

Philosophy that is Mindful

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You can measure the pulse of a nation with a bar of a song. Was it Christopher Dawson who remarked that three minutes in a Byzantine Cathedral might give one more of the wealth of a culture than many books? And what of three minutes in many a corner of Ireland? Like Kavanagh in Dublin?

“As far as Ballsbridge I walked
in wonder,
Watching the natives pulling
the jungle
Grass of Convention to cover
the nude
Barbaric buttocks where tail-
stumps showed
When reason lit up the road.”

But it takes a special kind of deep seeing to appreciate cultural health or cultural sickness. It takes the artist, the outsider, to grip with the gut the horror of our drift – or the expansive, exuberant possibilities of us all. Or it takes the theoretician, mindful of man in art or in agony, in daily hunger or in the decades of history. And so Bernard Lonergan, in a talk on art may say, mindfully and meaningfully, “What I want to communicate in this talk about art is the notion that art is relevant to concrete living; that it is an exploration of something that is extremely important in our age, when philosophers for at least two centuries through doctrines on politics, on economics, on education, have been trying to remake man, and have done not a little to make human life unlivable”.

But, hang it all, what does that

mean to the man in the street or the woman in the laundromat? Life, for them, obviously, is livable: it has to be lived, and at times it seems more than bearable – there are the moments of laughter, days of deep love, patches of exuberance. “Life unlivable”? No: that doesn’t echo in any depth. It may well be written off as meaningless exaggeration.

It is a curious fact that the theoretician ceases to be respected once his area of competence reaches into the region of values that are supremely of value. If the engineer predicts that your engine under present methods of use will burn itself out in a year, then you bow to his wisdom and believably beg his advice. But if the theoretician of culture points out that present drifting is making a shambles of your own life, and will leave your grandchildren with an unlife? Likely enough you deny the need for belief; you ask to be shown the simple facts, to be introduced to palpable and understandable adjustments. Centuries of thoughtless thinking about man have convinced us that the machine is more complex.

The anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn once remarked that “American society spent more for one single telescope at Mt. Wilson than was spent in three years on all studies of human life (excluding medicine),” that “the development of a flourishing science of man will wait upon fuller public understanding of the need for anthropology.” Things are changing in America: but what of our public understanding? What price the meaning of man?

No: it is not reason in its fullness that lights up our road. It is reason crippled by centuries of unreason. It is neon-reason that lights up our road.

Neon-reason would have all

things bright and obvious, a great chrome cage of consumers cell-ing their wonderfulness. Neon-reason has no place for regional culture which offers a vibrant spectrum of humanity; it offers the possibility of a spectral international monotony. Neon-reason weighs the soul of a nation in the balance of economic expansion and finds it weightless, of no gravity. Neon-reason would measure the pulse of the nation not with a bar of a song nerved with nationhood but at the bar of a European contest where songs tend more and more to be the same goods under different national labels. Neon-reason would have us all speak despairanto. Neon-reason would have our souls dammed.

I write in twisted English trying to cut through the Grass of Convention. What I write has been said more elaborately by theoreticians such as Erich Fromm. I mention Fromm specifically because I would like to recall here a suggestion he made at the end of his book *The Revolution of Hope: Towards a Humanized Technology*. The suggestion was that groups might be formed to reflect concretely on the crippled cultural drift: small theoretic groups and also larger groups who might be interested in the possibilities of fuller human living – I was in exile in the brave New World when I read this and I thought spontaneously of the Gaelic League: it struck me that we had a head start on the Americans. Certainly the individual voice tires in the noisome silence of established drifting; and our time is running out.