

The Curse of “Culture”

Thomas Martin

Thomas Martin is a professor of philosophy at the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

In the article “Journalism and Culture,” in *The Illustrated London News* of November 9, 1912 G. K. Chesterton writes,

In a certain journal which I regard as the sanest now to be found, I was chastened or chaffed the other day for saying that journalists would be the better for a wider culture. The word “culture” is cursed, and not without cause, except when it occurs as the last half of the word. No one is called a dreamy aesthete because he is occupied in *agriculture*. No one is accused of insensate pride even if he concerns himself with *horticulture*. But the second half of the word, “culture,” always has an absurd appearance. It is like the hind-legs of an elephant walking heavily on to the pantomime stage. [Vol. XXIX, 384]

Why does G. K. Chesterton think the word “culture” is cursed except when it occurs as the last half of the word? In order to answer this question let us look at examples of when the word “culture” appears as the last half of the word.

Long before man was immersed in the stream of “popular culture” he lived in a garden where he was employed as a horticulturist. It was a good life and gardening came as naturally as buzzing does for a bee. There was no land to clear, sod to cut, fields to plow, seeds to plant, weeds to pull or rows to hoe. Everything grew effortlessly, as long as the gardener remembered that the garden came first and its culture afterwards. Man’s act of cultivation in the garden was a matter of obedience:

Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

You know the rest of story: Man forgot his instructions and was introduced to agriculture. The ground was cursed for his sake with thorns and thistles, and the sweat rolled from his face, as he tilled the ground for his daily bread even though he would surely die.

So much for horticulture and the joy of the garden. Man now took a turn at learning agriculture and all would go well if he remembered the lay of the land. There is as much in the word “agriculture.” *Agri* means land and *cultus* is the root of culture meaning to worship, to attend, to cultivate and to respect. What applies to the land also applies to the farmer who can cultivate himself as he does the land.

There is a way to weed the thorns and thistles, the sin in a man’s life; to overcome pride, covetousness, impurity, envy, gluttony, rage, and sloth; to overcome his fallen state by worshipping God. He must repent and work the land as his penance where he longs to be fulfilled and surely not die.

“When I say ‘culture,’” Chesterton writes,

I ask the reader to think not of museums and music-lessons and libraries, but of fields and farms and gardens; not of archives, but of orchards; not of first editions, but of early flowers; not of the leaves of books, but of the leaves of trees. For the growth of human things is at least more like vegetation than the mechanical appliances of culture. [384]

In his proclamation that the “word ‘culture’ is cursed,” Chesterton is admonishing the journalists who have turned their backs on God and the moral of His story of creation, of which the thorns, the thistles and the beauty of early flowers are reminders. The popular journalist fancies himself to be the creator of the story and not a participant in the story. He pretends to see the world through an amoral lens when he reports man’s failings, as in his tales of Clinton’s affairs, viagra, and school children shooting teachers and fellow students. Such writing is not meant to admonish, instruct, or edify man on his pilgrimage but to excite and incite his emotions. He acts as though there were no curse upon the land when he reports adultery, lust, murder and greed; there is only the moment, and it is new and exciting. And if it is not sensational enough, he must make it even more so for his readers, who by now are addicted to sensation and almost inured to shock.

Chesterton knows the conditions of the ground is tied to man’s word which was broken, thereby setting him on an adventure. Now we find ourselves at the center of a story which turns on the “question of whether a man who was born upside down can tell when he comes right way up.” We are in the wildest of stories in which the moral man will readily say that “whatever I am, I am not myself.” The way to find himself is by keeping “the word” in a series of oaths from the sacraments meant to fulfill his soul. Realizing that “something that [he has] never in any full sense known, is not only better than [himself], but even more natural to [him] than [himself].” [Vol. 1, 363] A journalist, who is a good journalist like Chesterton, knows that words are the seeds of creation and that he is in a fairyland where the use of the word has spiritual repercussions,

A box is opened, and all evils fly out. A word is forgotten, and cities perish.
A lamp is lit, and loves flies away. A flower is plucked, and human lives
are forfeited. An apple is eaten, and the hope of God is gone. [Vol. I, 259]

Chesterton’s insight into the modern journalist being enamored with whatever pops before him as the way and needing a “wider culture” was illustrated in a recent article in *The Omaha-World Herald*, “Self-Esteem Suffering from Lack of Esteem,” which had been lifted from *The New York Times*.

Listen to what passes as news,

Self-esteem had it all, once.

Common sense and research had shown that people who did best in life felt good about themselves, and it seemed a short leap to conclude that the reverse must also be true: If successful people enjoyed high self-esteem, then high self-esteem would foster success.

Students would do better if they had more self-esteem. Employees would work harder. Girls who felt inferior because of poor body image or math phobia would gain self-esteem training.

By 1986, when California created a commission to bolster self-esteem as a statewide goal, the concept had become a pop-culture phenomenon. Celebrated in the media, in politics and in schools, self-esteem had become an end in itself.

Research is indicating that self-esteem is not in of itself a strong predictor of success. Criminals and juvenile delinquents, it turns out, often have high self-esteem. . . . New political movements in education have turned on self-esteem and blamed it for students' failure in learning.

There you have it, "common sense and research had shown that people who did best in life felt good about themselves." Every right thinking person knows that "feeling good" is not the same as "being good," and it did not take mountains of research data for him to know that petty thugs and mass murders enjoy the feeling of looting and killing people. Welcome to the sin of pride. Anyone who can think his way out of paper sack knows that if, in fact, people who do best in life (whatever that might be) felt good about themselves, it does not follow that a man feeling good about himself would do what is best for his brother or himself. Furthermore, who did not notice the fallacy of reversing the action and the consequence, e. g., happily married couples often take long walks and hold hands, therefore couples who are not happily married will be happily married if they take long walks and hold hands.

So after a generation of "self-esteem" in the elementary and secondary schools, of backpacks of papers filled with smily faces and certificates for "citizen of the month," "helping a child with a special need," all while the achievement scores plummet, some politicians, no doubt in California, see that the stroking of self-esteem has led to the students' failure in learning. Alas, a new political movement in education has risen and has turned on the promotion of fostering self-esteem as the primary end of education, because whoever is in this movement can see the obvious: feeling "good" does not equate with knowing and doing "good."

So it seems the "self-esteem" generation of education in the schools which has created the generation of the arrogantly ignorant is over. However the passing of one "pop culture phenomenon" merely allows the poptheist, "armed with common sense and the latest research," to relate the story of, what will soon be, the next "pop cultural phenomenon."

Here is what the latest “research” suggests:

Roy F. Baumeister, a psychology professor at Case Western Reserve University reports,

A dozen years ago, research was showing heavily positive things about self-esteem. Since then, questions have been raised about the size of the effects, the direction of the effects and whether in fact it’s a mixed blessing to even have high self-esteem.

At Indiana University the sociologist Timothy J. Owens thinks,

The idea of self-esteem is so ingrained in our culture, it’s presumed to be a real thing inside the human condition. . . . But it got overblown on both ends—society’s and the academy’s. In psychology, the idea has gained ground that there is no coherent self at all as people generally think of it, but a series of selves, like mirrors that reflect different aspects of an individual’s connection to the world.

Finally from Swarthmore College the psychologist Kenneth Gergen concludes, “The critical notion of the unified self whose levels can be fixed—that idea has ended.”

This is the new story, backed by common sense and research. Man no longer has a single self like previous social scientists thought. “Self” is now a dead word, no longer of use to anyone, as there is no anyone to use it. Since there

. . . is no coherent self at all as people generally think of it, but a series of selves, like mirrors that reflect different aspects of an individual’s connection to the world.

[This makes being compared to the lower half of an elephant who is lumbering about the latest “pop culture phenomenon” somewhat attractive. At least I have a self which may be compared to other animal parts, however lowly they be.]

Man can now be seen to be like the moon reflecting light but having no light of his own, a lunatic, a half-wit, upon which the shadows from his environment are cast. Such an object would be incapable of self-reflections even on the good days when content as a cow in a field of spring clover or on the bad days when feeling like a mangy cat on a dung heap. However such an object could not be content as a man, for a man without a memory is a man without a conscience, and such a man is not good for his word.

The poptheist is a twice fallen creature; he fell the first time because he could not keep his word; and he fell the second because he refused to keep himself. Now he refuses to remember that he ought to keep his word or that he failed the first time. He is his own creation recreated after each failure but always in his own image, which is forever changing.

In effect when the poptheist connects man to the world, he absolves him of the thorns and thistles, of his sins. And he tells a story of man as an alien on his own land who has forgotten the grounds of his condition. Man is not connected to the

world, he is in the world but not of the world.

In creation it is healthier to think of a man as a lamp rather than a mirror, who is fueled by the word. At this point I am reminded of G. K. Chesterton's remark about democracy being a matter of tradition.

Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. [250]

[Can the hind end of an elephant even figure out that the "small and arrogant oligarchy" of which Chesterton speaks is the rule of poptheist?]

It is wiser for a man to be directed by his conscientious ancestors whose words remain as a testament of what is immortal in them. Such words are lamps for those longing to see. But all who have eyes do not see, and all who have ears do not hear. There is a mystery in creation, when two can hear or see the same words and only one may understand.

There is more to be learned from the dead living in the spirit of the word than the poptheist living in the spirit of the age. This is because,

. . . the Spirit of the Age is not a Spirit; it is not really spiritual, for by definition it is not immortal. [Vol. XXI, 601]

This is why, when the aforementioned researchers of popular culture went (re)searching man's self, disconnected from creation, they see only what is before their eyes, and, as man is moving, he obviously has no "fixed self," nothing immortal about him. This has long been the problem with mistaking the eye that can see for the intellect cut off from its past. It is an ancient problem. Listen to Socrates talking with Theaetetus about the local poptheist in Athens,

Take a look around, then, and see that none of the uninitiated are listening. Now by the uninitiated I mean the people who believe in nothing but what they can grasp in their hands, and who will not allow that action or generation or anything invisible can have real existence. [156a]

Being able to open the words of the initiated in a soul is different from being able to mouth words. Epictetus, the Greek slave freed in Rome, spoke to this idea when he said,

You must know that it is no easy thing for a principle to become a man's own, unless each day he maintains it and hears it maintained, as well as works it out in life.

A principle is maintained by working it out in one's life, like a bean field is maintained by a daily hoeing—words cultivated into deeds.

If you do not work out the *logos*, the way, the words will not be understood, the soil will not hold the seed. Without a life to breathe the words of principle into

action, they lie lifelessly on the bookshelves, as coffins in a vault. If we can read with vision, we open the medium to the principles necessary for the cultivation of a life, and are able to lift words, as well as ways, into our life. In the Western world we start by lifting the lid of Plato’s tome, *Republic*, and hear Socrates trying to convince the youth, “You should not return a harm with a harm.” Then lift the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius saying, “Look within. Within is the fountain of good, and it will ever bubble up, if thou wilt ever dig.”

However it best to move beyond the ancient world; it is no longer possible to be a Greek living as a virtuous pagan. Move beyond the ancient into the good news and be admonished, “For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”

Today these words seem too noble and have fallen on rocky ground. It is no longer popular, the poptheist says, to speak of having a self which can be humbled, of there being a way to live, in a land, like America, where agriculture has been replaced by agribusiness and the gardener has taken his hands out of the soil to become a clerk in a sterile mega-market.

Why do people think their image is their pop identity, as exemplified in the car they drive, the clothes in which they are wrapped, and that success comes in the form of titles and possessions as they make their way in the global village? What used to be no longer seems suitable for working the land, a “Wasteland” for T. S. Eliot,

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats down,
And the dead tree gives no shelter.

The words have even been changed to accommodate the laborers, and now everyone selflessly lives in a popular culture.

We need not be at the mercy of the social scientists, the uninitiated, who can only grasp with their hands, who would have us forsake ourselves and forget our souls. We would do well to remember Chesterton’s words,

. . . that all that acts lives, that all that lives has grown; that anything which
would have a living future must keep alive its living past.

A few words are worth remembering to keep a man busy for a lifetime, so that he will not lose himself, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Ω