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In the Shadow of the *Belle Époque*: Progress, Decadence, and the Rush to War

Decadence, Degeneration, and the End: Studies in the European Fin de Siècle, edited by Marja Härmänmaa and Christopher Nissen, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, xi + 282 pp., £60.00 (cloth)

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At the turn of the twentieth century the philosophical theory of Positivism informed most intellectual, political, and cultural endeavors, permeating private and public discourse. People lived in the unassailable belief that science and technology would provide a solution to cure all social and political ills, thus leaving many problems simmering until they exploded in World War I. Positivism belonged to the broader modernist ideological framework that imbued political organizations, popular, and intellectual attitudes, and the very task of institution-building.¹ Modernism thus extends far beyond the artistic milieu to which art historians often confine it.²

Within Modernism, a partial exception was provided by *Decadentism*, a literary movement that, however, had strong links with artistic Modernism. The ‘decadents’ went partly against prevailing and broader modernist assumptions, but shared their eschatological horizon: they did not form a hegemonic movement, positioning themselves in opposition to mainstream ideologies such as Modernism and Positivism, which were more readily associated with nationalism, the dominant political ideology of the time—in fact, the adjective ‘decadent’ was initially used in a derogatory way.

In the *fin-de-siècle*, both nationalism and modernism accompanied the strengthening of the European system of nation states as they expanded their brutal colonial empires and steered their citizens toward collective self-destruction. World War I was propelled by unprecedented economic expansion, technological progress, increasing consumption, and the spread of wealth. As Thomas Piketty has shown, while capital increasingly accumulated in fewer and fewer hands, the *Belle Époque* (1871–1914) accompanied the techno-modernist push towards war.³ While a fraction of the cultural elite saw war as decadence, for many it held the promise of regeneration—a vision that was later embraced by warmongering movements such as Futurism. While most of the ‘decadents’ were poets, novelists, and literati, Decadentism had a negligible impact on political statecraft.

Yet how modernist was Decadentism? Encompassing symbolism, aestheticism, Gothic novels, and other late nineteenth-century literary trends and genres, the term Decadentism remained largely negative until poets such as Charles Baudelaire rescued it from marginality and began to use it with more positive connotations, sometimes in reference to their own work. Their interpretation stood in stark contrast to the predominant modernist notions of unilinear evolution and growth, privileging instead images of degeneration and ruin over the “faith in the new beginnings proclaimed by the voices of progress,” as editors Christopher Nissen and Marja Härmänmaa clearly note in their introduction (1) to *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End*.

Almost all the book's chapters are concerned with poets, literati, and visual artists—the only exception being the first chapter, which is devoted to Victorian science and philosophy and how the emergence of thermodynamics “reintroduced finitude into the cosmos” (17). In the second chapter, Natalia Santamaría-Laorden focuses on two *fin-de-siècle* literary movements in Spain, the Generation of '98 and literary Modernism. The aim of the former was to initiate a process of national regeneration to rescue Spain from the decadence that had culminated in the loss of its empire in the Spanish–American War of 1898; the latter brought a broader critique to positivist determinism, particularly Darwinism, through an aesthetic sensibility strongly influenced by French Symbolist poetry.⁴

Eventually, decadent modernism spread to Greece with the poetry of Constantine P. Cavafy and Stefan George, who linked it to late Roman and Hellenistic–Alexandrian times, reflecting, in Anastasia Antonopoulous's words, the “modern experiences of alienation by depicting them in a historical context, so that they become more familiar” (49).

In England Oscar Wilde, the archetypal figure of dandy Decadentism, adopted a different approach. His radical aesthetic served to “unmask his society's quirks” and “subvert Victorian society's dominant message of submission to codes and appearances.” The way to achieve this was by infusing “the world of the marvelous with certain elements characteristic of the Victorian era” (Fleuret, 67). Refining his literary tools with the aim of rescuing society from decadence, Wilde's *Fairy Tales* (1888 and 1891) identified a Victorian, individualistic route to regeneration. Overall, Wilde's radical aesthetic and creativity encapsulated the uniqueness of the individual bordering on eccentricity and thus provided a formidable antidote to the prevalent politics of conformism and patterns of cultural homogenization characteristic of the emerging mass society—as illustrated in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Hedonism, Consumption and Disease

In the *Belle Époque*, the spread of hedonism and new patterns of consumption were mirrored by—and led to—an awareness of disease and death. The decadent obsession with disease is well described through the lenses of Joel Lehtonen's Finnish novel *Mataleena* (1905), a post-Romantic embrace of malady, decay, and sickness through the re-inversion of hypocritical bourgeois values—these remained Decadentism's primary target. By revealing human frailty, the tragedy of sickness dismantled these hollow upper-class values, replacing them with psychological insights that only illness can manifest by uncovering fundamental existential truths. In Pirjo Lyytikäinen's view (chap. 5), Lehtonen's “subjective realism” captures the essential traits of human nature hidden behind the banalities of the quotidian and does so through negativity and the subversion of the *Belle Époque*'s hedonistic values.

The subtle link between hedonism and sickness can be highlighted by the thorny issue of drug abuse and dependence. This was the subject of graphic designer Eugène Grasset's lithograph *Morphinomaniac* (1897) depicting a wild-haired female morphine addict whose suffering, despairing fraught gaze clashes with the light yellow background and tenuous colours typical of Japanese *ukiyo-e*—woodblock prints that had intensely inspired European Modernists since the 1860s. Grasset, a pioneer of *Art Nouveau*, was a key representative of the *Belle Époque*, which can be loosely compared with contemporary mass consumerism. One can agree that the predicament embodied by the morphine addict remains fully graspable to the contemporary eye (Susik, chap. 6). However, while there is a touch of accessible contemporaneity in Grasset's works, it seems far-fetched to retroactively identify them as symptomatic of contemporary “consumer culture.” The uniqueness and centrality of Paris in the Decadentist *zeitgeist* can better explain this durability: the very notion of the ‘avant-garde’ implied the anticipation of broader cultural and social trends, before these could become widely accepted. For David Harvey, the consumerist spectacle was also born on the Parisian boulevards, spearheading the diffusion of consumerism as daily practice well before a powerful consumerist industry was built around it.⁵ But we should not lose perspective of the fact that, with the expansion of wealth, the gap between haves and have-nots also dramatically increased, so that we are still talking here about a tiny elite. Consumerism in the way we intend it today was yet to be born.

With Paris firmly placed at the centre of cultural affairs, a tide of Frenchification swept throughout Europe before World War I. One of its outcomes was the pervasive cultural impact of Parisian elites' consumption patterns.⁶ In contrast with contemporary Americanization, Frenchification did not carry with it a mass consumption culture that affected every individual in every walk of life: hedonism and consumerism were beginning to address an incipient mass society, but still affected a relatively minute elite, while the Paris art scene spawned a variety of other cultural expressions such as medievalism, Japonism, and ornamentalism. Yet, even the idea of belonging to a French nation had not really taken root among the ordinary non-urban French by the end of the nineteenth century, as Eugen Weber famously argued.⁷

The Salome Craze and the Return of the femme fatale

Modernism is intrinsically enmeshed with melancholia, a connection that can be explored through the multiple versions of the *Salome* myth reiterated, for instance, by August Strindberg, Oscar Wilde, and Henrik Ibsen. The tale from the Gospels of the death of John the Baptist and the exotic-erotic appeal of Salome, Herodias's “dancing daughter,” inspired several artworks of the time. Significantly, Wilde's play *Salomé* (1891) was written in French, a choice that again shows how central Paris and all things French were in the culture of the time. Kyle Mox recognizes that a certain degree of Frenchification affected the English speaking world, even though Wilde himself justified the use of French with the idea that “there are modes of expression that a Frenchman of letters would not have used, but they give a certain relief or colour to the play.”⁸

Exoticism was an important component of French culture at a time when the elites of other countries were increasingly following Western and French mores. The sweeping fad of ‘Salomania’ condensed the exotic, enchanting, seductive, hyper-sensual lifestyles associated with the Orient, the colonial and the racial tropes of the *femme fatale*. In fact, *Salome* was

“so ubiquitous that in 1912 one scholar claimed to have recorded 2,789 French poets who had written about the dancer,” as Johannes Hendrikus Burgers reminds us in Chapter 9 (165).

Yet the feminine was far from being the object of only negative interpretations among the Decadents: the theme of deep erotic love was proclaimed with more mellow seductive colours and lascivious imagery in Baudelaire’s “Les bijoux” (1857; “The Jewels”) from *Les Fleurs du mal*, which incurred censorship and a fine for being “bound to lead to stimulation of the senses through a coarse realism that offended decency.”⁹ Baudelaire’s poem was dedicated to a night of passionate love spent with his enchanting mistress, her bare soft amber skin simply dressed with tinkling jewels:

La très chère était nue, et, connaissant mon coeur,
Elle n’avait gardé que ses bijoux sonores,
Dont le riche attirail lui donnait l’air vainqueur
Qu’ont dans leurs jours heureux les esclaves des Mores.
Quand il jette en dansant son bruit vif et moqueur,
Ce monde rayonnant de métal et de pierre
Me ravit en extase, et j’aime à la fureur
Les choses où le son se mêle à la lumière.

Thus, we have nothing less than three chapters on *Salomania*—including one (chap. 10) on Aubrey Beardsley’s Japonist black ink drawings for Oscar Wilde’s play *Salomé*. Yet *Salomé* should hardly be considered a nineteenth-century phenomenon and can equally be studied as the reincarnation of a mythical figure periodically recurring from classical antiquity. A thread can thus be discerned linking the seditious Biblical queen Jezebel to the sorceress-enchantress Circe, the revengeful and manipulative Medea, the extravagant, multigamous Lucrezia Borgia, and the mythical Helen of Troy, as in Oscar Wilde’s poem “The New Helen” (1881).

But exoticism was not coterminous with decadence. Perhaps the major ‘rival’ to Salome was another exotic-erotic creation of the time, the Gypsy female protagonist of Prosper Mérimée’s novella *Carmen* (1845) that Georges Bizet transformed thirty years later into an opera (1875). This opera inaugurated another Parisian-centered fashion, the passion for Andalusian flamenco, now positively associated with a renewed Spanish national identity through the exotic fascination with a neighboring, lively, colorful Mediterranean land, rather than with decadence. At the time, however, Spanish cultural elites saw themselves immersed in a different kind of decadence, culminating in military defeat during the war against the United States and the loss of Spain’s last overseas colonies (1898).

Salomania may have been quintessentially decadent, but it was part of a broader timeless trend and phenomenon not clearly attributable to a specific epoch. What *Salomé*, *Carmen*, and Baudelaire’s “Les bijoux” shared was the glamorous scandals they incited, which rarely failed to attract the ire of censors and moralists in an era dominated by bourgeois hypocrisy and puritanism. Part 3 also includes a chapter by Kristen Harkness on the roots of decadence in late nineteenth-century Russian modernism.

The Crepuscular and the End

The fourth and fifth parts of the book consist of two studies of pictorial and narrative representations of death. Maura Coughlin discusses Charles Cottet’s post-impressionist

paintings—dark, evocative Breton seascapes with a variety of somber tones. Besides the poignant, non-idyllic rural landscapes of nineteenth-century Brittany, the figures of Breton women mourning as tragedy struck at sea evoke the frailty of the human condition (214–19). In his longing for a pre-modern world, Cottet traveled to one of France’s most remote areas, the island of Ouessant (which English sailors called “Ushant” in their sea shanties) in Finistère, France’s north-westernmost point. Often influenced by Gustave Courbet’s dark realism, and still within the orbit of Parisian symbolism, Cottet’s imagination strove to produce a peculiarly Celtic “subjective realism” capable of uncovering the tragic essence of life behind daily reality at the edges of geographical imagination (203–6). The sense of mortality thus associated with the political legitimacy of small nations like Brittany is well captured by the Breton national imaginary.¹⁰

In the final chapter, Marja Härmanmaa examines the most decadent of Italian poets, Gabriele D’Annunzio, through his obsessive relationship with death and violence in his autobiographic *Libro segreto* (*The Secret Book*, 1935), recalling his *idée fixe*—the contemplation of murder, suicide, perverted masculinity, and a final apology of gender violence suffuses most of his fictional and nonfictional works. Why did this wrathful extremism mount during the Belle Époque and accelerate the rush to war?

In the years leading up to World War I, artists and poets were far from passive bystanders; they were fervent nationalists increasingly captivated by war propaganda. Italian artists and intellectuals, like their French counterparts, competed to outdo each other in expressions of patriotism. With the freshly built Italian ‘nation-state’ so inexperienced and incapable of legitimately imposing its authority, Italian intellectuals and artists were perhaps the most extreme in this pursuit. As a new state built by a ‘liberal’ elite pathologically detached from popular culture, artists, journalists, and poets assumed the epochal task of nationalizing the masses by imposing their nationalist matrix on a variety of peoples attached to a myriad of regional identities and municipal loyalties. Here D’Annunzio stood out as a one-man band wholly dedicated to forging a charismatic following of adepts as the embryo of the new nation. Pankaj Mishra has recently explained how D’Annunzio’s charade provided the missing link between Giuseppe Mazzini’s messianic creed of redemption and Benito Mussolini’s new political religion.¹¹ Through symbolist imagery and the ‘invention of traditions’, such as the Roman salute and the black shirt, D’Annunzio championed war as national regeneration. These themes were later appropriated by fascism while the elitist nature of Italian nationalism demanded a hardly comparable degree of invention, intervention, and mass mobilization.

Nationalism, Modernity, and the Approaching End

None of the chapters tackles the crucial impact of nationalism, notwithstanding it was by far the dominant, hegemonic, and most pervasive political ideology at the turn of the twentieth century.¹² But many artists and poets were influenced by nationalism in quite extreme forms. Consider Apollinaire’s intense defense of war and nationalism. French symbolism deeply influenced Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in his audacious fashioning of the most warmongering of all artistic movements, Futurism.¹³ Many French intellectuals jumped on the bellicist bandwagon, some becoming fully involved in war propaganda.¹⁴ War, of course, was also the hobbyhorse of Italian decadents, chiefly D’Annunzio.

This absence of nationalism is perplexing since one of the book's editors, Marja Härmanmaa, is a renowned expert on Italian Futurism.¹⁵ Decadentism and Futurism shared an anti-traditionalist worldview, sometimes to the point of adopting eccentricity as a way of life. Both movements reacted to the sweeping patterns of cultural homogenization imposed by powerful nationalizing states, well exemplified by the centralizing Third Republic in France.¹⁶ Considering, at least, Wilde's and Ibsen's political sympathies, they blended very well with political anarchism as the most popular and most feared anti-state tradition of the *fin-de-siècle*.¹⁷

Nationalism was, perhaps, so all-pervasive as to pass nearly unnoticed, as if it were subconsciously assumed to be a normal state, a preordained line of thought, an ordinary ideology conveyed by banal rituals.¹⁸ But the movement remains unfathomable without bearing in mind the dominant nationalist mind-set and the parallel drive towards cultural uniformity against which Decadentism initially reacted. In all these developments, throughout the Second Empire and the French Third Republic, Paris firmly remained the hub around which the entire cascade and screenplay of modernity unfolded. At least until the outbreak of World War I, Paris remained the "Capital of Modernity."¹⁹

Overall, the collection would, I believe, have benefited from an introductory chapter that provided a guiding vision of the broader political and cultural changes affecting pre-war European culture. As it is, each chapter, including the introduction, stands on its own, contented with its narrow portion of territory, self-assured in its controlled expertise. The interpretive grid relies sometimes excessively on the classical clichés and language derived from cultural studies and literary criticism. Most importantly, it misses the opportunity to establish a significant parallel between contemporary and pre-war developments, which, as I hope to have demonstrated, would not be irrelevant to our present-day experience, but would need to be explored through other conceptual lenses.

"The End" in the title suggests that we should expect greater elaboration on the era that, in all its effects, led to the global cataclysm of World War I. Before that, the sinking of the Titanic (1912), the largest ship in the world and allegedly unsinkable, symbolically anticipated the end of an era predicated on blind faith in progress. But long, long after that tragedy, people were still dancing to the tune of nationalism on the sinking boat of modernity.

Notes

1. Conversi, "Modernism and Nationalism," 13–34.
2. For the sake of clarity, 'Modernism' as an artistic movement is used here with an initial capital letter, while 'modernism' as a political, cultural, and ideological framework is used with an initial lowercase letter.
3. Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.
4. Although the chapter is dedicated to Spain, it should be noted, however, that the term *decadence* in Spain is used to define an entirely different period dating from the seventeenth century when, impoverished by the expulsion of Jews, Muslims, and converts, Spain's previous position as Europe's hegemonic power slowly shifted to a second-tier player in the world economy and politics.
5. Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity*.
6. Conversi, "Homogenisation, Nationalism and War, 371–94; Conversi, "Anarchism, Modernism and Nationalism," 791–811.
7. Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*.
8. Wilde, *Salome*, 137.

9. Wake, "Charles Baudelaire," 191; Burt, "An Immoderate Taste for Truth."
10. Abulof, *Mortality and Morality of Nations*.
11. Mishra, *Age of Anger*.
12. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism*.
13. Conversi, "Anarchism, Modernism and Nationalism."
14. Hanna, *The Mobilization of Intellect*; Becker, "Artists, Commemorations, and Political Culture," 225–35; Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction*.
15. See Härmänmaa, "Beyond Anarchism," 857–71.
16. Conversi, "Homogenisation, Nationalism and War."
17. Conversi, "Anarchism, Modernism and Nationalism"; On Wilde's and Ibsen's pro-anarchism, see Weir, *Anarchy & Culture*.
18. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.
19. Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity*.

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