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Diagnosis: decadence

by [Stefan Beck](#)

A review of Our Culture, What's Left of It, by Theodore Dalrymple.

Among the ordure, both literal and figurative, on display at the Royal Academy of Art's "Sensation" exhibition was an outsize portrait, based on a mugshot, of the child-murderess Myra Hindley. That this image was made up of a child's tiny handprint (reproduced many times like the dots in a newspaper photograph) magnified the outrage of some of the public, including mothers of those killed by Hindley.

The British writer and prison doctor Theodore Dalrymple was quickly on the scene, to ask Norman Rosenthal, the Academy's chief of exhibitions, what he thought of this bit of publicity. Rosenthal chirped that "the picture raises interesting questions." Dr. Dalrymple called this tiresome bluff and asked what they were, as "it must be possible to formulate them in words."

For Rosenthal's stumbling and revealingly disingenuous reply, turn to "Trash, Violence, and Versace: But Is It Art?," one of about two dozen essays, culled from *City Journal*, in Dalrymple's *Our Culture, What's Left of It: The Mandarins and the Masses*.

The Doctor's question, which he might have phrased as a brusque *Prove it*, shows us the mission of his prose: truth, simply formulated. In a piece about the Marquis de Custine, he quotes Custine's reference to "the true greatest gifts of God—the soul and the speech which communicates it." To use that speech for the good and to record its misuse by everyone from despots and junkies to intellectuals and diversicrats are chief among Dalrymple's aims.

The good, in Dalrymple's case, is the vigorous defense of civilization from barbarism. He recognizes that often the greatest threats to this fragile human achievement come from within. One of his most persuasive essays, "What We Have to Lose," includes this striking bit of self-criticism:

My brother and I took a radio out onto the lawn and there smashed it into a thousand pieces with croquet mallets. With a pleasantly vengeful fury, as if performing a valuable task, we pursued every last component with our mallets until we had pulverized it into unrecognizability. The joy we felt was indescribable; but where it came from or what it meant, we knew not. Within our small souls, civilization struggled with barbarism: and had we suffered no retribution, I suspect that barbarism's temporary victory would have been more lasting.

Coupled with this recollection—for which few men could fail to find some analogue in their own childhoods—is the story of Dalrymple's horrified discovery, in Liberia's Centennial Hall, of a Steinway piano, assuredly the only one in that country, rendered legless by "revolutionaries." This

pair of seemingly trivial incidents reveals with an odd poignancy, or perhaps pungency, the appetite for wrack and ruin, which man must master if he is to survive as a civilized being.

As Dalrymple himself notes, his reaction to the piano was strange, given the horrors daily visited upon Liberia's population. But the piano, considered as a product and emblem of civilization, is a reminder that to create is the work of centuries, to destroy, the work of a moment. Hence, many of the essays in the present volume are concerned both with great creators (Shakespeare, Turgenev, Gillray, Cassatt) and with thoughtless destroyers (Marx, Lawrence, Kinsey, Virginia Woolf). In his essay on Woolf, she is quoted thusly:

The guinea [solicited from her to rebuild a Cambridge University women's college] should be earmarked 'Rags. Petrol. Matches.' And this note should be attached to it. 'Take this guinea and with it burn the college to the ground. Set fire to the old hypocrisies. Let the light of the burning building scare the nightingales and incarnadine the willows' . . .

The college was not up to her standard; naturally, it had better be demolished, in dramatic fashion. It is incredible, Dalrymple demonstrates, how frequently grievances petty or significant, when coupled with impatience and vanity, will admit of no solution but to tear down the whole edifice (literally, in this case) and "start fresh." Perfection is impossible to reach, but this never stops movers and shakers of a certain type from believing that they can do so, usually by a summary rejection of that steady piling on of improvement which takes ages and dedicated effort.

An unexpectedly moving illustration of this principle is "Why Havana Had to Die," Dalrymple's eulogy for the splendor of the Cuban capital. "No words can do justice to the architectural genius of Havana," he writes, "a genius that extended from the Renaissance classicism of the sixteenth century, with severe but perfectly proportioned houses containing colonnaded courtyards cooled and softened by tropical trees and shrubs, to the flamboyant art deco of the 1930s and '40s." Thanks to Cuba's disastrous communist rule, all this crumbled.

Lest any of this suggest that Dalrymple is a species of cold-blooded aesthete, concerned above all with the preservation of books, pianos, and old buildings, I should note that his criticism, more than any I have encountered, is informed by his experiences with a bewildering collection of people and places. In an essay about journalism and the attractions of danger, he writes:

I have been sought by the South African secret police for having disregarded the laws of apartheid; I have seen the inside of a Balkan police station from the point of view of someone under arrest; I have been deported from Honduras to Nicaragua as a Communist There are few exhilarations greater than being completely beyond the reach of anyone who might help you—provided of course that the dangerous situation has been freely chosen and not imposed, and that there is somewhere safe to return to when the excitement has either worn off or become overwhelming.

In another piece, he tosses off: "At any rate, we put on extracts of *Romeo and Juliet* in the desert [of Afghanistan], in which I had a small part, and the crown prince . . . was in attendance." (At any rate, indeed!)

Anecdotal evidence is not especially popular today, least of all among the intellectual elites that are so frequently Dalrymple's target. Anyone who has ever slogged his way through a sociology reader

knows that, in such works, twenty pages of bar charts are always preferable to one keenly interpreted interaction with an unpleasant human subject—say, a British heroin addict or a militant Muslim prisoner.

For example, one Naomi Lakritz, writing in the *Calgary Herald*, characterized Dalrymple's style as a "making free with the facts" and made him the subject of puerile caricature: "The world is going to hell in a handbasket, and Dalrymple . . . is observing it, aghast, from behind his monocle, furiously and impotently scribbling notes on its demise."

Impotently? Let's be fair: Dalrymple has practiced medicine among the very poor and very oppressed on several continents; Ms. Lakritz, one guesses, has practiced her professional hysterics on only one. It is no surprise that experience should be sneered at by those with the least of it, but it is nonetheless unfortunate. Much of what Dalrymple has predicted on the basis of experience has been borne out by increasingly catastrophic reality. Two essays, "The Man Who Predicted the Race Riots" and "When Islam Breaks Down," reveal through direct knowledge of England's Muslim and Sikh immigrant neighborhoods the "root causes," so to speak, of the 7/7 London tube bombings.

Dalrymple has seen more and done more than most people, and whatever topic he brings that to bear on—sex, drugs, serial murder, poetry, or public morality—he tells the tale with great style and humane wit. If only his work were wider read by those not already disposed to his arguments. It ought to be given to incoming college freshmen, in lieu of the Jared Diamond and Jonathan Kozol with which they are frequently saddled. After all, Dalrymple will—as he says of Custine and Tocqueville—be a great joy to read "long after the tabulators and statistical correlators are forgotten."

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