

C.E.M. Joad's Decadence and the New Barbarian

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To put it more specifically, to reject the doctrine of original sin, as so many of those whose outlook was formed in the atmosphere of Left-wing politics and rationalist philosophy rejected it, was to fall victim to a shallow optimism in regard to human nature which led men to think that the millennium was just around the corner waiting to be introduced by a society of adequately psycho-analyzed, prosperous Socialists.

The above is from Professor Cyril E. M. Joad's *The Recovery Of Belief*, written in 1951, two years before his death; and thus it could be said to have been written *sub specie aeternitatis*. It is an expression of a profound disenchantment with materialist and deterministic dogmas that ill-accord with Joad's religious view of the universe. In particular, the quotation is directed against the naive doctrine of socialism as espoused by Joad's former hero, Bernard Shaw; it is directed against the messianic utopia of Marxism; and it is dismissive of the psychological palliatives administered by Freud, Jung, and Adler. The quotation, indeed, a good deal of the book which reflects Joad's departure from agnosticism, is an espousal of the author's recovery of belief in Christianity.

There is, of course, nothing unique about leftist intellectuals "recovering" their belief in principles diametrically

opposed to those which preceded the "recovery." Arthur Koestler, Louis Fischer, and Malcolm Muggeridge, along with a host of other intellectuals and writers, have all walked the well-worn path which led them finally to abandon the "God that Failed." Nor is it unusual to witness the sort of individual—from any number of unmentionable debauchese to lifelong atheists—who, as death approaches, suddenly rushes into the ever-waiting embrace of religion, perhaps pragmatically in the form of a Pascalian wager; more desperately as a Kierkegaardian leap of faith; or simply because of mature and sober reflection in one's declining years.

What is unique about Joad is the manner in which he made the *volte face* (if indeed his espousal of Christianity could be termed such, for even in his days of seemingly anti-religious revolt against the norm in England, he never strayed from classic principles of *philosophia perennis* that are not absolutely divorced from Christian theology). Even more important is what he has to say aside from the dogma of Christianity. His theory of decadence preceded his "recovery of belief." Indeed that Platonically-derived theory, of pressing relevance to the present day, is of more interest in itself than Joad's espousal of Christianity. Before, however, turning to his theory of

decadence and its relevance to the emergence of a new form of barbarism, a glance at Joad the man—a perennial *enfant terrible* who was also a formidable philosopher—is in order.

“The Englishman Who Loves To Insult Us” is the title of a very critical profile of Joad published in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1953, a few months before Joad’s death. The profile, written by Ernest O. Hauser, recounts how the eccentric Englishman, who headed the philosophy department at a branch of London University, had incurred the ire of many Americans by making such unkind observations as:

Americans have humor, but they have no wit. This is because humor is a man’s natural inheritance, wit is the acquirement of civilization.

In regard to our language, he claimed he would:

... ban all Americanisms, I think the influence of America upon British life has been no less disastrous in the sphere of language than in the spheres of culture, art and politics. . . .

Of our diversions in life, he wrote:

Washing in all its forms is one of the sensual pleasures which is not forbidden by American puritanism.

It is not only Americans who felt the sting of his wit or became outraged over his at times intemperate remarks, for in 1933 he became *persona non grata* in his own country after he led the Oxford Student Union to vote that “this House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country.”

That extreme pacifism was publicly recanted by Joad when Hitler’s war machine was set into operation, as his perceptive essay “For Civilization,” published in 1941 as a Macmillan War Pamphlet, attests. Meanwhile, Joad became one of the most popular figures in En-

gland largely because of the Brain Trust radio quiz program which was originally intended as entertainment for the soldiers. A good deal of England, though, tuned into the “all-talk” program which featured a guest speaker weekly and a panel of experts, including Joad and Julian Huxley. The discussion encompassed just about everything. Taking its title from Franklin Roosevelt’s administration—one of the Americanisms that apparently escaped Joad’s ban—the program brought celebrity status to the controversial philosopher. He was to be seen judging beauty contests; heard dispensing his wit here and there; and read by a growing readership that delighted in his engagingly written treatises on philosophy, well-informed criticism of literature and art, and gadfly attacks on all with which he took issue.

The list of his books is too extensive to mention here, but a few of the titles are an indication of the personality and the erudition of the author: *Under the Fifth Rib: A Belligerent Autobiography* (1932); *The Testament of Joad; Guide to Modern Wickedness* (1939); *Guide to Philosophy* (1936); *Return to Philosophy* (1936); *A Critique of Logical Positivism* (1950); *Introduction to Modern Philosophy* (1924). The author’s fall from grace occurred in 1948 when he was caught *in flagrante delicto* without a ticket aboard a train from London to Exeter. After protesting loudly over the indignity of being questioned, he was brought to court and fined two pounds. This lapse in ethics, albeit a minor one, was all but devastating and it loosed the hounds in Fleet Street (as well as those in academia) against him, as old sins were called up: the treasonous statement of 1933; the small fact that he was not technically a professor since he held only a readership at Birkhead College which, as his critics were quick to point out, was but a night school division of London University whose philosophy department was undistinguished, and so forth.

Nevertheless, what could not be dismissed were his writings—wide-ranging, polemical, and expressive of a lucid approach to philosophy. His scholarship, therefore, transcends his peccadilloes and American philosophers who were above weighing his gibes at America too heavily recommended his scholarly books wholeheartedly, especially his introductory studies to philosophy. Thus, when one turns to program notes of those exciting public discussions and lectures that were commonplace in the United States in the thirties, forties, and fifties yet now are a rarity, one discovers time and time again Joad's name ranked along with major philosophers as a reference. In particular, The Muhlenberg Forum, which sponsored a series of lectures in philosophy chaired by Professor E. G. Spaulding of Princeton University (in 1937-38), recommended as suggested reading the works of Bertrand Russell, Alfred North Whitehead, William James, and Cyril Joad.

It is problematical whether Joad would be popular today, especially in most university philosophy departments of the British or American variety, for in addition to his being provocative (he defined himself as the "nastiest piece of work unhung"), a recurrent theme in his ubiquitous writings is that, by and large, modern philosophers—particularly those who have abandoned metaphysics—have nothing to say and the little that they have to say is said very badly. Though, as his writings indicate, logical positivism and analytical philosophy bore the brunt of his attack, he was no less critical in his analysis of the existential, phenomenological, and other subjectivist schools of thought. And he took particular offense at needless obfuscation and obscurity.

This, then, is the author of *Decadence*, which is Joad's most trenchant criticism of contemporary philosophy and its abandonment of metaphysics. It is also his

most incisive criticism of a prevailing malaise that affects all areas of contemporary life, as well as one of the most engaging intellectual considerations of a theory, Platonic in origin, that defines the present day. Of this book Professor Brand Blanshard, the late professor emeritus of Yale University, wrote in 1949: "Though the book is a jeremiad, it is that odd sort of lamentation which is a pleasure to read. Joad's irrepressible gusto and his gift for clear and easy writing make him unfailingly interesting." The review of *Decadence* by Blanshard, which appeared in the July 16, 1949, issue of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, is in itself interesting in that Blanshard recognized that Joad had put forth a telling, philosophical criticism of contemporary society that was not at all technical in composition. It is an example of the lucid writing that Joad prided himself upon and, though it necessarily incorporates philosophical argument and effortlessly explains related concepts, it is accessible to the average, literate reader. That this book is all but impossible to find today is symptomatic of the fact that so many who make it their job to search for the key to contemporary malaise are unaware of it.

Decadence, as Joad defines it, is the state that society finds itself in when universals such as truth, goodness, and beauty are unrecognized, ignored, and denied. It is man's denial, born of *hubris*, of all that is beyond the self, a headlong plunge into primarily sensory data, into the cult of the self, and into a predominantly materialistic, inverted, and subjective mode of life. In Plotinian terms, it is the state in which one "consorts with shadows from the nether world" in preference to recognizing the non-natural order of things. The universals then—truth, beauty and goodness above all—are the "objects," the recognition of which raises men above the level of mere brutish, acquisitive, and profane beings. In-

deed they are that which make for a "Socrates unsatisfied" instead of a "pig satisfied." The "object," for those theologically-minded, would also be inclusive of God and/or divine attributes associated with the Deity.

The "dropping of the object" occasions the opposite of the above. It salutes that which is rooted in the here and now at the expense of the transcendent and eternal. Values accordingly become attenuated, if not erased altogether, and dogmas like "situation ethics" take the center of the stage. Those stout-hearted schools of anthropologists and like-minded sociologists, so popular during the 1960s, who dismissed any objective remark or criticism as "value judgments" are representative of the situational ethical dogma. Likewise, the assertion that "There is no truth," "Everything is relative," follows suit, though those who advanced such views failed to realize the obvious: that in making these statements they thereby uttered a "truth" and made a statement in itself that is not relative.

But it is not just in the realm of ethics that Joad's theory of decadence applies. It also reaches into the arts, into the political arena, into all areas of human behavior and human thought, and it is this inclusiveness which undoubtedly caused Blanshard to entitle his previously mentioned review "Dropping of the Object Everywhere." We find in reading *Decadence* that all that wars against "the object" is in turned warred against by Joad. Anthropology, psycho-analysis, and Marxism receive particular attention for their equating of morality with expediency and they thus become examples of decadence, producers of what Joad calls an "insipid lifestyle," one in which the non-natural order is debased and etiolated.

Joad holds that we are now living in a period of decadence because there are no objective standards and subjectivist views dominate all areas of modern cul-

ture. When he wrote the book, logical positivism and analytical philosophy were dominant approaches in Western philosophy, with Thomism, Neo-Kantianism, and Phenomenology as struggling alternatives to the more popular positivist-analytical approaches. Hence, the condition of Western philosophy was very bleak, as both positivist and analytical philosophers were opponents of absolutes of any kind and their views tended to subjectivism in ethics or reductionist psychologism. The situation today, just short of fifty years later, is not perceptibly different.

Decadence, then, is antagonistic to *philosophia perennis*: It runs counter to the disinterested pursuit of truth which "starts from Plato and Aristotle, running through the neo-Platonists and [is] subsequently reinforced and enriched by Christianity." Accordingly, it runs counter to our Western intellectual, moral, and religious heritage (Joad does not treat in depth the application of decadence to the Orient, though it is easily seen how the argument would apply there, *mutatis mutandis*), and it is a flight from "the object."

Before turning to a consideration of how decadence, as defined by Joad, afflicts contemporary man, causing not only a state of decadence but an actual mutation of man, another definitive quotation from Joad is in order:

At this level what I have called the "dropping of the object" exhibits itself in an extreme concentration upon material things and material values, in an indifference to beauty, a semi-contemptuous patronage of art, a depreciation of knowledge for its own sake combined with a purely utilitarian attitude to education, in a decline in respect of the practice of the specifically Christian virtues, notably compassion, gentleness, humility, and mercy

Decadence was written between 1945-1947 and it reflects the aftermath of two

world wars, two destructive phenomena which the author writes of as accelerating the decline of morals, particularly Christian morals. It is in that context that Joad distinguishes his definition of decadence from that usually associated with the word. For the common definition of a decadent age has to do with periods of military weakness, declining population, disagreeable standards of living, and perhaps sexual immorality. He cites Greece after the Periclean age as an example; the second century of the Roman Empire as another; the age of Louis XV as yet another; and the final years of the Ching dynasty as a classic example of decadence as it is usually defined. As we have seen, Joad's decadence is not limited to these factors; in fact these factors are often the converse of decadence as Joad defines it. Thus, the decadence of the contemporary world is potentially more catastrophic than those periods of historical decline, or periodic nadirs, mentioned above. The present decadence augurs a total metaphysical decline in which not only values and knowledge are being lost but also one in which those values become unrecognizable. Man become insect, as it were. A termite society.

Now if Joad is correct, this theory of decadence would explain, in part, the alarming type of man that is appearing throughout the country and gradually throughout the world. This creature, which will be referred to as the New Barbarian (to borrow from Nietzsche), is a totally acquisitive, amoral and lethal force producing a mutation of what has been hitherto recognized as human. He has not only "dropped the object," he was never in possession of it. He would instead seek to deny the existence of "the object" to one and to all. He is a totally self-centered being in search of stimuli for his own self-aggrandizement. What Joad referred to as "experience valued for its own sake, irrespective of

the quality of experience," is his *modus operandi* and he preys upon the very values—manipulating them to his own end—that he so contemptuously denies.

This New Barbarian is a version of the *Übermensch* of Nietzsche who appears today in a far more terrifying sense than even Nietzsche himself envisioned. Traditional morality thrown into contempt; Christian virtues derided; altruism denied; cruelty exalted; irrationalism enthroned; religion, science, and philosophy vitiated and psychologized: these Nietzschean themes are well known to all who have acquainted themselves with that troubled philosopher's theory of power and will. Yet the New Barbarian is a bit more subtle than the Nietzschean anti-hero, a bit more adept at subterfuge, more of a chameleon on the surface than the self-proclaimed Nietzschean barbarian of old.

G. K. Chesterton glimpsed the emergence of this phenomenon, though he pictured it as but a recrudescence:

*Of God and man dishonored
Of Life and Death made vain
Lo, the Old Barbarian
The barbarian come again....*

Yet this creature of decadence is a new manifestation, at least in his growing numbers and in his resolve at present. He has emerged out of a miasma of particularly nineteenth-century irrational ideologies, not the least of which is the Nietzschean celebration of blind and destructive will. Of the latter, Bertrand Russell wrote in his well-known history of philosophy: "I will not deny that, partly as a result of his teaching, the real world has become very like his nightmare, but that does not make it any less horrible." The New Barbarian is the nightmare realized.

Psychology in general and psychoanalysis in particular are cited by Joad as creating an atmosphere of decadence since they promote irrationalism. The undermining of morality and objective

standards has been considerably advanced by the latter, as Joad reveals in his description of Freud's psychoanalytical tendency to reduce all issues to instinctive, animal urges and to speak of morality as mere sublimations of these urges. (It is not only in *Decadence* that Joad deals with psychoanalysis; he included a discussion of it in his autobiography *Under the Fifth Rib*, where he grouped it under his collective chapters of "dislikings" entitled the "Cult of Unreason." It is in those chapters that Joad gives a rather colorful description of the theory of the unconscious and sublimation by noting, *à la* Freud, that a man's sudden aversion to pickled cabbage in a restaurant is undoubtedly but an unconscious desire to elope with the waitress.)

The purpose here is not to delve into a discussion of psychology and psychoanalysis, save for the mention that the New Barbarian, this particular manifestation of decadence, has come under the aegis of psychiatry and psychology for both treatment and definition, neither of which has been effected with any success. The New Barbarian has been misdefined variously as psychopath, sociopath, and has recently emerged out of the related field of criminal psychology as "serial murderer." But these specialized attempts to define what is a philosophical, not a psychological problem, have only touched upon the surface of the most noticeable form of the New Barbarian: those heinous creatures who appear in the media after committing some unthinkable outrage against the public. They seem to be modern versions of Dracula, horrid offshoots from some blood-curdling science fiction movie, pestilential growths from the subterranean depths of H.G. Wells's *Time Machine*, grown-up versions of "The Bad Seed." In expressing no regret for their crimes, in showing no emotion for their vile deeds, in recognizing no values and nothing beyond their essentially infan-

tile desires, they reveal that they are indeed of a very different order than that which is generally thought of as human.

The New Barbarian as mass murderer, however, is only one manifestation of this barbarism. (Psychiatry, by failing to recognize "the object" and attributing all problems to emotive and psychological causes, is quite inadequate to cope with any version of this phenomenon.) For more often than not, the New Barbarian displays his barbarism in less sensationalist ways: in calm and calculated contempt and subversion of all laws, rules, and standards which impede his will. Like an artful chameleon he blends with the crowd, functions smoothly in society, and is undetectable except when his violation of moral and ethical standards of society is exposed. Otherwise, his lack of an integrated self, his lack of a moral center, his lack of loyalty and his virtual solipsism are concealed beneath a mask of ordinariness. Nicolas Berdyaev's comments on evil could be applied to the New Barbarian: "Evil is above all the loss of integrality; it is the breaking away from the spiritual center, and the formation of autonomous parts which begin to carry on an independent existence of their own. The good in man, on the other hand, is inner integrality, interior unity, the subordination of the life of the soul and a bodily life to a spiritual principle." And, as seen from the above, Berdyaev's description of the integrality of man is what Joad calls "the object."

The New Barbarian, the unrestrained will of decadence is in determined opposition to truth, beauty, and goodness, whether the form he takes is openly lethal or seemingly benign. (He may, in fact, manipulate his way through life without committing any legally punishable crime.) What is of central importance is his utter lack of morality and ultimately his utter lack of personhood. He is, in essence, a fragmented series of electrochemical impulses, a Humean bundle of

perceptions in extreme disarray, a de-based and lethal form devoid of substance and integrity. His essential make-up is violently fragmented. Thus, what appears on the surface to be a single entity is actually many; what may appear to be benign is lethal; and what appears to be a person is not. Even the gender employed here for convenience is inapplicable, for the New Barbarian is genderless. Such is the New Barbarian; the antithesis of "the object"; the fore-runner of the termite society that Joad prophesied.

Psychiatry, under whose specialization the study and the treatment of this mutant being has been placed, has found itself powerless to deal with the New Barbarian, for he is incurable. Attempts to place the New Barbarian under the umbrella of "mental illness" are far from the mark, for above all the New Barbarian is sane. He exploits psychiatry when it suits his purpose, since psychiatry has been a convenient tool to escape criminal punishments. Too often our criminal justice system has accepted a form of plea bargaining whereby the criminal undergoes psychiatric treatment in lieu of criminal punishment. All this has become commonplace today, and so we witness quite sane criminals passing themselves off as "mentally ill"—a disservice to those unfortunate souls who have *bona fide* mental problems. In reference to this charade, Dr. Thomas Szasz, the maverick psychiatrist from Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse, New York, exclaimed in a letter to the *New York Times*: "They are not sick, but sickening; not disturbed, but disturbing."

Another psychiatrist who has independently done impressive research on this new form of being is the late Dr. Hervey Cleckley. His seminal study, *Mask of Sanity* (1941), revealed the inability of psychiatry in dealing with the problem of the psychopath, or as we choose to call the phenomenon, the New Barbarian. In

Mask of Sanity, Dr. Cleckley writes *à propos* the phenomenon:

I have, after more than three decades, had the opportunity to observe a considerable number of patients who, through commitment or the threat of losing their probation status or by other means, were kept under treatment not only for months but for years. The therapeutic failure in all such patients observed leads me to feel that we do not at present have any kind of psychotherapy that can be relied upon to change the psychopath fundamentally.

Dr. Cleckley also made a plea for the experts to come together so as to find some understanding of the dilemma presented, but only silence ensued from the medical-psychiatric establishment and so there has been no answer to the problem Dr. Cleckley raised.

This argument, of course, is invidious to the medical-psychiatric establishment and opposition to it is to be expected. But, as stated before, the rise of the New Barbarian and his direct connection with decadence bring the subject under the consideration of intellectuals in general. Specialized interests, having failed to either stem the rapacious march of the New Barbarian or to explain how he came to be or even to understand what he is, must either retire or else share the field with various disciplines that offer more hope of explaining, if not actually solving, the problem. Joad argued persuasively that *philosophia perennis*, the tradition which eschews specialization, is best equipped to analyze decadence and since the New Barbarian emerges from decadence, it is to the catholicity of that tradition that we must turn. In turning to this disinterested source, we turn away from specialization, which, in this case, is the specialized tendency to treat medically all sorts of social problems.

Thus, we have the New Barbarian among us, and as universals recede into the background, as "the object" which

they comprise becomes fainter and fainter, decadence advances in the modern world. The signal force of the media which could turn the tide instead salutes the New Barbarian and his revolt against standards; thus we have any number of "role models" from Hollywood which are actually prototypes of the New Barbarian. The popular soap operas on television present as one to be emulated the type of being who is cynical, manipulative, amoral—one who thrives in an all but solipsistic world where blatant contempt for "the object" is depicted as the norm.

Likewise, the plague of subjectivism and psychological reductionism permeates the arts and it is the inverted standards of the New Barbarian which are supplanting time-honored and civilized traditions. It is not alone the proverbial backwoods fundamentalist who abhors the depravity inherent in the lyrics of much rock music, for example; not only a Solzhenitsyn who expresses his horror at the perversion of music itself; not only the fuddy-duddy who recoils from subjectivist literature that focuses on the abnormal and bizarre; not only a retrogressive few who are appalled at the ugliness of much of modern art and the drabness of what passes as modern architecture. There are many who still have

an awareness of "the object," some intimation of that which is beyond the self, some stubborn refusal to accept a merely utilitarian, valueless, and pragmatic view of the universe. It is they who resist what Joad refers to as the "advance of insecthood."

The message of Joad's study on decadence is a call, admittedly couched in the warnings of a Cassandra, that intellectual, moral, and aesthetic values must be re-asserted in a world which is fast denying these qualities. It is a call for traditional man to take stock of himself *vis-à-vis* an entirely different creature undermining all that tradition represents. Joad, furthermore, asserts that Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) is fast gaining ground—in tandem, it might be said with the drugged utopia of Huxley's *Island* (1962) which has made headway since Joad's death—and it is in consideration of this decline of values that Joad leaves us with this query:

My question, then, is whether it is possible in such a society that any refinement of the spirit, any integrity of the mind, any purity of thought or disinterestedness of endeavour, can survive to care for and to create what is beautiful, to discover and to pursue what is true, actively to practice what is good and to maintain an assurance of the existence and an inkling of the nature of God.