The Decadent Dilemma

R.K.R. Thornton

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Edward Arnold

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The last time I saw Southey was on an evening at Taylor's, nobody there but myself; I think he meant to leave town next morning, and had wished to say farewell to me first. We sat on the sofa together; our talk was long and earnest; topic ultimately the usual one, steady approach of democracy, with revolution (probably explosive) and a finis incomputable to man; steady decay of all morality, political, social, individual; this once noble England getting more and more ignoble and untrue in every fibre of it, till the gold (Goethe's composite king) would all be eaten out, and noble England would have to collapse in shapeless ruin, whether for ever or not none of us could know. Our perfect consent on these matters gave an animation to the dialogue, which I remember as copious and pleasant. Southey's last word was in answer to some tirade of mine against universal mammon-worship, gradual accelerating decay of mutual humanity, of piety and fidelity to God or man, in all our relations and performances, the whole illustrated by examples, I suppose; to which he answered, not with levity, yet with a cheerful tone in his seriousness, 'It will not, and it cannot come to good!'

Reminiscences by Thomas Carlyle, ed. J.A. Froude (1881, written 1867), pp. 326–7

. . . works which minds drilled into conformity by repetitious university lectures lump together under the generic name of 'the Decadence'.

J.-K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. Robert Baldick (1959), p. 40

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Preface

Many studies of the literature of the late nineteenth century in England have despaired of making sense of the term Decadence. Others have made attempts to define it, and yet others to extend its application either like Richard Gilman's *Decadence: the Strange Life of an Epithet* (1979) by seeing its use extending to modern problems. or by identifying elements which they choose to call Decadent and examining those features in literature and art of other periods.

My aim has been more modest: to catalogue what were the roots of the brief blossoming of Decadence as a movement in late-nineteenth-century England, letting the authors of the time speak for themselves where possible, and to examine the nature of the works of some of the writers central to that movement.

I have no expectation that this will be the last word on the subject, but I hope that the discussion of Decadence will be clearer for an account of how it grew, of what Decadence was for the 1890s, and what are the features of some literature and art called Decadent.

The publication of Jean Pierrot's *The Decadent Imagination: 1880–1900* came too late for me to do more than include it in the Bibliography; but I should say that it has much to add to my account and is essential reading for anyone wishing to understand the Decadence, particularly as it was seen in France.

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1 The Climate of Decline

Aetas parentum peior avis tulit
nos nequiores, mox daturos
progeniem vitiosiorem.
(Horace's *Odes*, III, vi)

What goes up must come down.

Anyone who looks at the history of Decadence must soon be aware that an idea of decline is by no means confined to literature, and by no means confined to the nineteenth century. Decline is, after all, a necessary part of at least three major and distinctive types of theory about the nature of the universe and its history: first, that the world was created perfect, and subsequent variation is necessarily a decline; second, that the universe, or nation, or empire, or state (and so on) is an organism which has periods of infancy, growth, maturity and decline; and third, that the universe progresses in cycles which repeat either the decline from a repeatedly-made perfection, or the organic cycle of growth and decay.

There are numerous reviews of the prevalence and nature of such theories, often in conjunction with or as appendages to surveys of the idea of progress, as in J.B. Bury's *The Idea of Progress* (1920) or Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas's *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (1935, 1965). One of the most attractive surveys is in the early chapters of Koenraad W. Swart's study of *The Sense of Decadence in Nineteenth-Century France* (The Hague, 1964), which reminds us of ancient Indian beliefs in contemporary man's inferiority to his ancestors, before continuing through Mesopotamian, Mayan, Aztec, Greek, Roman, Jewish, Christian, medieval, Renaissance, Italian, Spanish, French, sixteenth- , seventeenth- , and eighteenth-century ideas of decline as a background to his examination of the sense of decline in nineteenth-century France. The subject is huge and not only would require but has required whole books to deal with it; and to embark on a full-scale history of the ideas of Decadence in general would change the nature of the book I wish to write. I do however wish to make it clear, as has not seemed clear to many writers on the late nineteenth century, that

Decadence in that period is a variant of a well-known theme and that its protean variety for the nineties may well be caused or intensified by its catching reflections from many times and many cultures. For this reason and to introduce some of the possible variations, let me glance at a selection of the more influential and intriguing expressions of the theme.

The Greeks and Romans stood firmly behind any Victorian's understanding of his own society. 'It might seem ludicrous,' wrote Thomas Arnold in his *History of Rome* (4th edn 1845, I, p. x), 'to speak of impartiality in writing the history of remote times, did not those times really bear a nearer resemblance to our own than many imagine.' The glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome suggested the increasing prosperity of the British Empire. Modern scholars and historians of ideas debate hotly whether the Greeks and Romans had any idea of progress at all (as is well summed up with useful bibliographical material in Ludwig Edelstein's *The Idea of Progress in Classical Antiquity*, Baltimore, 1967), but for the Victorian there was no such doubt. So convinced were the Victorians in fact that, as Edelstein rather too confidently says:

> other philosophies of history current among the Greeks and Romans were neglected until E. Rohde, in 1876, contrasted their progressive outlook to the theory of decay and insisted that the belief 'in a development *in peius*' had been more popular. Rohde wrote under the influence of that disillusionment with the progressivist creed which had begun to grip the *avant-garde* of European intellectuals, and he was strongly influenced by Nietzsche's discovery of the deep-seated pessimism of the Greeks – a pessimism Nietzsche extolled in contrast to the shallow optimism of his own century. (p. xiii)

The idea of progress was, it is now generally agreed,

> missing from the oldest Greek literature. And when it did emerge it found the field already occupied by two great anti-progressive myths which threatened to strangle it at birth, the myth of the Lost Paradise – called by the Greeks 'the life under Kronos', by the Romans *Saturnia regna* or Golden Age – and the myth of Eternal Recurrence.
>
> (E.R. Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress*, 1973, p. 3)

Nobody has questioned, however, the ubiquity and antiquity of ideas of Decadence. Hesiod's gloomy view of the progressive decline through the ages of gold, silver, bronze and iron, with the age of Heroes interpolated between the last two, set the tone and perhaps the terms of much nostalgic reference to a Golden Age, as H.C. Baldry suggests in 'Who Invented the Golden Age?' (*Classical Quarterly* XLVI, 1952,

pp. 83–92); Hesiod, it must be admitted, tended to confine himself to moral matters, and though degeneration might be accelerating, it was not uninterrupted. In his *Works and Days* the Old Testament tones ring out:

> Thereafter, would that I were not among the men of the fifth generation, but either had died before or been born afterwards. For now truly is a race of iron, and men never rest from labour and sorrow by day, and from perishing by night; and the gods shall lay sore trouble upon them. (lines 174–8)

Homer equally, by depicting so powerfully a past heroic age, emphasized the associated idea of the decline of the present. Indeed the lines commonly held to be the first classical intimation of an idea of progress are by Xenophanes, a bitter opponent of Hesiod and Homer (see W.K.C. Guthrie's *In the Beginning*, 1957, p. 82; Dodds, p. 4; Edelstein, p. 1). Empedocles's view of the world saw the four primary substances brought together by Love or separated by Strife, and for him the force of Love was being displaced by Strife. Plato, claimed rather improbably by Edelstein as having a 'tragic optimism' which qualifies him as a believer in progress, seems on the contrary doomed by the theory of Forms to seeing mankind as always inadequately imitating a perfect model. Whatever view one takes as to who believed in, and with what details, the Great Year and its implications of decline – Plato, Aristotle, Heraclitus, the Stoics, the Pythagoreans – one can assent to J.B Bury's summary that 'the theory of world-cycles was so widely current that it may be described as the orthodox theory of cosmic time among the Greeks, and it passed from them to the Romans' (*The Idea of Progress*, p. 12). The most frequent adjunct to a theory of world-cycles was that the present age was towards the end.

Two simple reasons for the idea of decline among the Greeks being important to the Victorians were that the public school and Oxbridge system emphasized the Classics and that the Greek world could provide, as W.K.C. Guthrie remarks in his *In the Beginning* (1957, p. 13), 'a microcosm, a small-scale working model of human society in all its phases.' Richard Jenkyns in his lively and rewarding *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (1980) explores more fully what the Greeks meant to the Victorians. None the less, the decline and fall of the Roman Empire is more central to the late-nineteenth-century's concerns, the very idea of Empire bringing it more strongly home to the ambitious and expansive age.

It is perhaps the Greek Polybius who first suggests the Decadence of Rome in the second century BC in the words of Scipio at the destruction of Carthage: 'I have a dread foreboding that some day the same doom will be pronounced upon my own country' (*Polybius the Histories*,

trans. W.R. Paton, Loeb Classical Library, 1927, VI, p. 437). Cicero, though living in the period characterized by Florus as 'iuventus imperii et quasi robusta maturitas' – the manhood and, as it were, the robust maturity of the empire – picks up the thread for, although we may question his impartiality when in the first passage of his first speech against Catiline he rhetorically bewails 'O tempora, o mores!', he is elsewhere more soberly aware of Rome's decline. So too with Lucretius and, wherever one stands in the debate on whether he was primitivist or progressivist, it is simple to see where many Victorians stood with regard to Lucretius by looking at Matthew Arnold's verdict in his essay 'On the Modern Element in Literature'. There the features with which one becomes familiar in later discussions of Decadence are found in Lucretius:

> The predominance of thought, of reflection, in modern epochs is not without its penalties, in the unsound, in the over-tasked, in the over-sensitive, it has produced the most painful, the most lamentable results; it has produced a state of feeling unknown to less enlightened but perhaps healthier epochs – the feeling of depression, the feeling of *ennui*. Depression and *ennui*; these are the characteristics stamped on how many of the representative works of modern times! They are also the characteristics stamped on the poem of Lucretius.
>
> (*Complete Prose Works I*, 1960, ed. R.H Super, p. 32)

It is the morals as well as the spirit which Sallust describes in the first century BC. In his *The War with Catiline* (v. 9) he says that he must follow his account of the greatness of the institutions and the commonwealth of his forefathers with an account of 'how by gradual changes it has ceased to be the noblest and best, and has become the worst and most vicious.' Livy, anxious to point out the edifying lessons of history and in particular to praise morality and discipline, quickly tells the reader of his *Ab Urbe Condita*, which was to become a standard source book for later historians, that he should 'note how, with the gradual relaxation of discipline, morals first gave way, as it were, then sank lower and lower, and finally began the downward plunge which has brought us to the present time, when we can endure neither our vices nor their cure.' Seneca, too stoic to despair at adversity, assumes none the less that the world declines (as in *Ad Polybium*; *De Consolatione*). And Tacitus's *Annals* contain what Lovejoy and Boas call 'a typical expression of the three-phase theory of the general course of political history' (p. 97), which is a theory of decline. Florus in his *Epitome* (I, introduction) imitated the elder Seneca in dividing Roman history into four periods of organic development, namely childhood, adolescence, maturity and age, and there were frequent echoes of his interpretation since the work enjoyed a somewhat undeserved reputation until the

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seventeenth century. Marcus Aurelius, whose *Meditations* were so dear to Pater and through him well known to the late Victorians, writes of 'the periodic destructions and rebirths of the universe' (XI, p. 1). The decline and fall of the Roman Empire, assisted and defined (some would argue created) by Gibbon in particular, formed an example and a model against which many later historians would view their own empire in decline; and the corruptions of the declining Empire became a dreadful warning.

The lament at a decline from a golden age is of course a commonplace of literature, with the *ubi sunt* theme running strongly from Horace to Hardy with many a *'Gaudeamus Igitur'* or 'The Wanderer' between. In Teutonic mythology even the gods are subject to decline and Wagner, who was to become something of an enthusiasm for some late-nineteenth-century writers, firmly grasped at the notions of the Twilight of the Gods and the Ring.

Christian thought shares the idea of catastrophe beyond which is a purified world, an idea strong in millenialist thinking but not only there. Norman Cohn, for example, opens his *The Pursuit of the Millenium* with the generalization that 'Christianity has always had an eschatology, in the sense of a doctrine concerning "the last times", or "the last days" or "the final state of the world"; and Christian millenarialism was simply one variant of Christian eschatology.' Certainly the literature of the medieval period is amply supplied with examples of gloomy views of the state of the world, and Archbishop Wulfstan's pessimistic forecasts find many a subsequent counterpart, right up to Billy Graham, evangelist, who repeats the old lie in the popular press: 'history conclusively teaches that the decay of a nation inevitably follows the decay of its sex standards' (*Reader's Digest*, August 1970).

In 1577 Louis Le Roy, a French classical scholar and in his arguments an ancestor of Désiré Nisard (for whom see the next chapter), wrote a book attempting to draw lessons from the past, *De la vicissitude ou variété des choses en l'univers*. Its fears of decline are typical:

> If the memory of the past is the instruction of the future, it is to be feared that having reached so great excellence, power, wisdom, studies, books, industries will decline, as has happened in the past, and disappear – confusion succeeding to the order and perfection of today, rudeness to civilization, ignorance to knowledge. I already foresee in imagination nations, strange in form, complexion and costume, overwhelming Europe – like the Goths, Huns, Vandals, Lombards, Saracens of old – destroying our cities and palaces, burning our libraries, devastating all that is beautiful. I foresee in all countries wars, domestic and foreign, factions and heresies that will profane all things human and divine; famine, plagues, and floods;

> the universe approaching an end, world-wide confusion, and the return of things to their original chaos.
>
> (Quoted in *The Idea of Progress*, pp. 46–7)

The rhetorical flourish of the central part of this passage is the stock-in-trade of the modern racist politician, but it also reminds us that Shakespeare's plays, particularly the histories, are always conscious of the last-day-like disintegration and chaos beneath the fragilely held order. Le Roy claimed that, since Providence determines whether or not an argument from the past is valid, these things need not happen; the same argument was followed by Arthur Balfour in his *Decadence* which was given as the Henry Sidgwick Memorial lecture at Newnham College in 1908. Balfour suggested that the things which threatened Rome might also be threatening the British Empire, but he was able to hope that his time will be the exception and that 'we can escape the fate to which other races have had to submit' (p. 42).

Francis Bacon believed that he lived in the old age of the world, so retaining an idea of decline while asserting the value of his own period. The idea is also present in Descartes, Malebranche, Arnauld, and Nicole (see Bouillier's *Histoire de la philosophie cartésienne*), and Pascal too compares man in general to a single man who is now in his old age. Desmarets de Saint Sorlin, in J.B. Bury's words which remind us of Yeats's autumnal image, maintained that 'Antiquity was not so happy or so learned or so rich or so stately as the modern age, which is really the mature old age, and as it were the autumn of the world' (p. 82). Whichever side won the 'Battle of the Books' would have a theory of decline, either having *declined from* a golden age, or man having *reached* maturity or old age. Even when Charles Perrault took over the championship of the Modern from Saint Sorlin, and congratulated himself in his *Parallèle des anciens et des modernes* (1688–96) that his age had arrived at perfection and that he need not envy future generations because progress had slowed down as the days ceased to lengthen near the solstice, the times may not have been degenerate, but they were near the old age of the world.

Many French writers argued about the causes of Decadence in an empire or a great country. Rousseau claimed that Decadence was the result of an opposition to natural laws and of man's over-civilization. Bossuet had explained, as many Victorians were to explain, that Decadence came from an enfeeblement of religious beliefs and a consequent decline in moral standards, and was a direct punishment from God. Montesquieu, whose *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734) gave the word a wider currency in scholarly circles in France and abroad, blamed political institutions and material luxury for the Decadence. German theorists contended that

climate and racial characteristics were determining factors. By far the most widespread theory was simply that which assumed that Decadence is an inescapable part of the law of things, that whatever exists must grow, decline and die.

Of course, the nineteenth century saw a characteristic move in the opposite direction, seeing progress as its typical feature. Macaulay conveniently sums up the attitude in its most brassy form, as in the proud boasts of his review of Sir James Mackintosh's *History of the Revolution in England*:

> seeing that, by the confession of the most obstinate enemies of innovation, our race has hitherto been almost constantly advancing in knowledge, and not seeing any reason to believe that, precisely at the point of time at which we came into the world, a change took place in the faculties of the human mind, or in the mode of discovering truth, we are reformers: we are on the side of progress. From the great advances which European society has made, during the last four centuries, in every species of knowledge, we infer, not that there is no more room for improvement, but that, in every science which deserves the name, immense improvements may be confidently expected.

In a similar paragraph beginning with the confident assertion that 'The history of England is emphatically the history of progress', Macaulay notes the great strides from a 'wretched and degraded race' to 'the most highly civilised people the world ever saw', with vast empires and skills beyond the belief of the ancients. This race, he says,

> have carried the science of healing, the means of locomotion and correspondence, every mechanical art, every manufacture, every thing that promotes the convenience of life, to a perfection which our ancestors would have thought magical, have produced a literature which may boast of works not inferior to the noblest which Greece has bequeathed to us, have discovered the laws which regulate the motions of the heavenly bodies, have speculated with exquisite subtilty on the operations of the human mind, have been the acknowledged leaders of the human race in the career of political improvement. The history of England is the history of this great change in the moral, intellectual, and physical state of the inhabitants of our own island. There is much amusing and instructive episodical matter; but this is the main action.

Macaulay's exuberant optimism of 1835 was hard to dampen, but the erosion of the idea of progress in the nineteenth century can be epitomized in a footnote to Macaulay's hugely successful *The History of*

England (1848). Macaulay's footnote in the 1857 edition boasts that

> During the interval which has elapsed since this chapter was written England has continued to advance rapidly in material prosperity. I have left my text nearly as it originally stood; but I have added a few notes which may enable the reader to form some notion of the progress which has been made during the last nine years; and in general, I would desire him to remember that there is scarcely a district which is not more populous, or a source of wealth which is not more productive, at present than in 1848.

T.F. Henderson, the editor of the 1907 edition, added a note which suggests the change in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the despair at abandoning the hopes, or rather the confident expectations, of the mid-century: 'England has almost doubled her population and wealth since Macaulay wrote; but had Macaulay been now alive, he would hardly have written so boastfully of England's superiority to other nations, either morally or materially' (p. 74).

In 1918 Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* massively denied the progress of the present. Beginning, like Vico before him and Arnold Toynbee after, by comparing modern western civilization with the civilization of the Greco-Roman world, he asked

> Is it possible to find in life itself – for human history is the sum of mighty life-courses which already have had to be endowed with ego and personality, in customary thought and expression, by predicating entities of a higher order like 'the Classical' or 'the Chinese Culture', 'Modern Civilization' – a series of stages which must be traversed, and traversed moreover in an ordered and obligatory sequence? For everything organic the notions of birth, death, youth, age, lifetime are fundamentals – may not these notions in this sphere also, possess a rigorous meaning which no one has as yet extracted? In short, is all history founded upon general biographic archetypes? (*The Decline of the West*, 1961, p. 29)

For him it most emphatically was, and he applied his biographic archetypes to history and came up with the gloomy forecast that the West had passed through its period of 'culture' to a position where the future could only be decline.

It is not through lack of example that I bring to an end this selection of comments on theories of decline. Its purpose is merely to suggest the background and to show that it is not in its philosophical basis that we will understand the distinctness of the late-nineteenth-century Decadence. Writers at the time recognized this point; even the comically intense Max Nordau, whose *Degeneration* (English transla-

tion 1895) listed the characteristic features of the degenerate writers of his day in a way that seemed to demonstrate he was himself degenerate, pointed it out:

> In our days there have arisen in more highly-developed minds vague qualms of a Dusk of the Nations, in which all suns and all stars are gradually waning, and mankind with all its institutions and creations is perishing in the midst of a dying world.
>
> It is not for the first time in the course of history that the horror of world-annihilation has laid hold of men's minds. (p. 2)

The sources of the decline were of course different, and the irony of that decline when set against the conventional Victorican ideas of progress is an important feature. John A. Lester's notion of a *Journey Through Despair*, tracing the sense of frustration of the imagination by those very material developments which represented progress to Macaulay, highlights that clash, and he finds a clear expression of the note of the late nineteenth century in Grant Allen's summary of it: 'deep-questioning, mystic, uncertain, rudderless: faith gone; humanity left: heaven lost; earth realised as man's, the home and sole hope for the future' (p. 4). Max Nordau, with no sympathy at all for writers and one suspects precious little for literature, saw the *fin-de-siècle* mood as 'the impotent despair of a sick man, who sees himself dying by inches in the midst of an eternally living nature blooming insolently for ever' (p. 3). The situation may not have been new, but it was powerfully felt.

Theories of decline, then, are not confined to the late nineteenth century; nor are theories of Decadence solely literary notions. Indeed, the popularity of the term in the late nineteenth century in England may well be explained by the fact that it was felt to express something that was true of society as well as of literature. Like our own vogue words – 'permissive' or 'punk' for example – it crystallized an attitude and could refer to many aspects of society.

In the most superficial way, there was a sense of an ending in the approach to the end of the century, which combined with the sense of the ending of the reign of Queen Victoria. One does not need a Max Nordau to point out that the first is a mere convention of numbering and the second an accident of longevity, but Nordau recognized that there was in the popular mind a consciousness of the *fin-de-siècle*, however unreasonable it might be. The popularity of that term grew alongside the popularity of Decadence, so that *Punch* on 29 August 1891 was calling for a 'word-slayer' to kill off 'that pest-term' *fin-de-siècle*; from their subsequent use of it, one gathers they did not find one.

Nordau's views were not merely about literature. In a powerful piece of rhetoric which calls Yeats's 'The Second Coming' to mind, he wrote that

> One epoch of history is unmistakably in its decline, and another is announcing its approach. There is a sound of rending in every tradition, and it is as though the morrow would not link itself with today. Things as they are totter and plunge, and they are suffered to reel and fall, because man is weary, and there is no faith that it is worth an effort to uphold them. Views that have hitherto governed minds are dead or driven hence like disenthroned kings, and for their inheritance they that hold the titles and they that would usurp are locked in struggle. Meanwhile interregnum in all its terrors prevails. (pp. 5–6)

Nordau merely popularized and extended in a less scientific way the views of Cesare Lombrose, but even Lombroso was willing to contribute an article on 'Atavism and Evolution' to the *Contemporary Review* in July 1895 in which he said that

> It is a prevalent delusion of our times that we are always progressing. We picture progress to ourselves as an endless line leading straight up to heaven, without any turnings, and imagine our own white races at the top of the line, attaining by a continuous rise to immeasurable heights of civilisation. But a little calm observation quickly shows how great is the illusion of this view. Progress there certainly is in some nations, not so much in morality . . . nor even in religion. . . . All the same, an attentive consideration reveals the fact that, even among the most privileged peoples, the line of movement, far from being vertical, is always describing reactionary curves and winding ways; is varied by backward movements, just as in the case of individuals we meet with points of recurrence to atavism. (p. 42)

He went on to explain his view that genius is a 'form of neurotic degeneration' and listed some of the signs of regressive atavism common to genius, of which the most interesting for this study are a 'callousness extending even to moral insanity, . . . in many cases an interchange of sexual characteristics (absence of beard, &c.), above all, very commonly perverse, degenerate, or ignorant children' (p. 46). Confusion of sexual characteristics or sexual roles is a mainstay of accusations of Decadence, whether in seventeenth-century Spain (see Swart, p. 26), nineteenth-century England, or today.

The nineteenth century had of course a new metaphor for progress in the Darwinian theory of evolution, and the tendency was to assume that evolution and progress were synonymous. This is not so, and popularizations of the opposite possibility meant that in the later nineteenth century there was not quite the same naïveté about ideas of evolution. Professor E. Ray Lankester, for example, published in 1880 a book in the Nature Series called *Degeneration. A Chapter in*

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