

Decadence

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There is no decadence from the point of view of humanity. Decadence is a word that ought to be definitively banished from history.

Ernest Renan

The word *decadence* has been thrown about so much it has become a banality. Authorities or would-be authorities of all kinds (religious or political ideologues, the media) lecture to us about the decline of western civilization. On close examination the meaning of this term, whether used as an epithet or as a badge of honor, turns out to be elusive. In a general sense decadence seems to be connected to fatalism, anomie, malaise, and nostalgia. It describes a falling away of standards of excellence and mastery associated with a bygone age of positive achievement; heroism yielding to pettiness; good taste yielding to vulgarity; discipline yielding to depletion, corruption, and sensuality. Decadence has connotations of (over-) indulgence in carnal appetites, derangement of the senses, and violation of taboos. It is supposed to be a frivolous pursuit of exotic and marginal pleasures, novelties to serve jaded palates. Decadence makes you think of sin and over-ripeness.

Physics recognizes a law of decay and decline with universal application to all natural processes. It is called the second law of thermodynamics, or entropy. According to this law, there is a natural and increasing tendency in the universe toward disorder and the dissipation of energy. Efforts to arrest the process of decay and create order are only temporary in effect and expend even more energy. Through this inexorable process of entropy, astronomers tell us, the sun will eventually burn out, and the entire universe may well collapse back upon itself in a "Big Crunch" that will be the opposite of the theorized "Big Bang" with which it supposedly began. There's nothing anyone can do about this cosmic "decadence", but the time frame involved is so immense that there's no point worrying about it, either. Besides, it's just a theory. For the purposes of this essay, I will restrict myself to a consideration of the earthbound and largely historical dimensions of decadence.

Health and Disease

In a grand historical sense, the concept of decadence has been used to describe epochs of civilization in biological metaphor, as beings that are born, come to maturity, then sink into senescence and die because they have been condemned "by History" (or God). In this sense decadence is connected to a moralistic as well as a fatalistic vision. The word implies judgment of human experience on a scale of values and measures it against a "correct" or "healthy" standard. Decadence first appeared as an English word during the Renaissance (according to Webster's, in the year 1549) but its use remained sporadic until the nineteenth century. It can therefore be thought of as primarily a modern concept, and as such it is inescapably linked to the notion of Progress, as its opposite and antagonistic complement.

What lies on either side of Decadence, before or after it, is the myth of a golden age of heroism and (near) perfection. The ancient civilizations tended to place the golden age of their mythologies in the past. Judaism and by extension Christianity and Islam also have a golden age, the Garden of Eden, located in the past. But it is with the monotheistic religions that the dream of cosmic completion was first transferred to the future, in an eschatological and teleological, semi-historical sense. Christian theology underwent a long decay through Renaissance humanism,

the Reformation (in particular its unofficial, suppressed antinomian and millenarian currents), and the rationalist, materialist philosophy of the Enlightenment. The French and American revolutions partially destroyed the Christian time line and opened up the horizon of a man-made history. The violent irruption of the bourgeois class into terrestrial political power replaced the inscrutable cosmic narrative written by God shrouded in grandiose myth with a historical narrative authored by abstract Man and wallowing in the Reason of political ideologies. The dogma of determinism survived, however. Apocalypse, Heaven, and Hell were shunted aside by capitalism, which offered instead its absurd dialectic of revolution and reaction, progress and decadence. As the nineteenth century unfolded, liberalism, Marxism, and leftism continued the practice of identifying progress with industrial development and the expansion of democracy.

All of the great epochs of civilization (slavery, oriental despotism, feudalism, and capitalism) are considered by Marxist and non-Marxist historians alike to have experienced stages of ascendancy, maturity, and decline. The Roman Empire is one of the chief paradigms of decadence, thanks largely to the eighteenth-century English historian Gibbon and the French *philosophe* Montesquieu, the most well known chroniclers of its decline and fall. The reasons for the end of the ancient world are not so obvious, in spite of a familiar litany of symptoms, most of which are linked to economic causes: ruinous taxes, over expansionism, reliance on mercenary armies, the growth of an enormous, idle urban proletariat, the slave revolts, the loss of the rulers' will and purpose in the face of rapid change, and the most obvious and immediate reason-military collapse in the face of the 'barbarian' invasions. These facts don't explain everything. Can it be said that Christianity's rise to power amid the proliferation of cults was an integral part of the decay, or was it rather part of a revolution that transcended decadence? It is not at all clear that the Roman Empire ended according to an iron law of historical determinism. If that were the case, it is not likely that decadence could be imputed to "moral decay." The actual collapse of the Western Empire came centuries after the reign of the most depraved emperors, such as Nero and Caligula. And should it be said that the Empire was decadent, while the Republic was not? Both were supported by the slave-labor mode of production, and both were systems of extreme brutality and constant warfare. The notion of progress and decadence, retrospectively applied to this case, implies that the civilization based on slavery was not only tolerable and acceptable but indeed healthy, in the bloom of its historical youth, and only later became poisoned and morbid.

The same observation applies, of course, to the other ancient civilization of the West—Greece, which was superior to Rome in so many ways because of its democracy and its fine achievements in art, literature, science, and philosophy. The Athens of Pericles is usually considered to have been the high point of that civilization, in contrast to the "decadence" of the Alexandrian or Hellenistic age. But there would have been no Greek art or Athenian democracy without Greek slavery. There is the great tragedy; the beautiful things of civilization have always been built on a foundation of bloodshed, mass suffering, and domination. The other great classic of decadence in the grand historical sense is the *ancien regime* in France. This example serves as the core vision, dear to the modern Left, of a tiny handful of identifiable villains: the corrupt, obscenely privileged, and sybaritic aristocrats, oblivious to the expiration of their heavenly mandate, partying away on the backs of the impoverished and suffering masses, but who get their just desserts in the end. This was of course a partial truth, but it was built into a myth that has fueled similar myths well into our own time, the classic modern example being that of the Russian Revolution. The great revolution that chases out decadence has been multiplied more than a dozen times since. But this dream that has been played out so many times is still a bourgeois dream, though draped in the

reddest "proletarian" ideology. It is the dream of the Democratic Republic, which replaces one ruling class with another, and it has always turned into a nightmare.

Against the decadence of the old world of the feudal clerico-aristocracy, the Jacobins proclaimed the Republic of Virtue. The mode of cultural representation with which the revolutionary bourgeoisie chose to appear at this time—as a reincarnation of the Roman Republic—deliberately broke with Christian iconography. But it set a precedent for conservative, and eventually fascist, cultural ideology—the identification of social health with the classical, the monumental, and the realistic. The Jacobin regime of emergency and impossibly heroic ideals quickly fell, and the entire political revolutionary project of the bourgeoisie in France was rolled back (more than once) by a resilient aristocracy. But the reign of Capital was assured, for its real power lay in the unfolding, irresistible juggernaut of the economy. This juggernaut was already much further under way in England, while in Germany the bourgeoisie advanced only under the banner of philosophy and the arts.

Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century

The triumph of ascendant capitalism in the nineteenth century brought forth an unending cultural and human crisis as the bourgeoisie and its allies in the patriot aristocracy, even while continuing their struggle with feudal monarchy, fought also to contain the Utopian liberatory impulses unleashed by their own initial revolutionary impossibilism. The vaunted progress of the bourgeoisie—technological conquest of nature, industrial pollution, dull-minded positivist rationalism, and philistine demand for the proof of usefulness—had resulted not in a best of all possible worlds, but rather in a massive degradation of human experience. In addition to the proletarians enslaved in the factories, there were rebellious souls from more privileged social strata (the bourgeoisie itself, very often the aristocracy, and the middle classes) who revolted against the new conditions of alienation, in which Modernity and Progress were leading to disintegration of the self and nausea at the corrosion of spiritual values. These people looked to the demimonde of *La Boheme* ("the realm of the Gypsies") as an escape from and protest against bourgeois life. Art no longer in service, as it had been for centuries, to autocratic and ecclesiastical patronage, became "for itself." France, and more particularly Paris, became the great laboratory of social and cultural experiment outside the margins of respectability began the march of artistic "isms" seeking to negate the commercial reality of the bourgeois reign and always succumbing to recuperation by that commercial reality.

The term *La Decadence* refers specifically to a period of European cultural history covering roughly the last two decades of the nineteenth century and sometimes the beginning of the twentieth century as well. This period, also commonly known as the *fin de siecle* or the *belle epoque*, encompassed such movements as Symbolism, Art Nouveau (*Jugendstil*), Post-Impressionism, and the Parnassian poets, as well as those referring to themselves as Aesthetes or Decadents. The phenomenon of Decadence is best understood as the continuation and denouement of an earlier movement—Romanticism. Decadence and Romanticism are of a piece.

The Romantic movement began definitively late in the eighteenth century as a largely aristocratic revolt against the soulless, destructive engine of Capital's Industrial Revolution. The countries principally affected by these developments were England, France, and parts of the German-speaking world. (The second wave of the Industrial Revolution occurred later in the nineteenth

century and involved Germany, Northern Italy, Japan, European Russia, and the United States.) Although Romanticism, and later Decadence, resonated throughout Europe and the United States, their main centers of activity were always Paris and London. Throughout the course of the nineteenth century there was a lively exchange of influence between French and English poets, writers, and painters. In this essay I am concerned mostly though not exclusively with developments in France.

More Definitions

The word *romantic* is often contrasted with the word *classical*. The distinction between the two, originally drawn by Goethe and Schiller, consists basically in this: Classical is associated with naturalness, intellect, balance, universality, and rationalism; romantic with the revolt of worldly ideas, passions, and spontaneity against conservative, ascetic, or chastened ("uptight") ideals. This is strikingly similar to the distinction Nietzsche was later to make between the Dionysian and the Apollonian sensibilities. The reference in that case was to the Dionysiac movement of sixth century BC Greece, which saw itself as a revolt of mystical, chthonic nature against the solar divinities of the Dorians. Dionysus was the god of wine and revelry, Apollo the god of the sun and the leader of the muses. From this example it can be seen that Romanticism has precursors going back to antiquity. (Another example of ancient revelry with contemporary survivals was the Roman holiday of Lupercalia, a time of riotous feasting, fornication, and fun. The Catholic Church found itself obliged to co-opt many of the pagan holidays because it could not suppress them. This was the case with Lupercalia, which persists to this day in such forms as the Mardi Gras of New Orleans and the Carnival of Rio de Janeiro.) Although there may be an antagonism between the classical and the romantic, classicism can be a moment of romanticism (i.e., in the attempt at reviving pagan antiquity or any vanished civilization). Nietzsche saw both the Apollonian and the Dionysiac worldviews as essential elements of human nature.

"Romantic" first appeared in English around the middle of the seventeenth century and originally meant "like the old romances." It looked back with nostalgia to the chivalrous and pastoral world of the Middle Ages, when the Romance languages were becoming differentiated from Latin, or, going back still further, to the epic tales of ancient Greek heroes. The sensibility connoted by the word as used at that time stood in contrast with the growing rationalism of the Enlightenment, which, as the brother of commerce, was obsessed with the mundane and the quantitative. Many of the major themes that were to preoccupy the Romantics—the fantastic, the macabre, the wild and mysterious, the satanic and infernal—were also prefigured in the works of Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton. As a flight of the imagination, Romanticism found expression in all the arts, but was perfectly suited to the medium of literature. It is significant that the English word "novel" has as its equivalent in both French and German the word *roman*. "Romantic" has affinities with other words such as "romanesque," "gothic," "baroque" (all used to describe successive styles of architecture since the fall of the western Roman Empire and meaning by turns, fabulous, chimerical, grotesque, and flamboyant); and *pittoresque* (picturesque).

That last word, French but Italian in origin (*pittoresco*), described not only a scene, a landscape in particular, but also the emotions it induced in the observer. It was the feeling sought by young English gentlemen of the eighteenth century who were sent by their families on the "Grand Tour" of Italy to round out their education. (This practice preceded but may very well have launched

the era of mass tourism.) Here they would admire classical ruins, Renaissance art treasures, and the wild beauty of the Alps, and perhaps hope to meet an intriguing princess or countess. Italy was also attractive to German intellectuals and artists. Goethe, Mendelssohn, and Nietzsche are among those who either traveled or lived there.

The most influential and archetypal figures of Romanticism were George Gordon, Lord Byron and D.A.F. de Sade (the "divine Marquis"). These men pursued with uncommon vigor the beauty of the perverse and explored the mysterious bond between pleasure and pain. They were the most visible incarnations of aristocratic monstrosity and excess. The figures of vampire, Satan, demon lover, sadist, evil genius, and noble bandit they represented became much-imitated sources of inspiration to later generations of writers, among whom were Baudelaire, Huysmans, Swinburne, D'Annunzio, and many others.

There are some distinctions between High Romanticism and Decadent Aestheticism, in spite of their essential affinity. In Romanticism, Man is strong and cruel (e.g., the Byronic, Promethean, or Faustian hero) while Woman is weak and victimized; in Decadence the roles of the sexes are reversed. Romanticism is concerned with action and furious passion; Decadence is passive and contemplative. Romanticism often championed revolutionary social ideals, represented most notably by the English Romantics' initial identification with the Great French Revolution, and also by support for national liberation or unification movements in Italy, Poland, Hungary, Greece, and the Latin American republics—Wagner and Baudelaire both turned up on the barricades in 1848-49. These kind of commitments had largely faded by the time of the Decadence, which occurred in an unusually extended epoch of relative social peace and which tended for the most part to disdain politics in favor of *l'art pour l'art*. Baudelaire himself disavowed political involvement in favor of dandyism. Those artists of the later nineteenth century most concerned with social critique were of the realist and naturalist schools and identified with socialism, such as Courbet and Zola. This situation began to change, however, in the 1890s, as I will discuss later.

The Decadent aesthetic can be summarized as follows: the quest for the rare, sublime, and ultrarefined; the rejection of natural beauty; antifeminism; and the celebration of "perversion" and artificiality.

Gotterdammerung

A salient feature of the *fin de siècle* was the advent of a great religious crisis that had been building up steadily since the Revolution. The Roman Catholic Church, which had been losing ground for a long time (since Copernicus), saw its authority decay more rapidly than ever before the advances of nineteenth-century positivist science. The spiritual vacuum produced by this led to what could be called the first stirrings of the "New Age": the resurrection of heterodox spiritual practices from previous epochs; such as Satanism, occultism, and Rosicrucianism. fascination with vampires, werewolves, etc.; and a burgeoning interest in Eastern doctrines, such as Mme Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, which was imported into France by way of Britain and the United States. Many French and English (or Irish) writers and poets adhered to Roman Catholicism as a purely aesthetic ritual emptied of faith. Needless to say, they were scorned by the Church.

The spirit of gloom and decline among the Decadents was fed by the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer, a philosopher of passive nihilism par excellence who became more popular in

France than he had ever been in his native Germany. Schopenhauer's central concept was that life is pointless suffering and that the only pleasures are cerebral, fleeting, and negative. His advice to humanity was to drop dead, literally. In a strong echo of Buddhist or Hindu doctrine, he said that it is best to renounce sexual and all other desire: the Ideal is the nirvana of nonexistence. The Decadents followed this prescription for stone-cold reverie and agreed with his profound misogyny as well.

The wish for annihilation found expression in a great lament over the decline of Latin civilization. The Decadents sought to reconstruct poetically the vanished worlds of ancient Rome, Byzantium, and the Hellenized Orient. They had a keen sense that Paris and London were the new Byzantium or Babylon. In France especially the feeling of decline was acute because of the humiliation of defeat at the hands of Prussia in 1871, coupled with the knowledge of lagging behind England in economic power and development.

Sex, Drugs, Rock n' Roll

The use of drugs, which previously had been the exotic vice of a few (e.g., De Quincey's and Coleridge's indulgence in laudanum) became widespread at the end of the nineteenth century. Absinthe, also known as the "green fairy," was one of the most popular, and for a long time legal, alcoholic drugs. Morphine had been used extensively for the first time as a surgical anesthesia by both sides during the Franco- Prussian War, and the French conquest of Indo-china in the 1870s and '80s brought in a large quantity of opium. Many literary productions of this time were concerned with descriptions of drugged, hallucinatory states of consciousness, though none measured up to De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1822).

The Romantics and Decadents emphasized eroticism as the driving force of culture. The expression of Desire as power, deceit, cruelty, and unlimited egotism and love of crime was first explored in excruciating detail by Sade and by his contemporary, Choderlos Laclos. There had been eroticism in literature since Chaucer and Boccaccio in the fourteenth century, but it wasn't until the late eighteenth century that there was a lot of sexual imagery in western culture. From then on, the assertion of the animal nature, in all its 'polymorphous perversity' of humans appeared with increasing occurrence to blaspheme Christian dogma, tweaking the noses of the Catholic Church in France and the Protestant churches in England (though the great majority of the bohemian rebels in question, including the English ones, were Catholic, either by upbringing or by conversion). The themes of narcissism, male homosexuality, lesbianism, sadomasochism, incest, and hermaphroditism or androgyny that appear frequently in the literature of Romanticism sometimes provoked wrath and repression from the authorities. The Marquis de Sade spent the greater part of his adult life in prison, having been sentenced repeatedly by both *ancien regime* and Revolutionary courts, not so much for his deeds as for his unacceptable imagination; Oscar Wilde was broken by the scandal, trial, and prison sentence that resulted from his love affair with another man.

The late nineteenth century was a time of expanding knowledge about human sexuality (part of a process, going on since the Renaissance, of recovering the eroticism that had been so freely accepted in the ancient world), and the art and literature of the time seemed to have an understanding of the unconscious basis of the sexual drive. In the 1880s Sigmund Freud was a student in Paris, studying under the neurologist Charcot, who conducted research on a condition that was

then known as *hysteria*. Other pioneering efforts at a more or less scientific understanding of the psychology of sex included Richard von Krafft-Ebing's inventories of perversions, Havelock Ellis's classifications, and the writings of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. In light of contemporary views, some of these efforts may seem to have been fruitful (or at least interesting); others may be seen as faulty or inadequate due to Victorian, bourgeois, and patriarchal biases. At the time they served chiefly to debunk romantic love.

The Decadents took a dim view of love between men and women. Much of the time they made Woman the target of their spleen (nearly all the artists were male). Women were held in contempt as creatures enslaved to nature and instinct and incapable of reason. This trend was part of an overall fascination with and fear of nature as a dark, fecund, and devouring force. One of the most familiar motifs of the Decadence was that of the *femme fatale*, sphinx, and "Belle Dame sans Merci" (Keats), who victimized men, tearing them to pieces or otherwise luring them to madness, ruin, and death. Cleopatra, the Queen of Sheba, Carmen, Helen of Troy, and many versions of the Judith/Salome theme were familiar characters in the art and literature of the *fin de siècle*. The connection between pleasure and pain was extended into a bond between love and death. This eventually reached the point of becoming a mirrored inversion of Christianity's war against the body and its equation of sexual pleasure with sin and damnation. Pissing on the altar was another form of worship, and indeed, some rebels and apostates became prodigal sons and returned to the bosom of the Mother Church or some other "true faith" (as was to be the case among the Surrealists as well).

Mannerism, Myth, and Legend

The cult of artificial beauty led the Decadents to prefer plants made of jewels to real vegetation and to admire the icy beauty of crystals, metals, and precious stones. The more rare, refined, or fragile something was, the better, in their estimation. The taste for baroque ornamentation and metamorphosis inspired the Art Nouveau movement, which included such works as the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley, the posters of Alphonse Mucha, and the fantastic architecture of the Spanish (Catalonian) visionary Antonio Gaudi. Art Nouveau cultivated a craft sensibility, often employing floral designs, that opposed modern machine mass production. In a similar vein, the Arts and Crafts movement led by the English artist and Utopian socialist William Morris sought to revive medieval guild craftsmanship in the arts in a time that saw the advent of automobiles, cinema, mass advertising, and machine guns.

The Romantics and Decadents loved the fabulous and the fantastic and considered the dream superior to reality in all respects. Their quest for artificial paradises included a resurgence of interest in the traditional mythologies of many cultures: Greco-Roman, Nordic, Egyptian, Jewish, and Hindu. Arthurian legends-Avalon, Merlin, Guinevere, and the Holy Grail-were great favorites, as were Shakespeare's fairy-tale comedies. Richard Wagner, whose operas drew upon German, Nordic, and Celtic legends for their source material, was the object of a cult of admiration in the nineteenth century. To many, it seemed, the only fit remedy for an unpleasant contemporary reality was escape into a medieval fable world of dragons, unicorns, troubadours, noble ladies, and chivalrous, heroic knights.

Orientalism

Besides the Anglo-French Byzantium of decadent democracy, the "civilized world" at the end of the nineteenth century included five great autocratic empires that were all in a much more serious stage of decline: the Romanov dynasty in Russia, the Hohenzollern-Junker dynasty of Prussia, the Hapsburg monarchy of Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Turkish empire, and the Qing dynasty of China. All of them contributed certain features of *La Decadence* as it was produced and experienced in western Europe. Berlin and Moscow were, as cultural centers, completely in the shadow of Paris until the twentieth century. Vienna, though also subordinate to Paris, was the cosmopolitan capital of a great multinational Catholic empire and a hot spot of bohemian activity in its own right at the turn of the last century. (Its political ferment also served at that time as the incubator of both Nazism and Zionism.) The Ottoman Empire provided an important source of Romantic and Decadent imagery, particularly as England and France were in the process of dismembering it piecemeal and making colonies out of the Arab portions of it. The occidental fascination with, fear of, and desire for control over the Orient (Arab and Turkic lands, Persia, India, and China) had been of long standing going back earlier than the Crusades and continuing through the Eastern contacts made by traveling adventurers and merchants from Portugal, Spain, England, France, Holland, and the Northern Italian republics. This fascination became magnified in the nineteenth century as the Napoleonic wars extended British and French imperial rivalry toward the East. The wild and colorful Arabs made a significant appearance in European art at this time (e.g., in the paintings of Eugene Delacroix in the 1830s, after France had taken possession of the Algerian coast). In the nineteenth century there were also numerous paintings and literary descriptions of harem scenes and the opulent court life of the sultans, beys, and pashas. These images were steeped in the mystique of "Orientalism," a colonial vision, either overtly or subtly racist, of the East as a region cruel, lustful, and exotic; alluring for its real or potential riches; and populated by inferior peoples practicing weird religions and customs, who may once have had great civilizations of their own (which had helped make this one possible) but who were now in need of the paternal, Christian capitalist guiding hand of the "white man's burden" or *la mission civilisatrice*.

Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun

The era of the Decadence or late Romanticism ended approximately around 1900. In the 1890s, reaction to Decadence began to set in. Apparently the unrelenting pessimism, nostalgia for extinct civilizations, and indulgence in pure fantasy became wearisome. In their place appeared a tendency toward pantheism and a rehabilitation of nature and women. In the work of artists such as Eric Gill, Felix Vallotton, and Pierre Bonnard the female body and sensuality were celebrated. The end of the last century also produced movements of incipient modernism (e.g., Symbolism into Expressionism, Post-Impressionism into Cubism). Paul Gauguin was one of many artists not specifically connected to Decadentism who became interested in the culture of the Breton people, an "Other" society in modern France, which, by retaining its traditional language and culture and refusing to assimilate, seemed closer to nature and therefore to authentic experience. Gauguin was to seek his paradise as far away from civilization as possible (or so he thought), in Tahiti.

The 1890s saw a significant increase in political activity on all sides. The Dreyfus Affair was a principal catalyst for the awakening from anomie and revery and a renewed confrontation with history. Suddenly France was more politicized than it had been since the days of the Commune of 1871. The Left (which by this time meant nascent Social Democracy; Jacobinism and Blanquism were obsolete) championed the causes of parliamentary socialism, trade unionism, anticlericalism, and civil rights for Jews, a widely despised minority in France. Its leading literary figure was Emile Zola, who supported Captain Dreyfus. The Right wing of the bourgeoisie, on the other hand, was becoming fiercely nationalistic and wanted restoration of French *gloire*, which entailed a strong desire for revenge on Germany for the stinging military defeat of 1870-71. From the perspective of the French Right, the Third Republic and the Catholic Church were both weak and contemptible; only a strong leader in the tradition of Caesar or Napoleon (i.e., a "republican monarch") could restore order and greatness.

The revolutionary current, now dominated by anarchism, reemerged from underground to avenge the bloody destruction of the Commune. Terrorist acts were numerous in France as they were around the capitalist world. The most spectacular of these deeds were a bombing in the Chamber of Deputies in 1893 and the assassination of Carnot, president of the republic, in 1894. Sympathy for anarchism was widespread in the Parisian bohemia. Louise Michel, great heroine of the Commune, was friendly toward the Decadents and Symbolists. But the commitment to anarchy on the part of the bohemians was, in most cases, in the nature of a fashion, and (sensibly enough) it did not extend to a willingness to commit acts of violence that would entail almost certain martyrdom when the state retaliated with stern repressive measures, which included executions of *attentat* militants.

A further indication of the collapse of the Decadent scene was the fall of Schopenhauer's philosophical pessimism from favor. It was replaced by theories that stressed life, energy, action, and individualism. The newly favored thinkers included Henri Bergson (vitalism), William James (pragmatism), the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Friedrich Nietzsche, whose writings were just beginning to be translated into French at the end of the 1890s.

Nietzsche believed in individual greatness, human self-power, and the cult of Dionysus. He declared himself an enemy of decadence and rejected suffering, sacrifice, and asceticism. After denouncing Schopenhauer, Nietzsche repudiated his erstwhile mentor Richard Wagner, in large part because of Wagner's anti-Semitism. Nietzsche had a sweeping definition for the word *decadence*—he used it to describe Christian morality, nationalism, the socialist (and anarchist) labor movement, and to a large extent rational thought. And nothing was more decadent to him than the modern democracy of herd-thinkers. His was a definition of the word that stood its usual meanings and targets upside down while retaining it as an epithet, a disparaging and abusive term.

Thus, the twentieth century dawned on an increasingly mechanistic and godless capitalist world haunted by its prehistory. Radical insurrectionist tendencies with certain common characteristics—hatred of Christianity and bourgeois democracy, a yearning for rebirth or renewal (often defined as a return to nature, to the soil, to ancient myth and community), and a desire to replace the big business commodity economy with corporatist guilds or syndicates—produced an uncanny similarity of anarchist and protofascist ideas. The quest for adventure and aestheticism in the twentieth century led some European artists, like Marinetti, to celebrate war and fascism; some English and American writers, most notably Ezra Pound, followed their lead.

Already in the early years of this century the seeds were sown for the great dialectical modern nightmare-counterrevolution in the name of revolution, tyranny in the name of freedom.

The Legacy

The Romantic/Decadent currents produced repercussions that have persisted well into the twentieth century. The most obvious heir to the tradition was Surrealism. The Surrealists explicitly endorsed and claimed as forebears (or saints, as some would have it) such figures as Sade, Rimbaud, Lautreamont, and Jarry. Like the Decadents, the Surrealists valued subjectivity, the quest for absolute freedom, dreams, the perverse and irrational, the transgressive, and the strange beauty of crystals, minerals, birds, and the vegetable kingdom.

Surrealism had a historical perspective the earlier movements lacked. Surrealism developed a more coherent and consistent attack on Christianity and shed no tears for the legacy of the Roman Empire. In fact, it turned its back on the Latin roots of French bourgeois civilization (i.e., Gallicanism or Chauvinism) and took its influences more from English literature and German philosophy; its immediate precursor was Dada, which had been a thoroughly international movement. In the 1920s the Surrealists were among first in France to recognize and make use of Hegel, Marx, and Freud (in that combination). They identified their project with the proletarian revolution and denounced the imperialism of the western capitalist powers (such as the colonial war waged in 1925 on the Rif people of Morocco by France and Spain), but they stumbled by getting caught up in sympathy for the authoritarian dogmas of Bolshevism and Trotskyism.

Another significant difference between Surrealism and its forebears lay in its image of women: however problematic this image may have been (sometimes in the spirit of Sade, more often in that of Goethe's concept of *das Ewig Weiblich*, or the "eternal feminine") it was nonetheless a labor of love and not of contempt. Women in the Surrealist movement were obscure objects of desire and representation, but often they were also active participants and creative subjects as well (if not to the extent of full equality, then much more so than in previous cultural movements).

Though saturated with Romantic influences, Surrealism was, as Rimbaud would have put it, "absolutely modern," and hinted at the suppression of art and culture as categories separate from life. This is why the Situationists hailed it, along with Dada (though critically), for having laid the groundwork for the "revolution of everyday life." The extent to which Surrealism became, in spite of its better intentions, another art *movement* is the best indication of its ultimate failure.

Another major legacy of literary Romanticism are the modern genres of science fiction/horror/fantasy, which received a major impetus from Mary Shelley's magnum opus, *Frankenstein* (1818), and the weird tales of Edgar Allan Poe; developed further with Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, and H.P. Lovecraft; and have continued vigorously in the twentieth century. But what goes under the name of "romance" in our time is for the most part a frivolous, cryptopornographic phenomenon of Hollywood, television, and mass-market publishing.

The American Way of Decadence

Thus far I have discussed Romanticism and Decadence mainly as a function of the legacy of Greco-Roman antiquity and western European feudalism. These worldviews also made an impression in the USA, which is today the home of the postbourgeois, real domination of capital

in its purest form. From its early colonial history North America was conceived as a new Eden. Some of the initial settlers, such as the Puritans, were narrow-minded authoritarians; others represented the most enlightened antinomian currents of the Protestant Reformation. Most of the revolutionary "founding fathers" were Freemasons who, like their French bourgeois counterparts, briefly rejected Christianity and conceived their newly created nation as a renaissance of the Roman republic and of Hellenic science.

In the early period of America's existence as a nation, European Romanticism found its parallel in the romance of the wilderness and the frontier. The natural beauty of the land was celebrated in art even as it and the native peoples were made to retreat before the onslaught of civilization's "manifest destiny." James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Herman Melville were among the most illustrious of the American Romantics. As in Europe, the creative soul and the free imagination found themselves at odds with the reigning bourgeois society. The United States became the site of various experiments in the creation of Utopian communities either actual (New Harmony, Oneida) or planned (Coleridge's and Southey's "Pantisocracy"). But the "flowers of evil" did not seem to grow very well in American soil, probably because the country remained largely agrarian and because of the rising tide of evangelical Protestantism. The Southern plantation aristocracy resembled in some ways effete European absolutism, but its total destruction in the Civil War, like the destruction of the French monarchy, did little to establish the kingdom of virtue on earth. The slaves were indeed liberated, only to become wage slaves, and the power of the US Federal Government was vastly increased.

After the Civil War, heavy industrialization, the closing of the frontier, and the beginnings of global empire, the focus of romantic sensibility among educated Americans of the Northeast shifted even more to Europe. Such artistes as Mary Cassatt, James M. Whistler, and Henry James elected to spend most of their time in western Europe (Paris, London, and Northern Italy) to escape the staid small-mindedness of utilitarian bourgeois society at home and also to participate in the artistic ferment of the European Symbolism, Impressionism, Aestheticism, and so on. The practice of voluntary expatriation continued on a significant scale through the 1930s (and again, less brilliantly, through the 1950s), though by World War I New York City was emerging as the home of America's own cosmopolitan bohemia.

The 1960s and 70s produced the most recent mass explosion of the Utopian as well as dystopian elements of the Romantic legacy in the western world. This can be seen in the spiritual movements of that time, as well as in the political movements. As in France of the late nineteenth century, the power of Christianity in the US began to decay rapidly and become replaced in some quarters by cults derived from Eastern religion. This, combined with elements of popular psychology (particularly a la Carl Jung), became the basis of the contemporary New Age movement, which has become an expression of flaky, confused upper-middle class liberals. In the political (or antipolitical) realm the 1960s saw a significant resurgence of romanticism in the back-to-the-land hippie communes, as well as in the naive tendency, among students especially, to idealize the Third World peasant guerrilla movements. Many young leftists were all too eager to follow Mao's injunction to "serve the people" in a self-abnegating tradition that went back to the French revolutionaries' submission to Rousseau's concept of the "general will."

The Decadence of Capital

Much of what we have come to hear spoken of in the twentieth century as decadent has come from those calling themselves Marxists. For decades it was routine to hear the Soviet or Chinese leadership pontificating about the decadence of the West. They use(d) the word in a definitely moralistic sense, usually to condemn popular music from jazz onward or to attack the most blatant contradictions of modern capitalism, those attributes left over from its prespectacular stage, such as the grossness, ostentatious display and consumption of the idle rich contrasted with poverty in the ghettos of the metropolis and starvation in the Third World. This brand of condemnation coming from Marxist-Leninists recalled, in however degraded a fashion, the Jacobin Republic of Virtue, and boasted that red bureaucrats were somehow morally superior to the non-Stalinist bureaucrats of the West (a lie even on that level). The moralism of Leninist bureaucrats is a class ideology, and as such it is an inheritance of Judeo-Christian (or in the case of the Chinese, Confucian) moralism and bourgeois positivism.

But, some will protest, this is not real Marxism at all, it is vulgarized, perverted, recuperated. They have a point; in some ways Leninism, Trotskyism, Stalinism, etc. are departures from the original communist project. Very well then, let us cast aside the "false" Marxism and consider Marxism at its best, in its Western variants. These currents would include (besides the work of Marx and Engels themselves) a tradition coming out of the ultraleft of German and Dutch Social Democracy (Rosa Luxemburg, the council communists), Italian communism (Bordiga), and in more recent times, the Situationist International and its imitators. Of these currents, only that represented by Luxemburg promoted the theory of the decadence of capitalism. Her views were paralleled to some extent by Lenin during the early period of Bolshevism. These two leading theoreticians of the left of international Social Democracy in the early twentieth century saw capitalism as a historically decadent mode of production. Marx himself had been for the most part an amoralist and had never spoken explicitly of "decadence," although he had hinted that capitalism had a potential to destroy humanity. The theory of capitalist decadence, building on Marx's study of the economic crises of capital as "fetters on the development of the forces of production," was tied to theories of imperialism as the "highest and final" stage of capitalism, completing the global expansion of the system, liquidating precapitalist economies, and saturating the markets, leading to intensifying competition and war between the great powers.

The decadence, or stagnation, in the development of productive forces was thought to lead mechanically to stagnation in the total life of society (following Marx's theory of the determining relationship of the material productive base of society to its cultural and ideological superstructure). Here is a concept of decadence that appears furthest from morality, though it is still moralistic, because it offers an alibi for the work ethic and for the development and socialization of bourgeois society during its early, "historically progressive" phase. The theory of a new historical period beginning sometime in the years before the world war of 1914-18 (seen in the catastrophist view as the definitive onset of decadence) and requiring "new tasks" for the proletariat rescues a glorious past for the Social Democratic reformism of the Second International. It even defends a progressive role, albeit however briefly, for the Third International.

In reality both the Second and Third Internationals ultimately served to strengthen and extend capitalism. This outcome was an entirely logical outgrowth of progressivist ideology in the founders of "scientific socialism." Marx and Engels saw democratic reformism as a necessary transitional phase (i.e., building of the productive forces by capitalism laying the groundwork

for socialism and communism). Marxist defense of the labor ethic became an apology for its continuation during the transition stage. The ultralefts broke with the parliamentarism, social patriotism, and trade unionism of mainstream Social Democracy, nonetheless they defended the principles of organization, discipline, and political consciousness that were carried to fetishistic extremes by the Bolsheviks. The mystique of the Proletariat was preserved. The original theorists of capitalist decadence, such as Luxemburg, underestimated Capital's subsequent ability to expand; it has in fact expanded more in the twentieth century than ever before in its history. Economic crises recur (we are certainly living in one now), but it remains to be seen whether this is the final and fatal plunge. Nostradamus and Chicken Little have been wrong before. Socialism or barbarism? The specter of nuclear holocaust has faded, but the prospect of global environmental devastation looms ever larger.

There is no proof that human beings necessarily have to be prodded by a precipitous drop in material living standards in order to struggle for freedom. The experience of Paris in 1968 is the best example of this. Nor is there any proof that the conquest of bread in itself brings freedom, or that a vanguard leadership with correct or advanced ideas can raise the moral and spiritual condition of "the masses." The revolt against work is anathema to Marxists because they cannot understand why humans should want to rebel against their "essence" as producers. The "revolutionary party" can exist only to control and thwart the human revolt against Capital. For more complete, detailed arguments against Marxist theories of capitalist decadence, I refer the reader to the writings of John Zerzan, Jacques Camatte, and the French group Interrogations (for the Human Community). It is true that not all Marxists speak of "decadence" or defend "scientific socialism." Debord, for example, stated in *Society of the Spectacle* his view that what was best in the theory of Karl Marx was beyond scientific thought (i.e., beyond scientism or the naturalistic evolutionism that Engels, Kautsky, Bernstein, Plekhanov, Lenin, and Labriola were so fond of). The situationists too, it should be remembered, were of all Marxists the most in tune with the great Parisian tradition of decadence.

Decadent Modernism

The meaning of the word *decadence* seems to change considerably depending on who uses it. Decadence used as an epithet has been harnessed by both Right and Left ideological camps to attack bourgeois democracy. In the twentieth century the term has been employed by totalitarian ideologies to condemn and justify the suppression of libertarian mores and modernist cultural experimentation. Fascist, Nazi, and Stalinist regimes all described as "decadent" thought, behavior, and culture that, far from being stagnant, was actually the most vital and interesting of its time. These regimes, after exhibiting an initial toleration of or even flirtation with modernism, all settled on a preference for neoclassical architecture and the kitsch realism of genre painting with its banality, literalness, and mandatory good cheer. Subjective imagination, on the other hand, became a matter for the police. For the Nazis (and not for them only) war was healthy and virile; pacifism effeminate and decadent. The contemporary society of the spectacle, whose "end of ideology" is officially democratic but contains strong residues of fascist influence, permits all artistic movements of the past, including the most critical and negative currents, to coexist as co-opted cultural commodities to be consumed, cafeteria style. Christianity, though moribund, staggers on and remains the bedrock belief of broad sections of society in modern capitalist states, partic-

ularly alas in the United States, but the instauration of an "age of faith" is out the question (even after the fall of Stalinism). The operative justification for the "new world order" will probably continue to rely as it has for much of this century, on technorationalism and various conflicting, recycled, and ever more vulgar modernist ideologies.

"Long Live Decomposition"

Is there any sense in which decadence is a valid concept? This rotten civilization, the "air-conditioned nightmare," is certainly not going anywhere and indeed appears to be dying. If decadence can be defined as a function of the human species' increasing separation from nature, then ours is definitely a decadent age. And true enough, mediocrity reigns. But if we must speak of the decay of the system, the question arises, was not the decadence built right into it from the start? When was this society ever "healthy"? Do you yearn for the days when law and order prevailed, authority was respected, and the reigning ideology was vigorous and unchallenged? Do we really need masterpieces in our own time if we don't need God, the Pope, the Emperor, the Republic, Democracy, Socialism (or any other abstraction of alienation) to dedicate them to? It wasn't "revolutionary preservation" of the cultural achievements of past epochs of domination that dadaist Marcel Duchamp had in mind when he suggested using a Rembrandt as an ironing board! The collapse in the modern era of the distinction between high and mass culture is among other things an indication that the proles either want, or think they want, their own "decadence." After all, the fetishism of commodities in a mass society operates through a large degree of complicity from its victims, the worker-consumer citizens. Even if workers achieved the kind of leisure that was previously enjoyed by aristocrats or ancient Greek citizens, they might very well decide that the "good things in life" that industrial society has to offer aren't worth it. And then of course they wouldn't be workers (i.e., domesticated human animals) any longer. Everyone can indeed live in his and her own cathedral (or mosque, for that matter). But this Arcadian idyll of anarchic, universal human community can probably only come about through the supersession of civilization along with its cultural blandishments. Is this really possible? Who knows, but look not for another renaissance.

Counterculture and aestheticism as means of fighting or escaping from the system apparently reached the point of historical exhaustion decades ago, and as I have attempted to show, there was much about Romanticism and Decadence that was contradictory: it could be for either revolution or reaction, freedom or unfreedom. But everyone dreams of the love, adventure, and authenticity that the world of work and commodities can never fulfill and the world of art and literature as well as the modern spectacle of pop culture can only represent. As long as the false community of Capital, indeed civilization itself, continues to exist, it will continue to generate multifaceted modes of revolt, many of them in the tradition of bohemian decadence. Whatever the shortcomings of that may be, it is nonetheless more fun and more real than the public of Virtue or the posturing of secret societies of spartan heroes. Decadence can be a good thing if it gives us breathing space against biblical, socialist, or feminist moralism. Romanticism, one of whose definitions is the desire of overcivilized and domesticated humans to recapture a feral existence, will never be suppressed until it is realized in the social insurrection. It's time for a real Roman holiday, so bring on the barbarians!

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