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BOOKS

Decadence and Dr. Joad

DECADENCE: A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY. By C. E. M. Joad. Faber and Faber. (Our copy through the British Council).

(Reviewed by Arthur N. Prior)

THE word "decadence" suggests decay, decline, dissolution; but just what is it that is decaying, declining, dissolving, in a "decadent" age, or in "decadent" writers and thinkers? Dr. Joad, in his new book, suggests that a state of decadence is one in which people are losing their grip on a reality outside themselves. It is a sign of decadence, for example, when Koestler writes an article on freewill and determinism without once raising the question as to which of these beliefs accords with reality, confining himself to an examination of the psychological forces which lead men to adopt the one view or the other. The latter is a legitimate field of inquiry; but the article reflects a tendency to make the discussion of a belief's motivation not a supplement to, but a substitute for, the discussion of its truth. Dr. Joad very properly observes that if the claim of a belief to be true is never to be taken seriously, then the psychoanalyst's claim to give a true account of how we come to believe as we do, cannot be taken seriously either. If all beliefs can be psychoanalysed out of existence, then this must also apply to the beliefs of the psychoanalyst.

This is a fair sample of Dr. Joad's criticism of the inward-turning tendency which he identifies with decadence. It is, indeed, rather more than fair to him—not many of his points are as well made as this one. And when he has made it, he just sits on it his next topic. He does not bother to consider possible answers—for example, that when we attempt to formulate precisely the difference between determinism and freewill as beliefs, we might find that it just cannot be done, and so be forced to conclude that they are not, strictly speaking, beliefs at all, but only conflicting emotional attitudes; in which case a refusal to discuss their truth or falsehood would be quite in order. This is not my own view of the matter; but it is a possibility which a just and thorough philosophical criticism of Koestler is bound to take into account.

"Dropping of the object" is Dr. Joad's summary phrase for the tendency against which he is arguing. "The object" mainly means the object of thought; and to "drop" it is to imagine that we can "just think" without thinking of anything, as if thought were a mere modification of ourselves like feeling. Dr. Joad's "decadent" in fact, might be alternatively defined as one who attempts to live on the plane of feeling alone. "The object" also means the object of action; and the pursuit of power or speed without considering what we mean to do with our power or where we are hurrying to and what the hurry is, is also given as an instance of "the dropping of the object." But do we never make a genuine discovery that something, e.g., knowledge, which we begin by pursuing for the sake of something else, is worth

pursuing for its own sake too? No doubt Dr. Joad is right in denying this of power and speed; but his formula covers too much.

Dr. Joad complains, in his introduction, of a certain disrespect shown towards himself by "academic philosophers" and puts it down to their failure



BBC Photograph

DR. JOAD

A lack of care and thoroughness

to appreciate the need for philosophical popularisers, or "vulgarisateurs" as he calls them. But perhaps it is rather a legitimate reaction to his own lack of care and thoroughness.

ENGLISH VILLAGE

STILL GLIDES THE STREAM. By Flora Thompson; drawings by Lynton Lamb. Oxford University Press. (Our copy through the British Council).

IF you say of the English village that the more it changes the more it remains the same thing, this is about as true as most epigrams. It would seem to be as true of Restharrow, in Oxfordshire, the theme of this book, as of any other village. Restharrow, we presume, is an imaginary name, but we take it that the village itself is built up largely from Miss Thompson's personal knowledge, which she has already used in the acclaimed *Lark Rise to Candleford*. The chronicle begins at the present day, when there is no longer a blacksmith, a stonemason, or a tailor, and the old sweet shop with its bottle-glass window has become the General Store. There is a district nurse, and in place of a schoolmistress in a lean-to home of two rooms at the school, a schoolmaster lives in a proper house and runs a mower over his lawn. However, it takes more than two world wars to uproot the ancient foundations of English rural life. Miss Finch, an elderly retired teacher, returns to her birthplace, and recaptures much of what happened sixty years before. She was the daughter of the village carpenter, who belonged to the class known as the "comfortable poor." In respect to conveniences, her home at the time of Victoria's first jubilee would be shocking to the eyes of 1948, but it was comfortable, living was satisfying, and there was competence and character. The chronicle is of the everyday life of the

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