

Fin-de-siècle. Challenge and response

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I

There is a famous passage in Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* where at a party Lord Henry murmurs 'fin-de-siècle' and his hostess replies 'fin du monde', at which point Dorian himself adds 'I wish it were fin du globe, life is a great disappointment'¹. What Oscar Wilde wrote in the 1890's was echoed a little later in Germany by the young George Heym, one of the founders of expressionism: everything is so boring, so boring, he wrote in his diary, if only something would happen, the erection of barricades or a war². This kind of weariness of life and boredom was an expression of disgust with the commonness of the middle class world. As Baudelaire put it much earlier: 'I hate society so much that it really bores me'³. But out of this boredom and disgust came a challenge to established society, one to which this society responded. It is this challenge as well as society's response that made the turn of the century distinctive and not, as is usually assumed, the challenge alone.

Let us deal with the challenge before we analyze the response. Jan Romein and Stuart Hughes agree in its emphasis upon emotion rather than reason, the 'rediscovery of the unconscious', a withdrawal into a kind of individualism in face of the hypocritical, artificial and positivistic world⁴. We can all think of startling examples of such attitudes at the turn of the century, from the European youth movements, the expressionists, the wave of spiritualism, to the thought of Bergson and Max Weber. But much more was involved than the ideas of influential philosophers or sociologists: a new way of life was put forward at times chaotically and disorganized, as a challenge to the dominant consensus of the times.

This challenge to established society did not remain theory. It took concrete visible forms in the youth movements but also in what was called the decadence so opposed to youthful ideals of regeneration. Both were pushing at the borders of what was considered socially and morally acceptable, seeking to abolish or extend them. Why this push was just then considered so seriously, indeed undertaken at all, seems closely linked to threats to bourgeois complacency which strained the existing consensus: above all, the new speed of time, which Jan Romein addressed so well, besides other challenges such as the labour, socialist and anarchist movements. To be sure, we have

1 Oscar Wilde, *The picture of Dorian Gray* in: *The collected works of Oscar Wilde* (New York, Greystone Press, s. a.) 216.

2 George Heym, *Dichtungen und Schriften*, III, *Tagebücher, Träume, Briefe*, K. L. Schneider, ed. (Hamburg, Munich, 1960) 138, 139.

3 E. Moers, *The Dandy* (New York, 1978) 275.

4 J. Romein, *The watershed of two eras* (Middletown, Conn., 1978) 651 ; S. Hughes, *Consciousness and society* (New York, 1958) chapter 4.

to distinguish carefully between the economic and political challenge and that of the quest for a new life style. Not only were those involved in the latter quest singularly disinterested in the economy, while in its turn the labour movement, for example, had largely accepted the dominant life-style with its manners and morals.

Challenges to a life-style — to the way in which people organize their own lives and the moral universe which supports their way of life — characterize those movements which seem unique to the age. The opposition to the bourgeois life-style came from out of the bourgeoisie itself, it tended to ignore what is often called the social and economic infrastructure, and instead attacked the ordered life of their own middle classes, with their moral posture and emphasis upon accomplishment. We must ask the question if such an approach to changing society could make a real difference, other than adding to the variety of artistic endeavor? Half a century later, in the 1960s, another middle class generation will attempt much the same approach to changing their society, and from this point of view we are apparently dealing with a more constant phenomena of modernity. For all the inner directedness of this challenge at the *fin-de-siècle*, which historians have pointed out, it was concrete and visible enough to be widely understood and to elicit a strong response.

We will take as example of the challenge to bourgeois life the so-called decadence, perhaps the most typical manifestation of the *fin-de-siècle*, and which, unlike the youth movement, was not centered in one country but took in most of the West. It drew together the fear of the new speed of time and the fear of decline which were so characteristic of the turn of the century. The word decadence conceptualized what its popularizer, the physician Jean Baptiste Morel called in 1857

The incessant progression in Europe not only of insanity, but of all abnormal states which have a special relation with the existence of physical and moral evil in humanity⁵.

From its beginning decadence symbolized the fear that society would be engulfed by those who seemed to menace its very foundations. A destructive restlessness seemed to have spread throughout society: everything seemed scattered (*zerfahren*), thus to some contemporary observers the coffee house as a place of sociability with its coming and going seemed to symbolize society's sickness and decadence⁶.

But for contemporaries, the most important sign of such sickness was the apparent weakening of the nerves. Nervousness seemed opposed to all society stood for: the ideal of law and order, of steady work, of the willingness to compromise. There is much medical literature testifying to this preoccupation, including Charcot's famous lectures in the 1880's at the Salpêtrière. It was Charcot himself who told his audience that the clinical study of the nervous system (neuropathology) could no longer be considered a narrow speciality, but that its territory was one of the most expansive which exists. He went on to insist that hysteria considered by most an exclusive female

5 D. Pick, *Faces of degeneration* (Cambridge, 1989) 54.

6 E. von Sydow, *Die Kultur der Dekadenz* (Dresden, 1922) 148, 149.

disease, was more frequent among men than one would suppose, and that such men did not have to be effeminate⁷. But the alarm was raised, for masculinity as a bulwark against decadence was in danger, it stood for the ideals of virility, beauty and youth which were crucial to society's self-representation. While a German manual of proper behavior published in 1890 called *Die Frau comme il faut* (The proper woman), stated that no one can relieve⁸ even a healthy woman who declares that she has no nerves⁹, the manly man, following the example of Laocoon, was assumed to have none. Now this ideal was being undermined by that very medical profession which had played such an important role in determining the health of society and in confirming the supposed sickness of all outsiders.

The decadence constructed a counter-type to the image society liked to have of itself. From the figure of the decadent one could as in a mirror construct the stereotype of the ideal man or woman. It is hardly necessary to give details here, other than to point out that the bodily and mental were joined — the visible or half-hidden misformations of the body and what one German writer formulated as: 'Decadence - nervousness, sickness, criminality, destruction of morals and a flaccid intellect'¹⁰. Such degeneracy was not merely disembodied theory or confined to those in insane asylums under the care of dr. Morel, but exemplified through a whole range of men, women and movements, a challenge to the normative way of life. These were emancipation movements which in one way or another wanted to free themselves from the restraints of society and its hierarchical structures. They were accused of decadence because they seemed to raise the specter of chaos, of a society out of control.

The youth movements were in the main the least rebellious, though here also emancipation was the call of the hour: youth among itself. The challenge to accepted manners and morals was part of the opposition to the world of their elders. Their so-called rediscovery of the human body through its exposure to sun, air and the practice of nudism threatened the moral foundations of society. The 'shriek of desperation' of the expressionists, itself another youth movement, heralded an artistic *avant garde* devoted to 'grasping everything while it was in motion', to quote the German painter Ludwig Kirchner¹¹. Disorder seemed its governing principle. A phrase of Nietzsche, so attractive to the youth at the turn of the century, may serve to sum up such new attitudes: 'Ordered society puts the passions to sleep'¹².

Such opposition to their life-style from out of the middle classes themselves was joined by those so-called decadents who had largely remained hidden but now emerged into the light of day and even proudly proclaimed their decadence. Visibility

7 J.-M. Charcot, *Clinical lectures on diseases of the nervous system, delivered at the infirmary of la Salpêtrière*, Tr. by Thomas Saville, III (London, 1889) 6, 99 (lecture VIII).

8 E. von Sydow, *Die Kultur der Dekadenz* (Dresden, 1922) 148, 149.

9 N. Bruck-Auffenberg, *Die Frau comme il faut* (Vienna, 1890) reprinted in G. Häntzschel, ed., *Bildung und Kultur bürgerlicher Frauen, 1850-1918* (Tübingen, 1986) 122.

10 O. Bumke, *Kultur und Entartung* (Berlin, 1922, first published 1911).

11 Quoted in W. D. Dube, *The expressionists* (London, 1972) 81.

12 Quoted in P. U. Hohendahl, *Das Bild der bürgerlichen Welt im expressionistischen Drama* (Heidelberg, 1967) 265.

was crucial here; as the poet Heinrich Heine had said long before, a scandal which does not become public does not exist as far as society is concerned¹³. Outsiders like the jew were more visible than ever before in the 'generation of the Founders', and a so-called 'Jewish problem' was now on everyone's lips. Anti-semitism no longer emphasized the jew as killer of Christ, but the jew as the symptom of a restless modernity, prophet of decadence. Worse still, the clear division between sexes upon which so much of the middle class way of life rested was challenged ever more openly. For many sexual perversity combined with the dreaded syphilis put the health of the individual and society at risk. Homosexuals and lesbians at the turn of the century had their bars and even regular dances which attracted the curious in some numbers (at one in Berlin in 1904 some 700 people were said to be present)¹⁴. Oscar Wilde almost flaunted his and his friends' homosexuality with his green carnation, and in Paris, Natalie Barney and others proclaimed their lesbianism and presided over salons which were attended by the cream of the literary and artistic establishment¹⁵. But beyond the visibility and new assertiveness of such outsiders they now entered the discourse as they never had done before: through medicine, the science of sexology, but also through literature and the stage.

We can take as an example of the overt attack against gender division the new found idealization of the androgyne (who combined characteristics of both sexes) at the turn of the century, a figure who had been regarded as a monster throughout most of the nineteenth century. Oscar Wilde, Beardsley and Gabriele d'Annunzio, for example, were all fascinated by the androgyne, endowed so they thought, with special charm — combining in Oscar Wilde's words the grace of Adonis with the beauty of Helen¹⁶. The last line of Alfred Kubin's decadent German Utopia, *Die andere Seite* (1908) runs 'The deity who is the creator of the material world is an androgyne (*Zwitter*)'¹⁷. The androgyne boy-emperor Heliogabalus is the central character of Louis Couperus' *De berg van licht* (1905/1906) which with its graphic descriptions of an unbridled sensuousness and its opulent surroundings is one of the most perfect novels of the decadence. For some of the medical profession committed to safeguarding the dominant morality a virile man's association with an androgyne was thought to induce a form of insanity which derived from syphilis¹⁸.

Fascination for the androgyne was combined with the idealization of those men and women whom society had marginalized. The prostitute was decorated with a halo but so were the improverished, the criminal, and all those who lived by what society called vice¹⁹. Jean Lorraine, one of the celebrated figures of Paris society at the *fin-de-siècle*

13 P. Peters, *Heinrich Heine 'Dichterjude'* (Frankfurt a. Main, 1990) 109.

14 M. Hirschfeld, *Berlins Drittes Geschlecht* (Berlin, 1904) 55.

15 R. Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York, 1988) 365,424; H. Montgomery Hyde, *Oscar Wilde* (New York, 1975) 187-188; G. Wickes, *The amazon of letters. The lives and loves of Natalie Barney* (London, 1977) *passim*.

16 Oscar Wilde, 'The picture of Mr. W. H.' in: B. Reade, ed., *Sexual heretics* (London, 1970) 392.

17 A. Kubin, *Die andere Seite* (Vienna, 1952, first published 1908) 287.

18 J. Katz, *Gay American history* (New York, 1976) 554.

19 W.-D. Rasch, *Die literarische Decadence um 1900* (Munich, 1986) 69ff.

made whores, crooks, homosexuals into a kind of fraternity of outsiders. Baudelaire's prose and poetry provide an obvious example of their glorification, but Thomas Mann's early story, 'The destitute and the excluded' (*Die Darbenden und Ausgeschlossenen* (1903)), also sought brotherhood with the hungry, the cheated and the nay-sayers of society²⁰. Significantly enough society itself accused all the outsiders we have mentioned of not being able to form a community, they were universally characterized as lonely and sad. Just as the decadent was the counter-image of society so the community of the outsiders was counter-image to the true communities of the family and state.

The women's rights movement was a part of this onslaught upon society. The fear of population decline haunted the *fin-de-siècle*, and these *Les vierges fortes*, — to cite the title of Prévost's novel of 1900 — were accused of choosing celibacy in order to dedicate themselves to militancy and to remake the world in their image²¹. This was the *femme fatale*, the Salome, the Amazon, and these stereotypes were often applied to those fighting for women's emancipation. There was now a 'woman problem' which agitated people's mind, just as there was now a 'sexual problem' or, we might add a 'Jewish problem': for as Jan Romein pointed out here we also enter a new stage of urgency²². All of these problems became generalized in society, a preoccupation of doctors, thinkers and politicians. Moreover, the new mass media provided large scale means of dissemination: mass circulation newspapers, magazines, post-cards, and posters. The stereotype of the decadent became familiar whether it was that of deviant sexuality, crazy artists, shameless youth or antisemitic representation of jews. Not much literature about the specific impact of such new and hostile visuality exists, except for the jews where it has recently been demonstrated how far and deep the Dreyfus affair spread such a stereotype²³. The decadents were stylized into the counter-image of society, just as in much of the contemporary literature they die an unnatural death — after all extinction was the inevitable consequence of decadence. The 'outsider' was being ever more sharply defined by a frightened and disgusted society which struck back.

And yet, as we know, the years prior to the first world war were a time of great stability not only in economics or politics, but in the bourgeois way of life. Thus for Charles Morazé's *The triumph of the middle class* (1966) the year 1900 presented the climax of its ascendancy:

... to the European middle class, proud of their struggles and successes, proud of having mastered the world with so little loss and with only a modicum of heroic sacrifice, the future seemed secure²⁴.

20 *Ibidem*, 69.

21 A. Mauge, *L'identité masculine en crise au tournant du siècle* (Marseille, 1987) 102-103.

22 J. Romein, *The watershed*, 97.

23 L. Nochlin, 'Degas and the Dreyfus affair. A portrait of the artist as anti-semitic' in: N. L. Kleeblatt, ed., *The Dreyfus affair* (Berkeley, 1987) 96-112.

24 C. Morazé, *The triumph of the middle classes* (New York, 1968) xii.

II

Society Struck back against those who attacked its way of life through the process of marginalization I have discussed, making especially effective use of medicine and the law. Decadents were pronounced sick, as we mentioned already, fit for the asylum as hysterics close to insanity. During the last decades of the century laws against sodomy were revived or introduced (as in 1911 in the Netherlands). Countless attempts were made to legislate against the jews when the modern wave of anti-semitism started in the West during the 1880s. But this use of medicine or the law in order to contain forces thought hostile to middle class life were, in the long run, less important than the basic reason this opposition was so easily turned aside. Those who challenged the manners and moral of existing society nevertheless accepted many bourgeois ideals even while seeming to deny them.

The youth movement with its patriotism, its idealization of friendship and beauty, its worship of nature, was for the most part, rather easily re-integrated into society. The 'rediscovery of the body', the roaming in nature, had captured the imagination of many of their elders, and their emphasis upon chastity, a community of affinity and patriotism was gaining many adherents who-tired-of pomp and circumstance tried to internalize their ideals. The search for human beauty, for individual fulfillment, was no stranger to mainstream ideals. The patriotism of the youth movement corresponded to the new German nationalism with its emphasis upon internalizing and romanticizing the volkish heritage. Above all, the anti-authoritarian slogan 'Youth among itself' came at a time when for the most part the worship of youth had replaced that of old age. The majority of the woman rights movement accepted ideals of femininity and motherhood and centered its agitation upon the political equality denied to women. But what of the so-called decadents, and the artistic and literary *avant garde* which had attacked the prevailing manners and morals so sharply? Here a factor comes into play which seems to me fundamental in understanding the long lasting strength of the triumphant middle classes and which the youth movement and the movement for women's rights illustrated. The middle class ability to co-opt the challenges which they faced, provides a crucial explanation of why their way of life has remained so largely unbroken to this day, and indeed came to encompass that of all other classes in society.

To be sure, the challenge to the middle class way of life at the *fin-de-siècle* was not the first time their facility at co-optation had been tested. It is, as far as I can see, almost a constant of modernity. A century earlier than the *fin-de-siècle*, at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, a whole generation of youth in Germany also tried to opt out of and to challenge the normative way of life: the young Goethe and the young Schiller are perhaps among the most famous examples, but soon they too were co-opted, and in Goethe's case, even became the symbol of bourgeois ideals. His wild and pornographic poetry of his younger years was only rediscovered well after the second world war to the universal disbelief of his admirers²⁵. Later, towards mid-

century the romantics and student youth tried the challenge once more, and once again they were reintegrated into society. Middle class society adopted something from each of these challenges as its own, but as far as its way of life was concerned the *fin-de-siècle* heightened this process as an ever more pressing challenge of modernity.

We see something of this process of co-optation at work — to give only one startling example — as some middle class audiences supported plays, read books and bought painting which attacked them and all they were supposed to hold dear in the sharpest possible terms. They themselves provided the funds for the attacks they then denounced as decadent. This was a process which accelerated at the *fin-de-siècle* but became commonplace after the first world war. When, for example, in Germany censorship was relaxed it turned out that neither the audience nor the money was lacking to support sharp and unambiguous challenges against the establishment's way of life.

This was no conscious process of co-optation, but the result of a certain openness to all that was new by a segment of the European middle class which had internalized the liberal ideals of the Enlightenment. Tolerance was paired with denunciation and fear. Thus, for example, Gershom Scholem wrote to Walter Benjamin that when he visited Berlin in 1932 he was dumbfounded (*staunte Bauklötze*) when he went to a performance of Brecht's 'Three Penny Opera' and saw, as he put it, a bourgeois public which had lost all sense of its own situation, exult in a play through which they were made ridiculous and spat upon²⁶.

Such exultation was not a weakness but a strength which came out of a liberal tradition and a feeling of security. No doubt, a certain disgust with themselves and their social and moral universe also motivated such audiences and their sponsors, for it is no coincidence that Nietzsche replaced Schopenhauer in popularity at the end of the century. The self-confidence of the bourgeois age also played its role, despite the fact that by the time Scholem observed this phenomena such confidence and feeling of security was being undermined in war and depression. Nevertheless, the basic attitude remained intact. To be sure, we are only talking about a small elite who went to the theatre, collected art and read these kinds of books. But numbers do not count here: they tamed the *avant garde* into respectability.

Yet such co-optation had its limits: the division between the sexes must be kept intact. Decadence as such was not co-opted, it remained an epithet flung against those marginalized by society: a word which, as we have seen, had a definite connotation (which the Nazis later documented in their 1937 Exhibition of degenerate art). The decadence with its dedication to vice as the cause for the decline of people and states was continuously held up before the public and taught in the schools.

There was indeed a crisis of confidence in the bourgeois world at the *fin-de-siècle*, the kind of uncertainty and fear in the face of the challenges to its way of life. But many of these challenges were co-opted. The hero of decadent fiction was, typically enough called *l'homme des incertitudes*²⁷ and as over against his image bourgeois clarity and

26 G. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin. Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt a. Main, 1975) 220.

27 S. Jouve, *Les décadents* (Paris, 1989).

decisiveness were constantly reaffirmed, symbolized through the construction of a heightened masculinity as a bulwark of strength, order and discipline. The war which followed, further solidified this construct, as the way of life which had been so strongly attacked survived the crises of the post war world. But it is equally remarkable to what degree in the minds of this and the following post war generation the contest between the bourgeois way of life and its enemies was still fought out within the limits set by the challenge and response of the *fin-de-siècle*.

Nederland in het *fin-de-siècle*. De stijl van een beschaving

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De term *fin-de-siècle* heeft, in tegenstelling tot periodenamen als 'renaissance', 'barok' of 'romantiek', een schijn van objectiviteit. Dat de negentiende eeuw een einde heeft gehad is onbetwistbaar. Het woord zou dan ook dienst kunnen doen als een neutrale aanduiding voor het tijdvak tussen 1880 en 1900. Maar in de praktijk ligt de nadruk bijna altijd op een bepaald aspect: het gevoel van verontrusting dat in die jaren een deel van het ontwikkelde publiek beheerste en dat in de literatuur en de beeldende kunst, soms ook in de wetenschap, op allerlei manieren tot uitdrukking kwam¹. Naarmate de eeuwwisseling naderde leek het burgerlijk zelfvertrouwen af te nemen. Het vaste geloof in de vooruitgang werd ondermijnd door een fatalisme, dat Nietzsche omschreef als een 'große Müdigkeit', een 'Wille zum Ende'². Aan het begrip *fin-de-siècle* verbindt zich zo haast onvermijdelijk het begrip decadentie.

Hoe algemeen dergelijke gevoelens van neerslachtigheid en nervositeit zijn geweest blijft intussen de vraag. Zelfs in Frankrijk, waar het meest over decadentie werd gepraat en geschreven, behield het openbare leven doorgaans een toon van opgewektheid³. Later, na de verschrikkingen van de wereldoorlog, dachten velen aan de tijd rond 1900 terug als een zorgeloze *belle époque*. Het besef ingrijpende veranderingen mee te maken had niet alleen een verwarrende, maar ook een stimulerende werking. Naast de klacht over het verlies van traditionele waarden stond de verwachting van een spoedig aanbreekende glansrijke toekomst. Het idee van een *fin-de-siècle* kon ook een positieve wending krijgen, als een uitnodiging tot radicale vernieuwing, nu de oude vormen op sterven stonden.

In de Nederlandse cultuur van het *fin-de-siècle* heeft het vernieuwingsstreven vrijwel vanaf het begin de overhand gehad. Er zijn voor dit optimisme enkele eenvoudige oorzaken te noemen. Nederland had niet, zoals Frankrijk na 1870, de herinnering aan een nederlaag te verwerken; de internationale positie van het land leek sedert dat jaar eerder sterker geworden. Van een stagnerende bevolkingsgroei, voor veel Fransen het duidelijkste teken van uitputting, was geen sprake. De binnenlandse politiek werd door de opkomst van het partijstelsel ingewikkelder, maar er bestond geen kloof tussen staat en samenleving als in Duitsland of een parlementaire impasse als in Oostenrijk. De grote depressie van de jaren 1870 en 1880 trof Nederland, met zijn betrekkelijk ouderwetse economische verhoudingen, minder zwaar dan de omringende landen.

1 De bijdragen in M. Teich, R. Porter, ed., *Fin de siècle and its legacy* (Cambridge, 1990) interpreteren het begrip op de meest uiteenlopende manieren, zodat het boek iedere samenhang ontbeert.

2 Fr. Nietzsche, *Der Fall Wagner* (1888); in: Fr. Nietzsche, *Werke in drei Bänden*, K. Schlechta, ed., II (2de dr.; München, 1960) 901-938, aldaar 903.

3 Vergelijk K. W. Swart, *The sense of decadence in nineteenth-century France* (Den Haag, 1964) 187-192, en uitvoeriger E. Weber, *France, fin de siècle* (Cambridge Mass., 1986). D. L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in fin-de-siècle France. Politics, psychology and style* (Berkeley, 1989) 11-12, 316-317, trekt deze 'melioristische' visie in twijfel.