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David Weir, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction*
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There are as many definitional models of decadence as there are applications. The history of scholarship fixed upon defining and describing the term is long and rich, indicative of the term's elusive and convoluted nature. David Weir's book is a roadmap of decadence along historical and geographical coordinates. It offers a bird's-eye view of what the term represents in its multifaceted aspect, while zooming in on its milestone documents and pivotal moments. In many ways it builds on Richard Gilman's *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (1979). But although Gilman's valuable, yet at times meandering and impressionistic study hazarded that 'decadence' is a distended term that disguises its own emptiness of meaning, Weir's *Very Short Introduction* persuasively argues that decadence is the product as well as the obverse of urban modernity. – it 'emerges' as what Weir calls 'dark humanism' (p. 107) in which the paradigm of decline and decay provides an alternative to progress.

Varying the discussion of decadence fruitfully between *lato sensu* to *stricto sensu*, Weir offers a crisp, distilled narrative of the term as a self-conscious nineteenth-century artistic phenomenon situated firmly against a wider cultural-historical backdrop that stretches from antiquity to the present. Ancient Rome serves as a perennial model for modern decadence. As Weir argues in the introduction, the 'historical decline' associated with the fall of Rome leads to 'social decay', and that is conducive to 'aesthetic inferiority' (p. 1). By 'aesthetic inferiority' Weir refers to culture that has deviated from a standard of Classical excellence.

From the outset, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction* attempts to formulate a unifying theory of decadence. Weir is quick to emphasize that 'decline' is inseparable from 'renewal' (p. 3), a deep-seated paradox that contributes to the term's complexity. This 'conflicted attitude toward

modernity' (p. 4) was articulated by Charles Baudelaire in *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863) and Théophile Gautier, and Decadence proper begins with these figures, who were the first to embrace it as a positive attitude. Their mistrust of modern progress and the celebration of decline cannot but be borne out of 'urban experience' (p. 8). Weir, a master of analogies, stresses the urban artifice and multidimensional character of decadence (such as its association with 'hedonism', 'degeneration', or 'homosexuality') by comparing it to an 'old-fashioned magic lantern' whose various colour filters emphasize a different aspect when slid into place (p. 8). This remarkable and elaborate conceit enables a compelling reading of Paul Verlaine's 'Langueur' (1884) where, in the dense space of the sonnet form, the variegated hues of decadence are reflected through multiple 'filters' (pp. 9-12).

Weir sees a migration and exportation of decadence as a conscious cultural phenomenon which travels from urban centre to urban centre. Specifically, he detects a movement from elitist exclusivity to a 'democratization' of decadence – from 1880s Paris, to *fin-de-siècle* London, to Weimar Vienna and Berlin (p. 8). The book's chapters are refreshingly structured around this socio-geographical pattern. They consider the impact of city planning and infrastructure on how decadence evolved and branched off, and they cover a range of genres: historiography, fiction, poetry, painting, and film. In the first chapter, Weir begins with the 'classical decadence' of Rome, a discussion that complements 'The Matter of Rome' section of Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick's excellent *Decadence: An Annotated Anthology* (2012). Weir lingers on the paradox of 'classical decadence', making an edifying distinction between the two senses of the phrase: the imitation of classical perfection and 'the decadence of antiquity' (p. 13). By paying attention to historiographical texts as Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* (AD 121), Weir samples ultra-lurid snippets from the reigns of Caligula, Nero, Vitellius, Elagabalus, and Commodus. Even the most iconic decadent character Des Esseintes seems *manqué* by comparison. The examination of Petronius' *Satyricon*, in particular, provides a footprint for the association between the cultural and social dimensions of decadence, the two fulcra that support the book's following chapters. By

claiming that ‘positive decadence belongs to the modern era’ (p. 20), Weir steers his analysis towards the artificiality of historiography itself and the idea of the past as a misconstrued narrative that mirrors the present. The chapter is appropriately entrenched in backward-looking and retrospective approaches, yet it does not ignore the idea of decadence (or lack of it) within antiquity itself. Weir acknowledges the importance of how the decline of the Roman Empire was regarded during the Enlightenment; especially illuminating are Montesquieu’s and Edward Gibbon’s views on the detrimental role of Christianity. The discussion of the obscure fourth-century poet Ausonius (also mentioned by Gibbon), whose *Technopaignion* with its ‘pointless complexity’ (p. 21) exemplifies Verlaine’s ‘Langueur’, is a refreshing surprise. Through targeted analyses of Alma-Tadema’s Rome paintings, Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) and Flaubert’s *Salammbô* (1862), Weir shows how nineteenth-century literature and art recalibrated narratives of the excesses of antiquity and imperial decline.

The series of successive revisionist perspectives of the first chapter are further sharpened in the close-up imagining of the past in the second chapter on the ‘cultural decadence’ of Paris. Weir explores the historical forces that gave rise to decadence in France, where the alternation of two empires and three republics in the space of a century feeds into fictions of decline. In light of this, Thomas Couture’s painting *The Romans of the Decadence* (1847) emerges as a work of emblematic importance, a prophetic ‘political and cultural allegory’ (p. 35) of French history. In the cultural sphere, France’s political turbulence is also mirrored in the architecture of Paris – the clash between medievalism and modernity, and between idle reflection and utilitarianism. These tensions are consciously embodied in Baudelaire’s poetry and in the famous preface to Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835). Weir revisits social diagnoses and linguistic ideas of decadence by Désiré Nisard, Paul Bourget, and Friedrich Nietzsche, but, again, it is Baudelaire and Gautier’s active celebration of indolent inertia and *l’art pour l’art* that kick-starts Decadence proper. However, the high point is of course J.-K. Huysmans’s *À rebours* (1884), and in an in-depth discussion Weir reveals the novel’s *style faisandé* (p. 50). He makes the valuable claim that, contrary to Nisard’s and Bourget’s respective

negative and neutral assessments of decadence, for Huysmans '[d]ecay [...] has become desirable' (p. 51). Commentary on the somewhat underrated gem Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénu*s (1884) with its highly imaginative sexual eccentricity adds to the ever-specialized gamut of deviancy and artifice.

For a long time, the general consensus has been that English Decadence is a pale imitation of its French counterpart. Nonetheless, Weir makes some intriguing claims to the contrary. At the close of the second chapter he avers that decadence in 1890s London was 'more than just a style of writing: it was also a way of life' (p. 56). And in the book's introduction we find a similar claim: 'London decadence appears to integrate aesthetic style and personal behaviour more so than Parisian decadence does' (p. 7). This is a fascinating position, not least because French Decadence is a first-hand phenomenon, whilst English Decadence is imported from Paris and hence, in a way, is itself 'artificial'. In the third chapter, on London's 'social decadence', Weir draws a sharp comparison between the civic, architectural, and socio-political distinctiveness of Paris and that of London, the political instability of the former and the political stability of the latter, leading to different constructions of decadence. Against this background, Pater's insistence on momentary experience for its own sake in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) was a response to Ruskin's moral purpose of beauty formulated in *The Stones of Venice* (1851–1853). The joust between these Oxonians helped lay the groundwork for a generation of British Decadents. Weir builds his mosaic of the 1890s by commenting on George Moore; Arthur Symons; 'Michael Field', whose 'La Gioconda' (1892) provides a parallel to Pater's *Mona Lisa* from a female authorial perspective; Ernest Dowson who emulates Verlaine and Horatian 'classical decadence (or decadent classicism)' (p. 77); Oscar Wilde; and Aubrey Beardsley, particularly *Under the Hill* (1896) and the vital role of small presses in promulgating decadence. Although decadence is often considered as confined to aristocratic quarters, in London 'the origins of the decadent author lie precisely in the social class his art most opposes: the modern, urban bourgeoisie' (p. 80).

The fourth chapter posits that the 'bourgeoisification' (p. 81) of decadence becomes more pronounced in the Weimar era, in 1900s Vienna and 1920s Berlin where decadence 'is the

mainstream' (p. 94). In these two cities, Weir argues, urban infrastructure facilitated the intermingling of social classes and a wider propagation of decadent practices. Mirroring the academic conflict between Ruskin and Pater in England, Weir explores how the urban planner Otto Wagner's idea of '*necessitas*' and 'purposeful functionalism' (p. 84) opposed Gustav Klimt's *art décoratif* (p. 86), the aesthetic and the triumph of artifice over nature. Through a piece of trivia, Klimt's art becomes associated with the Viennese lady Ida Bauer who became the subject for Freud's study in hysteria (Freud referred to her as Dora). Stefan Zweig's memoir *The World of Yesterday* (1942) speaks back to the myth of the fall of Rome. In comparing Berlin with ancient Rome, Zweig writes that the deviant sexuality of decadence in Berlin (transvestite balls, for example) became 'the bourgeois norm' (p. 95). The legendary American actress Louise Brooks embraced this culture as Lulu in the film *Pandora's Box* (1929). Weir alludes to other relevant silent films of Weimar Berlin, writing that they only offer glimpses of what he calls 'the erotic capital of Europe' (p. 96). In discussing Christopher Isherwood's *The Berlin Stories* (1945), Weir illustrates how decadence in the Weimar era had 'a broad social base' (p. 98). The population's risqué behaviour came under attack by the Nazi regime in the 1930s. Weir reconfirms decadence as an iconoclastic current by paralleling Hitler's indictment of the 1937 Munich Art Exhibition's 'degenerate art' (p. 100) with Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892).

Weir concludes the chapter on the Weimar era with the remark: 'if the promise of liberal modernity cannot be kept, then decadence is far preferable to its authoritarian alternative' (p. 103). This is reflected in the 'Afterword', which adopts a thought-provoking Marxist slant. Here Weir considers decadence in light of Theodor Adorno's rejection of the cold rationality of Enlightenment in the aftermath of mechanized war and the Holocaust. He argues that for Adorno 'decadence entails an implicit critique of modernity' as its '*mirage*', its 'reverse image' (p. 105). This is what Weir designates as 'a kind of dark humanism' (p. 107) that resists the political failures of the rationality of progress. This critique of modernity is seen outside of Europe as well, in Bohemian Rio de Janeiro and Meiji Japan. He pulls the 'Afterword' in different directions, both

casting an eye on the disparate legacies of decadence – such as Djuna Barnes’ novel *Nightwood* (1937); Ken Russell’s film *Salome’s Last Dance* (1988); and a long analysis of Michel Houellebecq’s *Soumission* (2015) – and closing his study on a pensive note: ‘The mirage of decadence that once shimmered before modernity is matched by the shadow of decadence now cast after it’ (p. 114).

For all of the malleability and iridescent shape-shifting of decadence, Weir’s slim tome upholds that decadence is a discrete cultural phenomenon. By taking into account historical fermentations, it provides new perspectives. And yet it does not lose sight of the relationship between the thematic foci of decadence and its insistence on style, nor of the nettlesome paradoxes stemming from this relationship. By foregrounding less well-known figures alongside major players, the book provides a balanced overview of the history of decadence as a cultural tendency and artistic credo. Yet it is more than an overview as it raises productive questions at every turn and therefore serves as an indispensable toolbox of ideas for scholars and enthusiasts of Decadence for decades to come.