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John Armstrong, *In Search of Civilization: Remaking a Tarnished Idea*

Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2009. 197 pp. $24.00. ISBN-10: 9781555975807; ISBN-13: 978-1555975807

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One might get the idea from reading this book that the keepers of the culture now all resemble Howard Belsey from Zadie Smith's novel, *On Beauty*. Howard hated art and sought to destroy any remnant of passion for it his poor students held. This might be an unfair characterization, but Smith is a novelist and must be allowed some artistic liberties. Armstrong is being honest. Armstrong takes-on his colleagues in the modern academy, especially those in the humanities. With humor he exposes the inanity of their professional interests and the failure of their public role. (Does someone really study the depiction of camel legs in Renaissance paintings of the Magi?) From accounts of an art history conference and a luncheon at Harvard's research center for Renaissance studies in Florence, there is no question what he thinks about the state of the humanities.

Indeed, Armstrong's book is probably a better analysis of the crisis afflicting colleges and universities than the rising stack of volumes devoted to the subject. In the 1980s Alan Bloom started a cottage industry—or perhaps an industry that allows academics to build themselves cottages—with his *Closing of the American Mind*. Just this last year has welcomed (among many others) Martha Nussbaum's *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Mark C. Taylor's *Crisis on Campus*, Mark William Roche's *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?*, Craig Brandon's *Five Year Party*, and Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus' *Higher Education? How Colleges are Wasting our Money and Failing Our Kids—And What We Can Do about It*. There are many more, including Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa's *Academically Adrift*, which

received special attention in this journal. While these books tend to address issues such as finance, tenure, neoliberal capitalism, and any number of fads, marketing strategies and "next new things" that have plagued colleges and universities in this country, they do not face the fact that few in the academy are willing to defend the very notion of civilization. Armstrong does.

Armstrong's attempt to remake the tarnished idea of civilization is gentle and suggestive. For starters, he never accuses anyone of having tarnished the idea, he merely mentions it in the subtitle. Few would disagree. After setting the scene by reference to a children's book, he imagines a television talk show on the topic of civilization. As the modern equivalent of a Platonic dialogue, four interlocutors take different positions on what civilization is, namely, "a collective scheme of values," "a certain level of economic and political development," "a sophisticated pursuit of pleasure," and "a high level of intellectual and artistic excellence." These four options set the framework for the book and its division into four parts.

This device works very well, although it is not perfect. The reader will find Armstrong returning to many ideas and covering the same ground several times. This leads him to offer several definitions of civilization, not just the four options from the television program. I counted at least eight, and I know I missed some. But this is also the greatest virtue of the book: reading it is like having a long, leisurely conversation with a well informed friend. Armstrong does not doggedly pursue one clear answer that will settle the dispute and end the conversation. Indeed, the concluding attempt to sum-up and arrive at a definition is the least felicitous moment in the book: "Civilization occurs when a high degree of material prosperity and a high degree of spiritual prosperity come together and mutually enhance each other" (187). This is disappointing, given what comes before.

If we look back at his exploration of the first position, that civilization is a collective scheme of values, we find a far better definition: “civilization is not so much what we have as a picture of what we need” (39). He is led here from a consideration of Samuel Huntington’s now famous *Clash of Civilizations*. Armstrong does not summarily dismiss the notion that civilizations have, do, and will clash. Instead, he develops an idea that is often overlooked in this clash, namely, that the “rich achievements of any civilization are not in violent conflict, and in fact are on the same side in a clash between cultivated intelligence and barbarism” (23). The struggle against barbarism, which he addresses directly later in the book, is a theme that carries throughout and provides some of his deepest insights. It is also an invitation to distinguish between high and low, not between inside and outside. That is to say, from examples as far distant as Japan and his own childhood home of Glasgow, Armstrong makes clear that the greatest dangers to civilization no longer lurk on the edges of empires, wild men who paint themselves blue and spike their hair with horse urine, to cite some of his own ancestors (and mine). No, the dangers lurk or, more accurately, strut proudly inside the borders.

The idea that civilization provides a picture of what we need is compelling, and may more appropriately capture what is meant by “shared values.” It also leads neatly into his discussion of civilization as economic development, the second part of the book. Weaving together his own attempt at a life in the business world and the theories of Adam Smith, Armstrong does not shy away from the fact that we do need wealth. Civilization is not possible in a condition of near starvation and with no tools beyond stone knives and bear skins. He does not fall for the romantic fascination with the noble savage, or the primitive. Nor does he succumb to the temptation to despise the achievements of the modern world as mere dross and

corruption. As such, some reviewers have taken the book to be a triumphal celebration of the free market, capitalism, and the accumulation of vast personal wealth. It is nothing so crude.

While many are ambivalent about the economic development necessary for civilization, and others are downright hostile, Armstrong can get beyond handwringing over "How Beastly the Bourgeois Is", to cite D. H. Lawrence, and on to the difficult work of developing people's appreciation. This is the whole point of civilization, to take people "from attachment to secondary characteristics of goodness, namely: status and price, to attachment to primary characteristics: beauty and reason" (80). And so we come to the third part of the book, "Civilization as the Art of Living." Through a meditation on More and Erasmus, a confessional account of an awkward encounter with a French prostitute, and reflections on tragedy, comedy, and epic as necessary parts of each life, Armstrong concludes that, "A civilizing process is one in which some existing need or impulse develops well so that it serves our higher, nobler longings" (117). This is the work of civilization: transforming eating to dining, sustenance to cuisine, plodding to promenading, and covering one's naked flesh to cutting a figure.

All of this, of course, can lead to decadence which Armstrong explores in one of the most compelling chapters of the book. In good Aristotelian fashion he sets civilization as the mean between barbarism and decadence, these being for him the vices of individuals more than characteristics of societies: "Barbarism is strength without sensitivity; decadence is sensitivity without strength" (140). From there he outlines six causes of barbarism and four causes of decadence. The causes of barbarism are the best description of the worst undergraduates, while the causes of decadence are the same for the faculty. A shelf of campus novels could spring from these two paragraphs.

Indeed, many of the worst aspects of modern society are summed up in his description of barbarism, from uncontrolled sports fans rampaging through city streets in celebration of victory to eccentrically coifed businessmen pursuing the highest office. Neither can imagine leaving an appetite unsatisfied and both are intensely afraid of humiliation. Impatient, barbarism acts through aggression because "if I try to explain I'll get nowhere, if I negotiate I'll be outwitted, if I hesitate I'll be attacked" (141). At the same time, barbarians are conformists and have an intense fear of boredom, leading them to do anything—absolutely anything—so long as there is a large enough group doing it with them. Finally, they require obvious and outward symbols of status, be those tattoos or trademarks. One could easily despair.

Despair, of course, is a characteristic of decadence. Decadence, he tells us, arises from fear, lack of confidence, romantic pessimism, and communicative anxiety. In brief, the decadent individual is certain that the barbarian will win and so unsure of himself that he thinks defeat might be for the best. Armstrong captures the despair of decadence: "How do I know I am intelligent? No one understands me" (141). And so barbarism and decadence encourage one another and squeeze out civilization. But there is hope. Among the heroes of the book is Abbot Suger, from St-Denis. In the twelfth century he addressed a problem that remains at the heart of civilization: "How can a wide audience be gained for ideals that—in their pure form—are daunting?" (132).

This brings us to the final section of the book, "Civilization as Spiritual Prosperity." The promise is that the intellectual and artistic excellence produced and appreciated by a few can be enjoyed by many more. There is an art of calming the savage breast of the barbarian and fortifying the soul of the decadent so that both may share in the material and non-material wealth that civilization provides. Negotiation is necessary here because the barbarian must be

convinced not only that poetry is better than pushpin, but that he can and will appreciate it. The decadent individual, on the other hand, must be willing to accommodate, if not exactly praise, folly. One may want to wince at the rubes in their shorts and running shoes searching for the part of Chartres that looks most like a scene from Harry Potter, just as we may sigh as even our finest undergraduates fumble to use both a fork and a knife at the same time. As he describes from a recent trip to Florence, "The aspiring masses are tranquillized, and fleeced, as they stumble pointlessly past the objects whose real meaning is entirely lost upon them" (152). Can anything be done to bring the decadent and the barbaric closer to the mean of civilization?

Armstrong thinks the answer is to be found in the economy, the purpose of which is to "promote civilization" (190). More specifically, and curiously, "the opportunity for the future is going to lie in desire leadership" (189). This is the marketing of desire, the shaping of desire. We are to entrust the civilizing process to the ad men? Despair is back.

The notion that marketing must become engaged with civilization is not unreasonable. Indeed, on a recent visit to the Saatchi Gallery in London I was struck by the combination of prodigious wealth earned through advertising and massive artistic effort, such as a room filled entirely with stove oil. Neither could I help noticing the gimmickry of both. As Armstrong puts it, "It has been supposed that the point of high culture—of the greatest imaginative and creative effort—is to unseat some fantasized ruling class who had to be provoked and distressed into change" (67). This passage will win him few fans in the art world, but it points to an issue underlying all of this that Armstrong fails to address, namely politics, for unseating a fantasized ruling class is a political motive.

I appreciate greatly what Armstrong has accomplished with this book and I do recommend it highly. Nevertheless, the political aspect of civilization is almost never

mentioned. Once, briefly, he alludes to the fact that civilized law takes into consideration the intention of the accused. Then, right at the very end of the book, we read this: "The ideal that people like Cicero entertained was of an integration of the refinement and cultivation of the Greeks with the robust military and administrative capacities of Rome" (194). This is very well put, but what it has to do with "desire leadership" is beyond me.

A healthy dose of politics would have added greatly to Armstrong's analysis, especially a reading of *Democracy in America*. A democratic age, Tocqueville tells us, an era of equality produces people uncertain of themselves, individuals afraid to make a judgment for they are only that, mere individuals. In the face of The People, that great conglomeration of all and the only source of political legitimacy, they submit and conform. When nine out of ten dentists recommend a particular toothpaste or we discover which is the most popular car in America, who am I to disagree? (I might paraphrase Tocqueville and say that advertising is the one profession in the world where the precepts of Tocqueville are least studied and best followed.) Equality also resists any attempt to distinguish high from low, and the whole society is set against the ambition of his hero Suger, "to raise people from mass to elite culture" (132). Is Suger's project even possible in a democracy?

Perhaps the avoidance of politics was intentional. In this day when advocating the reading of Homer is perceived as code for expanding gun rights, or including comics on a syllabus (sorry, "graphic novels") is proof of devotion to a single payer healthcare system, it is courageous of Armstrong to have written this book in the first place. For as I mentioned in regards to his unflattering accounts of his academic colleagues, he will make few friends in the academy with this book. If he is right, and in many ways he is, the keepers of the culture, those

entrusted to protect civilization like the geese on the Capitoline, squawk at any movement. They now more often defend the barbarians from the civilized. How can Armstrong not despair?

Armstrong has good friends, the great authors and artists to whom he points the reader. These keep him from despair. By contrast, take Martha Nussbaum's book, *Not for Profit*, mentioned above. Her heroes are Rabindranath Tagore and John Dewey, two educational theorists and academics. Armstrong never points to the academy or to academics, but to the works they themselves love and study, or once did. His heroes may be the best evidence that he is in the university but not of it. Perhaps his position as Philosopher in Residence at the Melbourne Business School gives him this freedom. If so, he is not like Howard Belsey at all. He is more like the hero of Kingsley Amis's novel and we can call him Lucky John.

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