

What Is a Traditional Society?

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NOT long ago, I hope with no sinister purpose, I used the word tradition before a group of Southern men who had met to discuss the problems of the South. A gentleman from North Carolina rose; he said that tradition is meaningless, and he moved that we drop it. I have a certain sympathy with that view, because many features of our lives that we call traditions are meaningless, because we confuse with tradition external qualities which are now, in our rich American middle class, mere stage properties of a way of life than can no longer be lived. For the stage-set differs from the natural scene, I take it, in offering us a conventional surface without depth, and the additional facility of allowing us to stand before it on Saturday and Sunday and to resume on Monday the real business of life. Tradition as we see it today has little to do with the real business of life; at best it can make that grim reality two-sevenths less grim — if indeed the pretense of our week-end traditionalists is not actually grimmer than the reality they apologetically prefer and from which they desire, part of the time, to escape.

I do not understand this romanticism, and I bring it to your attention because, here within the walls of Mr. Jefferson's University, there is a special tradition of realism in thinking about the nature of tradition.

The presiding spirit of that tradition was clear in his belief that the way of life and the livelihood of men must be the same, that the way we make our living must dictate the way of life, that our way of getting a living is not good enough for us if we are driven by it to pretend that it is something else, that we cannot pretend to be landed gentlemen two days of the week if we are middle-class capitalists the five others. You will remember Ruskin's objection to the Gothic factory-architecture of his age — what ornamentation he urged should be used around the cornice of a kind of building that was new in that time. Ruskin's stylized money-bags set at the right rhythmic intervals around the cornices of the Bethlehem Steel Corporation might be symbolic of something going on inside, but I think the Chairman of the Board might rightly object that Ruskin was not a good satirist, but merely a sentimentalist, and the Chairman would leave his cornices bare. Committed on the one hand to an economic realism, he might on the other indulge himself in softer materials in another direction; he might buy or build a Georgian mansion somewhere near Middleburg, and add to it — if they were not already there — the correct row of columns that Mr. Jefferson adapted to Virginia after a visit to the Vieux Carré at Nîmes.

Mr. Jefferson could not know Ruskin, but he knew about mediaeval Europe, and he disliked it. He never visited Mr. Walpole at Strawberry Hill, but I wish he had. He would have rejoiced that Walpole's week-end Gothic — if you will allow the anachronism for the sake of the moral — meant the final destruction, in England, of the Middle Ages. He would have known that to revive something is to hasten its destruction —

if it is not sufficiently revived. The moment the past becomes picturesque it is dead. I do not agree with Mr. Jefferson about the Middle Ages, but I surmise that he would have considered a revival of the past very much in this light. He himself was trying to revive the small freeholder who had been dispossessed by the rising capitalist of the eighteenth century.

One of the curious features of our mentality since the Renaissance is the historical imagination. No other civilization, I believe, has had this gift. I use the term not in a strict sense, but in a very general sense, and perhaps not a wholly good sense. I mean that with the revival of Greek studies men in Europe began to pose as Greeks. After a couple of centuries, when the pose, too heroic to last, grew tired, they posed as Romans of the Republic. There we have a nice historical dramatization of the common sense of the eighteenth century. We were not unaffected by it. Indeed there is evidence that our Revolutionary fathers were the noblest Romans of them all. There is certainly not a Virginian here, nor a Southerner of Virginian ancestry, whose great-great-grandfather did not write letters to his son in the style of Addison, a vehicle nicely fitted to convey the matter of Cicero. *Libidiosa enim et intemperous adulescentia effettum corpus tradit senectuti* — it is not from the orations, but the rhythm and sentiment here were the model of the *ore orotundo* style that dominated society in the South and even other parts of America for three generations. These generations, if our records of their more elegant representatives do not lie, were not much impressed with the ravages of youthful license upon the body, which, as Cicero has just told us, passes

wearily into old age. The young blade of Albemarle of 1770, sitting over a punch-bowl in the tavern after a day of Cicero with the learned Parson Douglas, was not, at that moment, an exemplar of Cicero's morals, but I suspect that his conversation, even after the bottom of the bowl began to be visible, retained a few qualities of the Ciceronian style.

The style is the point of a digression that I shall hope you do not think frivolous. I hold no brief for Cicero — he is a dull mind in any language — but I do hold that the men of the early American Republic had a profound instinct for high style, a genius for dramatizing themselves at their own particular moment of history. They were so situated economically and politically that they were able to form a definite conception of their human rôle: they were not ants in an economic ant-hill, nor were they investigating statistically the behavior of other ants. They knew what they wanted because they knew what they, themselves, were. They lived in a social and economic system that permitted them to develop a human character that functioned all the time, not merely two days a week; and it functioned in every level of life, from the economic process to the county horse-race.

The Virginian of the 1790's might have found a better dramatic part than that of the Roman in *toga virilis* — as Mr. Custis, the first Southern dilettante, liked to paint him — but it was the easiest rôle to lay hold upon at that time, and it was distinctly better than no imaginative version of himself at all. My distinguished contemporary, Mr. T. S. Eliot, a few years ago told an audience at this University that there are two kinds of mythology, a higher and a lower. The

Roman *toga* of our early Republic was doubtless of a kind of lower mythology, inferior to the higher mythology of the Christian thirteenth century, and I suppose Mr. Eliot would prefer the higher vision, as I myself should were I allowed a preference. But we must remember that the rationalism of the eighteenth century had made myths of all ranks exceedingly scarce, as the romantic century had made myths of all ranks exceedingly scarce, as the romantic poets were beginning to testify; yet the Virginian did remarkably well with the minor myth that his age permitted him to cultivate. Mr. Custis's paintings may seem to us to be afflicted with a sort of aesthetic gigantism, and his blank verse dramas, in which every hero is an alabaster Washington named Marcus Tullius Scipio Americanus, are unreadable today. They must have been a kind of inquisite torture even when they were written. But Mr. Custis built Arlington, and Arlington is something to have built. He could not have built it, of course, if Mr. Jefferson had not first built a house upon a place that I believe is locally called the Little Mountain; but then Mr. Jefferson could not have built Monticello had he not been dominated by the lower myth of the *toga virilis*.

Perhaps this lower myth, from whatever source it may come — Rome, Greece, the age of Cellini, the naturalism of the South Seas, or even the Old South — this little myth is a figment of the historical imagination, that curious faculty of Western men that I have already mentioned. The men of our early Republic were powerfully endowed in this faculty. It is not the same as a religion, if by religion we mean Christianity in the Middle Ages; nor is it the same as the

religious imagination under any conceivable culture, for the religious imagination is timeless and unhistoric. The minor myth is based upon ascertainable history.

There is a chart that we might look at for a moment, but only for a moment; I offer it not as history, but as a device to ease the strain of the idea of traditional society that I am trying to give in so short a space. First, there is the religious imagination, which can mythologize indiscriminately history, legend, trees, the sea, animals, all being humanly dramatized, somehow converted to the nature of man. Secondly, there is the historical imagination, which is the religious imagination *manqué* — an exercise of the myth-making propensity of man within the restricted realm of historical fact. Men see themselves in the stern light of the character of Cato, but they can no longer see themselves under the control of a tutelary deity. Cato actually lived; Apollo was merely far-darting.

The third stage is the complete triumph of rationalism. And with the complete triumph of rationalism, in our own time, we get, in place of so workable a makeshift as the historical imagination, merely a truncation of that phrase in which the adjective has declared its independence. It has set up for a noun. Under rationalism we get just plain, everyday history. If this is an obscure conception, I must hasten to say that although history cannot write itself, although it must be written by men whose minds are immune as little to prejudice as to the law of contradiction, it is true that any sort of imagination is entirely out of this picture. Yet in recognition of history's impotence to bring itself into being, the historians give us a new word: method. We live in the age

of the historical method. Method brings history into being.

I shall not labor the point here, but I do think it is fair to say that *history*, although it has become attached to *method*, is still a noun of agency, as the grammarians call it, trying to do its own work. I think this is true simply because on principle scientific *method* is itself not attached to anything. It is just abstract method — from which plain, abstract, inhuman history differs not by a hair. Of course, I am talking about the historian's ideal of physical law — his belief that history must conform to the ideal of a normative science, whether or not it can mean anything written that way. The historical method then may be briefly described — by one who does not believe in its use — as the way of discovering historical "truths" that are true in some other world than that inhabited by the historian and his fellow men: truths, in a word, that are true for the historical method.

Now most of you have read *The Waste Land*, but I shall ask you to hear a passage from it again for the sake of those who have not read it.

*The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne
Glowed on the marble, where the glass
Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
From which a golden Cupidon peeped out
(Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra
Reflecting light upon the table as
The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,
From satin cases poured in rich profusion;
In vials of ivory and colored glass
Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes.*

In this charming *décor* the lady, I imagine, is about to dress for dinner. On the walls and ceiling are scenes from our heroic past:

*Huge sea-wood fed with copper
Burned green and orange, framed by the colored stone,
In which sad light a carved dolphin swam.
Above the antique mantel was displayed
As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene
The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice. . . .*

People living in such favorable influences, partaking of the best of our history, and of the most charming art of the great tradition, command our most interested attention: they will at least exhibit the benefits of a good lower mythology. We may expect them to show us, if not the innocence of the religious imagination, a high style that expresses, or is the expression of, the walls that we have just looked at. But no; the poet warns us as follows:

*And other withered stumps of time
Were told upon the walls; staring forms
Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed.
Footsteps shuffled on the stair.*

I hope you will forgive me if I venture to think that the shuffling feet are about to bring into the room the historical method. For, after some desperately aimless conversation, in which both the woman and the man seem to feel little but a bored exhaustion and vacuity of purpose, the woman suddenly says:

*"What shall I do now? What shall I do.
"I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street*

*"With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?
"What shall we ever do?"*

Her companion replies — and I ask you to place what he says against the heroic background of Renaissance art on the ceiling and walls: what he says does reduce it, I think, to withered stumps of time:

The hot water at ten.

And if it rains, a closed car at four.

And we shall play a game of chess,

Pressing lidless eyes, and waiting for a knock upon the door.

Now fortunately upon this occasion I am neither poet nor literary critic. Here I am a moralist, and if I find more to my use in Mr. Eliot's poem than he would willingly allow, you will remember that moralists these days are desperate persons, and must squeeze a moral even out of modern poetry. If the chess-game seems trivial as a symbol of aimless intellectuality, its intention is nevertheless just. The rich experience of the great tradition depicted in the room receives a violent shock in contrast with a game that symbolizes the inhuman abstraction of the modern mind. In proposing the game of chess the man is proposing an exercise in a kind of truth that has no meaning for either of them. The woman in this remarkable scene has just said she can think of nothing to do — the moralist here would gloss that as lack of purpose — and she intends to rush out into the street with her hair down.

What does this mean? It means that in ages which suffer the decay of manners, religion, morals, codes, our indestructible vitality demands expression in violence and chaos; it means that men who have lost both

the higher myth of religion and the lower myth of historical dramatization have lost the forms of human action; it means that they are no longer capable of defining a human objective, of forming a dramatic conception of human nature; it means that they capitulate from their human rôle to a series of pragmatic conquests which, taken alone, are true only in some other world than that inhabited by men.

The woman in Mr. Eliot's poem is, I believe, the symbol of man at the present time. He is surrounded by the grandeurs of the past, but he does not participate in them; they do not sustain him. To complete the allegory, the man represents a kind of truth that I have described in very general terms as the historical method: he offers us the exercise of intellect to no purpose, a game that we cannot relate to our conduct, an instrument of power over both past and present which we can neither control nor use.

Man in this plight lives in an untraditional society. For an untraditional society does not permit its members to pass to the next generation what it received from its immediate past. Why is this so? I have tried to describe in moral terms some of the defects of life in an untraditional society — and I expect merely to ask and not to answer, whether there is not some kind of analysis that we may subject our situation to, that will show us one way of understanding the fundamental difference between tradition and non-tradition.

I shall return to a question that I asked in the beginning. Why do many modern people live one kind of life five days a week and another the two other days? Why is it that a middle-class capitalist from Pittsburgh or Birmingham desires an ante-bellum

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Georgian house near Lexington, Kentucky, or Middleburg, Virginia? And why was it that the men who built those houses desired only those houses, and made serious objections in the eighteen-sixties to being forcibly removed from them? There are many answers to these questions, but I have space for only one. The middle-class capitalist has no confidence in the material basis of his life; his human nature demands a homogeneous pattern of behavior that his economic life will not give him. He doubtless sees in the remains of the Old South a symbol of the homogeneous life. But the ante-bellum man saw no difference between the Georgian house and the economic basis that supported it. It was all of one piece.

I am exaggerating, but permit me the exaggeration so that I may make this matter as clear as I can. Man has never achieved a perfect unity of his moral nature and his economics; yet he had never failed quite so dismally in that greatest of all human tasks as he is failing now. Ante-bellum man, in so far as he achieved a unity between his moral nature and his livelihood, was a traditional man. He dominated the means of life; he was not dominated by it. I think the distinguishing feature of a traditional society is simply that. In order to make a livelihood men do not have to put aside their moral natures. Traditional men are never quite making their living, and they never quite cease to make it. Or put otherwise: they are making their living all the time, and affirming their humanity all the time. The whole economic basis of life is closely bound up with moral behavior, and it is possible to behave morally all the time. It is this principle that is the center of the philosophy of Jefferson.

Yet what is there traditional about this? The answer is that if such a society could come into being now, and had no past whatever, it would be traditional because it could hand something on. That something would be a moral conception of man in relation to the material of life. The material basis of life, in such a society, is not hostile to the perpetuation of a moral code, as our finance-capitalist economics unquestionably is. It is an old story by this time that our modern economic system can be operated efficiently regardless of the moral stature of the men who operate it.

The kind of property that sustains the traditional society is not only *not* hostile to a unified moral code; it is positively the basis of it. Moreover it is the medium, just as canvas is the medium of a painter, through which that code is passed to the next generation. For traditional property is the expression of man's moral nature. Finance-capitalism, a system that has removed men from the responsible control of the means of livelihood, is necessarily hostile to the development of a moral nature. Morality is responsibility to a given set of conditions. The further the modern system develops in the direction that it has taken for two generations — the more anti-traditional our society will become, and the more difficult it will be to pass on the fragments of the traditions that we inherit.

The higher myth of religion, the lower myth of history, even ordinary codes of conduct, cannot preserve themselves; indeed they do not exist apart from our experience. Since the most significant feature of our experience is the way we make our living, the economic basis of life is the soil out of which all the forms, good or bad, of our experience must come.