



## THE TRENDS OF CULTURE

This PDF is one of a series designed to assist scholars in their research on Isaiah Berlin, and the subjects in which he was interested.

The series will make digitally available both selected published essays and edited transcripts of unpublished material.

The page numbers in square brackets in this online text mark the beginning of the relevant page in the original publication, and are provided so that citations from book and online PDF can use the same page-numbering.

The PDF is posted by the Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at Wolfson College, with the support of the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust.

All enquiries, including those concerning rights, should be directed to the Legacy Fellow at [berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk](mailto:berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk)

# The Trends of Culture

Contribution to 'The Year 1949 in Historical Perspective', in *1950 Britannica Book of the Year* (Chicago/Toronto/London, 1950: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.), xxii–xxxii

## I

THE YEAR 1949 was not notable for any revolutionary change or crisis in the development of thought or of art, or indeed of any form of human self-expression. But there were marked differences between the forms adopted by it in the principal areas of civilisation – Western Europe, North America and the Soviet orbit. In Western Europe the central mood was one of anxiety to avoid anything exaggerated or outré and too self-revealing, any suspicion of wishing to dramatise or romanticise either the present or the past, still less the future. As if conscious of the absurd spectacle presented by the extravagant cynicism and disillusionment in Europe after the First World War, the generation which succeeded the Second World War seemed determined not to be carried away by any wave of violent feeling, whether positive or negative.

It may be not unprofitable to bring this out by comparing some aspects of the year 1922, since, like 1949, it was divided by four years from the end of a great war. In Europe the early 1920s were marked by a sharp conflict between the ebbing, but still strong, current of liberal idealism which had created the League of Nations, which believed in open diplomacy and still, despite many failures and disappointments, seemed confident that a new and better order was surely, if somewhat slowly, coming into existence, bringing with it more liberty and equality and prosperity for individuals and classes and nations than any previous age. This optimistic faith was in some degree shared both by conservatives and liberals, victors and vanquished, at any rate in Western Europe. Arrayed against them were those sceptical and destructive persons who out of amusement and indignation exposed what they regarded as the shams, the muddles and the absurdities of their immediate predecessors – above all, the inflated values of that decaying Victorian establishment which had failed to prevent the brutalities of the great slaughter. They proudly flaunted their

disbelief in, and indeed contempt for, tradition as a heroic act of testimony to the truth, however unpalatable – an attitude superior to the passive acceptance of systems in art and thought and life no longer tolerable to any moderately intelligent or honest man. The air was full of violent denunciation of old divinities and bold new experiments intended not to produce objects of lasting value, but to innovate and to shock.

This is the best-remembered characteristic of those years; any methods, however bizarre, were applauded, provided they looked as if they could shake the ignorant and complacent out of the exasperating dead level of their unperceptive lives. Often these experiments were mere forms of extravagant exhibitionism or hysteria, launched by individuals with little talent save as impresarios. [xxiii] At times they revealed a pathetic frustration on the part of writers or artists whose anguish exceeded their gifts, and whose works, to a later and more critical generation, seem worthy of sympathy but scarcely of admiration or respect or even interest. At other times they resulted in works of the most authentic and enduring genius; it was a period exceptionally rich in works both good and bad and artistically and intellectually most exhilarating.

## II

The generation of 1949, as every available symptom indicated, was the opposite of this. Biographies are among the surest indications of the view of life for which the biographer, whether consciously or not, himself stands; and so far as he is typical of the mood of his generation, he will convey its thoughts and feelings for the most part more truly than its official heralds and prophets. If then we consider those of 1922, they represent either the last phase of the grand, old-fashioned Victorian tradition of competent and solemn monumental masonry, or else the exercise of sharp analytical skill compounded of the new sciences of psychology and sociology with which the authors, with varying proportions of gaiety and savage irony, struck out and demolished, pilloried and caricatured those of their predecessors who symbolised the most ridiculous or the most detested vices or tyrannies of previous generations. The tone in any case was moral: enthusiasm or indignation, passionate defence or bitter exposure; there was a major battle in progress; the old values and the new were sharply

distinguishable; the battle of the young against the old had never reached such heights of open and violent conflict. Both sides, even if they were not fully prepared to say what order it was for which they were fighting, were only too ready to specify what they were against; some stated their reasons in elaborate polemical tirades, others preferred direct action by word or painting or musical composition likely to outrage the enemy and in the end sweep him out of existence.

This was a far cry indeed from 1949 with its mood of sober nostalgia and cool appraisal: the great Victorians were amply commemorated in almost every literate country; in England alone two lives of Ruskin, two studies of Byron, massive books on Tennyson, Dickens and the Prince Consort appeared. Their writers were cautiously determined to say neither too much nor yet too little; the analysis was careful, judicious and morally neutral; the eminent dead were represented as burdened with an excess neither of virtue nor of vice – they were figures neither exceptionally great nor absurdly small, and although not overwhelming, were clearly considered as being far more impressive than either the biographer himself or his reader. The attitude was neither one of admiration nor disdain at the fact that those large beings once walked the earth. The reader was invited to inspect the more noteworthy characteristics of the persons described as part of a solid, and on the whole, more interesting world, worthy of the attention of the civilised and the fastidious, but not of sharp or eager advocacy.

At first this appeared a juster and certainly more mature outlook than that of a quarter of a century before. But if we compare the imaginative literature of the two periods we find that, if this is so, the price paid had been high indeed. For 1922 saw the appearance of these works (to take only those in English): among the older poets, new collections of verse by W. B. Yeats, Thomas Hardy, A. E. Housman; and then the true harvest begins – *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot, *Ulysses* by James Joyce, *Babbitt* by Sinclair Lewis, *Jacob's Room* by Virginia Woolf, *The Garden Party* by Katherine Mansfield, *Swann's Way* (the first volume of the translation of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, by C. K. Scott Moncrieff); all these, particularly *The Waste Land*, *Ulysses* and *Babbitt*, were works whose influence on English was greater than that of any other contemporary writing. In this same year, moreover, there appeared such minor masterpieces as *Lady into Fox* by David Garnett, the *Puppet Show of Memory* by Maurice

Baring, *Books and Characters* by Lytton Strachey, *The Second Empire* by Philip Guedalla, *Aaron's Rod* by D. H. Lawrence, *Mortal Coils* by Aldous Huxley, *Mr Proback* by Arnold Bennett, *Heinrich von Kleist* by Gundolf, books by Wells and Galsworthy, Keynes and G. M. Trevelyan, two volumes of caricatures by Max Beerbohm; and a work of philosophical genius which had a greater influence on the development of logic and the theory of knowledge than any other of its time, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* by Ludwig Wittgenstein. This is all stupendous enough in a year which was not exceptional in its own period; even allowing for the magic of distance it must be conceded that 1949 had somewhat less to show.

## III

The most important single factor in 1949 was, of course, the continuation of the battle between the creeds – between Marxism and its various enemies – the greatest since the Reformation and its aftermath. This divided the world into hostile camps about which no all-embracing generalisations could profitably be made. In the West, imaginative literature, while not precisely in decline, showed no sign of any bold new beginnings. The best English-speaking novelists produced works of great technical perfection in accepted and familiar genres. Elizabeth Bowen, Ivy Compton Burnett, Henry Green, utterly different as they are in almost every respect, published novels which reflected acute moral and spiritual preoccupation with the fate of individuals hemmed in by and insulated against an aggressively impinging environment. The feeling was romantic, and to some degree nostalgic, the canvas not large, the problems were (unlike post-war writing in France) neither intellectual nor social nor metaphysical, but personal, not a direct expression of – although not untouched by – the psychological doctrines prevalent at the moment.

George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which caused a considerable stir, was a tract of the times, dealing with the implications of the unchecked development of the ruthless control of the lives of individuals by political tyrannies which brutally crush and destroy human beings and forms of life in the name of official ideologies scarcely believed in by the leaders themselves. The mood of general distrust of political nostrums and formulae as such, a sense of horror when faced by the inhuman consequences of doctrines and ideas unmodified by understanding or sympathy

for the actual predicament of specific individuals or groups in specific situations, filled the writings of disillusioned writers who had broken with Communism (like the very gifted novelists Koestler and Silone), [xxiv] who denounced their past with varying degrees of anger or bitter and ironical satire. Even T. S. Eliot seemed caught by this ambiguity and lack of positive character; of all living writers in English he had had perhaps the strongest positive influence on other writers; he had an 'ideology' and a 'message'; his poetical dramas had conveyed his views as clearly as his left-wing opponents succeeded in expressing their own. But the performance of *The Cocktail Party* at the Edinburgh festival was less eloquent, more obscure and more elusive than even *The Family Reunion*. The zeitgeist seemed to have cast its spell even on his low-toned, carefully modulated voice. There was, on the other hand, a great deal of very distinguished work done in the field of criticism: Ernst Robert Curtius of Bonn published a masterpiece on the rise of the European tradition; and interesting and penetrating critical studies were published by Herbert Read, Edward Sackville-West, Lord David Cecil, Basil Willey, Cleanth Brooks, Van Wyck Brooks and Leavis; the bicentenary of Goethe's birth led to commemorations in many parts of the world and notable discussions of his genius and influence. Critical powers exceeded those of the creative imagination almost too obviously.

## IV

The general mood in Western Europe was sober, sane, touched with scepticism, afraid above all of those excesses of cynicism and disillusionment which to a later generation seemed sentimental and infantile. There was neither great optimism nor great pessimism; above all, writers were anxious to convey the impression that they were adult, balanced, fully capable of surveying the contemporary scene, however dull or dangerous or hopeless, with the unprejudiced and unexcited eyes of long experience, not likely to be betrayed into giving themselves away by exaggerated passion for or against anything. The genuine romanticism of the wartime resistance against fascism, both Communist and non-Communist, was dying fast. The great three-cornered ideological war – between Catholicism, Communism, existentialism – which during the years immediately following the war dominated both the life and art of France and threatened to convert the latter into applied social

theory, metaphysics, theology, everything but itself, diminished in importance. Mauriac and Claudel, Aragon and Edouard Sartre and Mlle de Beauvoir, continued to act as party leaders and banner bearers of the three movements; but some of their most gifted followers failed to retain their ideological purity. Some formally seceded; others returned to the practice of an art not primarily concerned with demonstrating the doctrine or preaching a particular way of life. And although France since the Renaissance had been – and still remains – the classical battleground of philosophy and religion, of highly self-conscious alignments of the least politically minded writers into this or that ideological camp, yet even there the claims of ‘pure’ literature were asserting themselves once more.

Aragon wrote a party novel, *Les Communistes*; Sartre continued to write existentialist plays and published a new volume of his great *roman-fleuve*. Camus published a remarkable historical play, *Les Justes*, about a political assassination in Russia in 1905. Neither Sartre nor Camus, after the fashion of their school, sought directly to suggest solutions to social or individual dilemmas in the manner of the realists, nor to discredit their importance in the drily cynical and deflationary manner of the Maupassant–Somerset Maugham tradition of amoral storytellers, nor yet to create lyrical or religious art like Mauriac or Cocteau. These once revolutionary writers, now no longer in their first youth, wrote and were widely read, and visited foreign countries and were duly acclaimed, but seemed more remote from the new mood than the surviving writers of the nineteenth century: André Gide and Maurice Maeterlinck (the latter died in the course of the year).

The climate of opinion was temperate, the attitude to life serious, meticulous, unsentimental, a little bitter and, in a restrained way, nostalgic. Julian Green was greatly looked up to; in France there was a minor revival of ‘daring’ literature, which dealt with sexual aberrations in a deliberately flat and unromantic manner which betrayed the still very powerful influence of André Gide and the modern US ‘tough’ school of novelists so greatly admired by him – Hemingway, Faulkner, Cain and O’Hara, the much-praised Steinbeck. The principal characteristics of writing, both imaginative and critical, were (apart from the waning Communist vogue) freedom from dogma or crusading zeal, a kind of cautious humanism, respectful both of the truths and methodology of science and of the inner life of the individual,

sensitive, tolerant, careful, observant, open-minded, civilised – almost a return to the civilised melancholy of Montaigne, but on the whole with little hope and little temperament.

This seemed true even of post-war German writing, which sought relief from the humiliating present behind the metaphysical smokescreen of the transcendental theology of such writers as Jaspers and Heidegger; the view of life was vaguely tragic but too remote to bring home the sense of the crimes and horrors of the immediate past, relieving the burden of particular guilt by a misty disquisition on its nature in general, in which the painful facts grew dim and invisible, written in quasi-theological prose for which the dark tradition of German and Danish mysticism and idealism was heavily drawn upon.

It seemed obvious that the post-war period in Western Europe had gone on far longer, because of the failure to achieve adequate social and economic reconstruction, than the similar period after 1918; and that, as happened then also, the romantic afflatus of the heroic years of war had become exhausted without producing an equally spirited reaction. The appetite for life which seems to require a certain degree of economic security and opportunity within the middle class (which continued to produce the majority of the writers and artists) had clearly not been achieved. The year 1949 was a time not so much of transition as of absence of forward motion, becalmed, with little wind to swell the sails.

If this applied to the field of critical and creative writing, in which no works of genius were born and even Malraux had ceased to be a revolutionary writer, great signs of originality and life could perhaps be perceived – combined with the prevailing unsentimental mood – in other spheres: Italian films, for example, among the most interesting artistic achievements of the day, displayed a capacity for natural vision, artistic sensibility and purity of purpose and freedom from rhetoric, or contrived pathos or solemnity, and so resulted in works of art more moving, poetical and true than anything achieved in any other country since the war. The reason for this may lie in the fact that Italy, with its creative energies so long constricted and perverted by a sterile despotism, possessed unexpended resources of feeling and constructive capacity not to be found in countries in which the writers and artists went through their greatest moral crisis in the late 1920s or the 1930s.



In music there was much charming and sensitive writing, particularly in France, Italy and Switzerland; the English composer Vaughan Williams produced a notable symphony, surprisingly modern in structure and sentiment. Interesting and highly skilful and agreeable but very non-revolutionary works were written by Ernest Bloch and Hindemith in the US, by Benjamin Britten in England and Dallapiccola in Italy. There was a revival of music in Germany; much was expected of a composer of partly Russian origin domiciled in Berlin, Boris Blacher. No new voice was heard, no new tendency asserted itself. The atonalists continued to experiment in their chosen medium, and much was written to expound the theories of its founder Schoenberg, but since the death of Webern atonal music seemed to exercise more appeal to the eye than to the ear. The technical skill of orchestras (though not of players of chamber music or singers) and the art of recording and mechanical reproduction appeared to improve in inverse ratio to originality and beauty of composition.

As for the visual arts, they were, as had often and monotonously been pointed out, dominated by the masters who were already in the full tide of their creative activity after the First World War – the painters Matisse, Picasso, Braque and Léger continued to overshadow their younger contemporaries; no national school could vie with that of Paris in this respect, but there was little new to record. The neo-Gobelin school of French tapestry and the occasional additions to their vivid brand of public art by the Mexican school did little to alter this general impression. Public appreciation of painting and sculpture rose as creative output diminished: the great exhibitions of painting in Paris and London and Switzerland held in 1949 were models of their kind, and excited much discriminating enthusiasm. Excellent critical studies were published on both sides of the ocean; commentators and interpreters appeared more gifted than their modern originals. The study of the history of art in English-speaking countries rose to heights of elegance and scholarship which made it the rival of the most distinguished masters of the subject in Italy and Germany, and Malraux's *Psychologie d'art* continued the noble French tradition of writing about art by men of letters, the tradition of Diderot, Taine and Valéry. The refinement, imagination and uncompromising fastidiousness displayed by the Third Programme of the British Broadcasting corporation, and its musical and literary programmes, raised this experiment far above

any consistent public effort of its kind attempted before; the state itself seemed to be adopting standards hitherto confined to cultivated amateurs.

In philosophy there was genuine progress. No common language could bridge the gulf between the great empirical school which dominated English-speaking and Scandinavian countries and the metaphysical and religious philosophies of Western Europe. The great revolution inaugurated by Bertrand Russell in the beginning of the century, perhaps the greatest since the seventeenth century, appeared in the 1920s and 1930s to be in danger of ossification in the great dogmatic schools of Vienna and Cambridge, and their many offshoots in Scandinavia and the US and elsewhere. There was some justice in the frequently made charges that the division of what could be said into empirical statements of fact and logical formulations of the rules of language mechanically eliminated, instead of solving, many problems which tormented generations of enquirers, and created an oversimplified form of utterance in which the finer differences became obliterated, and the problems posed by metaphysics were crudely dismissed instead of being resolved by the new technique. The progress of the subject in 1949, although not rich in major philosophical works, made possible far greater flexibility of expression, and so allowed the rich ambiguity of language to play its proper part in the conveying of those differences and similarities for which metaphysicians devised strange terminology, which in the end obscured and almost destroyed the purpose of the precise and therefore technical use of words. The most notable single work of this school of thought in 1949 was *The Concept of Mind* by Gilbert Ryle of Oxford University, a bold and imaginative volume written with uncommon force and freshness.

The philosophers engaged in this type of work seemed scarcely themselves aware of the magnitude of the transformation which they had been so rapidly effecting, or of the mass of philosophical writing during the last 150 years which they were rendering obsolete; seldom can so much darkness have been illuminated so rapidly and so successfully. The effects of this spread widely beyond the realm of technical philosophy, and standards of clarity and responsibility for factual statements insensibly rose in the fields of history, the social sciences and criticism generally. While empirical theories of thought and language on the one hand and the techniques of symbolic logic on the other progressed and

developed, the older philosophical theories lost ground, at least in the major seats of Anglo-US learning; or at any rate recognised enough of their opponents' claims to be fruitfully transformed themselves.

Meanwhile, the more traditional types of philosophy, relying upon intuitive methods rather than upon those of the natural sciences and common sense, continued to flower in France and Germany and Italy, as well as the countries of Latin America; there existentialism fought with more orthodox Catholic rationalism, in particular neo-Thomism, or uncompromising Protestant faith; while the proponents of Marxist dialectical materialism in the orbit of the Soviet Union denounced all philosophies in the Western world as equally bourgeois, decadent and false. Apart from the logicians and empirical philosophers and their allies among the psychologists and sociologists, whose subjects also were making swift if not always solid progress, the contending philosophers confined themselves to exposition rather than formal argument, each side remaining convinced of a sense of superiority; nor were there any inter-metaphysical techniques of communication between warring camps in terms of which either side could be made to recognise its own fallibility. This was particularly true in the field of ethics.

The general impression of the Western European scene was, therefore, one neither of an exceptional flowering of creative powers, nor of chaos or decadence; but of the pursuit of older directions with exceptional sensitiveness, competence, seriousness and moderation. As a result, its best achievements were not dull or mediocre, or extravagant, or counterfeit; but on the other hand they opened no new windows, and created no novel fields for the application of new technical methods. Individual works possessed a degree of originality and truth as great as any before them; they sprang from sober reflection and great critical sensibility, not exuberant imagination or an irrepressible desire to know or to enjoy, to do or to be, something in particular.

The situation outside Western Europe in the countries dominated by Communism and in the US was somewhat different. In the US there seemed less evidence of sensibility, but there was far more hope, and above all a far stronger sense of the crucial importance

of the issues involved and of the need to speak out and declare oneself in a relevant fashion. No [xxvi] doubt, the quality of works like Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* or Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, still widely discussed in 1949, was inferior in kind and not merely in degree to the masterpieces of Ivy Compton Burnett, or Sartre or Elizabeth Bowen, or Edith Sitwell, or Mauriac, or Anouilh. But these works, and the great mass of documentary and journalistic description from which they sprang, represent a vehement interest in, and passionate feeling about, critical issues, which, however crudely conveyed and analysed, were a symptom of a conflict of attitudes which in its turn presupposed belief in the possibility of action, and a sense of the presence of boundless resources with which, and for the possession of which, the battle was being fought.

The US novel and play referred to above, which had provoked much admiring and indignant reaction in the US, fell flat in Europe, partly because their lack of intrinsic literary or dramatic interest was no longer half concealed by the urgent nature of the social problems involved or the blunt courage with which they were set forth. The situation in the US in certain striking respects resembled that of Europe twenty-five years before. The narrow streams of personal and fastidious art – for instance, that of Glenway Westcott, the novelist, or Samuel Barber, the composer, or indeed so rigidly isolated a province as that of Faulkner's south – were so many conscious deviations from that main current of literature and the arts which more truly focused the condition and the moods of the broad central stream of social life; they stood aside from that public arena in which intellectuals fought with philistines, where open and concealed rebels of the type so common in Europe during the previous half century 'unmasked' and 'exposed' the follies and the vices of the establishment or of tradition or of fashion. Above all, there was a feeling that an immense amount was at stake, that the future seemed sufficiently controllable by a concentration of human resources to make the issue genuinely uncertain, the battle worth fighting. The arts and letters of the US in 1949, whatever their other qualities, were the only true heirs to the great social tradition of the nineteenth century in Europe, with its moral idealism, bitter partisan feeling and those immense public issues which involved the artists deeply and influenced the general outlook of a generation. A great critic like Edmund Wilson was far more representative of the great line

## THE TRENDS OF CULTURE

of European essayists and critics – Saint-Beuve or Taine or Mathew Arnold – than anyone writing in Europe in 1949. In so far as T. S. Eliot belonged to this tradition too, he derived from what was most American in him and not from what was most like his contemporaries among European men of letters.

In Western Europe this broad river seemed to be divided into isolated streams and pools. The French and English figures who represented the main tradition – the widely read ‘upper middlebrow’ novelists and poets and painters – were, with the solitary exception of Mauriac, minor figures, rightly made little of by serious critics, and aware themselves, with varying degrees of embitterment, of the fact that their *métier* had outlived itself.

Meanwhile, in the US, in the fields both of imaginative and quasi-historical, quasi-sociological writing, there was an effort to answer questions, to discover solutions of acute social and individual problems. It was accompanied by an increasing intolerance of heterodox views, by growingly severe tests of loyalty exacted by all parties and sects and movements, by demands for clear alignment, and charges and counter-charges, and declarations of war. And this, however exaggerated the results, and hostile to disinterested lives and humane forms of culture, was yet evidence of movement, and of passionate moral concern, and a capacity for heroism and uncompromising pursuit of ideals whose very fanaticism and violent collision was at any rate characteristic of the atmosphere in which alone major advances come into being. It was not political and economic predominance alone that led to the preoccupation with the US on the part of so many European writers.

But if the US scene resembled, at any rate in the depth of its preoccupations and antagonisms, that of Europe before the recent war, the cultural conditions of the countries dominated by Communism went back to a considerably earlier period – to those of the great religious wars of the seventeenth century or perhaps earlier still, to the ages of faith and heroic barbarism. In the Soviet Union itself the campaign for undeviating conformity to the party line in the realms of literature and art attained new heights in 1949. The limited licence granted to nationalism, and even to a certain degree of personal self-expression, during the war years was finally revoked; a political storm, more violent and more widespread than that of 1936–7, began to gather force in the early months of 1949, and finally broke over the heads of all the liberal professions. The dramatic critics were among the earliest victims of this great campaign to standardise all forms of cultural life; adherence was demanded to the party line – a blend of primitive Leninism with an anti-Western chauvinism more violent than any known before, even during the severest purges of 1936–8. All Western influences, every form of alleged sophistication or insufficient saturation in the carefully prescribed brand of social content was condemned with unheard-of severity as ‘formalism’ or ‘grovelling to the West’. Those suspected of the least degree of nonconformity, among them nearly all the most honoured names among the survivors of the still quite genuine Russian culture of the 1920s and 1930s, were subjected to vituperation unparalleled even in the history of Marxist polemics; and although this was more difficult to achieve among the central European nations, where Western influence and liberal traditions had had a longer history, there too the immense levelling apparatus had begun to crush the native civilisations and impose the new uniformity.

This process now gained pace in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, and led to the replacement of their normal literatures by a vast stream of what could be best described as children’s or young people’s books, literally. The novel became the medium for the widest possible inculcation of the simple virtues needed by the regime, and the castigation of the more obvious vices opposed to it. Anything which diverted attention from this simple goal – the idealisation of the right kind of citizen in the simplest and crudest

colours, calculated to make a strong impact on the least educated reader – was frowned upon as a dangerous form of diversion and a sign of disguised admiration for the corrupt and hostile West.

All art forms were subjected to this process; the state in 1949 imposed a degree of conformity to dictated patterns which exceeded all previously known examples of regimentation. Writers and musicians, critics and composers, historians, biologists, physicists, geneticists and even circus clowns confessed their crimes and humbly declared their gratitude to the Communist party for showing [xxvii] them the path to salvation. Attacks on the West grew more unanimous and violent; the mood was of a school which had been collectively punished for an infringement of discipline and was anxious to show every sign of contrition and zeal. Styles grew simpler, works of art more uniformly didactic than during the most unquestioning periods in the Middle Ages. Such originality and initiative as were left at all found expression in the relatively non-political corners of nursery rhymes and translations from the West European classics, or of the epics of the Asiatic nations within the Soviet Union; or else in public criticism of Western culture, in which there was still opportunity for ingenuity and sharp insight and power of irony and which, therefore, despite the standard of crudity demanded, succeeded at times in giving effective expression to damaging home truths about the art and literature of Western countries. Such communication as there was between the Soviet Union and the outside world, precarious at the best of times, which had grown somewhat larger during the better relations brought about by alliance during the war years, had diminished steadily since, and in 1949 began to approach vanishing point. Original works of art comparable with the best produced even by the attenuated cultural life of the West scarcely appeared. The purpose of all activity was the training of a certain kind of citizen, and all mental and material resources were concentrated upon this end. The State had evidently decided that its own security and that of its system left it with no margin within which it could afford to permit free self-expression to occur at any level; it was viewed as being at best a luxury, at worst a menace, to the minimum social discipline needed for survival.

It might seem that no generalisation can conceivably apply to such disparate developments occurring in a single human society. There were in being, if not many, at least two worlds, distinct from, and indeed opposed to, each other in every detail of both theory and practice. Yet something like a common tendency was nevertheless discernible. Everywhere the doctrine of social responsibility was gaining ground at the expense of self-assertive individualism and liberal humanism alike. In particular, disciplines were encouraged whose purpose it was to mould human beings in ways likely to make them fit more effectively, and eagerly, into preconceived patterns of social life; and this ideal was advanced at the expense of conceptions of existence in which men were left – or at any rate expressed the wish to be left – relatively undirected, to achieve their own triumphs and failures. Avoidance of misery was on the whole cultivated as a goal worthier than the development of independence of character with its record of conflict and frustration. The social sciences began to encroach boldly upon the territory of the older forms of humane learning; the application of social techniques on a wide scale was viewed no longer as a triumphant achievement of human intelligence and skill over human ignorance or the recalcitrance of the material environment, or as being indispensable to the preservation of what had been won against nature or the consequences of men's own technical achievements, but as being a form of activity valuable in itself. There was a growing preoccupation with the problem of self-preservation and survival in a society growing, with an apparently inevitable rapidity, less and less capable of creating or protecting what previous generations had sometimes valued beyond life itself – the disinterested discovery of the truth, the cultivation of personal relationships, the making and enjoyment of objects whose social value was of secondary importance.

This attitude had already found its way into literature and art before Germany attacked Poland in 1939. But it continued after 1945 with more vehemence and sense of urgency in the US, and in a more depressed and calm fashion in Europe. French existentialism was perhaps the last Byronic gesture of romantic defiance in which, however hopelessly, and, indeed, the more hopelessly the more defiantly, a last stand was made against total



## THE TRENDS OF CULTURE

submergence and dissolution in a world without independent passions or independent responsibility. This growing primacy of social over individual problems – the conception of the individual as an element in this or that social situation or pattern rather than vice versa – was part of the doctrine upon an extreme form of which the Soviet Union had been expressly built, and it had, in fact, advanced further in the West than the survival of cultural forms fully developed in a more individualist age might at first suggest. The sense of the final end of an era was perhaps most explicitly present in the analyses, filled with anxiety and melancholy premonition, of such critics as Arnold Toynbee and Julien Benda, who both published books in the course of the year, seeking to call attention to the final eclipse of the values of the post-Renaissance era.

The most obvious symptom of the new age is the half-conscious assumption that personal problems (for example, the very discussion of aesthetic or moral or intellectual issues as they affect individual decisions and duties) are peripheral, and at times almost exotic. And, per contra, all social, political and technological problems and all theories relating to them are in the forefront of attention as the battlefield where the fate of individuals and nations will be, or is being, finally decided. Consequently, all the appeals to return to private life and individual self-examination are considered as being in varying degree voices speaking from the past in wilfully eccentric or obsolete terms. In all these respects 1949 saw a further step taken in the direction characteristic of all the years since the end of the Second World War. It was not a turning point, nor did it mark a revolution or a sharp divagation. Nothing had yet occurred that enabled men to predict how far the process would carry them, for plainly the world was nearer the beginning than the end of a development of a genuinely new social age, to which the monuments of the culture of a liberal bourgeoisie would soon be only an interesting but hardly a haunting memory.

*Copyright Isaiah Berlin 1950*

**Posted in Isaiah Berlin Online 11 January 2019**