

Cultural Debris: A Mordant Last Word

We live in a world that is giving at the seams. Sometimes, indeed—especially to a man who travels a good deal—there comes an uneasy feeling that the garment of civilization has already parted and that if one were to tug even the least bit, a sleeve or a trouser leg of our social fabric would come away in his hand. In half the world, the decent draperies of the old order have been burnt altogether, and King Demos struts naked, like the emperor with his imaginary new clothes. When the garment of civilization is worn out, we are confronted by the ugly spectacle of naked power.

Yet cheerfulness will keep breaking in. At this hour when Communists and other totalists are busy ripping to shreds the “wardrobe of a moral imagination” (Burke’s phrase), certain people of a different cast of mind have turned tailors, doing their best to stitch together once more the fragments of that serviceable old suit we variously call “Christian civilization” or “western civilization” or “the North Atlantic community” or “the free world.” Not by force of arms are civilizations held together, but by the subtle threads of moral and intellectual principle.

Some years ago, I was in Europe participating in two international conferences, intended to help in this pious tailoring. Between sessions I tramped about England and Scotland with an American friend, an executive in a great industrial corporation. Being something of a classical scholar, my friend collects sixteenth- and seventeenth-

century editions of Latin works—particularly Cicero and Seneca—and pokes happily about Roman remains.

We found for his library, in the dusty caverns of Scottish secondhand bookshops, a number of admirable things at trifling prices. There lay the noble elephant folio of Strabo, in two immense volumes, at a mere thirty-five shillings; and the Strawberry Hill edition of Lucan, beautifully bound, at five guineas; and a twelve-volume set of Cicero for a pound. In an age of progressive inflation, one commodity alone remains stable, or actually diminishes in price: good old books. At the devil’s booth in Vanity Fair, every cup of dross may find its ounce of gold; but the one thing which Lucifer can’t sell nowadays is classical learning. Who wants Latin texts? No twentieth-century Faustus disposes of his immortal soul for mere abstract knowledge. The copies of Strabo and Lucan and Cicero for which a Schoolman might have risked his life ten times over are now a drug on the market. As my friend remarked to me, “These things are cultural debris. It’s as if a great ship had sunk, but a few trifles of flotsam had bobbed up from the hulk and were drifting on the surface of the great deep. Who wants this sea drift? Not the sharks. You and I are rowing about in a small boat, collecting bits of debris.”

Russell Kirk’s essay, “Cultural Debris,” originally appeared in *Modern Age* (1958). It is included in both *The Intemperate Professor* (1965) and *The Portable Conservative Reader* (1982).

Whether our civilization really retains coherence sufficient for restoration to be possible may be made clear to all thinking men within a few years. If the fabric of our ancient society has declined to the condition of a mere scattering of debris, all the tailors in the world cannot put it aright — nor all the beachcombers live by raking the sand for its vestiges. The totalists say that the old order is a corpse, and that man and society must be fashioned afresh, upon a grim plan. Yet there survive among us some people of intellectual power who hold that the wardrobe of our moral imagination is not yet altogether depleted.

Cant and equivocation dismissed, it seems to me that there are three great bodies of principle and conviction uniting what is called modern civilization. The first of these is the Christian faith: theological and moral doctrines which inform us, either side of the Atlantic, of the nature of God and man, the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, human dignity, the rights and duties of human persons, the nature of charity, and the meaning of hope and resignation. The second of these is the corpus of imaginative literature, humane letters, which is the essence of our high culture: humanism, which, with Christian faith, teaches us our powers and our limitations—the work of Plato, Vergil, Cicero, Dante, Shakespeare, and so many others. The third is a complex of social and political institutions which we may call the reign of law, or ordered liberty: prescription, precedent, impartial justice, private rights, private property, the character of genuine community, the claims of the family and of voluntary association. However much these three bodies of conviction have been injured by internecine disputes, nihilism, Benthamism, the cult of Rationalism, Marxism, and other modern afflictions, they remain the rocks upon which our civilization is built.

Well, presently my classics-collecting

friend and I walked some miles of Hadrian's Wall, away at the back of beyond in Northumberland. Here, for centuries, *Romanitas* and *humanitas* looked northward into barbarism. It is an empty country still, much of it; Pictish hill forts still scowl almost within bowshot of the Roman masonry. To the men of the legions, garrisoned here generation upon generation, it must have seemed—even toward the end—that indeed Rome was immortal; and that the barbarian, however vexatious he might be in one year or another, never could give the death thrust to a civilization which extended from Mesopotamia to Pictland, from Africa to Germany.

Yet in the fullness of time, when the common faith of the Roman world had lost its virtue, the Picts came over the wall. The end of Roman civilization was as abrupt as its beginning had been slow.

In material accomplishments, the barbarians never equalled the Romans; nor had they need to. They possessed the will to endure, and in the end the Romans lacked that will. So all that remains of the material achievement of Roman civilization is some fragments of cultural debris: a few coins, a smashed helmet, scattered beads, a ruined wall, a battered stone head. And as for the Roman moral and intellectual accomplishment, it is sold nowadays for a price not much superior to that of wastepaper.

Once we put some value upon our Roman heritage, and I hope we may do so again. Among us there still are men and women enough who know what makes life worth living—enough of them to keep out the modern barbarian, if they are resolute. If they are enfeebled, and if they cannot make common cause, the garment of our civilization will drift down the rubbish heaps of the future. Not many years of indulgence, I fancy, remain to us. But—as Henry Adams was fond of saying—the fun is in the process.