

COMMENTS

What is the “West”?

Jeffrey Hart

IN THE AFTERMATH of 9/11, the term “civilized nations” suddenly began to be widely used. Of course, everyone had always known that England and France are civilized and that Syria and Rwanda-Burundi are not. I sense that it was not polite to raise the chasm of difference into consciousness, much less to dwell on it. The character of the assault on the Twin Towers and on the Pentagon changed all that, clarifying thought. Multiculturalism died an overdue death on 9/11; bin Laden, al Qaeda, and the Taliban rendered it untenable. I thought of the title of a major work by Jean-Paul Sartre: *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Yes, an encounter with Nothingness can sharpen the edges of Being. On 9/11 we experienced pure negation, and as a consequence a renewed vibration of Being.

In my book *Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe: Toward the Revival of Higher Education* (2001) I tried to find a formulation that would reach deeply into the unique essence of the Western mind, explain at least in part its astounding success, its transforming energy, which have made the West supreme among the powers of the earth. The Declaration of Inde-

pendence asked only for American political equality among those powers, especially with England. The condition of economic and military equality was achieved late in the nineteenth century, and has been vastly exceeded. But with America preëminent, the West as a whole remains immensely stronger than any combination of powers that could be raised against it.

To a considerable degree I undertook *Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe* in response to the perception that our general culture has little notion of where we came from or who we are, and why. Many of us, it seems, are sleep-walking through time. Sleep-walking. And further, that the academy, which once was a repository of civilizational knowledge, has largely abandoned that function—or, worse, is busily negating it. Martin Heidegger called the condition I am describing an “emptying of Being”—a draining away of seriousness, intensity, gravity, self-definition.

Though tens of millions of us are surrounded by this environment, and hardly know anything better, even they, if they are encouraged to reflect on it, can come to realize that the symbols with which Western culture declares itself are spectacularly different from the symbols offered by other cultures and civilizations. If we think, for example, of the Golden

JEFFREY HART is Professor Emeritus of English Literature at Dartmouth College and author, most recently, of *The Making of the American Conservative Mind* (2005).

Gate Bridge, the Empire State Building, Salisbury Cathedral, the cyclotron, or those white churches of New England with their needle-like steeples pointing toward eternity, and if we stop to reflect on such symbols, we know immediately that they reflect something very different from what lies behind, say, the Great Wall of China and the Forbidden City.

The West is dynamic, exciting. China is static, only now struggling to shake off centuries of suffocating stasis. The eminent Yale sinologist Jonathan Spence has observed that the life of a rural Chinese was no different in 1900 from that of a rural Chinese a thousand years before. That is why Tennyson wrote, "Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle [millennium] of Cathay."

But there is a lesion of Being in the West because there is a draining away of memory. Reflect upon yourself as a human individual living concretely and irreversibly in time. Suppose there began to be subtracted from your consciousness all memory, all the experiences of childhood, all the stories you have read or have been told. You would not know who you are. You would be dumbfounded, alone in the cosmos. This would be a catastrophic lesion of Being. A civilization can begin to have an experience analogous to that, as it sinks into forgetfulness. I began *Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe* with three epigraphs, whose pertinence to what follows will be immediately recognized. They are explicated by the rest of the book:

"A people that no longer remembers has lost its history and its soul."—Aleksander Solzhenitsyn

"The temples of the gods are the most enduring works of man."—Christopher Dawson

"To lose what is not a wasteland is the very condition of being in a waste land."—Lyndall Gordon (on T.S. Eliot)

Our individual memories consist of multiple experiences, impressions, and countless stories. I think it was in kindergarten that I first became aware of history and heroism through a school-child jingle: "In the year fourteen hundred and ninety-two, / Columbus crossed the ocean blue." At about the same time I also became aware of loss and sorrow: "Little Bo-Peep has lost her sheep, / And can't tell where to find them." That distantly began to tune my sensibility for *sunt lacrimae rerum*.

We also have attempts at stories of vast reach that attempt to pull it all together. Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) tried to account for the collapse of the Roman empire in an attempt to warn the British empire against a similar fate. Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) sought to capture the past "*wie es eigentlich gewesen*" (as in itself it actually was), a heroic project. The great Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859), one of our greatest storytellers, saw the meaning of history as embodied in England's journey toward Protestantism, parliamentary democracy, and material progress.

If I could hear only one series of lectures, it would be on history at the University of Berlin, delivered by Georg Wilhelm Friederich Hegel (1770-1831). His *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1832) no doubt fails to convey his life-changing charisma. It was produced from student lecture notes, which were looked over and corrected by the master. But the notes are not his lectures as they were experienced.

Hegel taught that the idea of history is the actualization of freedom in the historical process. He traced this from the evidence of pre-historic tribes through the great archaic empires, through Athens and Rome, the Renaissance, and down to the modern state. He believed that it was in the nature of the human mind to proliferate options, hence the transformations toward freedom. He thought that

the nation-states of the Europe he knew were the highest actualization of freedom. When he saw Napoleon and his army marching through Berlin toward the battle of Jena, he thought that Napoleon carried the French Enlightenment in his saddle bags and was carrying it eastward. Hegel may have been right. If Napoleon had indeed brought the Enlightenment to the darkness of the Russian steppes, who knows how history might have been changed for the better.

Hegel nowadays receives bad grades from some because of his high valuation of the nation-state. But there is much truth in his teaching. Observe what happens when the state is weak, or almost non-existent, as in Africa and in the Middle East. This results in Thomas Hobbes's war of all against all. Life is solitary, nasty, brutish, and short.

Against the actuality of the state and its merits, *bien pensants* prefer international parliaments, Leagues of Nations, United Nations, without pausing to notice how vaporous such efforts so far have been.

But Hegel is so persuaded of the inevitability of freedom that his teaching lacks not only a recognition of struggle, chance, courage, and combat, but also a sense of the radical tensions that underlie the emergence of freedom in the actual civilization of the West.

So, after considerable meditation and study, I chose as Master Narrative—the one that was there very early, way back beyond Hegel, indeed from the earliest Christian centuries. And this Master Narrative “covers the facts,” or almost all of them. It leaves out the religion of *Amor*, which sprang up inexplicably in Provence during the eleventh century and, at least in the judgment of C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), the preëminent scholar of this subject (*The Allegory of Love*, [1936]), has been the most powerful emotional mutation in the West since Christianity itself. Its idealization of the Woman continues to af-

fect our behavior, at least residually. Neither the classical world nor Asia and certainly not Africa idealized the Woman. The Woman walked behind.

The Master Narrative that seems to me to “cover the facts” has been called “Athens and Jerusalem.” Those proper nouns stand for Greek philosophy and spiritual aspiration. So far as I know, the first major figure to use that expression as I do here was Tertullian (160?-230?), a Church father, who demanded to know “What is Athens to Jerusalem?” He wanted to exclude Greek philosophy from the Christian perspective. He was opposed by Clement of Alexandria (150-220) and Origen (185?-234), who argued that Greek philosophy was neutral or damaging, depending upon how it was used. It could be a valuable tool. After all, nature was part of the Creation. Within the Church, Clement and Origen won, and Tertullian lost. One consequence was that philosophy and science were institutionalized in Western universities. Thus Aquinas taught that grace completes but does not contradict nature. Athens and Jerusalem became recognized components of the Western mind from the earliest days. And implicitly so before the arguments of these Church fathers. But, of course, Athens and Jerusalem had long been vital and polar components.

The first chapter of John combines the scriptural narrative of Jesus with Greek *Logos*. Paul, a contemporary of Jesus, was a Roman citizen, a rabbi, a Greek writer and speaker, and a Christian. In the climactic scene of Acts, he journeys to Athens to speak in the Areopagus, the scene deliberately written to remind us of the trial of Socrates. In I Corinthians 15 Paul presents excellent reasons for crediting reports of the Resurrection. Speaking in Athens he tells the audience that Jesus completes Greek philosophy. I sometimes wonder whether Jesus spoke Greek. His contemporary Paul certainly did. It was the international language of the learned.

An enormous amount is at stake here. “Athens” stands for the view that truth is discovered through the intellect. “Jerusalem” stands for the view that truth is delivered through the insights of recognized genius. “Athens” stands for cognition, philosophy, and science. “Jerusalem” stands for the spiritual aspiration to holiness, or purity of soul.

Of course I was reminded of the “Athens” and “Jerusalem” dialectic in important work by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), Nietzsche (1844-1900), and Leo Strauss (1899-1973); but most recently by a pregnant observation Paul Cantor of the University of Virginia made in his excellent book *Hamlet*: “The conflict between the classical and the Christian has been central to Western civilization, and has produced the basis for both its proudest and most deeply problematical moments.”

Athens and Jerusalem are at the core of Western Being—not Confucius, not Buddha, not Mohammed, nor the Aztecs and Incas. And it is the tension between Athens and Jerusalem that generates the peculiar and powerful energy of the West. There is tension between the goal of knowing through intellect, and the goal of spiritual aspiration to holiness. They are not incompatible, but they are not altogether compatible either. Off at the edge, do we place our final bet on intellect or on inspired insight that has been confirmed by experience? Both have claims. There are immensely powerful intensities behind what we actually are. And they are unique in human history.

In 1492, the Chinese had navigational instruments far superior to anything available to Columbus. They lacked his fierce aspiration. Columbus had scientific goals (Athens) in navigation and geography. He had economic goals. Europe needed a sea route to China, since the Ottoman Turks blocked the land route. And he had religious, evangelical goals (Jerusalem). He did not have a dissociated sensibility. He seems to have thought that all three

goals were the same thing looked at from different perspectives.

In *Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe*, I begin with the *Iliad* and Achilles, *Exodus* and Moses. Two late Bronze Age (circa 1250) epic heroes, they represent in grand style the heroic phases of Athens and Jerusalem. The epic-heroic is about doers of deeds. Achilles exhibits his nobility in various ways, especially on the battlefield. He was exemplary for Athenian education. Moses is a great warrior, but also the “Law-Giver.” The focus of both the *Iliad* and *Exodus* is outward, on *conduct*. The key word here becomes *internalization*.

Plato wanted to replace Homer as “the educator of Athens.” His Socrates internalizes battlefield heroism as heroic philosophy. He begins every question by saying “I know nothing.” Out the window go the traditions and the religion of Athens. Mind will discover the truth. Philosophy and science are on the way.

Jesus—whose name around Nazareth was surely Yeshua—is in some ways parallel to Socrates. Jesus internalized the Ten Commandments about conduct, forced them toward a purification of the will and the most intimate inner self. After the opening blessings or beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount come the “antitheses,” each with the structure “It has been said,” but “I say.” Thus Moses says “Do not commit adultery,” but I say “Do not look on a woman with adultery in your heart.” If in the sixth commandment Moses said, “Do not murder,” then Jesus says “Do not even be angry with an enemy.”

We are not to be white-washed tombs, white on the outside, but corrupt within. The Sermon on the Mount is an argument with, a deepening of, Moses and the Prophets. It is fitting that in the famous “transfiguration” scene, Jesus goes up on a mountain and his companions see him radiant as the sun and talking with Moses and Elijah.

Socrates and Jesus perfect Athens and Jerusalem. Paul tries for a comprehensive synthesis; like Jesus and Socrates, he was executed for his trouble, in Rome, about 65 A.D.

The second part of *Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe* is entitled "Explorations" and examines a number of indispensable works. Augustine chooses Jerusalem, abandons the Neoplatonists and Cicero for Paul. Dante's great synthesis pulls Athens and Jerusalem together and adds the troubador religion of *Amor*, which placed the woman in a very different status than the ones she occupied in the classical world or in Asia or Africa. Dante is the greatest, indeed a cosmic, troubador. Beatrice, the ideal but inaccessible woman, is in the tallest of all towers, Eternity. Dante sings his love song in one hundred cantos. And she bestows upon him the desired gift, not a handkerchief or garter, but a direct glimpse of God, and the love that moves the stars. Of course, this was an "idea" of the actual Beatrice Portinari who lived and married and bore children in a dusty Florence. But it was the culmination of an idea that changed the West.

Then there is William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where in Act I the ghost of old King Hamlet lays a heavy charge on the Prince: justice requires the death of Claudius, but "taint not thy mind." The murdered king is in Purgatory, and this warning against anger and rage is Christian. Achilles would consider it completely incomprehensible. But what should Hamlet's soul be like when he kills Claudius? What does the Sermon on the Mount imply?

Then comes what I call the "indispensable Enlightenment," the emergence of the critical spirit, a swing toward Athens, represented here by Molière and Voltaire,

and finally two modern novels, *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Dostoevsky, like Shakespeare but unlike Freud, thinks the unconscious is moral, and, in being so, is a clue to ultimate reality. Here he has affinities with Augustine. Raskolnikov catches himself as a murderer, abases himself, and finds love and God in Siberian penance. *The Great Gatsby*, which I am certain is a great novel, has to do with love and longing, *sehensucht*, that excellent German word, both painful and delicious as in Wagner. Jay Gatsby can transform much with his magic touch, but he cannot return to 1917 or to Daisy Fay before she became Mrs. Buchanan.

The word "smiling" in my title reflects my conviction that we have the books and we understand them and that the yahoos do not. I pray that there are ten-thousand assistant professors out there in, as Nick Carraway called it, "the dark fields of the republic" who are tired of Victim Studies, Film Studies, Cultural Studies, and other trivial ways of wasting money and time, and not only wasting time but actively destroying memory. If they read and heed this book, we can all smile through the cultural catastrophe.

I will end here, as there, with a few lines from Chaucer, about his "Clerc of Oxenford," no doubt a young classical scholar who ekes out a living as a private tutor, starving himself to buy an expensive edition of Aristotle. He is "thin as a rake."

Of studie took he most cure and most hede.
Nought a word spak he more than was
neede...
Souninge in moral vertu was his speche...
And gladly woulde he lerne and gladly teche.