

Final Address to the British Council

Arthur Henry King

'Faith is the evidence of things not seen',
and therefore itself not to be looked at,
but to look at other things with.
It is, in fact,
like the periscope, microscope, or telescope,
the means of bringing evidence into view;
or rather,
like the radio-telescope,
a means of sensing the unseen
('Greet the' sputnik or the pulsar 'with a cheer!')
through another sort of eye.
'By faith', then,
poet and scientist became fellow-'strangers and -pilgrims';
and,
from any other than a superficial standpoint,
Lord Snow's ideas about the two cultures
are either platitudinous or nonsensical:
they are meant to mean and fail
through that lapse of faith in writer and reader
formerly known as *accidie*.

The Fall gave man a right
to choose the kind of consciousness
that makes a plain surface but,
like sky reflected in water,
illusively deepens the shallow,
or provides a bright false bottom
to cover a real but shadowy depth;
and thus the Fall gave man an equal right
to ignore the kind of consciousness

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that is clear in itself
because, without Orphic retrospection
on Platonic introspection,
it looks outward from the cave-mouth
at a morning landscape
lit,
not from in front,
nor from the cave,
but from a point above and behind sight
back of the towering range of which our cave is a modest cell.

You cannot, by intending it, educate for personality;
yet without personality there is no education.
Some forms of educational environment
seem indirectly to encourage
the genuine 'substance of things hoped for',
whereas others produce a synthetic substitute.
Thus, a country that, instead of creating particular artifacts,
makes introspective attempts at self-generalization,
falls to the level of Keyserling's or Spengler's style,
and is already a second-rate power,
sealed and sold to a mannered devil.
And thus, diplomats *en poste*
become postmen of sorts:
their manners
(these at least do not come by bag
and so—and yet—are not permissive)—
their manners are their contribution to the message,
and, mediumlike, their means become their end;
but 'there's' no bureaucratic 'divinity'
to 'shape' the Council's 'ends':
we get our modicum of clay
and it is left to us
(with manners or not—
preferably not,
for they tend, like a cuckoo in the nest,
to shoulder genuine fledglings out and down)—
it is left to us to produce good form.

Our attitude to the Council's work
should therefore be not that of seeking an image,
or confronting ourselves in the shaving-mirror,

or even that of a Rembrandt self-portrait—
wistfully puzzled though this may be—
and certainly not that of listening to ourselves talk;
but rather that of hearing our voice on a tape
for a few unrecognized instants,
or of glimpsing someone else
on the scanner-screen above the potential shoplifters
or in an angled glass along a corridor,
and suddenly realizing the stranger as ourselves.

If you think you know your centre,
you will be nothing but self-conscious circumference;
if you confine your self-knowledge to circumference,
you will be merely knowing;
if you try to define your end,
it will be mean;
if you concentrate on means,
there will be no end of them;
but if each of you is himself,
and you are all yourselves,
the centre will operate
and the end remain itself.

Those too lazy to afford
'a condition of utter simplicity
costing not less than everything'
(accustomed as they claim not to be
to public—and private—utterance,
linking clichés with loose and matey interjection,
'sort of' slipping in the slack 'you know'
or a facile 'frankly speaking';
or wearing a heart
like an *eidolon fori* procured for minimal coin
from some newsman, flagwoman, or pedlar on the kerb—
a heart pinned, not to the sleeve,
but to the lapel
to hide the mike in the buttonhole)—
those too treacherous to attain simplicity
(for spiritual laziness
in mere self-defense
takes to Iago's kind of treachery)
plump for a substitute: *simplesse*.

The difference between *simplesse* and simplicity
remains a fundamental class-distinction
quite unbearable
to those who have settled for *simplesse*;
Since to choose so
(though hardly *original* sin,
being rooted in conscious or subconscious envy
and therefore common everywhere
from the pub to the grace-and-favour apartment)—
habitually to choose so
grows into sin against the Holy Ghost;
for it leads through hypocrisy to humbug,
which is self-deceiving hypocrisy;
through gradual suicide to a whited sepulchre
(Iago at least seems to have remained
his reserved self to the end).

There is no greater threat to any society
than boosting false leaders
or fabricating dummy heroes.
Look unremittingly at public men
to detect any constructional fault
that may invalidate their façade.
This is not unfair procedure:
they need not take the test;
they are not compelled to a public career,
and, if they lay no claim to greatness,
dismiss them with mercy and forgiveness;
but if they stake their claim
(and the claim will not generally be explicit
like that of de Gaulle,
but implicit in acting and attitude,
like Mr. Wilson's head-and-shoulders full face on TV,
or Canterbury's gracious condescension
contrasted with his rather less grace of York's more forthright ap-
proach)—
if they use that claim,
expose it pitilessly
as that of a misleader and blasphemer;
for, since goodness is essential to public greatness—
as opposed to private genius—
and since only God is good,

then only God can be truly great.
Of the rest of us he requires—
and we cannot directly require it of ourselves—
the humility of not being aware of ourselves:
an attitude that develops indirectly
as an unconscious residue or summation of our conduct.
It is in this sense above all
that we have to become as little children
to enter the Kingdom of heaven—
and they have to be the sort of children
who have been given love without self-projecting attention:
they had better not be 'cute.

In Gandhi
sentimentality slept on a sterile charpoy
with lust.
Daily the former, awaking,
dragged the other about as a sleeping partner
to spin thread,
make salt,
or give a leg-up to the local cobbler.
Is it any wonder policemen got burnt,
or that a saint so duplicitous
should have drawn his killer's gun?
Full of the cow's milk of human kindness,
that Brahminy bull Nehru
as a younger man could not get away from himself
even at his wife's deathbed,
and as an older one
struck his way angrily through an eager crowd.
Stalin applied his youth's Byzantine theology
to the machinations and assassinations of middle age.
Hitler gave Chaplin a chance
by adopting the lower-middle class naiveté
of wide blue eyes and a toothbrush mustache—
he looked as if my father had gone sleepwalking.
The only trouble was
he also let loose the lower-middle-class envy
seething below the crust of its state education
or wallowing vicariously—as we still do in Britain—
in the aggression of its daily newspaper.
Roosevelt in Grosvenor Square

strikes such a cloaked stance
that the very cherry trees—Remember Washington?—
derive artificiality from it.

Mousy—‘Mousy, Mousy, where are you going?’—
Mousy Tung versed and walked with cunning strength,
but sagged into thinking like a tear-off calendar.

Even Churchill

put on only a ‘carapace’ part of the ‘armour of God’,
leaving the ‘soft underbelly’ of family relations
hidden but vulnerable;

and with the simplicistic pastiche
of his rhetoric and action

(the one early-Victorian liberal Macaulay,
the other late-Victorian buccaneering imperialism)

reducing most of us to tears

(the blood and sweat were not so ready)

and many of us to brave simpletons

(he dealt obstinately with those that kept their wits),

he preserved us, but he could not save

(I still prefer King Alfred).

Luckily it is not the Council’s business
to draw attention to contemporary statesmen,
but to make friends

and share the products of genius

whatever their apparent political complexion.

(If the politics are false,

the style will expose them,

whether in G. K. Chesterton, Julien Benda,

Norman Mailer, or Bernard Levin.)

As we grow old,

our spiritual and stylistic arteries

are liable to harden,

rendering our wrinkled voices

(the extreme examples,

regressive in their simple but ‘o’erparted’ simony,

being Maugham and Auden)

a song-of-simian caricature;

and as an aging man I am bound to be suspicious

of the style of this *Final Address*.

(Ask yourself whether it is pastiche or parody of the *Four Quartets*, whether it's any good as either, and whether, indeed, *they* do not resemble the curate's egg.)

Let us pray
(for most of us are Claudius
in uneasy yet unceasing usurpation of rôle after rôle—
and, though I spy Fortinbras in one corner
and good Horatio in another,
where, prey, is Hamlet?)—

Let us pray
that, if we *can* pray for the desires of our hearts,
we shall not find ourselves lost in duplicity,
but be found simple and upright at the last day.