

## **SMILING THROUGH THE CULTURAL CATASTROPHE by Jeffrey Hart**

pp. x-xi If history must be told, various narratives about Western civilization can attempt to "cover the facts." The most central, the one that goes furthest, I think, in covering the facts, has been called "Athens and Jerusalem." As used in this way those two nouns refer simultaneously to two cities and to two goals of the human mind. Athens and Jerusalem are at once actual and symbolic. In their symbolic meaning, "Athens" represents a philosophic-scientific approach to actuality, with the goal being cognition, while "Jerusalem" represents a scriptural tradition of disciplined insight and the aspiration to holiness. Together they propose the question: Is all of actuality more like a mathematical equation or is it more like a complicated and surprising poem, reflecting as Robert Penn Warren once put it, the world's tangled and hieroglyphic beauty. Over many centuries Western civilization has answered this question not either-or but both-and, both Athens and Jerusalem.

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p. xii The title of this book speaks of a "cultural catastrophe," and, more cheerfully, of "smiling through it." The catastrophe is evident to anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear, but as regards higher education, one aspect of the catastrophe is the fact that of the books discussed in the pages that follow, all of them bearers of essential civilizational knowledge, few are part of the intellectual equipment even of professors in the liberal arts today, much less their students. This occlusion has been accompanied by, indeed is part of, an epistemological egalitarianism that assumes one opinion is as good as another, one book or proffered work of "art" as good as another, one idea as good as another, one "lifestyle" as good as another. Not surprisingly we have seen growing incoherence in the university curriculum, a loss of point and a loss of seriousness, and as would naturally follow, a proliferation of whimsical and shallowly ideological courses: the triumph of nescience.

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p. 9 This was one way to express the polarities and their tension: the Greek striving for excellence, the Hebrew commitment to a moral and spiritual tradition handed down by father and mother. Unlike Strauss, however, Nietzsche wanted to resolve the tension rather than maintain it, the tension perhaps being too much for his nerves. He proposed to do so through a new kind of man who would contain the opposites. "The Roman Caesar," he called it, "with Christ's soul." This new man, the Übermensch, was, as Strauss put it, "meant to unite Jerusalem and Athens at the highest level."

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p. 11 I will risk a bit of repetition here because of the importance of the following point. Beginning in the first century A.D., and importantly articulated by Clement and Origen in the second and third centuries, the main Western tradition has held that Athens and Jerusalem, though in tension, are compatible. There would be shifts of emphasis, yes; but there would be no divorce. This amounted to the assumption that very ultimately there is a single truth available to both Athens and Jerusalem, toward which they converge, even if the two paths may not finally meet within human understanding. The dominant Islamic tradition, in contrast, evolved a tradition of compartmentalized truths. For Islamic thought during its decisive phase, a proposition might be true in science and philosophy but false in religion. The central Western tradition, with its roots in the first century, held with Greek logic that a proposition cannot be both true and false at the same time. Western truth, both scientific and religious, had to be unitary. There could be no contradiction. If a miracle is alleged to have occurred in time and space, it must be validated like any other event.

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p. 20 In Homer's two epics, the heroes strive toward the comprehensive excellence of *arête* in every aspect of their being. The ideal of *arête* combines battlefield prowess with courtly manners, constant awareness of ancestors and other noble examples, eloquence, and musical ability. Such a hero is both eloquent in speech and heroic in action. All the great figures in Homer strive for *arête*, even in the athletic games, which are more than games in the Homeric epic. Human nature is assumed to be uniform, and *arête* is its highest achievement. Thus Ajax embodies strength, Odysseus eloquence, but Achilles combines the two, in addition to all the others. The degree of *arête* a hero has achieved cannot be known until his death. Surely great Hector lost in this competition when he fled from Achilles in that terrible scene, running terrified around the walls of Troy; yet, all in all, he deserved his enormous funeral pyre at the end of the *Iliad*. In the pursuit of *arête*, every heroic action deserves eternal glory through recollection and celebration in art. The characters in Homer know their stories will be sung by the poets. Aristotle drew the elements of *arête* together in a pedagogical synthesis in his portrait of the magnanimous man in the *Ethics*. He also composed a hymn to his friend Hermias, prince of Atarneus, who had died for his moral and philosophical ideals. The hymn explicitly connects Aristotle's own conception of

permanent pattern with Homer. The gods and goddesses already have their perfection, as Homer conceived it, because they are immortal.

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p. 25 In this poem, very importantly, Troy, the civilized City, is the highest form of civilization known to Homer's world. Situated on the coast of today's Turkey, at the southern end of the Hellespont (Dardanelles), the city is far more attractive than the ferocious Greek military encampment on its beach. Troy, with its local allies, is large enough to field a formidable army (about 10,000 men), yet small enough to form a community in which the leading members at least know one another. Homer very finely evokes the beauty and civility of Troy, the work of its architects and artisans and its high civilization. Its goddess Athena, powerful and vengeful when crossed, also embodies intelligence. It has its temples, palaces, festivals, monuments, and tombs. King Priam's palace is a splendid structure.