



# Qualis artifex pereo! or barbarism and decadence

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# Qualis Artifex Pereo!

OR

## Barbarism and Decadence

*Voilà que j'ai touché l'automne des idées . . .*  
BAUDELAIRE<sup>1</sup>

### I

**E**VEN when looking forward, the decadent mind is never 'forward-looking': if it turns toward the future, it is only to anticipate regress. Yet, paradoxically, it seems to accept that regress with resignation, and even with enthusiasm, as if it were a kind of progress. In agreement with its own eschatology, decadence views the impending doom of the society it expresses as a total, ultimate end of civilization itself. Yet this does not prevent the decadent spirit from accepting, and even welcoming, the end of all culture, as well as its own death. In the extreme tension of its agony, decadence tries to call forth an alien palingenesis from its own apocalypse.

The name of the disaster spelling the end of culture is barbarism. As such, barbarism is but one of the many catastrophes occurring on the stage of history. Yet it is also the typical and specific nemesis of a

<sup>1</sup>This article, based on the interpretative reading of a series of poems by three modern authors, the Greek Constantin Cavafis, the Russian Valeri Bryusov, and W. B. Yeats, is a portion of a work in progress that takes its title and cue from the second hemistich of the epigraph above. *The Autumn of Ideas* is an essay of book length dealing with the notion of decadence as peculiarly developed by modern Western culture. The study analyzes that notion in its psychological, historical, cultural, aesthetic, and even in its ethical manifestations; above all, in its significance as a value, which may be only relative, but which still is no longer absolutely negative, as it was in the ancient or classical versions of the same concept.

The translations of the Cavafis and Bryusov pieces are by the present writer, who in such a task has availed himself of the advice of Harry Levin, while in the editing of the entire article he has greatly profited from the help of G. W. Cottrell, Jr. The texts of the Yeats poems, 'Byzantium' and 'Sailing to Byzantium,' are reproduced from *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York, 1956) with the kind permission of The Macmillan Company, New York.

decadent civilization. Such a civilization falls defenseless before the onslaught of barbarism precisely because it envisages that scourge not only as a moral retribution, but also as the only possible biological alternative.

Decadence considers itself as the product of a psycho-physiological disequilibrium, to be viewed in terms of either excess or defect. Its causes and manifestations may be on one side an abnormal exuberance, a feverish activity of all nervous and cerebral energies, and on the other, a wear and tear of vital power, a thinning out of the blood. Yet most of its witnesses and critics have emphasized exclusively the symptomatology of atrophy, and neglected the other. Only a few have diagnosed the decadent illness of civilization in terms of the excessive development of certain organs and faculties to the detriment of others, and of life itself.

One of these few was the Russian writer Mikhail Gershenzon, who made this point in a series of letters he exchanged with the poet Vyacheslav Ivanov under the title *Perepiska iz dvukh uglov* (*Correspondence from One Corner to Another*; 1921), which was a debate over decadence as much as an argument about the Revolution of 1917. There Gershenzon indicted the culture of which he was watching the ruin by comparing it to a heavy clothing that overburdens man, and prevents him from moving freely in his social environment and spiritual world. Gershenzon used directly the concept of hypertrophy in an example taken from animal life, through which he projected the parallel destiny of the overgrown culture he wanted to reject: 'The deer developed horns, as a means by which to frighten its enemies and to defend itself; yet in some breeds those horns have grown so big as to prevent the animal from roaming the woods, and thus the species is now dying out.'

Embarrassed and oppressed by his riches, the decadent is equally unable to wander in the forest of reality or to roam in the woods of being. By neglecting the essentials of civilization and prizing only its vanities, which are devoid of any survival value, he disarms himself for the struggle of life, and becomes himself the 'superfluous man' par excellence. He fails to realize that man's destiny is not decided in the *forum* or the *agora*, or, even less, in the drawing room or the boudoir, but in the wilderness, or on the battlefield. When the hour of decision comes, he discovers all too late that history has reverted to nature; and that the barbarian, being nature's child, is now becoming history's

agent. At this point the decadent recognizes that he is left no alternative but to play a passive, and yet theatrical, role on history's stage. That role is that of scapegoat or sacrificial victim; and it is by accepting that part, and acting it well, that he seals in blood the strange brotherhood of decadence and barbarism.

The chief writers of the European *fin de siècle* understood well this historical and psychological dialectic, which some of their romantic predecessors, although more dimly, had acknowledged before. A vague awareness of this subtle bond appears as early as 1854, in *Sylvie*, by Gérard de Nerval. This happens, strangely enough, in the opening passage, where the author evokes a newly emerging decadent sensibility as the young generation's daydream. Yet, against all naïve hopes, Nerval seems to realize that the daydream of decadence is always accompanied by the nightmare of barbarism. He reduces the sense of this fatal relation, so to say, *ad absurdum*, by wondering why no barbarians had come to put an end to the sophisticated intellectual games played by the youthful elite of which the story's protagonist, or its author, was a part. The conversations of the leaders of that elite rose so high, says the writer, that 'les plus timides d'entre nous allaient voir parfois aux fenêtres si les Huns, les Turcomans ou les Cosaques n'arrivaient pas enfin pour couper court à ces arguments de rhéteurs et de sophistes.'

When he wrote these words, Nerval obviously took it for granted that no one of those young men would have made even a show of resistance if any of the barbaric hosts had actually come. Such implication, typically reflecting the decadent outlook, runs counter to the classical and Renaissance tenet that there is no incompatibility between letters and arms. According to that tenet, the responsible citizen of a healthy social organism, far from treating culture as a sign of weakness, should consider it the best weapon in the struggle to be waged against the enemies of civilization.

This is the very conclusion that Gibbon, a typical representative of the Enlightenment, chose to draw from an anecdote all previous historians had reported to point the opposite moral and to adorn a very different tale. The anecdote relates a legendary episode that supposedly had taken place in the fourth century, at the end of the daring raid across the Roman Empire that led the Goths to subjugate and devastate the sacred soil of Greece. This is how Gibbon retells and reinterprets that instructive fable (*Decline and Fall*, Chapter X):

Another circumstance is related of these invasions, which might deserve our notice were it not justly to be suspected as the fanciful conceit of a recent sophist. We are told, that in the sack of Athens, the Goths had collected all the libraries, and were on the point of setting fire to this funeral pile of Grecian learning, had not one of their chiefs, of more refined policy than his brethren, dissuaded them from the design; by the profound observation, that as long as the Greeks were addicted to the study of books, they would never apply themselves to the exercise of arms. The sagacious counsellor (should the truth of the fact be admitted) reasoned like an ignorant barbarian. In the most polite and powerful nations, genius of every kind has displayed itself about the same period; and the age of science has generally been the age of military virtue and success.

Far from agreeing with Gibbon's optimistic opinion, the modern decadent would read again in this pseudo-historical apologue the harsh moral lesson it seemed to dictate for less enlightened observers. The decadent shares indeed the savage view of the 'ignorant barbarian,' and thinks with him that the man who wields the pen cannot wield the sword. Although subject to the fatal penalty of this law, the decadent finds it just as good as true; for him, as for the barbarian, might and right are one.

Being left with no other alternative than that of serving as the passive victim of the tragedy of history, the decadent pretends to contribute to its cruel poetic justice by doing more than merely waiting behind the closed walls of the citadel of culture. He thus often chooses to open the gates of the city to its barbaric besiegers, who will be its destroyers, as well as his executioners. Decadence may well be another name for civilization's self-betrayal: a truth more or less knowingly reflected in many literary documents of our time, but nowhere as fully and deeply as in two little-known poems, written in the early years of this century by two poets belonging to the periphery of Western culture. The first of these poems is 'Waiting for the Barbarians' ('Periménontas tous barbárous') by the Neo-Greek poet Constantin Cavafis (Kōnstantínos Kabáphēs), who flourished, distant and lonely, in Alexandria of Egypt, where he was born and died (1862-1933). The second is 'The Coming Huns' ('Gryadushchie Gunny'), by the Russian poet Valeri Bryusov, one of the masters of his generation, and the leader of the modernist group of Moscow, the great city where he saw the light, and spent all his life (1873-1924).

## II

The first of these two poems is only vaguely dated: all we know, on the uncertain authority of Cavafis' editors, is that it was written before 1911. Like most of Cavafis' poetry, which includes a string of highly personal lyrics, this piece is a historical tableau: one of the many that found their inspiration in the late, forgotten ages of classical antiquity, in what Baudelaire would have called 'la cendre latine et la poussière grecque.' The model that suggested such compositions was perhaps Hérédia's *Trophées*. Yet Cavafis was far from being an imitative artist: he replaced the decorative indifference of that Parnassian craftsman with a lucid and ironic vision, and with a passionate austerity of diction and form. He treated history not as an archaeological pageant but as a dramatic parable illustrating the facts of life and the ways of man.

This is particularly true of 'Waiting for the Barbarians,' which could be defined as a little tragicomedy, unfolded in a single scene. Its locale might be either Rome or Byzantium, or any one of the many temporary capitals of the Empires of the East and of the West. As for the time of the action, we may place it anywhere we wish in that long series of centuries historians designate as those of the 'great migrations' or of the 'barbaric invasions,' according to whether they complain or rejoice in their outcome, which might be viewed as the dawn of the modern age or the collapse of the ancient world.

The scene unfolds in dialogue form, as a succession of questions and answers by anonymous speakers, lost in the crowd filling the *forum* or *agora*, not for consultation or deliberation, but merely to wait there for an event of which most of them have neither knowledge nor understanding. The first question suggests with great immediacy the collective mood, which is a mixed one, made of hesitant expectation and of impatient curiosity. As for the first answer, it is a direct and simple acknowledgment of the impending happening everybody is consciously or unconsciously waiting for:

- What are we expecting, gathered in the square?
- On this day the barbarians will arrive.

All questions that follow stem not from the questioners' inner reflections but from their external observation; and this prevents the reader from deciding immediately whether the emotion ruling the

crowd is fear or hope. The crowd is not an unruly mob, but a throng of curious onlookers; all they do is wonder aloud about what is now happening before their eyes, which a few of them, those providing the answers, seem to apprehend better than the others. The unusual civic activities and ceremonies they are witnessing are *per se* neither good nor bad omens; yet, representing a break in the routine of city life, they must portend an exceptional event.

The multitude cannot for instance fail to observe that the Senate is in session yet transacts no business; that the Emperor sits outdoors on his throne, rather than in his palace; that the supreme magistrates, who are wont to greet foreign guests on the stairs of their official residences, are now on the open road, as to welcome visitors worthy of extraordinary honors; that despite so many signs of solemnity and festivity, there are no rhetors to deliver the orations required by public celebration or official occasion. Many ask the 'why' of all this; some give replies that either repeat the initial statement, which thus becomes the poem's insistent and compelling refrain; others offer elaborate explanations, often in the form of rhetorical questions. The gist of it all is that things are being done or left undone in order to please the barbarians, or at least not to displease them:

— Why so much inactivity in the Senate?

Why do the Senators not legislate?

— On this day the barbarians will arrive,  
What laws should the Senators make today?

The barbarians will come and legislate.

— Why did the Emperor so early rise  
And why now sits so solemnly on his throne  
With the crown on his head at the main gate?

— On this day the barbarians will arrive.  
The Emperor is waiting there to welcome  
Their chieftain, and already has provided  
For a scroll to be offered. There he wrote  
Many titles for him, and many names.

— Why did our consuls and our praetors leave  
Early this morning, donning their red tunics?  
Why do they armbands wear with amethysts  
And rings with splendid, flashing emeralds?  
Why should they wield their all too precious maces  
Which are chiseled so well in gold and silver?

— On this day the barbarians will arrive,  
And things like those impress barbarians greatly.

— Why are our excellent rhetors not coming,  
As usual, to deliver their orations?  
— On this day the barbarians will arrive  
And they despise speeches and addresses.

Yet, since the expected visitation fails to occur, the emotional state of the crowd gradually changes, and at the fall of evening their passive excitement turns into confusion and worry. The poem's splendid anticlimax compels the reader to recognize that the early mood of the multitude had been festive and hopeful, while the present one is made of uncasiness and doubt. This means that the whole citizenry, not merely the populace, desperately wanted the barbarians to come, and on that very day; and that what everybody is now suspecting, with a feeling of disappointment and loss, is that they will come neither tomorrow nor ever. In brief, the crowd fears the very thing for which normally it should fondly wish and hope. That thing would be, and is, the absolute certitude that the barbarians have disappeared forever into a mysterious nowhere:

— Why this sudden bewilderment, this anxiety?  
(All faces have at once become so serious!)  
Why are all streets and squares quickly deserted,  
Why is everyone going home so lost in thought?  
— Night fell, and the barbarians did not come.  
Some men have just returned from the borders  
And report that there are no more barbarians.

The poem closes with a final question, which is far from being rhetorical, like all questions we ask in anguish and despair. The only answer such questions elicit is man's confession of his impotence: and the poem ends with the acknowledgment of the utter powerlessness of a decadent society in the presence, and even in the absence, of the iron law of historical necessity:

— What will happen to us with no barbarians?  
Those people, after all, were a solution.

By ending on this note of cynic pessimism, Cavafis' poem proves *ad abundantiam* the paradoxical truth that the decadent mind can find peace only by submitting itself to the most inexorable of all the enemies of civilization, to the annihilating upsurge of the barbaric spirit. The problem of decadence is to be seen in its inability to resolve its own dialectic, in its eagerness to see its own Gordian knot brutally cut by the



barbarian sword. The very notion of decadence, at least in its modern version, is practically inconceivable without this psychological compulsion, on the part either of the individual or of the group, to become the passive accomplice and the willing victim of barbarism.

### III

We learn the same truth, although sung to a different tune, from the poem of Bryusov, an artist and man of letters of lesser depth, but of greater range, who like Cavafis often found inspiration in the glory that was once Greece and Rome. His poems on ancient subjects, which form a series of splendid cycles, are so masterfully wrought that their author deserved the praise of his fellow writer Andrey Bely as 'a poet of marble and bronze.' Yet in 'The Coming Huns' the historical theme is manifestly a mere convention, a thin veil baring, rather than hiding, the prophetic vision that is the poem's single-minded intent.

That vision implies the parallel destiny of the Empire of the Tsars and the Empires of the Caesars; and foretells that the first will soon come to the same end as the other two. The poet's muse, as is often the case with prophetic poetry, is neither the past nor the future, but the present. What stirs his imagination and feeling is a historical event in the making, of which he anticipates the ultimate outcome. This is why 'The Coming Huns,' unlike 'Waiting for the Barbarians,' is chronologically circumscribed, strongly anchored in time. In order to make his readers well aware of this fact, Bryusov included this piece not in any of his historical cycles, but in that section of his book *Stephanos: Venok* (1906)<sup>2</sup> that he significantly entitled 'Sovremennost' ('The Present Time').

The date of the poem itself, '10 August 1905,' testifies that it was written in trembling and fear, at the climax of a double catastrophe: the downfall of Russia's arms in distant seas and lands, under the onslaught of an alien race, and the breakdown of her social fabric through an inner upheaval that in retrospect was to be named both a 'little revolution' and a 'dress rehearsal' for a greater one. There is no doubt that the experience that suggested to Bryusov the idea of a new barbaric

<sup>2</sup>The obvious meaning of this bilingual title is 'crown,' or 'garland,' of flowers. A copy of the first edition is in the Kilgour Collection in the Harvard College Library; see *The Kilgour Collection of Russian Literature 1750-1920* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), No. 154.

invasion was the shock all Russia felt at the Manchurian triumphs of the army of the Mikado over the troops of the 'white Tsar.' The poet's complex historical symbolism equates, however, the warriors of the Rising Sun with the ancient Huns, and perhaps also with another Mongolian horde, with those Tatars who for three centuries submitted Kievan Russia to their yoke.

The first stanza of 'The Coming Huns' presents the impending irruption as an obscure intuition of the poet, who knows that the barbarians will come, but is unable to foretell at what hour and from what side they will strike. All he is able to guess, from the metallic noise reverberating in his ear from afar, is that the new Huns will rely not on horses, but on horsepower, on the terror and might of mechanical armor, of the modern machinery of war:

Where are you now, coming Huns,  
Who weigh on the world like a cloud?  
I hear your cast-iron tread  
On Pamirs yet undiscovered.

The two stanzas that follow reveal that the poet, like Cavafis' on-lookers, is not only waiting, but longing, for the barbarians to come. This is the more striking since the speaker whose single voice we hear in this poem, unlike Cavafis' multitude, is fully aware that the newcomers will arrive not as friendly visitors, but as cruel enemies: that they will rob and burn, destroy and kill. Yet, instead of accepting his fate with silent resignation, instead of propitiating his cruel guests with honors and gifts, or of appeasing them with flattery and tributes, he incites the barbarians to act according to the unrestrained violence of their wild nature. In brief, the poet summons the very disaster he should pray against or conjure away: he invokes the coming Huns with appeals sounding like commands, or, in grammatical terms, with a series of imperatives.

To be more exact, the speaker addresses to the coming Huns only the first of such imperatives, asking, or, rather, enjoining them to regenerate his decadent breed through the ordeal or sacrament of bloodshed:

Upon us like a drunken horde  
Rush from the dark tents of your camps —  
Revive our withered bodies  
With a flow of ardent blood.

As for the other imperatives, the speaker addresses them to a subject or party far different from the invading host. That subject or party is the plebeian mob of the poet's homeland: those slaves or 'prisoners of freedom' who will revolt as soon as the alien invaders have slain or dethroned their masters. If the 'coming Huns' stand for the Japanese enemy, or more generally for all ancient and modern manifestations of the 'yellow peril,' the 'prisoners of freedom' stand for those downtrodden Russian masses that had often shaken the foundation of Holy Russia, and that had risen anew against Tsardom, after its military defeat. In Toynbean terms, the former represent that 'external,' and the latter, that 'internal proletariat,' which through their combined action are supposed to bring about the breakdown of all universal empires.

Bryusov seems to welcome the domestic enemy no less than the foreign one, yet it is the blind rage of the rioting mob, rather than the deliberate violence of the invading horde, that destroys the temples of his worship, that violates the values of his creed:

Raise, prisoners of freedom,  
Your huts near the castles of old;  
Sow the bright growth of your fields  
Where the throne room once stood.

Heap all the books in bonfires,  
Dance at their flames' merry glow;  
Desecrate the holy shrines —  
Guiltless as children you are.

Thus for the poet it is not military disaster, which may be due to the overwhelming power of outside forces over which we have no control, but an inner upheaval, primarily social in character, that will bring our culture to its ruin. In Bryusov's view, it is our internal proletariat, rather than the external one, our own slaves instead of alien warriors, who will make a *tabula rasa* of civilization itself. The originality of such an outlook lies precisely in this: that in lieu of involution, the poet chooses revolution as the proper nemesis of decadence.

Bryusov's prophecy that the revolt of the masses and mob rule will be the destroyers of Western culture sounds less novel when we realize that all the representatives of Russian decadence held the same view. As a matter of fact, many of them greeted the advent of revolutionary terrorism even more enthusiastically, or less ambiguously, than Bryusov himself. There is indeed a paradoxical ambivalence in the latter's stand.

On the one hand, like all his Russian brethren, he wills the overthrow of the social order of which he is part, and asks for the totalitarian leveling of all distinction, for the abolition of the values inherited from the past. On the other hand, he wishes that at least some of the treasures of the civilization he condemns to death be forever preserved for the glory and memory of man.

What may explain this contradiction is that Bryusov remains all too deeply involved in the problematics of decadence and of barbarism. Cavafis, who feels these two realities in his flesh and blood, still succeeds, at least in the poem here discussed, in looking at both from outside and from above. Bryusov is instead unable to transcend the dialectic of those two terms. Like Blake's Milton, he is of the devil's party, and knows it. This is why here and elsewhere he speaks at once with two voices: as a humanist and as a cultural nihilist.

Every silver age is torn by the conflict between tradition and revolt, between classicism and modernism. As one of the leaders of the epoch of transition that followed upon the classical, golden age of Russian culture, Bryusov perhaps realized that the future would bring in an iron age bound to deny both tradition and modernism. Being incapable of reconciling that conflict within himself, or even unwilling to do so, Bryusov cultivated what one might call a decadent humanism: A decadent humanism may well be a contradiction in terms. Such humanism yearns for the salvation of culture, but the yearning itself is hardly more than a wishful thought. Thus that salvation reduces itself to salvage alone. Instead of defending openly the integrity of culture, the decadent humanist will patiently and painfully collect the broken pieces of its monuments and artifacts and hide them from the sight of the authors of such a ruin.

This is precisely what the following stanzas of the poem suggest we should do. The poet calls upon all his peers to bury underground, in the recesses of time, in what history calls the dark ages, the lamp of culture, which burns only in the open, and shines only in daylight:

As for us, poets and sages,  
Custodians of mystery and faith,  
We shall hide our burning lights  
In catacombs, deserts, and caves.

In the rhetorical question that follows the poet wonders whether any valid part of that buried cultural heritage will ever reach, at the dawn of a new renaissance, an all too distant posterity. He seems to

know that the most he can hope for is not a genuine revival of the lofty religion of which he was once a priest, but merely a partial and random exhumation of its archaeological remains:

Under the wing of the gale,  
Under the crash of the storm,  
What will playful chance spare forever  
Among all our secret handiwork?

Despite his well-founded fear that practically nothing will survive for the admiration and piety of the generations or civilizations to come, the poet still accepts, not only with the passivity, but also with the enthusiasm of a martyr, the sacrifice history imposes on all the men of his calling: a sacrifice that will bring forth, along with the annihilation of their persons and class, the everlasting oblivion of their unique creations, visions, and beliefs:

All that we alone saw and knew  
May perish leaving no trace.  
Yet you who are my destroyers  
I meet with a welcoming hymn.

Thus the poem's speaker ends by playing the role the decadent is required to play in the face of death. The stand the decadent takes before that tragic ordeal does not greatly differ from his attitude toward the dreary comedy of life. 'Live?' asks the protagonist of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Axel* — 'our servants will do that for us.' To which Bryusov seems to add that when it is our turn to die our former serfs will see to it that we do. *Noblesse oblige* even more when we cease to be what we are; and in a visionary rehearsal of future agony, the Russian poet seems to comply with destiny's highest decree by submitting to it. Yet what dictates such a compliance is not a lofty will to die, but a lowly death-wish.

At any rate, killing oneself is a hard and messy job, hence what one might call suicide by proxy is the only kind of self-murder a squeamish modern aesthete will allow himself to commit. After all, even Nero could not take his life except with the help of a slave's hand. Bryusov and the world he stands for seem to need the subversive and criminal fury of a rebellious mob as the spectacular instrument of their own violent end. The decadent dreams of dying like D'Annunzio's Saint Sebastian, under the rain of a thousand arrows piercing a body that only self-hatred and self-love tie to its post. Self-sacrifice is not

always a sacramental act: and decadent self-immolation is but an aesthetic pose or theatrical gesture, asking for applause rather than for terror and pity, although it sheds real blood. Like the dying Nero, the decadent hero-victim utters gracefully, for the benefit of the audience watching or even enacting history's tragedy, his exit line: *Qualis artifex pereo!* in his last sigh or gasp.

## IV

Bryusov's is but a voice in a chorus of the many writers of his nation and time who sang the same tune. The tune is morbidly sad. Bryusov and his brethren hoped against hope that the impending historical crisis would lead to both passion and resurrection: yet the horror of the imminent trial fascinated them more than the distant promises of their mystical quest. They found the black angels of damnation more appealing than the white dove announcing a bliss still to come. This explains why, before the end of the century, the 'yellow peril' had already stirred the imagination of the philosopher-poet Vladimir Solovyov; and why later Bryusov himself could take a line from his contemporary, Vyacheslav Ivanov, 'Trample their Eden, Attila,' as fitting epigraph for 'The Coming Huns.' The same obsession haunted Aleksandr Blok and dictated his 'Skify' ('The Scythians'), written in the early revolutionary year of 1918, under the impending threat of foreign intervention: a poem of hatred and revenge, confronting Europe with Russia's refusal to hold the shield protecting civilization from Eastern barbarism if and when a new, mechanized horde of Mongolian invaders should try to overrun again the Eurasian earth-mass.

Nor was Bryusov alone in considering the uprising of domestic slaves, as well as the irruption of foreign hordes, as an agency of retribution and instrument of doom. Blok saluted 'the breakdown of humanism,' and chose to go with the masses as soon as the people and the intelligentsia parted ways. Gershenzon went so far as to greet the revolution not as the recurrence of a golden age in the cultural or historical sense, but as a return to the golden age of prehistory. Bryusov, who, unlike many of his colleagues, was more of an aesthete than a visionary, acted with greater consistency than they when the revolution finally came. He accepted its rule of iron and blood without reservations or qualms. His conversion to Communism, which earned him either indifference or abuse, is virtually announced in 'The Coming Huns.'

Yet the significance of this text lies not in this anticipation alone. 'The Coming Huns' may well be primarily a psychological document provided we take the term in its broadest sense. 'Waiting for the Barbarians' is certainly a higher aesthetic and intellectual achievement, since its author looks at decadence not as an actor but as a spectator doubly removed, and hence able to afford both a sardonic and an urbane wit. By avoiding the hint that his historical tableau may be read in contemporary terms, Cavafis gives an air of finality and eternity to the scene he represents. Bryusov's poem is instead a direct manifestation of the *Zeitgeist*, expressing the mentality of decadence rather than judging it.

'The Coming Huns' is a lyrical, passionate monologue, while 'Waiting for the Barbarians' is a dramatic dialogue, commenting on an action, or a lack of action, that is watched rather than lived. It is the contrast between what the characters see and what we know that turns the dialogue into a tragicomedy. But the dialogue itself is pure comedy, and comedy of manners at that. Manners are but the mirror of morals: thus Cavafis' poem belongs to high comedy, which is marked by the high seriousness, or the objectivity, of its social and psychological outlook. This is why the speakers of Cavafis' poem are not those whom Bryusov calls 'poets and sages,' the aristocrats of decadence, its 'happy few,' but rather its 'men in the street.' The poet does not speak for them; he merely lets them speak, listening to their chatter, which is all they have to say. The total effect is that of a satirical parable, full of moral insight. 'Waiting for the Barbarians' portrays decadence as a way of life without issue, as a fatuous automatic suicide of the will. It is in a negative, and, ultimately, non-tragic sense that such a life finds the solution of its inner crisis — that is, by ignoring it. Strictly speaking, the decadent society that Cavafis represents needs no help from inside or outside to go to its doom. Without internal or external violence (the barbarians may, after all, never come) it will finally crumble, and vanish forever into dust.

In contrast to 'Waiting for the Barbarians,' there is nothing comic in 'The Coming Huns.' Bryusov's poem is formally an ode, but substantially a funereal elegy, or rather, a self-epitaph. By singing death as if it were life, Bryusov turns prayer into blasphemy, as well as a complaint into a 'welcoming hymn.' If 'Waiting for the Barbarians' reflects only a negative ethos, 'The Coming Huns' reflects the pathos of nothingness. The oracular tone of the poet's speech does not conceal, but

reveals, or rather exhibits, the mortal sickness affecting his generation and himself. By summoning the barbarians, he betrays the morbid longing of a guilt-ridden psyche not for purification and retribution, but for an orgy of self-chastisement, and self-adulation as well. *Amor fati* and *tedium vitae* join together in a monstrous grimace, while the swoon of narcissism finally merges with the agony of being, or with nihilism's spasm. This poem expounds in a nutshell the *ars moriendi* of decadence, which, like its art of living, is but a histrionic craft.

## V

As already stated, Cavafis' 'Waiting for the Barbarians' gives at first the impression of being a tragicomedy, although it fails to abide by the rules of that form. Tragicomedy, being more of a parody of tragedy than is comedy, pivots like tragedy on a reversal of fortune, rather than on the law of necessity. Here the play of chance works, however inversely, from foul to fair, from bad to good: the norm of tragicomedy is the curve of rise instead of that of fall. Its gist is then the consoling, or, better, comforting message that 'all's well that ends well.' If this is true, then a tragicomedy of decadence is a contradiction in terms. Decadence moves so fatally and naturally along the way of all flesh that we take its dissolution as a foregone conclusion, not as a ruin or fall. We cannot treat as tragic an ending that, although unhappy, seems to admit of no other outcome. The cynic and skeptic Cavafis understood this very well: yet, in a fit of sardonic humor, chose to imagine what would happen if decadence should face an unexpected retrieve or reprieve. In brief, he placed decadence in the most embarrassing of all dramatic situations, which is that so well expressed by the idiom 'wait and see.' By waiting without seeing, decadence finds itself confronted in Cavafis' poem with nothing other than its own anticlimax.

Whether unlikely or not from the historical standpoint, such a situation is quite novel from the literary one. No other text dealing with the dialectic of decadence and barbarism had ever contemplated the possibility that a decadent civilization might be prevented from sliding gracefully into its grave merely because no barbarian was around to help with a push. No other poet of the same type or breed had ever envisaged that barbarism might fail to keep its rendezvous with its passive partner, with its prescribed victim and appointed ward. In a sense, the real subject of Cavafis' poem is decadence's disappointment at being



ignored and neglected, at being left alone to live, or rather to die, by its own wits. It is this theme, temper, or mood that makes of 'Waiting for the Barbarians' not only the tragicomedy of decadence, but its mock tragedy as well. What renders its ending really unhappy is that there is neither release nor relief, or more simply, that there is no ending at all.

Both Cavafis and Bryusov contemplate in these two poems the nemesis of decadence. Yet the Greek poet sees the former in the survival or permanence of the latter, while the Russian poet sees it in its catastrophe or doom. This however does not raise Bryusov's poem to the level of tragedy: 'The Coming Huns' is not a vision, but a nightmare. Its author, like most decadents, is not so much a *voyant* as a *voyeur*: he projects his wishful fantasies and haunting dreams not into the tragedy of history, but into the 'passion play' of the artist, into a pathetic 'masque' of the self. Tragedy must end with an inner as well as an outer redemption, and reconcile the two. Only one modern poet was able to see that the nemesis of decadence might turn into a catharsis transcending decadence itself. This poet was W. B. Yeats, and the double instrument of that revelation was his Byzantium poems. In them the Irish poet used as his starting point Cavafis' alternative, the hypothesis that decadence is here to stay, since it represents the fitful fever of life, rather than the agony of the spirit. This is why he chose to purify its pathos by other trials than those of time.

## VI

In both of the Byzantium poems Yeats took the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire not as an extreme historical example, but as the everlasting archetype of decadence. By raising Byzantium from the sphere of the phenomenal into that of the noumenal, he hardly more than implemented the traditional view of the Byzantine Empire, which nobody has ever stated with greater authority than Gibbon, in a celebrated passage (*Decline and Fall*, Chapter XXXII): 'The empire of the East . . . from the reign of Arcadius to the taking of Constantinople by the Turks, subsisted one thousand and fifty-eight years, in a state of premature and perpetual decay.'

'From the reign of Arcadius to the taking of Constantinople by the Turks': the historical limits so prescribed are but a chronological periphrasis for what the writer could have conveyed more simply with

such a phrase as 'from beginning to end.' Nor, as far as the modern reader is concerned, was there any need to emphasize that if Byzantium had perished this was through the onslaught of a host of foreign invaders; by now we know that in the historical drama of decadence the final blow is struck, rather than by a suicidal dagger, by the axe of a savage executioner. What really surprises us anew in Gibbon's statement is that Byzantium 'subsisted one thousand and fifty-eight years'; what attracts us most in this case is the paradox, so well understood by Cavafis, of a quasi-eternal decay, of a 'decline' without 'fall,' or without end. It is this paradox, which may well be devoid of any historical validity, that makes of Byzantium the most fitting of all the emblems of decadence. The unhistorical contemplation of the supposedly endless disintegration of the Byzantine Empire seems to satisfy better than that of any other model the naturalistic bias that is such an integral part of the decadent bent.

This bias is but one of the manifestations of our concern, now healthy, now morbid, but always excessive, for the biological process; of our abnormal curiosity for the degradation of the forms of life, and of culture as well. At bottom, even decadent aestheticism is but a reflection of the same curiosity or concern. The decadent claims to subordinate all the values of human experience to the idolatry of art, and hence he tries to pattern even life after the aesthetic mode. Yet the decadent worships not so much art as the artificer, and deifies the artist in himself. By doing so he commits the worst kind of pathetic fallacy, since he makes divine the side of man that would justify defining him as a suffering, but *unthinking*, reed. Yeats recognized this fallacy, and condemned it both as a moral error and as an artistic sin.

Thus, when he wrote his two Byzantium pieces, he tried to express emblematically his conviction that art should be redeemed from aestheticism. By this he meant that it should be freed from the shackles of being, from the bonds of history, and from the ties of nature, which are life and death. The implication of all this is that art should free itself from the hold of decadence, which once he had himself viewed as exercising a lasting and morbidly attractive charm. It was while still a young man that Yeats had suggestively defined that charm as 'the autumn of the flesh.'<sup>8</sup> But the late Yeats projected into everything he

<sup>8</sup> In an essay by the same title, written very much in the *fin de siècle* manner, and included in *Literary Ideals in Ireland*, a collection of essays by John Eglinton, Yeats, A. E., and William Larmine (London and Dublin, 1899). There the poet, after witnessing the apparition, 'in the arts of every country,' of 'those faint lights and

wrote a portrait of the artist as an old man: his last and greatest theme is the plight of the poet who has reached 'the autumn of the flesh.' He composed the two Byzantium poems, then, to sublimate that moribund season into the everlasting 'autumn of ideas'; or simply to transcend the historical image of decadence through the vision of an eternal city of the soul. To do so he had to transform the perpetually dying metropolis into a luminous symbol, exemplifying not the passing degeneration of life but the recurring regeneration of art. By means of a poetic metamorphosis, Yeats turned Byzantium from a mirror of corruption into a *speculum perfectionis*, reflecting, however, only the second of the two alternatives he presented, at about the same time, in a famous line of his lyric 'The Choice': 'Perfection of the life, or of the work.'

## VII

'Byzantium' (1929) is chronologically the second of these twin compositions. Ideally, however, it is the first piece of the diptych. Here ancient or eternal Byzantium appears in a nocturnal vision, when the bustle of daily life subsides, when orgy yields to sleep, when all sound and fury cease. The last musical echo to be heard is the song of night-walkers or passers-by, lingering after the sacred bell has ceased to toll. In this hour the city does not reveal itself in the mass of its detail, but only in the lovely shape of its skyline. The only edifice that stands out against the formless and somber maze of its buildings is the city's main temple. And the most visible part of the cathedral's architecture is the cupola, which seems to look indifferently, even scornfully, at what is human, all too human, in the chaotic world of the sleeping metropolis:

The unpurged images of day recede;  
 The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed;  
 Night resonance recedes, night-walkers' song  
 After great cathedral gong;  
 A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains  
 All that man is,  
 All mere complexities,  
 The fury and the mire of human veins.

faint colours and faint outlines and faint energies which many call "the decadence," declares that he prefers to name those manifestations 'the autumn of the flesh,' prophesying that this is 'a weariness that will not end until the last autumn, when the stars shall be blown away like withered leaves.'

Suddenly the poet perceives before him, hovering in the air of the night, a supernatural being in ghostly form. That being is a reflection of Hades: a fleshless monster, able to summon with its immaterial voice other 'breathless mouths' to the call of the spirit. The poet hails in that monster a revelation of higher values, not merely the 'transvaluation' of old ones. Yeats's 'superhuman' is the very antithesis of Nietzsche's 'superman,' which was but an incarnation of the decadent ideal. Yeats's monster too would be an allegory of decadence if it were more of a shade and less of an image; if it were merely the reveries of passion, and the fantasies of the senses. Yet the poet names his monster not only 'death-in-life,' which by itself would turn it into a blazon of decadence, but also its opposite, 'life-in-death,' which changes it into a symbol of transcendence:

Before me floats an image, man or shade,  
Shade more than man, more image than a shade;  
For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth  
May unwind the winding path;  
A mouth that has no moisture and no breath  
Breathless mouths may summon;  
I hail the superhuman;  
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.

It is not 'death-in-life,' or the defeat of our human, sensual experience, but 'life-in-death,' or the triumph of a mental and spiritual insight, that enables the poet to shift from that mystical vision to the beautiful creation suddenly emerging as a pinnacle from the cupola's top. That creation is an artifact, molded in gilded metal and shaped like a flower or a bird, resting on the curved dome as on the bent branch of a tree. The tree, no less magic and real for being both artificial and metaphoric, has even greater power than the tree of life. The no less magic and artificial bird set upon its golden bough, made like the latter of an inalterable matter, is enough of a miracle in itself, and has no need to sing its own praise before the world. Yet, as by wonder, it starts suddenly to sing, or rather to crow, since it will utter its notes only to mock all living beings and natural creatures, such as feathery birds and grassy flowers, or men and women, with all the shames and miseries of the flesh:

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,  
More miracle than bird or handiwork,

Planted on the star-lit golden bough,  
 Can like the cocks of Hades crow,  
 Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud  
 In glory of changeless metal  
 Common bird or petal  
 And all complexities of mire or blood.

All this happens at night: and it is at night that the floor of the palace is flooded by a fire kindled by no other substance than itself. That fire is the purifying element within which souls still bound to the ties of the body come to cleanse themselves. They join the fire dance, which is also a dance of death. Here, however, the dance of death is an 'agony of trance' and an 'agony of flame,' or spiritual transport and mystical ecstasis: in our terms, it reflects not the nemesis of decadence ('death-in-life'), but its catharsis ('life-in-death'):

At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit  
 Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,  
 Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,  
 Where blood-begotten spirits come  
 And all complexities of fury leave,  
 Dying into a dance,  
 An agony of trance,  
 An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

The poet now summons all worthy spirits to come to Byzantium, crossing the sea of life on the back of a dolphin, the brute that saved the singing Arion from his shipwreck. In the palace of the Emperor the threatening tide of reality is checked by a dike of thin, precious metal, built not by the architects or the engineers, but by the goldsmiths. The mosaics of the pavement, where the spirits are still dancing, act like a mirror that both reflects and absorbs the confusion of reality, the frenzies of the flesh and the fancies of the mind, the sound and fury of the elements:

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,  
 Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,  
 The golden smithies of the Emperor!  
 Marbles of the dancing floor  
 Break bitter furies of complexity,  
 Those images that yet  
 Fresh images beget,  
 That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

## VIII

By inviting the soul to 'sail' to Byzantium, Yeats thus closes this poem with the same appeal by which he opens its twin piece. In 'Byzantium,' the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire acts as a double symbol, as an ambiguous antinomy: the city of Constantine there represents at once the nemesis and the catharsis of decadence, since it redeems the sins of daylight in a nocturnal epiphany, in the asceticism of sleep, and the sublimation of darkness. But in 'Sailing to Byzantium' (1927), that ancient metropolis embodies fully and singly an ideal of perfection and purity, equally indifferent to the pathos of day and the ethos of night. Here Byzantium becomes *figura*, an image breaking away from the dimension of time or the pattern of history. As such, it stands for the very antithesis of the *Zeitgeist*.

The poet begins by referring not to the shore toward which he has set his course, but to the one from which he has just sailed. For a while he turns back in thought to the very land from which his heart is turning away. This is why he calls it 'that country,' or a place that for him is only a 'then' and 'there.' Yet most men still call it 'this country,' or the place of the 'now' and 'here.' The shore that the poet has chosen to leave forever is the country of the young, or, more simply, the home of modern civilization and contemporary culture. It is there that decadence finds its time and place. We all too often treat decadence as a senile and chronic ailment, when it might be instead an acute disease, produced by a defect of youth, rather than by an excess of maturity. Decadence may well be a fruit out of season, but one that is unripe, rather than overripe. Then the land where that fruit grows is no country for old men; and so the poet has chosen to abandon the modern and changing West for the ancient and eternal East.

This is not the first time that decadence has been viewed as a product of immaturity, as a symptom of 'premature decay,' to use Gibbon's words: in brief, as a sickness of youth. Yeats sees this immaturity in the new generation's inability to grow beyond the life of the senses, in its too deep rooting in the values that the most barbaric of all recent decadences has characterized by the twin formula 'blood and soil.' The young cannot help remaining there, under the spell of being, constantly worshiping their self-image by loving other creatures like themselves. There they live not like men, but like singing birds. Like birds, they are only 'dying generations,' as the poet says, or, as we would say,

*enfants du siècle*, 'children of the world.' Like the birds, they sing not a song of experience or innocence, but of life and death:

That is no country for old men. The young  
In one another's arms, birds in the trees  
— Those dying generations — at their song,  
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,  
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long  
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.

By praising in the most vital season of their being death-in-life, or the mortality of any corporeal or material thing, the young and all those who accept the rule of the temporal become forgetful of that spiritual creation that defies time and change, age and death:

Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
Monuments of unaging intellect.

The old cannot sing the oblivious and wanton song of the young. Yet old age turns into a degrading curse unless able to exult in a song of its own. At the end of *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*, Nietzsche claimed that Socrates, that old decadent, would have perhaps found new springs of life had he learned music before his death. Yeats here summons all old men like himself to learn music again, and to sail with him to Byzantium, as humble and ardent disciples seeking the masters of their craft:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress,  
Nor is there singing school but studying  
Monuments of its own magnificence;  
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come  
To the holy city of Byzantium.

The 'mask' speaking here for the poet and all the old claims to have already reached the place of his quest, and turns now his voice to the sages of Byzantium, clad in the unsubstantial fire of their saintliness, fixed in the inalterable ecstasis of their mosaics. Through that invoking voice, the poet asks them to become the singing-masters of his soul.

Supplication avails itself even here of the imperative form, so natural to all prayers: and the poet begs and commands the sages of Byzantium to help him to purify and consume his heart, which, sickened by pas-

sion and mortality, will never be able to know itself. The suppliant finally asks to be freed from nature and time, to be gathered 'into the artifice of eternity':

O sages standing in God's holy fire  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,  
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,  
And be the singing-masters of my soul.  
Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is; and gather me  
Into the artifice of eternity.

We do not demean the significance of this poem by reading it as if it were an *ars poetica*, or even as a literary manifesto, and strongly polemical, at that. The drastic iconoclastic images by which Yeats represents the false values he denies and rejects are meant to indict all that lead the modern poet into temptation and sin, as both artist and man. The dangerous seductions to which Yeats alludes in metaphorical terms might be defined in literary jargon as romantic pathos and psychological naturalism. The former imprisons the artistic creator within the maze of public and private life, and shackles him to the historical and the personal, to the stake of an all too subjective and ephemeral *Erlebnis*; the latter imprisons him within the labyrinth of the phenomenal, and turns him into a link in the chain of being, into a passive slave of the species, or of nature's will. The poet must transcend both his lifetime and his *Zeitgeist*: he must overcome the limitations of both biography and biology. He will do so only if he merges the self with the artificial and the eternal: if, like the sages of Byzantium, he annihilates his own personality within 'the artifice of eternity.'

In expectation that his prayer will be granted, the poet promises that from now on he will choose the ideal model for his art not from natural and living shapes but from the form of a Greek artifact, molded in enamel and chiseled in gold; it matters very little that that artifact was once made to excite the weary senses of a senile ruler, or to gratify what we call decadent taste. It matters even less if in the process the artisan will become identified with the object created by his hands, if his soft human substance will die and harden into the crystal of form. Here we witness the metamorphosis of the creator into his own handiwork. Like the object 'planted on the star-lit golden bough' of the other poem, this handiwork is a mechanical bird, perched like its twin



on the branch of a tree of 'changeless metal,' or, as the poet says again, on a 'golden bough.'<sup>4</sup>

In both poems that tree of 'changeless metal' is also the 'tree of life,' as vital and magic as in Frazer's *Golden Bough*. By resting on a branch of that tree, the artificial and lifeless bird of poetry will forever sing for the lords and ladies of an ideal Byzantine court, not the song of youth, but the song of wisdom, a song that will celebrate not death-in-life ('whatever is begotten, born, and dies') but life-in-death ('what is past, or passing, or to come'):

Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

## IX

The voice that speaks here is that of the artist as an old man. Yet, while crossing at least in thought the threshold of death, Yeats refuses to utter the pathetic and declamatory *qualis artifex pereo!* of the decadent artist. He even refrains from repeating the sententious commonplace that the Parnassian or the aesthete takes from a famous Horatian line and rephrases as his own epitaph. An artisan who believes that his handiwork will endure, Yeats disdains claiming that his monument is *aere perennius*. He chooses instead to emphasize that the young, who are after all his posterity, are bound to neglect all monuments that, built on other foundations than 'all complexities of mire or blood,' are neither pleasure domes nor *jardins de supplices*. It is not the youth but the old man who cares for 'the artifice of eternity': who is willing to seek its mystery and magic not in the circle within which men live, suffer, and die, but beyond it, in the sphere of the immaterial and the timeless.

In the antinomy that Yeats establishes between Byzantium and the modern West, both terms embody the notion of decadence, even

<sup>4</sup>In a note accompanying the poem, Yeats claimed to have 'read somewhere that in the Emperor's palace at Byzantium was a tree made of gold and silver, and artificial birds that sang' (*Collected Poems*, p. 532).

though each represents a different incarnation of that concept. The modern West, the country of the young, stands for a historical and temporal decadence, which cannot overcome the nemesis it carries within itself. Byzantium, the country of the old, stands for a transcendental and everlasting decadence, transfiguring the mortality of all things through the catharsis of art. Western decadence is thus but a projection of the peculiar crisis of the modern mind, which could be clinically defined as a case of arrested growth.

It is then the new artists and poets, the modern and the young, rather than the ancient and old, who are 'dying generations at their song.' Haunted by death-in-life, they reduce art and culture to pathos and agony, and choose the artificiality of the *Zeitgeist* rather than 'the artifice of eternity.' Thus 'caught in a sensual music,' they create works that are too human, and that wither too fast, or age too soon. Hence they need no helping hand, either from barbarians or slaves, to shorten their lives, and to turn their buildings into dust.

Perhaps only old age will ultimately save Western culture from its historical plight and recover the everlasting values of the mind through the ageless adventure of the spirit. Old age alone can face fully and squarely the blight of decadence and the scourge of barbarism. The 'lords and ladies of Byzantium' are not impatiently waiting for the barbarians, like Cavafis' citizenry, nor do they feel impelled to welcome them, like Bryusov and his peers. They know all too well that the barbarians reached them a long time ago, and that they are still in their midst. Even the reader will recognize their countenances in the 'drowsy Emperor' of one of these two poems, and in the 'drunken soldiery' of the other. But at night the drunken soldiery are abed. What rules at that time is life-in-death, or the epiphany of the spirit, before which decadence becomes a pale shadow, and barbarism a vain dream. When 'the unpurged images of day recede,' the human mind may attain 'the autumn of ideas,' and hence acquire the power to fashion, or at least to envision, 'monuments of unageing intellect.'

RENATO POGGIOLI

## Honorary Degrees at Harvard: Corrigenda

IN the list of 'Honorary Degrees 1930-1958,' HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN, XII (1958), 348-353, the following corrections should be made:

1936

*for* Frederick Maurice Powicke, LL.D. *read* Frederick Maurice Powicke, Litt.D.

1942

*delete:* Ronold Wyeth Percival King, A.M.  
George Widmer Thorn, A.M.  
*insert:* Paul Joseph Sachs, Art.D.

1955

*for* Luis Mundz-Marin, LL.D. *read* Luis Muñoz-Marin, LL.D.

1958

*for* Neil Hasler McElroy, LL.D. *read* Neil Hosler McElroy, LL.D.  
*for* William Adolf Visser 't Hooft, S.T.D. *read* Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft, S.T.D.

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