

## THE AUTUMN OF IDEAS

The idea of decadence presents many variants of which two alone have a truly decisive importance. One is the biological, physiological and psychological variant; the other, the literary, esthetic and spiritual variant. The latter is so much more significant than the former that it often incarnates the very constant of the idea of decadence. This constant is eminently historical: everyone knows that when decadence, and nothing else, is being spoken about, it is not so much the degeneration of the species or of an individual that is under consideration, as the decline of a social and political organism or, more generally, of a society or a civilization. All modern speculation with regard to the notion of decadence derives from this principle.

The thought which Paul Valéry expressed in a forthright, sharp formulation: "From now on, our civilizations realize that we are mortal," has always haunted the human spirit, even before it was marked by the wordly pessimism of Stoicism or the Christian faith. But until its modern transformation this thought exercised, one might say, only a negative influence. For many centuries the idea of decadence operated simply as an antithesis: the thesis to which it was for so long opposed and from which

Translated by Sidney Alexander.

it drew its reason for being, was the absolutely positive notion of the golden century or the classical epoch. This notion was based on the belief that there are perfect exemplary epochs in the history of culture during which civilization achieves its apogee; and that in comparison with them, preceding epochs are barbaric just as those which follow are corrupt. *Ripeness is all*: these words of Shakespeare might very well sum up the ideal contained in this notion or belief. In order that the idea of decadence might develop into the altogether new and different conception which interests us, it was necessary first of all to admit the possibility of bringing to bear a value-judgment which was not necessarily negative on those epochs wherein ripeness seemed to be either lacking or excessive. In other words, it was necessary to be able somewhat to appreciate ages of silver, of bronze, or even of iron, alongside the ages of gold.

This rise of values on the stock market of history took place for the first time at the beginning of the last century. It occurred especially as a direct result of the romantic view of history, as the immediate effect of the movement of ideas which took the name of "historicism," with its boundless curiosity and limitless disposition to find all those elapsed epochs interesting and valuable. Modern erudition and literature have had a tendency to concern themselves—often even with delight—with those ages already surpassed, or those which have not yet achieved maturity; in brief, those ages later called by Renan, in *L'Avenir de la Science*, "origins and decadences."

But the decisive moment for the semantic and philosophical metamorphosis of the idea of decadence came precisely when this idea was applied in a half-negative, half-positive sense, to our contemporary age, that is, to an historical experience still in process, wherein we are as much actors as spectators. Defining the age to which one belongs as an age of decadence, entirely accepting it as such even though one may mingle eulogy with reproach, balance praise with blame—that is what our *Zeitgeist* has often, or almost constantly done, since the middle of the 19th century.

The present age may be defined as decadent only by making use of a historical parallel, comparing it with decadent ages of the past. One discovers, or rather believes one discovers resem-

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blances, often arbitrary or factitious, linking our epoch to those phases of decline marking the great civilizations of history, especially of antiquity. The priority or examples preferred are Alexandrian Hellenism and the late Roman Empire: they rose, as Baudelaire would have said, out of "Latin ashes" and "Greek dust." But sometimes one leaves the ranks of the West and of the ancient world to choose one's models in the China of the Emperor-poets and Mandarins, or in the Venice of the 18th century which, having lost its archipelagoes, had transformed itself into a new Cytherian Isle. But many thinkers find the perfect archetype of decadence in Byzantium; precisely because the civilization of the Eastern Roman empire gives the impression of an interminable agony: "the Eastern empire from the reign of Arcadius up to the capture of Constantinople by the Turks," says Gibbon, "will last one thousand fifty-eight years in a state of premature and perpetual decline."

The modern metamorphosis of the idea of decadence is almost exclusively the work of French literary thought. In France the idea is consistently applied for the first time to contemporary literature. Originally, of course, the intention was deprecatory, as is proved by the example of Désiré Nisard. The author of *La Littérature romaine de la décadence* was perhaps the first to call the literature of his own time decadent, after having compared its spirit and forms with those of Latin literature after the Augustan age. But Nisard is the last of the classics: the purpose of his comparison between the decadents of former times and those of today (that is to say, the Romantics) is the most absolute negation of one as well as of the other. That is why Nisard's contribution belongs to the pre-history rather than to the history of the modern idea of decadence.

Nisard's judgment became one of the commonplaces of Philistine literary opinion and it was in order to react both to the use and abuse of this cliché that new writers later accepted the epithet of decadent for themselves and for their own generation, unfurling it like a challenge. One of the first to take this position was Baudelaire who borrowed the epithet from the adversaries of modern art, while, at the same time, refusing its negative connotations and even reversing these into criteria of value. Many texts might be cited regarding this, but it is sufficient

to quote a passage written in 1852 found in the *Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe*.

At the beginning of this passage the author anticipates—for the purpose of refutation—the entirely conventional accusation which academic and classic critics would level against his poet: “Decadent literature! Empty words we hear often, falling with the sonority of an emphatic yawn, from the mouths of these sphinxes without enigmas who guard the holy doors of classical esthetics!” But, at the same time, Baudelaire immediately spurned the temptation of rejecting these “empty words”; on the contrary he made them his, since he saw that they might be filled with unexpected meaning and values which were real although unrecognized. “In the play of this dying sun certain poetic spirits will find new delights.” The key words in this sentence are two adjectives, one more remarkable than the other, and which are in balance precisely because they contradict each other: what Baudelaire wants to emphasize is not simply that the sight of a dying sun might produce delight, but also that these delights are *new*. Nothing is older than the old; all the same, it is by expressing the old age of our civilization that we will find and forge a new beauty. In brief, by recognizing that we are decadent we will succeed in becoming modern.

Baudelaire will apply this paradoxical lesson to his personal case in a sonnet of the *Fleurs du Mal* to which he gave the title *L'Ennemi*. In the first quatrain of this sonnet he compares himself and his work to a farmer in the decline of his years who must face the overwhelming task of once more rendering fertile the soil of a farm ruined by the cruelty of nature:

Voilà que j'ai touché l'automne des idées,  
Et qu'il faut employer la pelle et les râdeaux  
Pour rassembler à neuf les terres inondées  
Où l'eau creuse des trous grands comme des tombeaux.

[Now that I have reached the autumn of ideas / And must employ the shovel and the rake / To reassemble anew the drowned earth / Where water scoops out holes deep as tombs.]

Despite the despair of this vision of impotence and sterility, the poet concludes his poem on a note of dubious or, at any rate, hypothetical hope: he envisages the possibility that in the autumn of his life his efforts as a cultivator will not have been in vain;

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he imagines that the arid exhausted soil of his art might very well cause strange unknown flora to issue forth and blossom:

Et qui sait si les fleurs nouvelles que je rêve  
Trouveront dans ce sol lavé comme une grève  
Le mystique aliment qui ferait leur vigueur.

[And who knows if the new flowers of which I dream / Will find in this soil washed like a beach / The mystic food which will lend them their vigor.]

The paradox which Baudelaire establishes in this poem is identical with that suggested by the text cited above. The metaphor of the "dying sun" which represented the spirit or taste of decadence is now replaced by the image of "the autumn of ideas" symbolizing the decline of his life: while the "new delights" are transformed into "flowers" which are no less "new" and much more concrete. These "new flowers" are evidently *Les Fleurs du Mal* which the poet here considers as the late fruit of an unhealthy beauty, like an exceptional product of the precocious senility of his soul.

*L'Ennemi* is therefore an autobiographical figuration containing in germ the poetics of the artist. But these poetics are also the poetics of his time. As for the image of "the autumn of ideas," it can only signify, taken literally, the author's premature old age. But we know that in decadent imagery, metaphors drawn from the hours of the day and the seasons can evoke the destiny of the race and the fatal course of history as well as the flow of time and the curve of life. It seems to me, however, quite in order to borrow the most striking image from this sonnet and to make "the autumn of ideas" the emblem of the idea of decadence as a constant in history. And I find it no less legitimate to borrow the analogous and contrary image of another poet to sum up in a parallel formula the other aspect of the idea of decadence, or the most important of its variants, which is the biological variant. This poet is W.B. Yeats who in a youthful essay wished to define the spirit of "*fin du siècle*" art as "*the autumn of the flesh*." Of course, it must be recognized that the notion of decadence must be conceived above all as the "autumn of ideas": but one must not forget that this thought finds its *raison d'être* in the sense of a waning of universal vitality in an "autumn of the flesh."

The historical awareness of the “autumn of ideas” is expressed above all in ideologies or literary nostalgia. The “moderns” of the middle of the past century often dreamed of a language and style of decadence: and Baudelaire thought he had found the first in “the language of the decline of Latin” in which he discerned charming barbaric clumsiness” and “the baroque grace of infancy,” despite which (or rather, because of which) he considers it as “singularly apt to express passion such as the modern poetic world understands and feels it.” Thus, he expresses himself in a note to the poem which he composed in this language, *Franciscae meae laudes*, a eulogy parodying litanies, which he addresses to a Parisian working girl or, as he put it, to an “erudite and devout milliner.”

Gautier, especially, attempted to define the style of decadence, although he pretended to hesitate employing the term. This definition which is part of the celebrated posthumous essay on Baudelaire is formulated in terms of “the autumn of ideas” or of the historic constant of the idea of decadence: “The poet of *Fleurs du Mal* loves what is improperly termed a style of decadence, which is nothing else but art which has reached that point of extreme maturity which civilizations growing old develop in their slanting sunshine...”

Gautier considers the use of such a style not as an external, passing, more or less arbitrary fashion, but as an entirely spontaneous natural solution, thus confirming the principle which considers the spirit of decadence as an element of modernism: “The quality of the 19th century is not naïveté, and in order to render its thought, its dreams and its postulates, there is need of an idiom a little more composite than the so-called classical language.” In short, the style and language of decadence are an historic necessity for our epoch. Gautier expresses this thought, employing the metaphor of moments of the day, reflecting his experience of painting. This experience teaches him that each of these moments demands a palette for itself: “Literature is like the day: it has a morning, a noon, an afternoon, a night. Without engaging in vain dissertations whether one should prefer dawn to dusk, one must paint at the hour in which one finds oneself...” Since it is evident that “the hour in which one finds oneself” is now twilight, one must, therefore, in effect,

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paint twilight and its colors: besides "isn't sunset as beautiful as morning?"

It is after this well-known page that evening becomes the most suggestive allegory of the autumn of ideas, that is, of the critical and historical ideology of the decadent spirit. Later, evening will also become one of the most typical symbols of the autumn of the flesh and one of the most poignant themes of poetry inspired by this spirit. The passage of evening is transfigured into the state of soul exemplified by decadent poetry in many well-known works of which the most significant is perhaps the *Ballade des äusseren Leben* by the Austrian poet Hugo von Hoffmannsthal. This *Ballad of the Outward Life* ends, and is summed up in a line which needs no commentary:

Und dennoch sagt der Viel, der "Abend" sagt.

[And yet how much he says who says "evening,"]

The idea of decadence is not limited to literature but takes all history for its province. If, in the literary domain it is founded on its opposition to classicism and a paradoxical reversal of traditional value-judgments with regard to both terms of this antinomy, in the realm of general history it is based on an entirely dialectic interpretation of the rapport within itself, insofar as it conceives of itself as the last and most exquisite fruit of civilization, and the most absolute negation of civilization, which is barbarism.

One of the most illustrative texts of such an interpretation is Verlaine's sonnet which opens with the celebrated prosopopeia:

Je suis l'Empire à la fin de la décadence

Qui regarde passer les grands barbares blancs ...

[I am the Empire at the end of its decline / Watching the great white barbarians passing by ...]

Nevertheless, we prefer to study the same interpretation in two more recent and less-known, but extraordinarily significant literary documents. The first of them is a poem written at the latest in 1911, a product of the pen of the great neo-Greek poet Constantin Cavafis, who was born in Alexandria in 1862 and died there in 1932. (The fact that a man and artist like Cavafis lived in such a city may seem suggestive: Cavafis is the old poet often

spoken about, without being mentioned by name, and whose verse is quoted in Lawrence Durrell's *Justine*, a typically decadent novel which finds in the Alexandria of our time its most natural milieu).

Cavafis's poem is entitled *Waiting for the Barbarians*. It consists of an anonymous and collective dialogue composed of a series of questions and answers exchanged among a crowd gathered in the forum of a great city of Greco-Roman antiquity. This city, which is not named, must be one of the great capitals of the Eastern and Western empires. Here are some sections of this dialogue:

- What are we waiting for, gathered here in the Forum?
- The barbarians are arriving today.
- Why did Caesar wake up so early in the morning?
- Why is he seated on his throne,  
In front of the main gate, the crown on his head?
- ... The emperor is waiting to receive their chief:  
He has prepared a parchment for him  
With great names and great titles.

To all the other questions of the same kind, which are only variations of the same interrogation, replies are made in the same manner with the refrain:

- The barbarians are arriving today.

At the end, after vainly waiting for a long time, the crowd is seized by doubt and begins to disperse. The poem ends with the following exchanges sealed by the final question, formulated by the same person who responds with a skeptical or cynical statement, without illusions:

- Why is everybody going home so sadly?
- It is already night, and the barbarians haven't come.
- Someone has just arrived from the frontier,  
And he says there are no more barbarians.
- What will happen to us without barbarians?
- After all, those people were a solution.

This small and extraordinary poem gives us, in an abridged form and in all of its absurdity, the comedy of decadence. But at the same time, it gives us a very serious lesson, intellectual as well as moral: it teaches us that the idea of decadence, just like



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the historical reality which it represents, can find no other solution to its problems than by submitting itself to the domination of the barbaric spirit.

The other document is also a poem. Its author is the Russian poet Valeri Brioussov, who was born in Moscow in 1872 and died there in 1924. Ever since the end of the century, he had been one of the masters of Russian symbolism and modernism: and the text which will be quoted explains perhaps how and why such a man and such a writer could rally, after 1917, to the Communist cause. The poem, entitled *The Huns to come*, bears the date 1906, as if to indicate that the events which dictated it were the defeat of Russia in the war against Japan and the "little revolution" of 1905.

Brioussov opens his poem with an apostrophe to the cunning of a tribe of new Huns possessing all the homicidal arms of modern war, and menacing Russia from the borders of Asia. Actually, they have not yet appeared on the horizon: and the poet exhorts them to hurry and come destroy the world which is his. Nevertheless, no sooner has he invoked them, Brioussov forgets "the Huns to come," in order to evoke in their stead the revolt of the masses which the barbarian menace will suffice to unleash. Employing Arnold Toynbee's terminology, one could say that not satisfied with conjuring up the destructive force of the "external proletariat" of the barbarians, the poet also conjures up, like a true executioner of his civilization, the "internal proletariat" of the slaves. Instead of fearing their revolt, the poet provokes it with appeals as imperative as they are desperate:

Heap up all the books in a single pyre  
And dance in its flames!  
Violate the sacred temples,  
You who are innocent as babes.

As for us, priests and sages,  
Guardians of the holy mystery,  
We will hide our torches  
In grottoes and in deserts...

All that we alone have seen and known  
Will pass without leaving a trace.  
But you who will come to destroy me  
I salute you with my hosanna!

If Cavafis' poem gives us the comedy of decadence, Briousov's poem gives us its tragedy. In uttering, with a truly Neronian pathos, his "*Qualis artifex pereo!*," the author of *Huns to come* teaches us, just like the author of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, that the notion of decadence cannot go beyond the idea and even the value (it matters very little that they are negative) of what is called barbarism. The decadent must always willy nilly welcome the barbarians, and it doesn't matter very much whether what he expects from them might be either the welfare or the ruin of his life and his city. In this fatality may be recognized the decadence-barbarism antinomy in its true sense and inner dialectic.

After having developed such an antinomy in the sphere of general history, decadent thought reflects it, in turn, in the domain of specific history. But while reflecting it in art, poetry or culture, it tends to replace one of its terms by a term of a different order and less offensive tone. This term is that of primitivism. At first sight, decadence and primitivism should reciprocally negate each other, absolutely contradict each other. But if one looks deeper into the matter it is clear that decadence conceived of as a cultural form is opposed to primitivism in just as ambiguous a manner as the general idea of decadence is opposed to the concept of barbarism. In this case, too, the decadent willingly recognizes purifying virtues and regenerative powers in his adversary. It seems, therefore, that von Sydow was wrong to define decadence as "a culture of negation," considering that it is quite capable of finding positive values not only in itself but also in everything which denies it.

Baudelaire understood this paradox very well, as may be seen in the beautiful poem beginning: *J'aime le souvenir de ces époques nues* [I love the memory of those naked epochs]. In three lines of this poem Baudelaire seems to be saying that despite his proud awareness of having created a new art out of the century's evil and agony, the decadent spirit is nonetheless bound to respect and admire its contrary, that is to say, the primitive spirit, with its fresh immaturity:

Mais ces inventions de nos muses tardives  
N'empêcheront jamais les races malades  
De rendre à la jeunesse un hommage profond ....

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[But these inventions of our tardy muses / Will never prevent the sickly races / From rendering profound homage to youth ....]

We have already seen that the decadent spirit identifies itself, in the period from the middle of the last century up to the beginning of the present century, with nothing but the modern spirit. But we also know that for those generations closest to us, this rapport has come to be replaced by another bond which might be called the *avant-garde*-modernism alliance. With regard to this element, decadence might be considered as a modernism which seeks its landmark in the past, in those "recurrences of epochs" (the formulation is Huysman's) which haunt the nightmares of history. As for the *avant-garde*, it might be considered, in its turn, as a modernism which seeks its landmark in the future; and it is precisely for this reason that futurism seems to sum up in itself the entire *avant-garde* spirit. (I mean by the term futurism a general tendency rather than a particular movement, which, although in other respects stripped of importance, had the great merit of pointing out this tendency and unfurling it as its flag.

In reality, decadence and *avant-garde* both rest on the present: proving they are basically one and the same thing, despite their apparent opposition. In this regard, one must support the opinion of George Lukács, who identifies decadence and *avant-garde* although one need not necessarily share Lukács negative judgment which reduces both of these tendencies to a unique and final phase of the degeneration of the bourgeois Bohemians.

Even if they may be distinguished from each other, particularly as flags and pass-words, they were, despite everything, flags and pass-words of two different generations. Saying that they were one and the same thing therefore simply meant that they exercised, each in its own way, pretty much the same function. In order to demonstrate that their specific missions were at least complementary, I would like to juxtapose two bits of evidence absolutely independent from each other, but reciprocally explanatory insofar as they light up the problem with converging beams.

The first of these two bits of evidence contains the most

persuasive definition of the spirit of decadence that I know. It is found in *Correspondence from One Corner to the Other*, that is to say, in one of the letters which the poet Viacheslav Ivanov exchanged with the critic and historian Mikhaïl Guerchenon "from one corner to the other" of the same room (in a state sanitarium in which they were sheltered in 1921 during one of the cruellest periods of Russian history). The great subjects of this debate were the revolution (whether it had come to build or to destroy) and culture (whether its destiny was death or resurrection). Apropos of this theme, Ivanov poses the following question: "What is decadence?", in order to give this direct and keen reply: "It is the feeling, oppressive and exultant at the same time, of being the last of a series..."

What should be noted above all is that once again the sense of decadence has just been defined here by a couple of parallel and opposed adjectives. In qualifying this sense of *exultant* and also *oppressive*, Ivanov brings us the decisive proof that the modern idea of decadence is based on a judgment at least half positive of its subject or object. There are other observations to make and other conclusions to be drawn from this definition of decadence: but they will be clearer when one has compared them to a no less persuasive definition of the *avant-garde*, that is to say, the other proof mentioned.

This second bit of evidence is found in *Avventura novecentista*, a volume published in 1937, in which the Italian writer Massimo Bontempelli gathered all his polemical writing inspired by a long active participation in the most advanced literary and artistic movements between both wars. Bontempelli begins by wondering what the particular task of the *avant-garde* consists of, and replies to this question as follows: "The task of the *avant-garde* is to reestablish conditions of primordiality which make possible the appearance of the creator at the beginning of the new series." It may be seen at the outset that Bontempelli connects the *avant-garde* with that primitivism to which we have already connected decadence. It will also be seen that while not knowing each other at all and treating analogous but different subjects, the Russian poet and the Italian writer found the link uniting in one chain the ideas of the *avant-garde*, and of decadence. This link is the concept of "a series."

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Naturally, Ivanov is particularly aware of the series which is about to close; Bontempelli, that which is about to open. One is the ancient series; the other, the new series. Both series evidently have need of each other. Minds belonging to the first feel themselves as relieved as they are afflicted by the thought of being the last of their cycle. Minds belonging to the second, or more precisely, endeavoring to prepare for its coming, are ready to sacrifice themselves for it. That simply means that if decadence, just like the *avant-garde*, is also an age of transition, the *avant-garde*, just like decadence is also an age of agony. One might therefore conclude that one like the other finds itself suspended in a similar state of soul, made up of despair mixed with hope: or, to quote two lines of Matthew Arnold, their common destiny is to wander

... between two worlds, one dead,  
The other powerless to be born.