

Modern Liberalism And Despair: The Pilgrimage of Joseph Wood Krutch

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[It] is characteristic of political philosophers that they take a somber view of the human situation: they deal in darkness. Human life in their writings appears, generally, not as a feast or even as a journey but as a predicament. . . . Every masterpiece of political philosophy springs from a new vision of the predicament; each is the glimpse of a deliverance or the suggestion of a remedy.

Michael Oakeshott¹

New York's Greenwich Village in the 1920's was a retreat for all those young American writers, artists and intellectuals who were, as Malcolm Cowley recalled, "seceding from the old and yet could adhere to nothing new." To Cowley they seemed to be groping "their way toward another scheme of life, as yet undefined."² This was especially true of Joseph Wood Krutch, for whom neither the old absolutism of classical philosophy nor the relativism of contemporary science sufficed as a basis of belief.

Of the American thinkers who contributed to literary and social criticism in this century, Joseph Wood Krutch (1893-1970) was, for a time, among the most prolific and widely read.³ During the nineteen twenties and most of the thirties, Krutch was a popular essayist and drama critic for *The Nation* magazine. His books, *The Modern Temper* (1929), *Experience and Art* (1932), *Henry David Thoreau* (1948), *The Measure of Man* (1954), and *The Voice of the Desert* (1955), to name but a few, commanded attentive audiences in their own right.⁴ Through-

out his long career, Krutch was a twentieth-century American liberal who questioned the most fundamental liberal tenets, not the least of which was a belief in progress, a belief that made liberalism so attractive to so many people for so long. His despairing skepticism helps us to understand the epistemological crisis from which modern (or “post-modern”) liberalism has not fully recovered, namely, the problem of reconciling the individual to a world indifferent to human values or plans. Modern man, Krutch observed, “has the same sense of dignity to which the myth of his descent from the gods was designed to minister, and the same innate purposefulness which led him to attribute a purpose in nature, but he can no longer think in terms appropriate to either. The world which his reason and his investigation reveal is a world which his emotions cannot comprehend.”⁵

I

It was while writing for *The Nation* during the twenties that Krutch became increasingly dissatisfied with a negative variety of liberalism, a variety that came very close to equating or confusing liberalism with derision, derision with criticism, and criticism with renewal. Peering down at the world beneath them, “negative” liberals were quick to spot what was wrong with it, as if knowing what was wrong with the modern world was all that mattered. For them, truth might be hard to reveal—if not impossible—but cant was not. They reasoned that if we could discard inhibitions, and shun adjustment, then we just might be able to begin again.

At first, Krutch joined in this rebellious optimism. Clearly the most impending social evil from his perspective, as Krutch’s “native son” editorials on the Scopes Trial revealed, was “Puritanism, Provincialism, and the Genteel Tradition.”⁶ For Krutch and his *Nation* colleagues, Mr. William Jennings Bryan and other “enemies of enlightened reason” were part of a “dead past,” which they were eager to shed. But while agreeing that we would be better off without Puritanism, Krutch began to fear that what passed for the “Liberal Creed” was little more than a moral vacuum. Merely casting off the chains of Puritanism and provincialism was not enough to sustain his faith in social progress. He felt, even then, that too little attention was being paid to a positive notion of freedom. Freedom had to mean more than letting go of old superstitions and illusions. Looking back on the “Monkey Trial” era, Krutch realized that his circle of New York liberals

were against more things than they were for. They had definite enemies called Provinciality, Puritanism, and Sentimentality. And they had the rather naive idea that if they could only annihilate these monsters then Culture, Truth, and all the elements of The Good Life would, of their own accord, rush to fill the vacuum. In much the same way they wanted to be Free without stopping to ask, Free for What.⁷

Consequently, he found himself estranged, intellectually as well as emotionally, from many of his colleagues at the magazine who still believed that their liberal convictions would bring about a better world, as yet undefined, a New Era that would be the harbinger of a lasting prosperity.

It was not that Krutch was less liberal than his contemporaries, but that his liberalism was a lot less hopeful than theirs. They could fix their liberal stare on everyone and everything, and by doing so, make them better, or a little more liberal; Krutch could not, which made them uneasy.⁸ Edmund Wilson, for example, complained that Krutch was judging novels and plays less as products of a “revolutionary consciousness” and more for their artistic and dramatic content. Wilson went on to accuse Krutch, with some justification, of “politico-phobia.”⁹ Granville Hicks was even more specific: he charged Krutch with conducting a one-sided “war against communism.”¹⁰ Krutch, however, saw only universal regression in Wilson’s and Hicks’ celebration of the dawn of a new revolutionary age. Indeed, Krutch feared that most, if not all things modern—science, literature, education, art, politics—had left us worse off than before.

As his co-workers on *The Nation* moved further to the Left, and prepared to do battle with *their* world, Krutch retreated still further into his. When he returned in 1928 from touring the theatrical capitals of Europe and Russia, he began writing a series of essays, “a study and a confession,” later published under the title of *The Modern Temper*. This 1929 treatise established Joseph Wood Krutch’s reputation as a noteworthy American thinker. Even Granville Hicks dubbed it “one of the crucial documents” of his generation, a judgment he shared with Lewis Mumford.¹¹ Mumford regarded *The Modern Temper* as “the once ultimate bible” of its time, but, if it was a bible, it was a new testament of despair rather than hope.

While *The Modern Temper* may have been a “crucial document,” it was not by any means an entirely singular work of that period. Krutch’s apocalyptic thesis touched upon themes found in John Dewey’s *The Quest for Certainty* and Walter Lippmann’s *A Preface to Morals*, both of which also appeared in 1929.¹² Dewey and Lippmann agreed with Krutch that the distance between scientific rationalism and emotional needs, between empirical reality and aesthetic beauty, and ultimately between nature and human values, had grown wider. They did not agree on who or what was to blame for the “modern” predicament, and what could be done about it. Each offered “the glimpse of a deliverance or the suggestion of a remedy,” but the glimpse and the remedy that each offered was very different.

Walter Lippmann provided a monotheistic interpretation of our predicament. As Lippmann put it, the “acids of modern disillusion” had weakened “organic faith” in God. By an “organic faith,” Lippmann meant an unquestioning faith, but he knew that “modern” men and women were not about to *accept* anything, let alone a faith in a divine being, without first questioning it. The “new sciences,” such as Freudianism, had stripped the world of an ultimate Being, and

he felt that without a lawgiver, human beings had no standard by which to judge their own subjective desires. As long as modern thinkers “speak of God in more senses than one,” they, he wrote, “render all faith invalid, insincere, and faltering.” Lippmann was certain—as Dewey was not—that “God was the supreme symbol in which man expresses his destiny, and if that symbol is confused, his life is confused.”¹³ The Church could not help because *the* Church had become the churches, and if anything it was now part of the problem. Indeed, the only religion that modern men and women seemed to respect was that of science, but while science might tell us a great deal about *what* we are, something else was needed, Lippmann realized, to tell us *who* we are, and what we might become. Lippmann never really gave up on the idea of an objective and, therefore, valid morality to point the way. In *A Preface to Morals*, he searched for it in the past; and, later, in *Essays in The Public Philosophy*, he turned to an especially gifted and trained elite to bring it to earth. In other words, the public philosophy had to be theirs before it could become ours.

John Dewey approached the modern predicament from the opposite direction, arguing that we needed more science rather than less. Dewey believed that the “modern” predicament was not new, but resulted whenever intellectuals create an artificial gap between the world of ideas, thoughts, and values and the world of action, everyday living, and facts. Dewey thought that this gap could be closed, hence “modern” despair alleviated, if we were to apply the experimental method of science to the realm of human desires. The “scientific method” reunited, in a manner of speaking, facts with values, and values with facts. Dewey remained confident that the method(s) employed by scientists had “placed in our hands the means by which we can better judge our wants,” and that the achievements of science had given us “the instruments and operations” by which to satisfy them.¹⁴ In a very real sense, his was a search for a scientific moral law, which, if understood, might show us “the way to respond when specific conditions present themselves.”¹⁵ Of course, conditions are never static, nor can they be kept static; and so, recognizing that conditions change, Dewey believed that the scientific method would require open-mindedness regarding moral truths. The latter might be approached rather than attained. Thus what we needed to know was not what to do, but *how* to do it. Apparently, Dewey’s faith in process was no less absolute than Lippmann’s faith in substance. But that is where their similarities end, in that Lippmann, when all is taken into account, wanted no part of the modern world while Dewey wanted very much to be a part of it. Apparently, for Dewey, the modern predicament was not really a predicament after all.

II

While he did not share Lippmann’s monotheism, Krutch could not countenance Dewey’s faith in science either. Krutch’s plight in *The Modern Temper* was fundamentally that of a lost soul who desperately wants to believe in the existence



Figure 1: Joseph Wood Krutch, taken in 1938 while a professor of English at Columbia University. (The photo appears here courtesy of Columbia Collections Library.)

of a realizable standard of human conduct, but cannot. Such a standard becomes all the more indispensable to someone who, like Krutch, is convinced that his contemporaries are reverting back to a more bestial existence. If only they had a worthy alternative or knew of an ideal to which they might aspire. Unfortunately, the only alternative that fired their imagination was a kind of primitive utopia, which Krutch called “communistic utopianism.” Because this brand of utopianism allegedly followed “scientific” laws of history, it was inhabited by people who do not question their existence. They are, he decided, “absorbed in the process of life for its own sake, eating without asking if it is worthwhile to eat, begetting children without asking why they should beget them and conquering without asking for what purpose they conquer” (164). “Communistic utopianism,” which Krutch equated with the Russian model, celebrated the machine age “exactly as the literature of a primitive people celebrates the process of hunting or of agriculture because these are the processes by which the life of a people is sustained.” Complete adjustment of the individual to Nature’s unyielding demands was the goal, except that, under communism, the party and Nature trade places, in the same way that God and the Church had. The Communist party, Krutch explained, accepts nature’s rules, and by becoming one with nature, the party masters it, and, by mastering it, the party masters us.

At the root of Krutch’s analysis is a paradox: human beings are part of nature, but they cannot or, at least, should not submit to nature’s “blind thirst for life,” for to do so would be most “unnatural.” It would be most “unnatural” because man is *by nature* the only creature “in whom the instinct of life falters long enough to enable it to ask the question ‘why’?” Nature, therefore, can be both a help to man and a hindrance, and Krutch oscillates between both possibilities.¹⁶ In truth, throughout Krutch’s writings, the concept of nature takes on variable shades of meaning that are not always consistent or clear. In *The Modern Temper*, for example, Krutch deliberately capitalizes the word when referring to “nature’s” universal, “blind thirst for life” characteristics. But he uses the lower-case when discussing “nature” as an empirical fact. The former implies that “nature” has a purpose; it is prescriptive. The latter implies that “nature” is descriptive, and instead of acting, it is “acted on”. In any event, whether capitalized or not, the concept of nature is central to Krutch’s vision of the modern predicament and to his subsequent efforts at finding a remedy. Therefore, to understand his vision as well as his remedy, we need to understand the use(s) Krutch makes of nature.

Krutch starts out by depicting nature as external to all things human. Nature is a process, but it is not a process that begins and ends with man. Not only is man not sacred but he may even be expendable. Used in this way, the history of the western world may be viewed as a reflection of man’s dogged determination to break away from the constraints imposed by nature, and to assert the importance of his individuality, rationality, and uniqueness. The final stage of this “humanizing process,” as Krutch calls it, comes when the individual (and, in a corollary sense, western civilization) realizes that the principles that underlie a just or a good life have no solid foundation in nature. It follows that if nature will not

provide any sign-posts, the individual must help himself or herself. He must replace the morality and eminence that he once attributed to nature with his own. It was a not insurmountable task given Krutch's view of man: "a fantastic thing that has developed sensibilities and established values beyond the nature which gave him birth" (14). In so far as man can discover from his "own works and laws and worship"—the phrasing is Emerson's¹⁷—what constitutes right and wrong, Krutch's liberal credentials are very much in order.

Krutch provides, in effect, a secular version of 'Genesis,' except that, unlike the biblical Eden, his modern world contains many 'trees of knowledge' of which history and the sciences regularly provide new saplings. He finds that the historical accumulation of technical knowledge about the material world has forced us to realize how separate from nature are our teleological concepts. This separation is, for Krutch, at the root of modern man's predicament. As there is no measure of morality outside of man, Krutch is all the more skeptical that any morality can last. Short of an independent standard, he worries, as did Henry Adams and Emerson before him, that human beings will not know how to use wisely the little power they have.

Central to Krutch's skepticism is the view of nature that science provides. What scientists have discovered in the chemistry lab, or by gazing through the microscope, has given human beings the power to manipulate their physical environment. "Christian Evidences" have been replaced by empirical evidences and, as Krutch acknowledges, this certainly makes life less risky. Notwithstanding his reservations regarding all things modern, Krutch would not, he assures us, trade the world of modern medicine and electricity for the world of dark spirits and defective chimneys, no matter how "heroic" or "picturesque." Contemporary knowledge about nature's unchanging *modus operandi* has made surgical methods more reliable, after all, than death-bed prayers to exorcise the hapless sinner's cancer.

His admiration of what science has to offer did not, however, keep Krutch from raising questions about its affect on our lives. Science does not provide any respite for the rampant nihilism which is so characteristic of the modern age. What science does (indeed, all it can do) is to provide many truths enabling us to understand, and thus to manipulate, nature without ever providing us with *the* truth that might enable us to know what to do with the many truths it provides. Consequently, when we turn to the scientific method for spiritual or political guidance, it is a useless tool. If there is a way to construct a bridge between the world of fact and the world of value, science, Krutch reckons, does not, and indeed cannot, supply it. Krutch is even of the opinion that, as our knowledge of factual reality increases, our sense of what is good or beautiful proportionally declines. Nature appears from the standpoint of empirical investigation to be, at best, amoral or indifferent to the man-made world of poetry, myth, and religion; at worst, it is defiant of any sense or meaning imposed by human reason. Thus the world revealed by science appears fundamentally at odds with human purposes.

Not only does Krutch reject Dewey's remedy, but he also rejects Edmund Wilson's and Granville Hick's pseudo-scientific populism as well as Lippmann's Judaic-Christian message.¹⁸ "Biblical injunctions," he concedes in *Modernism in Modern Drama*, "such as 'Honor thy father and thy mother' as well as democratic political principles such as 'the Voice of the People is the voice of God'" are no longer self-evidently true. Instead, Krutch reminds us of what Ibsen said in *An Enemy of the People*:

Truths are by no means the wry Methuselah's some people think them. A normally constructed truth live—let us say—as a rule, seventeen or eighteen years; at the outside twenty; very seldom more.¹⁹

It is at this point in the argument that Krutch slips in another view of nature. He now takes into account nature as embracing health as well as disease, creation as well as destruction. In other words, nature's purposes, though exceedingly powerful, rather than being hostile or amoral, are merely ambiguous. Nature can come to our aid but, Krutch warns, we must be careful not to rely too much on it. Apparently, even where nature is at its best—a life force—he would have us refrain from giving ourselves over to it entirely. Animals, he reminds us,

cling to or fight for (life) with a determination which we might be inclined to call superhuman if we did not know that a will to live so thoughtless and so unconditional is the attribute of beings rather below than above the human level (158).

Our survival, it would seem, is dependent upon our coming to terms with nature, but too much dependence impairs our humanity. This is, I suppose, Krutch's way of saying that survival is not the only value. It is also a secular variation on the most basic of all Christian doctrines as expressed in the Christian Bible, wherein "Whosoever loseth his life, the same shall find it." Human beings may have to give up everything, even their lives, in order to secure their humanity. Krutch is, that rarest of all breeds, a liberal pilgrim.

The question for Krutch is how much of nature must man accept before he damages that which is distinctly human. After all, does not being human include the freedom to examine, and even frustrate, that which nature has decreed? This leaves Krutch with something of a dilemma: by standing apart from nature we can not, as a specie, survive. We not only would not survive but we would have to do without "those natural impulses which have made the *human* animal possible." But to become truly human, we *must* stand apart from nature, because to completely give ourselves over to nature would only serve to turn back the evolutionary clock, and that would be, paradoxically, as unnatural as trying to dispense with nature altogether. Thus Krutch's dilemma: man in choosing nature

as his guide, *or in failing to choose her*, invariably puts something of himself at risk.

Consequently, Krutch views *human* nature as being both part of this world and apart from it. Thus, when depicting man's art, poetry, and philosophy, Krutch depicts them as being exceptional products of our *distinctive* ability to dream, to question, and to speculate. Nature may have created man but man's creativity, it would seem, is what makes him/her human. Only humans, Krutch insists, are capable of imaginatively reshaping the world to more closely resemble their ideals of justice and order. Krutch, clearly, is not about to abandon a romantic attachment to the uniqueness of human individuality, including, on the one hand, our innate desire to build castles-in-the-air and, on the other, our need to bring them down to earth so as to critically assess their value. If, as Krutch is sometimes willing to admit, empirically based 'laws of nature' compel humans to restrict their "will to believe," he still wants to believe that artistic creation—be it a novel, a play or a painting—can liberate the human spirit. In the end, we have no choice, he says, but to choose between our desire to transcend the mundane and often base concerns of everyday living and the biological facts which nature imposes. "*Quiet desperation*, that famous phrase which," Krutch recalls,

Thoreau used to describe the mood of the average man, is the result of an impotent protest against the realization that he is playing the animal's part without being blessed with the animal's unconscious acquiescence; and the more highly developed the reflective powers of the individual become, the more likely is that quiet desperation to become an active rebellion which expresses itself in self-regarding vices (24-25).

Nature, thus conceived, is an uncertain ally. It reminds us of our deepest longings but does not satisfy them. We desperately want to be more than we are, which is precisely what our animal nature all too often will not allow. It is then that we have to choose—nature's way or ours—a choice that Krutch has already made. "Rejuvenation," he tells us,

may be offered to us at a certain price. Nature, issuing her last warning, may bid us to embrace some new illusions before it is too late and accord ourselves once more with her. But we prefer rather to fail in our own way than to succeed in hers. Our human world may have no existence outside our own desires, but those are more imperious than anything else we know, and we will cling to our lost cause, choosing always rather to know than to be. Doubtless fresh people have still a long way to go with Nature before they are compelled to realize that they too

have come to the parting of the ways, but though we may wish them well we do not envy them. If death for us and our kind is the inevitable result of our stubbornness then we can only say, 'So be it.' Ours is a lost cause and there is no place for us in the natural universe, but we are not, for all that, sorry to be human. We should rather die as men than live as animals (169).

Fortunately for us, as well as for Krutch, nature has yet another side. Instead of a nature that can ignore or repel or limit human purposes, he now introduces us to one that may direct them. This view of nature rests upon an assumption of natural law. Natural law, it has been said, does two things: it points the way to a more ethical life, and it will, or should, cause men to question the life they lead.²⁰ But just at the moment when Krutch's embrace of natural law appears absolute, he adds an important qualification: nature's moral teachings are left up to the individual to decipher. Krutch, it would seem, is never able to move too far from his liberal beginnings.

Thus nature does not so much speak to us, as we must listen to it, and Krutch remains doubtful whether human beings can decipher her instructions correctly, if at all. (Or as Roger Williams put it: "Man's reason is but a flickering candle.") Krutch's doubts stem in part from his inability to trust human beings and in part because he is never able to completely trust nature. There are two reasons for this: not only do men and women seem oblivious to nature's moral force, but modern philosophy seems incapable of offering conclusive proof that such a force exists. Nor are scientists or historians of much help. In the world that scientists seek to explain, absolute standards are always suspect; moral standards are non-existent. While in the world that historians seek to understand, custom or convention often explain ethics. Krutch is very much a "modern" in his awareness that there are no human actions which custom, at one time or another, has not justified or condemned, a "truth" that men can ill afford to ignore. Moral certainty, Krutch warns, can just as "conclusively demonstrate the existence, not only of a real Heaven, but of a real and flaming Hell as well" (151). In short, we have learned from history how dangerous such certainties are . . . and from science, how simplistic. Actually, Krutch goes science and history one better by claiming (with Dewey, no less) that the need for some such standard may be a symptom of social pathology. "All efforts to find a rational justification of life, to declare it worth the living for this reason or that, are, in themselves, a confession of weakness, since life at its strongest," he submits, "never feels the need for any such justification" (58).

III

Life, however, as Krutch depicted it in *The Modern Temper* was far from "at it strongest." His critics were certainly aware of this, citing Krutch for dismissing

out of hand just about everything “modern.” H. L. Mencken, for one, found Krutch “really quite ready for the corner.”²¹ Another critic dubbed his book “the modern distemper.”²² Perhaps what Michael Oakeshott said of political philosophers may also be said of Krutch: “It is characteristic of [them] that they take a somber view of the human situation; they deal in darkness . . . and some political philosophers may be suspected of spreading darkness in order to make their light more acceptable.”²³ But Krutch was well aware of the somberness of his view. Not only did he find the lives of most people in the present pointless, but he also heaped scorn on the remedies that were being bandied about. Rather than offering an alternative to “the modern temper,” they were merely symptomatic of what was wrong with it.

But where to turn—or to whom? Modern men and women, Krutch realized, do not take kindly to authority, even authorities of their own choosing, and they certainly are not about to return to the past. They might indulge in a bit of nostalgia, but they prefer, to paraphrase something Herman Melville once said, to make precedents rather than to follow them. Of course, if there is no meaningful continuity between past and future, there can be no timeless principles of rational behavior, and human beings will have no choice then but to live in an eternal present. Theirs will be a never ending struggle to know themselves without ever knowing what is right and wrong for themselves. Krutch never could quite reconcile himself to this possibility. His despair had to stop somewhere. And so, more out of desperation than commitment, he left it up to the solitary individual to close the gap between past and future.

The thought that the solitary individual must find a path that others are responsible for having lost explains much that would otherwise be obscure in Krutch’s thinking. Salvation, through any class or group, hence a political solution, was of no interest to Krutch. Reliance on “others” was always a trap. If he identified with anyone, it is with the artist and the intellectual. They alone stand out from the others.²⁴ Krutch, in other words, turned to those who find little comfort in the more conventional world of appetites and hormones. Krutch’s path is well-trodden, too well I fear. He offers a spiritual way out, if not to us, then to them. Apparently, and contrary to the teachings of the Christian Bible, the needle he had in mind was only wide enough to accommodate a very few people.²⁵

Krutch’s “way out” lends a decidedly moral tone to his liberalism. He assumes that each human being bears responsibility for his or her own life, in so far as they make conscious choices. But the choice Krutch gives us is between a “bland survival” and a “tragic existence.” Hence our choice is between living as others do, or not living as they do. The *genuine* thinking individual who is not, by definition, part of the unquestioning herd, will of course choose the latter, even if this means, almost by definition, alienation and extinction. To put this another way, what matters most to Krutch is not that the individual chooses, but that he/she makes the right choice. As opposed to an unrelieved materialism, Krutch asks that the individual live reflectively rather than reflexively, and to be conscious of

life's grandeur. It is not that materialism is all bad; much of it is good, but too much of it is not. And that, says Krutch, is because "the more abundant [a society's] material riches have become, the more thoroughly it has come to believe that only material riches count." The issue is one of balance: "We might even decide that two chickens in every pot, two cars in every garage, and no book in any living room does not suggest a standard of living as high as one of each would indicate."²⁶ A standard of living that does not take into account "what used to be called 'the good life,'" or that does not "take account of *all* the factors which contribute to make a life good," is, Krutch concludes, a standard that is not fit for human consumption.

Krutch's moralism then is inseparable from his liberalism. To separate them, he was convinced, would do neither any good. Accordingly, he saved his harshest criticism for those thinkers, like Friedrich Nietzsche, for whom the good was a mixture of 'will' and 'power' (94). In Krutch's coarse reading of Nietzsche, if the individual were able to get what he or she wants then that would be good. Nietzsche's "morality" is patently at odds with Krutch's. For Krutch, the individual has to decide what is good, but that doesn't mean that what he or she decides is good. Neither *The Modern Temper* nor any of Krutch's subsequent writings makes sense unless read as a condemnation of the choices people make. It follows that if we are to be as Gods, or like Nietzsche's superman, then we had better understand that God not only has the power to choose but that He—and, therefore, we—must bear full responsibility for the choices we make. Some might call this "positive liberty," and use it to question Krutch's liberal credentials. They would prefer that we reserve the label for those who defend liberty as an end, rather than as a means to something else. If "liberal" were so defined, then there would be no escaping it: Krutch would not be a liberal. For him, liberty is both an end *and* a means; which means, that while liberty is a value, like survival, it is not the only value.²⁷ Krutch's liberalism, without devaluing liberty, requires that we value other ends besides liberty.

This does not mean, however, that Krutch yearns for a return to a Victorian 'Golden Age' of morality, when a whole range of sentimental values possessed a supreme and mystical reality. T.S. Eliot's brand of Christian metaphysics is not for him. Krutch's skepticism liberates him from Victorian ideas about such matters as love, honor and duty. But—and always he adds the qualifier—he never forsakes them either.

If Love and Honor and Duty can be salvaged, then someone must write about them in a fashion which carries conviction. If we are to get along without them, then someone must describe a world from which they are absent in a fashion which makes that world seem still worth the having.²⁸

Indeed, it is precisely Krutch's unwillingness to let go of the *eternal verities* that keeps him from embracing more fashionable ones, such as Social Darwinism, Marxism, Freudianism, or any of the other "flabby pseudo-religions." He desperately wants to believe that human life cannot be reduced to mere chemical compounds, historical forces, or psychological complexes, and that it constitutes values which transcend mere social conventions and individual taste. He would join the classical thinkers in their acceptance of the unequivocal truths about nature's moral teachings, if he could. *But* his pessimistic doubts about the possibility, let alone desirability, of deducing eternal truths from nature prevent him from doing so.

IV

All this might well have caused Krutch to sink into an unredeemed, if not unredeemable, cynicism, popularized in the twenties by H. L. Mencken, the course of which had already been plotted by Walter Lippmann.

In the heat of the battle the rebel is exalted by the whole-hearted tension which is easily mistaken for a taste of the freedom that is to come. He is under the spell of an illusion. For what comes after the struggle is not the exaltation of freedom but a letting down of the tension that belongs solely to the struggle itself. The happiness of the rebel is as transient as the iconoclasm which produced it.²⁹

The rebel, Lippmann complained, finds inspiration and meaning only when he's attacking popular idols, tyrants, and plain stupidity. And in his attack on Mencken, Louis Kronenberger offered this piece of advice: "any man worth his salt who is bitten by skeptical pessimism must feel the double responsibility of his position—must see that the more darkness, the more imperative becomes the search for light."³⁰ H. L. Mencken, apparently, felt no such responsibility; Joseph Wood Krutch, however, did. Consequently, Krutch's kinsman is not Mencken, but Thoreau. It was, after all, Thoreau who set himself up at Walden in order to come to terms with nature's purpose—and *man's*—as well as to find what 'light' one might gain from living a more natural life. Beginning in the early fifties, Krutch turned to the Lower Sonoran desert outside of Tucson attempting to do the same: to find what so many of us have lost, or never had. How we might not merely live, but live well.

This last thought links Krutch to a long line of political philosophers, who, whatever form their diagnosis of the ills of society took, embarked upon a similar search for standards. In Krutch's case, he sought a standard that would enable him to criticize his society while defending a more "liberal" one. Herein lies Krutch's

timelessness. In one way or another, his numerous post-*Modern Temper* writings address the rights as well as the responsibilities of the individual, the natural right of a common man or woman to be uncommon, and the aesthetic and ethical temper of life in the modern world.

At the heart of Krutch's outlook was his tendency never to take anything for granted, most of all liberalism. His pessimistic inclinations, as first expressed in *The Modern Temper*, cut to the very heart of the liberal universe. He was far from confident that history will always favor the tolerant and free society. He feared the forces of reaction that would destroy liberalism from without as well as a bastardization of liberalism that, by throwing off all restraint, would undermine it from within. Some things are better, Krutch acknowledged nearly thirty years after the publication of *The Modern Temper*, "but," he quickly added, "by [my] diagnosis I will still stand."³¹ Thus the central question that Krutch would confront all his life was how to keep his liberal faith in light of his own intellectual self-doubts, much less defend it against various critics and a world that seemed indifferent if not outright hostile.

No doubt, his political remedies for healing man's alienation are often left murky; and yet, Krutch's liberal vision of the spreading darkness around him provides one small glimpse of a deliverance. It appears early on when, in *The Modern Temper*, he declares that human beings, instinctively and emotionally, are *ethical creatures*. So not all is lost, yet. For this reason, if for no other, Krutch's image of the human being, nature's most varied species—the dupe of modern advertisers, the accomplice of jingoists and bigots, the hostage of emotion, of fear, the enemy of himself or others or both—is, despite all, the repository of hope. A frail reed, no doubt, but then, as I said at the beginning, Krutch is that rarest of breeds, a liberal pilgrim.

Notes

1. Michael Oakeshott, "Introduction" to *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes (Oxford, 1957), xi.

2. Malcolm Cowley, *Exiles Return* (New York, 1959), 9.

3. Writing and editing over thirty books, including hundreds of articles, Krutch touched upon just about every critical problem—of epistemology, of aesthetics, of ethics—related to modernism. It is, therefore, surprising that relatively little has been written about an American thinker who wrote so much. So far John Margolis has provided the most comprehensive, critical analysis of Krutch's life and thought, see *Joseph Wood Krutch: A Writer's Life* (Knoxville, 1980). He has mapped out the distinctive contours of Krutch's long career, beginning with Krutch's drama criticism for *The Nation* in 1922 and ending with his death in 1970. Margolis has set Krutch's professional work and life in "the larger pattern of [a] quest" for eternal truths. But would this mean, as a student of political philosophy must ask, moving beyond the "liberalism" one usually associates with Krutch's early works as well? This is one of the questions that I propose to address in series of articles, including the present piece.

4. To my knowledge a complete bibliography of Krutch's works has never been published. Indeed, the job of compiling a complete list of Krutch's several thousand essays and reviews would be a major endeavor itself. But a few have made an effort: Richard C. Kohlar has deposited in the Library of Congress a thirty-three page bibliography of Krutch's essays which appear in collections edited and compiled by other writers, and an incomplete list of

reviews of his books up to 1962; see also Anthony L. Lehman, "Joseph Wood Krutch: A Selected Annotated Bibliography of Primary Sources," *Bulletin of Bibliography*, 41 (June 1984), 74-80; and, in preparing his biography on Krutch, John Margolis indexed Krutch's signed essays appearing in *The Nation*, *The Saturday Review*, *American Scholar*, and *New York Times* as well as more "fugitive pieces" which were published in more specialized periodicals, *Joseph Wood Krutch: A Writer's Life* (Knoxville, 1980).

5. Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Modern Temper* (1929; New York, 1957), 11. All subsequent page references will be cited parenthetically.

6. Joseph Wood Krutch, "Tennessee, Where Cowards Rule," *The Nation*, 15 July 1925, 88-89; "Tennessee's Dilemma," *ibid.*, 22 July 1925, 110; "Darrow v. Bryan," *ibid.*, 29 July 1925, 137. His reports on the 1925 'monkey trial' in Dayton, Tennessee allowed Krutch to sever all ties from the "churchy" community of his boyhood and established his liberal credentials.

7. Krutch, "Freedom Was Their Fetish," book rev. of *Day of the Phoenix* by Van Wych Brooks, *The Saturday Review*, 16 March 1957, 20.

8. Historian Roderick Nash places Krutch among those "few really shaken minds" of the late twenties, who stood at "the fringe of the American intellectual community," *The Nervous Generation: American Thought, 1917-1930* (Chicago, 1970). Unprepared to live in a world where, as F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "all gods were dead," Krutch and this "malcontented minority," according to Nash, deliberately confronted human futility and the absurdity of life as part of their "existential" quest for radically new values. Nash's thesis helps to explain the pronounced existential strain in Krutch's *The Modern Temper*.

9. Joseph Wood Krutch and Edmund Wilson, "Is Politics Ruining Art?: A Debate," *Forum*, 90 (1933), 80-84. This was the pre-*To The Finland Station* Wilson, at this time, sympathetic to the radical left. In a forthcoming article, I examine the validity of Wilson's indictment of Krutch's liberal aesthetic standards.

10. Granville Hicks, "A 'Nation' Divided," *New Masses*, 7 (December 1937), 8-11.

11. Granville Hicks quoted by John Margolis, "Joseph Wood Krutch: A Writer's Passage Beyond The Modern Temper," *Romantic and Modern: Reevaluations of Literary Tradition*, ed., George Bornstein, (Pittsburgh, 1977). See also Lewis Mumford, *Sketches From Life* (New York, 1982), 378.

12. See John Dewey, *Quest for Certainty: A Study Of The Relation of Knowledge And Action* (New York, 1929) and Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (New York, 1929). Krutch's estimation of the decline of social progress also shares much in common with Henry Adams's *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York, 1918), first published when post-war anxiety helped to make it a best seller in 1919. Unlike *The Education*, however, Krutch's *The Modern Temper* failed to attract a large audience. The mass American public in August of 1929 was in no mood to read about philosophical pessimism.

13. Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals*, 325-326.

14. Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, 45, emphasis added.

15. Dewey, 278.

16. Like many of his generation, Krutch uses the traditional "male-speak" of Western philosophy. He frequently juxtaposes humans (man) and nature (she). Krutch does this deliberately, suggesting that "she" is somewhat unpredictable and unknowable. Gender neutral language is preferable. But to degender his use of humanity and nature, I believe, would diminish Krutch's description of the modern predicament.

17. Quoted from Ralph Waldo Emerson in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays & Journals; Selected with Introduction by Lewis Mumford* (New York, 1968), 9.

18. For a more sympathetic treatment of Lippmann's position cf. John Patrick Diggins' "From Pragmatism to Natural Law" which appeared in *Political Theory*, 19 (1991). In expounding on Lippmann's position, Diggins contrasts Lippmann's "foundationalism" with John Dewey's "interventionalism." "Without foundations, there is no need to believe that knowledge must be grounded in, or have a cause or origins in, something immediately given, self-evident, unconditional, indubitable, a self-explanatory, self-justifying presence unaffected by our thoughts about it, a bottom on which thought is said to rest." Whereas Dewey's philosophy consciously urges us, and here the words are Lippmann's, "to manufacture our own philosophy," 535.

19. Joseph Wood Krutch, *'Modernism' in Modern Drama: A Definition and an Estimate* (New York, 1962), 11.

20. I wish to thank Theodore L. Putterman for his contribution to this discussion of natural law.

21. H.L. Mencken, "What Is It All About?," review of *The Modern Temper*, by Joseph Wood Krutch, *American Mercury*, 17 (June, 1929), 251.

22. Ralph Barton Perry, "The Modern Distemper," *The Saturday Review*, 1 June 1929, 1063-1064.

23. Oakeshott, "Introduction," x.

24. Krutch's plea for tolerance of eccentric artists and philosophers, without a doubt, goes back to the liberal tradition of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*.

25. The old puritan, needless to say, would have preferred to narrow the gap between this world and God's, but that was not an option available to Krutch. But then the elect that the old puritan had in mind were also few in number, so in this, at least, Krutch's faith was not so different from theirs.

26. Joseph Wood Krutch, *If You Don't Mind My Saying So; Essays on Man and Nature* (New York, 1964), 30, 33.

27. See especially Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1953), 251. Since for Strauss Lockian liberty is fundamentally negative, the modern liberal is left with only "the joyless quest for joy."

28. Joseph Wood Krutch, *Experience and Art* (New York, 1964), 220.

29. Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals*, 17.

30. Louis Kronenberger, "H.L. Mencken," *After the Genteel Tradition*, ed. by Malcolm Cowley, (Gloucester, Mass., 1959), 83-91, 91.

31. "Preface," *The Modern Temper* (1929; rpt. New York, Harcourt, 1956), xiii.