CULTURE AND THE COMING PERIL

An Address delivered in the Great Hall by GILBERT K. CHESTERTON, on Tuesday, June 28, 1927

SIR GREGORY FOSTER
IN THE CHAIR

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BY

GILBERT K. CHESTERTON

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SIR GREGORY FOSTER
(Provost of the College)

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THE CHAIRMAN: Ladies and Gentlemen, there is probably no country in the world in which it is necessary to introduce Mr. Gilbert Chesterton. There is certainly no place in this country in which he is not known. We have the proud satisfaction of knowing that he is specially well known here. He was a member of the Slade School. I believe that during his period of studentship he frequented lectures in other Faculties almost as much as he frequented the Slade School. At all events, whether that was strictly according to rule or not, we know that it was a very wise proceeding.

Without more ado I welcome Mr. Gilbert Chesterton, in your name, back to the College, and I invite him to give his address, "Culture and the Coming Peril."

MR. G. K. CHESTERTON: Sir Gregory Foster, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am not going to attempt to express how grateful I am for, I might say how overawed I am by, the opportunity and the honour of delivering this very inadequate address. I am very proud to say that I was in youth connected with this University and this College. It was, as
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the Chairman has truly said, at the Slade School that I passed a happy time. It was at the Slade School that I discovered that I should never be an artist; it was at the lectures of Professor A. E. Housman that I discovered that I should never be a scholar; and it was at the lectures of Professor W. P. Ker that I discovered that I should never be a literary man. The warning, alas! fell on heedless ears, and I still attempted the practice of writing, which, let me tell you in the name of the whole Slade School, is very much easier than the practice of drawing and painting.

I am not going to say on this occasion anything at all adequate to so great a celebration as that which you are now enjoying. You are celebrating the termination and crown of a very great century, a very great hundred years, which began, not as a mere arbitrary or accidental date, but with the opening, one might say, almost, of the modern world, certainly with the opening of those great hopes which existed a hundred years ago, which it is difficult to define in few words. Perhaps there are none better than those hackneyed words which are said to have been uttered by the great German poet when he was dying. The desire for light and for liberty and for the expansion of the mind which possessed the beginning of the nineteenth century and the end of the eighteenth century created a vast number of institutions that are still of tremendous significance and historic importance, this great College among them.

I suppose that we all know that those Liberal ideals, those ideals of enlightenment, have not in all cases and in all respects satisfied those who consider
them after a hundred years. As I say, it is difficult in any case to sum them up properly. I do not know any better summary of them, perhaps, than that which I once found as the motto of a Scottish debating club in Edinburgh: "The glory of man is reason and speech." It is an old story. In the religious phrase, we have all "fallen short of the glory of God," and it is no less true that we have all fallen short of the glory of man. People say, heaven knows truly enough, that Christians have not lived up to the ideal of Christ; but, heaven help us all, have Radicals lived up to the ideal of Jeremy Bentham, let alone John Stuart Mill?

To go back and read those glorious promises and prophecies of the first Liberal epoch is to be uplifted, but also, I hope, to be a little shamed. It is true, so I think, without attempting any further historical retrospect on that point, broadly speaking, that those great men who so gloriously founded the modern institutions of knowledge and enlightenment did not see all the evils or all the difficulties that even their own movement would produce, let alone the evils and difficulties which the world would inevitably bring against it. In other words, they made a certain number of mistakes, probably not so many as we are making, but a good many. It is a pleasant and consoling thought, if it indeed be true, as some say, that the novel is a form of literature that is dying out, and that theatres are being deserted, to think that our posterity will find sufficient entertainment in the contemplation of the enormous blunders that you are making at this moment. That will be a continuous source of laughter and joy to them, so that we need not fear
that our posterity will be entirely robbed of anything in the nature of a joke. We shall be the joke. Heaven knows that there is plenty in contemporary life which is already becoming a joke.

But I propose this afternoon to suggest to you in a very rough outline which seems to me to be the chief danger of that great principle of liberty and enlightenment, or, to use the word which we generally use now, Education. That danger is a little different from those that you will very often hear about in the newspapers and from the politicians; so I will first of all attempt to distinguish it from those current and generally rather superficial panics. I am not going to talk politics this afternoon if I can help it. I am not going to talk certainly the ordinary sort of politics talked on either side, because I am constitutionally unable to join in those particular sorts of enthusiasm. My opinions in politics are not moderate; they are only violent on both sides. Therefore any expression of any of my opinions on those subjects would be irrelevant and inappropriate, and therefore I will try to avoid them. But it is necessary, as I say, to distinguish between the kind of warning that I would venture to give and the sort of alarum that you hear perpetually from both sides of political expression. I mean that you will hear a vast amount about the danger of Bolshevism. When I talk about the coming peril a very large number of people will probably imagine that I do mean Bolshevism. I quite agree that Bolshevism would be a peril, but I do not think that it is coming. I do not think that, especially in England, we have either the virtues or the vices of a revolution. The
kind of thing that I want to suggest to you is something that is coming of itself, or at least it is capable of coming of itself, more or less independently of the whole questions of socialism and individualism as they used to be debated. As I say, it is not easy to get a name for it. I suppose that the very simplest name for it is "vulgarity"; but, as I shall point out in a moment, that word itself, especially in its derivation, may mislead us. I do not know whether it would be safe in such a connection to whisper the word "America," now by far the wealthiest of States and, in the degraded conditions of our day, therefore the most influential. But even that is much too crude a simplification. There are a great many different sorts of Americans, and there are a great many of them who are not in the least vulgar. When we talk about the opinion of America, for instance, it would not occur to everybody to immediately associate it with the opinion of Henry James. You know the old joke of the man who said, "Columbus did not discover America. It had often been discovered before, but it was always hushed up," which is, I believe, historically fairly accurate. I can imagine no person more qualified than Henry James himself for the purpose of hushing it up. But to call this tendency vulgar or to call it American is only, as I say, a very loose and crude way of attempting to define it, and I am not at all sure that it can be properly defined. Like most other things that are difficult to define, one has to approach it first by a kind of process of elimination, or, in other words, by negatives.

First of all, when I say that I am afraid that
Culture is going to suffer from a flattening, a repetition, a staleness, a lack of dignity and distinction, the first thing that everybody will say is, "Oh, that is democracy." It is asserted that our Government in England is a democracy, with a deplorable taste for paradox which I regret. I do not think that the Government in England is a democracy. I do not deny that democracy has its own particular vices; but it is not of a democratic vice that I am talking. As I understand the democratic idea, it is that the vast mass of ordinary people, including all the poor people and the working people, should have the maximum of direct effect upon Government. Although that has very real evils of its own, I do not think that this evil comes from that. There are great dangers, possibly, in the government, or in the influence, of uneducated people. I myself think that it is more often the evil of badly educated people, especially when they are also over-educated people; but there are evils in that. There would be faults and deficiencies in a State in which, let us say, peasants who could not read or write, or rough-and-ready farmers who lived in the country far from any town, or workmen with very little leisure for reading, had too overwhelming a power in the community. That is quite true; but I do not think that that will produce this evil.

The kind of thing that I mean is a certain large and gross familiarity, not always with bad but often with very good things, a familiarity that indicates insensibility to the thing that the man is handling, that sort of insensibility which is sometimes if anything more remarkable in the richer and in the
powerful of the modern world than in the comparatively impotent or poor.

To take a rough working example of what I mean, take the case of advertisement, that predominating feature of modern society. In all ages everywhere, quite naturally, people have had a tendency to write up something in very large letters, to chalk up something on the wall. There is an honest farmer living in my own district of Buckinghamshire who writes up in enormous letters on barns sentiments such as, "Prepare to meet your God." I do not think that that is vulgar. I think that it is insane, perhaps, but it is not in any sense vulgar, because it is a natural expression commensurate with the importance of the occasion. If he thinks that God is going to immediately visit that village with judgment, it is a very important piece of news, and it is perfectly natural and very right that he should write up so important a fact in large letters where people can see it. You know, of course, that other people of perhaps insufficient education, like himself, often scribble up on walls other statements less lofty but equally direct. I do not think that they are vulgar. They are sometimes coarse; but they have not this particular quality of showing an insensibility to the thing which is involved. God is an important thing, and even the heathen god Priapus is an important thing, and even horse-racing is an important thing for people who put money into it, and so on.

The kind of thing that I mean is a certain familiarity with things that are the materials of Culture, and, at the same time, an insensibility to them. To take a sort of rough and working
example, you go back to the old art and literature of the world, let us say, of the eighteenth century, and you find a vast amount of what is called sentiment or even sentimentality, the china shepherds, for instance, that used to stand upon mantelpieces and were recently relegated to dustbins and old curiosity shops, until people began to buy them up again very eagerly. That sort of light and graceful and fragile sentiment is common enough in the history of the world. People were in a certain mood in the eighteenth century, a mood which you may see, for instance, in the pictures of Greuze, and in a great many other places, where certain aspects of levity and charm appealed to them very strongly, and therefore they expressed them, as I say, in little knick-knacks, frivolous little bits of pottery and the rest. They were very pink and white; they represented shepherds very unlike any real shepherds, and so on. All that is, if you like, artificial, but it is not vulgar. On the other hand, while all this was going on, the real shepherds or the real poor people were no doubt conducting their loves in somewhat more candid terms. A transcript of their lives would be called coarse and realistic, but not vulgar. But when you walk down the street and see the whole of one side of a great house, so to speak, occupied with an enormous poster on which is written in large letters, "Keep that schoolgirl complexion," that exactly fulfils my definition of vulgarity. It is vulgar because the man is not a poor peasant unacquainted with grace and elegance, and he is not an over-civilised eighteenth-century artist dwelling too much upon grace and elegance. He is a person capable of
drawing and recognising the power of those light and pleasant human sentiments, and then of handling them as if they were so much mud, of treating them as nobody would treat such an idea. You would never find an eighteenth-century artist in pottery who would make one of those pink-and-white china shepherdesses as large as an Egyptian pyramid. You would never find any of them have so bad an instinct as to make a colossal statue of a shepherdess. His profound tradition and culture told him that those kinds of sentiment, while agreeable and healthy and normal to man, are essentially trifles and should be treated as such, should be treated in that light and graceful fashion. But when a man has the pleasant sentiment about the pink-and-white girl which is normal to mankind and then treats it, as I say, as if it were an Egyptian Colossus, he shows that he has at once a familiarity and an insensibility. That is the definition of vulgarity. Most of us, when we have an idea of a pretty girl, do not want to see her face as large as the pantomime mask of an ogre. That is a sense belonging to civilisation, or, if you like, to taste. I take that example out of a hundred that could be given to express what I mean by the danger of vulgarity and its war against Culture.

I have said that it is not particularly democratic. It is not. You do not see poor ragged transport writing up in large letters on the wall, “Keep that schoolgirl complexion.” You do not see a riot of workmen rising and insisting on putting up a hoarding of that kind. The hoardings are put up by very wealthy people who are by this time generally peers of the realm. They are put up by
people who know better or who ought to know better.

In the same way, in the light of that rough working example, I may say that just as the evil is not identical with democracy, so it is not identical with drabness or dullness or all that used to be associated with the industrial movement. Personally I deplore the industrial movement in a great many ways; but it is not true that this particular evil that I am talking about is merely drab or dull. When industrialism first arose there was for about a generation or two in England, and I dare say in America and other places that were affected by the industrial revolution specially, a curious kind of reaction against beauty, a violent contempt for it, which is one of the most curious psychological passages in the history of mankind. Of course, we all know that the traces of that unashamed ugliness still remain. The long rows of brick houses in the industrial towns that were built at that time still remain. The plans of the machines and factories still remain. The costume even, at any rate in my own unfortunate sex, is still largely modelled upon that period. We still wear trousers, as a rule, and a stubborn and heaven-defying few still wear "bowlers," but those are, I think, already something in the nature of relics and traditions.

In justice to the present movement and the evils in it that I am attempting to point out, I think it is only fair to say that I do not think that that sort of definite brutal ugliness is in the least likely to be characteristic of the next generation. The picture of the girl who rejoices in the schoolgirl complexion is not an ugly picture. The style of advertisement
and so on, in the merely pictorial sense, has, upon the whole, improved, and certainly a great amount of colour has returned to it compared with what I may call the utilitarian and realistic epoch of a hundred years ago. But what, as I say, appears to me to be the essential evil in it is this: All those beauties, all that wealth of colour and of culture, are in a sense thrown open to men, they can do what they like with them, they are not unfamiliar with them; but they are handled in a fashion that indicates an insensitivity to them.

For instance, nobody has an instinct for making colours and forms symbolical, as they had in what I should call more creative ages. Nobody wears any colours until they are all, as it were, drugged with colour. We have lost all sense that colour might possibly be used, as it was used in heraldry or in religious vestments, to express something.

Lastly—and, to my mind, this is the most important differentiation in this connection—the evil is not anarchy. It may proceed from a spiritual and philosophical anarchy in the very core of the mind, and I think it does; but that is quite a different question. If I attempted to talk about it, I should be thrown out of this College for being theological. But it is not in the ordinary external sense an evil as it was at the beginning of the industrial era, an evil of mere wild competition and undisciplined individualism. Exactly the opposite has come about, and that is exactly the danger to Culture that I see in this case. You could not, of course, have complete logical anarchy, though it was, I think, practically proposed by a great many of those great utilitarian philosophers in the early
period of the nineteenth century. Complete com-
mmercial competition absolutely unrestrained has
even been found quite impossible, let alone more
direct competition. The evil we have before us is
not at all the evil of ruthless struggle, such as the
Socialists in my youth talked about when they
denounced the industrial system. We could not
possibly have merely ruthless struggle; we should
all die, and death is not vulgar, which will no
doubt be a great comfort to us all when we are dead.
But what has come about is exactly the opposite.
It is here that I find myself in most danger of
trenching upon those political and sociological
questions which are not strictly part of the question
of Culture. Everybody knows, I suppose, that the
actual result of that commercial conflict that raged
at the beginning of the industrial era has not been
murderous anarchy or the survival of the best
citizens or any of the other things that were pro-
phesied for or against it. The ultimate result
of it has simply been the enormous growth of
monopoly, which is, of course, the very contrary of
competition. There has grown up on an enormous
scale in America, and on a hardly less enormous
scale in our own country, the institution of trusts,
that is to say, the centralisation of all commercial
operations. When you add that final fact to the
dangers that I have been trying to point out, you
do, I think, find yourself confronted with something
which is in the real sense of the word a peril to the
mind of man.

To put it shortly, the evil I am trying to warn you
of is not excessive democracy, it is not excessive
ugliness, it is not excessive anarchy. It might be
stated thus: It is standardisation by a low standard.

Consider, as I say, that example of advertisement which I took merely for the sake of argument, though I could give a great many others. The first thing that strikes one about it is the space occupied, the insensibility to the idea of size. The spaces that are now occupied by an advertisement of some highly dubious wine or some practically poisonous quack medicine are large enough to have been the shrines of gods or great saints, to have been a place for the emblazonment of great national coats-of-arms, to have held the proclamations of Napoleon or of the French Revolution, to have been used for a hundred striking and dominant purposes by our fathers in the past. They are now entirely surrendered to trivialities. On those large spaces nothing is seen except small things. That sense of the waste of size and the waste of space is in itself a witness to something that goes against the true intuition and imagination of Culture. Anybody seeing such a space would say, "This should be used for some greater purpose." But when we have that kind of centralisation of all commercial effort, those things, I think, will continue to go through quite naturally, because of all the advantages that are claimed for that centralisation. I am not going to argue the sociological question now; but everybody knows that there is a very good argument for the trust, just as there is a very good argument for the Socialistic State, and indeed they are very nearly the same. But the essential of that argument is that such a unification gives the public mind repose, that there is no longer that agonising sense of a
scramble in which people are trampled underfoot, but that, given this simplification of the social system, order and decent treatment and the other things can be introduced. All those things are good arguments, and I am not concerned to answer them just now; but I am pointing out that this sense of order, of repose, of the State having reached equilibrium when it becomes a monopolist State, is a very strong argument for the fact that people will not resent or resist or dislike this gradual debas­ing of the artistic sense and the imagination. They will be at home, exactly as they were at home for centuries in the pagan states of slavery, because slavery is a system that has equilibrium.

That danger of standardisation by a low standard seems to me to be the chief danger confronting us on the artistic and cultural side and generally on the intellectual side at this moment.

I am not going to attempt, as I have already talked far too long, to argue at any great length about the remedy. If I were to mention my own social remedies, I should be talking politics; and if I were to mention my own deeper remedies, I should be talking theology. Broadly speaking, in the ordinary sense of the word, the superficial sense, there is no remedy except that for which this great institution exists, education—in other words, train­ing the minds of men to act upon the community, making the mind a source of creative and critical action. I think that in this connection one may go back with a certain amount of loyalty and gratitude, I had almost said affection, to those great Radical and Rationalist individualists who founded this College and this great educational experiment.
They had their faults and they made their mistakes; but I do not think that anything is more needed in the modern world than the spirit they had, the spirit of independence, of thrift, of belief that the individual should earn his own living and stand on his own feet, that he should not be swept away into systems which I call systems of servility, what idealistic writers of advertisements call the spirit of service. In other words, there is a great deal in those old writers, and they are well worth reading, the men of that time, Bentham and Mill and the rest, because they believed profoundly in the independence of a man. They were chiefly asserting it against old feudal or episcopal or other schemes with which they disagreed. They did not see the evil against which we have to defend it.

My only purpose this afternoon is to bear my testimony to the fact that there never was a time in the whole history of the human race when it was more necessary to defend the intellectual independence of man than this hour in which we live. (Loud and continued applause.)

The Chairman: I will only just put into words what you have already expressed by your applause, namely, our thanks to Mr. Chesterton for his address. Like most things that Mr. Chesterton does, it was unexpected. I do not suppose that any one of us reading the title of his address was able to forecast at all accurately what he has so brilliantly said, and for that very reason we have all enjoyed it immensely. We thank you very much.