

# THE FALL OF LOVE

JOHN O'LOUGHLIN



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CDM Philosophy

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## *Preface*

The six lengthy essays included in this collection, originally dating from 1979, signify a transitional stage away from the dualism of works like *Between Truth and Illusion* and *The Illusory Truth* towards the Spenglerian historicism that, with the quasi-Marxist influence of environment upon the rise and fall of civilizations, was to characterize my literary work at around this period. Subjects discussed in such a fatalistic light include literature, music, meditation, art, environment and, last but not least, love.

John O'Loughlin, London 1979 (Revised 2022)

# CLASSIC AND DECADENT LITERATURE

There are fundamentally always two kinds of art: the classic and the decadent. "What are called classic," writes Havelock Ellis in his introductory essay to Huysman's *Against the Grain (À Rebours)*, "corresponds on the spiritual side to the love of natural things, and what we call decadent to the research for the things which seem to lie beyond Nature." – This is a very useful if slightly limited definition of the essential distinction between the two kinds of art, and we find this definition expanded into a largely classic/romantic dichotomy when Ellis writes: "Technically, a decadent style is only such in relation to a classic style, a further specialization, the homogeneous, in Spenserian phraseology, having become heterogeneous. The first is beautiful because the parts are subordinated to the whole; the second is beautiful because the whole is subordinated to the parts. – All art is the rising and falling on the slopes of a rhythmic curve between these two classic and decadent extremes."

Most people are undoubtedly familiar with the romantic aspect of decadence as exemplified in the music of composers such as Liszt, Beethoven (particularly his late works), Schubert, Chopin, Weber, *et al.*, where 'the whole' is generally subordinated to 'the parts' and sentiment gets the better of form. Likewise most people are familiar with the classicism of Mozart, Haydn, the early Beethoven, and even much of Mendelssohn, where 'the parts' are generally subordinated to 'the whole' and form gets the better of sentiment. This classic/romantic dichotomy is especially apparent in music, but it is also apparent in the arts of poetry, literature, sculpture, architecture, and painting, where one or another of the two creative tendencies are usually found to predominate.

Some artists, it is true, seem to be a subtle combination of both classicism and decadence (to use the more comprehensive term), or at least they display a mostly classic or decadent approach to their respective arts at different stages in their creative lives. But a majority of artists seem to be mainly one or the other, and to remain fairly consistently so, throughout the course of their creative lives. It also seems that the classic tends to alternate with the decadent, and that an epoch in art may be characterized

by the prevalence of whichever tendency happens to predominate during that time. On average an art epoch tends to last between twenty and forty years, and each successive epoch becomes a revolt, in one way or another, against the preceding one. This is especially true of the early twentieth century, which heralded in the works of authors like D.H. Lawrence, Thomas Hardy, André Gide, Hermann Hesse, and John Cowper Powys a classical revival in reaction to the predominating tone of fin-de-siècle decadence which had immediately preceded it.

There are, however, always exceptions to the general rule, and one finds certain writers producing works seemingly quite out-of-character with the prevailing tendency of their epoch: writers, for example, like Knut Hamsun, who wrote predominantly classic literature during the last decade of the nineteenth century, and, conversely, Aldous Huxley, who, in his otherworldly and mystical predilections, was arguably an outsider in relation to early twentieth-century classicism! Of course, one could argue that Hamsun, who continued to write in a predominantly classical spirit well into the twentieth century, was really a herald and forerunner of the classical revival, and that Huxley was effectively a protracted extension of fin-de-siècle decadence. But whatever the case, it should be apparent that this general alternation between the two schools of art provides the necessary incentive for each school to flourish in the manner most suited to itself, since without a tension of opposites there would be little or no chance of maintaining either!

I began by citing Havelock Ellis' definitions of the two main kinds of art, and in order to clarify the differences between them, as well as extend our study of this into an investigation of the leading creative tendencies of a number of individual authors, I would like to define, in greater detail, exactly *what* I consider to be the two chief forms of literary classicism and decadence respectively.

Firstly, there is the classicism of what Ellis calls "The love of natural things", which is to say, the appreciation of nature both as it confronts our vision as *external* phenomena and our understanding as *internal* phenomena. Thus these natural phenomena may range over a vast area of experience which encompasses anything from the splendour of a brightly-burning sun glimpsed at midday to the celestial beauty of certain star formations seen at midnight; from the mystery of birth to the mystery of

death; from the changing generations of man to the constancy of human life; from the daily intake of food and drink to the daily voiding of excrement and urine, and so on. The love of natural things, which was brought to such a high pitch in the pagan culture of the early Classical Age, only to be superseded by Christian decadence, with its emphasis on the Beyond and the futility of worldly life, finds one of its earliest and most notable Western supporters in Michel de Montaigne, who lived towards the close of the Middle Ages and whose legendary tower, containing thousands of mostly classical writings, provided him with both the necessary vantage-point over and isolation from his age through which to transcend its decadent limitations and, by turning his scholarly attention back towards the ancient Greeks, to indirectly point the way forward towards the long-awaited future revival of the classical ideal, as understood by a love of natural things.

In more recent times, however, one finds this form of classicism brought to a veritable apotheosis in D.H. Lawrence, who must surely rank as one of the few great classic poets of Western literature, as also in some of the works of André Gide, notably *Fruits of the Earth*, and still more recently in Gide's great classical heir and spiritual disciple, Albert Camus, whose outstanding fictional character, Patrice Mersault, remains one of the most poignant examples of twentieth-century classicism that we possess. With his emphasis on sun and sea, human love and human happiness, sensual enjoyment, travel, frugality, physicality, etc., Camus returns us to the simplicity and ancient nobility of pagan life, and never more seductively so than in lyrical essays like *Nuptials* (1939) and *Summer* (1954). "Over the sea," he writes in *Nuptials at Tipasa*, "hangs the vast silence of noon. Every beautiful thing has a natural pride in its own beauty, and today the world allows its pride to seep from every pore. Why, in its presence, should I deny the joy of living, if I can avoid enclosing everything in this joy? There is no shame in being happy. But today the fool is king, and I call fools those who fear pleasure." – This indeed is the voice of the classicism we are attempting to define, a voice which has become stronger since the decline of Christian values and which, while by no means the only voice to be heard in the modern world, is certainly one of the loudest!

But there is another voice which runs roughly parallel with what may be termed secular naturalism, and has also become louder in recent times. I refer, of course, to the voice of religious naturalism. This classicism

extends beyond the largely aesthetic surface appreciation of nature by those authors dedicated to secular naturalism, and embraces a pantheistic or semi-pantheistic appreciation of it, such as one finds to varying extents in Goethe and Rousseau in the eighteenth century, in Wordsworth, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Arnold in the nineteenth century, and in Hardy, Hesse, and, most poignantly, John Cowper Powys in the twentieth century. This religious aspect of man's relationship to nature is perfectly expressed in Wordsworth's *Lines Composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey*, wherein the poet tells of:–

"... a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man."

Likewise we find, in his essay *On Nature*, Emerson writing: "It seems as if the day was not wholly profane, in which we have given heed to some natural object." – This, then, is the positive side of classical naturalism, the side we find predominating in John Cowper Powys, particularly in works such as *The Art of Happiness*, *A Philosophy of Solitude*, and *In Defence of Sensuality*, where his philosophy of 'Elementalism', or the cult of nature worship, draws our attention to a partly spiritual rather than simply material identification with nature. If D.H. Lawrence stands out as the leading British exponent of profane naturalism in the first-half of the twentieth century, then John Cowper Powys must surely rank as the leading British exponent of religious naturalism – its spiritual counterpart.

However, contemporaneously with the natural form of classicism we find another form, on the whole a less noble and agreeable form but, nevertheless, one which has also made itself increasingly heard in recent years: what might be termed the classicism of social phenomena, or the love of everyday life. If the most suitable term we could find to define the first form of classicism was naturalism, then this second form of it can only be defined in terms of realism, albeit a realism that accepts rather than rejects the society or life it strives to portray. Indeed, such a classical realism regularly delights in the minutiae of everyday commonplace life,



committing itself to a portrayal of even the most seemingly trivial actions and situations. It is not the sublime colours of various kinds of flowers, the beauty of a sunset, the mystery of birth and death, or a spiritual identification with plant life which mostly concerns the authors of this school but, on the contrary, such things as the baseness of certain people, the seductive powers of various women, the financial positions of particular individuals, the nature of so-and-so's clandestine amours, etc., which goad their pens into scathing action.

To some extent one might divide this school of writers into nobles and plebeians, or those who, whatever their social background, grant most of their literary attention to the portrayal of grand-bourgeois and upper-class life and, conversely, those who grant most of it to the portrayal of working-class and petty-bourgeois life. This distinction is, I believe, relatively significant, because it helps us to know whether the realism in question is likely to be clean or dirty, proud or humble, prim or obscene, rich or poor, choice or vulgar, etc. etc., according to the context. The most typical examples of the 'noble' classical-realist tradition are authors such as Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, Turgenev, Henry James, and Thomas Mann, while the tradition of 'plebeian' classical realism calls to mind authors like Dickens, Balzac, Zola, Hamsun, Joyce, and Henry Miller. Obviously there are exceptions and borderline cases, and no-one can be classified as wholly one thing or another. But, for purposes of a fairly tenable categorization, such generalizations are not without some merit.

Having briefly dealt with the main classical literary approaches based solely on theme, it is now time for us to examine, in slightly greater detail, their decadent and more prevalent antitheses, which, at least in one of their popular manifestations, correspond to what Havelock Ellis defines as: "The research for the things which seem to lie beyond Nature." As I attempted to describe the classic forms in a given order, I shall do the same with their decadent counterparts, and thereby endeavour to highlight the corresponding antitheses to each classic form.

Firstly we have the decadence which stands in opposition to profane naturalism, the decadence, namely, of profane antinaturalism and aestheticism. One finds here a predominating tone of disgust with natural facts and occurrences, a revolt against the natural-world-order, against the apparent beauty or utility of various natural phenomena, against the

imposition to eat, drink, sleep, copulate, urinate, defecate, etc., which invariably characterizes the lifestyles of human beings. It's as though man, the eternal slave of nature, wishes to overcome nature, to live, in a spirit of reckless defiance, outside of and beyond it. A very clear example of this disgust with the natural-world-order, particularly that aspect of it entailing defecation, is to be found in Jonathan Swift in the eighteenth century. But more recent examples undoubtedly include Baudelaire, Wilde, Huysmans, Beckett, Genêt, and Sartre, whose various natural *bêtes noires* confirm their respective claims to the kind of decadence we are characterizing by disgust with natural phenomena. In the late-nineteenth century this disgust reached a veritable apogee with Huysmans' *Against the Grain*, whose leading character, Des Esseintes, contrives to live in complete solitude in his specially-designed villa at Fontenay, to pass much of his time there in a highly-sophisticated aesthetic contemplation of certain choice works, both literary and plastic, and to avoid, so far as possible, any direct contact with the outside world. Unfortunately for him, this life of aesthetic sophistication – with its unbounded admiration for such hyperdecadent artists and poets as Redon, Luyken, Moreau, Poe, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé – eventually leads to a series of nervous crises which, in their final consummation, make it imperative for him to return to the less-unnatural world of Parisian society from which he had so earnestly fled. As is well known, *Against the Grain* was to have a profound influence on Oscar Wilde, and his *Picture of Dorian Gray*, though less decadent than its great French prototype, nevertheless brought this kind of writing to a head in late-nineteenth-century England.

However, with the general change of literary approach to one of classicism in the early decades of the next century, profane antinaturalism, though not entirely vanquished, played a much-less pervasive role. But its voice began to reappear from time to time in the 'thirties, and never more unashamedly so than in Sartre's *Nausea* (1938). Like the protagonist of Huysmans' novel, Antoine Roquentin lives against the grain. But he lives against the grain of life *as life* rather than as time spoilt by human folly, without even the consolation or *raison d'être* of the sophisticated aestheticism which Huysmans' tragic character reserves for himself. If human folly is a sufficiently strong motive to drive Des Esseintes into a monk-like isolation from society, in order to lead a life he considers to be of some intrinsic value (the Nietzschean overtones of which are impossible to ignore), the only motive strong enough to isolate Roquentin from humanity is the sheer

absurdity of life itself, the apparent pointlessness of an existence which exists for no other reason than its inability *not* to exist, and the contemplation of which engenders that disgust and revolt epitomized by the word 'nausea'. When, trapped in a moment of such nausea in the local park at Bouville, Roquentin shouts: "What filth! What filth!", it is with all the poignant anguish of one who realizes that existence is eternal and inescapable, and that it's therefore impossible for anything, including the idea of existence, not to exist. The man is virtually suffocating in the oppressive consciousness of existence, which, aggravated by the realization that external phenomena are like masks over the uniform substance of things, is as apparent in the sight of a gnarled tree root as in the rest of the tree itself. Fortunately for him, however, this ,,