

At the time of Gilman's visit, China had only recently opened up to independent travelers from abroad. Foreign visitors were kept on a tight leash and even required to use a different currency from Chinese citizens, which dictated the types of hotels and shops they could patronize. Gilman finds that Beijing has only three hotels that accept Western guests.

Twenty-odd years later, visitors to Beijing have more than 500 options, from the Ritz-Carlton to Howard Johnson. It is astonishing to compare Gilman's descriptions of the country in 1986 to present-day China. "Part of what made Beijing appear so gray and industrial," she reports, "was its total lack of commercialism—no billboards, neon signs, gaudy advertisements." Today, a visitor to Beijing would be hard-pressed to make it through a single afternoon without encountering a Kentucky Fried Chicken or Starbucks.

Twenty-one years before Paris Hilton's judgment—"Shanghai looks like the future!"—Gilman describes it as "a formerly splendid metropolis now moldering in dust and neglect." While the nightclubs of present-day Shanghai stay open until sunrise, Gilman found that Shanghai by night in 1986 "was almost a blackout."

Yet, amidst the stupefying rapidity of China's evolution since Gilman's adventures, a certain species endures: the self-righteous backpacker, intent on adopting a lifestyle of Third World-style deprivation in order to assuage his/her privileged guilt. Anyone who has traveled abroad knows these people: They brag about how little they miss flat-screen televisions, central heating, 7-11s, and bathing. Gilman gives these creatures a refreshing upbraiding, noting that the Chinese people whose lives are so sentimentalized by Western tourists don't "live famished, agrarian lives due to some sort of Eastern spirituality or enlightenment. Give most of the world's population our money and opportunity, and they weren't going slumming at all. They were booking a Club Med vacation in Cancún and drinking a mai tai."

There are many places to find fault with *Undress Me in the Temple of Heaven*.

The dialogue feels overly expository and contrived. The main characters address each other as "Sweetie" far too often. The title and the cover—a photograph of a naked woman obscured by a rucksack—seem manipulative, sug-

gesting far more lasciviousness than is actually contained in the book. But the crux of the action—Claire's mental breakdown and the harrowing task of getting her home in one piece—makes for a thrilling read. ♦



# Remains of the Day

*A post-mortem on the 'great five-hundred year Humanist experiment.'* BY CHRISTOPHER BENSON

John Carroll belongs to that now common guild of writers—the Intellectual Undertaker.

The Undertaker has an overdeveloped olfactory organ, acutely sensitive to the putrid smells in our culture. His writing announces *The Death of "fill in the blank": Satan, Protestant America, character, tragedy, adulthood*), and the urgent business of burial means there is no time for maudlin theatrics and interminable nuance. Solemn readers gather round the gravesite of his work; they watch the ritual with memories of what is past and curiosity about what is ahead.

*The Wreck of Western Culture* ends with these words:

Our story is told. Its purpose has been simple, to shout that humanism is dead, and has been so since the nineteenth century. It is time to quit it. Let us bury it with appropriate rites, which means honoring what was good, and understanding what went wrong and why. We do not want to fall for its charms a second time.

Why has the corpse of humanism remained unburied for so long?

Its rallying illusion is bred deeply into us by now—that knowledge will make us better and happier, and that we are free, free to improve ourselves.

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Carroll, professor of sociology at La Trobe University in Melbourne, distinguishes himself among undertakers. He is a kind of performance artist who favors a hauntingly imaginative, improvisational style of expression, liberated from cumbersome footnotes and academic obscurantism. A rotten corpse has left him playfully ironic but

also deadly serious. His book—the burial rite of "the great five-hundred year Humanist experiment to found an entirely secular culture on earth"—features pugnacious prose, skillfulness, transgressive wisdom, and mental verve.

Over a century ago Nietzsche discerned that "we belong to a time in which culture is in danger of being destroyed by the means of culture." Carroll picks up where Nietzsche left off, praising humanism for succeeding "brilliantly at the material level" and "partly in the moral sphere," but censoring it because the "cultural consequences were ruinous." Why did culture become a danger to itself? Here, Carroll parts company with Nietzsche. His thesis, more likely from a theologian than a sociologist, runs against the grain:

Humanism sought to turn the treasure-laden galleon of Western culture around. It attempted to replace God by man, put humans at the center of the universe—to deify them. Its ambition was to found an order on

**The Wreck of Western Culture**  
*Humanism Revisited*  
by John Carroll  
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earth in which freedom and happiness prevailed, without any transcendental or supernatural supports—an entirely human order.

*The Wreck of Western Culture* is a four-part drama: Foundation, Middle Acts, Fall, and Death Throes. If you relish the masterpieces of the modern West because they reveal “the deepest truths of their time,” then you will welcome this study because Carroll unapologetically “seeks the best, and neglects the rest.”

The foundation of humanism is the Renaissance, and its hero Shakespeare’s Brutus. According to Carroll, he marks a dramatic shift from the ideal of piety to the ideal of honor, from the saint to the gentleman, from derived authority to autonomous authority. Regicide is coronation. By killing one sovereign (Caesar) he enthrones another (reason and free will). Before the death of Jesus, Pilate declared: “Behold the man!” After the death of Brutus, Mark Antony eulogized: “This was a man!” Brutus, then, is not an anti-Christ so much as a surrogate Christ, obeying his own higher law.

Does this gentleman-hero possess enough gravity to stand on his feet? Through incisive analysis of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, Carroll concludes: “Without God, without a transcendental law, there is only death.” In both the play and the painting, he notices how the sinister entrance of the skull terrifies the hero, flattening his intellectual aspirations and stealing his volitional power.

*The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, another painting by Holbein, plots “humanism’s first step, to destroy the authority of Christianity.” Depicting Christ as a dead man rather than a resurrected Savior, “Holbein hit the central nerve of humanist thought, and with it every member of the modern West. No one can escape the elongated, bony middle finger of Holbein’s Christ

as it collapses downwards onto the stone slab—the new world is empty of authority. Mortality rules.” To stave off this “death worship,” Cervantes introduces Don Quixote, a heroic knight whose action is possible only through “a sizeable dose of unreal fantasy.”

The Protestant Reformation chastens the humanist heroes. Against the intrepid knight, Luther argues that “free choice is a pure fiction.” No man controls his destiny because God determines his comings and goings, similar to “the metaphysics of Greek tragedy.” Luther’s doctrine of *sola fide* is multi-pronged, designed



*'The Ambassadors,' by Hans Holbein the Younger*

to impale the “nihilistic humanism” of Holbein and *Hamlet*, the so-called Christian humanism of Erasmus, and the Roman Catholic doctrine of works. Against the grandeur of the gentleman, Calvin offers “a vision of the littleness of the human, in contrast with the harsh magnificence of God.” The pilgrim emerges as a “counterideal to that of the Renaissance.” What characterizes him is “the darkness of faith where neither law nor reason shines,” the fearlessness of death because, to use Luther’s expression, “death killeth death”—the crucified Christ overcomes “the thrall of the skull.”

If the Protestant Reformation was a “demolition from the north,” the Alternative Reformation was a demolition from the middle, specifically France. Carroll focuses on the painter Poussin. Along with three Italian predecessors—Donatello, Raphael, and Caravaggio—Poussin extracts the best of Protestantism to assault Catholicism, notably the doctrine of *potestas clavium* (the power of keys) which “put into the hands of the Church and its priesthood total control over salvation.” Carroll describes Poussin’s paintings as visual representations of *sola fide*. For instance, *The Plague of Ashdod* presents an allegory of a chaotic, diseased town whose only hope of renewal is from an outsider—a young boy who bears the gift of order and grace. If the town is the Church of Rome, the boy is the Alternative Reformation, breathing new life into the archetypal story of Jesus.

Part two addresses the middle acts of the story, which begins with two artists who explore “the immediate post-Reformation trials of humanism.” For the secular trial, there is Velásquez and his painting *Las Meninas*, “the first direct representation in Western culture of the artist as a great man, the free, world-conquering individual.” Here the artist is equal to God and king, advancing the Protogorean boast, “Man is the measure of all things.” For the religious trial, there is Rembrandt and his painting *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, a test that determines whether the principle of *sola fide* is absurd. Here “Luther’s darkness of faith is too intimidating and even the greatest of men, the father of faith, could not bear up.”

After these trials, a “bourgeois fusion” emerges, “an attempt to integrate the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation by forming a composite-character ideal of gentleman and Puritan.” Vermeer and Bach herald this bourgeois

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fusion: Vermeer with his paintings that depict the “home as sanctuary” and Bach with his music that wrestles “bourgeois consciousness away from the profanely worldly, and onto the journey of the suffering, but immortal soul.” Carroll regards this period as “the most stable and enduring of the humanist offspring,” with its major contributions to education and parliamentary democracy. But alas, the flower fades.

Humanism was “a parasitic form” from its inception, Carroll astutely observes, feeding off the strengths of Catholic, aristocratic, and Protestant cultures.

As the bourgeois fusion itself began to disintegrate there was one last attempt to revive humanism, by two polarized schools. One, the Enlightenment, reverted to a narrow, hard-core humanism stipulated on a deified reason; the other, Romanticism, stakes its individualism on trying to invest passion with sacred status.

Descartes, the architect of the Enlightenment, built a “palace of reason,” but its basement of “clear and distinct” truths was haunted by the specter of doubt, leaving religion and morality spooked. The gift of rationalism was science; the curse was “the childlike utopianism that spawned the French Revolution.” To Descartes’s “I think, therefore I am,” Rousseau delivered his own riposte: “I feel, therefore I am.”

With his backstage pass, Carroll takes the reader behind the scenes to see that

The eighteenth century was directed by the problem caused by the loss of faith. It was the decline of Christianity that led to the schism between reason and romance. . . . The schism remained, and in the nineteenth century, when reason was not prospering in natural science it began to inflict its own curse, the rationalization of the world, just as Romanticism turned increasingly toward the skull, and became nihilistic.

Kant’s rationalist ethics was the last best hope for humanism to stand on its own feet. To his credit, Kant furnished the moral basis for liberal democracy and universal human rights—the

greatest achievement of humanism. But for all its promise of being a “religion of humanity,” Carroll argues: “The brilliance of Kantian ethics suffers from a superficiality, its failure to take account of the power of the demonic in human nature, the weak, subsidiary, and circumscribed role of reason, and above all that, as Luther thundered, faith is only to be encountered in the dark, where the individual is in chains, without freedom.”

Part three chronicles the fall of humanism, as rancor and chaos weakened cultural authority. Rancor was directed toward God and the church while chaos presented two faces, akin to the ancient Greek masks of tragedy and comedy: one face nihilism and the other liberalism. Carroll delineates three stages of the fall. The first stage is a mockery of old cultures. Marx insisted that “the world was determined by economics and the iron logic of History” whereas Darwin posited that nature ruled through natural selection. One casualty is the human, reduced to “the skull disguised as the great ape,” and the other is religion, “only the illusory sun, around which man revolves, until he begins to revolve around himself.”

The second stage is “dynamic nihilism,” a fight back. Meditating on the figure of Abraham, Kierkegaard wrestles with “the core Protestant contradiction—that I have no free will, but am responsible.” Carroll contrasts two treatments of Abraham: “While Rembrandt’s doubt was that humans are not up to the divine call—the stuff out of which they are made is too poor a quality—Kierkegaard’s is that they no longer hear the call. They are lost in inwardness; trapped in subjectivity.” Abraham experiences the leap of faith, but the modern knight of faith cannot depend on such a miracle; he is subject to crippling doubt, guilt, and paradox.

Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche pronounces modernity a failure: “Either there are the uncontrolled Dionysian excesses of Romanticism, gushing feeling without any ordering principle; or the banal pedantry of rationalism—the dry scholar, the dull priest, the painstaking bureaucrat—eyes closed

to the demonic.” Unlike Kierkegaard, Nietzsche does not lean on the Christian faith because it represents the last surviving “redemptive illusion.” Man overcomes nihilism through tragic sensibility, greatness of character, or invented values. None of these solutions is adequate for the fight, so “Nietzsche launches his last value, *amor fati*—to love fate.”

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were experimental pharmacologists. With Kierkegaard, the Reformation was on Prozac. With Nietzsche, the Renaissance was on Viagra. Neither medication stopped the encroachment of nihilism, so the third stage in the fall of humanism is resignation. Freud invites modern man to recline on his sofa, where “the last glorification of the humanist *I* is psychobiography, pieced together from dreams, the only story left that has meaning, kept safe and intact in the unconscious.”

Part four marks the death throes of humanism, final attempts in the 20th century “to build anew within the wreckage,” to give “metaphysical weight” to the weightless world, whether in the novels of Henry James or the films of John Ford. The last chapter delivers an account of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, when Osama bin Laden smashed against the West like a metaphysical wrecking ball, destroying its Twin Towers of humanist will and reason. Now we are, quite literally, at Ground Zero.

Some of the finest books are ambitious to the point of hubris, synoptic to the point of oversimplification, and courageous to the point of rashness. *The Wreck of Western Culture* risks the flaws to achieve the merits as it traces five centuries of Western humanism, beginning with the Renaissance credo “I am everything,” transitioning to the Reformation credo “I am nothing,” and ending with the nihilist credo “I am against everything.” The Undertaker has written a memorable requiem, but he hints, much like Pope John Paul II, at what exists beyond the gravesite of false humanisms: a return to the “I am” of Jesus. If Jesus is God’s supreme man, then true humanism is possible through an imitation of him. ♦