

Mohammed Merah, W.H. Auden and the Iranian Bomb

I was driving my car the other day, listening to the news on the radio. It spoke, among other things, of an alarming boost in the dark winds of interracial hatred, raging in the city of Toulouse in France, where a massacre of seven innocent people, among them three children, by a twenty-four years old Muslim fanatic, had taken place a week earlier.

Learning of such an unfortunate shift in the effect of this tragic event on ethnic tensions and racial antagonism in French society, which in the first days following the tragedy seemed to bolster a united front of religious as well as political leaders across the country against the use of violence in the name of religion or as means of coping with ethnic or social problems, my thoughts went back to the person who set it all going; to Mohammed Merah.

As many others around the world, I also came across the smiling face of the murderer in the photo released to the press: a smiling young human being, who by way of a terrible twist of the soul and surrender to absolute evil, had committed the worst of crimes and put to ruin the lives of whole families. And like most of them, I also despised to the innermost of my heart him and everything that might have had the slightest relation to his formation as a person.

However, while reflecting upon the issue all throughout the drive, a peculiar thing happened to me. As I kept focusing on the various layers of evil that could have produced such hatred and malevolent energy, recalling the emphasis on the anti-Semitic agenda of extreme Islamists throughout France, the ever-growing frustration from the hardships and failures of North-African immigrant assimilation in that country, the alleged Al-Qaeda connection etc., I suddenly saw in my mind's eye, or rather – heard in my ears, the few next lines:

*A ragged urchin, aimless and alone,
Loitered about that vacancy; a bird
Flew up to safety from his well aimed stone:
That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,
Were axioms to him, who'd never heard
Of any world where promises were kept,
Or one could weep because another wept.*

The poem 'The shield of Achilles', by the British poet W.H. Auden, came to my mind, and with it came a terrible question: Isn't Mohammed Merah the young brat depicted in those lines? This question was instantly followed by another one: Shouldn't this poem, being half a century old, have prevented the baby born to Mohammed's parents in the heart of central Europe more than half a century after it was written from becoming what Mohammed eventually turned to be? Luckily, it wasn't long before the extreme naiveté of that second question occurred to me, so I put it otherwise: Shouldn't we have known for many years now that children, as well as shields, come out neat from the assembly line, and it is up to society and civilization to prevent anybody from drawing upon them dark alleys and horror scenery?

Indeed, a young, monstrous Arab shoots three children (and a father) in the year 2012 for no reason other than their race, and further indulges over the matter, and on the notorious shield of my soul the poetry of W.H. Auden comes to the murderer's relief!! Am I serious?

I also went on to recall the Internet pictures of Mr. Nicolas Sarkozy, the French president, visiting the Jewish school in Toulouse, where the main attack had taken place, and giving restrained and heroic speeches of lament in the best spirit of French patriotism, reiterating the unshakable commitment of France and the French to the values of the enlightenment and their protection before barbarism, fanaticism and terror, mainly associated nowadays in international public opinion with extreme Islam. For some reason, on the background of the poem that had just overwhelmed me, my recollection of Mr. Sarkozy's image wasn't favorable, albeit it's articulacy, and the associations of heroism and enlightenment. The lamentation, the restraint, the commitment – all seemed lacking, although very serious and straightforward. They hadn't seemed, and definitely weren't, phony, but deeply I felt that their ceremony prevailed over the real nature of the event. It did so because the 'event' was much broader than the one Mr. Sarkozy attended – president or no president. It had nothing to do with chronicles and official engagements and it didn't ask for any self-defense on the part of democracy or any reiteration of its ultimate causes. It had rather to do with the positive role of the basic and most luminous values of the liberal tradition of western civilization – a role which, very unfortunately, hadn't been staffed for a long while, to the utter indifference, not to say shame, of Mr. Sarkozy and his peers in world leadership.

For the real lesson the tragedy of Toulouse had written in Europe's turbid skies wasn't defensive in kind, and didn't have to do with upholding the basic values of democracy in face of their supposed foes or contenders. It rather had an offensive character, and the object of the offense were specifically the beneficiaries of democracy and enlightenment, namely the citizens and societies of the western democracies: ourselves and our leaders alike. In other words, that dreadful event hadn't illuminated any need whatever to defend Europe from the Huns, or defend Enlightenment and civilization from barbarism and anarchy or distinguish the 'good guys' from the 'bad guys'. It rather had shown how complex and incoherent the commitment of that Europe to its own spirit and tradition of enlightenment had become; how tricky and indeterminate. And I use the term 'enlightenment', rather than 'democracy' or 'liberalism', on purpose, since it is the former which conditions the later, and not vice versa. In still other words, the lesson is that the basic values of western civilization today shouldn't be 'defended', but championed! Since, contrary to the prevailing view, they aren't being attacked, nor are they at any risk whatsoever, except that of nearly total neglect and disregard by the nations and societies that forged them.

It is indeed frightening how well Mohammed Merah integrates into the above cited lines. But it is much more frightening and crucial how fundamental our failure is, as humans who believe that man is not merely an advanced beast, but is essentially 'better' than a thinking beast, to adhere to the timeless call of culture to provide the conditions for him and her to be so.

For this is what culture, the eldest child of civilization, ultimately is, beyond the surface layer of nuisance and entertainment: a self critical, relentless call for self

betterment – an axiomatic command from nowhere for supra-evolutionary growth, aimed at the selves of a person, a tribe, a nation, a humanity. Hence, John Donne's plea not to ask for whom the bell tolls stems not only from the fact that 'each man's death diminishes me', but also that each baby's birth augments my, your and our existence, first and foremost in terms of shared moral responsibility. Hence, also, Rainer Maria Rilke's command 'You must change your life!' does not suggest you change your profession, but offers you shared responsibility for the balance between good and evil in the world, if only by taking explicit responsibility over your own choices. In its ultimate form, culture is personal no less than deity, and as graceful, wherefore no doctrine or authority, nor, for that matter – therapy, can allocate the grain for personal human growth the way it does. Those can make us zombies, indeed very sophisticated ones, whereas only culture can make us human, nay – remind us that we were born to grow to be so: not only chainless and prone for self realization, but free together and reciprocally inspiring.

And this is precisely the element that was missing in Mr. Sarkozy's pseudo-dignified follow-up on the tragic events in Toulouse, as it is absent from global statesmanship and leadership at large: an authentic commitment to the moral heritage of western civilization.

Such commitment, especially in our turbulent times, commands recess in neat diplomacy, strategy and wild competition, traditionally veiled by the deference of state ceremony, in favor of honest pursuit after some basic pillars of the common good – not any vague, opulent conception of it, but one which is all to meticulously embedded in that magnificent heritage, not least in its literature, philosophy and moral thought. The former will essentially serve, as they always did, to water down the calamity of Toulouse into reiterations of complex rivalries and doctrinaire apologetics, eventually to dissolve into futile discussion on ethnic tension and religious extremism, leaving the deep wounds of their nurture swelling and intact. The later, however, would have helped us not only to look into the core of the matter and discern within its very complex scenery Mohammed Merah's deeds as the epitome of evil they actually are, but also see right in our back yard the 'vacancy where that ragged urchin loitered aimless and alone', and where he learned and absorbed total indifference to cruelty and suffering alike. Only the 'eye' of culture (as distinct from the 'hand' of administration) can retain the fragile balance between the formal practice of the great institutions of western civilization (democracy, civil rights, independent legal system, welfare state, executive responsibility etc.) and their moral-philosophical origins in its even greater humanistic outlook and tradition – from ancient Greece to the post world war II nation-state democracies of the western hemisphere. As W.H. Auden had prophetically noticed many decades ago and as we are today more and more impelled to see, institutions, laws and officials – as brilliant, premeditated and precise as they may be – are simply not enough. A system without inspiration – without a vivid moral horizon – is a prison, no matter how noble are the principles upon which it was originally conceived and established. One needs to remember some basic commandments in order to merit the name of a human being. And the ultimate drill to achieve that is nowhere to be found but in culture – that incessant, self critical call for self betterment, that writers, poets, philosophers and other learned and creative men and women in all generations had sounded in various formidable, strictly human dialects (for Art is the only strictly 'human' language, all others being shared by the human species and the fauna).

That is why it is absolutely essential that when we speak of enlightenment, progress, humanism, human rights, civil rights, tolerance, liberalism etc., we should by no means perimeter ourselves to the level of institutional-administrative functionalism with which these are nowadays associated – the UN, the Hague, the courts, the parliaments, the international aid organizations and even the splendid personnel that makes all of them work. We must remember that all those accomplishments of humanity are far from obvious and hadn't emerged, as it were, out of their own decisions or directives. They rather came to be out of a most unique human spirit that is traceable to various prefectures of antiquity, but which gained its final, prevailing hold in human affairs via the creative thought and scripture of western civilization. And that torchlight, albeit not indispensable for the daily operation of the great institutions and progressive ways of life which delineate civilized society, is unfathomably essential for the preservation of their essence, of the lasting commitment to their raison d'être. Hence, a reiteration of international cooperation by such an institution as the UN after the 2nd world war in order to prevent the recurrence of the political dynamics that brought to its outbreak, may not suffice, whereas remembering Thomas Mann's contemplations in 'Death in Venice' on the intransience of deep negative potential from what might appear as the noblest and most advanced forms of existence, just might equip that reiteration with the necessary breadth of regard to bring it to its aspired end.

Hence, also, it was fine that the Greek semi-God, Hephaestos, would draw upon the great warrior's armor the kind of scenery, let alone – chronicles, that befit Barbara Tuchman's 'March of folly'. That is what Olympian Gods, let alone semi-Gods, do. And it was certainly alright for the great poet to look around him after the two great global wars of the first half of the 20th century, and sound the howl of humanity for three millennia of progress straight into hell. It is very far from plain or justifiable, however, that half a century after that shriek our leaders insist on overlooking the lesson of the poet and follow the footsteps of those Gods, rather than be worthy of leading that humanity.

I know that some thoughtful readers, perhaps even many, might initially be appalled by the so called 'attempt' to present Mohammed Merah as a victim, since the real victims in the tragedy he created are obviously those whose lives he had taken in such a ruthless, nay – devilish, way. But this is exactly the point, namely that as far as the ultimate humanistic standpoint is concerned, there is a prior step to posing the question in terms of 'us against them'. The French citizen Mohammed Merah is guilty of the crime he committed and the later is as condemnable as anything can be. But on another level – the sole level which also holds a grain of hope to the community where his evil erupted as well as for civilized society in general – it is not Mohammed, but the person Mohammed had become that matters – had become(!) rather than was born. Had become in our moral back yard, and therefore within the realms of our moral responsibility. In other words: not in Bashar al Assad's Syria, where the mental diet of common folk admits the sovereign's indiscriminate butchery of his own subjects only to retain his despotic, primitive, autocratic rule, but in the Europe that for three millennia now hosts a ceaseless, colossal rally of the mind in search of the best ways to better the individual both social nature of the human creature; the Europe that gave birth to the notions of history and eternity alike and where the human animal had become a person, then a citizen, then liberated and then a participant 'by right' in the design of all forms of his community, environment and the world around him, and at the same time also learned the notions of mercy, tolerance, benevolence and grace; the Europe where

those elevated notions, ideals, values and institutions were betrayed and desecrated far more than elsewhere, if only for the fact that they were existent and glowing upon the raw matter of natural evolution; finally – in the Europe where 'responsibility' – the mother of all moral values – means not only following orders or performing one's job well, but first and foremost employing personal both collective liberty. If we should understand that this is the only Europe that is worthy of its name and cultural heritage, we should also understand that having a boy amongst us growing to be what Mohammed Merah had become, should force us to look inwards right after the last tear from his victims' funerals had gone dry. Since Nicolas Sarkozy, as well as his rivals for the French presidency, have more important things to do now, we should do it for them.

And not only for them. As I write, a crucial summit is gathering in Turkey to deal with an issue of the utmost importance to all the inhabitants of our planet, but mainly to my own country, my people and my history alike, namely the one concerning the future of the Iranian nuclear project. Perhaps it would be too much to impart W.H. Auden's image of the ragged urchin upon Mahmud Ahmadinejad as well, notwithstanding the fact he never wears a tie, but it wouldn't be too much to expect a display of a different, 'back to basics' kind of leadership in those crucial negotiations from their key figure: the president of the USA, Mr. Barak Obama. A leadership that not only exploits the most brilliant tactics of international diplomacy, but which also truly commits itself to the values of western civilization. You are not my president, Mr. Obama, but you are the leader of the civilization I take the deepest pride to belong to. Fortunately or not, I am in no position to offer you practical advice in the great challenge you face, except the following: do not limit your ears, let alone your heart, to the Talleyrands or Kissingers around you, who had read too much of their Machiavellis, rather than dip their diet with Isaiah Berlin's 'The Hedgehog and the Fox', and who therefore know all the answers except those to be honorably accounted for before posterity. I dare say that even my own prime-minister, Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu, albeit unquestionably committed down to his marrows to the safety and prosperity of my country, whispers on your ear the kind of advice that at times pulls the blanket all too forcefully off your checkerboard. He is your ally, however – not merely in strategy, but also in values, although he tends to be selective and contingent about them, I agree. History might well help you too, since 1938 Munich had taught us that evil should be confronted boldly and with no hesitation, while 1919 Versailles was no less clear in that it isn't recommendable to humiliate your rivals or push them to the wall. But not least, dear president, as you sit around the negotiations table, let your partners on the opposite side see in you not the reflection of their essential evil, but the glowing images of Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, Abraham Lincoln, John Quincy Adams, and even W.H. Auden, since you'll be drawing on our shields a considerable part of the future, and that Giant's poetry is not a bad companion for how to do so, taking everybody who is concerned into account. Who knows, if you do, perhaps in many years to come and in altogether different circumstances, a future Auden might honor your living figure with such lines as: "O Captain My Captain".

With the utmost humility,

Daniel A. Drabkin

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