

## Foreheads Villainous Low, Aldous Leonard Huxley

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In *A Farewell to Arms*, Mr Ernest Hemingway ventures, once, to name an Old Master. There is a phrase, quite admirably expressive (for Mr Hemingway is a most subtle and sensitive writer), a single phrase, no more, about 'the bitter nail-holes' of Mantegna's Christs; then quickly, quickly, appalled by his own temerity, the author passes on (as Mrs Gaskell might hastily have passed on, if she had somehow been betrayed into mentioning a water-closet), passes on shamefacedly to speak once more of Lower Things.

There was a time, not so long ago, when the stupid and uneducated aspired to be thought intelligent and cultured. The current of aspiration has changed its direction. It is not at all uncommon now to find intelligent and cultured people doing their best to feign stupidity and to conceal the fact that they have received an education. Twenty years ago it was still a compliment to say of a man that he was clever, cultivated, interested in the things of the mind. Today 'highbrow' is a term of contemptuous abuse. The fact is surely significant.

In decent Anglo-Saxon society one may not be a highbrow. What may one be, then? Or rather, since the categorical imperatives of snobbery and convention are involved, what must one be? In America one must be, loudly and heartily and bibulously, the Good Mixer. Your refined Englishman deplores the loudness and heartiness; good mixing in the Old Country must be done in a superiorly genteel and Public-Schooly fashion. The ideal Englishman and Englishwoman are those two delightful young married people, who are the permanent hero and heroine of all the friendly jokes in *Punch*. They have about a thousand a year and perhaps two children, who are perpetually making the sweetest, the most killingly Barrie-esque remarks.

They are, of course, the greatest dears and awfully good sports; and as for their sense of humour—it's really priceless. When they find a couple of woodlice in their garden, they instantly christen them Agatha and Archibald—than which, as every one will agree, nothing could well be funnier. Indeed, their sense of humour is so constantly in evidence, that one would be almost tempted to believe that they take nothing seriously. But one would be wrong. These charming jesters have hall-marked hearts and all the right, all the genuinely upper-middle-class instincts about everything and everybody, including the highbrows, for whom they have a healthily Public-School contempt—mingled, however, with a certain secret and uncomfortable fear.

Dear priceless creatures! Of such is the kingdom of our anglican heaven. 'Go thou and do likewise,' commands the categorical imperative. I do my best to conform; but when the priceless ones draw near, I find myself obeying only the first part of the commandment; I go—as fast as I possibly can.

To what do we owe these two characteristically and, I would say, uniquely modern snobberies—the snobbery of stupidity and the snobbery of ignorance? What is it that makes so many of our contemporaries so anxious to be considered low-brows? I have often wondered. Here, for what they are worth, are the conclusions to which these speculations have led me.

Stupidity-snobbery and ignorance-snobbery are the fruits of universal education. Hence—for there can be no fruits without trees—their very recent appearance. The tree of universal education was only planted fifty years ago. It is now just beginning to bear.

Under the old dispensation, some people who might have profited by education, remained uneducated; others, incapable of getting much out of an elaborate schooling, were nevertheless (thanks to the accident of their birth) elaborately schooled. On the whole, however, those who could profit by education generally got educated. For those who can profit by education develop as a rule—some in childhood, some in adolescence—an intense desire to be educated. When a desire is intense enough, it generally gets itself fulfilled. The educated class in mediaeval times probably contained a fair proportion of the profitably educable individuals (at any rate of the male sex) distributed throughout the population. The merit of a system of universal education is that it gives all profitably educable individuals a chance of receiving the schooling by which they, and through them perhaps also society, will profit. At the same time, however, it enormously increases the number of those who cannot profit much by education, but who nevertheless are more or less elaborately schooled.

When culture was confined to the few, it had a rarity-value comparable to that of pearls or caviar. The golden ages of culture-snobbery were the dark ages of education. When finally the Many were given the education which, when it was confined to the Few, had seemed so precious, so magically efficacious, they found out very quickly that the gift was not worth quite so much as they had supposed—that, in fact, there was nothing in it. And indeed, for the great majority of men and women, there obviously is nothing in culture. Nothing at all—neither spiritual satisfactions, nor social rewards. There are no spiritual satisfactions, because most people (perhaps fortunately) are not endowed with the curious mentality of those who can wring pleasure out of the abstractions and inactualities of a liberal education. And there are no social rewards, because, in a world where every one is educated, the mere fact of having been to school ceases automatically to be the key to success. Under a system of universal education, social rewards will tend to go only to those who have talent as well as schooling. The schooled but untalented Many find themselves just as badly off as they were before.

Professional democrats continue to prescribe education and yet more education as a remedy for every individual and social ill. For these people, it would seem, education is more than a simple medicine; it is a kind of magical elixir. Man has only to drink enough of it to be transformed into something superhuman.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' the quack earnestly begins. The people listen, rather apathetically; they have heard this sort of thing before. But when the benefactor of humanity hands out yet another bottle of his concoction, they accept it, they take their dose and hopefully wait for the effects. There are, as usual, no effects. Somebody starts to laugh. 'There's nothing in it,' says a rather vulgar voice. Indignantly, the benefactor of humanity produces authentic testimonials from John Stuart Mill, Francis Bacon, and St Thomas Aquinas. In vain. The crowd doesn't believe in them. Why should it? It has had personal experience of the inefficacy of the elixir. 'There's nothing in it,' repeats the vulgar and resentful voice. The snobberies of stupidity and ignorance have come into being.

Universal education is still in its infancy; but the fruits of that young tree—oh, how astonishingly large they are already! The rapidity of their growth will surprise us less, however, when we remember with what loving care they have been fostered. Education brought them forth; but to Industry belongs the credit of their conscious and intelligent nurture.

If by some miracle the dreams of the educationists were realized and the majority of human beings began to take an exclusive interest in the things of the mind, the whole industrial system would instantly collapse. Given modern machinery, there can be no industrial prosperity without mass production. Mass production is impossible without mass consumption. Other things being equal, consumption varies inversely with the intensity of mental life. A man who is exclusively interested in the things of the mind will be quite happy (in Pascal's phrase) sitting quietly in a room. A man who has no interest in the things of the mind will be bored to death if he has to sit quietly in a room. Lacking thoughts with which to distract himself, he must acquire things to take their place; incapable of mental travel, he must move about in the body. In a word, he is the ideal consumer, the mass consumer of objects and of transport.

Now, it is obviously in the interests of industrial producers to encourage the good consumer and to discourage the bad. This they do by means of advertisement and of that enormous newspaper propaganda which always gratefully follows advertisement. Those who sit quietly in rooms with nothing but their thoughts and perhaps a hook to amuse them, are represented as miserable, ridiculous, and even rather immoral. Happiness is a product of noise, company, motion, and the possession of objects. The more noise you listen to, the more people you have round you, the faster you move and the more objects you possess, the happier you will be—the happier and also the more normal and virtuous. In the modern industrial state, highbrows, being poor consumers, are bad citizens. Long live stupidity and ignorance!

Fostered by the propaganda of the industrialists, the fruits of universal education have sprouted and swollen out, like cabbages in the unsetting sunshine of an arctic summer. The new snobberies of stupidity and ignorance are now strong enough to wage war at least on equal terms with the old culture-snobbery. For still, an absurd anachronism, the dear old culture-snobbery bravely survives. Will it go down before its enemies? And, much more important, will the culture it so heroically and ridiculously stands up for, also go down? I hope, I even venture to think, it will not. There will always be a few people for whom the things of the mind are so vitally important that they will not, they simply cannot allow them to be overwhelmed.

'But will there always be such people?' questions an ironical demon. 'And what about the yearly increase in the numbers of the mentally deficient? And what about R. A. Fisher's demonstration of the way in which a society that measures success in economic terms must fatally and inevitably eliminate all heritable ability above the normal?'

Let us ignore the demon; or rather let us piously hope that something may be done about him before it is too late. In the meantime the battle between the rival snobberies comically rages. A sham fight still; there is as yet no actual persecution of highbrows. We are safe. But even as things are, there are wholesale desertions and betrayals. Caliban's mere contempt is enough to shame hundreds of highbrows into a denial of their nature and upbringing.

'You're cultured.' Caliban points accusingly. 'You're intelligent.'

'But no! How can you say such a thing?'

'I distinctly heard the word "Mantegna."'

'Impossible!'

'I did hear it.' Caliban is inexorable.

The highbrows shake their heads. 'Then it must have been a slip of the tongue. What we meant to say was "gin."'

The end