The Development of Western Civilization

Narrative Essays in the History of Our Tradition from Its Origins in Ancient Israel and Greece to the Present

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THE DECLINE OF ROME AND THE RISE OF MEDIAEVAL EUROPE

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ROME
and the Rise of
Medieval Europe

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THE proposition that each generation must rewrite history is more widely quoted than practiced. In the field of college texts on western civilization, the conventional accounts have been revised, and sources and supplementary materials have been developed; but it is too long a time since the basic narrative has been rewritten to meet the rapidly changing needs of new college generations. In the mid-twentieth century such an account must be brief, well written, and based on unquestioned scholarship and must assume almost no previous historical knowledge on the part of the reader. It must provide a coherent analysis of the development of western civilization and its basic values. It must, in short, constitute a systematic introduction to the collective memory of that tradition which we are being asked to defend. This series of narrative essays was undertaken in an effort to provide such a text for an introductory history survey course and is being published in the present form in the belief that the requirements of that one course reflected a need that is coming to be widely recognized.

Now that the classic languages, the Bible, the great historical novels, even most non-American history, have dropped out of the normal college preparatory program, it is impera-
tive that a text in the history of European civilization be fully self-explanatory. This means not only that it must begin at the beginning, with the origins of our civilization in ancient Israel and Greece, but that it must introduce every name or event that takes an integral place in the account and ruthlessly delete all others no matter how firmly imbedded in historical protocol. Only thus simplified and complete will the narrative present a sufficiently clear outline of those major trends and developments that have led, from the beginning of our recorded time to the most pressing of our current problems. This simplification, however, need not involve intellectual dilution or evasion. On the contrary, it can effectively raise rather than lower the level of presentation. It is on this assumption that the present series has been based, and each contributor has been urged to write for a mature and literate audience. It is hoped, therefore, that the essays may also prove profitable and rewarding to readers outside the college classroom.

The plan of the first part of the series is to sketch, in related essays, the narrative of our history from its origins to the eve of the French Revolution; each is to be written by a recognized scholar and is designed to serve as the basic reading for one week in a semester course. The developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will be covered in a succeeding series which will provide the same quantity of reading material for each week of the second semester. This scale of presentation has been adopted in the conviction that any understanding of the central problem of the preservation of the integrity and dignity of the individual human being depends first on an examination of the origins of our tradition in the politics and philosophy of the ancient Greeks and the religion of the ancient Hebrews and then
on a relatively more detailed knowledge of its recent development within our industrial urban society.

The decision to devote equal space to twenty-five centuries and to a century and a half was based on analogy with the human memory. Those events most remote tend to be remembered in least detail but often with a sense of clarity and perspective that is absent in more recent and more crowded recollections. If the roots of our tradition must be identified, their relation to the present must be carefully developed. The nearer the narrative approaches contemporary times, the more difficult and complicated this becomes. Recent experience must be worked over more carefully and in more detail if it is to contribute effectively to an understanding of the contemporary world.

It may be objected that the series attempts too much. The attempt is being made, however, on the assumption that any historical development should be susceptible of meaningful treatment on any scale and in the realization that a very large proportion of today's college students do not have more time to invest in this part of their education. The practical alternative appears to lie between some attempt to create a new brief account of the history of our tradition and the abandonment of any serious effort to communicate the essence of that tradition to all but a handful of our students. It is the conviction of everyone contributing to this series that the second alternative must not be accepted by default.

In a series covering such a vast sweep of time, few scholars would find themselves thoroughly at home in the fields covered by more than one or two of the essays. This means, in practice, that almost every essay should be written by a different author. In spite of apparent drawbacks, this procedure
promises real advantages. Each contributor will be in a posi-
tion to set higher standards of accuracy and insight in an es-
say encompassing a major portion of the field of his life’s
work than could ordinarily be expected in surveys of some
ten or twenty centuries. The inevitable discontinuity of
style and interpretation could be modified by editorial co-
ordination; but it was felt that some discontinuity was in it-
self desirable. No illusion is more easily acquired by the stu-
dent in an elementary course, or is more prejudicial to the
efficacy of such a course, than that a single smoothly articu-
lated text represents the very substance of history itself. If
the shift from author to author, week by week, raises difficul-
ties for the beginning student, they are difficulties that will
not so much impede his progress as contribute to his growth.

In this essay, *The Decline of Rome and the Rise of Me-
diaeval Europe*, Mr. Solomon Katz presents a brief narrative
account of the most awe-inspiring tragedy of western Eu-
rope: the failure of civilized men to maintain the most civ-
ilized society the world had yet known. From the time of
Augustine to that of Gibbon, Europe lived under the shadow
of the Roman catastrophe, and hardly had our ancestors
emerged from this shade onto the sunny slope of the century
of progress when dark prophets began to read the destiny of
modern civilization in the decline of ancient Rome. Histori-
cal observers have found it all but impossible to contemplate
this glacial cataclysm without drawing moral conclusions,
discovering religious revelations, or describing scientific veri-
ties, thereby endowing the field with as much significance
for western philosophy of history as for the history of the
West. Confronted with this double tradition, Mr. Katz chose
first to focus his essay clearly on the central narrative of the
period and then succeeded in interweaving deft evaluations
of critical points of major interpretations of the history that will at once capture the imagination of beginners and command the respect of scholars.

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ROME, once a tiny village on the Tiber River in Italy, emerged as ruler of the western world. It had begun (tradition says in 753 B.C.) as a community of farmers, and its early history does not seem to have differed in essentials from that of any other Mediterranean city-state which, early in its career, sent its kings packing. To replace the monarchy, these farmer folk, by peaceful evolution and by revolution and civil war, formed an aristocratic republic controlled by a senate and a senatorial nobility. Under this constitution they brought Italy within their sway and began to master the Mediterranean world. Meantime they learned the ways of commerce and industry, and their simple culture was modified, its content made richer and more sophisticated, by contact with the older and more advanced civilizations of Greece and the Orient. This apprenticeship prepared the Romans to carry on the traditions which the Greeks and Hebrews had brilliantly established and so to complete the foundations of Europe and of the civilization of the West.

The burden of conquest and of governing the empire that conquest brought into existence proved too much for the essentially amateur and civilian institutions of the senatorial
The Decline of Rome

republic, and the ancestral constitutional government of Rome seemed about to end in military despotism or to dissolve in anarchy when it was replaced by the rule of one man. This was the work of Caius Julius Caesar (assassinated, 44 B.C.) and of his grandnephew and heir, Caius Julius Caesar Octavianus (63 B.C.—A.D. 14), whom we know best by the name Augustus. Originally this word meant little more than “honored,” with the added suggestion of “revered,” and this meaning gives a clue to the foundation on which the new regime rested: it was gratitude and admiration for the man who had restored order and saved the state. If gratitude soon made him seem a little more than mortal and a little less than divine, and if he was honored in death as a divine being, this was consistent with the attitude of the ancient world toward hero-saviors, and not surprising in the circumstances.

It would be a mistake to conclude that this shift away from a republic in theory to an empire in practice marks an abrupt or complete rupture with tradition. History knows few if any such breaks in the life of states and civilizations, and Augustus was careful to keep the ancestral frame of tradition intact. He kept the keys and title deeds to power carefully in his own hands and excluded the Senate and the senatorial aristocracy from access to them, yet he did not liquidate the aristocracy and it retained important duties and remained a major element of continuity throughout much of the long history of the Empire. In this Augustus was, perhaps, following a program of conciliation and conservative reform initiated before the collapse of the old government. In any event, his policy in these matters fixed the character and, broadly speaking, determined the future of the new constitution.
Had he chosen to do so, Augustus might have ruled as "imperator" (our word, "emperor"), the title by which the army knew him as commander-in-chief. In that case he would have founded a military despotism. Or he could have built his regime around the title "dominus," which carries the implication of lordship, even ownership, of the Empire and its people. Such a domination would have instituted a civilian despotism. He did neither, and the key to his policy is the word "princeps" (our word, "prince"). This means "first," with the notion of first in achievement and so in honor. The title had a republican tradition behind it, yet it was as princeps, that is, "first citizen," that Augustus elected to rule the world. This fitted the strictly legal aspects of his position, for in law he was never more than a simple citizen clothed by the Senate with an authority that was ultimately derived from the Roman people, just as it supposedly had been in the early days of the city-state republic. From the word "princeps" comes the term "Principate," often used to designate the government of the Roman Empire. And it is a proper term despite the fact that after the second century of the Christian era the government was seldom anything but a naked military despotism, because every emperor who ever wore the purple, whatever his public acts or claims, remained in law a citizen whose authority ultimately derived from the people. For this reason the Principate has been aptly described as a "disguised constitutional monarchy."

If, at first glance, the point seems far-fetched, it must be remembered that had this disguised constitutional monarchy not been embedded in Roman law and later in Christian thinking, the traditions bequeathed by Rome to the West might well have been those of a military rather than a civil-
ian state, of a lawless despotism instead of a government of laws. Under such conditions it is extremely unlikely that free societies, including our own, could have come into existence in modern western civilization. And had they by some miracle emerged, they would have found it difficult if not impossible to endure.

This suggests that in the long life of societies and civilizations it is not necessarily the most striking and dramatic elements that are the most potent and lasting. For this reason the words in which Professor Rostovtzeff sums up the Roman contribution to modern civilization make an admirable introduction to any study of the Roman Empire:

The ancient world slowly grew old and decrepit and was reduced to dust; but a new life grew up upon the ruins, and the new edifice of European civilization was built on a foundation that had remained firm and sound. The new building rose stone by stone, but its main lines were determined by the old substructure, and many of the old stones were used for further service. Though that world grew old, it never died and never disappeared; it lives on in us, as the groundwork of our thought, our attitude to religion, our art, our social and political institutions, and even our material civilization.¹

Any twentieth-century estimate of the situation and future prospects of western free societies which aims at realism and accuracy must take some account of the cause and course of events that took place in the Roman Empire the better part of two millennia ago.