

## *Ben Jonson's Good Society*

JEFFREY HART

*Civilization is memory.*  
Hugh Kenner

*I cannot do my duty as a true modern, by cursing  
everybody who made me whatever I am.*

G. K. Chesterton

THE SORT OF POEM that is written in praise of a particular place has always been cherished by lovers of literature. "Cooper's Hill," "Grongar Hill," lyrics on rural Devon by Herrick and Gay, Pope's "Windsor Forest," John Betjeman's poems about modest English scenes—these come to mind immediately as continuing that genre of "local" poetry whose validity is sufficiently proved by its endurance, and which stretches back beyond the Middle Ages to Ausonius' poems in praise of the Moselle valley, and doubtless to other and still earlier examples. Indeed, it seems to be natural to man to celebrate the places he has lived in, however grand or ordinary they may be; for to celebrate them has been one way of celebrating existence itself. In addition, love for one's locality is, as Burke saw, the source of more comprehensive affections: "To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong

to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind."

But closely associated with this great stream of poetry in praise of place is another and more special genre, in which celebration of place is carried out under the aspect of a potentially tragic danger, in which the very existence of the thing celebrated is seen to be threatened. Concerned as it is with the collision between the established and the insurgent, between tradition and novelty, between habit and the critical consciousness, this is a distinctively modern—that is, post-Renaissance—genre. I have in mind those poems in praise of great houses which constitute a kind of special tradition in English literature: Jonson's "To Penshurst," Marvell's "Upon Appleton House,"

perhaps Pope's "On Taste," and Yeat's poems about Coole Park, with its swans and old pictures, its gardens rich in memory, its great rooms "where none has reigned that lacked a name and fame."

Soon to be destroyed by democracy and industrialism, Coole Park embodied for Yeats a ceremonious and even heroic way of life, an existence redeemed by imagination. The estate of the Fairfax family provided for Andrew Marvell the conditions necessary for a life of contemplation—as Nietzsche observed, the religious life requires a good deal of leisure—but Appleton House had been threatened by the upheavals of the Civil War. Alexander Pope saw that the architectural style which reflected the good taste of the Earl of Burlington, as well as the social assumptions connected with that style—the desirability of decorum, moderation, balance—were giving way before the grotesque ostentation of a merchant plutocracy. The values celebrated in these poems are inevitably conservative ones—ceremony, order, contemplativeness, decorum, moderation, continuity; and it is worth noting that the age of the French Revolution produced a kind of counter-tradition. The great house as it appears to the Gothic imagination at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, far from representing order and beauty, stands for sinister and archaic power. Mysterious and satanic, the lair of dwarfs, incestuous noblemen, Jesuits, psychotic servants, even Italians, it seemed capable of any enormity: it ought, implies the Gothic mode, to be swept away—destroyed as was the House of Usher, or Rochester's castle, or Satis House in *Great Expectations*.

The poems mentioned above by Yeats and Marvell and Pope have received a good deal of critical attention, though not necessarily from the point of view suggested here. But Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst" has received very little, no doubt because of the well

known circumstance that Jonson himself is more honored than read. Yet "To Penshurst" is a memorable poem, and perhaps a great one.

## II

THE PENSHURST Jonson knew was the estate of the Sidney family and it lay in the Kentish valley, hard by the banks of the river Medway. The house had been built in the fourteenth century by Sir John de Pulteney, a knight and citizen of London. Additions were made to the original structure from time to time: in 1341 Edward III issued a license allowing Penshurst to be fortified with walls of chalk and stone. Later, others made their own contributions, in stone and in brick, and using various styles, yet not obscuring the gray buttressed walls and bold Gothic arches. The estate changed hands several times, more than one owner losing his head through his political imprudence. Finally, in 1552, it passed to Sir William Sidney and his heirs. At the time Jonson wrote his poem it was the home of Sir Robert Sidney, young brother of the renowned Sir Philip, and of his efficient but, it is said, somewhat shrewish wife, the former Barbara Gamage.<sup>1</sup>

There operates throughout Jonson's poem a comparison between the ancient Penshurst and much newer houses, built, as Jonson says, "to envious show." In contrast to Penshurst, these newer houses are "grudged at;" Penshurst, unlike them, was "reared with no man's ruin, no man's groan." In his references to these new and ostentatious houses Jonson has in mind a particular social problem: a whole class of newly rich had emerged as a result of wealth largely derived from discoveries in the New World, and this new wealth had the effect of unsettling traditional communal relations and accepted moral values. "It would be difficult to overestimate," as L. C. Knights points

out, "the importance of the influx of American gold and silver in hastening the disintegration of the medieval economic order. . . . Between 1500 and 1600 the stock of precious metals in Europe is estimated to have trebled."<sup>2</sup> A few figures will suggest the extent of the economic revolution. Sir Francis Drake's trading syndicate, for example, paid a 4700 percent dividend in 1580; in 1581 a Persian expedition of the Russian Company paid a dividend of only 106 per cent and therefore was considered a failure. Several voyages of the East India Company paid over 300 per cent. "Never in the annals of the modern world," Keynes observes, "has there existed so prolonged and so rich an opportunity for the businessman, the speculator, and the profiteer."<sup>3</sup> Knights describes very well the effect this sudden wealth had upon society:

The intensive economic activity that has been described resulted in the rise of a class of "new men"—clothiers, financiers, merchants, entrepreneurs. These owed their power not to the possession of land, like the old feudal nobility, nor to political and administrative talents, but solely to their business ability. . . . The nouveaux riches of the reigns of Elizabeth and James I acquired social and political power, and exercised a dominant influence on the course of English history.<sup>4</sup>

In "To Penshurst," as in *The Alchemist*, where Sir Epicure Mammon dreams of social and moral transformations to be brought about by money ("I'll ha' no bawds/ But fathers and mothers . . . I'll say unto my cook, 'There's gold;/ Go forth and be a knight'"), and indeed in many of his other plays and lyrics, attack upon the values of the *nouveaux riches* was a principal Jonsonian theme.

The poem begins by establishing what Penshurst is not, and elaboration of this initial proposition is the main task of the

poem, which moves from rejection to celebration. Like the society at Penshurst, the poem is exclusive. Indeed, it was a characteristic point of pride for Jonson himself to exclude the debased, whether in poetry or society, and his aesthetic and social attitudes have much in common. But though this contrast, moral and aesthetic, which Jonson insists upon by placing it at the beginning of the poem, is obvious enough, some subtleties of the opening lines may have escaped notice. In the first line, "Thou art not, Penshurst, built to envious show/ Of touch or marble . . .," it is surely true that some of the force of "not" adheres to "built" and thus provides a secondary reverberation of meaning which adumbrates meanings to be encountered more directly later on. Unlike the newer houses, Penshurst has not really been "built"; that is to say, it has *grown*. Such suggestions attaching to "not . . . built" prepare us for later passages which compare both Penshurst and the social structure it supports to the order of nature, for in fact there was a sense in which the house, like that famous oak on its grounds, had grown, had not sprung suddenly from the conscious will; it had in truth evolved organically, additions being constructed as needed. This quality of Penshurst is dramatized by the technique, employed throughout the poem, of addressing the house as if it were a person: "Thou art not, Penshurst . . ." The estate is further humanized by Jonson's metaphors: it "joy'st" in soil, air, wood, and water (Do these suggest the four elements, to some degree, and imply that Penshurst knows how to use the world well?); it "hast thy walks, for health as well as sport." What has humanized Penshurst, of course, is its history, the essences it has accumulated from the lives it has contained. But Jonson's metaphors establish a kind of equivalence: the poet's imagination can confer essences too; and perhaps, we

gather, tradition and the imagination have much in common. Both are *given*, have little to do with the operations of the conscious will, with the ambition or pride of an individual; neither can be constructed; they can only be recognized and honored.

The past enters the poem in another form when Jonson tells us that Pan, Bacchus, and the dryads frequent the "mount," or high ground, in the park at Penshurst, thus investing the estate with associations drawn from classical tradition. Though the past at Penshurst is indeed an English past, Jonson legitimately invokes classical tradition, for Penshurst has also been much involved with the political and cultural history of the Renaissance, and preeminently with one of its representative figures, Sir Philip Sidney, at whose birth "all the muses met." Jonson perceived, it is well known, a kind of correspondence between the actual world of England and the classical world he had read about; and the presence of these pagan figures in lines which echo Martial remind us of Jonson's own humanist commitments, as does the title of the volume in which this poem appeared—*The Forest*, which recalls the familiar *Sylvae* of his great humanist predecessors. Later in the poem we meet Jonson himself comfortably ensconced at Penshurst, and his presence in the community there is surely intended to reflect the position assigned to the poet in humanist theory. Jonson was secure in his place at Penshurst because the social function of poetry was recognized: the poet was the moral instructor of the governing class. His attention to language, furthermore, purified and enriched the national vocabulary, and his achievements enhanced the prestige of his country. In his lyrics as in his plays we see Jonson systematically carrying out these tasks. The mention of Pan and Bacchus has, however, yet another function. It foreshadows the two themes which run through the poem and bind it together: fertility and

eating. Penshurst, we gradually recognize, is alive with energy. It consumes and it reproduces. Yet all of its powerful energies are contained by a comprehensive order.

Lines 13-18 carry forward the erotic theme introduced by Pan, and the tree, carved with "the names/ Of many a sylvan," becomes a perfect emblem of the poem's meaning. The Sidneys love nature (the "sylvan"), and the artifacts resulting from this love (the carved names) have, like Penshurst itself, become a part of nature (the tree). As the names are to the tree, so Penshurst is to the countryside: the sign of love. And it was love, we recall, which, according to Sidney and other Renaissance theorists like Castiglione, held society together. These lines also suggest the special qualities of Sir Philip's literary works, concerned as they are with pastoral and amorous themes. And the community the Sidney family enjoys with nature is underscored by the next couplet: Sidney's "amorous flames" resemble those of the "ruddy satyrs" who chase the "lighter" (in color, in temperament) fauns to Lady Sidney's oak.

These lines, with their erotic meanings, anticipate the "ripe daughters" (line 54) and the "fruitful" Lady of the house (line 90), and prepare us for the central analogy of the poem, the analogy between the natural order of the estate and the human order of its inhabitants. Like the tutelary spirits of nature, the community centered at Penshurst has its feasts (compare lines 11 and 20) and its fertility.

### III

THE SECOND SECTION of the poem, beginning with line 19, describes in elaborate hyperbole the relationship which exists between nature and the great house. Near the house a wood, named for Lady Sidney's family, the Gamages, serves the Sidney's "seasoned deer," while the meadows provide

food for horses and livestock. The woods and the riverbanks yield rabbit, pheasant, and partridge; the river Medway and the ponds give "tribute fish," which are described as being eager to be eaten—that is, to play their role in the comprehensive order of the estate. There are a number of interesting things to be observed about this passage.

For one thing it is organized so as to suggest the great chain of being, naming the various forms of life in descending order: livestock and the other warm-blooded animals, wild fowl, fish, and finally fruits and flowers. This organization reinforces the sense of purposeful order which it is a concern of the passage to evoke and celebrate. Yet the extravagance of the conceit ought not to conceal from us another meaning of the passage, a meaning which qualifies and complicates, though it by no means subverts, the meaning of the poem as a whole. The animals and the fish must *sacrifice* themselves in the interest of the order of Penshurst; participation in this order, we are to understand, however just or natural the order may be, entails self-sacrifice and some pain. Just as the fish give up their lives in the interest of Penshurst and all that it stands for, so too, we gather, are the human beings in the next section giving up something in the interest of order. And of course they are giving up, or putting a limit upon, personal ambition; unlike the parvenus, they do not rise socially, or at least rise very much; they have no desire to be ostentatious. There is even the faintest of suggestions that the Sidneys' marriage itself involves a kind of self-sacrifice: just as the Gamage wood serves seasoned deer, so the Gamage family "serves" Barbara to the Sidneys. But for such self-sacrifice the members of the society at Penshurst are rewarded by the experience of community and harmony; they are liberated from envy, the envy—*ressentiment*—epitomized by the houses built "for envious show."

Furthermore, I do not think it would be fanciful to find in this passage a certain resemblance between the realm of the animals and fish and the human realm encountered at court. Jonson's diction supports this conjecture. The *purpled* pheasant *crowns* the Sidney table; the ponds pay *tribute* fish. It might even be said that the household at Penshurst stands in relation to the wildlife there very much as a king does to his courtiers, and even as James I (line 76)—the *unexpected* guest, and therefore in some ways the cruel one—does to the household itself. This secondary suggestion in the passage, that the wildlife resembles a court, is brought forward with considerable wit. The "fat, aged carps," the "pikes, now weary their own kind to eat," and the "bright eels," inevitably bring to mind all-too-familiar court types. The wit is sophisticated and not without critical edge: if the fish are like courtiers, then courtiers are like fish. But the affirmations of the poem contain, of course, these critical complications, just as the order of Penshurst contains the energies symbolized by Pan and Bacchus, to say nothing of the feasting poet.

If the second section of the poem (lines 19-44) moves down the chain of being to the vegetable world, the next section (lines 45-89) moves up the human scale from the "farmer and the clown" to King James himself, and thus sets forth the social analogy of the order we have already been shown in nature. The two realms of order, moreover, the natural and the social, are linked not only by implication but also by a subtle and effective rhetorical device. It is to be observed that the farmers' daughters are described by an adjective appropriate to fruit: they are "ripe." But the ripened fruit mentioned at the end of section two, the "blushing apricot" and the "wooly peach," are assigned adjectives normally associated with human activity. Thus Jonson reinforces the notion, already established, that there

is a relationship between the two realms. But the analogy between the natural order of the second section and the human order of the third receives still further elaboration. Just as nature brought gifts to Penshurst, so the local inhabitants come bringing gifts, "no one empty handed." And like nature itself, they bring things to eat. Indeed, the number of lines devoted to eating in this poem is remarkable.

The social order at Penshurst includes peasants, servants, Jonson himself, the Sidneys, Prince Henry and King James. It constitutes, that is, a kind of paradigm of traditional English society. Each person who participates in this order has his appropriate place, yet none is made to feel inferior to any of the others because each rank is understood to be necessary to the functioning of the overall order. The function of the peasant is as necessary as that of the King or the poet, and if the absence of mobility confines the individual to his rank it also eliminates the envy which inevitably attends upon the opportunity for rising.

Finally, the Sidney household itself is a paradigm of order. When King James and the Prince arrive unexpectedly after a day of hunting, the "high housewifery" of Lady Sidney ensures that everything is ready for them: "To have her linen, plate, and all things nigh./When she was far; and not a room but dressed/As if it had expected such a guest."

#### IV

THE COMMUNITY at Penshurst, Jonson shows, is capable of continuing in time; it is the perfect illustration of Allen Tate's definition of a traditional society: one which "can hand something on," provide for successive generations "a moral conception of man in relation to the material of life."<sup>5</sup> The Sidney children have been brought up to

continue the traditions, the culture, of the family. They have been instructed in the Christian religion and taught to pray "with the whole household"—that is to say, they are not snobs; and through the example of their parents they have learned the "mysteries"—the ability to practice—of "manners, arms, and arts." I think that in these lines about the Sidney children Jonson touches upon a matter of great complexity and importance—that is, the whole problem of the mode by which culture, defined as the whole way of life of a people or a class, can be transmitted. For what Jonson means here by "manners" is certainly not "good manners" or etiquette, but rather what Lionel Trilling calls the buzz of implication that always surrounds us; the implication, that is to say, "of assumption and value that never gets fully stated . . . coming in the tone of greetings and the tone of quarrels, in slang and humor and popular songs, in the way children play, in the gesture the waiter makes when he puts down the plate, in the nature of the very food we prefer." These are the things "that for good or bad draw the people of a culture together and that separate them from the people of another culture."<sup>6</sup> Culture conceived of in this way is, T.S. Eliot has remarked, an expression of fundamental values, is the "incarnation" of the beliefs of a people.<sup>7</sup> Now in Jonson's description of the traditional society at Penshurst, culture is transmitted through the family. It is not transmitted by means of formal instruction, which of itself has always been of doubtful utility in the transmission of culture. "By far the most important channel of transmission of culture," Eliot points out, "remains the family: and when family life fails to play its part, we must expect our culture to deteriorate."<sup>8</sup> And we may see that it is this sort of transmission that Jonson is concerned to praise, and not so much the promotion of intellectual pre-eminence; though it may well be

argued that the life of the mind ultimately depends upon the transmission of culture in this sense. For Jonson as for Aristotle the training of character precedes the training of intellect.

In these lines, then, Jonson raises an issue that is by no means dead, and is indeed of particular concern to those who have given thought to the problems of education; for the modern teacher surely must suspect that though he may be training a kind of intellectual elite—in Eliot's words, a "collection of individuals united only by their common interests and separated by everything else"—he is by no means transmitting a culture, as distinguished from knowledge about culture.

Like the architecture of Penshurst, the verse of the poem is unostentatious, seems deliberately modest and unpolished. Of the 102 lines, 36 begin with the soft "th" sound; there is no attempt at the sort of regularity that can be produced by end-stopping the couplets; and many lines seem deliberately lacking in mellifluousness: "Thy sheep, thy bullocks, kine, and calves do feed." Like Penshurst itself, which has no polished pilars or roof of gold, Jonson's verse disdains the high polish he might easily have given it (cf. "Queen and huntress, chaste and fair . . ."), and achieves, very appropriately, an effect rather more like the "natural" texture of Donne. Yet the seeming casualness of the diction is disciplined by the poetic order of the couplet form, and by the various other modes of rhetorical order described above, very much as the country stone of Penshurst had been shaped and ordered by the many generations it had accommodated.

## V

CRITICISM of the "new men" of the seventeenth century who were disrupting the established social and moral order was by no means confined to Jonson. In this res-

pect he was not unusual, but rather quite representative. Shakespeare's villains, men as different as Malvolio and Edmund, may be seen to be enemies of tradition; and even *Paradise Lost* may be read with reference to this social conflict. Satan's overweening aspirations bring him into disastrous conflict with the hierarchy of Heaven and with the order of Eden, like Penshurst a "happy rural seat of various view." Indeed the architecture of Pandemonium suggests values very much like those of Sir Epicure Mammon or the parvenus of "To Penshurst":

Anon out of the earth a Fabric huge  
Rose like an exhalation, with the sound  
Of Dulcet Symphonies and voices sweet,  
Built like a Temple, where Pilasters round

Where set, and Doric pillars overlaid  
With golden Architrave; nor did there want

Cornice or Frieze, with bossy Sculptures  
grave,

The Roof was fretted Gold.

The conflict between traditional society and what, very roughly, might be called the insurgent forces of commercialism and innovation went on throughout the Restoration and the eighteenth century. In *Gulliver's Travels* it is Count Munodi's estate, magnificent, regular, and polite, that is threatened by the caprice of the innovators. In the *Dunciad* traditional cultural values are seen to be disintegrating under the impact of commercialism. And this conflict reached its violent culmination in the French Revolution, which Burke considered, as Jonson would have, "out of nature," a violation of the natural order.

But though traditional society was indeed doomed politically and economically, there is a sense in which it has won the moral debate, for we return to the poems and plays and tracts of its defenders with increasing sympathy today. It seems to us that modern society has solved its economic problems at

the sacrifice of most of the other conditions of the good life, has constructed willy-nilly a society in which, as Ernest van den Haag has said, "most people perch unsteadily in mass produced, impermanent dwellings throughout their lives. They are born in hospitals, fed in cafeterias, married in hotels. After terminal care, they die in hospitals are shelved briefly in funeral homes, and are finally incinerated."<sup>9</sup> It is surely true that few modern men would be likely to address a building as "thou" in the manner of Ben Jonson; nor will they be any more likely to do so in the concrete-and-steel cities of the progressive future.

At the beginning of this essay I quoted Burke on the importance of *local* affections: "To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind." It is perfectly clear that under the conditions described by Van den Haag, mitigated though they may well be in one place or another, there is today for the majority little opportunity for these affections to develop; men have tended to become, again in Burke's words, the flies of a summer. The majority of modern city dwellers have little affection for their environment, and consequently tend to regard appeals to their patriotism as hypocritical. The separate

urban generations, alienated not only from their environment but also from other, cease to pass on any particular culture, any distinctive way of life. Under these conditions, as might have been expected, modern thought has developed, in Chesterton's words, "not only a touch of mania, but of suicidal mania." That is to say, the typical quest of our modern writers is for a radical kind of innocence, which is associated with childhood and ultimately with death. And enthusiasm about the defense of political liberty, which still obtains in the West, is increasingly difficult to find among American and European intellectuals.

All this being so, it is banal to criticize such conservative writers as Allen Tate and Russell Kirk for—the charge is David Riesman's—basing their social ideals on "an irrelevant landed gentry and professional class model." Indeed, by recalling to modern culture the idea of a society which did in fact provide conditions hospitable to civilized values, such conservative writers have helped to keep open the possibility that conditions will be created under which civilized values once again will flourish. And it is surely out of a desire to recall us to a sense of this possibility that students of literature and society are turning more and more to that body of writing, from Jonson and Dryden through Pope, Swift, Dr. Johnson and Burke, which is most closely associated with the civilized heritage that we have lost.

<sup>9</sup>Mary Sidney, *Historical Guide to Penshurst Place* (Tunbridge Wells, 1931).

<sup>10</sup>L. C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (London, 1937), p. 35.

<sup>11</sup>John Maynard Keynes, *A Treatise on Money II* (New York, 1930), pp. 158-59.

<sup>12</sup>Knights, p. 88.

<sup>13</sup>Allen Tate, "What Is Traditional Society?"

*Collected Essays* (Denver, 1959), p. 303.

<sup>14</sup>Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals and the Novel," *The Liberal Imagination* (New York, 1950), pp. 206-7.

<sup>15</sup>T. S. Eliot, *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* (New York, 1949), p. 27.

<sup>16</sup>Eliot, p. 42.

<sup>17</sup>Ernest van den Haag and Ralph Ross, *The Fabric of Society* (New York, 1957), pp. 173-74.