

*The Culture Vulture**

A recent article in *The Times Educational Supplement* discussed an experiment at Liverpool which indicated that, on the whole, a group of arts graduates from Liverpool University tended to know more about personalities in the arts and sciences than science graduates from the same university.

In this experiment the best individual performance was given by a chemist. It is a temptation to suggest that this confirms our own belief that chemists need to have very good mental filing systems. Being in possession of a good mental filing system such a person is then able to store up a vast assembly of facts which may have no particular relevance to his specialisation.

If we pick a group of people with roughly comparable mental filing systems and ask them a number of factual questions the answers given by individuals will depend upon the material stored in the filing system. This material will, in turn, have entered the system either from outside influences such as educational organisations, or will have been absorbed during the personal reading or experiences of the individual. Therefore, if one person is able to answer questions on subjects taken from many fields of knowledge with greater accuracy than another person it might be permissible to suggest that the first man has a wider educational background.

This idea of a wider educational background seems to be associated with the subject of culture values. Many people take it for granted that a nodding acquaintance with Molière is more respectable than a detailed knowledge of our most practical inheritance from Mendeleev.

If we may be stubborn for a moment, or obtuse, what conclusions should be drawn from the answers to our own experimental questions? In our test we blend carefully questions on cookery and stamp collecting. We find that one group of people gives better answers on cookery, while the other group gives better answers on stamp collecting, and that the group which gives better answers on stamp collecting manages to obtain better marks overall. What does this suggest about values? In our humble way we should prefer the people who know more about cooking. But a further experiment is immediately suggested. Can they cook?

Now it happens that most graduates in science from British universities undergo practical tests in their sub-

ject. For example chemists are required to isolate and identify substances. Do the arts graduates go through a similar practical training? Are they examined in their practical ability? Perhaps three hours would be a fair time to compose a sonnet, given the subject? For a full day of practical examination we suggest the composition of a sestina and a tanka. Already it might seem to the chemist that we are letting our arts graduate off too easily. To the chemical engineer the sights have obviously been set too low.

The chemical engineer has either to take a suitable design paper at university or to pass the Home paper of the I.Chem.E. What is the comparable standard for the arts man? For the English graduate to demonstrate his ability we might suggest questions such as: prepare all the editorial matter for the first copy of a new journal for women, to be called *Mum*; compose a shooting script for a modern version of the "Iliad" in which Marilyn Monroe plays the part of Helen—Ithaca is, of course, in New York State. For a graduate in French an equivalent problem might be: write the complete text of a television play (in French, naturellement) based on an existentialist triangle in Dudley Zoo.

From time to time scholars and others have suggested that one of the great features of the Tudor Elizabethan period was the men who combined intellect and action. Any courtier in those days was expected to be able to throw off a neatly turned verse without hesitation.

For some reason or another it is argued today that scientists tend to be lacking in culture. On the whole it is the scientists who are adding to our culture, yet it is suggested that they should take so-called cultural subjects in their examinations; on them is the blame and the burden.

Might it not be suggested that the great majority of our arts graduates are illiterate? By all means let them advocate cultural subjects for scientists—even science questions for arts men, but is it really creative?

We shall begin to believe that arts men are serious about culture when instead of preserving our heritage they accept the obligation to extend the limits of our culture by practical creation. For too long the high spots of university teaching in the arts subjects have been concerned with criticism, which in turn has led to the sterile contemplation of a vast navel of existing texts and texts about texts. Like Shelley, our vote is for those "whose transmitted effluence cannot die."

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