

*Pynsent, Robert B. (ed.): Decadence and Innovation: Austro-Hungarian Life and Art at the Turn of the Century.*

Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1989, XIV + 258 S.

*Decadence and Innovation* consists of a selection of papers on Austro-Hungarian art and life at the turn of the century which were delivered at an international conference

hosted by the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies, the University of London, in December 1986. It follows a similar volume entitled *Intellectuals and the Future in the Habsburg Monarchy* (1988), edited by László Péter and Robert Pynsent (BohZ 31/1990, 91–103).

Pynsent has chosen thirteen essays from a total of forty-nine conference papers, including his own conclusory essay which comprises about half of the book. The programme of the original conference was organized according to subject-matter, such as 'Metropolis', 'Culture and the Army', 'Music' etc. It is a pity that the published essays, which are concerned with subjects as diverse as Viennese occultism and Hungarian feminism, were not organized in a similar way. Moreover, the absence of a discursive introduction fails to provide the volume with a clear set of goals and aspirations. It would perhaps have been more satisfactory to have published the conference proceedings in several volumes along the lines of the three-volume publication of the Masaryk Conference. The material dealing with Czech issues alone deserves a separate volume in itself.

This structural flaw does not detract from the quality of individual essays, many of which offer new insights into old problems; for example, Steven Beller's judicious analysis of the Viennese Jewry's role in art and education rejects the polarized picture of Jewish cultural hegemony as drawn by George Steiner, at one extreme, and Carl Schorske's tendency to undermine its significance, at the other. Monika Glettler explores in detail the dilemma of assimilation facing the Viennese Czechs after Karl Lueger's nationalistic *Gemeindestatut*, introduced in March 1900. Other contributions deal with previously neglected areas as Jiří Kudrnáč's examination of Czech *fin-de-siècle* criticism, André Karátson's study of paradox in Hungarian Symbolism and F. T. Zsuppán's survey of the Hungarian Feminist Movement, 1904–14. In addition, the editor Pynsent has concluded the volume with an erudite critique of such key and nebulous terms as Decadence and Decay.

Like its forbear, *Intellectuals and the Future*, *Decadence and Innovation* seeks to broaden our cultural horizons by examining not just the familiar theme of 'Vienna 1900' but also the cultural ferment at work in the regional capitals of Prague and Budapest. A complex, antithetical process of decay and innovation emerges in which crude notions of national alterity and uniqueness were questioned and undermined. The contrary inclination of politics and culture is well summed up by the Czech art historian Petr Wittlich in his lucid essay 'The Self: Destruction or Synthesis, Two Problems of Czech Art and the Turn of the Century'.

Writers like F. X. Šalda, Antonín Sova, Otakar Březina or J. S. Machar demanded that their art be true to life ... Humanity takes precedence over nationality. They replaced a demagogic idea of the unity of the nation with the demand for self-determination, for the free individuality they considered to be the only rational basis for a prosperous national collective (p. 82).

This is, of course, only half the picture. If the Czech and Hungarian intellectuals were confronting questions of essence and identity, the *bourgeoisie* as a whole still sought national self-determination along racial-linguistic lines.

In spite of certain structural weaknesses, such as the lack of symmetry imposed by the absence of sub-divisions in the main part of the text, *Decadence and Innovation*

remains an important monograph on Austro-Hungarian *fin-de-siècle* art and life. At a time when the concept of *Mitteuropa* as a geo-political entity is beginning to re-emerge, the book is a valuable addition to our knowledge of its intellectual ancestry.

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