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The Western World: echoes of war

Redazione di Engramma, edited by Elizabeth Thomson

I. Athens 479 BC — New York 2001 AD

During this disturbing time of conflict; after the devastating attack on the two geometrical symbols of Western power — the Twin Towers that defined the skyline of New York, and the Pentagon — and after the resulting deaths of thousands of people, opposing notions of us/other, friend/enemy, and civilized/barbarian have reappeared in the lexicon of scholarly debate.

Heated discussions and raging passions have been kept in a state of slumber throughout fifty years of 'official peace'. 'The West', and 'the Western Tradition' are the theoretical themes and the rhetorical catchphrases around which the syntax of identity has been rationalized during this period of warfare. However, what is the 'West'? The definition of the term is, from the outset, relative. The 'West' is a dialectical perspective in relation to an original point of view, and represents a distinctive concept when compared with the 'East'.

If the boundaries of the East are fugitive, the West too has no boundaries that can be defined as stable and fixed. The notion of the pillars of Hercules being the 'NON PLUS ULTRA' would appear to have been established as an inducement to infringe the limits of the permissible, an infringement that was often put into practice during ancient times, and was planned when Byzantium gave way to the East, turning the horizons of the world into chaos. The land that would become a germ seed of the West was discovered as a result of the search for the East. However, Columbus' mistake was a manifestation of a basic and unfathomable uncertainty: where does the West end? Is the beginning of the 'East' not west of the 'West'?

In the *Iliad*, the first written text that tells of war between 'us-Greeks' and 'them-Trojans', the word barbaros never appears. The terms of reference are 'heroes', 'honour', 'war', 'rage' and 'compassion', 'us' and 'them' are not. The Trojans share with the Achaeans the language of ethics and aesthetics: names, gods, and values. Athena and her palladium, the powerful talisman that Odysseus attempted to steal from the city in order to make it defenceless protected Troy. The threat that the other's body will never be buri-

ed, but will be eaten by dogs and birds is the powerful threat that heroes exchange before facing each other in combat: they share the same symbolic language; Glaucus and Diomedes exchange weapons rather than fight each other because they acknowledge the ancient laws of hospitality respected by their forebears.

Hector, the Trojan hero, removes Achilles' armour from Patroclus, and dons it himself in order to present himself on the battlefield in the guise of Achilles: Achilles against Achilles. Hector's death prefigures the death of Achilles, which the narrative structure of the *Iliad* circumvents. However, the tears of Achilles' mother, Thetis, for the death of Patroclus as he wears her son's armour, and for Hector the Trojan hero who later also wears it, prefigure her son's death, using mirrored events to break through the temporal barriers of the narrative.

Homer, as Thucydides observed, does not acknowledge the existence of 'barbarians'; the 'others', in Homer are never part of the narrative; 'Greek' and 'barbarian' are defining terms of recent origin, that have everything to do with history. As Santo Mazzarino has authoritatively pointed out, the concept of 'otherness' between West and East, whether cultural or institutional, rather paradoxically stems from the liminal spaces where they came into contact — on the coast of Asia Minor during the early stages of Ionian colonization. Initially, the colonies extended the boundaries around the notion of identity, whilst exporting it eastward and elsewhere.

Friction and fertilization with the powerful political institutions of Persia were both equally fruitful. The boundaries of the Asiatic coast where the Greeks were subjected to the power of Persia, but where the influence of ancient Greek culture, from language to architecture, was immensely powerful, gave rise to the concept of 'us' and 'others'; it is where the first experiments in democracy took place, with all the difficulties and ambiguities that interpreting the term entailed, from the first time it is mentioned in Herodotus VI, 43, where he refers to the democracies instituted in the Greek colonies of Asia Minor by Mardonius, the son-in-law of Darius, after he deposed all tyrants of the Ionians. Herodotus, the father of history, was born in Halicarnassus, an Asiatic colony, and with him, the idea of the ancestral feud between Asia and Europe with its origins rooted in myth comes into being.

The Persian wars are when the Greeks acknowledge themselves as such, and call themselves, collectively, for the first time "Hellenes". Western identity

comes into being as a result of a specific conflict. The defensive wars of the Hellenes against the Persian invasions that occurred between 490 and 480 BC — a campaign intended to consolidate the Western front of a boundless empire that reached the shores of the Mediterranean with its wealthy Greek satrapies based in Ionia — unleashed the narrative device of prose writing that would be termed ‘history’. The idea of history has its origins in the West from the writings of Herodotus, which begin with a series of revenge attacks in which women are abducted and taken East or West.

The term “barbaros” is mentioned for the first time in the theatre of Dionysus in 472 BC, in the theatrical writings produced in the aftermath of recent war and destruction. It appears in the words of the chorus of the old Persians, the fearful enemy who a few years earlier had burned the temples in the symbolic heart of Athens and had caused the city to be evacuated. The language of tragedy explains that there is no *polemos* that in the end does not prove to have a core of *stasis*, an internal, irreducible conflict promoted by notions of identity and otherness that include the essential paradox of identity: the awareness that the enemy is always a reflection of one’s own anxiety, that one does not call ‘other’ or ‘enemy’ one who does not possess a recognizable reflection of one’s own identity (as seen in the exchanged glance between Achilles and Penthesilea at the fatal moment when Thanatos overcomes Eros).

However, if there is any sense in talking about a ‘Western tradition’, it is necessary to refer to the peculiarities of a culture that from its origins, beyond the primordial rhetoric of war, thought of itself as a place of frontiers, not as an expression of fact, with a vital awareness of its own dynamic identity that refused to allow itself to be fixed and forcefully circumscribed.

Aeschylus, an intrepid warrior during the Battle of Salamina, decided not to stage the victory of his own people, but the arrival of the news of the defeat suffered by the Persians. At the moment of the expected celebration of victory, in the very city that was destroyed by the army now defeated, the Athenian people watched another people’s tragedy. The stage distanced them from their own disaster - as Athens and the acropolis, the symbol of the *polis*, smouldered.

After the attack at the heart of New York, it is impossible not to equate the sacrilegious destruction of Athens, the undying symbol of antiquity, with the destruction of the city par excellence that represents the contemporary era. Ancient symbols and tragic myths do not allow themselves to

be simplified or reduced, as Aeschylus' upended stage version proves — let us try to imagine scenes of the assault on Kabul projected on to a screen at “Ground Zero”.

However, the exercise of bringing things up to date lends itself to a further variation. The Persians were a powerful nation and part of a vast empire conquered by the strength of an unbeatable land army, whose influence went beyond the boundaries of the territory they possessed. In the tragedy, the barbarous people are characterized by their wealth and the opulence of their garments, their display of gold, and their hierarchical political structure that placed a king, one man alone, above the entire people. Everything is brought into play to draw a distinction between their characteristics and those of the Hellenes who wore a peplos of undyed raw wool, and who in a democratic political system, reserved supreme power and justice exclusively for the gods, to whom alone attributes in gold could be made.

Furthermore, the Persians were a people who, led by a king hungry for war, pushed themselves beyond the albeit generous boundaries permitted them by the Moira. In their impious and ingenuous show of aggression, the young warriors of the army are beaten — a land army is impiously pushed beyond the limits of its ability towards the agile forces of the Hellenes and their proficient handling of the seas. If the distressing symbol of the gutted towers is superimposed on the image of Athens burning, the economic and military colonialism of America can be seen as a reminder of the hubris of the Persians. So who are the barbarians, who is the “Other”? The tragic myth about otherness teaches us that we should not believe there is only one answer.

Having formulated the basic questions about otherness (the East as other in relation to the West), and vagueness (where does the West end? Where does the East begin?), if we begin to think of ourselves as a constant middle point between the two poles of East and West, we could in a certain sense debunk some common places, and reveal the heart of these geographical identities as the sources of civilization and history.

II. Dionysus the Wanderer

Dionysus, the twice-born god from afar, travels westward from the East, always leads the way back to the dual and multiple beginning of things, and prevents the West from decaying by firmly determining for himself an identity which is absolute. Western culture, no matter how dialectically

obscure or rhetorically self-celebratory, cannot only be about 'identity' without, paradoxically, running the risk of resembling to an excessive degree, any other culture.

In *The Gordian Knot*, Carl Schmitt reasons that the geographical opposition between East and West is something that fluctuates and remains indeterminate, and is merely a matter of reduced night and light. The earth has a north and a south pole, but not an East and a West. In relation to Europe, America is West; in relation to America, China and Russia are the West, and once again, Europe becomes the West. In purely geographical terms, therefore, there are no polarities, and no rational explanations for the current hostilities.

Alexander the Great, the new Dionysus, travelled westward from the East, and by loosening the mythical Gordian knot, united the universe, politically and symbolically, for a brief yet extraordinary period. Alexander the Great appropriated the splendour of Asian royalty and in Eastern illustrations, the Greek king is also identifiable with the vanquished Persian king, whose power he has acquired.

At the end of his long-protracted struggle, Hermann Broch's Virgil confuses the places he has lived in during his life: Rome and the East are unclearly located; everything is veiled in a mist that blurs the boundaries of time and place. Everywhere in the Mediterranean has always been interchangeable with somewhere else, and often, via unpredictable routes, cities have been born anew elsewhere. Where was Rome more resplendent than in Africa or the Near East? In the cities of Palmyra and Leptis where the traditions of Empire have been preserved intact through time, and where colonnades rise up in the desert. Where was Islam more glorious than in Granada? Where does Greece reveal herself better than in her overseas colonies or in the mountain paths of the East or Alexandria? And where are England and Spain more real than in India and the Americas?

On their original sites, buildings, if life is separated from form, soon become empty icons, imprints or ruins that history pedantically takes upon itself to decipher. Forms and meanings, however, transfer themselves elsewhere, to places where time allows them to be preserved, or where a simpler way of life can still assign meaning to things. Places, the topoi of permanence, are by their very nature mutable and unsteady, and their secret journeys map courses that subvert conventional geography and make it impossible to determine rigidly established affiliations. This barely changes with the passage

of time, even if the progressive homologation of customs, religions, mass ideologies and products make the world increasingly uniform.

Even today, the meanings of places incessantly move about in space, challenging time, but their forms survive intact, even if buffeted by the influence of commerce and tourism. Almost nothing is any longer what it appears to be. Everywhere is increasingly like everywhere else. East and West have crossed paths and exchanged traditions so often that, paradoxically, each has within it the spark of the essence of the other. The skyscrapers that blot the skylines of African and Asian cities, and the Asiatic or Maghrebien enclaves in Europe and America are proof of this.

If it is true that places, at most, preserve to the bitter end their history made weak and sterile by the migration of forms and meaning, it is only topographical subversion that, by generating an unstable geography of names, can give rise to the renewal and regeneration of places long since worn down by over-representation and too many words. However, what is out of place in relation to the various forms of unifying waves of tourism, consumerism, and religion is also in imminent danger.

What still symbolizes something that does not form part of the process of standardization has to be eliminated. So it has been for the Buddhas of Bamiyan, whose destruction was prophetically feared by Bruce Chatwin in 1980, when he wrote that the Afghans would do something absolutely terrible to their invaders, and wondered whether they would awaken the sleeping giants of central Asia.

That which cannot be totally controlled is destroyed — symbols and places do not lend themselves readily to unequivocal meanings. In the unremitting endeavour to neutralize the 'other', there are those who will destroy their own towns and the symbols of others, and promote models that are oppressive yet reassuring; and there are those who attack them head-on unable to tolerate diversity. The annihilation of the 'other' can only lead to the negation of self via the removal of the unconscious identification with the 'other'.

The term 'identity' itself is incongruous, and has connotations of a fixed, photographic image rather than of a sequence in a dramatic action-packed film that more accurately describes the history of the West. The paradoxical and contradictory nature of this tradition is evident in the technically tragic

design that stylizes identity as a specific and individual tension between two opposing poles.

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Historically described by the act of deciding against something, by the historical act of breaking away from Asia, the idea of identity was born from movement, and must, in order to survive, continue to comply with this Heraclitean restlessness.

The crucial aspect of Western identity is manifest in its determination to exceed all limits and the constant recall to its 'place of birth'. The friction between the two co-ordinates has definite, historically defined repercussions, and the cultural forms brought about from time to time by encounters between the two extremes are always different and perishable.

The Roman Empire lost its best leaders — they were either killed during the Eastern campaign or died whilst defining the northern frontiers against the barbarians. As Marcus Aurelius, the emperor philosopher, testifies, the fundamentally aggressive character of the West was suited to the brutality essential for the struggle to mastermind a grand design. Regardless of any attempts at peaceful solutions that may have been made, it remains nonetheless true that the boundaries, rather than excluding them, attracted the 'Barbarians' into the world of civilized people. Boundaries intensify the dynamics of desire, attraction and aggression.

III. Symbolic attack

Out of the blue, in the sky over Manhattan, a plane appears and a tower of the World Trade Centre is hit. Eighteen minutes later the same thing happens again. Flames, orange and red, explode like wonderful fireworks, followed by the awesome, hell-like beauty of the tower disintegrating. Suddenly the walls expand, the tower falls, and a cloud embraces the whole

scene. The spectacle is dramatically stunning, and we repeat amongst ourselves, “It’s a film!”.

According to Alessandro Baricco, the events represent an irrational hypertrophy of symbolic precision, of purity of action, of spectacularity and imagination. He has observed that the eighteen minutes that separate the two planes, the revelation of the lies and truths behind the other attempted attacks, the enemy’s invisibility, and the image of the President leaving a small school in Florida to take refuge in the skies — in all this there is involve too much theatrical competence, too much Hollywood, too much fiction. He says that history was never like this, that the world does not have has not got time to be like this. Reality has no new paragraphs, does not use verbs that agree, or write beautiful sentences. We ourselves do it when we inform the world. The real world is ungrammatical, dirty and its punctuation stinks.

These images affect us because of their violence, the number of dead, and the fear they generate, but it is the perfection of the execution of the catastrophe that draws us and keeps us glued to the video. “The greatest work of art of all time” is not the verdict of a fanatic fundamentalist but of the German composer, Karlheinz Stockhausen announced on a Hamburg radio station. “That minds can accomplish a thing of this kind, that people can rehearse like crazy for a concert, quite fanatically, for ten years and then die: this is in an absolute sense the greatest work of art in the world”. He also remarked [...], “People who are so concentrated on a performance and then in one minute 5,000 people are sent off to their resurrection, in comparison, we composers are nothing”. Whilst talking, Stockhausen realized that he had been exaggerating. He justified himself by saying, “Where has Lucifer taken me? It’s crazy”, and he asked that the interview not be broadcast.

Aisthanomai: aesthetics has to do with nerves, with building a world by perceiving it, and arranging it with political responsibility within a network of connections, suggestions and concealments. Artistic value has no morality or autonomous value. Stockhausen’s assessment is therefore politically correct, because a great composer reacts like a Warburghian seismograph and — just like a visionary who is a free man, communicates the dynamic scale of disasters, unconsciously forgetting the preliminary prophylactic filter of moral and cultural condemnation. Nonetheless, the Musicfest in Hamburg immediately cancelled its programme of concerts.

The film *Independence Day* was a flop in America. Not even for amusement do the Americans believe in exceeding the limits: the destruction of symbolic places, of places of power, of places that are expressions of their identity. On 11 September 2001, an unlikely science fiction film became fire, dust and blood...As the writer Adriano Sofri has observed, those haters of humanity who chose the Twin Towers are not sufficiently uncivilized as to be unable to recognize the immeasurable value of our symbols.

The Twin Towers are Manhattan, like the Eiffel Tower is Paris and St. Peter's Rome. New York with her unique skyline amputated has suffered the traumatic loss of a vital part of herself. Manhattan is one of the major financial and decision nerve centres of the world. Like London, Bangkok, Tokyo and Frankfurt, it is one of the intersections of the global city, where everything is done and planned everywhere. The World Trade Centre is a most obvious and recognisable symbol, a visible concentration of economic power and public transport systems: crucial connections throughout the city, various lines of the underground system and the train for New Jersey used to pass under the two towers.

The seat of power, economic and otherwise, has been hit, but if we think again about the aesthetic truth that has so affected us that we find it hard to forget, we have to admit that the director who filmed the terrorist attack, using real not special effects, fully grasped the messages that cities communicate. To have struck the towers and the Pentagon signifies not only striking a blow at politics and the economy. It also signifies targeting the means of communication and the identity of a culture that expresses itself through its architecture whose points of reference are alluring signs that positively conjure up the essence of contemporary Western culture.

An identity is impossible to define without an image. This is particularly true of Western culture which, since images could be mass-produced, has made of iconism the instrument *par excellence* of self-expression. For the West, but not the East, we can talk about the cult of images - it was this very objective that became the focus of Islamic extremism, making the terrorist attack a chiefly symbolic one that also drew on the American notion of 'the enemy'. However, this extreme perfection, in aping the technological precision of the West is tantamount to the ultimate negation of what is distinctive of the West: fracture, imperfection, and injury.

Once again, monotheistic and iconoclastic purity is set against the imagined danger of polytheism, a characteristic that is peculiar to Western cul-

ture. Still vital, it transforms and questions its symbols by metamorphosing them. The resulting transformations perpetuate tradition by enabling them to circumvent inactivity, a trait that sets Western culture apart from others, including Islam, whose many marvels, frozen in time, seem lifeless.

Although far from coming to an end and dying away, we have to acknowledge that Western culture is more than ever showing its flaws:

“For some time, the West, outstandingly endowed with signs, emblems and logos, has been losing the battle of symbols. The West launches missiles from Martian helicopters, whilst the others use the fathers of multiple sons stuffed with explosives and nails, and girls pregnant with bombs as their ammunition. And now, in order to push symbolic aggression as far as the sky, the men of terror have combined fanatical suicide with technical power” (Adriano Sofri).

The time has come for greater security; in the current climate, the temptation to adopt restrictive rules for all channels of communication is flourishing. All censure is justified by the need to stop terrorism. Once again, the ‘value’ of security prevails, with all it entails: the inability to enter into a creative relationship with the other; psychological defensiveness; the concentration of authority to rebut the beliefs and identity of particular social groups; the cynical obsession of the state towards foreigners, or rather, in the Hobbesian sense, towards all citizens.

By projecting the conflict outwards and with a united front, by placing itself with absolute rigidity in opposition to the ‘Other’, the West is beginning to resemble the ‘Other’. It is seeing in this transformation a danger, and has delegated to a theocratic authority the power to interpret the world, and, without requiring evidence to support its view, mistrusts neighbouring nations. The notion of difference is disintegrating and with it the self-legitimization of the Western tradition.

Fear (or rather disillusionment, and the depletion of the contributions of creative tensions to the experience of the world) makes us return to the notion of purity, the idea of a chosen people, ethnic homogeneity, and submission to the Book. A regime based on rigidity is set against the uncontrollable dangers of free speech.

Restricting and policing the Internet because it is a potential instrument of war is tantamount to admitting that the terrorists have also won this

battle. War, security, controlling the network, the mausoleum on the site of the Twin Towers are not reactions that can reanimate a culture that wants to continue to be vital. The reverse is true — they are a like a verdict that sentences it to an inactivity to which it the Western tradition is alien.

IV. Vertical architecture

What about the skyscrapers and the emptiness that has opened up in the New York skyline? The French Architect Jean Nouvel has stated that he hopes the terrorist attack will not put an end to the great architectural theme of sky-rise buildings with its potential for symbolic meaning; he argues that surrender would be tantamount to admitting the terrorists are right, which would be politically and ethically unacceptable.

The disaster has opened up new spaces and perspectives. We do not need the immobilizing forces of commemorations. We need architects to fill the voids, and politicians who, like Pericles, even as they remember the dead, sweep their interlocutors to new enterprises, the only dynamic way to process mourning, and to give a voice to those who have been sacrificed.

The ultimate requirement when making sense of a tragedy is to prevent crude interpretations of the facts, and to rescue from oblivion the roots and causes of conflicts, and the way the East and the West are vividly and profoundly interwoven. Political insight has to be set against animal feelings of fear and revenge. By its very nature, political insight is the opposite of cunning mediation, and requires vehement declarations that can easily turn into conflict or war in order to bring an end to an uneasy state of affairs of man's making. No, the advanced nations of the world will not give up their skyscrapers. Mega structures built from the 1990's onwards have had an extraordinary relaunch in the USA, the Far East and some European cities. The greatest symbolic expressions of financial clout and creative and technological daring will not cease to rise in the sky. As Kurt W. Forster has declared, the attack on Manhattan will not stop the quest for the tallest building, just as the disintegrating cathedrals of the 14th century did not bring ecclesiastical architecture to an end.

One just has to think of Wright's Mile High Tower that contains an element of provocation: it is the point of convergence of the various financial centres that form the global society. The quest will be limited by the twin components of Economy and Structure. New York will never choose a me-

morial — a typically European idea — the financial value of the area rules out the possibility.

As Maxmilian Fuksas, the architect of the Twin Towers in Vienna says:

“What are we to do, are we to return to the city-cum-garden for fear of terrorists? We cannot abandon the act of creating. We are compelled to go upwards by the population density of the entire world. In China alone, 600 million people will move to the cities, and in Peking over 140 high-rise buildings have been planned. Manhattan needs 6 million square meters — how many acres would they cover if they were subdivided into six-storey buildings? During the seventies, when car bombs were used to attack American embassies, the State Department wanted to decentralize the new seats of diplomacy to peripheral and unglitzy locations. Is this what we are reduced to? Retreating to armoured and closely guarded strongholds? Or will we have the courage to defend the ideal of a densely populated and vital city?”

We cannot be neutral, and it should be clear that on the site of the Twin Towers no little trees should be planted. New and more daring skyscrapers should rise up from this devastated piece of land, in this to-be-again meeting place. The attempt to strike at the city’s architectural pride will be denied only through the futuristic dimension of a vertical city. The incoherence of what is past, and the energy that is being released calls for a new political and artistic sensibility. Only the Western tradition can produce the necessary response, by re-working the repertory of the traces of the past, and the scars and enterprises that connote it, a repertory that it appears to no longer remember.

“A living hell is not something that will come in the future; if there is one, it is the one that exists already, the hell that we live every day, that we create by being together. There are two ways not to suffer. Many find the first easy: accepting hell and becoming part of it to the point they no longer see it. The second is risky and demands continuous caution and wisdom: looking for and recognising who and what, in the middle of hell, is not hell, then giving them space and ensuring they survive“. (Italo Calvino)

No worldwide gendarmerie can restrict communications, it is impossible not to travel, and one cannot move away from the city — the city is Western man’s greatest invention and is full of his presence and signs. One cannot forsake the memory of what has been and still is, and move into a world that is static and isolated, calm, safe and without aspirations. According to Italo Calvino, cities can be divided into two kinds: those that over

years and transformations continue to give form to aspirations and those in which aspirations either manage to cancel cities or are cancelled by them.

V. Icons on the net

Since 11 September 2001, thousands of images have assailed our eyes and minds. At first, printed paper and television provided documentary images of what was happening. Within four months, however, these images changed: driven by a kind of voyeurism, the media went in search of the best shots of the tragedy, the most harrowing scenes, and the glossy, glossiest images of pain.

This voyeurism was contrasted by the irony (and in some cases, cynicism) of the digital images circulated on the Internet. These images, immediate and imaginary projections of the Western imagination, home produced and handcrafted by imaginative albeit anonymous computer wizards, and then privately and playfully disseminated, exemplify how the West perceives and interprets the current crisis. It is now interesting to note that these images are exclusively of the attack in New York. This is significant as it concerns the most potent symbol of an economic and political icon, (the heart of the polis) rather than a military icon. The repertoire of images created by the emotional upsurge caused by the attack in New York is vast. However, we will analyse only certain specific types particularly appropriate for understanding the distance between the fact itself and its representation.

V.1 “Self-representation through detachment” and the Inferno

The spectacular images and films of the New York skyline shrouded in smoke are flanked by images of demons. The vast melting pot of the Internet, augmented by the email grapevine, has ensured that many a desktop has been deluged by images, videos and animations of the tragic events of September, and the beginning of fighting in Afghanistan. Much of the material in circulation is anything but tragic or dramatic: ferocious sarcasm often replaces extremely pitiful scenes.

The source of the images (mostly European but also North American) reveals a mode of “self-representation through detachment”, and the capacity for irony inherent in homo occidentalis. In recent weeks, the West has often flaunted pungent self-mockery, as if to exorcise fear and dismay. The great ‘enemy’, the East, appears rather cold and hard and therefore in sharp

contrast to the 'lightweight' tragic West: fundamentalism, every fundamentalism, is far from ready to accept sarcasm and irony.

In fact, Americans, considered "godless", seem victims of a morbid fascination with the devil: the symptoms are visible not only in the proliferation of satanic cults, but also in the abundance of films dedicated to the subject. Even in the events of 11 September, it would seem they believe that the aggressor is none other than Satan, whose malevolent sneer appears in at least two CNN shots showing the faces of the presumed perpetrators of the attacks.

In fact, such diabolical images are not extraneous to the Western tradition. A similar case, supported by historical documents (but considered by contemporaries the product of the imagination), occurred at the death of Alexander VI, the much-condemned Borgia pope from whose swollen and smoking body seven demons made their exit. The images in question, however, raise certain doubts. Where did the malevolent devil to which the face belongs reside? In the bodies of the hijackers or in the World Trade Centre? Whatever the answer, if one gives credence to these kinds of images, the war in Afghanistan, if not exactly holy, is at least otherworldly.

V.2 The future of the site of the inferno

A further typology of images linked with the events of recent times portrays the site of the World Trade Centre in the future. In the mind-set of the Americans, an obliterated space at the heart of the Big Apple is unthinkable. The acropolis cannot remain charred and bare, not even for the time it would take to stage a cathartic tragic play. In this kind of *horror vacui*, the empty space should immediately be filled and revived, and to this end digital images have already shown how the New York of the future could look.

Some images show the complex of buildings that make up the world Trade Centre rebuilt and extended. The towers have increased from two to five and simulate an offensive middle finger salute to the terrorists. Other images, on the other hand, offer a view of the New York skyline in the event of a defeat: minarets and mosques amongst the skyscrapers.

V.3 The battle of the icons and the statue of Liberty

The battle of the icons and the statue of Liberty. The statue of Liberty is the symbol par excellence of New York and the United States. It is neither a goddess nor a palladium (if it were, it would have to be changed because

ineffective). Perhaps it is because the statue is not a recognizable goddess that it is so identifiable with the American mind-set. Together with this politically correct neutrality, the cinema and the rituals of tourism have turned this image into a powerful, versatile icon that can maintain its own in the war of images. The statue of Liberty unlike, for example, the Christ in Rio, can raise its arms to the sky in a vulgar gesture aimed at terrorists, the same gesture that is proposed in the plans for the reconstruction of the World Trade Centre.

In the event of defeat, a future for Miss Liberty, as the inhabitants of New York like to call her, has also been thought of. She will continue her existence wearing a burqa. Here too the Americans have judged their enemy badly: monotheistic Islam would find religious and iconographic syncretism quite unacceptable.

V.4 Other iconic characters

Someone has observed that this war is a war that has arisen around the problem of women. Here too the typical icon of the *foemina occidentalis* has entered the battlefield: Barbie. This time it is not a Barbie-Marilyn sent by the government to Vietnam to lift the spirits of the marines, but a Taliban Barbie. Note however that she is not a Barbie with a burqa, but an androgynous Barbie, bearded, and armed and she is handing accessories and weapons to her eternal boyfriend, renamed for the occasion Ken Ben Laden. Barbie the icon (loathed by women, adored by little girls, desired in the flesh by men, worshiped by gays) has become a man, negating her gender, but not her power.

Amongst the many other images, particularly the cynical ones, we wish to point out one that illustrates the distance of these images from the portrayal of the Persians by Aeschylus on the burnt out Acropolis. The ex-Spice Girl, Geri Halliwell, sings her successful hit from last summer, 'It's raining men', whilst behind her, in the background, the employees in the World Trade Centre throw themselves out of the windows to avoid the flames. The rhetorical and theatrical use of bloody scenes such as this has no place in the ethical and aesthetic values of the cultural tradition of the West, and is therefore to be considered barbarous in the extreme.

No tragedy in which the enemy speaks has been staged on the sites of the attacks, but a moving charity concert was organized in which, among the hundreds of lighted candles, pop and rock stars, actors and actresses, jour-

nalists and public figures of all kinds sang repeatedly “God Bless America”. In a culture based on the centrality of self and America, the ‘other’ is not ‘my’ problem; he is not the enemy to defend oneself from but an adversary that needs to be eliminated.

V.5 Osama Bin Laden as icon

The leader of Islamic terrorism who has brought America to its knees has chosen a video image for his official introduction to the whole world — an image that is eloquent, calculated and skilfully considered. An analysis raises several interesting questions and considerations on the value of an image for its power to communicate, and for the cultural and iconographic stratifications it can contain.

The image used extends his, Bin Laden’s, authority to all areas, cultures and nations precisely because it uses a posture that is widely decipherable. He appears as a hieratic icon, his face quite naturally middle-eastern, his facial expression showing his intense suffering, and his gestures composed. However, the expressive and aggressive charge of the image is assigned to the iconographic apparatus of combat jacket, rifle, and the bunker that emphasizes his militant faith, whilst the turban and long beard underline his total obedience to the tradition of his faith.

The image appears this way unquestionably because he is middle-eastern and Islamic. However, his decision to appear in the guise of a major saint, a new-born prophet fighting for his faith, derives from Christian martyrdom, itself derived from figures of the *Imitatio Christi*.

The evidence of this comparison is disconcerting, and a more complex reading of the image can be made. Christ’s right hand is raised in a gesture of benediction that is also a reminder of the agony of his sacrifice. Indeed, in accordance with the Byzantine iconographic tradition, the raised thumb, index and little finger form a cross, whilst the left hand holds an open book, the Word of God. The figure of Bin Laden is a mirror image of Christ: his left hand raised in a hieratic gesture of admonition, whilst the right holds a microphone through which he proclaims his message to the world. His image reaches the eyes and homes of all those who live in the West and the Middle East, and for this reason too it is so supremely incisive.

In the face of such studied complexities, one is prompted to ask several questions. One could reflect on the charismatic-totalitarian value of the

images mass produced with Walter Benjamin, or re-interpret the possible value of such an image in the eyes of iconoclastic Islam, and ask oneself along with Grabar, how come it was in the C8th that the major battle of images began and that it was in the 8th century that the iconoclastic Islamic faith came into being.

Above all, one has to ask oneself if this image is directed at the Western world, where we now live in a climate of inurement to inflated images, or whether it is directed at the Eastern world, and is therefore using symbolism as propaganda epitomized by the great tyrants and emperors of the East. In any event, Osama Bin Laden, who was a student in the West, learnt both lessons well.

VI. Wounds

A wound has been opened up in our collective psyche. Some people are calling for mass psychiatric therapies for self-centred, prosperous adults reduced to child-like states of panic, whilst others encourage nostalgia and sorrow for the collapse of the creative impulse in their own culture. Behind absolute Good and absolute Evil, behind the primitive and unsubtle tales that attempt to explain them, still undecipherable transformations are beginning to awaken, and deserve to be properly acknowledged: the West exists as a cultural identity that, described in geological terms, is characterized by a certain telluric restlessness that is the opposite of the stillness that is the feature of the oriental concept of 'Being', a state that is constant and unchanging, and beset by the paranoid ideal of an immutable Order.

It would be a mistake to ignore the wound that has been opened up, to deny it, and to try to restore it by speedily reconstructing the wounded body, or by ravaging the bodies of those who are arbitrarily identified as the 'enemy'.

According to the philosopher James Hillman, the wound can be seen as a sort of opening, a mouth, and a part of us that has something to say, if only we could listen to it. The wound acts as a vitality test of our tissue, of its sensibility and ability to react, and its capacity for tolerating assault and the mark it leaves.

The Western spirit, profoundly and visibly wounded, has two alternatives. It can react by becoming a victim and insisting that retaliation is essential for cure and the restoration of the status quo. On the other hand, as James Hillman has also suggested, it can elaborate and incorporate the wound as

a permanent sign, like an initiation that can reconnect us to fundamental values that will make us see how much ugliness and injustice America has come to represent.

From the images of the destroyed cities, from the atrophication of expressive forms – artistic and cultural – typical of the aphasia afflicting the world today, from the unfavourable comparison with the ability of the ancients to transcribe such an event into the language of tragedy, one can see that there is an occasion arising from these recent disasters to portray them in a dignified way.

Finally, in the search for words and images suitable for this time, what James Hillman has to say is essential. He has written that since the afternoon of 11 September he has, in his thoughts, been flitting between New York and Berlin and recalling how he has seen them during the course of the century. One, intact and still magnificent, the other completely rebuilt yet still exposing its open wounds, the gaping holes made by the bombs during the war; the decapitated Reichstag now covered with its transparent dome, a symbol of democratic hope; the traces of wall left for future memory; and the lacerated memory of the Jews re-assembled in the Liebenskind museum.

He reflects, in the end, that the difference between the two shores of the Atlantic during the course of the century – a festival of light on one side while the other was disfigured and overshadowed – is due to these wounded memories scarring the mental landscape of Europe whilst sparing that of America. The wound inflicted on Manhattan has cancelled this difference at one blow, restoring America to its European matrix. Perhaps, rather than tormenting ourselves over how American or otherwise we feel ourselves to be, we should consider the consequences of the events of 11 September: it is now impossible for any descendants of European consciousness transplanted to the New World to be excused from also having a tragic inner self.



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