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# *From Pre-Socratics through Postmodernism, Western Tradition Dialectical at Its Core*

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**Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe: Toward the Revival of Higher Education**, by Jeffrey Hart. *New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001. 271 pp. \$26.95.*

In this lucid and gracefully written book, Jeffrey Hart has produced a brilliant defense of the Western tradition, which has been under assault for some time now by intellectuals who regard themselves as postmodernists. According to these intellectuals, the Western tradition is simply too parochial or too monolithic to be worth considering in any extended fashion, and we would do well to view it condescendingly as a tight little unity or as an easy-to-identify nexus of closely related biases (sexist, elitist, racist, logocentrist), detected at last and appropriately exposed by our own more sophisticated modes of critical thinking. The cultural catastrophe referred to in Hart's title is precisely the mistake of supposing, as we now do in many of our

schools and universities, that we are educating our students when we urge them, on the basis of a crude caricature such as this, to belittle or ignore the masterpieces of Western thought and literature.

Hart's main contention, which he establishes concretely through a series of careful readings, is that the Western tradition is essentially dialectical. It cannot be pinned down easily, because it is full of tensions, complexities, varieties of emphasis, and precarious balances which are always under scrutiny (and sometimes under sharp attack) from within the tradition itself. Indeed, the Western tradition, as Hart shows us, has always been supremely self-critical. It is constantly refining its own elements, and it is constantly factor-

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ing into itself whatever new elements it discovers or makes contact with. Of course, this is obvious to anyone who has made a serious effort to study the literature and philosophy of the West, but sadly, as Hart reminds us, many of the great books have been dropped from the curriculum and are now virtually unread, even by persons who call themselves professors. Hart's remedy is to trace the dialectical oppositions in at least some of these books, from the *Iliad* and the Pentateuch to *The Great Gatsby*. Through Hart's fresh and insightful readings, we get a synopsis of Western culture from beginning to end, including the Greeks, the Jews, the Romans, the early Christians, the medievals and early moderns, and, finally, the late moderns, who carry forward into our own time the deep divisions and conflicts that characterize the Enlightenment. We learn, as we go, that the works Hart discusses are dynamic in character, because each of them reflects, in its own particular way, that precarious synthesis of discordant elements which is the Western tradition.

In his opening pages, Hart tells us that he will be tracking, in particular, what he calls "the Athens-Jerusalem dialectic," which is essentially a volatile mixture of classical Greek elements (from which we get our science and philosophy) and Judeo-Christian elements (from which we get our moral outlook or our religion). Because of their separate origins and tenden-

cies, these elements have sometimes been recalcitrant, but also, at certain moments, they have reacted upon each other and have emerged in new, recombinant forms. There have been thinkers who have tried to separate the two strands of tradition so that one strand or the other might flourish without opposition. But this has not happened. In fact, as Hart explains, it is the ongoing tension between Athens and Jerusalem "that is distinctive in Western civilization, and has created its restlessness as well as energized its greatest achievements, both material and spiritual" (xi). (Readers familiar with Matthew Arnold will notice that Hart's thesis is a reaffirmation and a reprise of Arnold's famous discussion of Hebraism and Hellenism in *Culture and Anarchy*. Although Arnold's work was formerly read in the schools with almost the same frequency as *A Tale of Two Cities* or *Silas Marner*, one suspects that it has now lost its place there along with numerous other works of inestimable worth.)

However, Hart's work is valuable not just because it recapitulates Arnold. Its chief merit is that it calls attention to the complex character of works that at first may seem relatively uncomplicated as representations of cultural norms or values. Starting with Homer, Hart shows us that the *Iliad* is, above all, a critical probing of the heroic code, through the mood swings, doubts, and evolving re-

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flections of its chief representatives. It is not so much a static affirmation of the heroic ideal as it is a sophisticated portrayal of the strains and limits imposed on those who come closest to embodying the ideal and who, because of their circumstances, are compelled, simultaneously, to re-think it.

In the same way, Hart presents Moses as an epic hero, in conflict with himself, with God, and with his own people—a hero whose life, like that of Achilles, is “marked by ambiguity” (71). Moses’ epic task is to rescue a particular people from bondage, but it is also the task of rescuing an adequate conception of God from polytheistic conceptions that are less than adequate but still powerfully attractive. Closely connected with this task is the dramatic and painful movement of the Hebrews back and forth between a clan mentality, on the one hand, and a new kind of mentality which transcends clannishness and, in effect, calls for its annulment. In essence, the new mentality is a new universalism or a new monotheism, struggling to be born in what Hart aptly describes as “the recurrent tension, indeed often agony, in the relationship of the Israelites to this [newly conceived] God” (39).

In addition to showing us the complexity of these foundational texts of Western consciousness, Hart reminds us that it was the function of both Socrates and Jesus

to accomplish a massive reorientation towards just these foundations by internalizing or spiritualizing the standards of excellence associated with them. Whether these two figures represent the absolute negation or the final flowering of their respective traditions remains hotly disputed even today, precisely because the full significance of their work (like that of the traditions they both preserve and annul) cannot be lightly or conveniently summarized. Indeed, their relationship to their respective traditions is simultaneously positive and negative, to the great consternation of those who would prefer that it be either the one or the other.

Finally, in the last centuries of antiquity, we have the syncretism of the great Christian thinkers, as exemplified by Paul and Augustine, who succeeded in accomplishing a rapprochement between the classical and the Biblical traditions, in opposition to the puritans like Tertullian, who insisted that the two traditions could not be brought together. “Which is to say,” as Hart reminds us, “that the mind of the West was born amid tension and contradiction and draws strength from refusing to be either-or but rather both-and, both Greek and Jew” (121).

Hart continues, through readings of Dante and Shakespeare, until he reaches the Enlightenment, when the celebration of reason evolves or modulates into a critique of reason that is still going

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on today under the guise of post-modernism. The celebration of reason was, at first, an effort "to shift the mind of the West away from Jerusalem and in the direction of Athens, away from a biblical understanding of human nature and history toward philosophy (newly defined) and science" (187). However, one of the consequences was "a powerful reaction against the Enlightenment that attacked it as unheroic; narrowing, unreceptive to aesthetic, moral, and philosophical aspiration; and therefore inadequate to the entire human experience" (211). Thus the Enlightenment had the effect of producing almost immediately its own dark twin, namely, an enlightened repudiation of its own pretensions to enlightenment. In fact, much of the literature and philosophy that has followed, from the Romantics down to the present, can be described as a critical analysis of the Enlightenment's faith that mankind can be renovated or rehabilitated by a total rethinking (i.e., a total criticism) of the human condition. As Hart points out, the modern novel has given us richly complicated portraits of at least two men who try, with ambiguous results, to think themselves into a new condition of being: Raskolnikov and Jay Gatsby.

The central conclusion of Hart's book is that the West has always criticized itself because it has been propelled from the very beginning by its own competing and evolving forms of reflective thinking. As

might therefore be expected, all the attacks upon tradition that have surfaced in the academy during the last thirty years under the rubric of "critical theory" have been compelled to use methods and concepts that are inconceivable apart from the tradition that has spawned them and that is unwittingly reaffirmed whenever they are employed. In fact, whenever some "new" idea or attitude is presented as an unprecedented alternative to Western ways of thinking, it can always be shown to have been thematized somewhere within the West's own meditations. There has been no form of skepticism or sophistry in our own time, nor any form of hermeneutics or pragmatics brought to bear upon textual or cultural materials, that was not known, in principle, by the Greeks. The effect of reading Plato, after encountering the philosophical positions taken by post-modern theory, is to notice that it is the problematic character of just these same positions, in their ancient form, that typically provokes the original Socratic discussions. Platonism is not something that comes *before* these positions have been discovered. Rather, it arises as a critical response to them, which then proceeds to become an attempt to arrive at something better. But how could we know this if we thought it no longer worthwhile to read the classic texts themselves? Hart is certainly right to insist that there are all sorts of riches to be found in such texts, if

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only we will approach them on their own terms and not in terms of a preconceived agenda aimed at

trashing them. Hart's own book is a model of the right way to make the approach.