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The Narrative of the Occident



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Preface

The main purpose of this book is to analyze the narrative of the Occident in its present state. Earlier developments are of interest only insofar as they are still manifest in its current aspects. Obviously, "Occident" is such a vast notion that even a large number of books would not be sufficient to explain what it actually means, has meant and, possibly, will mean in the future. It does not have a truly unambiguous meaning. But there is nothing to be gained by a priori definitions. Let us simply think of the Western hemisphere and its civilization, which is found in other geographical parts of the world too.

The Occident manifests itself in countless ways, from high culture and grandiose appearances to down-to-earth and often banal-seeming examples. The latter are given precedence in the present essay: they are usually overlooked and thought of, if at all, condescendingly. Yet they can give a more adequate and enlightening picture of what is going on and why. Better understanding can sometimes be achieved by paying more attention to less well and less frequently explained phenomena. They shape our world views in constantly shifting patterns which seem random but are subject to not yet well understood rules or "laws of culture."

Narrative, then, should be understood in a very broad sense. I posit that components of material culture, for example, tell us at least as much about a civilization as its highbrow creations. The former often express better where a civilization is headed, and where its characteristic attributes are hidden. Items and accomplishments not intentionally generated usually tell us more about their originators than cultural feats and prestigious products performed or manufactured in order to bring about a certain image.

This implies the deciphering of civilizational manifestations which are, if not exactly occulted, well concealed behind officious stagings and other deliberate strategies. More often than not non- or transverbal, these clues can be found just about everywhere; material culture, social comportment and all kinds of imaginations provide us with leads. We must not look solely for written or spoken "messages;" imageries are in all probability more important, and have been for quite some time. And we have to appreciate that unintentional by-products frequently teach us much more about how a civilization recounts itself.

These narratives reveal the state the civilization is in. Self-examination and readjustment are permanent, essentially uncon-

scious, and result in guidelines marking out potential future itineraries. Narratives tend to be "self-addressed," but inevitably also show an inclination to project themselves outwards. Its recipients are both extraneous to the emitting civilization and parts of it. The result is a constant cultural interplay inducing reciprocal understanding (or misunderstanding). The descriptions and portrayals (communications, "locutions," often images rather than words, manifestations, etc.) given by the narratives can be intended as explanations, even justifications. But they are predestined to be misleading since, on a collective-unconscious level, they are given to idealization, self-aggrandizement and repression (*verdrängung*).

For a long time, the Occident has been an expert storyteller. The "Master Narrative" saw to the motivation of the masses, to persuasion, to all kinds of identification. It produced identity. Even when and where that Master Narrative became speculative, it was never pure invention; there was a correspondence of valid actuality and what one had to say about it. This adroitness has got lost; the sub-narratives, and hence *the Narrative* itself are out of joint. Incontestable disparities between pretensions and reality have become insurmountable, that is to say, not "recoverable" by even the most elaborate narrative.

It will be shown that the occidental narratives for some time now have shown vexatious and precarious tendencies to self-disparagement, no doubt best expressed by voguish (and very vaguely leftist) ready-made prattle, making moral relativism the equivalent of a fallaciously defined "multiculturalism." The thus alleged equivalence of values is nothing but lethargic resignation dressed up as attraction to "alterity" and is among the most disquieting traits of today's occidental narratives. To show the ultimate untenability of this position is one of the major motives of this essay. By subscribing to relativism, the sphere of values is relinquished to religious fundamentalists. The withdrawal from rationality principles and the rationality project can surely be seen as endangering the most significant achievements of the Occident.

One question has to be posed unrelentingly: how can we, after Auschwitz (by no means a mere "formula," the word expresses the quintessence of evil), continue a moralistic discourse? With ethical legitimacy lost, the Western narratives after 1945 showed an increasing disposition to grow skeptical, bitter, more and more anti-Western by themselves. The consciously constructed and emitted parts of the social discourses became, at least in their outward appearance, prone to an ostensibly diffident self-contempt, regardless

of whether the generating society was more, less, or hardly at all responsible for the Great Crime of the twentieth century.

This essay will demonstrate what an amount of perversity is to be diagnosed here. Contingent self-incrimination proves to be less than honest: it allows to insist on one's ability to moral judgment, yet is at the same time a clever strategem to unburden oneself and secure latitude for trade and exports, political influence and renewed reputation. But this plotting is not even clever scheming because the pseudo-ethical posture can eventually be seen through. The fusion of the mendacious allegation that the "the others" are more honorable than oneself with uppity moral grandstanding, paradoxically anchored in self-reproach, could be considered an impertinent condescension were it not ultimately but a clumsy camouflage of lassitude.

The talent to distinguish between different sets of moral adequacy and also a prowess for pragmatic down-to-earth methods of "doing things," so characteristic for the Occident (and particularly its north-western parts), it will be claimed, was mainly a result of intelligently narrating one's own dynamic capabilities. The deterioration of the occidental "messages" is arguably due to the moral relativism manifesting itself in a perverse combination of narcissism and self-indulgence on the one hand and the phony tolerance of the "Anything Goes" on the other.

To undo that syndrome is not least part of our task. We'll patiently disassemble large tracts of the occidental narratives and try to find out how they work—or do not, or not anymore. I'd like to refer to it as *scholarly reverse engineering*. Take it apart, try to comprehend how it works (or doesn't satisfactorily, and how it might conceivably work better), put it together again, and hope that some future clever *re-engineering* will actually make it work better next time. That could conceivably represent a contribution, however minimal, to a healing process of the Occident and its narratives.

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How exactly do narratives work? The question will here be approached in several different ways. The two most distinguishable are theoretical reflections, enabling us to examine the construction and transmission of meaning on the one hand, and pragmatic examples on the other, demonstrating the results of narratives by analyses of "significations." These are mostly understood as the effects of meaning, that's to say, how "it is done" and "what it has led to." Production of meaning, then, and produced meaning. We could also

say, definitions, explanations, conceptions etc., their social consequences and the ensuing reciprocal actions. The *panoply* extends from general tendencies to everyday practice.

Although *narrative* may seem to be just chic diction it is a very serviceable notion. It is not just the mere conveyance of a "serializable" sequence of events, and certainly more than a sum of stories or recountable material well arranged in all kinds of representations up to superordinate general descriptions and explanations. The interconnections between the components of the narrative "raw material" count for more than the singular meaning of the isolated elements. It is never simply a matter of "substance" and "essence," the decisive factor is the interplay of seemingly separate components; the social relevance of meaning is widely governed by "relationism." Narratives can be considered as acts that, *a posteriori*, impart order to random, even chaotic, seldom systematic and "necessary" events, states and their patterns.¹

There is nothing really straightforward and clearly arranged in the Grand (or Master) Narrative and its countless slave narratives. Therefore this essay carries out many "take-offs" in terms of explanations offered; there is a number of inceptions and reiterations. Musicologically expressed, there are many onsets and intonations and, with respect to interpretation, many *variazioni* of some central *teme*. There is also some calculating that, by getting back to points seemingly already covered, but picking them up again in quite different ways, surprise effects can be achieved (I'm thinking of Haydn's *Paukenschlag* symphony, the "Surprise Symphony"). Taking the reader by surprise, unawares, an argumentation is given more chances of getting through.

In all fairness it should also be said what this essay is not. It is not a history of Western thought, much less one about "the Occident" *tutto compreso*; it is not even a complete panorama of all significant components of the occidental narrative as it presents itself at the moment. It is a selection of examples, though a rather wide one, but still determined by my particular knowledge and cognizance, by observations made over the years, continuous consideration, research done for the present book. The selection was motivated by my familiarity with certain items and motives and the con-

¹ A good example for how narrative(s) can transcend the boundaries of theoretical speculations and become quite practice-related is given by Reinhard Sieder: "Nach dem Ende der biographischen Illusion: Leben im Konditional," in: Hans Petschar, Georg Rigele (eds.): *Geschichte. Schreiben*. Vienna: Turia & Kant, 2004, pp. 31-47, particularly 29-34.

nections between them that I know well. These connections account for our decisive impressions of correctness, even truth, for what we conceive of as sense.

By putting a main accent on the interconnectedness of the elements of meaning we'll frequently come across unsuspected or underestimated correlations. The option for multi-faceted perspectives and multi-layered examinations calls for some deliberate repetitiveness but it will enable us to appreciate the components of the narrative in alternate contexts, thus time and again "in a different light."

The fact that I favor *thèmes mineurs* could well create the impression that I think little of the "truly important" issues. (By "minor themes"—borrowing from the thoughts on *littératures mineures*—I mean the ones which are usually considered to be "banal" and not all that important in "cultural terms.") Of course, I do not bypass the "major" problems at all. I simply restate that this book ascribes the same importance to themes which are often considered to be of minor relevance as to the ones considered to be "earthshaking." I'm confident that I'll be able to show that it is nonsense to gullibly expect manifestations of "high culture" to be of more consequence than "trivia" simply because the former are more highbrow.

It may well take a whole book to make the point. I definitely reject the misapprehension that everything can be imparted cursorily in a sufficiently clear way. Not least to compensate for what could be misconstrued as redundancy (in engineering redundancy is considered to be indispensable), I have in places chosen a polemical tone, not, I hope, totally devoid of humor (if sometimes of the sarcastic or even despairing kind). A little zest is always welcome, and arguments which all too easily can become quite dry should, I think, be made preppy to become better digestible.

The polemicist is rather interested in arguments than in aggressiveness; the calculation he or she relies on is the contingency of controversy, of disputation rather than sterile repetitions of the terrible "truths" and of the "One Knows." If bellicosity there is in this essay, it only raises its head (not a too ugly one, I trust: to engage witlessness can be stunning) when and where, all too conspicuously, long established clichés and truisms take up the place of desirable debates. I'm sure that some polemic flavor does not necessarily subtract from scholarly schemes.

Similarly, I profess to the choice of diction not without quirks; I have taken some linguistic liberties probably not to the liking of all purists. The medium co-shapes the message; presentation and style contribute their share to the display of the arguments. Granted, I

wanted to have it both (even many) ways: stolid passages alternate with vehement segments; reserved style blends into a fiercer one; rigorous explanations are counterpoised by irony and mockery. But even where the presentation is getting acerbic, bordering on the angry, you'll find that the facts presented are solid and, I hope, the arguments worth pondering. This, after all, is an essay—a trial, attempt or rehearsal, as the OED has it, "a short prose composition on any subject." With the exception of *short*, this definition is well suited to the present proposal. (And, incidentally, this book was written on "pre-Gates"-NOTA BENE, Windows being much too dangerous for my (mental) health, and further processed by Word 2003.)

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As to the critical apparatus, there are, notably, classical footnotes—you don't need two bookmarks—, and I adhere to the mode of quotation as it has been before the natural science-inspired way took hold. The bibliography itemizes only the works quoted from or hinted at directly and the ones of which I am certain that they have made indelible impressions on my thinking (which doesn't exclude that I have overlooked the one or the other).

I emphasize that the order of the chapters represents a recommendation rather than a strictly marked out path. (The subtitles of the segments also guide you to specific items, and how they are taken up from different angles.) If you happen to be interested in movies or aviation, I leave it to you to read the respective excursus first. Generally, if you are more interested in practical examples, digests, case histories it is perhaps preferable to deal with chapters VI to VIII before attacking I to V.

My wife, despite being at work on a book of her own, has helped me in every conceivable manner; there's no way the present essay could have come into being without her crucial assistance—from text processing to, above all, her input in terms of substance. We have lived and worked together for such a long time that it is impossible to tell which idea, interpretation, explanation has been developed by whom. I'm sure that I have "stolen" countless ideas from her (for many years, for instance, we've joked together about "unintelligent design," only to come across the notion in Sam Harris's reflections about religion). But it goes without saying that the responsibility for presenting and editing all those jointly developed thoughts in the present fashion is mine alone (in this case there can be no "in for a

penny, in for a pound"). I owe her. I also thank Klaus Schiller from the University of Salzburg for the excellent job he has done with preparing the text for final publication.

Over the years, I have benefited from intellectual inputs by many individuals, too numerous to list: were it not for such stimuli, provided by chance acquaintances as well as by small groups of friends, living in a backwater would make it next to impossible to even contemplate writing an essay such as the present one. I'd like to single out the graduate students of the research group "Sigma" who, mainly in the eighties and early nineties, were a first-rate encouragement. But I value the odd, occasional contacts with colleagues as highly—be it Auckland, Christchurch and Dunedin, Melbourne and Sydney, or Hamilton, Kingston, Ottawa, Toronto. The "virtual web" out there, all too easily overlooked, made up by reminiscences of often temporally remote encounters, expresses the persistence of latent interpersonal bonds which can even much later potently contribute to trains of thought. Thus, we are able to tap into a kind of covert cerebral network which subtly shows what a shared civilization ultimately means.