

THE MUSIC OF A DEAD CULTURE¹

DOROTHY OSBORNE, writing to her lover, Sir William Temple, in 1653 gives this description of her daily life at her home in Bedfordshire:

The heat of the day is spent in reading or working, and about six or seven o'clock I walk out into a common that lies hard by the house, where a great many young wenches keep sheep or cows, and sit in the shade singing ballads. I go to them and compare their voices and beauties to some ancient shepherdesses that I have read of, and find a vast difference there; but trust me these are as innocent as those could be. I talk to them, and find they want nothing to make them the happiest people in the world but the knowledge that they are so. Most commonly, when we are in the midst of our discourse, one looks about her, and spies her cows going into the corn, and then away they all run as if they had wings to their heels.

The picture of the shepherdesses singing at their task on an English summer's evening catches the same pastoral beauty that one finds in Gray's *Elegy*: to some it may seem romantic and a touch sentimental. The writer, however, was not of that temper: she shows in her letters a plain common-sense and humour, which gives this description a sense of exactness: nor is her picture exceptional. Sir Thomas Overbury had written this of milkmaids and shepherdesses a few years earlier:

She dares to go alone and unfold her sheep in the night, and fears no manner of ill, because she means none; yet to say the truth she is never alone; she is still accompanied with old songs, honest thoughts and prayers, but short ones.

Milton too in a lighter mood recalls the same happy characteristic:

While the ploughman near at hand
Whistles o'er the furrowed land;
And the milkmaid singeth blithe,
And the mower whets his scythe,
And the shepherd tells his tale,
Under the hawthorn in the dale.

¹ The substance of a Paper read to the Aquinas Society, Leicester, December 16th, 1935.

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Here too is a clear vignette of a seventeenth century English landscape, peopled by rustics who whistle and sing and tell stories. In the twentieth century, the young wenches have migrated citywards, and any attempt at singing blithely at their work would be regarded with coldness by those who employ them. The common where they kept their sheep or cows was enclosed by the squire and the parson at the beginning of the nineteenth century: like the village green, in Mr. Chesterton's poem, "it got mislaid and turned up in the squire's back-yard": at the beginning of the twentieth century, he sold it to a jobbing builder, who covered it with artistic maisonettes and nice little bungalows. The ploughman and the mower have turned mechanic, and for them knowledge of the petrol engine is of more importance than knowledge of the plough. In up-to-date farms the cows are milked and the sheep are sheared with economy, despatch and hygiene by machines which draw their motive power from the "grid." In the fields too and the farmyard a machine does everything except grow the corn. It sows it, reaps it, stacks it, and threshes it. The late Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges, describes "the new poetry of toil" in the countryside that *we* know:

How was November's melancholy endear'd to me
in the effigy of plow teams following and recrossing
patiently the desolate landscape from dawn to dusk,
as the slow-creeping ripple of their single furrow
submerged the sodden litter of summer's festival!
They are fled, those gracious teams; high on the headland now
squatted, a roaring engine toweth to itself
a beam of bolted shares; that glideth to and fro
combing the stubbled glebe.

Again where reapers, bending to the ripen'd corn
were wont to scythe in rank and step with measured stroke,
a shark-tooth'd chariot rampeth biting a broad way,
and jerking its high swindging arms around in the air,
swoopeth the swath.

Or what man feeleth not a new poetry of toil,
whenas on frosty evenings neath its clouding smoke
the engine hath huddled up its clumsy threshing-coach
against the ricks, wherefrom labourers standing aloft

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toss the sheaves on its tongue; while the grain runneth out
and in the whirr of its multitudinous hurry
it hummeth like the bee a warm industrious boom
that comforteth the farm, and spreadeth far afield
with throbbing power.²

The work of the labourers in the countryside has to-day been largely displaced by machines, whose power and precision have removed much of the drudgery that was knit into their lives, that *labor improbus*, unremitting toil, which the earth exacts from those who look to her for a fruitful return. Even so, granting the drudgery (which is in truth inseparable from most human effort), those that have been relieved of their pastoral labours have been deprived of more than a living; they have been dispossessed of a life: a life simple and unlettered, set in a landscape compounded of sky and ploughland, pastureland and woods: a life lived in direct contact with Nature, subject to every variation of weather, conscious of every subtle change of light and leafage as season followed season. All the ingredients that make life human in body as well as soul were at hand. The peasants enjoyed shades and tones in creation which the townsman is too blind to see. They felt a kinship and sympathy too with the animal creation, which they tended, in its birth-pangs, its matings, and its death-throes; this perhaps they subconsciously sensed as the pattern of their own hearth-life, with its succession of childhood, youth and parenthood, quickened in the body with the conscious stimulus and zest of human love. The unlettered peasant seems to have shared in that vast range that was covered by the ancient sense-consciousness among the primitive peoples of Greece to which D. H. Lawrence refers. To quote his own words: "We have lost almost entirely the great and intrinsically developed sensual awareness, or sense-awareness, and sense knowledge, of the ancients. It was a great depth of knowledge arrived at direct, by instinct and intuition, as we say, not by reason. It was a knowledge based on words but not on images." Rural life would seem to have been conatural with human instincts and desires. So, in its train, it

² *Testament of Beauty*, III, 354, ff.

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would bring a high degree of such contentment and happiness as is possible to us here. "I talked to them and find they want nothing to make them the happiest people in the world, but the knowledge that they are so." That was the authentic note of rural contentment: it was quite objective, unselfconscious, unreflective. The true rustic did not think in terms of ideas; he thought of things; he did not analyze his own thought-processes. He suffered neither from intellectual scruples, soul spasms, nor heart searchings: his consciousness was built up on personal experience and direct observation, with the firm buttresses of religion, legend and folk-lore; a cult-life rather than a culture, D. H. Lawrence would say.³ Academic education lay entirely outside his range; but when the village school was built, this rural life received its death-blow. Faculties which had been in active exercise upon nature herself were now put to grips with the printed word: men ceased to experience life, and began to learn letters. The following passage from Henry Williamson's *Dream of Fair Women* is suggestive in this connection:

I pray for power to bring back that awareness into the human mind; I feel in my mind all the flowers and the songs of boyhood are stored, and I must pour them out, giving them shape and form in sentences which ring in the hearts of all who read, and soften them, and bring back to them the simplicity and clarity of the child-heart. For the hope of the world, of the human race, is in the child. Its young mind must be impressed with natural beauty, not dreary, dead facts of what kings died and when, and what $a^2 + b^2$ equals. The tissue of the child mind must be free as a dove's breast-feather drifting in the sunlit air. But what do they do to the imaginative tissue of little children? They blench and wither it by forcing it to apprehend unintelligible facts. They strip the petals of its young blossom!⁴

For most rustics the loss tended to outweigh the gain. The school provided an education designed by the academically minded for urban conditions, and this was ill-related to rural life. The peasant child by degrees absorbed with his lessons

³ *The Wheelwright's Shop and Change in the Village* by George Sturt give the best description of the old English village as an organic community.

⁴ Page 126, 1933 edition.

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a sense of inferiority for being a country bumpkin and a slow-witted yokel, whose life was brutish and uncultivated. The eyes of more and more inspectors made him feel hot and sweaty, the accumulation of honest farmyard and good earth upon his gaiters gave offence to the sensitive nose of the parish visitor. Inspectors and parish visitors have done their damndest; and young Hodge now wears collar and tie, factory-made clothes, and patent-leather shoes, on Sunday, whereas old Hodge would have worn a smock. Young Hodge takes his girl in the bus to the pictures; he listens-in, he rides a motor-bike as soon as he can pay the instalments, he plays the gramophone, and drives a tractor. He is a cleaner and altogether more presentable fellow than old Hodge, his grandfather, who was a proper ignorant yokel, and ended his days in the workhouse, mumbling a lot of silly old songs that an old parson was silly enough to put down on paper.

We may think that young Hodge is a more likeable and recognizable chap than the old man. We have all had a hand in teaching him not to be a hobbledehoy, and in turning him from a peasant into a townsman.⁵ The difference between the old and the new is symbolized by the kind of songs they sing—or rather, by the old man's songs which the young man would not sing if you paid him. The old man was a peasant, and so was his wife; they were both unlettered, they both sang, sometimes at work, sometimes at play. They sang because they were reasonably happy in the life they led; because their music was built into the fabric of their existence. What they sang was old and enduring and sound: the kind of songs that have been part of the living tissue of every peasant culture the world over for century upon century. The stories that the old man sang in his ballads form the stock-in-trade of every peasantry from India to Iceland: they are a part of our Aryan heritage. Similarities, too, of toil in peasant communities produced similar needs for lightening it, and so the work song was born, and lightened the work. The work song was as natural and as

⁵ "Even the farm labourer to-day is psychologically a town-bird"
—D. H. Lawrence in the *Architectural Review*, August, 1930.

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spontaneous as was the shanty of the sailors who toiled at the capstan or the halliards.

Ballads, work songs, love songs, songs of the spring, of the harvest time, of the sheep-shearing; songs as infinite in number as in the variety of their local colour; the song, too, that recalled the flood, the fire, the earthquake, the victory; all these were for an unlettered people the source of knowledge and the vehicle of folk lore and tradition. To sing was the common expression of the community, and was as spontaneous as the tribal dance, the prayer, and the sacrifice. Such songs as these were the expression not of individuals as such, but of individuals as members of the community, of the folk; they were the outcome of purely natural instincts, quite distinct in character from the self-conscious musical composition of an educated person; such music we call art-song. Folk song was the possession, the expression, and in some sense the creation of a community. Where there is no peasantry in direct contact with Nature, it seems as though there can be no song of this kind. In England the Enclosure Acts, the successive discoveries that followed the application of steam, oil, and electric power, and popular education, have all helped to eliminate this class from the social fabric of the English people; and so the last peasants have now carried with them to the grave a great musical heritage. Many of their songs, probably most of them, have been saved from oblivion by the careful and patient work of musicians who gathered what they could from the surviving rustics of the older England. Scholarly editions of these songs have been published and are accessible to all who have developed the taste and perhaps the enthusiasm for them.

We must not however delude ourselves into the belief that the reproduction of these songs, when they are sung to-day, continues the authentic folk tradition. Think for a moment of our associations with the words "folksong" or "folk-dance"—heavy shoes, home-made hosiery that is thick and itchy, shaggy tweeds, arts and crafts, peasant industries, vegetarians, all the paraphernalia of that pallid sophistication that swerves away into crankiness. Perhaps that is a little unfair. Has not the Board of Education had a hand

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in this folksong business, and recommended the teaching of folksongs in elementary schools? This one readily grants, but one suspects that the Board's intention was not to knit the folksong heritage into the national tradition again. They are wise enough not to put old wine into new bottles. The reason probably is this; educational authority realizes their melodic genius and their value for musical training: the children all over England may sing them dutifully and beautifully in class, but one somehow suspects that they will howl Connie Boswell's latest hit when they want to enjoy themselves in more congenial surroundings. The sketchier elements in Letchworth and Welwyn can *Dabble in the Dew*, and warble *One May Morning So Early* until a well-earned cold stops them, but the songs they sing and the dances they perform have ceased to be folksong and folkdance except in name. The songs are not sung spontaneously from memory as the living tradition of an unlettered peasantry to which children and grown-ups alike belong. They may be sung by schoolchildren or rendered on the vicarage lawn by folk in picturesque smocks at the Parish Bazaar, but are they still sung over the tankards by countrymen in their village inn? That seems to be a fairer test of their spontaneous vitality. *In vino veritas.*

If the Folk Muse were by some misfortune to find her way to England and hear her songs, she would hardly recognize them, and she herself would be as out of place in an elementary school or a garden suburb as the angel in Wells's novel who was winged by a short-sighted country vicar's shotgun, and later proved to be a distinctly awkward guest in his respectable clerical household.

The larger problem involved by the disappearance of this music still remains to be discussed. Its vital growth and development have gone beyond recall because the culture which created it and maintained it in vigour is dead. These songs of the English countryside were the spontaneous expression of what formed the greater part of the English people until about 1760. For centuries the life and prosperity of England were built up on virile peasantry, whose material conditions and traditions differed in no important

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respect from those of the Middle Ages. Despite the religious upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries each village retained a strong communal spirit, based largely upon the possession of their common land. The philosophic individualism of the educated classes had not filtered through to these unlettered communities. Village life was, according to Dorothy Osborne and, about a century later, to Addison and Fielding, congenial and not unpleasant: it was more than an existence providing for man's needs; it contained in fact all the ingredients of a complete culture. The English peasant was more than a mere bumpkin. He was a man who had a personal share in the creative activity of his own community which by virtue of its work formed a constituent and stable element in human civilization. The disappearance of this rustic culture, as old as every creative civilization man has hitherto known, is too close for us perhaps to estimate in all its aspects. In our own world of to-day the tilling of the soil and the tending of stock for the production of man's food can be organized on more economic and rational lines by the use of industrial methods in those parts of the globe which are most productive, e.g. Canada and New Zealand. The machines provide the necessary means of transporting this produce to the *foci* of distribution. The majority of the men involved in the system do the work of mechanics, under the direction of chemists, technicians and scientific experts. Food production is as patient of rationalization as is any other factory-produced article. Consideration upon these lines inevitably recalls *Brave New World* and the conditioned, mechanized, dehumanized, sterile simulacrum of mankind which it depicts as the result of the rigid application of scientific method. Hardly a department in our material circumstances seems likely to remain unaffected. Food, clothing, furniture, architecture, town-planning, transport, work, recreation, all the material constituents of human life can be and are being mechanized. The Press gives us a standardized opinion, ready-made: so too do the radio and the cinema. Man tends to exercise fewer of his own native faculties in his work and in his play and becomes passively receptive: the radio and the talkie

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and the gramophone all emphasize this: in listening there is little or no active stimulus beyond that of appreciation, though often the mind of the listener remains as unaffected as when he reads the newspaper. How many of us after reading a column in the daily press could repeat the gist of what we have read in a reasonable summary? This habitual receptivity tends to produce in the mind the antithesis of that active creative instinct which was more evident in less mechanically developed conditions of life. We have seen almost within living memory the last vestiges of a creative impulse of this kind disappear from society. Is the new society—this *Brave New World* of ours—disposing man to create as readily as the old world did? The current seems to be running hard against the spontaneous development of any common creative impulse. For example, the last thing that will spring from a highly mechanized people seems to be music. The radio, still in its infancy, is working an immense revolution in this respect. Far more people listen, far fewer sing or play. After all, is it reasonable to do so when the world's best music entrusted to the highest artistry is at everyone's disposal at so small a cost? What matters here is not the quality or the quantity of broadcasting or of mechanized music, but the mere fact of its existence as an active hindrance to the conscious or unconscious instinct in man to be musically creative, whether as composer, singer or player. It is so easy to turn on the radiogram and listen entranced to Elizabeth Schumann singing German *lieder* as no one else on earth can, or to Koussevitsky conducting a Beethoven Symphony. Why go through the painful business of learning when there is the joy of listening to the best whenever we like? Our critical faculty will become perhaps very highly developed, but the creative faculty will remain dormant and perhaps grow moribund. Old Hodge and his kind shared in a creative activity by their singing, and that is more than most of us do, for all our reading and all our listening. The Machine Age is to give young Hodge more leisure: but when he has done his four hours' work for the day, will he have the inclination or even the disposition to do anything creative? Probably his leisure time will be spent as

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it is to-day, listening to and looking at what is provided for his entertainment. He doesn't want to be creative; he doesn't want to be improved, any more than does the bulk of our industrialized population. *To Poietikon* and *To Practicon* are alike subject to the ordinary course of human inclination: neither legislation nor official encouragement will make Hodge creative, or for that matter morally good, if he does not want to be. His music is on a level with the rest of his avocations: it is psychologically an escape, a distraction from boredom and worry; it is hardly a part of his very life, a spontaneous accompaniment and interpretation of his experience as it was with the old man and his songs.

Folksong stands as more than a symbol of rural culture: it was the creative expression of the rural commonwealth. The system which has taken its place hardly seems as yet to leaven humanity with the same disposition to create something of its own. Music tends more and more to become the specialized activity of a very few highly skilled exponents, a caste of experts whose work is disseminated far and wide by mechanical methods. The inherent instinct in society to create seems to be dormant, and in this respect society is in danger of becoming sub-human. The Garden City will not make us creative, any more than Bournville gives Cadbury's workers to-day greater exercise of freedom. Primitivism too provides no solution: to live the simple life in a shack, or to go gipsy in a caravan, and preach the gospel of the Luddites, and scratch at the soil with a handmade hoe, is to shirk a vital issue: in this, it is like any other attempt to put the clock back; it is little more than an escape from reality and a refusal to acknowledge our debt here and now to our own human society which has bred us. By all means let us have our daydreams of the Golden Age, but we will never reach it by walking backwards. Social atavism will never infect the mass of the people. It catches those victims whose temperaments make them susceptible to the microbe. Social atavists all run true to type: they all think alike and act alike because they are temperamentally similar. The men all wear beards, they have a somewhat grubby look, their children are in danger of becoming little hooligans

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who, in a few years, will not bless their parents for the opportunities of which they have been deprived—and they all sing folksongs out of little books. But what of education? Will not that, if it is rightly ordered and directed, give us a people as creative at least as the unlettered peasantry was? There is little in the present system to justify optimism on this score. Primary and secondary education are standardized in a uniform system by the Board of Education: but what formation children are receiving beyond a mass of unrelated material knowledge and a fair dose of class-consciousness must be a secret shared by the Minister of Education and his deity: those who have the job of teaching do not share it. (Some may see in education the figure of Jupiter who drove Saturn, his father, from his throne on Olympus and thus brought to an end the Golden Age when mankind was contented and happy.) The price of material progress to-day in terms of human life is perhaps heavier than we realize. Folksong and peasantry seem to have gone beyond recall; shall we ever develop a people who will produce a tithe of old Hodge's mite of human creativeness? Possibly you see the problem. What the answer is I really do not know. *Solvitur ambulando* perhaps . . .

AELWIN TINDAL-ATKINSON, O.P.