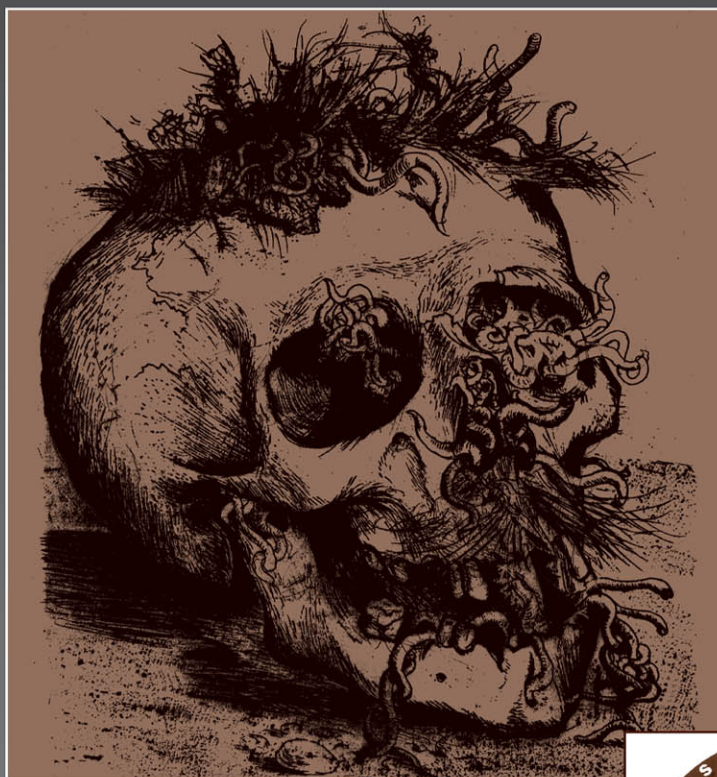# Romancing Decay

*Ideas of Decadence in European Culture*

EDITED BY MICHAEL ST JOHN

ROMANCING DECAY

# General Editors' Preface

The European dimension of research in the humanities has come into sharp focus over recent years, producing scholarship which ranges across disciplines and national boundaries. Until now there has been no major channel for such work. This series aims to provide one, and to unite the fields of cultural studies and traditional scholarship. It will publish the most exciting new writing in areas such as European history and literature, art history, archaeology, language and translation studies, political, cultural and gay studies, music, psychology, sociology and philosophy. The emphasis will be explicitly European and interdisciplinary, concentrating attention on the relativity of cultural perspectives, with a particular interest in issues of cultural transition.

Martin Stannard
Greg Walker

University of Leicester

# Romancing Decay: Ideas of Decadence in European Culture

*edited by*
Michael St John

Studies in European Cultural Transition

Volume Three

General Editors: Martin Stannard and Greg Walker

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# Introduction

This is the third volume in the series *Studies in European Cultural Transition*, the aim of which is to explore identifiable moments of transition in European culture in a fresh and stimulating manner. To begin the series 'decadence' has been chosen as the subject for discussion, as differences in the way in which that particular concept has been defined through time suggest very clearly the forces of cultural transition at work. Yet, along with change, similarities have also emerged, and the value of a collection of essays such as this, dealing with a subject across the periods, is that recurrent patterns relating to the formation of a concept such as decadence can be identified. In this volume it has been the political connotations of any definition of decadence that have proved particularly striking. The ways in which seemingly diverse examples of decadence, even those of an apparently apolitical kind, can be so easily politicized, reveals the extent to which defining anything as decadent is in itself a highly charged and arguably political act. I would like to illustrate the political issues surrounding the idea of decadence with two quite disparate historical examples, in order to suggest how the subject of decadence facilitates interdisciplinary debate across the periods. The first example is an obviously political idea of decadence taken from the twentieth century, the second an apparently apolitical and predominantly psychological definition of decadence made some sixteen centuries earlier.

On 19 July 1937 the National Socialist government of Germany made a dramatic public attempt to define authoritatively the nature of decadent art for the benefit of its citizens. By gathering together hundreds of works thought to be no longer acceptable from thirty-two German museums, an exhibition was assembled illustrating all that was corrupt in contemporary art in Nazi eyes. This exhibition was called *Entartete Kunst* ('Degenerate Art'), and was seen by over two million visitors as it toured Germany and Austria over a period of three years.[1] The word *entartet* had been in use for several years and was semantically implicated in the desire for racial as well as cultural purity that obsessed the exhibition's creators:

> *Entartet*, which has traditionally been translated as 'degenerate' or 'decadent,' is essentially a biological term, defining a plant or animal that has so changed that it no longer belongs to its species. By extension it refers to art that is unclassifiable or so far beyond the confines of what is accepted that it is in essence 'non-art'.[2]

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[1]   Stephanie Barron, *'Degenerate Art': The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (Los Angeles and New York: published jointly by Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991), p. 9.

[2]   Ibid., p. 11.

The inclusion of works in the exhibition was intended to vilify both the artists themselves and those museum curators who had originally displayed them. It was effectively modern art prior to 1933 which was being censured. The exhibition included works by artists such as August Macke, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Emile Nolde, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Max Beckmann, George Grosz, and Otto Dix. The fact that only six of the one hundred and twelve artists included in *Entartete Kunst* were Jewish exemplifies that it was the art itself that determined which artists were censured, and that it was a cultural exercise in the classification of a 'species' of art, devised and conceptualized in a manner commensurate with the Third Reich's racist ideology.[3]

The aims of *Entartete Kunst* are given in the programme, written and designed to provide a highly prescriptive interpretation of the material for its visitors. *Entartete Kunst was* meant to signal (and confirm) a specific historical moment of cultural transition. So much is stated in the first of a number of declarations at the beginning of the programme subtitled 'What the "degenerate art" exhibition means to do':

> *It means* to give, at the outset of a new age for the German people, a
> firsthand [*sic*] survey of the gruesome last chapter of those decades of
> cultural decadence that preceded the great change.[4]

This 'cultural decadence' is attacked in the programme as an orchestrated act of political subversion. Consequently no allowance is made for the artist to represent reality as he sees it. The artist is, instead, a co-conspirator with other 'political agents' in creating what has *become*, socially as well as culturally:

> *It means* to show that this was no 'necessary ferment' but a deliberate and
> calculated onslaught upon the very essence and survival of art itself . . . *It*
> *means* to show too, how these symptoms of degeneracy spread from the
> deliberate troublemakers to infect those more or less unwitting acolytes
> who, in spite of *previous* – and in some cases also *subsequent* – evidence
> of artistic talent, were so lacking in *scruple, character*, or *common sense*
> as to join in the general Jewish and Bolshevik furore.[5]

The programme therefore politicizes both the art and the artists in its aim to 'expose the common roots of *political* anarchy and *cultural* anarchy'.[6] The decadent artist, no matter how unwittingly, has, in the view of the Reich, become part of the 'Jewish and Bolshevik' conspiracy, working towards 'anarchy in

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³    Ibid., p. 9.
⁴    *Guide to the Exhibition Degenerate Art*, p. 2. Quoted from the facsimile of the Entartete Kunst programme reproduced in Barron, *Degenerate Art*, pp. 357–90, with a translation by David Britt.
⁵    Ibid., p. 2.
⁶    Ibid.

*cultural* politics'.[7] In order to encourage hostility towards the contents of the exhibition, the programme employs sexual metaphor to draw out the threatening latent energy of the artist and his work:

> Constrained reality is split up and broken open to become a vessel for his accumulated, burning sensual passion, which once inflamed is oblivious of all psychic depths and bursts out – consuming, expanding, copulating with all its parts. There exist for him no resistance and no preordained limits . . .[8]

These words are presented in the programme as an unattributed quotation from a text that originally supported the 'new art', so that the world-view of those who approved of it can be equated with a disruptive and disturbing sexual presence in the minds of people attending the exhibition. They, especially the women, must be protected from such 'abortions' (a much used word in the programme), their own physical and mental purity being covertly played upon as the issue that is really at stake. In this way the organizers are able to capitalize upon established fears and anxieties concerning racial purity. Having invoked the predatory sexual energy latent in the material however, the organizers must then protect those who attend the exhibition, since 'The sheer diversity of the manifestations of degeneracy, as the exhibition seeks to show them, is such as to stun and bewilder any visitor.'[9] This 'containment' is effected by the structure imposed upon the exhibition: 'a clear organizational principle has been adopted whereby the works in each room are classified by tendency and form into a number of groups'.[10] Then, after the experience of so much carefully policed decadence, there is the vision of the non-decadent, the ideal that has emerged despite the destructive effect of such art, and this is described at the end of the programme by the Führer himself.

> Today the new age is shaping a new human type. In countless areas of life huge efforts are being made to exalt the people: to make our men, boys, and youths, our girls and women healthier and thus stronger and more beautiful. And from this strength and this beauty there springs a new lease on life, a new joy in life. Never has mankind been closer to antiquity, in appearance or in feeling, than it is today. Steeled by sport, by competition, and by mock combat, millions of young bodies now appear to us in a form and a condition that have not been seen and have scarcely been imagined for perhaps a thousand years. A glorious and beautiful type of human being is emerging [. . .] This human type, as we saw him in last year's Olympic Games, stepping out before the whole world in all the radiant pride of his

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7   Ibid., p. 4.
8   Ibid., p. 5.
9   Ibid., p. 6.
10   Ibid., p. 6.

> bodily strength and health – this human type, you gentleman of the
> prehistoric, spluttering art brigade, is the type of the new age.[11]

It is difficult to imagine a more politicized definition of decadence than that
attempted in the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition. It is also difficult to imagine a more
powerful warning of the dangers involved in defining anyone or anything as
decadent for overtly political reasons. The charge of decadence is now and has
always been a potent weapon in the hands of political *élites*. When that potency
is at the disposal of a totalitarian regime with the capacity to define its
implications definitively, the result is politically as well as culturally catastrophic.
The definition of what is or what is not decadent must thus be open to continuing
debate as a safeguard against its use to oppress or castigate dissenting voices. It
is hoped that this volume might help to stimulate and assist such debate.

The political implications of the above example are striking. I now want to
consider a much earlier definition of decadence by St Augustine that at first sight
seems to be as far removed from issues of a political kind as possible, and which
also introduces the interplay between theology and society that has informed
definitions of decadence in the West, which is studied further in some of the other
essays in this volume.

St Augustine (354–430), Bishop of Hippo, wrote his theological treatise the
*City of God* (413–26) during one of the most crucial periods of transition in the
history of Western culture. The Emperors had embraced Christianity, but many of
the Roman aristocracy and wealthy land owners had not, and remained deeply
opposed to the idea of abandoning the traditional forms of pagan worship. In the
context of such an opposition Augustine had to defend the Church against the
arguments of those who blamed the ailments and decay of the Roman state upon
the usurpation of the old religious practices by Christianity. Much of the *City of
God* is therefore concerned with demonstrating the absurdities of pagan practice,
as well as the limitations of the pagan writers such as Plato and Cicero. This
meant that Augustine was prepared to attack not only pagan ideology, but also the
social injustices that it served to maintain.

> In regard to justice, the city of God had an obvious bias to the poor.
> Augustine noticed that the most vocal defenders of the old social order
> were in general defenders of the social order in which the poor fawned on
> the rich, and the rich exploited their dependent clients [*City of God* 2.20].
> He realised how inadequate was private almsgiving and the Church chest
> with its register of paupers daily fed from the soup kitchen. The
> dimensions of destitution were too great to be met except by redistributive
> taxation [*City of God* 5.17].[12]

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[11]  Ibid., p. 6.
[12]  Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford: OUP, 1986), p. 100.

There is, therefore, an obviously political dimension to the *City of God*. However, the legacy of the text has generally been regarded not in terms of its politics, but in terms of its description of the decadence of the human subject as a result of the Fall, which has deeply influenced the course of Western theology, both Catholic and Protestant. It is this that I now want to consider.

In the *City of God* Augustine presents a teleological account of human history that contains his famous description of the decadent subject. According to Augustine, as a result of the expulsion of Satan and his angels from heaven, there was allotted a specified amount of time in which the human race could produce enough people (saints) to fill the spaces vacated by the fallen angels. Then, when this number has been reached, history will have fulfilled its purpose and be brought to a close. This idea, however, creates problems where human sexuality is concerned, because lust, which the early Church regarded as sinful, seems to be integral to the process.[13] How could sinful passions have existed in Eden before Adam and Eve had disobeyed God? Because of this problem other theologians, such as Ambrose, Jerome and John Chrysostom, maintained that there would have been no sexual intercourse in Eden, which only arose as a consequence of the Fall.[14] Augustine begins by addressing those who held this traditional view before developing his own idiosyncratic theory of what sex in Eden would have been like.

> If anyone says that there would have been no intercourse or procreation if the first human beings had not sinned, he is asserting, in effect, that man's sin was necessary to complete the number of the saints. For if they would have remained in solitude by refraining from sin, because, as some may imagine, they could not have bred if they had not sinned, it follows that sin was essential if there were to be a number of righteous people, instead of a single pair.[15]

In opposition to such an idea Augustine proposes an account of pre-lapsarian sexuality that is devoid of the experience of lust which is caused by sin.

> It follows that, if there had been no sin, marriage would have been worthy of the happiness of paradise, and would have given birth to children to be loved, and yet would not have given rise to any lust to be ashamed of; but, as it is, we have no example to show how this could have come about.[16]

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[13] Sexual desire is almost always treated negatively by the Church Fathers, despite the fact that St Paul regarded it as a sound reason for entering into marriage, within which the desire can be indulged and satisfied freely (1 Corinthians 7: 1–5).

[14] See Peter Brown, *The Body And Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 399.

[15] St Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), Ch. 23, p. 585.

[16] Ibid.

There is 'no example to show how this could have come about' but Augustine can rationally apprehend how this would have been since parts of the body, hands and feet for example, are still subject to the will. This leads Augustine to ask:

> Then why should we not believe that the sexual organs could have been the obedient servants of mankind, at the bidding of the will, in the same way as the other, if there had been no lust, which came as the retribution for the sin of disobedience?[17]

Augustine proposes a pre-lapsarian sexuality that is devoid of the passions that we naturally associate with reproduction, replacing them instead with purely rational motivations. Because of this he regards some contemporary accounts of the extraordinary control of the will over the body as vestiges of this pre-lapsarian control still remaining in certain individuals.

> We do in fact find among human beings some individuals with natural abilities very different from the rest of mankind and remarkable by their very rarity. Such people can do some things with their body which are for others utterly impossible and well-nigh incredible when they are reported. Some people can even move their ears, either one at a time or both together. Others without moving the head can bring the whole scalp – all the part covered with hair – down towards the forehead and bring it back again at will. Some can swallow an incredible number of various articles and then with a slight contraction of the diaphragm, can produce, as if out of a bag, any thing they please, in perfect condition. There are others who imitate the cries of birds and beasts and the voices of other men, reproducing them so accurately as to be quite indistinguishable from the originals, unless they are seen. A number of people produce at will such musical sounds from their behind (without any stink) that they seem to be singing from that region [. . .] We observe then that the body, even under the present conditions, is an obedient servant to some people in a remarkable fashion beyond the normal limitations of nature [. . .] If this is so, is there any reason why we should not believe that before the sin of disobedience and its punishment of corruptibility, the members of a man's body could have been the servants of man's will without any lust, for the procreation of children?[18]

This famous passage strikes the modern reader as bizarre, especially where the breaking of wind in a musical fashion is introduced in order to support a serious theological argument, since it seems at once to be both comical and inappropriate. But this is not apparent to Augustine because he has such a strong sense of the decadence of the human subject where the power of the will is concerned. There

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17   Ibid.
18   Ibid., pp. 588–9.

would have been no aspect of the body that would not have been governed by the sovereign will. In order to maintain the idea of rationally motivated sexual intercourse in Eden he must account for the subsequent decay of the will and dominance of lust over reason, and the examples he gives are intended to provide evidence of a residual dominance of the will over certain bodily functions in certain individuals.

This passage seems to be far removed from the domain of politics and has generally been interpreted in the context of Augustine's own subjective experience as evidenced in his earlier writings, especially the *Confessions* (397–98). John O'Meara writes, for example, that the text is 'founded upon Augustine's own experience' and that 'it is an application of the theme of his own development and conversion, as described in the burning pages of the *Confessions*'.[19] The origins of Augustine's views are easy to trace in his own accounts of his struggle with lust which he describes in great psychological detail in the *Confessions*. Traditionally, scholars such as O'Meara have followed this path (which Augustine surely intended) by relating his theories in the *City of God* to his own subjective experience, thereby emphasizing the highly personal source of his arguments. Others, however, have chosen to draw out what they see as the political implications of Augustine's description of the decadence of the human subject. Elaine Pagels argues that what seems like an analysis born out of introspective reflection, is in fact a suitable vehicle for furthering a political agenda:

> His analysis of internal conflict, indeed, leads directly into his view of social conflict in general. The war within us drives us into war with one another – and no good pagan or Christian, remains exempt. So, he explains, while a good man is progressing to perfection, one part of him can be at war with another of his parts; hence, two good men can be at war with one another.[20]

Pagels claims that Augustine, unlike other theologians such as John Chrysostom, viewed the authority of the state as a necessity in a fallen world, and that Augustine 'acknowledges the emperor's rule however limited (or even brutal), to be nevertheless, as permanent and ineradicable – in this world, at least – as the effects of original sin'.[21] Thus she draws out the political implications of Augustine's account of the post-lapsarian decadent subject who, divided against himself, must be policed by the state.[22]

19   St Augustine, *City of God*, op. cit., introduction by John O'Mara, p.vii.
20   Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 113.
21   Ibid., pp. 118–19.
22   Peter Brown provides an example of a more 'traditional' approach to Augustine, aware of the political issues but also of the importance of private experience in

It is unclear to what extent Pagels regards Augustine's thinking in the *City of God* as being politically motivated. Certainly she seems to place political issues at least on a par with theological ones when considering his authorial intentions. Her reading, though, is of interest here because she demonstrates the ease with which a description of decadence, no matter how apparently removed from the realm of politics, can be seen to have profound political implications. Describing anything, or anyone, as decadent, involves reference to an ideal from which the subject thus described declines, this in turn implies ways in which that subject might be thought of and treated in society. The decadent subject defined by Augustine must, according to Pagels, be policed in some way, hence she argues that Augustine provides the theoretical support for justifying the Church's relation to the state, and hence the powerful influence that his ideas have exerted upon Western theologians. Contentious as this reading of Augustine is, it demonstrates the ease with which descriptions of decadence can be politicized.

These two examples, then, one from the early Christian era and the other from more recent history, can be associated in discussion when the political significance of decadence is brought to the fore. It is in this way that the subject of decadence affords a unique opportunity, or window, upon European culture, revealing the ideas and values that determine what is, or is not, privileged and how these change. The political implications of decadence are therefore evident in a number of the essays in this volume. Michael Davies for example, examines a tract by Jonathan Swift, drawing out the political agenda that is latent in his argument concerning the decay of the English language. His approach thus reveals the way in which court libertines and religious non-conformists are both allied in the mind of Swift as a combined threat, an unlikely combination and one that has hitherto been little commented upon. Andrew St John locates the poetry of Rudyard Kipling in the domestic political debate concerning the problems posed by social decay in British cities for the effective running of the empire. This reveals Kipling's sympathy with the working classes of England and the colonies, in contrast to the radical policies current at that time and advocated by parties right across the domestic political spectrum. Mark Rawlinson's essay deals with a more contemporary debate and considers the idea of the 'decadent university' as a politically contentious issue of great importance to the future of academia. My essay presents a reading of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* in which political references are identified in the poem and related to the Good Parliament of 1376, where the sexual conduct of Edward III became the subject of both debate and censure.

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Augustine's work. Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford: OUP, 1986) also cautions against politicizing Augustine's views: 'The *City of God* is treated incorrectly if it is regarded as a statement about political theory [. . .] Augustine offers much more hope to the individual than to the institutions of human society, peculiarly liable to be vehicles of group egotism', p. 106.

The importance of early Christian culture in shaping ideas of decadence is evidenced by two further appearances of Augustine in this volume, in the essays by David Salter and Martin Davies. Salter examines the idea of the decadent city presented in the *City of God*, how influential this was in medieval Europe, and how it came to be altered by the Franciscan mission to redeem the cities. This transformation is examined with reference to two paintings produced in the fifteenth century by Colantonio. Martin Davies's essay reminds us once again of the psychological significance of Augustine's thought, as he considers the very human perception of the present as somehow always less than that which proceeds it. Augustine's famous remark that it is 'in the mind' that time is measured is used to further define Davies's concept of 'lateness'. In Amir Nojoumian's essay, Derrida's views on translation are considered as post-structuralist secularized versions of Walter Benjamin's metaphysically inclined theories, which involved a particular understanding of the Book of Genesis. The importance of the accounts of the Fall and the Tower of Babel for both writers again demonstrates the influence of theological ideas upon concepts of decadence. Tristram Hooley's essay further underlines this influence by looking at the biblical idea of 'Apocalypse' and how this was used in the work of various British novelists in order to engage with the events of the Second World War through what Hooley refers to as 'Apocalypse fiction'.

The European dimension of this volume is supported by Susan Bassnett, Marina Spunta, Julie Dashwood and Andrew Hammond. Bassnett introduces us to the truly decadent world of the Italian writer Gabriele D'Annunzio, offering some useful insights into his disturbing fictions. Marina Spunta explores the work of the contemporary Italian writer Antonio Tabucchi, analysing his very urban descriptions of decay and the description of an isolated individual perspective in his novel *Il filo dell'orizzonte* (*Vanishing Point*). Julie Dashwood's essay considers the use of macabre fairy-tale motifs in the nineteenth-century drama of both Gabriele D'Annunzio and Pierre Quillard. Andrew Hammond's essay considers descriptions of the Balkans by British travel writers in the first half of this century, who held up the Arcadian ideal they found there as a contrast to the decadent reality of their native modern Europe.

Although I have deliberately sought to extend the range of this volume beyond the confines of a traditional treatment of nineteenth-century aesthetic decadence, a number of essays nevertheless touch upon this area in new and stimulating ways. Vincent Newey provides an engaging analysis of Dickensian decadents through incisive close readings of Dickens's work, and suggests ways in which certain characters point towards a fascinating anticipation of the condition of *fin-de-siècle* decadence. Julian North reconsiders the origins of the *fin-de-siècle* concept with special reference to French writers and English criticism from the Romantic to mid-Victorian period. Nicholas Daly examines the parallels between Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and John Meade

Falkner's *The Lost Stradivarius*, in order to engage with the sexual politics of the 'decadent novel'. Some of the issues touched upon by Daly can also be traced in Martin Halliwell's treatment of Thomas Mann's reading of André Gide, though quite different conclusions are reached. Halliwell examines specific works by Gide and Mann in order to contest the idea that aesthetic harmony can be established as a response to moral disorder.

Science and technology also raise important issues where the idea of decadence is concerned in the twentieth century. Daniel Cordle shows how, in the work of I. A. Richards, the threat to society and culture that was in part seen to be the result of the power of science, paradoxically informed Richards' formulation of an 'objective' criticism, designed to bolster the declining influence of high culture through the reading of literature. Finally, Nicholas Zurbrugg identifies the parallels between modern and postmodern decadent mentalities, in order to consider 'technological cultural mutations', which include the perceived decadence of an ever proliferating media culture.

The essays that follow are arranged chronologically according to their subject. This does not of course mean that they must be read in sequence – each essay is self-contained and designed to be read as it stands. And, although contributors have responded to one another's arguments in certain places, it is the reader's prerogative, and, I hope, reward, to make the kind of observations seen above concerning decadence, and to use the concept as a means of appreciating significant changes, and correspondences, in the development (or perhaps even decadence) of European thought. Above all I hope that these essays will provide a starting point, and stimulate further original debate concerning an idea that is arguably central to Western thought.

Chapter 1

# Redeeming the Decadent City: Changing Responses to the Urban and Wilderness Environments in the *Lives* of St Jerome*

*David Salter*

**Introduction: decadence and the city**

From ancient times, decadence has been seen as a characteristically urban vice. Evidence of the antiquity of the association between decadence and city life can be found in the Book of Genesis, which tells how the first city was established by Cain, the first murderer, on whose forehead – as a sign of his irreparably corrupt and fallen nature – God is said to have placed a mark of shame (Genesis 4: 15–17). Writing at the beginning of the fifth century of the Common Era, and following a tradition of both Jewish and Christian legend which regarded Cain as the founder of a race of degenerate evildoers, St Augustine drew upon the strongly antagonistic view of urban civilization evident in the Book of Genesis when he identified Cain's city with the 'City of Man', an allegorical place whose inhabitants consisted of those men and women whom God had condemned to suffer eternal damnation.[1] However, although Augustine's writings betray a deep distrust of the wickedness and depravity of urban life – for instance, he wryly noted that Rome, like the city of Cain, was founded by a fratricide (*City of God*,

[1]    See St Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), Book XV, Ch. 5, pp. 600–601. A useful introduction to the apocryphal legends of Cain can be found in O.F. Emerson's 'Legends of Cain, Especially in Old and Middle English', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, XXI (1906), pp. 831–929, and John Block Friedman's, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 94–107.

Book XV, Chapter 5) – his attitude towards cities was nonetheless ambivalent, for not only did he choose to represent Hell and damnation in terms of urban civilization, but he also conceived of the Heavenly kingdom as a city:

> I classify the human race into two branches: the one consists of those who live by human standards, the other of those who live according to God's will. I also call these two classes the two cities, speaking allegorically. By two cities I mean two societies of human beings, one of which is predestined to reign with God for all eternity, the other doomed to undergo eternal punishment with the Devil.[2]

The idea of the City of God – like that of the City of Man – has its origins in the Bible, not least in the new Jerusalem of the Book of Revelation, while Augustine himself indicated that its direct source was Psalm 87: 'Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God' (Psalm 87: 3). But Augustine's belief that Heaven could best be understood as a city no doubt also reflects the very great extent to which his cultural and intellectual outlook was moulded by the civic values of classical Greece and Rome. The city stood at the very centre of classical civilization. According to Aristotle: 'man is by nature a political animal', that is, one who participates fully in the life of the city (polis).[3] Thus, it is possible to discern both in the work of Augustine, and in the wider cultural milieu from which he drew, two contradictory attitudes towards city life. On the one hand, Augustine saw the city as the arena within which human civilization was best able to flourish, the place where all that was most noble in human nature could be realized, while on the other hand he was profoundly suspicious of the worldliness and hedonism that were so much a part of urban existence.

Of course, each of these two views of the city carries with it a corresponding set of beliefs and assumptions about that which is not the city: the countryside or wilderness. To those who look favourably upon the city, the country can be seen as a rustic backwater that knows nothing of the great cultural achievements of human civilization such as philosophy and art. Alternatively, the country can be viewed as a pastoral idyll that has remained relatively untouched by the decadence and corruption of the city – a place that has thus managed to preserve something of the primal innocence of humanity.[4] In this essay, I shall explore these different responses to the country and the city by examining how urban existence was represented in the Life and work of Augustine's great contemporary, St Jerome, both in his writings and in the legendary stories that

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[2]    See Augustine, City of God, Book XV, Ch. 1, p. 595.

[3]    See Aristotle, The Politics, trans. T.A. Sinclair and Trever J. Saunders (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), Book 1, Ch. II, p. 59.

[4]    Raymond Williams has investigated the different ways in which these ideas have been treated in English literature, particularly by authors of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in his study: The Country and the City (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973).

subsequently came to be told about him. As a point of entry into this material, I shall concentrate upon the painting of *St Jerome and the Lion* that was undertaken in the middle of the fifteenth century by the Neapolitan artist Niccolò Colantonio (Plate 1). By comparing its treatment of the themes of the city and the wilderness with Jerome's professed views on these subjects, it will be possible to reflect upon the ways in which attitudes towards the urban and wilderness environments altered over the course of the Middle Ages.[5]

## St Jerome: life and legend

Jerome was born during the middle of the fourth century at Stridon in Dalmatia (the exact date of his birth is unknown, but modern scholars estimate that it was some time between 331 and 347), and his greatest contribution to history, and the achievement for which he was most revered during the ensuing Christian centuries, was his production of a Latin translation of the Bible (which became known as the *editio vulgata*, the Vulgate or popular edition), a text that for almost a thousand years, and throughout the Latin-speaking West, was regarded as the standard version of the Scriptures.[6] However, in addition to his skills as a linguist, scholar, and translator, Jerome was also famed for his advocacy of the monastic life (a life that he himself practised, first in solitude in the Syrian desert, and then as the leader of a community of monks at Bethlehem in Palestine), and it is while

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5    Very little is known about Colantonio. His artistic education is thought to have taken place under the patronage of René D'Anjou, who reigned in Naples from 1438 to 1442, while his last work was commissioned in 1460 by Queen Isabella Chiaromonte, the wife of King Ferdinand I of Naples. The painting of *St Jerome and the Lion* (which formed the lower section of an altarpiece, the upper panel of which was a depiction of *St Francis Distributing the Rule to the First and Second Franciscan Orders*), was completed near the beginning of Colantonio's career, and although it is not known who commissioned the work, there is documentary evidence to indicate that it was originally housed in a chapel dedicated to St Jerome in the Franciscan church of San Lorenzo, Naples. For a discussion of Colantonio's life and work, see Giovanna Cassese, 'Niccolò Colantonio', in ed. Jane Turner, *The Dictionary of Art*, vol. 7 (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 542–4. See also Penny Howell Jolly, 'Jan Van Eyck and St Jerome: A Study of Eyckian Influence on Colantonio and Antonello da Messina in Quattrocento Naples' (University of Pennsylvania, PhD thesis, 1976), pp. 80–151.

6    For an excellent modern biography of Jerome, see J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London: Duckworth, 1975). Useful essays on Jerome, his biblical scholarship, and the medieval history of his translation of the Bible can be found in the first two volumes of the *Cambridge History of the Bible*. See H.F.D. Sparks, 'Jerome as Biblical Scholar' in P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans, eds, *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 510–41: E.F. Sutcliffe, 'Jerome' in ed. G.W.H. Lampe, *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: CUP, 1969), pp. 80–101; and Raphael Loewe, 'The Medieval History of the Latin Vulgate' in ed. Lampe, *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 2, pp. 102–54.

1 Niccolò Colantonio, *St Jerome and the Lion* (*c*. 1445), Naples: National Museum of Capodimonte

he was residing in Bethlehem during the second phase of his monastic career that his miraculous encounter with the lion is supposed to have taken place.[7]

Jerome's extensive writings, and in particular the many letters that he wrote to his friends (and enemies), are full of personal information about his life and work, and these scattered autobiographical references – along with testimonials to his character from such eminent figures as St Augustine, Sulpicius Severus, Gregory the Great, and Isidore of Seville – were the sources from which two ninth-century Latin *Lives* of the saint were compiled. These *Lives*, written independently of one another by anonymous authors, are known as *Hieronymus noster* and *Plerosque nimirum*, and were in turn used as sources for all of the subsequent medieval biographies of Jerome.[8] However, as well as recording the known facts of Jerome's life, the author of *Plerosque nimirum* also included in his narrative the legendary story of the saint's encounter with the lion, a tale that had previously been told in relation to a near-contemporary of Jerome – the Palestinian abbot St Gerasimus – by John Moschus in his seventh-century collection of the lives of the desert fathers, the *Pratum Spirituale*.[9]

## Colantonio's *St Jerome and the Lion*

According to the author of *Plerosque nimirum*, the encounter between Jerome and the lion took place one evening while the saint was listening to the sacred lessons with his fellow monks in the monastery that he had established at Bethlehem. A lion suddenly came limping into the building, whereupon everyone fled except for Jerome, who confidently approached the animal as though he were welcoming an honoured guest. The lion showed Jerome his paw, and seeing that the creature was badly injured the saint summoned his brothers and instructed them to wash and bind the wound with care. As the monks were performing this task they observed that the lion's paw had been scratched and torn by thorns, but they washed and dressed the wound so carefully that they were able to restore the

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7    For an account of Jerome's monasticism, see Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, pp. 46–55 and 129–40.

8    See *Hieronymus noster, in Patrologia Latina Cursus Completus*, 22: 175–84, ed. Jacques Paul Migne (hereafter referred to as *PL*), and *Plerosque nimirum*, in *PL* 22: 201–14. For a discussion of the sources of these two works, and their influence on the subsequent biographies of St Jerome, see Eugene F. Rice, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. 23–48.

9    For the story of St Jerome and the lion, see *Plerosque nimirum*, 209 ff. See also Joannes Moschus, *Vita Abbatis Gerasimi, in Pratum Spirituale*, in *PL* 74: 172–4. Eugene Rice (*Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, pp. 44–5), has suggested that in all probability the story of Gerasimus's lion became attached to the figure of Jerome some time during the seventh century, after the military invasions of the Arabs had forced many Greek monks who were living in the deserts of the Middle East to seek refuge in Rome.

animal to full health. From then onwards the lion lost all traces of his former wildness, and lived tamely alongside the monks, helping them with their labours.

The story of Jerome and the lion was widely disseminated in the late Middle Ages thanks to its inclusion in two of the most popular and influential books of the thirteenth century; Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum Historiale*, an account – completed in 1244 – of the history of humanity from the Fall to Vincent's own lifetime, and the *Legenda Aurea*, a collection of saints lives written by Jacobus of Voragine, the Archbishop of Genoa, which dates from about 1260.[10] However, the popularity of the story was not simply confined to the medium of literature; it is also reflected in the field of the visual arts. According to the art historian Grete Ring, Jerome was perhaps 'the most frequently represented saint in art from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, with the exception of the members of the Holy Family and St John'.[11] Although a number of different episodes from the legend of St Jerome not involving the lion formed the subject of some of these fourteenth-, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century representations, the saint was most commonly shown dressed as a cardinal and seated on a chair in his study (or on a rock in the wilderness), either removing the thorn from the lion's paw, or reading a book with the animal lying quietly at his feet.[12]

The eminent Italian canonist Joannes Andreae, who taught law at the University of Bologna from 1301 until his death in 1348, and who commissioned a number of paintings of Jerome, is usually credited with introducing the motif of

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[10]    See Vincent of Beauvais, 'De Vita et Actibus Sancti Hieronymi Presbiteri', in *Bibliotheca Mundi. Vincentii Bellovacensis Speculum Quadruplex: Naturale, Doctrinale, Morale, Historiale*, ed. Benedictini Collegii Vedastini, 4 vols. (Douai, 1624), vol. IV, Liber XVI, Cap. XVIII, p. 623, and Jacobus of Voragine, *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine*, trans. Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York: Arno Press, 1969), pp. 587–92. The popularity of the two books is reflected in the large number of manuscripts that has survived from the period. Gregory G. Guzman has compiled a list of 200 manuscripts of the *Speculum Historiale*, while according to Eugene Rice, there are over 500 extant manuscripts of the *Legenda Aurea*. See Gregory G. Guzman, 'A Growing Tabulation of Vincent of Beauvais' Speculum Historiale Manuscripts', *Scriptorium: International Review of Manuscript Studies* 29 (1975), 122–5, and Rice, *St Jerome in the Renaissance*, p. 23.

[11]    Grete Ring, 'St Jerome Removing the Thorn from the Lion's Paw', *Art Bulletin* 27 (1945), p. 190.

[12]    The art historian Herbert Friedman has observed that: 'The lion occurs in the great majority (more than three-quarters) of all paintings, graphics, and sculptures representing Saint Jerome in the wilderness. . . . It also occurs in more than half of all renditions of the saint in his study chamber. The beast is to be found in many, if not the majority, of representations of Jerome's last communion and of his death, as well as in more than half of other compositions in which Jerome is shown, either by himself as a formal, hieratic figure of a great Church Father, or as one of the attendant, lateral figures in conventional altarpieces, especially in those created after the first years of the fifteenth century.' See Herbert Friedmann, *A Bestiary for Saint Jerome: Animal Symbolism in European Religious Art* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1980), p. 229.

the lion into the visual arts, and combining it with images of the saint as a scholar and theologian.[13] In his book *Hieronymianus* or *De Laudibus Sancti Hieronymi*, Joannes wrote:

> I have also established the way he should be painted, namely, sitting in a chair, beside him the hat that cardinals wear nowadays (that is, the red hat or *galerus ruber*) and at his feet the tame lion; and I have caused many pictures of this sort to be set up in divers places.[14]

The painting of *St Jerome and the Lion* by Colantonio perfectly accords with Joannes's prescriptions, and is one of the best-known, and most interesting, artistic treatments of the subject. The painting is dominated by the figures of Jerome and the lion, both of whom are situated in the centre of the composition, and Colantonio successfully managed to convey not only a sense of the benevolence of the saint and the pathos of the injured animal, but also a strong feeling of trust and companionship between the two. However, the picture is also remarkable for the extraordinary detail with which it represents the interior of Jerome's cell.[15] The shelves are strewn with books, pens and papers, along with all of the other equipment that one would expect to find in a scholar's study, while the book that is lying open on Jerome's desk, and the general atmosphere of disorderly clutter, gives the impression that the saint had been busy at work when the lion entered his room, seeking his help. Jerome himself is seated on an ornately carved chair. He is dressed in a brown habit and cloak, and is wearing a tightly fitting grey hat, while his tasselled, red cardinal's hat, the *galerus ruber*, is prominently displayed to the left of the lion, on a table in front of his desk. Finally, in the bottom right-hand corner of the painting, behind Jerome's chair, a mouse can be seen eating a scrap of paper.

Amidst all the finely observed detail of Jerome's study, the lion remains a somewhat incongruous, almost enigmatic figure. In spite of the animal's large size and enormously powerful frame, he is stripped of the conventional leonine attributes of wildness and courage, and is pictured instead with a slightly mournful and subdued expression, looking rather ill at ease in the domestic setting of Jerome's book-lined chamber. The lion's former wildness stands in stark contrast to his present domesticity, and the encroachment of the animal into the indoor, human space of Jerome's study seems to blur the traditional opposition between the concepts of 'nature' and 'culture', 'wilderness' and

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[13] For a discussion of Joannes's role in establishing the iconography of Jerome, see Rice, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, pp. 64–8, and Ring, 'St Jerome Removing the Thorn from the Lion's Paw', p. 190.

[14] Quoted in Rice, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, p. 65.

[15] Penny Howell Jolly ('Jan Van Eyck and St Jerome', p. 103), has suggested that Colantonio's painting 'is the first Italian representation of St Jerome in his study to make the setting of such great importance'.

'civilization', and 'wild' and 'tame'. Moreover, Jerome's evident sympathy for the predicament of the lion, and the proximity and intimacy of the two, threatens to dissolve still further the conventional boundaries separating the human and animal worlds.

It is significant that in contrast to the literary version of the story found in *Plerosque nimirum*, Colantonio chose to locate the action not in one of the monastery's public, communal areas, but in the private space of Jerome's study, a setting that enabled him to depict an impressive array of books and papers in the background of the painting. Furthermore, rather than following *Plerosque nimirum* and portraying a scene in which Jerome at first examined the lion's wound, and then delegated the task of washing and dressing it to his monks, Colantonio showed the saint actually removing the thorn from the animal's paw. (According to *Plerosque nimirum*, the lion did not have a thorn stuck in his paw, but merely a wound that he had received when his paw had been pierced with thorns.) The effect of these two changes was to simplify the narrative while simultaneously amplifying the role that Jerome played in it. By removing the other monks from the scene, and so making Jerome solely responsible for healing the lion, Colantonio eliminated all the superfluous elements of the story that could divert attention from the saint, and reduce not just the dramatic impact of the miracle that he performed, but also the strength of the bond connecting him to the lion. With great narrative economy, then, Colantonio was able in the one painting to convey two quite distinct images or impressions of Jerome. On the one hand, he depicted a popular animal story in which a genuine sense of intimacy and companionship between the human and animal protagonists was conveyed, while at the same time he projected an image of the saint as a great scholar and theologian – reminding his audience of Jerome's reputation for erudition through the expedient of locating the action in his study.

Of course, in addition to these two aspects of Jerome's life and character, Colantonio – following the artistic convention established by Joannes Andreae – also represented the saint as a cardinal, displaying his red cardinal's hat on the table situated in front of his desk. In the same way that the books and papers lining the shelves of Jerome's study lend intellectual weight to the portrait, so the presence of the *galerus ruber* invests the figure of the saint with considerable ecclesiastical authority, denoting as it does the important position that he was thought to have occupied in the governing hierarchy of the Church. However, it is important to note that the institution of the college of cardinals was not actually established until the eleventh century, over six hundred years after Jerome's death, and it was not until the Council of Lyons in 1245 that Pope Innocent IV declared that the red hat should be worn by holders of the office.[16]

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16    For a discussion of the origins of the Cardinalate, see Rice, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, p. 37, and I.S. Robinson, *The Papacy 1073–1198: Continuity and Innovation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), pp. 33–120.

The anachronism of granting Jerome the title of cardinal reflects the way in which the writers and artists of the late Middle Ages tended both to visualize and understand historical figures in terms of the customs, fashions and institutions of their own time. Interestingly, Colantonio's painting contains a number of such historical anomalies. For instance, the magnifying glass that is hanging from the shelf above Jerome's desk is clearly a late-medieval detail, as such devices did not come into use until the end of the thirteenth century,[17] while the folded document situated on the bench immediately above the mouse has a papal bull attached to it, which can be identified as late-medieval in origin from the heads of saints Peter and Paul that are visible on its seal.[18] But, even more important than the anachronistic presence of these physical objects (at least from the point of view of the present discussion), is the fact that Jerome's relationship with the lion is also represented in an anachronistic manner. An examination of this aspect of the painting will highlight discrepancies between the attitudes towards city life that were held by Jerome and his monastic contemporaries, and the view that prevailed a thousand years later during Colantonio's lifetime.

## Jerome's *Lives* of Paul and Malchus

Alison Goddard Elliott has observed that miraculous encounters with wild beasts are one of the characteristic features of the *Lives* of the early Christian anchorites, and that lions appear much more frequently in these stories than any other animal.[19] Significantly, Jerome himself was the author of three biographies of desert saints, two of whom – Paul the hermit and Malchus the monk – had dramatic encounters with lions in the wilderness. Thus, it is possible to compare Colantonio's late-medieval treatment of the story of Jerome and the lion with two narratives, both involving saints and lions, that were actually written by Jerome himself.[20]

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[17] As has been noted by George Sarton in his discussion of the technological developments that occurred in the field of optics during the late Middle Ages. See George Sarton, *Introduction to the History of Science*, vol. II (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1931), p. 24.

[18] According to Penny Howell Jolly ('Jan Van Eyck and St Jerome', p. 102), 'the heads of Sts Peter and Paul . . . [were] a commonly used form for the reverse of papal seals in the 14th and 15th centuries'.

[19] See Alison Goddard Elliott, *Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of the Early Saints* (Hanover: Brown University Press, 1987), pp. 144–67.

[20] See *St Jerome, Life of St Paul the First Hermit*, trans. Sister Marie Liguori Ewald, in ed. Roy J. Deferrari, *Early Christian Biographies, The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 15 (Washington DC: The Fathers of the Church, 1952), pp. 217–38, and *St Jerome, Life of Malchus*, trans. Sister Marie Liguori Ewald, in ed. Deferrari, *Early Christian Biographies*, pp. 281–97.

It is thought that Jerome wrote his *Life of St Paul the First Hermit* some time around 376, while he was living the life of a solitary hermit in the Syrian desert.[21] According to Jerome, contrary to received opinion – which regarded St Anthony as the instigator of the monastic movement – Anthony had merely followed the example of his master, Paul of Thebes, who was in fact the first Christian monk to withdraw into the desert.[22] At the very end of his narrative, Jerome described how – after enduring the privations of the wilderness for almost a century – Paul finally died, leaving his body to be discovered by Anthony, who grieved that he did not have any tools with which to dig a grave. However, two lions suddenly appeared from out of the desert, prostrated themselves before the dead body, wagging their tails and roaring loudly with grief. After communicating their feelings of sorrow in this way, they began to dig a hole in the ground not far from Paul's corpse, and when they had made a space large enough to contain the body, they respectfully approached Anthony, who sent them away with a blessing.[23]

The holy monk, Malchus, the subject of Jerome's second sacred biography, also had a miraculous encounter with a lion in the wilderness. After living in a monastery in the desert for a number of years, Malchus returned home to visit his widowed mother for one last time. On his way he was captured by Ishmaelites and sold into slavery. He eventually managed to escape with a fellow Christian slave, but they were pursued across the desert by their former master, who was accompanied by a servant. Malchus and his Christian companion finally took refuge in a cave, convinced that they were about to be murdered, yet they were miraculously rescued from this fate by a lioness who attacked and killed their assailants, but left them completely unharmed.[24]

As Alison Goddard Elliott has observed, the lions that feature in the *Lives* of the desert saints typically perform a similar function to the 'helpful beasts' of folklore, in that they willingly override or renounce their naturally bestial inclinations in order to grant their assistance to those holy figures whose innocence and sanctity they instinctively recognize.[25] But, as well as using this common folkloric motif as a way of highlighting the holiness of Paul and Malchus, the two stories also share a similar location – a cave in the desert, beyond the boundaries of the civilized, human world. This wilderness setting, far from being incidental to the two narratives, actually reflects the theological concerns and convictions of the desert fathers themselves, for both Paul and

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[21]    See the comments of Sister Marie Liguori Ewald (p. 221), in her introduction to Jerome's *Life of Paul the First Hermit*. However, J.N.D. Kelly dates the work slightly later, arguing that it was written by Jerome in Antioch, after he had returned from his first sojourn in the wilderness. See Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, pp. 60–61.

[22]    See Jerome, *Life of St Paul the First Hermit*, 1, p. 225.

[23]    See Jerome, *Life of St Paul the First Hermit*, 16, p. 236.

[24]    See Jerome, *Life of Malchus*, 9, pp. 296–7.

[25]    See Elliott, *Roads to Paradise*, p. 159.

Malchus chose to forsake the world and lead a solitary existence in the wilderness because they believed that the civic, humanistic values of late-classical society were incompatible with the ascetic ideals proclaimed by Christ in the Gospels.

The inherent sinfulness of human society, and the redemptive, purifying power of the wilderness, is a theme that is given particular prominence in the *Life of Malchus*. According to Jerome, Malchus first went into the desert in order to escape the malign influence of his relatives, who – ignoring his vow of chastity – were trying to force him to marry. Then, having lived as a monk in the wilderness for many years, Malchus decided to visit his widowed mother one last time before she died, only to be told by his abbot that this seemingly innocuous wish was in fact a temptation from the Devil, and that in succumbing to it he would be placing his soul in great jeopardy. The abbot's forebodings proved to be well founded, for Malchus was captured by Ishmaelites on his journey home, and sold by them into slavery. In this captive state his virginity was again imperilled, this time by his new master, who tried to force him to marry a fellow slave, and it was in order to escape this threat to his sexual purity that he once again sought refuge in the desert. For Malchus, then, the harshness of the desert climate, and its general physical inhospitality, made it a place of spiritual safety, a religious haven where on two separate occasions he sought sanctuary from the moral corruption of human society.

Jerome's attitude towards the wilderness was identical to the view that he attributed to Malchus. In a famous letter that he wrote in 384 to Eustochium, the daughter of his friend Paula, he reflected upon his own experiences of the austerities of the desert – with its potential for spiritual salvation – and compared it to the morally corrupt and decadent nature of life in the city:

> Oh, how often, when I was living in the desert, in that lonely waste, scorched by the burning sun, which affords to hermits a savage dwelling place, how often did I fancy myself surrounded by the pleasures of Rome. ... Filled with stiff anger against myself, I would make my way alone into the desert; and when I came upon some hollow valley or rough mountain or precipitous cliff, there I would set up my oratory, and make that spot a place of torture for my unhappy flesh. There sometimes also – the Lord Himself is my witness – after many a tear and straining of my eyes to heaven, I felt myself in the presence of the angelic hosts, and in joy and gladness would sing: 'Because of the savour of thy good ointments we shall run after thee [Song of Solomon 1: 3]'.[26]

Like Malchus, Jerome would seem to have regarded human society in general, and urban existence in particular, as beset with moral dangers; dangers that could best be countered by withdrawing from civic life and retreating into the

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[26]    St Jerome, 'Letter XXII: To Eustochium', in *Select Letters of St Jerome*, ed. and trans. F.A. Wright (London: Heinemann, 1933), pp. 67–9.