

Smoke, Locusts and Scorpions

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On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society, by Gertrude Himmelfarb (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994) 192 pages, Notes, Index

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The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. (Revelation 9:1-3)

The narrative of Revelation Nine then continues with a depiction of what these nasty little “demons” from the Abyss of darkness, falsehood and lies are released to do. They are sent forth with the express purpose of attacking certain human beings—all those who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They are forbidden to do any harm to the external realm of nature; they only go forth to work seduction and error in the hearts of everyone who has not the Spirit (seal) of God as a shield over the mind (forehead). The Spirit of God is the seal of the truth in their hearts and minds and without that signature of ownership all men are prey to the lies and distortions of the 'fallen star' (Satan) and his armies of darkness (locusts and scorpions) and falsehood. The effect of their 'sting' is described as one of torture, suffering and a longing to die, but to no avail. They must live with their torment as a fit curse upon them because they would not repent so as to come to a knowledge of the truth. That is, their cultural ideals must be endured as a tissue of lies and nonsense. It will produce no good, but they must accept it whether they like it or not. Such is the nature of the Abyss, when once it is opened, for all those who seek to explain their life and world without reference to, indeed in opposition to, God and His Word.

In her latest collection of essays, Gertrude Himmelfarb, eminent historian of Victorian England and perhaps one of the foremost prose writers of our day, has presented another

series of articles in which she offers us her astute observations on the massive perversions which have come to grip modern intellectual and academic life. These essays she has entitled, *On Looking into the Abyss*. Whether or not she had the book of Revelation in mind with her use of the word 'Abyss' is nowhere explicitly stated, and it is unlikely in any case. She borrowed the phrase, as she admits, from a quotation by Lionel Trilling who probably did have some inkling of the thought that is recorded there. If not, his remark certainly comes close. For his (and her) use of the term “abyss” referred to modern intellectual man's spiritual impoverishment; his growing belief in ethical, aesthetic, moral and cultural relativism—men, in other words, “for whom there is no reality but only language, no philosophy but only a play of mind, no morality but only rhetoric and aesthetics.” (p. xi) For these intellectuals, good and evil no longer possess any substantive meaning and as a result the events of the twentieth century (to mention no others) have come to be seen not as acts which conform to or depart from an objective standard of morality and truth but are only whatever the historian, philosopher, or social analyst chooses to see in them. He looks into the “abyss” and sees only what he wants to see and constructs, or better 'deconstructs', only what his clever imagination comes up with.

Prof. Himmelfarb has subtitled her book: *Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society*. “Untimely”, because her ideas are out of keeping with modern trends in academic and intellectual circles. She is, as she claims, “dedicated to the proposition that there are such things as truth and reality and that there is a connection between them...” (p. xii) The mind of man (or woman) is not free to invent whatever he (or she) wishes about life and the world, but must submit his (or her) interpretations to the criteria of an objective reality if one is to produce the fruits of a true understanding. This ideal, as she realizes, has been under fierce attack in the modern university and is treated with scorn and contempt by the self-appointed leaders of “postmodernism”.

In their vaunted estimation all traces of our Western culture with its literary and intellectual heritage must be eliminated, for it has done nothing but produce a mental and moral tyranny, as well as forge the implements of social and political oppression. Much to their dislike, it sought to convey the notion that human beings are limited by a reality not of their own making; that there exist standards outside the mind of man to which he must accede if he hopes to construct a viable culture and society. But for modern man there are no longer any objective standards, no objective reality of any kind—there is only the “abyss”. The abyss lies deep within the human psyche from which he summons up whatever suits his purpose or tickles his momentary fancy. But from it nothing permanent or lasting may be taken. Nothing beyond the imaginings of the moment can have any import. Everything is a matter of experiment, pure fantasy and arbitrary contrivance.

Prof. Himmelfarb appreciates that the abyss as the source of modern man's ideals and values first made its appearance on anything like an influential level sometime in the last century. In her view, although many voices could be heard in support of it, the principal espouser was Nietzsche. Since his day, however, it has grown and spread to where it has nearly surpassed every previous form of intellectual and moral discourse. As she writes:

Since then the abyss has grown deeper and more perilous, with new and more dreadful terrors lurking at the bottom. The beasts of modernism have mutated into beasts of postmodernism—relativism into nihilism, amorality into immorality, irrationality into insanity, sexual deviancy into polymorphous perversity. And since then, generations of intelligent students under the guidance of their enlightened professors have looked into the abyss, have contemplated those beasts, and have said, “How interesting, how exciting.” (p. 6)

Nothing more! Just interesting! exciting! No attempt is made to evaluate such findings in the light of any objective standards. For none exists. Students do not learn to think or judge; only to express amazement at the irrationality—at the sheer depravity of the human imagination. Of course, for them there is nothing abnormal about it at all. To stare into the outhouse of the soul elicits no disgust, merely fascination and curiosity.

In academia the abyss has, perhaps, wormed its way more deeply into literature, philosophy and history than elsewhere. To be sure, with the exception of the hard sciences, it is present nearly everywhere. It can be found in law (critical legal studies), political studies (socialism still fascinates), and sociology (which has exploded into a variety of gender and multicultural programs), as the most conspicuous of those areas where it has made its presence felt. But the attack on the more traditional humanities has been more greatly felt, if not because of their more established place in the curriculum then at least because they seemed to embody for so long more of what passed for an objective standard of knowledge in Western culture. At the very least, they are areas of thought with which Prof. Himmelfarb, with over thirty years in academia, has had a greater firsthand acquaintance than those others and consequently is in a better position to comment on.

Since language is from time immemorial man's primary means of conveying thought and idea, of expressing notions of truth and goodness—since words give shape to the mind's thinking and understanding—language has been at the forefront of man's ideals of education. Language is his principal tool for constructing the edifice of knowledge and, therefore, lies at the very foundation of culture and civilization. Without the means adequately to communicate his thoughts it would have been impossible to forge a common agenda. No individual could possibly build civilization all alone: it needs the work of many. But for many to work together they all need to be able to agree on some common purpose or other. This can only be accomplished by means of language, especially written language, which enables everyone more or less to come to terms with that on which all can share in or contribute to as an agreed-upon purpose, thereby engendering an “objective” frame of reference from which later generations can begin and carry on.

We should not be surprised, then, if the first assault from the “abyss” is aimed at language, i.e., literature. Deconstruction and structuralism are the names of the “locusts” which have descended on this field. In departments of literature, it is no longer

fashionable to read and analyze the contents or styles of particular novels or poems, past and present; instead, “students...are all too often reading books about how to read books.” (p. 6) In other words, not literature, but literary theory dominates the discussion. 'Theory' allows discussion and learning to take place on the basis not of what the author of some particular piece of literature has to say but what the theorist-professor, with his or her superiority over author and text alike (p. 7), deems essential. Literature becomes a means for pretentious minds to assert pet theories about anything they wish and thereby “produce the most startling effects, unrestrained by anything but the limits of his own wit and audacity.” (p. 9) They, not the literature itself, control what may be said from the text. There is no right or wrong interpretation, only clever and interesting inventions of the theorists. Himmelfarb describes what this amounts to:

For theorists, what is interesting is what is outré, paradoxical, contradictory, opaque. Since there is no “right” interpretation, the opportunities to be “interesting”, in this sense, are unlimited. And since novels and poems are simply “texts” (or 'pretexts') that are entirely indeterminate and therefore totally malleable, they can be “textualized”, “contextualized”, “recontextualized”, and “intertextualized” at will. The result is a kind of free-floating verbal association, in which any word or idea can suggest any other (including, or especially, its opposite), and any text can be related in any fashion to any other. (pp. 8 & 9)

The abysses of philosophy and history are, perhaps, even more sinister than that which can be found in the area of literature. Philosophy, especially, has concerned itself with those basic ideas about which the mind thinks as well as how it thinks about them. Metaphysics and epistemology, the bedrock of an external reality and truth, have been abolished by the 'new' philosophy. Or, rather, the hope is to abolish them if possible. Of course, we well know that that is altogether impossible. Still, the hubris of modern, or “postmodern”, men is to assume that reality can be abolished. The problem is difficult. At least, they can playfully pretend that nothing true can be known about any external reality; that the world is what the mind makes of it, not what it discovers to be actually there. All the more possible is it, then, to construct (via “deconstruction”) whatever reality one wishes! The world does not limit man; rather man is limited only by the ingenuity of his creative imagination.

Finally, in the discipline of history, the area of Prof. Himmelfarb's expertise, the abysses are working overtime to redefine what may, or may not, be considered 'knowledge' as it relates to man's past. Here, the great interest has been to “dehistoricize” history by denying that the past has any objective reality—that is, any “fixity” (p. 133)—which the historian seeks to understand more or less on its own terms. The “abyss” claims that history is merely what the historian chooses to make of it. “Postmodernist history, one might say, recognizes no reality principle, only the pleasure principle—history at the pleasure of the historian.” (p. 133) History is not some search for what really happened in the past, and therefore it is not about being accurate and factual. Instead, history as propounded from the abyss is history as imagined or invented by the postmodern

historian for purposes which he alone deems useful or instrumental. More often than not his or her purpose is to treat the past as if it were the secret to explaining fashionable political ideologies in the present. History, in this sense, is approached in terms of race, class, and gender, and events, beliefs, ideas and the actions of individuals are replaced by impersonal structures, forces and institutions. (pp. 17 & 18) In one sense, history from the abyss seeks to model itself on that of anthropology, professing itself to be “value-free”. (p. 18) In reality, postmodernist history rebels against the tyranny of chronology and the logic of cause and effect in human events and denounces traditional history as nothing but the product of “patriarchal ideology”. (p. 152) In the end, history is used to “deconstruct” Western culture and to treat other cultures as equal or superior.

Prof. Himmelfarb has enlisted the aid of her sharp mind and clarity of thought in the ongoing discourse on the decline of intellect and education that is the hallmark of our day. She has been uniquely placed to observe this corrosion, having spent her entire career inside the halls of academe. She stands as a reliable witness to the assault on the traditional belief that there are such things as right and wrong, truth and falsehood, reality and fantasy. Not only is she conversant with the deviant trends of today, but she has spent a life-time analyzing the roots of the modern transformations from a belief in and reliance upon a pre-given “objective” realm of existence and thought to that of total surrender to the “abyss” as the only criterion of what modern (or, postmodern) men believe. Having seen the beginnings in the nineteenth century, she knows full well that the abyss did not just emerge recently. Nevertheless, from those beginnings it grew as each generation since then has spent more and more time “looking” into it. What they saw, they fancied as “liberating” and “empowering”. Men not only saw the possibilities for a brave new world freed from moral and intellectual confinement, but one in which man, and man alone, decided all the issues, dictated all the terms, and gleaned all the honor and glory. What the abyss meant, and means, was freedom from God and His reality. It means the freedom to replace God with Man and to substitute his “reality” and “truth” for that of God.

Prof. Himmelfarb, although she does not go so far as to suggest anything remotely close to this, nevertheless does recognize that modern man's attempts to replace centuries of civilization and culture with the “abyss” as the only basis upon which he will act or think can only lead to moral and intellectual suicide. (p. 160) We could not possibly disagree. However, all attempts to recapture the way things were are useless in the face of the underlying “religious” problem, a difficulty more easily understood when we recognize that man's fascination for and attraction to the abyss is not simply a matter of his own choice, but is equally due to that real Abyss from which comes forth the filth of untruth and immorality and which “stings” his heart and mind with its poison. There is no protection from that Abyss except the Spirit of God, and the truth for which He stands. The “fallen star” is given the “key” (authority) to the Abyss and men by themselves are powerless against him.

Chapter nine of Revelation, however, is not the end of the matter. It is immediately followed by chapter ten which is meant specifically to contrast with chapter nine. For at the beginning of chapter ten we see another “angel” coming down from heaven. Only this

angel does not “fall”, but “descends” under His own power and authority. What is more, He is decked in the appearance of majesty and dominion. He has something in His hand (signifying His authority). It is the “antidote” to the poison from the Abyss. It is the Word of God! As the “star” has come (or, rather, has been cast) to earth and history, weakened but still deadly, and with authority to deceive, so too, but with greater authority, has come the Lord of creation who, though risen in glory, nevertheless shows by His descent that He is equally present in the earth and history to work His will against the dominion of “smoke, locusts and scorpions”.