

THE DECLINE OF QUALITY

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A question raised by our culture of the last two or three decades is whether quality in product and effort has become a vanishing element of current civilization. The word "quality" has, of course, two meanings: first, the nature or essential characteristic of something, as in "His voice has the quality of command"; second, a condition of excellence implying fine quality as distinct from poor quality. The second, obviously, is my subject.

The discussion that follows is not, except for a few samples, based on documentary or other hard evidence according to usual historical method; rather it represents the personal reflections of an observer with half a century's awareness of and occasional participation in public affairs, supported by the study and writing of history. It offers opinion on a pervasive problem and, as opinion, should and, I hope, may be supplemented by factual studies on special areas of the problem, such as education, labor and merchandising.

In the hope of possibly reducing the hail of censure which is certain to greet this essay (I am thinking of going to Alaska or possibly Patagonia in the week it is published), let me say that quality, as I understand it, means investment of the best skill and effort possible to produce the finest and most admirable result possible. Its presence or absence in some degree characterizes every man-made object, service, skilled or unskilled labor - laying

bricks, painting a picture, ironing shirts, practicing medicine, shoemaking, scholarship, writing a book. You do it well or you do it half-well. Materials are sound and durable or they are sleazy; method is painstaking or whatever is easiest. Quality is achieving or reaching for the highest standard as against being satisfied with the sloppy or fraudulent. It is honesty of purpose as against catering to cheap or sensational sentiment. It does not allow compromise with the second-rate.

When Michelangelo started work on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, five friends who were painters came to assist him and advise him in the techniques of fresco, in which they were practiced and he was not. Finding their work not what he desired, he resolved to accomplish the whole task by himself, locked the doors of the chapel until his friends gave up and went home, and through four painful years on a scaffold carried the work to completion, as Vasari tells us, "with the utmost solicitude, labor and study." That is what makes for quality - and its cost - and what helped to make Michelangelo one of the greatest artists, if not, as some think, the greatest, of all time. Creating quality is self-nourishing. Michelangelo, Vasari goes on to say, "became more and more kindled every day by his fervor in the work and encouraged by his growing proficiency and improvement." Genius and effort go together, or if they do not, the genius will be wasted.

Quality, however, can be attained without genius. Art, in any case, is a slippery area for discussion of the problem, because values in the perception of art change radically from one generation to another. Everyone knows how the French Impressionists were scorned when they first exhibited, only in recent decades to reach the peak of repute and honor and what seems to be permanent popularity. Now, in our time, we are confronted by new schools of challenging, not to say puzzling, expression. In some individuals among the moderns, quality is emphatic because it is individual: in Louise Nevelson's impressive and innovative work, for example; in the intensity of loneliness in Hopper's mature paintings. With

regard to the schools - as distinct from individuals - of Pop Art, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, hard-edge, scrawny-edge and whatnot, the two criteria of quality - intensive effort and honesty of purpose - often seem missing. The paintings seem thin, if not empty; one feels nothing behind the surface of the canvas. By contrast, behind the glow and mystery of a Turner, for instance, a whole world of ships and storms and eerie seas and men laboring over mountain passes stretches the imagination far beyond the canvas. It occurs to me to wonder whether museums hang the modern abstracts, and the public crowds to see them, in some vast pretense of seeing something where there is nothing; that in the present state of our culture, many do not know the difference.

Here we must confront the contentious question whether quality is something inherent in a given work or something socially induced - as the ultrafeminists say of sex - in the eye and periodconsciousness of the beholder. I unhesitatingly opt for the inherent (as I do for sense of gender in the individual). In architecture there is something inherently right in certain proportions of windows to wall space, or for example in the Double Cube Room at Wilton House in England. One may be an architectural illiterate and still recognize, indeed feel, the perfection. Any kind of illiterate will recognize a difference in quality between, let us say, Matisse's exhilarating interiors and hotel art of little waifs with big black eyes, or between Michelangelo's marble Moses or David and that school of sculpture which consists of jigsaw puzzles lying on a museum floor, or, alternatively, the ceramic Snow Whites and Bambis advertised at such fancy prices in The New Yorker.

The difference is not only a matter of artistic skill, but of intent. Although the Moses and David are period pieces, they are timeless, universal, noble. They were intended to be - and they are - supreme. The others fall considerably short of that measure because they are designed for lesser reasons: the ceramic

princesses and companions for commercial appeal to cheap sentiment, the floor puzzles for appeal to false sentiment - that is, worship of the avant-garde for its own sake as chic.

These examples represent the posing of extremes in which quality versus nonquality is unmistakable. If I come closer, however, and suggest that quality is inherent in, let us say, the stark, exquisite fiction of Jean Rhys but not in "Princess Daisy," in New England's white-steepled churches but not in Howard Johnson's orange-roofed eateries, in the film "Ninotchka" but not in "Star Wars," in Fred Astaire but not in Johnny Carson, I shall be pelted with accusations of failure to understand that what was once considered quality has given way under a change of social values to appreciation of new qualities and new values; that the admirers of the ceramic dolls and trash fiction and plastic furniture and television talk and entertainment shows with their idiotic laughter find something in these objects and diversions that means quality to them - in short, that quality is subjective. Yes, indeed, just as there are men who believe and loudly insist they are sober and who stumble and weave and pass out five minutes later. The judgment is subjective but the condition is not.

Contemporary life undeniably marks many improvements over the past, in freedom and nonconformity and most strikingly in material welfare. Such fine devices as the microchips that govern computer systems, a lifesaving mechanism like the cardiac pacemaker, drip-water techniques that permit arid-zone agriculture and a thousand other developments that have added to human efficiency and well-being may be cited as evidence of modern quality. Nevertheless, these are technological and seem to me to belong to a different scheme of things from the creative components of civilized life.

In two other areas, morals and politics, loss of quality is widely felt, but as I am not sure that the present level in these areas is much lower than at many other periods in history, I shall leave

them out of the discussion.

In labor and culture, standards are certainly lower. Everyone is conscious of the prevalence of slipshod performance in clerical, manual and bureaucratic work. Much of it is slow, late, inaccurate, inefficient, either from lack of training or lack of caring or both. Secretaries still exist who care and who produce a perfectly typed letter, but more and more letters appear like one I recently received which contained - whether owed to writer or typist - "parred" for "pared," "deline" for "decline," "in tact" for "intact," and the information that removal of portions of an author's text "eschews his political intentions."

The writer in this case was certainly ignorant of the meaning of the word "eschews," while it is impossible to say whether the other errors represent ignorance or simple slackness. Either way, though only a sample, no more manifest evidence could be had of what has become prevalent in many fields. Even more striking is recognition that no such letter could have been written from a reasonably literate office 10 or 15 years ago. The decline has been precipitate, perhaps as one result of the student movements of the 1960's, when learning skills was renounced in favor of "doing your own thing" or consciousness-raising and other exercises in selffulfillment. It is good for the self to be fulfilled but better if coping skills are acquired first.

In culture the tides of trash rise a little higher by the week: in fast foods and junky clothes and cute greeting cards, in films devoted nowadays either to sadism or teen-agers and consequently either nasty or boring; in the frantic razzle-dazzle of Bloomingdale's and its proliferating imitators; in endless paperbacks of sex and slaughter, Gothics and westerns; in the advertising of sensation-fiction which presents each book as the ultimate in horror, catastrophe, political plot or world crime, each by an unknown author who is never heard from again - fortunately.

Examining the evidence, one could apply a system of Q and non-Q for quality, on the model of the famous system of U (for upper-class) and non-U in language* sponsored by Nancy Mitford. Her categories were devised to distinguish social class, which brings us to the dangerous problem of the relationship of quality to class.

*Based on Prof. Alan S.C. Ross's treatise on language, which Miss Mitford incorporated into an article on the English aristocracy for Encounter magazine, and which she and others later expanded in the anthology "Noblesse Oblige."

Quality is undeniably, though not necessarily, related to class, not in its nature but in circumstances. In former times, the princely patron had the resources in wealth and power to commission the finest workmanship, materials and design. Since his motive was generally self-glorification, the result was as beautiful and magnificent as he could command: in crystal and gold and tapestry, in exquisite silks and brocades, in the jeweled and enameled masterpieces of Cellini, the carved staircases of Grinling Gibbons. It is also true that cities and states caused works of equal value to be created not for individual glory but for the good of the whole, as in the Greek temples and theaters, the Colosseum of Rome, the Gothic cathedrals, the public parks of London.

The decline that has since set in has a good historical reason: The age of privilege is over and civilization has passed into the age of the masses. The many exceptions that can be made to this statement do not invalidate it. No change takes place wholly or all at once and many components of privilege and of capitalist control remain functioning parts of society and will, I expect, continue as such for some time. Nevertheless, the turn has taken place, with the result that our culture has been taken over by commercialism directed to the mass market and necessarily to mass taste. De Tocqueville stated the problem, already appearing in his time, succinctly when he wrote, "When only the wealthy had watches they were very good ones; few are now made that are worth much but everyone has one in his pocket."

In the absence of the princely patron, the public is now the consumer, or if government is the patron, it is answerable to the public. The criterion for the goods and services and arts that society produces is the pleasure and purchasing power of the greatest number, not of the most discerning. Therein lies the history of non-Q. Arts and luxuries may still be directed to the few and most discerning, but when the dominant culture is mass-directed and the rewards in money and celebrity go with it, we have to consider whether popular appeal will become the governing criterion and gradually submerge all but isolated rocks of quality.

Will the tides of trash obey Gresham's law to the effect that bad money drives out good? This means, I am told, that as between two coinages of equal denomination but different intrinsic value in gold or silver content, the one of lesser will drive out the one of higher value. I do not know whether, according to our ever-flexible economists, Gresham's law remains valid, but as regards quality in culture, it has gloomy implications.

Quality cannot be put down altogether. As the would-be philosopher said of cheerfulness, it keeps breaking in, and I suspect always will. It appears in the crafts movement that, in a reaction to floods of the tawdry, has been expanding in the last decade, producing fine hand-woven fabrics and handmade utensils and ornaments of pottery, glass and wood. There are art and design in these and individual skills that make for Q. We come across Q here and there in every field of endeavor, from a symphony orchestra to a well-run grocery and on the covers of the Audubon bimonthly magazine. For all its appearances we are grateful and by them encouraged, yet we have to recognize that the prevailing tendency is non-Q.

This is not confined to the taste of the masses. It reaches into the richer ranks, where purchasing power has outdistanced cultivated

judgment. Persons in this difficulty tend to buy purses and scarfs and various garments -even sheets - adorned with the designer's or manufacturer's initials in the illusion that, without risking individual judgment, they are thus acquiring the stamp of Q. In fact, they are merely proclaiming that they lack reliable taste of their own. If I were to adopt the Mitford tone, I would have to say that wearing anything bearing commercial initials is definitely non-Q.

Most of the products of non-Q have the economic excuse that they supply needs to pocketbooks that can afford them. An entire level of society has arisen that can now afford to obtain goods, services and entertainment formerly beyond its means. Consequently these are now produced at a price level attractive to the greatest number of consumers and likewise at a cultural level, or level of taste, that presumably the greatest number wants or will respond to. Whether the merchandiser or advertiser is invariably a good judge of what the public wants is open to doubt. Whereas one used naively to believe that, under the infallible test of profit, business knew what it was doing, we have now witnessed the most monumental goof in business history committed by the very king of American enterprise, the auto industry. If Detroit with all its resources errs, can the rest be far behind?

A question that puzzles me is why inexpensive things must be ugly; why walking through the aisles in a discount chain store causes acute discomfort in the esthetic nerve cells. I have heard it suggested that raucous colors and hideous decoration are meant to distract the purchaser's eye from shoddy workmanship, but since that only results in a remedy worse than the disease, it cannot be the whole explanation. One had supposed that ugly, oversize packaging obeyed some mysterious law of merchandising, the merchandisers having proved that if the package were neat, discreet and elegant, it would not sell. I wonder if they really know this, based on careful tests, with controls, of consumer response, or whether gratuitous ugliness is not just a presumption of what

the public is supposed to like. The automobile companies thought they knew too, and they were so wrong that the taxpayer is now bailing them out in survival loans and unemployment insurance to the workers they had to let go.

I do not see why the presumption cannot be made the other way: that the consumer would respond to good design rather than bad, and to quality insofar as it can be mass-produced, rather than junk. The answer will doubtless be that when this experiment has been tried the mass of consumers fails to respond. For this failure, I believe, two institutions of our culture are largely to blame: education and advertising.

We have some superb schools, public and private, in this country but the dominant tendency, once again, is non-Q. Education for the majority has slipped to a level undemanding of effort, satisfied with the least, lacking respect for its own values, and actually teaching very little. We read in the press that, despite the anxious concern and experiments of educators, college-entrance scores are sinking and the national rate of schoolchildren reading at belowgrade levels hovers at 50 percent. The common tendency is to blame television, and while I suppose that the two-minute attention span it fosters, and the passive involvement of the viewer, must negatively affect the learning process, I suspect something more basic is at fault.

That something, I believe, lies in new attitudes toward both teaching and learning. Schoolchildren are not taught to work. Homework is frivolous or absent. The idea has grown that learning must be fun; students must study what they like, therefore courses have largely become elective. Work is left to the highly motivated, and failure for the others does not matter because, owing to certain socially concerned but ill-conceived rules, students in many school systems cannot be flunked. Except by the few who learn because they cannot be stopped, the coping skills society needs are not acquired by the promoted failures, and the

gulf between the few and the mass will widen.

Further, one becomes aware through occasional glimpses into curriculums, that subject matter makes increasing concessions to junk. Where are the summer reading lists and book reports of former years? A high-school student of my acquaintance in affluent suburbia was recently assigned by his English teacher, no less, to watch television for a week and keep a record on 3-by-5 index cards of what he had seen. This in the literature of Shakespeare to Mark Twain, Jane Austen to J.D. Salinger! How will the young become acquainted with quality if they are not exposed to it?

The effect appears at the next level. A professor of classics at a major Eastern university told me recently that, in a discussion with his students of the heroes of Greek legend, he tried to elicit their concept of the hero without success, and resorted to asking if anyone could name a hero. Only one student, a girl, raised her hand, and replied "Dustin Hoffman."

I feel sure that Mr. Hoffman, whose real persona is not at stake, will forgive his name being used to illustrate a case of modern know-nothingism. The girl neither knew what a hero was, nor apparently that an actor represents a character without being it. If she could not distinguish between make-believe and real, her school is unlikely to have equipped her to distinguish between quality and vulgarity or fraud, between Q and non-Q. She does not know the difference. Consequently, when the market offers her junk, she and her contemporaries buy it and listen to it and wear it because that is all they know.

Advertising augments the condition. From infancy to adulthood, advertising is the air Americans breathe, the information we absorb, almost without knowing it. It floods our minds with pictures of perfection and goals of happiness easy to attain. Face cream will banish age, decaffeinated coffee will banish nerves,

floor wax will bring in neighbors for a cheery bridge game or gossip, grandchildren will love you if your disposition improves with the right laxative, storekeepers and pharmacists overflow with sound avuncular advice, the right beer endows you with hearty masculine identity, and almost anything from deodorants to cigarettes, toothpaste, hair shampoo and lately even antacids will bring on love affairs, usually on horseback or on a beach. Moreover, all the people engaged in these delights are beautiful. Dare I suggest that this is not the true world? We are feeding on foolery, of which a steady diet, for those who feed on little else, cannot help but leave a certain fuzziness of perceptions.

When it comes to standards of labor, the uncomfortable fact must be faced that decline in quality of work is connected with the rise in the security of the worker. No one likes to admit this, because it is depressing and because it does not fit into the sentimental conviction that all's well that is meant well, that good things have only good results. The unhappy fact is that they have mixed results. Work may be a satisfaction to those who can choose their own line of endeavor and who enjoy what they do, but for the majority work is a more or less disagreeable necessity. Therefore, when holding a job no longer depends upon quality of performance but on union rules and bureaucratic protections, the incentive to excellent work is reduced. Like the failing student who cannot be flunked, the inadequate worker cannot be fired, short of some extreme dereliction. If he is laid off or quits for reasons of his own, unemployment insurance provides a temporary substitute for the pay envelope and, in the long run, the various supports of social welfare preclude destitution.

No one this side of the lunatic fringe suggests that these rights and protections of labor should be abandoned or weakened because loss of quality has been part of their price. Gain in one aspect of society generally means loss in another, and social gain in the well-being of the masses has been the major development of the last two centuries. We have put a floor under misery in the

West and few would wish it removed because its measures have been abused. The privileged abuse their opportunities too, by monopolies, trusts, graft, bribery, tax evasion, pollution - and with far higher returns. At whatever cost, the working class has obtained access to comforts and pleasures, possessions and vacations that have changed immeasurably not only their lives but the whole of our economy and culture. On balance, this is social progress, but let us not suppose it has been unalloyed.

Other factors have played a part: The alienating nature of the assembly line and mass production is one, but this has been present since the Industrial Revolution. The great change has come with the complacency of - on the whole, in America - a comfortable society (previous to present inflation and recession). As in education, the change has been in attitude. The pressures and needs that once drove us have relaxed. Today's watchword is "Why knock yourself out?" The Asians in our midst - Koreans who put a whole family to work in a grocery of neat, washed, fresh produce, and stay open for 24 hours - exemplify the difference.

What of prognosis? The new egalitarians would like to make the whole question of quality vanish by adopting a flat philosophy of the equality of everything. No fact or event is of greater or less value than any other; no person or thing is superior or inferior to any other. Any reference to quality is instantly castigated as elitism, which seems to inspire in users of the word the sentiments of Jacobins denouncing aristos to the guillotine.

In fact, elitism is the equivalent of quality. Without it, management of everything would be on a par with the United States Postal Service, which, mercifully, is not yet quite the case. Difference in capacity does exist and superiority makes itself felt. It wins the ski race and promotion on the job and admission to the college of its choice. There are A students and D students, and their lives and fortunes will be different. I do not know if egalitarianism applies to horses, but if so how does it account for

Seattle Slew and Affirmed sweeping the triple crown; and if all are equal, why do we hold horse races? Given the evidence of daily life, the egalitarian credo must be difficult to maintain and succeeds, I imagine, in deceiving chiefly its advocates.

However, because egalitarianism obviously appeals to those least likely to excel - and they are many - its appeal is wide, and not altogether harmless. It sponsors mediocrity, which, as we learned a few years ago on the occasion of President Nixon's nomination of Judge G. Harrold Carswell to the Supreme Court, has an important constituency in this country. The general criticism of Carswell as mediocre prompted from Senator Roman L. Hruska of Nebraska one of the historic remarks of the century. He did not think Carswell should be disqualified on the grounds of an undistinguished judicial career, because, he said, "Even if he were mediocre, there are a lot of mediocre judges and people and lawyers and they are entitled to a little representation, aren't they?"

The more I ponder this idea of a seat for mediocrity on the Supreme Court, the more it haunts me. The Hruska Principle is only a logical extension, after all, of majority rule, and if carried to its logical conclusion must mean that the mediocre shall inherit the earth. (Carswell was rejected, of course, but for alleged racism, not for mediocrity.)

In the 18th century, Montesquieu saw political egalitarianism as a "dangerous fallacy" that could lead only to incompetence - and, he added, mob control, by which he meant democracy. We are less afraid of democracy than he was because we already have it, but growing incompetence is undoubtedly a feature of contemporary life, although it is not necessarily an attribute of democracy. There never was greater incompetence than in the Bourbon monarchy in the last decade before the French Revolution. It brought the old regime down in ruins, but we need not take that precedent too closely to heart for, despite present

appearances, I think our society has built itself more safeguards and a firmer foundation.

I cannot believe we shall founder under the rising tide of incompetence and trash. Perhaps that is merely a matter of temperament; it is difficult to believe in fatality. Although I know we have already grown accustomed to less beauty, less elegance, less excellence - and less hypocrisy, too - yet perversely I have confidence in the opposite of egalitarianism: in the competence and excellence of the best among us. I meet this often enough, if not quite as often as the reverse, to believe that the urge for the best is an element of humankind as inherent as the heartbeat. It does not command society, and it may be crushed temporarily in a period of heavy non-Q, but it cannot be eliminated. If incompetence does not kill us first, Q will continue the combat against numbers. It will not win, but it will provide a refuge for the trash-beleaguered. It will supply scattered beauty, pride in accomplishment, the charm of fine things - and it will win horse races. As long as people exist, some will always strive for the best; some will attain it.