CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FIN DE SIÈCLE SOCIAL THOUGHT AND DECADENCE

FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

‘If you were to destroy in mankind the belief in immortality, not only love but every living force maintaining the life of the world would at once be dried up.’
-- Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov (1879-80, Book 2, Ch. 6)

The subjectivist and psychological turn in literature can be exemplified by the mid-nineteenth century work of the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoyevsky. In Notes from the Underground, Dostoyevsky's hero (or rather, in the tradition of twentieth century existentialist literature, his anti-hero) reflected the perversity of the universe and the ultimately self-destructiveness of human nature.

Dostoyevsky's writings were initially Realist in their content. In Poor Folks (1846) and other writings during this early period, which culminated in the revolutions of 1848 in Europe and the subsequent decline of Romanticism, Dostoyevsky wrote about the sufferings and explored the character of people who were oppressed by the social circumstances of their lives.

Dostoyevsky was influenced by liberals and the Romantic socialist ideas from France, particularly by Fourier. Along with other young Russian intellectuals, Dostoyevsky debated the ideas of rationalism, atheism and humanism derived from the Enlightenment. His early Realism was linked to his social concerns. He argued in favour of abolishing serfdom and ending government censorship. It was a revolutionary period in Russia and, as a consequence, the Czar had imposed strict censorship laws. Even debating Western liberal and socialist ideas was forbidden. When Czar Nicholas' secret police infiltrated Dostoyevsky's debating circle in 1849, the dissidents were all arrested and slated for execution. On the day he was scheduled to be shot, Dostoyevsky and the other condemned prisoners were lined up against a wall, facing a firing squad. The soldiers prepared to fire. Then, at the very last moment, after expecting to be murdered on the spot, the condemned prisoners were told that their sentences had been reprieved by the Czar. It had been an elaborate charade intended to terrorize them. Durgy called this a "wantonly cruel act" and said the prisoner standing next to Dostoyevsky "went mad" as a result.¹

Dostoyevsky's sentence was commuted to exile at hard labour in a Siberian prison labour camp, followed by service in the army. The literary result of these hardships was the novel The House of the Dead, published in 1861, marking Dostoyevsky's partial transition from Realism (the writing is starkly realistic in its portrayal of the brutality of imprisonment) to a new form of the novel, profoundly psychological in its complex depiction of the depths of the inmates' characters. The way to truth, Dostoyevsky claimed, was through suffering and the spiritual redemption it brings: ‘In despair there are the most intense enjoyments, especially when one is intensely conscious of the hopelessness of one’s position.’²

Having his reprieve from immediate death, followed by four years in a labour camp with criminals of all kinds and nothing to read but the Bible, Dostoyevsky experienced a profound and personal transformation of his ideology. He discarded the optimism of Western humanism and

¹ Durgy, 1969, p. x.
² Fedor Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground (1864, Part 1, Ch. 2).
rationalism. In their place, Dostoyevsky returned to his roots in Russian culture and the Russian Orthodox Church. His writing became increasingly complex, psychological, and spiritual. Exploring the depths of the human psyche in his novels, Dostoyevsky depicted what Freudians would later call the split personality and the passive-aggressive type. In the end, Dostoyevsky returned to religion, believing that it was impossible to live in the world without belief in a god.

In one of his best-known novels, *Crime and Punishment*, the "hero", Raskolnikov, imagines, becomes obsessed with, and then commits the murder of Alyona Ivanovna, a pawn broker. The murder is an act of self-consciousness, a free choice. Echoing the Enlightenment motto proclaimed by Immanuel Kant, Dostoevsky's murderer reasons that power is given only to the person ‘who dares to stoop and pick it up’, the person who has the courage ‘to dare!’

Raskolnikov's motives for murder are complex. On the one hand, as a nihilist, he wants to demonstrate that he is free and, Napoleon-like, he is above the humanly-constructed rules of morality—that ‘all is in a / man’s hands’.

On the other hand, he rationalizes that the murder is for the best, it was the right thing to do for society in the circumstances. In an exact parallel to his own reasoning, Raskolnikov overheard a student arguing with a young officer, speculatively, that the old pawnbroker deserved to die:

I could kill that damned old woman and make off with her money, I assure you, without the faintest conscience-prick…. [O]n one side we have a stupid, senseless, worthless, spiteful, ailing, horrid old woman, not simply useless but doing actual mischief, who has not an idea what she is living for herself, and who will die in a day or two in any case. … On the other side … [a] hundred thousand good deeds could be done and helped, on that old woman’s money…. Hundreds, thousands perhaps, might be set on the right path; dozens of families saved from destitution, from ruin, from vice…. Kill her, take her money and with the help of it devote oneself to the service of humanity and the good of all. What do you think, would not one tiny crime be / wiped out by thousands of good deeds? …

One death, and a hundred lives in exchange—it’s simple arithmetic!

In the ‘balance of existence’, the pawnbroker’s life was worth ‘[n]o more than the life of a louse’. The intended victim was a social parasite, Raskolnikov reasoned, so ridding the world of this person would provide a benefit for all. The stolen money would be used to help his needy family and finance his education. Thereafter, Raskolnikov would use his training to do good in the world and, by this means pay his debt to society. Taking direct action by committing a freely-chosen bad deed could be justified because it would result in many socially good consequences that would greatly outweigh the original sin. What was required was rational planning and then, at the crucial moment, the willpower to do it.

For Dostoevsky, this ‘simple arithmetic’ represented precisely what was wrong with the modern world. The most barbaric acts were being justified by asserting the priority of ends over means. But the laws of morality were deeper than rationality, they were even deeper than Kant’s *a priori* because Dostoevsky believed they derived from God. When Raskolnikov

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contemplated the actual, physical act, ‘that I shall really take an axe, that I shall strike her on the head, split her skull open . . . that I shall tread in the sticky warm blood, break the lock, steal and tremble, all spattered in blood’, he feels that it is ‘base, loathsome, vile’; the thought itself made him feel sick with horror.\textsuperscript{6} The same student who had debated the moral arithmetic by which the murder could be justified, shrank from the idea of actually committing the act. We know intuitively that murder is wrong. The closer Raskolnikov came to carrying out his idea, although he could find no rational objections, ‘the more hideous and the more absurd’ his resolution appeared ‘in his eyes.’\textsuperscript{7}

The difference between imagining the act and the act itself was a great as the difference between rationality and intuition. Raskolnikov did crush Alyona Ivanovna’s skull with the blunt side of his axe and steal booty from under her bed. But then he slaughtered the victim’s sister, who returned unexpectedly, using the sharp end of the axe for the second murder. This killing was committed without planning, irrationally, instinctively in self-preservation. The sister was, more obviously, an ‘innocent’ victim that no mental arithmetic could justify. Raskalnikov did not even gain materially from his crime—he buried the stolen objects under a stone. Instead, Raskalnikov reaped only intense, moral suffering.

The same moral impulse, Dostoyevsky believed, that makes a person shrink from committing a detestable act eats at their soul and compels a confession. In a mysterious way, Raskolnikov’s confession of his murder to Sonia paralleled the murder itself. The confession did not unfold actually as Raskolnikov had mentally rehearsed it. Sonia was repulsed by his confession, stared at him with the same terror as his victim, and realized he had not only committed murder, he had done something terrible to himself. She sought excuses for him. He was hungry. He did it to help his mother.\textsuperscript{8}

But Raskolnikov knew that’s not the ‘real thing’. Painfully, Raskolnikov recited to Sonia his obsessive ruminations about his crime. He ‘wanted to become a Napoleon’ he confessed. In the same circumstances and with the same logical arguments, Napoleon would have acted; he ‘would have strangled her in a minute without thinking about it!’\textsuperscript{9}

Finally, however, Raskolnikov’s reasoning reached rock bottom. He realized that he was a louse, as much as ‘all the rest’; that he murdered for himself, alone.\textsuperscript{10} Sonia pleads with him to ‘stand at the cross-roads, bow down, first kiss the earth which you have defiled and then bow down to all the world and say to all men aloud, “I am a murderer!”’ Then God will send you life again.\textsuperscript{11} Later, when he did actually bend down and kiss the ‘filthy earth’, he was struck suddenly by a sensation ‘like a single spark kindled in his soul and spreading fire through him.’\textsuperscript{12} Like all of humanity, Raskolnikov had to know that he was ‘made in the image of the Beast and with his mark’. Only when, through his suffering, Raskolnikov knew that he was utterly unworthy would his soul be redeemed.\textsuperscript{13} Finally sentenced to imprisonment in Siberia, Raskolnikov abandoned his obsession with rationality and discovered love. Instead of analysing

\textsuperscript{6} Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment, 55. 
\textsuperscript{7} Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment, 64.  
\textsuperscript{8} Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment, 370-1. 
\textsuperscript{9} Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment, 373. 
\textsuperscript{10} Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment, 377. 
\textsuperscript{11} Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment, 378. 
\textsuperscript{12} Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment, 471. 
\textsuperscript{13} Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment, 21.
consciously, ‘he was simply feeling. Life had stepped into the place of theory’ and, like Lazarus rising from the dead, he embarked on a renewed, spiritual life.\textsuperscript{14}

For Dostoyevsky, Raskolnikov (and, by extension, humanity in the era of rationalism) had usurped the moral authority of God. He could not justify the ethically wrong means (murder) with the socially desirable ends (practical benefits). Raskolnikov was tormented by nightmares of guilt and suffering, finally coming to believe that human reason alone was insufficient for ethical behaviour. The ethics of right and wrong were absolute and derived ultimately from God. Only the existence of God assured that the rules of morality, such as thou shalt not kill, are absolute and not, as modern, secular philosophers argued, simply relative.

The ideas in \textit{Crime and Punishment} were a direct contrast to -- and rejection of -- Dostoyevsky's earlier dabbling in the ideals of materialism. The symbol of the crass materialism and empty rationalism of the West, Dostoyevsky believed, was the Crystal Palace, a vast exhibition pavilion of steel and glass built in Hyde Park in London and opened in 1851. Dostoyevsky visited this monument to Western capitalism and scientific rationality in 1862. The Crystal Palace was the site of the first World Fair, a celebration of 19th century science, technology, Empire, and progress, putting on display what were supposedly the most marvellous achievements of human ingenuity at that time. For Dostoyevsky, it symbolized the worshipping of mammon (cold, soul-less wealth) and the loss of the spiritual. He associated this crass and overly-materialistic culture with the ideas of liberalism and socialism, rejecting them all as inseparably linked. Dostoyevsky’s mission was to save Russia from defilement by these Western ideas and practices.

In 1863, the most important of the Russian Westernizers, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, published \textit{What is to be Done?} This novel depicted a supposedly ideal future, when humans acted on the basis of their reason alone and each individual was free to calculate what was in his or her own advantage in a way that did not harm anyone else. Chernyshevsky’s novel was published despite the strict censorship laws as a result of an error on the part of the Czar's censors. It was then promptly banned, though too late to prevent the ideas of the novel from influencing Russia's Westernized intellectuals, including Lenin, who would later lead the Russian Revolution in 1917.

Although written as a novel, \textit{What is to be Done?} was actually a call to bring about social and political change in Russia. Chernyshevsky presented his readers with both an emancipated female hero (Vera Pavlovna) who organizes women workers and embraces rational calculation in her personal life in place of emotion or intuition, and a male hero, Rakmetov who consciously converts himself through rigid self-discipline into a people's leader. The future world of female emancipation and cooperative socialism could be brought about and society reconstructed in a scientific, rational, and socialist future.\textsuperscript{15} This image of an ideal society based on innate human sociability was drawn from anarchism.

According to this liberal, utilitarian, and rationalist tradition that Dostoyevsky was consciously discarding, the main problem in the world was ignorance. Once people were enlightened to their real interests, they would apply their reason and cease to fight, stop oppressing each other, no longer strive to better themselves at the expense of others, and make political and social decisions based on reason and science. From the Westernizer's point of view, human nature was potentially good and beautiful, as Rousseau had proclaimed. People did not

\textsuperscript{14}Dostoevsky, \textit{Crime and Punishment}, 492-3.

\textsuperscript{15}Peace, 1989, pp. 262-263.
yet understand that what was to their individual advantage, within the terms of ethical cooperation, was actually good for everyone.

The Westernizers, who wanted Russia to adopt European values of individualism and capitalism, were challenged by the Slavophils who believed in the intuition of the Russian people and the mysticism of the Russian Orthodox Church.\(^\text{16}\) In *Notes from Underground* (1865), Dostoyevsky settled his account with his own past ideals -- his earlier socialism, rationalism, and optimism about the human condition -- and answered the Russian Westernizers. *Notes from Underground* also introduced the modern type of anti-hero, the alienated individualist. What the nameless narrator of the novel does possess is acute consciousness of his self. He has no redeeming features, and he analyses his character without pity. It is a novel of obsessive introspection. The novel begins: "I am a sick man…. I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man".\(^\text{17}\) As early as the age of 24, the narrator explained, his life "was even then gloomy, ill-regulated, and as solitary as that of a savage. I made friends with no one and positively avoided talking, and buried myself more and more in my hole",\(^\text{18}\) hiding underground.

Dostoyevsky uses the narrator of *Notes from Underground* as his mouthpiece. His target is modern society and, in particular, the emphasis on rationalism, science, progress, and technology. The primary disease of the modern world is rationalism, a doctrine that has sought to replace human instinct as well as traditional intuitive understanding. Like Hamlet in Shakespeare’s play,\(^\text{19}\) too much reason -- "thinking too precisely on th’ event" -- leads only to inactivity. Dostoyevsky contrasts the overly self-conscious, overly rational person who cannot act, with the "direct man of action" who acts without thinking. Intellectuals were burdened with an "over-acute consciousness" which resulted directly in inertia, or inactivity. For Dostoyevsky, too much thinking, too much reason, is a curse. Overly conscious people are unable to make up their minds and "consequently do nothing":

> I swear ... that to be too conscious is an illness, a real thorough-going illness. For man's everyday needs, it would have been quite enough to have the ordinary human consciousness, that is, half or a quarter of the amount which falls to the lot of the cultivated man of our unhappy nineteenth century .... It would have been quite enough, for instance, to have the consciousness by which all so-called direct persons and men of action live....\(^\text{20}\)

The direct men of action, Dostoyevsky says, “know how to revenge themselves and to stand up for themselves in general.” When they are

> "possessed … by the feeling of revenge, then for the time there is nothing else but that feeling left in their whole being. Such a gentleman simply dashes straight for his object like an infuriated bull with its horns down, and nothing but a wall will stop him."\(^\text{21}\)

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16 Durgy, 1969, p. xi-xii.
18 Dostoyevsky, *Underground*, p. 60.
“Well, such a direct person I regard as the real normal man, as his tender Mother Nature wished to see him when she graciously brought him into being on the earth. I envy such a man until I am green in the face. He is stupid. I am not disputing that, but perhaps the normal man should be stupid. If you take, for instance, the antithesis of the normal man, that is, the man of acute consciousness, ... [he] has come, of course, not out of the lap of Nature but out of a retort [a flask for mixing chemicals]....  

This individual of “acute consciousness is the special product of Dostoyevsky's main targets: Enlightenment rationalism, liberalism, and individualism. In Notes from Underground, Dostoyevsky attempts to refute the whole of this Western, rationalist tradition. The beliefs of Rousseau, of the English liberals and French socialists, he argued, were all but "golden dreams." Arguable, however, the potential existing in society for progressive change is reflected in such dreams; social criticism and movements for social change are equally part of the human condition.

As Dostoyevsky believed, any social science must run aground on the essential facts of human free will, imagination, and individuality. Dostoyevsky warned that science tried to teach man:

that he never has really had any caprice or will of his own, and that he himself is something of the nature of a piano-key or the stop of an organ, and . . . that everything he does is not done by his willing it, but is done of itself, by the laws of nature. Consequently we have only to discover these laws . . . and man will no longer have to answer for his actions. . . . All human actions will then, of course, be tabulated . . . mathematically, like tables of logarithms . . . in which everything will be so clearly calculated and explained that there will be no more . . . adventures in the world.

But, Dostoyevsky asserted, people do not always act in a rational way to meet their interests:

What is to be done with the millions of facts that bear witness that men, consciously, that is, fully understanding their real interests, have left them in the background and have rushed headlong on another path, to meet peril and danger, compelled to this course by nobody, and nothing, but, as it were, simply disliking the beaten track, and have obstinately, wilfully, struck out another difficult, absurd way . . . in opposition to the laws of reason, in opposition to his own [material] advantage—in fact, in opposition to everything. [This apparently unreasonable action] shatters every system . . . explaining to mankind their real normal interests.  

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22 Dostoyevsky, Underground, p. 32.
23 Dostoyevsky, Underground, p. 41.
Shakespeare’s Hamlet had made a similar complaint that Guildenstern was trying to play upon him like a flute: ‘you would seem to know my stops . . . do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?’

**Fin de Siècle**

“Time is not real, Govinda. I have realized this repeatedly. And if time is not real, then the dividing line that seems to lie between this world and eternity, between suffering and bliss, between good and evil, is also an illusion.”

—Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha* (1922)

The French *avant garde* emerged under and in opposition to the regime of Napoleon III, which was characterized by economic advance and the domination of commercial values. Like the Romantics, who claimed to be the instinctive enemy of the bourgeoisie, the *avant garde* rebelled against the crass materialism of modern culture. As the censorship of the French Code ensnared leading writers, the liberal ideal of the free individual seemed ever more remote from reality. For the poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), the external appearance of bourgeois society concealed, as Nicholls argues, ‘its inner sameness’ reproducing only ‘the safe limits of the bourgeois world.’ For Baudelaire, the oppressive repetition of everyday life produced only *ennui*, boredom, apathy, ‘hypersensitivity and nervousness’. Art had ceased to express moral truths and, instead, had become commercialized, popular, and philistine. In its place, the *avant garde* inverted the moral claims of bourgeois society by exploring the underside of the self-centredness that was the core value of capitalist society. In this conception, expressed by the literary genre known as Naturalism, evil is the natural principle of the world and is expressed in the workings of fate. Human beings, at least the great majority, are flawed and corrupt.

In their rejection of the liberal belief in the high potential of the average person, the *avant garde*, Nicholls asserts, revived the argument in favour of aristocracy. For Baudelaire, the new elite consisted of a minority of talented outsiders who did not claim power in wealth or politics, but only in through their superior cultural achievements, a movement he called ‘Dandyism’. It was a heroic ‘last flicker’ of taste and refinement which was doomed by the ‘rising tide of democracy, which spreads everywhere and reduces everything to the same level’. Culture had split irreconcilably into high culture, the style of the déclassé Dandy that reflected a refusal to compromise with the repellent *status quo*, and low forms of culture that were the epitome of philistinism. Art for the *avant garde* must cultivate an anti-social stance, Nicholls concludes, what Baudelaire termed ‘misanthropic republicanism’ which is ‘driven by a limitless aristocratic hatred, without pity or bounds, for monarchs and bourgeois, and for a broad sympathy for everything in art which is excessive in color or form, everything which is intense, pessimistic and Byronic’. The chief paradox, Nicholls concludes, was that ‘the genuine art of a bourgeois society can only be anti-bourgeois’.

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29 Nicholls, *Modernisms*, p. 11.
30 Nicholls, *Modernisms*, pp. 11-12.
The avant garde, anticipating Freud, explored their own subjectivity, the intricacies and paradoxes of their own psyche, their desires and self-destructiveness. Literature and art took a symbolic turn using words to evoke indirect suggestions rather than direct description to express emotions and ideas. Poetry used words as sounds, bringing it closer to music. In painting, artists such as James Ensor examined the art itself, focusing on color, texture, and design, abstracting from reality. According to Nicholls, in the new Symbolism, a term that appeared in a manifesto in 1886, ‘Intuition, mystery, suggestiveness’ were to replace ‘‘teaching, declamation … objective description’’ as in the poems of Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891). Rimbaud scandalized polite society with what Nicholls called his ‘‘ostentatious contempt for all forms of convention and authority, both in his behaviour and his writing’. Inspired as a young man by the revolutionary zeal and then martyrdom of the Paris Commune, the last and most explicitly socialist of the nineteenth century revolutions in France, Rimbaud felt completely alienated from the bourgeois world and sought kinship with the displaced and marginal underclass. He began a notorious same-sex affair with the poet Paul Verlaine (1844-1896) and wrote his famous poetry before the age of twenty, before disappearing from the literary scene.

With poets such as Rimbaud, Symbolism evolved into Decadence, the new avant garde that was influenced by the reissue of the works of de Sade in the 1880s and the pessimistic philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). In The World as Will and Idea (1819), Nicholls argues, Schopenhauer emphasized the central role in life of human will, a blind and irrational force that was expressed above all in appetites and desires. The universe lacked sense and logic; humans were full of egoism, hatred and malice. For Nicholls, art became self-consciously anti-social leading ultimately to the pessimistic embracing of death.

In the novel Axël (1890), which Nicholls calls a, ‘monumental statement of aristocratic stoicism and worldly abnegation’, Villiers de l’Isle-Adam made the extreme statement about the absurdity of existence. The novel culminates in the dual suicide of Sara and Axël as a final renunciation of life itself; ‘As / for living?’ Axel says, ‘Our servants will do that for us.’

The modern ego is represented in literature by the character, Peer Gynt in Henrik Ibsen’s play. Peer Gynt prospered as a merchant, trading ‘In negro slaves for Carolina, / and idol-images for China.’ Ibsen investigates the modern ego, the view of the world from the point of view of the self. Logically, Peer Gynt made his living as a merchant, ‘to grub and grub in the bins of trade’. ‘What should a man be?’ Gynt asks: ‘Himself, is my concise reply, / He should regard himself and his.’ Peer Gynt is simultaneously ‘in-and-for-yourself-ness’.

But what then is the Gyntish Self?
The world behind my forehead’s arch,
By force of which I’m no one else
Than I, no more than God’s the Devil. /

... The Gyntish self – it is the host
Of wishes, appetites, desires, --
The Gyntish self, it is the sea

32 Nicholls, Modernisms, pp. 26-27.
33 Nicholls, Modernisms , pp. 27-31.
34 Nicholls, Modernisms , pp. 47-48.
35 Nicholls, Modernisms , pp. 51-53.
Of fancies, exigencies, claims.
All that, in short, makes my breast heave,
And whereby I, as I, exist.\(^{37}\)

For Ibsen, the modern egotistical self is akin to being mad. The fullest expression of the individual self is in the madhouse:

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\text{It's here, sir, that one is oneself with a vengeance; /}
\text{Oneself, and nothing whatever besides.}
\text{We go, full sail, as our very selves.}
\text{Each one shuts himself up in the barrel of self,}
\text{In the self-fermentation he dives to the bottom, --}
\text{With the self-bung he seals it hermetically,}
\text{And seasons the staves in the well of self.}
\text{No one has tears for the other's woes;}
\text{No one has mind for the other's ideas.}
\text{We're our very selves, both in thought and tone,}
\text{Ourselves to the springboard's uttermost verge}^{38}\]

The anti-social, \(\textit{fin de siècle}\) return to Romantic Subjectivism represents the turn to ‘modernity’ in the arts. This is a difficult, perhaps impossible concept. In one sense, Romantic Subjectivism is a rejection of the modern world, if that world is taken to mean the dominance of rationality, bureaucracy, capitalism and technology. In this sense, modernism is anti-modern. At the close of the twentieth century, similar intellectual currents would be termed ‘post-modern’. At neither time did these ideas displace the dominance of rationalism and global capitalism.

Among the Realist and some Naturalist authors, such as Zola and Dreiser, the novel represented, at least in part, a potential weapon in the struggle for reform. A much more drastic direction was being taken by intellectuals who rejected the belief that art should have any social purpose at all. Increasingly in modern art and literature, artists abandoned the attempt to depict the real in favour of more abstract art forms. It was a movement that was parallel to the development of Romanticism earlier in the century, which had been a reaction against the view of the Age of Reason that art was to instruct.

Both anti-rational and didactic tendencies were apparent in the development of symbolic art, leading in the twentieth century to surrealism—realistic-style paintings of unrealistic things. This concern with symbols was common to painting and literature, and was associated with a new interest in the psychological, with the mysteries of thought processes. The influence of Freud and the various schools of psychoanalysis were very important in shaping this direction for twentieth-century art and literature. Above all in the ‘\(\textit{fin de siècle}\)’, the spirit of disillusionment, degeneration, and pessimism was expressed in a neo-Romantic lifestyle and series of artistic movements that collectively reflected a period of decadence. ‘In this menagerie of mankind’s vice’, as Baudelaire said, ‘Debauchery and death are pleasant twins.’\(^{39}\)

\(^{38}\) Ibsen, \textit{Peer Gynt}, 228-9.
‘Modern’ is a slippery concept. As a new age arises to evaluate the existing one, it presents itself as modern relative to the old but, in the sequence of change, what was once modern soon becomes passé. For the early generation of sociologists, ‘modern’ depicted the world of industrialism that had, over the last three centuries, definitively replaced agricultural society in the West. The modern was coextensive with rationalism, limited democracy, and capitalist enterprise. Not all social theorists celebrated the birth of the modern world. While both outright reactionaries and some Romantic idealists sought to overturn the present in favour of the past, most turn-of-the-century artists staked out a variety of other positions that accepted certain elements of the modern while seeking to transcend what they perceived as the negative in their inheritance. The term ‘modernism’ is used here more narrowly to refer to the reorientation of social thought that began in the late nineteenth century, based on a widespread turn to subjectivity that would expand in the twentieth century beyond the arts into the social and even the physical sciences.

DECADENCE

With the failure of the 1848 revolution, a cloud of disillusionment settled on many artists and writers who abandoned the political causes of the past and embraced, instead, a profoundly subjectivist and potentially nihilist art-for-art’s-sake ideology. As in the lifestyle rebellion of the early Romantics, the new avant-garde intellectuals adopted an anti-bourgeois stance that rejected the crass materialism, the emphasis on utility over beauty, and the uniformity of the modern capitalist culture. ‘The bourgeois prefers comfort to pleasure, convenience to liberty, and a pleasant temperature to the deathly inner consuming fire’, Hermann Hesse wrote in *Steppenwolf* (1927). Much of this ‘decadent’ movement was socially conservative. Writers and artists pined for the lost aristocracy, for hierarchy, and elitism. A democratic culture was simplistic, unrefined, and vulgar. At the same time, the core of the movement’s ideology was an extreme individualism that was the defining principle of the bourgeois revolution. In their own eyes, the avant-garde constituted a kind of impoverished aristocracy or cultural elite that rejected the new mass culture, decrying what they saw as the lowering of taste by philistine writers, who sold their serialized stories by the line, and by artists, who mass-produced imitations of famous painting styles.

A decadent lifestyle presumed the search for the extreme (liminal) experience, celebrated in fiction as romantic suicide, the ultimate and final thrill. Casanova, the title character in Lasse Hallström’s 2005 film, claimed that he was seeking: ‘A moment that lasts a lifetime.’

As Rubinstein argued, there was a material foundation for this turn inward, to subjectivity. By the 1850s in France and the 1880s in England, with the exception of the novel, the bourgeois classes no longer had need for serious art. They were no longer willing to pay

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40 In theology, Vatican I (1870) attempted to bring the Roman Catholic Church back to traditional, conservative, and elitist practices.
42 Roland Stromberg, *European Intellectual History Since 1789*, 6th edn (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1994), 139. Stromberg points to the question of romantic suicide in Villers de l’Isle Adam’s play, *Axël*. Count Axël and his lover, Sara, discuss suicide as the only fitting end to their rapture since continuing to live after this high would be banal (p. 139)
43 Casanova (2005), directed by Lasse Hallström, screenplay by Jeffrey Hatcher and Kimberly Simi.
money to artists who expressed rebellious ideas. The bourgeois was comfortable in his existence, sought mild diversions in mass culture, and rejected the openly critical sentiments of the alienated artists. Since the broad middle classes identified completely with what the artists were most alienated from—bourgeois society itself—their art had only a tiny audience and little monetary support. The artist retreated into Bohemia, into a culture of poverty, into an artistic subculture in Soho, London, or on the Left Bank of the Seine in Paris. Although small, this avant-garde artistic community stretched across Europe, from Ibsen’s Norway to Dostoyevsky’s Russia. As Stromberg put it, a sense of crisis was felt almost simultaneously all over Europe. At its root was a feeling of utter boredom, a sickness unto death with a ‘hideous society’.  

For the artistic rebel, critic William Gaunt argued, the ‘bourgeois was his enemy not simply because he was, as the great Daumier was representing him in lithographs . . . a creature of greed and craft, of physical and mental ugliness, but still more because the bourgeois had an objection to the arts, and to artists, as performing no useful function he could understand.’

When the middle class cut the financial strings, the artist no longer felt any obligations except to art itself and to the small, alienated artistic subculture of which he was a part. The French painter Edgar Degas, for example, claimed that:

Painting was private life. You practised it for two or three living friends and some who were dead!

The others knew nothing about it and never would know anything and consequently you did not care what they thought.

As Nietzsche proclaimed, ‘I am a law only for mine own; I am not a law for all.’

Arts for art’s sake was characterized, above all, by a turning inside to the mind, to subjectivity, and away from external reality. Realism and scientific rationality were no longer fashionable attitudes to take among the avant-garde; what the artist intended to convey was what was claimed to be a deeper, subjective reality, an inner vision. For the French poet, Charles Baudelaire, ‘the Real erects its stifling wall’ around the ‘Soul of misty dreams’. This new experimental attitude was found also in painting (impressionism, cubism, expressionism), in music, and in dance. In philosophy, Friedrich Nietzsche, whose ideas are discussed below, epitomized this fin de siècle disillusionment with the rationalistic core of modern ‘civilization’ and promoted a new elitism.

Modernism in the arts is much too complex and contradictory a movement to summarize briefly, even with respect to its social and political implications. Some movements, such as futurism, deliberately sought to destroy the old and usher in the modern world. Other artists and writers sought the security of conventional attitudes and institutions. Both the modern ethic of mass consumption and the new artistic creed knelt before the god of novelty. For capitalism, novelty implied the search for new gadgets that could be sold to the expanding middle class market. For the avant garde, novelty meant going beyond existing limits, the pursuit of ever more dangerous desires. Baudelaire, wrote that ‘My spirit … / Yearns for extinction,

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insensibility’. 50 ‘[T]he land rots’, the poet declares. It is time to lift anchor and ‘sail into the night’. 51

if now the sky and sea are black as ink
our hearts, as you must know, are filled with light.
Only when we drink poison are we well—
we want, this fire so burns our brain tissue,
to drown in the abyss—heaven or hell
who cares? Through the unknown we’ll find the new.

In the early twentieth century, modernism in art and literature implied always a new avant garde in place of the old, a new individual search for the unique and new. Artists reflected on their new movement in their works, such as Against Nature by Joris Karl Huysman (1845-1907), but also, self-consciously in statements of purpose. The new journal Le Décadent popularized the term ‘decadent’ for the end-of-the-century avant garde. 52 Walter Pater, Nicholls argues, had in 1873 started the decadent creed of the search for intense, if temporary experience. For Pater, ‘’To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life’’. The ideal is to dwell intensely in the moment of ‘’exquisite passion’’. 53

Nicholls argues that decadence contained an in-built impasse in its deep cynicism and ethic of the end. The culture of the fin de siècle, however, was characterized by diversity and multiplicity, and an ethic of novelty as a supreme value – what was in was soon to be out. Creativity and individualism meant reaching what appeared to be the summit only to have revealed another summit to surmount. Many artists perceived false summits, mirages of novelty. Living in the here and now always presents itself as a confusing melange of tendencies, pretensions, and novelities, but only the passing of time permits an appraisal of which were pregnant with the future – which were made to succeed and which to pass away.

The ‘fin de siècle’ was also notable for the emergence, within the artistic and intellectual community, of multiple sexualities. Increasingly, however, non-heterosexuality had been subject to social regulation and punishment. In England, the career of the Irish dramatist, Oscar Wilde, exemplified the persecution of homosexuality. Wilde was directly influenced by the decadent movement in France, drawing inspiration from Baudelaire’s image of the ‘dandy’. Wilde imagined that art could work its magic to refashion the world ‘anew in the darkness for our pleasure’ [see Box 13.1].

**Box 13.1 Refashioning the World in Pleasure**

‘There are few of us who have not sometimes wakened before dawn, either after one of those dreamless nights that make us almost enamoured of death, or one of those nights of horror and misshapen joy…. [until] Veil after veil of thin dusky gauze is lifted, and by degrees the forms and colours of things are restored to them, and we watch the dawn remaking the world in its antique pattern…. Nothing seems to us changed. Out of the unreal shadows of the night

51 Charles Baudelaire, The Flowers of Evil, 185.
52 Nicholls, Modernisms, p. 54.
53 Quoted in Nicholls, Modernisms, p. 69.
comes back the real life that we have known … and there steals over us a terrible sense of the necessity for the continuance of energy in the same wearisome round of stereotyped habits, or a wild longing, it may be, that our eyelids might open some morning upon a world that had been refashioned anew in the darkness for our pleasure, a world in which things would have fresh shapes and colours, and be changed, or have other secrets, a world in which the past would have little or no place, or survive, at any rate, in no conscious form of obligation or regret’.


**Oscar Wilde**

Any culture which is exclusively or essentially aesthetic contains within itself a germ of immorality, or at least of inferior morality.

-- Émile Durkheim, *The Evolution of Educational Thought* (1938:207)

For Wilde, humanity had a natural tendency to fear the passions, those inborn desires that placed people on a level with the animals and appeared to be stronger than the rational, mental ability to control them. Defining the passions as ‘savage and animal’, society sought to subdue them, tame them by self-torture or starve them into submission by self-denial. But, Wilde believed, if you resist expressing your passions and desires, ‘your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful.’ As a result, ‘We degenerate into hideous puppets, haunted by the memory of the passions of which we were too much afraid, and the exquisite temptations that we had not the courage to yield to.’

In his novel, *A Room with a View*, E. M. Forster drew an unsympathetic portrait of an over-aestheticized intellectual. Named symbolically Cecil Vyse, Forster described him as ‘medieval. Like a Gothic statue’ who ‘remained in the grip of a certain devil whom the modern world know as self-consciousness’. Vyse practiced acting unconventionally; ‘he despised the world as a whole; every thoughtful man should’. He was ‘easily upset by ugly things’. Asked what he did for a living, Vyse gave the conventionally decadent answer: nothing.

‘I have no profession,’ said Cecil. ‘It is another example of my decadence. My attitude—quite an indefensible one—is that so long as I am no trouble to anyone I have a right to do as I like. I know I ought to be getting money out of people, or devoting myself to things I don’t care a straw about, but somehow I’ve not been able to begin.’

His disclaimer is disingenuous—Vyse does defend his decadence. The hard-working bourgeoisie, he claims, are either busy exploiting other people, or working so hard themselves they can’t appreciate the finer things of life. ‘There are some chaps who are no good for anything

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56 Forster *A Room with a View*, 83, 93, 136.
57 Forster A Room with a View, 91.
but books’, Vyse confessed: ‘I plead guilty to being such a chap.’ In particular, Yvse is ‘no good’ as a lover. The vice of over-refinement leaves him about as passionate as a prune.

Instead of this Victorian denial of desire, Wilde advocated the lifestyle known as dandyism. In Wilde’s version, dandyism sought to spiritualize the senses and ‘assert the absolute modernity of beauty’. The dandy created and lived the new standards of taste and aesthetics that freely sought pleasure and gratified desire. The purpose of this new hedonism, Wilde wrote, ‘was to recreate life’ in an age of Puritan revival. The ethic of hedonism ‘was never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience. Its aim, indeed, was to be experience itself. . . . [I]t was to teach’ people to concentrate ‘upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment’ and make life anew.

Wilde was as notorious for his licentious lifestyle as he was celebrated as a playwright. Born in Dublin, Ireland, Wilde’s mother was a poet and active in the nationalistic Young Ireland movement of the 1840s. Although he married conventionally and had two children, Wilde transgressed the sexual conventions of Victorian England by following his sexual impulses into a homosexual relationship with Alfred Douglas, the son of the Marquis of Queensbury. In 1885 a Criminal Law Amendment Act had prohibited consensual ‘indecent’ relations between men. When the Marquis made the relationship between Wilde and his son public, Wilde sued him for libel; however, Wilde was subsequently charged criminally and convicted in 1895, in a second trial, of ‘immoral conduct’. Sentenced to two years penal servitude at hard labour, he finished his sentence at Reading Gaol where ‘all, but Lust, / is turned to dust In Humanity’s machine.’ In his Ballad of Reading Gaol, Wilde realized that:

The vilest deeds like poison weeds
Bloom well in prison air:
It is only what is good in Man
That wastes and withers there.

Wilde became the ‘unmentionable one in England’—the original ‘he who must not be named’. His play, Salome (1892) was considered so scandalous that it could not be produced in London. Wilde published it a year later in France. Salome was the impetuous step-daughter of Herod who, in the Biblical story, demanded and received the head of the prophet, John the Baptist (or Iokannan, John’s Hebrew name that Wilde uses in the play).

In Wilde’s version, Salome lusts after John the Baptist: ‘I am amorous of thy body, Iokannan!’ Salome declares. ‘Suffer me to touch thy body.’

When Salome achieves her desire, however, it is not as she had imagined. The long-time prisoner’s body is hideous to the touch, and his hair is horrible. Neither quenches Salome’s inflamed desire: ‘It is thy mouth that I desire …/ Suffer me to kiss thy mouth’ she demands.

When John (Iokannan), again, absolutely spurns her, Salome’s passion is inflamed. With ultimate power, she can achieve her desire at any cost. She has John slaughtered and decapitated,

58 Forster A Room with a View, 168. Symbolic of his overly-aesthetic refinement, Vyse wears a pince-nez that interferes painfully the first time he tries, self-consciously, awkwardly, and ineffectually, to kiss his fiancé: ‘As he touched her, his gold pince-nez became dislodged and was flattened between them’ (p. 108).
59 ‘Two Loves’, the infamous Douglas sonnet used against Wilde at his trial, ends: ‘I am the Love that dare not speak its name.’ Isobel Murray, ‘Introduction’, The Writings of Oscar Wilde, xv.
60 Oscar Wilde, ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’, in Writings, 564.
61 Rubinstein, Great Tradition, 854.
and his head is brought to her on a platter. Finally, Salome achieves what she has so desperately desired. She declares::

‘I love thee yet, Iokannan, I love only thee…. I am athirst for thy beauty; I am hungry for thy body; and neither wine nor apples can appease my desire. What shall I do now, Iokannan? Neither the floods nor the great waters can quench my passion. I was a princess, and thou didst scorn me. … I was chaste, and thou didst fill my veins with fire….‘62

Salome finally achieves her desire and kisses John the Baptist’s lips, but it is not as she had imagined. As Wilde had observed in Lady Windemere’s Fan (19), ‘In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it. The last is much the worst, the last is a real tragedy!’63

Unless it was notoriety, Wilde also didn’t at first achieve his desires from this controversial play. Being intimate with a severed head was too much for the London audience and he was unable to produce the play. The Victorian stage was not yet the place to display Wilde’s refashioned world, with its new, illicit desires and pleasures.

In Wilde’s short novel, The Picture of Dorian Grey, the initially innocent (and necessarily beautiful) young Gray was initially moved, idealistically, to follow a life of service to the needy. A cynical aristocrat, Henry Wotton, then seduces Dorian Grey into a life of debauchery, counseling him to realize to the fullest his youthful pleasures—to gather rosebuds while he may. According to Wotton, Grey was squandering his youth in the vain attempt to help hopeless failures, the ignorant, the common, and the vulgar.

‘These are the sickly aims, the false ideals of our age,’ he declares, ironically.

Instead, Wotton asserts, the goal of life is simply to live fully, to be ‘always searching for new sensations’.64 Dorian Grey is bewildered by the subtle magic in Wotton’s words that touch in him a ‘secret chord’ like seductive music. But music was inarticulate; music created in him only a sense of chaos. Words, on the other hand, were vivid. They gave shape to his temptations and created the image of a new world, a new life.65

Seduced by the goddess of pleasure, Dorian Grey begins a life of depravity. Wilde believed that the effects of living a life of debauchery would be etched permanently on Dorian Grey’s face and body, the disfigurations becoming the visible and physical symbols of his sins. His body would become increasingly repulsive, mirroring his moral degeneracy. To avoid this visual deterioration, Grey makes a Faustian bargain that grants him, perpetually, the external appearance of youth and innocence despite living a life of debauchery. His youthful portrait captures the essence of his youthful beauty and innocence (and hence, his ‘soul’). In the ordinary course of existence, this youthful-looking picture would remain unchanged while Grey’s body progressively aged. In Oscar Wilde’s imaginative story, the reverse occurs: Dorian Grey remains perpetually young looking while his portrait grows visibly older and increasingly hideous—

62 Oscar Wilde, Salome, Writings of Oscar Wilde, pp. 309-310; 328.
64 Oscar Wilde, ‘The Picture of Dorian Gray’, The Writings of Oscar Wilde, p. 65. Huysman’s Against Nature, Nicholls notes, was the ‘poisonous book’ that seduced Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray’, Nicholls, Modernisms, p. 54. Wilde did not name the ‘poisonous book’ in his short novel, though its style was described as French Symboliste. As Dorian Gray read the book, ‘It seemed to him that … the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him’ (p. 141).
65 Wilde, Dorian Grey, p. 62. ‘The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it’ (pp. 61-62).
effects of a life of depravity written on canvas rather than the body, reflecting his cruelty, indifference, selfishness and advancing age. Dorian’s exploits were inspired by a ‘poisonous’ French novel, generally assumed to be Huysman’s A Rebours. It was, however, a Faustian bargain. The only way Grey can stop the escalation of evil is to destroy the portrait and, in effect, commit suicide. As Franz Kafka remarked in 1917, ‘One cannot pay Evil in instalments – and one always keeps on trying to.’

Wilde spent the last few years of his life in France, friendless and in penury. He had rejected and defied social conventions and morality in a very public way, which may account for the severity of the response he elicited. He was condemned because of his sexuality. Victorian formality avoided the open acknowledgement even of heterosexuality. Under the proprieties of Victorianism, of course, lay explicit sexuality and sexual diversity, as well as a culture of lower-and upper-class prostitution and commonplace bourgeois male infidelity. It was a society severely and unnaturally divided between the limelight of apparent public morality and a backstage of private vice. As they peeled away the layers of smug hypocrisy shielding Victorian realities, the novelists and playwrights emerged as early and insightful psychologists. Naturalism and decadence helped to usher in the modernist movement, which had a new dark side of desire and disorder that so horrified such traditional Victorians as Tennyson. He summarized the new and, in his view, objectionable tendencies in art and literature, referring to them as ‘Zolaism’ in his poem, ‘Locksley Hall, Sixty Years After’ (1886):

Bring the old dark ages back without the faith, without the hope,
Break the State, the Church, the Throne, and roll their ruins down the slope.
Authors—essayist, atheist, novelist, realist, rhymester, play your part,
Paint the mortal shame of nature with the living hues of art.
Rip your brother’s vices open, strip your own foul passions bare;
Down with Reticence, down with Reverence—forward—naked—let them stare

Set the maiden fancies wallowing in the troughs of Zolaism,—
Forward, forward, ay, and backward, downward too into the abysm!

In the early twentieth century, the Italian social theorist, Vilfredo Pareto condemned ‘the abject … paladins of purity’ represented by Tennyson. ‘The fanaticism and idiocy that inspired the old prosecutions for witchcraft are present point for point in modern prosecutions for offences against the sex religion.’ The new ‘sex heresy’ included printing stories ‘reputed to be obscene’ or immoral; nude photographs, ‘the crime of mentioning the [lesbian] embrace of Daphnis and Chloe—things that have always been done and will always be done so long as the human race endures.’ Governments may give refuge to exiled murderers, Pareto complained, but the ‘Inquisitors on Purity’ quickly ‘hand over sex heretics to their prosecutors, sex heresy being a more serious crime than murder’ because it involves ‘a violation of a sex taboo’.

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66 Wilde’s character Henry Wotton worshipped youth -- with limitations: ‘To get back my youth I would do anything in the world, except take exercise, get up early, or be respectable.’ Wilde, Dorian Grey, p. 208.
CONCLUSION

‘Every so-called decadent epoch (in which a disintegration of the old world takes place) is characterized by a refined and highly “speculative” form of thought.’
-- Antonio Gramsci, Selections from Prison Notebooks (p. 370)

The ethics of spirituality and anti-materialism shaped alternative perspectives among the Bohemian counterculture. By the 1920s, however, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia had added a further complication to the ambivalent attitudes of the avant-garde. D.H. Lawrence, for example, condemned in equal measure, and roughly for the same sins, both bourgeois society and Bolshevism. Bolshevism was anti-bourgeois and dynamic, but it was also anti-individualist, an attitude that strikes at the heart of the avant-garde. Any flirtation with Bolshevism could only be historically specific, temporary, and hesitant.

For many artists, the voyage into the unconscious and the imagination was also an escape from reality, a particular form of protest against the status quo. For the artists of alienation, the only liberation from the present is personal, individualistic, spiritual, and subjective. In practice, such liberation is available only to the few, the intellectual elite, who regard themselves as capable of seeing through both the hypocrisy of the present, materialistic culture and the unrealizable pretensions of the social reformers and revolutionaries. These artists were contemptuous of the masses and of the ideology of the masses, of democracy (an impossible illusion), equality (contrary to the laws of nature), and socialism (an absurd combination of both illusions).