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

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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-
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 tendencies, 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-
flections of its chief representa-
tives. It is not so much a static af-
firmation of the heroic ideal as it is
a sophisticated portrayal of the
strains and limits imposed on
those who come closest to em-
bodying the ideal and who, be-
cause 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 con-
ception of God from polytheistic
conceptions that are less than ade-
quate but still powerfully attrac-
tive. Closely connected with this
task is the dramatic and painful
movement of the Hebrews back
and forth between a clan mentali-
ty, 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 universal-
ism or a new monotheism, strug-
gling 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 reorienta-
tion towards just these founda-
tions by internalizing or spiritual-
izing the standards of excellence
associated with them. Whether
these two figures represent the ab-
solute negation or the final flower-
ing of their respective traditions
remains hotly disputed even today,
precisely because the full signifi-
cance of their work (like that of the
traditions they both preserve and
annul) cannot be lightly or conve-
niently summarized. Indeed, their
relationship to their respective
traditions is simultaneously posi-
tive and negative, to the great con-
sternation of those who would pre-
fer 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 August-
ine, who succeeded in accomplish-
ing a rapprochement between the
classical and the Biblical tradi-
tions, in opposition to the puri-
tans 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 read-
ings of Dante and Shakespeare, un-
til he reaches the Enlightenment,
when the celebration of reason
evolves or modulates into a cri-
tique of reason that is still going
on today under the guise of postmodernism. 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 postmodern 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
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.
The West and the world has hitherto been dominated by what Andrew Gamble characterises as the Modern or Western Ideology. But the validity of that worldview and its associated ways of thinking, going back to the ‘Enlightenment’ and beyond, has come to be radically questioned. It is within this context that the work and thought of CS Lewis is examined. Although Lewis is generally recognised, and regarded himself, as conservative and even reactionary, there is a paradoxical quality to his conservatism, the elements of which coexist with features which might be regarded as liberal and as period of the Western Civilization. Postmodernity. Contrary to the popular belief that postmodernism is predominantly a North American phenomenon its traditions are much better developed in France and the United Kingdom (Stephens, C.U. & Guignard, R.M. (2000). It constitutes a reaction and critique to the ideas of Western modernity. Oliver (Oliver, M. (1997). has commented that postmodernism is a state of mind, it is an attitude. The term was first used in the 1960s to describe the dawning of a new era which Jean Francois Lyotard described as characterized by the gradual decline of the old ideologies and belief system of the modern world. The identifiable difference between modernism and postmodernism is the difference in the nature of discourse.