The Impact of English Culture on World Culture

Zahrat al-Sharq, 7 April 1941.

Among the subjects people take up in lectures, there are some that cannot be treated in any depth, being too vast and too weighty for a lecturer to do justice to in a single hour, or even several.

Modern British culture, in this modern age, is the sum of what the English mind has produced over the last four centuries.

English culture, in the age of Europe's literary revival, was influenced by Greek and Latin culture.

In this age — the sixteenth century — the cultural revival was divided between two nations: the French nation and the English nation. What chiefly distinguished this culture in that era was a certain return to ancient Greek life, and what had distinguished that ancient Greek life: an aspiration toward the highest ideals in art, letters, and philosophy. This means the revival was shaped by the pagan freedom toward which it leaned, and so a fierce struggle arose between this tendency and the foundations of medieval civilization, with governments working to resist it, to the point that it became difficult for authors to publish their books without someone to shield them from the violence of the state and the power of the clergy.

The French and the English contended over this culture between them; for the nature of the French mind inclined toward balance and adherence to fixed principles in word and deed, whereas the English nature inclined instead toward a liberty that knows neither restraint nor law.

The Frenchman tends to be shaped by social life, whereas the English nature tends to guard the liberty of the individual person, even while taking care that his life should remain compatible with social life — or at least appear so outwardly.

From this divergence between the natures of the two peoples emerged the divergence between what each produced in literature.

While French writings took care not to depart from the familiar except by measured degree, what the English men of letters produced

was in revolt against the familiar. Hence the literature the English produced was more strongly marked by liberty and less strongly marked by temperament — that is, it was shaped both by Greek culture and by British unruliness. And the liberty of the modern age may well have been a consequence of English life and culture in that period.

Among the most wondrous things one can do is trace the life of intellectual liberty among the English. People know that England is the homeland of parliament and the homeland of democracy, but their knowledge of this may well need to go deeper still.

The English rose up against ancient philosophy, and drew the mind out beyond the bounds of adherence to traditional rules, working to free it from its various fetters, so that a man might think as he himself wished, not as Aristotle wished, nor as the state or religion wished. From this arose freedom of thought and freedom of expression.

The great English poet Milton may well have been one of the great champions of intellectual liberty and of freedom of thought and expression, for he struggled fiercely to secure this liberty, and spent his entire life in that struggle. It was Milton who said, in reproach of the bishops: "They are a people who, failing to raise themselves up to heaven, have brought God down to earth to dwell with them." From these observations — no more than a small part of what I should have liked to say to you — one may conclude that the English, by virtue of their own particular temperament on the one hand, and their exposure to ancient cultures and their contact with other nations on the other, succeeded in forming for themselves a culture of their own, whose chief mark is precisely that mark of liberty I have been speaking to you about. It was this liberty that endeared the English culture to Europeans across the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries; and it was this same liberty that led the English to establish experiment as one of the foundational principles of science — which is why England was the foremost of nations in establishing scientific experiment.

And I believe, gentlemen, that were we to abbreviate and summarize our characterization of English culture, we might say of it this: that it gave European culture that liberty of mind which produced freedom of thought, of expression, and of experiment, and brought about whatever democratic revolution it brought about in Europe.

And we might say: that English culture granted the modern European mind the liberty it stood in need of. In saying this we do English

culture no injustice, for we shall have described it in the very terms the English themselves are most eager to claim for it.