

Diogenes's Invectives

A Picnic Lunch with Hemlock

Atlas - Air France n°74 – August 1972

I cannot speak for you, but as for me, my favorite fifteen minutes of daily culture comes with my picnic lunch.

Seated on the doorstep of my barrel, my feet and my soul at ease, I remove my snack from its page of newsprint and, while eating, plunge myself with philosophical delight into the message of our time in which my grocer has chosen to wrap my meal.

Today, as chance would have it, the grocer provided me with page 36 of a newspaper dated June 22, 1973. This is not very recent; but, as you have no doubt been taught, to philosophize is to consider all things *sub specie aeternitatis*, from the point of view of eternity. So I shall consider...

I read here on my page 36 that a certain minister of cultural Affairs would like to establish a firm direction for cultural policy. To tell the truth, I wonder how culture can be directed. Culture is creation, discovery. How can we say: all right, now it's time to discover Archimedes' principle, to write *Hamlet* and the *Légende des siècles*... and let's be quick about it? To define the ends is to imply that we already know where we're going, and therefore that there is no discovery, hence no creation, hence no culture.

It is my opinion that the government of Athens would have done better to reward Socrates than to condemn him to death. But I am also convinced that it was a lesser evil to condemn him "after the act" than it would have been to direct him beforehand. Great gods! Imagine a Socrates directed by the Athenian government! Better the hemlock! We lost Socrates, it is true, but our lives have been immeasurably enriched by his thought.

The "Council for Cultural development" is not satisfied with the performance of its minister. That is its right, and I, caring little for ministers, am not in the least troubled. On the other hand, however, what I read here on my lunch-wrapping chills my spine: "The Council draws attention to the necessity of clearly recognizing its responsibility [that is, the Council's] for proposing the fundamental orientation of cultural policy..."

I am acquainted with a few members of this Council, and in particular with its president, M. Pierre Emmanuel. And to him I cry out: Mercy, M. le Président, mercy! Leave me the choice, let me swallow hemlock rather than your orientations! I promise to drink it quietly, politely, head bowed, provided that you leave me free of your ideas. My own are quite sufficient, thank you.

Diogenes.