

## Culture: High, Low, Middlebrow, and Popular

Mark C. Henrie

*Of course* culture is important, and it is in trouble. So much so that for much of the past decade and more, conservative intellectuals have fairly wanted to scream to campaigning politicians on the Right, "It's the *culture*, stupid!" And so, when graciously invited to give a talk at a symposium on "The Importance of Culture," one instantly accepts.

But then the trouble begins, for in order to have something to say, you must first come to some clarity about your subject. And as you revolve this particular subject in your mind, the only thing that is immediately clear is how obscure and muddled the idea of "culture" is. Indeed, it is unclear that "culture" *is*, unequivocally, an "idea," or a "substance," given how diffuse are our uses of the term. What, exactly, is the question to which "culture" is the answer?

Perhaps the best way to proceed is to follow the lead of the classical philosophers and begin with how the word appears to us in common usage. Starting from what is near, we may hope to shed at least a little light to take us further in our understanding. So, culture today enters our public discussions primarily in two ways: with the controversies over "multiculturalism" in the universities and in the form of

"culture wars" within American society as a whole. I'd like to examine each in turn.

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On university campuses, and subsequently in our secondary schools, multiculturalism has become a God Word of the Left, subject in turn to a now-decades-long critique from the Right. In the first instance, multiculturalism means the incorporation of hitherto "excluded" works of literature, art, and philosophy - works of cultures not *our own* - into the common curriculum of our own culture. Heretofore, it is said, we have, for purely arbitrary and self-interested reasons, failed to evaluate justly the artistic and intellectual productions of those from outside our "group" - that of white European males, whether dead or not. We have, perhaps naively but nevertheless culpably, imposed unjustifiable "universal" and putatively "transcendent" hierarchies when judging the *poesis*, the "making," of other peoples, other races, the other sex. What we have failed to understand is that there *is* no transcendent position from which to judge cultures, for cultures are "wholes" entire to themselves, "perspectives" which are not intercommunicable and which contain internally their own valid standards of discrimination and judgment. Our attempts at transcendence

merely (and necessarily) encode the unreflective biases of our own culture: in other words, what in the bad old days had been taken for liberal education was in fact only enculturation, a kind of propaganda reinforcing the self-esteem, or baseless pride, of our own culture. Once we recognize the prejudice in our traditional discriminations of aesthetic and intellectual values, it becomes clear that multiculturalism is the form of learning appropriate to the diversity, even the "deep diversity," which we confront in the world.

Yet this project is incoherent on its face, since the multiculturalist curriculum belies the very presumption that cultures are and can only be "wholes." This is so, on the one hand, because multiculturalists include among the cultural "Other" American women and African-Americans - who, it would seem, ought to be considered part of our own culture if our culture, like all cultures, is a "whole" - while multiculturalists also judge to be *our own* the *poesis* of such apparently "Other" cultural locales as pagan Athens, Baroque Rome, or Puritan Colonial Boston - cultural locales whose connection to modern America is by no means self-evident.

But what is more, the multiculturalist's formal *goal* of sympathetic appreciation for cultural diversity requires a student (who is a member of the cultural whole that is America) to overcome his parochial perspective and achieve a kind of

transcendent view from which he may be brought to appreciate appropriately the artifacts of the world's various cultures. Having first denied the possibility of liberal education, in other words, multiculturalism turns around and purports itself to constitute an *authentically* liberal education, an authentic transcendence of cultural parochialism.

It is important to note here that the multiculturalist ideal does therefore share some of the features which we previously attributed to traditional liberal education. In the past, we spoke of a "cultured" man as one who had devoted time and sympathetic study to a broad range of cultures, had traveled widely, and therefore had the kind of rich critical knowledge which we associate with connoisseurship. The old liberal education did aim to overcome parochialism: that is why it deployed a rhetoric about "broad" education (not so different from "diversity"), and it is also why the Grand Tour was deemed essential for the highest form of education. What seems to have intervened is a "political" intrusion into education which arbitrarily "prejudges" the cultural productions of the Other as at least equal to (if not superior to) our Own. One might say that multiculturalism might better be termed "xenocentrism," a far more unnatural malady than "ethnocentrism." There is also, notoriously, the fact that whereas the Englishman on his Grand Tour would seek out the best that a culture had to offer - for

example, he would go in search of an epic poem or a sacred literature or an architectural monument - multiculturalism refuses to distinguish the high from the low, even though, in point of fact, all cultures do themselves make such discriminations. Thus, there is the following peculiarity: despite their formal similarity, these two forms of education, the traditional liberal arts and contemporary multiculturalism, have two ends in view. The first seeks to refine or sharpen judgment or discrimination of taste - to prepare a student to say "no"; the second seeks to relax and muddy such discrimination - to lead the student to say "yes."

As an aside, I would remark that some years ago *Harper's Magazine* published a splendid article entitled "I Know Why the Caged Bird Cannot Read." (September 1999) The writer was a teacher of freshman composition at an American university who concluded that the reason her task has become more difficult with each passing year is because in order to write well you must first be a reader, and today's college freshmen are not readers. She speculated that the reason for this probably lies in what her students had encountered in the high school literature curriculum, where they are presented with the likes of Maya Angelou and told that *this* is great literature worthy of serious study which, of course, is nonsense. Students are not fools and can see this for themselves, so they conclude that if

*this* is great literature, then there is nothing important to be learned from literature. While the great and the high in cultural matters may not always be immediately apparent, especially for one who is not himself cultured, it does seem that there is some basis in *nature* by which the high and the low may be distinguished – regardless of what the multiculturalists and their theories of “power” may say.

But to return to the main thread: what can we learn from this consideration of multiculturalism and its relation to traditional liberal education?

We learn, for one thing, that culture, taken in one sense, refers to something aesthetic or intellectual. It has something to do with the work of the human intellect, and in particular with the uses to which the intellect is turned when we are most free (or, as Pieper has it, at leisure). We may use our leisure, by the way, either for creation or consumption – writing a poem or reading a poem – and both activities seem to be a “part” of culture. Indeed, it may be the case that culture is more a matter of “consumption” than of creation.

We learn, also, that culture involves something which is held *in common* by a group but which is not shared universally by human beings as such. It does not seem meaningful to speak of a “culture of mankind.” So culture is a term both of unity and division, or commonality and distinction. And while, for

example, it seems possible to sub-divide cultures a great deal in not unmeaningful ways: moving from the study of, say, the folk songs of urban working-class women to the folk songs of urban Italian-immigrant working-class women in Brooklyn, there must eventually arrive a point at which subdivision is no longer possible, since further subdivision would exclude the *commonality* which is a feature of culture. There would no longer be "members" of a shared culture, only a single member, sharing nothing.

Yet we have also seen that culture can be a term of distinction rather than commonality: we do not say that the "cultured" man is the man who shares the *most* with his co-culturalists. He is not the man who is most enculturated into his group and so most typical in his tastes. Rather, a cultured man prefers Mozart to the latest pop music, prefers Jane Austen to what's on T.V. To be cultured is, perhaps, to achieve the distinction in taste which can discriminate the high from the low - whether or not one is able to give an account of such a discrimination.

Oddly, with a few scattered exceptions, the conservative, or rather neoconservative, critique of multiculturalism has not focused on questions of high and low. Rather, the neoconservative stand in defense of the traditional American liberal arts curriculum has involved the claim that the West's

historic intellectual *openness* to other cultures constitutes the decisive point of our particular culture's superiority. The Western tradition is the story of questions which remain open, not of answers. In other words, the only reason that enculturation in the Western tradition can constitute genuinely liberal education is because Western culture (or Western civilization) is a *universal* culture in a way that is true of no other.

But of course, this cannot be sustained. To take China as but one example: Buddhism, a foreign import from India, won critical acceptance during the period of about 600-900 A.D. Christianity in turn was greeted with not unsympathetic interest by the Mandarins of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. And today, Western classical music - Bach in particular - commands a wide following in the nevertheless increasingly chauvinist Middle Kingdom. At best, with respect to critical openness, we are speaking of degrees rather than of differences in kind. And if culture concerns that which is held in common by a human group but which is not a universal human trait, then a "universal culture" would perforce be an oxymoron.

Finally, it is worth observing that the clinching argument of the neoconservative critique of multiculturalism has not been aesthetic or intellectual but *moral*. Multiculturalism entails cultural relativism, to which the neoconservatives, following

Allan Bloom, have respond by raising the question of the British colonial officer in India confronting the practice of suttee. Ought cultural difference to be respected to the point of countenancing cultural traditions which are unjust and immoral, even evil?

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This turn from culture as something intellectual and aesthetic to culture as something concerning morals takes us to the "culture wars" currently raging in America - the second of our two everyday uses of culture, which I would now like to explore much more briefly. When we speak of "culture wars," we seem to mean, in the first instance, disputes regarding the sphere of private morals, particularly sexual morals - and the closely related subject of the family. William Bennett's "Index of Leading Cultural Indicators" included statistics on crime, out-of-wedlock births, divorces, drug-use, charitable giving - with only a codicil on "popular culture," which nonetheless focused not on aesthetic questions as such, but rather on the prevalence sex and violence on T.V., a moralistic approach to that medium. The only non-moral measure in Bennett's survey instrument was SAT scores.

Culture in this moral sense would seem to concern not our *poesis*, not the representations we make of nature and human nature, but rather our moral acts. Culture is the morality we have in common. But beyond discrete questions of moral behavior in matters sexual, culture - for the purposes of the "culture war" - also extends to such controversies as the division of labor between the sexes within the household, the proper relationship between parents and children, the extent of our hospitality to strangers: our manners and mores, which of course we distinguish from our morals. We might call them "folkways," which of course, presumes a "folk." Such controversies concern not moral acts, strictly construed - we hold back from saying, quite, that this or that household division of labor is categorically *immoral*. But then, the question of whether or not such matters "rise" to the level of morality and immorality would itself seem to be a cultural question - as is evident when we consider how these matters appear within the culture of Islam.

In America, the "culture war" involves the *loss* of a common moral horizon, a common *ethos*, and two responses to that loss: one of celebration, and one of reaction. As Gertrude Himmelfarb has written, America today presents itself as one nation, but two cultures. Presumably, such a conflict might be restricted to the level of culture alone, with two groups living side by side,

each cleaving to its own moral conceptions and viewing with disdain the behavior of the others - as, for example, various immigrant groups in America managed to do in the past (though not without certain unpleasantnesses). These cultures, in other words, would not constitute themselves politically, only culturally. That is the liberal solution - the privatizing of culture, as liberalism before had sought to privatize religion, the "cult" out of which "culture" is sometimes said to grow. But such a resolution cannot necessarily be expected, for the struggles of the culture wars involve, in no small part, which "cultural norms" shall be taken as a basis for informing public law. Here, a "neutral" resolution is impossible: one side must win, which means the other side will lose, when it comes to the legal status of our mores.

Have we added anything to our understanding of culture from this consideration of the "culture wars"? We have seen once again that culture concerns something held in common. America's "moral crisis" became a "culture war," I would hazard to say, at the precise moment when those holding to the older traditions came to understand the moral rebels not as individual rejectors of *the* common morality but as a group set upon forging a *new* commons - and so, understood themselves, the adherents of the older culture, as an "us" bound in common against this new "them." Culture is a particular commonality.

But something else has also come to light: with the more intellectual or aesthetic meaning of culture in mind, T.S. Eliot defined culture as "what makes life worth living." Culture in this sense concerns not "mere life," the necessities of food and shelter and reproduction, but the "good life." If leisure, *otium* or *scholē*, is the basis of culture, then culture is distinguished from other human activities by its nature as arising from our *freedom*. Insofar as moral acts are *free* acts, this understanding of culture as something having to do with morals may at first appear consistent with the first, more intellectual understanding of culture. But notice that when we talk about culture in the moral sense we usually mean shared presumptions about right behavior which are so unquestioned as to appear as "second nature" to us - and so, it would seem, *beyond* our freedom. "Art is man's nature," as Burke asserted. Culture would then concern not our freedom, but our unfreedom, our constraint: the "guardrails," as Daniel Patrick Moynihan once put it. Nonetheless, however "natural" our second nature may seem, culture is *not* something that cannot not be. [Sorry about those nots.] Even if we are by nature artful beings, culture-forming beings, any particular culture does not have the hard and substantial stability of our first nature, nature itself (at least, nature before the biotechnologists have had done with it). If we are free to form cultures, are we any less

free to deform and ultimately to unform them? In which case, in what way does culture provide a guide or a norm?

This last question relates again to the culture wars, since we saw that public laws may be said to "reflect" or fail to reflect cultural norms, to reinforce our second nature or to ignore or "bracket" it. There is an ample literature concerning the relationship of culture and politics, a central question of which is: Which is prior? Culture or politics? In which way does the "causal arrow" run? It seems obvious that the answer is "both ways." Culture may govern politics, as Tocqueville observed of the Americans, but so too may politics govern culture, as Tocqueville also observed of the Americans.

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Amidst such a welter of cross-cutting meanings, the political theorist Mark Blitz, in a thoughtful article in 1996, "How to Think about Culture and Politics," (*PSR*) concluded along lines similar to these that the two major differentiations in the notion of culture were: (1) "culture as something intellectual vs. culture as something moral," and (2) "culture as something comprehensive vs. culture as something rarefied."

He continued by arguing that: "The key element in the moral sense turns out to be education and habituation toward

character, and, especially, justice as the virtue that governs the concrete hierarchies and opportunities that shape character... The key issue in the intellectual sense is properly to differentiate the arts and thought from the moral and to see what has happened to them - where they have gone wrong - by their own lights. Our moral and intellectual phenomena are related, especially to the degree that both are governed by what counts as publicly defensible speech about equality and liberty."

His Final Solution to the Culture Problem, if not the culture war, was to eliminate our talk about culture altogether. To talk of culture only muddies matters rather than clarifying them. Instead, we should speak in the older terms of classical political philosophy: return to questions of justice, friendship, and love, which are the matters really at issue in our talk about culture. Fundamentally, culture for Blitz concerns justice in everyday life, and this is what we should be speaking about.

While I admire Blitz's article, I do not think he quite gets things right. Most conspicuously, he centers his proposal around justice, as governing friendship and love - he mentions as well justice's governance of loyalty and devotion, and he might have mentioned, but not did, piety. But is it not the case that friendship and love (and loyalty and devotion) are in some

sense "beyond" justice - and that in fact, justice is in tension with friendship, love, and loyalty?

Blitz's proposal, informed by classical political philosophy, turns on the two meanings of *politeia* in Aristotle. *Politeia* refers to "the arrangement of offices in a city," Aristotle tells us, and it is also the *bios*, the life or "way of life" of a city. I believe ultimately that Blitz considers culture to be merely our word for the *bios* of a city, which classically is comprehensively structured by the sovereign political institutions of the city. Politics is prior to culture, simply, as for Aristotle the city is prior to man. After all, in the classical *polis*, even the priesthood is a formal office within the city.

But of course, our way of life has differed from that of the classical city at least since the arrival of revealed religion: Aristotle's *zoon politikon*, man the political animal, becomes man the "social and political animal" in St. Thomas. For something "social" has emerged outside of politics in the intervening period. And this, in no small part, because the "cult" has slipped out, or drawn away, from the sovereign superintendence of the city - indeed, the Christian cult asserts a rival, a superior, sovereignty to that of the *polis*.

Still, in the long disputes between the Pope and the Emperor, the combatants did not speak of a "culture war"

between, say, ecclesial culture and imperial culture in Christendom: even though, today, a capable historian might well be able to enrich our understanding of those controversies by examining what we can now discern, in retrospect, to be the "cultural" differences of the Guelfs and Ghibelines. When did we *begin* to speak in terms of culture? Under what circumstances did we "discover" it?

In his book, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture*, Roger Scruton begins with Johann Gottfried Herder, who in the mid-eighteenth century distinguished *Kultur* from *Zivilisation*. "Culture" is a reaction to Enlightenment, which soon splits in two: into Romanticism and Classicism. It was the peculiarity of the German world's relation to England and particularly to France which enabled this early awareness, I think: for French civilization was something "foreign" to the German people. But thought about culture then really gets going in the early nineteenth century, and in France itself. Culture is really a category of post-Napoleonic and therefore post-Revolutionary Europe. "Culture" arises with the sciences of man, and these arise subsequent to, and I believe as a result of, the regime brought into being by early-modern political philosophy. "Culture" - in the problematic way we experience it - is an artifact of the liberal regime. How is this so?

Aboriginally, the *res publica* constituted a human whole, a complete way of life in common for a people. Christianity pulled individuals away from the *res publica* but re-constituted the common at a different and higher level. The liberal regime, however, sought to resolve the problem of diversity within the Christian cult by a second kind of transcendence - really, by an abstraction - the abstraction of persons into "individuals." Whereas political life, before, set as its end the *common good* of a community, now politics would concern itself only with securing public peace. Whereas political life was once a reflection or re-presentation of a community's aspirations, now the liberal regime would represent not the community but ... something else: an aggregate of individual wills? A lowest common denominator? An agreement to avoid the *summum malum*? Or perhaps the pre-conditions under which free and equal transactions - "just" interactions - might take place between persons?

The *problem* of culture - our sense of culture as fragile and threatened, rather than boldly life-giving, as Herder presents it - is the result of this development. In other words, culture is what "remains" of the *commonweal* once politics (and the economy) have declared their autonomy. Thus, the question to which culture is the answer is just this: what remains of the common good once politics (and the economy) have declared their

autonomy? And this is why a turn to talk of "justice," to the exclusion of culture-talk, is no solution to the problem at all. Culture has come to light precisely in an intuition about the "injustice" of (liberal) justice - if you will. Blitz gives his game away by his limiting criterion: "publicly defensible speech about equality and liberty." That is, by the canons of liberal justice, we will be able to talk culture away altogether - in the world of individuals bristling with their rights, the only good held genuinely in *common* is liberal justice itself. Yet culture is an expression of the *common* aspiration to talk publicly - in common - of something more. Under the liberal regime, therefore, culture "shrinks" - but this means that the common good, the human good, likewise atrophies.

Michael Novak unintentionally captures a glimpse of all this in his writing about the three autonomous "systems" which structure the human community: the political, the economic, and the "moral-cultural." Novak defends democracy as the best form of politics, capitalism as the best form of economics, and then - well, then, he suddenly equivocates, nicely illustrating the problem of culture in our time. At times, Novak has protested that democracy and capitalism arise out of a Judeo-Christian culture, following Weber. And moreover, that these two systems need the continuing support of Judeo-Christianity. Culture must "prop up" these two systems, and Judeo-Christianity alone, so it

seems, is up to this task (a task that it never knew it had). But at other times, Novak writes of "pluralism" as the appropriate cultural form which "reflects" or "corresponds" with democracy in politics and capitalism in economics - and obvious a pluralist culture is not a Judeo-Christian one, much less a Christian one. Novak's confusion within the moral-cultural sphere maps precisely against the "two cultures" noted by Himmelfarb, and his confusion arises because of his prior commitment to democratic capitalism, such that culture can only play a bit part, at best, in his understanding of the human things - like Blitz, Novak's prior commitment to liberal justice would acquiesce in the loss of the commonweal.

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Well now, we've come a long way, and perhaps you're wondering whatever happened to "high, low, middlebrow, and popular." I'm wondering that myself. I'll try to conclude with a few remarks to tie this discussion together with these terms, which are also a part and parcel of our everyday speech.

In his book, Roger distinguishes High Culture (which is related in some way to *Zivilisation*) from "common culture" (or *Kultur*); the latter term he then divides into two kinds, folk culture and popular culture. His book is a characteristically

insightful polemic concerning the disintegration of folk culture and its displacement by popular culture. Without *quite* saying so in so many words, Roger holds out the hope that High Culture might "save" the common culture - *Zivilisation* save *Kultur* - which is certainly something Herder would *not* have looked for, though Matthew Arnold might have.

What is so wonderfully "old fashioned" (and "highbrow") about Roger's book is that it remains on the level of the aesthetic and intellectual, barely touching on the moral questions which, it seems fair to say, are the kind of cultural matters which dominate our concerns today - at least in America. And this old-fashioned approach calls something to our attention. For about half a century ago, in America, there was a different kind of "culture war" - or at least a culture worry - which did involve primarily questions of aesthetics rather than morals. In American English, it was this cultural worry which gave birth to the now familiar, even old-fashioned, language of "high, low, middlebrow, and popular." Historically, a culture war at the aesthetic level *preceded* our culture war at the moral level. Might there be some causal connection? If there is one, it would concern the simultaneously mimetic and creative character of *poesis*. Art holds up a mirror to nature - but this reflection is also, at least in part, constituting of the imagination (including the moral imagination) of those who come

after. To say that art has moral consequences is *not*, therefore, to be moralistic.

The words "highbrow" and "lowbrow" are taken from Franz Joseph Gall's nineteenth-century pseudo-science of phrenology: those with a high forehead have bigger brains, those with a low forehead, smaller brains, Q.E.D. The first use of "highbrow" to denote an "intellectual" is from 1875, and in 1902, a *New York Sun* reporter began popularizing the two terms, "highbrow" and "lowbrow," to refer to cultural types. In his 1949 essay, "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow," the art critic and *Harper's Magazine* editor Russell Hynes introduced the term "middlebrow," and *Life Magazine* quickly popularized the now threefold distinction with an illustration: a tall man in a Brooks Brothers suit standing thoughtfully before a Picasso, a stocky man in a union suit ogling a calendar pinup, and in the middle, a man in middling-quality white-collar clothes standing earnestly before Grant Wood's painting, "American Gothic." What seems touchingly quaint, viewing these photos from our historical vantage point, is the easy relating of aesthetic taste with socioeconomic status: Who today would expect high cultural tastes from a high-income individual merely on that account? And who, indeed, would expect the middling man to have any aesthetic tastes at all? Has not popular culture - which is to say, lowbrow culture - become all in all? Indeed, has not the

spirit of popular culture - culture as entertainment - entered even into the hallowed chambers of our world-class museums?

In 1944, meanwhile, Dwight Macdonald, an editor of *Partisan Review*, published his seminal essay "A Theory of Popular Culture" - to which T.S. Eliot paid the compliment in 1948 of saying that he believed Macdonald's was the best *alternative* to Eliot's own *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*. Macdonald for his part refined his views in 1953 with the essay, "A Theory of Mass Culture," later expanded in the long essay, "Masscult and Midcult." Roger cites Eliot frequently in his book, but he does not cite the American Macdonald - though truth to tell, Roger seems to me rather closer to Macdonald than to Eliot.

To Macdonald, High Culture is associated historically with aristocratic patronage: the production of something fine for a connoisseur. Folk culture, conversely, is an authentic good in its own right, made possible by a peasantry's being wholly fenced off from the world of the elite. Mass culture, however, is culture produced neither for the connoisseur nor for a folk community but for *the market* - which is to say, for the bourgeoisie, that historical *diabolos ex machina*. Thus, mass culture or "Masscult" rises with the market economy, beginning in the eighteenth century. It is culture produced for the money to be made by appealing to the masses as a mass. In other words, it is "culture" for abstract individuals rather than for persons

defined by their membership within an articulated community. It is not culture which solicits a complex individual response, but which rather evokes a mass sentiment. Mass culture is a commodity, like chewing gum. And it does not arise from below, but is marketed from above, by "the Lords of Kitsch." It is a form of domination. So, Macdonald, and all, I think, quite true.

The "new thing" against which Macdonald wrote to warn his readers, however, was the rise in mid-twentieth-century America of *middlebrow* culture. "Midcult," to Macdonald, was nothing but a form of "Masscult" with pretensions to High Culture. It was a "cancerous growth" on high culture, a Trojan horse. "[A] tepid ooze of Midcult is spreading everywhere," MacDonald notes, threatening to swamp the truly highbrow. He lets loose in particular on "Our Town," *The Old Man and the Sea*, and Archibald MacLeish's verse-play, "J.B." And he includes in his indictment everything from American collegiate Gothic architecture to the novels of J.P. Marquand, to say nothing of Clifton Fadiman and Mortimer Adler. All are the bastard children of Midcult. He heaps scorn on those who cannot distinguish the high art of Chaplin and D.W. Griffith from the kitsch of Cecil B. DeMille, those who do not notice the drop from Rodgers and Hart to Rodgers and Hammerstein.

The heroes of Macdonald's tale are those artists who "separated [themselves] from the market and [were] in systematic

opposition to it," namely, *the avant garde*. Their heyday had been from 1870-1930, from Rimbaud to Picasso. In Macdonald's description, these artists constituted "an elite community, a rather snobbish one... [Their] significance was that [they] simply refused to compete in the established cultural marketplace. ... The attempt was against the whole movement of history." For himself, Macdonald presents himself in his critical writings as a champion of the *avant garde*, by displaying, in Joseph Epstein's words, "two Picassos rampant upon a field of *Finnegans Wake*."

Now, in what way was Macdonald an "alternative" to Eliot? I think the answer lies in their differing attitudes toward the *avant garde*, despite the fact that Macdonald praises Eliot as himself being a noble exemplar of that tendency. Macdonald praised the *avant garde* as the salvation of high culture under the conditions of a mass society in virtue of their opposition to the leveling power of the market. But the *avant garde* values itself precisely as an *alienist* culture, a hermetic elite who produce their work "only" for themselves, in their idiosyncratic yet predictable forms of alienation. It's aspiration, in other words, is to be a "culture" - and I place that term in inverted commas - which cleaves to the "high" to the positive exclusion of the "common." The *avant garde* is what happens to culture when

an elite declares its own "cultural" autonomy from both the polity and the economy.

Eliot, on the other hand, rested his hopes in a highly cultivated but emphatically not alienated class of connoisseurs. From Eliot's standpoint, the avant garde appears as a cultural temptation, whose eccentricity, in the end, can provide no challenge to the deculturating forces of the democratic market. And has this not come to pass? Is it not the case that prints of Kandinsky adorn the walls of college students everywhere - a mass commodity evoking even less of an "individual response" than the latest production from Hollywood? Has not the avant garde itself become a form of Kitsch?

At the beginning, I asserted that the connection between us and pagan Athens, Baroque Rome, and Puritan Boston was not self-evident. Because high culture is "acquired" rather than innate, what one chooses to acquire can seem quite arbitrary: why *not*, today, forge a new relation to African culture by choosing to read African literature rather than the *Iliad*? Yet if culture represents a dimension of a human community's *common good*, then the choice of acquisition cannot be arbitrary: to turn one's back completely on the common, even in the name of the highest and most universal "standards," is to make a leave-taking of culture. Centricity, rather than eccentricity, is the watchword of authentic culture. Somehow, Pagan Athens and Baroque Rome are

in fact a part of "us" in a way that they are not for others. In other words, an American scholar who has devoted himself to the intense study of Japanese haiku is not thereby a cultured man. There is something "broad" or "common" that remains essential to cultured cultivation. Might there have been more hope for us in an effort to raise the level of Macdonald's execrated "Midcult" than in what did in fact come to pass: the universalizing of the spirit of the avant garde?

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One final word. At the end of *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture*, Roger offers the profoundly conservative Confucius as a prophet and a model for our time - a time of moral disarray, impiety, disillusion, and glib talk. Refusing to speculate on the heavenly things, the Sage beckoned his followers nonetheless to a life of punctilious correctness in the ceremonies of Chinese culture, to live a life "as if" these products of human *poesis* reflected something true. Such is the best we can hope for, Roger asserts, once the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" has subsided into the merest murmur - that is, when cult is so debilitated that it can no longer serve as the soil or the plinth of culture.

I yield to no one in my admiration for the Chinese sage. But is Confucian irony really available to us? After all, we are Western men. The attitude of the Confucian elite, when translated into Western terms becomes ... well, something very like the avant garde, an elitism drawing the common not backward and upward to a classical past, but rather outward, away from the center, into eccentricity.

Not the mandarin but the monk should be our model. For in the monk, the most common things - work, prayer, time - are raised up, while remaining rooted in their very commonality. The barbarous Greek of the Gospels issues, at length, in the B-Minor Mass. It seems that only within the cult can the high and the low be contained in such a way that the low is brought high, rather than the high being brought low.

We should look for a renewal of culture, therefore, in the most homely of places. If a class is to come into being in America that is capable of a truly high relationship to the high culture of the West, we should look to the homely work of the homeschoolers. There, one finds the rudiments of a non-ironic and unalienated aspiration for cultural wholeness. There, one finds the habits of personal discipline which are a prerequisite for any high culture. There, one also finds, almost always, a religious seriousness, a genuine experience of the cult whence

culture springs. When tempted by despair at the travails of culture in our time, there is one counsel of hope: Look home!