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NEW INSIGHTS INTO THE CONCEPT OF DECADENCE

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The aim of this paper is to give new insights into the concept of decadence and, by doing so, to promote the methodological benefits of a trans-disciplinary approach to socio-philosophical notions such as “progress” and “decline”. Analysis of decadent literature leads to valuable insights into the problem of “decadence” in the time of postmodernism, i.e. an epoch abundant in trans-historical re-imaginings of modernism, usually accompanied by methodological preference for interdisciplinarity. In the first part of the paper we reflect upon the role of “dissipative” style in the evolution of literary forms. In the second part we analyze an example of persiflage in decadent style during the time of decadence in Croatia, and in the third we speak about cultural pessimism, cultural optimism, and cultural sustainability, commenting on Bourget, Nordau, Spengler, Bergson, and contemporary theoreticians.

Key words: decadence, modernity, evolution, progress, reversibility, entropy, sustainability

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THE ROLE OF “DISSIPATIVE” STYLE IN THE EVOLUTION OF LITERARY FORMS

“Decadence and degeneration have little in common: one refines corruption and the other corrupts refinement. The decadent, at least, maintains a standard of decline, while the degenerate lets those standards slip.” This is the first paragraph from the Acknowledgments section of David Weir’s well-known book *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, published in the mid-1990s. Weir’s laconic statement, as logical as it seems in its tendency for simplification, does not cover some of the most important aspects of the phenomenon of decadence. Decadence has always been, and remains, a problematic concept. Weir’s intention was to show the importance of the decadent style to the development of Modernism in general, claiming that the latter adopts realistic canons for its content, and decadent canons for its style and rhetoric. Although aware of the “self-contradictory, oxymoronic quality of decadence”, Weir ensures from the beginning that his reader

knows "what decadence is not". His primary interest is in exemplifying the way decadent literary style *refines* corruption; he is not interested in decadent bohemianism. Weir's obsession in making a clear distinction between literary style and life-style¹ can perhaps be explained by his scholarly upbringing in the field of textual philology.

Because I establish decadence as an aesthetic category, I distinguish it from bohemianism, which has more to do with life than art. As an "artistic" life-style, bohemianism may or may not be assumed by the decadent writer: Baudelaire did, Mallarmé did not. In addition, the bohemian is closely affiliated with romanticism, or at least some urban variation of it, whereas the decadent is only indirectly associated with that movement. Decadence and bohemianism are literary neighborhoods with boundaries that sometimes touch or overlap, but separate locales nonetheless. Similarly, the boundaries of decadence and the belle époque also touch, but the ladies and gentlemen of that era are altogether too energetic and optimistic for the decadent. Also, many figures associated with the belle époque (mainly Jarry and Apollinaire) boast a highly experimental form of literature that does not harmonize completely with decadence, whose writers are more guarded about their avant-gardism. (Weir 1995: xii)

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A deep-rooted philological traditionalism of textual criticism, however, does not make Weir's acclaimed insight into (literary) decadence uninventive. On the contrary, after an overview of representative scholarly views on decadence, Weir goes into well-founded, meticulous and authentic readings of Flaubert's *Salammô*, Goncourts' *Germinie Lacerteux*, Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* and Huysmans' *A Rebours*. Analyzing Gide's ambivalent

¹ Weir has also written a study on the "aesthetic politics" of Modernism, which attempts to show the missing link between anarchist aesthetics and anarchist politics. Weir is skeptical about the insights offered by cultural studies: "My purpose, then, is not to provide a broad explanation of the relationship of politics and art, but, rather, to examine one strain of a particular ideology in the context of the culture specific to modernism, mainly literature. I must add, however, that I hesitate to claim authority over any of those big words that make us so unhappy: ideology, politics, culture." (Weir 1997: 8). For him, the term *culture* itself is a case in point. He sees his method of approaching anarchism as falling somewhere between the broadly theoretical approach of "ideological criticism" and the narrower concerns of "cultural history". That is why for Weir, the issue of "whether anarchy and culture are truly integrated at the turn of the century must remain, for now, an open question". He feels safer analyzing texts, and following the political ramifications of anarchism as a phenomenon on literary art: "But there is no doubt that affinities existed between anarchists and artists as the nineteenth century wound down, especially in Paris, and the phenomenon has many ramifications for literary art in the age of modernism and beyond" (Weir 1997: 11).

reaction to decadence in *L'Immoraliste*, and pointing to the way Joyce's early interest in writers affiliated with decadence shifted his interest away from the art of the traditional narrative, Weir unveils the paradoxically "progressive", transformative, and dynamic element in decadent style that has contributed to some major changes in modernist literature. This is where his interpretation of decadence comes into its own. Indeed, from a stylistic point of view, decadence should not necessarily be regarded in juxtaposition with *progress*. Paul Bourget's belief that decadence is in fact an *evolution*² towards individualism³ can be easily exemplified by numerous instances of auto-reflexivity in modernist writings, authorial egotism in modernist programs, and self-centrism in social behavior (dandyism as an auto-erotic impulse in re-designing one's social Self, for example). The concept of individualism is central to the definition of decadence, and to the aesthetic relationship of decadence to modernism. Calinescu rereads Bourget and concludes that "a style of decadence is simply a style favorable to the unrestricted manifestations of aesthetic individualism", where decadence (thus understood) and modernity "coincide in their rejection of the tyranny of tradition" (Calinescu [1987] 2003: 171). Bourget develops his theory of decadence around the example of the "troubling figure" of Baudelaire, who has undertaken—according to Bourget—"the most disturbing seduction of the modern soul" by being simultaneously "a man of decadence", and "a theorist of decadence". In this remark, Bourget goes much deeper than Weir, (and does so long before Calinescu and those who quoted him, of whom Weir is one) exemplifying the two-fold nature of decadence, characterized

² One of the key words in Paul Bourget's essays collected under the title *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* is "evolution". In the third part of his essay "Charles Baudelaire", subtitled "III Théorie de la décadence" (written in 1881 and later commented upon in the first volume of the 1920 edition), Bourget develops his theory of decadence within the larger framework of evolutionism. Bourget's early insight into the problem of the reversibility of artistic "evolution" was based on the theory of decadence. Even in his "atheistic period", inspired by (primarily H. Spenser's and Darwin's) evolutionary ideas, his theory branched off from Darwinism (as it was received in France), and Spencerian progressivist social evolutionism, which was based on the idea of society's progression towards *integration*, *differentiation* and *definiteness*, as it grows into more complex and differentiated forms. See also Footnote 5.

³ The sub-topic of Herbert Spencer's *evolutionary individualism* deserves separate large-scale analysis and contextualization, especially regarding Bourget's interpretational shift in the reading of Spencer. Later, we will introduce some insights into the topic of Bourget's essayistic and novelistic treatment of "fashionable" science in *Le Disciple*, commenting upon aspects of Bourget's novelistic portrait of Spenceresque Adrien Sixte, who also possesses some of the traits of Hippolyte Taine's publicly constructed character.

by the interdependence of intrinsic and extrinsic impetus towards its (self) understanding. In 1881, Bourget opened the possibility of defining the modern (stylistic and psychological) individualism within the larger concept of evolutionism:

The word "decadence" is often used to designate the state of a society that produces too few individuals suited to the labors of communal life. A society is comparable to a living organism: like an organism, it consists of a collection of lesser organisms, which in turn consist of a collection of cells. *The individual is the social cell.* For the whole organism to function energetically, the lesser organisms must function energetically, but with a lesser energy; and, for these lesser organisms to function energetically, their component cells must function energetically, but with a lesser energy. *If the cells' energy becomes independent, the organisms that make up the total organism similarly cease subordinating their energy to the total energy, and the subsequent anarchy leads to the decadence of the whole.* The social organism does not escape this law: it succumbs to decadence as soon as the individual has begun to thrive under the influence of acquired wellbeing and heredity. *The very same rule governs the development and the decadence of another organism, language. A decadent style is one in which the unity of the book falls apart, replaced by the independence of the page, where the page decomposes to make way for the independence of the sentence, and the sentence makes way for the word.* There are innumerable examples in current literature to corroborate this hypothesis and justify this analogy. (Bourget 1920: 20, emphasis added)⁴

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Bourget sees the decadent fall of the intellectual empire, the Baudelairean "phosphorescence of decay" ("phosphorescence de la pourriture") as leading, paradoxically, to change on a stylistic level in the literary corpus of the future, and develops his theory of decadence within the larger framework of evolutionism.⁵ However, the idea of progress is not exclusively defined from the point of view of *the survival of the fittest*, where an individual is, Bourget remarks, "a social cell", and where the decadent is doomed to be

⁴ All quotations from *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* are taken from the French edition, published in 1920. Shorter quotations and terminology are translated by the author of this text, but this quotation was translated into English by Nancy O'Connor. Although I do not agree with some nuances of O'Connor's translation, this version is used in many English language commentaries on Bourget.

⁵ The aim (and scope) of this paper does not allow us to go into the details of turn-of-the-century differences between Lamarckianism, Spencerism, Darwin's Darwinism, and Darwinism in the broader sense (a term coined by Thomas Henry Huxley [1860: 569], standing for evolutionary concepts in general). For further details, see Mawkins 1997; Cain and Ruse 2009; Glick and Shaffer 2014; and Hoy 2000.

extinct. Bourget foresees the dynamic role of the phenomenon of “decay” in cultural progress towards the future. It is our belief that the idea of progress according to Bourget should not be explained as a static relationship between so-called *socio-biological progress*, on one hand, and so-called *socio-cultural decay* on the other, but rather as a result of a two-fold dynamic, where, unlike in civilizational development, art, as a system, allows reversible dynamics⁶.

⁶ As far as we know, Bourget’s analogy of societal and linguistic evolution as a concept based on *two-fold dynamics* has not been developed as yet. Some authors, for example Susan Jennifer Navarette, point to Bourget’s treatment of textual decomposition in Decadent style “both as correlative of organismal degeneration and as a symptom of cultural breakdown and decay” (Navarette 1998: 193–194). However, Navarette and others who interpret this aspect of Bourget’s thought, do not see the missing link between Bourget “the evolutionist”, and Bourget “the conservative social moralist”. It is our view that Bourget *is consistent (in both phases)* in identifying the dynamic role of the phenomenon of “decay” in *cultural progressing* (as evolutionary development) towards the future. From the point of view of ethics-esthetics that Bourget accepts later in his conservative phase, this *progressing without progress*, is perceived as a morally suspect, negative tendency. But this does not change Bourget’s basic postulates, which are in accordance with Darwin’s original approach (and with contemporary approaches), to “evolution”, which uses the term without suggesting progress from a less satisfactory to more satisfactory state. However, unlike Darwin and contemporary *neo-Darwinists*—as supporters of the “Modern synthetic theory of Natural selection”—when it comes to social constructions, Bourget believes in progress from the less developed world of “struggle-for-lifers” to the more developed form of *scientific democracy* (he admires American democracy, and dreams of a new utopian world of the future, where humankind would be forced to make it possible “not only for Englishmen to live with Irishmen, and Germans with Frenchmen, but yellow and black men with men of white skins” (Bourget, 1895: 6–9). Bourget is, at the same time, an anti-Lamarckian (and anti-Spencerian) in relation to what he sees as a crisis in the European development of social and political institutions. In this context, he is perceived (by contemporaries like Le Dantec and most of contemporary interpreters) as a reactionary who advocates aristocratic and racial ideologies (Tatum 2011: 115), who has taken a racist part in the Dreyfus affair, and who has a “defamatory assessment of the new Jewish immigrants to America”, as expressed in the book *Outre-mer*. (Ben-Joseph 1996: 137). Today there is a continuing nativism vs. empiricism debate between scientists who insist more on the aspect of “nature”, and those who insist more on that of “nurture” in language development. It is not only at the beginning of the twentieth century that this prolonged controversy contaminates scientific insights with arguments concordant with political agendas. Take the example of Geoffrey Sampson—a professor of natural language computing, a representative of empirical linguistics, the author of *Schools of Linguistics: Competition and Evolution* (1980), and *Educating Eve: the ‘Language instinct’ Debate* (1997)—who polemicized Chomsky’s and Pinker’s concepts. Sampson is an active politician, who served until 2002 with the local Conservative Party branch. After he claimed on his blog that racism is “natural”, students from the University of Sussex called for the resignation of the “racist” professor. Sampson tried to defend his views as scientifically “racialist”, and not socially “racist”. The question of the professor-disciple relationship, and the influence of authority on the younger generation, although it seems outdated (together with some reactionary views of the author of *Le Disciple*) had an unexpected re-actualization

No perfectly reversible “whole life process” of an organism has ever been observed. However, *adaptive evolution* is to some degree reversible. In some species, like *Drosophila melanogaster*, adaptive reverse evolution to the ancestral state is a contingent process, and occurs with only 50 generations of sexual reproduction (Teotónio and Rose 2000). Evolutionary change, on the whole, can be interpreted as moving forward in time and complexity. However, it is part of a system in which some biochemical reactions might become more complex, some less. “Backwards” or “forwards” is a matter of interpretation, depending on the degree of our insight into the dynamics of the redistribution of complexities and simplicities concerning each part of a whole system, and their exchange with the system and its ecological niche. Observed from that angle, the direction of biological evolution is determined by all its contributing factors. Here, the concept of change is the only scientifically relevant concept devoid of typically human simplifications in the perception of chronology (e.g. intuitive bias towards attributing *positive connotations* to the perception of moving forward). It is our belief that Bourget’s early insight into the problem of the reversibility of cultural “evolution” based on the theory of decadence should be also discussed in connection to the concept of entropy applied to the arts. As far as we know, no one has examined this important element of Bourget’s theory of decadence. Although it is a complex matter that deserves independent study, the subject of this paper allows us to comment on it only briefly. No matter how marginal it might seem to the topic of *literary decadence*, it is worthwhile mentioning that the development of thermodynamics in the nineteenth century—with the concepts of energy and entropy—made a considerable impact on the social thought of the period. Greg Myers, in his essay “Nineteenth-Century Popularizations of Thermodynamics and the Rhetoric of Social Prophecy”, claims that, much like Darwinism, thermodynamics has been intertwined with social thought (both influenced by, and influencing it) since its earliest formulations. According to Myers, the implication of the modern “myth of entropy”, identified by Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West*, is that history is shaped by the laws of physics rather than by the struggles of people (Myers 1985: 35). Rudolf

in the University of Sussex’s 2002 intellectual climate. For more on the topic of “Nature and Nurture in French Social Sciences”, see Staum 2011. Language has been traditionally analogized to an organism (Becher 1833), but for some recent contributions to the problem of the evolutionary emergence of language, see Knight *et al.* 2000. For new insights into the ecology of language evolution, see Mufwene (2001).

Arnheim, in his study *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Disorder and Order*, attempts to reconcile the supposed contradiction between order in nature, where the evolutionary drive leads to greater complexity of life forms, and the principle of entropy implicit in the second law of thermodynamics. Although it may be argued that life's dynamics are contrary to the Second Law of Thermodynamics,⁷ whenever a system can enter into a process of exchange with its environment an entropy decrease in that system is entirely compatible with it. Arnheim contemplates art, observing it to be between a tendency for greater organization, and the general trend of the material universe toward death and disorder. An interdisciplinary scientist whose specialty is *Gestalt* psychology as applied to art and visual perception theory, Arnheim explains the popularity of the concept of entropy (which is originally a thermodynamic concept). He illustrates its typical (mis)use in early modernist debates among intellectuals from the field of arts and humanities, which range from philosophical lamentation on cosmic *memento mori*, to vulgar applications in historiography and journalism:

The popular connotations of the Second Law of Thermodynamics were quite different. When it began to enter the public consciousness a century or so ago, it suggested an apocalyptic vision of the course of events on earth. 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 distinctly negative ring. They were congenial to a pessimistic mood of the times. Stephen G. Brush, in a paper on thermodynamics and history, points out that in 1857 there were published in France Benedict Auguste Morel's *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine*, as well as Charles Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal*. 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. According to Henry Adams' witty treatise,

⁷ Entropy here is defined as the measure of randomness in a system. The Second Law of Thermodynamics states that there is an increase of entropy (the higher measure of randomness) in an isolated system, due to the dissipation of energy and the dispersal of matter and energy. According to this law, the state of entropy of the entire universe, as a closed isolated system, will always increase over time. It is far from my intention to go into a deeper discussion on the interdisciplinary applications of the topic of entropy, which is originally a thermodynamic concept (for example, in information theory, psychodynamics, thermoeconomics, and the application of analytical thermodynamic models for biological networks). However, for those who are interested in meandering away from the main topic of this paper, texts on entropy and applied thermodynamics can be found in Works Cited.

The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma, to the vulgar and ignorant historian it meant only that the ash heap was constantly increasing in size. The sun was getting smaller, the earth colder, and no day passed without the French or German newspapers producing some uneasy discussion of supposed social decrepitude; falling off of the birthrate; decline of rural population; lowering of army standards; multiplication of suicides; increase of insanity or idiocy, of cancer, of tuberculosis; signs of nervous exhaustion, of enfeebled vitality, "habits" of alcoholism and drugs, failure of eyesight in the young and so on, without end... (Arnheim 1977: 8–9)

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The utopian quality of a theoretically valid, but practically improbable, model of the supposed ideal "reversibility" would be based on the thermodynamics of isolated systems that can be "reversed" by infinitesimal changes to a property of the system without entropy production. The reversible quality of art's capability to proceed in either direction in the process of change can be modeled in thermodynamic terms. This is undoubtedly a nice philosophical hypothesis for which we can, perhaps, provide a set of elegant algorithms. The problem with the system of artistic expression is that, much like other social and biological phenomena, it is an open system, or rather a network of systems, which has continuous exchange with its socio-biological and ecological surroundings. Each artwork is a non-equilibrium structure. Take an "oil on canvas" painting, or a fresco painting from the Renaissance period; it has been materially deteriorating since its author signed the compositionally "finished" and aesthetically "final" version of his work. Paint as a medium of fixation reacts in accordance with the Second Law of Thermodynamics, damaging the material work of art as time passes, and making the measure of randomness in that artistic system greater and greater. On the other hand, the "evolution" of literary style and the historical "development" of literary genres makes *mimesis* of nature's tendency towards a greater complexity of forms, which seemingly reduces entropy. Bourget's idea of "decomposition"—seen as a distinctive trait of decadent style—is an oxymoronic concept of evolution through the dissipation of forms where, as previously quoted from Bourget, the unity of the book falls apart and is replaced by the independence of the page, the page decomposes to make way for the independence of the sentence, and the sentence makes way for the word. Bourget is influenced both by Darwinism and the concept of "energy" borrowed from nineteenth century thermodynamics. What makes his approach stand apart from the views of his contemporaries is not so much his insistence on the dynamic exchange of energy in the process of "reciprocal action of society on the individual",

where each time the individual isolates his energy, “he deprives himself of the benefit of that action” (Bourget 1920: 24). Rather, from the perspective of postmodernity, the most valuable aspect of Bourget’s heritage is his attempt to find a place for the style of “decomposition” in the evolutionary dynamics of literary forms that will make up part of the system of art at some historical point in the future. That future will resemble the time in which we now live and create.

FROM BOURGET’S HYBRIDITY TO A. G. MATOŠ’ PERSIFLAGE OF DECADENT LITERARY STYLE IN THE TIME OF DECADENCE

Bourget’s prose *Le Disciple*⁸ (1889) combines some generic characteristics of *roman à thèse* (in the sense that it is an essay made into a novel by elaborating

⁸ The difference between Bourget’s approach to evolutionism in his agnostic phase, and after he published his novel *Le Disciple* in 1889 is easily documented both intrinsically (through comparative analysis of his essayistic topics and belletristic development of themes, motives and characters), and his self-explanatory statements in the novel’s Introduction, and in public statements and interviews, like that given to *The New York Herald*, and rewritten and published in *The Pittsburgh Press* on August 21st, 1893. This interview is titled “Paul Bourget in New York”, and subtitled “Ideas of Christianity: the Rising Parisian Novelist Chats About His Methods”. When asked in a direct and provocative way if he were a Christian, Bourget answers his American interviewer with an illustrative example from the world of science. He compares his attitude towards religion to how Pasteur looks upon the “liquid he injects into patients bitten by mad dogs”. Bourget develops his argument rhetorically, making the chosen simile more emphatic: he says that Pasteur does not know how to cure hydrophobia any more than he knows how to cure the evil in the world, but Pasteur knows that these injections give a certain immunity against the disease. “Therefore he believes in injections—although he does not understand their action,” Bourget concludes. The type of commonsensical faith Bourget advocates is based on proofless belief, whose evidence, nonetheless, he sees in the daily practice of social life where “there is such a thing as responsibility for the influences we have upon others”. Bourget defines Christianity as a “system for practical happiness in this world”. Later in the interview, he explains his personal conversion from agnosticism as “the necessity of adopting Christianity as a practical working creed”. Bourget’s exploration of the New Continent (coinciding with his “conversion” from evolutionism to Christianity) was, as he explains in *Outre-mer*, his book of impressions from America, propelled by the desire to explore *the three divinities (les trois Divinités)* of the modern world of the Old Continent: Democracy, Science, and Race (Bourget 1895: 4). Bourget’s “regressive” ideas have been widely criticized by his contemporaries at the time and today, but the most challenging issue concerning his “conversion” is his mixture of conservative views (in tune with a bleak vision of Europe’s decadence) with a utopian vision of a new type of multiracial and multinational democracy

on some of the author's ideas about moral philosophy and evolutionism); *roman à clef* (seen in Bourget's documented, but never admitted, inspiration from the judicial and public aspects of Henri Chambige's murder case and its implications for the development of the fictional character of Robert Greslou, and in Bourget's typifying of the fictional character Adriene Sixte, in an attempt to portray the publicly constructed characters of Spencer and Taine); the *didactic novel* (a genre suggested by the preface in which the author appeals to the young generation to abide by traditional morality rather than modern scientific theory); the *crime story* (a popular genre counterpoising the intellectual challenge of a thesis novel; and finally, *roman divertissant* (whose structure is supposed to lure the audience and "trick" them into engaged reading). Bourget's choice of a hybrid genre is well founded in his analysis of *hybridity* as a typical trait of modern literary style, which is perceived as an evolutionary disposition of the "soul", characteristic of the modern epoch:

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The novel is—we can never say enough—by definition a hybrid genre. It adheres to poetry. By following its affiliation through the ages, it seems to represent the latest evolutionary stage of the epic. But it also adheres to science by its—more and more pronounced—pursuit of exactness and the truth. And now this hybridity, is it not that it belongs to the modern man who remains instinctive, imaginative, simply because he is human, and who is, at the same time, drawn to the scientific discipline by all the influences that surround him? The conflicting sensibility that has remained a common literary theme for a century is only a manifestation of this duality. (Bourget 1922a: 125–126)⁹

Bourget's concept of hybridity applies to some aspects of the poetics of A. G. Matoš—a famous Croatian author from the turn of the century, and the most relentless, sharp-witted chronicler of Croatian modernity. Matoš critiques the general symptomatology of the European *fin de siècle* in the intriguing narrative *The Mouse (Miš)*, incorporated in his first book of stories *Splinters* (Matoš 1899). Matoš ironizes decadence as a cultural category, making, at the same time, a scintillating narrative persiflage of decadent literary style. Bourget's essayistic and novelistic treatment of "fashionable" science in *Le Disciple*, his attack on the modern self-centeredness and selfish individualism of "struggle-for-lifers", and his didactic impulse to advocate

imagined at some point in the future, as a social construct established on experiences learned from American democratic experiments (Bourget 1895: 6).

⁹ This passage is from the chapter "Note sur le roman français en 1921".

responsibility in both social and intimate relations are factors that make possible parallel readings of *The Disciple* and *The Mouse*. The plot of *The Mouse* is simple: a young medical student returns home on vacation and takes advantage of a middle-aged governess, pretending that he loves her. Some months later, she reveals the news of her pregnancy in a love letter sent to his rented apartment in Vienna. The student writes back, asking her to abort. Their letters are written in a polite manner, concealing the main topic of pregnancy behind intellectual small talk. The woman ultimately commits suicide, and the man feels relieved at the news of her death. However, after a while, he starts to experience signs of physical and mental exhaustion due to sleep deprivation caused by the sound of a mouse scratching. The noise repeats every night, starting at some point around midnight, and continuing until dawn. Half-asleep and in a daze, the man sees an apparition of the dead woman, whom he had nicknamed "my little mouse" in the period of their physical closeness. Exasperated, and afraid that this might be a sign of ongoing mental illness, he sets a trap for the mouse, making a mechanism that will pull the trigger of a gun when the mouse bites a bacon-coated rope. Suffering from symptoms of nervous tension, the student sets the trap incorrectly; the mouse bites into the rope, the gun fires, and he himself is killed.

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The plot of the story is almost trivial, but interpretation of *The Mouse* gains complexity the moment we take into account the historical, political and biographical context within which the prose of A. G. Matoš emerged. There are numerous, equally legitimate interpretational options. We can read *The Mouse* as: 1) a tragicomic love story with elements of the epistolary genre; 2) a story of everyday urban life with fantastical elements; 3) social fiction dealing with class, gender and ethnic problems; 4) a story about a metropolitan-provincial relationship; 5) satirical prose about the disintegration of modern society; 6) a persiflage of decadent literary style; 7) fictionalization of literary criticism; 8) auto-irony in the treatment of the subject of exile; 9) an attempt to allegorize the concept of homeland as an abandoned mistress.

At the end of the text, another interpretational possibility is obliquely suggested: the narrator says that "behind the deceased remained an interesting diary and a draft of a dramatic poem in German", from which we can infer that we should perhaps add the form of a modernist *Künstlerroman* to the list of potential literary genera. The main character is described as a student and a passionate reader, a Greslou-like "disciple" of the modern era. His "reference list" includes—along with professional medical and

psychiatric textbooks—a range of philosophical works and hermetic writings, classical and modern fiction in Croatian and Serbian, and books by international authors, in their original languages and in translation. Towards the end of the story, we learn that the medical student was also an aspiring writer. Here we can take another two genres into consideration: the diary, and the dramatic poem. There is no doubt that Matoš alluded to the romantic dramatic poem and to epistolary, autobiographical prose, but he did not miss the opportunity to make fun of the romantic “hero of our time”, connecting this to a decadent *dandy*, and modernist “demonic” character type. Finally, we can evaluate the potential of Matoš’ fiction from a dramaturgical point of view, to see whether it is a good “candidate” for dramatization.

The Mouse, which belongs to the earliest phase in Matoš’ opus, is a widely known piece of literature, which is on the list of required reading for high school students. With this in mind, it is surprising that Matoš’ abundant use of literary-historical allusions as well as allusions to concepts from turn-of-the-century psychiatric textbooks, have so far remained undetected. Several terms originating in the pre-Freudian field of psychiatric research became so popular in highbrow and middlebrow discussions of the early twentieth century that they assumed the status of keywords of the modern epoch. For example, *folie raisonnante*, introduced by Philippe Pinel in 1812, became a part of the modern repertoire of cultural commonplaces. Matoš, an expert diagnostician of the symptoms of modern society’s “illness”, sensed the almost viral potential of this and similar terms: their meme-like capacity to propagate through social interaction in the literary salons of European cultural centers, from Paris and London to Vienna and Berlin. Pinel’s term *Manie sans délire* or *folie lucide raisonnante* referred to a special type of mental disorder that consisted of abnormal emotionality and behaviors in patients whose intellectual capacities remained unimpaired. By 1909, when Sérieux and Capgras published *Les Folies raisonnantes, le délire d’interprétation*, the term *delirium of interpretation* had been interpreted as “chronic interpretative psychosis”—a type of paranoid disorder in which correctly perceived facts are misinterpreted due to false reasoning, leading to a system of complex intellectual delusions in the later stages of the illness. A. G. Matoš, connects the “egoism” of the Modern Subject with “some sort of moral insanity” (a term introduced to psychiatric literature in 1835 by J. C. Prichard, who developed the definition of *manie sans délire* first described by Pinel and his student, Jean-Etienne Dominique Esquirol in the first half of the nineteenth century. In his book titled *Moral Insanity*, Prichard states:

Eccentricity of conduct, singular and absurd habits, a propensity to perform the common actions of life in a different way from that usually practiced, is a feature of many cases of moral insanity, but can hardly be said to constitute sufficient evidence of its existence. When, however, such phenomena are observed in connection with a wayward and intractable temper, with a decay of social affections, an aversion to the nearest relatives and friends formerly beloved, in short, —with a change in the moral character of the individual, the case becomes tolerably well marked. (Prichard 1935: 28)

Matoš writes: “If Greek modernism in Antiquity was more aesthetic and healthier than ours, then our modernism is by far more universal and more intimate. Greeks adored the body, and we – the spirit” (Matoš 1909: 396). When we analyze Matoš’ essay “On Modernity” from a distance of more than a century, his observations seem even more valuable now than before. First, the quoted essay shows the affinity between Baudelaire’s and Matoš’ conceptual understandings of modernity as a cultural category with social and trans-media symptomatology. Second, it points to the fact that, over the course of several years, Matoš introduced the term “bodlerism”—described as the “latent state of the modern soul”—to his list of “mutually contradictory” modern styles. Being a writer of fiction as well as a literary and theatre critic, Matoš was antagonistic to his fellow writers, and rather cynical about some of the stylistic preferences of the modern times. He was not so much interested in the interpretation and understanding of new traits in artistic practices, but rather in *his own critical capacity* to understand the symptoms of the change in the modern mind that had led to this change in literary and artistic styles. This is one reason why we should not approach Matoš’ critical discourse on other authors as a piece of literary critical analysis *per se*. His criticism is always an *exercice de style* in the open genre of modernist auto-poetic narration. The third point of interest is in trying to see how and why—in Matoš’ opinion—the change in cultural emphasis from body to spirit happened at the turn of the twentieth century. Furthermore, it is important to identify to what extent the shift from the “healthy” aesthetics of Antiquity to “nervous modernism” and its global, almost universally modern “introversion”, were perceived by Matoš, and interpreted as a degenerative trend in European cultural development. In the introductory chapter to the comparative study *Symptoms of Drama Modernity* (Petlevski 2000) we wrote about Matoš’ thematic treatment of different modes of “modernity”, pointing to his dual literary and literary-critical insight into the civilizational dimension of modernity, as well as to his interest in everyday topics related to this dimension. It is necessary to

274 summarize some of the ideas previously developed in connection to Matoš' work in order to cut straight to the concept of decadence as the main subject of this paper. Matoš approached decadence both as a literary style, and as a cultural symptom of the disintegration of modern society. His approach was imbued with passion, and advertently contaminated with personal views. As a belletrist, he tried to pinpoint his own position in that moment of history, thus denouncing the modern style from within, by stylistic means comparable to the *eirôn-alazôn* dynamics in Socratic *maieutics* and in the Greek Old Comedy of Aristophanes' plays. Matoš—both as a literary narrator and a public figure in Croatian culture—enjoyed assuming the role and function of the *eirôn*. With the pedagogical goal of enlightening his audience in mind, Matoš—the public self-deprecator—did his best to bring down the *alazôns*, his braggart opponents from the national public sphere, by making them show their inadequacies. However, as a modern ironist, he enjoyed switching the author (himself) and the reader (the typical Croatian public figure as a collective character) from *eirôn* to *alazôn* and back, in a continuous loop, and with great speed. Matoš criticized cultural modernity by means of Socratic irony and persiflage, and travesty based on an incongruous language and style, but also in a more subtle manner, by re-examining the dubiously complacent relation of the subject of the discourse and the style in which that subject was publicly discussed. He perceived "bodlerism" side by side with other key principles and symptoms of modernity, like "speed", "absolute feasibility", a "preference for rapid and condensed sensation", and "respect for different forms of individuality". The fact that Matoš was indebted to the psychiatric literature of the second half of the nineteenth century is easily detectible from the terminology he used in connection to the concept of "bodlerism". However, the aesthetic modernity in which "bodlerism" participated as one of its symptoms was accessible to Matoš only as a cultural category. "Melancholy", "nostalgic vision," "suggestion," "nervous modernism", a "tragic feeling in the most enjoyable moment of life", and some forms of the altered experience of reality, Matoš remarked, had over the years become a frightening experience, making the modern subject withdraw before the demons of objects into a self-created abstract world, seeking safety in "introversion" and distrust.

By comparing the version of Matoš' text on Baudelaire published in the Trieste journal *Jadran* in 1904, with the that in *Vidici i putovi* published in 1907, we can trace the gradual change in Matoš approach to Baudelaire, and see how, in less than four years, he upgraded Baudelaire's cultural significance by changing his criteria of evaluation from singular to

symptomatic. In Matoš' interpretation, Baudelaire is a paradigmatic figure with an important function in the creation of cultural modernity. In his revised text on Baudelaire, Matoš uses the explicit term "influence" in the broader sense of the concept of importance. The actual phrase from the second version of his text is "the value of literary influence", while in the first version he uses the term "heroism" in the phrase "the value of literary heroism". This mention of "heroism" relates directly to Baudelaire's text "On the Heroism of Modern Life", from *Salon of 1846*. Matoš' early attempt at making Baudelaire the characteristic writer of modern life is profound and well grounded, and we can find a much later attempt to reveal Baudelaire's "heroism" in Walter Benjamin's claim that the hero is the true subject of modernity because "it takes a heroic constitution to live modernity" (Benjamin 2006: 103).¹⁰ In Baudelaire's case, this meant that he showed a willingness for the character of his age to mark and scar his body. This willingness is in Benjamin's view connected to an attempt to capture an experience that "seeks to establish itself in crisis-proof form" (Benjamin 2006: 8). It is not so much the "crisis-proof form" as an attempt at living in "the heart of unreality" (Benjamin 2006: 50), that makes Baudelaire's "heroism" different to Nietzsche's pessimistic "heroism". Contemplating the difference between Baudelairean and Nietzschean principles of happiness, Benjamin reflects upon the concept of progress:

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Eternal recurrence is an attempt to combine the two antinomic principles of happiness: that of eternity and that of the "yet again". The idea of eternal recurrence conjures the speculative idea (or phantasmagoria) of happiness from the misery of the times. Nietzsche's heroism has its counterpoint in the heroism of Baudelaire, who conjures the phantasmagoria of modernity from the misery of philistinism. The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are "status quo" is the catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given. Strindberg's idea: hell is not something that awaits us, but *this life here and now*.

Redemption depends on the tiny fissure in the continuous catastrophe.

The reactionary attempt to turn technologically determined forms that is, dependent variables, into constants can be found not only in Jugendstil but in Futurism.

The development which led Maeterlinck, in the course of a long life, to an attitude of extreme reaction, is a logical one.

¹⁰ Benjamin's essay on some of the motives in Baudelaire—"Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire"—was originally published in January 1940 in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Vol. 8, 1–2.

Explore the question of how far the extremes to be encompassed within redemption are those of “too early” and “too late”:

That Baudelaire was hostile to progress was the indispensable condition for his ability to master Paris in his verse. Compared to his poetry of the big city, later work of this type is marked by weakness, not least where it sees the city as the throne of progress. (Benjamin 2006: 161–62)

In his interpretation of decadent fiction, Robert Ziegler uses the mathematical figure of the asymptote to show how the interrelationship of Decadent artists and their fictions converge, then split apart and grow more distant. Ziegler’s thesis is that the Decadent writer’s approach “to the facsimile selves, the fictional epigones he plays with and discards, is the curve that never intersects with his authorial identity, the straight line traced by intelligence, discipline, and work” (Ziegler 2009: 12). The case of A.G. Matoš—a hardworking, prolific author and lucid observer of *fin de siècle* cultural symptomatology who denounced the modern style from within—seems to be in accordance with Ziegler’s thesis: the distance between Matoš as a living protagonist of his times and the curve in the fictional development of his “facsimile selves” approaches zero, as the curve and the line head towards infinity. Ziegler makes clear what his study of decadent fiction is about:

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Along with proposing a radical differentiation of fin-de-siècle authors and their characters, this study argues that, for the Decadents, authorship is a transformative process. By projecting into fiction unwanted traits, destructive tendencies, the writer dissociates himself from a character who embodies an obsolete identity. Creative work does not illustrate a narcissistic entanglement of authors and characters. It does not show, as critics have long maintained, that Decadence is sterile self-reproduction. By allowing the playful fashioning of multiple identities, writing exorcised harmful features, enabled an experimentation with adaptive strategies, so that art became a dynamic act of creative regeneration. Paradoxically, Decadent writing turns into a successful quest for health. Having rejected the regressive impulses that he works through in his characters, the Decadent is able to escape the shell of stifling subjectivism. Free to move out into the world of material reality, he experiences again the inexhaustible richness of other people. (Ziegler 2009: 12)

The interpretation of decadent art as a “dynamic art of creative regeneration” is the most interesting part of Ziegler’s argument, at least in the context of this paper.

CULTURAL PESSIMISM, CULTURAL OPTIMISM, AND CULTURAL “SUSTAINABILITY”

It is interesting to observe how philosophers and theoreticians in the field of social sciences and humanities approached the problem of social dynamics in the first part of the twentieth century. These attempts at a systemic insight into the future of the human society culminated either in a model of political utopia (with well-balanced spheres of politics, law, customs and conditions, and ideally harmonized with the natural niche), or a bleak dystopia (with an exaggerated worst-case scenario), depending on the respective optimistic or pessimistic bias of their authors. Some of the great philosophical systems of thought, like that created by Bergson, follow the relationship between “natural society and war” and describe modernity as a state in which “mankind lies groaning, half-crushed beneath the weight of its own progress (Bergson 1932: 170). Bergson concludes his late work, *The Two Sources Of Morality And Religion*, by reproaching men for their lack of initiative:

Men do not sufficiently realize that their future is in their own hands. Theirs is the task of determining first of all whether they want to go on living or not. Theirs the responsibility, then, for deciding if they want merely to live, or intend to make just the extra effort required for fulfilling, even on their refractory planet, the essential function of the universe, which is a machine for the making of gods. (Bergson 1933: 170)

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On the other hand, Spengler’s *cultural pessimism as historical relativism* foresees a time in history where scientific progress will be so great that it might lead, paradoxically, to a decline in the authority of science—both within and outside the boundaries of scientific disciplines—with auto-destructive, antithetical elements that undermine science by its own methods. In response to a superficial reading of *The Decline of the West*, one of the biggest bestsellers of the twentieth century, Spengler wrote an essay titled “Pessimism?”, which was first published in the *Preußische Jahrbücher* in 1921. In it, Spengler indicates a mistake in the interpretation of his philosophical system, believing one of the major obstacles to an understanding of his book to be its rather disconcerting title. He further complains that there are people who cannot hear the word “decline” without thinking of a sudden and dreadful calamity. Spengler makes clear that his title does not imply catastrophe, and suggests that, perhaps, we can eliminate “pessimism” without altering the real sense of the title if we were

to substitute the word "decline" with "downfall fulfillment" (*Untergang Vollendung*), bearing in mind the special functions that Goethe assigned to this concept in his own worldview (Spengler 1921: 3). Spengler ascribes significant value to the concept of Destiny, and if we read the title of his well-known book from that perspective, the term *Untergang* is not so much connected to the concept of *the decline* of the West, but rather to a fateful fulfillment of the inner principles of the Western system. For Spengler, the idea of Destiny leads to "depth experience". The "Physiognomic Rhythm", as the third important concept, is defined as an unconscious technique of grasping not merely the phenomena of everyday life, but the sense of the universe. Spengler does not see "world history" as a unified sequence of events but as a collection of high cultures, whose life histories—although independent of each other—share a similar "structural pattern". Spengler's concept of historical Relativism as an intrinsic element of life confirms the idea of Destiny:

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With this we can dismiss one of the most absurd criticisms leveled against my views: the argument that Relativism carries with it its own refutation. The conclusion to be drawn is that for every culture, for every epoch within a culture, and for every kind of individual within an epoch there exists an overall perspective that is imposed and exacted by the time in question. This perspective must be considered absolute for that particular time, but not with respect to other times. There is a perspective imposed by our own time, yet it goes without saying that it is different from that of the Age of Goethe. "True" and "false" are concepts that cannot be applied here. The only pertinent descriptive terms are "deep" and "shallow." Whoever thinks differently is, in any case, incapable of thinking historically. (Spengler 1921: 10–11)

Max Nordau, the author of widely popular but controversial books *The Conventional Lies of Our Civilization* (1883), and *Degeneration* (1892), is typically perceived as a historical pessimist, but when we look deeper into the analysis of his works of social criticism, we discover that Nordau's supposed pessimism is a specific *liberal utopianism*,¹¹ based on an attempt to preserve

¹¹ The question of liberalism and Zionism is a topic in itself. See, for example the interpretation of Christof Casten, who thinks that the question is whether or not Zionism could be understood as both anti-liberal and liberal at the same time. He suggests that it was liberalism's own internal inimicality to assimilation that Zionism made visible, and that this exposure of liberalism to its own contradictory constitution formed the basis of Zionism's critique of liberalism. On the other hand, says Casten, Zionism incorporated the very ideas of liberalism itself. From this ambiguous perspective he understands Zionism as *anti-liberal*

bourgeois social values while simultaneously deconstructing the political framework of that same civil society. In his text on Nordau’s approach to Zionism, D. J. Penslar remarks that

Nordau’s Zionism, laced with Darwinism, was darker than Herzl’s. True, both men believed that antisemitism was an incurable affliction of the European body politic, and that the Jews, particularly those in Eastern Europe, had no choice but to leave for their ancient homeland. But underlying Nordau’s call for Jewish national mobilization was pessimism, a grim foreboding, a fear that a great battle lay ahead, and that the battle might be lost. This pessimism led Nordau to warn, even before World War I, of impending calamities; this “catastrophist” orientation was only strengthened by the disasters that befell Russian Jewry during and immediately after the war. (Penslar 1996: 224)

Penslar reminds the contemporary reader of what Nordau predicted about the society in which we now live:

In *Conventional Lies*, Nordau warned of a future society enslaved by frantic production and joyless consumption. At the end of *Degeneration*, Nordau vacillated between a technophilic utopia and a degenerate dystopia featuring an all-too-familiar combination of public drug-peddling, random shootings,

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liberalism (Casten 2012: 269). Casten’s essay “concentrates on how Max Nordau’s concept of the *muscular Jew*, a term that he introduced into the Zionist debate at the Fin de siècle, functioned as a liberal attempt of Jewish self-emancipation within the ambiguous context of the German liberal-bourgeois society that was deeply steeped in anti-Semitism. The concept of muscle Judaism is itself an abstract category, and reveals its liberal roots in the identitary self-empowerment as subjugation under an abstract concept” (Casten 2012: 267). Nordau’s belief in continuous progress (a peculiar type of utopianism) counterpoised his cultural pessimism. Penslar points to the internal paradox in Nordau’s views: “Just as the rational and the romantic dwelled side by side in Nordau’s Zionist thought, so did echoes of the liberal and utopian elements of his general works of criticism resonate in his Jewish nationalist writings.” In his response to Ahad ha-Am’s critique of Herzl’s utopian novel *Altneuland* (1903), Nordau praised Herzl’s vision of a cosmopolitan, European culture in the future Jewish state, and accused Ahad ha-Am of advocating xenophobia and fanaticism. Whereas Ahad ha-Am warned that Arabs would not willingly make way for masses of Jewish newcomers, Nordau assured his readers that Jews and Arabs would live fraternally in the Jewish state. As mentioned above, Nordau conceived of Palestine’s Arabs as individuals, not members of a nationality. Thus Nordau, like other liberal Zionists of his era, unconsciously projected onto Palestine the emancipatory discourse of the French Revolution and nineteenth-century liberalism, which, as pithily expressed by Clermont-Tonnerre, granted the Jews everything as individuals but nothing as a nation. Nordau toyed with Zionist utopianism, and in 1919 suggested that “biblical Sabbatical and Jubilee legislation be applied in Palestine” (Penslar 1996: 224). See also Baldwin 1980: 99–120.

graphically violent popular entertainment, and a massive reduction of the human attention span. (Pendar 1996: 220)

Nordau cites from Bourget in the chapter on “Degenerates”, but misinterprets his famous passage on the “the individual as the social cell” and on “energy of the cells”:

Very true. A society in decadence “produces too great a number of individuals unfit for the labors of common life”; these individuals are precisely the degenerate; “they cease to subordinate their energy to the total energy”, because they are ego-maniacs, and their stunted development has not attained to the heights at which an individual reaches his moral and intellectual junction with the totality, and their ego-mania makes the degenerate necessary anarchist, enemies of all institutions which they do not understand, and to which they cannot adapt themselves. (Nordau 1895: 301–02)

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What Bourget covers by the concept of “anarchy” in the exchange of energy between the individual cell, an organism as a whole, and its niche—as we have shown previously in this text—is actually an oversimplified version of the concept of entropy borrowed from nineteenth-century physics and contaminated with Darwinian influences. What Nordau makes of Bourget’s text is a deliberate misreading of his model of the dynamics of exchange. Nordau reads the term “anarchy” literally, vulgarizing Bourget’s metaphorical concept, and bringing its metaphorical charge down to the banality of daily politics. Nordau’s views on literary decadence are now rarely discussed in a serious scholarly context; what was once globally popular now seems outmoded. But is this really so? If we go back to the beginning of this text and reread Weir’s laconic thesis that decadence “refines corruption” and degeneration “corrupts refinement”, we can discover in his argument a well-concealed prejudice against the bohemian lifestyle. Could we say, following Weir’s opening words of the book on decadence, that a decadent lifestyle “corrupts the refinement” of the artistic style of decadent writing?

The disintegration of the modern subject, and the supposed degeneration of the modern society connected to it, remained a popular topic for discussion in literary salons throughout the first half of the twentieth century. It can be traced back to Nordau’s attempt to establish a relationship between physiology and the concept of nation (under the strong influence of Lombroso’s theories). This fervor of discussion on the decline of Western culture was fueled by readings and misreadings of Spengler’s concepts such as “the physiognomy of culture” and “physiognomic rhythm”. The fateful

fulfillment of the Western system of thought—the decline of the West as its structural, intrinsic doom—, had suddenly been perceived as being connected to an error in the scientific approach. Spengler warns that when high science is most fruitful within its own sphere, the seeds of its undoing begin to sprout. In his view, for scientific methodology to refuse to mend the cracks in its knowledge of the principles of cognition and rationality with “habits of intuitive perception” would be a fatal mistake.

Bergson’s *optimism without progress* is a concept that deserves reevaluation in the contemporary social studies context, especially his prediction of the shift from static system to “dynamic religion”. Regarding social rhythms (in which he sees a caricatured synchronization that is the product of conventions of political order), Bergson opposes the need to link all individuals with a unique spiritual vibration of humanity. Such a vision of an open society is related to the “mysticism of mechanics”, and creates the basis for the establishment of a utopia of mankind, organized according to a special form of the “Will to power”. This form of the “Will to power” is one that establishes sovereignty, but as Bergson states in *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, it will be “a sovereignty, not over men, but over things, precisely in order that man shall no longer have so much sovereignty over man.” (Bergson 1932: 167). Bergson points to the danger of attributing nationalisms of the ancient gods to “the God of modern mysticism”, thus giving impetus to the rise of imperialism disguised by the mask of mysticism.

These three representative systems of thought—Nordau’s, Spengler’s and Bergson’s—determine the symptoms of the crisis of the modern era, first attempting to see how the dynamics of this crisis work, then explaining the symptomatology. All these modern versions of social philosophy contain keywords explaining some of the basic forms of social dynamics. These are *Entartung* in Nordau, *Untergang* in Spengler, and *la loi de double frénésie* in Bergson. *Degeneration*, *decline*, and *the law of double frenzy* are the “official” English translations of these well-known concepts that, nevertheless, remain obscure if not coupled with the original terminology.

The space-time relationship—that special link between a particular place on the map and a corresponding historical event—is a key point in which all three philosophers seize the opportunity to reflect on the history of metaphysics. Bergson’s “law of double frenzy” (Bergson 1932: 161) is the law by which cultures and societies are thrown out of rhythm, desynchronized with their own historical development. Bergson assumes that just as the modern luxury-crazed culture replaced the medieval era of asceticism, so will a new era of simplicity one day oust the consumption-obsessed modern era. The

Bergsonian utopia of a new form of wealth, based on the rejection of all that is excessive and superfluous, introduces into the modern speculative discourse a beautifully antiquated vision of man's return to nature. In the Bergsonian "process-relational" approach to phenomena, nature is, as in A. N. Whitehead, a creative advance in time.¹² If necessary, we could free that vision from its peculiar utopian quality, and call it—in keeping with the times in which we are living, and with its new age utopianisms—a philosophy of "deep ecology".¹³

Living in the end times is a catchy phrase that depicts some of the gravest thoughts and feelings of contemporary people. It is also the title of one of Žižek's books, published in 2010, in which the Slovene philosopher identifies the four riders of the coming apocalypse: the global ecological crisis; economic imbalances; the biogenetic revolution; and exploding social divisions accompanied by violent ruptures. He argues that our collective responses to economic apocalypse correspond to the stages of grief: ideological denial; explosions of anger; attempts at bargaining; and finally, depression and withdrawal (Žižek 2010: xi–xii).

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If ecological sustainability is about how biological systems remain diverse and productive, then sustainable development in connection with humankind and its survival includes the idea of environmental, economic and social wellbeing, combined with *a new notion of progress*, perceived at the intersection of the concept of needs and the idea of limitations. Many meetings and conferences are held by experts around the world to try to find ways to: operationalize and implement development policies and programs in a culturally sustainable and ethically sound way; integrate culture into different social and welfare policies; reconnect culture and nature; and change conceptual approaches to the interior dimension of sustainability where values and norms are made. No matter how convincing the bureaucratic¹⁴ rhetoric of the sustainable development planning might

¹² For the Bergson-Whitehead topic see, e.g., Debaise 2009; for the topic of Spencer's early influence on Bergson, and anti-Spencerism in Bergson's concept of evolution, see, e.g., Papanicolaou and Gunter 1987; and for the topic of morality and evolution in Bergson, see Gallagher 1970.

¹³ In this paper, we cannot go into a more profound discussion on Bergson's implicit environmentalism, but for further reading, see, e.g., Aguirre 2013: 161–167; and Gunter 1999. For the topic of deep ecology, see, e.g., Katz 2000; and Glasser 2005. For the beginnings of the debate on deep ecology-social ecology, see, e.g., Bookchin 1987: 4–5; and Light 1998. For the topic of deep ecology, cognition and moral politics, see, e.g., Lakoff 2010: 70–81.

¹⁴ See Robinson 2004: 369–384. The author reviews how the concept of sustainable development has played out in industrialized countries since 1987. He "examines the theory and practice of sustainable development in the context of three criticisms (it is vague,

seem, it is hard to ignore the ethical concerns connected to the prioritization of needs.

Both “sustainable development” and “sustainability” are at root normative concepts, describing visions of how human activities and ecological processes might be reconciled for the “good” of both. Yet these visions are frequently at odds depending on the social group advocating a particular path. The advantage of “sustainability” lies in how researchers invoking it must reference it against specific geographic, temporal and socioecological contexts. This context-specificity forces the crucial questions: what exactly is being sustained, at what scale, by and for whom, and using what institutional mechanisms? (Sneddon 2000: 524)

The problem is not in the limitations, because the idea of sustainable development is not the Bergsonian utopia of a new form of wealth based on the rejection of excessive needs. On the contrary, this is a pragmatic vision of limited growth compatible with new programs of economic sustainability, which are “green” in theory, but not in the brutal practice of the global market.

If we are to believe George Christakos¹⁵ from San Diego State University, there is currently “an integrative method of problem solving in a time of decadence”. The discipline known as IPS (Integrative Problem Solving) is based on a scientific approach requiring a combination of knowledge and skills in various fields of human endeavor. It refers to all human knowledge of competences in the fields of perception, memory, awareness and understanding, where solutions can be found at the crossroads of various scientific approaches, as well as on the verge of philosophy and science. Promoting the value of philosophy in scientific research, Christakos coins the term “Epibrainmatics” to denote the use of epistemic ideas and principles (Epi) from brain sciences (brai) to develop action-based mathematics (matics) for the solution of real-world problems, under conditions of multi-sourced uncertainty and composite space-time dependency (Christakos 2010: ix).

attracts hypocrites and fosters delusions), and argues for an approach to sustainability that is integrative, is action-oriented, goes beyond technical fixes, incorporates a recognition of the social construction of sustainable development, and engages local communities in new ways” (Robinson 2004: 369).

¹⁵ G. Christakos is a known expert in *health geographics*, and a referenced author in stochastic hydrology, mathematical and computer modeling, applied probability, stochastic environmental research and risk assessment, and in interdisciplinary spatiotemporal modeling and prediction.

Epibrainmatics seeks a relationship between objectivity and interpretivity involving a generative tension between the two. Christakos writes “during a time of (contemporary) Decadence” about its symptoms:

It should not escape the reader’s attention that the book was written during a time of Decadence that characterizes every aspect of the society (politics, economics, culture, art, science, and education). A time of deep concern, confusion, and peculiar restlessness; a time of intellectual decline, superficiality, diminishing meritocracy, and decreasing social mobility; a time of pseudo-pragmatism and highly valued consumptionism, when the powers that be focus on agenda-driven policies at the expense of human principles; a time of post-truth political and social environments in which arguments are merely operational than fact-based; a time of vulgar corporatism characterized by deep-rooted corruption, greed, and institutionalized deception; a time of radical deconstruction and ahistoricism; a time of hostility to major intellectual traditions and human achievements of the past; a time of the disappearance of significations, and the almost complete evanescence of values in favor of an increasingly meaningless world; a time of devaluing and even cheapening both humankind and Nature without any serious protest; a time of crisis that is not only out there in the world, but primarily in Man’s own consciousness. (Christakos 2010: vii–viii)

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Christakos belongs to a small group of contemporary scientists and engineers who do not shun from extensive reading in the arts and humanities. This should not be viewed exclusively as his personal predilection for philosophy, literature and other artistic media, but rather as a precondition for stochastic reasoning that forms a basis for the field of integrative problem solving.¹⁶ It is from the perspective of stochastic reasoning that this author sees, defines and argues the symptomatology of contemporary “Decadence”.

¹⁶ Stochastic reasoning is a technique used in areas including AI, statistical physics, and information theory, to estimate the values of random variables based on partial observation of them (Pearl 1988). Stochastic reasoning—as Christakos popularly explains—lies at the interface of logic and empirical evidence, with strong ties to philosophy, linguistics, sociology, psychology and cognitive science. It acts in the human inquiry milieu by being “an intellectual catalyst that shows how different topics ran naturally into each other” (Christakos 2011: 256). It is from the perspective of stochastic reasoning that this author sees, defines and argues the symptomatology of contemporary “Decadence”. The consideration of “Decadence” in Christakos’ book is essential to the realistic study of environmental problems and their rigorous solution, because the broad context within which the problems emerge can affect their solution. Stochastic reasoning underlines the conceptual framework (a set of conceptual postulates and the corresponding mathematical operators), as well as the methodological framework of IPS.

IPS addresses the *multidisciplinarity* of *in situ* problems, the *multisourced uncertainties* characterizing their solution, and the *different thinking modes* of the people involved, providing mathematical explanations and models for uncertainties and contingencies. However, what makes Christakos' method potentially useful for the development of new methodological approaches in the humanities and social sciences is that this author points to the link between mathematical problem-solution, and solutions that have social impact. The concept of contemporary "Decadence" is essential for the argumentation he develops at the crossroad of stochastic mathematics, physical science, neuropsychology, philosophy, and sociology. The problem of model-based clustering for crisis identification in society (including its ecological niche) is usually addressed mathematically; however, there should be a more "intuitive" way to pinpoint the elements of a crisis. Such first-hand insights do not come only from those who suffer rapid deterioration in their standards of living, but also from those who take active part in the crisis itself, both by contributing to it, and by taking, or not taking, responsibility for its outcomes. Christakos claims that it is widely admitted that the world—contemporary world rather than that of the turn of the twentieth century—is "in a time of Decadence that is the result of the intellectual poverty, blatant opportunism, and squalid motives that characterize most power holders that dominate societies at a worldwide scale" (Christakos 2010: 27). In doing so, he is following a line of argumentation previously developed by authors such as Eric Havelock (1951), Jacques Barzun (1959), Richard Hofstadter (1963), Susan Jacoby (2009), Chris Hedges (2009) and Janine R. Wedel (2009), as well as some relatively recent studies that consider corporatism as a major contributor to the crisis (Korten 2001; Rushkoff 2010). Christakos' knowledge of social theory and philosophy is substantial, and he is meticulous in his analytical approach to the vast and diverse reference material used in the book.

The mathematical representation and modeling of stochastic reasoning on one hand, and the methodological insights adopted from humanistic and social sciences on the other, allow Christakos to apply the emotionally imbued "turn-of-the-century" literary and philosophical concept of Decadence to the cross-disciplinary enlightenment of the cluster of symptoms comprising the contemporary crisis. For example, he analyses the *postmodern corporatism university model (PCU)* as a "mixed model of "ill-conceived deconstruction and reckless and shortsighted utilitarianism" (Christakos 2010: 46), which gave rise to the paradoxical creation of a model of higher education "completely unable to prepare students for the most critical features of life in the twenty-first century: the largely unknown but potentially catastrophic

consequences of the anticipated slowing down of material growth and prosperity worldwide (both measured in terms of consumption indexes) as a result of economic globalization, international competition for vital yet diminishing resources, climate changes, and the like” (Christakos 2010: 49).

Following Steven Shapin’s study of scientific life in the context of the moral history of a late modern vocation (Shapin 2008), Christakos sees the production of ideas aimed at attracting the interest of venture capitalists and entrepreneurs as “the most ruthlessly instrumental sector of late capitalism and late modern technoscience” (Christakos 2010: 49–50; Shapin 2008: 270). However, his usage of the term “technoscience” is different from that of Shapin’s, because for Shapin it is *just a term* that allows him historically to follow natural knowledge and its embodiment in material artifacts *without taking a position* on what is science and what is technology:

To argue for the importance, even the centrality, of the personal dimension in late modern technoscience is directly to confront a sensibility that defines almost all academic, and probably much lay, thought about late modern culture. Isn’t the regime of trust, familiarity, and personal virtue precisely “the world we have lost”? What is modernity, and even more its “late” version, but the subjugation of subjectivity to objectivity, the personal to the methodically mechanical, the individual to the institutional, the contingent and the spontaneous to the rule of rule? It is widely said that we now trust in impersonal criteria, not in people; in rationally organized and regulated institutions rather than in charismatic leaders. This is the sort of thing Max Weber meant when he pointed to the “separation of business from the household, which completely dominates modern economic life,” and which was the spatial manifestation of familiarity’s decline. As late moderns, it is claimed, we are not able to call upon the resources of familiarity in addressing social and intellectual problems, nor would it be considered legitimate to do so. People are accounted weak; rules and institutions are accounted strong. (Shapin 2008: 3)

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The subjugation of subjectivity to objectivity, the individual to the institutional, typically interpreted as a lamentable characteristic of the postmodern world, is thus seen as a tendency developed in the late modern time, and continued in postmodern times. Shapin argues that the Weberian concept of modern value-freeing and losing of individual charisma should not be applied too freely to the new circumstances of the contemporary world of venture entrepreneurs, where *embodied leadership* counts more in business than impersonal criteria, the rulebook, or the organizational chart:

“Charisma” is in these ways not just a protean vernacular usage; it is a consequential, reality-making usage. The charismatic nature of entrepreneurial

action is widely recognized by participants: they use it to make sense of their world, to coordinate actions within it, to recognize legitimate conduct, and to help make a future. The world of late modern entrepreneurial science is at once the leading edge of capitalism and an ongoing set of experiments in charismatic authority. (Shapin 2008: 267)

Shapin sees continuation rather than cessation in the concept of late modern and postmodern technoscience. This is despite obvious, easily detectable differences between “the late modern technoscience” and “the contemporary world occupied by venture capitalists and the entrepreneurs seeking their support”—the world in which “distinctions between ‘science’ and ‘technology,’ or, indeed, between doing science and doing business, are not consequential actors’ categories” (Shapin 2008: 270).

Technosocial systems live their “real-world” lives between two opposing theoretical views: technological neutrality, which maintains that a given technology has no systematic effects in society; and technological determinism, which maintains that technologies directly cause particular societal outcomes. Christakos is “committed” in his attempt to explain to a wider intellectual audience (including colleagues from the arts and humanities, and social sciences) the negative trends obtained by the use of applied probability, stochastic socio-environmental research, and risk assessment. His explanation is in plain, and often emotionally charged language, and the use of the concept of “Decadence” is part of his strategy. Christakos’ position on the problem of “morality” in scientific life is straightforward: he speaks from the perspective of environmental sciences and engineering, and does not want to interpret symptoms of crisis only by means of systemic modeling; rather he wants to do so in the public sphere of shared intellectual responsibility. On the other hand, Shapin’s perspective as a historian and sociologist of science simulates “neutrality” in its in-depth description of *all* coexisting symptoms indiscriminately. Shapin states that the culture of twentieth-century academia is real, pervasive, and consequential. He shows that a presumption of the *de-moralization* of experts coexists in late modernity with both contrary sentiments and vast evidence of technoscientific practices, which point to different conclusions altogether. Accordingly, the description of “the way we live now” cannot be *unitary, simple, or tidy* (Shapin 2008: 13).

According to Shapin, it would be convenient to be able to tell a story of linear transition from one discrete sensibility to another, “from a sacred to a secular world, from trust-in-familiar-people to anonymous trust in impersonal standards and faceless institutions; from virtue to institutional

control as a solution to problems of credibility and authority" (Shapin 2008: 13–14). It would be handy to say that we used to live one way, and have thereafter lived another, and to complain about "the way we live now" while feeling nostalgic for "the world we have lost". But Shapin does not want to buy and sell such "stories" because he does not believe in the pre-War Golden age (and pre-Cold War Golden age) of purity in scientific and academic life. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, in a review of Shapin's book *The Scientific Life*, says that there is a difference between science as a "quasi divine calling pursued by men of monastic virtue" and the science perceived (since the end of World War Two) as a job like any other. She concludes: "Shapin emphasises that the story of that transformation is not a linear one, a simple matter of decline and fall" (Herrnstein Smith 2009: 10–12).

Even when they elaborate upon the same corpus of evidence—and even when the arguments they develop from that evidence are comparable—Shapin and Christakos assume different perspectives. We could say that Christakos is "involved and committed", where Shapin is "involved, but neutral". The acceptance or dismissal of the concept of decline (or "Decadence") separates them. In Christakos' study on Integrative Problem-Solving in the age of "Decadence", it is never a *simple* matter of decline and fall. A large number of mutually interacting random variables are represented in the form of joint probability. These interactions often have specific structures, so that when a set of variables is fixed some variables are independent from others. In other words, they are conditionally independent, and their interactions take place only through these conditioning variables (Shiro *et al.* 2004: 1779). Stochastic reasoning is never simple, but stochastic modeling makes complicating data (the structure and dynamics of crisis) more approachable and easier to analyze.

It appears that the new concept of "Decadence" is effective in finding solutions to negative trends obtained and interpreted by stochastic modeling of social data in their techno-ecological niche. The same turn-of-the-century term seems almost obsolete from the perspective of empirical types of historiography, whether they are purely descriptive or social. Late modern historiography does not find it necessary to search for *solutions* to problems presented by collected historical data, even when it—for example, in the methodological approach typical of cultural historiography—gives contextual explanations and enters a discussion about the influences of social constructions. Historiographical approaches based on G. R. Elton's "*descriptive history*" model (Elton 1965) are opposed to analysis and contextual explanation in their belief that reality is an objective "given" sum of facts

that can be described with scientific precision and rendered from a “neutral” perspective of quantitative research, including some formal statistical methods. However, these methods are not adequate for modeling dynamic systems because they do not include more complex probabilistic reasoning. That the modern historiographer’s perspective leaves solutions to problems to be “worked out” by real-life political and economic factors may be morally disputable, but the option to *describe without taking a position* is a matter of methodological choice in historiography.

Then again, it is not only a matter of counterposing one methodological practice against another: *describing* against *analyzing*, and *inferring from data* against *proposing solutions*. It is the concept of progress—and its acceptance or negation—that exposes the core of the argument, both in modern and postmodern historiographical debates.

“Textual criticism” as a postmodern historical approach adheres to the belief that there is no absolute “truth” in representing historical data. The postmodernists of the 1980s and 90s “favored the contingent, discontinuous, marginalized, oppressed, unique, perspectival, and ineffable”, and rejected the modernist view of history as progress (Breisach 2003: 4):

Language changed from being the neutral medium between consciousness and the outside reality to being itself the only accessible reality. Mostly overlooked in the stipulation of the Linguistic Turn as the ultimate basis for this postmodernism has been that the view of reality as a web of ceaselessly and aimlessly shifting linguistic relationships has as its fundamental premise a world of total flux. Henceforth, the only acceptable continuity was the continuity of change since it was an “empty” or formal nonoppressive continuity. (Breisach 2003: 25)

The concept of change without progress is originally connected to the anthropological description of *involution* in cultural forms that, having reached its definitive form, *continued to develop by increasing internal complexity*, (like Gothic architecture) (see Goldenweiser 1936, and Geertz 1963, 1991). Cultural involution is not the *exhaustion* of a cultural form, unproblematically analogous to the biological involution of unused organs that results in their shrinking, or retrograde changes that occur in the body in old age. Nevertheless, we can draw some parallels with the biological concept of involution in the sense that involution and evolution are “two names for two phases of the same procedure of growth and are perpetually coactive and interactive” (Bar-Yehuda Idalovich 2014: 788). As we stated earlier, “backwards” or “forwards” is a matter of interpretation, depending on the

degree of our insight into the dynamics of the redistribution of complexities and simplicities. It is tempting to see the concept of involution in Bourget’s definition of decadent style, and its literary procedure of “decomposing the page”, as well as to recognize *the “decadence” of interpretational change without progress* in the postmodern methodology of textual criticism and cultural deconstruction, and in the philosophical basis for it, in “Derrida’s Derrida”. As Catherine Malabou shows in *Counterpath: Travelling with Jacques Derrida*, deconstruction destroys standard interpretational travelogues as accounts of the advance towards certain points in the geography of theory and practice:

Traveling with Derrida thus implies taking the Odyssey by surprise, exploring a jagged landscape, full of “effects” and “collapsing,” finally following the thread of a strange and perilous adventure that consists in *arriving without deriving*. (Malabou 2004: 10)

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A rejuvenated approach to decadent literature—we believe—could lead to valuable insights into the problem of “decadence” in a postmodern epoch abundant in trans-historical re-imaginings of modernism, usually accompanied by a methodological preference for an interdisciplinary approach. Our main goal in writing this paper was to move beyond discipline-specific approaches to address socio-philosophical notions like “progress” and “decline”.

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