THE NOVEL OF DECAY: A GENERIC STUDY OF DECADENT THEMES, FORMS, METAPHORS, AND SUBJECT-MATTER IN SELECTED ENGLISH AND AMERICAN NOVELS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.

# CONTENTS

## Preface

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Introduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## SECTION ONE: DECLINE AND FALL: SOME ASPECTS OF DECADENCE.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decadent Romanticism and Romantic Decadence</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decadence and Barbarism</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and the Decay of Optimism</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existentialism: the Philosophy of Decadence</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Summary</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## SECTION TWO: CONRAD AND THE DECADENTIST NOVEL.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heart of Darkness</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lord Jim</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Summary</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## SECTION THREE: "THE NOVELS OF T. S. ELIOT".

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brave New World</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Mischief</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Handful of Dust</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venusberg</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Summary</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## SECTION FOUR: DECLINE AND FALL IN AMERICA.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catch-22</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henderson the Rain King</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sot-Weed Factor</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love in the Ruins</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Summary</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## SECTION FIVE: THOMAS PYNCHON AND THE SCIENCE OF DECADENTISM.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Crying of Lot 49</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gravity's Rainbow</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Bibliography

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are three major points which this study attempts to discuss and illustrate. Firstly, it is suggested that much recent American fiction generally described as belonging to the "comic-apocalyptic genre" can better be understood as belonging to a much longer tradition of socio-literary decadence whose origins can be found in nineteenth century thought, and that the apocalypticism of these novels is only one aspect of the decadent process. It is also argued that a group of less recent English novels fits into this decadentist genre. Second, it is suggested that these novels have in common such a large group of similar themes, images, and metaphors that a general similarity of form results. Finally, it will be suggested that, whatever indigenous literary and socio-cultural conditions may lie behind contemporary American fiction, much of that fiction betrays a quite consciously European sensibility, and a special conviction that the America which is depicted is heir to all the decadence and degeneration of Europe in the last hundred years.

The study, it will be seen, is divided into five main sections, each of which is subdivided. The first section discusses the idea of decadence in the nineteenth century, seeking common images and metaphors among the differing fields of history, literature, science, and philosophy, and concludes by describing a communal nineteenth century conceptual model of decadentism in terms of order and disorder. In the second section, Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1901) and Lord Jim (1900) are examined as archetypal fictional expressions of nineteenth century decadentism, and the influence of Conrad, which is repeatedly evident in the novels studied here, is traced in the third section into the poetry of T. S. Eliot, whose "The Waste Land" (1922) and "The Hollow Men" (1925) transferred Conrad's sombre decadentism to the literature of the 'twenties and 'thirties. This section examines novels by Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, and Anthony Powell which reflect the influence of Conrad and Eliot. In the fourth section of this
study I discuss the changes which occur to literary decadentism in the environment of contemporary American fiction, and then trace these changes through some of the novels of Walker Percy, John Barth, Saul Bellow, and Joseph Heller. Finally, in this fifth section, Thomas Pynchon's three novels are seen as representing a pitch of self-awareness in the genre of decadentist fiction, and a consequent determination to outdo all former contributors to it. In addition, Pynchon's increasing use of scientific metaphors makes a qualitative change in the genre which dispels its prolonged relativism.

A note about my resources is in order here. It is inevitable that any study which embraces current literature must rely on the tentative explorations provided in articles and reviews, for the substantial studies are - one presumes - still being written. Generally, my last two sections refer to the sketches and insights found in journals and periodicals, rather than to any fully-articulated critical vision - unless this work itself deserves to be described as such.

It was begun in 1970 and a great deal of uncertainty about its nature and direction. I am very grateful to Professor J. C. Garrett, my supervisor while Professor R. A. Copland was on leave, for his advice on the nature of research and for the quickening effect of his steady enthusiasm for my subject. In Professor Copland I found a sympathetic and painstaking reader of my early drafts and a tactful corrector of my later progress. I thank him for his patient understanding, his excellent advice, and particularly for placing before me his high standards of scholarship.

I am also very grateful to Professor K. K. Ruthven, who read various drafts of this thesis and steered me toward a vast hoard of supplementary material. My fourth substantial debt is to Professor H. Bogart of Kalamazoo College, Michigan, Fulbright Professor in the University of Canterbury English Department in 1972, when he acted as my co-supervisor. Professor Bogart taught me, quite simply, how to understand contemporary American fiction, leaving me indebted to him in such obvious ways that no further comment is needed. Finally, I thank John Goodman for his discussions of the theoretical aspects of the creative process.

P.D.E.
INTRODUCTION.
One of the most distinctive features of the criticism of contemporary American fiction is the fear which began to be voiced in the 1950's that the writer had been robbed of a stable reality to describe. As early as 1954, Malcolm Cowley referred to the writer's "horror at what is happening in the world", his feeling of "generalized dismay at the results of five centuries of progress and widening enlightenment", and his resultant "fear of catastrophe". In 1957, John McCormick mentioned changes in society which demanded changes in art, a point supported by Irving Howe. Malcolm Bradbury summarizes the contemporary writer's implied view of the world: "Human conduct is essentially absurd, an activity of the libido; the natural tendency of man is toward filth and obscenity; the mechanization of the world redirects attention toward this because it abstracts society and makes its moral demands unreal."  

More recent writers and critics continue the theme. Norman Mailer, suggesting that "surrealism has become the new reality", has said, "It was as if everything changed ten times as fast in America ... a virus perhaps, an electronic nihilism went through the mass media of America and entered the Christians and they were like to being cannibals ... the hypocritical empty and tasteless taste of the television arts they beamed across the land encountered the formless form and the all but tasteless taste of the smalltown tit-eating cannibal mind at its worst, and the collision produced schizophrenia in the land". Susan Sontag, too, has used the term, "surrealism", to describe the kind of reality found in the America of the 1960's, and Philip Roth has described his own predicament in the early 'sixties when confronted by the gross reaction of the Chicago press and public to the molestation and murder of two young girls. After lengthily describing the tasteless interviews, sketches of the crime, false confessions, and the gift to the bereaved mother of two parrots named after the girls, Roth concludes that "the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make credible, much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures daily who are the envy of any novelist". Paul Levine makes similar points: Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Vietnam and South Africa surround us, he says, and television gives us daily visions of the Los Angeles riots or Lee Harvey Oswald's death. "No one, after all," he says in conclusion, "invented Werner von Braun or

5. A list of articles on and studies of this distinctive topic is attached to the bibliography; the introductory nature of my remarks above has precluded their being specifically mentioned.
Barry Goldwater, Baby Jane Holzer or Jack Ruby; are they any less bizarre or more unreal than Doctor Strangelove or Moses Herzog, Holly Golightly or Humbert Humbert? What did happen to that 'fading line between fantasy and reality'?\(^\text{10}\)

It is a question which is frequently asked but infrequently answered well. The reader of recent criticism might be struck by the inadequacy of many attempts to define, explain, or even simply understand this distinctive and important phenomenon. The most distinguished of recent critical studies, Tanner's *City of Words\(^\text{11}\)*, is so broad that it becomes too generalized for specific investigations of this sort. Scholes's *The Fabulators\(^\text{12}\)* does point to the highly imaginative properties of novels by Barth or Southern, amongst others, but is quite unable to discuss why they should be so; and Olderman's *Beyond the Waste Land\(^\text{13}\)*, while valuable for its understanding of the continuing influence of T. S. Eliot in contemporary American fiction, becomes obsessed with arranging the novels it discusses in a preconceived pattern that ignores intrinsic problems. Shorter studies, too, are notable for the poverty of their explanations of real causes and fictional effects when the writer loses faith in the reality which surrounds him\(^\text{14}\). What is lacking here is a willingness to locate recent American fiction in a context of literary history, and particularly in the sort of tradition in which causative links can be made out. When R. W. B. Lewis did this he produced, significantly enough, one of the definitive works of criticism in the area\(^\text{15}\); shortly after came Robert Alter's supplementary comments on Lewis's essay, which were also of a historical and contextual nature\(^\text{16}\), and these two analyses, when taken together, provide at last some vital insights into the contemporary American novel. I shall devote some space to discussion of the major points each writer makes, because both establish limits, dimensions,

\(^{10}\) *The Intemperate Zone*, p. 509.


\(^{14}\) See footnote 5 above.


\(^{16}\) "The Apocalyptic Temper", *Commentary* 41, 6 (June 1966), pp. 61-6.
and definitions which will be acknowledged in my own study.

Lewis's long essay begins by discussing the "resoundingly apocalyptic mood" (p.184) of fiction written in America since 1950, making the important point that its fascination with impending cosmic disaster is no different in cause from the fear of the Turkish hordes exhibited by "the Reformation doomsters" (p.184). But what distinguishes the contemporary form of this phenomenon is "a pervasive sense of the preposterous: of the end of the world not only as imminent and titanic but also as absurd" (p.184). This kind of fiction, Lewis concludes, should be called the "comic apocalyptic" mode of writing.

Moving then back to pre-Christian Judaism, he claims that "the dominant theory of last things turned from what is called the prophetic to what would eventually be known as the apocalyptic" (p.194). There is a movement away from the prophetic tradition, with its belief in the human capacity for improvement and its confidence in the establishment of the heavenly kingdom on earth. During the last hundred years before Christianity, this propheticism gave way to a feeling that man was too morally depraved to be worthy of a tangible heaven; and this future state became seen instead as a period of purgation which would effect the destruction of the wicked while translating the remainder to an abstract heaven. An integral part of this scheme, says Lewis, was the machinery of purgation, the "cosmic conflagration" which, along with other devices, would raze the earth (p.195).

Out of this kind of Judaism, he argues, Christian apocalypticism is born, chiefly expressed in the book of Revelation with its phantasmagoria of apocalyptic horsemen, white-haired figure, locusts, sea-beasts, Whore of Babylon and battle of Armageddon, and the final vision of the "new Jerusalem" (pp.195-6). Such a mode of Christianity endured for about three centuries and when it faded remained unrevived till the Protestant Reformation in which, according to Lewis, apocalypticism gained some of the attributes of finality and immediacy which mark its present form. From this phase, with its
conviction that the Antichrist was on the Papal throne in Rome and its nervous eyeing of the Turks as a possible source of immediate annihilation, apocalypticism developed into the curiously optimistic utopianism of the Romantic period (pp.195-202). Conversely, American apocalypticism grew from the heady idealism of Puritan-New England to the dark predictions of doom characteristic of the late seventeenth century, when the old hopes were acknowledged to have decayed and the imagination was revelling in apocalypse. In this development, says Lewis, apocalypticism becomes a creative and humanistic tool, and there occurs a "reanimating of those great and ancient archetypes by which Western man has periodically explained to himself the full range of his condition, and the most spectacular of his expectations and terrors" (p.206).

Moving into an examination of nineteenth century fiction, Lewis suggests that Melville's *The Confidence Man* and Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger* stand at the beginning of the comic apocalyptic genre. Each book "helps to identify the imaginative aim of a series of novels which, over the past two and a half decades, have explored a thickening American chaos, an America hovering ever more perilously on the day of doom. For while attempting to do full justice to the conditions perceived, these novels have a further apocalyptic purpose - to reveal an essential fraudulence within the horror, to uncover the ridiculous within the catastrophic; in the hope, at least, of letting in a little light" (p.212). He then turns to Nathanael West, Ralph Ellison, Joseph Heller, John Barth, and Thomas Pynchon (pp.213-34), and some of his conclusions will be mentioned later in this study. But his conclusions about the origins of the genre are vital here, and one way of understanding them more fully is to examine immediately Robert Alter's assessment of them, which illuminates the role of Judaic apocalypticism.

Basically, Alter feels that Lewis's traditionally Christian approach to Biblical apocalypticism misrepresents the Jewish tradition which yielded it.
He agrees with Lewis that "Christianity was born out of the apocalyptic side of Judaism", but makes the important specification that "apocalypse itself is a decadent form of Judaism". In its whole and healthy form, Judaism is not noted for its tendency to predict apocalypses, he says, but concentrates instead on a sort of practical utopianism which Christianity will later adopt as an element of its larger system of apocalypse. This utopianism relies upon a stable social system and cultural and religious optimism: secular in origin, it anticipated a Messiah who would be a practical politician rather than a glorious celestial visitor (p.64). But Judaic apocalypticism is the product of social decay, of the failure of stability and the loss of optimism, and is the reaction of those who have totally withdrawn "from a history that has become unbearable" (p.62). "Apocalypse", he adds, is a word of Greek origin with the literal meaning of "uncovering" or "revealing", which appropriately implies that what is to be uncovered is already present rather than being lodged in the future. "In the prophets, God works through man in history, with the promise of bringing history to a fulfillment; in Jesus's teaching, God stands poised to lop off history, suddenly, in the night" (p.64).

Alter concludes that the apocalyptic tendency in recent American fiction results from a loss of nerve, a "failure of faith" (p.66). But he strongly emphasizes a point that is latent in Lewis's essay, that apocalypticism is the obsession of a society which considers itself in decay. Jewish apocalypticism derives from a feeling that society is following false gods, that its old values have been lost; Christian apocalypticism responds to the next stage in the process, being a distinctively revolutionary and reformatory mode. Lewis himself seems aware of the link between decadence and apocalypticism when he states that the latter became a means and not an end. For if one of the most distinctive things about the "comic apocalyptic" genre is the dominance of the

comic element over the catastrophic, another is its practitioners' self-indulgent habit of brooding over the idea of apocalypse as if it were a separate phenomenon in itself. This, as we are to see, is one of decadent man's most typical traits: he is always fascinated by images of his own doom.

While both Lewis and Alter make the vital point that decadence is the prelude to apocalypse, they typify recent criticism by showing more interest in the latter than the former. This study attempts to compensate for this critical imbalance by placing selected English and American novels of this century in the light of nineteenth century ideas about social, cultural, and scientific decadence. Initially, such an aim may seen to be at odds with the contemporary critic's certainty that his age has quite distinctive and disturbing forms of experience to offer; yet one of the first responses to this is that such ideas were first expressed eighty years ago:

A king abdicates, leaves the country, and takes up his residence in Paris, having reserved certain political rights. One day he loses much money at play, and is in a dilemma. He therefore makes an agreement with the government of his country, by which, on the receipt of a million francs, he renounces for ever every title, official position and privilege remaining to him ...

The corpse of the murderer Franzini after execution underwent autopsy. The head of the secret police cuts off a large piece of skin, has it tanned, and the leather made into cigar-cases for himself and some of his friends ...

An American weds his bride in a gas-factory, then gets with her into a balloon held in readiness and enters on a honeymoon in the clouds ...

An attaché of the Chinese Embassy publishes high-class works in French under his own name. He negotiates with banks respecting a large loan for his government, and draws a large advance for himself on the unfinished contract. Later it comes out that the books were composed by his French secretary, and that he has swindled the banks ...

A public schoolboy walking with a chum passes the gaol where his father, a rich banker, has repeatedly been imprisoned for fraudulent bankruptcy, embezzlement, and similar lucrative misdemeanours. Pointing to the building, he tells his friend with a smile: "Look, that's the governor's school" ...
There is very much about these remarks which resembles the more recent complaints of Roth, Mailer, and others: there is a similar tone, an awareness of grossness or distortion in experience, the same sense that morality is losing its footing, and that civilized man is being remarkably brutal. These passages are from "Fin-de-siècle", the first chapter of Max Nordau's famous attack on the late nineteenth century decadence of Europe, which he called *Degeneration*.

For Nordau, society and culture are threatened not by change or reform but with annihilation, a fate which is seen as an inevitable product of their degenerate qualities. Imbued with this Nordic idea of *Götterdämmerung* and a general tendency toward hysteria, *Degeneration* is now seen as a symptom of the very ills it sought to expose; but it reminds us that notions of social and moral decay, the sensing of grossness in the texture of experience, are not peculiar to contemporary America. It also leads to the important conclusion that the decadence which it both attacks and makes evident in itself is with us still: that it is this ongoing process which, in some form and stage of development, the contemporary writer and critic describes. If it were objected that an eighty-year period of decline seems excessively long, or that the Great War is often conceded to have been the pyre of those weaknesses Nordau finds, it would be appropriate to reply that whenever civilized man senses his own society's decadence he reaches for the myth of apocalypse whether his senses are right or wrong. This can be a non-literary movement, as with medieval millenarianism, but is usually literary; and since man senses decline more frequently than history provides falls, the literature of decadence exceeds its history. The literature of decadence to be examined in this study, whether written in 1900 or in 1973, and whatever evidence contemporary society may seem to provide, will be treated as a purely literary phenomenon.

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and not as socially prophetic. As we have seen already, the contemporary writer is more concerned with the effect of apparent social decay upon his art than with its possible effect upon his neighbour. Culture, that vast but indefinite thing, is seen to be threatened and in need of defence, but mankind is not seen in the same way: at one and the same time the twentieth century novelist of decay is a zealous practitioner of his art and a morbid, fascinated watcher for the apocalypse. Wittingly or not, he is a part of a tradition we can trace back through many links for two hundred years, and of a habit two thousand years old; and it is time now to consider some of the origins of this tradition.
SECTION ONE: DECLINE AND FALL: SOME ASPECTS OF NINETEENTH CENTURY DECADENCE.

1. Decadent Romanticism and Romantic Decadence.

2. Decadence and Barbarism.


5. In Summary.
At the heart of the notion of decadence is the idea of the passage of time and the forcing of all natural processes beyond fruition to decay and death. We may therefore seek a starting-point for a discussion of decadence not at the onset of pessimism in the mind of the European thinker, during the second half of the nineteenth century, but during the century before, when men seemed more constantly able to look at history and draw optimistic conclusions from it. Eighteenth century Europe seems, in fact, to be one great arena of optimism, inherited from Descartes, Locke, and Leibnitz; so entrenched are the ideas of Progress and Improvement in the writing of the period that there seems to be no place for decadence at all.

Progress, as Professor J. B. Bury has shown, is primarily a French idea: Montesquieu's De l'esprit des lois (1748) and Voltaire's Essai sur les moeurs (1751) present man as being capable of improvement if capable of devising improving laws for himself; Turgot, in his planned Histoire Universelle (c.1750), "conceives universal history as the progress of the human race.

advancing as an immense whole steadily, though slowly, through alternating periods of calm and disturbance towards greater perfection\(^2\), and in this pattern individual cases of calamity are merely minor setbacks necessary for the greater good. The confidence of the French Enlightenment that man is capable of unlimited improvement by means of his own efforts is expressed in the publication of the *Encyclopædia* (1751-65) by Diderot and his colleagues, and approaches Millennialism in the writings of the French Economists, Quesnay, Mirabeau, and the rest, for whom perfection was accessible through monetary rather than moral laws\(^3\). The wide dissemination of such ideas as these could only speed the advent of the Revolution as long as such a drastic measure was seen to herald not a Reign of Terror but a new Golden Age for all men.

The fate of Condorcet, one of the younger Encyclopaedists, underlines the idealistic nature of Enlightenment optimism: facing death during the Terror, he wrote a Sketch of a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Kind (1793) in which, surrounded by barbarity, he tried to show "that nature has set no term to the process of improving human faculties, and that the advance towards perfection is limited only by the duration of the globe"\(^4\).

French optimism penetrated Germany in the eighteenth century, where it prompted optimistic writings of a distinctively mystical nature. A pamphlet by Lessing, entitled *Education of the Human Race* (1780), is typical: here history is seen as consisting of man's progress through a series of religions each one of which educates him more efficiently than the one before. The religion itself is important here, and not the education; for Progress is seen to be directed toward another, future and unspecified, religion which will be superior to Christianity. Herder's thought had this religious optimism, too: his *Ideas of the Philosophy of the History of Humanity* (1784) sees mankind

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3. Biny discusses these aspects in The Idea of Progress, Ch.3.
4. The Idea of Progress, p.211.
as caught in a progressive system inaugurated but not further interfered with by God; each civilization is not a stage on the road to Perfection but is capable of generating its own perfect state, if this has been pre-ordained; history is a record, therefore, of hundreds of experiments in the search for happiness and peace. Kant, in an essay called *Idea of a Universal History on a Cosmic Plan* (1784), managed to reconcile his natural pessimism with a concept of Progress by arranging a historical dialectic between man's peaceful and aggressive instincts. In the ideal civilization, these instincts are in a fruitful balance, and it is only in less than ideal civilizations that man's barbarous ways predominate; the product of this dialectic is, apparently, moral improvement. Hegel's approach to Progress is far more metaphysical: the world, in his view, is part of the self-fulfilment of a mystical God or Spirit, whose higher stages are indicated by what we call civilization and culture; although we cannot imagine the nature of the end-point of this process, it will come. Like Hegel, Schelling too established a system in which earthly developments were the mere indices to the progress of a divine plan.  

For all the transcendent and speculative emphases of this kind of thought, it helped, as Professor Bury points out, in the establishment of a practical climate favourable to the idea of Progress. In England, such a climate already existed: revolution had occurred in the seventeenth century, and Progressivism often took the form of a conservative defence of the status quo. Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) stands out for its extremely revolutionary views at this time: theoretical and anarchistic, it advocated the complete removal of all governments and political systems, in the belief that man without government was educable toward perfection. The chief disciple of Godwin was the poet, Shelley, whose impractical idealism was the logical product of Godwin's thought; the Romantic tendency for escape into imaginative realms is in turn a logical development of social theory which enters the world of art.  

Ideas of Perfectibility and Progress continued to be analysed during the early nineteenth century by the Frenchmen, Sainte-Simon and Comte, and were loudly cheered on in England by Macaulay, Tennyson, and their contemporaries. But despite all this long-standing confidence, there had always been long-standing doubts about Progress and the perfectibility of man in society. Rousseau, in 1750, and Chastellux, in 1772, had examined history in a way that produced pessimistic conclusions about the worth of civilization, and David Hume had never been an enthusiastic advocate of Progress. But the most significant and accurate doubts had been raised by Malthus in his Essay on the Principle of Population (1798), which drew attention to the disparity between geometrical growth of population and mere arithmetical growth of food supply. He saw the irony that within the existing situation disease and repression alone checked the population of the poor, and that Perfected Man would too soon become Populous Man, with all too few resources on which to feed his excellence.

These unpleasant realities of social upheaval and chaos must be turned to now. For as surely as the Revolution in France had abruptly terminated a political system, less flamboyant developments in eighteenth century England had brought to an end a social system which was still basically feudal. The Enclosure Act of this period had removed the communal system and established throughout the country a powerful land-owning elite which controlled a larger but poorer class of peasants and labourers. Economic problems combined with the irresponsibility of the new landowner class to produce and increase another new class, the dispossessed pauper. This agricultural revolution was closely followed by the Industrial Revolution and the growth, in the north of the

7. See The Idea of Progress, Ch.15 & Ch.16. Jerome Buckley also discusses the idea of Progress in the early nineteenth century in The Triumph of Time (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), Ch.3. For a historical view of the period, see Asa Briggs, The Age of Improvement, (London:Longmans, 1959), Ch.1 & Ch.2.
8. The Age of Improvement, Ch.9 & Ch.12.
country, of large industrial towns and their spawn, the urban poor, often
drawn from an increasingly impoverished countryside. By the beginning of
the nineteenth century, Britain had irrevocably changed as a result of
specific developments which bred alike an increasingly wealthy landowning
and merchant middle class and an increasingly large urban labouring force
which supplied it.9

Such social and economic polarization, and particularly the growth to
dominance of the wealthy and powerful bourgeoisie, may be taken as paradigmatic
for the experience of Europe in the nineteenth century. As industrialization
changed the face of landscapes it altered the nature of societies; as cities
grew their urban proletariat also swelled; increased mercantilism fed a
burgeoning middle class and steadily the old feudal hierarchies became fossil-
ized relics. With an underprivileged and impoverished lower class pushing
upward and a merchant class growing in power, it became inevitable that the
outmoded superstructures of privilege and power should, at different times in
different countries, be toppled. The idea of Progress, so long the possession
of the historian and the social meliorist, became the property of the bourgeoisie,
with their greater opportunity to focus upon the material achievements of the
doctrine while the artist, the social historian, and the scientist found
themselves grappling with ideas of a more disturbing nature. In the follow-
ing pages I shall discuss four expressions of these new ideas, emphasizing
their development into literary expression while attempting at the same time
to trace their effect as popular ideas which stood far from the doctrine of
Progress. To begin the first such discussion we return to the point raised
earlier in this section, that an awareness of decadence can first be perceived
not in the pessimistic later half of the nineteenth century but in the

9. For a concise outline of these developments see R. J. Evans, The Victorian
Age (London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1950).
optimistic later half of the eighteenth, when the historian seemed able still to look at history gladly.

1. Decadent Romanticism and Romantic Decadence.

One of the most revealing works of Augustan historical research is Edward Gibbon's long *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which he completed in 1787. Few who have followed its protracted narrative of social decay and political collapse, its unalleviated descriptions of nearly identical despots, can fail to wonder whether such morbid interest, sustained over such a long period of composition, was a healthy sign in a period so confident in its own goodness. Certainly, the conclusions Gibbon frequently drew in *Decline and Fall* were soundly optimistic:

> Yet the experience of four thousand years should enlarge our hopes and diminish our apprehensions: we cannot determine to what height the human species may aspire in their advances toward perfection; but it may safely be presumed that no people, unless the face of nature is changed, will relapse into their original barbarism. 10

And yet it is curious that such conclusions had to be drawn from a study of a long period of historical decline, and that a more positive example could not have been adduced. This morbid interest in images of civilizations barbarically besieged is, as we are to see, a trait of nineteenth century decadence, and it is illuminating to find it so early. There can be no doubt that the establishment of such metaphors in nineteenth century thought derives from the earlier popularity of historical works of which Gibbon's is the most famous example.

His case is just one of many such "anti-Augustan" cases at the time. Blake is another, whose *Songs of Innocence* was published two years after the conclusion of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*. Even here, in "The Chimney Sweeper", the vital impulse is to quit an unpleasant world; in *The Book of Thel*, written

at the same time, the unborn Thel refuses to take up carnal existence at all. "A Song of Liberty", also of this period, is a brief catalogue of the sickness of earthly empires and a prophecy of their impending consumption by eternal fire, and the effect is of a compression of one of Gibbon's descriptions.

"Songs of Experience" (1794), with its forsaken chimney sweep, cankered rose, blighted London, and satanic tiger, could scarcely be less like the Augustan picture of man in society. Blake wore his French Revolutionary cap through London because he was a man of the new age, aware of the iniquities of his civilization and increasingly sure that the way to Improvement was to quit earthly life altogether. To give up hope in earthly improvement, as the more idealistic Progressivists did in effect, was to deny that actual civilization had any capacity to improve, to admit that society was irreversibly decadent.

The ideal state proposed by Godwin in Political Justice had this distinctly unearthy tinge which coloured the romantic escapism of his disciple, Shelley. The hallmark of Shelley's idealism is the almost completely abstract imagination which produces, for example, the more diffuse passages of Prometheus Unbound (1820): this kind of poetry is about draped abstractions and is almost scornful of mortal problems. When Shelley's attention was deflected from the abstract to useful examples of the worthlessness of the society in which he lived, he employed the imagery of the charnel house.

"Lines Written During the Castlereagh Administration" (1819) depicts England with a lusty hatred Blake might have envied:

> Corpses are cold in the tomb
> Stones on the pavement are dumb
> Abortions are dead in the womb,
> And their mothers look pale, like the death-white shore
> Of Albion, free no more.

"The Mask of Anarchy", written during the same year about the so-called
"Peterloo Massacre", depicts a stately but apocalyptic Anarchy "Trampling to
a fire of blood/ The adoring multitude". And "England in 1819" moves from
"An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king" and "Princes, the dregs of
their dull race" who "leech-like to their fainting country cling", to "A
people starved and stabbed in the untilled field/ An army, which liberticide
and prey/ Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield". Typically, and as
with all his anti-social poetry, the poem ends by sweeping upward to euphoric
and abstract hope.

If we suspend briefly our critical instincts and look at Keats's "To
Autumn" in an emblematic way we can sense that he too was writing, although
more personally and less anti-socially, about the afflictions of corporeal
existence in a decadent age. An autumn myth would not have attracted a
summer-minded Augustan, but it will be highly attractive, as we will see,
to nineteenth century Parnassians and Decadents. The first two verses of
"To Autumn" represent with their connotations of warmth and fruition the
fullness of development in a time-ridden physical world; the bees, who
"think warm days will never cease,/ For Summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy
cells", are deceived, for swelled gourds and fruit filled with ripeness verge
on the first rottenness of decay; and the poem becomes increasingly laden
with images of the impending desolation and death which winter will bring.
Spring is long gone; "barred clouds" accompany the "soft-dying day", the
fields are stubble, "wailful" gnats "mourn", "sinking as the light wind lives
or dies", and swallows gather to escape winter. The world was much more
with Keats than it was with Shelley, but for personal reasons it was a world
of burning, aching flesh threatened by a decline to death and escapable only
by the correctly Romantic means of igniting the imagination. For Keats, as
we see in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn", the world of the imagination creates in
turn the timeless world of art, and the doomed mortal in the carnal world can
gain comfort from the contemplation of beauteous things which are joys forever.

Romantic and Decadent poetry truly overlap in the work of Keats, and just as it
is difficult to make a chronological distinction between the two movements it is
difficult to say which element dominates his art. A. E. Carter has suggested that
all nineteenth century Decadence, irrespective of its origin, is the efflorescence
of tendencies within late Romanticism, resulting from the perversion of the "lan-
guid, receptive character" and the dynamic "fatal man" who "runs lushly to seed
in the melodramas of Byron, Hugo, and Dumas". But nineteenth century Decadence
derives more than simply its subject matter and tone from Romanticism. Flaubert,
for example, will turn in revulsion from the empty figure of the bourgeois to a
cheerful confrontation with the void in a way reminiscent of any later English
Romantic, and particularly of Shelley or Byron. But more important is the Kears-
ian desire to turn to art: Flaubert claimed a desire to write "a book about nothing,
a book relating to nothing in the outer world, which sustains itself by the gravity
of its own style ... a book which does not come near a subject or else one whose
subject is nearly invisible, if that is possible". Thus, as Roland Barthes has
said, the art of Flaubert "points to its mask as it moves forward", for there
is nothing else of value or permanence in a decadent world which may be singled
out. This is "art-for-art's-sake", the turning away by the Decadent from the
emptiness and boredom of decadent life to the temporary meanings offered by art,
to art's assertion of value in the face of the void.

12. The Idea of Decadence in French Literature (Toronto: University of Toronto
Press, 1959), p.27. Carter devotes all of his second chapter, "Decline and
Fall", to the relationship between Romanticism and Decadence; see pages 26-61.
13. "Ce qui me semble beau, ce que je voudrais faire, c'est un livre sur rien, un
livre sans attache extérieure, qui se tiendrait de lui-même par la force
interne de son style... un livre qui n'aurait presque pas de sujet ou du
moins où le sujet serait presque invisible, si cela se peut". Letter to Louise
Colet, Correspondance, ed. René Descharmes, (Paris: Librairie de France, 1923),
Renato Poggioli has seen this Romantic escapism as a distinguishing feature of Decadence, and uses a phrase from Baudelaire's poem, "L'Ennemi", written about 1855 and the last to be included in Les Fleurs du Mal (1857), to encapsulate this development. The phrase is "l'automne des idées":

And now, lo, I have reached the autumn of ideas,
Now I must handle shovel and rake
In order to repair the flooded ground,
Where water digs holes as large as graves. 15

Here, says Poggioli, Baudelaire has reached a final stage of life and must face the problem of viewing his creations in a way which will represent their innate order and meaning. The key phrase will signify "not merely the falling off, in the brain of the poet, of the leaves of thought; it may well represent the sudden appearance in his mind of an autumnal symbol or myth." 16 In a note within Les Fleurs du Mal Baudelaire pursues the idea further, with a syncretic view of decadence as an eternal phenomenon whose inevitable recurrence liberates it from history and places it "above" time. What he advocates, as his friend Gautier explained after his death, 17 is the liberation of Decadent art, with its special rhetoric, imagery, and tone, from social and historical contexts and into an independent aesthetic. Poggioli refers to the development of this in Mallarmé's poetry: in "Plainte d'automne" (1864) is seen "the poet's attempt to reduce the notion of decadence to a purely imaginative and emotional vision, to fix, as the poet says, 'all that might be summarized in this word: fall', into the perfect stasis of an absolute, timeless experience." 18 We have seen how Flaubert desired something very

15. "Voilà que j'ai touché l'automne des idées,/ Et qu'il faut employer la pelle et les râteaux/ Pour rassembler à neuf les terres inondées,/ Où l'eau creuse des trous grands comme des tombeaux." "The Autumn of Ideas", The Massachusetts Review II (1961), p.662; the translation is Poggioli's.
similar for his art, with his wished-for book about nothing, and Baudelaire and his successors made this attempt to break free from the gravity of time and events one of the most distinctive features of Decadent art, as it is of the Romantic movement. As Poggioli observes, the later Decadent poets such as Verlaine are mannerists, self-conscious enamellers of their own tradition, in whose mellow sunlight they bask. Some of Mallarmé's earlier work is prophetic of this later ingrowing of the genre: Poggioli mentions his poem, "Las de l'amor repos ..." (1864), which reflects the influence of Baudelaire's "L'Ennemi" but far outreaches that poem in its nihilism. For Mallarmé, there is no chance of an "autumn of ideas" which gives aesthetic unity to his life's work; but there is a sort of winter in which he abandons all attempts to create art ("Je veux delaisser l'Art vorace d'un pays/ Cruel ...". Instead, he will become "a minor, decorative artist, who finds 'serene rapture' in painting a natural scene on the edge of a teacup". The stormy troubles of Decadent art are to be replaced by a tempest in a teacup, whose decoration calls to mind not only the orientalism of the Parnassians but, even more appropriately, another, nobler vessel-emblem for the timelessness of art, Keats's Grecian urn.

It remains for Yeats, much later than any of these writers but with an irresistible finality, to complete the mythical expression of this Decadent desire for Romantic escape into the country of the mind, the imaginative realm of art. Poggioli has clarified the process by treating Yeats's two Byzantium poems in reversed order, with "Byzantium" (1923) representing the city as a possibility, a Janus-faced symbol for the daylit actualities of temporal decadence and a nocturnal image of eternity, and "Sailing to Byzantium" (1927) representing the full realization of the second condition, the

achievement of "an eternal city of the soul" which will "transcend the historical image of decadence"\(^{22}\). What fascinated Yeats was the length of time in which the moribund Byzantium lay ill but refused to die: its collapse seemed perpetually imminent for a thousand years. In the mind of the poet, the historical fact becomes elevated to an emblem of the timeless realm of art. In the second poem the specific images of decadent life-bound existence in the city are juxtaposed with the vague images of the city's eternal, nocturnal outline:

The unpurged images of day recede;  
The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed;  
Night resonance recedes, night-walkers' song  
After great cathedral gong

The central image of the poem is of the cupola of the city's great cathedral, with the highly artificial golden bird which surmounts it: this represents the eternal work of art which transcends time and flesh, and its appearance has followed an apprehension of the existence of the timeless superworld of art. The unfuelled purgatorial fires of the night-shrouded palace in the following lines mark the nexus of the two realms, actual and spiritual, and the poem concludes with an injunction to the artistic elite to make the sea-journey to Byzantium, the city of the creative soul.

"Sailing to Byzantium" arrives at the end of this sea-journey, beginning with its celebrated images of doomed fecundity:

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.

It is no country for old men, this pre-Byzantine physical world, because its inhabitants are ignorant of the spiritual, of the possibilities of Yeats's Byzantium. What follows is a clear expression of Poggioli's conception of the Decadent "autumn of ideas", the maturation of art in a way corresponding

\(^{22}\) "Qualis Artifex Perea? or Barbarism and Decadence", Harvard Library Bulletin XII, 1959, p.152.
to the seasonal maturation of the years and the unfolding of the life of man:

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 ...

In Yeats's poem, the soul has sailed to its Byzantium to purge all mortal aspects of art in the imperial fires, to enter the singing soul-world. Here he becomes his own handiwork, the mortal soul becoming submerged in the artificial and eternal work of art which forever belongs to the transcendent superhuman world and which forever stands as his monument. Implicit in this Decadent syndrome is an aesthetic which apotheosizes artifice, announcing the infolding of art upon itself as it breaks free from its mortal referentials.

Decadent art, as first suggested by Baudelaire in his autumnal phrase, aims to live in its own special climate of ideas and, finally, in its own rhetoric. As the process develops by which it shuffles off its mortal coils, the art becomes much more manner than matter, as Flaubert, for instance, said it would: and the end result of this process is the development of manner into mannerism, which makes the genre a rich field for the borrower and the imitator. The English poetic Decadence, though not entirely mimicry and eclecticism, used a sort of ventriloquism in order to speak in the way of the French Decadence, as some of the poetry of Ernest Dowson and Arthur Symons shows. These were the most conscious imitators and translators of the Symbolists, and they acted as conductors of one tradition to another.

Dowson often imitated Verlaine, whose sentimental vision of loneliness, vanished pleasures, and present languor he managed to preserve. Here, for example, are the first three verses of his "Colloque Sentimental":

Into the lonely park all frozen fast,
A while ago there were two forms who passed.

Lo, are their lips fallen and their eyes dead,
Hardly shall a man hear the words they said.

Into the lonely park, all frozen fast,
There came two shadows who recall the past.
A similar frail despair informs "Spleen":

Around were all the roses red,
The ivy all around was black.

Dear, so thou only move thine head,
Shall all mine old despairs awake!

Too blue, too tender was the sky,
The air too soft, too green the sea.

Always I fear, I know not why,
Some lamentable flight from thee.

I am so tired of holly-sprays
And weary of the bright box-tree,

Of all the endless, country ways,
Of everything, alas! save thee.

Arthur Symons was the doyen of the English Decadence, and even more closely related to the French movement than was Dowson. His three poems entitled "At Dieppe" are impressions which rely on the Decadent stage-properties of misty rain, night, evanescent women, ivory sickle moons, and a generally languorous diffuseness. The third, "On the beach", is worth seeing in full:

Night, a grey sky, a ghostly sea,
The soft beginning of the rain;
Black on the horizon, sails that wane
Into the distance mistily.

The tide is rising, I can hear
The soft roar broadening far along;
It cries and murmurs in my ear
A sleepy old forgotten song.

Softly the stealthy night descends,
The black sails fade into the sky:
Is not this, where the sea-line ends,
The shore-line of infinity?

I cannot think or dream; the grey
Unending waste of sea and night,
Dull, impotently infinite,
Blots out the very hope of day.

Symons's range is not particularly wide, and it is easy to mistake one of his poems for another. But his mood does intensify, and his achievement become more distinguished, when he is relying closely on a French source. "Sea-Wind"
and "Sigh", both derived from Mallarmé, are far stronger than the "Dieppe" poems:

The flesh is sad, alas! and all the books are read.
Flight, only flight! I feel that birds are wild to tread
The floor of unknown foam, and to attain the skies!
("Sea-Wind")

My soul, calm sister, towards thy brow, whereon scarce grieves
An autumn strewn already with its russet leaves,
And towards the wandering sky of thine angelic eyes,
Mounts, as in melancholy gardens may arise
Some faithful fountain sighing whitely towards the blue!
("Sigh")

Swooning lovers in "the rose and grey/ Ecstacy of the moon" recur in his translations from Verlaine's "Fêtes Galantes", while his version of Gautier, "Posthumous Coquetry", epitomizes all that is expected of both French and English Decadent poetry:

Let there be laid, when I am dead,
Ere 'neath the coffin lid I lie,
Upon my cheek a little red,
A little black about the eye.

For I in my close bier would fain,
As on the night his vows were made,
Rose-red eternally remain,
With khol beneath my blue eye laid ...

Poetry of this sort, focussing in images of shadow and light, is very close to Poggioli's "Decadence in miniature": the polished, artificial decoration made for its own sake, coming very close to meaning nothing at all but representing itself as a self-explaining and self-sufficient entity hovering in a limbo devoid of other phenomena. Such poetry aims to become as completely superficial as the gaudy birds and butterflies which flit through it, erecting a verbal cosmos against the emptiness or disorder of life. Yeats described such a poetic as having "taught us to walk upon a rope tightly stretched through serene air"\(^\text{23}\) a metaphor which Giorgio Melchiori extends to all Modernist writing and its funambulistic precariousness "so vividly reflected both in——

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the form and in the content of the artistic and literary works of the first half of this century. All the implications of this vitally important metaphor are consummated in the most truly Decadent work of the late nineteenth century, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Axel* (1889), a verse play depicting the decision of the hero to take his life in order to preserve the fullness of his love from the decay of time. His castle is a fortress against the banalities of mundane existence; the act of suicide will enable him to enjoy forever the exquisite moment of perfection, while the everyday living of his life may, he says, be carried out by his servants. Anticipating Melchiori, Edmund Wilson applied the same metaphor of control and order to twentieth century writing in his collection of essays entitled *Axel's Castle*. This Decadent extremism is a common part of the novels to be examined in this study, and becomes particularly distinctive amongst the American fiction we are to examine.

To find the artist making a heaven of the imagination in spite of an earthly hell is a terminal point in the purely literary aspect of nineteenth century decadentism. But in its socio-literary aspect, it can reveal more about the mind of the decadent, as we will now see.

2. Decadence and Barbarism.

The most common response to real or imagined social decay in nineteenth century Europe is a brooding consideration of the primitive and the barbaric. We have already seen the thinker and artist showing his belief that man walks a knife-edge between his barbaric origins and a golden future that somehow has not come, between a primitive past and a future in which he seems unlikely to transcend his own brutality. He finds himself locked in a disturbing present moment which Poggioli has described as the product of "a

25. This quintessentially Decadent idea is expressed in Act IV, scene v.
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. The historian's picture of the decline and fall of earlier empires and civilizations has shown such conditions to be the prelude to an apocalyptic return to barbarity, and the thinker and artist begins to see civilization as a ruined quest for an impossible resting-point between equally unpleasant poles of existence, the decadent and the barbaric. The myth of the Millennium has no currency for him; he finds significance in other myths, and Nero and Ghengis Khan glower in his mind, across stages of development all too quickly traversed.

Even before the end of the nineteenth century, the Russian poet, Solovyov, showed an obsession with a threat of invasion from the east. His misgivings were well-founded, for Russia and Japan were at war within a few years. What is most revealing is the way the poet's mind senses the disaster - or anticipates it, in this case - and immediately casts it into the terms of received mythology. As Poggioli points out, Solovyov saw the threat from Japan as an atavistic form of the Mongol invasions which have haunted the Western mind for two thousand years. When the clash between Russia and Japan in 1904 seemed to realize the barbaric apocalypse, Valeri Bryusov was provoked to write "The Coming Huns", a poem which spoke of the impending downfall of the old Tsarist order by using the metaphor of the fall of the Roman Empire. At the level of myth, the invading hordes are seen as the old Asian Tartars, not as the modern Japanese Army, and at the level of metaphor Bryusov senses the uprising of the barbaric Russian masses through the rotted tissue of the old order. He sees the Japanese threat as a possible

27. "Qualis Artifex Pereor!", p.147.
means of purging the decadent old order, and as he articulates the coming apocalypse he clearly welcomes it. Similar work was done by Vyacheslav Ivanov, and when the Tsarist order was overwhelmed a decade later in the Revolution, Aleksandr Blok's poetry depicted the barbaric purgation as coming from within, with the unleashing of the Russian masses.

In nineteenth century France, so bitterly attacked by Nordau, a quite different social situation managed nevertheless to make the artist think in terms of decadence and barbarism. Despite the purgative effects of the French Revolution, there grew again in the shape of what had lived before a rigidly stratified society, as if the lopping of a withered branch had seen another, slightly smaller and a little different in shape, grow from the wound. The different shape of the new limb of society reflects the growth in newly-gained power of the bourgeoisie, into whose hands fell more and more property and power, and whose blind materialism and unthinking acceptance of the ways of society convinced French writers that society itself, and the bourgeoisie in particular, were perilously close to barbarism in the process of decay. A. E. Carter, surveying the causes of French literary Decadence, describes the relationship between bourgeois society and the increasingly-alienated Decadent, the one groaning under its blind materialism and the other sick with revulsion: "Decadent sensibility develops from the theory that civilization is artificial and corrupt; it dwells orchid-like in the hot-houses of an excessive and ageing culture, in the boudoir and brothels of the great city." The Decadent sees the bourgeois as surrounded by an artificial atmosphere and convinced that the panes of glass above his head are reality itself; the Decadent, although physically "within" the hot-house of civilization, knows that it is a hot-house; and that beyond its panes is

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a "real" world of harsh, barbaric savagery which will destroy the frail, feeble values of civilization. So repulsive does the alienated Decadent find this civilization that he is glad of the presence of the outside domain: just as Bryusov and his colleagues were to welcome the prospect of barbaric purgation at a later time, Flaubert, for example, welcomed the chaos and barbarity and sheer emptiness he sensed beyond the pale:

This sense of my own weakness and emptiness comforts me. I feel myself a mere speck of dust lost in space, yet I am part of that endless grandeur which envelops me. I could never see why that should be a cause for despair, since there could very well be nothing at all behind the black curtain.\(^{31}\)

We have seen the Decadent artist turn from the "black curtain" to the temporary meanings of his own art; but the lack of any style at all in the bourgeois could infuriate the Decadent. Flaubert, for example, could run "foaming and blaspheming from the room" when confronted by a member of the bourgeoisie, for to be "void of style was the real void, an emptiness more awful because more crass and assured than any authentic austerity"\(^ {32}\). (Even the bourgeois could find himself stifled by the atmosphere of the "hot-house", as Robert Martin Adams points out: "ennui was a favorite complaint of the French lady of fashion, often accompanied with the specification that she was lapsing into néant.\(^ {33}\))

When contemplating the antithesis between decadence and barbarism, the French Decadents and neo-Decadents were capable of ambiguity, as Carter notes. Gautier, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, and their lesser contemporaries "united two fundamentally opposed ideas: a hatred of modern civilization and a love of the refinements modern civilization made possible."\(^ {34}\) Since in Carter's view, the Decadent artist never resolved this contradiction in his


\(^{32}\) *nil*, p.59.

\(^{33}\) *nil*, p.219.

\(^{34}\) *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature*, p.6.
work, there remains in it "a sort of literary schizophrenia". But he also notes Gautier's "suggestion of irony ... a desire to shock and astonish", unconsciously directing us toward the Decadents' satiric aims and the desire seen for example in Huysman's *À rebours* (1884) to reduce the unknowing artifice of decadent society to absurd and ridiculous excess. When misunderstood, this ironic approach led to Nordau's *ad hominem* attacks; when correctly viewed, it underlined by satiric exaggeration the proximity of civilized artifice to savagery and barbarism. Behind much of the poetry of the French Decadence lies the belief that the barbaric domains beyond the walls of civilization exactly mirror the true nature of decadent society itself, as if the very stones could reflect, and as if the bourgeois who sees the first barbarian scramble over the ruined wall finds that he is looking at himself.

The limitations of space in this study make it impossible to explore this phenomenon fully, but time and again, as Carter makes clear in his first chapter, "The Perverted Legend", the poets of the French Decadence move from expressions of the barbarism of the cities to expressions of an artifice which involves sexual perversion, necrophilia, drugs, dandyism, sadism, and debauchery. That much of this material could be transported wholesale into the poetry of the English Decadence suggests that it is literary exaggeration rather than strict historical fact.

But long before the English Decadence which we have already begun to glimpse, events in England had brought about many of the social phenomena which in France had convinced the Decadent of the degeneration of his own society. I have already referred to the growth early in the nineteenth century of a powerful middle class in England, and have suggested that the idea of Progress became their property early in the Victorian era. Years of stability,

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prosperity, and insularity appeared to compound the optimistic view of things, with the result that the bourgeois singer of Empire soon found that he could quite credibly point to a strong, stable civilization, the apotheosis of Progress and the incarnation, if in a somewhat Gothic form, of Perfectibility. But a sort of schizophrenia is evident when the High Victorian comes to survey himself: for the social critic and the artist could claim to see a general loss of faith, a creeping materialism, a blind belief in an idea of Progress that was devoid of purpose and proportion, and a social development that in its hectic pace was forming a dangerously unbalanced society. It is this kind of society which appears in Tennyson's Arthurian cycle, and of which Arnold too expressed frequent awareness.

This double view of contemporary society also involved a different attitude towards decadence and barbarism. As with Continental literature, the apocalyptic arrival of the barbarian is anticipated and the purgatorial primitivism he brings is welcomed. But a curiously indigenous quality prevails. In general, literary primitivism in nineteenth century England can be literary but not quite primitive, fictionally expressing a socio-cultural death-wish, or primitive but not quite literary, with a growing movement to quit civilization and explore the backward domains of the growing Empire.

The socio-cultural death-wish shows how a nation can be conscious of its own excellence and yet express subconsciously its fears of degeneration. It involved the increasing production during the late Victorian period of works in which writers depicted with lurid fondness the invasion and destruction of their own country by apocalyptic forces. Its resemblance to the classical literary anticipation of the barbarian invasion is mitigated by two factors: firstly, there was no obvious barbaric threat from without; and second, the authorship of these cheerfully destructive works was almost entirely bourgeois.
instead of Decadent. Bernard Bergonzi has suggested that the whole outpouring was prompted by the Franco-Prussian War, but whatever its immediate cause the Victorian literary death-wish obviously voices a deep-felt discontent with a society which must have seemed even to some of its middle class to be sterile, purposeless, and boring. The way in which these volumes anticipated the holocaust of the Great War can be seen in a brief survey of their titles. General Sir George Chesney's The Battle of Dorking (1871) depicts the invasion of England by the Prussians who had just conquered the French; such imaginary invasions occurred again a decade later in General Sir William Butler's The Invasion of England (1882), and yet again in William Le Queux's The Great War in England in 1897 (1894). An unconscious parallel to Russian fears of a Tartar invasion occurs with the overwhelming of the entire West by Chinese hordes in The Yellow Danger (1898), by M. P. Shiel; Chesney's novel was reworked by F. N. Maude in The New Battle of Dorking (1900); Shiel returned to arrange a gigantic natural catastrophe in The Purple Cloud (1902), presumably to account for any survivor of this remarkable succession of imaginary holocausts; and Erskine Childers's The Riddle of the Sands (1903) forecast a German invasion of Great Britain. Literally hundreds of imitations of these novels attest to the fascination the genre held for its audience, and authors as far removed from Decadentism as Wells and Hardy were stirred by the fin du siècle phenomenon. Just as the actually barbaric threats to Russia or France were welcomed, the fictional threats to England were seen too as the inevitable end of a historical process, as metaphorical evidence of civilization's decay and a means of cleansing the corrupt old order.

The non-literary manifestation of English decadence, the exploration of the barbaric outposts of the Empire, can be seen as a decadent-imperialistic

impulse not peculiar to England alone. The Old World - Russia, Spain, Portugal, Holland, France, Germany, Belgium, and Britain - had long before begun to colonize and exploit the New World, in a development which is easily seen symbolically as an overflowing of all that was bad in decadent Europe into an uncivilized world. Increasingly, toward the end of the nineteenth century, this movement is seen not as bringing the light of civilization to the darkness of the jungle, but as the return of the blighted, decaying European to his symbolically natural state. Any truthful history of the Europeans' rapacity at the heart of darkness reinforces this interpretation: "The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes in the colonies, where it goes naked," wrote Karl Marx, referring to what Jean-Paul Sartre later called "the strip-tease of our humanism" 40. G. P. Gooch and Benjamin Kidd wrote at the turn of the century of civilized man's relapse amongst the natives" 41; and Gissing remarked of the literature of colonial development that it showed "the completest barbarism still existing under the surface... The masses of men are still living in a state of partially varnished savagery" 42. Herbert Spencer too saw that savagery begins at home, remarking on the barbarity of the Jubilee celebrations 43. 

An anthropologist like Sir James Frazer could also see how close European man had always been to savagery, and his metaphors evoke the frailty of civilization. A remark from The Golden Bough may be compared with the earlier optimism of Gibbon:

"It is not our business here to consider what bearing the permanent existence of such a solid layer of savagery beneath the surface of society, and unaffected by the superficial changes of religion and culture, has upon the future of humanity. The dispassionate observer, whose studies have led him to plumb its depths, can

42. "Imperialism", p.126. 
hardly regard it otherwise than as a standing menace to civilization. We seem to move on a thin crust which may at any moment be rent by the subterranean forces slumbering below. From time to time a hollow murmur underground or a sudden spirit of flame into the air tells of what is going on beneath our feet.  

Frazer was particularly sensitive to the idea that civilization carried its own inner savagery as a mirror of the barbaric threat from without. The European peasant in particular reminded him of this: the class was "pagan and savage at heart" and their civilized aspects "merely a thin veneer which the hard knocks of life soon abrade, exposing a solid core of paganism and savagery beneath." The link between the barbarian outside decadent civilization and the barbarian within who is responsible for the decadence (a metaphor central to the psychology of decadence) is described in The Scope of Social Anthropology:

We appear to be standing on a volcano which may at any moment break out in smoke and fire to spread ruin and devastation among the gardens and palaces of ancient culture wrought so laboriously by the hands of many generations. After looking on the ruined Greek temples of Paestum and contrasting them with the squalor and savagery of the Italian peasantry, Renan said "I trembled for civilization, seeing it so limited, built on so weak a foundation, resting on so few individuals even in the country where it is dominant.

Obviously, for the dispassionate observer of late nineteenth century Europe there was plenty of evidence that what seemed to be civilization's zenith was in fact the nadir of barbarism; and the whole period shows how early and how clearly could be felt the strains of the decline into the Great War.

To envisage the primitive from the safety of a study in an English or Belgian house leads to a romantic view of the uncivilized parts of the world; to recall one's own civilization amid the frightening inhospitality of a dark continent leads to an understanding of the frailty of civilization. Joseph Conrad gives a good example of the perishing of romanticism: in 1890 he travelled up the

45. The Tangled Bank, p.207. See Hyman's chapter on Frazer (pages 187-292) and Freud (pages 293-424) for his discussions of the use of these metaphors.
Congo to the core of Africa on the journey which he was later to translate into man's classic quest for the heart of darkness. As a boy he had daydreamed of exploring that very spot, but as a man and actually there he found his boyish romanticism giving way to a reality that made him very uneasy: "A great melancholy descended upon me ... there was no shadowy friend to stand by my side in the night of the enormous wilderness, no great haunting memory, but only ... the distasteful knowledge of the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration."46

The environment Conrad finds near the Stanley Falls is anything but the refreshing Nature which the Romantic finds regenerative: as Aldous Huxley was to point out, man had "re-created Europe in his own image" in the nineteenth century, and its "tamed and temperate Nature confirmed Wordsworth in his philosophizings."47 Under a vertical sun, he argues, the Romantic's pantheism degenerates into diabolism: the returned explorer will describe a harsh, alien, inscrutable and immeasurable world. As in Conrad's diaries quoted above, the tropical surroundings are given no intrinsic qualities, and the explorer has to bring his human and civilized reactions along with his tropical kit.

Some of these come from Sir Richard Burton, who travelled in both East and West Africa and took home from there lurid accounts of the primitive customs he observed with which to reward the civilized Englishman with a decadent appetite for horror. In 1864 he published an account of his travels in Dahomey, and described in them his arrival at the palace of the king:

The approach to the palace was not pleasant. The north-eastern or market-shed was empty; out of its tenants, nine had perished. Four corpses, attired in their criminals' shirts and nightcaps, were sitting in pairs on Gold Coast stools, supported by a double-storeyed scaffold, about forty feet high, of rough beams, two perpendiculars, and as many connecting horizontals. At a little

distance, on a similar erection, but made for half the number, were two victims, one above the other. Between these substantial affairs was a gallows of thin posts, some thirty feet tall, with a single victim hanging by his heels, head downwards...

We then passed to the south-eastern gate of the Komasi House, where the palace shed was also untenanted. In front of sundry little black dolls, stuck in the ground at both sides of the entrance, lay a dozen heads. They were in two batches of six each, disposed in double lines of three; their faces were downwards, and the cleanly severed necks caught the observer's eye.

An account like this would underline to the sensitive European the romantic frailty of the idea of Progress, the precariousness of civilization itself in an inhospitable world. Burton himself prefaced his description above with the reminder that "A Dahoman visiting England but a few years ago would have witnessed customs almost quite as curious as those which raise our bile now", a reference to quaint European rites which Gibbon must have forgotten to notice; Booth's In Darkest England and the Way Out (1890) had a similar basic outlook.

The effect of such eagerly-devoured reports as Burton's - culminating in the avid response to the bloody atrocities of the Benin massacre and the reprisals of the 1890's - was to establish a collective self-image of a none-too-civilized and unromantic Europe surrounded by a world that was inscrutable jungle and all too capable of evidencing its innate barbarity. In the next section, we will see how nineteenth century scientific discovery worked to compound and augment this disturbing image.


Science in the nineteenth century eroded the old optimism and showed the gap between man's humanistic view of himself and his cosmic self-conception; for until this time, doctrines of Progress and Perfectibility were curiously detached from physical knowledge of the planet upon which they were supposed to occur. Man saw his evolution in a narrow, social context, and not in the broader biological context that was to come; when the historian evaluated

49. Among the popular descriptive works were A. Boisragon's The Benin Massacre (1837), H. H. Bacon's Benin the City of Blood (1897), and H. L. Roth's Great Benin: Its Customs, Art & Horrors (1903). [K. K. Ruthven, "The Savage God: Conrad and Lawrence", Critical Quarterly X, (1)(ii), 1968, p.45.]
man's development he felt, as we have seen, firm grounds for optimism.

It is not difficult to see why social prognosis tended to be kept separate from scientific knowledge in the eighteenth century. Geologists of the time had an extremely apocalyptic interpretation of the physical history of the planet, ascribing to it a life-span brief enough to suit the Biblical theory of Creation, and envisaging a series of volcanic catastrophes alternating with periods of calm and, in one popular variation, floods, of which Noah's was merely the best example. An earth afflicted with chronic earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and floods, while an impressive spectacle in itself, was not a suitable place for a mankind seen to be marching inevitably towards Sainte-Simon's Golden Age or Condorcet's Millennium. The eighteenth century mind appears to have been appropriately schizophrenic in its attitude to these two areas of thought, but as the century waned it became increasingly difficult to keep man and environment separate. New discoveries in geology emphasized the development on earth of biological species; geology and biology, and hence ontology and humanism, were being thrust together willy-nilly in the early years of the nineteenth century by an irreversible scientific process which steadily opened out the earth's developmental span and laid bare for study those generations of biological species which had no place in the eighteenth century world-picture.

James Hutton's Theory of the Earth (1788-95) envisaged a long period of uniform development and embraced the ideas of species and geological development. Hutton's Uniformitarianism received support from Sir Charles Lyell's Principles of Geology (1830-3) and Louis Agassiz's theory of Glacialism, announced in 1837, both of which described periods of prolonged and steady geological development. These early works forced many scientific disciplines together, stabilizing the

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geological theories of the earth's development and producing a time-scale which was later to suit evolutionary theories, but doing little damage to the doctrine of Special Creation. But as evolutionism became more firmly established, with its visions of aeons of slow development, nineteenth century man began increasingly to look like a latecomer who could not possibly have been present at the Creation. Gradually, aided by the pragmaticism of Malthus and Bentham, Progressivism relinquished its humanitarian-historical impulse to biological motivation, and the way was cleared towards the acceptance of scientific evolutionism.

Although there had been, even in the eighteenth century, theories of human development that were truly evolutionary they had never been taken seriously. Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) certainly was: bringing together the tendencies of fifty years he drew a Uniformitarian picture of the earth's development and then, working from fossil and embryo evidence, depicted groups of species developing steadily through generations and changing by mutation. His omission of a Creator from his scheme partly explains the uproar he created, but despite this the *Vestiges* did help to create an atmosphere in which evolutionism could sensibly be discussed. The next step is generally acknowledged to have been taken by Darwin with his *Origin of Species* (1859), but for the purposes of this section I wish to deflect discussion towards the evolutionism of Herbert Spencer, who is not widely known to have anticipated some of Darwin's ideas.

Spencer's essay, "The Development Hypothesis" (1851-4) discusses the question of evolution in its modern context for the first time; and an essay of this period entitled "A Theory of Population, Deduced from the General Law of Animal Fertility" (1852)51 coined the phrase, "survival of the fittest" which is usually ascribed to Darwin. Spencer had been allowing his characteristic curiosity to toy with evolutionary theories even before Chambers's work appeared, and in the late 1850's, quite independently of Darwin, he began to express

the need for a synthesis of all aspects of evolutionism, from the microcosmic to the cosmic. This was to become his famous "Law of General Evolution", and its significance lies in his willingness to fuse geology, biology, sociology, and even mechanical physics into the evolutionism which he was to elaborate during the remainder of his long life. The correctness or otherwise of this synthesis is quite immaterial; what does matter is his popularization in page after page of his many works of a view which linked the cosmic with the social and biological. Darwin's work, more specific and restricted than Spencer's, did not have such a range; but, having seen that certain aspects of Spencer's evolutionism have become attributed to Darwin, we may safely guess that what was to become known as "Darwinism" was coloured in the popular mind by Spencer's explicit introduction of cosmic terms into the rhetoric of evolutionism.

The induction by which the examination of heat in physics became a part of Spencer's System occurred a little after he produced his essay, "Progress: Its Law and Cause"\textsuperscript{52}. This shows Spencer intuitively setting up an all-encompassing notion of evolution which lacked only practical proof. This was found when he realized that the unstable state of homogeneity in his theoretical evolutionism resembled the conditions of heat conservation outlined in the First Law of Thermodynamics. This law asserts that all natural forces (electricity, gravity, magnetism, heat, and so on) are aspects of one universal force; Spencer described his law of evolution as being similar, as "an integration of matter and concomitant dissipation of motion"\textsuperscript{53}, a wholesale moving of all phenomena towards one state.

The strange union which followed Spencer's happy perception, between

\textsuperscript{52} Westminster Review, 1857: see Evolution and Poetic Belief, p.37.
\textsuperscript{53} First Principles (London: Williams & Norgate, 1884), 5th edn., p.396.
findings about heat engines and a theoretical synthesis, initially yielded happy results: the evolutionism of the first edition of First Principles (1862) was distinctively Progressivist in its optimism. "Evolution", Spencer states there, "can end only in the establishment of the greatest perfection and the most complete happiness". But by yoking his synthetic philosophy to the progress of discoveries in heat physics, Spencer unknowingly doomed not simply its optimism but, in the end, its validity as a synthesis: for he exposed it to the damaging discoveries about heat loss that were soon to be announced, and whose significance Spencer could not admit to himself until near the end of his life. Since these attacks were also generally directed at Darwin's discoveries, I will outline his contribution to nineteenth century man's self-conception before assessing the final problems which heat physicists were to pose for biologist and synthetic philosopher alike.

The core of Darwin's evolutionism was made public in a paper presented to the Linnean Society in 1858. The Origin of Species, published in the following year, well expressed what until then had merely oft been thought. The idea of the descent of species from earlier progenitors had been suggested before, as we have seen, but no empirical verification had ever been produced. Darwin's contribution was to translate evolutionism from the realms of philosophical speculation to the arena of scientific fact, not by introducing the idea of natural selection - which is Malthusian in origin, as Spencer would have known - but by proving evolutionism to have been a historical fact. To Malthus's notion that man multiplies in geometric progression, outstripping the sustenance provided by his environment, Darwin added the fact that species as they multiply vary in ways which make them more or less suited to survive the state of struggle; and his proof of this was so irrefutable that evolutionism could no longer be dismissed as speculative. Western man was confronted

at last with two images, one of man deprived of divine origin and, so it seemed, equated with the animal, and another of life deprived of inherent morality and consigned to chaotic and amoral struggle.

The hubbub created by the *Origin of Species* indicated that Darwin's contemporaries did not like what they saw. More illuminating than the professional attacks are those of the common man, who seemed to fear that Darwinian man was a man without a soul, the Darwinian world one without positive divine guidance, and the history of Darwinian man merely a senseless progression of generations in which the animal, man, instinctively and blindly continued to multiply his kind. Roppen quotes one typical response:

... there must have been a transition from the instincts of the brute to the noble mind of Man; and in that case, where are the missing links, and at what point of his progressive improvement did man acquire the spiritual part of his being and become endowed with the awful attribute of immortality?  

A contemporary commentator, John Dawson, is much less bothered about missing links, and his imagery is quite illuminating:

... the theory of the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest ... is nothing less than the basest and most horrible of superstitions. It makes man not merely carnal, but devilish. It takes his lowest appetites and propensities, and makes them his God and creator. His highest sentiments and aspirations, his self-denying philanthropy, his enthusiasm for the good and true, all the struggles and sufferings of heroes and martyrs ... are in the view of the evolutionist mere loss and waste, failure in the struggle for life.  

Clearly enough, the immediate alternative to man seen as divinely endowed was man seen as a devil in a waste land of ideals, and it is revealing that Dawson reached these conclusions by attacking Darwin and Spencer as co-authors of evolutionism.

Such visions of man were to be intensified by the discoveries in heat

55. *Fraser's Magazine*, July 1860; cited in *Evolution and Poetic Belief*, p.22.
physics which Spencer was so eager to assimilate into his system and, indirectly, into the general topic of evolutionism. I have suggested that the notion of the conservation of energy, expressed in the First Law of Thermodynamics, helped to crystallize Spencer's thinking. But in 1852 the Second Law of Thermodynamics was generalized by William Thomson (later Lord Kelvin), and as the years passed it became realized that this law was quite incompatible with any optimistic conceptions of evolution toward perfection. Kelvin's Second Law formulated discoveries made earlier by Continental physicists and asserted the "universal tendency in nature to the dissipation of mechanical energy", meaning that

within a finite period of time past the earth must have been, and within a finite period of time to come the earth must again be, unfit for the habitation of man as at present constituted ... 57

The First Law of Thermodynamics had reassuringly preached the eternal conservation of energy, but the Second Law showed that heat loss was not recoverable because always converted to other forms of energy. As a formula applied to heat engines, the Second Law is a neutral statement; but in Thomson's phrasing it becomes a statement about cosmic doom, depicting man aboard a dying planet ever more slowly circling a dying sun amidst a dying universe.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the idea seems to have been constantly revived, in language that becomes increasingly nihilistic. Thus the German physicist, Herman von Helmholtz, congratulated Thomson in 1854 for seeing "in the letters of a long known little mathematical formula, which only speaks of the heat, volume and pressure of bodies ... consequences which threatened the universe ... with eternal death". Elsewhere, Helmholtz

depicted a universe whose energy had been dissipated to evenly distributed heat and an earth whose organic development had been stilled, and concluded that "the universe from that time forward would be condemned to a state of eternal rest". An Englishman, Balfour Stewart, made equally spine-chilling remarks in 1873 in his treatise on the conservation of energy: "Universally diffused heat forms what we may call the great waste-heap of the universe, and this is growing larger year by year ... we are led to look at an end in which the whole universe will be one equally heated inert mass, and from which everything like life or motion or beauty will have utterly gone away".

By this point, all the implications of the Second Law of Thermodynamics had been drawn out and it had been fitted with the distinctive coinage, entropy, which Clausius had devised to quantify lost and irrecoverable energy.

There followed a long, public debate involving Thomson, Spencer, Darwin and others, in which the former constantly attacked evolutionary theories which did not conform with his estimation of the age of the earth. The nature and outcome of these arguments, which spread to America as well, are far less important than the fact that the debate tended to bring together the emotive issue of evolutionism and Thomson's reminder that the Solar System was cooling. Seen in this way, the Second Law of Thermodynamics is, like Darwinism, no longer a scientific discovery but a pessimistic image of man: a man reduced by one science to a bestial animal and placed by the other science under a dying sun. It was an image which the optimistic Spencer found hard to face; as P. B. Medawar says, Spencer could choose "between

58. Quoted in "Thermodynamics and History", p.494.
60. "Thermodynamics and History", p.494.
61. See "Thermodynamics and History", pages 495-505.
alternative doctrines of world transformation, the one apparently contradicting the other. The principle of General Evolution spoke of a secular increase of order... While the Second Law of Thermodynamics, suitably generalized, spoke of a secular decay of order and dissipation of energy\textsuperscript{63}. Spencer could have retained this decadent element in his system only by carefully dividing its effects into two. His dominant picture is extremely comforting: accepting the differentiating aspects of evolutionism, which are safely entropic, he foresaw the attainment of a final state of equilibrium, which would be distinguished by its harmonious nature; but quite separate from this was the state of dissolution, which was the final and wasteful state. Thus, for some time, he could claim that evolution would culminate in complete happiness, while dismissing all the dissolute tendencies he sensed in his borrowed material to a safely distant spot. As Robert Haight has tartly observed, Spencer appeared to believe in the evolution of everything but his own ideas\textsuperscript{64}, and it was not until the final edition of \textit{First Principles}, which appeared in 1900, that he finally removed his optimistic claims for the state of equilibrium and gave some emphasis to the contradictory passage in which he conceded the possibility of a more wide-spread and imminent doom for the planet\textsuperscript{65}.

Spencer's happy clutching-together of the optimistic and pessimistic strands of the thought of his age has given us a useful example of what was happening more generally in nineteenth century thought. It would be exciting to show the Second Law as revealing the grim truth about things to otherwise optimistic nineteenth century writers; but in fact, it came, hand in hand with Darwinism, at a time when writers and thinkers were managing to be very pessimistic

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65. \textit{First Principles}, (London: Watts & Co., 1900), 6th edn., p.462. The irony is that the over-ordering implicit in equilibrium develops into a sociological metaphor paralleling that dangerous boredom which precedes apocalypse.
indeed without any assistance. Rudolph Arnheim, who pinpoints the influence of the Second Law as becoming effective about 1870, goes on to say, "The Second Law stated that the entropy of the world strives towards a maximum, which amounted to saying that the energy in the universe, although constant in amount, was subject to more and more dissipation and degradation. These terms had a distinctively negative ring. They were congenial to a pessimistic mood of the times". As he goes on to say, the scientific verification of pessimism was only that, a confirmation of processes which had been identified in society for some time. "The sober formulations of Clausius, Kelvin and Boltzmann were suited to become a cosmic memento mori, pointing to the underlying cause of the gradual decay of all things physical and mental".

Like Nordau, the nineteenth century thinker seemed to need general explanations of what he felt to be going wrong about him.

Arnheim also mentions the useful remark of Henry Adams, who was one of the first to employ the term, "entropy", as a metaphor. The Second Law, said Adams, "to the vulgar and ignorant historian ... meant only that the ash heap was constantly increasing in size". The image he attributes to others is important, pointing forward to the twentieth century waste land and also backward to earlier depictions of the waste land. As Curtis Dahl has shown in his study of the waste land in Victorian poetry, Tennyson, Arnold, Browning, Swinburne, and Thomson all used extended images of the waste land during the later part of the Victorian period, and similar though slighter work was done by Hardy, Wilde, Morris, and Clough. While not all of these drew pessimistic conclusions, their very evident need to show that their society was metaphorically a waste is very revealing.

The picture of nineteenth century pessimism, with its growing awareness of decadence, has begun to broaden considerably, and the comprehensive nature of the phenomenon is noticeable; for here are different disciplines providing different kinds of decadence which can be formed into a single image. And if its outlines are blurred, there is strong definition at the centre. It is appropriate to close this examination of scientific decadentism with a glance at two of its most obvious products, the so-called "scientific pessimism" of T. H. Huxley, and of H. G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay* (1908).

In his famous Romanes Lecture of 1893 and the Prolegomena he later attached to it, Huxley summed up the findings of his generation and formed them into a metaphor which will occur again in this study. He begins "Evolution and Ethics" with the acknowledgement that "the state of the cosmos is the expression of the transitory adjustment of contending forces; a scene of strife, in which all the combatants fall in turn"70. The problem is "to discover the bearing of these facts on ethics; to find out whether there is, or is not, a sanction for morality in the ways of the cosmos"71. The metaphor Huxley provides for the apposition of man's ethical impulses and his original savagery is of the walled garden amid the jungle. The barbaric force of the cosmic process is rife beyond the walls and opposes man's attempts to set up order within them: "it is not only true that the cosmic energy, working through man upon a portion of the plant world, opposes the same energy as it works through the state of nature, but a similar antagonism is everywhere manifest between the artificial and the natural"72. Man, whether he tends the garden of ethics at home or at the heart of darkness, must be constantly on guard against the

71. *Evolution and Ethics 1893-1943*, p.64.
encroachment of the barbaric cosmic will within himself and from over the walls. And there is a further problem:

The garden was apt to turn into a hothouse. The stimulation of the senses, the pampering of the emotions, endlessly multiplies the sources of pleasure ... But the very sharpening of the sense and that subtle refinement of emotion, which brought such a wealth of pleasures, were fatally attended by a proportional enlargement of the capacity for suffering ... Finally, the inevitable penalty of over-stimulation, exhaustion, opened the gates of civilization to its great enemy, ennui; the stale and flat weariness when man delights not ... and life seems not worth living except to escape the bore of dying.\(^{75}\)

This is exactly the image Carter found in the French Decadence, and describes the dangers attending over-successful conduct of civilization, the decay into weakness which admits chaotic and barbaric outer forces. Such a picture - whose pessimism extends further than I have space to describe - is merely an adjustment of the carefully-split picture Spencer put forward: of the ordered, "equilibrious" social core surrounded by the waste land.

E. G. Wells directly inherited Huxley's views, and his novel, _The Time Machine_ (1895), provides the most famous literary description of the entropic extinction of the world, just as _The Island of Dr Moreau_ (1896) popularized the image of "Darwinian man".\(^{74}\) But it is _Tono-Bungay_, which Gillian Beer calls the "romance of commerce"\(^{75}\), which most successfully compresses social diagnosis and the scientific metaphors of the sort the nineteenth century pessimist was given to. Wells had thought of calling it _Waste_; the initial letters of the title reveal what he had in mind. It is a romantic lament for the wastage of all that was good in English society, a situation brought about by the growth to power of the commercial bourgeoisie and symbolized by the eponymous cure-all, the "slightly injurious rubbish"\(^{76}\) on which Edward

\(^{73}\) Evolution and Ethics 1893-1943, pages 65-6.


Ponderevo's commercial empire is built. His nephew George is a scientific optimist, who experiments with balloons in the vague hope of saving society, but since he tends to fall out of his dirigibles and into love with the worthless, aristocratic Beatrice Normandy, he reaches a point of futility which sees him, a good Victorian son, setting out for the heart of darkness.

Mordet Island, his threateningly-named goal, seems from the safety of England to offer a source of regeneration: it consists almost entirely of "quap", a substance Edward Ponderevo wishes to use commercially in light bulbs. But "quap" is a word which connotes waste, and when George and his crew reach Mordet Island they realize that "there is something—... cancerous—... about the whole of quap, something that creeps and lives as a disease lives by destroying; an elemental stirring and disarrangement, incalculably maleficent and strange"77. The men suffer from what we would call radiation sickness, their hands becoming unhealably sore, and George in desperation descends to the barbarity of murder. On the way back to England, their boat sinks after the quap eats right through its hull, and George later finds himself "haunted by a grotesque fancy of the ultimate eating away and dry-rotting and dispersal of all our world"78.

For all its significance for the times in which it was written, Tono-Bungay is really an allegory about the processes which afflicted nineteenth century Europe. As such, it is anything but a reassuring view, and tends further to define the age's self-image, which becomes not simply a garden of order threatened by weeds within and vines without, but a crumbling society in a waste land79.


In The Joyful Wisdom (1882), Friedrich Nietzsche presented his famous

77. Tono-Bungay, p.294.
78. Tono-Bungay, p.294.
79. For a more general survey of the literary scene in England at this time, see Frank Kermode, "The English Novel, Circa 1907", in Twentieth Century Literature in Retrospect, ed. R. A. Brower (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pages 45-64.
parable of the death of God: a madman with a lantern searches in broad daylight for God and silences his jeering onlookers by crying,

"Where has God gone? ... I shall tell you. We have killed him - you and I. We are all his murderers ... whether are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not perpetually falling? ... Do we not feel the breath of empty space? ... God is dead."

It is not clear whether Nietzsche thought God had been killed by the arrow of scientific discovery or through being neglected by a materialistic age; but he devoted his life to the setting out of a philosophy appropriate to the century in which, as William Barrett has said, Protestant man made his encounter with the void. He depicted a world in which man suddenly finds himself alone and surrounded by a universe no longer explicable by the guidance of an authoritative divine presence. It is this "collapsing" of the world "out there" upon the individual which is the most distinctive feature of the new ontology and, as Norberto Bobbio explains, it is from this point that we may apply the term "existential" to any world picture thus conceived, for "existentialism is the belated product, the posthumous fruit, of decadentism in the sphere of reflex thought".

Remarkably few studies of existentialism acknowledge its provenance in socio-scientific decadentism, but it is a relationship that becomes quite explicit in Bobbio's treatment. Existentialism, he declares,

counters hope with despair, the attainment of man's goal with final disaster, continuity of being with a rupture between being and existence, the coherence of rational thought with the inconclusiveness and impreciseness of a state of mind, the unspeakable joy aroused by the contemplation of being with the anguish aroused by the contemplation of nothingness - in short, faith in the

creative spirit of man, which is characteristic of idealism and positivism, with lack of faith and the will to destruction, as they stand revealed in decadentism.

I do not intend to examine in this section all aspects of existentialism, but I wish to discuss something of the ontology of decadence. Since the novelists to be seen in this study all create world-pictures which respond to an era of socio-scientific decadence, it is reasonable to assume that the world-pictures of the philosophers of decadence will illustrate those of the writers of fiction. This illumination will primarily be of structure, but in addition we will see the very concerns of existentialism occurring repeatedly as subject-matter. Existentialism, then, growing from the same barren ground as the fiction studied here, will be seen as a parallel development, but never as the focus of this study.

The decadentist philosopher of the nineteenth century inherited a world picture which his predecessors had divided into two: from Descartes on, there had always been the "inner", felt world and the "outer", intellectualized realm. Both Kant and Schopenhauer had responded to the growing pessimism of their times by attacking the dominance of the a priori world, but it was only when the depredations of socio-scientific decadence in the nineteenth century made it possible to think of the world as Godless that the "inner" and "outer" realms could be thought of as one. The Absolute banished, the world can no longer be thought of as "out there"; instead, it is chaotic and often absurd as it crowds in upon the viewer to remind him of the vacuity of a life without an informing purpose, of the meaninglessness of the sheerly

84. The Philosophy of Decadentism, p. 5.
85. See Irrational Man, pages 180–1.
physical when it is thrust before the observer, and of the presence of the void that is beyond the physical. The decadent feels himself both a part of this "self-world" and alienated from it; and it is scarcely necessary to recall that such a response to life is not the property of the existentialist philosopher alone, for we have already seen it in Decadent and Romantic poetry.

The existentialist philosopher, however, is distinguished by his attempts to achieve some kind of meaningful relationship with the absurd cosmos. The most coherent and specific of these attempts at reconciliation is in Søren Kierkegaard's Either/Or (1843), a paradigmatic early work which he elaborated in later works. Although it is difficult to find the words "existentialism" or even "decadence" in his writing, and although he is primarily a Christian writer, he is acclaimed as one of the fathers of modern existentialism because of the distinctive nature of his personal anguish and the clarity with which he sets out his predicament. The first part of Either/Or presents the documents of a young man known only as "A", who is in a state of rather romantic anguish; it sets out the steps by which the "aesthetic" stage of development is achieved, a state which involves simply the process of becoming conscious of the "self-in-the-world".

"My view of life is utterly meaningless" A gloomily announces early on 87: "Life has become a bitter drink to me" (p.20). Such alienated self-consciousness is reached by three stages, which Kierkegaard illustrates by reference to three of Mozart's operas. The first is represented by the Page in Figaro:

The sensual awakens, not yet to movement, but to a hushed tranquillity; not to joy and gladness, but to a deep melancholy. Desire is not yet awake, it is only a gloomy foreboding. In desire is always present the object of desire, which rises up

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and manifests itself in a bewildered twilight. This
condition progresses for the sensual, as clouds and mists
dissipate, and reflection on these matters draws nearer.
Desire possesses what will become its object, but possesses
it without having desired it, and so does not possess it.
This is the painful, but also in its sweetness, the delight-
ful and fascinating contradiction which in its sadness and
melancholy, resounds throughout this stage. (p.61)

This state is similar to that of the dreaming infant. The second step
on the path to the despair of full self-consciousness is symbolized by
Papageno in The Magic Flute. Here the self becomes more fully aware than
before of the world "out there", which occasionally penetrates to it:

Desire is directed toward the object, it is also moved
within itself, the heart beats soundlessly and joyously,
the objects swiftly vanish and reappear; but still before
every disappearance is a present enjoyment, a moment of
contact, short but sweet ... only momentarily is a deeper
desire suspected, but this suspicion is forgotten ... it
discovers. (p.65)

As soon as the self begins in this way to break out of the dream of self, it
becomes filled with dread or angst, which comes from awareness of the void
beyond the self, as Kierkegaard later stated in The Concept of Dread (1844):

In this state there is peace and rest, but at the same time
there is something else, which is not dissension and strife,
for there is nothing to strive with. What is it then?
Nothing. But what effect does it have? It feeds dread.
This is the deep secret of innocence, that at the same time
it is dread.

To become self-conscious, then, is to become filled with dread and angst; in
Kierkegaard's view man falls from innocence into consciousness, a consciousness
of the dreadful void that surrounds him. The third stage of this process is
symbolized by Mozart's Don Juan who, says Kierkegaard, turns away from the
empty world and seeks escape by burying himself without thought (and therefore
without full consciousness) in carnality. Mozart's musical version of the
arch-seducer is the most appropriate symbol of this phenomenon because "Don

pages 37-8.
Juan is the absolutely musical idea" (p.82) and "as soon as he acquires speech everything is altered" (p.86), for he then becomes a reflective animal. Mozart's musical Don "seduces with the demoniac power of sensuality" (p.82), and, as with the amnesiac, every encounter is fresh and new.

But the lucky Don Juan is an ideal figure whose aestheticism neither "A" nor Kierkegaard can emulate. Unable to bury themselves in the carnal world thoroughly enough to escape angst, they intensify it with their futile struggles. Their attempted aestheticism produces despair, which Kierkegaard describes in *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849):

> The torment of despair is precisely this, not to be able to die ... It is in this last sense that despair is the sickness unto death, this agonizing contradiction, this sickness in the self, everlastingly to die, and yet not to die ... This is the hot excitement, or the cold fire in despair, the gnawing canker whose movement is constantly inward, deeper and deeper in impotent self-consumption.

The unreflective Don Juan is always in a fulfilled present in which he is unaware of the passage of time; "A", fallen short of him, is aware of the passage of time and thus is prey to boredom as well despair. In *Either/Or* Kierkegaard sets out "The Rotation Method" of defeating boredom, which of course fails because it involves more rather than less thought. The retreat into the self outlined in "The Diary of the Seducer" (the last section of Part One) is also a failure, because it leads to irony. Part Two of *Either/Or*, setting out the "ethical" and "religious" phases which lie beyond the aesthetic, gives quite unconvincing outlines of a bourgeois way of life which Kierkegaard himself later rejected; and his world-picture remains dominated by the aesthetic mode and the image of man desperately alienated, caught up in a chaotic and manifestly empty world of absurdity.

But Kierkegaardian man can find himself confronted with evidence of intrusion into this self-world which has hitherto seemed so claustrophobic and impenetrable.

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When he does realize that the world contains objects apart from himself (even another part of his body) he is deeply shocked, for he has been sure that the world "out there" is all his. The metaphor which Kierkegaard uses here comes from Defoe: the apparition of the Other in the self-world is like the apparition of Man Friday upon Crusoe's island. It is mentioned in Repetition (1843), whose central figure has achieved unwonted aesthetic release by watching a brilliant comedian from a box at a theatre; he is fused with the events on the stage, his conscious mind lost, when "in the desert which I beheld about me I discovered a figure which gladdened me more than the sight of Friday gladdened the heart of Robinson. In a box directly opposite me was a young girl" 90. It is not her beauty which fascinates him, but her capacity to exist autonomously in his self-world. Later in the volume, a young man has a similar experience when caught in a thunderstorm; he too experiences terror at this intrusion into the self-world.

Kierkegaard's world of the anguished consciousness and the alarming intrusions of the Other is compatible with the philosophy of Nietzsche. In Twilight of the Gods (1883), Nietzsche describes a six-fold path through which philosophers have moved toward the abolition of the world "out there". The first stage contains the platonic notion of a "true" world immediately attainable by the pious; the second sees the withdrawal of this world because of the degeneration of piety; in the third it becomes an abstract world, and ineffable in the fourth stage; in the fifth (because of the "death of God") obsolete; and in the sixth, or "Nietzschean" stage we acknowledge that the world of appearances, being the only one available to our senses, is the only world, the self-world we each possess. 90a The parable of the death of God in The Joyful Wisdom is followed by Nietzsche's explanation of the "collapse" of the objective world

upon the self:

Consciousness of appearance: ... I have discovered for myself that the old human and animal world, indeed the entire prehistory and past of all sentient being, works on, loves on, hates on, thinks on in me - I have suddenly woken in midst of this dream but only to the consciousness that I am dreaming and that I have to go on dreaming in order not to be destroyed; as the sleepwalker has to go on dreaming in order not to fall. What is "appearance" to me now? Certainly not the opposite of some kind of being - what can I possibly say about being of any kind that is not a predicate of its own appearance? Certainly not a dead mask placed over an unknown "x", which could, if one wished, be removed! Appearance is for me the active and living itself, which goes so far in its self-mockery as to allow me to feel that there is nothing here but appearance and will-o'-the-wisp and a flickering dance of the spirits ... 91

In Twilight of the Gods he states that "being is an empty fiction ... The 'apparent' world is the only world; the 'real world' has only been deceitfully added ... "92. When a community of men assembles, their respective views, Nietzsche states, overlap to form community values and areas for error and debate; but the communal heritage of these values in turn sculpt each man's way of looking at his self-world.93 Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche concedes that beyond the subjective view of the world there may be concealed a horrifying reality (like Kierkegaard's Other manifest in the thunderstorm); this "may be true although it were harmful and dangerous in the highest degree; indeed, the basic constitution of existence might be such that one would be destroyed by a complete knowledge of it"94. This feeling that beyond our frail subjective knowledge of the world is a possibly malevolent reality will haunt the genre of decadent fiction.

This world-picture, almost completely stripped of any a priori impulce except the individual ones, intensifies Kierkegaard's and also exceeds it, for Nietzsche advocates two positive concepts which are far more interesting than Kierkegaard's

91. The Joyful Wisdom, p.88.
92. p.18.
93. Pages 26-49.
rather forlorn attempts at legislation. These concepts are the "will-to-power" and the "übermensch" or superman, both of which illustrate something of the decadent mind and make their way into the fiction of decadence.

Something of the emotional appeal that the idea of the "will-to-power" had for Nietzsche can be sensed in a letter he wrote to a friend when a young man, in which he describes one of his solitary walks in the countryside, the interruption of a violent thunderstorm (Kierkegaard's comes to mind), and his finding shelter in a hut where a man was slaughtering two animals. In an actual event very similar to some of his later parables, the rolling thunder, lightning flashes, stabbing of the knife and gouts of blood all united in his mind, it seems, in an epiphany of "pure will, without the troubles of the intellect. How strong! How happy!"95 This barbaric, instinctive will is all that is left to a world that has been stripped of abstract meaning, and as such is very familiar to us, if in a somewhat more moderate form, from the writings already seen in this section. This will-to-power generates all morality, which can have no other source; and the conversion of the will-to-power into other forms is an aspect of the civilizing process. In Human, All Too Human (1878), Nietzsche analysed the psychology of morality to prove that all motivation, good or evil, stems from the will, and elsewhere claimed that all civilized motives - love, altruism, asceticism, the desire for justice and liberty, and so on - resulted from a determined shaping of this single impulse.96

Two points naturally follow: first, a society which ceases to overcome the blind will falls all too easily away from the civilizing process and reveals its barbaric nature, a point which has resounded throughout all the nineteenth century writing we have seen in this section; secondly, the process of transcending the will requires a superhuman effort, and superhuman efforts require

supermen to practise them:

I teach you the superman. Man is something that should be overcome. What have you done to overcome him? All creatures hitherto have created something beyond themselves: and do you want to be the ab of this great tide, and return to the animals rather than overcome man? ... the superman is the meaning of the earth. 97

In the same volume in which he preached the doctrine of the Ubermenach, Nietzsche also set out his idea of the "eternal recurrence", a non-climactic view of history which can be seen as a part of the anti-Progressivist climate of his time: in it, he suggests that if history is not moving towards the establishment of the master-race, each civilization can nevertheless produce its own superman. He, according to Nietzsche, will legislate new and permanent values for mankind and maintain man's separation from his animal origins; his apotheosis is achieved by such a gigantic tug on his own bootstraps that he is no longer human, but a full replacement for the Creator Nietzsche's age appeared to have sent away.

5. In Summary.

By the closing years of the nineteenth century, the sensitive reader of contemporary fiction who was also familiar with the popular scientific journals and philosophical debate of his time could piece together a comprehensive, if not always fully coherent, picture of a universe which man could well despair at seeing. This new world, often called by its inhabitants the "post-Darwinian", was one in which the role of the Creator had been so constantly thrust back in time by scientific discovery that to many it seemed that no possible tasks remained for Him to have performed; in which the positivism of discoveries in science seemed incarnated in the materialism of Europe's bourgeois society; in which the ethics of Progress and Improvement toward future millennia had long been weakened by the evolutionists' picture of the

meaningless progression of generations and by the physicists' termination of the life-prospects of the universe itself. Huxley could show the precariousness of civilization before the barbaric cosmic will; Spencer's revisions could show the collapse of the old optimism before inescapable forces of decay; Nietzsche could display what appeared to be a glad acceptance of the death of God; Moriald could be seen berating Europe for its degeneracy.

Such a reader could turn to Tennyson's later poetry and find in "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After" (1886), for example, a thoroughgoing pessimism which was the culmination, not the reverse, of a trend begun at the time of Arthur Hallam's death in 1833. "The Two Voices" (1842), "In Memoriam" (1850), "Maud" (1855) and others all express this personal grief and nihilism in a cosmic terminology and imagery which derives, as Rappen argues, from Tennyson's knowledge of scientific development. The second Locksley Hall poem summarizes this process:

Half the marvels of my morning, triumphs over time and space,
Staled by frequency, shrunk by usage into a commonest commonplace!
(lines 75/6).

Evolution – seen as a synonym for Progress, revealingly enough – falters and is pulled down:

Evolution ever climbing after some ideal good,
And Reversion ever dragging Evolution in the mud.
(lines 199/200).

This "Reversion" is not a personal force but a general, social decadence, it seems. Arnold, too, in his famous "Dover Beach" and also in "Empedocles on Etna", faced the problem of the recession of faith, while at other times he appeared to think of the ideal state as unattainably in the future, not in the past: "That promised land it will not be ours to enter, and we shall die in the wilderness".

98. Rappen discusses fully Tennyson's knowledge of some nineteenth century scientific developments and its effect on his poetry in Evolution and Poetic Belief, pages 66-111.
As we have seen in this introductory section, "fin de siècle" gloom set in long before the end of the century, and even by 1870, when scientific discovery could be said to have begun reinforcing men's misgivings about English society, a solid body of pessimistic literature had been established. The literature of the remaining years of the century seems merely to confirm and elaborate this trend: Swinburne's and Meredith's lusty paganism, or Thomson's *City of Dreadful Night* (1870), or Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1894), are all a part of the phenomenon which included the English Decadent poets and the "fin du siècle" practitioners we have already seen.

In this chapter I have attempted more than to narrate some of the changes which occurred to nineteenth century man's picture of himself in the society of his times and in the world, however. I have tried to focus on some of the images with which he furnished his picture, as well as some of the more common attitudes he struck when contemplating it. What I have tried to underline is how much the various metaphors employed have in common. From history came the popular image of the barbarian horde bearing down upon the crumbling walls of civilization; the social anthropologist recorded an image of man standing on a thin crust under which bubbled volcanic lava, ever-ready to erupt. Yeats, and later Melchiori, preferred the image of the writer whose skill alone preserves his balance on the tightrope above the void. Carter refers to the hot-house image of Decadentism, the artificial growths in their unnatural and stifling climate within, and the coarse jungle in the intertemperate climate without. Huxley preferred the image of the garden of civilization, its order frantically tended while its walls become draped with the vines of the surrounding jungle. Darwin seemed to offer a picture of a savage and ungodly man whose civilized ways were merely extensions of his ancestors' struggle for survival. Spencer, and Henry Adams after him, popularized the concept of the ordered core around man losing its order to
the burgeoning waste land which surrounds him. The Decadents and Parnassians offered the artistry of Axel's castle against the siege of everyday life. And, at the more personal level, Kierkegaard depicts man as a Robinson Crusoe disturbed to find an Other in the world of self; while Nietzsche sees him as surrounded by a multitude of surfaces which might conceal a destructive reality.

These images of a decadent universe, all bespeaking the precariousness of man's lot and the dominance of the chaotic and the barbaric, can be fused into a single metaphor. This composite picture of the decadent world will show the decadent figure alienated from his environment, which to him is bewilderingly superficial and empty. Whether he uses the metaphor of the hot-house, the walled garden, the walled city or the castle of civilization, he conceives of himself as being shut off from the savage world which nevertheless, to his dismay, is constantly revealing itself to him as a horrifying and inhuman order of reality visible through shattered pane or over decaying wall, in the vine and the savage who advance over the paving stones of his civilization. And constantly, he sees in himself signs that he truly belongs beyond the pale, in the realm of the savage and the chaotic, and that his civilization is at an end.

Order and the decay of order are at the heart of this metaphor, and we have seen that the notion of entropy, with its connotations of waste and the waste land, is central to this. Quiescent in literature for eighty years, entropy will become an active metaphor in contemporary American fiction, where it will become a synonym for general decadence. Also, by means of a scientific sleight-of-hand, it will elaborate the notion of linguistic decadence which had its philosophic origin in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1922) of Ludwig Wittgenstein, a work whose basic assumptions, as we will see, belong properly to the late nineteenth century. Also a part of this period, and
a part of the composite metaphor of decadence which I have set out above, is the collapse of the classical physics of Kelvin and his colleagues and the birth in 1900 of quantum physics; later in this study, we will be able to place this development in the context of the decadentist world-picture.

The literature to which we now turn will employ various parts of this decadentist metaphor, for, as will be seen, the writers to be examined exhibit not only a conviction of some sort that they belong to a decadent society but an awareness that they are writing within a literary genre. In the next section, we turn to the first major writer of this genre, and find in Joseph Conrad a writer who, at the dawn of the twentieth century, makes an archetypal expression of decadentism in fiction.
SECTION TWO: CONRAD AND THE DECADENTIST NOVEL.


2. *Lord Jim* (1900).

3. *In Summary.*
If evidence were needed of the extent to which the idea of decadence had become current at the dawn of the twentieth century, the letters of Joseph Conrad to his friend, the socialist and parliamentarian, R. B. Cunningham Graham, written between 1897 and 1905, would provide it. His naturally gloomy pessimism was nourished by a fair understanding of what the philosophers and scientists were saying about his planet and his age, and this distinctive nihilism, expressed with the language and images of the English Decadence, informs his earliest novels. It is difficult not to turn up some of his blacker remarks when reading his letters; for example, in August of 1897 he writes to Graham, "often I fancy myself clinging stupidly to a derelict planet abandoned by its precious crew. Your voice ... seems to come through the clean emptiness of space". When he is not resembling Hardy or Flaubert, he can indicate a knowledge of what Kelvin and his

fellow-physicists had announced to the world:

Nothing can touch man but the curse of decay - the eternal decree that will extinguish the sun, the stars one by one, and in another instant shall spread a frozen darkness over the whole universe ...  

The mysteries of a universe made of drops of fire and clods of mud do not concern us in the least. The fate of a humanity condemned ultimately to perish from cold is not worth troubling about. If you take it to heart it becomes an unendurable tragedy. If you believe in improvement you must weep, for the attained perfection must end in cold, darkness, and silence.

... there is nothing more, do you understand, Absolutely nothing, oh foolish man! Nothing. A moment, a blink of the eye and there is nothing more - but a gob of mud, of cold mud, of dead mud flying through black space, turning around an extinguished sun. Nothing. No thought, no sound, no soul. Nothing.

His view of the origin of the universe is strictly deterministic: like Nietzsche, he thinks of it as firmly materialistic and phenomenal:

There is — let us say — a machine. It evolves itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold! — it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider — but it goes on knitting. You come and say: "this is all right; it's only a question of the right kind of oil. Let us use this — for instance — celestial oil and the machine shall embroider a most beautiful design in purple and gold." Will it? Alas no. You cannot by any special lubrication make embroidery with a knitting machine. And the most withering thought is that the thing has made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart ... you can't even smash it ... it is what it is — and it is indestructible!

It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair ...

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A doomed world, a meaningless universe, a humanity endlessly multiplying itself; in this context man himself is "less than a shadow, more insignificant than a drop of water in the ocean, more fleeting than the illusion of a dream"\(^6\), and his morality - the morality Huxley believed civilized man must struggle to preserve for himself - becomes irrelevant when placed against the neutrality of the void: "the ardour for reform, improvement for virtue, for knowledge, and even for beauty is only a vain sticking up for appearances as though one were anxious about the cut of one's clothes in a community of blind men"; faith "is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore; thoughts vanish; words, once pronounced, die ... "\(^7\). Elsewhere, he states that "Egoism is good, and altruism is good, and fidelity to nature would be best of all, and systems could be built, and rules could be made ... our refuge is in stupidity, in drunkenness of all kinds, in lies, in beliefs, in murder, thieving, reforming ... There is no morality, no knowledge and no hope ... "\(^8\).

If morality is without basis and meaning in an inhuman universe - which was the Nietzschean view - then the words which convey morality are equally invalid. Conrad constantly points to the gap which opens between objects and the words and values which man gives to them: "Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion and folly of his own conceit"\(^9\). Five years later he tells Graham that man's best thoughts are "unutterable - not because of their profundity but because there is a devil that tangles the tongue or hangs to the penholder making its use odious and the sound of words foolish like the banging of tin cans"\(^10\).

The idea that language has decayed as a means of coping with a confusing world will be developed both by Wittgenstein and the later American novelists.

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8. 31 Jan. 1898, Joseph Conrad to Cunningham Graham, pages 70-1.
10. 19 March 1903, Joseph Conrad to Cunningham Graham, p.141.
What can a man be if deprived of full consciousness, values, and morality, of language that truly communicates, of a meaningful world to live in? In Conrad's vision, man is dehumanized and inanimate. Speaking of human actors in a play, he claims to prefer marionettes, "especially those of the old kind with wires, thick as my little finger, coming out of the top of the head. Their impassibility ... is heroic, superhuman ... I love the marionettes that are without life, that come so near to being immortal." For mankind seen in this way, a dull future waits - the so-called "heat-death" is not quite imminent - in the new century:

The stodgy sun of the future ... lingers on the horizon, but all the same it will rise - it will indeed - to throw its sanitary light upon a dull world of perfected municipalities and WC's sans peur et sans reproche. In its barrenness, this is full confirmation of the tendencies in nineteenth century thought toward the erosion of faith and the recession of meaning from the world. The earth is envisaged as merely existing in the universe, containing no inherent or abstract meaning or spiritual life; there is no fulfilment but mere progression; man is insensitive, half-conscious, inanimate and isolated, his morality and religion devoid of an objective anchor and therefore buffeted by those who do not recognize them.

The question must be asked at this point whether such a bleak vision of human existence is capable of any expression whatever in fictional form: it is a brief, or at least a simple, novel which will tell us that life is meaningless, and this paradox presents itself repeatedly to the reader in this genre. How does one employ the traditional romance form - that is, the coherent, plotted and progressive fiction - to say that life is empty? Conrad's answer is revealed parabolically in another of his letters to Cunningham Graham:

11. 6 Dec. 1897, Joseph Conrad to Cunningham Graham, p.50.
Ah! The lone tree on the horizon and then bear a little — (a very little) to the right. Haven't we all ridden with such directions to find no house but many curs barking at our heels. Can't miss it? Well perhaps we can't. And we don't ride with a stouter heart for that. Indeed my friend there is a joy in being lost, but a sorrow in being weary... ride on to the tree and then to the right — for verily there is a devil at the end of every road. Let us pray to the potbellied gods... to guard us from the mischance of arriving somewhere.

Tony Tanner comments on this passage in a way which sees it as the key to Conrad's artistic vision: for Tanner,

Conrad reached that last stage of nihilism which very few other writers — Melville is one — have experienced. The stage at which the greatest fear is not that the meaning of life might be evil but that there might be absolutely no meaning at all to be found. It is easy to state it thus glibly; but to have that conviction gnawing at you for the better part of a lifetime must be a rare and unenviable experience. Which is perhaps why Conrad's letters are among the most anguished any writer has left us. Such a man may well pray for the grace of non-arrival.

The world Conrad sees, in other words, exists and things happen in it, but it has no meaning; and if it ever appears to reverberate with hidden meaning or shimmer with the promise of fulfilment, such meaning and fulfilment are meretricious illusions. Conrad sees the world as wholly materialistic, and man as applying to it his evaluations and descriptions, which remain to a certain extent relative and arbitrary. As E. M. Forster has remarked of Conrad, "the secret casse of his genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel"; and at the core of Conrad's art is his acknowledgement of the ultimate hollowness of life.

Thus, as Tanner says, there is implicit in that nihilistic letter a literature of evasion, an acknowledgement that were he to use the methods of the traditional novel, and particularly of the romance, he would bring his fiction to face a featureless void. But a grail quest without a grail seems unthinkable to Conrad — later writers will not turn from the prospect — and the only solution possible to this dilemma is to deflect the narrative line of his fiction.

away from the hollowness that is always threatening to be revealed. Thus the artist aims his narrative towards "The lone tree on the horizon" and then bears "a little ... to the right". If there is indeed a devil at the end of every road (not a devil which speaks of evil but one which betokens the even greater horror of the void), the writer will do all in his power to chart a meandering course towards it. Fundamental to Conrad's art, then, is this understanding of the darkness at the heart of life, and fundamental to his technique is the art of avoiding a direct confrontation with this darkness.

The realization that his art strongly needed such ways of evasion in order to remain an art seems to have come during the creation of Heart of Darkness, Marlow's story of his Congo trip, in which he completes the traditional romantic quest for understanding or salvation by arriving at the hollow core itself. But although the novella is Conrad's first fictional acknowledgement of the heart of darkness, it is the climax of a series of fictions which express a strong conviction in the decadence of life. This series begins with Almayer's Folly (1895) and continues with An Outcast of the Islands (1896) and The Nigger of the Narcissus (1898); in all of these, Conrad can be seen as a fin de siécle novelist whose artistic affectations of despair and enervation are steadily replaced by a more truly felt nihilism. The Decadent content of these early novels has been explored by Frederick R. Karl, who emphasizes the heavy "enamelling" this influence gave to the writer's early prose style; the trappings of Decadent poetry are visible in Almayer's Folly, where the primeval nature of the jungle is constantly mentioned in the text, where storms return in their indifferent fury, and the moon casts its deceptive reflections on the sea. Often in this novel, these elements occur all at once, almost as a set piece, a phenomenon which Karl attributes to the influence of Conrad's favourite poet,

Arthur Symons. This influence seems present in *An Outcast of the Islands*, too, which adds to Conrad's properties a primitive native seductrix called Afessa, and both of these novels are dominated by symbols of the impotence of civilization when it is pitted against the relentless and inhuman forces of primitive nature; Almayer's new but ruined house and the erosion of civilized values in each of the main characters of the second novel are examples of this. *The Nigger of the Narcissus* is a curious mixture of spare, direct descriptions of vigorous physical action, and language which becomes cloying and unconvincing because, like the language of Decadent poetry, it is self-conscious and unrelated to what it purports to describe.

"As representative works of the late nineteenth century", Karl remarks of these novels, they show "only a moderate movement toward a new style in the novel, preliminary steps as yet unsure of direction". But by 1899-1900 Conrad's literary development was becoming surer, partly because his fiction was moving toward the safer ground of directly autobiographical experience. *Heart of Darkness* was written at what was, for him, breakneck speed: it was started and finished during the first five weeks of 1899 while he wrestled with the beginning of *Lord Jim*, a book which at the time promised to be of novella length as well. The coincidental composition of these two works is important, for it suggests that the semi-autobiographical and artistic problems involved in the conception of the longer work were vicariously solved in the more strongly autobiographical shorter one. The expansion of this point may be made now, with the further aim of understanding these two novels as fictions of decadence.

1. *Heart of Darkness* (1901).

*Heart of Darkness*, for all its intrinsic complexities of narrative technique,

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employs a fairly simple linear form which we will see again in Lord Jim. This is Marlow's tale of his youthful journey up the Congo in a battered steamboat to fetch an ivory trader called Kurtz, and is told to a group aboard a boat anchored in the Thames at dusk. The setting is significant, for, as Marlow says, "this also has been one of the dark places of the earth" he goes on to evoke the pagan past of Britain during the Roman invasion and occupation in a way which not only underlines the savage origins of contemporary Britain but also draws parallels between the doomed Romans on the Thames and the later British explorers on the Congo. The Europe that Marlow describes himself leaving as a young man is exhausted and boring, a "whited sepulchre" (p. 55), and his trip into Africa is seen as a chance for adventure and rejuvenation. The journey is a literal one of many hundreds of miles as well as a symbolic one into the subconscious and a metaphoric one from civilized exterior to primitive interior. A fragile civilization deriving from Europe is threatened throughout Heart of Darkness by the brooding presence of the savage and the barbaric, as is conveyed in Conrad's image of the French warship off the African coast, blindly "firing into a continent" (p. 62). Before reaching the mouth of the Congo, Marlow's steamer stitches its way down the continental sea-coast, dropping off civilization's soldiers and clerks into "settlements some centuries old, and still no bigger than pin-heads on the untouched expanse of their background" on "the edge of a colossal jungle, so dark green as to be almost black" (p. 60). "Watching the coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma", Marlow states before he arrives at the mouth of the Congo (p. 60).

Once there, he sails thirty miles up the river and finds that the further he proceeds into the continent, the more fragile is civilization's hold. At the ivory trading station which is his immediate goal, he finds that a Swede has hanged himself out of sheer desperation; he is passed by a mute chain gang.

19. Heart of Darkness in Youth, a Narrative and Two Other Stories (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1923), pages 45-162; p. 43. Subsequent references in text.
of natives; others loll under a tree, where they are dying of the diseases the white man has brought. Here, where European and native meet together, the civilized and the primitive affect each other equally: metaphorically, there is no difference between the two, as I have suggested in my introductory section. Civilization's strongest representative is the man who has worked hardest to keep himself in order: the chief accountant, in his "high starched collar, white cuffs, ... light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, ... clean neck-tie, and varnished boots" (p.67), has placed against the ravages of the primitive the limited but clear meaning of his ledgers. Marlow, set the task of repairing the damaged steam-boat, similarly turns to the task in hand in order to avoid thinking of the barbarity around him: "What I really wanted was rivets, by heaven!" he cries at one point: "Rivets. To get on with the job - to stop the hole ... " (p.83). The manager of the station, an uneasy figure, has survived, but not through rigidity: he is strangely impervious to disease. "Men who come out here should have no entrails", he states (p.74), and Marlow speculates that there might be "nothing within him" (p.74). It is he who tells Marlow about Kurtz, an ivory trader whose great abilities exceed even those of the apple-pie chief accountant, but who has fallen ill at his station far up the Congo.

Marlow's journey up the Congo to fetch the sick Kurtz back to civilization is a masterpiece of illusions, and "like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings" (pages 92-3). Aboard the old steam-boat (itself a symbol of the Victorian idea of Progress, being battered and corroded in an inhospitable environment) the Europeans can see nothing on the banks, but are certain that they are being watched. They hear distant drum-beats and war-cries continuously, and a shot-gun blast into a bush on the bank hits several natives concealed.

20. The chief accountant, like Marlow, betrays here a typically Victorian belief in the need to work in order to keep anti-Progressive forces at bay. See "The Living Present" in The Triumph of Time, pages 116-136.
there. A fog descends, magnifying and distorting sounds but concealing all else, as if the very heart of darkness were already reached; and the boat itself runs aground on a sandbank that lies a few inches below the surface of an apparently-innocuous stream. The journey is recorded as a series of images which imply that beyond the superficial a hidden and destructive reality exists, with the further implication that the end of the journey will reveal this reality.

Marlow and his colleagues reach their comrades to find that his decay is more than simply physical. Kurtz has "gone native" long before, and is now revered as a god by the natives: he has indulged in what Marlow, in a moment of civilized understatement, has called "unspeakable rites" (p.118) and "inconceivable ceremonies" (p.115). Between Marlow and Kurtz there is at this point an enormous gulf of understanding, which leaves Kurtz looking merely devilish. The most eloquent example of this gap occurs when Marlow "rescues" Kurtz from the natives: Kurtz is lying sick near a fire which is surrounded by the fiendish figures of natives, and Marlow cuts off his retreat with all the glee of a "boyish game" (p.142); Kurtz faces in toward the fire and its native figures while Marlow stands with his back towards it, looking out. The trivial Marlow is obviously too "civilized" to understand Kurtz at this stage, and only begins to alter his opinion during the journey back down the Congo.

When they have left this garish and heathen spot, Kurtz dies aboard the steamer, the enigmatic words, "The horror! The horror!" upon his lips (p.149). Our interpretation of what Conrad means in Heart of Darkness turns upon the different ways in which we interpret this ambiguous utterance, with its "strange and terrible message of ambivalence toward the life of civilization", as Lionel Trilling calls it. Does Kurtz's death-cry refer to the unspeakable bestial-ities of his native experience, or to the barbarity of the decadent "civilization"

to which he is being returned, or simply to an apprehension of the primitive power revealed to him in the heart of the African darkness, the utter meaninglessness of the inscrutable universe which is incarnated in the malevolent countryside? Does he, as Nietzsche thought it possible to do, sense the essential horror of existence?

Conrad does not single out any interpretation as authoritative, and preserves this balance by juxtaposing two equal but opposite views of Kurtz. Earlier in the novella, Kurtz's character tended to be revealed to us in glimpses, the chief accountant and others giving their judgements of him; here, the curious harlequin-figure of the young Russian, who unreservedly idolizes Kurtz, is balanced by Marlow and his steady disapproval. But before Kurtz dies, and as the steamer chugs slowly down the Congo, Marlow steadily begins to alter his opinion of Kurtz, for Conrad must use him in order to stress the point that Kurtz's horror reflects a true view of the nature of civilized life in a malevolent universe. "Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again ... It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror - of an intense and hopeless despair" (p.149). The rent veil is the tissue of civilization - "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (p.117) - the expressions revealed all those of the ivory-craving barbarity that is at the heart of civilization. Then Marlow himself falls ill, and comes closer still to Kurtz, who seems now "a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines" (p.149); the death which Marlow manages to fight off has an "impalpable greyness" too (p.150), and when he has recovered he is able to "affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man ... since I peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare [that] was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough

to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness" (p.151). Kurtz, Marlow now seems, has always seen things clearly and whole; has sensed the emptiness of existence and the inhumanity of man's natural barbarity, something suggested earlier when Kurtz scrawls "Exterminate all the brutes" over his "improving" treatise on how to civilize the native (p.118).

Marlow's search in Heart of Darkness, then, becomes a search not for a man but for a meaning, and in turn an understanding that there is no meaning to be found in the world. Kurtz is, appropriately, not a full or developed character at all but a "hollow sham" (p.147) and a "Shadow" (p.143): he is a figure gutted of meaning and swallowed by the dark void which he has found in primitive Africa.

The manager of the ivory trading station was correct in suggesting that only a man without entrails could survive at the heart of darkness; and it is from this sort of hollowness that Conrad, working through Marlow, must attempt to deflect the reader. Like its title, the novel as a whole becomes incapable of explication because of the success of this technique of decoying the reader from directly confronting its hollow core; instead, there is presented a series of balanced judgements, an array of perspectives of the single subject.

Constantly, to use Conrad's own terminology, we are steered for the lone tree of understanding - the understanding of our awful meaninglessness and barbarity - and then deflected a little to the right.

2. Lord Jim (1900).

In the full-length novel, begun as he dashed off the novella, Conrad developed more fully these processes of procrastination and avoidance. The pair of judgements balanced about Kurtz grows in the novel to a full series of perspectives of Jim. What Conrad is doing here effectively corresponds to any artistic prescriptions Nietzsche might have made, and both Heart of Darkness and Lord Jim use techniques which strongly reinforce the world-view of the decadentist philosopher. For Nietzsche, as we have seen, the world, being thoroughly
materialistic, was devoid of a spiritual dimension: and we have seen Conrad's conviction of the truth of such a view in his letters. For Nietzsche, there can be no core of meaning to be found by the quester; Conrad, too, shares such pessimism. For Nietzsche, there are only perspectives, visions of superificies, which, varying from viewer to viewer, both contradict and confirm one another in varying parts; and Lord Jim, as we are about to see, employs exactly this technique of viewing its central figure. Like Nietzsche, Conrad knew the folly of looking for meanings and explanations in a neutral universe, and at this point we can see that the genesis of Marlow as Conrad's surrogate-narrator at this period of his artistic development is inevitable: Conrad needed someone to go on his fool's errands for him.

When, quite late in Lord Jim, Marlow finds that he is not bringing back answers about the significance of Jim but conflicting views of his man instead, he gives up his quest. This is then conferred upon an anonymous "privileged reader", who views the actions of the last third of the novel. Marlow's last view of Jim, after his visit to Patusan, presents him as disappearing into a void:

He was white from head to foot, and remained persistently visible with the stronghold of the night at his back... For me, that white figure in the stillness of coast and sea seemed to stand at the heart of a vast enigma. The twilight was ebbing fast from the sky above his head, the strip of sand had sunk already under his feet, he himself appeared no bigger than a child - then only a speck, that seemed to catch all the light left in a darkened world... And then, suddenly, I lost him.

This enigmatic and ultimately inaccessible figure is Marlow's and Conrad's focal point, to be seen darkly through many glasses. The reader must peer at Jim firstly through the eyes of Conrad, then through Marlow's, then through those of the "privileged reader" as he writes to Marlow at the very point when Jim seems, at last, to become a little more accessible to the reader. And all the time, there are the seven or eight evaluations of Jim that are given by the

various characters Marlow meets. Reading Lord Jim is like living itself, for
the process of judgement and evaluation is conferred upon the reader; and an
ironic hint at the difficulty of objective vision in this novel is given early
when Marlow visits the alcoholic engineer of the "Patna" in hospital. "I tell
you there are no such eyes as mine this side of the Persian Gulf" the delirious
engineer tells Marlow (p.52), underlining the visual and hence perspectival
nature of the novel; and he points for proof to the millions of pink toads that
he sees gathered under his bed. Marlow, not a delirious alcoholic, cannot see
them; but for the chief engineer they are definitely there. With such a warning
from Conrad before us, we can now turn to examine each of the differing perspec-
tives of Jim which are given in the novel, in the order in which they occur.

An early view of Jim is provided by the deserters of the apparently-
stricken, pilgrim-laden "Patna", which has struck an unidentified, half-submerged
object in the Indian Ocean at night. Jim ends up literally in the same boat
as the deserters, having almost involuntarily abandoned his romantic conceptions
of heroism when confronted by the reality of disaster. His leap from the
"Patna" is "into an everlasting deep hole"(p.111), which evokes the void into
which Kurtz was pitched by his African experiences; for, like Kurtz, Jim finds
himself surrounded by confusion and turmoil. The question implied by his
association with the pig-like German captain of the vessel and the other repul-
sive deserters is whether he is one of them, whether he is fully and satisfyingly
explained as another of the "dirty owls" (p.123) in the boat. Clearly,
although this judgement holds a grain of truth, it will not stand alone as the
final comment on Jim, a fact Jim himself signals to the reader by scrupulously
sitting at the other end of the boat from his companions.

This "Patna" episode is broken by another - a facet of Conrad's complex

24. The idea that both Kurtz and Jim have "fallen" is attractive to the literary
psychoanalyst; for various discussions of this aspect in both novels see
David Ketterer,"Beyond the threshold'in Conrad's Heart of Darkness", Texas
Studies in Language and Literature XI, 2, (Summer 1969), p.1013; Allan H.
Hollingsworth, "Freud, Conrad, and the Future of an Illusion", Literature
narrative sequence - which involves the steamer captain, Brierly, whom Jim finds judging him at the court of inquiry into the "Patna" desertion. Jim's youthful idealism seems to be fulfilled in the initial appearance of the older man: Brierly is bluff and strong, with a heroic reputation and the early command of a large ship. "The sting of life could do no more to his complacent soul than the scratch of a pin to the smooth face of a rock", Marlow comments, adding that "his self-satisfaction presented to me and to the world a surface as hard as granite. He committed suicide very soon after" (p.58). Implicit in this episode is Brierly's gaining of an unbearable self-knowledge while presiding over the autopsy of Jim's cowardice. Again, there is a parallel with Jim, a partial identification of two characters; but Brierly's past remains a secret, and this perspective of Jim is finally unrewarding.

And little further ground is gained in the third perspective of Jim, given by the French lieutenant whom Marlow meets in Sydney. Devoid of Jim's romantic imagination, the lieutenant has coolly performed the acts of practical heroism which escaped Jim in the same situation. He reveals to Marlow that it was he who boarded the deserted and listing "Patna" and "stayed on that ship thirty hours" (p.140) while his own craft towed it to safety. He is motivated not by Jim's woolly romanticism but by a more pragmatic code of honour. For him, the act "was judged proper" (p.141), for man "is born a coward ... It is a difficulty - paradox! It would be too easy otherwise. But habit - habit - necessity - do you see? the eye of others - voilà. One puts up with it. And then the example of others who are no better than yourself, and yet make good countenance ... " (p.147). For the lieutenant, honour alone is real, and he cannot judge Jim's case, for honour has vanished from it. Once more, a fleeting parallel has been formed between Jim and a character who has a certain

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perspective of him; but we find ourselves being drawn away from Jim by the
resemblances, instead of towards him.

A fourth such oblique encounter occurs when Marlow meets the Australian,
Chester, and his associate, Robinson. These two are the novel's extreme
materialists, focussing their avarice upon a guano island (like Wells's "Mordet
Island") which is in the Indian Ocean and which they intend to exploit. Their
assessment of Jim is a suitably practical one: needing a white man to control
black labourers upon their desolate island, Chester asks Marlow to offer the
job to Jim, who in their opinion is "no good" (p.166), and therefore suitable
for such a lowly task. Marlow rejects the offer on behalf of Jim, confirming
that Jim is not kindred to the likes of Chester and Robinson; and once more
we find that a perspective of Jim has drawn as far away from him as it has
led towards him (especially when the value of their judgement is shadowed by
their death at sea on the way to the island). A further disparaging perspect-
ive of Jim is given at Patusan by the scurrilous and beetle-like Cornelius,
who wishes to exterminate Jim. His view is minor and extreme, but long before
we have reached Patusan and Cornelius we have been presented with a perspective
of Jim that is much more substantial and convincing: one which is difficult
to brush aside and which has been embraced fully, in fact, by at least one
noted critic.

This perspective is given by the expatriate German entomologist, Stein,
who gives Jim his chance to make good in Patusan. Marlow recounts Stein's
youthful experiences in the Celebes and implies a parallel with Jim's later
experiences in Patusan; but the links between Stein and Jim seem to become
even stronger. For, after hearing Marlow's account of Jim, Stein begins a
long and convincing commentary on the novel's central figure. One of his
explanations is that Jim is a romantic, a fact we could hardly dispute; he
identifies Jim's problem as "How to be" when man "is born ... into a dream
like a man who falls into the sea", and, trying to climb out, drowns (pages 213
All his explanations seem to be surrounded by convincing penumbras:

"The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up" (p.214).

Recalling his capture of a magnificent butterfly from a "heap of dirt" (p.210) he makes his division of man with the metaphors of the beetle on the dungheap and the butterfly in flight.

Stein is a truly seductive figure, a glib explainer who occurs at a point in Lord Jim when the reader may well feel the need for some convincing explanations. He is equipped with an impressively symbolic occupation and locus, and an appropriately broken accent. "Stein habitually talks in ellipses and paradoxes", Tony Tanner has said, "and his speech is full of cryptic lacunae"; but it would be a mistake, I think, to assume that these lacunae stand for meaningful silences, or to take Stein generally as offering very much more than does any other perspectival viewer of Jim. Vivid and compelling though he is, he is yet another decoy for the reader; and he appears to have taken in Tony Tanner, who predicates his entire interpretation of Jim on Stein's division of man into butterfly and beetle. Conrad has made it clear from the mouth of Stein himself that in the "destructive element" of the barbaric realm man survives only by stoically keeping himself afloat, and any explanation in a world acknowledged to be devoid of meaning must necessarily be irrelevant. As I shall suggest below, Stein's imagery is a means to the understanding of the novel; but it will never lead us to the "meaning" of Jim. The Stein episode is yet another perspective of Jim and is no more intrinsically valid than any other; it is another siding and not the end of the line. His serried rows of encased butterflies above drawers of beetles are all too good to be true, and it is worth noting both that the explaining Stein

is made to prowl about the half-lit or darkened reaches of the room as he talks, moving away from the single pool of illumination in the room, and that after Jim's tragic death he is a shrunken figure, his confidence shattered.

Gentleman Brown remains as the last viewer and judge of Jim, in his disastrous invasion of Patusan. Alone of all Lord Jim's many perspectivists - except perhaps Stein - Brown has a symbolic task to perform, and his encounter with Jim is the conjunction of the two realms suggested by Stein's metaphors of butterfly and beetle. The metaphors ordain the structure of Lord Jim, for they reflect and augment its division into the mundane "real" world and the escapist world of Patusan. Something of the nature of both worlds must be understood before Brown's role is analysed.

The "mundane" world of Lord Jim comes to us via a consistent excremental imagery which represents the hard, material world of the realist. The gross, porcine captain of the "Patna" sweats waste from his body; Chester and Robinson are obsessed with their island of excrement, and the materialism which draws them to their deaths; Cornelius is scuttling and beetle-like, and Stein has assured us that the beetle is bound to its pile of dung; finally, the implications of Brown's name will escape no-one. The beetle clinging to its heap of dust or dung is a fine symbol for bourgeois man bound to a time-ridden, decadent existence: the insect is "hollow" in its hide of thick, impenetrable armour, and the dung-heap is both literally and figuratively waste. This is the world in which Jim cannot survive, and it is populated by beetles who do survive it, characters whose hollowness is signalled by the imagery of surfaces. We will recall the suggestion of the trading station manager in Heart of Darkness that "you need to have no entrails to survive" the barbarity of Africa. The same imagery of surfaces occurs with the description of Brierly, all "surface as hard as granite", on which threats are like "the scratch of a pin to the smooth face of a rock" (p.58). For Chester, honour is a tissue,
a "piece of ass's skin" (p.179). The experiences of the French lieutenant cannot reach his inscrutable, impregnable interior, but leave their embroidery in scars on his skin (p.140). And Brown, seeing himself reflected in Jim, calls him a "hollow sham" (p.344). Decadent man, as we have seen, is hollow in the metaphoric sense because possessing a completely empty life, and in the perspectival sense because possessing no value beyond what is superficially visible in him.

At this point it ought to be recalled that Marlow himself left the "whited sepulchre" of Decadent Europe to travel to the heart of barbarism, where he learned of the bleak void in men's hearts: and it is fair to say that this pattern is repeated in Lord Jim, whose tortuous working-out, too complex to record here 26, reflects Conrad's growing - if subconscious - realization that both novel and novella dealt with the same pattern of experience. Neither Jim's idyll in Patusan nor Brown's destruction of it had been planned by early 1900, when twenty chapters of the book had already appeared in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine 27, yet both are obviously critical to the book. Together they vary the theme of the journey from decadent civilization to heart of jungle darkness (Patusan, like the Congo trading post, is thirty miles up a river), in that the Patusan idyll depicts a world of fragile meanings whose brittleness at the arrival of Brown and his degenerate crew shows the illusory nature of meaning before the meaningless destructiveness of the world.

The name, "Patusän", is obviously meant to echo the name of the mundane "Patna" in the chaotic world with which Jim could not cope; and the reversal of the final syllables of each word suggests some sort of reversal of the worlds they denote. Patusan seems, in fact, to have been conceived as a mirror of the mundane world, and the tragedy of Lord Jim is that Jim cannot

27. "Editor's Note on the Composition of Lord Jim", p.275.
see its treacherous superficiality - which even Marlow remarks on - and thinks himself safe in the world of the imagination. For Patusan is just such a country of the mind as those I discussed in the poetry of the Decadents: the escape-world of art which the decadent seeks for its temporary meanings and its security from temporal decay. Conrad seems to urge such an interpretation upon us with the recurring image of the split hill from which Marlow watches the moon rise over Patusan. The cleft hill is the traditional symbol for Parnassus - a name which resembles "Patusan" - the traditional mountain of the muses; a realm presided over by the mount of Parnassus is surely a world of the imagination. When French Decadent poets chose the name, "Parnassian", for their school of poetry, they obviously had in mind the divisive connotations of the myth: one of the peaks of Parnassus is traditionally Apollo's and is associated with reason and civilization; the other is traditionally Dionysus's and is associated with orgy, carnality, and disorder. Jim is, obviously enough, an Apollonian chooser of order, and Patusan is his ordered world of the imagination, a work of art.

Marlow, once he has left Patusan after his visit to Jim, is sometimes unsure whether he imagined his experience there or not: "In the darkened moonlight the interlaced blossoms took on shapes foreign to one's memory and colours indefinable to the eye" he remarks while in Patusan (p.322), and later he recalls the place as a tissue of appearances, all colour and design, and "like a picture created by fancy on a canvas" (p.330). If the time-ridden world from which Patusan is an escape is dominated by the image of the dung-beetle, Patusan is dominated in its turn by the image of the butterfly, not simply because Conrad would obviously have known of the Decadents' fondness for butterfly imagery but because the butterfly is an apt emblem for the gaudy, patterned surfaces of the country.
of the mind. The difference between this interpretation of the butterfly metaphor, which sees it as a part of a structural device, and Tanner's interpretation of it, which sees it as a clue to Jim's "meaning", must be noted. For Tanner, "the whole inquiry of the book is directed at ascertaining whether there is contained within the perishable 'gorgeous markings' of Jim something, some quality, some essence, which will defy destruction, some 'splendour' which will remain 'unmarred by death'", and when he examines Jim he asks us to bear in mind "the possible metaphor of the butterfly". But, as we have seen from his letters, Conrad based his art on a knowledge that no such essence can exist, and its task is to evade such knowledge. Jim is a decadent who becomes a Decadent by creating an escapist world of the imagination, and Lord Jim is a pessimistic novel because it states the impossibility of the survival of such worlds.

Conrad communicates this by ensuring that Patusan is an ambivalent world, one which seems colourful and brilliant while at the same time being deceptively superficial in a way which mirrors the hollowness of the savage, everyday world: it carries the seeds of its own destruction within itself, like any Decadent fruit. Patusan is dominated by the moon, a source of temporary illumination against the black void of night, and a traditional symbol for inversion. A knowledge of nineteenth century physics would scarcely have been necessary to remind Conrad that the moon itself is a giant mirror, reversing the everyday ("mundane") light of the sun and providing a ready-made symbol for the announcement of a mirror-world. Marlow notes that the moon is "like the ghost of dead sunlight" (p.246), and that "It is to our sunshine ... what the echo is to the sound" (p.246). Elsewhere, the moon is associated with the curious cleft hill, rising from between its twin peaks before the watching Marlow one evening: "For a moment it looked as though the smooth disc ... had rolled to

the bottom of that precipice ... the bare, contorted limb of some tree, growing on the slope, made a black crack right across its face" (p.322).

This forbidding proleptic view of the moon combines the two worlds of the novel, implying the ultimately sad fate of Jim's escape-world; and the parallelism of the two is made clear with the apposition of the twin peaks, one of which is "real" (topped by the fortress of the shabby warlord who captured Jim on his arrival in the area) and the other of which (the Apollo- nian, up which Jim and the Patusanians lug an old cannon) is ideal. When the fortress is demolished by a broadside, Jim's devotion to the mirror-world is complete.

Other images than the moon imply reflection in the Patusan section of Lord Jim, of which the river and the sea dominate. Jim's departure from Marlow to begin his new life in Patusan has a hint almost of magic translation from one realm to another: "My eyes were too dazzled by the glitter of the sea below his feet to see him clearly", Marlow reports, adding what the reader knows by now, that he is "fated never to see him clearly" (p.241). The houses of the Patusan settlement are referred to by their reflections in the river, which itself is described as a mirror frequently enough, as when Marlow watches two distant canoeists who seem "to slide painfully on the surface of a mirror" (p.332). At times, Conrad seems willing to suggest that something close to a hermetic seal exists between the everyday world and the world of the mind. Leaving Patusan and Jim for the last time, Marlow reaches the open sea where "suddenly at a bend it was as if a great hand far away had lifted a heavy curtain, had flung open an immense portal" (p.331). This hinted sealing-off is present in Jim's entry to Patusan and in his "exit" from it, which corresponds to Gentleman Brown's intrusion upon Patusan. Soon after his arrival thirty miles up-river, Jim is captured by one of the petty princes who terrorize and plunder the area, and is confined in a stockade. His escape from this shabby
reality resembles his leap from the "Patna": he bounds over the stackade wall and passes through a creek from whose sticky bed of mud he struggles to free himself before reaching the safety of Patusan, which lies just on the other side (p.251). It is probably not insignificant that, just before quitting the time-ridden and decadent : everyday world Jim has refused to mend the prince's clock (p.252): time is something he wants to destroy, rather than assist. While Jim is safe in Patusan, he is surrounded by rivers noted for their fullness, as if they have risen to seal Jim into his deceptive mirror-world; but when Brown and his boat-load of brigands - for all the world like the scruffy deserters of the "Patna" come to haunt him again - make their ominous appearance, the subsiding river reveals again its bed of excremental mud (p.360), after obligingly remaining full long enough to enable them to get ashore (p.359). And Brown meets Jim "not very far from the place, perhaps on the very spot, where Jim took the second desperate leap of his life - the leap that landed him in Patusan" (pages 379-80).

There can be no mistaking the part such a mirror-world plays in Lord Jim, nor the deliberation with which Conrad sets up Jim's Parnassian refuge. Its frailty reveals Conrad's certainty that the world will betray the ideal, the civilized, and the romantic; that Dionysus will overcome Apollo. The attractive gaudiness of Patusan hoodwinks Jim, who sees it as the incarnation of his artistic imagination; and Marlow, with his over-civilized limitations, cannot analyse his half-formed insights into the superficiality of the place. But Conrad supplies the reader with a symbol of the truth of Patusan: this is the silver ring which Stein gave Jim as a certificate to present to Doramin, the native leader, and which rolls back to the feet of the dead Jim after the retributive killing which ends the book. Like the moon, it is a silver circle, but quite hollow inside; and as a corrective metaphor for the world of Patusan it reveals its true emptiness and superficiality, those qualities which have
deceived and betrayed Jim.

In such a hollow world, Jim's quest for hope and meaning is as pointless as Marlow's quest for the significance of Jim. The arrival of Brown and his gang is the inevitable arrival of the everyday, material world; and his confrontation with Jim is the confrontation of mirror-twins who stand "at the opposite poles of that conception which includes all mankind" (p. 381). It is a moment whose symbolic significance resounds not simply throughout the book, but through the late nineteenth century as well, with its certitude that man was both civilized and savage, a brutal materialist and an idealistic romantic. This is not the "secret" of Jim: after all, it is a statement requiring the confrontation of two characters, Jim and Brown; but it is the burden of the novel. Jim's inability to cope with the savage threat posed by Brown comes from his realization that he is Brown's twin; and, sensing this in his turn, Brown probes mercilessly at Jim's weak spots. "There are my men in the same boat - and by God, I am not the sort to jump out of trouble and leave them in the d-d lurch", he says to Jim; "I was afraid once in my life" (pages 382-3). Jim's irresolute handling of Brown leaves the savages of civilization free to return to the river-mouth, where they slaughter the unsuspecting band of young Patusanian warriors camped there. It is an act quite devoid of logical motivation, a baring of the brute forces in decadent man: for Brown is, as Marlow understands, "a blind accomplice of the Dark Powers" (p. 354), an agent of the savage cosmic will.

3. In Summary.

Writing at the dawn of the new century, Conrad took the variously-expressed misgivings of the old and gave them new fictional forms which, as this study will suggest, were to become archetypes for later writers who shared his belief that the age was in decay. The most important of these is what might be termed
the "Heart of Darkness" archetype, which is so central to the novels discussed in this section. In this, the adventurer leaves his decadent home to seek regeneration beyond the pales of civilization but finds there only confirmation that his home is meaningless and barbarous, and a sense of the awful power that stems from the void behind life. Time and again, as we shall see, novelists who followed Conrad find themselves depicting the same division between savage and civilized, and bringing their adventurers back as empty-handed as Marlow.

His second contribution to the structure of decadentist fiction of the twentieth century is perfected in *Lord Jim* after beginning its evolution in *Heart of Darkness*; this is the "perspectival novel". In a parallel response to Nietzsche's, Conrad knew that "at the center of existence there was only a vapour, and not the much desiderated jewel", as Tony Tanner renders Forster's remark31; and he formed a technique for expressing a view of the world remarkably similar to the one posited by Nietzschean ontology. In this technique, no single view or judgement of life is made, but the artist offers instead multiple and often partly-conflicting perspectives of his fictional world. The notion that a decadent world may be seen only as superficial becomes, with later novelists, a reversible motif, and the world depicted as superficial is implicitly decadent.

Finally, and as a logical outcome of these developments, Conrad began the process by which is undermined the romantic quest of the traditional literary form. He wrote his novels knowing that there was no meaning to be found in life, but in order to dramatize this he needed Marlow to make quests for meaning which would fail. In both novels, Marlow, in every way the morally upright and limited Englishman of the nineteenth century, grapples with understandings that are beyond him, battles bravely toward his goal only to find himself deflected time and again toward spurious explanations and half-meanings,

31."Butterflies and Beetles", p.458.
finding at Sisyphean moments that his man recedes into the void as rapidly as he himself approaches him. By this development Marlow is, as we shall see, the first of many baffled questers in twentieth century literature.
1. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932).

2. Evelyn Waugh's *Black Mischief* (1932) and *A Handful of Dust* (1934).

In 1921, T. S. Eliot, convalescing from a breakdown caused by a preoccupation with "the ruin of postwar Europe" and "a hardly excusable apprehension that two thousand years of European continuity had for the first time run dry"¹, produced a ganglion of poetic fragments which he and Ezra Pound then reworked into "The Waste Land" (1922) and "The Hollow Men" (1925). The epigraph which Eliot chose for the whole original unit - and which is now placed before the second poem - came from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* ("Mistah Kurtz - he dead"), and reassuringly continues the expression of decadence in a generic way. For, like Conrad, and despite the cremation of decadent Europe which had occurred in the Great War, Eliot believed himself to be surrounded by decadence, a point he makes clear in a later essay:

We can assert with some confidence that our own period is one of decline; that the standards of culture are lower than they were fifty years ago; and that the evidences of this decline are visible in every department of human activity.²

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² Notes Toward the Definition of Culture, cited by Melchiori in *The Tightrope Walkers*, p.2.
Putting aside the fact that such a statement betrays more about the speaker than it does about his milieu (a loss of objectivity which will intensify as the genre grows), we can see that Eliot's certainty that the processes of socio-cultural decadence could actually have survived the apocalyptic moment, leaving a civilization gutted of its purpose and a culture shattered into fragments, has proven remarkably attractive to his contemporaries and survivor. During the period 1917-1927, he published a series of poems which appeared to encapsulate the ethos of this exhausted civilization, and subsequent writer both in England and in America, have turned to these - under "their own illusion of being disillusioned", as Eliot once put it-as if seeking validation of the fictions which they produced.

"The Waste Land" probably surpasses all other poems of this period as a representative of its times and in evoking Conrad's earlier expression of the decadence of Europe in Heart of Darkness. Leonard Unger, Sydney Krause, Everett Gillis, and Daniel McConnell have all discussed Eliot's fairly obvious use of Conrad's novella in "The Waste Land" and "The Hollow Men"; Unger, for example, mentions Eliot's use of

The barges drift  
With the turning tide  
Red sails  
Wide  
To leeward

which is borrowed from Conrad's opening description of the crepuscular Thames. Krause, Gillis, and McConnell make the fairly obvious point that Eliot's interest in Conrad was more than merely rhetorical: it was certainly a sympathy with the nihilism that Conrad barely keeps at bay that encouraged Eliot to import so much of it into the poetry he was writing in the latter part of 1921.

Conrad's themes of sterility and exhaustion, horror and torpor, hollowness and superficiality, even his sense of cosmic dissipation, have all been integrated into these two major poems, as their original epigraph would suggest.

Generally, Eliot's poetry of the 'twenties (including the two parts of "Sweeney Agonistes") provided a literary hero for the age, together with an environment and a means of describing him. The point about Eliot's "hero", whether we call him Prufrock, Sweeney, or a Hollow Man, is that he scarcely exists, so dominated is he by the bewildering demands of contemporary life. The undistinguished and unheroic Prufrock is a "hollow man" because eviscerated of moral will and consequently locked within a cycle of meaningless events which recur because of his tendency to talk rather than act. The later "Hollow Men" are really only metaphors for Prufrock: scarecrows or guys, their middles, if not truly hollow, straw-filled; caught in "death's dream kingdom", the "dead land" or "cactus land", individuality effaced in the mass, speech neutralized by chorus or incantation. The extension of the Guy Fawkes metaphor of "The Hollow Men" provides a view of their morality: for between the idealized motive and its execution falls the shadow of moral flabbiness, the failure of the will, the weakness which sees the world end - on sound thermodynamic principles - "Not with a bang but a whimper". Sweeney, dumped amid the uninspiring Dusty, Doris, Wauchope, and others, can see like Kurtz the incommunicable horror of their life, a cycle of "Birth, and copulation, and death". "Gerontion" (from the 1920 volume) can be seen as referring to the post-war world with its "decaying house" of Europe, a meaningless hulk surrounded by dissipating actions, unmotivated incidents, and a deterministic world pursuing its own ends while "Hakagawa", "Madame de Tornquist", and "Fraulein von Kulp" make arcane plots and seek invisible meanings. Beyond this lies

6. This was Ara Vos Prec (London: The Ovid Press, 1920): "Gerontion" was the twenty-fourth, and only new, poem in the collection.
always the void which Sweeney senses ("De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs Cammel, whirled/
Beyond the circuit of the shuddering bear/ In fractured atoms").

"The Waste Land" gives not a symbolic version of this world but a broken
series of images of its specific details. Perhaps the dominant initial
impression is of sterility:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.

(Part I; "Burial of the Dead").

Sterility gives way to images of regeneration:

While I was fishing in the dull canal
On a winter evening round behind the gashouse
Musing upon the king my brother's wreck
And on the king my father's death before him.

(Part III; "The Fire Sermon").

A current under sea
Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell
He passed the stages of his age and youth
Entering the whirlpool.

(Part IV; "Death by Water").

Then a damp gust
Bringing rain

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?

(Part V; "What the Thunder Said").

There are also images of an idealized past which is very different from the
decadent present; in the bar-room scene at the end of "A Game-of Chess", in
the seduction of the typist in "The Fire Sermon", and particularly later in
the same part where the Conradian views of the contemporary Thames are juxta-
posed with the idealized image of Elizabeth and Leicester on the same river:

The river sweats
Oil and tar
The barges drift
With the turning tide
Red sails
Wide
To leeward

Elizabeth and Leicester
Beating oars
The stern was formed
A gilded shell
Red and gold ...

The shabby reality of contemporary London can often give way to images of nightmare unreality (London is an "unreal city"; a corpse blooms; there are sewer-like urban scenes) which are intensifications of the neurotic strain depicted at the beginning of "A Game of Chess".

This poetry is as much manner as matter, and one of Eliot's greatest achievements in it is the devising of a form suited to recording the discrete and fragmented post-war world. A poem like "Gerontion" is not, despite its final line, "about" a single person or sensibility: it is a group of images which rebound from the objects surrounding an almost token focal figure.

"The Waste Land" is even less focussed, its turmoil of flying images emanating from no single point; not even the elastic mind of a Tiresias. It is possible to argue, as John Goodman has, that these poems, and particularly "The Waste Land", are influenced by Cubist theories of composition which in turn correspond to Nietzschean ontological theory about perspective. Nietzsche's moral and phenomenal relativism works via the Cubists, in this view, to allow Eliot to explore facets of a situation in a suspension of time, evoking nothing that can be paraphrased; this technique produces a circular effect by undermining "the inherent consecutiveness of language, frustrating the reader's usual expectation

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of a sequence and forcing him to perceive the elements of the poem juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time", as Joseph Franks has said.  

In all these ways Eliot, consciously or not, presented his contemporaries with models of their age and provided them with a comprehensive set of methods of approaching it.  In the curious way that symbolic works often have, "The Waste Land" and Eliot's other poems of the 'twenties helped create their era as much as capture it, and indelibly altered the collective literary sensibility of the time.  Amongst novelists, for example, Aldous Huxley is often acknowledged to have best expressed the futility of the 'twenties and 'thirties; but a glance at his letters around this time will convince even the casual reader that his fictional despair is indeed fictional. The Great War, in which he did not participate, is safely distant from him: and when he later defends his novel, Antic Hay, in 1923, he strikes an attitude:

I will only point out that it is a book written by a member of what I may call the war-generation for others of his kind; and that it is intended to reflect - fantastically, of course, but none the less faithfully - the life and opinions of an age which has seen the violent disruption of almost all the standards, conventions and values current in the previous epoch.

It is a view unsupported by his other letters, which tend to show smugness and complacency.  The real source of the fashionable despair of Antic Hay is "The Waste Land", which was published a little earlier, allowing enough time for Huxley to absorb its influence and for this influence to surface, in small parts, in the novel.  Perhaps the most revealing indication of the gap between Eliot's feeling and Huxley's is the fact that the novel is comic where the poetry is not.

Gumbril, the "hero" of Antic Hay, is an ineffectual, Prufrockian figure, whose lack of determination extinguishes his plans for economic success; like

Prufrock, who senses a future time "To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet", Gumbril needs a false beard and heavy overcoat to conceal his ineffectual self; the commercial invention he plans to market is a pneumatic trouser seat which cushions the self from the outer world and is suitable apparel for a hollow man. Disguised, he begins to seduce the wife of a colleague and soon tells her, "Tiresias, you may remember, was granted the privilege of living both as a man and a woman". Gumbril has obviously been reading Part III of "The Waste Land", with its parenthetical comment,

And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
Enacted on this same divan or bed ...

and Huxley is clearly inviting us to bear in mind the seduction of the typist by the "young man carbuncular". Gumbril evokes the tone of Eliot later when recalling the seduction: "And you lie tranquilly on your bed, thinking of what you'd do if you had ten thousand pounds, and of all the fornications you'll never commit" (p.147). Huxley borrows from Eliot not to add content so much as to reinforce the tone of the passages in which he places the borrowings; by assuming that his reader knows as much of Eliot's poetry as he himself does he assumes that the reader will also use the same "scenery", the same mental images, for both poetry and fiction.

Like other novels written between the wars in England, Antic Hay can be seen as almost a direct product of Eliot. When Huxley gives Gumbril this passage to express the meaninglessness and horror of life, he is merely being more explicit than Eliot would have been, one feels:

All the legless soldiers grinding barrel-organs, all the hawkers of toys stamping their leaky boots in the gutters of the Strand ... the old woman with matches, forever holding to her left eye a handkerchief as yellow and dirty as the winter fog ... and then there were the murderers hanged at eight o'clock ... the phthisical charwoman who used to work at his father's house, until she got too weak and died.

There were the lovers who turned on the gas and the ruined shopkeepers jumping in front of trains. Had one a right to be contented and well-fed, has one a right to knowledge and conversation and the leisurely complexities of love? (pages 68-9).

Such worried questioning is Eliot's, surely, as much as Huxley's. Again, there is a similarity between the Elizabethan Golden Age evoked by Eliot in "The Waste Land" and the more recent Golden Age referred to by Huxley: Gumbril's father has a large model of the London Wren unsuccessfully proposed to build after the Great Fire (including, no doubt, the Church of Magnus Martyr which makes its way into Part III of "The Waste Land").

Furthermore, Antic Hay shares the alinear form of Eliot's poetry, although where the fifth section of "The Waste Land" seems to offer some promise of regeneration the novel circumvents this by becoming circular in movement.

The most obvious source of literary regeneration is love of some sort, earthly or divine; but Gumbril's seduction is shabby, his moral inertia kills his only chance for true love, and he is left with Myra Viveash, the rather worn princesse lointaine of the novel 12, who is all too easily attained. The form of the novel is entropic, for all Gumbril's early vigour has dissipated at its end; Myra Viveash's life has, as her name would suggest, turned to ashes; and the pair end the novel circling London together in a taxi, Myra's last words sounding "expiringly from her death-bed within" (p.254). At the same time, the biologist, Shearwater, frantically pedals his wheel-less bicycle during a laboratory experiment.

Although Point Counter Point (1928) develops more of Huxley's own themes and often shows him writing about sterility and futility single-handed, he calls on Eliot for aid when the fascist politician, Webley, is murdered near the end of the novel. Thus, as the assassins wait for nightfall beside the hardening body, we are told that "the prickly pear has had time to invade only another

12. The term, "princesse lointaine", is discussed by John Fowles in The Aristos (Boston:Little,Brown; 1964), pages 245-6: it is derived from Alain-Fournier's Le Grand Meaulnes, whose hero's tragedy was that he won his princesse.
hundred acres of Australian territory, and Huxley goes on later to make explicit what Eliot implies:

At the core of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil he had found, not fire and poison, but only a brown disgusting putrefaction and a few small maggots...

(p. 559).

Nietzsche, one feels, would have approved. Before committing suicide, Spandrell, a nihilist who is one of Webley's assassins, recalls music "like water in a parched land" (p. 593), a phrase which evokes Part VII of "The Waste Land"; but the water which he actually sees is in a garbage-filled gutter reminiscent of the lines from Part III of "The Waste Land": "A rat crept softly through the vegetation/ Dragging its slimy belly on the bank". But in this novel, Huxley seems to exceed Eliot by far in the expression of despair and the depiction of decadence. For Huxley, it seems that man is an animal who has deluded himself into thinking that he has a soul: many of the characters in Point Counter Point have animal attributes and a party is described as a jungle (p. 69), while the cynical Illidge points out that in order to be aerodynamically stable an angel would require a breastbone protruding five feet (p. 393). The world of this novel is not quite Godless, but instead of Eliot's modestly-offered hope Huxley depicts a God who is in hiding, a prankster who is "only a dust-bin" (p. 599). The world is caught in a chilly universe capable of permitting the cruelly arbitrary death of Philip Quarles's young son; to these things one can only respond with the arbitrariness of Spandrell, an outsider who has seen "The essential horror" which is like "casting garbage" (p. 593), and who after committing murder allows himself to be killed while an endlessly rotating gramophone disc is scratched by its needle (p. 599).

Evelyn Waugh, too, in the early novels which he wrote in the 'twenties and 'thirties, owed a debt to the poetry of Eliot, and like Huxley (whose novel,

12a. Point Counter Point (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954), p. 536. Further page references are made within the text.)
Brave New World, will be studied below) moved on to write a novel about
decadence in the Conradian form. Before we turn to A Handful of Dust (1934),
we can see how his earlier novels share Eliot's view of contemporary decadence
and many of his literary methods. The title of Decline and Fall (1928)
scarcely needs comment; its hero is a Proustian "shadow that has flitted
about this narrative under the name of Paul Pennyfeather" and the book "is
really an account of the mysterious disappearance of Paul Pennyfeather, so
that readers must not complain if the shadow which took his name does not amply
fill the important part of hero for which he was originally cast". As
A. E. Dyson has remarked of this character, "An education conducted along
impeccably Arnoldian lines has turned him into a waste-land character,
without convictions, without insight into evil, without any felt or under­
stood values", a judgement which could be fairly extended to Adam Fenwick-
Symes, "hero" of Vile Bodies (1930). Both characters share a world which
James Carens correctly describes as "valueless and incoherent" and in which
"no order or purpose is even discernible". Paul is sent down from Oxford
for indecency after a group of drunken students remove his trousers following
some idealistic, innocuous meeting he has attended; he is pitched into a teaching
position for which he is quite unsuited, drifts towards an absurd marriage
with the aristocratic Margot Beste-Chetwynde, is imprisoned for her white slave
trading activities, finds that his public schooling suits him to prison life,
is smuggled out by friends and "dies" during an operation, completing the
circular movement of the novel by returning to his old life at Oxford as his
own cousin. Just as he pursues the worthless princess e lointaine of this
novel, Adam Fenwick-Symes pursues a similar figure in Vile Bodies; in fact, the

references occur within the text.
14. "Evelyn Waugh and the Mysteriously Disappearing Hero", Critical Quarterly II,
p.73.
15. The Satiric Art of Evelyn Waugh, (Seattle: University of Seattle Press, 1966),
p.13.
entire novel describes Adam's vain attempts to finance a marriage to this trivial girl, Nina Blount. The manuscript of his promising novel is taken by customs men, he then loses two thousand pounds to an evanescent Major, is given a cheque in compensation by Nina's father only to find it signed "Charlie Chaplin", loses Nina to a rival whom she marries on the spur of the moment, and ends the novel engaged in an apocalyptic world war.  

Where Huxley's early satires show a strong awareness of the weak hold order has in the world they show, Waugh's early novels give way to chaos. That this is deliberate is suggested by the constant reappearances in Vile Bodies of Father Rothschild S. J., the priest whose baggage is full of false beards and alternative identities: as Neil Isaacs suggests, Father Rothschild parodies Thackeray's Father Holt S. J. in Henry Esmond (as well as Chesterton's Father Brown, it would seem); but the important point about him is not, as Isaacs suggests, that he is never wrong, but that what he is always right about never matters. Thackeray's priestly sleuth, like Chesterton's, was a hunter and assembler of meaning; but in Waugh's chaotic cosmos a Jewish Jesuit is doomed not to make sense but to be swallowed up. Another literary suggestion of absurdity comes with the location of Paul's school at Llanabba in Wales, the country in which Lewis Carroll wrote Alice in Wonderland. If we think of Paul as having gone through a mirror, like Alice in Through the Looking-Glass, a verbal inversion would land him in "A banal" world at Llanabba, far different from the haven provided at Oxford; and certainly the school - and the whole world of the second novel - is inhabited by appropriately absurd characters. There is "Captain" Crimes, the war amputee who confides that he lost his limb during a drunken encounter with a tram, and who constantly disappears and reappears throughout the book; like him, the headmaster, Dr Fagan, and the

butler, Philbrick, are all things to all men, capable of doffing and donning convincing but inexplicable new identities at will; there is also the parson, Prendergast, who "couldn't understand why God had made the world at all" (p.41), and is later decapitated by a lunatic prisoner. In *Vile Bodies*, such extremely absurd characters crowd the pages: the evangelistic lesbian, Mrs Melrose Ape, with her troupe of pretty, vapid "Angels"; Father Rothschild; Walter Outrage, a Prime Minister who is too busy dreaming of oriental seduction to know whether or not he is still in office; the Honourable Agnes Runcible and the homosexual Miles Malpractice; the frenzied Colonel Blount, and so on.

Like Huxley, Waugh depicts the decline of England between the wars in terms of a circular, unprogressive metaphor: the circling taxi at the end of *Antic Hay* corresponds to the circling progress of Paul Pennyfeather's career in *Decline and Fall*, while the turning record at the end of *Point Counter Point* is similar to the car race in *Vile Bodies* with its attendant metaphor, in Waugh's first novel, of the revolving floor which flings off all those who cannot reach the still point of this turning world (p.231). In view of Waugh's energetic extension of the ideas of decadence and social entropy we find in Eliot, it is revealing to see that in his next two novels, *Black Mischief* (1932) and *A Handful of Dust*, he uses the archetypal form of *Heart of Darkness*, as we will see later in this section.

The third novelist of this period to be influenced by Eliot is Waugh's friend, Anthony Powell, whose early satirical novels, *Afternoon Men* (1931), *Venusberg* (1932), and *From A View to a Death* (1933) continue in a blander fashion to dramatize the basic ideas that few significant things happen in the human community, that degeneration is perpetual, that people are empty and love is unattainable, and that man is incapable of dignity. Jocelyn Brooke has called the first novel "a prose version of 'Sweeney Agonistes'"\(^{18}\), and we only

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need glance at Eliot's "Wauchope" in that poem and Powell's use of a character called "Wauchope" in Afternoon Men to feel that there is a connection between the two. The mysterious "Pereira" of the poem becomes "Undershaft" in the novel, another figure whose actions dominate the presented characters but who is never seen. "The American gentlemen here on business" that Wauchope introduces to the poem are compressed in identity if not in bulk and become the voluminous Mr Scheigan (Eliot's are "Knumpacker" and "Klipstein"), an American businessman who is being fleeced by an unprincipled girl called Harriet Twining. The tone of the whole novel is epitomized by Sweeney's

That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks: Birth, and copulation, and death ...

with the important difference that in Powell's world, no character experiences quite the despair which grips Sweeney. Nonetheless, it is evident that Eliot's poetry of the period has informed Powell's creative sensibility as fully as it informed Huxley's and Waugh's.

There is, consequently, much similarity amongst the fictional worlds of the three writers. Atwater, "hero" of Afternoon Men, is the son of a chicken farmer and is a nonentity of the stunted stature of Pennyfeather, Fenwick-Symes, and Gumbril: his job in a museum involves preventing the public from seizing a display of suggestive primitive figures. Lushington in Venusberg is a minor correspondent for a minor newspaper, with a liking for drink and unattainable women, while Zouch, the "hero" of From A View to a Death, is a cheap and shadowy figure who incorrectly thinks himself a Nietzschean superman. Surrounding these empty central figures is a galaxy of shabby and empty people common in type to all the novels, and epitomized perhaps by Raymond Pringle in the first, whose appearance is generally agreed to be immeasurably improved when he wears a false nose at a party. And their enjoyment of experience is probably epitomized by Atwater when he bites an apple to find that it tastes of "absolutely
nothing ... like eating material in the abstract." The prickly pear is only another bite away.

Like Huxley and Waugh, although in a more bland way, Powell presents a version of the Heart of Darkness archetype to express his conviction that his times are in decay, and this novel, Venusberg, will be examined later in this section with the more Conradian works of Huxley and Waugh. But it is still instructive to glance here at Afternoon Men and From A View to a Death to see how they reflect and add to the ethos of the waste land. Afternoon Men moves from one such waste land (the London of the 'thirties) to another (a desolate, primitive beach cottage) in an inconclusive way suggested in the section headings of the novel, "Perihelion" and "Palindrome". Pringle has rented the cottage in order that he might refresh his life and particularly his painting there in the company of a group of his friends whom he has invited to spend a weekend with him; the company looks like something Nordau might have described in Degeneration, and only Harriet Twining - yet another of those all-too-accessible princesses lointaines who infect this genre - achieves any physical beauty. The desultory weekend is distinguished by the sudden engagement of Harriet to the repulsive Pringle, an unexpected betrothal which ends when Harriet absentmindedly seduces another painter, Barlow, as well as Atwater. Pringle, his grail revealed as a cup which has passed from hand to hand, swims out to sea in order to drown himself, leaving a suicide note on a pile of cold meat that has been prepared for lunch. He returns, however, dressed in the clothing of a fisherman, having changed his mind at sea and been rescued by a fishing crew. Pringle is obviously meant to evoke the myth of the Fisher King, but any regenerative implications of the episode are parodied by the subsequent scene, in which the company haggle over a suitable reward for the man who saved Pringle's life: a sum of fifteen shillings is finally paid, in Powell's world a handsome valuation.

From A View to a Death portrays an even wider group of human degenerates, suggesting that the "family" of England decays at the individual family level. "The Orphans", for example, are a group of brothers who have grown into middle age in their rural environment bereft of parents and sustained by the proceeds of their public organ-grinding. Physical maturity has not been attended by a desire to find superior employment, and these retardates are a recurrent image of degeneracy in the novel. The Passenger family is beginning to break up, too: Mr Passenger speaks of a curse of decay upon their family and Mrs Passenger feels cut off from her daughters. Mary has become a romantic dreamer; Betty, the older, has a repulsive child by a broken marriage to a pederastic Italian duke. When Zouch enters Passenger Court, he feels as if he were going into "a mausoleum". Even more decadent than the Passengers, however, is the neighbouring Fosdick family, whose head, Major Fosdick, is a richly comic indigenous version of the neuropathological dandy of the French Decadence, "not merely a comic figure but a sign of the malaise of his class", as Bergonzi has said. Major Fosdick's greatest private pleasure is to dress in a sequined gown and picture hat when alone, and one of the most comic passages in any of Powell's writing occurs when the Major is confronted by Mr Passenger thus attired: both men converse lengthily without managing to mention the aberration. Major Fosdick is deranged, and when he is finally conveyed raving to a coastal asylum he leaves his sons as monuments to physical degeneration: Jasper has a receding chin and enormous, bat-like ears; while of Torquil, Powell notes, "Senile decay seemed already to have laid its hand on him while he was still in the grip of arrested development. Prematurely young, second childhood had come to him at a time when his contemporaries had hardly finished with their adolescence" (p.37). Another neighbour, Mrs Brandon,

lies moribund throughout the novel on a sofa as her servant prattles to her; the maid is an unobservant woman who does "not notice that her mistress [is] dead" (p.209).

Powell seems to have in mind in this novel a satirical portrayal of Nietzsche's community of ordinary mortals in the decadent world; these characters are very ordinary indeed. It is not surprising that the Nietzschean superman is given the chance to transcend this environment. Both Mr Passenger and Zouch think of themselves as supermen, but neither is particularly efficient. "Hardly anything in his career had turned out as he intended", it is observed of Passenger (p.26): his trip to the Boer War ends in measles, his edition of a poet's works fails because riddled with errors, and his attempted farming collapses as his crops become destroyed year after year by obscure germs. Passenger is in fact a parodic Übermensch, just as Pringle was a parodic Fisher King, and Zouch in his turn proves to be no better. Intending to rise in the world by marrying Passenger's daughter he falls instead from his horse and is killed in a ludicrous manner, a victim, like the stricken sons of Point Counter Point and A Handful of Dust, of the indifferent cosmic will.  

The ability of Powell, Huxley, and Waugh to portray decadence as both very grim and very comic marks them off from the anguish which is evident in Eliot's poetry of the 'twenties. The poetry is in fact a touchstone for them, and, in a generic sense, a means of transferring classically decadent themes from Conrad into their own fiction. The fictional expression of decadence, as I have tried to suggest above, has an indigenous quality by the time these three novelists have shaped it; but perhaps the most important influence Eliot gave was to remind them of the provenance of fictional decadence in Conrad's writing. Thus, as I have indicated, each writer has felt constrained to employ the Heart of Darkness archetype at least once in his fiction of this period, and I

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22. In view of the consistency with which Powell uses decadent material in these novels, it is surprising to see John Russell's argument that they are about power alone, an interpretation which seems tangential to the presented
turn now to individual examinations of these classical fictional statements of the process of decline.

1. Huxley's Brave New World (1932).

Huxley's dystopia marks an in-turning in the genre which will be long-lasting, an orientation toward literary as well as socio-cultural satire which can be witnessed in the ironic reversal of the classical pattern in which jaded explorer quits decadent civilization for the barbaric jungle: in Brave New World, the savage reaches the heart of decadent civilization to be broken by what he finds there.

The novel concentrates upon the future-in-the-present, a tendency probably prompted by a visit to California in 1926 when (like Thomas Pynchon in later years) he was disturbed by living proof that the future will not work. As Rudolph Schmerl notes,

Brave New World is doubly satiric. On the one hand, it satirizes the world of 1932, or rather the world of the decade just completed: the mindless and synthetic emotions of the movies and popular music, the compulsive pursuit of pleasure, or of what passed for it, the vulgarity ranging from bathroom-fixtures to religious cults ... On the other hand, Brave New World's fantastic historiography satirizes the limited visions of possible futures entertained by serious thinkers such as Huxley's grandfather.

This satire often becomes fused. The substitution of "Our Ford" (who at times of stress becomes "Our Freud") for "Our Lord" is both metaphorically and satirically appropriate; characters' names commemorate some of the informing impulses of modern society ("Bernard Marx", "Lenina Crowne", "Helmholtz Watson", "Benito Hoover", and so on). Other parts of the novel allegorize aspects of substance of the fiction. See "Quintet From the '30's: Anthony Powell", Kenyon Review XXVII, pages 698-726.


contemporary civilization alone: the process of "Bokanovskization" breeds identical humans for a rigid hierarchy of five classes which range from an elite of "Alphas" to a proletariat of "Epsilons", and each class, having been bred with a brain-capacity commensurate to its social expectations, is trained stringently to accept and enjoy its role. Families have been abolished, promiscuity is inculcated by "erotic play" in childhood, boredom is countered by licentious hedonism, depression is ended by the drug soma, physiological cravings are quelled by substitute pregnancies and passion surrogates, experience is replaced by tactile cinema called "feelies", and religious desires are sapped by a safe, mindless ritual of group singing. Mustapha Mond, one of the Controllers, describes the "brave new world":

Now - such is progress - the old men work, the old men copulate, the old men have no time, no leisure from pleasure, not a moment to sit down and think - or if by some unlucky chance some crevice should yawn in the solid substance of their distractions, there is always soma, delicious soma, half a gramme for a half-holiday, a gramme for a week-end, two grammes for a trip to the gorgeous East, three for a dark eternity on the moon ... 25

Such descriptions invite the reader both to condemn the decadence of such a world and to concede its proximity to his own. Huxley's England was just as rigidly hierarchized, if less formally, from a privileged aristocracy to an underprivileged proletariat; each class learned to accept its lot; Marx himself knew that religion was the opiate of the masses; and drink does the work of soma. The satire sharpens when the "Delta Mirror" is mentioned (p.55 ); the "feelies" correspond to the cinema; the "Bureaux of Propaganda" and the "College of Emotional Engineering" (pages 54-5 ) are merely collective metaphors for processes already in existence in Huxley's world. And like Huxley's England, the "brave new world" can mismanage things: it has no answer to earthquakes and the population explosion, and its sterilized women tend to grow beards they do not want.

The "brave new world" bears many resemblances to brave older worlds, too.

Sealed in their hot-house, Huxley's decadents of the future are like something from a novel of the nineteenth century Decadence. Huysman's A Rebours sets out to do much the same as does Brave New World: it seeks to correct by satiric means the tendencies it sees in contemporary society by extending them to excess; Huxley in effect depicts a whole civilization of Des Espérits sealed off in an artificial environment where they may safely go against the grain. This society has its outcasts, too, and the implication that the alienation of Bernard Marx and Helmholtz Watson stems from faulty decanting during their foetal development evokes the neuropathological school of French decadentism.

The discontent of Marx and Watson with the mindless, lascivious vapidity of their decadent society is the mainspring of the novel, for it yields the generic desire to break out of their numbness and experience reality for the first time. "I want to know what passion is," Bernard states at one point: "I want to feel something strongly" (p.77). And Helmholtz Watson has similar cravings:

I feel I could do something much more important. Yes, and more intense, more violent. But what? What is there more important to say? And how can one be violent about the sort of things one's expected to write about? ... Can you say something about nothing? That's what it finally boils down to. (p.58).

At another point, Bernard hovers in romantic contemplation of the stormy English Channel during a helicopter trip, while beside him Lenina Crowne - the epitome of Eliot's "pneumatic bliss"26 - shrinks in terror from the "rushing emptiness of the night" (p.74). Like any nineteenth century explorer jaded by his civilization, Bernard sets out with Lenina to inspect a native tribe; but the irony is that since few uncharted areas remain in the world, they holiday at an Indian reservation where savage and civilized meet fairly amicably: most of the decadentist fiction which uses the Heart of Darkness archetype will, like

26. "Grishkin" is the name of the pneumatic young lady in Eliot's "Whispers of Immortality", Aara Vos Prec.
Conrad, depict this halfway state where, as in the ivory trading station up
the Congo, civilized and savage meet and merge. And the more obvious irony is
that here, the generic progression to the heart of darkness which follows
actually returns the protagonists to decadent civilization.

Flying to the Indian reservation in New Mexico, the travellers make a clear
transition from one order of reality to another:

Ten minutes later, they were crossing the frontier that separated
civilization from savagery. Uphill and down, across deserts of
salt or sand, through forests, into the violet depths of canyons,
over crag and peak and table-topped mesa, the fence marched on and
on, irresistibly the straight line, the geometrical symbol of
triumpphant human purpose. And at its foot, here and there, a
mosaic of white bones, a still unrotted carcass dark on the tawny
ground marked the place where deer or steer, puma or porcupine
or coyote, or the greedy turkey buzzards drawn down by the whiff
of carrion and fulminated as though by poetic justice, had come
too close to the destroying wires. (p.86).

The electrified boundary of civilization, a pile of electrocuted animals at its
foot, perfectly symbolizes the inimicality of the "brave new world" into the
natural. The reservation itself, too, is far from palatable to the etiolated
couple, its raw reality of "blank impeding rock-face" and forbidden customs
of marriage, motherhood, and family overwhelming Lenina in particular (p.88).

Native man is undeodorized; a primitive drumbeat gives a rhythm like a "mysterious
heart" (p.88); two half-naked men approach, festooned with live snakes;
and the pueblo itself is fly-riden and rubbish-strewn. There, Lenina makes
her first contact with savage, unmediated reality:

An almost naked Indian was very slowly climbing down the ladder
from the first-floor terrace of a neighbouring house - rung
after rung, with the tremulous caution of extreme old age. His
face was profoundly wrinkled and black, like a mask of obsidian.
The toothless mouth had fallen in. At the corners of the lips
and each side of the chin a few long bristles gleamed almost
white against the dark skin. The long unbraided hair hung down
in grey wisps round his face. His body was bent and emaciated
to the bone, almost fleshless. Very slowly he came down,
pauing at each rung before he ventured another step. (p.90).

In Lenina's world, as in the world of the French or English Decadence, cosmetic
artifice prevents physical decay from revealing itself, and death is concealed behind slogans and morphia. Further horrors await Lenina: young women breastfeeding their babies ("She had never seen anything so indecent in all her life"; p.93); dead animals in the streets, a goitred old woman (reminiscent of Eliot's old woman in the vacant lot in the "Preludes") who is the first diseased human Lenina has ever seen; and a terrifying primitive ceremony involving flagellation and more live snakes.

At this point they meet the Savage. His origins are worth noting: he is the product of an "uncivilized" union between the Director of the "brave new world" and a young woman he left behind in the savage reservation years before to have the child. Linda, the woman, is now a shocking example of the decay of artifice:

... two of the front teeth were missing. And the colour of the ones that remained ... It was worse than the old man. So fat. And all the lines in her face, the flabbiness, the wrinkles. And the sagging cheeks, with those purplish blotches. And the red veins on her nose, the bloodshot eyes. And that neck - that neck; and the blanket she wore over her head - ragged and filthy. And under the brown sack-shaped tunic those enormous breasts, the bulge of the stomach, the hips. (p.97).

Linda has become a drink-sodden whore, unfit for either civilized or savage domain; her son, John the Savage, also an outcast and raised on the plays of Shakespeare long banned from the "brave new world", becomes a symbol of the savage-in-the-civilized (a theme we will see John Barth using in the next section). With his mother, he is taken back to the dark heart of civilization.

The point of Brave New World is that the Savage perceives the hollow horror of civilization when actually within civilization. Marx and Watson are both exposed as amateur rebels by the severity of the Savage's revulsion: he is seen as the genuinely romantic explorer in the jungle of civilization, whose horrors must be purged from him:

"Did you eat something that didn't agree with you?" asked Bernard.
The Savage nodded. "I ate civilization."
"What?"
"It poisoned me; I was defiled. And then," he added in a lower tone, "I ate my own wickedness."
"Yes, but what exactly ... ? I mean, just now you were ... "
"Now I am purified," said the Savage. "I drank some mustard and warm water." (p.198).

Desperate to preserve his own individuality in this waste land of human mediocrity and multiplied identity, the Savage retreats to an abandoned lighthouse to confront reality directly. Just before this retreat, he has told the Controller, "... I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin" (p.197). This, replies the Controller, amounts to a claim to the right to be unhappy:

Not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat; the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen tomorrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind. (p.197).

The Savage's desire for all these is a rejection of decadence and a claiming of unmediated experience, a yearning to live outside the hothouse of civilization or, better, to smash its panes of obscuring glass. But this desire marks him out as an alien in the "brave new world": newspaper reporters and cameramen arrive to record his flagellation for a moronic public, and crowds of sight-seers arrive to stare at him. As Huxley showed in his earlier novels, there is no chance of regeneration in the waste land of decadence, and meaning cannot be found in this land of hollow men. *Brave New World*, like its predecessors, comes to a thwarted, circling conclusion: the Savage is found hanged.

Slowly, very slowly, like two unhurried compass needles, the feet turned towards the right; north, north-east, east, south-east, south, south-south-west; then paused, and, after

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a few seconds, turned as unhurriedly back towards the left.

South-south-west, south, south-east, east ... (p. 213).

By constantly enforcing such conclusions as these, Huxley mimes a pessimism more consistent if not greater than Conrad's or Eliot's: the gloom resides in the borrowed forms and themes, in the assumed tradition of the equilibrious conclusion. With Waugh's rendition of Conrad's decadentism, we will see a more comic, and more authentic, pessimism.

2. Waugh's Black Mischief (1932) and A Handful of Dust (1934).

Alvin Kernan has drawn attention to the passage in Waugh's Helena (1950) in which Constantius shows Helena the Roman wall which separates Gaul from Germany; Constantius calls it

a single great girdle round the civilized world; inside, peace, decency, the law, the altars of the Gods, industry, the arts, order; outside, wild beasts and savages, forest and swamp, bloody mumbo-jumbo, men like wolf-packs, and along the wall the armed might of the Empire, sleepless, holding the line. Doesn't it make you see what The City means? 23

"This speech", says Kernan, "renders in geographical terms a master image of life which underlies most of Waugh's novels. In his hard-headed, classical view of life the powers which threaten civilization are ineradicable, and the opposing forces are distinctly separated, barbarism and chaos on the outside, civilization and order on the inside, with the ceaselessly manned wall in between. But in the postwar England of the '20's and '30's, the basic scene of Waugh's first four satiric novels ... the walls have already been broached and the jungle powers are at work within The City" 24.

We have already seen enough of Waugh's first two novels to understand that the polarity Kernan discerns is strongly present in them. In Black Mischief, he is drawn to depict the open barbarity of the jungle-clad island of Azania,

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which he locates off the coast of Africa. At the other pole is an exhausted England very carefully depicted by Waugh, who makes the points that too much of the country's power is held by governing elites, that democracy is a facade, not a reality, and that the whole of England's ruling class is diseased and degenerate. These criticisms are focussed in a scene after a party which has been given by the mother of Basil Seal, destined to be the novel's alienated adventurer. Basil has rejected all chances of taking a place in the rotting framework of his country's government and has turned his back on all its values. Lady Seal and an ancient friend of the family, Sir Joseph Mannering, indulge in a long and entirely irrelevant conversation in which they plot a new life for Basil, envisaging his selection of an appropriate girl, marriage, attainment of a law degree, and so on. At the end of the conversation, "The old boy bounced back in his taxi-cab to St James's and Lady Seal slowly ascended the stairs to her room; both warm at heart and aglow from their fire-lit, nursery game of 'let's pretend'". The point about their retardation is made as Waugh depicts the old lady being prepared for bed and fed warm milk by her nurse as if she were a child. Shortly afterward, Basil steals her jewelery to finance his trip to Azania.

Basil Seal represents a set of values and a fluid morality with which the decayed aristocrats are unequipped to deal. His arrival at Azania places him in the classical area for the meeting of civilized and savage: the island kingdom has a melioristic young monarch, Seth, who is attempting to "civilise" his backward land, and the novel records the long process in which civilized and savage merge or overlap. Something of the incongruity of this process is conveyed in Seth's proclamation of accession: "We, Seth, Emperor of Azania, Chief of the Chiefs of Sakayu, Lord of Wanda and Tyrant of the Seas, Bachelor of the Arts of Oxford University ... " (p.11). The point, as the proclamation

implies, is that any attempt to convert a savage land to the values of a civilization so exhausted that it verges on the barbaric itself is doomed.

The island kingdom is at war when the novel begins, a symbolic battle between the forces of Seth's primitive pretender-father and those of Seth's own progressive loyalists. The town of Matodi is threatened with a rebel invasion in the opening pages of the chapter, and the thin veil of civilization is rent immediately. Murdered corpses litter the street as citizens struggle to survive the coming holocaust, and although the distant battle in the jungle is won by the loyalists, the struggle for survival continues throughout the remainder of the novel. Constantly, Seth's wrong-headed attempts at modernization are pulled down.

The plight of Progress on the island of Azania evokes Conrad's earlier remark that "If you believe in improvement, you must weep", with the important difference that Waugh would advocate laughter instead of tears. Against the strength of the primitive are pitted the most laughably derelict aspects of civilization, each debased by local custom. General Connolly, the white mercenary who leads Seth's army, returns with his troops from victory in the battle of Ukaka to be asked by his monarch whether the newly-introduced tank was instrumental in the glorious success. "The whole thing was red hot after five miles," Connolly tells him: "We used it as a punishment cell" (p.45). Seth later equips Connolly's army with boots, which the soldiers stew and eat. The General's reward for victory is to be created Duke of Ukaka (he joins a wide range of Azanian savages who possess such titles), and he immediately thinks of the pleasure it will bring the new Duchess of Ukaka: "Black Bitch will be pleased as Punch about it" (p.47).

Waugh is quite explicit about the impulse that is symbolized in these intended improvements. Seth sees himself as a single-handed apostle of Improvement for Azania, the incarnation of Progress, and he tells Connolly,
We are Progress and the New Age. Nothing can stand in our way. Don't you see? The world is already ours; it is our world now, because we are the Present. Sayid and his ramshackle hand of brigands were the Past. Dark barbarism ... We are Light and Speed and Strength, Steel and Steam, Youth, Today and Tomorrow. (p.43)

Seth is essentially a muddled thinker, as the passage above betrays, and when he announces his need of "a man of culture, a modern man ... a representative of Progress and the New Age" (p.105), it is inevitable that he should choose Basil Seal for the job. Between them, Basil and Seth make Improvement a disaster: a campaign to establish contraception succeeds only because the recommended device is thought by the natives to aid virility; the inaugural "pageant of contraception" is broken up by gunfire; a museum of Azanian history accumulates junk; Seth's plans to build a new capital end with the violent destruction of the one he already has, and so on. At times the hopelessness of the marriage between civilized and savage condenses into a single, vivid, and intensely ironic image: of the coronation of the aged Achon, a pretender, in which the massive imperial crown snaps his ancient neck; of Basil's realization that he has just consumed his girlfriend at a tribal feast after having fondly told her, "I'd like to eat you" (p.183); and of the train, agent of "Progress" and "Steel and Steam", which baulks at Seth's royal progress by steaming away and leaving him stranded in his carriage.

These supposedly civilizing forces are shown to be a part of a decadence which corrodes all it touches. European civilization on Azania is a satirically drawn image of the one Basil left behind in England. Life at the British consulate on Azania quintessentially oppresses all that is effete and exhausted in the old world and all that is barbaric in the new. The British envoy, Sir Sampson Courtenay, mistakenly reputed to be a cunning diplomat, spends absent-minded hours in the bath dallying with rubber toys; his wife labours all day in the hot African sun to establish a formal garden, calling to the reader's mind T. H. Huxley's metaphor; their daughter, Prudence, is writing a
philosophical work entitled *The Panorama of Life*, when not flirting with an under-secretary; the rest of the staff toil relentlessly at bridge, croquet, and clock golf. The French Legation exhausts its feeble energies in the interpretation of Sir Sampson's fumblings as mandarin ploys in a complex diplomatic plot which involves the wife of their own ambassador (an identification of political plotting with general decadence which we will see again throughout the novels of Thomas Pynchon). The other representatives of Europe's superior standards are Dame Mildred Porch and her companion, Miss Tin, agents for an anti-vivisectionist league, who pass starving children to feed dogs.

The collapse of civilization beneath the force of the rebels' revived barbarism - which sees the murder of Seth and the rout of his supporters - established Waugh's pessimism firmly in this novel, showing the guttering flame of civilization utterly extinguished by the forces of darkness in man. As the Europeans on the island gather at the British Legation to await an airlift to safety, they form a familiar image of decadent civilization at bay before the barbaric jungle; Seal escapes by disguising himself as a native, a disguise which, at the symbolic level, is really a revelation of his true nature. The conclusion of the novel ought not to be seen as optimistic: the reformed Azania, "mandated by the League of Nations as a joint protectorate" (p.235) is clean, peaceful, and hygienic, sound in economy and crowded with new buildings, as if Seth's desired reforms were posthumously achieved. But in the last pages of *Black Mischief*, a familiar metaphor appears: a gramophone which endlessly plays one of the more inane ditties from a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta.

Waugh wrote *Black Mischief* after travelling in Africa, the implication being that its resemblance to the Conradian archetype may not be deliberate or

thoroughgoing. But the novel marks a stage on the path to _A Handful of Dust_, which certainly turns back with consciousness to Conrad's novella. The result is a work acclaimed by Frank Kermode, for example, as "one of the most distinguished novels of the century"[^32], the parable of the English romantic-decadent whose quest for meaning in life condemns him to a life of everlasting meaninglessness.

Again, this novel takes the collapse of family life as a symptom of a larger decadence: the marriage of Tony Last and his wife, Brenda, is broken by the destructive force of her degenerate friends and his refusal to adapt his inherited Gothic sham, Hetton Abbey, to modern life. Their disharmony leaves Brenda open to approaches made by the Beavers, mother and son, an undistinguished, grasping pair who are the advance guard of the forces into whose hands the declining England will finally fall. Mrs Beaver runs a chic fashion and home decorating business in the style of the Otto Silenus of Waugh's first novel, who ravaged the old King's Thursday and built a chrome monster in its place. Her builders carve venerable eighteenth century London homes into flats, decorating them with chromium-plated walls and fur floors.

John Beaver, her son, does nothing at all, except vainly awaiting election to fashionable clubs and filling last-minute vacancies at luncheon parties. He is Prufrock: and for this silly, shallow figure Brenda Last gives up home and family. She is installed in one of Mrs Beaver's fashionable London flats, where she mixes with the riff-raff of a decaying and degenerate society, including a bogus Arab princess and an aviatrix called Mrs Rattery.[^33]

Brenda's selfish dereliction leaves her son unprotected from a stroke of the cosmic will that seals her husband's eventual fate. By allowing her son, John Andrew, to remain unsupervised she lets him fall into the company of a


[^33]: Bergonzzi discusses the thinness of Waugh's characterization in "Evelyn Waugh's Gentlemen", _Critical Quarterly_ V, pages 23-36, without relating them to the hollow man of decadence; James F. Carenas discusses Waugh's characters as decadents in relation to the influence of Ronald Firbank; see _The Satiric Art of Evelyn Waugh_, pages 5-10.
groom who encourages the boy to ride in a fox-hunt; the child is thrown and killed when another horse kicks him on the head. This unpleasant death is not an example of authorial nastiness: John Andrew is sacrificed by Waugh to show the proximity of the barbaric will of the universe to the decaying situation; we have already seen both Marley and Powell showing the same thing in the same way. The element of chance is emphasized in the comments Waugh distributes to the observers of the accident: "Everyone agreed that it was nobody's fault" he himself remarks34; and the family doctor says, "No one to blame though" (p.121); the groom thinks "It wasn't the kid's fault", and others repeat, "It wasn't anyone's fault" (p.122); the other rider is also exonerated, and Tony Last agrees that the accident "just happened" (p.123).

To the point of being laborious, Waugh is stripping the incident of human motivation in an effort to depict it as the first assault of the barbaric on the decadent.

Like Marlow, Tony makes his voyage to the heart of darkness, where he expects to be regenerated at the seat of the very force which has struck his son down. The journey, like Jim's in *Lord Jim*, is a romantic quest: with a mysterious Dr Messinger, he travels up the Amazon to find a lost city of gold. This city, according to Messinger, "lies between the head waters of the Courantyne and the Takatu" (p.183), and like the core of meaning which Marlow sought within Jim it has to be represented indirectly, by means of perspectival glimpses. "Every tribe has a different word for it", says Messinger, "The Pie-Wies call it 'Shining' or 'Glittering', the Arekuna the 'Man-Watered', the Patamonas the 'Bright Feathered', the Warau, oddly enough, use the same word for it that they use for a kind of aromatic jam they make" (p.183). Typically, the jungle is anything but the kind of Wordsworthian landscape the roaming romantic

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expects: in fact, like any true heart of darkness, it is utterly inhuman and uncivilized. To such an environment, civilized clothing offers no barrier:

Every exposed part of his skin was bitten by cabouri fly. They had found a way into the buttonholes of his shirt and the laces of his breeches; mosquitoes had got him at the ankles when he changed into slacks for the evening. He had picked up betes rouges in the bush and they were crawling and burrowing under his skin; the bitter oil which Dr Messinger had given him as protection, had set up a rash of its own wherever he had applied it. Every evening after washing he had burned off a few ticks with a cigarette end but they had left irritable little scars behind them; so had the djiggsas which one of the black boys had dug out from under his toenails and the horny skin on his heels and the balls of his feet. A marabunta had left a painful swelling on his left hand.

So much for the Romantics' view of beneficent nature: this is the arena of T. H. Huxley's "cosmic will", the harsh determination of nature which overcomes attempts at mere human control. This last point is driven home very explicitly when Waugh depicts a deserted farmhouse which the explorers find on the way through the Amazon basin: as Huxley suggested, its garden of "civilized" cereal and fruit crops has reverted to primitive types of growth when abandoned. At night, Tony and Dr Messinger sense the frailty of their fire light and lantern as the vast darkness looms above them, and the picture is reminiscent of Conrad's diary passage written in 1890 when he first arrived at the heart of the Congo.

Soon, it becomes clear that Tony and Dr Messinger have left behind all aspects of civilization. They are confounded to find parallel streams flowing in opposite directions; trained by the science he has learned within civilization, Messinger scrupulously keeps a chart of their explorations, but man's tiny rational and measuring capacities have long been exceeded, and "The chart began to have a mythical appearance" (p.207). They are now in a country of the mind, as Tony fluctuates in and out of hallucinatory fever; the native guides flee, crazed at the thought of a mysterious enemy and the sight of the
clockwork mice Hessinger has tried to use as barter, and the two Europeans
are left alone in the dark. Tony's fever worsens, and Messinger paddles off
for help down the river in a frail canoe. But the puny forces of science
succumb at last to the forces of nature and the jungle as Messinger is swept
over a waterfall to his death. Now the raving Tony is left alone.

At this point, he has his imaginative reward, the vision of the Eldorado
he has been seeking:

Tony saw beyond the trees the ramparts and battlements of the
City; it was quite near him. From the turret of the gatehouse
a heraldic banner floated in the tropic breeze; the sound of
music rose from the glittering walls; some procession or pageant
was passing along them ...

The gates were before him and trumpets were sounding along
the walls, saluting his arrival; from bastion to bastion the
message ran to the four points of the compass; petals of almond
and apple blossom were in the air; they carpeted the way, as,
after a summer storm, they lay in the orchards at Hetton. Gild-
ed cupolas and spires of alabaster shone in the sunlight.
(pages 233-4).

This vision of Hetton as a sort of Camelot is revealing, for it suggests that
his earlier attachment was a delusion. Exposed to reality, Tony now becomes
the captive of Mr Todd, the illiterate half-caste who has spent his life
among the Amazon Indians. In a celebrated conclusion, Todd cures Tony but
then keeps him captive for the rest of his life reading aloud the works of
Dickens. And back in England, Brenda loses Beaver just as she lost Tony,
and marries the handsome but empty soldier-politician, Jock Menzies-Grant.
Tony is presumed dead, and Hetton Abbey goes to his poor middle-class relatives,
who seal all but a living quarters and breed silver foxes commercially in the
stables. In the jungle, Tony's romantic quest has found the decadence of
death-in-life, as the name, "Todd", would imply.

The novel would be a slighter thing if we did not see that it incorporates
a large amount of Tennyson's "The Holy Grail" (1869) from The Idylls of the
King. In this poem, Tennyson expressed a glum view of his society and its
misplaced values: the knights of the Table Round fall short of their king's ideals of spirituality and self-sacrifice, and become materialistic, with Queen Guinevere and Sir Lancelot, in particular, yielding adulterously to the flesh. Their quest for the Holy Grail is wrongheaded because supernatural in direction; and it is inevitable that when they return they should find Camelot in ruins.

As a sombre warning to Tennyson's fellow-Victorians, "The Holy Grail" maintains its serious tone throughout. But, as Richard Wason points out, Waugh's attitude to the poem is complex and his tone parodic. Hetton Abbey, for example, is obviously set forth as a ludicrous mistake, whereas Tennyson has no derision for its rather Pre-Raphaelite counterpart, the court of King Arthur; the adultery of Brenda Last with Beaver is shabby, which can hardly be said of the adultery of Guinevere and Lancelot; Tony's quest occurs after his Camelot collapses, not before, making him appear foolish where Percivale appeared nobly misguided; Galahad, Percivale's guide, disappears, whereas Tony's Messenger drowns after an undignified ducking. Nevertheless, much remains unchanged from the Victorian poem: Tony's vision of Hetton in the Brazilian jungle reads like a prose version of Percivale's vision of the Grail-city, and they reach it through the same territory, one in poetry and the other in prose. Of particular interest is Percivale's recurrent experience in which he grasps at a sumptuous romantic image only to find himself clutching a handful of dust: a thirst-slaking stream in a pastoral vision vanishes as he drinks it; a fair woman in a fair house (to be transformed into Brenda in Hetton) crumbles to a "broken shed,/ And in it a dead babe"; and a glorious knight crumbles to leave him "wearying in a land of sand and thorns". As

Wasson says, Tennyson liked the dust image\(^{40}\), and it seems that Eliot saw that for Tennyson the image symbolized the reality of a valueless life. The "fear in a handful of dust" which appears in Part I of "The Waste Land" is a conflation of images from both Tennyson and Conrad; and Waugh appears to have reached the Arthurian cycle by moving backward, as it were, through "The Waste Land".

The fact that Waugh's use of received material in his fiction aids a specifically Catholic criticism of his society is relatively unimportant, I think, compared with the importance of the form this criticism takes. This tendency to parody literature becomes a central part of the genre, and provides the dominant theme of my next section; it confirms the tendency I noted in my discussion of Brave New World towards satire and parody and away from the heart-felt pessimism of Conrad and his contemporaries. Increasingly, decadent­ism becomes, if not an attitude to be struck, certainly a far more complex phenomenon than a simple denunciation of socio-cultural decadence; the way begins to clear towards sophistications of certain aspects of the genre and variations of its tone. We may end this section by examining one such subtle variation.


The conflict between the delusions of romanticism and the harsh reality of experience, so central to the novel of decadence, occurs again in Venusberg. Here, as with the other novels we have studied, the central figure is shadowy, passive, and Prufrockian, another hopeless lover of a princesse lointaine briefly held and long lost. Lushington is a minor journalist for an inferior newspaper who is sent as foreign correspondent to an unnamed Baltic state which has recently won its independence from Russia, and where he hopes to find solace and strength with which to face his romantic loss. It is immediately obvious that this use of the Heart of Darkness archetype differs greatly from Huxley's or Waugh's. Lushington's assignment to "Venusberg" is the

\(^{40}\) "A Handful of Dust: Critique of Victorianism", p. 333.
quest of the romantic decadent for primitive renewal; but it is typical of Powell's artistic restraint and subtlety that the Baltic state is no Congo settlement but instead a merely old-fashioned country still threatened by the barbaric Russian state and making a poor job of aping more "civilized" countries. The polarity that is implied in this novel is between the exhausted Western Europe and the barbaric Russia, the Baltic "Venusberg" providing the generic meeting-point of the two influences. "Venusberg" is a version of Azania or Patusan, both an arena for struggle and a country of the mind, but in a minor key.

The city Lushington finally reaches after a sea-voyage contains many images of the brittle hold of the civilized over the primitive. It is split almost surrealistically into old and new halves: the apartment building in which lives the ailing Count Scherbatcheff is new but only half-completed, its unfinished wing crumbling into decay; hotel-lifts work well enough but oblige their occupants to leap suicidally to each floor; an impoverished military procession resembles something from Azania; a beautiful palace is occupied by lunatics; a dismembered statue lies with its face in the snow which makes the whole place seem so unreal to Lushington; and there is a laundry which specializes in returning clothing in shreds. "Venusberg" is constantly being drawn backward by its own primitiveness.

As a Patusanian theatre of the imagination, a "country of the mind", this place constantly displays its own air of unreality. When Lushington's boat docks there, he is reminded of a bizarre moment when holidaying in England: funnels and masts had suddenly loomed above trees in a meadow, indicating the presence of boats which seemed unbelievably land-locked. The odd split in "Venusberg", between the modern buildings of the "Low Town" and the medieval buildings of the "High Town", makes the whole place seem more unreal than this; and Lushington thinks that when the winter's snow comes,
this unreality would be absolute, although as a set-piece the scene would remain unstylized. Because the unreality was something in itself. Not the product of historical association nor even the superimposed up-to-dateness. It was related perceptibly to the foreground of sea.41

As any Decadent or Romantic poet would know, the sea is nature uncivilized, and its closeness to "Venusberg" places that town on the battlefront, as it were. Powell's first novel had the crepuscular setting of good decadentist fiction; but Venusberg is a winter novel set amongst the snows of the heart of whiteness. Passing a headland fort as he leaves the place near the end of the novel, Lushington thinks of it as "the last outpost of the unreal city and, prodigally dramatic, a soldier was standing on one of the bastions of the central tower ... a gargoyle against the snowy castellations and pale stars"; he concludes that this is "the final and rather masterly shot of the reel" (p.181). Back in London, he is to describe "Venusberg" as "less real" than even his earlier experience of the funnels appearing in the field (p.191). Like Tony Last's quest to the jungle, and like Jim's kingdom in Lord Jim, the whole episode of Lushington's experience in "Venusberg" seems to be deliberately portrayed as unreal and imaginary. But Lushington, unlike those earlier fictional questers, is aware that he is in a "place that had been left without meaning" (p.111). When two of his vacuous associates, the American, Cortney, and a local army officer named Waldemar assert that the Baltic town is crammed with interesting history, character, and "romance", the sick Russian count, Scherbatcheff, supplies a corrective view of its inhabitants. Its women, he says, are "no more than illusions that the camera throws on the shaking screen", and the people there like the creatures of Scandinavian myth,

... creatures who present to the eye the appearance of flesh and blood and beauty. And yet, going behind them, they are discovered to be flat. They have no substance. They are like pictures that are hung on an easel that have no thickness. (p.127).

41. Venusberg (London: Heinemann, 1962), p.41. Further page references will be cited within the text.
Lushington wins a woman in "Venusberg" who is rather like one of these mythical beings: Ortrud Mavrin is the young wife of an ancient academic, and she bears a remarkable resemblance to the girl Lushington has lost and left behind. Like many of the princesses lointaines in the decadentist genre, Ortrud is readily available, and their affair, which is constantly interrupted by ridiculous intruders, becomes a parody of a romantic love.

Yet, for all its burlesque qualities, this relationship is the focal point of Venusberg, for it demonstrates yet again the deflation of romantic delusion in an environment which at first seems hospitable to romance. Ortrud and her English counterpart, Lucy, are both attractive but superficial; and it is the latter quality which suffuses the love each gives to Lushington. In order to emphasize the point that love will be barren if conducted in the waste land—whether the waste of England or of its metaphor, "Venusberg"—Powell cuts short Lushington's affair with Ortrud by means of another blow from the inscrutable cosmos like those which unseated Zouch and killed young Quarles and Last. Lushington's rival, Da Costa, takes Ortrud home from a ball in a carriage when assassins open fire at the nearby chief of police; Da Costa and Ortrud are killed immediately. Not surprisingly, the murderers are revealed as agents of barbarous Russia; and the whole incident, Lushington realizes, has been quite devoid of purpose, completely arbitrary:

Here then was that rather astonishing mystery about which so much had been said that, when the fact itself was there, no further comment was possible. For the moment no near-at-hand formula seemed at all adequate. This was something well-defined and at the same time not easy to believe in. It seemed absurd, overdone. Lacking in proportion, like other people's love affairs. Here were all the signs of a loss of control. A breakdown of the central machinery. The sort of thing no-one could be expected to be on the look-out for.

(p.171).

Muted and underplayed, this is nevertheless the novel's equivalent of the generic insight at the heart of darkness: just as Kurtz's cry announces a
possible glimpse of horror amidst the collapse of control, this passage acknowledges the triumph of the barbaric will over man's rational abilities, and concedes that meaning and order are frail things in the waste land. Lushington returns to London and to Lucy, knowing that either attempting to win her or deliberately avoiding her are equally pointless actions: nothing possesses meaning.

The inglorious crew Powell gathers about Lushington in Venusberg is worth briefly noting, so typical are they of these waste land novels. As Sanford Radner remarks, the novel emphasizes "the decadent nobility rather than middle class intellectuals": Baroness Puckler is a fortune-teller whose predictions are always wrong; the dying Russian, Scherbacheff, takes Lushington home to his half-derelict apartment building and displays a tiny flat crammed with relatives, all leading their quite pointless lives together in an intense image of meaninglessness; Da Costa, for all the distinctions of his family background, is emotionally hollow, unable to give love; Cortney is garrulous in a way which reveals the emptiness of his words; and there is the repulsive but comical figure of Pope, Da Costa's valet who has been "loaned" to Lushington for his Baltic stay. Pope is Eliot's "eternal footman", condescending and anamnesiac, possessing an inexhaustible supply of self-congratulatory anecdotes. Appropriately, Cortney inherits his services near the end of the novel, and their torrent of chatter becomes less and less meaningful, increasingly a betrayal of their emptiness.

But the most typical and illuminating character in Venusberg is the bogus Russian count, Bobel, a traveller in cosmetics who belongs to the genre's tradition of Captain Grimes, Father Rothschild, and Gumbril. Evasive when questioned about his origins, forever with women of doubtful virtue to whom he attributes grandiose noble connections, constantly and inexplicably appearing in unexpected places, Bobel is yet another in a lengthening queue of hollow

42. "Powell's Early Novels: A Study in Point of View", Renascence XVI, p.196.
men who have forged their own values in the empty world. By proximity, he is associated with the barbarism of the murder of Da Costa and Ortrud: he is found at the scene with a pistol in his hand, but is released when the weapon is revealed to be the hollow man's gun, a cardboard cutout. Doubt remains about his involvement in this affair, as about any other aspect of him: he may be a fatuous imposter, or he may be a Russian agent engaged in revenge after the revolution; but in this shifting waste there is simply no way of fixing values. Lushington, sea-sick on the return journey to England, listens to Bobel make the novel's only fully explicit reference to the void:

In Russia we have an expression - nitchevo. It is difficult to render into another language. It is in reality untranslatable. It means nothing or, more freely, what does it matter? ... I think this is a moment when such a philosophy of life might be of value to you. Say to yourself - nitchevo. (p.186).

With varying degrees of intensity, with differing kinds of commitment, the writers we have seen in this section have been saying nitchevo all the time.

4. In Summary.

I have tried to illustrate a number of things in this section: initially, that even if Eliot and Conrad were different kinds of people, and however reliably we may believe in their sociological judgements, they chose to write about decadence in the social, cultural, and individual sphere in very much the same manner and terms. The important point for this study is that Eliot's borrowings from Conrad form the basis for a distinctive genre; and I have tried to show that, in their turn, Huxley, Waugh, and Powell borrowed details from Eliot for their early novels and tried to maintain in them something of the evanescent spirit of exhaustion and pessimism caught in "The Waste Land", "The Hollow Men", and the other poetry of the period. Just as Eliot and Conrad are similar only in this respect, the novelists themselves do not slavishly follow the poet: we have seen strong similarities amongst the satirical works above which derive from the writers' knowledge of one another's work, rather than from identical responses
made to one group of poems. For Huxley, Waugh, and Powell, the poetry of
Eliot is a springboard into the business of writing novels; and subsequently
they swam in different directions, Huxley in the direction of philosophy and
the philosophic novel, Waugh towards his Catholic novels, and Powell, after a
decade of silence, in his roman fleuve, The Music of Time. If this tendency
smacks of an insincere practice of decadentist fiction, it might be recalled
that Eliot himself found Christianity in 1928 and that the older Conrad was,
on the surface at any rate, much less pessimistic than the Conrad of 1900.

We will find as we move ahead now that one of the most distinctive
attributes of the novels studied in this section is their display of tenden-
cies which we often associate with the contemporary American novel alone. It
is fair to ascribe to the metamorphic figure a traditional part in American
fiction, with origins in Melville and Whitman; but Waugh's Captain Grimes and
Powell's Count Bobel are conceived as mysterious, metamorphic figures,
too. The question I am trying to pose here is whether our view of American
fiction is enriched if it acknowledges a provenance in the fiction of decadence.
Without placing Waugh or Huxley behind Ellison's Invisible Man or Selby's
Last Exit to Brooklyn, I am suggesting that certain concerns in certain
contemporary American fictions are identical to those which so far have been
discussed in a purely European or English context. One way, for example,
of understanding the metamorphic narrator of Whitman's "Song of Myself" is
to examine Aldous Huxley's essay on the fluctuating nature of experience and
the arbitrariness of the values human beings place on it.43 Again, Eliot's
ability to devour lines of Conrad's prose and digest them into "The Waste Land"
- as well as the novelists' abilities to consume Eliot's work - will be
compounded as a tendency in the novels of the next section. Waugh's use of
the poetry of Tennyson in A Handful of Dust is similar to Saul Bellow's use
of received written sources in Henderson the Rain King, as we are to see; and

(This was originally published in Ends and Means, 1937.)
John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* uses other people's documents in this parodic way, too. All these writers share the aim of commenting upon the value of the material which they borrow.

All this is to argue in support of seeing a generic link which moves from Conrad through Eliot to the novelists of this section, in one case, and to the novelists of the next section in the other case. The strongest evidence I could adduce for placing Huxley, Waugh, and Powell in this genre was to examine some of their novels and identify in them their need to use again the classical archetype of the decadent experience in fiction which Conrad created in *Heart of Darkness*. This evidence will be seen again, amongst the writers of contemporary American fiction studied in the next section. Here, however, a subtle change inevitably occurs: the contemporary American decadentist writer is aware of the traditional relationship between the exhausted Old World of Europe and the ambivalent promise of the New World; but he also knows well the origins of the New World as a colony of Europe, and sees that the Europeans who first explored the eastern rivers of the new continent were mirror-twins of those who, across the Atlantic, moved up the western rivers of Africa to confront the heart of darkness. For contemporary American writers, America is the new home of the old decay.
DECLINE AND FALL IN AMERICA.


2. Saul Bellow's Henderson the Rain King (1959).


The mighty pageants of Spengler and Toynbee do not bolster our confidence; a barrage of anti-utopias - Wells's, Huxley's, Orwell's - blots the horizon. The story is nearly always the same: spirit is exhausted, civilization is over-extended, the individual must move on surfaces or be crushed inward. History, we learn from Spengler's Decline of the West, is the relative process of human societies, evolving from Culture to Civilization, from a dream-heavy awakening of the soul, through a great moment of creative and ripening consciousness, to cosmopolitan, practical, and irreligious decadence. Imperialism and urbanization on a giant scale are the precursors of dissolution.

This is Ihab Hassan, writing in one of the more perceptive critical works of the contemporary period and revealing a range of awareness which, as we ought to expect by now, is wider than the American experience alone and reaches back into European history. This is the distinctive feature of much of American literature and criticism in this century: that there is such small reluctance to place America amidst those processes of decay which have trapped so many civilizations in history. Hassan's points are twofold: first, that twentieth century man is constantly reminded of his imminent demise; and second,

that the American writer and critic feels himself a part of a European tradition of decline and fall. These are both implicit in the remarks I quoted at the very beginning of this study, in which Roth, Mailer, Friedman and many others observed with bewilderment so many social phenomena which we found we could relate to the very things Nordau attacked; and the importance of this attitude amongst recent writers will be discussed soon.

Initially, however, one might be forgiven for feeling a little surprise at the critics' desire to yoke America together with an exhausted Europe; for, as suited the land of the fresh start and the new hope, Americans from the beginning have expected an optimistic literature of their writers. Much of American fiction seems to express a belief in the value of the individual and the community's progress: there is no doubt in the Leatherstocking novels of James Fenimore Cooper, for example, that individual courage and resourcefulness will have their way. And yet a closer examination of the American literary tradition reveals more, both of a corrosive nihilism and a sustained ambiguity. Melville's Ahab is a quester, but a tormented one whose ambition finally sees him drowned in the very ocean which - by the lights of traditional romance - should be the source of his redemption. It is hard to evaluate the white whale at all (whereas the grail of the romance is accepted without valuation): what can be made of the immense blankness of its exposed side? Melville's Billy Budd reminds us of the heroes of more optimistic media, yet he ends the novella dangling from the yard-arm of the ship in a darkness which becomes apocalypticism in The Confidence Man. With a little less intensity than this, Hawthorne shows a gloomy picture of America's origins when he depicts the narrow-minded and destructive Puritanism of The Scarlet Letter (1850) or The House of the Seven Gables (1851). Not very far behind the puckishness of Clemens's Tom Sawyer (1876) and Huckleberry Finn (1885) is a deep and thoroughgoing dread:

2. Lewis's discussion of this novel occurs in Trials of the Word, pages 209-10.
3. A good discussion of the general sort of nihilism I have in mind here is in Van Wyck Brooks, The Ordeal of Mark Twain (London:Heinemann,1922),pages 1-25.
in Injun Joe's vile, candle-lit face against the black void of the catacombs, and in the apparitions of Huck's terrifying father. Moving a little closer to the twentieth century, we can see in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1894) a classical example of the ambiguous jostling-together of material which is in a humanistic and optimistic mode with a manner which undoes all promise. Crane's Henry Fleming conquers cowardice and becomes a man, but the sun which triumphantly greets his new status at the end of the book has been the bloody sun of paganism throughout, and Crane was surely aware that in his times manhood was not necessarily a very impressive thing to bestow on anyone: Darwinism, after all, made a strong impact in America, too.

Frank Norris was another who remained unsure about optimistic progressivism, and particularly about that aspect of the so-called "American Dream" which, in Greeley's phrasing, ascribed to westward movement inevitable personal success. Even more than in nineteenth century England, the railway symbolized the march of civilized Progress in America, "breaking in" the wilderness and branding it with the iron of the track. Norris's *The Octopus* (1901) depicts the railway as a corrupt and degenerate force, a bearer of evil from an Eastern seaboard unhealthily close to the diseases of a degenerate Europe. In *McTeague* (1899), Norris places this corruption at a personal level but with strong symbolism, ending with his famous scene in the desert, where the two doomed men are stranded by their dead, gold-encaged bird. From this point, generally speaking, the fiction of American nihilism seems to gain a social weighting, and what had in Melville and Twain a cosmic tinge becomes in their successors a feeling that it is specifically man's behaviour in society which causes pessimism amongst his fellows. The advent of the Great War, and America's rather reluctant involvement in it, symbolizes the end of idealism and an enforced confrontation with socio-cultural realities which all too often had the appearance of socio-cultural decline. Here, the waste land of the expatriate American, Eliot, becomes a
fairly permanent part of American fiction.

It seems that Eliot's "waste land" poetry was as important to American writers of the 'twenties and 'thirties as it was to the English. Writers who depict their society as a waste usually think of it as caught in the processes of socio-cultural decadence, as we have seen. Scott Fitzgerald, for one, presented in *The Great Gatsby* (1926) references to a racist work which had seen the American Negro as a classical symbol of the decline of the nation; according to R. W. Stallman, Fitzgerald's ideas were influenced by Spengler's *Decline of the West*, and Tom Buchanan's remarks are often those of a Republican Nero. The novel presents two complementary images: of the "fresh green breast" of the New World, its human equivalent ruptured and torn in the car accident; and of the valley of ashes beside which so much of the action takes place.

As well as being Fitzgerald's most socially-oriented novel, *The Great Gatsby* is his most pessimistic, for his two main images imply the death of optimism and the permanence of the waste. Ernest Hemingway was capable of an even greater pessimism: in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Catherine Barkley is a succulently-available princesse lointaine who is torn from Frederic Henry by malevolent if self-effacing forces; the pattern of *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) is of the castrated Fisher King who finds no redemption, only (as in the English novels of the period) a circular taxi journey; and there is the famous invocation to Nothing which occurs in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place", in *Winner Take Nothing* (1933):

> Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada. Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. Give us this nada our daily nada and nada us our nada as we nada our nasadas and nada us not into nada but deliver us from

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6. The writer of the work Fitzgerald referred to was Theodore Lothrop Stoddart.
nada; pues nada. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee.

This sort of writing is, possibly, less surprising to us after the nihilism we saw in the English novels we have studied so far, if only because we may feel that the despair of the writer may not be wholehearted after all. But however valid its expression, the American novel has a bedrock of pessimism, as the social novels of the 'thirties will show. Dos Passos's U.S.A. (1938), Farrell's Studs Lonigan trilogy (1933), or Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath (1939) all show a strong social awareness and a belief that certain aspects of the decadent process were at work in American society. A novel like Nathanael West's A Cool Million (1934) is an inevitable and significant product of the impingement of reality upon the romance form, and the genre which results is known as the romance-parody. West's novella, a reversal of the optimistic myth of Horatio Alger, sees his youthful hero crushed and dismembered by reality, while James Purdy's Malcolm (1960), a more recent example of the parody of romance, presents exactly the same thing in a more symbolic and less surrealist way. Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita (1958) is further evidence of the disillusionment of the romantic quester; and later within this section we will see parodic elements within the longer romance forms employed by Bellow, Barth, and Percy.9

There are a number of points within this compressed view of the American fiction of decline which simply cannot be examined because of lack of space; but there are two peculiarly American aspects of decadentism which must be commented on. First, while the "hollow man" of decadence lives on, the contemporary American writer is much more concerned about the value of his central character, the man who knows his times are decadent and his fellow-man a bourgeois. Alienation, of the value-seeking hero from the cluttered emptiness of his world, is as central to this fiction as it was to the nineteenth century

decadentist philosopher. Secondly, and quite distinctly, a peculiarly linguistic element enters the American fiction of decay, and language itself becomes a central part of the subject-matter of fiction.

Robert Penn Warren's *All The King's Men* (1944), with its theme of survival in the jungle of politics, makes a good illustration of the first point, in that it does not accept that Jack Burden, its central figure, has a necessary place in his world. Jack's most typical state of existence is "The Big Sleep", a sort of suspended animation in which he remains uninvolved in time-ridden life. Life-in-time is impelled by the animal drive of "The Great Twitch"; Burden's idealism, or Willie Stark's, brings about their downfall because idealism is a rigid, romantic value which cannot be maintained in the jungle of politics. The novel concludes with Burden's tentative acceptance of a new identity after he has found the true identity of his own father; but there is no assurance that his entry to the world will be at all successful.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) revolves about the same themes of identity and alienation in a similar, though more severe and symbolic, way. The nameless Negro who narrates the story begins life enclosed in the self given him by his white Southern masters; the novel records his gradual emancipation from this identity until, during the apocalyptic outburst of a Harlem riot, he vanishes underground completely stripped of all identity after acknowledging the multiplicity of experience symbolized by the multiplying figure of Rinehart. There, the narrator writes his retrospective story, convinced of his existence only because illuminated by thousands of light bulbs.

Given the spontaneous appearance in American fiction of such themes, with the typically surrealistic and barbaric scenes which occur in each, it is not surprising that contemporary writers should accept the influence of Continental existentialist fiction. Austere and concerned with the philosophic, Meursault of Camus' *L'Étranger* (1942) and Roquentin of Sartre's *La Nausée* (1938) appear
to have impressed some American writers of the 'forties and 'fifties as expressing much of their own feeling of dislocation from an unpredictable and violent world. For Saul Bellow, the North Africa route was obviously the way into fiction, and his first two novels, Dangling Man (1944) and The Victim (1947), rely on Camus. Like most fictional alienation in America, these novels are slightly more concerned with the ontological aspects of alienation than are their Continental counterparts, which emphasize the disgusted repulsion of man adrift in a sea of things. Joseph, in the first novel, has lived in Chicago for years when he finds himself called up for military service. Because of an administrative breakdown he must wait seven months after ending his civilian job and before entering the army, during which time he "hanges" in a limbo devoid of the flimsy assurances of occupation and citizenship. He is stripped, in fact, of his identity, and in his new freedom must face the fact that for all his "humanity" and "personality" he is essentially meaningless when considered as an individual. In the Sartrean sense, he has chosen an identity and then had it removed; and the novel ends with his happy anticipation of the approaching restrictions and regimentation of army life. The Victim represents a similar situation more symbolically, in the relationship between the victimized Jew, Leventhal, and his supposed oppressor, Allbee. Leventhal is enclosed by his own identity, and sees the world as if through a tunnel; Allbee, as his name suggests, represents the fullness, chaos, randomness, and temporal decadence of the world. Initially, the novel shares Leventhal's view of things; but gradually the reader begins to see that Allbee's apparent persecution of him may result from Leventhal's own defensiveness, and that Allbee too is a victim. At the end of the novel, Leventhal has learned that the self is much less definite and coherent than he had imagined it to be.

John Barth's novels are even more self-consciously imitative of existential fiction, for all his denials of this. Todd Andrews, narrator of Floating

*Opéra* (1955), is as physically clubbed as the repulsive tree-roots Roquentin sees in *La Nausée*, and suffers from an existential heart-disease which may terminate his life at any point, making him in an almost ironic way a living symbol of the Decadents' death-in-life. Andrews spends the book pondering the problem of evaluation in a relativistic universe, and the gratuitous act by which he intends finally to announce his freedom from the short-term values of the bourgeoisie involves blowing up a riverboat which is full of local citizens who are watching a bizarre, surrealistic concert. But his fuller understanding is that his decision to commit murder or not is irrelevant; no act, even the free act, has any significance; and thus he escapes the fate of Meursault, which he so closely imitates. Jacob Horner, narrator of *The End of the Road* (1955), is the hollowest of hollow men, a sufferer from cosmopsis, in which "one is frozen like the bullfrog when the hunter's light strikes him full in the eyes". A Negro doctor of mysterious origins treats him and sends him into the world again to teach — significantly, as we will see very soon — prescriptive grammar, in order that he may hold fast to at least one value-system in such an overwhelming world. At a local teachers' college he becomes involved with Joe Morgan, a cheerful pragmatist who is aware of the void but believes in the efficacy of short-term enterprises such as the Boy Scout movement. Horner seduces Joe's wife, Rennie, after showing her how Joe behaves when he thinks the others have left him on his own: he grimaces before a mirror, marches about in his scoutmaster's uniform, and masturbates while vigorously picking his nose. Rennie becomes pregnant, and dies during a botched abortion operation performed by the Negro doctor. Horner, aware now of the ease with which human relationships may be changed or broken, returns permanently to the doctor's sanitorium.

Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1960) introduces to American fiction a slightly

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Hemingway and Dos Passos influenced him in the writing of his fiction, which in turn influenced later American writers.

different alienated figure. Binx Bolling, the narrator, is as intelligent and self-aware as his creator, and is therefore highly articulate about the nature of alienation. Percy has discussed this in an early article on the subject, called "The Man in the Train"\textsuperscript{12}, in which he imagines two very different train-travellers, surrounded by material luxury and sealed from the reality through which they pass. One is the classically bourgeois figure, who will "feel himself quite at home, seeing the passing scene as a series of meaningful projects full of signs which he reads without difficulty", while the other is the traditional alien, who "is in pure anxiety; he is horrified at his surroundings - he might as well be passing through a lunar landscape and the signs he sees are absurd or at least ambiguous"\textsuperscript{13}. The world of Percy's fiction is divided in this radical but familiar way: between a materialistic but empty bourgeois society and the alien who can see the horror of the emptiness which lies in the sheer clutter of material life, the dishonesty with which the bourgeois forms and holds his values. Thus, says Percy, we find the bourgeois "say, in the Park Forest development near Chicago, who has a good sexual relation ... who feels secure, who is socially adjusted ... These people are desperately alienated from themselves. They are in fact without selves. They experience themselves in things, as commodities, or as nothing"\textsuperscript{14}.

Binx Bolling is conceived as "a man who finds himself in a world, a very concrete place and time. Such a man might be represented as coming to himself in somewhat the same sense as Robinson Crusoe came to himself on his island after his shipwreck, with the same wonder and curiosity"\textsuperscript{15}. The metaphor used here, we will recall, is Kierkegaard's, whose influence on Percy's thought will

\textsuperscript{12} "The Man on the Train: Three Existential Modes", Partisan Review XXIII (Fall 1956), pages 478-94.
\textsuperscript{13} "The Man on the Train", pages 478-9.
\textsuperscript{14} "The Coming Crisis in Psychiatry", America XCVI (1957), p.392.
be seen later in this section; but Binx's task here is more directly influenced by Camus' *L'Etranger*, as Lewis Lawson has noted. In the swift rush of time Binx is surrounded by pleasant hollow people from whom he must differentiate himself meaningfully, which he seeks to do by two means. The first is what he calls the "vertical" search, which involves analysis and prescription, and which he rejects for reasons we may discuss a little later; the second is the "horizontal" search, which involves a personal, subjective, non-rational approach to life. The best of his "horizontal" methods is "movie-going", which often involves his cousin, Kate Cutrer, who, like Binx, suffers from Kierkegaardian angst but, unlike him, is generally conceded to be neurotic.

Moviegoing does something to arrest the terrifying rush of time and to replace the gods lost to a degenerate age. Seeing William Holden walking in the streets of Gentilly, his home town, Binx is astounded by his "peculiar reality", a quality which translates all film stars to the status of *Ehrenmenschen*. The terms Percy uses to describe the effects of movie-going all come from Kierkegaard. A "repetition" is "the re-enactment of past experience toward the end of isolating the time segment which has lapsed in order that it, the lapsed time, can be savored of itself and without the usual adulteration of events" (p. 80). In this case, Binx is viewing "The Oxbow Incident" in the same theatre seat from which he viewed it in 1941, and afterwards has the nostalgic experience of smelling privet and crushed camphor berries just as he did before. A "rotation" is "the experiencing of the new beyond the expectation of experiencing the new": this occurs when he watches a film in which

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18. We will recall that "repetition" comes from Kierkegaard's *Repetition*.
the stars themselves watch a film. "Certification" (a term which appears to have no parallel in Kierkegaard) involves seeing a film set in one's own neighbourhood, which is thus elevated from its "everydayness". But these methods are not cures, and the novel ends in a manner reminiscent of Warren's All The King's Men, with Binx's sudden marriage to Kate and the faint hope that they will be able to live with integrity.

Percy's second novel, The Last Gentleman (1966), presents an even more seriously dislocated figure, Will Barrett, and a more richly symbolical landscape which will develop into the fully symbolical locus of Love in the Ruins (1973), which will be discussed later in this section. Will Barrett suffers from recurrent and intensifying bouts of amnesia, like Kierkegaard's Don Juan; given the task of roaming the South in a caravan as the paid companion to the dying son of a rich family, he constantly finds himself waking as if newly born, amidst the segregationist riots of the early 'sixties. The relationship of such a predicament to the ideas of nineteenth century decadentism can readily be seen; for Will, deprived of past and future, has only consciousness of a present self fully contained in the little caravan in which he roams the countryside, constantly perceiving in his timeless awareness an inexplicable series of barbaric acts involving Negroes and bourgeois whites.

The burden of The Last Gentleman is carried by the doomed boy's older brother, a dissolute doctor called Sutter Vaught, whose deliberate drunkenness and acts of flamboyant fornication have led to his expulsion from his profession. Sutter is the mouthpiece for many of Percy's theories about the ills of modern America, which develop into Percy's theories of linguistic alienation. A discussion of Sutter's ideas is appropriate here, for it will give insights into the nature of both "existential" and linguistic alienation as they apply to the novels remaining for discussion in this section.

Percy, like many of his fellow-writers, has never doubted that contemporary
America is in a state of decline. "It is more or less generally recognized", he states, "that despite unprecedented cultural and material advantages, the lives of a great many people in America and the West ... have sunk to unprecedented depths of paltriness and banality"\textsuperscript{21}, and we ought to "consider the possibility that the dislocation of [our] times is related to [an] incapacity to attach significance to the sacramental and historical-incarnation nature of Christianity"\textsuperscript{22}. Sutter Vaught specifies this view: he believes that the layman's reading of scientific theorizing has made him view the world as transcendent or "spiritual" instead of concrete or actual, a tendency traditional Christianity reinforces. The sexual instinct, which is natural and "real", becomes covert because its physicality is at odds with "spiritual" interpretations of humanity. In a degenerate society sexuality becomes lewdness, either as sly fornication or as transcendental "romantic" love, and Sutter is led to describe "U. S. culture" as

the strangest in history, a society of decent generous sex-ridden men and women who leave each other to their lusts, the men off to the city and their conventions, abandoning their wives to the suburbs, which are the very home and habitation of lewd dreams.\textsuperscript{23}

And he describes "Main Street, U. S. A.":

a million-dollar segregated church on one corner, a drugstore with dirty magazines on the other, a lewd movie on the third, and on the fourth a B-girl bar with condom dispensers in the gents' room. Delay-your-climax cream. (p.290).

Sutter claims to be "the only sincere American" (p.280) because he is frankly and publicly sexual, a habit which accounts for his expulsion from society. Western man has caught himself in the "transcendent trap", and the world is "doomed to the transcendence of abstraction" from which "the delectation of immanence, the beauty and exaltation of lewd love" offers "the only reentry

\textsuperscript{21} "The Culture Critics", Commonweal LXX (June 5, 1959) p.249.
\textsuperscript{22} "The Culture Critics", p.250.
\textsuperscript{23} The Last Gentleman (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), p.271. Later references are cited in the text.
into the world which remains to us" (p.340).

Percy obviously has Kierkegaard's Don Juan in mind here, too, for Sutter is the epitome of the alien who seeks to imbed himself in the flesh in order to avoid the disorientation of abstraction. The doctrine of fornication which Sutter preaches has in fact linguistic and not sexual significances, for the culprits he blames are "scientists", the makers of the "pseudo-science articles in the Reader's Digest", as Sutter describes them (p.271), and all those social scientists who seek to analyse, prescribe, and order life. As Percy pointed out in an earlier article, "The Message in the Bottle", there are more relevant things for modern man. Here he supposes that a castaway has been washed ashore upon a very highly developed island from whose shore he later begins to pick up bottles containing messages from overseas. The castaway finds that he can divide these into "island news" (about matters which pertain to his own well-being) and "knowledge" (which results from "a very special kind of human activity ... which the castaway ... attributes alike to scientists, scholars, poets, and philosophers")24. "Island news" alone has relevance to the castaway's predicament, "knowledge" being unimportant because so distinctly unrelated to the immediate problems of survival. In "Culture: The Antinomy of the Scientific Method", he develops this argument. There is, he says, "a remarkable difference between the sort of reality the scientific method is and the sort of reality it understands its data to be"25, and he attempts to investigate "the state of affairs which comes about when the scientific method is applied to this very activity of which it is itself a mode: the assertory phenomena of culture"26. The result is "an antinomy" because culture "is not a catalogue of artifacts or responses to an environment but is rather the ensemble of all the modes of assertory activity. Culture has been defined as all human inheritance, material as well as spiritual. As such it would include

hoes, baskets, manuscripts, and monuments, as well as the living language" 27.

The mistake which the scientist makes, according to Percy and Sutter Vaught, is to raise manuscripts, documents, and the living language above the world-of-things by virtue of their apparent capacity to explain the world-of-things in their systems of ordered, consecutive words. Percy has discussed this problem at great length and with considerable complexity 28; his conclusion in paraphrase is that when a sign or symbol distinctly relates to an object or a meaning, alienation does not occur; but when language begins to abstract and generalize, to move away from the concrete, to prescribe and order, it becomes increasingly severed from reality and more likely to alienate contemporary man.

Percy's novels abound in pleasant but empty bourgeois figures who mistakenly believe in the efficacy of the scientific method. The scene in The Moviegoer in which Binx travels in a train next to a monolithically empty middle class American businessman is a dramatization of his Partisan Review article: the obviously-successful fellow possesses a sort of bulky vacuity which is evident when he uses pocket-scissors to clip neatly from his paper an article on "the convergence of the physical sciences and the social sciences", a phrase which seems to Binx to "howl through the Ponchitoula Swamp, the very sound and soul of despair" (p.191). His friends, the Lovells, have re-examined their values and found them "pretty darn enduring"; they share the "same life-goal", "To make a contribution, however small, and leave the world just a little bit better off" (p.101), a hollow statement which makes Binx want to break wind as if in sympathy. His landlady, Mrs Schexnaydre ("she's nadir", according to Brainard Cheney 29) loves the Reader's Digest and hates Negroes. His aunt, an intelligent but misguided humanist, lectures him fruitlessly on the attainment of abstract goals. He watches an itinerant doctor-author and his wife

publicizing their book, *Technique in Marriage*, another pseudo-scientific work of analysis and prescription, and imagines them "at their researches, as solemn as a pair of brontosauruses, their heavy old freckled limbs twined about each other" (p.190). In *The Last Gentleman*, Percy satirizes Will Barrett's sessions with a psychiatrist; the dying boy reads the euphemistic mysticism of Kahlil Gibran; his sister offers him the unthinking spirituality of Roman Catholicism.

The linguistic element of alienation in contemporary American fiction is a sophistication of what I have called "existential" alienation, and in the subsections which follow I will show how deeply imbedded the verbal element is in the alienation of three decadentist fictions. It is vital to understand that linguistic alienation, the diminution of the stature of the written word, is a decadentist phenomenon; and this point will become much clearer if we refer to a work which has been "adopted" by many contemporary American writers.

This is the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the Viennese philosopher's early work, which was first published in English in 1922. The *Tractatus* sets out a scrupulously-evolved set of aphorisms which explain how language is linked to objects and states just how far we may stray from the world-of-things when we speak. Wittgenstein willingly concedes the existence of a world which is full of objects to which we ascribe names (Percy's "symbols" and "signs"); at this strongly literal level, we name groups of closely-linked objects which form "atomic facts" ("chair", for example, names an atomic fact consisting of lesser objects which it is not always useful to name). When we talk about atomic facts we use "elementary propositions" (*Tractatus*, 4.21), which, says Wittgenstein, are "pictures" of atomic facts, in the sense that a true elementary proposition correctly represents the structure of the atomic facts. "An elementary proposition consists of names. It is a nexus, a

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30. "The Coming Crisis in Psychiatry", *America* XCVI (1957), pages 391-3 and 415-8 sets out the theory behind this sort of attack.
concatenation of names" (4.22); and the names strictly correspond to objects.

This is the most important point so far: that at a relatively simple level, congruity is imagined between thing and name, object and language; and that language mirrors the world. But, Wittgenstein points out, this fidelity to fact does not always exist in language, and our statements tend to become more complex instead of remaining simple. Language forms elementary propositions into groups, and from these makes "truth-functions" (5) which become increasingly separate from things-in-the-world. Any linguistic statement is true which is verifiable by comparison with the world-of-things about which it makes its statement (that is, if it is an accurate "picture" of it), but "It is impossible to tell from the picture alone whether it is true or false" (2.224). This is what is wrong with the statements of logic or philosophy, or of Percy's "scientists", for they claim to be true in themselves and of themselves without empirical basis; so "the propositions of logic say nothing" (6.11) and do not make any useful sense (4.461), and "Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical [and] arise from our failure to understand the logic of language" (4.003). These disciplines claim to discuss the meaning of the world and of the things which happen in the world, but, says Wittgenstein, "The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists" (6.41), which means that "The solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies outside space and time. (It is certainly not the solution of any problems of natural science that is required)" (6.4312). Thus, "What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence" (7).

The Tractatus, then, sets out the limitations of language when confronted with the ineffable, and appears to condemn the very analytical activity of which it is a part itself. Wittgenstein was aware of the possibility of apparent contradiction, and portrayed the Tractatus as a dispensable means to the end
of greater understanding:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them - as steps - to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright. (6.54).

The curious decimal system he employs, in which the first six of his seven aphorisms are supported by numbered explanations of a scrupulously expository nature, is a concession to the need to avoid metaphysical speculation in a work which condemns metaphysical speculation. The importance of this technique will be discussed in my final section, in the context of Thomas Pynchon's use of the Tractatus.

The retrospective adoption of Wittgenstein as a kind of posthumous father-figure for contemporary American fiction can be better understood if we realize how well his theory of language fits the classical decadent construct which I tried to establish in Section One of this study. There, we saw numerous metaphors in which the decadent deliberately sealed himself off from reality, from the chaos "over the wall", and attempted with flagging will to maintain his garden of civilization. Implicit in the Tractatus is the feeling that the writer - whether of philosophy, literature, or "science" - is a sort of verbal gardener too, who creates word-worlds of order which are at odds with the disorder of things in the real world: the further he strays from the atomic fact, from the mirror-nexus between language and objects, the more order will his theories have, but the less relation to the world of things. An interesting validation of this view is given by Irving Massey, who juxtaposes the two connotations of the "uncreating word" Pope mentions in "The Dunciad". In Pope's poem, Massey states, "the 'uncreating word' is the word that undoes creation; it is the word that rolls the film of experience back off the reel.

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of time"\textsuperscript{32}. But the phrase can also mean "the word that does not create"\textsuperscript{33}; and Massey argues that since the Romantic period and because of Romanticism our language has gradually become impoverished because of the widening gulf between word and object. The picture he paints is of a long period of linguistic decadence, although he does not use that term specifically; whose culmination, significantly enough, is in Camus' \textit{L'Etranger}, as well as the French school of Structuralism and the anti-Structuralism of Michel Foucault\textsuperscript{34}.

Of particular interest to this study is Roussel's \textit{Impressions d'AFrique} (1963), to which Massey refers:

The most intriguing of these new authors who first encountered on their path the new language, in which words have officially declared their freedom from user and purpose alike ... was Raymond Roussel. Roussel's situations are totally arbitrary, but instead of filling them in with a neutral, colorless substance appropriate to their emptiness of meaning, he chooses to work them out in the most exotic medium he can provide\textsuperscript{35}.

Roussel's choice of location for such a novel is psychologically revealing, an admission that language in such a predicament properly belongs to the heart of darkness. It is exactly this link, between language which is decaying as a means of communication and the settings and trappings of the traditional novel of decadence, for which I will argue in the remainder of this section.

Frequently, we will see in the state of siege and the heart of the jungle the book, document and map pitting their frail order against the chaos of barbarism.

Perhaps it is a little easier to see now what has made the \textit{Tractatus} such an inviting work for the contemporary American writer. The decline of linguistic communication has yielded the Structuralists and the contemporary American novel alike; but a theorist like Foucault is far too "difficult" to encourage intellectual copulation between the two movements. Because he is absolutely

\textsuperscript{32} The Uncreating Word, p.88.
\textsuperscript{33} An excellent illumination of Foucault's thought is achieved in Hayden V. White, "Foucault Decoded: Notes from Underground", \textit{History and Theory} XII, 1 (1973), pages 23-54.
\textsuperscript{34} The Uncreating Word, p.91.
determined to be understood, Wittgenstein is immediately accessible to the writer seeking formalization of the mood of decadentist fiction. The romance-parody, for example, relying on the belief that regenerative Grails are not available in the decadent universe, states, as does Wittgenstein, that the questing knight is too poor a fellow to reach his Meaning. It is this idea of the falling-short of language before the ineffable that is most attractive to the writers we are soon to examine, and leads to their conclusion that language and the documents which bear it are open to parody because of their weakness.

The comments of Mailer, Roth, Friedman, and the others with whom I opened this study reflect exactly this point of view. Constantly, they proclaimed the incapacity of art to do justice to the inventiveness and chaos of life, and saw that a new and satirical attitude toward literature lay ahead of them. The clearest articulation of this attitude is given in John Barth's article, "The Literature of Exhaustion", a phrase which means "the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities"35, as he puts it.

Suppose you're a writer by vocation - a "print-oriented bastard", as the McLuhanites call us - and you feel, for example, that the novel, if not narrative literature generally, if not the printed world altogether, has by this hour of the world just about shot its bolt, as Leslie Fiedler and others maintain... If you happen to be Vladimir Nabokov you might address that felt ultimacy by writing Pale Fire: a fine novel by a learned pedant, in the form of a learned commentary on a poem invented for the purpose. If you were Borges you might write Labyrinths: fictions by a learned librarian in the form of footnotes, as he describes them, to imaginary or hypothetical books. And I'll add, since I believe that Borges' idea is rather more interesting, that if you were the author of this paper, you'd have written something like The Sot-Weed Factor or Giles Goat-Boo: novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of an Author.37

There is an ironic stance here38, an attitude which places the formal and traditional aspects of the novel deeply "within" each contemporary fiction, a technique

38. White mentions Vico's tropical divisions in The New Science, paragraphs 400-10 and 443-6; he states that irony is the trope of decadence, an interesting acknowledgement that the ironist's dislocation of language and meaning properly belong to the decadent mode.
which Tony Tanner calls "framing". Increasingly from this point in the decadentist genre, we will see the writer regard the fiction as object, both the fiction which he is writing and the received literature whose parodied corpses litter the path to the heart of darkness. As a writer himself, he will become increasingly willing to give up the task of ordering his fiction and capitulate to the chaos that inheres in life; although, as Barth points out above, the Fiedlerian doctrine of "genrecide" has led not to the death of the novel but to new fields of self-imitation and, beyond this, to great riches of chaos and ambiguity. And constantly, in proof of the writer's belief that he is dealing with a decadent phenomenon, this new topic which is also a new method will be couched in an Old World mode, with the metaphors and images of traditional decadence, and in varying forms of the Heart of Darkness archetype. Some of these points will become clearer in the next pages, as we turn to specific novels of this kind.


Although critics have given much attention to Heller's first novel, they have preferred to discuss it as a traditional novel which protests against war instead of as a thoroughly decadent fiction which sees war as the apocalyptic end-point of the decadent process. The novel is set on an American airbase upon the Mediterranean island of Pianosa during the Second World War, a classical image of the state of siege, conducted this time at the seat of the second great European conflagration. But what distinguish the novel are the linguistic traps which hold the novel's central figure, Yossarian, an American airman, and his comrades. Yossarian is an alienated figure because caught in a system which no longer has any meaning; he cannot communicate with the world because language has come adrift from it. Catch-22 is a self-

39. City of Words, p.93. Here Tanner is discussing the novels of James Purdy, another figure who could be discussed as a decadentist were it not for exigencies of space. His novel, The Nephew (London: Secker & Warburg, 1961) is worth consulting in relation to this study.

40. See for example "The End of the Novel", Waiting for the End; the American Literary Scene from Hemingway to Baldwin (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), pages 6.

41. The traditional interpretations are well exemplified in Eric Solomon, "From
sustaining and self-explaining word-world pitted against its own characters.

The eponymous "Catch-22" is the most distinctive of all these verbal traps, a Sisyphian rule which epitomizes the attempts officialdom makes to control and regiment human behaviour by linguistic means. Yossarian will not die if he completes the number of bombing missions which will gain him home leave; but the rule of "Catch-22", as operated by Colonel Cathcart, constantly increases the required number of missions just beyond the number which Yossarian completes. The only escape from this predicament is to feign insanity; but "Catch-22" blocks this path, too, for to declare oneself insane involves an act of self-scrutiny which betrays a very sane regard for one's own safety.

Many of the statements in Catch-22 have no literal possibility at all, in fact. One of the officers, Colonel Cargill, is outstanding because he is mediocre; Milo Minderbinder, the squadron's Mess Officer, recovers a stolen blanket "in return for none of the pitted dates he had borrowed from Yossarian"42; one of Yossarian's lovers is an atheist who claims, "the God I don't believe in is a good God, a just God, a merciful God. He's not the mean and stupid God you make Him out to be" (p.179). Colonel Cathcart is "handsome and unattractive" (p.185); Milo exports some of his black market goods to countries whose names rhyme with the names of the product. His explanation of how he makes a profit by selling eggs at less than the purchase price is a virtuoso performance in keeping language clear of reality:

"But I make a profit of three and a quarter cents an egg by selling them for four and a quarter cents an egg to the people in Malta I buy them from for seven cents an egg. Of course, I don't make the profit. The syndicate makes the profit. And everybody has a share."

Yossarian felt he was beginning to understand. "And the people you sell the eggs to at four and a quarter cents apiece make a profit of two and three quarter cents apiece when they sell them back to you at seven cents apiece. Is that right? Why don't you sell the egg directly to you and eliminate the people you buy them from?"

"Because I'm the people I buy them from," Milo explained.

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"I make a profit of three and a quarter cents apiece when I sell them to me and a profit of two and three quarter cents apiece when I buy them back from me. That's a total profit of six cents an egg. I lose only two cents an egg when I sell them to the mess halls at five cents apiece, and that's how I can make a profit buying eggs for seven cents apiece and selling them for five cents apiece". (pages 226-7).

The fragility of this way of arguing is equalled only by the eggs Milo is talking about. In such a verbally-dominated world as this, the role of communications is central. The entire American forces in the Mediterranean are run by ex-PFC Wintergreen, the mail clerk at Twenty-Seventh Air Force Headquarters. His principles of communication are soundly anti-decadent: he rejects the "too prolix" statements of General Peckem in favour of the less entropic (because less diffuse and abstract) utterances of General Dreedle (p.26).

But on a later occasion he refuses to allow the transfer of the entropically-and equilibriously-named Major Major Major Major from the Mediterranean (p.135).

Yossarian and his comrades also tamper with verbal communication. While malingering in the hospital, he censors the outgoing letters of the airmen on the base, making sure that he renders them as thoroughly uncommunicative as possible. As arbitrary as Wintergreen, he strikes out adjectives, articles, and later everything but conjunctions; then he signs letters with the chaplain's name, or as "Washington Irving" or "Irving Washington". Also in the hospital, significantly enough, is a colonel from Communications who is dying from a mysterious disease which causes him to cough up "glutinous messages from the interior" (p.14).

Those who cannot use words find themselves used by them. The Squadron Medical Officer, Doc Daneeka, is placed in a similar predicament to that of Mudd, an airman who flew on a mission before actually signing onto the airbase and, being killed, was never acknowledged to have existed, despite the presence of his belongings in Yossarian's tent. Doc Daneeka avoids making his requisite flights each week by making an entry in the log book instead of the plane.
When McWatt crashes his aircraft Daneeka is considered dead because officially named amongst those aboard, even though he stands obviously alive amongst the airmen watching McWatt's 'plane fly into a hillside. After this, he is ostracized because officially no longer in existence.

Clevinger is another unfitted for survival, because of his belief that words denote fixed and meaningful values. He believes in liberalism, art, the American way of life— all very diffuse values— and in the ability of America's war leaders. He is quite unable to understand the primitive, terrified superstition of his fellow-airmen before the daunting mission over Bologna. Applying cold logic to their actions, he accuses them of "confusing cause and effect" (p.118), but is lost without trace shortly afterward when he flies into a cloud from which he does not emerge. His death is described as "the basic flaw in his philosophy" (p.103), a reminder that philosophy is not meaningful amidst the barbarity of war. The linguistic alienation of the pathetic Major Major Major Major is even more significant, however. His malevolent father has christened him in this way, and he finds himself immediately elevated to the rank of Major upon entering the Air Force. Deprived of distinctive personality under the burden of his name, he is further hampered by his resemblance to Henry Fonda: many of his men believe him to be the actor, thus robbing him further of identity. He takes the only refuge remaining to him, locking himself in his office and allowing intrusions only when not in the room.

His experience shows how identity shifts in a verbally-dominated world. In the hospital, Yossarian takes the place at one stage of a young Italian-American airman who has died, in order that the youth's relatives, who have arrived too late to visit their actual son, may have someone to farewell. Since the name at the foot of the bed is their son's, the Italian-American family accept Yossarian in that role. Later, Yossarian's friend, Dunbar, "becomes" another Italian-American airman simply by getting into the bed which bears the
name card of "A. Fortiori"; not until he gets into his own bed does he "become" Dunbar again (p.286). On the same principle, Yossarian "becomes" Warrant Officer Homer Lumley, inheriting from the former owner of that name "a father in the state legislature and a sister who's engaged to a champion skier", as well as a high temperature and a feeling of nausea (p.286).

It is not only Yossarian and Major Major Major Major who find that their identity can shift about; any named object can do the same thing. In the hospital, a warrant officer who has contracted malaria after fornicating in the open wonders, "Who can explain malaria as a consequence of fornication?" (p.169) Yossarian recalls an incident in which he contracts a venereal disease from a girl when he had originally set out to buy a bar of candy; there is general agreement that the disease really belongs to the warrant officer. Another officer, who has inherited three hundred thousand dollars, feels that it must belong to someone more worthy of it: Dunbar concludes that the amount must belong to his own thrifty and industrious father, but adds, "He's dead now, so you might as well keep it" (p.169). The same unstable relationship between word and world can explain the rumouring into existence of an apocalyptic new weapon being used by the Germans, the "Lepage glue gun" (p.138), which glues flights of 'planes together in mid-air; it has been invented by the imagination of Yossarian, but gains the status of fact through being constantly mentioned. Similarly, Yossarian effects the capture of the German-held Bologna by surreptitiously shifting the Allies' front line northward on the squadron map.

Linguistic decay operates most sweepingly on Pianosa alone; the novel's scenes set in Rome are devoted to a more literal exposure of the decay of Europe by means of a long and unpleasant series of descriptions. The historical perspective of this part of the novel is suggested in the comments of an ancient Italian whom one of the younger airmen meets in Rome:

Rome was destroyed, Greece was destroyed, Persia was destroyed, Spain was destroyed. All great countries are destroyed. Why
not yours? How much longer do you really think your own country will last? Forever? Keep in mind that the earth itself is destined to be destroyed by the sun in twenty-five million years or so. (p.239).

The historical apocalypticism of this passage is illustrated when Yossarian wanders at night through the chaos of war-torn Rome, in which local inhabitants and occupying forces seem equally barbaric and utterly doomed:

Nothing warped seemed bizarre any more in his strange, distorted surroundings. The tops of the sheer buildings slanted in weird, surrealistic perspective, and the street seemed tilted. He raised the collar of his warm woolen coat and hugged it around him. The night was raw. A boy in a thin shirt and thin tattered trousers walked out of the darkness on bare feet. The boy had black hair and needed a haircut and shoes and socks. His sickly face was pale and sad. His feet made grisly, soft, sucking sounds in the rain puddles on the wet pavement as he passed, and Yossarian was moved by such intense pity for his poverty that he wanted to smash his pale, sad, sickly face with his fist and knock him out of existence because he brought to mind all the pale, sad, sickly children in Italy that same night who needed haircuts and needed shoes and socks. He made Yossarian think of cripples and of cold and hungry men and women, and of all the dumb, passive, devout mothers with catatonic eyes nursing infants outdoors that same night with chilled animal udders bared insensibly to the same raw rain. Cows. Almost on cue, a nursing mother padded past holding an infant in black rage, and Yossarian wanted to smash her too, because she reminded him of the barefoot boy in the thin shirt and thin, tattered trousers and of all the shivering, stupefied misery in a world that never yet had provided enough heat and food and justice for all but an ingenious and unscrupulous handful. What a lousy earth! (pages 402-3).

There are several more pages of Yossarian's nightmare tour of the dark side of a European civilization in ruins, and his reactions are much the same in each case. A young allied soldier having epileptic convulsions is arrested by military police in a jeep (p.403); a small group of drunken soldiers are attempting to rape a drunken woman against the Corinthian columns of a large public building (p.404); a crowd apathetically watches a man beating a dog, while another around the next corner watches a man beating a small boy (p.405); in a surrealistic moment, Yossarian finds himself treading his way through a sea of broken teeth and congealing blood, to find a crying soldier waiting for
an ambulance and, a little further on, a bookish civilian being bundled into a police wagon as he utters the ambiguous cry, "Police! Help! Police!" (p.406). Yossarian comes to the conclusion that "Mobs with clubs were in control everywhere" (p.407). When he reaches the billet at which he is staying, he finds one of the more moronic of his comrades has raped and murdered the maid, whose shattered body lies out in the street; a police van arrives, and Yossarian is arrested for being in Rome without a leave pass.

The reaffirmation of belief in the verbal sign and symbol, the importance of rules enforced through language, is appropriate to such a decadent situation; but attention ought to be drawn to three occasions when language falls back in Catch-22, when the word fails in a way that implies the existence beyond it of a reality that cannot be measured or communicated. The first occasion involves the soldier in white, a mummified figure who is completely invisible and inaudible - anonymous, in fact - in a cocoon of bandages; he appears in a hospital bed to upset Yossarian's falsely-won respites from the violence outside. From his groin rises a zinc pipe, and his waste fluids drip through a tube into a jar on the floor which is regularly interchanged with with one which feeds a vein in his elbow. "All they ever really saw of the soldier in white was a frayed black hole over his mouth" (p.10). Whenever they malinger in hospital, the airmen find that the soldier in white appears in their ward; near the end of the novel, his appearance causes a stampede after one of the airmen, peering into the "lightless, unstirring void of the soldier in white's mouth" announces that there is nothing within (p.358). The soldier in white is a mordant variation on the unknown soldier who has found it sweet and fitting to die for his country: he is the hollow man at war.

The second apparition of a symbol for the immeasurable occurs while the pilots and nurses are swimming and sunning themselves at the beach near the airfield. McWatt's 'plane, flying over a swimming-raft upon which the young Kid Sampson is standing, dips too low and cuts him in half, leaving the barely-joined legs
teetering on the raft's edge. Confronted by this bloody evidence of their own mortality, the bathers surge back up the beach in a screaming, sluggish stampede, each returning alone in the following days to "peek through the bushes like a pervert at the moldering stumps" (p.339). His remains are never removed, for "everyone made believe that Kid Sampson's legs were not there" (p.339). Heller's bizarre way of executing Kid Sampson is a revealing one, for the barely-joined legs severed from his trunk form a symbolic Pi-sign, evoking the immeasurable factor of geometry. Seen in this way, the remains of Kid Sampson are like the soldier in white: both are human yet horribly inhuman; images of man's inability to conceive of the nature of the world in which he finds himself, of the collapse of the descriptive in the face of the barbaric reality which it conceals.

The third of these revelations of the darkness at the heart of man has occurred by the beginning of the narrative, and its recurrence in Yossarian's memory persuades him to save himself before he too is killed. This involves the young gunner, Snowden, who has been wounded in Yossarian's 'plane and requires first aid which Yossarian proceeds to give. Having bandaged the youth's leg, Yossarian becomes aware that there is a greater wound, and when he unzips the other's flak suit, he finds that he has been disembowelled:

Yossarian ripped open the snaps of Snowden's flak suit and heard himself scream wildly as Snowden's insides slithered down to the floor in a soggy pile and just kept dripping out. A chunk of flak more than three inches big had shot into his other side just underneath the arm and blasted all the way through, drawing whole mottled quarts of Snowden along with it through the gigantic hole in his ribs it made as it blasted out. (p.429).

This insight is a literal one, a revelation of man's meaningless interior, the secret of man's mortality conveyed in Snowden's tumbling guts. Both the soldier in white and the trunkless legs of Kid Sampson are images which revive Yossarian's memories of Snowden, and it is not surprising that he flies from them. "Here was God's plenty, all right," he realizes as he broods over Snowden's corpse, and he realizes that
It was easy to read the message in his entrails. Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. Drop him out a window and he'll fall. Set fire to him and he'll burn. Bury him and he'll rot, like other kinds of garbage. The spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden's secret. Ripeness was all. (p.430).

This knowledge, of man's frailty and limitations in a savage world, is implicit too in the soldier in white and Kid Sampson: the heart of darkness is both within and without man.

Heller's use in Catch-22 of a situation which is alienating both in the decadent-existential sense and in the linguistic sense is typical of the novels which follow. Less awareness is shown in this novel of the limiting nature of "literary" language, for Heller focusses instead upon the way in which the everyday misuses of language intensify a decadent situation. Jan Solomon has attempted to indicate the presence of some kind of formal literary parody in an article which describes two formal time-schemes for the novel, one for Yossarian and one for Milo Minderbinder; according to Solomon, Heller places events in Yossarian's chronological past which relate to Milo and then occur in Yossarian's future, making the novel itself wholly incapable of literal performance, a word-world consistent only with itself, severed from reality and, in the sense which Wittgenstein uses, linguistically decadent. Unfortunately, this exciting interpretation is withered in the cold blast of Doug Gaukroger's corrective view, which exposes Solomon's misreadings and Heller's fundamentally straightforward and possible chronology. But there remains in Catch-22 nonetheless a pervasive consciousness of the ultimate disparity between word and world, of the truth that, although language can mirror the chaos and absurdity of the decadent situation up to a certain point, it must in the end give in, leaving symbols of the immeasurable as tombstones of the language of realistic description. As Gaukroger has said, Heller contorts the novel's time-scheme in order "to confuse the reader's sense of order and to upset his basic assumptions"; he continues: "It is only

fitting that a novel which deals with an apparently absurd and confused world should be written in an apparently absurd and confused style". Or to sophisticate his remark: it is only fitting that a novel which is about a decadent situation should be written according to the rules of linguistic decay.

2. Saul Bellow's Henderson the Rain King (1959).

In his fifth novel, Bellow brings together Conrad's archetypal decadent quest with the contemporary theme of linguistic decay in a manner which strongly associates literature with socio-cultural decay. His alienated decadent is Eugene Henderson, a massive and ridiculous figure who is unlike the confident Marlow and the anguished Kurtz. Henderson is fully aware that something is wrong both in his society and within himself, and his behaviour early in the novel is a perfect example of the contemporary American hero who is attempting to form a meaningful relationship with his world, a problem which his European antecedents never recognized. There are tonal problems, too, which Conrad would never have provided: the reader who likes his problems served in a profound manner will find it difficult to accept the clumsy, angst-ridden Henderson, clad in soiled jockey shorts and plagued by his haemorrhoids as he stumbles through the wastes of Africa. Bellow's use of _Heart of Darkness_ is partly parodic, since all didactic literature is suspect because theoretical by definition; and as a result the conclusion of the novel is particularly ambiguous. As we are to see, Henderson's journey is as much a trip through literature - and hence "decadent" because at a remove from actual experience - as it is a literal trip; and, like _Catch-22_, _Henderson the Rain King_ becomes cut off, to a certain extent, from reality.

Henderson's physical bulk symbolizes the extremity of his plight. Obsessed by his advancing age and intimations of his own mortality (which he confronts

46. For a general discussion of Bellow's use of the anti-hero, see David Galloway, "The Absurd Man as Picaro: The Novels of Saul Bellow", _Texas Studies in Language and Literature_, VI (Summer 1964), pages 226-54.
with horror early in the book when he senses the "cosmic coldness" of an octopus in an aquarium\(^\text{47}\), he is pursued by a nameless drive for inner satisfaction of some sort: a voice in his ear plagues him with the cry, "I want, I want, I want!" (p.24). He has inherited wealth "from a stock that has been damned and derided for more than a hundred years" (p.86), and thus has the leisure to experiment with ways of finding contentment. He attempts to communicate with his dead father by learning to play the old man’s violin—an ironical obsession, in view of his own poverty as a parent—and he makes the Grand Tour of the Continent seeking spiritual satisfaction in the soaring cathedrals there. As Jeff Campbell has pointed out, Bellow loads the early part of the novel with a series of parodies of literary attitudes, and Henderson is in fact making a Grand Tour of twentieth century literature when he travels overseas\(^\text{48}\). His tour of the cathedrals echoes Henry Adams’s quest for the Virgin symbol in The Education of Henry Adams, but Henderson is "unable to respond to the images of medieval unity presented by the cathedrals, and the Virgin of Chartres offers no fixed point of reference by which he may chart an explanation of history"\(^\text{49}\). Henderson’s premonition of death when he confronts the octopus in the tank resembles the opening of Dreiser’s The Financier (1912), Campbell suggests,\(^\text{50}\) which also suggests the barbaric will of the cosmos; and a reference to Steinbeck’s Sea of Cortez (1941) may also be intended.

Henderson’s description of his family’s background carries Faulknerian overtones, while his frenzy of work on his family estate is reminiscent of Hemingway (whose symbolic “Wound” is diminished here, Campbell argues, to the "truthful" blow Henderson suffers while chopping wood\(^\text{51}\)). Camus’ La Peste is evoked in a passage in which Henderson sorts through the Sargasso Sea of junk his housekeeper has collected, while his affinity with pigs, according to Campbell, is a parodic inversion of the central metaphor of Golding’s Lord of the Flies (1954).\(^\text{52}\)


\(^{49}\) "Henderson’s Intimations of Immortality", p.324.
While Henderson's anguish has a life of its own, the early part of \textit{Henderson the Rain King} strongly suggests that one of his burdens is the half-digested didacticism of Western culture. Handel's and Wordsworth's strains bubble forth unsolicited into his mind, and the novel proceeds against an increasing tide of philosophies and prescriptions which Henderson must transcend. The passage referred to above, in which he finds the rubbish his housekeeper has accumulated, fuses a symbol of the actual fate which awaits him in America with a reference to its literary counterpart in French existential fiction. The housekeeper has dropped dead during one of Henderson's violent arguments with his wife, and when he goes to her cottage he finds it crammed with rubbish:

\begin{quote}
In the cottage I had to climb from room to room over the boxes and baby buggies and crates she had collected. The buggies went back to the last century, so that mine might have been there too, for she got her rubbish all over the countryside. Bottles, lamps, old butter dishes, and chandeliers were on the floor, shopping bags filled with string and rags, and pronged openers that the dairies used to give away to lift the tops from milk bottles; and bushel baskets full of buttons and china door knobs. And on the walls, calendars and pennants and ancient photographs. (p.40).
\end{quote}

While this obviously symbolizes extreme social entropy, it also stands for the cultural waste which envelops Henderson. He understands this in his usual hysterical manner:

\begin{quote}
Oh shame, oh shame! Oh, crying shame! How can we? Why do we allow ourselves? What are we doing? The last little room of dirt is waiting. Without windows. So for God's sake make a move, Henderson, put forth effort. You, too, will die of this pestilence. Death will annihilate you and nothing will remain, and there will be nothing left but junk. (p.40).
\end{quote}

The journey which he decides now to take is both the classical quest for refreshing and reviving meaning at the heart of darkness and a trip which will purge from him the disease of social and cultural decadence.

The Africa of \textit{Henderson the Rain King} is, therefore, not primarily a realistic country; and Bellow expends little effort to make it, for example,

like the tangled, wild, and convincingly preconceptual landscape of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. His primary purpose is to establish Henderson's Africa as a "country of the mind", more like Patusan than the Congo Basin: an imaginary retreat in which fragile meanings can be found and sustained, another prose parallel to the Decadent's withdrawal into art. This is implied repeatedly. Henderson is favourably impressed by the colourfulness of Africa (p.43) and a little later by the gaudiness of the Arnewi village (p.51) and its peculiar light (pages 101-2); this colour-consciousness is linked to a sense of fragility when he feels that he is "lying on the skin of a drum" beneath which is nothing (p.46). Later in the novel, Henderson thinks that "the world is a mind" and that "travel is mental travel", that in "the noumenal department" we "create and create and create" (p.167), and that "maybe every guy has his own Africa" (p.275). From the air this mind-country is impressive: it looks like "the ancient bed of mankind" (p.42) in which he is entering "the past - the real past ... the prehuman past" (p.46). The "territory has never been well mapped" (p.46), and in it he feels that he has gone "clean out of the world" both chronologically (p.53) and geographically (p.45). This sense of archaeological regression that occurs within a mind-country implies a healthy regression from the over-conscious civilized state of mind to the innocent self (a movement which occurs in Conrad's novella almost equally explicitly). Henderson acknowledges that he is like a child and that children do not fear the world "the way a man fears" (p.84): his response to his new environment is, he already believes, to be appropriately spontaneous.

In fact, he will find that true spontaneity occurs only after a prolonged process of the removal from his mind of its literary connections. Bellow's Africa is a fictional *tour de force*, built out of the scraps and shards of historical study and painstaking analysis of the continent made since the white man first appeared there. This original creation becomes a "metaphysical
Africa", as Eusebio Rodrigues has said, because it so strongly evokes the history of man's abstractions about the place. Some details come from Bellow's own anthropological studies: the Arnewi's cattle veneration, for example, relies on a study made by his own instructor, as well as John Roscoe's article on the Bahima tribe. Added details, generally minor, come from twentieth century sources: Tor Istram's *The King of Ganda* (1944) and Roscoe's *The Banyankole* (1923) and *The Soul of Central Africa* (1922). But a rather larger source is historical, including Sir Richard Burton's *A Mission to Gelele*, *King of Dahomey* (1864) and F. E. Forbes's *Dahomey and the Dahomans* (1851).

Anthropology broadens the civilized man's understanding of the world, and the anthropological content of this novel will show him the primitive in the civilized. Just as Marlow passed through a transitional state at the ivory trading station on the Congo, in which civilized and savage were destructively interfused, Henderson passes through a half-way-house between decadent America and the barbaric Wariri village which is his goal. This is the Arnewi village, at which the patterns of the primitive begin to reflect upon the civilization he has left behind him. The Arnewi are a gentle tribe, doomed and fatalistic, whose rigid cow-veneration is leading to the collapse of their society, just as the sacred cows of Henderson's country are no longer a sure means to survival. The provenance of this section of the novel is specifically in twentieth century writing, coming from Melville Herskovitz's article and Roscoe's books when Henderson is wooed by the vast Princess Mtalba and wrestles with Prince Itelo, he is repeating acts which have already existed in the literature of anthropology for some years.

There is a significant difference in the provenance of Bellow's descriptions of the Wariri village, Henderson's goal and locus of much of the novel. He

54. "Bellow's Africa", p. 244.
55. "Bellow's Africa", p. 244.
uses here the nineteenth century writings of Burton and Forbes, Victorian explorers who were drawn to Dahomey with the fascinated horror I have already diagnosed as a syndrome of the fin de siècle. Dahomey was "an African state notorious in the nineteenth century for two things", Rodrigues states; it "had an army of Amazons and its people practised some barbarous rites known as the 'Dahomey customs'"57. Where Henderson's visit to the Arnewi evokes twentieth century anthropology, his Wariri trip recalls the original Victorian quests to the heart of darkness. His approach to the village is forbidding: the terrain is rough, threatening tribesmen line the way, and he and his guide are obliged to spend their first night in the company of a corpse (p.134). The following day, Henderson is appalled to see inverted corpses dangling from the distant gallows (see page 41 above), and begins to understand how deeply barbaric the Wariri really are. "What was one corpse to them?" he asks himself: "They appeared to deal in them wholesale" (p.149). Later, when he has become their Rain-King, he takes part in a skull-infested ceremony (p.193), and King Dahfu is also closely associated with skulls. Small wonder that Henderson's guide, Romilayu, refers to the Wariri as "chillen dahkness" (p.115). Burton's A Mission to Gelele King of Dahomey provides many details of the savagery of Bellow's Wariri: Gelele's palace, like Dahfu's, is "thatched" with skulls58, and he describes a cruelly-gagged prisoner awaiting trial who appears in Bellow's novel (p.242). Burton and Forbes are combined to provide the details of Dahfu's person and court (Forbes depicted King Gezo and Burton his son)59.

Henderson's quest, then, as well as moving into a pre-civilized past and an innocent state of the mind, takes him backward through the literature of the continent from the civilized to the decadent, from the twentieth century analyst

the nineteenth century explorer. For the reader who is aware of them, the literary sources do much to reinforce the intensity of Bellow's descriptions; but it is also vital to see that their didacticism, their theoretical nature, makes them another superficial thing which Henderson must put behind him as he makes his quest. The travellers on the steamboat up the Congo in *Heart of Darkness* were surrounded by enigmatic surfaces and deceptions; Bellow's traveller is surrounded by superficial, received dogma which are rejected by him when he makes his final understanding. But before we see what is involved at this point of the novel, and more particularly how the novel brings about the rejection of the written word, some narrative details of Henderson's quest need to be sketched.

As a questing knight, Henderson is constantly parodied. Driven by his enigmatic inner voice to "burst the spirit's sleep" with the truth which "comes in blows" (p.67), he arrives at the Wariri village eager to do good. As he later tells King Dahfu, he wants to attain an authentic level of existence:

> some people found satisfaction in being (Walt Whitman: "Enough merely to be! Enough to breathe! Joy! Joy! All over joy!"). Being. Others were taken up with becoming. Being people have all the breaks. Becoming people are very unlucky, always in a tizzy. The Becoming people are always having to make explanations or offer justifications to the Being people ... Now Willatale, the queen of the Arnewi, and principal woman of Bittahness, was a Be-er if there ever was one. And at present King Dahfu. And if I had really been capable of the alert consciousness which it required I would have confessed that Becoming was beginning to come out of my ears. Enough! Enough! Time to have Become. Time to Be! Burst the spirit's sleep. Wake up, America! (p.160).

Henderson sees himself as a "Becomer" who has "just got to stop Becoming" (p.191) because he has no "wish to live by any law of decay" (p.190); it is obvious enough that when he calls on America to wake up, he thinks of it as asleep in decay.

The Arnewi venture in which he hopes to find Being is a true romance-parody,
relying upon the myth of the Fisher-King and numerous Biblical echoes. The village water-tank, which sustains the venerated cows before it sustains the villagers, has been infested with a plague of frogs. Unwilling to remove them from the tank, the Amewi are also unwilling to see their beloved cows die of thirst; the whole incident is interpreted as a fateful prophecy of their own doom. Henderson, whose bulk impresses the literal-minded Amewi, completes the early stages of his knightly quest with great success: he defeats Prince Itelo in a mandatory wrestling contest, and attracts the love of the bulbous Princess Mtalba. An interview with Queen Willatale goes even more successfully: she is the first of two figures in Henderson the Rain King who recall Stein, the convincing explainer of Lord Jim; and in her Henderson is sure that he can make out unspelled meanings. As an "explainer", she has been well equipped by her creator: she has the inner eye of wisdom (p.72) and "a certain power - unmistakeable! - which emanated from the woman's middle" (p.74) which makes Henderson feel that "she might open her hand and show me the thing, the source, the germ - the cipher. The mystery, you know." (p.79). The distinct "inwardness" of Willatale's enigmatic life-force is scarcely reassuring in a genre which has often shown cores of meaning to be vacant. Yet there is no doubt in Henderson's mind about her vitality and promise, or about the value of her "Bittah-ness". "A Bittah was a person of real substance. You couldn't be any higher or better. A Bittah was not only a woman but a man at the same time" (p.75). She identifies Henderson's problem as a desire to live, "Grun-tu-molani" (p.85), a property she possesses in full and which he senses must "burst the spirit's sleep" (p.77).

Knowing this, he turns immediately to test the power of his "Grun-tu-molani", to break the sleep of "Becoming" by setting out to rid the water-tank of its frogs, an act whose symbolic reference needs scarcely to be stated. Infused by his optimistic power, Henderson is reassured by the intensifying of his vision and the epiphanous quality of the morning light, "like the fringe of
the Nirvana" (p.102), and sets out with a home-made bomb and confidence of success. But he fails, as all parodic knights must: the blast stuns the frogs but also demolishes the tank, and he is banished in shame from the parched Arnewi village.

Is Willatale a sham, or is Henderson a fool? The question is not resolved but is posed again in Henderson's next adventure, the central episode of the novel, which occurs in the Wariri village. As I have suggested, the literary evocations here reinforce the fact that he has reached the heart of darkness in his Conradian search for the "mystery". But, again, it is a bookish place that he finds, with the landscape owing much to Forbes and Burton, as I have pointed out. The Grail Myth is evoked again, too, and once more Henderson appears to plod the path of success. At a rain-making ceremony, he manages to lift the massive idol before the assembled tribe (p.192), after which his earlier glow of "Grun-tu-molani returns and he feels that at last he has reached his "real depth" (p.193). There is irony in this remark, for moments later he reaches new depths of savagery when he realizes that by lifting Munmuh he has become one of the tribe, their new Rain King. Amazons strip him of his soiled undershorts (themselves a wry image of his civilization) and he is confirmed in a skull-spangled ceremony whose conclusion is the assembling above of suitably "Paleozoic" clouds which drop rain (p.199). Implied throughout - with a suitably parodic tone - are the "unspeakable rites" Kurtz is said to have performed; and, like Kurtz, Henderson has sunk toward the depths of barbarism in which he will find his new knowledge.

A walking image of his own decadence-in-civilization, the white Rain King begins his relationship with King Dahfu, the second figure in the novel who evokes Stein. Dahfu is even more impressive than Willatale: like her he has "almost an extra shadow" that is similar to her inward life-force, and a property of "all people who have a strong gift of life" (p.209), an "intense gift of being" (p.224). Dahfu is a "Be-er", and possesses a leonine quality which
Henderson will recognize as being only just metaphoric: for the King keeps a lioness called Atti in the basement of the Royal Palace, as a symbol of the authentic life and hence a useful audio-visual aid in his lessons on how to Be. The problem was first raised by Stein in Lord Jim, and Dahfu is just as confident about his lion as Stein was about his butterflies and beetles. "Atti is all lion", he says, recalling Sutter Vaught's desire for the immanent rather than the abstract: "Does not take issue with the inherent. Is one hundred per cent within the given" (p. 263).

First she is unavoidable. Test it, and you will find she is unavoidable. And this is what you need, as you are an avoider. Oh, you have accomplished momentous avoidance. But she will change that. She will make consciousness shine. She will burnish you. She will force the present moment on you. Second, lions are experiencers. But not in haste. They experience with deliberate luxury. The poet says, "The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction." Let us embrace lions also in the same view. Moreover, observe Atti. Contemplate her. How does she stride, how does she saunter, how does she lie or gaze or rest or breathe? (p. 260).

Dahfu, it seems, will instruct Henderson how to Be, chiefly by teaching him to imitate the lion, to lose his fear of its absolute physicality and thus burst the spirit's sleep and sate his demanding inner voice. Henderson thinks of this as an urge toward reality (p. 318), but it is more accurately seen as an urge away from the abstract and theoretical.

Involving such an urge, Dahfu's philosophy makes the last half of Henderson the Rain King as ambiguous as the Arnewi episode. Just as the Biblical allusion fell short there, the references to the predicament of Daniel (which even the obtuse Henderson can see, on page 229) and to Blake's Tyger poem here make us suspect Dahfu a little. For he is a polemicist preaching the shortcomings of polemicism, a phenomenon with which we are becoming familiar by now. He is an embodiment of Reichian therapy, for example, which sees all civilized ills as psychosomatic and hence curable through alteration of physical behaviour; his galaxy of contented wives suggests he is Reich's "genital man", 
and he forces the terrified Henderson to crawl on all fours behind the lion, in order to convert him to Reichianism. Dahfu, Henderson realizes, has "some kind of a conviction about the connection between insides and outsides, especially as applied to human beings", a statement which has a familiarly hollow ring to it (p.236). What is more damning is Dahfu's thrusting of loads of obscure scientific books upon Henderson which are supposed to enlighten but which in fact only confuse him (p.246). And, like Stein, Dahfu is an amazingly glib talker. He is impressive in his long discourses, but is disturbingly unspecific (see pages 213-4, for example), and at one point he appears to parody Stein's advice to Marlow when he tells Henderson, "So, a fellow throws himself in the sea of blows saying he do not believe it is infinite" (p.214).

We soon realize that Dahfu is not a "Be-er" at all but a "Becomer": he has conquered Atti and gained power to fuel his wives, but he will be confirmed as King and "complete Becoming" (p.210) only when he has fulfilled the ritual of capturing an enormous male lion which the Wariri believe incarnates the spirit of his dead father. For Henderson, Dahfu is not a goal but a means to a goal: he is the embodiment of all those theories, abstractions, speculations, and dogmas with which man attempts to answer the question of how to exist authentically. Poised with Henderson in a tree above the enormous lion he hunts, the normally-nimble Dahfu slips and falls to his death (p.311), his theories dying with him and his Reichianism symbolically discredited when the lion emasculates him. His demise is the demise of all that has been bookish in this book: it is the failure of the anthropological and historical documents with which Henderson the Rain King is built, and of the scientific journals with which he plied Henderson, and of the theorizing of Stein and his generic descendants, and of the etiolated abstractions upon which Henderson's own civilization is built. It is a fate of which Walker Percy would surely approve.

Instead of the validation of Dahfu's doomed cerebral cargo, there occurs the epiphany of the truth which Henderson has been seeking so long. He has progressed, at the symbolic level, from the sophisticated outer mind toward the primitive and innocent self, as he assures us early in the book; and as he looks down at the huge tiger its roar seems to strike him at the back of the head (p. 307), with a truthful blow aimed appropriately at the primitive lower brain:

Then, at the very doors of consciousness, there was a snarl and I looked down from this straw perch - I was on my knees - into the big, angry, hair-framed face of the lion. It was all wrinkled, contracted; within those wrinkles was the darkness of murder. The lips were drawn away from the gums; and the breath of the animal came over me, hot as oblivion, raw as blood ... the thought added itself that this was all mankind needed, to be conditioned into the image of a ferocious animal like the one below. I then tried to tell myself because of the clearness of those enraged eyes that only visions ever got to be so hyper-actual. But it was no vision. The snarling of this animal was indeed the voice of death. And I thought how I had boasted to my dear Lily how I loved reality. "I love it more than you do," I had said. But oh, unreality! Unreality, unreality! That had been my scheme for a troubled but eternal life. But now I was blasted away from this practice by the throat of the lion.

(pages 306-7).

Truth, reality, darkness, oblivion, death, barbarism: of these is Henderson's impeccably decadentist vision made. It is experienced, and not preached; which brings the novel to the curious but unavoidable position of appearing to devalue itself, rather as Wittgenstein sensed the Tractatus tended to invalidate itself. Dahfu becomes yet another generic theorizer swallowed whole by reality, and Henderson the Rain King is deliberately left as a rudderless work of art when Dahfu is gone.

It is not difficult to see this last development as the logical end-point of what has happened in the novel. If the real nature of Henderson's quest has been the transcending of the prescriptive word which conceals reality, the horrific blast from the lion's throat nullifies the ordering principle which, as I have tried to suggest in the introduction to this section, makes
the written word decadent because it places it at odds with the chaos of reality. From this point in the novel till its end, Henderson the Rain King consists of un-ordered experience, since artistic shaping has been extinguished as a valid force in it. Thus, it becomes impossible to assess Henderson as the novel runs down: as he himself realizes, "there is nothing that ever runs unmingled" (p.339). He is sure, however, that "the sleep is burst" and that he has come to himself (p.328), a fact symbolized, apparently, in the small lion cub which he takes with him back to America for its 'Grun-tu-molani' (p.329), even though the experience of the novel has cast doubt upon the value of this property. The novel ends in ambiguity, with a familiarly circular image occurring once again in the genre; at fifty-five, Henderson determines to embark upon a new career in medicine; he befriends a Persian orphan on the 'plane home and, while it refuels in Newfoundland, he gallops about this heart of whiteness with child and cub tucked under his arms. Bellow scrupulously refuses to guide the reader's responses, and the novel ceases but does not end.


Barth's third novel brings together two important aspects of the genre studied so far. Firstly, it is the logical development of his attitude to the limitations of literature which he expressed in "The Literature of Exhaustion": like many of his contemporaries, Barth is constantly parodic in this novel, and like Bellow and Pynchon in particular, he reduces the status of received literary documents by basing his narrative upon historical examples of it, and by making specific documents, and not life itself, the focus of his fiction. Second, and just as Bellow associated Heart of Darkness with contemporary themes of socio-cultural decay, Barth has perceived the symbolic importance

61. This idea of a new beginning being conceived at the end of a novel is a typical minor aspect of the genre; another example, although not from within the strictly decadentist tradition, occurs at the end of Philip Roth's novel, Portnoy's Complaint (1971), whose last word is "begin".

62. Bellow's ambiguity here also stems from a desire to be independent of mindless waste land traditions in which the apocalypse is as inevitable as it is
of the relationship of Old World to new: that the early seventeenth century explorers of primitive America were no different in kind from the nineteenth century explorers who bore their corrupt and diseased civilization into primitive Africa. Thus *The Sot-Weed Factor* manages both to sketch a decadent ancestry for contemporary America and to imply that this decadence is related to the inadequate, obscuring tendencies of its cultural language.

Since it is the more obvious element, the novel's concern with social decay may be discussed first. We have already witnessed Bellow's reliance upon the three-stage construction of *Heart of Darkness* when he makes the Arnewi village a union of civilized and savage; Barth too divides *The Sot-Weed Factor* in this way. Set in the last decade of the seventeenth century, it moves between a scurrilously decadent and politically seething England via the frontier townships of Maryland (where political intrigue and social decay are also intense) to a barbaric third point, a marshland called Bloodsworth Island on which dissident Negroes and Indians have gathered to make an apocalyptic threat to the shabby Europeans of Maryland. But Barth's parodic attitude, as we should expect, precludes simple generic rehearsal; and while the novel certainly sets out the progress of the romantic-decadent to the revelation which occurs at the heart of the dark North American continent, the story of Ebenezer Cooke is buried in an avalanche of literary parody. Hyman has detected parodies of Rabelais, *Don Quixote*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders*, Joseph Andrews, *Tristram Shandy*, and *Fanny Hill*; Miller sees its mock-epic form as reflecting the *Odyssey* as well as numerous minor epics; Earl Rovit has drawn similar conclusions. None of these, however, sees the integration of Barth's relentless pursuit of parody and pastiche with the form of *Heart of Darkness*.

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We saw Bellow's Henderson enduring a similar journey whose climax was the banishing of literary references and a direct confrontation with the savage will. But we have also been able to place Barth entirely on the side of parody because of his doubt that fiction can successfully cope with life, and we should expect his use of *Heart of Darkness* to involve a deliberate, parodic emphasis on the literary at the expense of the portrayal of life. This is in fact what does happen in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, to the extent that the generic moment of dark insight - preserved in *Henderson the Rain King*, we will recall - is replaced by a search for two documents which dilute the impact of the insight by placing it at a remove from experience. As Bellow used Burton, Barth uses the "General Historie" of the historical Captain John Smith (1580-1631), which records his expedition up the Chesapeake in 1607-8; but Barth undermines his received literature by the intensity of his parody. He turns the "General Historie" into the "Secret Historie", and adds to it a fictional historical figure, Sir Henry Burlingame, and a fictional historical document, the "Privie Journall". The pun in the title of the latter is intended, for Barth's re-written account of European man's first journeys into the new dark continent are as scatalogical as Smith's account was steadfastly romantic.66

These parodic documents dominate *The Sot-Weed Factor* in a way that the literature imbedded in Bellow's Arnewi and Wariri villages does not, for Barth has them split up, concealed, and made the focus of the novel's quest. Hidden after their completion in 1608, the two journals are rediscovered eighty years later and their blank reverse sides used as a record of the corrupt proceedings of the Maryland Assembly of 1691, and particularly of the activities of the mysterious and dangerous plotter, John Coode, who divides the journals and conceals them in and around the state of Maryland. They become in this way a rather tortuously-achieved compound symbol: a record, on one side, of European

66. For an outline of the historical material Barth has used in this novel, and an inkling of the lengths to which he has gone to find it, see Alan Hodder, "What Marvellous Plot was Afoot? History in *The Sot-Weed Factor*", *American Quarterly* 20, pages 596-604.
man's dark behaviour amongst the savages, and on the other a record of the corrup
t and decadent state he has later set up in the New World. The novel's two central figures, Ebenezer Cooke and his tutor, Henry Burlingame, seek the journals throughout Maryland in order to find evidence to put down Cooke; but as they piece together the various parts of the documents they also find proof of Burlingame's savage ancestry and of the darkness of the land they are in, by the simple expedient of turning the pages over. There is no epiphany of understanding in The Sot-Weed Factor like Henderson's confrontation with the roaring lion, but instead a long paper-chase, a quest for the symbols and metaphors which are at a remove from life.

Something of the contents of these two concocted documents must be known before fuller comments can be made. A part of Sir Henry Burlingame's "Privie Journall" is found first, and when reunited with its severed half later in the novel it forms a scatological version - or perversion - of the historical meeting between Captain John Smith and the tribe of the Indian maiden, Pocahontas. In a passage that is reminiscent of Marlow's trip up the Congo, Smith's boat is grounded in shallows and attacked by natives. Like Kurtz, Barth's Smith indulges in rites which, if not unspeakable (they are fully described) are a sure index to the decadence and depravity of the civilization which he represents. Barth makes a travesty of Smith's account of his meeting with Pocahontas: the exploration of the continent, in the invented journals, becomes an exploration of the incontinent, with Barth relying heavily on a technique which turns Smith's romantic exploits into obscene yarns, "not so wondrous heroic after all". Burlingame's journal depicts Smith as taking part in the traditional sexual contest with the daughter of the king, a corruption of the Fisher King myth which sees the insatiability of the princesse humiliating her father's courtiers until her relief at the hands of a visiting stranger. Captain Smith's successful but gross penetration of Pocahontas

is a travesty of the journey to the interior, achieved in public and by means of a secret aphrodisiac made of an eggplant recipe from darkest Africa (p.737). On all occasions, Smith is portrayed as the bringer of a diseased civilization to the savage world, always reliably worse than are his primitive captors. Both Pocahontas and her father, Powhatan (whom Barth appears, incidentally, to have modelled on the same account by Burton which gave birth to Dahfu; see page 151), are fascinated by the obscene post-cards and gadgets which come from the heart of darkest Europe, and are particularly taken with Smith's compass, whose needle directs as its obscenely-engraved rim distracts.

"Salvages are a degenerate race", Sir Henry Burlingame primly observes in the "Privie Journall" (p.149) as he scrupulously records the "depravitie" of Smith which makes that white man an equal of the natives. Smith's own "Secret Historie" continues the record, but generously includes Burlingame in the degenerate antics it describes. Amongst the Accomack tribe, Sir Henry attempts to arouse the frigid wife of yet another humiliated native king, but is turned away; the depraved, interior-seeking Smith is more successful as he executes upon her "that sinne, for wch the Lord rayn'd fire upon the Cities of the Playne ... " (p.259). Having affirmed yet again the degeneracy of the European explorer, Smith proceeds to describe a waste land fit for such an encounter with civilized man's alter ego. The coast which looms next before the explorers is "foul and stinking by reason of the stagnant waters therein", and Smith concludes that it "is forsooth no countrie, for any save the Salvage ... " (p.368). Later in the novel, another piece of the journal provides this description:

It dooth in sooth transcend the power of my pen, or of my fancie, to relate the aspect of this place, so forsaken & desolate & ill-appearing withal; a sink-hole it is, all marshie and gone to swamp. Water standeth hereabouts in lakes and pooles, forsooth there is more water than drie land, but most of the ground is a mixture of the twain, for that the tide doth rise and fall, covering and discovering grand flatts of mud thereby, and Isles
bearing naught but green reedes and pine-scrub ... All thereto, the entire country is flatt, and most below the level of the sea, so that the eye doth see this dreary land-scape endlesslie on every hand ... it is forsooth Earths ugliie fundament, a place not fit for any Englishman, and I here venture, no matter how that the countrie near to hand, such as our own Virginia, doth prosper in yeers to come, yet will no person but a Salvage ever inhabit this place through whiche we march'd except he be a bloudie fool, or other manner of ass.

(pages 556-7).

There is much irony here, for this barren waste will be known as Bloodsworth Island to Ebenezer Cooke and his tutor in ninety years' time: the document gives it a symbolic status, a pedigree, in preparation for its later function as a meeting-ground of the Indians and Negroes who will threaten the whites of Maryland. One such symbolic aspect involves waste, and we see Smith's crew, afflicted with dysentery, befouling the Bay of Chesapeake, which "was of greate size, and c'd accommodate them better than our barge" (p.370). In this state Smith's men are helpless to resist an attack by the local "Salvages", and when he names the nearby straits "Limbo" (although he thinks "Purgatorio" more apt), Smith adds oblivion to the area's symbolic barbarity and waste.

Remaining for the "Secret Historie" of Smith is the task of linking white man and savage Indian in a symbolic way that will be seen in the present time of the novel's actions. It is here that Smith uses Sir Henry Barningame as his target, and he spends much time describing the Falstaffian knight's credentials for depravity. The strongest parallelism between black and white occurs during another gargantuan competition, this time when Sir Henry acts as champion for a candidate for the vacant kingship of the tribe which has captured them, called the Ahatchwhoops because of their renowned affliction of "foule aire, that riseth on a man's stomacke, after he hath eate a surfitt of food" (p.557). The contest involves the consumption of a banquet, and Sir Henry sits opposite his rival, a "fatt Salvage" called Attonce, as if facing a mirror which shows him the metaphoric truth about himself. All the novel's themes of hollowness,
barbarity, and European decadence come to a climax as white man and savage match each other in gluttony, consuming identical dishes at the same time (p.562). In the end, the victory goes to the "civilized" contestant, a heart-attack felling Attonce after only twenty-six courses: the dead savage squats opposite his live and equally gross counterpart, the noble Sir Henry Burlingame, for whom no fitter home than Bloodsworth Island or the Limbo Straits could be found.

As the new ruler of the Ahatchwhoops, Sir Henry Burlingame is rather like Henderson the Rain King; but where Henderson flees, he stays and fathers in his symbolic savagery a progeny whose mingled blood incarnates the savage-in-the-civilized and the civilized-in-the-savage. His three grandsons are involved with Ebenezer Cooke and his friends in the present time of the novel, and their experiences there, each described at great length, attest to the inferiority of "civilization" in Maryland. Ebenezer Cooke learns of the late "Charley" Matassin's story - Sir Henry's first, and darkest-skinned, grandson - from the half-breed's former lover, Mary Mungummory, the "travelling whore of Dorset".

Sent by his father, Chicamec, as ambassador to another chief, Matassin has been carried in a squall into a white settlement where he finds Mary Mungummory, rapes her, and is sufficiently impressed by her skill to become her lover. Later, he also becomes the lover of her sister, Kate, who has married an elderly and wealthy Dutch settler called Wilhelm Tick. The Tick episode, which shows a European family blindly destroying itself in its greed to inherit its patriarch's property, makes the white man stupid but the Indian cunningly intelligent. Caught unwittingly in Charley's plot, Tick's sons kill their father and then one another, with Kate herself murdering the last son and being murdered by Charley himself. But the jealous Mary Mungummory betrays her Indian and he is hanged, passing into memory as a mysterious and titanic figure in whom Ebenezer senses his own tutor's lust for the world and its occupants.

68. Barth's treatment of the Indian character in this novel is discussed by Brian Dippie in "His Visage Wild, His Form Exotick': Indian Themes and Cultural Guilt in John Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor", American Quarterly 21, pages 113-21
The story of Charley Matassin shows the Indian to be actually more admirable for his civilized qualities than the white man, who is a degenerate tick motivated only by greed. Charley's brother, the lighter-skinned Cohunkowprets, is involved in a fable about the nobleness of the noble savage, and so goes one better than his older brother. Also washed by chance into a white settlement in Maryland, he staggers into an inn where he acquires both a pejorative nickname, "Billy Rumbly", and a liking for rum. Seeing that he is attracted to a young woman who is staying at the inn, the whites there persuade him to rape her by insisting that this is a part of civilized courting procedures: although she shoots him, the young lady finds his savage vigour attractive. When they begin to live together as man and wife, their essential ways become manifest under each other's influences: she becomes savage and he acquires the polished manners of a civilized being. By the time Ebenezer arrives and recognizes her as Anna Cooke, his own beloved twin, her outward and visible degeneration is a sign of the inner and invisible degeneration that has taken place in him. The naive Ebenezer makes a moving speech extolling the virtues of civilization: he pleads "the case of humankind, of civilization versus the Abyss of Salvagery. Only think, sir: what you've acquired in less than a fortnight wanted two thousand years and more a-building; 'tis a most sweet liquor, isn't not?" (p.662). But Cohunkowprets is insufficiently civilized to connive at the destruction of his own people, as the Maryland whites wish him to, and overnight he changes back into an Indian, even his skin seeming "magically to have darkened" (p.664). Anna, for her part, lightens her skin by the less enigmatic expedient of washing it, and is civilized once more.

The copper-skinned Matassin and the bronzed Cohunkowprets have a brother who is lily white, long lost because ejected as an infant by the Ahatchoops, who detested his resemblance to the hated white man. This third grandson of the decadent Sir Henry Burlingame and his native wife is, inevitably, Henry
Burlingame III, tutor to Ebenezer and Anna, who at the beginning of the novel has known no more of his origins than that he has been found, a Moses-like infant cast adrift in a canoe in the Chesapeake, his name tattooed on his chest, and that after being brought up by an old sea-captain and his wife he began his quest for his father. It is primarily through Burlingame that the metaphors of barbarism, waste, and emptiness are transferred from the scattered journals of 1607-8 to the present-time activities of the novel, in the 1690's. In unravelling the "journals" of Captain Smith and Sir Henry Burlingame, we have clarified much of this extraordinarily complex and witty novel. The critic's temptation is to plunge ahead with the task of unravelling more, and certainly there is all of Ebenezer's and Burlingame's relationship to be accounted for; but I think it is right to pause here and consider once more the process Barth has obliged us to take in order to understand The Sot-Weed Factor. While it is obviously a consciously-wrought version of the Heart of Darkness archetype, the novel equally obviously demands a disproportionately large amount of analysis in order for that archetype to become apparent and for its significance to be meaningful. Are the generic attributes of Burlingame, for example, enriched by the fact that we have to read so much of his lineage from an achronologically-presented book-within-a-book? Is Bloodsworth Island better fitted as the home of dark insights after we have worked out the symbolic significance of events which have occurred there ninety years before? Is the barbarity of the white Marylander shown any more strongly after the stories involving Sir Henry Burlingame's three coloured grandsons? All these questions, I think, together with other similar queries that might also be made, can fairly be answered in the negative without crippling the book, so obviously do they accord with Barth's parodic attitude. Reality is at odds with art, in his view; the artist cannot compete with the sheer inventiveness of the world (which is why The Sot-Weed Factor degenerates so frequently into lists of things). The only true artistry, he implies in "The Literature of Exhaustion", accentuates
the differences: and so a simple narrative becomes a complex business of yarns from the past, picaresque adventures, snatches of written documents, elephantine coincidences, incredible character-changes, and dangling suspensions of disbelief, while vital generic attributes become ridiculous because burdened with symbols. It is not only Conrad's novella which is being parodied here, but the whole process of literature, from Smith's Jacobean language and the historical Ebenezer Cooke's poem, "The Sot-Weed Factor" to the tortuously opaque language and conventions of the eighteenth and nineteenth century novel. Both novels dealt with in the earlier part of this section had a similar attitude to language, but where Heller and Bellow allow the word-veil to part or collapse in order to admit the archetypal vision of reality, Barth's scrupulous belief in the limitations of literature has precluded him from doing this at all. Kurtz's original glimpse of "The horror" becomes dissipated in The Sot-Weed Factor to a tedious scramble for documents which reduce that vision to literary symbols, to life placed at a remove.

Bearing all this in mind, we may now turn finally to the events set in the novel's present time. As a counterpoint to the density of the parodied journals, Ebenezer's classically romantic-decadent quest to the New World is muted and underplayed, culminating in the almost laconic insight which occurs on Bloodsworth Island, that well-documented and certified heart of darkness.

Ebenezer begins his three-stage journey in England, where he is presented as a romantic daydreamer, "dizzy with the beauty of the possible" (p.11) and quite unfit to recognize everyday reality. Practical needs overwhelm him (he is sent down from university) and send him into that state of paralysis, cosmopsia, from which Jacob Horner suffered. Sent to administer his father's estate in Maryland, Ebenezer wins the laureateship of the colony from Lord Baltimore, its former administrator, even though Baltimore no longer possesses the power to

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69. For a discussion of Barth's similarity to Sartre in his ideas of "hollowness" and identity see Jean Kennard, "John Barth: Imitations of Imitations", Mosaic 3, ii. p.123.
distribute much posts. Then, confronted by the worldly but attractive prostitute, Joan Toast, he so idealizes her that she becomes the muse for his proposed encomium to Maryland, the Marylandiad. He resolves to preserve his virginity as a mark of his pure idealism.

The question of Ebenezer's virginity is significant beyond the customary equation of sexual and worldly innocence. As we will recall from Percy's treatment of sexuality, an idealistic attitude toward this essentially physical activity makes it a transcendent thing when it is not spiritual but immanent. Ebenezer's prolonged refusal to indulge in sex, despite the frequent opportunities which come to him, can be interpreted as a refusal to "enter", literally, a physical world incarnated in Joan Toast; his final union with her, when she has been diseased and aged by worldly experience, is an acknowledgement not only of her real state but also of the state of the world; an acknowledgement accompanied by the abandonment of The Marylandiad for a more disillusioned work, "The Sot-Weed Factor". This last, because it does not attempt to falsify reality, is the least "decadent" work, linguistically speaking, in Barth's novel.

His earlier innocence is at odds with the generic images and metaphors of reality which confront him when he is washed ashore in the New World, and the reader recognizes them if Ebenezer does not. He finds a tied and beaten Negro on the beach, a moment reminiscent of Kierkegaard's Crusoe metaphor for the apparition of the Other in the world of self. This Negro is an image of barbarity, too; and moments later he realizes that he is in terra incognita (p.277), where words and titles have no meaning (p.279). The first man he meets in the New World announces that they are in "shitten Maryland" (p.293), and the cumulative effect of these images is to suggest that Ebenezer has found the home of the barbaric, the waste, and the void. Similar imagery distinguishes his tutor, Henry Burlingame: we have already seen that his origins
are as barbaric as the Negro's; he is thought, because of his enigmatic origins, to be ex nihilo (p.131); and though not specifically associated with waste imagery, he is certainly as protean, and therefore as devoid of order, as anything in the New World. Burlingame is, in fact, an entrepreneur for experience, a reality tutor who is reality; and the more Ebenezer discovers about him, the more he discovers about the world. Burlingame's long homilies have a distinctly twentieth century ring to them, and are aimed at undermining Ebenezer's idealism by underlining the frailty of identity in the vault of experience. Late in The Sot-Weed Factor, for example, Ebenezer peers through the window of Malden, his Maryland estate, and sees Burlingame impersonating him; robbed of himself, he understands for an instant the emptiness within himself. After listening at another point to Burlingame's homily on the need for desperate self-assertion (p.345), Ebenezer has the sensation of "falling" upward into the endless void of space (p.346).

What, finally, of Ebenezer's insight at the heart of darkness, that vital part of the genre? He reaches this after a long declension of minor incidents similar in tone and nature to those which bring about the disillusionment of Bellow's Henderson. Having set out by boat to sail across the bay to Malden, his goal, he and his companions are blown off course and through those very Limbo Straits which, as they now know, were named by Captain Smith ninety years before their time. They are captured by Negroes and Indians on Bloodsworth Island but are saved from execution by the production of the last document they have sought for so long: and so the prolonged and rather laborious fitting-together of the jigsaw puzzle which has replaced the epiphanous vision of Kurtz is over. Burlingame is revealed as one of the tribe, and a quick moment of intellection - far removed from apprehension - reveals that the world for which he stands is barbaric too.

70. Beverley Gross has made the same point in a useful discussion of the relationship of Barth's novels to the literary material within them and to life. See "The Anti-Novels of John Barth", Chicago Review, 20 iii, p.103.
A novel like *The Sot-Weed Factor* reveals the limitations of over-strict adherence to the view that all literature is linguistically decadent. In itself, the attitude is harmless, if the holder of it is willing to turn to other forms of art. But Barth's use of a decadent form and decadent themes in order to convey to the reader the decadence of the verbal medium itself becomes otiose, leading inevitably to the involutions of his next novel, *Giles Goatboy* (1966). Although a logical development of this part of the decadentist genre, *The Sot-Weed Factor* stands at the end of a path that will not be travelled again in this study. We turn now to Walker Percy's third novel and find ourselves on familiar ground once more, confronted by a classical image of decadence, offered by a writer who does not suspect the medium which he uses.


It is curious - and a relief, as I have suggested above - that a writer who has diagnosed the phenomenon of linguistic alienation so accurately should treat it polemically, in *The Last Gentleman*, instead of dramatically or formally. The advantage for the reader lies in Percy's steady evocation of an older, Gibbonian picture of the decline and fall of modern America. In the final section of this study, we will see the linguistic and social forms of decadence merge in the novels of Thomas Pynchon; meanwhile, Percy's novel is a useful reminder of the older forms of socio-scientific decay in fiction.

The America about which Percy writes is the America we saw described with such bewilderment in the opening pages of this study. The small Louisiana township in which it is set is less regionally representative than the Southern towns of the earlier novels: it is an American Everytown that exhibits traits that can be found anywhere. Its theatre, for example, advertizes "HOMO HIJINKS ZANY LAFF RIOT", referring to a film in which there occurs "an act of fellatio

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performed by two skydivers in a free fall in 3-D Ektachrome on a two-hundred-foot screen. A vast golf course, carpeted with plastic grass, is the scene of a Bible convention celebrating "Jesus Christ, the Greatest Pro of Them All" (p.83). The town contains too an institute for sexual research, in which martyrs to science voluntarily copulate for white-coated technicians who stand on the far side of one-way mirrors. Like Roth, Mailer, Friedman and the rest, Percy sees such things as signs of a general decadence which, in this futuristic novel, has torn America in two. The states are no longer united: some in the North have formed alliances with Scandinavian countries, while others in the South have formed diplomatic relations with Rhodesia. The Republican Party has become the extreme right-wing "Knothead Party"; the Democrats for their part have moved just as far to the left; the businessman and the Klansman have pitted themselves against the Negro and the student outcast; the conservatism of the South is at loggerheads with the liberalism of the North. In Ecuador, a long, expensive war in which America has supported the southern half of the country against the invading north has drained the United States of its vitality. Within the country, the Roman Catholic Church of America has shattered into three parts:

1. the American Catholic Church whose new Rome is Cicero, Illinois;
2. the Dutch schismatics who believe in relevance not God;
3. the Roman Catholic remnant, a tiny scattered flock with no place to go.

The American Catholic Church, which emphasizes property rights and the integrity of the neighbourhoods, retained the Latin mass and plays The Star-Spangled Banner at the elevation.

The Dutch schismatics in this area comprise several priests and nuns who left Rome to get married ... Now several ... are importuning the Dutch cardinal to allow them to remarry.

The Roman Catholics hereabout are scattered and demoralized ...

(p.6).

The central figure of Love in the Ruins (like his predecessors, a degenerate descendant of noble ancestors, in this case of his namesake, Thomas More) returns

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to the basic metaphor of _The Last Gentleman_ as he surveys America: things have fallen apart and the centre cannot hold:

... Even now, late as it is, nobody can really believe that it didn't work at all. The U. S. A. didn't work! Is it even possible that from the beginning it never did work? That the thing always had a flaw in it, a place where it would shear? ... was it the nigger business from the beginning? What a bad joke: God saying, here it is, the new Eden, and it is yours because you are the apple of my eye; because you the lordly Westerners, the fierce Caucasian-Gentile-Visigoths, believed in me ... so I gave it all to you ... even gave you the new world that I blessed for you. And all you had to do was pass one little test, which was surely child's play for you because you had already passed the big one. One little test: here's a helpless man in Africa, all you have to do is not violate him. That's all.

One little test: you flunk!

(pages 56-7).

This reads as if it were a synopsis of numerous views we have seen of American socio-cultural decadence. Percy's obvious desire to make the Negro a part of his polemic betrays his symbolic, literary approach to the theme. Just as America has been cut in two, Americans have been cut in two; the cynical, alcoholic doctor makes this explicit in the manner of the Sutter Vaught whom he closely resembles. The world, says More, is broken, sundered, busted down the middle, self ripped from self and man pasted back together as a mythical monster, half angel, half beast, but no man. Even now I can diagnose and one day cure: cure the new plague, the Modern Black Death, the current hermaphroditism of the spirit, namely: More's syndrome, or; chronic angelism-beastialism that rives soul from body and sets it orbiting the great world as the spirit of abstraction whence it takes the form of beasts, swans, and bulls, werewolves, bloodsuckers, Mr Hydes, or just poor lonesome ghost locked in its own machinery.

(pages 382-3).

Here, More is showing classically decadentist views, for he sees in man the effete abstracting principle which moves him away from reality and, at the same time, the uncontrolled animal tendency of the beast. Metaphorically, Percy's American is at one and the same time an etiolated white and a savage, carnal black; a polarized view which informs the whole novel. It is probably wise, therefore, to see the Negro of _Love in the Ruins_ as primarily a symbolic and not literal figure, a point to which I will return at the end of this sub-sect-
This symbolic view of the relationship between black man and white is a part of Percy's substantial use of the classical images of decay popularized by Gibbon. Like Bryusov and his fellow-poets early in the century, Percy turns specifically and consciously to archetypes which - slightly transformed - will illustrate the decadence which he sees. Thus the Louisiana township in which the novel is set is surrounded by a marshy waste; the walls of civilization become a protective wall built about the wealthy suburbs of the town; the invading barbarians are the Negroes and white cultists who live in the marshes, together with Bantus who have been especially imported from Africa to aid revolution and symbolism alike. The hot-house of civilization continues by means of a slightly different metaphor, the glassed-in patios of the wealthy suburban bungalows; the paving of those built too close to the surrounding marsh cracks, and creeps with vines which reach out from T. H. Huxley's Romanes lecture; a deserted Howard Johnson motel decays near the wasted marshes, the brackish green water of its swimming pool filled with snakes and water-turtles. These are all images of a contemporary America which has drifted away from a life of integrity and towards artifice, abstraction, and sterility, causing a polarization which leaves the individual spreadeagled and crippled.

Trapped in 1964, Sutter Vaught had no chance to treat the alienation which he so fully diagnosed. But the vaguely futuristic Love in the Ruins allows Thomas More to devise an artificial means of curing the alienation of his fellow-man. His original insight toward this occurs when a Heavy Sodium pile used in cancer research blows up in New Orleans, killing a pair of physicists and sending up a surprisingly literary symbol in a "curious yellow lens-shaped cloud" (p.25). He connects this incident with unusual developments which follow in the nearby psychiatric hospital in which he works, "Some of the patients got better and some of the psychiatrists got worse" (p.26), the insane become sane and the extroverted become introverts. After twenty years spent
pondering this curious connection, More realizes that a reaction has occurred between the Heavy Sodium of the pile and the Heavy Chloride of the salt domes which lie beneath Southern Louisiana. Realizing that Heavy Sodium stimulates Brodmann Area 32, the abstractive area of the brain (p.27), and that Heavy Chloride stimulates the thalamus, seat of bestialism, he sees that the psychological imbalances of the hospital inmates and residents have been completely inverted during the reaction which the fatal explosion brought about.

As the heavily symbolic setting of Love in the Ruins would suggest, Percy is working mythically here, and does not mean that his narrative should be taken completely literally. The lens-shaped yellow cloud emitted by the Heavy Sodium pile is an outward sign of its tendency to reverse psyches as a lens will invert the poles of any object seen through it; and there is a mordant irony when Heavy Sodium produces angelism instead of a cancer cure. But more important than this is the location of much of Percy's decadent South, already raised toward mythical status in the first two novels, upon a bed of radioactive chloride salt. It is as if Wells's Tono-Bungay had been set on Mordet Island, or Lord Jim on Chester's pile of sea-bound guano, with the scientific meaning of waste reinforcing the metaphor of social decay. The Louisiana township of this novel is both literally and symbolically decadent and potentially apocalyptic, its barbaric marshy wastes teeming with black activists and Bantu tribesmen, and positioned above a "barbaric" chemical, Sodium Chloride. This chemical is capable of reacting with More's entirely mythical invention, the "ontological lapsometer", a reaction which would result in another lens-shaped cloud. The crumbling, doomed civilization of Love in the Ruins is thus assured of either a traditionally barbaric apocalypse, with Bantu and Negro scrambling over its walls, or a nuclear apocalypse appropriate to the second half of the twentieth century.

"More's Qualitative Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer" (p.30) is a human-
istic device given the highly credible trappings of contemporary science, and is of the same order as Wells's time machine or invisible man, a scantily-sketched gadget which belongs to romance-fiction and not science-fiction.

The lapsometer is "a gadget without wires that will measure the electrical activity of the separate centers of the brain", of which More asks, "given such a machine, given such readings, could the readings then be correlated with the manifold woes of the Western world, its terrors and rages and murderous impulses? And if so, could the latter be treated by treating the former?" (pages 28-9).

As its name suggests, the lapsometer is potentially capable of restoring man from his lapsed or inauthentic condition to an authentic one; it diagnoses by means of recording and comparing the electrical impulses of various parts of the brain; it later heals through its capacity to bombard the respective brain areas with compensating doses of sodium or chloride ions (pages 210-11).

In his desire to put such a machine to work, Thomas More shares much of the motivation of other central figures in this genre. All, however modestly, have been seekers of meaning and order, desiring to interpret the signs they see about them in a way that will give them a message of human significance, however unsure they might be when they begin their quest what the nature of their sought meaning is. Seeing the traditional poles of savage and over-civilized within society, More seeks to balance them by reconciling them, and thus seeks to create order once more out of the incipient chaos that exists at the beginning of the novel. As he sees it, the lapsometer is a means of making hollow men whole again, "the first caliper of the soul and the first hope of bridging the dread chasm that has rent the soul of Western man ever since the famous philosopher Descartes ripped body loose from mind" (p.191).

The lapsometer fails, however. Used in specific and limited situations it functions effectively. But in a stunning public debate held at the local hospital, dozens of lapsometers are handed about and used indiscriminately, with remarkable results. Severely "intellectual" doctors leer lasciviously
at nurses and the women students; formerly inhibited couples begin to copulate with abandon beneath the seats of the lecture-theatre; a Negro doctor normally noted for his restraint assaults a white doctor who has condescended to him for years; the world-famous, highly-regarded director of the hospital reveals an unsuspected fondness for boyish young men (pages 228-42). This is chaos, a chaos which could have been avoided had the lapsometers been used with care and discrimination. The mistake More makes is to hand the patent for his lapsometer over to a government agent who intends to use them as a means of accentuating the polarized nature of contemporary American society, provoking peaceful demonstrators to riot in order that the forces of authority might be given a pretext for striking back and crushing them. More's foolishness brings about the barbaric apocalypse he has tried to forestall: hordes of Bantu guerrillas invade the outskirts of the town while the middle-class whites retreat behind the fortified walls of their suburbs.

Thomas More remains in the no-man's-land between swamp and civilization, for, like Sutter Vaught and the archetypal Kurtz, he is aware of the emptiness essential to both. As a doctor, he treats the ills which civilization induces as well as those contracted in the marshland by the people who have left civilization behind. His outings into the marshes are a variation in minor key of the heart of darkness quest, given a further symbolic tinge by the danger that his pocket lapsometer might react with the Sodium Chloride of the marshes. His attempts to bring black and white together, both in the sense of reconciling savage and civilized and in the sense of balancing these areas of the individual mind, are useless, however; as are all ordering attempts in this genre. By handing the lapsometer over to either of the two opposed forces in society, More has thrown away his mythical shaping device; and the chaotic scenes in which lapsometers are used en masse are dramatizations of the entropic process at work. Inevitably, the lapsometers bring about another apocalyptic blast like the one which occurred at New Orleans twenty years before. The explosion,
with its lens-shaped cloud, is relatively unimportant in itself, for the event is primarily a literary one which reinforces the power and significance of the barbaric invasion of the walled suburb which begins at the same time. Percy presents a ludicrous image of decadence as the explosion is about to occur, with players in a golf tournament wandering amongst smoking yellow craters which they mistake for bunkers, and slowly succumbing to the Heavy Chloride and Heavy Sodium being produced in the steadily-intensifying reaction (pages 353-73). After the explosion, and in obedience to the symbolic lens-shaped cloud the explosion emits, black and white are reversed; the swamp-land Negroes belong to the walled suburbs and the middle class, while the white man is cast into the impoverished ghettos.

It seems inappropriate to see Percy's conclusion to this novel as simply satirical, a suggestion that the Negro will become a bourgeois figure if given the opportunity. As I have tried to make clear, this final inversion consummates his view of the symbolic relation of black man and white, bestialism and angelism. It is more appropriate to recall the static, entropic conclusions to so many of the novels studied above, and to see the inexhaustible interchangeability of black for white, savage-civilized for civilized-savage here as yet another loss of order and the chance for meaning in the genre. Discreetly used, the lapsometer could have created a new kind of man; but Love in the Ruins, like all decadentist novels, knows that order is foredoomed, that in the contemporary waste land the circling of the prickly pear follows the apocalyptic whisper.

5. In Summary.

I have tried in this section to show how contemporary American fiction manifests two aspects of decadentism in particular: firstly, the way in which the human and romantic tragedy of alienation dominates the description and analysis of the processes of socio-cultural decay; and second, that to a large degree contemporary man in America is alienated from his environment because the language
he uses to describe it is in verbal decay.

A novel like *Catch-22* shows how the two themes fit together but also typifies the way in which the linguistic tends to dominate the human in American fiction. Yossarian's alienation is obviously a genuinely-felt thing, and clearly derives from his predicament in a highly decadent situation. But his final escape is reminiscent of the ending of *Huckleberry Finn*, a sign that the whole novel is an escape from literature and the language of literature. Yossarian and his comrades are caught in the semantic traps of a language system which, like anything decadent, has lost touch with reality; and although *Catch-22* is an extreme example, this tendency continues throughout the genre, as I have tried to show. A more representative example was to be found, perhaps, in *Henderson the Rain King*, where written traditions and literary material subtly furnished the background for Henderson's romantic quest, but needed to be transcended by the undermining of Dahfu in order for the quest to come to a conclusion. Very obviously, too, *The Sot-Weed Factor* was about books and their inadequacies, and not about life. The linked quests of Ebenezer Cooke and Henry Burlingame III, therefore, were doomed before they began, because aimed at the proof of negative things.

Barth's attitude to the exhaustibility of literature typified the way in which much of contemporary fiction resembles the Parnassianism of the Decadent poets. Just as the doctrine of "art for art's sake" forsook the confusions of the everyday world to find meaning in works of art, any aesthetic which affirms the gulf between life and fiction consigns its own fictions to the realm of game-playing and escapism. It also brings into the genre a new figure, a sophistication of the doomed seeker-of-meaning. This is the quester-as-artist, the figure whose failure to find meaning is accompanied by the collapse of the fiction in which he lives, an acknowledgement that the artist who writes about the decay of order and meaning in the world must mimic that decay in his own work. All the central figures of the writers examined in this section develop
from the status of mere questers to the status of substitutes for their artistic creators.

The tendencies and developments and sophistications of the decadentist genre which I have attempted to trace in this section continue in the last section of this study, which is devoted wholly to the novels of Thomas Pynchon. His terminal placement is inevitable, since his novels quite deliberately demand to be treated as the end-point of fictional decadentism; and I hope to show that his work presupposes the existence of a tradition such as that I have tried to delineate to this point. But more than this, and more excitingly, Pynchon's novels take the fiction of decay into a wholly new imaginative dimension.
SECTION FIVE: THOMAS PYNCHON AND THE SCIENCE OF DECADENTISM.

2. The Crying of Lot 49 (1967).
4. In Summary.
More than any writer studied so far, Thomas Pynchon shows a consistent awareness of the contents and details of the novels of decadence, and an understanding of the social and historical implications of decadence, as well as a determination to outdo all former practitioners of decadentism in fiction. Thus, in his fiction, the tendencies of this twentieth century genre become stressed and underscored in full, and a study of his work will enable us to confirm the presence of many of the tendencies we appear to have detected so far. By providing us with three novels in which this process may occur - where Bellow or Barth have produced only one example within the genre - Pynchon merely widens the possibilities of confirmation.

Were his fiction noteworthy for this alone, it would still deserve its terminal position. But Pynchon is also a writer who, like Percy, has been trained as a scientist, and while his fiction sets out clearly some of the post-humanistic implications of decadence in contemporary America it can also express the old concerns, often with the greater clarity and richness afforded by scient-
ific metaphor. This scientific influence causes the most important development in his fiction offers the decadentist genre: in his novels the God whom nineteenth century science seemed to have banished is replaced by a new Absolute; but one essentially malevolent, a Manichaean influence rather than a beneficent one. Thus, as we will see in the remainder of this section, the decadentist novel retreats from the vacuum left by the removal of the divine. But we will also see how threatening Pynchon's new Absolute is to man.

This distinctive yoking of the liberal arts with contemporary science and technology began when Pynchon completed a course in aerodynamics engineering at Cornell University in the late 1950's. After a period in which he helped in the production of a scientific magazine for the Boeing Corporation in Seattle, he served in the United States Navy (two experiences which were to provide material for his first novels), and later joined the writing class being run at Cornell by the distinguished novelist, Vladimir Nabokov. Thus, after long absorption of science and technology and exposure to current scientific developments, Pynchon found himself a writer of fiction in his early 'twenties. Certainly, he could have found few better men than Nabokov to guide him to the upper reaches of the decadentist genre: his Lolita (1958) is a classical American romance parody. Pale Fire (1962) makes a game of the apposition between the writer's word-world and the mundane world in which the assassin, Gradus, moves, gripped by his wayward bowels and confused by the city of Lex. It seems possible to conjecture that Nabokov was writing this novel at the same at which Pynchon was learning to write in his classes; it would be impossible to deny a strong general influence by the older writer upon the younger.

The strongly literary consciousness of Pynchon's fiction is self-evident, and there is no need to discuss it separately from the analyses of each novel.

1. I have derived these facts from the most explicit of the very few biographical entries on Pynchon that exist: see Contemporary Authors: the International Bio-Bibliographical Guide to Current Authors and Their Work, ed. James M. Ethridge (Detroit: Gale Research, 1962), pages 352-3.
2. Contemporary Authors, p. 353.
which will follow. But there is much about the scientific influence in his novels which ought to be made clear before we reach them. His personal reticence — he has never been interviewed — makes the usual process of tracing sources and influences a hypothetical one, and when I assume that he was aware of developments in the mainstream of science and technology, I am conjecturing, of course. But it seems valid — unavoidable, in fact — to do this when discussing the work of a former student of physics and aeronautical engineering whose subsequent job at the Boeing Corporation would have kept scientific developments continually before him. The final test of my conjectures is, naturally, their validity when applied to each of Pynchon’s novels.

Pynchon’s greatest innovation as a writer of the novel of decay is, without a doubt, his introduction of quantum physics to the genre. This rather breathtaking claim means simply that he has perceived an analogy between the development of physical research and the development of fictional decadence during the same period, and has enriched the latter through his understanding of the former. (It is impossible to discuss the question of any causative link which may appear to shimmer between scientific and literary decadence.) In the next few pages I will discuss at a layman’s level the connections Pynchon appears to have made, and his use of them in fiction. But some outline of the relevant aspects of quantum physics is needed first.

Quantum physics was born in 1900 with the publication of Theory of Heat Radiation, Max Planck’s response to problems occurring in the classical approach to particle decay experiments (a form of scientific decadence which outmoded the kind I discussed early in this study). The classical nineteenth century formulae governing heat physics had been found by Planck and others to relate poorly to observed experiments. Planck therefore introduced a variable quantal factor to the standard formulae, to account for the limitations of human observation and measurement of particle decay.3 Closely related to this is

Heisenberg's Principle of Indeterminacy, which formalized the impossibility of ever conceiving perfectly and absolutely what is involved in particle decay experiments: accuracy is not achievable by the infinite perfection of measuring devices, and is in fact lost by it.

To acknowledge such things is an ontological as much as a scientific business, and involves a realization that at a microscopic level the world of appearances ceases instead of becoming more distinct, yielding to baffling processes which far outstrip our abilities to measure. (In the same way, and at the same time, Einstein's relativity theory drew similar conclusions about the macroscopic domain.) The classical version of the atom, as an object like Newton's apple or as a tiny solar system circled by visible electrons, became outmoded initially by the curious behaviour of the electron, which was found to exchange orbits about nuclei without actually moving, and later (in Einstein's and Bohr's hypothetical experiments of 1927) to change from a particle to a mediumless wave when fired at an apertured screen. To discuss such things in such a manner is of course misleading, for the logic of language cannot cope with such post-conceptual phenomena; the arcane processes which occur in the cloud-chamber of the physicist are meaningfully guessed at only in relation to the mechanisms of the experimental situation, including the eye of the beholder, with the result that the entire experimental situation becomes subjective.

This brings us to Bohr's theory of complementarity. Knowing that the processes of particle decay are inconceivable, and knowable only through their impact upon the machines which record them and upon the scientist observing the machines, Bohr proposed groups of parallel or complementary experiments containing the same reaction but each compensating for variations in the mechanism

of experiments (an electron may be fired through a fixed screen in one experiment and through a vibrating screen in another, and so on). Each experiment is a "field", involving the observer too; and the results together form a single composite result more accurate than any individual result.  

Stripped of its formulaic proof and diluted by the language of the liberal arts, quantum physics can be basically understood as I have set it out. I hope that some of its significance is already evident in the context of this study. For example, Heisenberg's remark that complementarity "accords very neatly with the Cartesian dualism of matter and mind" could be restated to acknowledge its even neater accordance with late nineteenth existentialism. The death of the objective in Nietzsche, for example, is paralleled by the death of classical physics with its rigid formulae and objective approach to the experimental situation; Nietzsche's establishment of a subjective self-world like Kierkegaard's and filled with surfaces behind which lurks an incalculable reality resembles the conflation of experimenter, experiment and reaction in quantum physics; the multiple view of the world which in Nietzsche's philosophy yields the relative truths of society is an exact counterpart to complementarity. The transition of classical physics to quantum physics is a symptom of a general transition of conceptualizing processes from the objective to the subjective which seems a phenomenon peculiar to the late nineteenth century. As Bergstein remarks, "The complementarity of quantum physics displays the fundamental interdependence of observation and description of natural phenomena", a statement which needs expansion to include the observing and describing functions which inhere in fiction-writing.

It is my argument that Pynchon has seen these parallels and their significance, and that to him Conrad's two novels of 1900 are of equal importance with Planck's publication of the same year. I have tried to suggest, in the section in

which I examined *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, that they bespeak a new sensibility and a rejection of such classical literary conventions as plot consummation, character analysis, and belief in the presence of order and meaning in life. For the reader of *Lord Jim* it is clear that nothing specific or positive is understood in the novel, that Marlow will never "know" Jim; and for the reader of *Heart of Darkness* it is equally clear that Kurtz's world contains inchoate forces, possibly malevolent, which pass all understanding. Just as the physicist finds himself reaching into the unknowable beyond the visible, so Kurtz apprehends the ineffable; just as the physicist seeks through complementarity to diminish his uncertainty about particle decay, so Conrad presents us with his multiple perspectives of the evanescent figure of the Decadent Jim. In fact, throughout this genre, and particularly in its contemporary American phase, there is this "quantal" approach to the recording of phenomena and this tendency toward what we might call literary complementarity. Two of Melville's works suggest that these approaches inhere in the American experience itself: his white whale is an aspect of reality which repels harpoon and cetologist alike and requires numerous perspectival views; while his apocalyptic confidence man, forever altering his appearance, clearly baffles the eye of the observer as the protean proton and electron do in the physicists' cloud-chamber. As Ellison's invisible man comes nearer to a naked confrontation with reality it is Rinehart he sees, not one but many different people all bearing the same name; Barth's Floating Opera, with its continuous stage show of absurdities and its never-ending river-journey from port to port, stands without subtlety for a reality experienced only as absurd because experienced only in segments. Bellow's Allbee heads a cast of shifting, ambiguous tutors of "all-being" in his novels (Einhorn, Tamkin, Dahfu, Willatale); the confusing word-world of *Catch-22* marks its lacunae with symbols of the immeasurable and the ineffable; Barth's constantly-metamorphosing Burlingame, vanishing into the savage marshes of reality from which he came, is the most celebrated of all
these figures, less Heraclitean or Ovidean than merely quantal; John Gardner's "Sunlight Man", dangerously insane but also pathetically foolish, capable of vanishing and taking guns and books as he goes, or of emitting offensive odours at will, is yet another in the genre.\textsuperscript{10} Obviously, there are numerous analogies for Pynchon to have seen within American fiction, as well as the tendency I have tried to indicate in spheres as disparate as linguistics and ontology, poetry and quantum physics, toward the decay of the objective and ordering principles.

\textbf{V.} The Crying of Lot 49, and Gravity's Rainbow will be seen in the remainder of this section to exploit this general analogy between the literary-geographical heart of darkness and that of particle physics. \textbf{V}, for example, is a work of literary complementarity: the figure of \textbf{V}, constantly changing as she becomes less and less susceptible to the measuring abilities of this world, is examined in six different "fields", by varying observers, in six different periods of history. The Crying of Lot 49 bases its construction upon Maxwell's Box and its heroine upon Maxwell's Sorting Demon: typical of late nineteenth century classical physics, James Clerk Maxwell's hypothetical engine failed to work, in a way that merely proved the need for a quantal approach, thus becoming retrospectively a symbol for the apposition of old and new ways. Gravity's Rainbow actually loses its central figure in a chaos of imminent apocalyptic collapse, and never retrieves him, despite the important work that he has to do.

There is an extension to this analogy between literary and quantal hearts of darkness which, though indefinite and hence a little risky to discuss, bears on our further understanding of Gravity's Rainbow. In all three novels, but particularly in the last, Pynchon implies the presence of a controlling force, an intelligent but ineffable Absolute. This too can be seen as a product of a mind trained to quantum physics. As Arthur Koestler has argued, the world of quantum physics is an abstract, non-physical world, and anyone delving into

it soon loses any conception of being surrounded by solid, material things. Thus Sir James Jeans remarks, "the stream of knowledge is heading toward a non-mechanical reality; the universe begins to look more like a great thought than a great machine"11; and another physicist, Sir Arthur Eddington, adds, "the stuff of the world is mind-stuff"12. If we accept the quantum physicist's view of the world, we must take the next step and concede the possible existence of a Thinker, an ineffable source of a universal Meaning and Order which (as Wittgenstein saw) lies outside space and time and at which, therefore, we are constantly launching our frail verbal rafts. Koestler's The Roots of Coincidence is one such verbal raft, which, like all works in this area, is frail with speculation and hypothesis; but it does establish a link between the physicist and quantum physics and, on the other hand, the world of extra-sensory perception. This latter world is certainly present in Pynchon's third novel.

As Koestler says, the physicist has seen that all things have begun to tend towards unity:

The nineteenth century was the age of the most spectacular syntheses in the history of thought. The science of electricity merged with that of magnetism. Then electro-magnetic radiations were discovered to account for light, colour, radiant heat, Hertzian waves. Chemistry was swallowed up by atomic physics. The control of the body by nerves and glands was seen to rely on electro-chemical processes... "heat", "light", "electric fire", "mechanical motion", "magnetic flux", were recognized to be convertible into one another, and to be merely different forms of "energy".

Although this unity cannot be understood by our merely human minds, it leaves a pattern in everyday experience which is manifest both in the psychic experience of extra-sensory perception and in what has variously been called Seriality and Synchronicity. Jung's theory of archetypes, postulating a common pre-historic experience which we all share in memory, is one attempt to account for this; and he and the physicist, Wolfgang Pauli, attempted together to

14. See The Roots of Coincidence, pages 82-104.
construct an explanation for pre-cognition and inexplicable coincidence. The Viennese philosopher, Paul Kammerer, also attempted to understand inexplicable coincidences by a theory he called "Serialism"; and a lesser-known attempt was made by J. V. Dunne in his numerous and rather idiosyncratic volumes on the subject. (The best illustration of "serialism" comes from Jung, who was analysing a patient's dream of a scarab when a scarab beetle flew in his window.)

The intrinsic merit of these highly respectable inquiries is less important than their relation to physics and the general movement of thought induced by a study of quantum physics. That Pynchon, as a student of physics, should have been unaware of them is unthinkable, and is obviously denied by the emergence of these themes in his fiction. But the pertinent question to be raised here is how these interests affect the novel of decay. Generally, the generic division between precariously-ordered civilization and the primitive and chaotic is reinforced by the influence of quantum physics. The quester in Pynchon's novels will quest beyond the apparent world and will always be aware that the Meaning he thinks he finds in signs around him may in fact be a paranoid property of his own subconscious mind. The world in which he begins his quest, laden with images of decay from the tradition of socio-literary decadence, contains in addition signs of decay familiar to the student of contemporary America and those signs in which a potential Meaning seems to be assembling itself. But, as earlier in the genre, nothing can be fully established, little can be relied on, and the nearer the quester gets to his grail the further it moves from him.

How, then, does Pynchon make concrete this generic division in his fictional worlds? In V and Gravity's Rainbow, classical archetypes of decadence-and-barbarism are used; but in V and The Crying of Lot 49 in particular Pynchon also employs very distinctively the mirror-metaphor which places the white

17. Koestler points out that Helmut Schmidt, a distinguished parapsychologist, worked at the Boeing Scientific Research Laboratories. One concludes that the Boeing house organ would have reported the activities of the laboratories from time to time. See The Roots of Coincidence, p.43.
sepulchre on "this" side of the glass and the chaotic and barbaric realm in "that", reflected world. All three novels evoke Carroll's Alice, who has hovered about the more absurd passages of the decadentist novel for some time; Pynchon's have the bizarre refinement in which the Alice-figure becomes a wanton young seductress once through the mirror. But this concrete use of the mirror metaphor (which we have already glimpsed in Conrad and Waugh) is scientific in origin, and not literary, it seems: it is another continuation of the transformation of particle physics into art.

In particle physics, qualities of equal but opposite charge and molecular structures of similar but reversed composition are described as being mirrored. It is this kind of metaphor which appears to guide Pynchon towards his use of the mirrored world; and this likelihood increases if we take into account the kind of development that was occurring in particle physics in the late 1950's. This, widely discussed in scientific circles, involved the discovery of groups of particles whose charges were the reverse of those of the proton, the neutron, and the electron, the basic particles known for a quarter of a century. These new particles were named, with some inevitability, the anti-proton, the anti-neutron, and the positron; and their existence evoked an image of a mirrored world opposite the actual world and composed of "anti-matter", whose chief property seemed to be its absolute inimicality to the everyday world. For a series of complex physical reasons, the world of matter and the hypothetical and reversed world of anti-matter would explode violently on contact.

Such a conception of a pair of mirrored worlds so completely opposed is certainly at work in Pynchon's fiction. In V, the six "fields" of history in which V appears involve the mirror-world in some way because it is to the mirror-world that V belongs; although the setting certainly finds itself geographically in the heart of darkness often enough, the symbolic mirror-world is never entered. It is something that is always sensed as being present in the

18. The explosive nature of the "anti-world", as well its mirror-relationship with this one, are discussed by Martin Gardner in "Anti-Particles", The Ambidextrous Universe (Pelican Books, 1970), pages 209-222.
decadent situation, as when one of the female characters visits a plastic surgeon and finds herself in a waiting room full of degenerates. There is a huge mirror above the mantelpiece, which reverses the image of the clock which stands before it. The girl imagines a timeless realm beyond, the abode of those whose mutilation has rendered them inhuman:

here were time and reverse-time, co-existing, cancelling one another exactly out. Were there many such reference points, scattered through the world, perhaps only at nodes like this room which housed a transient population of the imperfect, the dissatisfied; did real time plus virtual or mirror-time equal zero and thus serve some half-understood moral purpose? Or was it only the mirror-world that counted; only the promise of a kind that the inward bow of a nose-bridge or a promontory of extra cartilage at the chin meant a reversal of ill fortune such that the world of the altered would thenceforth run on mirror-time; work and love by mirror-light and be only, till death stopped the heart's ticking (metronome's music) quietly as light ceases to vibrate, an imp's dance under the century's own chandeliers ...

The reader of \textit{V} remains just as unsure as the girl above about the nature of the mirror-world; not so Oedipa Maas, the heroine of \textit{The Crying of Lot 49}, who is thrown directly into it. Having become executrix of the estate of her millionaire former lover, she drives to a Southern California motel to meet her co-executor, a handsome lawyer called Metzger. There, in a scene which we will see to be full of intricate metaphors of mirror-worlds and transitions, Oedipa symbolically passes into the mirror-realm where all experience is subjective and new understandings and insights seems to await her. In \textit{Gravity's Rainbow}, mirror-images abound, and Slothrop, its questing figure, makes his transition into the dark realm of the novel at a mirror-bedecked casino; but this is a shattered novel, and the mirror-world is presented in shards, as we will see.

But the physicists' apposition of mirrored worlds of matter and anti-matter goes beyond this. We have seen that the Kurtzian insight becomes, in Pynchon's

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novels, more than a glimpse of chaos and barbarity; it is a partial apprehension of a Meaning that cannot be fully grasped, and may not in fact be there at all. Why should Pynchon choose to locate this manifestation in the mirror-world? The generic tradition of placing the dark vision in the dark realm would be influential, of course; but Pynchon could also have been influenced by the widely-publicized parity experiments of 1956 and 1957, which are extensions of the particle reversals discussed above. Once more, the experiments are too complex to be fully outlined here, but their nature can be indicated. As we saw with the notion of the existence of anti-matter, physicists had for years conceived of a universe whose basic particles enjoyed reversible properties. In a crude analogy, to imagine a particle experiment mirror-reversed would not be to imagine it as radically different from its original form; the direction of particle rotation would be the same in relation to the emission of decaying electrons, and so on. In an even cruder analogy, to imagine one's own hand mirror-reversed does not involve imagining the relationship of thumb to fingers differently. But the experiments of 1956-7 assaulted this notion of physical parity: an experiment on cooled nuclei of Cobalt-60 in a magnetic field proved that electron emission occurred less frequently at the magnetically north end or pole of the rotating nucleus. In short, a natural physical reaction had been achieved which could not be imagined reversed. Esoteric though this conclusion may seem, it is well to recall the tendency of the scientist to treat such findings at the level of their greatest significance. The experiment was greeted as a major discovery about the nature of the universe, and the consensus of scientific opinion was that an absolute had been found where none had existed before.

If we put together this confident acceptance of the shaped and ultimately

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meaningful nature of the universe with the long-standing literary assertion of its mordant opposition to the human we will begin to appreciate how Pynchon's distinctive vision might have been formed in an experience which moved from the scientific to the literary. His basic methods and concerns invite his inclusion in this study, but his notion of the Manichaean nature of the new absolute, as well as of an anti-entropic absolute in the first place, distinguish his contribution to the genre. To conceive of civilized man as being in constant struggle with the random forces of the universe is bleak enough, as is evident to anyone who has read this far in this study; but to envisage him as the victim of a malevolent force which he can apprehend but not fully understand pushes the genre to a grim and final extreme. It is an image not of the barbarian peering over the crumbling walls of the decaying civilization, but of the whole world in decay, erupting into pockets of violence, and surrounded by the mysterious cosmic force which plots a mysterious end for it. We may begin now to examine this image of the world besieged.


V is the story of the quest for the Absolute of the post-Darwinian world: the questers are Sidney Stencil, born in 1859, and his son Herbert, who is the product of a union, it is hinted, between Sidney and the very woman they seek. She is V, a metamorphic and decreasingly human figure with whom is associated a meaning, a plot which dissolves as her pursuers reach out towards it; Herbert, towards the end of the novel, realizes that his quest has been for the world itself, an understanding which will come to later questers in Pynchon's fiction.

The annunciation of a presence beyond the humanly knowable in this novel is made quite explicitly in the ninth chapter, "Mondaugen's story", possibly the most spectacular section of the work. In this chapter (which I will turn to again), a young German radio expert called Kurt Mondaugen is sent to the Kalahari Desert in German South-West Africa in 1922 as one of a world-wide team recording a curious series of radio messages from the cosmos, in the hope of
finding a coherent pattern over a long period of time. As the chapter concludes, what appears to be a highly entropic communication is received: DIGEWOELTISTALLESWASDERFALLIST; but this conglomeration proves to be highly ordered, for every third letter provides an anagram of the young radio operator's name, leaving the remaining letters to form the opening statement of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: "DIEWELTISTALLESWASDERFALLIST" (p. 279). This is the most blatant intrusion of the *Tractatus* into a contemporary American novel, implying the existence of an ordering intelligence "out there" and the limitations of the verbal and prescriptive as a means of understanding it.

But the presence in *V* of this reference to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is much more significant than merely as a symbol. For the actual shape and form of the whole work corresponds to that of the *Tractatus*, a coincidence which helps explain many of the aims of the novel. Wittgenstein's work, as we have seen, is not a documentary exposition of its author's philosophy, but consists of six propositional aphorisms each supported, but not analysed or explained, by statements at subsidiary levels; the whole work is terminated by the brief aphorism, the seventh, which is unsupported. A brief quotation of the first aphorism (which Mondaugen receives through the "sferics" from outer space) and its subsidiary statements, will illustrate Wittgenstein's methods:

1. The world is all that is the case.
1.1 The world is the totality of facts, not of things.
1.11 The world is determined by the facts, and by their being all the facts.
1.12 For the totality of facts determines what is the case, and also whatever is not the case.
1.13 The facts in logical space are the world.
1.2 The world divides into facts.
1.21 Each item can be the case or not the case while everything else remains the same.

As I have said before, Wittgenstein cannot make an abstract analysis of the aphorisms he sets out, because the whole work is against the process of verbal

abstraction, and relies on the decimal system at the left to ensure that the whole is purged of uninformative links. This linguistic positivism is oriented against linguistic decadence, as we know; and implies that the world we understand by means of verbal constructs is smaller than the world of things beyond, which we have no means of understanding at all, however frequently we are aware of its presence.

Thus we throw away Wittgenstein's ladder of words after making the six-fold climb to the seventh understanding, that there is a Presence beyond the world of things which is not capable of being fully understood. The *Tractatus*, as we have already begun to see, is another means of reinforcing the divided picture of the decadent world; understanding the work means apprehending the existence of the realm beyond the readily knowable. But V itself is, for both the reader and the searching Stencils, exactly the same sort of progression, consisting of six apparitions of V in a series of historical episodes and a final, seventh appearance in the mind of Herbert Stencil near the end of the novel. The understanding required by the reader of V, then, is that required of the reader of the *Tractatus*: that there exists beyond the knowable realm another which will not respond to the descriptions and evaluations of the first.

The fact that direction towards Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* in Chapter Nine comes from the unknowable cosmos itself is an ironic reminder of Pynchon's belief in an organizing Presence; and there is little doubt that the Presence is disturbingly inhuman and malevolent, for Pynchon employs the existential notion that the Other world consists of objects totally separated from the human in his restricted realm, a vision which informs the whole of *Gravity's Rainbow*. V, the quantal figure of her novel, begins it as a fully human girl called Victoria Wren, with father, sister, a Yorkshire home and a rather unnervingly strong will. But as she reappears in various forms during the remaining historical episodes of the novel, she shows "an obsession with bodily incorporating little bits of inert matter" (p.488), a process of reification
which culminates in the younger Stencil's vision of her final state:

skin radiant with the bloom of some new plastic; both eyes

glass but now containing photoelectric cells, connected by

silver electrodes to optic nerves of purest copper wire and

leading to a brain exquisitely wrought as a diode matrix

could ever be. Solenoid relays would be her ganglia, servo-

actuators move her flawless nylon limbs, hydraulic fluid be

sent by a platinum heart-pump through butyrate veins and

arteries. Perhaps ... even a complex system of pressure

transducers located in a marvellous vagina of polyethylene;

the variable arms of their Wheatstone bridges all leading to

a single silver cable which fed pleasure-voltages direct to

the correct register of the digital machine in her skull.

And when she smiled or grinned in ecstasy there would gleam

her crowning feature: Eigenvalue's precious dentures.

(pages 411-12).

This is V vanished completely beyond the visible, and therefore only imaginable.

It is also the seventh apparition of V in V: that moment of understanding of

the existence of the Other world beyond our understanding. 23 We can look at

the structure of V in two ways, then: it is a quantum search for a decadent

figure who defies our merely human abilities and recedes increasingly beyond

the merely superficial world we understand; and at the same time, it is a

toiling climb up the Wittgensteinian ladder of words to a rejection of the word

and acceptance of insight.

Knewing this, it is important also to realize that this understanding comes

to Herbert Stencil in contemporary America (the novel's present time is 1956),

and that the whole novel is weighted towards a depiction of contemporary

America as the inheritor of the historical decadence with which V is associated

as the novel progresses. Pynchon goes to great lengths to show the present

as a time of social and political decadence, selecting six periods of European

history at which the decadent civilization erupted into the barbaric, and a

seventh which shows the "New World" to have exhausted all its creative energies.

This theme is focussed in the entropic and pear-shaped figure of Benny Profane,

a schlemihl who is always at odds with the physical world 24, a man exhausted of

23. James Young has come close to perceiving the influence of Wittgenstein in V,

which I have not found discussed anywhere at all. Young uses the analogy of

Elgar's "Enigma variations", in which the varied themes are sometimes said
to evoke another, abstract theme which cannot be heard. Unfortunately, he
will and purpose who moves from job to job in New York and, when unemployed, is given to the highly equilibrious occupation of "shuttling" in the subway train from one side of New York to the other. At one point, the whole universe is depicted as if similarly engaged: "If you look from the side at a planet swinging around in its orbit, split the sun with a mirror and imagine a string, it all looks like a yo-yo" (p.35). But Benny is only one in a world of entropy: he is associated with a dozen other figures who make up the "Whole Sick Crew", a gang of sham artists and hangers-on who are "removed from reality, Romanticism in its furthest decadence, being only an exhausted impersonation of poverty, rebellion and artistic 'soul'" (p.56). One of their number, Pig Bodine, is "a byword of decadence" (p.218), and the whole group is later described in the rhetoric of the Decadents (p.296). Eigenvalue, the dentist, describes his times as "this Decadence" (p.297).

In the contemporary America Pynchon draws, Dudley Eigenvalue is one of two dominant and powerful figures. One index to the country's decadence is the gradual growth of the inanimate, not only in the historical figure of V but in the glimpse of the hooded Pig Bodine, silently straddling his motorbike at night, the sight of Rachel Owlglass, Benny Profane's lover, washing her sportscar while crooning love-talk and erotically fondling its gear-lever, the appearance of the drowsy Fergus Mixolydian, who is wired into his television set in order that it will turn on when he drifts off to sleep, and particularly in the scenes in which Benny talks to two plastic mannequins. These are SHROUD ("synthetic human, radiation output determined") and SHOCK ("synthetic human object, casualty kinematics") (p.295), which are used at a research centre at which Benny briefly holds a night watchman's job. SHROUD very accurately associates inhumanity with the decline into decay: "Has it occurred to you

does not pursue the analogy very fully, and certainly does not extend it to a discussion of Wittgenstein's Tractatus. See "The Enigma Variations of Thomas Pynchon", Critique 10 i (1967), pages 69-77.

24. The "schlemihl" or "schlemiel" is the "poor unfortunate" of Yiddish story, the archetype of the anti-hero of contemporary American fiction; see Ruth R. Wisse, The Schlemiel as Modern Hero (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).
there may be no more standards for crazy or sane, now that it's started?"
he asks, after mentioning concentration camps; and he adds, "Me and SHOCK are
what you and everybody will be some day" (p.286), later assuring him of the
emptiness within (p.369). R. W. B. Lewis has suggested that the inhuman in
V is primarily satirical of man's tendency to let machines do his work; but
I think it can be seen as a manifestation of the inhuman horror of the Other
world, constantly eroding humanity and aiding decadence. Eigenvalue's power
comes from his symbolic task as dentist, operating at the point where the
human being literally becomes inhuman (there may also be a pun intended on
"decadentist"). "The pulp is soft and laced with little blood vessels and
nerves", Pynchon remarks; "The enamel, mostly calcium, is inanimate." (p.153).
The tooth, in short, is a metaphor for the state of siege, the human being in
carious decay; Eigenvalue's intimacy with this process makes him the psycho-
analyst of decadentism, one consulted frequently by the questing younger Stencil.

Even more powerful is Schoenmaker, the Prospero of the modern world because
of his ability as a plastic surgeon to change people's external appearances.
Whether we use a Nietzschean or a quantal analogy, the world of V is a world
of superficies, surfaces which are constantly questioned and probed for the
meaning which lies beneath and which is of course beyond understanding. As
he replaces Esther Harvitz's large nose with a small one, he reveals the empti-
ness within her (pages 106-8); when Stencil guesses that Schoenmaker has "a
vital piece of the V-jigsaw" (p.55) he is right: it is the decadentist's know-
ledge of the hollowness within man. His environment is literally hollow, too,
as Benny Profane proves in one of his many jobs, this time involving hunting
albino alligators in the sewers of New York. After a craze for baby alligators
in New York some years before, bored children flushed them away; once in the
sewers, they become symbols, in a sort of subterranean Congo of waste which has

25. Tanner makes a useful general discussion of entropy and the contemporary
American waste land, including Adams's views, in City of Words, pages 141-52.
crept into the heart of decadent New York to stand for that city's latent barbarism. Benny pursues the alligators for the promise of their phosphorescent trails, but this glow never intensifies into meaning - as of course it never can - and he is reduced to slaughtering them as his companions do.

V is rumoured to have been sighted in a sewer in Paris in 1914 - yet another of those apocalyptic moments in history with which she tends to be associated - which brings us back to the point that the entire novel attempts to establish the symbolic properties of V in order to apply them to the present moment. If we arrange in chronological sequence the rather contorted time-scheme of the novel's six historical chapters, we will see that V's appearances in each gain momentum through her increasing dehumanization. On each occasion she is more and more closely associated with the eruption of the barbaric in declining Europe, and with its hollowness and intrigue. Since her nature and function in the novel are clearer at this point, and the significance of the Stencils' search for her is apparent, we might turn now to an examination of the six historical sections of the novel in order to see both the contribution they make to Herbert Stencil's final insight and their part in the fiction of decadence.

The first of these moments in which V is associated with the decline of Europe occurs in Chapter Three, openly stated to have been imagined by Herbert Stencil. Based on Pynchon's short story, "Under the Rose,"27, it is set in Egypt in 1898 at the time of the Fashoda incident, in which the British under Kitchener and the French under Marchand met in a conflict of colonial interests near Fashoda in the heart of the jungle, where "the law of the wild beast" is said to prevail (p.63). Although the place seethes with intrigue, Pynchon concentrates upon a sub-plot in which a British spy called Porpentine is murdered by another, called Bongo-Shaftsbury. Immediately, some of the details will be familiar: the date, for example, and the setting of the incident near the Nile, another riverway into the heart of the African darkness; similarly, the

imperialism of the rival European powers needs no further underlining to show its relation to decadentism.

There is another familiar aspect to this chapter, too: as we ought to expect, this first perspective of or "field" for the apparition of V is a parody of received literature. We saw this technique explained and illustrated in the previous section of this study; and we will see it further employed in V. Already, we have seen Benny Profane chasing his glowing alligators through the sewers of New York: at one point, he finds that he is in that part of the sewers occupied during the Depression by a crazed Roman Catholic priest called Father Fairing, who gave up humanity and went to work to convert the rat population he saw as the meek inheritors of the earth. There is, of course, a rat called Veronica, with whom the priest behaves in an unpriestly manner; but it is more important to see here a parodic reference to Andre Gide's *Les Caves du Vatican* (1914), yet another work caught up within the fiction of decay to be exposed for its linguistic limitations, its literary "decadence". The Fashoda incident of 1898 as told by Pynchon parodies Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* (1962), and the political and personal intrigue moves from observer to observer and town to town. An Arab waiter, for example, watches an Englishman whose decadence is betrayed in his peeling, shredding face, as he talks with another at a cafe in Alexandria. Another waiter then describes a consular reception at Alexandria held the same night, where a minor eruption of an obscure intrigue occurs and Victoria Wren, a "balloon girl" who seems to be suspended above the "waxed mirror beneath" (p.67) makes her chronologically first appearance in the novel. A third perspective follows, given by a degenerate expatriate Englishman called Maxwell Rowley-Bugge who is begging in a gentlemanly fashion for a meal at an Alexandria cafe. He has been drummed out of England because of his tendency to seduce young girls, and to him Victoria Wren resembles the Yorkshire lass who caused his expulsion. Her name was Alice, and since she came from the same town from which Victoria is later noted to have
come we can conclude that they are one and the same. The reference becomes heavily obvious when Rowley-Budge recalls that his Alice would "carol" with pleasure (p. 70), and Victoria is said as a girl to have constructed a private world "back of beyond" (p. 73); by implication, Victoria is associated with the mirror-world.

The narrative of this third chapter then moves to a fourth viewer, a conductor on the Alexandria-Cairo express, who watches the English group in one of the carriages. As the train trundles through the desert waste, Bongo-Shaftsbury provides the novel with one of its more eerie moments when he bares his forearm to reveal a two-way switch imbedded in it, with which he claims to be able to turn himself into a mechanical doll (pages 80-1). An enigmatic struggle with an Arab follows, and then the chapter proceeds to its fifth perspective, given by a Cairo taxi-driver. This is notable for its Huxleyan metaphor of the taxi-driver's home, a walled garden surrounded by the encroaching desert, and for his nihilistic awareness of the omnipresence of Nothing and the imminence of apocalypse at Fashoda (p. 85). In the sixth view of the English party, a cat-burglar outside Shepheard's Hotel listens to Porpentine, who has fallen from a window into a bush, describing Victoria's seduction in the room above by a fat Englishman called Goodfellow. The seventh view discusses the impending clash at Fashoda from the point of a young German waitress at an imitation bierhalle at Cairo; also seen is Victoria's severance there from her father, and the revelation that a German waiter is a part of the obscure plot which has been conducted throughout the chapter. This plot is consummated in the eighth view, which is created directly by Herbert Stencil; in this the German is beaten by Porpentine who is then murdered by Bongo-Shaftsbury, after Victoria Wren has made her brief appearance.

This first of six intrusions by V upon European history is a good example of Pynchon's methods. The parody is not kind: where Durrell's "human archaeology" aims at steady revelation of meaning and motive as each perspective is
supplemented by another, Pynchon's cubistic views of the plottings and intrigues of Alexandria and Cairo are only confusing, a faithful depiction of the confusion of life and not a - "decadent" - ordering of it. The plottings of this chapter are typical, too, for in V the political intrigue is always the efflorescence of Europe's socio-political decadence, a purulence which precedes the eruption of apocalypse. We can see in Chapter Three the tendency for the metaphors and images of decadentism to become secondary in importance although still frequently recurrent; V will always be near a mirror, Porpentine is not the last figure whose tissues fray, Bongo-Shaftsbury is not the last inhuman figure in the novel, Huxley's walled garden metaphor will recur, and so on. Historically, this novel is a pageant of decadent figures and themes, some traditional and some Pynchon's.

These points are further illustrated in the next historical apparition of V, in Chapter Seven, subtitled "She hangs on the western wall". This is another of Herbert Stencil's imaginative recreations, based on V's known presence in Florence during the riots at the Venezuelan Consulate in 1899. These riots were linked to the actual and brutal rise to power of Cipriano Castro, President of Venezuela from 1899 to 1908; the Gaucho, the Venezuelan expatriate in V who organizes the riot, is presumably an agent of this historical figure. The whole chapter, furthermore, appears to parody Romanée (1903), Conrad's collaboration with F.M. Ford, which also has a character called Castro and a plot involving abduction by boat; Pynchon's mind appears to work in an associative way.

Much of this parody involves two typical European decadents: Signor Mantissa, a pessimist and decadent (p.160), who is a romantic consumed by a crazy desire to steal Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" from the Uffizi Gallery and smuggle it out in a hollow tree; and a degenerate sot called Cesare. Mantissa, who wants to possess the painting's beautiful tissue for himself, employs the services of the "barbarian" Gaucho (p.165). But Mantissa's romantic Venus is less spectacular than

\[\text{\textsuperscript{27a}}\] I am grateful to Professor R. A. Copland for pointing out these connections; the apocalyptic doings of President Castro, which must have attracted Pynchon's admiration, are described in Guillermo Mórron, A History of Venezuela (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964), pages 182-3.
the Vheissu of old Hugh Godolphin, an ancient explorer whom Victoria Wren meets in a Florentine church, and who is convinced that he is being pursued by the agents of the remote land of Vheissu, who tunnel underground and thereby acquire the status of V herself. His son, Evan Godolphin, knows Vheissu as his father's imaginary world, one of those "private colonies of the imagination" to which the old man escaped after the horror of witnessing the Mahdist uprisings at Khartoum (p.158) (as a Victorian explorer, old Godolphin becomes another standard figure of decadence in this novel). And yet this retreat from the world has become a confrontation with its horror, and Vheissu becomes another of those mind-countries, all surface and colour, which like Patusan turn against their dreamer. As the old man tells Victoria Wren, his journey to Vheissu was a harrowing journey to the heart of darkness; the land itself is like many of those bizarre places the English have explored, "with barbarity, insurrection, internecine feud", but is distinguished by its constantly changing, random and meaningless patterns of colour, "its raiment, perhaps its skin" (p.170), which elicit a desire for violence in Godolphin (p.171).

The barbaric "V-ness" of Vheissu stands behind the riots at the Venezuelan Consulate, turning a minor eruption of barbarism into a moment of potential apocalypse from this "barbaric and unknown race, employed by God knows whom, ... even now blasting the Antarctic ice with dynamite, preparing to enter a subterranean network of tunnels" (p.197). Beneath all surfaces lurks the unspeakable horror which V stands for, and which in this episode is represented by Vheissu: Godolphin recalls contemplating this horror years before during a midwinter dash to the South Pole:

I had begun to think that there, at one of the only two motionless places on this gyrating world, I might have peace to solve Vheissu's riddle. Do you understand? I wanted to stand in the dead center of the carousel, if only for a moment; try to catch my bearings ... The barrenness of that place howled around me, like a country the demiurge has forgotten. There could have been no more entirely lifeless and empty place anywhere on the earth. (p.205).
Godolphin had dug a cache in which to spend the night; looking down, he sees the body of an iridescent spider monkey from Vheissu preserved in the ice; it is, as Godolphin states in the novel's most overtly Conradian moment, "Nothing I saw", a vision of the empty horror at the core of all things (p.204), a "dream of annihilation" (p.206).

Mantissa, confronting his painting of Venus in the Uffizi, watches "its movement, a slow horror growing in him", for it reminds him of Godolphin's spider-monkey, "a gaudy dream, a dream of annihilation" (p.210), and he and the Gaucho abandon their plot to steal it. The riots follow, Venezuelan because of the sinister "V-ness" of that country and also because Venezuela is a part of another dark continent contaminated by European colonization and imperialism (Argentina will be mentioned in Gravity's Rainbow for the same reason). Victoria, who has begun her process of physically exhibiting her inhumanity by wearing a bizarre hair-comb depicting five of the British soldiers crucified by the Mahdists at Khartoum, watches the violence with eagerness:

It was as if she saw herself embodying a feminine principle, acting as if complement to all this bursting, explosive male energy. Inviolate and calm, she watched the spasms of wounded bodies, the fair of violent death, framed and staged, it seemed, for her alone in that tiny square. From her hair the heads of five crucified looked on, no more expressive than she. (p.209).

V's appearances in history are not conclusive, it seems, at least in the narrative sense; the incidents are crammed with symbolic weight and intensity, relying too on the cumulative effect of her multiple appearances. The third "field" or perspective in which we see her is the Paris of 1913, in Chapter Fourteen, "V in love". Robert Golden correctly identifies this episode as focussing on an extreme point in the development of modernism, an avant-garde ballet resembling Stravinsky's "Rites of Spring". But the barbaric and apocalyptic aspects of the performance are stressed, and Pynchon obviously keeps in mind the contingency of modernism and decadence. The maestro in this case

is called Porcepic, a hashish-smoker and indulger in the Black Mass, whose music, based on "African polyrhythms" (p.402), is described as "orchestral barbarity" (p.413). The rehearsal, conducted in "an exhausted yellow light" (p.408) and accompanied by explicit discussions of the nature of decadence (p.405), betrays the extremes to which this form of modernism has developed. Suitably, this ballet features German-made automata which portray the handmaidens of Su Feng, its principal figure.

V appears as the patroness of this venture, an unknown lesbian in her early 'thirties whose partner is the young girl, Melanie, who plays the part of Su Feng. Melanie is the first character in V to come close to the mirror-world and the implications of what lies beyond: early in the chapter she pretends to copulate with one of the robots while watching herself in the mirror, and in the sleep which follows dreams that she is fully inhuman and being wound up with a key which is lodged in her back (p.402). As her relationship with V intensifies, "The girl functions as a mirror" which reflects an ungodly presence (p.399), finding her true identity in "the mirror's soulless gleam" (p.411), and V provides dozens of mirrors for their trysts. V herself (who in the intervening years has "become intimate also with the Things in the Back Room" (p.410), is a splendid embodiment of the diabolistic side of Modernism: she wears an "evening dress of crepe Georgette the color of a Negro's head, beaded all over," and "a tiny hat riotous with the plumage of equatorial birds" (p.399), and her apartment is "decorated African and oriental" (p.406).

The first performance of Porcepic's ballet is a disaster, for - inevitably - it has acquired political significance and becomes involved in intrigues. "Orientalism - at this period showing up all over Paris in fashions, music, theater - had been connected along with Russia to an international movement seeking to overthrow Western civilization" (p.412); and agitators in the audience cause it to erupt into immediate violence. Melanie, thoroughly corrupted by V's influence, accompanies the violence of the audience with a supreme sacri-
fice - to the inhuman, and not to art - and impales herself upon a pole held by the automatic handmaidens; she dies, and the distraught V makes off with a "mad Irredentist" (p.414).

V's chronologically fourth appearance in history occurs in 1919 in Valletta, Malta; instead of having been imagined by Herbert Stencil, it is reconstructed from the dossiers and records of his father. Sidney Stencil has been sent to investigate anti-British dockyard riots, another secular plot which is a by-product of socio-cultural decadence and which is accompanied by overtones of V's black, ineffable intrigue. "The Situation", as Sidney Stencil likes to call it, has become far too complex for anyone's understanding, but it clearly involves V in some way. In this "field", she appears as Veronica Manganese, a wealthy and influential lady of middle age to whom Stencil is led by Majstral, the Foreign Office's agent in the dockyards. Veronica Manganese has an artificial eye whose iris is a clock, a large sapphire sewed into her navel, and a pair of golden boots which she desires to exchange for an artificial foot "of amber and gold, with the veins, perhaps, in intaglio instead of bas-relief" (p.488). Stencil notes that her room is "almost creeping with amassed objects" (p.488), and that her retainer is a man whose horrible facial mutilation suits him for his rôle (it is in fact Evan Godolphin, the old explorer's son, his face poorly reconstructed in paraffin after a 'plane crash in the Great War).

Shortly afterward, the dockyard erupts into riot, British troops are brought in to quell it, and Stencil, like Ahab, is lost at sea on his way home.

V's fifth historical "field" occurs in "Mondaugen's story", Chapter Nine, set in German South-West Africa in 1922. This is a long exposition on decadence which evokes Heart of Darkness and the darkness Conrad saw at the heart of the Belgian Congo. Young Kurt Mondaugen has been obliged "to leave depression time in Munich, journey into this other hemisphere, and enter mirror-time in the South-West Protectorate" (p.230) in order to trace his cosmic signals. Working
in the "vast death" of the Kalahari (p.229) he is caught in the rebellion of the local Bondel tribesmen and forced to take refuge in the enormous fortified farmhouse of a German farmer called Foppl. Here he finds himself in the company of numerous degenerate outcasts from Weimar Germany and other European countries in decay; they begin a prolonged "siege party", while the Bondel tribesmen lurk in the desert that lies outside the fortified wall of the farm. This is, of course, the classical image of decadence, a European citadel barbarically besieged, "a tiny European Conclave or League of Nations, assembled here while political chaos howled outside" (p.235).

"Mondaugen's story" explores lengthily the psychology of European decadence, moving between descriptions of the excesses of the long, depraved party and evocations of the barbarity which is incipient in it in the recollections of Foppl, who served with von Trotha, the German general who savagely repressed an earlier uprising by natives in 1904. V appears amongst the guests at Foppl's farmhouse, of course, known now as Vera Meroving and associated with a Lieutenant Weissmann, with whom she executes some over-dramatic scenes involving flagellation and transvestism. She is also present in the perverted Alice-in-Wonderland figure of the young girl, Hedwig Vogelsang, who leads Mondaugen down to the bowels of the farmhouse to confront him with the most brutally decadent image in the novel: Foppl, whip in hand, stands over the sprawled form of a Bondel whom he is whipping to death, and whose very core has been exposed by flogging. Foppl treats his witnesses to a long account of the atrocities of German troops under von Trotha. Much of this section of the book is - necessarily - repulsive and repetitious, and there is no need to narrate it here; but it is important to note that it marks the low point of the European in the genre, a nadir implied when the young German soldiers find themselves so tanned that they mistake one another for natives (p.257). In a wry afterthought, it is suggested that the wind there will fade before reaching "the Congo's mouth or the Bight of Benin" (p.271): those popularly-known sinks of atrocity in the nineteenth century.

29. Roger Henkle detects traces of Herman Hesse's Steppenwolf in this section; see "Pynchon's Tapestry on the Western Wall", Modern Fiction Studies 17 (1971), p.211
would pale before the atrocities Foppl recounts. V's association with these incidents is merely another epiphany of the world beyond the mirror in this world, an index to the inhumanity of this classically decadent-barbaric situation.

The sixth, final, intrusion of V into the history of the decay of Europe occurs in 1943 during the siege of Malta. Like Heller's Pianosa, Malta is at the centre of the second great European conflagration this century, and this eleventh chapter, "The confessions of Fausto Maijstral", makes it yet another classical image of decadence, the inhumanly rock-like island bombarded by wave after wave of bombers. Fausto Maijstral, the young writer whose early romanticism perishes during the bombing, feels that all on the island at this time share a "sensitivity to decadence ... as if the island were being hammered inch by inch into the sea" (p.317). Later, he muses on the connection between the matriarchal nature of the island and its decadence:

Decadence, decadence. What was it? Only a clear movement toward death or, preferably, non-humanity. As Fausto II and III, like their island, became more inanimate, they moved closer to the time when like any dead leaf or fragment of metal they'd be finally subject to the laws of physics. All the time pretending it was a great struggle between the laws of man and the laws of God. (p.321).

V is on the island too, and Fausto, a romantic decadent, confronts her at the end of a long period of disillusionment. He has divided his disillusionment into three periods, and the documents Pynchon invents as the self-conscious, precious writings of his university period are masterly parodies, convincingly like the papers yellowing in the bottom drawer of any ageing romantic. In a sense, the failure of Fausto's early ambitions to be a writer symbolize the collapse of literature and the written word in the face of chaos and disorder. Certainly, his complete capitulation occurs after "a horrible encounter with one we only know as the Bad Priest" (p.306).

This is V, yet again metamorphosed, of uncertain sex and, as a priest, of uncertain commitment to the Church. Her influence, though never specified, is
thoroughly malevolent. Maijstral considers the Bad Priest to be "Outside; a radius along with leather-winged Lucifer, Hitler, Mussolini" (p.339); in this form she wanders the ruins of the battered island, advising the young girls to become nuns and devote their lives to the Virgin, and the boys to adopt the rock-like - and inhuman - qualities of Malta. But when she is trapped during an air-raid beneath the fallen rafter of a house, it is these very children who dismember her and bear away the inanimate objects of which she is now almost completely made. "She comes apart", as one of the children says (p.342): under her hat is a white wig, beneath which in turn is a bald pate tattooed with a crucifixion scene in two colours; her boots come off to reveal delicate gold slippers, which come off to reveal a pair of artificial feet; the sapphire is prised from her havel with a bayonet, and the children take her dentures from her mouth and her clockwork eye from her eye-socket. Fausto is left alone to administer the last rites to the body which is "night's cold, object's cold, nothing human, nothing of me about it at all" (p.344). As a specific part of the narrative, she does not appear again, for her actual incursions into the everyday, historical world are over. But the novel goes on in its present time of 1956; and if any female figure in it inherits any of her attributes, it is Fausto's daughter, Paola Maijstral.

We may approach a better understanding of Pynchon's aims here if we recall the aims of the Tractatus which it so closely follows. When V dies on Malta, the sixth of her aphorisms, so to speak, is over; and the contemporary period of the novel remains as an arena for that seventh understanding. But we should not expect anything like the illuminating presence of V in the seventh stage: the final aphorism has exhausted the capacity of words, in Wittgenstein's scheme, and the contemporary American scenes of V must indicate a significance which they cannot express. As I have suggested earlier in this discussion, V makes her seventh appearance in the fertile imagination of the younger Stencil, who imagines a completely artificial mannequin fully committed to the mirror-world.

30. For an alternative view of the source and purpose of Pynchon's perspectives, see Don Hausdorff, "Thomas Pynchon's Multiple Absurdities", Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, pages 298-69.
Speaking to Profane in New York, he makes it plain that although her few mortal remains lie buried in Valletta, V's memory lingers on. He has sensed her presence, he claims, in a mirrored brothel in Nice since 1945; disguised as a Hussar, she has stolen an aeroplane in France; she has been sighted in the guise of a Mallorcan fisherman; and so on. No longer a fixed entity, "V, by this time was a remarkably scattered concept" (p. 399), a random principle at work in the novel's present time.

Herbert Stencil sets off nevertheless in one final quest for her, and inevitably arrives at Malta at the height of the Suez Crisis and Hungarian Revolution which place that island still at the heart of a barbarous Europe. He finds only "the discomfort of being haunted" (p. 447), a feeling that V is all around him. To sense in this way the presence of the inhuman at the heart of the dark present is an appropriate response for one who has climbed a fictional version of Wittgenstein's ladder of aphorisms. A significant concrete action occurs, however, which will not escape the reader's notice. This occurs when Paola Maijstral, who has come to her homeland from America with Stencil and Profane, is reunited with her sailor husband and gives him as a token of their reunion the Mahdist hair-comb which symbolized the growing inhumanity of Victoria Wren so long before. Related to this act is Paola's curious sojourn in America in which she masqueraded as a Negress: all the Maltese are dark enough to appear negroid without cosmetics, a point that is made with obvious symbolic purpose. We will also notice the influence of the "Bad Priest" on Paola's mother just before the girl's birth.

The deliberate implication of these things, it seems, is that the spirit of V lingers on in Paola Maijstral, who returns with her husband at the end of the novel to America, new home of the old decline. But it is an implication only; neither Pynchon nor the pattern-conscious Herbert Stencil gives it sanction. For the reader of V, like Stencil, also climbs Wittgenstein's fictional ladder to find himself in a realm where the didactic has perished, where he may sense
the presence of V in the narrative but cannot prove it. Like Percy and Bellow, Pynchon chooses to end his fiction by confronting the reader with an ambiguous situation; but the difference is that V contains still the faint possibility of possessing a shape, a shape which Pynchon himself will not outline but which may well be there. 31

And so the "V-principle" is "fed" into the contemporary American period, symbolizing all the decadence which has been quite explicitly described amongst the "Whole Sick Crew" and the country they stand for. Pynchon's third novel, rather than the one we are about to turn to, continues these ideas most specifically, particularly emphasizing the relationship of decadent Europe and decadent America; but I hope it can be already seen how fully V is illuminated by this decadentist approach, and how well it stands at the end of this study. It is one of the most curious aspects of the criticism of Pynchon's novels that, despite the open references to and discussions of decadence in them, no fully decadentist approach has been essayed so far. While numerous critics have made statements which, in my view, betray a complete misunderstanding of Pynchon (George Plimpton, for example, suggested that V would provoke much speculation about the actual identity of V 32), many others have made useful contributions to the understanding of parts of the novel, and these I have acknowledged in the discussion above. Golden, for example, sees the closeness of artistic modernism and social decadence, and is one of the very few critics to have acknowledged that V makes wide mention of social decay; but his discussion of Modernism, while it explains much of "V in Love", simply does not explain enough about the remainder of the novel. Irving Feldman claims that Pynchon has created pastiches of Woolf, Gide, Borges, Proust, and Durrell in V, but refuses to illustrate this claim, although we can see for ourselves how valuable such illustrations could be 33. Charles Harris also discusses the parodic aspect

31. The casting-off of language places V in a realm of communication which has an analogy with musical communication; a fact substantiated by the late Richard Farina's composition of a musical version of V. See Contemporary Authors, p. 353.
but in a disappointingly general way. Perhaps the best comment of all has come from James Young:

A great mystery about any novel is that it can be described, finally, by reviewers who say very different things. Can one really imagine a novel that would prompt readers to say both that the author "hasn't conceived of his theme greatly enough," and that the novel "is simply a picture of life"; both that in the novel "sections turn up which are dull", and that "each of its wildly dissimilar parts is as good as the rest"? One reviewer finds that much of the novel "is unreadable", another that he is taxed "to convey a sense of how completely boring all this melee finally is", while another finds that the same novel "leaves the imagination spent and the mind reeling", and another asserts that the author's "remarkable ability" includes "a vigorous and imaginative style, a robust humor, a tremendous reservoir of information, and above all, a sense of how to use and balance these talents."

He continues with many more paradoxical criticisms quoted from the reviewers and critics of both V and The Crying of Lot 49, reminding us of the need for a coherent and comprehensive approach to these novels. We may turn to the second novel with this in mind, prepared to accept helpful critical insights along the way but expecting the decadentist approach to prove itself alone, and by its ability to illuminate.


Pynchon's second novel brings together again metaphors derived from quantum physics, the laws of physical parity, and the literature of decadence. For all its unfamiliarity, The Crying of Lot 49 is fundamentally a part of the latter, and the scientific metaphors illuminate this traditional theme but do not take it further. At its core, the novel is about the relationship of contemporary American decadence to its European origins, and as it exposes this it tends to fuse complex themes within the metaphors it employs.

The entropy metaphor, for example, which is so widely used in contemporary

American fiction, stands here for social decadence. The novel is set largely in a Southern Californian town called San Narciso; as Peter Abernethy says, Southern California is the end of the frontier, the place where the American dream tumbles into the sea, where social decadence reaches its entropic maximum.

Oedipa Maas, central figure of the novel, thinks of herself as suffering from a sort of social sickness, and her husband, Mucho Maas, has nightmares about his former job as a used-car salesman, in which he began to identify the doomed waste-landers who were his customers with the exhausted wrecks which they drove (the true nature of his job is revealed in the sign outside the car lot, representing the National Automobile Dealers' Association by its initials, N. A. D. A.).

Oedipa and Mucho Maas are themselves waste landers, in a society which has reached a maximum of entropic equilibrium. In *The Human Use of Human Beings*, Norbert Wiener discusses contemporary American social entropy in terms familiar to us: he too evokes an image of islands of order amidst a sea of disorder, and adds that language bears information in negative proportion to its entropy, a point already discussed fully in this study. As Tanner puts it, "the decay ... in significant information, which is a necessary consequence of the increasing probability of mass-media messages, has affected the American writer's feelings about the ability of any language to transmit significant information." Abernethy adds, referring to this novel, that "because of its entropic tendencies, American society has produced a failure in communications which leaves its citizens intellectually and spiritually dead at the core." The important point is not that Pynchon has read Wiener — he has shown more definitely that he has read Wittgenstein — but that in *The Crying of Lot 49* he identifies social

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decadence and linguistic decadence in the same metaphors: thus, as Oedipa drives to San Narciso, she notices the "ordered swirl" of the houses on an estate, and is reminded of the printed circuit-card of a transistor radio (p.24). She experiences a sense of impending revelation which, appropriately, does not fulfill itself.

The metaphor which Pynchon uses to link these two kinds of decadence is quantal, as I suggested in my introduction to this section. Later in the novel, Oedipa finds that she has become lost inside the giant Yoyodyne complex at San Narciso; wandering amongst hundreds of identical young men at drawing-boards she meets Stanley Koteks, a disillusioned young designer who shows her a picture of the "Nefastis machine" (p.85). This turns out to be an actual version of Maxwell's Box, the hypothetical two-chambered engine by which James Clerk Maxwell proposed to overcome entropy. It relied upon the Sorting Demon, which sat in the hole between the two chambers of Maxwell's machine and put all the swiftly-moving molecules that were in the unevenly-heated first chamber into the second. As Nefastis himself pointed out, there were two kinds of entropy,

One having to do with heat-engines, the other to do with communication. The equation for one, back in the '30's, had looked very like the equation for the other. It was a coincidence. The two fields were entirely unconnected, except at one point: Maxwell's Demon. As the Demon sat and sorted his molecules into hot and cold, the system was said to lose entropy. But somehow the loss was offset by the information the Demon gained about what molecules were where. (p.105).

Oedipa's attempts to make the "Nefastis machine" work fail, as her own quest in the novel will fail, because like Maxwell she brings an objectifying mind to a situation incapable of objective measurement. Maxwell's classically-trained mind was unable to realize that it had placed its hypothetical Demon in a quantal situation, as the physicist, Brillouin, explains:

Before an intelligent being can use its intelligence, it must perceive its objects, and that requires physical means of
perception. Visual perception in particular requires the illumination of the object. Seeing is essentially a non-equilibrium phenomenon. The cylinder in which the Demon operates is, optically speaking, a closed black body... The observer must use a lamp that emits light of a wavelength not well represented in the black-body radiation, and the eventual absorption of this light by the observer or elsewhere increases the entropy of the system.\textsuperscript{42}

The better the Demon can see the molecules he must sort and order, the better he will order but the more ordering he will have to do, since his source of illumination increases the disorder in the chamber. In short, the more he knows, the more he needs to know.

As Anne Mangel argues, Pynchon obviously means us to think of Oedipa as being in the predicament of Maxwell's Sorting Demon, cast out from her ordered but decadent existence and into a realm where she must find order and meaning, but is given information which is only confusing.\textsuperscript{43} Like an electron in a cloud chamber, the Meaning she seeks fades as she approaches it. But there is plenty of evidence in The Crying of Lot 49 that Pynchon would also like the reader to think of Oedipa from the point of view of the \textit{Tractatus} of Wittgenstein once more. At an art exhibition held in Mexico City, she is especially struck by a Spanish painting:

in the central painting of a triptych, titled "Bordando el Mantra Terrestre", were a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world.\textsuperscript{(p.21)}

Oedipa, one of the frail girls, must fill the void with a tapestry of language from a tower which evokes the image of the artist's castle. This version of her can be "fitted over" the quantal version outlined above without becoming inconsistent, and suggests that Pynchon's aims here resemble his aims in \textit{V}.


\textsuperscript{43} "Maxwell's Demon, Entropy, and Information", p.198.
Oedipa Maas's Southern Californian quest is another "field", a search for the immeasurable, which will pit the resources of language against the ineffable and find them wanting.

But there is a third general metaphor which operates in this book: where V saw the mirror used as a motif, the second novel pitches Oedipa quite specifically through the mirror into a new realm. After her trip to San Narciso - the significance of the name needs no comment - she arrives at a motel ready to meet her co-executor of the estate of the dead Pierce Inverarity, Metzger. There, a contest begins between what are in effect two symbols for the looking-glass: the mirror, which always pretends to reflect a faithful and normal image of the world, and the television set, which has laws and peculiarities of its own. From the start, the television has an advantage: the advertisements are all for commodities and investments owned by the Inverarity estate, and the show they interrupt is an old film of a war-time musical comedy featuring Metzger himself as a child actor, when he was known as Baby Igor. At times, Metzger recalls the filming of the musical as if it were a documentary film of a battle, with a sea-borne invasion being recalled as staining the sea "fifty yards out" (p.36). At other times, the film cheats his memory, developing in directions he does not recall having filmed at all. In fact, the old film shows such narrative independence that Oedipa and Metzger begin to play "Strip Botticelli", wagering on each new development and removing clothing if they bet wrongly.

What occurs next is very important. Threatened by impending nakedness - she is not guessing particularly well - she slips into the bathroom and begins to put on all the clothes she has brought with her. Turning to the mirror, she sees "a beach ball with feet" (p.36) and laughs so much that she loses balance and knocks a can of hairspray from a shelf. The can begins to emit a sticky spray and flies about the room like an emitted electron, bouncing from walls and ceiling, narrowly missing Metzger's ear, and sealing the pair of them to the floor in its gluey mess:
The can knew where it was going, she sensed, or something fast enough, God or a digital machine, might have computed in advance the complex web of its travel; but she wasn't fast enough, and knew only that it might hit them at any moment, at whatever clip it was doing, a hundred miles an hour. "Metzger," she moaned, and sank her teeth into his upper arm, through the shark-skin. Everything smelled like hairspray. The can collided with a mirror and bounced away, leaving a silvery, reticulated bloom of glass to hang a second before it all fell jingling into the sink; zoomed over to the enclosed shower, where it crashed into and totally destroyed a panel of frosted glass; thence around the three tile walls, up to the ceiling, past the light, over the two prostrate bodies, amid its own whoosh and the buzzing, distorted uproar from the TV set. (p. 37).

This is much more than slapstick: incalculably swift, the electron-like spray-can defeats Oedipa's merely human sense of time but emits the viscous solution which binds the pair as if frozen to the floor. The shattering of the mirror is inevitable, a symbol of the defeat of the everyday, superficial world in the novel, and along with the removal of the frosted glass wall of the shower cabinet, a suggestion of the extrusion to the real. Meanwhile, the television set in the other room celebrates its victory by depicting Baby Igor's surprising and horrible death "electrocuted, thrashing back and forth and screaming horribly" (pages 42-3). A little later, she seeks her image where the mirror had been and suffers "a moment of nearly pure terror" when she cannot find it (p. 41), for she no longer belongs to a world which can be faithfully shone back at her.

This final understanding is confirmed near the end of the chapter, when Metzger seduces Oedipa and their sexual climax is accompanied by the explosive extinction of the lights of the motel. If we recall some of my earlier remarks on the physicists' conception of parity we will remember that the world of anti-matter "through the mirror" would hypothetically explode on contact with the world of matter; Oedipa, through the mirror and of the world of anti-matter, makes explosive contact with the everyday Metzger.

The next chapter begins with the words, "Things then did not delay in turning curious" (p. 44), a deliberate echo of Alice's words in her mirror-world, and she begins her impossible task of bringing order and understanding to Pierce.
Inverarity's estate, openly stated to be a quitting of a word-world, which began with "that night's infidelity with Metzger" (p.44). Whether we think of her quest as quantal, Wittgensteinian, or Carrollian, it is beyond time; and we may think of some of the events which occur there in an order other than that in which they occur. Quite late in the novel, she meets a Mexican in San Francisco who recalls Inverarity as "a miracle", which he describes as "another world's intrusion into this one" (p.120). Oedipa comes to think of her experience as just such a "kiss of cosmic pool balls" (p.124), the manifestation in her new realm, as she sorts through the business of executing the vast estate, of the possible presence of a system called The Tristero. As she gradually learns, "From obscure philatelic journals ... an ambiguous footnote in Motley's Rise of the Dutch Republic, an 80-year-old pamphlet on the roots of modern anarchism" (p.158), the Tristero is the historical "Other" of European communications, which appears to have been established in the late sixteenth century as a rival to the Thurn and Taxis postal system which had monopolized European communications since 1290 but which was then on the verge of collapse. Where the Thurn and Taxis system had expedited communication, the Tristero system was a malevolent force which murdered rival couriers and terrorized travellers throughout Europe, impeding communication. Its power grew until it became the incarnation of "Power, omniscience, implacable malice, attributes of what they'd thought then to be a historical principle, a Zeitgeist" (p.165), and it seems that by the late eighteenth century the Tristero were busy staging the French Revolution (p.165). By 1849-50, their power waning in the Old World, they transferred their influence to the New, at a time when the United States Government was establishing a monopoly of all postal services; Oedipa uncovers evidence of its possible continued existence about her, a thriving underworld of outcasts and conspirators and anarchists. Again, the animating force in the long decline of the Old World is seen to find a comfortable home in contemporary America.
But Oedipa's tracing of this pattern is ambiguous and often a faint process suggested by the narrative voice of the author and cast into doubt by the occurrences of the novel. Like V, the Tristero System represents an ineffable force which could have been at work in the processes which have brought violence and decay to Europe and America; but it is beyond Oedipa's ability to shape into an ordered and understandable meaning. What we saw of V we could fairly safely guess at, since because we saw her we knew she was a part of the everyday world. But Oedipa is behind the mirror, in the realm of subjective insights and revelations amongst the chaos; and, as Mangal says, "the more entropy or disorder in the system, the more information will be needed to describe the system". Oedipa tries to "describe" it through the signs it leaves, the mutilated postage stamps and such postmarks as "REPORT ALL OBSCENE MAIL TO YOUR POSTMASTER" (p.46); the more probability a message has, entropically speaking, the less it communicates; the presence of the Tristero is signalled in the tampering which slightly misplaces one of the letters of the otherwise highly probable message above. The Tristero also conceals itself behind two acronyms which are familiarly decadentist: "WASTE", which is usually accompanied by a symbol of a muted post-horn (p.52), and "DEATH" (p.121), which she finds scrawled on the back of the bus-seat. Waste and death, we will remember, are two dimensions of the classical insight of the genre; here, they are tied to this decadentist plot by standing for "We Await Silent Tristero's Empire" (p.169) and "Don't Ever Antagonize the Horn" (p.121).

Oedipa's problem is that in trying to unravel this plot and verify (or otherwise) the existence of The Tristero in contemporary America, she cannot rely on the information she receives or get sufficient additional information to supplement it. When she attends a performance of a play called "The Courier's Tragedy" she is fascinated by the appearance of three apocalyptic figures in this Jacobean melodrama who represent Tristero couriers; but an original copy of the play does not represent them or any textual reference to them, and when she tries 44. "Maxwell's Demon, Entropy, and Information", p.202.
to persuade the producer to explain why he inserted these references, she finds that he has committed suicide by walking into the Pacific. An ancient man in a rest home (which is part of Inverarity's estate) yarms to her about his own grandfather's adventures with Tristero couriers disguised as Indians, but when she returns to check his story with him she finds that he has died (p.166), and she has only the recollection of seeing a Tristero ring he has shown her. A philatelist called Genghis Cohen, after initially showing enthusiasm for her search, inexplicably becomes cooler. Her husband, Mucho, far from helping her, becomes confused and rambling under the influence of LSD; Metzger runs off with a young girl instead of helping her with their executive job; Oedipa's psychiatrist, Dr. Hilarius, a former Nazi, succumbs to paranoia and locks himself in his surgery with a rifle which he fires in all directions. Instead of knowing more, she finds that her search has led her to know less.

There follows a familiar aspect of the decadent genre, the harrowing night-journey through a nightmare city; it is San Francisco, and here Oedipa is pursued by a series of experiences which constantly offer her the chance to assemble them into a pattern (Yossarian's night journey through Rome does not offer such a chance, which suggests the difference between Pynchon's decadentism and that of other practitioners of the genre). Repeatedly, she sights the symbol of the muted post-horn, each time in association with some derelict, illicit, anarchic aspect of society. Her first such contact is with an empty-eyed man in a bar, whose post-horn badge has on it the letters, I. A.: he explains that as a member of "Inamorati Anonymous" he is devoted to preventing love and preserving loneliness (p.112). In the "infected city" she spends the rest of the night "finding the image of the Trystero post horn" (p.117): it is vaguely seen in the window of a herbalist's shop, and chalked as a children's game on the sidewalk as children chant, "Tristoe, Tristoe, one, two, three,/ Turning taxi from across the sea ... " (p.119), in an infuriatingly different version of the words Oedipa seeks. The Mexican anarchist carries a newspaper bearing
the symbol (p.120); a group of delinquents carry it on their leather-jacketed backs (p.121); an automatic laundry carries the symbol on its notice board, and so on:

And so it went. Oedipa played the voyeur and listener. Among her other encounters were a facially-deformed welder, who cherished his ugliness; a child roaming the night who missed the death before birth as certain outcasts do the dear lulling blankness of the community; a Negro woman with an intricately-marbled scar along the baby-fat of one cheek who kept going through rituals of miscarriage each for a different reason, deliberating as others might the ritual of birth, dedicated not to continuity but to some kind of interregnum; an ageing night-watchman, nibbling at a bar of Ivory Soap, who had trained his virtuoso stomach to accept also lotions, air-fresheners, fabrics, tobaccoes and waxes in a hopeless attempt to assimilate it all ... (p.123).

During this inconclusive experience, Oedipa considers various explanations. The first is that the confrontation with the reappearing post-horns means that she is being controlled: "Each clue that comes is supposed to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence. But then she wondered if the gem-like 'clues' were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night" (p.118)

But even she thinks at one point that "perhaps she did not see it quite as often as she later was to remember seeing it" (pages 123-4), and the other explanation she offers herself is that she is suffering from paranoic delusion, and is imagining the appearances of these tokens:

Either you have stumbled indeed, without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, onto a secret richness and concealed density of dream; onto a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating whilst reserving their recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty, for the official government delivery system; maybe even onto a real alternative to the evilness, to the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of everybody American that you know, and you too, sweetie. Or you are hallucinating it. Or a plot has been mounted against you, so expensive and elaborate ... so labyrinthine that it must have meaning beyond just a practical joke. Or you are fantasying some such plot, in which case you are a nut, Oedipa, out of your skull. (pages 170-1).
In such a condition, she is ready for the revelation of the identity of the Tristerno, which is promised when she is told that a mysterious and anonymous bidder, who could be only from the Tristero, will be present at the auctioning of the forty-ninth lot of Inverarity's mutilated stamps. But this direct confrontation with the dark Presence she has so long sensed is far beyond the resources of language which have been tested for six chapters. Oedipa settles down in the auction room to await the apocalyptic moment, the revelation of the Tristero: but Pynchon follows the advice of Wittgenstein's seventh aphorism, and his seventh chapter consists of blank pages. "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent".  

The multiple scientific metaphors of this novel and the Wittgensteinian analogy tend to remove it to an extreme part of the genre because they provide details and setting different from what we have been used to. But it is plain that Pynchon makes some effort to locate his second novel within the decadentist tradition. Oedipa thinks the possibility of the actual existence of the Trystero "the void" (p.171); like waste and death another property of the apocalyptic insight of the genre, although not reduced to acronyms in this case. And the burden of the novel, like that of V, is that the decadent principle of Europe now belongs to America. The emphasis upon the decay of information is a peculiarly American aspect of the genre which has been made the central focus of this novel, without removing it from the decadentist tradition; it merely stresses once and for all the tendency we have seen in American fiction for decadence to be thought of as involving received decadent literature. At the same time, Pynchon's own desires for the novel form need to be accommodated; in his third novel we will witness these parallel but opposite impulses, to give account of an old theme in an old manner while devising new methods and forms for as much of the experience as is new.

45. The blank chapter in the original, Lippincott edition amounts to nine leaves. The paperback edition (New York: Bantam, 1967) does not accommodate this subtlety, and ends on the last leaf of the book.

In coming to Pynchon's third, and most ambitious, novel we approach a locked chest whose contents we need but whose lid has been sealed to all but the most resilient reader. The relative reticence of the critics when confronted by his novels is a reaction to his active indifference to the kind of novel which lets its meanings die of exposure. In Gravity's Rainbow one often senses an almost wilful desire to baffle the reader of the literal and to conceal meaning and significance: Pynchon is not a writer to court the critic.

It is a novel which has broken up formally, acknowledging, in the most spectacular way we are to see, the pressures of reality upon the traditional form. Its great length, allied with its constant taxing of the reader's interpretative faculties, almost invites surrender; a reaction which, in a curious way, Pynchon would probably not be unwilling to provoke. Its consistent adherence to the present tense suggests the imminent termination of the events it describes; further unreality comes from Pynchon's continuation of the tendency shown by characters in the earlier novels to burst into song, with the development that the characters will often be described as if belonging to a comic strip or a film cartoon. A group of mice in a laboratory maze, for example, suddenly become cartoon mice with imitation Brooklyn accents; two characters approaching the very heart of darkness in the novel are suddenly described as "sneaky-Peteing like two cats in a cartoon" (p.503); one of the characters uses "classic gangster head-move gestures" (p.530). The tone of the whole novel tends to preserve this absurdly inappropriate manner throughout, anaesthetizing the reader's response to many of the actions which occur. In much of Gravity's Rainbow, its central figure, an American serviceman called Slothrop, wanders through the ruins of postwar Germany dressed as "Rocketman", complete with cape and a helmet shaped like a nose-cone. Later, he spends some time dressed as a giant pig.

46 The hard-backed copy is 760 pages long.
Anthony Burgess was among the first to comment upon the fact that Pynchon has quite deliberately set about severing the links between the traditional novel and Gravity's Rainbow. Epigraphs to its various sections come from Wernher von Braun, Merian C. Cooper, the silent film producer, the script of "The Wizard of Oz", and Richard M. Nixon; internal references are principally to popular collections, comic books and magazines. The final hundred pages of the novel degenerate completely into an evocation of the rhetoric and mentality of these sources. It is this section which begins to clarify Pynchon's aims in the whole novel, for it should remind us of the complaints made by critics and writers early in this study, the feeling that reality has become distorted and gross and that the mass media are at fault. Where the first two of Pynchon's novels spoke of the decay of contemporary America objectively, Gravity's Rainbow evokes its decay in its own texture, following the McLuhanesque dictum that the medium provides the message: our struggle, as readers, to make sense of this novel corresponds to the writer's struggle to make chaos into a novel. Here, Pynchon deposits the numbing detritus of mass popular culture in its original forms into the novel, and as it progresses its very sensibility becomes depraved until the apocalyptic conclusion reveals quite specifically the dark horror in contemporary American culture.

In this way, as we will witness in greater detail in this sub-section, Pynchon helps return this study to its origins, and it would be hard to imagine a more appropriate novel with which to conclude. I turn now to trace some of these archetypal decadentist themes and forms in Gravity's Rainbow as a means of finding the meaning of the novel and, ultimately, of fulfilling the shape of this study. Like V, to which it is very close in range and tone, Gravity's Rainbow depicts not simply civilization at bay before the random forces of barbarism, but a decayed world at bay before the intelligent, ordering force of a Manichean

Presence. It is set in Europe during the last months of the Second World War, during the bombardment of the east coast of England by the German rocket bombs known as V1 and V2; and it extends beyond VE Day and into the shattered remnant of Europe after a war which is seen to terminate centuries of decline, and which is interpreted as merely a "version" of a "real War" that is ever-present (p.645).

Beginning in England, it shows the decadence of that country: Roger Mexico, an English mathematician engaged in secret research at a coastal town observes the white cliffs nearby and thinks them deathlike, adding to himself that "Early barbarians of Europe who ventured close enough to this coast saw these white barriers through the mist, and knew then where their dead had been taken to" (p.89). He thinks of himself as a decadent, familiarly enough as an "Anti-mexico", but wonders

on what cortex, what winter hemisphere? What ruinous mosaic, facing outward into the Waste ... outward from the sheltering city ... readable only to those who journey outside ... eyes in the distance ... barbarians ... riders ...

(p.89)

Here, typically, are compacted metaphor after metaphor for the divided world of decadence, with a complexity the novel explores fully. Familiar themes are presented with similar density, too: there is for example the notion that the spawn of European colonialism belong properly - like the Venezuelans in Y - to collapsing Europe. Thus Argentina, a dark jungle where Europeans "tried to exterminate" the Indians (p.264), is represented by a group of exiled Argentinians in Europe who view the rise of Peron with gloom (Argentina is remembered to have been "smuggled up" to Southwest Africa aeons ago49). Russia, too, an occupying force after the defeat of Germany, is depicted as a country containing its own barbaric Other world in the Siberian wastes; and another section describes the wanton slaughter of the Mauritian dodo by a seventeenth century Dutchman who has been carried to excess by the primitiveness of his surroundings (p.108). A Norwegian mulatto appears in the book; the remark is almost anticlimactic which

49. Gravity's Rainbow, p.321; see also p.383.
states that "Colonies are the outhouses of the European soul" (p.317).

Just as England can be seen in this novel as a citadel of decadence besieged by barbaric forces, a swift mirror-reversal enables us to picture Nazi Germany in the same way. Completely decadent-barbaric, it has its roots in "Mondaugen's story", the ninth chapter of V, that extended image of the decay of Weimar Germany which culminated in the annunciation of the cosmic Presence. Lieutenant Weissmann reappears, as does an older Kurt Mondaugen, now a rocket expert busy devising the ultimate symbol for the apocalypse of decadence. This apposition continues throughout Gravity's Rainbow, England and Germany both being seen as both barbaric marauders and besieged decadents.

But the manipulating Presence is above both camps, manifesting itself in each, although principally in the more Satanic Germany. This becomes clear in the first of the novel's four sections, which shows the effects of the rocket-bombing of London near the end of the war. It is the time of the silent V2 attacks upon a London which seems ripe for extermination, rather as it was at the beginning of Conrad's Heart of Darkness; and one of the characters observes that the lower classes of London are kept to the east (as Wells noted in Tono-Bungay), and its wealthier classes further away from the "Threat From The East ... from the mass of Europe" (p.172). But this threat is highly specific and organized, as the novel's central figure, Slothrop, has reason to know. He is the most extremely decadent figure in the genre, in the sense that he is a Kierkegaardian Don Juan who is all too literally in love with his own death: a fastidious seducer, he keeps a map of London beflagged with records of his seductions; a friend notices that it exactly corresponds to the official map which records V2 strikes upon the city. Ironically, his attempts to submerge into the "musical erotic" condition are congruent with the intrusion of the angst-inducing Other.

Typical of the comic-apocalyptic mode, this novel underplays its central situation and verges on the ridiculous as it follows some of Slothrop's explosive
coitions. But at the symbolic level, Slothrop's condition is important to an understanding of Pynchon's construction of decadentism. It has been induced during his infancy by a Dr Jamf, who has sought to control his infant eroticism by relating it to a stimulus but has left him like one of Pavlov's dogs, subconsciously conditioned to respond to an arbitrary stimulus, in this case the rocket attack. Jamf belongs to the giant international industrial-chemical cartel of IG Farben, which for Pynchon symbolizes the presence, in each European nation in which it is represented, of its inherent inhumanity. V, we remember, had the task of embodying this principle in the first novel; but here, the "things in the back room" have become the "things downstairs", so to speak, for the bowels of the earth contain the inanimate and the dead, the products of aeons of chemical decay:

Consider coal and steel. There is a place where they meet. The interface between coal and steel is coal-tar. Imagine coal, down in the earth, dead black, no light, the very substance of death. Death ancient, prehistoric, species we will never see again. Growing older, blacker, deeper, in layers of perpetual night. Above the ground, the steel rolls out, fiery, bright. But to make steel, the coal tars, darker, and heavier, must be taken from the original coal. Earth's excrement, purged out for the ennoblement of shining steel. Passed over.

We thought of this as an industrial process. It was more. We passed over the coal-tars. A thousand different molecules waited in the preterite dung. This is the sign of revealing. Of unfolding. This is one meaning of mauve, the first new colour on Earth, leaping to Earth's light from its grave miles and aeons below. There is the other meaning ... the succession ... I can't see that far yet ...

But this is all the impersonation of life. The real movement is not from death to any rebirth. It is from death to death-transfigured.

(p.166).

There are so many ideas in this passage it is difficult to know where to start. To begin with, it is spoken by means of a medium in a seance: it the voice of Walther Rathenau, the assassinated German Foreign Minister. "Rathenau" is a talkative spirit who is aware of the Presence and of the shape of history, which, he says, is moving toward the deadly and the inhuman. The "other meaning" about which he is hesitant is, presumably, the Meaning about which so many practitioners
in the genre have been hesitant.

The model "Rathenau" sets up is also thoroughly decadentist, positing a malevolent force "out there" and a corresponding but internal source of the inanimately decadent and artificial inside the earth: it is Pynchon's version of the besieged decadent who recognizes the invading barbarian as his mirror-image. Within the earth is a waste land of "dung", of all that once lived but has died and decayed, and from this the industrial chemist, a sort of modern Frankenstein, fashions his artificial materials, including mauve, the first colour to be duplicated by science. Thus, says "Rathenau", the progress of history is not religious, toward spiritual rebirth, but decadent, towards death-in-life. In this context, the giant industrial cartels have a significance equal to that of V in the first of Pynchon's novels, for they are the earthly agents of the besieging Presence. Later in Gravity's Rainbow the ruined works of one branch of I G Farben are imagined by one character to be actually in perfect working order and a part of a gigantic network controlling the course of the war (p.520). Another character sees it as

A Rocket-cartel. A structure cutting across every agency human and paper that ever touched it. Even to Russia ... Russia bought from Krupp, didn't she, from Siemens, the IG ... Are there arrangements Stalin won't admit ... doesn't even know about?

(p.566).

The superhuman Meaning can never be exposed, but manifests itself through the agency of the inhuman syndicate envisaged here, with its movement "beyond life, toward the inorganic", where lies "the Timeless" (p.580).

The V-rocket is inevitably linked with this impulse, for the new science which so drastically defeats gravity does so with materials gained from the inner earth on which that force is centred. "Gravity, taken so for granted, is really something eerie, Messianic, extrasensory in Earth's mindbody ... having hugged to its holy centre the wastes of dead species" muses an imaginative character later in Gravity's Rainbow (p.590), and goes on to imagine the limit-
ations of what is knowable on earth's surface in comparison with what is unknowable below. This ineffable force impels rockets of mythical nature from a dying Germany that Pynchon must mythicize too, both to symbolize its decadence and to make that decadence stand for all decadence. Thus the Zones of Allied occupation are transcended by The Zone (p.333), the area at which Slothrop's quest will end, and at which the nature of the Presence which orders the rocket-firing will be revealed. The Zone is peopled not simply by native Germans but by a large number of Southwest African natives, known either as "Zone-Hereros" or "schwarz-kommandos". The Lieutenant Weissmann who decoded Mondauengen's message from the cosmos in Chapter Nine of V is responsible for their presence; with missionaries, he has brought back from Southwest Africa a number of Hereros in that reflex movement which symbolizes the decadence of the European country. Few more quintessentially decadent symbols could be found than the Herero race, who are determined to indulge in the "racial suicide" that will "finish the extermination the Germans began in 1904" (p.317). They are the hollow men apotheosized, "Ombindi, Empty Ones" (p.525).

Their leader is named Enzian, taken as a boy by the pederastic Weissmann and brought back to Germany; he especially is thrust before us as a symbolic figure, for, like Barth's Burlingame, he is half European and half native, his mother having been seduced by a Russian sailor. He is closest to the "Zero" (p.319) his race personifies, and thus is the appropriate leader for the V2 rocket programme. Enzian's place as Weissmann's boy lover has long been taken by a German youth, Gottfried; here the sexual depravity of a doomed Germany, typified by the transvestite fantasies Weissmann makes Gottfried and a young Dutch girl act out for him, become fused with the image of barbarity the Hereros provide for the "dying Reich" (p.97). Weissmann, changing his name to "Blicero" (derived from "Dominus Blicero"), ceases to be a human figure at all and, poised between the perversions of the flesh and the presence of his black rocket troops, and
locked in his "Kingdom of Lord Alicerco" which is a land whiter than the Germanic
death (p.486), begins to assemble a final symbol of the dark impulse. As The
Zone transcends all zones, he orders a Rocket constructed which will transcend
all rockets.

It is difficult to discuss *Gravity's Rainbow* from this point on, so imbedded
has it become with symbols. The Rocket itself is a myth in which are collected
all the attributes we have come to associate with the Other realm for which it
stands, all dimensions inherent in the heart of darkness. It is known as the
"black rocket" and is distinguished from all others by the row of zeros which
is its number; in case the symbolism of the colouring is unclear a Freudian
analyst who analyses Slothrop's subconscious excrementalism links it to black-
ness and "feelings about putrefaction and death" (p.276). The instrument panel
is marked not in German but in ancient Herero symbols (p.361); and the technology
which produces is it is directed towards "dark surrender, to the Void, to
delicious and screaming collapse ... To Attila the Hun, as a matter of fact,
come west out of the steppes" (p.578). Further than this, and beyond its
power to transcend the force of gravity, based in that mysterious waste land
within the earth, the Black Rocket is constructed of Imapolex G, a new synthetic
made by Jamf for I G Farben and which is described as being of such revolutionary
structure that it has reached a pitch of the artificial which enables it to
withstand enormous heat and great pressure (pages 249-50).

We need to pause here to consider the meaning and significance of The Rocket,
focal symbol of the novel and, in a sense, of the whole genre. In one sense,
it turns *Gravity's Rainbow* into an extended pun, for it is about a V2 and thus
"V, too": but the recurrent and cumulative revelations of V in the first novel
are eclipsed by the sheer density of this symbol, and one senses that no writer
will be able to equal it in the decadentist novels of the future. Drawing all
attributes of the generic dark vision to itself, signalling its contingency upon
the ineffable by its reliance upon Leibnizian calculus in the calculation of its
flight 50, it is poised with a secret cargo for its final, symbolic journey of apocalypse.

It is the focus of two quests, each from a geographically different direction. One is by a half-brother of Enzian of whom he does not know, a Russian called Tchitcherine, who is as bent on killing him as Slothrop is upon finding the Rocket. Tchitcherine, whose wounds have been hastily patched over the years until he is nearly as full of artificial parts as is V (p.337) is a barbarian too, coming from the steppes of Central Asia and finding himself an alien amongst Russians nearer the west. He is a northern barbarian, twin to Enzian the southern barbarian; where Enzian is of the heart of darkness, Tchicherine has undergone a curious experience in the heart of the Siberian wastes years before in which he has confronted the "Kirghiz light", the heart of light whose appearance blinds him and which is specifically related to the principle which informs the Rocket.(p.359). Tchitcherine is possessed by an obscure desire to find and annihilate his barbaric half-brother and the Schwarzkommandos, this "black version of something inside himself" (p.499).

Slothrop is a similar figure, a decadent with barbaric tendencies which are revealed in psychoanalysis, and his quest is the classical quest beyond the decadent civilization and into the heart of barbarous Europe. It begins at a French casino, with all its implications of chance and the possibility of being controlled; there, he is stripped of uniform and papers (p.205) and senses for the first time a Presence beyond the normal (p.203). With little left of his former self-conceptions, he finds himself helped along by agents in the many plots which web the ruins of postwar Europe. At different parts of his journey to the heart of the dark Rocket, he senses that he is being controlled by the researchers back in England, by a larger, but still official, Allied organization (p.257), by I G Farben, which at one point he believes to have been watching him since birth (p.286), and by a force which he cannot name at all (p.395). In this way is expressed the gamut of forces, from the secular

to the Manichaean, which work the processes of decadence.

The casino in the south of France is another generic halfway-house, and Slothrop has to undertake another transition from the historical and geographical to the fully mythical Zone. Pynchon is at pains to equip his traveller with as many literary credentials as possible for this journey: "Signs will find him here in the Zone," he notes, "and ancestors will reassert themselves. It's like going to that Darkest Africa to study the natives there, and finding their quaint superstitions taking you over" (p.281). Like Stencil, Oedipa Maas, and Kurtz long before them, Slothrop is to confront himself at the end of his quest. When he makes his way, "like a planchette on a Ouija board" (p.283) to the underground rocket factory at Nordhausen, already occupied by Allied troops and the black rocket-troops who are their true images, he senses again a Presence as he did at the casino, and a "terrible familiarity here, a center he has been skirting, avoiding as long as he can remember - never has he been as close as now to the true momentum of his time" (p.312). But since the Rocket itself has been shifted to Peenemunde, Slothrop is forced to take a long, rambling journey through "white autumn-prone Europe" (p.322), confronting all the time images for various kinds of decay. A German woman reflects "all the malaise of a Europe dead and gone gathered here in the eyes black as her clothing, black and lightless" (p.458); Berlin is shown in a state of utter collapse (p.373) which involves recurring Alice-figures whom Slothrop finds himself seducing and perverse, flagellatory affairs with women which he recalls as approaches toward the "Center" and "Nothing" (p.509). There is also a recurrent and surrealistic riverboat not unlike Barth's Floating Opera, on which are enacted scenes of the most resourceful and imaginative depravity that could be described.

Peenemunde provides the locus classicus for the vision of darkness, with its barbaric native troops (p.506), a sense of blackness (p.658), barren surroundings (p.502), and even a nostalgically V-shaped launching-pad (p.510); the place reminds one of Slothrop's companions of the Mexican jungle (p.438). But, as
we know, the heart of darkness is no place for words, and in fact Slothrop becomes lost to the reader of the novel in a chaotic turmoil of events which marks the beginning of the decay of the ordering principle of the whole work. All acts of the creative imagination are fair game for Pynchon, and they go into the novel's last section without ordering or shaping. Dominant in the last hundred pages of *Gravity's Rainbow*, as I have already said, is a frenzied rendering of the decay of contemporary America. The language is that of the popular media, of everyday America, with comic-strip scenes, small page-long essays on aspects of the media and their effect on America's life, and a constant and mindless drivel of songs and ditties. Juxtaposed with these scenes are others set in Peenemunde, showing the preparation of the giant Black Rocket for its launching; the coming-together of Rocket and media-crazed America is made inevitable by the metaphor in which Pynchon sees the parabolic flight of the Rocket as determined by the Leibnitzian calculus which gave birth to cinema techniques. Steadily, its symbolism is revealed, and it is finally equipped with its degenerate cargo: the boy, Gottfried, in transvestite attire and wrapped in a protective film of Impolex G (p.754). It rises, its human payload "an erotic category" (p.758), its very obvious target the New World which has been shown in increasing hysteria during an enormous stage-show - the stage-show of America - as the Rocket approaches:

And it is just here, just at this dark and silent frame, that the pointed tip of the Rocket, falling nearly a mile per second, absolutely and forever without sound, reaches its last and measurable gap above the roof of this old theatre, the last delta-t.

(p.760).

4, In Summary.

The more cynical reader may object that a rocket so laden with symbolism might find difficulty in leaving the ground at all; and certainly, the last pages of *Gravity's Rainbow* are dense with the symbolism of an entire genre, weighted with a whole tradition of pessimism. I find it impossible to imagine
another work which could outdo the decadentism of this one, with its coprophagous Brigadier Pudding, its "Zone-Hereros", its Blicero, its Black Rocket, and its decadent hero, Tyrone Slothrop, "in love, in sexual love, with his, and his race's, death" (p.738). It is also difficult to imagine another novel which so fully acknowledges the mood and imagery of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, that work which so many writers have turned to for its adumbration of so much that has happened in this century. And yet Pynchon transcends imitation to give the decadentist novel a distinctive, terminal note and a new stature which saves it from its own tendency towards the negative. Edward Mendelson has identified this quality in his perceptive review of *Gravity's Rainbow*, and extends his remarks to include the first and second novels:

Pynchon's novel of the modern condition dwells on the initial moments of ascent, when the important moments were considered, when the means of control were set in operation, when the direction we were to follow was chosen once and for all. The Potsdam conference occurs near the middle of the novel. Yet this is not a despairing book; it is instead a deeply moral one. Pynchon knows that it is only the inanimate rocket that is fully and irrevocably determined - the rocket and anything or anyone else that yields to the systems of control, who refuses to make the continuous effort demanded by freedom. As in Pynchon's earlier books the possibilities for freedom, responsibility, and love are rare and difficult, yet the possibilities are real. *Gravity's Rainbow* is a tragic, not a pessimistic, novel. It is perhaps the most extensive and profound synthesis yet written of the ways in which the contemporary world lives with and accepts the obstacles to freedom, yet with all its knowledge of the obstacles and barriers it insist on the necessity and possibility of freedom ... 51

Few books in this century have achieved the range and depth of this one, and even fewer have held so large a vision of the world in a structure so skillfully and elaborately conceived. This is certainly the most important novel to be published in English in the past thirty years, and it bears all the lineaments of greatness. 52

Like many critics of Pynchon - who tend to praise or damn his novels to equal excess - Mendelson has probably gone a little far here, but there can be no doubt that the tenor of his remarks is right. Pynchon is often funny, disturbing, or dazzlingly clever, and his scope and range are distractingly wide. But

in paying attention to these qualities we often forget that he has a social and historical seriousness about his fiction that, as Mendelson points out, is almost without parallel in postwar American writing, and which certainly could not be equalled by any novelist treated in the earlier sections of this study. In his novels, the decadent process becomes subject-matter and not the immediate means to insight and utterance; and there is a corresponding opening-out of the significances of his writing.

* * * *

This range is simply not present in most decadentist fiction. Conrad's anguish was articulate and heart-felt, as I suggested, but was also retrospective and personal; Eliot's also took a personal form and eventually became spiritually rather than socially or historically oriented. For Huxley, Waugh, and Powell, the genre itself became increasingly interposed between the writer and reality; and when we confronted the contemporary American fiction of decay we found that tendency compounded. The writer who, like Heller, Barth, or Bellow, tends to see words looming as large as any other object in the world becomes a stricken writer in the end, a Parnassian, or, worse, a cynical Parnassian. The involutions of Barth's later novels well illustrate the sterility of which the genre is capable, and demand an elite audience of literary detectives who know before they read that they will witness a dance on the grave of realism. Bellow, too, tends to suffer the penalties of scrupulous artistic ambiguity: is there any reason for us to accept that the conclusions of Henderson the Rain King, Herzog, or Mr. Sammler's Planet are actually conclusive? Percy also suffers from this terminal faintness which can make the genre seem so suicidal, and the religious aspiration which is a part of his conviction fits his didactic articles better than it fits his novels.

I have tried to stress that Pynchon's manifest awareness of decadence as a historical, social, and literary phenomenon earns him his place at the end of

53. See "Seven Laymen Discuss Morality", America CIV (October 1960), pages 12-13, and "The Message in the Bottle", for such discussions.
this study; but it must be clear that his work overflows the limits of decadent-
ism and that part of the richness he gives it is not naturally its own. I know,
and have known throughout this work, that any contextual study of a long chrono-
logical period which embraces more than one author is itself merely a perspect-
ive, with the constant tendency to distort a writer's oeuvre by placing parts of
it in a new context, as well as a weakness to the sniping of counter-argument.
Despite this knowledge, I still feel sufficiently deluded to wonder in what
direction the novel of decay might next develop, especially in view of the
paradox that Pynchon appears to bring its end yet himself seems to abound in
youthful creative energy. Like so many of the other novelists who have produced
books about the process of decline and fall, he may well become a different kind
of writer from now on: the decadentist novel lies on a muddy, autumnal and well-
trodden bank of the mainstream of literature. But apocalypticism, which is at
its heart, is a vital part of the American socio-literary consciousness, and
forms of the novel will certainly appear continually in the future, I think.

It could be argued, in fact, that - in a general sense - the form and concerns
of decadentist fiction as I have set them out are merely an extreme version of
the form of fiction dominant in the twentieth century. The defenders of Iris
Murdoch, Richard Hughes, Angus Wilson, John Updike, James Gould Cozzens, Truman
Capote, Thomas Berger, and many other first-rate writers who may seem denigrated
by this claim need not feel offended. For my claim is to a great extent a truism,
stating that fiction is and has always been in some way about the journey to
self-knowledge, the quest - often to the other side of the village, and not to
the heart of darkness - which will end enclosed, restricted values and begin a
new and liberal attitude towards life. Bellow's novel, The Victim, is a better
example of this than, say, Forster's A Passage to India (a thoroughly decadentist
journey to the heart of darkness, it could be argued); and so, too, is Jane
Austen's Emma. Frequently, however, novels not at all open to location in a
decadentist tradition manifest an interest in aspects of the genre and thus
remind us of its proximity to all kinds of modern writing. Thus we have Paul Bowles's _Let It Come Down_ (1952); or Greene's _The Heart of the Matter_ (1948); James Dickey's recent trip with rod and pen up-river in _Deliverance_ (1970) to separate the men from the writers; Janet Frame's _The Adaptable Man_ (1965), with its concern with words and traditions and mirrors and freedom; or that retrospective Victorian quest to the heart of Australia in Patrick White's _Voss_ (1957).

Or the heart of darkness can be sought within, through the pineal door. John Gardner's _The Sunlight Dialogues_ (1973) opposes the seedy, sterile certainty of Batavia Chief of Police Fred Clumly and the magical, epiphanous appearances of the lunatic Sunlight Man with his zodiacal signs and his interminable lectures on Assyrian gods and Sumerian architecture. John Fowles's _The Magus_ (1966) sends an adventure-seeking Briton to a Greek island and a confrontation with Tarot symbols, his own subconscious heritage, and the possible presence - this is familiar stuff - of a Controller.

Whether from social need, historical impulse, or motivations imbedded deep in the psyche of the writer, decadentism seems destined to force itself into numerous forms for some time, for it relies on archetypal metaphors in the growing culture of the West. Like its survival so far, its probable future growth, the freshness with which each new writer approaches its themes of staleness, its prolonged proclamation of the imminence of collapse, its wordy condemnation of the word, will all continue to be its necessary, traditional ironies.
BIBLIOGRAPHY.
This bibliography covers the entire range of the references used in this study, with the very infrequent exception of a few works so fleetingly referred to and indirectly involved that they have been omitted. I have divided this section in the customary way, making the usual differentiation between primary and secondary sources. Within each of these there occurs a further subdivision. It seemed right to distinguish between those primary sources which are fictional and those which are original documents, in order that the reader might be able to see swiftly the novels I ascribe to the decadent genre. The subdivision between extended works of criticism and that which occurs in journals is equally obvious and necessary; and I have avoided differentiating between articles and reviews in any other way than making a brief note of the latter as they occur. Finally, I append the bibliography of articles relating to the sub-topic of the artist's belief in the apparent distortion of reality, which I promised on page seven above.

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