
Missives About Man

Selected Letters of James Thurber;
Edited by Helen Thurber and Edward
Weeks; Little, Brown; Boston.

The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien; Edited
by Humphrey Carpenter with Chris-
topher Tolkien; Houghton Mifflin;
Boston.

by Carson Daly

Today we hear a great deal about culture. To judge from what we read, it can be almost anything and can be unearthed almost anywhere. There are, for example, physical, pop, ethnic, religious, aesthetic, academic, folk, popular, teenage, European, Latin, Asiatic, and American cultures—to name just a few. Various forms of it can be spotted on Carnaby Street in London, in New York's Harlem, or under the desert sands in the royal burial chamber of the Pharaoh. Moreover, culture has been reduced to a hotly desired "commodity" that can be used to sell almost anything—houses, clothes, food, books, cameras. Culture, it seems, is de rigueur for the up-and-coming person in the 80's.

In the past, culture was generally thought to be an outgrowth of religious doctrines, historical circumstances, governmental administration, social mores, and literary, artistic, and musical developments. A cultured person was often considered to be a well-traveled individual who was broadly educated in the humanities. This person was, above all, a gentle man or woman and the product of a civilized, Judeo-Christian tradition. This view of culture and of the cultured individual has all but disappeared. It has been replaced in many quarters by the vulgar notion that culture can be acquired like objets d'art—and the proposed mode of acquisition is

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nearly as disturbing as this concept. The guiding principle of such a mentality is osmosis. One does not actually work at learning languages or appreciating art or reading the classics; instead, one reads critics on these subjects and adopts their views. Unfortunately, those critics are generally the voices of what can only be called the pseudoculture. These sirenlike voices call to the culturally deprived, offering them a chance to be among the beau monde if they but subscribe to *The New Yorker*, jog, eat health food, shop at Bloomingdale's, learn snatches of three modern languages, and memorize the Greek alphabet. This is hardly culture. It is not the glory that was Greece or the grandeur that was Rome. It is not even the authentic grime of Harlem or the grotesquerie of 42nd Street. It is the ethos of Berlitz and the ontology (such as it is) of Madison Avenue.

Yet this view of culture is disseminated throughout the media and is manifest in the degeneration of the family, the decay of social inhibitions, and in a generally fast, egomaniacal "lifestyle." The kind of ersatz commodity that grows out of these circumstances is powerless to satisfy the hunger of the human spirit for a real, organic, traditionally based culture. In fact, our rejection of, but instinctive desire for, this kind of culture is a major topic of modern music, art, and literature. Even such art forms as the rock song and the soap opera record this inchoate desire.

Not surprisingly, much of modern literature testifies to the desperate need to maintain Western culture against the onslaught of modern mores. The recently published letters of James Thurber and of J.R.R. Tolkien, two impressive but very different men, make this same point in diverse but unequivocal ways.

Throughout Thurber's letters to friends, novelists, editors, doctors, and strangers, he never mentions culture explicitly. Nevertheless, all that he draws

and writes is conditioned by his reliance upon it. He intuitively understands that without culture and the moral strictures upon which it is based there can be no humor and, therefore, none of the hilarious cartoons or witty stories at which he excelled. This is not to say that he was a Bible-beating enthusiast or an adamant sectarian. Far from it. He seems to have recognized religious enthusiasm in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner, as when he wrote to E.B. White: "Over here [England] everybody turns Catholic when anything is the matter and perhaps you should try that. T.S. Eliot turned Catholic and so did Evelyn Waugh and they look fine." Thurber recognized that a world devoid of a code of fundamental decency, order, and ethics is anything but a funny place to live. Moreover, in such a world where nothing is normative, there can be no humorous plays on the unanticipated, the unlikely, the ironic, the incongruous, the bizarre, the grotesque, and the outrageous because none of them is a departure from the regular. As Thurber cogently observes, "The old cliché 'the dignity of man' is proved in the breach. It is only when he falls down that we appreciate how straight he can stand." We might add that if he never stands, we cannot appreciate the humor or the tragedy of his fall.

Thurber makes this same point in various ways throughout the letters—most notably in his comments on Henry James and modern mores and on living in New York. In the first instance, the humorist notes that the kind of drama that James could achieve is no longer available to the modern writer because society has lost much of its horror of unprincipled behavior:

What a nicely glowing point of honor he put upon two people for giving up Love for a principle! It seems so far-away in this day when we give up principles for Love—and somehow the Love they gave up seems, God help us all, rather more worth the

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having, and the principles not so much.

As much as Thurber lived and achieved in New York City, he seems to have considered life there a kind of manic existence which could ultimately destroy health, happiness, sanity, and finally humor. He describes it as:

A city made of steel and cement, with very few trees, and such trees as they are, paltry and vulgar, sad and almost sordid, a city in which it is possible to live for weeks and move around for miles without seeing green grass and blue sky and never to hear crickets or frogs or silence can have the same unavoidable effect as a shell from a gun.

He goes on to compare New York to the battlefield of Verdun and concludes that it is "imperative not to live there," if for no other reason than such a life is funny only when viewed as abnormal—from the outside and at a distance.

Although Tolkien, the famous creator of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and a sometime don at Oxford, never lived in New York, he too was well aware of the difficulty of protecting culture amidst the megapolitan technocracy. His life's vocation—the study of "dead" languages and of Nordic and Anglo-Saxon literature—attests to his dismay at the modern tone in the arts. His deep adherence to the Catholic Church and his belief in the sacraments betokens his aversion to a laissez-faire morality. But most of all, Tolkien's creation of an entirely original fantasy universe indicates not only his distaste for the modern condition but also his absolute belief in the necessity of a cultural context for the creation of a great literary work.

For Tolkien, as for Thurber, the chief criterion of a cultural context was a moral framework. The former believed that there could be neither fruitful life nor great art without at least an attempted adherence to a strict code of behavior. For

him, concepts like love, honor, loyalty, and self-sacrifice were not the beliefs of dupes but the armor of saints, the virtues of heroes, the heart of all great stories, and the food of the soul's imaginings. Tolkien believed that the heart of all great stories was not simply a moral, ethical, or even Christian context; he was convinced that the paradigm for all stories, and therefore for all lives, was that of man's fall from grace. He asserts: "There cannot be any 'story' without a fall—all stories are ultimately about the fall—at least not for human minds as we know them and have them."

The fall, however, is not the whole story. Tolkien believed that the paradigm was completed only with the redemption of man after the fall. To describe the "key" to life and literature he coined the term "eucatastrophe," meaning a good catastrophe. The author defined this word as "the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a

joy that brings tears . . . [a] Christian joy which produces tears because it is qualitatively so like sorrow, because it comes from those places where Joy and Sorrow are at one, reconciled, as selfishness and altruism are lost in Love."

But Tolkien, who was vitally concerned with literature, and Thurber, who devoted his life to humor, were poignantly aware that man can neither laugh nor cry in a world without a rich cultural context. Moreover, as their letters show, they realized that the richest of cultural contexts grows only out of a strict ethical code. For Thurber this code was the backboard against which he bounced his salvos and volleys of outrageous wit. For Tolkien it was a mold which gave shape to man's otherwise formless sufferings. For both men, morals gave more than shape: they also gave (in observance as well as in the breach thereof) laughter and—after eucatastrophe—ultimately joy. □

Honest & Dishonest Confusion

Brian Crozier: *The Minimum State: Beyond Party Politics*; Hamish Hamilton; London.

Edward S. Herman: *The Real Terror Network: Terrorism in Fact and Propaganda*; South End Press; Boston.

by Samuel T. Francis

Brian Crozier is known to British and American readers as a writer on the problems of political power and conflict, problems that he has explored in a series of books launched in the 1950's. Since 1978 he has become better known to Americans as a commentator on foreign affairs, succeeding James Burnham (whom Crozier acknowledges as his phil-

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osophical mentor) as the author of "The Protracted Conflict" in *National Review*. In his most recent book Crozier departs somewhat from his usual theme of internal and international conflict in order to explore the desiderata of political theory and the causes of our present discontents. The results of his effort are mixed.

The political ideal that Crozier expounds as the "minimum state" consists of a government that is able to ensure three conditions: "the safety and security of the people," "defense against internal enemies," and "the preservation of the value of money." His selection of these criteria as the sine qua non of good government is justified on the grounds that, while other conditions provided by government may be desirable, no others are possible if these three are not provided: "A government which delivers such items, yet neglects security, defense, and the currency, is a bad government." Moreover, Crozier argues, a government