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Permanence and Change

The liveliest definition of the word *conservative* is Ambrose Bierce's in *The Devil's Dictionary*: "Conservative, n. A statesman who is enamored of existing evils, as distinguished from the Liberal, who wishes to replace them with others." To put this in a less mordant fashion, the conservative has his roots in the past, and seeks permanence; while the liberal glories in his vision of the future, and is a champion of change.

Because the liberal or the radical desires sharp alteration of the existing order, ordinarily the liberal or the radical is more active than the conservative. Except when aroused by dread of perilous change or alarmed by the decay of his society, the conservative tends to rely upon custom, habit, and established institutions. It is this tendency which gave John Stuart Mill cause for calling conservatives "the stupid party."

Yet when the conservative is roused to serious thought and action, often he can move with a power startling to his radical or liberal adversaries. There exist stupid conservatives, quite as there are stupid liberals and radicals; but conservatives do not actually constitute the "stupid party." Walter Bagehot wrote that "conservatism is enjoyment." The conservative believes life to be good, despite all its afflictions; and he believes that American society, for all its large defects, remains sound at its core. So he does not share the radical's frantic desire to mold all things anew. He does not believe that ours is the worst of all possible worlds; nor that there ever will come to pass a perfect world, here below. Conservatives form the stupid party only in the sense that radicals form the neurotic party: that is, if some conservatives are merely dull and complacent, nevertheless some radicals are merely malcontent and hysterical—the men who went out to David in the Cave of Adullam. "Ordinarily," Professor E. J. C. Hearnshaw wrote, "it is sufficient for the conservative to sit and think, or perhaps merely to sit."

Nowadays, however, many conservatives have become aware that it cannot suffice for them merely to sit; they must think as well, and act. There wrote to me some years ago a Scottish friend—George Scott-Moncrieff, the man of letters—who put this point memorably: "People seem to accept premises that have been rejected by the wise through all the ages, and there is a horrible ominous throbbing in the air like the sound of countless trotters on the cliff-head at Gadara." All the good places and people, he continued, are being sacrificed "not to a candid malevolence but to unbearably specious cant."

Alarmed at the spirit of the age, men and women of the conservative cast of mind have begun to act intelligently. Stupidity is one of the principal accusations against conservatives—although what is meant by the charge, ordinarily, is that conservatives do not believe that schemes of positive law and mass meetings can make this world of ours into a terrestrial paradise. To the visionary, the conservative retorts that the utopian is the true fool.

Another charge frequently brought against conservatives is that they set their faces against Progress. This is a misinterpretation of conservatives' attitude. The conservative is not opposed to large improvements, although he denies that there exists any such force as a mystical Progress, with a Roman P, at work in the world. When a society is progressing in some respects, usually it is declining in others. The conservative argues that any healthy society contains two elements, what Coleridge called its Permanence and its Progression. The Permanence in a society is formed by those enduring interests and beliefs that give a nation stability and continuity: without that Permanence, the fountains of the great deep are broken up, and society slips into anarchy.

The Progression in a society is that body of talents, and those interests, which urge a people on to reform and improvement: without that Progression, a people stagnate, and society subsides into an Egyptian or a Peruvian lethargy. So the intelligent conservative endeavors to reconcile or balance the claims of Permanence and the claims of Progression. He believes that innovators, blind to the just claims of Permanence, would endanger the patrimony of civilization, in a rash endeavor to break through into an imagined future of universal happiness. The conservative, in short, favors a reasoned and temperate progress; he opposes the abstract cult of Progress, which cult assumes that everything new necessarily is better than everything old.

Change is essential to a good society, the conservative reasons. In Edmund Burke's phrase, "change is the means of our preservation." Rather as the human body uses up old tissues and manufactures new, so the body politic must discard some of its old ways, from time to time, to make room for salutary innovations. A body that has ceased to renew itself has begun to die. But if that body is to be healthy, its changes must be in a regular manner, harmonious with the form and nature of its species; otherwise, change produces a monstrous growth, a cancer which devours its host. The conservative statesman takes care that nothing in society should ever be wholly new, and nothing should ever be wholly old. This is the means of social conservation, as it is the means of conservation of organic creatures.

Just how much change, however, a society requires, and what sort of change, depend upon the spirit of the age and the peculiar conditions of the society in question. It is one of the faults of the radical that commonly he advocates immediate and perilous change at the very time when gradual and temperate change already has commenced. Thus it was in the French Revolution: as Tocqueville wrote of his nation, "Halfway down the stairs, we threw ourselves out of the window in order to get to the ground more quickly." The conservative believes that any change which means a sharp break with established interest and usages is perilous; and he maintains that change, if it is to achieve real benefits, must be the voluntary work of many individuals and

associations, not decreed by some presumptuous central authority. The United States have altered greatly since the founding of the Republic; some of those changes have been for good, and some for ill; but it is one of the chief merits of our country that we have not been in love with change for the mere sake of change. Our prosperity and comparative tranquility are the result, in no small measure, of the fact that we always have tried to reconcile the best in the old order with the improvements which our ingenuity has suggested. And our change has been the work, not of someone's Grand Design, but of the independent endeavors of many men and women working prudently.

Some very important things, however, the conservative knows to be immutable; and he holds that it is highly dangerous to tamper with that which probably cannot be altered for the better. He does not think that we can change human nature, in the mass, for the better; there is only one sort of improvement in human nature, and that is internal improvement—the improvement every man and every woman can work privately. He does not think that we can improve upon the Ten Commandments as a guide to virtue. He does not think that we can create out of whole cloth a form of government better suited to our national temper than that which we already have. He holds, in short, that the great discoveries in morals and in politics already have been made; we will do well to employ these truths, rather than to seek vaguely for some new dispensation. He says, as Burke wrote sternly two centuries ago, in reply to the eighteenth-century advocates of a new morality and a new politics, "We know that we have made no new discoveries; and we think that no discoveries are to be made, in morality; nor many in the great principles of government, nor in the ideas of liberty, which were under, stood long before we were born altogether as well as they will be after the grave has heaped its mould upon our presumption, and the silent tomb shall have imposed its law on our pert loquacity."

If one has to choose between the two, Permanence is more important than Progression. Between a custom and an institution that are known to function fairly well, and a custom and an institution that are unknown qualities, it is wiser to prefer the old and tried over the new and untried. Just that is the true meaning of conservatism, Abraham Lincoln declared in an election address. We legitimately presume that what functions tolerably well ought to be cherished. The elaborate fabric which we call our civil social order—the complex of moral habits, political establishments, customary laws, and economic way—has been erected over many centuries by a painful and laborious process of trial opinions and the weighed experience of many generations. If we demolish that edifice, it is scarcely possible for us to rebuild it. Our established order works; we cannot be sure that some conjectured new order would work. And we have no right to play with society as if it were a toy; the rights of millions living and more millions yet to be born are at stake here. So, I repeat, whenever a clear choice has to be made, we are wise if we prefer Permanence to Progression.

But often it is not necessary to make that choice. Frequently we have it in our power to combine moderate and measured progress with the present advantages of established society. The prudent conservative does not forget his obligation to unite to a disposition to preserve an ability to

reform. The American conservative character has made it possible for us to grow from two million people in Atlantic seaboard colonies to a great nation of two hundred and fifty million people, extending from the Arctic to the Caribbean. This has been genuine progress; but it has been progress within the framework of tradition. In accomplishing this progress, we have preserved almost intact the moral and social institutions with which our Republic commenced. Such is the conservative's ideal of the satisfactory relationship between permanence and change. The grand principles endure; it is only their application which alters.

Canon Bernard Iddings Bell, half a century ago—when nearly everyone who wanted to be *a la mode* called himself a liberal—set down as accurate and pitiless a description of modern liberalism as I know:

A Liberal, to be brief, is one who thinks that human beings are by nature good and trustworthy, and that everything is sure to get better and better by mere lapse of time, provided only that we rid our life of unfortunate social maladjustments brought about by ancient wickedness such as, of course, no longer exists, and can free human minds from the inhibitions of supernatural religion. The Liberal believes that man is a noble fellow with no soul, and that as such he is sure to come to possess the most sublime creations of culture as a sort of by-product of enlightened self-interest, or, as the vulgar put it, of "keeping an eye on the ball." In education, the Liberal regards with awe "the unspoiled human baby," and seeks to develop that baby not by way of teaching him the necessary disciplines but rather by letting him do as he pleases. In politics, the Liberal believes that if you give a vote to every human being and always direct public policy in accordance with the majority of ballots cast, the highest possible social good is inevitably the result.

The conservative is a very different sort of being. The conservative knows that he was not born yesterday. He is aware that all the benefits of our complex civilization are the delicate creations of many generations of painstaking and sacrificing effort. It is not "by mere lapse of time" that everything gets better and better; when things improve, it is because conscientious men and women, working within the framework of tradition, have struggled valiantly against evil and sloth. Progress, though too rare in history, is real; but it is the work of artifice, of human ingenuity and prudence; it is not automatic. And progress is possible only so long as it is undertaken upon the sure footing of permanence.

Conservatives, then, in essence are the defenders of moral and social permanence. In this sense, conservatives have existed in every culture, in all ages. To be more specific, however, the body of convictions that are called "conservatism" today are some two centuries old, as a school of political thought.

Historically considered, political conservatism has been a protest against the delusions and excesses of the modern revolutionary impulse (described somberly by D. W. Brogan in his book *The Price of Revolution*). It is an error to look upon the American War of Independence as the

first of the terrible revolutions of the modern era: for America's "Revolution" was a movement intended to preserve the institutions of American society against the intended innovations of George III. The French Revolution, instead, with its contempt for social continuity and its exaltation of abstract doctrines, ushered in the disorder which has brought destruction upon most of the modern world. "Conservatism" was not a term of politics until the early years of the nineteenth century, when Continental thinkers, and presently British writers and politicians, began to employ the word to describe those principles of social and moral order which Edmund Burke had expounded in his later writings.

For an understanding of the tension between the claims of permanence and the claims of change, one turns to the speeches and writings of Edmund Burke. When the Parisian mob stormed the Bastille, in 1789, Burke was sixty years old, a party leader who had been out of office most of his career, an orator celebrated for his championing of liberal causes. The radicals of that day, Thomas Paine among them, fancied that Burke was admirably calculated to head in Britain a radical movement on French principles.

But they had mistaken Burke's nature. He marvelously foresaw the course of events which would follow upon the French attempt to reconstruct society upon an abstract pattern. The Revolution, after careering fiercely through a series of stages of hysterical violence, would end in a despotism. Much read in history and much practiced in political affairs, Burke knew that men are not naturally good, but are kept more or less obedient to positive law and moral law by custom, habit, and compulsion—which restraints the revolutionaries would discard as so much antique rubbish. Burke knew that the advantages of the civil social order are the products of intricate human experience over centuries, not to be improved overnight by some coffeehouse philosopher.

It is to his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, and to his other writings after he left Parliament, that educated conservatives turn for principles, often. On first examination, the *Reflections* may seem a chaotic book; but really Burke "winds into his subject like a serpent," blending history with principles, imagery with practical aphorisms. All his life he detested "abstractions"—that is, speculative notions with no secure footing in history or in apprehension of human nature. What Burke does in the *Reflections* is to defend the permanent things—as, on different occasions, he had been the champion of progression.

To understand the greatness of Burke's book, one must read it through, with close attention. Written at white heat, the *Reflections* burns with the wrath of a great man who saw the social order dissolving before his eyes. Yet his sentences are suffused with keenness of observation and a wisdom that are the marks of an accomplished practical statesman. This book had a great part in defeating the French revolutionary movement; it endures as a major work of political thought, and one of the most influential tracts in the history of literature.

Today its pertinence is greater, whether for conservative or liberal (Burke himself was both), than it was a century ago. The revolution of our times has dissipated the shallow optimism of the early years of the twentieth century, and we now perceive in the Russian Revolution the counterpart, still more terrible, of the French Revolution; and we behold in the grinding tyranny of the Soviets the full realization of Burke's prophecies: Having broken with all the old sanctions to integrity, Burke knew, revolutionaries must come down to force and terror, the only influences which suffice to govern a society that repudiates the conservative principles of veneration and prudence. The spirit of religion and the spirit of a gentleman, Burke tells us, gave to modern Europe everything generous and lovely in our culture. A speculative system which detest both piety and just order speedily will repudiate even the pretended affection for equality which gives that system its initial appeal to the masses. "To them, the will, the wish, the want, the liberty, the toil, the blood of individuals is nothing," Burke said of the French zealots. What these pretended humanitarians really sought was power; the human person was as nothing, in their fierce imagination, by the side of an abstract nationalism. In the name of liberty, every ancient freedom would be overthrown; in the name of fraternity, every atrocity excused. And the true moral equality of men would be rejected together with the religious sanction which gave it meaning. We know all too well, in the middle of the twentieth century, the dreadful accuracy of this description, which nineteenth-century optimists took for mere distempered fancy. We, to our sorrow, live in that "antagonist world" of madness and despair which Burke contrasted with the traditional order of social existence. Oliver Goldsmith once feared that Burke was giving to his party the talents he ought to give to mankind. In the end it was otherwise, for Burke broke with party and friends out of "the exigencies of this tremendous reason." Burke knew that the Revolution in France was no simple political contest, no culmination of enlightenment, but the inception of a tremendous moral convulsion from which society would not recover until the disease had run its course.

Burke is the most powerful of conservative spokesmen. But it will not do to neglect the American sources of conservative thought. As Dr. Daniel Boorstin points out, American conservatism usually has found its expression in a respect for juristic precedent and constitutional interpretation, rather than in an affirmation of abstract political dogmata. Both early political parties in the United States, Federalists and Republicans, were led by men whose training and mode of expression were those of Anglo-American jurisprudence, rather than of metaphysical speculation. Jefferson, despite the show of French ideas that he made from time to time, founded his principles of liberty and justice upon the writings of Coke and Kames and other English juridical authorities, and upon the tradition of English freedom from the Anglo-Saxons down to the nineteenth century. And the most candid of American conservatives, John Adams, anticipated Burke in some things, and did much to establish ineradicably in American minds that attachment to the division and balancing of power which has been a principal achievement in the art of just government. His demolition of the delusion that men are naturally benevolent, his historical examination of constitutional government, his attack upon centralized

power, and his contempt for sentimental abstractions are a high expression of the American genius for practical politics illuminated by historical knowledge.

The better men in American political life usually have desired to be regarded as conservative. Even American radical movements, Populism chiefly, sometimes have been inspired, however curiously, by certain conservative impulses. Americans have submitted themselves with good will to the most successful conservative device in the history of government, the federal Constitution. None of America's major political parties has been long dominated by radicals, and all parties have contained some strong conservatives. From the first, the American people were moved by conservative impulses and prejudices, possessing religious convictions, hostile to arbitrary power, suspicious of centralization, convinced of the beneficence of the institution of private property.

In every country, the majority of conservatives have been people of slender means and obscure station. These conservatives are not devoted primarily to economic competition or the standard of living, valuable though such things may be. What gives the conservative his strength in a time of troubles is his belief in an order which joins all classes in a common purpose, and through which they may live in justice and liberty. Prescription, prudence, and permanence are conservatives' watchwords.

Perhaps I have been fulsome in my praise of the conservative character. There exist, nevertheless, varieties of conservatism—or rather, political impulses vulgarly called conservative—for which I feel no sympathy. One of these is the conservatism of mediocrity; the other, the conservatism of desolation.

By the conservatism of mediocrity, I mean the concept of "the middle of the road," the excluded middle, the way of the temporizer, pluming himself on having attained the Golden Mean when in actuality he has only split the difference. Unless the conservative adheres to some general principles, the middle course will lie wherever one extreme or the other decides to assign it. The thinking conservative is not a devotee of "expediency" in the present common meaning of that word. Burke, it is true, often commended policies of "expedience"; but what he meant was prudence, the avoidance of applying abstract *a priori* doctrines regardless of particular circumstances.

Nor is the genuine conservative a pragmatist. C. Hartley Grattan, once upon a time, commended a certain Republican senator as a "pragmatic conservative." But there exists no such animal. Pragmatism, in the signification it has acquired from its adoption by Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, is the policy of judging all things purely from the standpoint of how they "work"—that is, simply in the light of present experience, ignoring tradition and the lessons of the past, and in the confidence that somehow vague experiment with everything established will lead to sure improvement. A pragmatist has no faith that abiding principles exist; while the conservative believes that a man lacking principles is an unprincipled man. A conservative may be an

empiricist, however, and many conservatives are—that is, they judge of present things by the light of historical consciousness, which Patrick Henry called the lamp of experience. This is a very different attitude from the pragmatic endeavor to act in the flickering light of the evanescent present.

By the conservatism of desolation, I mean the forlorn endeavor of certain persons of conservative instincts to convince themselves that they are "individualists"—that is, devotees of spiritual and social isolation. The dreary secular dogma of individualism is the creation of Godwin, Hodgskin, and Herbert Spencer, and it progresses from anarchy back to anarchy again. Any thinking conservative knows it for a snare and a delusion. The real conservative is all in favor of sound individuality; he is all against doctrinaire "individualism," the belief that we exist solely in ourselves, and for ourselves, so many loveless specks in infinite time and space, like the unfortunate youth in Mark Twain's *Mysterious Stranger* to whom Satan reveals that nothing exists except the boy and empty space, and that his very informant is no more than a random thought of the desolate Self. *La vida es sueño, y los sueños sueños son*. Whatever we may say to Calderon, it is well to remember that the emancipated critic of Twain's novel is the Devil, or at least the Devil's nephew. Individualism was born in the hell of spiritual solitude. The conservative knows that he is part of a great continuity and essence, created to do unto others as he would have others do unto him. Godwins and Spencer's individualism, literally applied, would destroy the whole fabric of civilization. It is nonsense in any age; but in our complex age, with all its apparatus of industry and urban life, it would bring a very speedy and very unpleasant death to almost all men.

We ought not to indulge such childish heroics. We do not really live for ourselves, nor unto ourselves. Burke and Adams knew that individuality, the dignity of personality and private rights, was a great good, and the product of elaborate conventions, developed by the painful experience of the human race over thousands of years. They also knew that the doctrine of individualism preached by their adversary Godwin was nicely calculated to wipe out the whole civil social order, should it obtain a hold upon the popular imagination. Burke was the most courageous opponent of tyranny and the improper employment of the state's powers; but he knew that just government is the means by which a people may enjoy a peace and security impossible in a condition of anarchy. Burke insisted that society, after all, is individuals taken collectively, and that no policy which harms particular persons can be good for society. But Burke spoke out with all his powers against the anarchism which would reduce men and women to "the flies of a summer."

The thinking conservative rejects Rousseau's misty and perilous concept of the General Will, and denies Hegel's cult of the abstract State; but he does not cut himself off from true community, his patrimony of culture, his duties, and his posterity. We are made for cooperation, says Marcus Aurelius, like the hands, like the feet: "Does the eye demand a recompense for seeing, or the feet for walking? Just as this is the end for which they exist, and just as they find their reward in realizing the law of their being, so too man is made for kindness, and whenever he does an act of

kindness or otherwise helps forward the common good, he thereby fulfils the law of his being and comes by his own."

Most Americans being innocent of political theory, and not much acquainted with political novels, it is possible for some intellectual freak to get up, temporarily, a fair-sized following among persons who would be shocked if they could perceive the ultimate consequences of the notions that they uncritically embrace. What Burke called "metaphysical madness" can afflict very solid citizens in a time of troubles, if they mistake a radical ideologue, somehow, for a defender of their interests. So it is with such intellectual oddities as Ayn Rand, and her ideology of "objectivism."

Like Marx, Ayn Rand, in her polemical novels and other writings, denounced as fools or scoundrels nearly all thinkers who preceded her in time. Figuratively speaking, she was born in Nightmare Alley. She literally would supplant the Cross, the symbol of sacrifice, by the Dollar Sign, the symbol of self-aggrandizement. Denouncing "altruism," or charity, she attributed to men of business a curious sort of sanctity that resembles Marx's exaltation of the abstract proletariat. Were I an agent of red revolution, I would hasten to join myself to such a movement, and to butter up its backers: for the best possible way to discredit conservative interests would be to represent conservative movements as expressions of a cosmic selfishness.

The conservative, if he understands himself and his world, is no sentimental humanitarian; but neither is he a swaggering nihilist, jeering at the state, the duties of men in society, and the necessities of modern life. As a reaction against the ugly insensate collectivism that menaces mankind today, this flight to an extreme individualism is understandable; but it is consummate folly, for all that, and even more disastrous to the conservative cause than is the policy of unprincipled trimming. There is an order which holds all things in their places, Burke says: it is made for us, and we are made for it. The thinking conservative, far from denying the existence of this eternal order, endeavors to ascertain its nature and to conform to that order, which is the source of the Permanent Things.

There have occurred eras in which a culture urgently needed to be aroused from stagnation and apathy. But that is not the condition of twentieth-century industrial culture: as the century staggers to a close, change occurs with vertiginous speed, uprooting whole peoples, effacing habits and hopes that had sustained humankind for centuries. The present desperate necessity is to shore up permanence, not to accelerate change.

Our inherited culture is involved in great difficulties: I suppose that most educated people nowadays will assent to that statement. Forty years ago, not long after the Second World War, I encountered often people who waxed indignant at my venturing to suggest the possibility of cultural decadence among us. It is otherwise now.

Sometimes, true, I come upon men and women well satisfied with our world, and with their diversions—rather nasty diversions, not infrequently—therein. Yet these are not what I call tranquil people: instead they bring to mind a poem of two lines by Adam Mickiewicz:

*Your soul deserves the place to which it came,
If having entered Hell, you feel no flame.*

Our present discontents and distresses are not the subject of this chapter; my subject just now is the cause of the descent of modern culture toward the pit of decadence. So a single paragraph from my friend Malcolm Muggeridge's essay "The Great Liberal Death Wish" must suffice here as a succinct analysis of our plight.

"As the astronauts soar into the vast eternities of space," Muggeridge writes, "on earth the garbage piles higher; as the groves of academe extend their domain, their alumni's arms reach lower; as the phallic cult spreads, so does impotence. In great wealth, great poverty; in health, sickness; in numbers, deception. Gorging, left hungry; sedated, left restless; telling all, hiding all; in flesh united, forever separate. So we press on through the valley of abundance that leads to the waste land of satiety, passing through the gardens of fantasy; seeking happiness ever more ardently, and finding despair ever more surely."

Just so. Some years ago I was sitting in the parlor of an ancient house in the close of York Minster. My host, Canon Basil Smith, the Minster's Treasurer then, a man of learning and of practical faith, said to me that we linger at the end of an era: soon the culture we have known will be swept into the dustbin of history. About us, as we talked in that medieval mansion, loomed Canon Smith's tall bookcases lined with handsome volumes; his doxological clock chimed the half, hour musically; flames flared up from his coal fire. Was all this venerable setting of culture, and much more besides, to vanish away as if the Evil Spirit had condemned it? Basil Smith is buried now, and so is much of the society that humorous, high-minded Yorkshireman ornamented and tried to redeem. As we sat beside his fireplace, I thought him too gloomy then; but already much that he predicted has come to pass.

On the occasion of my last visit to him, indeed, there had occurred a small but significant incident that is related to my concept of why our culture seems in the sere and yellow leaf. The bells of York Minster had pealed over the city for centuries, every Sunday morning. But in the year of my visit, the proprietor of Young's Hotel, across a medieval street from the Minster, had complained that the bells disturbed the slumbers of his guests who had been heartily at their potations the preceding night. With a meekness of a sort not enjoined by Jesus of Nazareth, archbishop and chapter had agreed not to ring those confounded bells on the Sabbath. The decaying "sensate culture" (as Pitirim Sorokin would call it) had triumphed over a remnant of an enfeebled "idealistic culture." That process continues, with increasing speed, in Britain, America, and elsewhere. The dismissal of the sacred: that rejection lies at the heart of our difficulty. But I

run on too fast. If we are to arrest the decay of our culture, first we must diagnose the malady called decadence.

In the ten-volume *Century Dictionary*, published at the beginning of this century, we find a succinct definition of this word *decadence*: "A falling off or away; the act or process of falling into an inferior condition or state; the process or state of decay; deterioration." The term "The Decadence", in historiography, specifically refers to the closing centuries of the Roman empire. Is twentieth-century civilization suffering from ills very like those of fifth-century Roman civilization? But, postponing an answer to that inquiry, let us pursue our business of definition.

In Britain, forty-three years ago, D. R. Hardman, parliamentary secretary to the ministry of education, spoke candidly of the decline of culture. "The age of industrialism and democracy had brought to an end most of the great cultural traditions of Europe, and not least that of architecture," he told an audience of teachers. "In the contemporary world, in which the majority were half-educated and many not even a quarter educated, and in which large fortunes and enormous power could be obtained by exploiting ignorance and appetite, there was a vast cultural breakdown which stretched from America through Europe to the East."

T. S. Eliot commented on Hardman's sentences, in his cautionary way, "The exploitation of ignorance and appetite is not an activity only of commercial adventurers making large fortunes: it can be pursued more thoroughly and on a larger scale by governments." Indeed it has been so pursued by many governments, worst of all in the Third World, since 1946: that is one of the principal marks of our decadence. But back to definition! A lively if dismaying book on the subject is *Decadence: A Philosophical Inquiry*, by C. E. M. Joad, published at London in 1948. Professor Joad writes that a society or an individual that has become decadent has "dropped the object"; or, in less abstract terms, in a decadent state people have lost any aim, end, or object in life: to decadent folk, life has no significance except as mere process or experience; they live as dogs do, from day to day. The essence of the decadent understanding of the human condition, in Joad's phrases, may be found "in the view that experience is valuable or is at least to be valued for its own sake, irrespective of the quality or kind of the experience, and in the appropriate beliefs about life, morals, art, and society which entail and are entailed by this view, together with the scales of values and modes of taste associated with these beliefs."

Joad sets down certain characteristics of a decadent society: luxury; skepticism; weariness; superstition; preoccupation with the self and its experiences; a society "promoted by and promoting the subjectivist analysis of moral, aesthetic, metaphysical and theological judgments." Anyone who does not recognize the acuteness of Joad's analysis here—why, he must lead a life singularly sequestered.

The mordant wit of C. Northcote Parkinson, in *The Law of Longer Life*, published eleven years ago, is directed toward the history of social decadence. Parkinson distinguishes six stages,

historically regarded, through which civilizations pass on their way to dissolution. Here are those stages, very briefly put:

First, political over-centralization, as in Babylon, Persepolis, Rome, Peking, Delhi, Paris, and London.

Second, inordinate growth in taxation, which becomes "the means of government interference in commercial, industrial, and social life ... Taxation, taken to the limit and beyond, has always been a sign of decadence and a prelude to disaster."

Third, "the growth of a top-heavy system of administration." A great characterless political machine develops. "Those who are theoretically men of power have surprisingly little real authority, being caught up in a machine which moves slowly in some unintended direction."

Fourth, "promotion of the wrong people." In the labyrinth of political bureaucracy, "To have original ideas would be a bar to success. This situation is probably inevitable and eternal but the same tendency, in a decadent society, rubs off on other people.... The whole society, as well as the whole organization, becomes lethargic and cumbersome, routine-ridden and tame."

Fifth, "the urge to overspend." After years and decades of excessive public expenditure, "Lacking the courage to reduce its expenditure, lacking the means of improving the revenue (the taxes having hit the ceiling), the government incurs a vast debt and loads it on to the shoulders of some future generation."

Sixth, "liberal opinion"—that is, a feeble sentimentality which weakens the minds and the wills of a great part of a nation's population. "What concerns our argument is not that the world's do-gooders are mistaken but that their attitude is decadent. They are moved by sentiment rather than by reason and that is itself a symptom of decay. Still more to the point, their interest is solely in the present and for them, too, the future is merely the end."

Hard truths! Hardman says that the triumph of industrialism and democracy have led to cultural decadence—in architecture and the visual arts, comparable to the sudden transition in such concerns from the early years of the reign of Diocletian to the late years of the reign of Constantine. Joad says that a state of mind called subjectivism has done mischief to culture, particularly in obsession with "the self and its experiences." Parkinson, having in mind principally political structures, says that decadence comes to pass through lack of political vision and resolution. All three writers, I believe, are painfully correct.

And yet no one of these three, it seems to me, has touched directly on the principal cause of the ruinous decay of great cultures. The writer who describes that principal cause most movingly is Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in his address on receiving the Templeton Prize, in 1983. Here is one passage:

"Over half a century ago, while I was still a child," Solzhenitsyn said, "I recall hearing a number of older people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: 'Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened.' "

Amen to that. It is my argument that the Permanent Things stand in grave peril near the end of the twentieth century; that our culture may expire of unbelief, or perish from violence, or die from a conjunction of both afflictions. Those of us who still think that life is worth living ought to address ourselves urgently to means by which our patrimony of culture may be preserved and restored.

"Redeem the time, redeem the dream," T. S. Eliot wrote. It remains possible, given right reason and moral imagination, to confront the age's disorders boldly. We need not go down to dusty death meekly. The restoration of learning, humane and scientific; the reform of many public policies; the brightening of the corners where we are—such approaches are open to those among the rising generation, who are seeking for a purpose in life.

Such a restoration, painstaking labor, cannot be accomplished by the ideologue, the violent revolutionary. Conceivably the politics of America, to the end of this century and beyond, may be much more concerned with the reinvigoration of our culture than with the economic issues which have dominated elections, most of the time, for the past six decades. And whether or not humankind are given a Sign from on high, those men and women who are concerned for the moral order, and for the civilized order derived from moral insights, have their work cut out for them. Their task is delineated in the remaining nine succinct chapters of this book.