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Leisure and Culture

M R ALDOUS HUXLEY, discussing in the current issue of *Harper's Magazine* "the outlook for American culture," makes somewhere the statement that "universal leisure and variety of impressions make possible a rich universal culture." Now, that leisure is a prerequisite of culture is a truth as old as the ancient civilizations whose glorious intellectual achievements were reared upon it. Indeed there have always been found some to say that the very seed of a pregnant culture is a social hegemony in which the enslavement of the many means the unfettering of the few. Only then does civilization reach its ripest capacity when the subservience of the masses to the wants of a group releases the energy of that group from the struggle for existence to the ferment of ideas.

Leisure, of course, implies luxury, and luxury implies the indulgence of a taste for the novel, the beautiful, or the esoteric. Social groups habituated to leisure by long enjoyment of it, and living on the artistic usufruct of earlier generations that have reaped its profits, inevitably by a process of familiarization and refinement develop bases of value and standards of judgment. But the process is a long one, and the sudden possession of leisure and the means to gratify the esthetic desires that are the common possession of the connoisseur and the tyro by no means insures a coincident development of taste and interest. Our American culture is so thin a veneer at present and so constant a target for the critics precisely because it has had so short a time for maturing.



For it must not be forgotten that America is the nation of the middle class, and that to an extent never before known in history prosperity prevails among the masses. Leisure in this country is the possession not of the few but in some degree of the majority, and that majority has been built up and is constantly being recruited from the unfavored classes, from the downtrodden, the ignorant, and the economically harassed. Circumstance has held their noses to the grindstone, and when ill circumstance has suddenly been translated into good fortune, it is small wonder that the richer life opened out should produce a welter of unbalanced impressions. The very "variety of impressions" which Mr. Huxley says, together with leisure, should make possible a rich culture operates temporarily against the acquisition of that culture. Where the senses are perpetually bombarded by a thousand manifestations of a complex civilization it is infinitely more difficult to discriminate amongst them than when the range of selection is limited to a few. Only the extraordinary individual is born with a perfect sense of fitness, with the ability unerringly to assess worth, and to distinguish between the meretricious and the true. For most of us critical ability is an acquired faculty, bred of study and example and the possession of an accredited data of knowledge. And in how many an instance even the trained critical sense can be befuddled by fustian we have only to recall the innumerable intellectual fads that have swept the country to understand.

Here in America is a vast population, in a constant state of social flux, the upper fringe of which has been for several generations possessed of wealth and culture, and if not of leisure simply not of leisure because its tradition has favored work. Back of it, and constantly impinging upon this fringe, are the millions who have recently acquired or are in process of acquiring economic ease, who have had

Lines to a Ship-Model

(For sale in a Provincetown Antique Shop)
By HARRY KEMP

YOU'VE just returned from voyaging somewhere
Over a purple sea with shining prow;
You can't deceive my eyes by sitting now
Diminished to a model but hand-square:
Last night I voyaged too: I saw the air
Pushing your canvas, big; and I saw how
Your skysails glistened in the morning's brow—
For was I not your sailor, climbing there?

They think that I spent all night couched in bed,
You, in your window: that my ordered ways
Are as my pen moves; as they're sure that you
Are but a toy—but what great dawns are red
Over lone wastes, what ocean-whelmed days,
We know, and fool them from the secret too!

This Week

"New Backgrounds for a New Age."
Reviewed by *Talbot F. Hamlin*.

"A History of the Ancient World."
Reviewed by *C. W. Mendell*.

"Demoniality." Reviewed by *S. Foster Damon*.

"The Main Stream." Reviewed by *Arthur Colton*.

"In China." Reviewed by *Felix Morley*.

Qwertuio: A Shirtsleeves History.

"Witch Wood." Reviewed by *Samuel Merwin*.

Neihardt's "Works." Reviewed by *William Rose Benét*.

Next Week,

On Mrs. Trollope's "Domestic Manners of the Americans." By *Michael Sadleir*.

the advantages of education and travel and therefore the equipment to measure the values of life. Back of them come those incomparably more millions who have known the yearning for sweetness and light but never having had the chance to make contact with the fruits of culture have equally had no chance to establish standards of judgment. Yet these millions are fluid, and are constantly advancing to a higher economic status. With more wealth comes more leisure, more opportunity to indulge the desire for beauty and enjoyment. Why then feel surprise that in the tumult of impressions that increased opportunity brings the false frequently appears as the true, and the artificial as the real? Culture seeps down slowly, but American society is of porous constitution and is constantly in process of absorbing. "Leisure and variety of impressions" may not yet have produced a widespread culture in the United States but there is reason to hope that in time they will.

William Blake

By J. B. PRIESTLEY

W ILLIAM BLAKE, poet, artist, and seer, died one hundred years ago, on August 12, 1827, in Fountain Court in the Strand. His last hours were entirely characteristic of the man. He was sixty-nine years of age, and for the past eighteen months had been ailing and frequently confined to his bed. But the very day of his death found him still working, trying to finish his Dante drawings. Suddenly—his friend Tatham tells us—he threw down the design he had been coloring and cried: "Kate, you have been a good wife; I will draw your portrait." They had been together, happy and inseparable, for forty-five years, and this domestic idyll—for it was nothing less than that—had begun with the strangest courtship. When Blake was twenty-three he was jilted by "a lively little girl called Polly" and was so distraught that he was sent, for a change of scene, to Kew, to stay at the house of a market-gardener named Boucher. His host had a pretty daughter, Catherine, who listened very sympathetically to Blake's story. He was immediately touched. "Do you pity me?" he asked. "Yes, indeed I do," she told him. "Then I love you," he cried; and they were married in the following year. He taught her to read and to write, then the rudiments of his craft of engraving and coloring, so that she helped in his work. If he felt suddenly inspired during the night to set down his visions, she would rise with him and hold his hand. She was, too, "a good housewife and a good cook." The annals of literature and art, which are filled with toiling and patient women, outnumbering all the fickle beauties, can show no better wife. Now, on this last afternoon, she sat near the bed and he spent an hour making a drawing of her. When this was done, he began to sing in joy and triumph. Just before the end, an eye-witness tells us, "his countenance became fair, his eyes brightened, and he burst into singing of the things he saw in heaven." Thus he died as he had lived, in an ecstasy of vision.



"Drive your horse and cart over the bones of the dead," he had once written. At the time of his death he was still poor and almost unknown, so that he came to be buried in a common grave and in a little while his very bones were scattered. Now he began to live in the minds of men, however, for his works were increasingly studied and his fame, the wonder of him, shot up like a magic tree. In his own day, and for many a year after, he was set down as a madman. Now we are not so sure. Wordsworth, after reading some of the poems, declared that there was something in their madness that interested him more than the sanity of Byron and Scott. Looking back at Blake's life, thinking over what he did and what he was, we can only echo Wordsworth's remark. If this is madness, then what are we to say of the world's sanity? Here is a man who claims no pity of ours. He possessed no advantages, was almost self-taught, always poor, and had to work early and late, forever harassed by circumstances; but neither neglect nor misunderstanding soured him; he lived happily in his rich and fiery imagination, in the two arts he practised and in his bold sallies of thought; he rarely complained and was grateful for the least service; he was honest, brave, and independent in the world's glance, simple and warm-hearted in his relations with those about him, and there was no man or woman long in his

company who did not find him lovable. His character is there in that eager open face,* with its fine forehead and large eyes, its "expression of great sweetness." Such was William Blake, and if he is to be regarded as one of our lunatics, then it is a pity there are so many sane men in the world.

It is not surprising, however, that his contemporaries should have concluded that he was insane. The fault was partly his and partly theirs. Where he is at fault, we may discover his weakness, and where they were at fault, we may discover his strength. We will begin with his weakness, the result of special circumstances that were bound to make him appear eccentric to the pitch of madness as a person, and ended by ruining him as a poet. Now Blake was a bold and original thinker who entirely lacked formal education. No amount of such education will produce original thought in a man, but it will at least discipline his mind and will enable him to communicate his thought. Again, Blake was a mystic who stood outside a tradition. There were no symbols waiting for him, so that he was compelled to create his own. This fact did not disturb him, for he lived so intensely to himself that he was increasingly unable to make proper allowances for his hearers and readers. Add to this his central conviction, the keystone of his doctrine, that man best approaches reality through his imagination, that whatever is intensely imagined, clearly seen by the inward eye, is real and actual, and we have the clue to all his failings.



We can put it another way by saying that the mystic in him defeated the poet and weakened the artist. The failure of his poetry, after the first and glorious lyrical stage is passed, is a failure in communication. By the time he has reached the Prophetic Books, he is like a man who has decided to speak in a language of his own, and makes matters even worse by using words already known to us while giving them special meanings. These later works introduce us to a private mythology, take us to some dark and distant planet where there is nothing but a groaning and howling and a few titanic shapes in the gloom. At last they cease to be literature altogether and become theosophical puzzles. No such failure attends his art, but there is weakness even here and it comes from the same source. His belief that natural objects weaken and deaden the imagination, that the sight of "outward creation" (his own term) is a hindrance and not a help, set free the seer in him only to bind the artist, for the artist must go to work with Nature, must look out to express his own vision, and turns aside at his peril. Thus, much as we admire Blake's art, we cannot be surprised to find that his drawing is commonly crude and violent and false, that his pictures, having once flashed their idea at us, frequently have nothing more to say and leave us cool and sceptical. So much for his weakness.



Where his contemporaries were at fault, we have said, we can discover his strength. Had we grown up in the eighteenth century, he would have startled us (and it is easy to see now that he delighted in flashing out a startling paradox) into making the most sweeping judgments upon him. His boldness and originality enter here. He insisted upon reversing every decision of his time, standing the eighteenth century on its head. Thus he began by trusting the imagination completely. To him the hour of inspiration was the hour of Truth. He was the first, as he was in many respects the greatest, of our Romantics. In an age that asked for elaborate proof, he declared:

He's a blockhead who wants a proof of what he can't
Perceive;
And he's a fool who tries to make such a Blockhead believe.

The immediate intuition was enough for him,
and cautious reasoning was devils' work:

He who Doubts from what he sees
Will ne'er Believe, do what you Please,
If the Sun and Moon should Doubt
They'd immediately Go Out.

In an age that delighted in generalization and discovery of rules for everybody in both life and art, he cried: "To generalize is to be an idiot. To particularize is the great distinction of merit." He even refused his consent to that general benevolence which is characteristic of his time, saying:

He who would do good to another must do it in Minute
Particulars.
General good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite, and
flatterer.

*See next page for portrait of Blake.

In his "Jerusalem," he says: "I must Create a System, or be enslaved by another Man's;" and the system he created is based on the instincts and intuitions of the artist. What he did was to substitute an esthetic basis for the common moral foundation. Character and energy are all-important, and Good and Evil are largely illusory, their contrast a play of shadows. This conviction is behind his note on Aristotle:

Aristotle says, characters are either good or bad: now, goodness or badness has nothing to do with character. An apple-tree, a pear-tree, a horse, a lion, are characters; but a good apple-tree or a bad, is an apple-tree still. A horse is not more a lion for being a bad horse—that is its character. Its goodness or badness is another consideration.

He is fond of showing how, from a little change in the angle of vision, Hell becomes Heaven and devils are seen as angels. The only discipline his system implies is that of Art: the insistence upon the concrete as opposed to the abstract; the immediate approach to those "minute particulars" which he mentions so often; the duty of understanding and expressing persons as against judging and condemning them. All other discipline was evil. He would have nothing to do with natural laws, moral codes, rational systems, and all the dead weight of institutions. There was no other gospel, he said, "than the liberty both of body and mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination." That way alone brought man to the supreme reality. "The world of imagination is the world of eternity."

The strength of this view of things may be found in his art. This consists for the most part of drawings, usually engraved and sometimes tinted afterwards in watercolor, made either for his own poems, which were published in this way, being themselves engraved, or as sets of illustrations for such works as Young's "Night Thoughts," Blair's "The Grave," the Book of Job, and Dante. He also made a great many individual drawings and paintings (in what he considered to be the manner of the early fresco painters), such as his famous "Ghost of a Flea." In all these things there is a strange imaginative splendor and force. We see in them the fine fruits of what he called the "great and golden rule of art," which was that "the more distinct and sharp and wiry the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art;" though his coloring is delicate, curiously prismatic. Few artists have ever excelled him in embodying sublime ideas in precise and memorable images. In his finest work he can touch both grandeur and an exquisite tenderness.



It is, however, with his poetry that we are chiefly concerned here. His great theme as a poet may be discovered, as Raleigh once pointed out, in an essay on Blake that everybody should read, in the title he gave to the best of his books: "Songs of Innocence and of Experience, showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul." His problem was (in Raleigh's words): "To reconcile the surprising and grave lessons of experience with those joyous revelations which come to eyes newly opened upon the world." His earlier and more famous poems simply express those joyous revelations. He began by going straight back to the Elizabethans, as the songs in his earliest volume, "Poetical Sketches," amply demonstrate. It is astonishing how little the young poet—and all the poems in this volume were written in his 'teens—is troubled by the influence of his own time. Most of us, if we were asked to find such songs as "My silks and fine array," "When silver snow decks Sylvia's clothes," "How sweet I roamed from field to field," would turn to the First Book in Palgrave's "Golden Treasury," forgetting that they were written by a young eighteenth century engraver. More astonishing than these, however, is the "Mad Song"—

The wild winds weep,
And the night is a-cold;
Come hither, Sleep,
And my griefs enfold. . . .

in which Blake's lyrical genius first shoots up like a rocket. If it were not for this one song, we could say that it was only in the next volume, the "Songs of Innocence," that he finds his own manner. Here indeed is the poetry of "eyes newly opened upon the world;" these songs are like happy innocence itself piping in the field, like the very daisies in the grass. They describe an earth that has not yet discovered the Tree of Knowledge. They are filled with green fields and blossoms, the lambs' innocent call, the tiny unquestioning sorrows and the happy sports of childhood. We see, as in "Holy Thursday," the "thousands of little boys and girls raising their innocent

hands." Night itself is only the signal for another happy pageant to begin:

Fare well, green fields and happy grove,
Where flocks have ta'en delight.
Where lambs have nibbled, silent move
The feet of angels bright;
Unseen, they pour blessings,
And joy without ceasing,
On each bud and blossom,
And each sleeping bosom.

These are the innocent cries of children turned into poetry, little flutings from the Golden Age, and there is nothing quite like them in all literature. In this handful of tiny lyrics Blake did something once and for all.

When we arrive at the Songs of Experience, we have passed out of that Golden Age and into another and sadder world. This is what Blake sees so clearly, and his one desire is to reconcile innocence and experience and restore that Golden Age, to build Jerusalem—as he says—in England's green and pleasant Land. We cannot follow his thought as it twists through these and the later poems until at last it loses itself in the dark wilderness of the Prophetic Books. It is sufficient to say that it is a growing elaboration of the doctrine we have already noticed, with its faith in the imagination, its distrust of the rational faculty, its insistence upon mutual forgiveness; though it is worth pointing out that there is irony in the history of Blake's thought, for the seer in him created a system in which life is viewed from the standpoint of the artist, just to satisfy the artist in him, but gradually took control and finally hindered instead of helped the artist. It is difficult, perhaps impossible in the long run, for the mystic and the artist to own the same allegiance, and one must give way at last to the other. We need not be surprised to find that the poetry that embodies this doctrine is perhaps the most strangely unequal in our language. It is frequently filled with lazy rhymes, absurd imagery, and obscurities, until at last it is neither musical nor comprehensible. But at its best its splendor of imagination takes our breath away. It is the lyric touched with sublimity:

Bring me my Bow of burning gold!
Bring me my Arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

In another key, there is this—

Ah, Sunflower, weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the sun.

And again, the sheer black magic of

Tiger, tiger, burning bright
In the forests of the night.

He can make his thought flash out poetry, as in such a thing as this:

Abstinence sows sand all over
The ruddy limbs and flaming hair.

Some of the couplets in his famous "Auguries of Innocence" are as droll as an old woodcut, but others have the beauty of some lost age of innocence:

The wild deer wand'ring here and there
Keep the human soul from care.

But there is all of him, his mysticism and homely speech, his profundity and quaint simplicities, in this poem, which could only have been written by one who was at once a seer, an artist, and still something of a child:

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower;
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

There is no space for more. We have said nothing of those proverbs of his, in which profound truth and hearty prejudice are so richly mingled. But one of them returns to the mind: "He whose face gives no light shall never become a star." More than one observer has told us how he saw the face of William Blake brighten before him. Now, when a hundred years have gone by, he has become a star.

Sir Harry Johnston, explorer, author, painter, and pioneer in the colonization of Africa, died recently at the age of sixty-nine. His main field of interest lay in his explorations and in the administration of sections of British Equatorial Africa, but during his last years literature absorbed his energies. Among his most successful books was "The Gay Dombey," a novel which under the guise of being a sequel to Dickens's tale, introduced actual figures of contemporary England into its story.