

The JOURNAL

OF THE RUTGERS UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

VOLUME XL

JUNE 1978

NUMBER 1

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE HONOR STUDENT

BY JOHN W. OSBORNE

This paper is based on an address to the Honor Society of University College, Rutgers University, in October, 1977.

IN his book, *The Revolt of the Masses*, the Spanish philosopher, Jose Ortega y Gasset, distinguished between mass man and aristocratic man, defining the latter as one who struggles to excel and the former as one who is simply content to take life as it is. It seems to me that University College students fall within the definition of Ortega's aristocratic man for all of them, regardless of their objective in college, are witness to a desire for self-improvement and are not content merely to drift along the tide of life like a cork on a fast-running stream.

Ortega was an astringent critic of twentieth-century mass society and argued for an elite. He would probably have appreciated the Rutgers University College Honor Society as evidence that the desire for individual accomplishment has lived on despite the horrors of our contemporary majority culture. Your organization is a testimonial to a devotion to what the nineteenth-century poet and critic, Matthew Arnold, meant when he defined education as the best that man has thought and said.

By your activities in college and, I hope, outside of it, you carry on that struggle for civilization which men and women of education and refinement must wage in every generation. Your behavior is characteristic of the late Harold Nicolson when he wrote toward the close of his life that "I have loved learning, scholarship, intelligence and the humanities." Nicolson's life of thought and action included a career first as a diplomat and later as a man of letters. His pleasures included "foreign travel, the purchase of books and pictures, and the unthinking enjoyment

of food and wine." Honor Society members also share with the Italian humanist, Niccolo Machiavelli, the pleasure of putting aside the cares of the world for an evening and losing themselves in the lore of the past.

This thing we call civilization is delicate and, as history shows us, it is not a natural development of man but is highly artificial. If man were always content to act naturally he would still be wearing animal skins and painting his body blue. Freud recognized the acquired nature of civilization in his disturbing book, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, when he depicted an increase in neurosis which accompanies every growth in civilization. Still we try to raise ourselves and (we may hope) our society. In this struggle, University College students take the lead. Not for them the brutal pastimes of the majority, they are that elite which is necessary in every society if it is to rise. Alas, the faith of the eighteenth-century intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment in the character improving power of mass education has not been entirely fulfilled. In no important characteristic—intellectual capacity, emotional stability, moral strength—are we different from those pioneers who beheld the dawn of civilization some 7,000 years ago. Our chief advantage over our ancestors lies in our painfully-won, spiritual and intellectual development and this is the essence of civilization.

The civilized man or woman possesses intellectual poise and is concerned with things of enduring value, and it may well be that a major difference between an educated person and an uneducated person is that the former knows when he is wasting time and the latter does not. The nineteenth-century scholar and religious leader, John Henry Newman, defined education as that "which gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, and to discard what is irrelevant. It prepares him to fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility. . . . He has the repose of a mind which lives in itself, while it lives in the world, and which has resources for its happiness at home when it cannot go abroad." Newman was also clear about what education is not. "Do not say," he notes, "the people must be educated, when, after all, you only mean amused, refreshed, soothed, put into good spirits and good humor, or kept from vicious excesses." The remarks of Newman were apt one hundred and twenty-five years ago when the ancient university curriculum based on the Greek and Latin classics that had served

Europe well was being challenged by new disciplines. It is even more relevant today when our grand tradition of humane learning has been mangled and cast aside in most schools and colleges.

Newman defined liberal education as “nothing more or less than intellectual excellence.” This simple definition is good to keep before us for it is a reminder that society is composed of individuals and that nothing can benefit society until the men and women who make it up are improved. In our own cruel century we have witnessed the rise of ideologies based on the mass which have wreaked havoc with human life and with this precious and fragile thing that we call civilization. In certain parts of the world this frightening development is continuing.

It is up to people such as you to carry on civilization—if you do not do so, I don’t know who will. Let us emulate the successful businessmen of Renaissance Italy who had a passionate desire for beauty and learning and who patronized the authors of books and the makers of pictures, statues and tapestries. The twentieth-century scholar, connoisseur and humanist, Bernard Berenson, said that “my house is a library with living space attached.” We may never realize the sumptuous, art-filled villa overlooking the City of Florence that Bernard Berenson lived in but his precept is worthy for us to follow.

John Henry Newman as usual put the matter correctly when he noted in his *Idea of a University* that everything has its own perfection. He said, “Things animate, inanimate, visible, invisible, all are good in their kind and have a *best* of themselves. . . . There is a physical beauty and a moral: there is a beauty of person, there is a beauty of our moral being, which is natural virtue; and in the like manner there is a beauty, there is a perfection, of the intellect.” Like Newman, we may agree that perfection for its own sake is an admirable good, and all of us as persons still actively seeking education can continue to strive for it for our entire lives.