Untiming Decadence in Latin America

Well, crumble then, society! Perish, old world!
—Huysmans (203)

Latin Americans admire Huysmans; they do not, or cannot, rewrite him.
—Molloy (41)

How does European periodization travel across the Atlantic? Is the study of decadence in Latin America an unmistakable sign of Eurocentrism? If so, then in contrast to *modernismo*, usually considered the most "authentic" form of Latin American culture of this period, roughly 1885 to 1910, decadence and decadentism would be a pale and belated "mimicry" of the original cosmopolitan models, which as usual are found primarily in Paris and London. As Jorge Olivares documents, this query simply reiterates the reasoning with which decadent tendencies in art and literature are rejected from the beginning in Latin America: "The most hackneyed argument made by traditionalists was that the Latin American decadents were emulating the 'trans-Atlantic fashions' and that what was a legitimate preoccupation in Europe turned into a literary pose in America" (18; my trans.). What is more, insofar as the style of decadence is already perceived in Europe to revolve around self-conscious artifice, with the title of Huysmans's 1884 *Against Nature* (*À rebours*) providing the canonical slogan behind the trend, accusations against decadence as an unnatural excrescence of otherwise wholesome concerns become all the more virulent in the case of Latin America.

A corollary to these accusations is the refusal to consider the exchanges during this period between Europe and Latin America otherwise than as a confirmation of the ongoing power struggle between center and periphery—as if the traumas of dependency prolonged themselves deep into the hearts of even the best-intentioned comparatists of the present. The inner dynamic of the phenomena known as decadence is thereby lost, as are the ways in which these phenomena unfold not only in Latin America but also in Europe. We need to address both the dominance of European period terms and the blinding effects of an all-too-rash critique of them, which by a kind of overcompensation continues to leave the study of European decadence in a realm of its own, wholly cut off from its ties to the non-Western world.

European decadence itself cannot be understood purely on its own terms; one must also take into account the legacy and crisis of national traditions from a global perspective. Charles Baudelaire gives us a glimpse of the comparatism needed to understand this dialectic. "Dandyism," he writes in "The Painter of Modern Life" (first published in 1863), "is the last spark of heroism amid decadence." But he is quick to provide an odd example that undoes the logic that would tie decadence to an awareness of events taking place exclusively on the political and artistic scenes of Europe, adding that "the type of dandy discovered by our traveler in North America does nothing to invalidate this idea; for how can we be sure that those tribes which we call 'savage' may not in fact be the *disjecta membra* of great extinct civilizations?" (28–29). Belying the trend toward the autonomy of pure artifice, decadence and dandyism become placeholders for a gaze that looks at itself only through the eyes of the other—a gaze staring back at modern civilization from outside it, from a place that is not the dark and long-forgotten origin of civilization so much as the constitutive promise of its savage future. Baudelaire is undermining the historicist prejudice according to which decadence ought to be read from within the frame of a linear metanarrative as the fatal endpoint of progress from savagery to barbarism to civilization. Even the alternative of a cyclical temporality, which often supports the figure of decadence, does not hold up anymore. Behind all such developments, linear-historicist or cyclical, there still would lie a stable principle of contemporaneity, or a notion of the now, which would provide a normative point of comparison between the periods or cycles in question. But Baudelaire's readers cannot continue relying on a single standard of development, including its necessary stages and relapses. Instead, in the absence of such a

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900168841 Published online by Cambridge University Press

common measure of periodization, radically different temporalities clash in what we might call a singular conjuncture, for which decadence is only one name. The usual time lines break down and open out onto a contingent articulation of events, which no underlying unity can normalize or give an aim to, since now all civilizations appear put together from the *disjecta membra* of a haphazard history.

Both progress and decline are subject to a unique antihistoricist attack, as Walter Benjamin later argues: "Overcoming the concept of 'progress' and overcoming the concept of 'period of decline' are two sides of one and the same thing" (*Arcades* 460), at least for the historical materialist willing to retrieve the violence and discontent beneath any document of victorious civilization. "And just as such a document is not free of barbarism," he writes, "barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist, therefore, dissociates himself from it as far as possible; he regards it as his task to brush history against the grain" ("Theses" 256–57). In Baudelaire's case, such are the scenarios of internal splitting when basic ideological tenets from the turn of the century are imitated from across the Atlantic, twisted and dislodged, with the ocean functioning as a deforming mirror for endless operations of transference and countertransference. Baudelaire's pseudo-anthropological "dandy from the tribe in North America," in this sense, could well be compared to the inverse figure of "a certain *indio* who knows French" and makes a one-time appearance at the end of José Martí's only novel, the 1885 melodrama *Lucía Jerez* (203).

From the shores of Latin America, the notion of decadent untimeliness—together with its spatial equivalents—cannot fail to be understood as a sign of uneven development. In other words, if decadence names a time that is out of joint or dismembered, this should not be imputed too quickly to some ontology of becoming. Instead, temporal disjointedness itself should be related to the history of capitalism at the point of crisis of its imperialist projection. But then the logic of uneven development, far from affecting only peripheral societies, must be generalized, as even Karl Marx came to understand late in his life, too late to make peace with a continent for which, because of its love of Bonapartism, he famously never had any real revolutionary hopes (Aricó 116–43). Martí, who seems to have returned the favor by criticizing Marx in a necrological note, can be our guide in carrying the logic of uneven development onto a global scale so as to include phenomena of decadence and disjointedness within a world-historical comparatist frame ("Tributes").[1]

In *Lucía Jerez*, Martí nearly anticipates the conclusion Marx comes to, in his later writings on Ireland, Poland, and Russia, about the universal nature of uneven development, all the while echoing Marx's earlier assertion, made in his famous preface in 1859. Martí writes:

> These times of ours are out of joint, and with the collapse of the old social walls and the refinements of education, a new and vast class of aristocrats of the mind has emerged, imbued with all the showy needs and rich tastes that come with it, without there having been sufficient time, in the rapidness of the turnabout, for the change in the organization and distribution of fortunes to correspond to the brutal alteration in the social relations produced by political liberties and by the vulgarization of knowledge. (145; cf. Marx)

We could expand the scope of micrological models such as these to include the global developments that overdetermine the drama of vacillating national identities not only in Latin America but in Europe as well.[2] Even conventional efforts of periodization, including the typical nineteenth-century project of writing a world history—from Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of history (1822–30) to their scathing parody in the second of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* (1874)—can be seen as attempts to overcome the problems that derive from colonization, from both the deeply felt need for and eventual failure of colonial powers to legitimize their rule in the name of universal reason. These

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900168841 Published online by Cambridge University Press

efforts recall what happened with the collapse of the Roman Empire when Augustine in *City of God* produced a world-historical account of decadence and regeneration in response to the ideological crisis that followed the sack of Rome.

We should be surprised that anyone can still present an intellectual history of decadence without taking into account the violent and unequal legacy of colonial expansion.[3] Late-nineteenth-century decadence and the critique of historicism, from the larger perspective that seems unavoidable to me as a Latin Americanist, do not emerge as the result of post-1848 or post-1870 conflicts in or between Germany and France so much as a last-hour response against the irruption of scandalous truths that forever will have put into crisis the imperial project of Europe.

Bruno Bosteels
Cornell University

Notes

1. I am also thinking of Fredric Jameson's proposal, which incidentally occurs right after a discussion of Spanish American *modernismo*, that "literary 'influence' looks rather different when, as today, cultural evolution is grasped as a symptom of the dynamics of an international capitalist system. Yet a dialectic does not yet exist that is capable of coordinating the incommensurable conceptualities of the national-literary and the international" (101).

2. The question of imitation I ask at the beginning of this paper is one point of entry into the topic. Rubén Darío famously asked himself, "Qui pourrais-je imiter pour être original?" ("Whom might I imitate so as to be original?"), even though elsewhere he quotes Wagner: "First of all, do not imitate anybody, especially not me" ("Colores" 52; "Palabras" 48; my trans.). But the same question also drives a wedge between France and Germany from Romantic times all the way to the Franco-Prussian war. "The fact is, to begin rather abruptly, that since the collapse of Christianity a specter has haunted Europe: the specter of imitation—which means, above all, the imitation of the ancients," as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy write. "The drama of Germany was also that it suffered an imitation to the second degree, and saw itself obliged to imitate the imitation of antiquity that France and Italy did not cease to export for at least two centuries" (299; trans. modified). Nietzsche himself situates his notion of untimeliness in this context: "Or is it actually the case that we Germans—to leave the Romance nations out of account—must always be no more than 'heirs' in all the higher affairs of culture, because that is all we *can* ever be. . . . What I mean by this—and it is all I mean—is that the thought of being epigones, which can often be a painful thought, is also capable of evoking great effects and grand hopes for the future in both an individual and a nation, provided we regard ourselves as the heirs and successors of the astonishing powers of antiquity and see in this our honour and our spur" (103).

3. This is the case even with Charles Bernheimer's otherwise brilliant overview, published posthumously. A rare exception is Alain Badiou, who in *The Century* reads *la belle époque* as indissociable from colonial barbarity. Speaking of the creative splendor of "the two great decades between 1890 and 1914" and the enigma of their relation to the savagery of World War I, he writes: "There is no hope of resolving this problem unless we keep in mind that the blessed period before the war is also that of the apogee of colonial conquest, of Europe's stranglehold over the entirety of the earth, or very nearly. And therefore that elsewhere, far away but also very close to everyone's conscience, in the midst of every family, servitude and massacre are already present" (7).

Works Cited

Aricó, José. *Marx y América Latina*. Mexico City: Alianza, 1982. Print.

Badiou, Alain. *The Century*. Trans. Alberto Toscano. Cambridge: Polity, 2007. Print.

Baudelaire, Charles. "The Painter of Modern Life." "*The Painter of Modern Life*" *and Other Essays*. Trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne. New York: Pantheon, 1964. 1–41. Print.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: Belknap–Harvard UP, 1999. Print.

———. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*. Ed. and introd. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zone. New York: Schocken, 1969. 253–64. Print.

Bernheimer, Charles. *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*. Ed. T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002. Print.

Darío, Rubén. "Los colores del estandarte." *El modernismo visto por los modernistas*. Ed. Ricardo Gullón. Barcelona: Guadarrama, 1980. 49–57. Print.

———. "Palabras liminares." *El modernismo y otros ensayos*. Ed. Iris M. Zavala. Madrid: Alianza, 1989. 48–50. Print.

Hegel, Georg W. F. *The Philosophy of History*. Trans. J. Sibree. Buffalo: Prometheus, 1991. Print.

Huysmans, Joris-Karl. *Against Nature*. Trans. Robert Baldick. London: Penguin, 2003. Print. Trans. of *À rebours*.

Jameson, Fredric. *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. London: Verso, 2002. Print.

Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe, and Jean-Luc Nancy. "The Nazi Myth." Trans. Brian Holmes. *Critical Inquiry*

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900168841 Published online by Cambridge University Press

16.2 (1990): 291–312. Print. Trans. of *Le mythe nazi*. La Tour d'Aigues: Aube, 1991.

Martí, José. *Lucía Jerez*. Ed. Carlos Javier Morales. Madrid: Cátedra, 1994. Print.

———. "Tributes to Karl Marx, Who Has Died." *Selected Writings*. Ed. and trans. Esther Allen. London: Penguin, 2002. 130–39. Print.

Marx, Karl. Preface. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Introd. Maurice Dobb. New York: International, 1970. 19–23. Print.

Molloy, Sylvia. "Too Wilde for Comfort: Desire and Ideology in Fin-de-Siècle Latin America." *Negotiating Lesbian and Gay Subjects*. Ed. Monica Dorenkamp and Richard Henke. New York: Routledge, 1995. 35–52. Print.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life (1874)." *Untimely Meditations*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Introd. J. P. Stern. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993. 57–123. Print.

Olivares, Jorge. "La recepción del decadentismo en Hispanoamérica." *La novela decadente en Venezuela*. Caracas: Armitano, 1984. 13–33. Print.

An Idea in Combat with Itself: Benjamin, Hölderlin, and "Temporal Plasticity"

Among the claims Walter Benjamin proposes in a dense essay from late 1914 or early 1915 entitled "Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin" ("Two Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin"), one appears to leave even its proponent at a loss. Benjamin asserts that "the poetized" ("das Gedichtete") of a late poem by Hölderlin is characterized by "temporal plasticity" ("zeitliche Plastik" [120]), which suggests that time does not flow like a river but, rather, stands still like a work of plastic art such as a statue, mosaic, or temple.[1] The introduction to the essay is devoted to explaining what Benjamin means by "the poetized." Whatever else may be said about the poetized, one thing is certain: it is opposed to psychologism. Just as Hermann Cohen and Edmund Husserl develop their programs for "pure knowledge" (Cohen, *Logik*) and "pure phenomenology" (Husserl) by attacking any form of empirical research that impinges on the domains of logic and epistemology, Benjamin circumscribes a field of "pure aesthetics" ("Two Poems" 105) by making the analysis of artworks incompatible with inquiries into the empirical conditions of artists and their audiences. In the case of lyric poetry, "aesthetic commentary" (105) seeks to identify the basic task that the poem under investigation is meant to fulfill, regardless of what the poet wished to say or the audience may have felt. The identification of this task yields the poetized, which can then be considered the a priori of the poem. Unlike New Criticism, which also dispenses with psychological considerations, the program Benjamin develops in "Two Poems" is less concerned with grasping the verbal artifact by means of close reading than with approaching the methodological ideal of the "pure poetized" (108), which would itself be a poem—or life itself.

No similarly brief thesis can be formulated to explain some of the other terms Benjamin develops for his analysis of Hölderlin's late ode "Blödigkeit" ("Infirmity" or "Timidity," with a hint of "Stupidity") in relation to one of its earlier versions, "Dichtermut" ("Poetic Courage"). Most puzzling of all is probably "temporal plasticity." Nevertheless, this term describes the culmination of the program for "pure aesthetics," since it completes the critique of psychologism by striking at its underlying concept of experience, which represents time as a unidimensional, irreversible flow. The plasticity of time means that it is multidimensional, static, and formable—hence reversible. Reversible time is inconceivable from the perspective of lived experience, as Benjamin emphasizes. Only a thoroughly contemplative consciousness, which approximates the perspective of a god, can apply *plastic* to time; otherwise, for empirical consciousness, it appears to flow.

This much is clear: the idea of temporal plasticity opposes what Heidegger would later call "the vulgar concept of time" (420). Far less clear is the source of this idea. Nowhere in the poems discussed by Benjamin does *plastic* appear. In his analysis of the spatial character of "Blödigkeit," he emphasizes one of its words: *gelegen* ("opportune," derived from *legen*, "to place"), which allows him to describe the spatiality of the corresponding poetized in terms of *Gelegenheit* ("opportunity"). When every place is opportune, space no longer appears empty. The sight of empty space is generated by the as-

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900168841 Published online by Cambridge University Press