

THE COMING SUPREMACY OF THE AESTHETIC

Is our title as paradoxical and unrealistic as it sounds? More than a little argument and persuasion would no doubt be necessary to convince anyone that a world wracked by economic conflict and distress, by the aftermath of war and by war itself was on the verge of any kind of Golden Age. But it is not Utopia that is in the making, nor, whatever it is, will it be born suddenly. What we are aware of in the significant changes of direction in human affairs is not the infant's first wail but the first shocking deed of what is already a youth, who strides to the center of the stage and will not thereafter be silenced. The Renaissance is a classic example. We do not know the ultimate origins of that change which is already mature in Sir Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum*. In hindsight it reads like something already far advanced and in fact like a protocol of conspiracy by scientists to make over the world in a new image, a world in which the pursuit of knowledge will be justified by its being a pursuit of power. To achieve this "I have submitted my mind to things," says Bacon.

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The new order, the order of the aesthetic that is now being prepared is the next step beyond this submission of the mind to things. The aesthetic is a value which must be embodied in physical or phenomenal media however far it may reach into the realm of imagination, and this aspect it shares with economic value. By the latter we shall mean the satisfaction of the necessities of life including perhaps a certain basic physical comfort or comfortableness. The achievement of leisure, which is the most favourable climate for the prevalence of aesthetic value, has always been at least an ulterior purpose of the individual's participation in the economic system of production. But aesthetic wants and satisfactions do not wait for the full achievement of leisure. Often they are woven into the very fabric of even the most humdrum activities. Beyond this, as fine arts, they are pursued for themselves alone whenever the mere economic wants are quieted and satisfied in leisure.

Our purpose is to see how near we are to approaching such a goal not only for the few but for the many. As already noted, we must be warned that it is by no means a Golden Age that is hereby promised except that all future fulfillment is golden in anticipation. What is foreseen here is none of the shallow hopes so often postponed in human history. It is one thing and one alone, namely an age in which aesthetic values and all their near relations will occupy such a degree of supremacy that they will not only occupy the greater part of men's time and thoughts but will in turn decide the direction of their actions in life as a whole. Any number of cataclysms may erase these possibilities but these are in general of such a character that should they transpire at all far more than aesthetic values and hopes would be dashed. On the other hand the greater the growth of the aesthetic hope the more perhaps will the threat of these disasters diminish. Let us now consider the reasons we have for awaiting the change we have so far only named. We shall have first to justify the use of certain broad generalizations about the dominance of values and then to consider the aesthetic in just such a dominant role.

The activities of human beings are generally classified under such headings as art, science, industry, religion and so on. The classification can be made so broad and so basic that every age of history will prove to have devoted some of its effort to

each of them, or it can be made more narrow, so that when we look at each age more closely we can see in it a special flourishing of one of these and a relative backwardness in the others. We think at once of religion when we think of the middle ages and of industrialism and the physical conquest of nature when we review the last century. Everyone knows by now the dangers inherent in tagging off the ages of mankind, in semi-Comtean fashion, as the age of faith, the age of art, the age of the machine, yet we recur to these defective formulas of necessity, again and again. As with all generalities, their usefulness depends on what we do with them. The truth of the matter is that all understanding whatever comes through the grasp of generalizations which state the prevalence of properties or relations of one sort or another. If we would explain anything we must risk such generalizations. Many aspects of the actions of Europeans in the middle ages are totally inexplicable to an observer who does not know what spiritual enthusiasm is and who does not count it as an eminent, if not pre-eminent, explanatory factor in certain situations. If he stops short at economic generalizations to explain men's actions, if he takes the judicious use of economic skills such as husbandry, storage, marketing and so on to be the principal mark of prudent and even rational action, then some of the behaviour of medieval man seems stupid and wasteful, as indeed it does to the Marxist. Obviously medieval man held as supremely valuable something other than the physical domination of the earth, else he would have been more successful at it than he was. Even allowing for the fact that scientific knowledge takes a long time to accumulate, he could have gained far more domination of nature had he put his mind and energies to it; he was scarcely any less intelligent than we are. He valued the things of faith above the acquisition of knowledge and power. All we wish to establish by this is that it is useful to seek out guiding factors in various epochs, factors which can also be called values, and that it is not only useful but, for purposes of explanation, necessary that we do so.

A value, as we are considering it, is supreme in a society if its devotees, from some preponderance of their number or their prestige or both, induce that society to sacrifice other values for the sake of the given one. So considered, political honor or glory has sometimes taken precedence over material values

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that were thought very precious indeed, such as fertile fields or ancient cities. For when it came to a decision, the ruin of the cities and fields, to say nothing of human life, was risked in war to preserve some other value. It is difficult of course to identify rightly the positive value that is supreme even in such a situation. It is generally easier to identify the ones that are sacrificed. Was it political honor that kept Britain in the war in 1940? No doubt this is not the right name for it. What we know is that what was supreme was not material, for the material was willingly sacrificed in defence of the complex spiritual value. If material survival alone had mattered, it could have been purchased, at a price. In similar fashion we can see that the middle ages cared less for material well-being, dominance of the earth, sea and sky, exact knowledge of nature and so on, than for refuge from what was threatened in that most terrifying of hymns, the *Dies Irae* of the *Missa pro Defunctis*.

Rome at its height set high value upon social order, upon a certain degree of visual aesthetic order, and a lesser value, but still higher than all her predecessors, upon physical well-being. It set little value upon spirituality, but it also did very little in the way of exploring nature except for readily foreseeable practical ends. We have of course ample and profound record of the values of ancient Israel. In religious or theocratic societies in the past the effort was made to determine every least action in the society by the demands of some spiritual value. The planting of corn, the choice of enemies and allies, the choice of propitious moments for specific actions, the erection of cities, buildings, and places of worship, their style, size and character, the patterns of behavior in marriage, birth and death, the choice of amusements, and so on, were to be controlled by someone's decision as to whether it contributed to the glory of God or deliverance from his wrath. In ancient Israel, in the middle ages, in what one might call ancient New England, we see approximations to such a pattern. There were lapses from the ideal, and there was eventual downfall as other values emerged supreme. Quite different were the values of ancient Assyria and Sparta, permeated by the military ideal, where, unlike the preceding cases, if religion flourished at all it was only as the handmaiden of war.

In our own culture we have heard the scientist, the artist and the clergyman lament that ours is not an age which finds

supreme value in knowledge or art or theistic religion. They all find that something else seems always to take precedence in men's minds at the critical moments. Different as these several kinds of critics are, they all find something arrayed against them more often than they find themselves arrayed against each other. Whatever this is that emerges triumphant when choice must be made is obviously the supreme value of the age.

We shall not trouble to produce elaborate arguments or statistics to prove that material well-being has at length emerged as the primary value of our time. We need only remind ourselves of the efforts which are expected of modern governments East or West, to maintain economic welfare, present and future, to see how far we have come from government that could stand solely upon *Dieu et mon Droit*.

In a review of the cultures of the past it would be difficult to find a single one in which material well-being, contrary to the contentions of Marxists, has been the supreme and decisive factor that could energize a whole tribe or nation to fit every other activity to its demands, and the reason is not far to seek. It is that this value has in the past been all too difficult to achieve as compared with military prowess, spiritual union with God, devotion to the *Volksgeist*. As with all other values, certain individuals and groups in a society might achieve a full measure of it, but where it could not be shared by all it could hardly be supreme. It is only in our time that economic well-being has seemed reasonably within grasp for every man. Certainly in Europe the religion of nationalism that flourished so fiercely for centuries is on the decline. It is not so easy to animate Frenchmen with *La Gloire*, and judicious politics could make the remains of Nazism into a mere lingering twentieth century Bonapartism. Everywhere on earth the mastery of industrial technique is seen as the magic key to economic plenty for every man. Accordingly any and all other values are forced to bow in this direction or to bow themselves off the stage or off to the sides. In such a situation the religious are inevitably moved to protest at the materialism of the age. The remaining devotees of time-honored military and patriotic cults deplore the internationalism enshrined in the United Nations which sets as its aim the achievement of peace and security. The devotion of this

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organization to such aims arises not from the conviction that war is sin or nationalist enthusiasm inherently evil, nor even that either is aesthetically repellent, but from the conviction that without peace, material security, which it regards as basic to all other security, is impossible for the world at large. Concern is acute for the sufficiency or availability of material goods, and jubilation greets announcements of limitless supplies of atomic or other energy in the earth, sea or atmosphere. On the other hand, we have sobering worries when we are told, for example, that the world's copper would be exhausted in a decade if every nation on earth used it at the rate it is used in the United States. Let us think now with what equanimity a medieval saint would greet the news that we may soon be out of copper. The patriot-militarist would be concerned only if he thought that his nation's military forces did not have a special supply which would last forever or that no substitute for it could be developed. But the internationalist is alarmed if he thinks that it is a necessary cog in the machinery of providing material well-being the world around and that for lack of it we shall again plunge into an age of want.

Ardent supporters of values which once were supreme, such as those of religion, although they have little hope of restoring the medieval pattern, deplore the rise of materialism, that is, of overweening concern for material welfare. Religion, on the whole, seems resigned to occupying rather a component than a dominant position, although the Church of Rome is by no means ready to acquiesce in this. Religion may come to mean either something which guides the secular creed about material and other supreme values, enjoining not only brotherliness but especially unselfishness in the consumption of goods, or it will mean, from the secular standpoint, mere devotion to some special spiritual hope. The remaining nationalisms, if they can be called such, the Atlantic, the Asiatic, the Russian, will either exterminate each other, and so possibly not only material welfare but man himself, or become tolerable regional enthusiasms. Such nationalisms are among the few remaining obstacles to the supreme prevalence of the creed of universal physical well-being. It is to be doubted whether most people do not agree with the former American Defense Secretary Charles

Wilson's dictum that what is good for General Motors is good for the country, for General Motors is for them the symbol of the instrument of plenty. His opponents would include two curiously different schools of thought: the sceptics who doubt that General Motors is devoted to man's physical well-being and the anti-materialists who think that, alas, it is.

We are then in the midst of an era in which material considerations are obviously decisive. If ever again we see anything comparable to the religiosity of Israel or Ireland or to the Teutonic *Volksggeist* it is likely to be outside the regions that now play the deciding roles. Such values will be ancillary to other values, or perhaps offered as substitutes for them, as religion may be recommended in place of psycho-analysis. The devotion to spirit that led saints to interpret the command to "sell what thou hast and come and follow me" as a command to live a life of want and deprivation and to invite all others to do the same, would now seem nothing less than a boycott and subversive of the "established" economic order unless it affected only a tiny minority. Military officers have in the past often looked with more than suspicion at the crassness of the merely economic man. A Prussian officer in the day of his glory thought of him with contempt. If workmen interpreted the denunciations of materialism literally and took to the fields and the sunshine like the little folk in the Children's Crusade would this be long tolerated?

What lies brightly ahead for the creed of material well-being is the prospect of endless energy from the interior of the atom. Like gunpowder its first use is military, in the defense of national interest. But everyone knows that dynamite will also remove mountains to make express highways and that atomic energy will not remain the property of general staffs.

We are already warned copiously of not only the economic but of the social consequences of this, when coal and oil will be as outmoded as fuels as the droppings of cattle. The economic system as at present constituted calls for the employment of a large proportion of the population in production. In earlier ages they accepted physical toil as the consequence of Adam's sin or as simply the lawful chattel property of noblemen. They now accept it only as the simplest method of achieving material

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security. But suppose that such security either seems or is possible with little or no effort, where neither Adam will till nor Eve spin and everyman will yet be a gentleman? These are no longer the dreams but the palpable possibilities of the next centuries. Even though for the moment the great issues in the world seem to be military and political (in the last analysis there are but few *purely* political issues), the settlement of these in war or diplomacy is impossible without facing the greater issues underneath which are altogether economic, that is, how to distribute the world's goods in such a manner as will prevent economic want from turning into political crisis. But despite inevitably great upheavals in the economic system even these are soluble and with their solution—what then?

In seeking to answer this question we first observe that there are other values than those we have been considering which have never enjoyed universal supremacy, namely knowledge and aesthetic satisfaction. There are some things which we can now see as inevitable about at least one of these.

It was once the fashion to speak of the Death of Art. Not only was the announcement of its death premature, but the prevailing of aesthetic value as a primary one is now in the making for the first time in history. Always in the past economic sufficiency has been the necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the flourishing of aesthetic value. As we have seen the day is at hand when, barring the collapse of civilization in total war, universal economic security is not just a possibility but a likelihood. Since art, even more than other intangible values, such as those of religion, must have phenomenal embodiment, aesthetic values are the natural accompaniments of material and economic value. There must in the end arise values that justify man's existence when he has satisfied every basic material need. The modern version of the thesis "not by bread alone" is at least as old as Matthew Arnold. If the more narrowly religious values decline in occupying this position, is there any other value than the aesthetic that can take its place in an economically satisfied society?

The problem of leisure is now familiar but by no means trite. Leisure, the condition for all aesthetic enjoyment, may yet prove to be man's most burdensome problem. Indeed it is a

problem on which even now he spends enormous sums of money. Since the end of the first World War we have seen a gigantic growth of a variety of aesthetic, semi-aesthetic, and pseudo-aesthetic phenomena. Where in the ages before the Industrial Revolution aesthetic expression for the common man worked itself out in handicraft, religious worship, military display and the like, and but rarely in games and sport on a mass scale, the nineteenth century saw the rise of a lower as distinct from a higher order of games, arts and entertainments. We had now the music hall and vaudeville, the cheap book, the mass-appeal game in all Western countries. In the twenties of our century we saw the development of radio and sport on a gigantic scale, especially in the United States. A citizen of any other age would be astonished at the sight of an average American newspaper which devotes more space, inch for inch, to sport than to nearly any other fixed topic. He would find it hard to believe that what was once only horseplay on the village green had now assumed these proportions. Likewise, a teller of tales or a composer in the Romantic age would be astonished at the development of his art in the cheap book, the magazine, the radio and television.

Nothing is easier than to wash one's hands of all this. But can this be done? We see that whether good or bad there never was such dissemination and appeal as now prevails for some of the arts. Enormous time and energy are devoted to the exploitation of that leisure which is an inevitable concomitant of the successful pursuit of material welfare in our time. Games and art have from the earliest times occupied the leisure time of the minority. What we see now is a duplication of this on the greatest scale for the average man.

Games are, to be sure, not fine arts in any received sense but they are cousins to them at least. Perhaps they lie somewhere between the military arts we have discussed and fine arts, but they are unmistakably leisure matters and no war was ever that, even in all the glories of chivalry. Nor can we object by adopting the attitude of aloofness of the connoisseur and say that all this has nothing to do with art in a special and supreme sense. A critic might have said the same of the universal but often superficial participation of the mass of

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society in religious devotion in the middle ages. We merely close our eyes to the scope and sweep of the aesthetic problems of our time if we define them in terms solely of supreme creative effort. How indeed to preserve, distinguish and elevate that high quality of effort will be or should be the problem for those who will guide the aesthetic effort as a whole.

We can say, therefore, that aesthetic issues are already among the great issues of our day. When economic issues are solvable almost without remainder, the supreme issues will have to be aesthetic issues or close kin to them. These issues will thus become, strange to say, political issues. Barring a recrudescence of older supreme values and problems, there is scarcely any other that can play this role.

All this would even so seem to lie far, far in the future. It would indeed if the growth of aesthetic interest waited until the last difficulty in the economy were solved. But as we have observed, the aesthetic or aesthetic-political problems arise as soon as economic well-being becomes the primary concern of society. We are in the midst of aesthetic-political issues as soon as the mass patrons of the aesthetic fare that is being offered protest in one way or another that they want something else. Could not governments rise and fall over such issues if they are taken seriously enough? That will be a time for the aesthetic theorist comparable with the present situation for the economic and social theorist who is now everywhere called upon for advice to help solve economic and social problems that cannot be simply left to the caprice of the electorate. In an age when religion was supreme the theologian was called upon to help solve problems which, though religious, were also earth-shaking religious-political problems: the supremacy of reasons of faith, the true presence, the apostolic succession, investiture, redemption by works, and so on. Any Roman in the first century of our era who predicted that the issues of the future were to be of this religious-political nature might have been thought more than a little odd. The parallel is justified. Aesthetic activities of one order or another are immensely important even now, even if we think them in a wretched condition. This has the makings of crisis in it and one which aesthetic theorists are as yet ill-prepared to give advice about. But they will have to be consulted

sooner or later. The result will be aesthetic statesmanship, good or bad, comparable to the religious statesmanship of the past and the economic statesmanship of the present and future.

An enterprise such as art must at the least provide relief from boredom. At best it can provide the means of filling the perceptual universe of time, space and the imagination in a way at once rich and profound. To supply this need artists have until now revealed limitless resources, on occasion at least. But even this is an exhaustible supply. At the present time in the entertainment industry the plots and patterns of the old masters in music and literature are ceaselessly reformulated. It is mass art, almost mass produced. It is beside the point here to make appropriate signs of disappointment and revulsion. The question is, how anything comparable to the quality of these old masters can even conceivably be maintained in the indefinitely long future. We have no other image of the great artist except as a one-man team, personally and absolutely dominating his material. If it were anything other than art that was needed, if it was only utile implements for example, we might say that a concerted effort comparable to that expended upon the pursuit of knowledge about physical nature in the last century would make all our aesthetic achievements hitherto, immense as they are, seem as primitive as the achievement of Aristotle and Leibniz in the realm of science. But the fact is that we do not know except from the example of the "laboratories" of the motion picture and television "industries" what degree of quality can survive aesthetic mass production. Possibly a very high degree can and will survive. Early ages attributed knowledge or wisdom about nature to hidden, occult revelation. Now the sage or seer of divine genius has been replaced by the task force in the laboratory. Art is still largely regarded as the product of occult genius. This notion too would vanish if the aesthetic could make a transition comparable to that which occurred in science in the seventeenth century. It was Kant who remarked, even though mindful of the "incomparable Newton," that there was not and could not be such a thing as a genius in science. Genius was reserved to the arts, which cannot proceed by recipe, rule or reason. Whether Kant was right or not, the question before us is whether we shall be able

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to dispense with genius even in art—and yet have art. Perhaps the answer to this will prove analogous to what we have had in the domain of religion, that is, every degree of quality from genius to charlatanism.

It should thus go without saying that the future dominance of the aesthetic may bring us anything but aesthetic Utopia. Another historical analogy comes to mind here. Gibbon in his history and Hegel in his early observations on Christianity voiced the opinion that Christianity was not perfected but corrupted by its attaining institutional and political supremacy in the ancient world. If a comparable result were to ensue for aesthetic, its quality and character might diminish abominably, though the opposite is still quite possible. An aesthetically dominated society would also undoubtedly develop all the phenomena of schism and conflict that have appeared in cultures oriented toward religion or other values. The sensitivity that is necessary for the genuine appreciation of art could and would often be faked just as religious sensitivity has been faked. In fact it would be just as likely as in the religious situation that we would have merely cold formal adherence to some aesthetic cause, as we had High Churchmanship against warm personal emotionalism in eighteenth century Pietism and Methodism. It is thus not necessarily a rosy future but rather one that will call for the highest aesthetic intelligence. We cannot honestly say that such intelligence is at work in the mass media of aesthetic communication and creation today.