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Paul Metzner. *Crescendo of the Virtuoso: Spectacle, Skill, and Self-Promotion in Paris during the Age of Revolution.* Studies in the History of Society and Culture, no. 30. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. xii + 385 pp. Notes, index. \$50.00 (cl.), ISBN 0-520-20684-3.

David M. Gordon. *Liberalism and Social Reform: Industrial Growth and Progressiste Politics in France, 1880-1914.* Contributions to the Study of World History, no. 55. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996. 226 pp. Notes, appendix, bibliography, index. \$65.00 (cl.), ISBN 0-313-29811-4.

Asti Hustvedt, Ed., *The Decadent Reader: Fiction, Fantasy, and Perversion from Fin-de-Siècle France.* New York: Zone Books, 1998. 1088 pp. Notes. \$58.00 (cl.), ISBN 1-890951-06-4; \$32.00 (pb.), ISBN 1-890951-07-2.

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The three books under review share little in terms of their content. The historical actors range from post-Revolutionary virtuoso chess masters, chefs, detectives, musicians, and automaton builders in Paul Metzner's *Crescendo of the Virtuoso*, to early Third Republic progressive liberal industrialists in David M. Gordon's *Liberalism and Social Reform*, and finally to a cross-section of fin-de-siècle decadent authors assembled in Asti Husvedt's *The Decadent Reader*. Neither are the books linked by period, as together they span the entirety of the long nineteenth century, from the French Revolution to the eve of the Great War. Yet each engages, in ways particular to its subject, the figure of the virtuoso, a "self-made man" whose individual expertise and skill helped define an era.

In French history and criticism, individualism generally tends to be subsumed by social, political, or aesthetic considerations. Under the Napoleonic Code, individual legal status was established primarily through the family unit. Beneath the "great men" of French political and intellectual history, individual lives are most often examined socially in terms of class or gender identity. French liberalism is more commonly associated with the constitutionalism of Benjamin Constant and Alexis de Tocqueville's critique of democracy, than the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham or John Stuart Mill. The nineteenth-century French cultural canon tends to elevate creative genius, through its romantic, realist, bohemian, and avant-garde pantheon, above the aesthetic innovations of more commercially-driven artists, writers, and musicians (although, under the sign of Walter Benjamin, this has been changing somewhat in the past decade). In short, the general preference has been more to situate individual lives upon a matrix of categories rather than to pursue individualism in the American or British mold where the autonomous individual constitutes his own social foundation.

The issue of whether individuals are independent historical actors or individuated symptoms of larger social and historical processes constitutes a critical thread that winds through and binds these quite diverse books to a very broadly shared historical fabric. Each in its way emphasizes the unique contribution of individuals toward creating their historical eras, rather than merely being expressive of them. These are not great men of politics, aristocratic *salonnières*, or romantic geniuses but an array of unlikely heroes who achieved success and influence largely based upon their skills of technical manipulation, self-promotion, tenacity, and audacity. Yet while these books do a wonderful job of bringing individual lives and accomplishments to the forefront, in some measure they do so at the expense of suppressing the complexity of the historical milieus engendered in each case. Cultural and social historians will find each of these books valuable resources, rich in information and ideas, but may find the material most useful when applied to issues and questions beyond those framed by their respective authors.

Of the three books under review, Metzner's *Crescendo of the Virtuoso* displays the greatest breadth in historical scope and claims. Set within the Age of Revolution, from the late eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries, Metzner focuses upon Paris as a center of public spectacles performed by technically accomplished virtuosos. Beyond technological innovations in such serious realms as chemistry, physics, biology, archaeology, and industry, Metzner extends "the cultivation and demonstration of technical skill" (p. 6) into such diverse and obscure realms as chess, cuisine, criminal detection, solo musical instrument performance, and automaton magic shows. Beyond mere entertainment value, for Metzner such virtuoso performances produced a "new self-centered worldview" (p. 7) that valued personal achievement over tradition and social hierarchy, a historical development that he regards as the logical outcome of this age of political, economic, and social revolutions. In this milieu, the virtuosos themselves were the architects of this self-centered worldview, through demonstrating their superior abilities in "spectacle-making, the cultivation of technical skill, [and] self promotion" (p. 9). Further, these spectacles of technical prowess were championed by an entertainment-consuming public. Theirs was the age of virtuosity, with the historical good fortune of being recognized as such.

Crescendo of the Virtuoso divides into two sections. "Some Models of Excellence" charts the lives and accomplishments of the virtuosos, particularly chess master François-André Danican Philidor (1726-1795), *chef de cuisine* Marie-Antoine Carême (1783-1833), Sûreté detective Eugène-François Vidocq (1775-1857), violinist Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840), pianist Franz List (1811-1886), and magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin (1805-1871). In each instance, Metzner carefully charts the shift from aristocratic to bourgeois sensibilities surrounding these activities, from Old Regime diversions to Enlightenment idealization, and finally to post-Revolutionary virtuosity. In the historical transition from novelty to commercialization, virtuosity was given a second cultural life through publications; chess guides, *grande cuisine* cookbooks, the *mémoires* of Vidocq's exploits, newspaper reviews of Paganini's and Lists's performances, and Robert-Houdin's exposés of gambling and magic tricks. In addition, these individuals were exemplary models for the public, commercially democratic in advertising the attainment of excellence through the mastery of skills.

In the second half of the book, "Some Modes of Excelling," Metzner establishes three modalities within the larger social and cultural terrain that fostered virtuosity. Metzner sees the "publicization" of virtuoso activities from private into public realms as synonymous with the "Republicanizing" of France, with both staging spectacles for ever widening and more distant audiences and then reenacting these spectacles through publicity and publications. Through the "exaltation of technical skill," the Old

Regime notion of *privilège* was transformed into the values of technocracy: desacralization, secularization, and instrumental manipulation. Finally, the “ballooning of the self,” the self-aggrandizement of Rousseau’s *amour-propre* (self-love), not only promoted individualism, but fostered the *égoïsme* of nation and empire as well. Through these new modalities, Metzner concludes, “The Age of Revolution validated virtuosity” (p. 291).

The accomplishment of *Crescendo of the Virtuoso* lies in Metzner’s attempt to achieve a kind of grand historical synthesis, a highly commendable enterprise in an academic profession often criticized for overspecialization and inaccessibility to a generally educated audience. This yields a stimulating intellectual and social history that bridges high and low cultural realms. Diversions and entertainment are raised to the level of Enlightenment philosophy, and historical change advances through spectacle, skill, and self-promotion. Yet the sources of historical agency are somewhat nebulous in Metzner’s analysis. There is a built-in assumption that the “Age of Revolution” inherently promoted individualism, commercial enterprise, invention, celebrity, spectatorship, democracy, careers open to skill and talent. A fair amount of scholarship on the political culture of the French Revolution in the past two decades has emphasized, by contrast, contradictions and contingencies in the formation of bourgeois and revolutionary values from this era. The social and political meaning of the revolution shifted through its various phases and eventually yielded a synthesis that alloyed liberalism with family traditions and social hierarchies rather than being in opposition to them.[1] Further, a “self-centered world view” may be explicitly anti-Republican and anti-democratic, as the decadent authors gathered in Hustvedt’s collection attest. To infuse large historical process with general intent is tricky business. Scholars of Metzner’s book will likely find the lives of the virtuosos fascinating and the modalities of excellence intellectually provocative, but may look elsewhere for interpretive frameworks.

David M. Gordon’s *Liberalism and Social Reform* features a different set of virtuosos: progressive liberal industrialists. Gordon explores the careers of textile magnate Eugène Motte (1860-1932) and iron and steel manufacturers Georges Claudinon (1849-1930), Antoine Arbel (1855-1933), and François de Wendel (1874-1948), and he charts the ways in which these enormously successful industrialists became leading *Progressiste* politicians. For Gordon, these individuals constitute an elite who embodied “the heroic spirit of French industrial capitalism” (p. 2) in the two decades before the Great War of 1914. Through their individual “dynamism and audacity” (p. 7) and skills at coalition building, these four industrialists turned progressivist politicians “contributed to the evolution of French liberalism into a modern political philosophy capable of winning popular support in the age of the masses” (p. 26). With an entrepreneurial drive that overcame the sluggishness of more cautious businessmen (*bourgeoisie fainéante*), and a political acumen that sought out compromise when Socialist, Radical, and anti-Republican nationalist agendas remained more intransigent, the moderating leadership of Motte, Claudinon, Arbel, and Wendel led the French economy and politics toward “a first, and very tentative, step toward the modern welfare state” (p. 27).

In historiographic terms, Gordon proposes a corrective to accounts that treat this era as one of economic and political stalemate, characterized by a broad but weak collection of republican parties caught between radical socialists and anti-republican nationalists, with industrialists typically cast into a conservative and reactionary role.[2] In sharp distinction to this interpretation, Gordon adopts political historian Douglas Johnson’s position that “the motor of French political life is not so much an oscillation between Left and Right, as a small, almost insignificant movement between Left-center and

Right-center” (quoted in Gordon, p. 17). From such a vantage point, the careers of these four *Progressiste* politicians are regarded as the specific individuals who successfully negotiated that crucial political center of activity. The substantive chapters of the book seek to demonstrate this through reconstructing the political careers of these four men in great detail. In the conclusion, Gordon notes the historical irony that, through two decades of political compromises necessitated by the democratic process, free-market and free-labor *Progressiste* industrialists arrived at a common purpose with formerly revolutionary Socialists of promoting social progress through free-market economic productivity.

In contrast to the large historical waves ridden by Metzner’s virtuosos, Gordon’s account is detailed to the level of specific election campaigns. In his own fashion, however, Gordon fails to make the case that the successful manipulation of the political center was due solely to the efforts of his four *Progressiste* industrialists. When political developments favor economic liberalism, Gordon attributes success to the political prowess of these individuals. Conversely, when their agendas are thwarted, failure is credited to circumstances beyond their personal control. But such generosity in political fortunes is not to be extended to leading Radicals or Opportunists, the other principal actors shifting between “Left-center and Right-center.” Socialists are criticized for altogether wrong-headed political strategies, with Jules Guèsde portrayed in particularly unpleasant terms (“a vivid figure with long hair, a sickly pallor, and a black beard... the most intransigent of the French Marxists,” p. 22). Without a common framework for judging either individual politicians or the activities of various political parties, the extensive level of detail provided by Gordon’s book is impressive, but inconclusive.

The preference given to these particular political elites as agents of historical change may be attributed, in part, to Gordon’s explicitly neo-liberal economic perspective. The opening pages of the book proclaim the failure of socialism to provide social justice in our contemporary age, and Gordon champions the capitalist marketplace as providing the economic foundation for social welfare. The development of the latter, Gordon emphasizes, was due primarily to political compromises between these *Progressiste* politicians with Radicals and begrudging Socialists. But ultimately, social justice takes a back seat to the capitalist marketplace: “*Progressiste* victories strengthened capitalism by helping to limit government interference in the economy” (p. 190). Yet it is reasonable to question whether capitalist economic growth in twentieth-century Europe has been achieved through a lack of governmental intervention, and it remains an open question whether market-driven economic growth will continue to sustain and promote the social welfare state.[3] *Progressiste* industrialists may have been skilled individual politicians, but their economic prescience and their status as world-historical actors may be overdrawn in Gordon’s book.

The literary virtuosos collected in *The Decadent Reader* share absolutely nothing with Gordon’s industrialists, save a temporal coincidence. Railing against scientific progress, bourgeois respectability, and democracy, decadent authors reveled in an artificial paradise of reveries (drug induced and not), the poetics of necrophilia, and the cult of oneself to the point of self-annihilation. Self-stylized aristocrats, and sometimes by inheritance actually so, they tended to be anti-democratic in politics, misanthropic and misogynistic in social sentiments, flamboyant in lifestyle, male in gender preference, and insolent in literary expression. Not surprisingly, the term “decadence” has typically been cast in pejorative terms, the *fin de siècle* at its sickest, as expressed in Max Nordau’s 1893 polemic, *Entartung* (“Degeneration,” French translation *Dégénérescence*, 1894).

Literary assessments of decadent authors have tended to be disparaging as well. As Asti Hustvedt emphasizes in the general introduction, “decadence continues to suffer from a bad reputation in French literary studies. Works that fall under the decadent label have been, for the most part, considered marginal, inferior, or unreadable” (p. 12). As an artistic and intellectual movement, decadence has been pushed to the periphery of the French literary canon despite some significant scholarly attention given to the subject.^[4] The situation has been even worse in English, where most readers’ knowledge of decadent literature has been limited to a few works, such as *Against Nature* by J.-K. Huysmans (1848-1907) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde (1854-1900).

The Decadent Reader seeks to redress this situation, in part, by making a broader selection of decadent works available to the English reader, much for the first time. Some of the authors, like Jean Lorrain (1855-1906), Catulle Mendès (1841-1909), Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918), and the Rachilde (1860-1953), were strongly associated with the decadent movement at the time but have suffered from relative neglect since. Others are not commonly thought of as decadents, such as late romantic Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly (1808-1889), realist Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893), naturalist Octave Mirbeau (1848-1917), and symbolists Villiers de l’Isle-Adam (1838-1889), Jean Moréas (1856-1910), Remy de Gourmont (1858-1915). Yet the inclusion of such a wide array of individual authors serves to demonstrate that decadent ideas were widely diffused throughout late nineteenth-century French literature. The themes represented in these decadent writings are diverse as well, stories not only of the supernatural and occult, but of science fiction, romance, and “slice of life” sensational crimes (*faits divers*). The assembled authors and selections are introduced by leading French literary critics Emily Apter, Janet Beizer, Charles Bernheimer, Jennifer Birkett, Peter Brooks, Asti Hustvedt, Françoise Meltzer, Richard Sieburth, and Barbara Spackman. Third Republic historians unfamiliar with current trends in literary criticism may be perplexed by some of these introductions, which repeatedly invoke the trope of Charcot’s hysterical female body, interpret sexual perversion as psychological fetish, and emphasize textual indeterminacy. Other introductions are biographical and contextual, and will no doubt be more pleasing to many historians. Yet historians of *fin-de-siècle* France may derive the greatest benefit from this collection by removing the individual selections from the somewhat internal discourse of these literary critics and placing them upon other cultural terrain. The cases of Rachilde’s *Monsieur Vénus* and Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s *The Future Eve* illustrate the point.

In the introduction to *Monsieur Vénus*, Janet Beizer rejects Maurice Barrès’ preface to the novel (included in this translation) as a “privileged means of access to Rachilde” (242). Barrès focuses upon the sexual inversions, and thereby perversions, of the novel in which a young, artistic, and aristocratic woman named Raoule de Vénérande is Monsieur Vénus, and her mistress is a young, male, flower maker named Jacques Silvert (called “Jaja,” Zsa-Zsa). Barrès attributes such a scenario to the “virginal” imagination of young Rachilde (she wrote the novel at age twenty), which he regards as “natural” evidence of woman’s monstrous nature and expressive of the *maladie du siècle* “made up of an excessive nervous fatigue and a pride hitherto unknown” (p. 273). Beizer eschews Barrès’ perspective in favor of her own deconstruction of *Monsieur Vénus* as a “hystericized text” in itself. But social and cultural historians may find Barrès’ introduction provocative in terms of *fin-de-siècle* fears of national degeneration, and Rachilde’s novel may provide historians of gender with a useful supplement to discussions of nineteenth-century masculinity, homosexuality, “tribades,” and “pederasts.”^[5]

Villers de l'Isle-Adam's *The Future Eve*, about an artificial woman invented by Thomas Edison, similarly provides greater possibilities for the cultural and intellectual historian than the introduction initially suggests. Hustvedt focuses his critique upon the way in which late nineteenth-century French writers and scientists formulated the "woman problem" in terms of a hysterical body: "Jean-Martin Charcot and Villiers's Edison share a conception of flawed womanhood and the desire that springs from it: to make a new, artificial Eve" (p. 499). Over the course of the introduction, he also notes sympathies between *The Future Eve* and La Mettrie's *L'homme-machine* (p. 504), mechanical reproduction in print and photographic media (p. 507) and wax and plaster models (p. 509), yet he always interprets these connections in terms of the hysterical body. Cultural and intellectual historians may develop these connections differently, relating Villiers's novel to commodification, consumerism, modernist shifts in perception, spectatorship, and the transformation of everyday life at the end of the nineteenth century.[6] As a case in point, Metzner devotes a portion of *Crescendo of the Virtuoso* to Robert-Houdin and automatons, a chapter rich in considerations about the interrelationships between humans and machines without a single reference to Charcot. And successfully so.

In circuitous ways, these examples suggest that there may be inherent limitations to thinking about history through individuals, or in historical interpretations that move directly from the particular to the general. The authors and contributors do magnificent jobs in their respective books of highlighting the influence of highly accomplished individual performers, politicians, and writers on nineteenth-century French society and culture. These virtuosos were not simply molded by circumstance; each made a unique imprint upon the age. At the same time, context is everything. The authors set their respective historical actors upon historical, or semiotic, fields articulated by themselves. Setting these same subjects within different contextual fields will engage alternative mediating processes, and will thereby shift the meaning as well. Historians are encouraged to do so.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Durham: Duke University Press 1991); Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1996); Lynn Hunt *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) and *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); and Michelle Perrot, ed., *From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, vol. 4 of *A History of Private Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1990).

[2] Specifically, Stanford Elwitt, *The Making of the Third Republic: Class and Politics in France, 1868-1884* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975) and *The Third Republic Defended: Bourgeois Reform in France, 1880-1914* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986); Stanley Hoffman, "Paradoxes of the French Political Culture" in *In Search of France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963); and Herman Lebovics, *The Alliance of Iron and Wheat in the Third French Republic, 1960-1914* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

[3] See, for example, numerous works by another David M. Gordon, a labor economist at the New School for Social Research, whose single and co-authored works in the past decade include *Economics*

and *Social Justice: Essays on Power, Labor, and Institutional Change* (Northampton, Mass.: Edward Elgar, 1998) and *After the Waste Land: A Democratic Economics for the Year 2000* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1990). My thanks to economist William S. Brown for pointing out the contrary and erroneous name coincidence between the two David M. Gordons. For a contemporary socialist perspective critical of the liberal economic and social policies in Western Europe favored by Gordon, see Daniel Singer, *Whose Millennium? Theirs or Ours?* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999).

[4] Major works cited by Hustvedt are Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination*, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Jane Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers* (London: Quartet Books, 1986); Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); and David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

[5] See, for example, Carolyn Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Regan, Jr., eds., *Homosexuality in Modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Robert Nye, *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); and *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[6] See, for example, Christoph Asendorf, *Batteries of Life: On the History of Things and Their Perception in Modernity*, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, eds., *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

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