

BY FRED INGLIS

*IN SEARCH OF CIVILIZATION: REMAKING A TARNISHED IDEA*

By John Armstrong

Allen Lane

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John Armstrong is a Good Thing. He is one of the newish philosophers, including Alisdair MacIntyre, Simon Blackburn, Martha Nussbaum, Judith Shklar, who are determined to return moral philosophising to the intercourse of plain people.

Armstrong set himself to take the big words with capital letters in front of them – words once at the centre of the conversation of culture and now relativized to a gossamer translucence – and to restore something of their solid old, black-and-gold magic. He began with art, continued with love, wrote a miniature masterpiece on beauty, and now has arrived at the pearly gates of civilization.

He is himself plainly civilized, not without humour, at times touchingly confessional (about sex for example), direct, admirably earnest, unencumbered with scholarly debris. He is, moreover, unafraid of diction which steers him close to the self-help and spirituality shelves in the bookshops, knowing that to speak straightly of such matters – of the quality of relationships and the meanings of life – is indeed to touch upon the tears of things and our tender terror of mortality.

Armstrong knows that circumstances are always difficult for civilization, a recognition which, one is relieved to say, prevents any danger of his collapsing into the reassurance of old Reaction and the droning iterations of the past as a better place. He sees that the civilizations of Rome or of Medici Florence had their horrible aspects, and welcomes modern prosperity and accumulation, without which civilization cannot accumulate its own necessary mass and energy. He contends that the good society attains a material prosperity which must be held at poise with a spiritual flourishing if it is to count as civilized, that this balance is always veering, and that – as he puts it – when the balance wobbles over to one side there gapes in waiting the monstrous abyss of barbarism, while on the other bubbles the revolting quagmire of decadence.

Throughout his fluent essay he darts from example to example, for civilization, like his previous big topics, is an ostensive ideal: you find out what it is by pointing to examples of it in all the multiplicity and sumptuousness of reference which may be packed into two hundred (unindexed) pages.

So those pages are dotted with the genial figures of Adam Smith and Bernard Berenson, the decadent and irresponsible Lord Marchmain is judged for what he is, the cool sexiness of Ingres' Madame Devaucay is delicately appreciated, and – new to me – the Abbot Suger, whose life's artwork was to make twelfth century St Denis in Paris into the type of the good Christian society, is handsomely turned into an

emblem for Armstrong similar to Thomas Carlyle's idealization of St Alban's and its hospitable friars.

There is in all this a strong groundbass of Christian apologetics which might set on edge the teeth of the pious atheist (me). But I am more deterred by something a bit too gentlemanly, something languid and Paterian in the tone and the style of Armstrong's civilization. It comes out in an endearing little paragraph which strays rather too close to the kitsch of the advertising copywriter, where Armstrong gives us a glimpse of civilized life – a shot of urban urbanity in Edinburgh New Town, a view of Venice from across the lagoon, a lunch table in a garden under Provencal plane trees. *Of course* these are civilized moments and effects, but they are effects of leisure – effects, in effect, of the holiday time which seems to be the only time left in the rich economies for the imagining of civilized living and the ordering of the good society.

What Armstrong doesn't admit to his leisured and decidedly recumbent images of civilization is the hard attentive work (itself one of the civilized values) it all takes in the making of it. Not only that. He doesn't tell us, as he should, the truth that Orwell finds in Kipling: 'He sees clearly that men can only be highly civilized while other men, *inevitably less civilized*, are there to guard and feed them.'

Perhaps the origin of this blankness lies in Armstrong's tendency to psychologism. He gives us a tabulated Aristotle, for sure, from which we may take our guide to the golden mean, but then, unbelievably (nonetheless according to the canons of the business school) places Aristotle alongside the pious inanition of dreary old Maslow's "hierarchy of needs".

Needs are here called upon, as indeed they are on the self-help shelves, to do far more work than they are morally capable of, and the only help they get these days is from that later addition to the fashionable vocabulary of psychoanalytic postmodernity, 'desire'.

Armstrong justifies this by his insistence on the traffic between "inner selves" ("depths", "mental states") and their outer manifestations in practice. But as Wittgenstein should have reminded him, the outer manifestations- in- practice of *culture* are all we have to go on; they comprise the form and content of civilization, whether in art, science, or everyday conduct.

I do not want to make too much of what looks like a hardly credible and cringing act of genuflection towards the end of this talkative and likeable book. Armstrong is, the blurb informs us, Philosopher in Residence at the Melbourne Business School, and it is a measure of the enviable goodness of Australian society that this should be so. But when he tells us, in a really abject finale, that business should be in the business of "desire leadership", and that the "essential message of advertising is: you know what will make you happy, and we are listening to you", then the civilized reader can only burst into tears of laughter.

The gaff comes damn near to destroying the book. After all, Armstrong has quoted F R Leavis approvingly in his pages, and it is eighty years since Leavis first alerted people to the dreadful and debilitating force of advertising in the decay of civilization. Civilization, R G Collingwood tells us, "does not happen except to human beings; and

to them it does not happen individually, it happens collectively”. The moral most vigorously taught by Armstrong’s well-chosen and affecting instances of the polemics of civilization – by Kenneth Clark’s mighty television series, by Matthew Arnold, by Erasmus and Ruskin and W H Auden – is that if intelligent and civilized people are not prepared to build and to defend their best creations with the necessary steeliness and resolution, they will be destroyed or seriously injured by those who hate them. Armstrong makes me think these things, but he doesn’t say them. If things are bad, and they are, civilization will have to call on a harshness and a tenacity not to be found in this gentle, refined and civilized book.

Fred Inglis’ biography of R G Collingwood, *History Man*, is published this month by Princeton.