Much Ado About Culture

Note: this is a draft and is unfinished. I've abandoned the writing of this piece, as it is unsalvageable except through a rewrite. Proceed at your own peril

During the investigation of such immense questions as the purpose of true education or the nature of the good life, there is a term, in my observation, that comprises the convenient distillation into which many of their answers reduce, and from whose orbit most discursive attempts can never seem to escape, at times steering the conversation through its associated constellation of concepts and at other times making direct appearance, but in either case, evading consensus regarding its definition. That term is culture. By culture is meant not "way of life" as might be understood in the lay sense of the word - as in, some combination of cuisine, customs, languages, and mores that define a particular people or civilization - and a man of culture is not a man who is merely knowledgeable of mass culture and pop culture, or any particular national culture such as that of the French. Rather, culture here is meant to denote some notion of cultivation, refinement, and growth, as applied to the whole person: mind, character, soul; this distinction is important, as one might otherwise interpret a sentence such as "liberal education is an education in or towards culture" as an injunction to jump on a flight and travel abroad or pick up a print on celebrity gossip. The Germans, clever and rigorous as they are, do possess a word not available in the English language that captures this notion of broader human development - *Bildung* - and those who are familiar with the term may immediately understand what I mean, as well as the difficulties that are to come. For the fact that culture is to be understood as "cultivation" when applied in the

philosophical context is about as far as many humanists will agree. Even then, one would be justified in wondering whether the aforementioned agreement is at all meaningful if we have simply "pushed back the envelope of definition" onto the term "cultivation". What is actually meant by culture or cultivation - or what true culture consists in - is a question for which so many different accounts and definitions have been produced that agreement only appears to exist at a vague conceptual level, or perhaps only semantically. I have been scrupulously collecting such accounts throughout my brief wanderings through intellectual history, and in light of such brevity, am certain that such a project has been undertaken by a mind and in a manner far more academic than my own, though if it exists I have yet to encounter it; and at any rate, the realization of this effort is meant to reflect to any who might be interested in matters important to me my true thoughts on these matters.

There is much difficulty with the definition of culture. We can trace part of the difficulty down to the fact that, among the various conceptions of culture, several deal heavily in conceptual terms which rely on subjective knowledge if true understanding is to be reached, and such written definitions, rich and descriptive as they may be, will only resonate insofar as one has had subjective experience of the issue. Indeed, if we are to use the definitions of culture which invoke concepts such as beauty, nobility, and greatness, then perhaps the best way to understand culture is to enter into it, that is, to become cultured, and I would not disagree if one went further to say that this is the *only* way to know culture. This presents a unique conundrum. The preservation of culture as such depends on an appreciation for it, which in turn generally relies on direct knowledge of it, which is not to be attained unless one enters into culture, which is unlikely if culture has not been preserved in the first place. One can see how the decline of culture more easily propagates itself than does its incline. We might note that it has been the former which captures the trendline of the most recent centuries of history. Indeed our age, having since grown considerably more bourgeois and positivistic than those in which these terms were first conceived to describe it, no longer has much interest in, or may not understand in the first place, the question of culture and of human formation. Such a lofty and historical, or even spiritual, question does not readily appease the needs of a mind that recognizes validity in only the tangible and definable and that requires some possibility of

worldly utility in any project in which it is willing to invest effort. As one who was once thoroughly and is still moderately the product of his time and place, I might, when speaking of a mindset of complete ignorance to the higher matters, appear under the guise of an enlightened and removed observer, but I assure you, am rather merely recounting the perspectives I once inhabited and once lived, or rather, until I had the tremendous fortune to be rescued by people to whom I owe so much of who I have become (a journey which is now chronicled in Memoirs of a Careerist). Perhaps it is due to this unique trajectory that my subsequent studies found affinity with the issue of the true nature of culture, a question after whose discernment my interest in the subject grew tenfold; indeed, what lured me into philosophy, which of its many forms appealed to me most as the effort of reflection meant to serve action (to serve life, and living), was a tradition of thought anchored upon the idea of culture and its respective merits and discontents.

I will begin with a few examples of phrases of the kind of which I earlier spoke, those which ostensibly aim to clarify the definition of culture but which do so by recruiting to its aid a set of words somewhat longer in length but not evidently any more amenable to the understanding, so much so that one might rather be inclined to dismiss them as clever maneuvers to push the burden of clarification away from "culture" and onto these other concepts. This is in my view, as an initial reaction, appropriate though misinformed, on the basis that any explanation which is subject to simplification in the hopes of acquiring clarity tends as a general rule to have also lost some of its conceptual content, at best perhaps retaining directional correctness or capturing a derivative effect; inevitably any tangibility is gained at the expense of accuracy or completeness. It would be naive, as well as intellectually torpid, to expect from generally complex ideas the possibility of a distillation which simultaneously reduces it to a form gentle on the comprehension yet still capable of encapsulating the idea in full, that is, able to pierce into the emotional and conceptual core. That this is descriptive of many of the concepts that we encounter in daily life should not come as a surprise. Just as some people are said to possess a remarkable tact in social situations - which we might try to explicate as a subtle judgment, a subconscious capacity to perceive the right cue and display the right response, yet nonetheless struggle to codify into concrete rules - or, just as humans possess

a sense of humor - where our ability to unambiguously detect its presence does not entail the ability to know anything about its efficacy - so too does there exist a notion of culture for which tacit understanding could be attained upon sufficient experience with it in life, but short of that, there is nothing one can say in words to capture its subtle essence. By drawing our attention to these domestic and commonplace examples, I hope to illustrate that such concepts, those which simultaneously are known to us through ordinary life and usage yet resolutely resist imprisonment in language, abound in our world—and the concept we have heretofore referred to as "culture" is merely but one of them. Having now established this lengthy primer-disclaimer, I will in the following accounts begin directly with those nebulous descriptions of culture which, while faithful and sound, will as I have warned neither absolve one from having to invest the mental and experiential legwork nor offer the soothing balm to the frustration of which any eager and adept mind denied apprehension will quickly become aware, indeed, descriptions which might inspire, among other impressions, the thought that that paragraph with which I preceded the section was certainly not without its reasons; and only afterwards, venture into more concrete examples which do not independently capture the real essence of culture but do commend themselves as aids to intuition.

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In the first of these accounts we are presented with the notion that culture consists in the development of man as such: not man as producer, man as specialist, or man as instrument, but man as man. Indeed what might be meant by this abstract set of terms is not immediately apparent to us, but [I believe there is a good way to get clarity on this]. In societies long before our own were to be found those properly attuned to the importance of the holistic formation of the human being, those who pioneered modes of learning which openly professed commitment towards an ideal of the cultivated or cultured man, those who believed that only through liberal education - an education deemed befitting or even necessary for the free man - could one come to acquire what is a distinction in many respects but above all in disposition and character; in our time, such species of broad thinkers have been placed on a slow march towards extinction, their natural habitat, the academy, having been transformed into a barren and inhospitable expanse, populated now rather with specialists who derive selective

advantage from the systems of incentives which was only ever appropriate for the natural sciences but which has now engulfed the entirety of the institution. Those engaged, as are we, in the effort to reinvigorate and inform their understanding of culture will find greatly profitable the habit of turning from time to time a solemn eye towards this exalted past, towards this ideal of liberal and humanistic education which we otherwise would have trouble locating in our own time, for it has largely (under these same social and philosophical pressures of what we might for now abbreviate as 'modernity') devolved into a paltry strain of technical training and career preparation.