

Post-Modernism as Decadence

On Aesthetics and the Philosophy of History

En route to the Ljubljana conference, and as yet unsure what to present to it, I made for an historic library at the Stift Klosterneuburg, Austria. My taxi was blocked from delivering me, however, since I was entering the sacred city of St Leopold and the Babenberg house on the day that half its bodily upright inhabitants engaged in a mass running race from its precincts to the centre. I smiled. The competitors were all expensively clad in athletic outfits to disprove »in the long run« what the European originator of this »fitness enthusiasm« had first alarmingly bellowed: that Westerners were in danger of physical, let alone cultural, »Degeneration«. I refer of course to the well-known Jewish, indeed Zionist polemicist Max Nordau, who should be rather better remembered for writing a very widely read volume – *Entartung* (1892) – about the socio-cultural condition of the West *à la fin du siècle*, at the end of the last century.¹

An early summary statement in that volume speaks loudly of Nordau's assessments. What, he asks, does the *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon amount to in his time?

It means a practical emancipation from traditional discipline, which theoretically is still in force. To the voluptuary this means unbridled lewdness, the unchaining of the beast in man; to the withered heart of the egoist, disdain of all consideration for his fellow-men, the trampling under foot of all barriers which enclose brutal greed of lucre and lust of pleasure; to the contemner of the world it means the shameless ascendancy of base impulses and motives, which were, if not virtuously suppressed, at least hypocritically hidden; to the believer it means the repudiation of dogma, the negation of a super-sensuous world, the descent into flat phenomenalism; to the sensitive nature yearning for aesthetic thrills, it means the vanishing of ideals in art, and no more power in its accepted forms to arouse emotion. And to all, it means the end of an established order, which for thousands of years has satisfied logic, fettered depravity, and in every art matured something of beauty.

One epoch of history is unmistakably in its decline, and another is announcing its approach. There is a sound of rending in every tradition,

¹ For background, especially S. Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism* (New York: Harper, 1981), ch. 10.

and it is as though the morrow would not link itself with to-day. Things as they are totter and plunge, ... because man is weary, and there is no faith that it is worth an effort to uphold them...

The great majority of the middle and lower classes is naturally not *fin-de-siècle* ... The Philistine and the Proletarian still finds undiluted satisfaction in the old and oldest forms of art and poetry, if he knows himself unwatched by the scornful eye of the votary of fashion... It is only a very small minority who honestly find pleasure in the new tendencies... But this minority has the gift of covering the whole visible surface of society, as a little oil extends over a large area of the surface of the sea... And thus it appears as if the whole of civilized humanity were converted to the aesthetics of the Dusk of the Nations.²

The question compels; have matters changed? or, colloquially, »so what's new?« Genuine pejorists and uninformatarians, of course, will have already constrained us from expecting anything better from most times. That reminds me, I did eventually get into the Stift Bibliothek, only to be depressed by the past. I worked on a late sixteenth century Latin text by Juan de Mariana about the history of Spain from her origins to the reign of Philip II. Covering page after page of the turbulence, intrigue and venality, however, all preventing the outcome of a united Spain until nearer his own time, the liberal Jesuit is left gasping for a breath of explanation (and his continuator had to face the signs of Spain's decline following the failed, fabled Armada). The nearest de Mariana could come to a covering principle – a rather pessimistic one – is that humans are caught in an eternally conditioned web of causes from which they never really extract themselves and which the ancient Stoics called fate.³ Perhaps this may resign us to expect »more of the same« too concessively, for after all, there have always been voices of lament over social dilapidations through the ages, as the clanging of bells to slightly different tunes. Yet it is hardly a matter lacking interest that some very important intellectuals in our time are sounding notes very like Nordau's, in the twentieth century West's *fin-de-siècle*, *fin-de-millénium* situation.

Consider two recent and related treatises. One is by Ernst Gellner on the affects of cultural and existential relativism as indicative of the post-modernist condition: for him we are reaping expressions of fundamental-

² The Nordau edition used: *Degeneration* (Heinemann's Empire Library of Standard Works 1) (London: Heinemann, 1895), pp. 5-7.

³ J. Mariana, *Historiae de rebus Hispaniae libri triginta* (ed. and add. J. E. Miniana) (The Hague: Hag. Comit., 1731 edn.), vol. 2, p. 377 (Bk. XX, 16). On pejorism, uniformitarianism, etc., G. W. Trompf, *The Idea of Historical Recurrence in Western Thought* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1979), vol. 1, pp. 110-12, 248, 291-5, etc.

ist certainty as a reaction, together with the loss of faith in ideal beauty and truth as a symptom of perplexing times.⁴ The other is very recent, and a daring attempt at a general history of Truth by Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, eminent author of *The Millennium*. He decided that, given the yawning gap, the West desperately required such an account, which includes tracing apprehensions of beauty, because a paradoxical combination of consumerism, pluralism and faddish intellectual trends are making it increasingly difficult to hold to any such profundities.⁵ Macrohistorically speaking, both analysts smell the corrupting of old socio-cultural cohesions.

Between the brilliance of late Victorian England, or Dionysian Vienna, or Gustave Moreau's Paris, down to our own time there have been more than enough traumas, indeed global ones, to make the discourse of decadence continually viable, even world-wide, in its force. Somewhere in the chronological middle W.B. Yeats summed it up poetically.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre,
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, whilst the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.⁶

And I am now beginning to ask myself, on your behalf in this context, whether »the beast« he imagined slouching »towards Bethlehem to be born« was: post-modernism. Or perhaps I should specify »the post-modernist condition«, because in a short space I will obviously have to disentangle concepts and terminology, in fact a lot of semantic confusion.

I mean, I honestly cannot pinpoint the origins of post-modernity as a complex cultural trajectory. Each aesthetic and intellectual sphere will have to be revisited time and again to unravel that special issue. I am obviously more immediately concerned with post-War figures self-designating as minds reacting against the so-called »Enlightenment Project«, taken by them as axial modernity. A curiosity arises for me at this stage of the argument in that I have remained immensely challenged and mentally invigorated by the great protagonists for the post-modern – Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Irigaray,

⁴ Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), esp. chs. 1-3, 5.

⁵ Fernandez-Armesto, *Truth: a history* (London: Bantam, 1997), esp. chs. 5-6 cf. *The Millennium: a history of our last one thousand years* (London: Bantam, 1995).

⁶ Yeats, »The Second Coming« (1926) in *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan 1958 edn.), p. 211

Jameson, and the like. Quite often I feel as disjointed and as ontically lonely as Octavio Paz. I also revel somewhat in the imagic transformations of quirkish post-modern art, although the list of captivating *Gestalten* would be too inordinate to present here: Mark Kostabi's Princess Diana as virginal Madonna, a clothed Kate Moss as a beauty model posing in a feminist take-off of Manet's »Breakfast on the Green« with two male nudes, and so on.⁷ Why, I have to admit, I did not get aggravated enough to protest Andres Serrano's »Piss Christ«, let alone become implicated in the theft of Tania Kovat's »Virgin in a Condom« from the Sydney Museum of Contemporary Art.⁸ Like most of the people reading this paper I have to learnt to place such »developments« in the world of aesthetics (which I concede could actually enervate one into a »lack of cultural conviction«), even if I do reserve the right to lament, as I believe you would, what I sense to be »monumentally bad taste«, or, to put a contentious matter cautiously, what is »unconscionably uglifying«.⁹

But here I stand as a scholarly cultural symptomatologist; and in my ongoing work on *The Idea of Historical Recurrence* in Western, and now more and more non-Western thought, I become increasingly familiar with the reflective »sign reading« or »semeiology« of civilizational corruption, decay, decline, degeneration, *decadenza*, *Untergang*, even disintegration. All sorts of interesting things come out of comparative symptomatologies in relation to aesthetics. Pursue but one small avenue for an impression. Well before Theodor Adorno's analyses of mass culture, for instance, or our very own Arnold Berleant's resiling over the world's »Disneyfication«, Albert Schweitzer intuited one of the best indices for *The Decay of Civilization* to be the modern billboard.¹⁰ *Pace* my own uncle, Percy Trompf, who was clearly one of the world's greatest billboard painters, there is a lot to this assessment. You just have to travel in the central Canadian countryside, where the

⁷ I refer to Kostabi's 'The Sanctification of Virtue' (1997). For the latter case, see W. Klausner, »Das Model und die alten Meister: Kate Moss posiert in der neuern YSL-Kampagne nach historischen Vorbildern«, *Gala* 35/4 (Aug. 1998): 30-1. This ploy can obviously be taken too far, as in the string of 'spoofs' on paintings in the great tradition of the West by the Australian painter Brett Whiteley.

⁸ For the latter altercation, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 Oct., 1997: 1.

⁹ Here I preempt issues being raised in F. Speed's work in *Aesthetics and Philosophy*, »The Physics of Ugliness« (Doctoral dissert., University of Lancaster), Lancaster (forthcoming).

¹⁰ Cf. Schweitzer, *The Decay and Restoration of Civilization* (trans. C. T. Champion) (London: Unwin, 1961), cf. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (eds. G. Adorno and R. Tiedemann) (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1974 edn.); Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

wretched things are banned from the landscape, to see the point. And now, of course, billboards are becoming trendily post-modernistic, so that even today in this very city of Ljubljana, »beautifully decadent« as it is, we have a monumental mini-piece of bad taste, with two crying so-called »Siamese« twins advertising a Pop group.

But I suppose here we have to take stock of what is being meant by decadence, since there is as much a need to dispell confusion in its connection as with post-modernity. Let us begin with nineteenth century France, with notions and artistic articulations of decadence yielding a kind of *locus classicus*, in the nineties, in that *fin-de-siècle* ambience Nordau sought to diagnose. There, with Gustave Moreau and the »dreamers of decadence«, as Philippe Jullian introduces them, we find a kind of sickly poignancy that we sometimes still hear in more occult art circles. It entailed the conceit that

Those who see Beauty in their eyes
Are condemned to death, and
Can serve no purpose on the earth.
*Wer die Schönheit angeschaut mit Augen.*¹¹

The processes in French decadence theory, intriguingly, appear to run from an earlier mourning over the loss of cultural cohesion and moral fabric on to this kind of *accepting* indulgence.¹²

Of course focussing on that *fin-de-siècle* situation could bring up various difficulties in terms of paralleling the condition of early *décadence* with post-modernity. Certainly, we could take Charles Baudelaire as the great mid-century French poetic harbinger of the later decadence, and recognize in his disdain for his own times a rejection of modernity and its mediocrity. »Je deviens tellement l'ennemi de mon siècle.« The trouble is, however, he himself rejected decadence as a literary label, and his intimate friends knew of him that he completely accepted »l'homme moderne«, and that he was a »modernist« in the sense that he »preferred the artificiality and corruption of a decaying society to the more robust virtues of less degenerate civilizations«. ¹³

¹¹ Juillian, *Dreamers of Decadence: symbolist painters of the 1890s* (London: Phaidon, 1971), [p. 6 on the quoted 'Tristan' by A. Graf von Platen] *et passim*. Cf. (recently) L. Ingrisch, *Das Leben beginnt mit dem Tod* (Vienna: Verlag Österreich, 1997).

¹² K. W. Swart, *The Sense of Decadence in Nineteenth-Century France* (Archives Internationales d'Histoire des Idées 7) (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1964), ch. 6.

¹³ Baudelaire, *Correspondance générale* (eds. J. Crépet and C. Pichols) [in *Oeuvres complètes*] (Paris: Conrad, 1947-53 edn.), vol. 4, p. 99 (first quotation); Théodore de Banville (1867), quoted in A.E. Carter, *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958), pp. 55-6 (second): Swart, *op. cit.*, p. 114, cf. p. 116.

Thus it is that tricky issues spring to light for one who would link post-modernity and decadence in our own latter-day context, when meanings and values put upon human developments can very easily slip from one side of the interpreter's anvil to another. Why, amid post-War uncertainties of the Western bloc's future, did not the French political theorist Raymond Aron deem it respectable to defend a »decadent Europe«, if it meant that she happened to combine instability and the richness of civilization against the culturally-stable military powerful societies?¹⁴ Then there is the imputation, obviously begging attention, that decadence is a modern/modernist condition. After all, if, as many tacitly deem him, Nietzsche was the first of the philosophic post-modernists, how resounding are his evocations against »the [current] decadents«, although one admits this only by also conceding that his views are highly idiosyncratic. Europe's *Untergang* is for Nietzsche extraordinarily deep-inured, a long-term wastedness reaped from imbibing Socratic metaphysics and Christian *slavische Morale*.¹⁵ He denounces at a time, though, when others can use him as legitimation for indulging in death, or succumbing to neo-pagan temptations, and flout the rational *Aufklärung*.¹⁶

Nietzsche's peculiar orientations and context aside, it remains palpable that acclaimed protagonists of post-modernity through the last generation have set themselves up as analysts of decadence, which inevitably entails them pronouncing over the inadequacies and demise of the modern. Consider Jacques Lacan handling the *malaise de la civilisation*, or Michel Foucault's diagnosis of Western humanity as the product of totalizing structures, both institutional and intellectual.¹⁷ And such scholars are good at guarding their own backs by evading the implication that, in deconstructing traditionalist and Enlightenment procedures for organizing societies, they may be part of the problem of decline they believe they comprehend. That last matter is the suspicion, to return to very recent critics, of Gellner and

¹⁴ Aron, »My Defence of our Decadent Europe«, *Encounter* 49/3 (1977): esp. 29.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols* [1889] (trans. R. J. Hollingdale), Harmondsworth, 1968, esp. pp. 32-4, 39, 43, 45-6, etc.

¹⁶ Cf., e.g., W. J. McGrath, *Dionysian Art and Populist Politics in Austria* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974); Jullian, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-4, 164.

¹⁷ For guidance, P. G. Guéguen, »Lacan and the Malaise of Civilization« (Seminar paper, Melbourne Centre for Psychoanalytic Research and the Department of General Philosophy, University of Sydney, 3 Aug., 1993) (Sydney, 1993); D. Eribon, *Foucault* (trans. R. Wing) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

¹⁸ Start with S. Morawski, *The Troubles with Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), cf. B. Fetz and K. Kastberger (eds.), *Der literarische Einfall* (Profile 1/1998) (Vienna: Profile, 1998 (on literature in particular)).

Fernandez-Armesto; and it seems built into the reactions of the »New Aesthetics« as well.¹⁸

Yes, even post-modernist decadence theorists can be very much part of the Western predicament. If influential provocative and profound-looking questions are ever asked of any encyclopaedic-globalist kind about »where we are at« – and most well known post-modernist thinkers hardly eschew macroscopic evaluations¹⁹ – we would be foolish not to consider seriously: »by whom« and »for whom« are these questions being put? Take one of the most fetching statements of perhaps the most gifted contemporary American post-modernist rhetoricians Frederic Jameson. »Never in any previous civilization«, he asserts, »have the great metaphysical preoccupations, the fundamental questions of being and the meaning of life, seemed so utterly remote and pointless« (and he means aesthetic ideals as well).²⁰ This seems like a sound recognition of a depleted sense of absolutes and the problem of the paradoxically subjectivist closure (which reactivates Gellner and Fernandez-Armesto also cunningly identify); but for Jameson the new condition is the making of a philosophical agenda. And one must ask »by whom?« and »for whom?«, first, because the broad claim only makes sense in a very limited Western(ized) intellectual forum, and second, because for the overwhelming part of global humanity – and I say this as a published comparative ethnohistorian – Jameson’s statement is nonsense. Actually never before have so many people been posing traditional (and strikingly Western-looking) questions of Ultimacy and Existence than in our own time, and yet been so ill-deserved by irresponsibly jargonistic and culture-bound philosophical »sets« in the West.

The general implication of the argument has been looming enough. It is now necessary for philosophers and aestheticians to recapture basic and more traditional apprehensions of decadence while faced with the intellectual turbulence and conceptual muddles under our very noses. A sound philosophy of history in particular can hardly let the self-inscriptions of modernists, post-modernists and the like close them off from access to the extraordinary wealth of Western reflection on the causes of cultural demise developed through many ages. The Western tradition as an untruncated continuum waits to be tapped for truths and warnings. Admittedly some traditional models can drag entirely new sets of problems in their train. It is a shared value old military realists from Sallust through Machiavelli and

¹⁹ Start with F. Rella, *The Myth of the Other* (PostModern Positions 7), (trans. N. Moe) (Washington DC.: Maïssonneuve, 1994).

²⁰ Quoted in the introduction to R.P. Scharlemann (ed.) *Theology at the End of the Century* (Charlottesville and London, University Press of Virginia, 1990), p. 14.

beyond, for example, that societies enjoying too much external peace will dissipate their energies in luxuriating expressions of internal achievement, and both competing voices of theoretic discourse and aesthetic impetus, on this reading, will reflect and partly generate a threatening social dissonance (as they do now).²¹ The new *problématique* entailed here, I hasten to point out, is that social health only comes by a fostering a sufficiently strong degree of external aggression, which is a more persuasive stance than most contemporary philosophers and aestheticians would like to recognize, and rather too »close to the bone« when one considers the resurgence of ethnic nationalism next to Slovenia and the over-readiness of a hegemonic United States to intrude into the Yugoslav region! The arresting and enduring external/internal paradigm has to be noted, nonetheless, as part of the rich repertory available to any traditionalist who wants to fathom the connected lakes of symptomatology (ancient, »Occidental«, even Eastern), and thus develop a more balanced perspective on our current dilemmas.

Among the many aetiologies, one more pertinent and carrying less political burden concerns interests, that when private interests decidedly outweigh public ones, a society enters *decadenza*. This was an important insight of the Scottish Enlightenment,²² yet it has obvious twentieth century relevance. By the significant year 1918 the American sociologist Edward Alsworth Ross repeated the dictum, with the supplementary notion that »decay sets in after the we-feeling [corporateness of a people] has died«. He also gathered up the complex French story of *décadence* into a covering statement of more conventional wisdom.

Late in the last century the French passed through such a critical epoch, during which artists relentlessly dissected, not only all elements of religious faith, but, as well, all moral, social, and civic ideals. The result was a movement of unbridled individualism culminating in a widespread moral disorganization, the symptoms of which were so plain early in the nineties that the French got the repute for being a »decadent« and negligent people. About this time the group sense of self-preservation took alarm, the intellectuals realized that negativism had gone too far, and

²¹ Sallust, *Catil*, ii, 1-iii, 2; N. Machiavelli, *Istorie Fiorentine* (Rome: Blado, 1532), V, 1.

²² [A. Ferguson, »Essai sur l'histoire de la société civile«, in (G. Deyverdun and E. Gibbon eds.), *Mémoires littéraires de la Grande Bretagne pour l'an 1767* (London: n.p., 1767), esp. p. 68.

²³ (Although Ross resorts to the external/internal classical model by affirming that France's rebirth of solidarity was nowhere better illustrated than during the War!). Ross, »Social Decadence«, *The American Journal of Sociology* 23/5 (1918): 6328-9, cf. 631 (earlier quotation).

there was a reaction in the direction of the building up of sound ideals in the rising generation.²³

The awareness of the pitfalls in (over-, hyper-) critical theories and their disorganizing effects is strikingly relevant for the late 1990s;²⁴ the notification that intellectuals and the creative *avant-garde* do and can actually intuit that they have gone too far (or become irresponsible) is momentous. The intelligentsia, hopefully the least culturally forgetful lot in society, are supposed to be teachers, not nihilists. They do what they do so that others learn, and if, latterly, they are coming to abandon tradition in this sense, never will their social vacuousness have presented itself so terribly. Alexander Solzhenitsyn made a related point, in his Nobel Speech, about the passage of Art (even but »one word of Truth«) from one country to another. He had Eastern Europe on his mind in maintaining that art from one context can perhaps save a »second nation ... from taking an unnecessary, mistaken or even ruinous path ... Art can straighten the twisted paths of man's history«.²⁵ But at the bare minimum one has to defer to the basic tradition that Cultural Articulaters *do* teach (even if some ostensibly spurn the didactic), and what they pass on will either aid the world constructively, or misdirect it in lessons it can ill afford.

The »traditionist« position I hereby espouse (and it is not traditionalism or reactive conservatism)²⁶ involves a call to blunt the heavy accentuation of a contest between the Modern and Post-Modern, and engage with the extraordinary scope of the Western tradition as a whole (including its various interfaces with other socio-cultural zones). It is going to be the broadly-based capacity to tap various and relevant resources from far Antiquity up to the immediate present that will count for our future.²⁷ It is hardly going to be productive for global survival just to »kill off the Enlightenment Project« and read books published only after 1985. The positive reorientation, indeed, will involve deliberately avoiding misreadings of the world that lack depth, though they have come to have such surprising, if superficial,

²⁴ For the close connection between critical theory and postmodernism, e.g., M. Poster, *Critical Theory of the Family* (London: Pluto, 1978).

²⁵ Solzhenitsyn, 'One Word of Truth ...' (The Nobel Speech on Literature 1970) (London: Bodley Head, 1972), pp. 14-15.

²⁶ Thus Trompf, »Croce and Collingwood on Primitive Classical Aesthetics«, *Literature and Aesthetics* 7 (1997): 131-6.

²⁷ In aesthetics, E.H. Gombrich has set a useful tone for the future by avoiding as many arbitrary periodizations as possible, cf. R. Woodfield (ed.), *The Essential Gombrich* (London: Phaidon, 1996). On architecture, note intelligent conclusions by D. Erskine, »Democratic Architecture«, in D. Lasdun (ed.), *Architecture in an Age of Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 73.

influence over a mass of people who do not understand them, like »a little oil«extending »over a large area of the surface of the sea«.

Which brings my to point of a daring pedagogy, in conclusion, that circumstances are fast compelling aestheticians who have not lost their social conscience and educative sensibilities to make a mature deference towards pertinent social scientific (or »social studies«) insights. To cope with, and avoid entrapment in, what is sapping our vitals and wishing us away into an indulgent cultural narcissism and a defrauded spirituality, we need to do some »sociology of knowledge and aesthetics« to discover and plot just how rampant is the disjunction between Western intellectual or creative life and the world's social and environmental needs. There is too much in post-modernism that is despairingly irrelevant and irresponsible *vis-à-vis* the Third or Two-Thirds World. The extent of jargonism and the increasing lack of communicability have been clear symptoms of the disease. Aesthetic impoverishment in the West has been bad enough: for, outside the photographic (and the »domestic-mediocre« genre), the landscape has all but dropped out of painting, with nature rendered apparently boring. Recovering continuity, or retracing humanity's ideas and techniques along the long »Rhodian Shore« has become a matter of imperative, as against wrecking the (cultural) dunes and paranoically always spotting dung in the water.²⁸

We need to train ourselves in basic anthropology as well, to pinpoint that all too frequently appearing »intellectual set«, especially among post-graduate students, calling themselves post-modernists (in America often being dubbed or self-inscribing as »pomos«). I write as an experienced fieldworker, and *inter alia* as a well-seasoned traveller from one campus to another. I can only confirm what many fellow academics report around the Western world: on a burgeoning of disaffected, arrogant, jargonistic, dogmatic, self-consciously troublemaking and everdispleased coteries of young people who, as »second-generation imbibers« of post-modernism, I have to imagine being among the intellectual leaders of the future. Perhaps I am getting old, but I expected better; and I look longingly to a newer and more inspiring breed: a »new Man«. To combine post-Nietzschean aggravation with post-post-modernism, I presume to direct the future with a bold gesture: *Ecce homo. Exit pomo.*

²⁸ See C. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: nature and culture in Western thought from ancient times to the end of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1976 edn.), cf. C. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American life in an Age of diminishing expectations* (New York and London: Norton, 1979).