



DECADENCE AND REGENERATION IN DRIEU LA ROCHELLE'S ŒUVRE

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SUMMARY

Belonging to the generation of French writers of what is usually labeled as "literary fascism", Drieu in his literary work epitomizes close alliance of the political and the literary. Moreover, acting as journalist (and general editor) in *Nouvelle Revue Française*, linked with Jacques Doriot's party PPF (*Parti populaire française*) and promoting his ideas of "New Europe" and "New Man" Drieu epitomizes typically fascist/modernist union of politics and arts. Living in profoundly ideologized times, experiencing two world wars, being French and believing in decadence of his nation it was almost impossible for him not to join some of warring sides. The paper looks at Drieu in the context of his "lost generation", as Barrès' disciple and as one of many offshoots of generally and long-time accepted idea of decadence. Drieu's emphasis on warlike virtues, virile masculinity, activist attitudes, instinctual and biological aspect of human existence derives not just from his personal psychological condition, but also from his personal experience in the Great War. His œuvre can be viewed as an extension of the 19th-century dark romanticism and fin-de-siècle's malaise, something one can find in his literary characters. Putting himself to the centre of the triangle of three other writers of his generation (Montherlant, Malraux, Céline) Drieu represents just one of many voices revealing dark side of man and his "noble" ideals.

Keywords: Drieu La Rochelle. Decadence. Body-mind relation. "New man". Fascism.

RESUMO

Pertencendo a uma geração dos escritores franceses geralmente rotulada como "fascismo literário", Drieu na sua obra literária constitui uma aliança do político e do literário. Drieu atuou como jornalista (e editor geral) em *Nouvelle Revue Française*, foi ligado ao partido de Jacques Doriot PPF (*Parti populaire française*) e propagandeando suas ideias da "Nova Europa" a "Novo Homem" personificou uma união tipicamente fascista/modernista da política e da arte. Vivendo na época profundamente ideologizada, vivenciando duas guerras mundiais, sendo francês e acreditando na decadência da sua nação foi quase impossível para ele não unir-se aos lados bélicos. O artigo vê Drieu no contexto da sua "geração perdida", como discípulo de Barrès e como um dos muitos grelos da geralmente há muito tempo aceita ideia da decadência. A ênfase de Drieu às virtudes bélicas, masculinidade viril, aspecto instintivo e biológico da existência humana deriva-se não só da sua própria condição psicológica, mas também da sua experiência pessoal na Grande Guerra. Sua obra pode ser vista como uma extensão do romantismo escuro do século XIX e do mal-estar do fim do século, algo que pode ser visto nos seus caracteres. Colocando-se no centro do triângulo de três outros escritores da sua geração (Montherlant, Malraux, Céline) Drieu representa apenas uma das vozes revelando o lado escuro do homem e suas ideias "nobres".

Palavras-chave: Drieu La Rochelle. Decadência. Relação corpo-mente. "Homem novo". Fascismo.

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INTRODUCTION FROM "PROGRESS" TO "DECADENCE"

Biological and depth-psychological aspect of human existence started to be felt as essential for understanding human nature long before Freud's *Traumdeutung* was published. In fact, early romantic psychology and German *Naturphilosophie* went hand in hand when conceiving psyche and nature as existing in profound unity. Actually it was this idea together with several others what separated western thought in two distinctive currents labeled by Sternhell as "*illuminisme – anti-illuminisme*" (STERNHELL: 2010). Romantic thought had so tremendous and ubiquitous impact that the enlightenment tradition has never fully recovered so one can hardly speak about 19th century as totally dominated by enlightenment values or modernity. Seen from retrospective, romantic tradition was regularly upgraded and took different forms: from darwinism, social darwinism, neoromanticism, idea of decadence, degeneration, *fin-de-siècle* occultism and spiritualism to inter-war modernism and fascism. If we are to look for deeper sources and inspiration of so-called "literary fascism" we have to delve deeper to European 19th-century anti-modernity and romanticism.

In the early 19th century it was romanticism what introduced a new version of divine into European culture. What was new about it was unusual and uninstitutionalized, but still ritualized way of religious feeling. The divine was incarnated as a philosophical principle of profound unity of Psyche and Nature. Apart from prose and poetry it was romantic psychology and German *Naturphilosophie* that helped to expand this romantic sense. Whereas romantic psychologists initiated profound research in the human psyche including its pathologic expressions, foremost philosophical protagonist Schelling (1775-1854) declared that "*nature is visible spirit, spirit is invisible nature*" supposing that Spiritual (*Geist*) and Natural (*Natur*) arise from the same source (ELLENBERGER: 1970, p. 202), idea somehow similar to Goethe's category of *Weltseele* (World soul). Shortly, romanticist movement re-introduced or rehabilitated old idea of man-nature unity as one of the main principles of its worldview. Coexistence of such worldview with so-called "modern world" and its sophisticated and rational institutions was not without problems especially because romanticism was in its very principle open to the irrational, the occult, the mysterious, the indefinable, the evasive and, perhaps more importantly, to the cultural pessimism.



In 1850s *Naturphilosophie* and romanticism seemed to be disappearing from European thought and superseded by positivism and mechanicism, but it was Darwin's main work that gave new impulse to romanticist worldview. Even though Darwin was very careful not to enter field of philosophy, there were others who did so and Darwinism rapidly conquered all domains of human intellect. 18th-century optimistic vision of history and culture got under critical scrutiny again and many concepts had to be re-validated. Whereas heirs of Enlightenment followed vision of history as an exteriorization of law of progress and ideal of *perfectibilité humaine*, their romanticist counterparts were less subject to such a historical optimism. Baudelaire's scepticism and suspicion regarding progress make him one of prominent anti-modern thinkers:

Il ne peut y avoir de progrès (vrai, c'est-à-dire moral) que dans l'individu et par l'individu lui-même (BAUDELAIRE:1975-1976: p. 681)

Baudelaire serves as a good example of those anti-moderns who rejected materialist, mechanicist bourgeois concept of culture and called for deeper spiritual dimension against mediocrity:

Théorie de la vraie civilisation./Elle n'est pas dans le gaz, ni dans la vapeur, ni dans les tables tournantes, elle est dans la diminution des traces du péché originel. (BAUDELAIRE: 1975-1976: p. 697)

With Darwin modern and anti-modern concepts of culture got more depth and controversy. Enlightenment idea of single humanity was abandoned and social sciences got biologized. During the second half of the 19th century anti-modern religious feeling was ready to earn rather social-darwinist/nationalist characteristics and approximated Hobbesian "*homo homini lupus*" principle. In 1888 Thomas Huxley, one of Darwin's first disciples, suggested:

From the point of view of the moralist, the animal world is on about the same level as a gladiators' show. The creatures are fairly well treated, and set to fight – whereby the strongest, the swiftest and the cunningest live to fight another day. The spectator had no need to turn his thumbs down (...). So among primitive men, the weakest and stupidest went to the wall, while the toughest and shrewdest, those who were best fitted to cope with their circumstances, but not the best in any other sense, survived. Life was a continuous free fight and beyond the limited and temporary relations of the family, the Hobbesian war of each against all was the normal state of



existence (...) the effort of ethical man to work toward a moral end (...) perhaps has hardly modified, the deep-seated organic impulses which impel the natural man to follow his non-moral code (...). (ELLENBERGER: 1970, p. 234, note 149)

Darwinism literally "cleared up" Occidental cultural optimism. Social darwinism, i.e. uncritical applications of such concepts like "struggle for life", "survival of the fittest" and "elimination of the unfit" on social and international reality, coincided with the wave of cultural pessimism and growth of nationalism. As far as cultural pessimism is concerned, it got underpinned by concepts like Max Nordau's degeneration or decadence. Here is the way how Carter refers to European decadence:

Nearly all authors of the time thought their age decadent. This was not the whim of a few eccentrics, but the settled opinion of pathologists, philosophers and critics ... Seen from the ruins of the present, the 19th century looks almost unbelievably massive, an accumulation of steam, cast iron and self-confidence, rather like one of its international expositions. It was the century which absorbed continents and conquered the world ... Why such an age, which lived a vigorous life vigorously, should have spent so much time in sullen musing on its own „decadence“, real or imagined, is a strange problem to which no simple answer can be given (CARTER:1958, p.144-151).

Neoromantic movement beckoned the same direction. In contrast to romanticism it did not look for direct connection to *Weltseele* (world soul) or soul of the nation. Neoromantic figure was frequently isolated narcissistic individual without any true bonds to other people or external world. Narcissus became embodiment of the closing 19th-century European *Zeitgeist*. Similarly to romanticism it searched within depths of human psyche, but at the same time put stress on both collective and individual pathology. In fact, neoromanticism was introducing *fin-de-siècle* culture.

In the very end of 19th century both anti-modern trends – "depth-psychological" and "biological" joined. Its most eloquent exponent was probably Gustave Le Bon, founder of then newly introduced domain of "collective psychology" or "psychology of masses". In his view the political and cultural were conceived as determined not by human *ratio* and the way how human rationality perceives and interprets the world, but first of all by collective, unconscious, biological and psychological factors. Consequently "character" of certain peoples was not viewed as a result of education, learning and civilizational processes or school systems, but as deeply imbedded bio-psychological predispositions:



Les qualités intellectuelles sont susceptibles d'être légèrement modifiées par l'éducation; celle du caractère échappent à peu près entièrement à son action. (...) Les découvertes de l'intelligence transmettent aisément d'un peuple à l'autre. Les qualités du caractère ne sauraient se transmettre ..(...). Le caractère d'un peuple et non son intelligence détermine son évolution dans l'histoire et règle sa destinée (LE BON:1894, p.29-30)

Le Bon initiated then fashionable *Zeitdiagnose* and analysed the "decadence" *fin-de-siècle* literature. Le Bon's diagnosis perfectly answers to Drieu La Rochelle's observation of decadence:

Arrivé à ce degré de civilisation et de puissance où, étant sûr de ne plus être attaqué par ses voisins, un peuple commence à jouir des bienfaits de la paix et du bien-être que procurent les richesses, les vertus militaires se perdent, l'excès de civilisation crée de nouveaux besoins, l'égoïsme se développe. N'ayant d'autre idéal que la jouissance hâtive de biens rapidement acquis, les citoyens abandonnent la gestion des affaires publiques à l'État et perdent bientôt toutes les qualités qui avaient fait leur grandeur. Alors des voisins barbares ou demi-barbares, ayant des besoins très faibles mais un idéal très tort, envahissent le peuple trop civilisé ...(LE BON:1894, p.25-26)

Allusions to consumer bourgeois society and its values stretch across Drieu's work as well. Forty years later Drieu's literary style, his literary *alter egos*, their dilemmas, inner conflicts and even Drieu's personal life itself echo the same feeling of general decrease of energy, dynamics, vitality, strength. What was once observed with Le Bon's objective analytical eye, becomes very personal and destructive experience of French author. More than that, quest against decadence becomes quest for both collective and individual salvation, quest for pure, heroic, virile future. That is the quest for fundamental and radical transformation that keeps Drieu (and his generation) apart Le Bon (and his generation).

On peut très bien oublier la commodité et le confort; mais le Français avait décidé qu'il n'y avait que ça qui lui plaisait dans la vie. Ce n'était pas l'avis de nos ancêtres, ce n'était pas l'avis de mon bisaïeul, qui c'était engagé en 1793 et qui n'est rentré chez lui qu'en 1814. Celui-là se moquait du confort comme d'une guigne, il avait mieux suivre son idée et son chef sur toutes les routes d'Europe. (...) ... il n'est jamais devenu bourgeois. (DRIEU:1943,p.253-254)

In fact, it was Drieu's generation that was expected to change the world. It was Agathon that, already before the Great War, announced powerful entry of new "virile" generation



embodying "*le goût de l'action*", "*la foi patriotique*", "*une renaissance catholique*" and "*le réalisme politique*". It supposed to be "*élite inovatrice*" or "*le type nouveau de la jeune élite*":

Nous avons fait porter notre recherche sur des garçons de dix-huit à vingt-cinq ans. C'est à la sortie du lycée, dans les grandes écoles, avant l'emprise d'une carrière, que se façonne notre visage moral et que se choisissent ces directions intellectuelles à quoi nous demeurons fideles toute la vie. Parmi les nouveaux venus, ceux qui approchent de la vingtième année nous ont paru réaliser vraiment un type original. La génération dont nous voulons esquisser une image est donc celle qui naquit vers 1890 (AGATHON:1913, p.II)

Agathon identified decadent and pessimistic spirit of older generations evident in Baudelaire's *Fleur du Mal*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* or Huysmans' *À Rebours*. At the same time it endorsed Paul Bourget's prophetic words ("*une mortelle fatigue de vivre, une morne perception de la vanité de tout effort*") or words pronounced by Maurice Barrès:

L'ennui baille sur ce monde décoloré par les savants, dit-il. Tous les dieux sont morts ou trop lointains: pas plus qu'eux, notre idéal ne vivra. Une profonde indifférence nous envahit. La souffrance s'émousse. Chacun suit son chemin, sans espoir, le dégoût aux lèvres, dans un piétinement sur lace, banal et toujours pareil, du cri douloureux de la naissance au rale déchirant de l'agonie – dernière certitude ouverte sur toutes les incertitudes (AGATHON: 1913, p.4-5)

Henri Massis (one of Agathon group members) was convinced that the older generations suffered from what he called "*antinomie de la pensée et l'action*": antinomy paralyzing ability to act leading to passivity, something identifiable in Taine, Bourget, Renan and even in Barrès (AGATHON: 1913, p.1-5). Even though Agathon did not make use of word "fascism", it attributed to young generation almost all those qualities later called "fascist" – especially cult of action, anti-rationalism or irrationalism, rejection of "*l'analyse intérieure*" because "*ce cheminement philosophique les intéresse de moins en moins*". In his view young generation considers "*vain sujet de méditation, et qui retarde l'heure d'agir*" (AGATHON:1913, p.15). It is somewhat paradoxical that Agathon associated that cultural revolution with the return to traditions (Maurasian or Barrèsian) whereas young generation itself got gradually closer to Marinetti's futurism and nascent fascism. For example Drieu's "*révolution du corps*" is clearly perceptible already in Agathon (AGATHON:1913, p. 31). In Agathon Nietzschean dictum "beyond the good and the evil" and moral relativism, i.e. fundamental attributes of fascism,



are perceivable as well. That was the direction that Drieu and other French writers like Céline, Montherlant or Brasillach decided to take.

DRIEU LA ROCHELLE: FROM DECADENCE TO FASCISM

Serge Doubrovsky avait raison d'écrire: "Prendre Claudel sans le christianisme ou Brecht sans le communisme, ce n'est pas s'installer dans la littérature, mais dans le vide". Nous durions de même que séparer le Drieu romancier du Drieu politique, c'est risquer de ne comprendre ni les romans, ni la politique (KUNNAS : 1972, p. 17)

Drieu's literary production was shaped by free following significant factors: his early family and adolescent experience, and participation in the Great War. Already in the end of the Great War Drieu was a budding author. By 1920 Drieu appeared to be promising poet, novelist and political essayist whose attention was captured by the phenomenon of decadence, all-permeating decline of traditional virtues and vitality as experienced in Parisian bourgeois class. All these factors converged in his decision to embrace fascist cultural revolution (1934) and Doriot's *Parti populaire française* (1936), to chant France's salvation from hands of nazism and, in the very end of his life, to delve deep to the study of oriental religions. All these facts make Drieu harbinger of his own time and, simultaneously, an interesting object of interdisciplinary studies.

It was disharmony between parents, father's systematic infidelity and degrading behaviour to little Drieu that shaped writer's life in increasingly revolting and rebellious way: "*Mon père méprise ma lacheté et son ricanement cloue mes pieds nus au parquet*" (DRIEU : 1921, p. 27). In his early and highly autobiographical novel *État civil* (1921) Drieu confessed that it had been feeling of his own weakness that had constituted the most important lesson of his childhood:

Je m'écartais des bons élèves, des quelques garçons qui restaient paisibles, réguliers, sans inquiétude. J'étais attiré par les plus mauvais, par ceux qui s'abandonnaient au plus bas d'eux-mêmes, à tous leurs penchants... C'était une complicité chaleureuse contre tout ce qui nous gênait... Nous étions possédés par l'esprit de subversion. Nous méprisions et haïssions les gens âgés. Nous étions aveugles et violents. Nous ne songions qu'à l'émeute (DRIEU : 1921, p. 130-131).



Drieu's inferiority feelings got compensated by his early quest for strong male figures and leaders. In 1921 Drieu was 28 years old but *État civil* reveals his adolescent feelings of weakness.³ Drieu's experience from the Great War was not just personal but collective and was shared with many of his contemporaries across all the Europe. But not all of them took the same lesson. Drieu's early years fated him to the revolt against modernity, against liberal-democratic establishment and to fascism. According to some scholars Drieu's emotional and intellectual investment in fascism was of romantic nature. His revolt was directed primarily against what he considered decadent, e.g against urban living standards, bourgeois morals, liberal democratic establishment, all that gradually considered not just legacy of French revolution but also of modernity and Jewry. The dark side of this quest for pure, light, masculine, strong, instinctive, rooted and profoundly authentic existence was the reason why he had to turn his arms against himself.

Drieu was tall elegant man with aristocratic demeanour, well-known figure of Parisian salons and experienced lover. André Malraux called him Casanova.⁴ That is how Drieu described himself: "*J'étais grand, blond. Les yeux bleus, la peau blanche. J'étais de la race nordique maîtresse du monde*" (ANDREU-GROVER : 1979, p. 37). Tall, nonchalant, fashionably dressed man with reserved presence, Drieu was particular about his appearance, each detail was important to him. His appearance was that of elegant dandy, Casanova, bourgeois. That's how J. Baron, one of younger members of surrealist group, described him:

Drieu me semblait plus Casanova que Don Juan; c'était des femmes qui tombaient dans ses bras. Ma première impression sur Drieu ? L'élégance. Nonchalante, oui. Mais il avait aussi une grande fermeté. De la guerre il gardait un prestige rouspéteur. Ce côté terrien normand, dont il faisait grand cas, lui conférait une équilibre trompeur (DESANTI:1978, p. 212).

Number of women passing through his life was impressive: youngsters, mature, married, intellectuals, widows, prostitutes. However, Baron points at Drieu's enormous doubts and aloofness to women. In fact, Drieu was haunted by incessant thoughts of decadence and suicide. Neither amorous relations, marriage nor friendships (surrealists) could resolve this

³ Here similarity with Maurice Barrès (1862-1923) is striking.

⁴ number of Drieu's novels is inspired by his experiences with women (*Plainte contre inconnu*, 1924; *L'homme couvert de femmes*, 1925; *Blèche*, 1928).



inner conflict completely. It seems that his literary work was supposed to be outlet of that inner conflict. At the beginning of 1930s Drieu was really alone and in 1934 decided for fascism – such decision had its political but also personal dimension. Drieu was convinced that fascism would regenerate France and Europe and that he himself would become a new (it is strong, vital, virile and deeprooted) man. Travelling to Moscow and Nürnberg, Drieu got impressed by virility of "new German man" without any symptom of decadence:

Un hall magnifiquement décoré, une cérémonie impeccable, beaucoup de beauté et de grandeur. Mon coeur se désolé à l'idée que tout cela est inconnu en France. Que d'élan de force, de joie ici ...Et il y une espèce de volupté virile qui flotte partout, qui n'est pas sexuelle mais très enivrant (ANDREU – GROVER : 1979, p. 338-339).

Political, social and personal transformation converge. After partly autobiographic narratives and novels describing life in decadent Paris (*Le Feu follet*, 1931), chanting Nietzschean man and denouncing decadent man (*La Comédie de Charleroi*, 1934; *La Rêveuse bourgeoisie*, 1937) works permeated by fascist propaganda follow (*Doriot ou la vie d'un ouvrier français*, 1936; *Avec Doriot*, 1937). This quest for "*l'homme fasciste*" culminated in the novel *Gilles* (1939). Drieu's development during 1930s is perceptible in his main characters. If *La Comédie de Charleroi* is an autobiographic description of wartime horrors and an expression of hope that the war itself offers the way out from decadence, then *La Rêveuse bourgeoisie* expresses author's conciliation with his own childhood and belief in transforming experience and the new beginning. *Gilles* is a novel in which decadence is overcome and decadent hero Gilles gets transformed in virile Walter. In the end of 1930s Drieu became one of the main speakers of the French fascism and *Gilles* reached about 21 editions. One scholar described it as "*the most complete portrait in fiction of the moral and intellectual development of a French fascist*" (CORRIGAN : 1945, p. 203).

"NEW MAN": FROM "RÉVOLUTION DU CORPS" TO "HOMO FASCISTA"

In his early political text *Notes pour comprendre le siècle* (1941) Drieu stated that the decisive "turning point" in the modern European thought was the import of Darwinian ideas



to the continent. In his view the greatest thinkers of 19th and 20th centuries were Darwinists (in Germany Nietzsche, in England Kipling and in France Sorel). Desperately searching for the raw reality, Drieu believed that Darwinism had revealed the bottom line of human existence. In course of 1920s and 1930s Drieu stressed his epistemological "pragmatism"⁵, i.e. conviction that the true knowledge "is the product only of experience". Drieu repeatedly affirmed that to get to know the truth, it must be tested by life itself and lived out actively. In fact, Drieu advocated certain type of fascist existentialism. It was the same philosophy as that defended by Agathon in 1913, very close to that of Marinetti and many other writers of his time. Many of them were ready to accept imperfections of the world and the man and to live out the existence as it really was.

Céline views policy as based almost on biological psychology. For him animal makes part of human. One cannot trust in sociology and its rational analyses: "*Pour la question des grandes reformes, des sociologues progressives, c'est aux chromosomes d'abord qu'il faut s'adresser. À l'esprit plus tard*" (CÉLINE:1966-1969, p. 219). As Kunnas wrote about the main character of Céline's novel *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1933):

Le héros du "Voyage" comprend que la grand fatigue de l'existence naît chez l'homme d'un perpétuel effort pour rester raisonnable, pour ne pas être simplement, profondément soi-même, c'est-à-dire immonde, atroce, absurde (KUNNAS: 1972, p. 33)

Already in his early poems Drieu confesses certain grief regarding those who suffered from war but his thoughts follow the same line as those of Céline: "...*je n'ai point confiance dans l'homme/il ne vaut rien sans sa souffrance*" (DRIEU : 1917, p. 81-82). Heroes of his novels are too distant from Kantian man. Camille Le Pesnel or Mme Pragen, Drieu's characters in *La Réveuse bourgeoisie*, do not believe in human ideal and humanity. The same scepticism can be found in the character of Michel Boutros in *Femme à fenêtre*. Gilles, the main character in Drieu's novel *Gilles* or Dirk Raspe in *Mémoires de Dirk Raspe* manifest the same attitudes.

⁵ Note that Drieu's use of word "pragmatism" differs from the way how it was used and defined by American pragmatic philosophers (John Dewey, Charles S. Peirce or C.I. Lewis). Drieu's epistemology could be labeled rather as subjectivist than pragmatic. In addition Drieu linked his pragmatism with romanticism. Here we have again problem of definition. It is evident that neither William James nor John Dewey were fascists. Even though Drieu's pragmatism is similar to American philosophical school in certain aspects, but it contains big dose of vitalism as well. Drieu looked for inspiration rather in Nietzsche than in James.



All that seems to be extension of Drieu's wartime experience but these views go together with a massive current of French thought as well. Le Bon, Sorel, Barrès, Péguy, Maurras and first of all Bergson manifest the same position.⁶ There is no doubt Drieu's work fits in this current. But there is even wider current: Drieu's scepticism regarding human nature and idea of soul-body unity express the same attitudes as that hold by Nietzsche and by nazi-fascist theorists of human nature:

(...) la nature humaine prend sa racine dans la biologie. Qu'est-ce que l'humanisme ? La recherche et le maintien du point d'équilibre entre ce qui chez l'homme est animal et ce qui est désincarné, entre ce qui est trop brutal et ce qui est trop pur (DRIEU:1943, p.151)

Irrationality of Drieu's protagonists echoes his vision of human nature. Drieu's humans are determined exclusively by their instincts. It seems that his war cult and irrationalism follow the nazi-fascist thesis of primacy of the biological and the irrational. Drieu believes that such forces will overcome decadence and give birth to new virile civilization. As I have already stated, these are convictions whose germs were present already in early Drieu's poetry:

Il est temps, ô mes amis, de jeter notre cri./Nous jeunes hommes d'aujourd'hui, nous sommes nous/veaux et notre grandeur n'a pas été connue de ceux qui/ont vécu autrefois. (...) Nous avons rejeté la pierre d'infamie (...) Ceux qui parlaient de déca/dence, sur eux confusion et malédiction (DRIEU:1917, p. 69-70).

In another place (*Le Fond de cantine*) Drieu – similar to Italian futurists – admires velocity, machines and technology but at the same time expresses doubts concerning human hubris as well. Later Drieu follows Nietzschean direction: renewal of paganism, strength, virility hand in hand with destruction of sterile masses domination:

Ce qui fut étonnant, prodigieux, fécond; cette découverte du XVI^e siècle qui s'aperçoit qu'il n'a plus besoin de Dieu parce que la source divine est aussi bien dans l'homme

⁶ Even if Bergson is not usually understood as a political thinker, his thoughts transcend narrow frame of philosophy: "Bergson has, then, been connected with the advocacy of violent political means and ends and with the promotion of unconsidered changes in laws and institutions. His theories have been labelled 'proto-fascist', 'revolutionary', 'romantic' and associated with modernist trend in French Catholicism" (KENNEDY : 1976, p.77).



(...) toute de suite en commence le gâchache le plus absolu. Tout cela au vingtième siècle, vers 1909, quel radotage épuisé et inefficace (DRIEU:1921, p. 85)

In spite of nationalist and anti-German attitude Drieu took in novel *Gilles* (1940) he became an advocate of European ideas and asked his countrymen for collaboration with Nazi Germany. For him, such collaboration meant to build new, virile and powerful Europe. Conviction that German virility leads to transformation does not make Drieu German or Nazi thinker. Already in 1931 in *L'Europe contre patries* ridiculed German tendency to understand history from racial point of view:

D'abord vous n'êtes pas des Germains, assez de ces blagues. Pas plus que nous ne sommes Gaulois ou Latins, ou que les Italiens ne sont pas Romains. Figures esquissées par la poésie, épaissies en forme de monstres politiques par des patits bourgeois nostalgiques au fond des bibliothèques du XIX^e siècle. Dieux têt fatigués. Vous êtes un groupe d'hommes au milieu d'Europe qui, péniblement, avez formé un État et une nation (DRIEU:1931, p.12).

In *Socialisme fasciste* (1934) Drieu refused Hitler's thesis about race and language. According to him all these theories served as pretexts for German expansionist foreign policy and had no justification in reality. Not only that there were millions of Slavs and Celts speaking German, but in addition German blood was a mixture of blood of many nations, result of migrations and marriages among different races. After his first journey to Germany (1934) Drieu referred to Nazi "*conservatisme eugénique*", condemned what he designated as German tendency to divide humanity into casts according to the blood criterion. As far as his antisemitism is concerned, it seems that it was rather cultural than biological (SOUCY:1967, p.66-67). On the other hand he was convinced that Jews were inflictors of decadent life style of the West (materialism, rationalism, urbanism) and thus responsible for European decadence.⁷

Drieu was typical French fascist in many other aspects as well. A particularity of French fascism consisted in its political and ideological disunity, lack of central, uniting force. In fact, there were many parallelly existing parties. The first of them was *Faisceau* founded by Georges Valois in 1925, *Parti Populaire Française* led by Jacques Doriot or Déat's *Rassemblement Nationale Populaire*. Fascists disposed of number of reviews and journals so there was a

⁷ Drieu embodied these attitudes already in 1936. In this respect Drieu was similar to many other French fascists – antisemitism started gaining force both among conservatives and fascists exactly in 1936.



perfect chaos in the field of fascism. The French – including Drieu – were noted for their "Europeism", e.g. belief in general European fascism, strong socialist element (many of them were originally socialists including Drieu himself) and strong elitism which made fascists closer to conservatives and was particularly attractive for intellectuals like Drieu. French fascism did not know German *Massendemokratie* where all the nation was as one man subordinated to one leader. However, it shared many common features with German nazism: anti-communism, fight against decadence, irrationalism etc.

Drieu implored French to participate in "*Révolution du corps*", sort of "*la grande révolution du XXe siècle*" that was supposed to share many characteristics with *völkisch* spiritual quest. "*Révolution du corps*" was not any simple program of physical exercise prescribed against disease of modern industrial society. 19th-century industrial revolution transformed humans into machines and servants. Human body went through enormous changes, got weakened as well as human character. The only way from decadence was to free human body from the effects that contradicted human nature, effects that resulted from urban life-style. A man should be freed from slavery in factories or offices. Overcrowded cities should withdraw in favour of new settlements scattered in the countryside and interconnected by high-quality motorways. Exercises and sport together with holidays and repeated travelling were supposed to play an essential role in life of a new society. That is why Drieu advocated multiplication of athletic teams, sport associations, *auberges de jeunesse*, stadiums, "*villégiature*" in the mountains and on the seacoast. Sport was an essential need for human health. (DRIEU:1943, p.49-53).

La définition la plus profonde du fascisme c'est celle-ci: c'est le mouvement politique que va plus franchement, le plus radicalement dans le sens de la grande révolution des moeurs, dans le sens de la restauration du corps – santé, dignité, plénitude, héroïsme – dans le sens de la défense de l'homme contre la grande ville et contre la machine (DRIEU:1943, p. 50)

Drieu's belief in regenerative force of German nazism got closer to convictions of many other European intellectuals of his time. As some of older historical studies (George L. Mosse) revealed and some recent religious studies (Petteri Pietikäinen) confirmed, German nazi cultural revolution had a very important religious aspect. Connecting link between political nazism and its religious dimension constituted so-called *völkisch* movements that had



originated already in the 19th century and during 1930s nourished utopian dimension of nazism. Hitler's coming to power marginalized them, but even during 1930s their *Weltanschauung* got very close to Drieu's ruralism, anti-urbanism or anti-modernism. It was also C. G. Jung who expressed enthusiasm to such movement within German society. In May 1933 Jung tried to diagnose "German revolution" and identify its positive and negative aspects:

It is a regression and injustice, there is no doubt about that; but they [the Germans] cannot get together as a nation, they cannot celebrate their love feast, if strangers are in between. Of course you can say that Jews are scapegoats; of course they are scapegoats, but other people, individuals, do the same thing: in the process of individuation, for instance, they exclude many things, they may desert their relations, which is unjust, cruel, or foolish perhaps, but it serves that one purpose of individuation, of coming together (DOUGLAS, C.:1998, p. 976)

Here Jung compares "*German revolution*" with his own concept of individuation process by means of which individual becomes what he really is, i.e. attains his/her authenticity and wholeness (*Ganzheit*). For Jung collective national process of individuation signifies attainment of a new stage of consciousness and, during such a process, Germans would have to "*exclude many things*", among them Jews. At the same time Jung was afraid that "*suppression of the free speech*" and "*expulsion of valuable people*" could "*have a very bad influence on the further development of the German mind*" because Germans started getting too detached from the world. That's why, "*for the time being*" declared Jung in May 1933, "*we must suspend our judgement*" (DOUGLAS:1998, p. 976-997). As we know, after 1945 Jung declared that Germans themselves became victims of archetypal forces of collective unconscious and were "possessed" by Wotan archetype.

However, during 1930s Jung's thought was attractive to nazis. We should not forget that contrary to Freudian psychoanalysis Jung was not Jew and his theories were not fundamentally materialistic. Thus it is not very surprising that Kurt Gauger, a nazi official in charge of educational films, delivered speech at the International Medical Congress for Psychotherapy in Bad Neuheim in 1934, where he first contrasted Freudian (and, by extension, Jewish) materialism with Jung's allegedly positive influence of National Socialism:

The road of Jung looks forward ...Jung is an ethician. One could also call him a seer, in the deepest and most reverent sense of the word. Jung is the poet among psychologists ... Freudian psychology incorporates all the advantages and dangers of



the Jewish spirit, Jungian psychology all those of the Germanic soul (MOSSE:1966, p.56)

Even though Drieu was not adherent of Jung's psychology and it does not seem he knew his concept of individuation, he also believed in regenerative forces of "German revolution". When he arrived – in the end of his life – to the conclusion that nazi-fascism would be overthrown, he arrived also at conviction that the future regeneration of Europe would be brought by Russian bolshevicks. Just shortly before his death Drieu encouraged one of his closest friends Lucien Combelle to become – if he survives the war – a communist: "*J'espère que vous vivrez (...) et que vous défendrez ce que nous aimons: un socialisme fier, viril (c'est que nous soulignons)*" (VANDROMME:1958, p. 114). In the very end of his life Drieu revaluated his previous opinions about fighting qualities of communists and refused primitive arguments against Marxism. Certainly, in certain period Drieu called for alliance between Allies and Germany against Soviet Russia, but forthcoming German defeat made him follower of Soviet Russia. Run of events revealed that Russians were the strongest:

Je crois que, si les Russes venaient en France, la seule différence de leur tonalité vitale soufflerait littéralement les Français, eux qui ont déjà tant de peine à supporter des contacts qui sont de bien moindres contrastes. Il n'y aurait même pas besoin de communisme et de massacres: la seule présence de quelques centaines de milliers de Russes éteindrait nos gens (DRIEU:1944, p.349)

It is evident, that Drieu's prescription against modern decadence could be shortly summarized as "*Révolution du corps*" and "*homo fascista*" / "*l'homme hitlérien*" but in the end of his life he expected such cultural revolution from Soviet bolshevism. At the same time Drieu indulged in religious thought – thus got closer to thinkers like Jung, Eliade, Dumézil, Pettazzoni, Schmitt and others. Religious studies made during 1930s and 1940s manifested great progress and its prominent representatives were to bigger or lesser degree linked with new ideological currents. Only the most recent studies reveal more from their concepts and mutual contacts. According to Grottanelli Drieu already in 1943 adhered to the French religious scholar Georges Dumézil⁸ and praised him "*for contributing greatly to the*

⁸ In his article *France, Angleterre, Allemagne* published first in official periodical of German Cultural Institute in Paris with the title *Deutschland-Frankreich* (1943) and then again in his book *Les Français d'Europe* (1944).



knowledge of the ancient harmonies connecting Vedic India, early Rome, Druidic Gaul, Germany and Scandinavia" (JUNGINGER: 2008, p.311). He believed that on such historical foundation a solid and bodily revolutionized Europe could be built again. Dumézil made use of categories *Aryens* and *Indo-Européens* as synonyms and World War II interpreted as fratricidal battle. These were some of key ideas Drieu adopted from Dumézil in his article *France, Allemagne, Angleterre* (1943) where he stated that 1) Germans, French and English are of the same race and should fight together and 2) possible victory of Germany will transcend individual nations and will form united Europe.⁹

TRANSFORMATION: MÉMOIRES DE DIRK RASPE

As it was already stated, the central theme of Drieu's œuvre was the decadence and its overcoming. Drieu's heroes are corroded by decadence and overcome it often just partly. In *La Comédie de Charleroi* (1934) the anonymous hero extracted from decadent Parisian society experiences military attacks against enemies with the ecstatic, almost religious feelings. Drieu aesthetizes such attacks and uses religious terminology. War becomes existential peak experience close to religious ecstasy:

Alors tout d'un coup, il s'est produit quelque chose extraordinaire. Je m'étais levé, levé entre les morts, entre les larves. J'ai su ce que veulent dire ... et miracle.
(DRIEU: 1939, p.70)

What Drieu describes is a self-realization through war experience that can be compared to sexual ecstasy. *La Comédie de Charleroi* has a strong autobiographic streak – Drieu's personal experiences of Parisian bourgeois life, wartime trenches and his desire to transform his own self-consciousness. There is a strong presence of *Führerprinzip*. One can feel nostalgia for strong and virile leader. Hero gradually learns that he himself can lead others to the fight, he gets intoxicated by his own power and sudden transformation. But such moments of ecstasy did not take a long time and hero recognizes his need of living out his virility. That is possible

⁹ The second idea Drieu expressed already in his earlier works *L'Europe contre les patries* (1931) or his *Les Français d'Europe* (1944).



just in the war. During all the war Drieu's hero looks for someone he could look up to. Even though the novel is not written explicitly from a racial perspective, Jews are viewed as somehow different people (Mme Pragen). What links this novel with fascism is first of all *Führerprinzip*. On the other hand there is a typical description of decadent Paris: superficiality and decadence of bourgeoisie. Drieu's hero is afflicted by decadence in such a degree that he starts hating France. But the war changes him, gives meaning to his life, he discovers his masculinity, touches the essence of his life:

À quoi sert de vivre, si on ne se sert pas de sa vie pour la choquer contre la mort, comme un ...briquet ? Guerre – ou révolution, c'est-à-dire guerre encore – il n'y a pas à sortir de là. Si ...à mort n'est pas au cœur de la vie comme un dur noyau – la vie, quel fruit mou et bientôt blet ? (DRIEU: 1939, p. 85-86)

These portraits are controversial: on the one hand literary hero condemns modern war because of its inhumanity and injustice but on the other hand views it as a unique experience that shapes and ennobles character. We find ourselves in extreme Nietzschean individualism. As a romanticist, Drieu believes in the regenerating effect of the war.

Another novel *Rêveuse bourgeoisie* contains autobiographic elements and the theme of overcoming decadence. It was a result of Drieu's ambition to write *Familienroman* that would express the theme of decadence in French bourgeois families. Aristocratic but insolvent Le Pesnel family allies with bourgeois family Liegneul. Both families regularly oscillate between illusion and disillusion and both exemplify Drieu's vision of eradicated society. Marriage between Camille Le Pesnel and Agnes Liegneul is supposed to promote social status for the Liegneuls and money to the Le Pesnels. But all that is one of many illusions both families suffer from. Camille Le Pesnel is a typical decadent hero, failed businessman, unfaithful husband squandering money of his wife and father-in-law. Relationship crumbles exactly at that time two children are born and both of them inherit chimeras and illusions of their parents. Trying to get rid of their family conditioning Yves leaves university and escapes to Africa. Geneviève follows a better path. After several amorous deceptions marries a successful man (Robert Piremont), travels all around the world and becomes a successful artist-actress. Both her father and brother die and it is just her and her children who embody some future perspective of the family.



Main characters of the novel suffer from compulsive dreaming – typical for decadent bourgeoisie – and stagger from one failure to another. In spite of the best intentions of older generations, decadence dominates all their attitudes and activities – their creative spirit is assaulted, they are escapists and their creativity is reduced to imitation. It seems that just the third generation (Geneviève's children) offers certain way out from the family decadence.

In his novel *Gilles* (1939) Drieu attempted to depict transformation of decadent hero into virile fascist hero. Its main character, Gille Gambier, does not appear in Drieu's novels for the first time. We can find him in two previous novels *L'Homme couvert de femmes* and *Drôle de voyage* and in the collection *Journal d'un homme trompé*. All these previous characters are called Gille and constitute Drieu's *alter egos* characterized by amorous adventures and decadent Parisian life-style. In later novel *Gilles* Drieu added to hero's name letter –s.

Gilles Gambier is an orphan who enters trenches of the Great War. In 1917 Gilles gets permission to get back to Paris and to live unrestrained civil life. After several amorous adventures establishes Parisian review *Apocalypse* by means of which tries to save Europe from apocalyptic decadence. After the death of his wife hopeless Gilles adheres to fascism, adopts new name Walter, leaves for Spain to fight on nationalist side against republicans. Military discipline and life full of danger save him from weakness of urban decadence. Walter finally finds authentic meaning of life, becomes man of action. Like that Drieu depicts transformation of decadent figure of Gilles into virile fascist Walter who constitutes "*le fascisme catholique et viril*":

J'appartiens à un nouvel ordre militaire et religieux qui s'est fondé quelque part dans l'onde et poursuit, envers et contre tout, la conciliation de l'Église et du fascisme et leur double triomphe sur l'Europe (DRIEU:1973, p.674-675).

But such transformation is simply inconvincible. This inconvincibility is even more apparent when social level and personal level of the main character (Gilles/Walter) are taken into account.

Another and probably the best version of transformation can be find in Drieu's last novel *Mémoires de Dirk Raspe*, novel written after two unsuccessful attempts at suicide. At that time Drieu got concentrated on his spiritual life and quit political and social activity. Such reversal in his career had a lot to do with his personal life and political situation. After 1943 Drieu



renounced his political ambitions, dedicated himself to literary work and reading (study of religion – bible, oriental philosophy, English romanticism, Baudelaire).

The novel was inspired by life of Dutch painter Van Gogh. The older he was, the more he was attracted to Van Gogh because he felt certain affinity between his own life and Van Gogh's destiny. Main character of his last novel, Dirk Raspe, is an orphan coming from pastor's family and is brought up by evangelic pastor Robert Haywood. Dirk is a recluse, loves painting and as a young man he gets influenced by two pastor's sons. Their controversy about their proper careers – religion and arts – echoes tensions both within Dirk Raspe and Drieu. In the second part of the novel Dirk works in London for paintings merchant and gradually improves his understanding of arts. Amorous disappointments lead him back to the Netherlands and to the conviction that his destiny leads to the profession of priest. Subsequently Dirk oscillates between religion and arts.

As in previous novels, here idea of decadence is present again but this time it is not the central point of the story. Dirk discovers that the modern society is corrupted, superficial and decadent and that is what leads him to self-imposed isolation. Dirk detests human mediocrity, disdains people and their materialism typical especially for women. Almost all of them strive just for material values. Dirk observes general decadence and his mind delves deep into metaphysics:

Il se pouvait que cette civilisation fût morte à mes yeux, mais aussi je voyais l'homme au-delà de toute civilisation, passée ou future (DRIEU: 1978, p.337)

Crucial question of each part of the novel is the question of grace (*grâce*). Dirk asks again and again question of grace not just from the Christian perspective but also from the perspective of oriental religions and philosophies. Central and repeatedly present is the gospel of St. John. Dirk asks himself if he is the chosen one, his life gets mystical tinge and he resembles secret teachings apprentice. Dirk gets progressively through fundamental transformation and makes peace with himself: peacefully integrates his artistic and religious inclinations, accepts his desires for what lies outside society and its rules:

Le drame des hommes était pour moi bien au-delà ou bien en deçà du drame social. Derrière les habitudes, les tribulations, les aspirations, les colères sociales des



hommes, je sentait des dispositions plus profondes et plus énigmatiques ...“
(DRIEU: 1978, p.184).

Dirk's discovery leads him first to the path of Dutch pastor. Question of the grace still stirs his soul:

Je préférais, bien sur, saint Jean aux autres évangélistes et j'avais relevé dans son livre toutes les phrases où il est bien entendu que le Royaume est conquis sur cette terre, réalisé sur cette terre dans le coeur de l'homme ou ne l'est jamais
(DRIEU:1978, p.184)

Typically for Drieu, the only true reality is the life itself. And that is what his main character Dirk Raspe discovers as well: *"Il y a peu d'élus. Et il n'y a qu'eux qui connaissent la vérité, la vie"* (DRIEU:1978, p.223). After some time of religious service in Dutch mining region, Dirk doubts about his mission, suffers from lack of faith and discovers that behind his motivation to be a pastor is a self-knowledge: *"Au fond, je ne veux pas sauver l'âme des autres, mais la mienne. Au fond, les autres ne sont qu'un prétexte, qu'un moyen."* (DRIEU: 1978, p. 207). Two mysterious visits follow and Dirk discovers that the grace can have many forms including arts: *"Vouz avez été touché par la grâce, monsieur Raspe ...Peut-être que vous êtes un homme de talent, et voilà tout. Le talent et la grâce, c'est la même chose"* (DRIEU: 1978, p.200).

There is no rule according to which some are endowed with grace. In each artists there is something saint and each saint has something of great artist. Dirks views great artistic works as products of religious ecstasy similar to that of great religious mystics. Even religious asceticism is comparable with the poverty of great artists:

(...)on comprend, dans ces élans de la nature qui vous traversent/ou dans ces élans de la nature qui vous traversent/ou dans ces élans dont vous traversez la nature/, la discipline des moines qui se flagellent comme on déchire l'écorce d'un arbre, et le désespoir des génies trop pleins d'eux-mêmes, les beuglements de Michel-Ange ou de Rembrandt, les dessins fous de Vinci (DRIEU: 1978, p.229)

Dirk finally integrates the religious and the artistic within himself, discovers his proper identity and his mission. Like that he is ready to sacrifice what he does not need – financial security and women – and follows his path independent from that of society offers:



Il y a un moment, quand on s'est aperçu qu'on ne peut pas vivre sans s'exprimer d'une certaine façon, ou il faut choisir entre soi et le monde. J'avais pris parti pour moi contre le monde" (DRIEU:1978, p. 253).

Mémoires de Dirk Raspe is probably the only Drieu's novel where there is almost no – usually ubiquitous – element of decadence. The main character does not suffer from human relations, destiny of Europe or war but he is turned inward. The danger represents rather morals and society rules. The hero is aware of dangerous influence of consumer society and materialism but he does not fight it and learns to live independently. Dirk Raspe is not decadent Parisian intellectual, but poor young guy stirred by inner conflict between the artistic and the religious he finally manages to integrate. Previous necessary ingredients of *Führerprinzip* and virile masculinity are lacking. It seems that in the very end of his life Drieu expounded transformation in much more convincing way than in previous novels and – paradoxically – without using those components as before: virile masculinity and decadent heroes. Topic of transformation got a new dimension.

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