



GENEALOGY AND DEGENERESCENCE: THE CULTURE OF DECADENT LEGACY

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*Abstract – Starting with the considerations formulated by the philosopher Maël Renouard in his essay Nostalgie et mélancolie regarding the both material and symbolic meaning of a heritage and from Nietzsche’s reflection on the connection between heritage and memory, we analyzed this topic from the conjugate perspective of decadent aesthetics and philosophy of decadence as approached by theorists such as Mario Praz, A.E. Carter, Richard Gilman, David Weir, Barbara Spackman, Matei Calinescu and philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Oswald Spengler, or Emil Cioran and degenerationist theories of heredity from the late 19th century. From the perspective of heritage as cultural memory and defective heredity correlated with the decadent theme of the last living scion of an aristocratic family or of genius as a “superior degenerate” in Cesare Lombroso’s terms, we approached two relevant texts in this sense: the novel *Against the Grain* by K.-J. Huysmans and the short story *Remember* by the Romanian writer Mateiu I. Caragiale. The decadent aesthete type becomes the depository of an extended cultural memory, a living library/pinacothèque, at a time when the heritage can no longer be passed on but only exhibited for the last time.*

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A Decadent View on Heredity

The debate over decadence¹, a “literary movement” that actually failed to become one, has classified it either as an expression of artificiality in modernity, according to A.E. Carter in *The Idea of Decadence*

in the French Literature, 1830-1900², or as a “dynamics of transition”, according to David Weir in *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*³, or as one “face of modernity”, according to Matei Calinescu in *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*⁴. Anyway, the term has been outclassed by one more appealing to the Republic of Letters, namely symbolism, whose manifesto was published by Jean Moréas in *Le Figaro* in 1886. In the absence of a systematically configured poetics such as that of symbolism, decadence nevertheless boasts an imagination richly fed in the age by the graver preoccupation with the decline of European culture and civilization. The same topic is addressed by the literati, philosophers, and historians, as well as by medical experts, from hygienists and alienists to psychoanalysts, criminologists, and sociologists. Actually, two major directions – of the arts and especially of literature, on the one hand, and of epistemes, on the other – converge in relation to the broad topic of decadence in all its forms. The interest in artificiality and disease, especially mental disease, and sexual deviance, or “psychopathia sexualis”, to use the seminal phrase of Kraft-Ebbing⁵, who offers a series of literary models and examples that can refine sensations and sublimate horror and the ugly, and implicitly, the interest in art for art’s sake, converge with the interest in heredity. Heredity indicates a legacy that cannot be refused and that forges an indirect connection with one’s ancestors, both with their biology in silent terms and with their biography at the level of expression, in the case of aristocrats, the topic of heredity fuses with biography in genealogy. To state it otherwise, heredity is articulated in a genealogical narrative, which, in turn, can be integrated into a family history. Yet, heredity circumscribes within decadent aesthetics exclusively a “loaded” form of heredity, or, in other words, defective heredity. For what is any legacy, after all, if beyond its material dimension there is not a symbolic one too, that has accrued in the history of those who have transmitted it?

I am interested here in the relevance of this decadent legacy, as I would call it, a legacy that merges issues of heredity with an aesthetic filiation. In *Nostalgie et mélancolie*, an essay included in the edited volume *Hériter, et après?*, philosopher Maël Renouard makes two essential observations. One concerns the inherent ambiguity of the notion of legacy, whether in a literal or metaphorical sense. “Legacy” refers

euphorically to wealth, possessions, but also to transmission and continuity; in other words, it has a positive – victorious – connotation by naming the successful transfer of a capital that the “inheritors” may use. Yet, there is also a dysphoric dimension of legacy, for it invokes death: the legacy is thus a compensatory mechanism for loss, absence, or breaking up. We can notice, within the richness of what is preserved, the shadow of what is lost too. However, we can also wonder to what extent the legacy passed down to us does not also carry the “curse” of a commitment we cannot ignore, a token of death. Anyway, David Weir has noted what we may call a paradox of decadent aesthetics, where degeneration assimilates a hyper-refinement of the family: “the paradoxical parallelism of degeneration and refinement”⁶. Of course, heredity is much more congenial to the current topic than a cheque or a bank account number would be, yet the very notion of cultural legacy can be couched in terms of a problematic transmission. Maël Renouard’s second remark uses an observation by Nietzsche in *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* [On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life], in *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen* [Untimely Meditations], regarding the excess of history inherent in any legacy, to which Nietzsche opposes the necessity of oblivion and creative action in the present:

Ceux qui ne sont que des héritiers, des héritiers purs, seront eux-mêmes sans héritiers. Ce sont les malheureux que Nietzsche appelle les «tard venus». Ils sont des mémoires vivantes, dit-il, mais leur pensée sans héritiers est dépourvue de sens. Ils pressentent obscurément que leur vie est une injustice, car aucun avenir ne pourra la justifier⁷.

Nietzsche indicates a standstill, namely the moment when legacy transmission becomes impossible. At the same time, though, the legacy is fully apparent, thus transforming the last inheritor into its treasurer, a “living memory”. What Nietzsche calls the “Spätling” [latecomer], the last scion of a noble family, becomes an obsessive theme for the culture of decadence, and Vyacheslav Ivanov rightly notes “the feeling, at once oppressive and exalting, of being the last in a series”⁸. The issue of the last inheritor – incapable of passing down their legacy either in hereditary or cultural terms – is of great concern to decadence. In other words, what matters here is the legacy of decadence, which concerns

exclusively the heirless inheritor. To retain the ambiguity, we could say that the inheritor becomes the very legacy, while the legacy itself belongs to culture – it is culture.

In the nineteenth century, the notion of legacy or inheritance shifts away from jurisprudence – so important otherwise, for instance, for social relations, as the Victorian novel demonstrates – towards culture in its relation to ancient Greek and Roman culture or Renaissance culture to gain a new nuance. At the same time, though, inheritance does concern heredity, a notion shared by physicians, alienists such as Bénédict Augustin Morel, or hygienists interested in heredity such as Max Nordau, criminologists like Cesare Lombroso, or psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud; naturalist novels also reflect on the topic. A new categorical subdivision emerges between medicine, sociology, and anthropology, which belongs to none: degenerescence or degeneracy. Defined in simple terms, degenerescence is a pathological process that affects as much the biological as the social bodies (namely, society); the explanatory discourse uses “disease” as a metaphor to draw a parallel between the two bodies. In his *Traité de dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine et des causes qui produisent ces variétés maladives* (1857), the famous French psychiatrist Bénédict Augustin Morel depicts the growth of degeneracy in narrative terms, namely that it complies with laws and has an origin and an end. The process is somewhat discreet, accessible, as it is exclusively for the clinical gaze and implicitly for proper hermeneutics. Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Mathew Potolsky have coined the phrase “perennial decay” to name a mentality reflex of Europeans, starting from the fin-de-siècle view of European culture and civilization as decadent. They have also noticed a discursive tension regarding the “decadent” notion, for the term functions not only aesthetically but also as a critique of decadence itself, especially as framed by degeneracy: “Decadence does not stand as a basic fact from which the work can be assumed to proceed. Rather, it functions as a critical designation for a work whose textual strategies are in constant tension with its supposed explanations and examples”⁹. The morphology of culture that Oswald Spengler outlines in *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte* [The Decline of the West: Outlines of a Morphology of World History] is underpinned precisely by this decadent notion, in Spengler’s own terms, of “world decay”¹⁰. Emil Cioran simply

takes up the German philosopher's reflection when he devotes his essay *De la France*¹¹ to the decadence of French culture and civilization. Degeneracy is the epistemic correlative of decadence, which the positivism that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century highlights all the better. Degeneracy concerns a particular type of legacy, heredity, or rather a defective heredity that accrues ever more "vices" with each new generation. Two axes become apparent here. On the one hand, the horizontal, syntagmatic axis juxtaposes in the present the destitution of the pauper and the concupiscence of the privileged (the aristocracy and high bourgeoisie). On the other hand, the vertical, paradigmatic axis probes the depth of the legacy bestowed by one's forebears as *atavism*, from the Latin *atavus*, "ancestor". The notion of degeneracy further extends to the bohemian condition of the artist, his (*sic*) disorderly lifestyle, yet also to the condition of the decadent, bohemian artist and to his art as an expression of a high register degeneracy, or what Cesare Lombroso, in *The Man of Genius* (1891), names the "superior degenerate". Specifically, the work of art – in literature, the fine arts, music etc – virtually charts disease, preferably mental or sexual disease, on the "template" of an enormously successful book at the time, Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (*Entartung*, 1892). In *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to d'Annunzio*, Barbara Spackman aptly summarizes the problematics of decadent legacy in viewing the text as the particular expression of either a hereditary disease or a disease acquired because of weak heredity: "Yet the question asked is not who produced a text but what – what disease, what atavistic deformity, what hereditary fault"¹². The very same logic, if pushed to the extreme, led the Nazis to organize the "degenerate art" exhibition in Munich in 1937. On the other hand, writers assume what Barbara Spackman calls a "rhetoric of sickness", namely a problematic of "loaded" heredity whose management actually entails liquidating it in a formula that renders it aesthetic.

The Superior Degenerate and Genetic Load in K.-J. Huysmans

K.-J. Huysmans's *À rebours* was published in 1884 and before long became virtually a "gospel" of decadence for its protagonist, the aristocrat

Floressas des Esseintes, is the living image of decadent aesthetics. Highly seminal in European literature, the novel influenced the likes of Oscar Wilde and Gabriele D'Annunzio in Britain and Italy, respectively, and the Romanians C. I. A. Notarra and Mateiu I. Caragiale. Paradoxically, Huysmans chooses an exceptional character, a full-fledged individual who is as opposed to gregariousness and the collective as the extraordinary is opposed to the ordinary. He is the one intended to represent his age, not in what is shared in common but in what is distinct and particular, through its modern art and simultaneously through its impasse. At the same time, though, Floressas des Esseintes is the last scion of a moribund, crepuscular aristocracy, an aristocracy incapable of managing its inheritance or of passing it down and thus incapable of shaping a tradition – defeated as it is by the western democratization of society. The aristocracy has lost its social and political authority; the only authority it still has is aesthetic, one of good taste, hence preeminently antidemocratic, manifested in and through the work of art. Even here, though, an issue concerning inheritance still emerges, for the decadent genius or degenerate aristocrat is sterile par excellence and thus incapable of generating and transmitting his (*sic*) inheritance. The full expression of this incapacity lies in his considerable erudition, his highly refined artistic taste, a finesse concerned with detail. This kind of aristocrat overlaps with the “man of genius” as defined by Lombroso without necessarily being conflated into one, yet he meets the criteria of the exceptional. As Barbara Spackmann has put it,

From the Lombrosian island of normalcy, the view of genius includes sterility as an important feature, complemented by various forms of aberrant sexuality. [...] Genius represents both the highest evolutionary development and the most atavistic throwback, for sterility appears in the lowest animals as intelligence grows¹³.

The prefatory note in Huysmans's novel is emblematic for the way in which heredity inheritance shifts from a genealogical one to a figural dimension, as enshrined in the portrait gallery gracing Lourps Castle. Quite interestingly, the origins of the French nobleman are Germanic, not French, and they mix together knights, namely noblemen, and mercenaries, the pioneers of a robust family configuration. What is noteworthy is the “breach” (*trou*) in the portrait series, which also introduces a major imbalance. The early figures are serial, they share

as their common denominator physical robustness, a martial posture exuding bellicose energy, as the military gear confirms. Thus, we can see a group of ancestors, the founders, who form a military caste. However, between the portraits of this group of forebears and the next portrait, there is a jarring difference. What is shown next no longer belongs to military typology; instead, the portrait depicts an unctuous, refined, and effeminate courtier who lacks vitality. Nonetheless, the figure, for all its absent virility in comparison with the previous ones, does retain a semblance to the ancestors due to certain features, almost a family air, or, in the narrator's very words, "par un singulier phénomène d'atavisme". The inheritance is evidenced figuratively, while the phrase it is couched in (literally, "a singular phenomenon of atavism") has its own ambiguity for it claims that inheritance is as "loaded" as defective heredity (in today's parlance, genetic load). This singular portrait indicates a paradigm shift with a clear cause, namely a decline owing to indulging in vice and also the predominance of lymph in one's blood ("les vices d'un tempérament appauvri, la prédominance de la lymphe dans le sang, apparaissaient"), or, in John Howard's translation, "a sluggish and impoverished constitution"¹⁴. The choleric, vitalist, strong, impulsive temper thus got replaced by a lymphatic, lazy, weak temper lacking vitality. The decline is featured through physiology so that the portrait becomes a clinical presentation, a display of symptomatology, rather than a collection of clues relevant to an interpretation of character in either Lavater's physiognomic or La Bruyère's satirical terms. The *missing link* from the portrait gallery would be another series of portraits to show the gradual shift to the portrait that depicts the decadent ancestor. The explanation furnished in the note outlines a logic of defective heredity due to consanguineous marriages, where gradual degeneration is legitimated biologically: "the decadence of this family had followed an unvarying course"¹⁵. The final portrait displays a refinement of features, an intellectualization of the family, which henceforth works alongside its very degeneration. The identification operates not at the level of the given name, especially as the latter is replaced by the much more sonorous surname, but at the level of illustrious friendships, which highlight not only caste solidarity but also one of shared mores. Anyway, the old *noblesse d'épée* of the warrior-knight has been replaced by a *noblesse de robe* of the scholar

initiated in diplomacy and scheming. Huysmans's description in the note is worth quoting in full:

The Floressas Des Esseintes, to judge by the various portraits preserved in the Château de Lourps, had originally been a family of stalwart troopers and stern cavalry men. Closely arrayed, side by side, in the old frames which their broad shoulders filled, they startled one with the fixed gaze of their eyes, their fierce moustaches and the chests whose deep curves filled the enormous shells of their cuirasses.

These were the ancestors. There were no portraits of their descendants and a wide breach existed in the series of the faces of this race. Only one painting served as a link to connect the past and present – a crafty, mysterious head with haggard and gaunt features, cheekbones punctuated with a comma of paint, the hair overspread with pearls, a painted neck rising stiffly from the fluted ruff.

In this representation of one of the most intimate friends of the Duc d'Epéron and the Marquis d'O, the ravages of a sluggish and impoverished constitution were already noticeable.

It was obvious that the decadence of this family had followed an unvarying course. The effemination of the males had continued with quickened tempo. As if to conclude the work of long years, the Des Esseintes had intermarried for two centuries, using up, in such consanguineous unions, such strength as remained.

There was only one living scion of this family which had once been so numerous that it had occupied all the territories of the Ile-de-France and La Brie. The Duc Jean was a slender, nervous young man of thirty, with hollow cheeks, cold, steel-blue eyes, a straight, thin nose and delicate hands.

By a singular, atavistic reversion, the last descendant resembled the old grandsire, from whom he had inherited the pointed, remarkably fair beard and an ambiguous expression, at once weary and cunning¹⁶.

The inheritance that is taken up figuratively by a descendant from the same decadent category Des Esseintes belongs to is actually defective heredity. In his naturalist novels, Huysmans structures his scientific explanation on the successful positivist-naturalist template of Emile Zola, where the degenerescence phenomenon receives unambiguous hard evidence. "Loaded" heredity (namely genetic load) belongs to this category of negative inheritance within modernity or, in aesthetic terms, to the "negative categories" referred to by Hugo Friedrich in his book on modern lyric. This line of argument brings the notion of inheritance onto the turf of medicine, which, under the guise of hygienism, explains broader social phenomena, and of sociology when it addresses

the redundancy of the upper classes, the aristocracy's resignation not so much in moral as in biological terms vis-à-vis a bourgeoisie that demonstrates its vitalist elan and intrepidity genius through its healthy heredity as well as its know-how in building up its inheritance. Nonetheless, the shift that both Huysmans' novel and his own aesthetic options reflect actually concerns an entire generation of writers. The final portrait in the gallery and Des Esseintes himself claim a different type of inheritance and also reading them in a different key, namely aestheticism, which entails a different spiritual lifestyle of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art. It is taste that recommends this aristocrat, an aesthetic taste attuned to modernity as the latter was being shaped at the time, with all that was the most challenging and innovative in art. The nineteenth century witnesses the metamorphosis of the naturalist novel into a decadent novel; thus, the aesthetic explanation gains the upper hand over the positivist explanation couched in terms of degeneracy. According to A. E. Carter, while naturalism depicts pathology in a deterministic fashion, thus offering examples of degeneracy, decadence transposes this pathology in aesthetic terms. As Carter states, "a distinction ought to be made between degeneracy and decadence – although Zola and others used both terms synonymously – the one being pathological, the other aesthetic"¹⁷. In her preface to the first Romanian edition of Huysmans's novel¹⁸, Georgeta Horodincă addresses this shift as an antithesis between nineteenth-century positivism and atheistic republicanism, Catholic monarchists and *l'ancien régime*, or, in other words, what Antoine Compagnon calls the *antimoderns*¹⁹, namely the upside-down moderns that decadents are. With Huysmans, the clinical explanation that certifies degeneracy in noble families steeped in endogamy so as to preserve their caste privileges and, moreover, to reproduce their own type, their matrix, is suspended in representation, which generates ambiguity. The leap from warrior to courtier is never represented, even as no explanation is offered. The breach indicates a transformation in the speculative order, whose essence is not physical, but metaphysical, and which can be best illustrated in the art of portraiture. Two modalities operate here, the epistemic-degeneracy mode and the aesthetic-decadent one, which reinforce each other to a certain extent as they share the problematic of heredity. However, the degeneracy mode is undergirded by a deterministic logic based on pursuing a clinical causality of

the transmission of defectiveness and its worsening for various reasons such as consanguineous marriage, a vicious lifestyle, and so on. The degeneracy mechanism places the decadent character at the far end of a long line of degeneracy. By contrast, decadence bypasses the linear trajectory of defective heredity, or at least resorts to *mise en abyme*.

Aesthetic Legacy vs. Heredity Inheritance in Anamnesis: Mateiu I. Caragiale

What Huysmans' novel fails to successfully accomplish is spelled out in a decadent short story by Mateiu I. Caragiale, *Remember*, published in the *Viața românească* magazine in 1921. A very young English aristocrat who refuses to mention his name, thus surrounding his caste identity in secrecy, frames the issue of genealogical inheritance in an enigma that moreover constitutes the text's *mise en abyme*. He replaces the heraldic symbols with the image of a sphinx set in the middle of a ribbon or garter – similar to the one that surrounds the coat of arms of Great Britain, the narrator says²⁰ that bears the motto "Remember". The anonymous narrator of the short story is an aficionado of museums, fully conversant with the fine arts and displaying an erudite competence to invoke them. He keeps trying to identify the aristocrat, whom he has befriended and fancies for a while, as Aubrey du Vere (as the latter signed an apology letter); yet not one likely identity is certified by documents. The English aristocrat is a full-fledged dandy who stands out, beyond his flawless elegance, thanks to his carnation scent and seven rings with Ceylan sapphires. Identification thus takes place at the figural-symbolic level of the fetish, which a dandy can fully capitalize on. The heraldic symbol, or rather its replacement with the symbol of enigma (the sphinx image) and the "Remember" motto, places genealogy into infinite recursion and demonstrates that genealogy should not be sought for in an irrelevant classical genealogy. This is a second, figural-hermetic level of identification. The third modality of identification, by recourse to mores, hence sociological, addresses the suspect inclinations of the youth, which transpire in the narrator's two nocturnal encounters with Sir Aubrey cross-dressed as a woman. The issue of degeneracy, of sexual pathology, is simply brought up

without being fully elucidated at the figural-theatrical level. There is yet a fourth, figural-aesthetic modality of identification: it uses a decadent logic to offer a filiation through art – again portraiture art, as in Huysmans. Aubrey de Vere's secret identity is reflected in the image, *per Speculum et in Aenigmate*.

In *Remember*, Mateiu I. Caragiale uses the same consanguinity motif we have seen at work in Huysmans to explain, in a naturalist-positivist key, the physiological decline of the aristocratic family, yet not from a determinist-degeneracy point of view. Kinship engenders here likeness with respect to features, customs, and attire. The nobles whom the narrator refers to are those painted by Van Dyck and Van-der-Faës, which indicates an aristocratic typology through resemblance:

Tot astfel semăna tânărul cu unii din acei lorzi, ale căror priviri, mâini și surâsuri Van Dyck și, după el, Van-der-Faës le-au hărăzit nemuririi. Zic unii dintre acei lorzi, fiindcă mai toți sunt la fel. În trecut, în castele restrânse, celor de aproape și înmulțit înrudiți, trăind împreună, cu același port și obiceiuri, fiecare epocă le întipărește același aer, dacă nu chiar aceeași înfățișare. Se întâmplă iarăși ca, acolo unde cu gândul nu găndești, să răsară ființe cărora le trebuie căutată aiurea, în alte țări, la alte neamuri, în alte veacuri, adevărata asemănare, fără a li se putea bănui măcar, în vreun fel, cu aceia de cari îi despart prăpăstii de timp și de stirpe vreo cât de îndepărtată înrudire²¹.

[Just so did the young man resemble some of those lords whose gazes, hands and smiles had immortality conferred upon them by Van Dyck and after him Van der Faes. I say some of those lords because most of them look almost the same. On those who live close together, confined in their castles amid intricate relations of kinship, with identical costumes and habits, every past epoch engraves the same allure if not the same appearance. It happens also that in places you would never have imagined, creatures appear whose true likeness should be sought elsewhere, in other countries, being impossible even to guess, in any way whatsoever, the remotest kinship with those from whom they are separated by abysses of time and family origin²².]

The heredity logic is undermined here, or rather is suspended, hence irrelevant, and the connection is indicated by a resemblance mediated by the fine arts, by painting. Kinship plays no part and cannot even demonstrate the continuous inheritance transmission through heredity. Not a genealogy of hereditary origins is at stake here, but one motivated aesthetically. Resemblance dictates genuine filiation,

which evokes the cultural legacy of a lifestyle, of countenance, of refinement, of a gesture, all of which are transferred through affinity to an individual while suspending any kinship. Nonetheless, this logic does not annul the certificate of nobility received through heredity and recorded in genealogy but sanctions it thanks to the power of like to evoke like, as in acts of magic, a principle – *similia similibus evocantur* – analyzed by Marcel Mauss in *A General Theory of Magic*²³. Identification ineluctably occurs via image – a painting – in a metaphysical frame. Genealogy in *Remember* thus works recursively both through the art of portraiture and through the omission, from the heraldic image, of the coat of arms, of several of the specific codes that enable identification. To understand the significance of this subversion, we can quote Cornel Mihai Ionescu's perceptive analysis of *Remember* in his essays on the text, included in his book *Palimpsests* [Palimpseste]. The Romanian aesthetician explains that Sir Audrey's motto on the "garter" – the latter, akin to that of Britain's The Most Noble Order of the Garter – evokes King Charles I Stuart, whose last words before decapitation were "Remember". It further evokes a deep-seated Oedipus complex, which erases the figure of the father and thereby erases filiation and its associated inheritance. While this explanation converges with the author's biography, given the frictions between Mateiu and his father, Ion Luca Caragiale, a famous writer of the Romanian *la belle époque*, a "great"²⁴ classic, in the aesthetic sense of the term, it nevertheless also reinforces the relationship that decadence establishes with heredity, genealogy, and inheritance.

Prin această negare a numelui tatălui, Aubrey de Vere oficiază în efigie un paricid, actualizând o 'fantasmă' (în sens psihanalitic) în care imaginarul lui Mateiu Caragiale concentrează întreaga semnificație a reveriei sale onomastice și a obsesiilor sale heraldice²⁵.

[Through this denial of the name of the father, Aubrey de Vere officiates a parricide in effigy, thus actualizing a 'fantasm' (in psychoanalytical terms) onto which the imagination of Mateiu Caragiale heaps the entire significance of his onomastic reverie and of his heraldic obsessions (*m.f.*).]

In fact, beyond family psychodrama, the son refuses here also the aesthetic legacy of his father, classicism, and its pedagogical pertinence,

thus breaking up with classical typologies as well as temperaments, only to embrace another tradition: that of Barbey d'Aurevilly, Félicien Champsaur, Jean Lorrain, Oscar Wilde, and Huysmans himself. It is a tradition at once literary-decadent and cultural in a broad sense, which includes the fine arts in a genuine polyphony of erudition. At long last, the only reclaimed legacy is cultural, with affinities for decadent sensibilities. It is precisely what Des Esseintes does in his Latin library when he selects the authors according to his decadent taste – by their *écriture*. In like vein, his art gallery displays a decadent selection of modern artists, from Gustave Moreau to Odilon Redon. Giorgio Agamben, in *Il fuoco e il racconto* [The Fire and the Tale], interprets Gershom Scholem's parabola to the effect that literature represents the only legacy that testifies to the loss of "fire", namely of mystery, of tradition: "Tout récit – toute la littérature – est, en un certain sens, mémoire de la perte du feu"²⁶. If we agree with Agamben, then we may argue that there is no legacy beyond literature.

- ¹ For a detailed introduction to this debate see also Angelo Mitchievici, *Decadență și decadentism în contextul modernității românești și europene*, Editura Curtea Veche, București 2011.
- ² Alfred Edward Carter, *The Idea of Decadence in the French Literature, 1830-1900*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1958.
- ³ David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, University of Massachusetts, Amherst 1996.
- ⁴ Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Duke University Press, Durham 1987.
- ⁵ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia sexualis. Étude médico-légale à l'usage des médecins et des juristes*, trad. française par René Lobstein, Payot, Paris 1931.
- ⁶ David Weir, *Decadence and the Making...*, p. 48.
- ⁷ Maël Renouard, *Nostalgie et mélancolie*, in *Hériter, et après?* (sous la direction de Jean Birbaum), Édition Gallimard, Paris 2017, p. 50.
- ⁸ Qtd. in Richard Gilman, *Decadence. The Strange Life of an Epithet*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1979, p. 14.
- ⁹ Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff and Mathew Potolsky, *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1999, p. 21.
- ¹⁰ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, two volumes, translated by Charles Francis Atkinson, Alfred A. Knopf, Abridged Edition, New York 1927, p. 18.
- ¹¹ Emil Cioran, *De la France*, traduit du Roumain par Alain Paruit, Édition de L'Herne, Paris 2009.
- ¹² Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to d'Annunzio*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1999, p. 1.
- ¹³ Ivi, p. 21.
- ¹⁴ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, translated by John Howard (e.g. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12341/12341-h/12341-h.htm> [May 4th 2023]).
- ¹⁵ Ibidem.
- ¹⁶ Ibidem.
- ¹⁷ Alfred Edward Carter, *The Idea of Decadence...*, p. 62.
- ¹⁸ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *În răspăr (À rebours)*, Romanian translation by Raul Joil, preface and chronology by Georgeta Horodincă, Editura Minerva, București 1974.
- ¹⁹ S. Antoine Compagnon, *Les Antimodernistes. De Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes*, Gallimard, Paris 2016.
- ²⁰ The narrator actually describes Britain's The Most Noble Order of the Garter.
- ²¹ Mateiu I. Caragiale, *Opere*, ediție, studiu introductiv, note, variante și comentarii de Barbu Cioculescu; prefață de Eugen Simion Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București 2001, p. 37.

- ²² Mateiu I. Caragiale, *Remember*, translated by Delia Radu and Stephen Winfield, in *Plural: Culture and Civilization*, nr. 4, 1999. Available on the site of the Romanian Cultural Institute: <https://archive.ph/20130131115028/http://www.plural-magazine.com/article-remember-4-1999.html#selection-869.0-869.736> [May 4th 2023].
- ²³ Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, translated by Robert Brain, Routledge, London and New York 2001.
- ²⁴ In *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* (Ediție și prefață de Al. Piru, Editura Minerva, București 1982), George Călinescu names him a “great classic” alongside Mihai Eminescu, Ion Creangă and Ioan Slavici, an assessment that has become canonical in Romanian literary historiography.
- ²⁵ Cornel Mihai Ionescu, *Remember: o poetică a negației, Palimpseste*, Ed. a 2-a, Cartea Românească, București 2007, p. 105.
- ²⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Le feu et le récit*, traduit de l’italien par Martin Rueff, Édition Payot & Rivages, Paris 2015, p. 10.

