

THIS THING CALLED CIVILIZATION.

BY HARDIN T. MCCLELLAND.

“The old, old urge, based on the ancient pinnacles;
lo, newer, higher pinnacles; from science and the
modern still impell’d—the old, old urge: *eidolons*.”
—Walt Whitman.

AFTER three years of discussion over the negative findings which Prof. Babbitt has made against the naturalistic and pseudo-romantic tendencies in modern life, there is coming to be an irresistible query in many minds whether our boasted Civilization is anywhere near the real thing. It is so much a mere round-robin of subscribed deceit and subsidized debauchery, so much a vicious circle of publicity propaganda, smear-culture and profit-squalor, that any sensible or sincere person has a perfect right to doubt the sumptuous sanity and the proffered prestige it is supposed to afford us.

To cheat oneself and neighbors is the ultimate procedure of “success.” To make our friends the hirelings of our own self-advancement or petty ambition is the customary motto of political preferment. To anticipate the inevitable settlement with cunning spoilsmongers is the principal function of industrial courts and economic conferences. To shirk the holy duty of public trust and personal integrity, and force a selfish usury on widows, orphans, defectives, the aged needy and disabled veterans is one of the flagrant practices of professional parasites and others who falsely proclaim the credentials of organized charity. While to jerk and twist one’s features in the aping of nobler emotions or in the mad nightmare of a hedonist’s reckless life is what often passes for sympathy, pity or the amiable sociability of an inert happiness. It is certainly a bad mess of affairs when anyone has *cause* to become

sceptical about the supposititious principles, functions and durable values which idealists ascribe to Civilization.

But what have we failed to do that permits our affairs to become thus disarranged and cause us to thus grope about in the bleak anxiety to avoid the pitfalls of our spiritual cavern? Why should we lose both the vision and the skillful practice of the beautifully good and true?—that principle which Ruskin once enunciated to the effect that

“Fine Art is that in which the hand, the head, and the heart go together . . . making a little group of wise men better than a wilderness of fools.”

One possible explanation is the following more or less subjective account. I have always felt but little confidence in the civilization of an age whose people could not be easily imposed upon. It is hardly less discouraging to have a jungle of ravaging knaves making our path of progress unnecessarily hazardous than to have a wilderness of fools so cowardly and unwise as to feed and succor them. For when a community, state or nation is composed of that ruling minority of individuals who are ever wary, sophisticated, unscrupulously cunning, and whose action-patterns are consequently the expressions of complex motives, how can it survive for long except on condition that the rest of the population remain gullible, myopic and misinformed? And even when it does survive for any comparative length of time, how can it result in anything but a commonwealth of mediocrity, obscurity and sterile civilization? The continued hegemony of the Few requires a certain proportion of exploitation, arbitrary control, injustice and clever propaganda to secure its power over the heterogeneous Many.

Thus then, except in sporadic individual cases of intelligent life, the general texture of Civilization is shoddy, faded and of ugly design. Times indeed do often change, but not the people or the actual code by which they live. The rhyomism of petty minds and purposes seems to be perennially in fertile flower and gives employment to the vigilant *weeder*s of a more thrifty and industrious field. Lacking initiative virtue and ethical hospitality, such a former age as our grandchildren will look back upon will be said to lack also generosity, sincerity, faith and unselfish love. It will probably be called the age of exploit, confusion and unrest that was concerned only in its attempt to *get by* on the least possible expenditure of honest thought and expression of moral energy. No wonder its so-called civilization is even now looked upon in various circles

as a questionable process culpable of many veiled devices set to trick and spoliolate the keepers of her shrine.

It seems to me then that our only national safety, like our ultimate cosmic destiny, is assured to us only in the honest pursuit and ethical perfection of our moral capacity. We must educate ourselves to become keen purveyors as well as accurate surveyors of righteousness, sensitive alike to the close discriminations of justice and to the broad distinctions of honesty, kindness, public courage and private responsibility. For we are secure from future disaster only when we have actually and irrevocably destroyed all special privilege, all kakistocracy and economic tyranny; and only when our social institutions have been established on the fundamental principles of equal opportunity for all, the vocational recognition of genius and special types, the non-eligibility of mere fortune of birth to power and plenty, and the homogeneous (if not harmonious) placement of every form of creative capacity, executive ability or constructive skill. Spingarn has very ably shown us the utter antithesis between "the Seven Arts and the Seven Confusions" (New York, 1917) as well as the utter folly of trying to foist an economic yoke on genius and appreciative taste. But I think there is an *eighth art* that comprises the normal rational method of all honest civilizing processes, while there is also the correlative *eighth confusion* which results from an abnormal, foolish and misdirected cultural process. Our choice then is between just such an art and just such a confusion of human life. It is the Great Alternative which Charles Fletcher Dole sees at the foundation of Christianity.

I seldom lend so close an ear to the clamor of this boisterous world as I do to the thrill of a peaceful song, a bird in rapturous delight, or a woodsman whistling as he goes to work. It is to me a world that gives us more in proportion as we pay it less attention, and troubles us less in proportion as we accommodate ourselves with periods of repose and meditation. That is, we should be less concerned with worldly goods and more enamored of the sunny nooks and refuge of the woods. Only if we will, we can make of it almost over night a world, not of bustling self-interest and high-gear'd expediency, but of music, virtue, wisdom, love, hope, science, religious devotion and (last but of equal importance) *sane conversation*. This is no distant or quondam possibility. It is an individual problem in *how* to keep one's balance and stay really civilized in the turmoil and ephemerality of this rancorous modern world. Howsoever we disclaim its general applicability, our ultimate

realization or failure to achieve an upright life proves that it remains a moral problem decisively immediate to our inward needs. That is surely one good reason why it demands our most capable and sincere attention.

In "The Summit of the Years" America's venerable philosopher and Nature-lover, John Burroughs, deploras this mad wrangle called modern civilization; our sophist paradoxes of power and weakness, longevity and race-suicide, social prestige and superficial ideals, prodigy-education and statistical sneer-culture. He gives also a fine description of how we kill the spirit trying to save the soul. We certainly have sufficient evidence on hand to argue successfully that the world has gone mad over size-and-quantity measures of achievement; the sentiments of sanctity, sincerity, courage, and true noble quality being relegated to the dusty limbo of second-hand and third-rate literature. It is far otherwise than an auspicious religious sign when we find that people are overly devout only because they have access to the giant eight-foot Bible at Oxford or the Lord's Prayer which is engraved on a cherry stone at Pittsburg. The true and irredundant biography of humanity can actually and sufficiently be written into the space of a hundred pages pica. All over this amount is merely the fringe of a wizard carpet, beautiful perhaps but foolish and useless. Only an endless series, as it is today, of notes and indices, quotations and tables of contents for the information of babes and fools and knaves. Think then of the three million idle if not actually culpable repetitions in the Parisian Bibliothique—not to mention the thousand and two other vast collections scattered over the face of the earth! No wonder Christopher Morley, rehashing an old riddle, says that a book nowadays "is black and white, but seldom red (read) all over." And we are fast becoming inveterate triflers, not only in literature, but even in art, sociology, religion, science and philosophy.

This thing called modern civilization is certainly a far-fetched guess at the riddle of life. It really is, in its last analysis, an exceedingly awkward attempt to wear a starched collar on a work-shirt, to dance the Newport glide in logger's boots, leaving all the graceful charms of artistry to professional press-agents. The world, very much after the fashion of Schopenhauer's dictum, is a pendulum perpetually swinging between the extremes of culture and anarchy, religion and blasphemy, philosophy and folly. And yet the one extreme is as obstructive and disastrous in its *softness* and luxury-aims as the other is in its *hardness* and energy-values. The

real distinction is closer cut than that which only sees external aims and applications, and hence is moral and ethical in the principles which render the two sides distinct and antithetical. It is not so much a question of *how to interpret* religion and literature, as Matthew Arnold's "sweetness and light" would have us think. Quite possibly "mind and purpose ride on matter to the last atom," but this does not point out an adequate solution to the world's age-old problem of evil, nor does it offer any suggestions how to cure the raucous incorrigibility of those who persist in doing evil either openly or covertly. A good world must be rendered fool-proof as well as unsusceptible to the seductions of evil and finite interest.

After looking, with J. M. Guyau, at Art from the sociological point of view, we have known for long that

"Life is that in which thought, action and will converge toward one end—*la synergie sociale*. But this is not enough. To this must be added the exaltation of the individual thru *la sympathie sociale*; the production of this being the supreme function of art."

And it is one of the primary functions of every real cultural process to be social in aim, not merely a private and uncommunicable activity. It must honestly *mean* to build up and control the relevant affairs of Civilization whether these be early or late, good or bad, valuable or vain. Because the moral and the ethical tendencies of any particular code of life are invariably reliable criteria of its worth and the degree of its ultimate practicability, we need not remain raw humanists, but should seek to refine our heritage from Nature into a spiritual reality. The only art that is more fundamental in skill and ideal action-patterns than are usually listed in the bare chronicle of man's civilization is the art of living. And there are, just as there have always been, but very few masters to guide us aright.

Knowing how to live is at once the specialty of wise men and the puzzling paradox of fools; for the latter seem always to either live without knowing how or else they know how but do not live according to their knowledge. And yet, to be honest, preserving one's even temper, reserving judgment, and being always amiably disposed—this is the fourfold passport to the exotic shore of normal living. The physical reflection of normal intellectual and moral life will always be a faithful reproduction of the original pattern, and anyone can readily see where the original fault lies whenever there is evidence of a physical or ethical deformity.

An honest mind will not pass impeachable judgments upon anyone or anything, nor be vexed with them only in reflecting on brawling reports, equivocal opinions, or base conjectures. A balanced mind will always keep to the normal level of thought and speculation, sensible of but not weakly susceptible to the influence of external circumstances. An ephectic mind will not run headlong into the myopic impasse of rash decision, for it is ever disposed to await the truth and treat its deliverances in a cheerful mood of cautiousness. Likewise too, the amiable mind will not desert its unique refuge of innocence and contentment, for it experiences the daily gratuities of calm discretion and hopeful courage. The one element most common to these four aspects of the normal mind, or rather the one reliable compository which settles them in anticipation of any possible disturbance or infirmity, is the nobler function of the heart, its pattern of persistent truth, its perennial prescription of capacity-culture or development of talent, and its implacable struggle against all manner of treason, strategems and spoils. These are the necessary instruments to normal living; and yet there must be a sad minority who use them in daily practice, for it is getting to be a rare thing indeed to find anyone who is honest and liberal and cheerful at heart as well as in mind.

However, the criticism of others' conduct as being distinct from the similar tendency of our own is a truly risky business. Even when our own lives are actually set upon the estimable pedestal of probity and judicial discernment, we are taking chances with the *whole truth* of whatever we presume to judge. Especially when publishing a conception of how our neighbors ought to live, we are proceeding under the false impression of self-love and the egotism of presuming our own a normal capacity for pronouncing judgment upon the moral and intellectual responsibilities of others. Thus our own individual virtue and manner of living may be unimpeachable, but yet not a suitable or sufficient ground on which to dictate the conduct of someone else. What is measurable as limited good and what is indeterminate as variant evil are matters that we take exceptional hazard in attempting to decide from the ground of self-esteem alone. Our own merits and abilities may be sufficient to allow our critical function an adequate scope of action, but without benevolence and meekened sympathy our judgments are likely to result in little short of mere self-bias and automorphism—a truly ridiculous label on our decision.

Goethe had a rule from Wilhelm Meister that "every day we

should hear at least one little song, read one good poem, and look at one choice picture." This procedure, in distinction from what I have above named the moral course, is to lead the aesthetic life, and have those rarer qualities of intellectual power and artistic taste which will accommodate our sensitive appreciation of the finer forms of beauty and goodness which may be found here and there in the two great worlds of Nature and Human Life. Music, poetry, and painting are the three elder sisters of our creative genius (sculpture, architecture, design, creative prose and dramatic literature being others of the same family); and hence we do well to have an ear for the solace, the advice and encouragement they lend in our struggle against the uncouthness and vandalism of our awkward adolescence. Even in our later years they are of much practical counsel warding off ennui and pejorism. All these items might be considered as sidelights on F. W. Fitzpatrick's article on the "Evolution of Ethics" in *The Open Court* for January.

With peculiar regularity we find that the constant casuist cycle of opinion is to make inordinate claims and then fall into doubt over them. Habitual casuists are never tender-minded; they will unconsciously and, apparently, by second nature seek for specious irenics and apologies to cover every situation in which their acrobatic faculties place them. No social wrong, usury, hoax or out and out fraud seems capable of ruffing their well-oiled feathers. They have intellectual scruples and microtomic instruments aplenty, but none of conscience or moral principle. In any honest ethics the data of the "beyond good and evil!" moralist are indeed meagre, for he is seeking to live beyond morality and cannot take a reliable back-sight testimony. Man's only defensible brief for civilization is the slight degree of progress he has made in fellowship and aspiration, not the vast material wealth and achievement he has so shrewdly made his own. If there is any lesson in history it is this: that man has found that worldly codes are vain, that selfish utility and indulgence are the idle maxims of half-wise dupes and hedonists, and that all this mass of would-be eternal values is but the mercury on our automorphous mirrors. Progress is change for the better, and Civilization is an illusion if it is not wholly melioristic.

There is a legitimate tho fragile support allowed to romantic morality by our highest ideals of justice, altruism, integrity and loyalty; but these ideals have a background of ethical promise and true expediency in our instinctive tribal nature, they are subjective first and adjectival afterward. The heroism of Gandhi and the

ruthlessness of his non-co-operators in contemporary India clearly illustrate the order in which a man's ideas and aspirations seek to become realized. Anyone having philosophical doubts regarding the *inherent* degree of a certain nation's civilization and wishing to prove his case one way or another, needs only to try to change the existent system of life. And there are usually more conservative elements present to offer reactionary proof than can be immediately discountenanced and set aside in favor of those more progressive.

Biologists agree that environmentally acquired traits of character cannot be transmitted to offspring, that they are not inheritable, altho of high survival value in the disposition of the individual. It would seem then that traits of character can only be developed *after* birth, and that what we really do inherit is nothing but bare tendency, a disposition to be of a certain type regardless of the fortunes and moral suasions of our subsequent surroundings. Still, contemporary moralists have a strange sympathy for the creed-shy caution of the modern sceptic's departure from Melanchthon's synergism (a departure which Guyau anticipated and sought to forestall)—holding that neither God nor man can have any lasting influence on meliorism to take effect in the external processes of Civilization, much less in the obstinate sphere of human appetite and material ambition. The mere desire for better conditions of life and civilized progress can in time be realized, but it should not be carried forward entirely naked of other considerations and have its bare limbs cramped and forced into some pet scheme of intellectual content or reified into some far-off theological purpose; for then it is liable to hatch up less scrupulous mischiefs if still a positive purpose or, if weak and grown negative, it is liable to become an illusory sentiment or an inert moral force making its devotees nothing but helpless and negligible social factors in the world.

It is significant that none of the modern *travailleurs intellectuels* are any longer dupes to such outworn intrigue as the sparkling wit and clever worldly wisdom of the "three literary madams" (the Mmes. Sevigne, de Stael, and Maintenon) whose slightest glance and expression of opinion could make or break a powerful statesman's reputation. And still, with all our intellectual freedom and social democracy giving sanction and support to practically every conceivable sort of initiative, this modern sophistication seems yet to be inadequate to save us from the corruption, fraud and injustice of a false civilization. Not since the precious days of Louis

Quatorze and the "grand age" which culminated in the deliberately immoral policy of Louis XV, the fanatical contest between Jacobins and Girondists, and the bloody denouement of Robespierre's triumph, has there been such an impasse of unrest, ethical malfeasance, and general debauchery of both public and private honor. One of the foremost contemporary causes of this deplorable condition is the too popular but fallacious idea that the very spirit and genius of human nature can be temporarily repaired, advertised with gaudy labels, and bought and sold across the bargain counter of ephemeral and foolishly mercenary motives. But human life is not an ephemeral commodity, else it would meekly submit to the wage-cuts and other economic trimming or jobbery administered by cold-blooded financial autocrats; nor can all the venality and commercial intrigue of a myriad spoliating schemers ever thus translate the value of our personal wills-to-live or the primal aim of our individual destinies. Such a vulgar and selfish plot cannot become a durable transvaluation because it is wholly unnatural, artificial and chimerical. And anyone so desiring is either a fool or a knave to seek solace in such sycophantic sophistry.

Civilization is that degree in the process of spiritual development which should guarantee justice, equal opportunity, education, eugenesis and proper moral heritage to everyone regardless of their material fortune or power; and any phase of life which presents characteristics of less moral or intelligent quality might very well be of a certain definable promise but should not be prematurely called *civilized*. One of the surest arguments for the notion that we have made progress during the last two milleniums is not based upon this or that compend of material advancement or mere external perfection, but on the obvious fact that at least *some* of the people of the world are awake and are exerting themselves to realize Aristotle's decision that,

"The State came into being that man might exist, but
its end is that man might live nobly."

It is the gradual dissemination of this decision among the minds of modern people which makes them see their proper political (moral and educational) heritage, and appreciate the aspirational will that God has given them to fight for the actual and durable realization of this natural birthright in all its economic scope and social grandeur. And so it should be in a truly intelligent and progressive world. But until the general public, both communal and international, is brightened and ennobled with this conscious decision and

given signatory power over its verbal drafting and official presentation to the world, especially in its moral, educational, ethical and economic measures, we may only expect to continue our jungle-caveman mode of life and always have with us a vast majority of knaves who will derive an easy sustenance from those of us who are foolish enough to support them with the culpable mediocrity of our indifference and incapacity.

However, excepting as we let our attention dwell on the pejorative tendencies which nowadays seem so obstinately in the ascendant, there are still many items that encourage us to believe that the age of a normal world is at hand. There are new departures everywhere springing up to replace the old prejudices, giving brighter vision and exaltation to the mystic inner life of man. Justice and kindness, honesty and benevolence, political brotherhood and spiritual aspiration are the flaming watchwords. These are always the symptoms of an urge to progress, a thrust-bearing which takes up the strain of a direct conflict between an irresistible moral character and the mass inertia of an outworn age of circumstance and finite interest.

It is promised that men and women shall set up a co-regency of public and domestic honor, law and order, culture and freedom, wisdom and love which, when once firmly established, shall prove to be the most durable dynasty in all the archives of human history. Then shall the full significance of our social and political life flower into obvious prospects of moral culture and ethical achievement. And by becoming manifest to the multitude it will be afforded the rare opportunity of becoming realized on a universal scale. But can these promises, these high ideals for our moral future, be to any measurable or practical degree realized? And when realized, can they be economically applied to the social and political problems which are so absorbing and persistent today?

This present finitude which dims our vision and corrupts the contemporary souls of people cannot endure for aye, for it spells its own doom by its very mischief and limitation of function. We must somehow and sooner or later deliberately shuffle off this mortal coil of cumbrous ethical evasion, and set up instead the normal bisexual composite of moral government with its attendant complements of social equality, economic justice, educational reduction of delinquency and mediocrity, and the vocational recognition of genius and creative capacity. Surely we will some day recognize and advocate the now unborn principle of co-operative spiritual

effort and co-ordinated aspiration, using real efforts and real aspirations in solving our everyday problems. Surely we will some day pick out the kernel of truth which now nestles so snugly in the unnecessarily ponderous shell of our crusted ignorance. And in the digestion and assimilation of it into our general moral system we will probably begin to realize how long we have gone hungry for just such an occasion and just such a sumptuous repast.

Our moral life grows by means of justice and kindness, honesty and benevolence, culture and freedom, wisdom and love. So why should we not arrange our communal affairs so that our social or ethical life also would proceed according to a harmonious government by means of an equal dispensation of law and order, sincerity and service, industry and art, skilful thinking and honest manual labor? Why can we not recast this barbarous system now in ridiculous if not rancorous vogue? Is it really impossible or only difficult to start up a phoenix nation of real men and women who will live respectively according to the normal masculine and normal feminine principles of life, knowing no hermaphrodite illusion about soft foppery or hard androgyny, but resting content to be exactly as God intended them to be—complementary to each other? Can it be denied that we are already the dual vehicle in the world conveying justice and kindness, moral decision and cultural aspiration, brotherhood and constructive industry, wheresoever they have thus far been conveyed and the spark of divinity kept alive in human nature?

Such as these are our ultimate political questions; they have a vital bearing on the contemporary trend of Civilization, and the various manners in which we find occasion to answer them will certainly bear an equally various fruit in the ethics and morality of the future. The actual data on both our origin and destiny are very meagre and obscure. So, while science does not know and religion offers but little solace, we can at least exercise anticipation and hope, feeling that the Great Perhaps of Erasmus and Robert Burns is the last word in any valid confessional of faith in the hereafter.