

The Refreshment of the Humanities

Mark C. Henrie

Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe: Toward the Revival of Higher Education, by Jeffrey Hart, *New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. 288 pp.*

THERE WAS A TIME, not so very long ago, when the political and cultural pronouncements of men of letters—literary critics and writers, both—were accorded enormous respect. Allen Tate's Phi Beta Kappa Address or Faulkner's Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech were major events, for these authors possessed authority. Having cultivated their talents in the rich soil of the Western literary tradition, the men of letters were seen as the custodians of our high culture in an age anxious about growing deculturation. What they had to say mattered.

Few today look to literary men for guidance in the fractured culture of late modernity. The "great writers" of our day seem mostly to record and to reflect a pop culture which long ago wandered off from the tutelage of tradition; they have no standing for a truly critical relationship to our situation, and they tell us nothing we do not already know. And no one looks to the professors of literature for wisdom;

with precious few exceptions the critics have become faddish *poseurs* or—at their best—social scientists *manqués*. The collapse of the authority of the humanities and of the humanists is so great that today a younger generation can scarcely imagine how it was possible that anyone took such men seriously.

This is all the more surprising because we live in a time of *Kulturkampf*. The question, *Who are we?*—perhaps the central question of culture, and of the humanities—is fiercely contested, and nowhere more so than in the literature departments of the academy. But the interventions of the humanists in these struggles too often seem parochial, remote, or unconvincing. Battles may be waged over the curricula of English Departments, but meanwhile the numbers and the quality of enrollment in those departments continue to fall. The classical canon of great works may be defended, but the arguments deployed in that defense never quite seem to command conviction. What do old stories really have to say to a generation which defines itself only, as it were, apophatically: postmodern?

Perhaps since Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* (1987), cultural authority has flowed (if it has flowed anywhere, rather than dissipating into the froth of celebrity) to the philosophers and political theorists. In a small and

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perhaps only temporary way, this transformation of the economy of intellectual authority can be seen as something like a reversal of the change that occurred in the late fifteenth century, when the prestige of the dialectics of the schoolmen was eclipsed by the rhetorical and discursive mastery of the humanists. Intellectual styles have consequences no less important than the consequences of ideas. So while the culture wars play out in these newly authoritative disciplines as well, there is also a noticeable, and troubling, area of common agreement.

To the question, *Who are we?*, the practitioners of these disciplines may answer, Western Men (and Women). But in saying this, both partisans of the left and of the right agree that the West is characterized by contestation, by disagreement, and by questions more than by answers. Thus, in the academy, the left proffer "teaching the conflicts," while the neoconservatives now typically claim (with scant evidence) that the Western tradition is unique, and uniquely to be valued, *only* because it consists of a long series of disagreements and questions that remain open. Our heritage is nothing in particular except a Socratic not-knowing. For those whose intellectual habits are first formed by philosophy rather than by the literary studies which have as their end "the critic as anti-philosopher" (F.R. Leavis), there is no distinctively Western *ethos*, and neither political theory nor philosophy can provide a compelling reason why anyone must know of Homer, or Dante, or Shakespeare. Literature may be useful, for those lesser lights incapable of philosophical abstraction, in its display of human "types"; or it may be a diverting entertainment; but it cannot be a serious study with a dignity and an excellence of its own.

Into this dire state of affairs comes Jeffrey Hart, a student of Lionel Trilling, Jacques Barzun, and Mark Van Doren at Columbia; an interpreter of eighteenth-

century political writers, of twentieth-century popular history, and of the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald; a senior editor of *National Review* and an editorial advisor of *Modern Age*; a humane voice from the past, though no less lively thereby. At its best, *Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe* wonderfully reminds us of what the literary intelligence can do, when it has the confidence to cleave to its own proper pursuits. The book's less successful qualities also usefully illustrate the trouble into which men of letters can fall when they feel themselves compelled to "borrow" key concepts from the philosophers—which is no less true when those borrowings occur on the right than on the left.

The book is a difficult one to characterize. There are two parts: "The Great Narrative" and "Explorations." The first part, consisting of five chapters, is an extended essay on the interaction between Athens and Jerusalem, an interaction which forms the heart of the Western character. Hart discusses the heroic spirit in Homer (he renames the *Iliad* the *Achilead*) and then interprets Moses as an epic hero (he calls the Pentateuch the *Mosead*). Here, he shrewdly describes how the settled pattern of the Near Eastern epic tradition is transformed in the blazing light of emergent monotheism. He then attempts to show that both Socrates and Jesus represent an "internalization," and so, a radicalization, of the heroic impulse. He offers Saint Paul as the emblem of universal synthesis, the first complete Western man. The second part of the book, also five chapters, is comprised of disparate essays on Saint Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare, Molière and Voltaire, and Dostoevsky and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Some of these essays touch only tangentially on questions of Athens and Jerusalem, though there is an afterword which reprises that theme.

The least satisfactory aspect of the book is that which has received the most

fulsome praise from certain critics. In his first chapter and in the afterword, Hart sketches a “theory” or even a “philosophy” of the West. He explicitly borrows from Leo Strauss the notion of a “dialectic” between Athens and Jerusalem to explain Western development, including the Western devotion to freedom. As with neoconservative philosophers and political theorists, Hart here claims that the Western tradition is “open-ended,” “adversarial,” and “permanently in tension.” “It embodies an argument at the core of its being.” Hart claims he wants to show the working out of this dialectic through his engagement with his various texts, as an essay in definition of the West: “It is not too much to say that what is valuable in us, what is most essential, and whether we know it or not, flows directly or indirectly from Socrates and Jesus.”

True enough. But Strauss was neither the first nor the last to argue that the West is decisively shaped by the relationship between Athens and Jerusalem. Christopher Dawson and Etienne Gilson, to name just two, made similar claims. What is unique to Strauss is his characterization of that relationship as one of implacable *conflict*, and his existential commitment to the ultimate irreconcilability of the two poles. For Strauss, it would appear, the Western mind at its best devotes itself to policing the unbreachable boundary between faith and reason. By implication, it is only lesser lights who seek to arrive at a spurious synthesis of the two. For Gilson or Dawson, on the other hand, what is fruitful, and uniquely Western, about the relationship between Athens and Jerusalem is not their conflict but their continued *conversation*—not the exclusive devotion of some men to one and other men to the other, but the devotion of the greatest Western minds (and hearts) to both. Yes, there are tensions between faith and reason, but the West in its highest aspiration strives to bring the two into mutual conversation, perhaps even into synthe-

sis, not to keep them hermetically distinct.

Having repaired to Strauss for a philosophical account of the West, however, Hart sets out on a course which actually owes much more to the humane Christian historian Dawson. It is Saint Paul, after all, who stands for Hart as the paradigmatic Western man: “Paul attempted to effect in his own mind a synthesis between Athens and Jerusalem. If that claim can be sustained, it is fair to say that he presided over the birth of the Western mind.” Charming, he calls the *Acts of the Apostles* the *Pauliad*, and that Christian experience, much more than either the *Achilead* or the *Mosead*, is the epic of the West, *our* epic.

Happily, nothing in the rest of the book stands or falls on Hart’s ambiguous fidelity to Strauss. Indeed, the career of the West that Hart develops in his literary engagements is quite a bit more interesting—at once both more arrestingly novel and more familiar—than the partisan philosophical account found in Strauss. Here perhaps is one fruit of Hart’s humanistic training: a largeness of mind capable of learning from the “closet philosophers,” with a balance of judgment which prevents the fall into a pure theory that is too distant from the moral contents of life.

It is in Hart’s readings of his literary texts, then, that the real value of this book lies. In taking seriously literary works that deserve serious consideration, he displays anew what it was that generated the authority of the older men of letters.

With deft hands, Hart opens up for us a handful of the conventionally great works of the Western world, as well as a few which are more obscure. In doing these works justice, he displays what we might call the humanist’s dialectic. While on the one hand, he deploys a certain abstraction—revealing human types and permanent human possibilities, and discovering by reference to canons of form the uniqueness of certain works—on the other hand, he attends faithfully to what

is particular and irreducible in a literary work. If the philosopher seeks to abstract to an essential depth, the humanist would seem to work to keep both depth and surface together. If the philosopher seeks the universal, the humanist would seem to work to keep both the universal and the particular together. Perhaps another way of saying this is to observe that "What is the West?" or "What is an American?" are not really philosophical questions, for neither "the West" nor "America" are natural substances. But both are profoundly human questions, for us, and they can only be answered, in the end, humanistically.

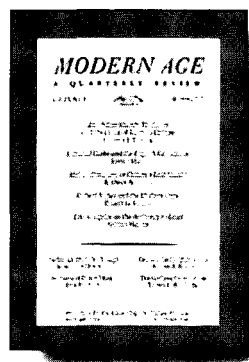
Hart offers no "new and original" readings of the great works using "the latest" methods of his discipline: the sort of thing that earns academic appointments and tenure—and the sort of thing that, almost always, adds nothing of value to our understanding of the great works, to the common culture, or to the soul of the purveyor of such specious novelties. Instead, we find marshaled on nearly every

page *insights*—some traditional, some idiosyncratic—which cut to the heart of the work in question. To take just one example from among many, Hart takes Aeneas's slaying of Turnus at the culmination of the *Aeneid* to represent the slaying of the spirit of Achilles, a necessary prerequisite for the founding of the civilized city—an interpretation which puts Virgil's mere "imitation" of Homer in quite a different light. Or again, Hart notes that while the *Mosesad* is explicable as a (quite radical) development of the epic form, the four Gospels are not. "Unprecedented in form, and making unprecedented claims, they are without doubt the most influential pieces of writing in human history." These are elementary insights, but they are also primary insights. Attending to that which is of primary importance, we begin again to realize the *greatness* of the great books, a greatness which has been obscured and deadened by the industrious work of so many busy generations of academic scholarship.

Because this is not a work of "original"

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scholarship making a contribution to a “research program” in the style of the natural sciences, the book has baffled some reviewers, who cannot quite fathom what, or who, the book is *for*. It is certainly a very curious book, and not the least curious is the title: *Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe*. Nowhere does Hart explain or even make reference to that amusing title, but there is a clue to its meaning offered in the subtitle: *Toward the Revival of Higher Education*. Clearly Hart intends the book as a general cultural intervention at a time when higher education and the humanities are in crisis—indeed, are undergoing a catastrophe. When other men of letters have attempted such an intervention, they have proceeded with meta-arguments which “point to” the value of the humanities, and with policy proposals. Hart’s book seems to indicate that this is a mistake. In effect, what he says is that the way to win the culture wars is to ignore them. The books remain. The way to smile through what is certainly a cultural catastrophe is to get on with the serious business of humane learning, humane reading and writing—the serious business of sorting out what is important and what is not, and what it all means. The best defense of the humanities is the activity itself—an activity that now takes place only sporadically within humanities faculties. The way for humanists to recover their cultural authority is by doing what they do best: reading and explaining and criticizing the old books.

By eschewing fashionable methodologies and having the confidence to conduct an authentically humanistic inquiry into the question of the West, Hart has written a book that is worth reading. His book instructs both by argument and by example, and its instruction is often a delight as well. If one were to encounter an undergraduate who had just finished the latest work of, say, Stanley Fish, and who found in him an example to emulate,

we might wonder about the state of the young man’s soul. But if, upon reading this book, an undergraduate conceived a desire to follow Hart, we would, I think, be witnessing the refreshment of the humanities, at last.

Humility and Method

THOMAS AUSTENFELD

The Humanities in the Age of Technology by Ciriaco Morón Arroyo, Washington, D.C., *The Catholic University of America Press, 2002. xiv + 263 pp.*

The Humanities in the Age of Technology is a profession of faith in the humanities as a mental disposition: a disposition which employs rigorous discourse, favors holistic over partial truths, and thus contributes to an ethically grounded companionship of human beings. The author’s lofty aim of proving his case for the abiding, indeed the indispensable, presence of humanistic thought is balanced by his intellectual humility (in an Erasmian sense), by his respect for the range of human achievements and human dispositions, and by his careful methodology.

Employing classification, description, and literary examples, the author develops his case over the course of fifty-five sections grouped into larger chapters, of which the ones entitled “The Interdisciplinary,” “Reading,” “Understanding,” and “Knowing”—the latter three forming the core of the book—deserve special atten-

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