

Theodore Dalrymple

Our Culture, What's Left of It: The Mandarins and the Masses. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005

Not With a Bang but a Whimper: The Politics and Culture of Decline. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee: 2008

The New Vichy Syndrome: Why European Intellectuals Surrender to Barbarism New York: Encounter Books, 2009

Theodore Dalrymple (the pseudonym of Anthony Daniels) is a contributing editor of *City Journal*. He is a retired doctor from the British prison system and he previously practised medicine in several African countries. His articles have appeared in numerous papers: *The Times*, *The Observer*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The Spectator*. By my count, since 1986 he has published 23 books.

Dalrymple is a very lively writer with a lucid style. His essays on literature demonstrate his willingness to make his own judgements rather than reproduce the orthodoxies of contemporary literary theory. His arguments about contemporary events in Britain—especially involving violence and brutality—are illuminating because he refuses to comply with the now automatic reaction which is to prescribe a greater dose of social justice as the cure. He knows that Shakespeare and Dr Johnson are great thinkers and writes of our world using them as the measure.

Not With a Bang but a Whimper and *Our Culture, What's Left of It* are collections of essays originally published in *City Journal*. In the former, the essays are divided into two sections: “Artists and Ideologues” and “Politics and Culture.” The division doesn’t actually mean much because the arguments are consistently written in defence of civilization against the open invitation to barbarism that Dalrymple identifies in (post)modernity. Many of the examples and anecdotes in this book and the next are drawn from his experiences with criminals or victims of criminal violence in the prison system. The range of topics is impressive. Dalrymple repudiates the ideas of Steven Pinker’s book *The Language Instinct*, offers an answer to the question of “What makes Dr Johnson great?” (and shows why Voltaire can be adolescent by comparison), attempts to redeem the reputation of Arthur Koestler, exposes the ignorance of the new atheists Dawkins, Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and others, reveals the incompetence of the British police and prison system, shows the prescience of Anthony Burgess’s novel *A Clockwork Orange* in anticipating the troubles of contemporary youth culture, and examines Tony Blair’s belief in himself as a purely beneficent being despite the untruthfulness and unscrupulousness that marked his time as prime minister.

The last few essays—on young Muslim men in western culture, the failures of multiculturalist social and educational policies, the consequences of Michel Foucault’s reductive readings of medicine as merely the power relations between doctors and patients, and the dangers for children growing up in a society that refuses to instill rules for conduct and teach structures for critical thinking—are profoundly disturbing and, at times, deeply moving. A passage from the argument Dalrymple makes about Ibsen’s attacks on marriage is indicative of the whole volume: “The elevation of emotion over principle, of inclination over duty, of rights over responsibilities, of ego over the claims of others; the impatience with boundaries and the promotion of the self as the measure of all things: what could be more modern or gratifying to our current sensibility?”

Our Culture, What’s Left of It is also divided into two sections: “Arts and Letters” and “Society and Politics.” The essays on Shakespeare, Virginia Woolf, Stefan Zweig, utopian fiction, James Gillray, and some others are in the first half, and essays on Marquis de Custine, the city of Havana, corruption, famous murders in England, a schoolmaster named Ray Honeyford, the disintegration of Islam, among others, are in the second half. He reads the hysteria surrounding the death of the people’s princess as a symptom of cultural collapse. He sees the liberal faith in all sex all the time as the road to happiness in a way that would be at home with the criticism of pornography in *The Survival of English*. His criticism of what he calls somewhere the liberal fundamentalism—i.e. to forbid is forbidden, all restraint is inherently evil—is damning. As with the other volumes, the intelligence is consistent throughout.

His essay on Ray Honeyford is worthy of special notice. Dalrymple describes how the man wrote essays to reasonably explain the fundamental problems with multicultural education policies and the liberal media and the British intelligentsia attacked him relentlessly as a racist. The essay suggests there is nothing like freedom of thought and discussion in Britain unless your thoughts happen to agree with the dominant ideas of the time. The demolition job Dalrymple performs on Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas* should be required reading for those who praise her as one of the great English writers and fail to recognize or willfully ignore her self-pity and resentment.

Reading Dalrymple is, at times, a little like reading Ian Robinson’s *Untied Kingdom*. In *The New Vichy Syndrome*, Dalrymple writes about the rotten state of Europe in a book-length argument. He argues that the Islamisation of Europe is not the great threat that some have made it appear. He uses demographic insights and comments on how Islamic youth become Westernized to deflate that balloon. He sees many greater dangers as already present and only aggravated by outside influences. Most of the book is about the loss of reason and rational argument, the aggressive attack on any and all boundaries, the various problems of national identities, the German and French centre of the EU (and why it matters most to those nations), the rewriting of European history as merely a story of war and massacre without art or culture, atrocities during World War II and the French-Algerian war, the self-righteousness of guilt (the game of

who is the most guilty for what as a mark of superiority), and the divided society in France (the slums surrounding the great cities). One striking passage in the book is buried in a footnote about the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie and the unwillingness to enforce laws against the death threats made by various Moslim clerics and others in England. Dalrymple has a strong sense of the cowardice in politicians, intellectuals, and others who might be expected to know better, those who should be capable of judgement but abdicate their responsibilities.

His work embodies what he sees lacking in his opponents: he makes the connections linking specific social, political, and moral problems with an entire way of life. He insists on representing the human consequences of the multicultural and social welfare policies that disable common sense and common judgement. Here is an apt example of his prose:

To paraphrase Burke, all that is necessary for barbarism to triumph is for civilized man to do nothing; but in fact for the past few decades, civilized men have done worse than nothing—they have actively thrown in their lot with the barbarians. They have denied the distinction between higher and lower, to the invariable advantage of the latter. They have denied the superiority of man's greatest cultural achievements over the most ephemeral and vulgar of entertainments; they have denied that the scientific labors of brilliant men have resulted in an objective understanding of nature, and like Pilate, they have treated the question of truth as a jest; above all, they have denied that it matters how people conduct themselves in their personal lives, provided only that they consent to their own depravity. The ultimate object of the deconstructionism that has swept the academy like an epidemic has been civilization itself, as the narcissists within the academy try to find a theoretical justification for their own revolt against civilized restraint. And thus the obvious truth—that it is necessary to repress, either by law or custom, the permanent possibility in human nature of brutality and barbarism—never finds its way into the press or other media of mass communication.

Though his style is nothing like Thomas Carlyle's, Dalrymple is writing about the signs of the times. He should be read in the university, but his criticism would explode the theories of many disciplines, including the biological determinism of psychology and the cultural determinism of sociology. He is a serious opponent of the mechanisms of social justice that dehumanise both the bureaucrats who control the system and the citizens who are forced to endure it.

Alfred Applegate

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