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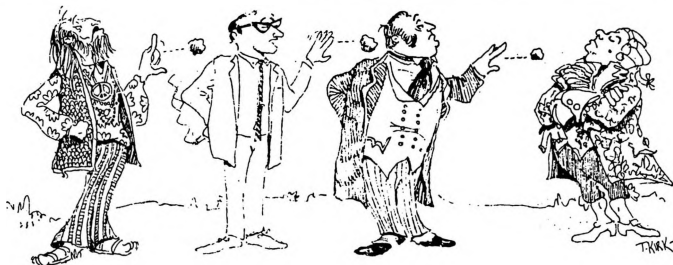
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Chronological Snobbery



Editorial: Chronological Snobbery

Barfield ... made short work of what I have called my "chronological snobbery," the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited. You must find out why it went out of date; was it ever refuted (and if so by whom, where and how conclusively) or did it merely die away as fashions do? If the latter, this tells us nothing about its truth or falsehood. From seeing this, one passes to the realization that our age is also "a period," and certainly has, like all periods, its own characteristic illusions. They are likeliest to lurk in those wide-spread assumptions which are so ingrained in the age that no one dares to attack or feels it necessary to defend them. — C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955. p. 196.

The above is the point and essence of this editorial, whose purpose is to make a contemporary comment on what Lewis described as his condition when he was a university student.

There is a strong sense of chronological snobbery in our culture today. It is about as intense as in former periods of history, and for nearly the same reasons. I want to compare the Age of Enlightenment, the Victorian Age, the "Modern Man" of this century, the Counter-Culture Revolution of the 1960s, and finally our own age of the 90s.

The Age of Enlightenment, which over-lapped the 17th and 18th centuries, was a highly snobbish one. Those who were of that Age felt truly superior to all previous human history. They felt they had surpassed the wisdom of the Classical World by the aid of untrammelled Reason. It was in that period that the phrase "the Dark Ages" with a capital "D" was invented, both to describe and deprecate that long and painful reorganization of the Western World following the incremental collapse of Classical Civilization. Lack of reason had not simply pulled down the Classical World; there were extremely disruptive invasions and plagues

that more than once destroyed huge segments of the population of Europe. Political chaos and cultural deprivation followed from both of these effects. Nor was Europe gradually transfigured and renewed solely though the agency of pure reason, despite what those of the Enlightenment might have thought.

Those of the Victorian Age knew they were superior to those of the Age of Enlightenment. They had something better than abstract reason; they had verifiable and empirical reason in the form of a plethora of scientific discoveries gained in tandem with the Industrial Revolution. In addition, they had spread Western thought and technology to nearly the whole globe. They mistakenly assumed cultural superiority to all other civilizations and cultures they came into contact with. A more correct reason for their success was that theirs was a civilization still growing, and feeling the very natural enthusiasm of this growth. The timing of their contact with other cultures and civilizations, such as the Middle Eastern, the Indian, and the Chinese, was done when the others had basically already reached their Golden Ages and were in various stages of comparative decline.

The so-called "Modern Western Man" of the 20th Century seemed no longer concerned with reason, as such, or indeed intellectual systems of thought. The people of this age were overwhelmed with the awareness of their own accomplishments, and decided they wanted a materialistic, creature-comfort utopia. No be indolent, they worked hard and brought forth the "golden age," even though they had to pass through two devastating world wars to achieve this. Soon the hollow and bitter fruit of this material paradise had resulted from neglecting or soft-pedaling ethical and spiritual values that were part of their heritage.

We could say that the "Modern Western World" has had the worst snobbery of all, primarily because of the harnessing of two powerful psychological and mythical

forces. The first is the theory of Evolution. Here I must make my own position clear — I do not disbelieve in evolution as a working hypothesis to explain in a functional way how organic life came to be where it is today. While I understand there are some gaps and problems with the theory, I find myself allowing my mind to use the theory of evolution as a convenient and understandable way to approach biological processes. But this is not the same as the near deification of the theory into a mystical, metaphysical doctrine, which is the way it is popularly understood today. People began in the 19th century to apply the theory to topics completely unrelated to biology — areas such as human history, music, politics, literature, human consciousness, economics (capitalism, Marxism, fascism), and worst of all, religion. By refusing to make a distinction between mystical faith in the Doctrine of Evolution and the more scientific theory of biological evolution, modern Western Man put a mighty weapon in his arsenal to bolster his superiority. This is because this weapon had the backing of Science (with a capital “S”). As we know, Modern Western Man does not question Science as the fountainhead of Ultimate Truth.

The second weapon was the harnessing of psychological research into areas of manipulating human wants and needs for commercial purposes — which used to be called “The Madison Avenue” approach. To make products sell well, Modern Western Man took the idea of the novelty and interest in something new, and expanded it far beyond any previous age; he invented *The Cult of the New*. Products from detergents to automobiles can be found that tellingly demonstrate this. Every six months or so, we must be told that a certain brand of cleaning agent has come out with some dubious improvement, crying “New, New, Improved!” To do otherwise is to find its sales sharply declining. Those who think up these claims are forced by the nature of the market to continue their continual dole of exaggerations.

I find this kind of thing very dangerous and subversive. It carries with it the implication of “New is Good; Old is not only bad, it is *unfashionable*.” This kind of thinking is a circular trap. Perhaps some people will always need that certain new item to make them feel important by vicarious identification; a sop to their deeper feelings of inferiority. If we always have to have the latest and newest, what are we basing our value judgements on? We deny value in the thing itself; it is only valuable because it’s *new*. When it has lost its newness, it has lost its value. This is the denial of inherent value in anything. Those who follow the Cult of the New seem to be on an endless road to nowhere. I prefer to seek value in the thing itself. Forgetting fashionability, I prefer to appreciate a book for the qualities it has. It is refreshingly ironic that many things that do seem fresh and worthy are so because they do not attempt to be the latest thing. *The Lord of the Rings* is a superlative example.

In the 1960s we saw “Post-Western Man” in strong reaction to the increasingly plastic glory of the former way of

thinking. The reaction was mainly a rejection of, and non-involvement with, what came to be called, somewhat inaccurately, “the Establishment.” The 60s were a transition period where both ways of thinking clashed together. It was at this time we heard the phrase “the generation gap” to describe the increasing lack of real societal communication.

C.S. Lewis has said that each period has defects and blind spots, and here I detect one in the “Establishment” approach. Modern Western Man has a fixation on the doctrine of necessary progress — which proceeded from the Mystical Doctrine of Evolution — and is the main pillar that has supported his chronological snobbery. It tautologically proves he is bigger and better than people of all previous periods. But then what did he say of the hippies, flower-power, the yippies, the love-generation, and all the other manifestations of a new and different way of thinking? The organized leadership of Modern Western Man, known in America in the 60s as the Establishment, seemed to have fallen into the trap of saying “the forces of progress have worked their mysterious destiny up to this point; all those who come later to disagree are freaks and abortions of this, up to now, perfect system.” This was incredible yet necessary doublethink.

Change is not necessary progress; change is merely change, and can be for good or ill. But what of the “new ways of thinking” that pervaded our culture with snowballing rapidity in the late 60s and early 70s? This is a result of a three generation situation: Generation A held certain values and honestly tried to apply them to its culture. Generation B found out that a faster buck could be made by paying lip service to the values, while milking the system for personal gain. Through the attrition of Generation A, Generation B became the Establishment, having the facade of cultural integrity and the affluent life, and yet paid the desperate price of inner harmony and self respect. Generation C came to see the hypocrisy of B and angrily threw out the baby with the dirty bath water. Generation C not only rejected the hypocrisy of B, but also the honest values of A. This was, and continues to be, the real tragedy.

In the 60s we confused the *desire* for change as change itself. That generation seemed to mistake saying “love is the answer” was the answer. Compare the grandiose claims of the 60s with the mixed and sometimes dissolute results. Expansion of the Consciousness was proclaimed: lives and brains short-circuited and drug abuse was more frequently the reality. Self-knowledge was the espoused virtue; self absorption seemed to be the effect in the 70s and 80s.

We have now entered into this century and millennium’s ending decade. Given all the recent momentous change in world structure and economic realities that, if nothing else, promise *further* changes and adjustments, we are less apt to feel that we are personally on the top of the crest for the moment. For this brief period we are slightly more vulnerable to the truth. I predict this will soon pass, and as the next decade develops its momentum,

a new generation and a new snobbery, based on some new rationalization, towards all past Ages will be as strong and overpowering as ever before.

It seems that each new generation delights in the glories of nature and discovers yet again for the first time the sensitivity of the human spirit. It also has the incredible arrogance to think that it is composed of the first human beings to discover love, sex, awareness of beauty and intellectual depth. It is quite predictable, because each generation sees the previous generation as being preoccupied with other things. But a fullness and maturity of spirit cannot be achieved until this arrogance is rejected.

True freedom is to strive to transcend all chronological snobberies. To this point I have spoken disparagingly of all four former periods, pointing out their foibles. But while all periods have their deficiencies, great individual minds and spirits have arisen in each Age, and we individually and collectively owe very much to them. I identify with my brothers and sisters of all ages, attempting to understand their limitations as I hope to be forgiven for mine.

To be at peace, is not only to be so with the world and universe, but with other individuals — not only those living now but also with those of former ages and of future ages. Self-realized minds are often produced in spite of the Spirit of the Age feelings of arrogance and an "hurray for our side" posture. To seek a cosmic appreciation of beauty and the human spirit is far more preferable and rewarding than to be blinded with snobbish feeling that you are the latest and most fashionable item to ride up on the ephemeral crest of "progress."

— Glen GoodKnight



MYTHOPOEIC CORE READING LIST

MYTHLORE frequently publishes articles that presuppose the reader is already familiar with the works they discuss. This is natural, given the purpose of this journal. In order to be a general help, the following is what might be considered a core reading list, containing the most well known and frequently discussed works. Due to the many editions printed, only the title and original date of publication are given.

J.R.R. Tolkien

The Hobbit, 1937; "Leaf by Niggle," 1945; "On Fairy-Stories," 1948; *The Lord of the Rings : The Fellowship of the Ring* 1954, *The Two Towers* 1954, *The Return of the King* 1955; *Smith of Wootton Major* 1967; *The Silmarillion* 1977.

C.S. Lewis

Out of the Silent Planet 1938; *Perelandra* 1943; *That Hideous Strength* 1945; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* 1950; *Prince Caspian* 1951; *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* 1952; *The Silver Chair* 1953; *The Horse and His Boy* 1954; *The Magician's Nephew* 1955; *The Last Battle* 1956; *Till We Have Faces* 1956.

Charles Williams

War in Heaven 1930; *Many Dimensions* 1931; *The Place of the Lion* 1931; *The Greater Trumps* 1932; *Shadows of Ecstasy* 1933; *Descent Into Hell* 1937; *All Hallows' Eve* 1945; *Talesin through Logres* 1938, and *The Region of the Summer Stars* 1944 (the last two printed together in 1954).

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Those who are interested in volunteering their experience in editing and producing publications, and those who would like to help in typing manuscripts, please write directly to the editor, Glen GoodKnight. See page 2.