

Backgrounds of
European second edition
Literature

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BACKGROUNDS OF EUROPEAN LITERATURE

*The Political, Social,
and Intellectual Development
behind the Great Books
of Western Civilization*

Second Edition

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Preface

This book provides, in compact form, a general survey of the principal historical and cultural events that have shaped Western Europe from ancient times to the present. It traces the main currents of European civilization from their sources in Classical secular culture and Hebraic religious ideals, through their fusion with the Gothic achievements of medieval times, down to their intricate blending in the cultures of modern nations.

The text is intended for students at the college level and may be used in several ways:

1. to provide background material for a course on the origins and principal movements of Western civilization as they were reflected in European literature;
2. to supply integration, purpose, and direction for a course in which a limited number of Great Books are studied;
3. as a supplementary volume for general courses concerned with Occidental literature or with European culture patterns.

To add to the book's usefulness as a classroom supplement, lists of suggested readings for further study are offered after discussions of principal topics, and for convenient review a chronology of significant events is given at the end of each part.

In this second edition, the authors have added much new material to the last section of the book covering the period from 1500 to the present. The chapter on the Renaissance

has been expanded to include brief treatments of the Counter-Reformation and of the Spanish *Siglo de Oro*. Two entirely new chapters have been added to cover the period from the end of World War I to the present. The lists of readings have been completely updated.

This book grew out of the authors' experience in teaching courses in European literature. They found that examination of great literary works themselves was not very fruitful for their students unless those students had prior knowledge of the cultures in which those works were produced. Intelligent reading of an ancient Greek tragedy, for example, requires at least a knowledge of Periclean Athens and of Greek dramatic form and stage conditions, and usually some acquaintance with ancient Greek religion and mythology. In the same way, Plato becomes much more meaningful after a review of earlier Greek philosophy. For a course dealing with selected Great Books that are inevitably widely separated in time as well as in subject matter, by beginning with works from ancient Greece and Rome, then turning to passages or books from the Old and New Testaments, and finally observing the amalgamation of Classicism and Hebraism in later Western literature, the teacher can intelligently arrange a coherent program of readings from past to present.

In their choice of material to be treated in this volume and in making decisions concerning the extensiveness of such treatment, the authors have been guided by the needs of students as these needs became apparent in the classroom. While it is not intended to be an exhaustive history of Western culture, this handbook nevertheless aspires to be enlightening on the principal cultural influences that have contributed to making modern man the complex creature that he is.

The authors wish to express their appreciation to Mrs.

Tess Kushel for her assistance in the preparation of the manuscript of the first edition, and to Professor Herbert W. Edwards of New York University for his critical reading of some of the sections. Gratitude is especially owed to Professor Albert C. Baugh for his many helpful suggestions and gracious guidance in the total process of planning and completing this volume. For the second edition, thanks are again due to Professor Edwards and also to Professor Harold A. Schofield of Colorado Women's College for their reading of the new material. Our wives have proved indispensable in the preparation of the manuscript.

R. W. H.

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OUR CULTURAL HERITAGE

We of the twentieth century are apt to pride ourselves a great deal on our individualism. Yet, try as we may to be ourselves, we are very much what custom, society, and the cultural traditions of the past have made us. To put it another way, we were born yesterday, but the world wasn't. All that we learn as we grow up is selected from what was discovered or invented in the past, sometimes the very remote past. Our most cherished ideas and social attitudes were formulated by those who lived before us. Even our daily habits and ways of thinking are products of centuries of cultural growth.

This culture into which we are born is an amalgam of great complexity, representing a fusion of the achievements of many previous civilizations. Three of these, the Classical, the Hebraic, and the Gothic, seem to have been particularly prominent in shaping the present Western world. Of course, many very important individual contributions (such as Arabic numerals) originated elsewhere, but the main stream of European civilization had its twin sources in ancient Classical and Hebraic times with a major tributary added by the later Gothic invasions.

Classicism, which originated in Greece and was continued in ancient Rome, was the principal contributor to that aspect of our life which is usually referred to as secular. Our school system, our civic institutions, our sciences, and many of our arts and crafts trace their origins to Classical inspiration. The distinctive qualities of the Classical point of view arose from the circumstance that the leaders of the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome were continually striving for a clear-eyed understanding of the realities of life. They were insatiably curious about the nature of the world in which they found themselves, and they were so much given to speculation that they produced the greatest philosophers of all time. In fact, the intellectual atmosphere of the Classical world encouraged individual thinking to such a degree that scarcely any modern theory is not traceable to an origin there. With the simultaneous ambition to create a sane and orderly society in which human dignity would be respected and human achievement consequently encouraged, they emphasized form and symmetry in life as in their arts. Being distrustful of uncontrolled emotional impulse, they sought to create broad principles of rational and balanced conduct which would result in the cultivation of mind and body and spirit. The ennoblement of man as a rational animal was the ultimate achievement of ancient Classicism.

At approximately the same time, in a small area known as Palestine, another desire to comprehend the universe as a coherent and purposeful whole led to the devotion to one God and gave rise to the richest expressions of religious feeling known to Western man. Here was a different attitude toward life which glorified man as the child of a loving Father, who was the creator of the universe and whose favorite creation was the human race. To learn how to serve God, to understand the difference between right and wrong, to be humble before one's Maker—these were the ideals

which Hebraic leaders expounded to their followers. There was a very great deal that was rational in these preachings, but the special quality of Hebraism was the glorification of the pure in heart rather than the brilliant in intellect. Our seven-day week with its day of rest was transmitted to us from Hebraism, and many of the most deeply felt artistic achievements of the Western world, together with the very language and imagery of many English and European poets, are indebted to Hebraic literature for their inspiration. Even when one examines the theories of such influential modern thinkers as Rousseau and the ensuing cults and philosophical schools devoted to right feeling rather than right thinking, one wonders how many of these "modern" ideas would have come into being without the impetus of Hebraic ideology.

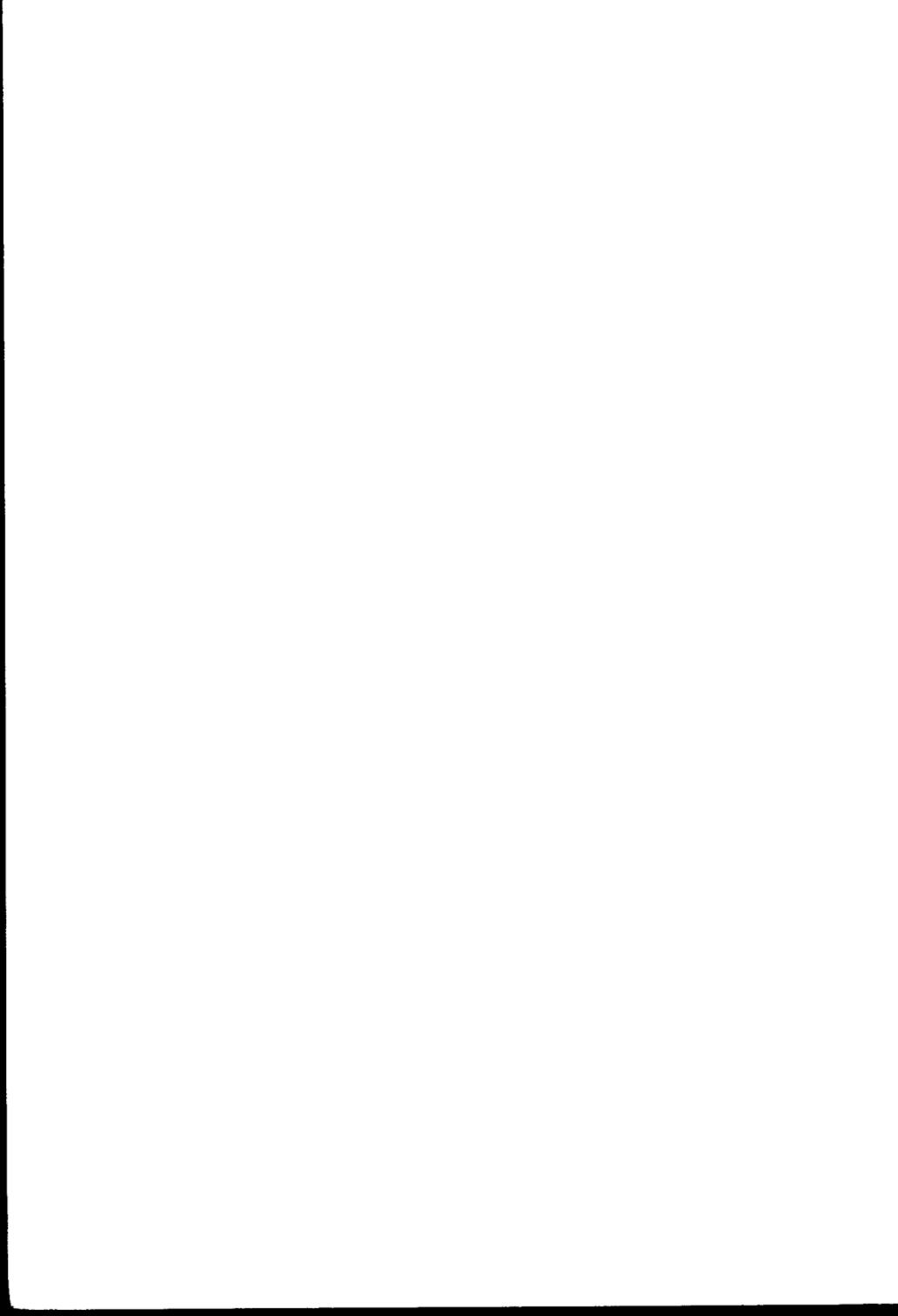
Before the first century A.D. these two independent cultural attitudes began to be aware of each other. In the first century Christianity, which originated in Hebraism, began to spread throughout the Classical world and to adopt Classical traditions, including a great deal of Platonic theology. When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the blend of the two culture patterns was essentially completed, although the many conflicts so produced distressed thoughtful individuals and occasioned many heated arguments. Such conflicts have never been fully resolved, as is witnessed by the never-ending debates between science and religion and the many troubled individual religious doubts and wonderings of our own time. But the presence in every town of some sort of a municipal building and school is a symbol of our inescapable Classical heritage just as the local church evidences the continuity of the Hebraic attitude toward life. The American twenty-five-cent piece bears the inscription "Liberty," a Classical ideal, on the same side of the coin as the Hebraic "In God We Trust."

The temporary setback to Western civilization known as the Dark Ages was occasioned by the Gothic invasions. Their most obvious immediate effect was the destruction or dimming of the composite Judaeo-Classical culture in Europe. But when the recovery known as the Middle Ages took place, the appearance of new ideas and attitudes indicates that the Goths had also contributed something of their own to the Occident. Restless energy, or love of activity, was primary among these contributions, but reinforcement of the ideal of individual liberty, a fascinated interest in the grotesque, a mystical regard for women, and the concept of personal loyalty to a chief were also influential in creating the patterns of medieval and later European life.

The reintroduction of Classical learning through the Moslem conquests in Spain is a partial explanation of the ensuing Renaissance when Classicism seemed to be dominant. The Reformation is explainable as a resurgence of Hebraic religious feeling. The Neo-Classic Age and the following period of the Enlightenment were inspired by Classical models, but the theories of the Romantic Movement and of many of the nineteenth-century German philosophers emphasize the intuitive approach to knowledge upon which Hebraism was built. Meanwhile, Gothic urgency had been very much in evidence in the physical and mental activities of Europeans from the Middle Ages on.

It is not particularly worth while to attempt to analyze every aspect of contemporary civilization with the object of indicating its reflection of one or more of these three cultural patterns. It is very illuminating, however, to recognize these three forces in their early and purer phases and to observe how the blending took place. Such interpretation will be given in the following chapters, beginning with a careful analysis of the three cultures and then proceeding more briefly with descriptions of ensuing cultural move-

ments and trends. As a final preliminary preparation for this journey through Western civilization, it may be helpful to think of mankind in Aristotle's terms as made up of heart, mind, and will, and to observe how the heart of modern man has been influenced by Hebraic religious feelings, his mind trained by Classical methods, and, less certainly, his energy inherited from or stimulated by the example of his Gothic ancestors.



Part I

CLASSICISM