

Shryock on Weir (2018)

Weir, David. *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2018, pp.132, ISBN978-0-19-061022-7

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David Weir's *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction* is an excellent contribution to the Oxford University Press series, which has been providing readers with general, yet thoughtful overviews on a vast array of topics. This is a much-needed presentation of a subject that has confounded and confused many. Weir's previous scholarship on decadence including *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* makes him particularly well suited to this challenging task.

Decadence is organized both chronologically and geographically: the Roman Empire, Paris, London, Vienna, and Berlin. Weir uses the interplay between time and space to illustrate a concept whose forms reshape themselves relative to their context. The decline of the Roman Empire serves as a reference point and, as Weir notes, a "paradigm of decadence" (3). This model will be revisited (and reimagined) particularly by writers and artists throughout the primary period of Weir's inquiry: approximately 1880 to 1930.

Each chapter is composed of layers that slowly and methodically build to provide the reader a rich notion of the complexity of the central concept. This same structure exists as well from one chapter to the next with the author weaving in ideas developed earlier in the text to explain relationships between various manifestations of decadence in different times and places. For example, the first chapter on the decline of the Roman Empire ends with examples of nineteenth-century French and British literature and art that used Roman models in portraying decadence of their own time. These comparisons point to not only influences but also important differences such as the way in which a negative concept could take on positive dimensions.

The second chapter moves to cultural decadence in nineteenth-century Paris. Weir clearly and concisely examines the development of the notion of decadence starting with Désiré Nisard's and Thomas Couture's negative portrayals of the link between the decline of ancient Rome and contemporary culture. Baudelaire's pivotal role, theorized by Théophile Gautier and Paul Bourget, lays the foundation for the ultimate work of decadent fiction: *À rebours*. This novel justly receives more critical attention than any other single work in this study and includes descriptions of a few scenes from the novel to give the uninitiated reader a taste of Joris-Karl Huysmans's eccentric hero des Esseintes.

The third chapter crosses the English Channel to survey the contributions of writers and artists such as Walter Pater, George Moore, Arthur Symons, Ernest Dowson, Aubrey Beardsley, and of course, Oscar Wilde, with an emphasis on social decadence. Throughout, Weir shows the influence from France and delineates some of the differences such as the role of homosexuality in British decadence.

Social and cultural decadence elide in the chapter on Vienna and Berlin. In Vienna, where the focus is on the period leading up to the end of the First World War, Weir examines Gustav Klimt along with, somewhat surprisingly, Sigmund Freud. The latter is used to elucidate sexual themes in Arthur Schnitzler's work. Weimar Berlin is studied, in part, through Stefan Zweig and the Walther Ruttmann film *Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*. In addition, the sexual openness of German decadent life in the 1920s is explored. Of particular interest is Weir's linking of the Nazi's creation of "degenerate" art to other manifestations of decadence, deftly situating this attack on artists both esthetically, scientifically, politically, and socially.

The concluding chapter of the book, "Legacies of Decadence," is an intriguing addition to the topic and attempts to expand the impact of decadence geographically and temporally. The brief efforts to include Brazil and Japan could have been left out without great loss as these are the only mentions of decadence outside of Europe and they are not explored in depth. The influences on the American writer Djuna Barnes make for a stronger argument. While not surprising, one of the continuing legacies is the extent to which Oscar Wilde continues to maintain a high level of popularity. The chapter finishes with an analysis of Michel Houellebecq's 2015 novel *Soumission* and its indebtedness to decadence.

Decadence succeeds at offering an introduction to a complicated topic and making it accessible to the non-specialist reader. The book includes illustrations of several of the artworks discussed and has short excerpts in boxes to give the reader a taste of the literature in question. Foreign words are translated. Weir is careful in his definitions and does not hesitate to explain his choices. This helps avoid the conflation of terms or ideas as well as aids in stripping away the ambiguity and confusion that often surrounds this topic.

As is the norm for this series, no footnotes are used but a “References” section at the end of the book provides a chapter-by-chapter listing of the sources quoted. In addition, the “Further Reading” section offers a substantial selection of works on and related to the topic. The index makes possible quick navigation within the text.

This very short introduction to decadence would be read profitably by the general public and could easily be used in an undergraduate class. Scholars unfamiliar with the topic would benefit as well since the book clearly lays out the multiple strands that compose decadence and ties them together in a tidy package.

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