that is to say, the power to understand him has been left behind. Certainly Dante wrote over the gates of hell that they were made by the power, wisdom and love of God:

'Feccemi la divina Potestate,
La Somma Sapienza e il primo Amore'
('To rear me was the task of Power divine,
Supreme Wisdom, and Primeval Love') - Dante's *Divine Comedy*

and neither the Middle West nor the Soviets nor ourselves can be expected to agree with that. But there is no reason why we should not understand it, and stretch our minds against his, although they have a different shape. The past is often uncongenial as far as its statements are concerned but the trained imagination can surmount them and reach the essential. Dante seems to me a test

case. If people are giving him up it is a sign that they are throwing culture overbroad, owing to the roughness of the water, and will reach the further bank sans Dante sans Shakespeare and sans everything. Life on that further bank, as I conceive it, is by no means a nightmare. There will be work for all and play for all. But the work and the play will be split; the work will be mechanical and the play frivolous.

If you drop tradition and culture you lose your chance of connecting work and play and creating a life which is all of a piece. The past did not succeed in doing that, but it can help us to do it, and that is why it is so useful. Crooners, best sellers, electrical organists, funny-faces, and dream-girls cannot do it - they throw the weight all to one side and increase the split. They are all right when they don't take themselves seriously. But when they begin to talk big and claim the front row of the dress-circle and even get to it, something is wrong. Life on that further bank might not be a nightmare, but some of us would prefer the sleep that has no dreams.

Cultivated people are a drop of ink in the ocean, They mix easily and even genially with other drops, for those exclusive days are over when cultivated people made only cultivated friends, and became tongue-tied or terror-struck in the presence of anyone whose make up was different from their own. Culture, thank goodness, is no longer a social asset. It can no longer be employed either as a barrier against the mob or as a ladder into the aristocracy. This is one of the few improvements that have occurred in England since the last war. The change has been excellently shown in Mrs. Woolf s biography of Roger Fry; here we can trace the decay of smartness and fashion as factors, and the growth of the idea of enjoyment.

All the same, we are a drop in the ocean. Few people share our enjoyment so far. Strictly between ourselves, and keeping our limited circulation in mind, let us put our heads together and consider for a moment our special problem, our special blessings, our special woes. No one need listen to us who does not want to. We whisper in the corner of a world which is full of other noises, and louder ones. Come closer. Our problem, as I see it, is this: is what we have got worth passing on? What we have got is (roughly speaking) a little knowledge about books, pictures, tunes, and a little skill in their interpretation. Seated beside our gas-fires, and beneath our electric-bulbs, we inherit a tradition which has lasted for about three thousand years. The tradition was partly popular, but mainly dependent upon aristocratic people. In the past, culture has been paid for by the ruling classes; they often did not know why they paid, but they paid, much as they went to church, it was the proper thing to do, it was a form of social snobbery, and so the artists sneaked a meal, the author got a sinecure, and the work of creation went on.

Today, people are coming to the top who are, in some ways, more clear sighted and honest than the ruling classes of the past, and they refuse to pay for what they don't want; judging by the noises through the floor, our neighbour in the flat above doesn't want books, pictures, tunes, runes, anyhow doesn't want the sorts which

we recommend. Ought we to bother him? When he is hurrying to lead his own life, ought we to get in his way like a maiden-aunt, our arms, as it were, full of parcels, and say to him 'I was given these specially to hand on to you…Sophocles, Velasquez, Henry James… I'm afraid they're a little heavy, but you'll get to love them in time, and if you don't take them off my hands I don't know who will...please… please… they're really important, they're culture.'

His reply is unlikely to be favourable, but, snubbing or no snubbing, what ought we to do? That's our problem, that's what we are whispering about, while he and his friends argue and argue and argue over the trade price of batteries, or the quickest way to get from Balham to Ealing. He doesn't really want the stuff. That clamour for art and literature which Ruskin and Morris thought they detected has died down. He won't take the parcel unless we do some ingenious touting. He is an average modern. People today are either indifferent to the aesthetic products of the past (that is the position both of the industrial magnate and of the trade unionist) or else (the communist position) they are suspicious of them, and decline to receive them until they have been disinfected in Moscow. In England, still the abode of private enterprise, indifference predominates. I know a few working-class people who enjoy culture, but as a rule I am afraid to bore them with it lest I lose the pleasure of their acquaintance. So what is to be done?

It is tempting to do nothing. Don't recommend culture. Assume that the future will have none, or will work out some form of it which we cannot expect to understand. Auntie had better keep her parcel for herself, in fact, and stop fidgeting. This attitude is dignified, and it further commends itself to me because I can reconcile it with respect for the people arguing upstairs. Who am I that I should worry them? Out of date myself, I like out-of-date things, and am willing to pass out of focus in that company, inheritor of a mode of life which is wanted no more. Do you agree? Without bitterness, let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings, ourselves the last of their hangers on. Drink the wine - no one wants it, though it came from the vineyards of Greece, the gardens of Persia. Break the glass - no one admires it, no one cares any more about quality or form. Without bitterness and without conceit take your leave. Time happens to have tripped you up, and this is a matter neither for shame nor for pride.

The difficulty here is that the higher pleasures are not really wines or glasses at all. They rather resemble religion, and it is impossible to enjoy them without trying to hand them on. The appreciator of an aesthetic achievement becomes in his minor way an artist; he cannot rest without communicating what has been communicated to him. This 'passing on' impulse takes various forms, some of them merely educational, others merely critical but it is essentially a glow derived from the central fire, and to extinguish it is to forbid the spread of the Gospel.

It is therefore impossible to sit alone with one's books and prints, or to sit with friends like oneself, and never to testify outside. Dogmatism is, of course, a mistake, and even tolerance and tact have too much of the missionary spirit to work satisfactorily. What is needed in the cultural Gospel is to let one's light so

shine that men's curiosity is aroused, and they ask why Sophocles, Velasquez, Henry James should cause such disproportionate pleasure. Bring out the enjoyment. If 'the Classics' are advertised as something dolorous and astringent, no one will sample them. But if the cultured person, like the late Roger Fry, is obviously having a good time, those who come across him will be tempted to share **it** and to find out how.

That seems to be as far as we can get with out problem, as we whisper together in our unobtrusive flat, while our neighbors, who possess voices more powerful than our own, argue about Balham and Ealing over our heads. Remember, by the way, that we are not creative artists. The creative artist might take another line. He would certainly have more urgent duties. Our chief job *is* to enjoy ourselves and not to lose heart, and to spread culture not because we love our fellow men, but because certain things seem to us unique and priceless, and, as it were, push us out into the world on their service. It is a Gospel, and not altogether a benign one; it is the zest to communicate what has been communicated. Works of art do have this peculiar pushful quality; the excitement that attended their creation hangs about them, and makes minor artists out of those who have felt their power.

About the Author

Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970) has been considered as one of the most popular and widely read authors of twentieth century. He was born in London in a respectable family. His grandfather was a Member of Parliament. Forster studied at King's College, Cambridge and took a degree in Classics and History. After completing his studies he travelled in Greece, Italy and Germany. Forster visited India thrice and these visits provided him with a perspective of Indian culture .He wrote a novel 'A Passage to India', which is considered as his most important novel. Among his better known novels are 'Where Angels Fear to Tread', 'The Longest Journey' and 'A Room with a View'. He also published two volumes of essays,' Abinger Harvest' and 'Two Cheers for Democracy.'

About the Essay

The present essay is taken from 'Two Cheers for Democracy' and it brings out Forster's intense concern at the decline of culture in the traditional and classical sense. He puts a passionate and vigorous defence of the cultural heritage down the ages. People today are either indifferent to the aesthetic creations of the past or, are suspicious of their worth, or lack the power to understand them. The understanding and enjoyment of art was regarded as a mark of culture in the past, and the cultured persons formed a kind of aristocracy. The artists would find patronage from the aristocratic classes who considered the works of art precious. We have inherited from the past wealth of artistic treasures in form of books, music and paintings but these objects of culture are losing a credit today, and now

most people go after cheap amusements. Forster's 'Does Culture Matter?' is about the preservation of culture in the contemporary society.

Glossary

Brandenberg Concertos : Musical Compositions of German composer Sebastian Bach(1685-1750)
Cezzane: French impressionist painter(1839-1906)
Crooners: Those who pretend to be singers, but without talent(satirically used for popular singers)
Dansant : French word for 'tea party with dancing'
Dante: Dante Alighieri (1265-1321). Italy's greatest poet. His 'Divine Comedy' is regarded as one of the greatest works of the Renaissance creation
Gridiron: a metal framework to torture by fire in middle ages. Dante uses it to suggest the tortures in hell
Henry James: American born novelist (1843-1916) who adopted British citizenship;
Madrigals: songs of love set to music without accompaniments
Jackpayne and Henry Hall: Dance band conductors of 1930s
Kow-tow: touching the ground with the forehead in worship (a Chinese custom)
Mediumistic séance: The summoning up of Spirits of the dead through a human medium
William Morris: (1834-1896) British poet and artist who advocated love of beauty for its own sake
Neat hit: a Clean win by Boxer in a single, sharp punch
Racine: (1896-1934) French Dramatic poet who was one of the founders of the French classic drama
Roger Fry: (1896-1934) English painter and art critic who introduced Cezanne to the English art lovers
Runes : letters or characters of the ancient Teutonic alphabet, believed to have mysterious or magical powers
Sans: without
Santa Sophia: A monument of Byzantine architecture, a model of great classical art
Sir Richard Terry: (1865-1951) famous British composer and organist at Westminster cathedral
Stravinsky: Russian composer who adopted American citizenship. Known for his unorthodox techniques
Sophocles: (495-406B.C.) One of the greatest Greek tragic dramatist
Touting: trying to sell by clever propaganda
Velasquez: (1599-1660) One of the greatest portrait painters of Spain
Mrs. Woolf: Virginia Woolf(1882-1941)One of the most eminent Technical innovators among British novelists and essayist. She used 'stream of

consciousness technique' in writing her novels
Wurlitzer Organ: an electric piano fixed at the floor level to provide music during intervals between films

1- Choose the correct alternative:-

1. Why culture is a forbidden word?

A). The court ordered so
B). The Bible says so
C). The author uses it satirically for the modern disapproval of cultural stuff
D). None of the above

2. " Faith makes one _____"

Fill in the blanks with correct alternative:
A). Kind
B). Neutral
C). Indifferent
D). Unkind

2- Answer the following questions in 15-20 words each:-

1. What was the speciality of Richard Terry?
2. What kind of a civilisation is described by Sinclair Lewis in his novel 'Babbitt'?
3. What did Dante write about the inscription on the gates of Hell?
4. Why does Forster say that cultivated people are like 'a drop of ink in the ocean'?

3- Answer the following questions in 30-40 words each:-

1. What are the two arguments of the people against culture?
2. What does Forster mean by 'Faith makes one unkind'?
3. What reason did Mrs. Leavis give for the aggressive attitude of popular fiction towards classics?
4. Why does Forster that Dante is a test case?

4). Answer the following questions in about 150 words each:

1. How does Forster defend culture and advocate its continuance in the modern context?
2. Describe the incident of the popular comedian and the B.B.C.? What does the author want to suggest by this incident?
