IMPROPER CHARLIES

An old slogan from the student strikes in Paris in the Spring of 1968 reminds us that those who are in the right will always be on the left. That belief in the radical imagination finds another echo in the ordinary French version of the English expression, “You’re right,” which is of course “Vous avez raison” – You have reason; you are rational.

The French love reason and reasonableness with an almost irrational intensity. They believe profoundly in the benefits of doubting and are deeply reverent about mockery as a moral force. Secularity is sacred to them. That may be why the city of Paris was often called the capital of the nineteenth century, the era of Enlightenment, and it’s certainly why General de Gaulle would always ask at the breakfast table in the Elysée, “What is Jean Paul Sartre writing in the newspaper this morning?” ‘Intellectual’ may be an insult in this country, but in France it enjoys the majesty we confer on poets – poets such as Seamus Heaney who eventually deleted from his own famous poem “Digging” the original reference to his fountain-pen as a form of weapon. “Thumb” and “gun” were not just a half-rhyme; they were a complete contradiction.

So the massacre of the cartoonists doesn’t only slaughter half a dozen satirists. It violates France’s own self-image at its spiritual core, because satire is a straightforward, street-wise form of irony, and irony alone can guarantee the mental health of a humanitarian culture. It is the assassins, addicted as they are to the chronic simplicities of fanaticism, who are operating from a cartoon-version of the world and its intricate religions, and it is those macabre ghouls with their garbled ideology, not the improper Charlies amongst comic magazines and coffee-cups, who threaten to turn our zenith into their nadir.

It will be utterly lost on them that they murdered a fellow Muslim in the course of their pogrom, just as it will be lost on them that most of the words I’ve used in the three preceding sentences - garble, magazine, coffee, zenith, nadir, macabre and ghoul – come into English as gracious gifts from Arabic, the beautiful mother tongue of the Koran.

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