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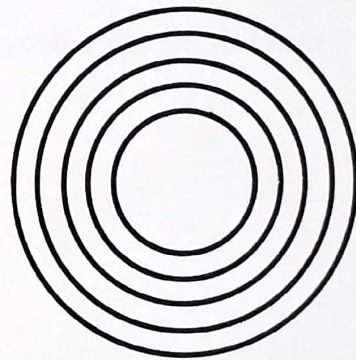
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# THE THEORY OF THE AVANT-GARDE

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*translated from the Italian by Gerald Fitzgerald*

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#### 4. AGONISM AND FUTURISM



## Nihilism

We now return, after a long parenthesis, to the typology of avant-garde attitudes, continuing from the point at which we left it, the nihilistic moment or *nihilism*. It will perhaps be useful to say that this term is not to be taken as implicitly derogatory; it has no more of a derogatory connotation than any other term used here, though the others are generally of a more innocuous appearance. We use the term to allude in a purely descriptive way to a determinate state of mind, not to judge, even less to condemn, that state of mind. This, fundamentally, is to use the word as originally intended, since the French orientalist Burnouf coined it to translate, without any value judgment, the philosophical concept of nirvana. Turgenev, to be sure, then used the term in quite a different way and caused it to take on, inside Russia and beyond, the added meaning of terrorism or the extreme of intellectual radicalism. Nihilism is used here, without love or hate, to indicate a characteristic *forma mentis*, and nothing else.

If the essence of activism lies in acting for the sake of acting; of antagonism, acting by negative reaction; then the essence of nihilism lies in attaining nonaction by acting, lies in destructive, not con-



structive, labor. No avant-garde movement fails to display, at least to some degree, this tendency, either on this side of the activist and antagonist impulses or beyond them. Activism and antagonism are most profoundly and authentically revealed in Italian futurism, but the stimulus of nihilistic destruction appears there too. For example, that stimulus is betrayed or, better, is expressed in the title *L'Incendario* (The Firebug), which was imposed on the first edition of Palazzeschi's poems by Marinetti (the poems now seem more crepuscular than futuristic). As for Russian futurism, it is enough to point out that within that movement there briefly crystallized a current or group whose members called themselves *nichevoki*, which has the ring of "the nothing-ists." Mayakovsky later gave extreme nihilistic expression to antitraditionalism and the cult of the *tabula rasa* when he said, "I write *nihil* on anything that has been done before." English vorticism acutely displayed the same state of mind with its official, short-lived organ *Blast*, so called by the same Wyndham Lewis who no less suggestively entitled his own literary memoirs, *Blasting and Bombardiering*. But it was perhaps only in dadaism that the nihilistic tendency functioned as the primary, even solitary, psychic condition; there it took the form of an intransigent puerility, an extreme infantilism. We have already mentioned this complementary and particular aspect of nihilism and shall again; enough now to establish that there existed in the avant-garde mentality a nihilism and an infantilism which functioned reciprocally. Further, as practical psychology teaches us, the taste for destruction seems innate in the soul of a child.

Be that as it may, the nihilistic tendency in its pure state demonstrably attained its most intense and varied expression in dadaism. Fundamentally, the dadaist position began by repeating and carrying to extremes what Rimbaud, the great standard bearer of contemporary avant-gardism, had already formulated at the end of his poetic career: "Now I hate mystical effusions and stylistic quirks. *Maintenant je sais que l'art est une sottise.*" In a way both analogous and opposed to Rimbaud's negation, the nihilism of dada is not a specifically literary or aesthetic posture; it is radical and totalitarian, integral



and metaphysical. It invests not only the movement's program of action but also its very *raison d'être*. "Dada does not mean anything," declared Tristan Tzara, and his negative statement ought to be extended to issues even more substantial than the mere name. "There is a great destructive, negative task to be done: sweeping out, cleaning up"—so we read in yet another of the founder's manifestoes. These dadaist manifestoes announce a totally nihilistic attitude, whether the issue is art in general ("the abolition of creation") or the art of the avant-garde itself ("the abolition of the future"). The second of these analogous formulas attacks the favorite myth not only of futurism but of the whole avant-garde.

Although many ex-dadaists protested against the history of the movement that Georges Ribémont-Dessaignes wrote for the *Nouvelle revue française*, he was certainly right in saying that "the action of dada was a revolt against art, morality, and society." This again demonstrates that, in the spirit of avant-garde art, ideology and psychology are quite as important as poetics and aesthetics. Even an unprejudiced observer like André Gide judged dadaism, which its supporters had called "a demolishing operation," to be "a negating operation": demolishing and negating extended to all human values, as we see from the title of one of the movement's organs, *Le Cannibal*.

Furthermore, avant-garde nihilism was not exhausted in dadaism. Just as it had at least in part inherited the tendency from futurism, so it passed it on in turn, almost intact, to surrealism. It is not necessary to point out that the latter survives, more or less endemically and latently, in the most recent avant-garde experiences. As proof, enough to cite a little review founded a few years ago by a group of young American expatriate writers, laconically and significantly entitled *Zero*. The ability of the nihilistic tendency to transform itself into a thousand disguises does not negate, but rather affirms, its continuity and permanence; it can be metamorphosed into skeptical and cynical negations, as sometimes happened with the surrealists, who more than once used the words of their leader André Breton to proclaim "the feeling of the theatrical and joyless



uselessness of all things." Naturally, the nihilistic attitude had its immediate and spontaneous aesthetic reflections, among them the *denigrating image* (to be discussed later), a form inspired by a genuine poetic nihilism, especially when dictated by an intent that goes beyond the merely technical factors of stylistic deformation.

However, it remains true that avant-garde nihilism is predominantly psychological or social in nature, though functioning in terms of cultural problems. In other words, we are dealing with a professional psychological deformation which is a function of particular sociological phenomena. Doubtless the nihilistic posture represents the point of extreme tension reached by antagonism toward the public and tradition; doubtless its true significance is a revolt of the modern artist against the spiritual and social ambience in which he is destined to be born and to grow and to die. The motivations for this revolt appear simultaneously under the different guises of reaction and escape: reaction against the modern debasement of art in mass culture and popular art; escape into a world very remote from that of the dominant cultural reality, from vulgar and common art, by dissolving art and culture into a new and paradoxical nirvana.

Only a few rare leftist critics, those who are not insensitive to the tragic pathos of contemporary culture, have been able fully to comprehend and feel this nihilistic dialectic of avant-gardism. Such is the British Marxist, Christopher Caudwell, as may be seen in a passage from his *Studies in a Dying Culture*, which is valid despite the severely condemnatory tone and the *parti pris* of the ideology inspiring it: "Thus bourgeois art disintegrates under the tension of two forces, both arising from the same feature of bourgeois culture. On the one hand there is production for the market—vulgarisation, commercialisation. On the other there is hypostatisation of the art work as the goal of the art process, and the relation between art work and individual as paramount. This necessarily leads to a dissolution of those social values which make the art in question a social relation, and therefore ultimately results in the art work's ceasing to be an art work and becoming a mere private phantasy . . .



And, in the sphere of art it produced the increasing individualism which, seen at its best in Shakespeare, was a positive value, but pushed to its limit finally spelt the complete breakdown of art in Surrealism, Dadaism and Steinism." But of this we shall speak at greater length when we study the connection between avant-garde art and the society from which it derives and which it opposes.

### *Agonism*

Of unlimited importance is the moment of *agonism*, no doubt representing one of the most inclusive psychological tendencies in modern culture and deserving, therefore, a more ample discussion. But here it will be treated only as a function of avant-garde art where it manifests itself in some of the most typical forms of that art. The ideal meaning behind the word *agonism* is clearly joined to the Greek *agone* and *agonia* from which it derives, although it transcends the pure etymological meaning. If *agonism* meant no more than *agone*, it would be only a synonym for activism and would express only the modern cult of contest, sport, and game. If *agonism* meant no more than *agonia*, it would allude to that tragic sense of life so intensely felt by Pascal and Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, by all those whom Leone Sestov called the "philosophers of tragedy": the sense, that is, of what the existentialist movement in our day has popularized.

But what we mean here by *agonism* is more pathetic than tragic, is neither Christian nor Dionysian. Derived from the modern historical pathos, it represents the deepest psychological motivation not only behind the decadent movement, but also behind the general currents culminating in that particular movement and not exhausted by it, since they were destined to outlive decadence and reach back in time to romanticism itself. In these currents (and this seems at least an apparent difference from the decadent position), the agonistic attitude is not a passive state of mind, exclusively dominated by a sense of imminent catastrophe; on the contrary, it strives to



transform the catastrophe into a miracle. By acting, and through its very failure, it tends toward a result justifying and transcending itself.

Agonism means tension: the pathos of a Laocoön struggling in his ultimate spasm to make his own suffering immortal and fecund. In short, agonism means sacrifice and consecration: an hyperbolic passion, a bow bent toward the impossible, a paradoxical and positive form of spiritual defeatism. The most typical aesthetic symbol of this state of mind is precisely that attempted and failed masterpiece of the most extreme literary avant-gardism, the *Coup de dés* thrown by Mallarmé almost as an ultimate gesture of defiance at the instant of supreme tension.

Mario Praz, or others for him, justly rendered as the "romantic agony" the translation of his study of the cult of death, flesh, and the devil, among the most extreme and symptomatic themes of modern literature. The author intended, with that title, to demonstrate once again the continuity between the romantic and the avant-garde mentalities. Nothing better demonstrates the presence of an agonistic mentality in the avant-garde aesthetic consciousness than the frequency in modern poetry of what we shall call the *hyperbolic image* (to be discussed later). That the agonistic myth had been more or less obscurely divined by the contemporary critical consciousness is shown by the frequent concept of the artist as victim-hero. The agonistic tendency not only appears within the confines of aesthetic psychology or sociology; at times it expresses itself directly even in critical terminology. Enough to recall the frequent use of the concept of tension in New Criticism, not only antagonistically, in reference to the conflict supposed to occur between opposite polarities within a work of art, but also by way of a contrast between the work and the atmosphere in which it is produced, a contrast presupposing that the creative act occurs in a state of crisis.

Obviously, in an epoch like ours, dominated by an anxiety or an anguish alien to any metaphysical or mystical redemption, agonism must above all be conceived of as a sacrifice to the Moloch of historicism. Romanticism is, to a large extent, historicism, and his-



toricism means not only an enlarging and deepening of the historical vision of the world, or the capacity for comprehending the infinite metamorphoses of the *Zeitgeist*, but also an idolizing of history, the history not only of the past, but of the present and future, made into a divinity. This is precisely the transcendental function, or ideal mission, of avant-garde agonism—to be studied in the following section, as *futurism*, a term used as a common noun to indicate a general tendency rather than a determinate movement. Meanwhile, it will suffice here to define the agonistic variant of futurism as a self-sacrifice not to posthumous glory, but to the glory of posterity.

But this side, or that, of the agonistic sacrifice to the future (the avant-gardes were sufficiently conscious of this to name a movement for it), we ought to say also that avant-garde artists sometimes allowed themselves to be completely seduced by an agonism which was almost gratuitous, by a sense of sacrifice and a morbid taste for present suffering that was not conceived of as self-immolation on behalf of future generations. We can give testimony for this feeling from the realm of the lyric. It occurs in the verses from Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, used to introduce this book, in which the poet asks the men of the present for pity:

*Pitié pour nous qui combattons toujours aux frontières  
De l'illimité et de l'avenir  
Pitié pour nos erreurs pitié pour nos péchés.*

But we can also give testimony from the critical realm to support the more general truth, using a passage where Massimo Bontempelli, after declaring that "the very spirit of avant-garde movements is that of the sacrifice and consecration of the self for those who come after," then concludes with an affirmation that even an excessively restricted chronology does not invalidate: "In practice, the avant-gardes of the first fifteen years of the century have in general submitted to the fate of military avant-gardes, from whom the image is taken: men destined for the slaughter so that after them others may stop to build."

Furthermore, this immolation of the self to the art of the future



must be understood not only as an anonymous and collective sacrifice, but also as the self-immolation of the isolated creative personality. Thus the agonistic sacrifice is felt as the fatal obligation of the individual artist, not only of the movement he leads or the historic current that sweeps him along. So Rimbaud in *Lettre du voyant* speaks of the perdition that destiny assigns to anyone wishing to be a new poet:

*Qu'il crève dans son bondissement par les choses inouïes et innomables: viendront d'autres horribles travailleurs; ils commenceront par les horizons où l'autre s'est affaissé.*

[Let him croak with his jumping into unheard of and unnameable things: other horrible workers will come; they'll start from the horizons where he broke down.]

Still in the ideologies of more recent avant-gardes, the agonistic sacrifice is conceived in terms of a collective group of men born and growing up at the same moment in history: in other words, as Gertrude Stein called a generation that ironically survived itself and a world war, a lost generation. But it is important to repeat that this destiny is often accepted not only as a historic fatalism but as a psychological one as well. So the agonistic tendency itself seems to represent the masochistic impulse in the avant-garde psychosis, just as the nihilistic seems to be the sadistic.

### *Futurism*

Exactly by virtue of this paradoxical agonism, functioning almost as a positive defeatism, followers of the avant-garde in the arts act as if they were disposed to make dung heaps of themselves for the fertilizing of conquered lands, or mountains of corpses over which a new generation may in its turn scale the besieged fortress. A real and true *course au flambeau*, agonism then transforms itself into *futurism*, as Bontempelli well understood and showed us in the preceding section. As already observed, the futurist moment belongs to all the avant-gardes and not only to the one named for



it; to generalize the term is not in the least arbitrary, even in view of Ortega y Gasset's and Arnold Toynbee's use of it as a historic and philosophically generic term to designate eternal psychological tendencies belonging to all periods and all phases of culture.

Therefore, the so-named movement was only a significant symptom of a broader and deeper state of mind. Italian futurism had the great merit of fixing and expressing it, coining that most fortunate term as its own label. Indeed, precisely because the futurist moment is more or less present in all the avant-gardes, the best definitions are not those offered by actual and official futurism, which in any case sensed only its most superficial and external aspects; the best definitions come from witnesses outside the specific movement. One of these is, again, Bontempelli who, at the end of the passage cited earlier, furnishes, perhaps unwittingly and without wanting to, the definition we seek: "In sum, the avant-gardes had the function of creating the primitive or, better, primordial condition out of which is then born the creator found at the beginning of a new series." This means that in the psychology and ideology of avant-garde art, historically considered (from the viewpoint of what Hegelians and Marxists would call the historical dialectic), the futurist manifestation represents, so to speak, a prophetic and utopian phase, the arena of agitation and preparation for the announced revolution, if not the revolution itself. So evident and natural a political parallel could not escape Leon Trotsky, who in his book of literary theory and criticism defined the historical mission of Russian futurism as follows: "Futurism was the pre-vision of all that (the imminent social and political crises, the explosions and catastrophes of history to come) within the sphere of art."

We can then sum up the tendency in question by saying that the initiators and followers of an avant-garde movement were conscious of being the precursors of the art of the future. Hence derives the characteristic impatience of the contemporary soul which Umberto Saba clearly noted in one of his little books of aphorisms, thinking perhaps not only of our century but also of the Novecento movement named after it: "The twentieth century seems to have



one desire only, to get to the twenty-first as soon as possible." To understand the historical impatience of avant-gardism we need, first of all, to examine critically the agonistic component of the concept of the *precursor*.

The idea of the precursor, as commonly used, is an *a posteriori* concept. It involves a retrospective historical awareness which identifies men and ideas of a more or less remote past as seeming to have anticipated some philosophical or religious, ethical or political, cultural or artistic revelation belonging to the present or to the less remote past. In the rare moments when avant-garde art seeks to justify itself by the authority or arbitration of history, in any one of the partial and infrequent fits of humanism or traditionalism that now and again afflict it, even it deigns to look for its own patent of nobility in the chronicles of the past and to trace for itself a family tree of more or less authentic ancestors, more or less distant precursors.

Such a regression is particularly erroneous in the case we are studying here. In fact, even if for different reasons, there seems to be justice in the polemical claims of its followers and supporters that avant-garde art is an art of exception, exceptional not only in the present but also in the whole tradition. But in any case the regression is fallacious: historically it is clearly arbitrary, a patent spiritual anachronism, to believe in the objective existence of precursors, concrete and thus identifiable, for a given historical reality. In the face of such a pretension, only two alternatives are possible: either admit that everyone, as children of history and the past, has had precursors (excepting Adam) and that these precursors are no more and no less than the whole human race; or contrariwise deny that anyone has ever had any, insofar as each of us constitutes a *unicum* and an *individuum*, each enclosing within himself an irreducible and unmistakable historical and psychic personality.

The invalidity of the precursor concept, understood retrospectively, multiplies to infinity when considered in an inverse relation, as a function of the future, an anticipatory anachronism—which is exactly what the avant-garde in general, and the futurist moment in



particular, does do. How can we reasonably and consciously consider ourselves as the roots or seeds of a plant this side of creation, not yet existing in any solid historical terrain, of whose ability to strike roots, of whose growing power, we know nothing, ignorant even of its botanical species? If by this question, purely rhetorical as it is, we intend to deny value to the precursor as a concept, we must be careful not to discredit or undervalue its significance and scope as a myth. Its mythical character constitutes the efficacy and importance of this idea-force, rich in normative powers and formative virtues, as is any metaphysical or mystical belief.

Similar powers and virtues naturally adhere even in the first and most modest conception contained in the notion of the precursor, which in its totality and integrity could only have been formulated by self-complacent modernists, those thus ignorant of, or at least alienated from, the spirit of the ancients who—and how dearly—loved the opposite notion of the epigone (when that was, naturally, void of the excessively pejorative sense now attributed to the word). But the metaphysical and mystical intensity of the precursor myth grows in geometric proportion when the initial relationship is replaced (the present–past, operating in favor of the present contemporary age and the generation to which we belong) by an inverse relationship (present–future, where, following the dictates of the agonistic spirit, the current generation and the culture of our day become a subordinate function of the culture to come).

This attitude, in itself, makes up the integrating part of what might be called the historical mythology of contemporary art, and exercises particular influence in avant-garde psychology and ideology. Precisely therefore, it works directly, as an emotional leavening, on the mentality of the artist in our time, making him assume arbitrary and paradoxical positions in the face of his own work. Thus it is seldom expressed in critical theory, but often lyrically, as a poetic confession. This type, or way, of confession recurs in the prose of manifestoes, which often are fiction and literature rather than aesthetics and poetics. It recurs even more frequently in the works of



art themselves, as in these lines from Mayakovsky, significant also because they betray the hyperbolic ideal in a wholly mechanical and quantitative way:

*Shakespeare and Byron possessed 80,000 words in all:  
The future genius-poet shall in every minute  
Possess 80,000,000,000 words, squared.*

As such a citation shows, the author seems to conceive of his own art and that of his generation as a preparatory phase, as the study for or prelude to a future revolution in the arts. The poetry of the future is furnished with an arsenal of verbal instruments which grows in geometric proportion, in contrast to the arithmetic proportions of the technical means presently available; an arsenal of future means whose quantity can be rendered only in astronomic ciphers or by virtue of a hyperbolic image.

The sense or consciousness of belonging to an intermediate stage, to a present already distinct from the past and to a future in potentiality which will be valid only when the future is actuality, all this explains the origin of the idea of transition, that agonistic concept par excellence, favorite myth of an apocalyptic and crisis-ridden era, a myth particularly dear to the most recent avant-gardes and, despite all appearances to the contrary, bound up with the futurist attitude. That the avant-garde spirit was conscious of what this concept leads to is proved by the fact that a literary review, written in English, brought out for years in Paris the work of expatriate and cosmopolitan writers; it commends itself greatly to us for having published fragments of *Finnegans Wake* when James Joyce's extreme experiment was still "work in progress." The founder and director of this review, Eugene Jolas, chose to entitle it, paradoxically with an initial minuscule, *transition*.

The idea of transition, as a variant of avant-garde futurism, clearly reveals its special function as an antithesis to the historical myth favored by the classical ages, as so luminously formulated by Ortega in *The Revolt of the Masses*: the myth that consists of the illusory belief of each of those classical ages that it had attained to



the "fullness of time." Each classical age felt that it represented a summit, to which the recent past was only the way up and which the imminent future would be obliged to preserve if it wished to avoid what would otherwise be a fatal and infelicitous fall back to barbarism. By virtue of an analogous historical-mythical antithesis, that between classical and romantic, the antinomy between the classical and the transitional again recalls the problem of the avant-garde's relation to romanticism, and makes it necessary to examine that relationship from a futurist viewpoint.

To a superficial observer, the romantic idea of the *Zeitgeist* in fact appears almost as a modern variation of the myth of the fullness of time. But that myth is static, whereas the *Zeitgeist* myth is dynamic. The fundamental principle of the latter is that every age attains the fullness of its own time, not by being, but by becoming, not in terms of its own self but of its relative historical mission and hence of history as an absolute. This means that for moderns the consciousness of historical culmination, or the fullness of time, is at once granted or denied to each epoch, pertaining to none or to all. In the consciousness of a classical epoch, it is not the present that brings the past to a culmination, but the past that culminates in the present, and the present is in its turn understood as a new triumph of ancient and eternal values, as a return to the principles of the true and the just, as a restoration or rebirth of those principles. But for the moderns the present is valid only by virtue of the potentialities of the future, as the matrix of the future, insofar as it is the forge of history in continual metamorphosis, seen as a permanent spiritual revolution.

Here, again, we see the romantic spirit and the avant-garde spirit in contrast, as if to demonstrate that what we call the futurism of the avant-garde could not have been born without the romantic precedent of the *Zeitgeist*. The two myths are complementary: the "presentism" of the *Zeitgeist* stands to the futurism of contemporary art as romanticism does to avant-gardism. Furthermore, it was precisely by the term "presentism" that Wyndham Lewis defined the credo of the movement he founded and named "vorticism," by which he deceived himself into believing that he had surpassed Italian and



French futurism, as the dadaists also tried to do when they postulated the "abolition of the future." It may be that in so doing dadaism and vorticism overcame the historical and concrete futurism, but certainly not the typical and ideal one, what should be defined as the agonistic interpretation of the mission of the present. In any event, the image used by Wyndham Lewis is agonistic and nihilistic when, in his manifesto, he describes his movement as "the new vortex," which "plunges to the heart of the present."

A passage from Jung proves that the dialectic of the *Zeitgeist* was not exclusive to the romantic and avant-garde cultures, but easily extends to almost all the sectors of civilization in our time and infects even the philosophical and scientific exponents. One of Jung's passages reveals a clear awareness of the absolute modernity of the conception of the present as a matrix of the future, as well as the quasi-transcendental value that the idea, or image, of transition has assumed for us: "Today is a process of transition which separates itself from yesterday in order to go toward tomorrow. He who understands it, in this way, has the right to consider himself a modern." And in another passage the same author shows that he understands the connection between the nineteenth-century myth of limitless progress and the avant-garde's future-oriented utopias. He also perceives the antagonistic, antitraditional components, nihilistic and agonistic, in the futurist attitude: "The progressivist ideal is always rather abstract, unnatural, and immoral, inasmuch as it requires faithlessness to tradition. Progress won by will power is always a spasm."

### *Decadence*

At this point we need another parenthesis. One may legitimately doubt that what the history of modern arts and letters knows as *decadence* is really an avant-garde movement while still recognizing its general kinship with romanticism. Actually, a retrospective awareness of its precursors is characteristic of the decadent mentality, and modern "decadences" do nothing but appeal to defunct



civilizations, to predecessor and ancient decadences: Alexandrian or Byzantine Hellenism; the Latin of the late empire, or Silver Latin; the Middle Ages, those most obscure, barbaric, and gothic centuries. On the other hand, a tendency to ignore the anticipatory and prospective side of the precursor concept seems to come just as naturally to the decadent temperament. It also ignores the antihistorical and presentist aspects of the avant-garde mind: the first is ignored because of its own vision of the past as an uninterrupted decaying; the second, because of its own concept of decadence as pure *Zeitgeist*.

In this regard it must be observed that the decadent spirit sometimes (though not always) shows itself hostile to contemporary civilization, and this might lead one to suppose a negative attitude on the part of the decadents toward the avant-garde's futurist impatience. Théophile Gautier shows that this is not always the case when he affirms, in his essay on Baudelaire, that the decadent spirit is in harmony with the crisis of contemporary civilization. Gautier's hypothesis, as well as the implied relation between decadence and futurism, would seem to be confirmed by the confrontation and contrast between a Russian and an Italian definition. The old Russian poet Vyacheslav Ivanov, in his debate with Mikhail Gershenzon on cultural destinies ("Correspondence from Opposite Corners"), defined decadence as "the feeling, at once oppressive and exalting, of being the last of a series." Bontempelli, at the end of the passage cited earlier, believes the mission and function of the avant-garde to be the opening of a new series, or at least the preparing of its way.

These two definitions represent two extremes and as such they touch, showing that decadence and avant-gardism are related, if not identical. The implicit distinction is a secondary one, limited to recognizing that, while the futurist mentality tremulously awaits an artistic palingenesis, preparing for its coming practically and mystically, the decadent mentality resigns itself to awaiting it passively, with anguished fatality and inert anxiety. Bontempelli considers the avant-garde's aim and ideal to be the establishing of a primitive or primordial condition which makes possible a grand future renaissance. But in the decadent spirit one can also perceive



a profound and disturbed nostalgia for a new primitiveness: the wait with mixed fear and hope for the coming of a new "return to barbarism." Paul Verlaine had already sensed this sentimental and dialectic contrast when he closed his sonnet "Décadence" with the vision of a mob of "huge white barbarians" at the horizon of that sky over the sinking Roman Empire.

Fundamentally there is no great difference between the decadent's dream of a new infancy (dear to old age) and the futurist's dream of a new maturity or youth, of a more virginal and stronger world. Degeneration and immaturity equally aspire to transcend the self in a subsequent flourishing; thus the generations that feel themselves decrepit, like those that feel themselves adolescent, are both lost generations, *par excellence*. If agonistic tendencies triumph in avant-garde futurism, a passive agonism dominates the decadent mentality, the pure and simple sense of agony. Decadence means no more than a morbid complacency in feeling oneself *passé*: a sentiment that also, unconsciously, inspires the burnt offerings of the avant-garde to the cultural future.

The *Zeitgeist* which was for the romantics only one of the many metamorphoses of the genius of history, hence a dialectic and dramatic manifestation, became for the avant-garde a tragic and heroic manifestation; for the decadents, dionysian or pathetic. Nothing is more full of pathos than determinism or nihilism; hence, nothing more full of pathos than the anarchistic fatalism of the dadaists, who fundamentally represented only a return of decadence within recent avant-gardes. Thus Von Sydow's definition of decadence as a "culture of negation" seems especially suited to the dadaists. Yet one could say the same for futurism, in which the critic Piccone Stella, writing on the occasion of Marinetti's death, believed he saw "the last clanking patrol of European decadence" (perceived by others before him, beginning with Benedetto Croce and Francesco Flora). This explains why and how the most facile and frequent motif of hostile criticism is to accuse all avant-garde art of decadence, following a prejudice that leftists love as dearly as rightists do. But this



a profound and disturbed nostalgia for a new primitiveness: the wait with mixed fear and hope for the coming of a new "return to barbarism." Paul Verlaine had already sensed this sentimental and dialectic contrast when he closed his sonnet "Décadence" with the vision of a mob of "huge white barbarians" at the horizon of that sky over the sinking Roman Empire.

Fundamentally there is no great difference between the decadent's dream of a new infancy (dear to old age) and the futurist's dream of a new maturity or youth, of a more virginal and stronger world. Degeneration and immaturity equally aspire to transcend the self in a subsequent flourishing; thus the generations that feel themselves decrepit, like those that feel themselves adolescent, are both lost generations, *par excellence*. If agonistic tendencies triumph in avant-garde futurism, a passive agonism dominates the decadent mentality, the pure and simple sense of agony. Decadence means no more than a morbid complacency in feeling oneself *passé*: a sentiment that also, unconsciously, inspires the burnt offerings of the avant-garde to the cultural future.

The *Zeitgeist* which was for the romantics only one of the many metamorphoses of the genius of history, hence a dialectic and dramatic manifestation, became for the avant-garde a tragic and heroic manifestation; for the decadents, dionysian or pathetic. Nothing is more full of pathos than determinism or nihilism; hence, nothing more full of pathos than the anarchistic fatalism of the dadaists, who fundamentally represented only a return of decadence within recent avant-gardes. Thus Von Sydow's definition of decadence as a "culture of negation" seems especially suited to the dadaists. Yet one could say the same for futurism, in which the critic Piccone Stella, writing on the occasion of Marinetti's death, believed he saw "the last clanking patrol of European decadence" (perceived by others before him, beginning with Benedetto Croce and Francesco Flora). This explains why and how the most facile and frequent motif of hostile criticism is to accuse all avant-garde art of decadence, following a prejudice that leftists love as dearly as rightists do. But this



prejudice disqualifies itself by using the myth or concept antihistorically.

This too long digression can be justified as a complementary proof of the hypothesis that historical continuity exists between the romantic and the avant-garde Zeitgeists. In effect it establishes a supplementary connection between the paradoxical historicism of the decadent's love of the past and the no less paradoxical futurism of the avant-gardist. We advise anyone who has doubts on this score to think again of the concept of transition, which we have shown to be related to futurism and which itself reveals an affinity to decadence.