

Forum

Legacies of Canaan and Etruria

TO THE EDITOR:

Basem L. Ra'ad's "Primal Scenes of Globalization: Legacies of Canaan and Etruria" (116 [2001]: 89–110) is to be commended for drawing attention to "exclusionary notions" (91) and to "human questions that might challenge" traditional narratives (98). To throw light on neglected legacies, the article surveys the development of the alphabet and marshals a wealth of interesting details probably new to most *PMLA* readers (e.g., that "the Hebrews adopted the Canaanite alphabet" [103]; that the "word *ba'al* still means rain-fed agriculture to Palestinian farmers" [94]; that Rahab means "broad" or "welcome," Cadmus "coming" or "east," and Europa "west" or "evening" in Canaanite [95–96]; or that "Ugaritic epics refer to terraces," proving that terrace agriculture preceded the Israelite conquest [100]). Even for the initiated it is salubrious to be reminded that "the flowering of Etruria predates the Greek 'miracle' by centuries" (92).

We may ask, however, whether the "two cultures" studied in the article really "were, *by any measure*, more advanced than" their "successors," who "appropriated *all* from them," and whether they have in fact been "elided" and "unfairly" or excessively "devalued in the construct 'Western civilization'" (89, 105; italics mine). I think it is no more a "devaluation" of Ugaritic texts to "maintain [the Bible's] centrality" (100) in Middle Eastern literary studies than it is a "devaluation" of Cinthio or Plutarch to pay more attention to Shakespearean plays derived from them than to Cinthio and Plutarch, because I am not convinced that the two fine Ugaritic passages quoted (101, 104) form part of as impressive a masterpiece as the Bible, which, I agree, they (and similar passages) may have influenced. In the process of showing what the Etruscan and Canaanite cultures have contributed to the Western canon, Ra'ad's article has "devalued" Greek and Roman art and literature and the Bible. Most readers would regard the latter as "a unique document" without necessarily accepting it as "an accurate work of history in an age of ignorance"; they

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might not agree that the “assumption of [the Bible’s] uniqueness prevents a richer appreciation” of something else, and many of them would contend that such appreciation should not be diminished if we were to discover that the Ugaritic “sources on hard clay” were themselves “redacted derivatives” (99). Archaeologists might wonder why Ra’ad fails to mention the 1993 find at Tel Dan of an Aramaic inscription from the ninth century BCE even if it did not change his view on “David’s historicity” (103). Some of us may disagree with Ra’ad’s application of “two alternative modes of being and of relating to others” (93), and if “[l]egendary narratives are made history” (97), this may happen to Canaanite narratives as well; but the article helps us to make a judgment on such issues, and it certainly has the virtue of acquainting a wider audience with material that has often been overlooked by scholars.

Something that tries to redress the balance of what has been presented one-sidedly deserves to be heard. Certain readers may think that there ought to be no political statements in a *PMLA* article, whereas others may feel that the journal should make more room for anything that enhances its human content. I deplore the lamentable “present condition” of Ra’ad’s “silent helpers” (105). I also grieve for the catastrophe that befell the Palestinian people in 1948 and caused the loss of Ra’ad’s family land and home in West Jerusalem, mentioned in the *PMLA* Forum of the October number (116 [2001]: 1447). While it is the Nazi Holocaust that indirectly victimized the Palestinians, as a citizen of Israel—indeed, as a citizen of the world—I must share responsibility for the suffering, past and present, of “the people in villages and towns in Palestine” (105).

But others have also suffered and suffer still. My wife, who lived through the horrors of a concentration camp, and I, who escaped Hitler’s Germany in 1939, though we were both refused entry into Palestine, immigrated—or rather returned—after the establishment of the Jewish state, to our “national home.” This is the term internationally recognized since 1917, though disputed by the Palestinians, who, together with the invading armies of several Arab countries, violently opposed the 1947 United Nations resolution for the partitioning of Palestine and are thus not entirely blameless for the calamity that then overtook them. It is because we too “retain deep historical roots” (94) that my wife and I were drawn to

the “Jewish community in Palestine” (100), of which throughout the years of exile there had always been a remnant. As survivors of Nazism who have lived here most of our lives, we would like to register our votes that we see “Israel as [. . .] evidence of ‘Jewish self-confidence’ that ‘discredited’ Nazism” and not as “‘a bastion of imperialism [. . .]’” (96). While we welcome any “‘soul-searching dialogue’” that is more than just “nominal” (105) and that would lead us “to accept rather than deny the other” (100), we are meanwhile grateful for the steps our various governments have taken to protect us against those who threaten to blow us to bits and likewise against those who aim at ultimately expelling us because we were not born here. Of course, I do not suggest that Ra’ad, who writes with compassion and from whose article I have learned much, would sympathize with either of these groups, but I cannot help feeling that he too might have shown greater awareness of the dangers of *all* “exclusionary histories” (92).

Wolf Z. Hirst
University of Haifa

Reply:

Since my essay emphasizes elisions and selectivities in the Western paradigm, I question why the two responses in the Forum have tried to politicize my discussion. Perhaps they are concerned about my including the biblical model as one operative component in Western civilization and in projects of colonization. Another letter, by Balachandra Rajan, says that the special issue on Globalizing Literary Studies fails to dispel “anxieties” about selective historiography (116 [2001]: 1444–45). Has this respondent read my essay? Wolf Z. Hirst’s response shows more careful reading and recognizes many of my points. A possibility of dialogue opens here, though I must answer fallacies in his arguments.

Because Greek and Roman civilizations and the Bible are such strong anchors in the West, their commentaries and interpretations, weighing down library shelves all over the world, have often been exaggerated and bent to the service of the paradigm. I therefore do not emphasize what is already highly valued. Rather, my essay includes what has been, as Hirst says, “overlooked”—often willfully so, I would add. Acknowledging roots and borrowings