Doing the multicultural blues

On Multicultural Literacy, the Graywolf Annual No. 5.

The word “multicultural” is much with us, and not the least interesting thing about its popularity is just what it means. The OED Supplement, that indispensable guide to newer words and usages, defines “multicultural” as “of or pertaining to a society of varied cultural groups.” Like most present-day uses of “culture,” this definition conflates sociology with civilization and anthropology with art and learning. Nonetheless, it expresses a truth about the United States: we are indeed a nation of many peoples, different in origin, character, and style, and we are the product of the contributions of all these disparate origins, characters, and styles.

But users of this new buzzword for the 1990s are hardly content with describing our national past or even our present. For today’s flock of multiculturalists, “multicultural” is taken to convey a méélange of desirable attitudes about the direction of American society and its traditions, learning, and art. Evidence as to the nature of the road upon which we are urged to travel, along with the usual exaltation of folkways as art, can be found in Multi-Cultural Literacy, a collection of previously published articles appearing now as the fifth of the Graywolf Annual series. Here, under the subtitle “Opening the American Mind,” is a concatenation of Native American, Afro-American, Latino, Asian, and even nostalgically Luddite White writing; here are all the familiar descriptions, predictions, and prescriptions, including an account by the late James Baldwin of the American “criminal conspiracy to destroy” black children, a disquisition by Carlos Fuentes on the nobility of sympathizing with Mexico while living abroad with the international rich and famous, an evocation by Wendell Berry of the joys of farming with horses rather than tractors, and (by lesser-known writers) a paean to Indian gynocratic societies of the Southwest, a Jamaican lesbian’s attack on the British for having imposed their values on her education, and a short memoir by a Japanese American, married to a white pediatrician, who does not feel he will be able (for reasons of suffering conscience) to use black help in caring for the children he and his wife may one day have.

What unites all these indictments, of course, is hatred: hatred for white men, for America, for Europe, for the West that is now seen to rule the world, and for the Western civilization that made this despised triumph possible. Sometimes the hatred takes the childish form (in the words of an
article in *The Graywolf Annual* of “spitting into their cultural soup”; sometimes it sympathizes
with, though never quite endorses, the violent ideology of Frantz Fanon. As the objects of this
hatred, we quite rightly react: as the old French saw goes, “This animal is very mischievous; when
it is attacked, it defends itself.” And so a bitter conflict is now going on between the defenders of
the Euro-American West on the one hand and the multiculturalists on the other.

A large part of this worldwide conflict is political and legal; some of it spills over into acts of anti-
Western terrorism. At home, much of this conflict, and not the least important part, is concerned
with ideas; as the hostilities of *The Graywolf Annual* amply demonstrate, the battlefields of this
conflict have been, and remain, the faculties and curricula of American colleges and universities,
the programs of museums, theaters, and concert halls, and the offerings of the media. There are
now fresh signs that the government agencies in Washington—in particular the National
Endowments for the Arts and for the Humanities—are being swept up in the struggle.

There can be no doubt that the present moment calls for a vigorous and spirited defense of
America as one nation, of our European inheritance, and of the ideals of the West that we in
America—all of us, whatever our origins—have striven to represent. But at the same time that we
fight for what will inevitably be called Western civilization, we must realize that we are defending
more than the West and its traditions: we are also defending the many strands of other
civilizations that have gone into the making of the West.

When we defend the West, we must go on to defend the very idea of civilization as something
irreducible to the social sciences. What is great about the contribution of the West to the world is
not its particularism, but the possibilities it has envisioned of the universality of scientific and
liberal knowledge, of citizenship and freedom—indeed, of the universality of humanity. It is one
of the glories of the West that it has preserved so much of the high civilizations of other societies
which would otherwise have vanished through neglect and worse. In the most important sense,
the great line from Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome to our century is not a conception of ethnicity,
but a conception of humanity that transcends ethnicity.

Unlike the sour hatreds of *The Graywolf Annual*, the fight today, now as in the past, in Eastern
Europe and in China, is not just a fight for the values of the West, but a fight for the universal
values that the West has brought—however incompletely—into reality. We must make clear that
in defending the West and its civilization, we are defending all civilizations.

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