Symbolism, Decadence and the Fin de Siècle

FRENCH AND EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES

Edited by

PATRICK McGUINNESS

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Introduction

PATRICK Mc GUINNESS

Nous assistons [...] à un spectacle vraiment extraordinaire, unique ...

[We are witnessing [...] a truly extraordinary spectacle, unique ...]

Mallarmé, Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire, 1891

'When Was Modernism?', asks Raymond Williams.¹ To Williams' 'when', we might add a 'where' and a 'what': a troublesome trinity of questions to which the stately configuration of our title seems especially vulnerable. Symbolism, Decadence, fin de siècle: each of these terms is, in a way Williams might have explored as well as one which a library catalogue would recognize and classify, a 'keyword'. Together they stand poised to connote, on the one hand, a riotous profusion; on the other, exhaustion, deceleration, decline. Like words in a hermetic poem, these abstractions derive what little they have by way of a 'when', a 'what' and a 'where' from their relations with each other. Outside each other's orbit, and without one another's steadying pull, they threaten to mean either too little or too much.

The first historians of French Symbolism complained that 'Symbolisme' was a misnomer, and with good reason: it had very little to do with the expected definition of 'to symbolize or be symbolized by', and continues to confuse for precisely this reason.² 'Symbolism', when seen in the neighbourhood of 'Decadence', is likely to refer to a self-styled (but riven and self-dividing) avant-garde community, equipped with a daunting appendix of theories. Indeed, perhaps more than a maze of precepts about how to write, paint or compose, Symbolism was primarily a set of perspectives on reading and interpretation: if the Symbolists could not always agree on what constituted a 'symbolist' poem or a 'symbolist' poet, they were at one on the need for what Mallarmé called 'un esprit ouvert à la compréhension multiple' ['a mind open to multiple comprehension'].³ The Symbolist 'manifesto' of 18

September 1886 (which appeared not in a transient 'little review' but in a major journal, *Le Figaro Littéraire*) was less the launch of a movement than a taking stock of what already existed; within five years Jean Moréas, its author, had repudiated both the movement and the poets he aligned with it.

While 'Symbolisme' and 'symboliste' were used warily by writers, the words 'Symbole' and 'symbolique' were more freely called upon to describe the oblique, the allusive, and the inexplicit, and to designate creative practices which required, from reader or spectator, a capacity for ambiguity, multiple meaning or radical paradox.⁴ The extent to which Symbolism functions in anything but the most rudimentary terms as what René Wellek has called, borrowing a Kantian term, a 'regulative idea'. 5 may be gauged by the fact that Mallarmé. Verlaine and Rimbaud were all at one time or another considered both 'Symbolist' and 'Decadent'. The differences between the kinds of writing produced in the name of the 'Symbole', along with the fact that the Symbolists and Decadents sought to reclaim and in some cases relaunch older writers (like Villiers or Verlaine, Poe or Goethe), is further evidence that the appelation drew attention to, rather than created, artistic practices. Moreover, it is difficult to ascertain when (and indeed whether) Symbolism ended, since many of the younger writers who began in its orbit took the movement's influence into the twentieth century and exported it beyond France. The Symbolists were no self-celebrating literary élite; they extended their attention to a range of cultural manifestations outside the literary: film, theatre, dance, painting and music, as well as popular cultural forms such as mime, circuses and acrobatics. Several of the essays in this book demonstrate how Symbolist imaginations were engaging productively with the 'democratic' arts and technologies of their time.

To complicate matters, Symbolism was not the same thing in Germany and Italy as it was in France, much less in France's nearest neighbour, Belgium, and none of these Symbolisms happened at the same time. Symboliste was the term used by T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound and F.S. Flint, writers at the centre of what became the 'Imagiste' movement, spelt and pronounced in the French way, and which basked, even in the cosmopolitan circles of early Modernism, in its Gallic otherness. Even the perceived Frenchness of French Symbolism poses problems: though it centred on Paris, not only was it exceptionally international in its inspiration, but it was also international in its constitution: Moréas was Greek, Maeterlinck, Verhaeren and Rodenbach were Belgian, Charles Vignier was Swiss, Téodor de Wyzewa and Marie Krysinska were Polish, and Stuart Merrill and Francis Vielé-Griffin were American. Symbolism and Decadence were francophone movements, prototypes perhaps of the modern 'francophonie', discovering the unity-in-difference of a shared French language. In 1889 Charles Morice published La

Littérature de tout à l'heure [The Literature to Come], in which he described a modern movement that drew on a variety of influences. His striking 'Pyramide', its peak tantalisingly witheld from view (Figure 1), attempts to set out the genealogy of modern artistic endeavour; international, eclectic but also incomplete because still in process. These facets—internationalism, eclecticism and incompletion—are constitutive of Symbolism itself as both a historical and an aesthetic category. Another suggestion in Morice's diagram, combining as it does both a circle and a pyramid, is that Symbolism may constitute both an ascent and a cycle, representing the return of ideas recombined, accentuated and synthesized—at the same time as projecting their conclusive working-through. But the debate was not always so exalted, or indeed so learned: Morice's mentor Verlaine claimed in 1891 that Symbolism was, in fact, an un-French aberration, thus aligning himself with the critics who believed that the Symbolists had perverted the French mind and polluted the genius of the French tongue: 'Le symbolisme? . . . comprends pas . . . Ca doit être un mot allemand . . . hein?' ['Symbolism? . . . don't understand . . . it must be a German word . . . eh?'1.8

The word 'Decadence' is similarly difficult, though more perversely paradoxical, since many of its most satisfying definitions explicitly contradict each other. While the socio-political and historical notions of decadence posited decline, the idea of *Décadence* in the literary realm was altogether subtler and more productive. Baudelaire in 1857 had written that the language of the 'dernière décadence latine'

—suprême soupir d'une personne robuste déjà transformée et préparée pour la vie spirituelle,—est singulièrement propre à exprimer la passion telle que l'a comprise et sentie le monde poétique moderne.⁹

[—supreme sigh of à robust being already transformed and ready for the spiritual life,—is singularly appropriate to expressing passion as it has been understood and felt by the world of modern poetry.]

Models and theories of decadence had been a subject of sustained debate long before the fin de siècle: Désiré Nisard had published his Etude de mœurs et de critique sur les poètes latins de la décadence in 1834, and the comparison between Decadent Latin and French literatures sought to reflect badly on both. ¹⁰ By the middle of the nineteenth century, Baudelaire and Gautier had cleansed the term décadence of its negative connotations, relaunched it as a synonym of subtle, ingenious and complex, and identified it with a new and modern poetic movement. As Gautier wrote of Baudelaire in his Histoire du romantisme:

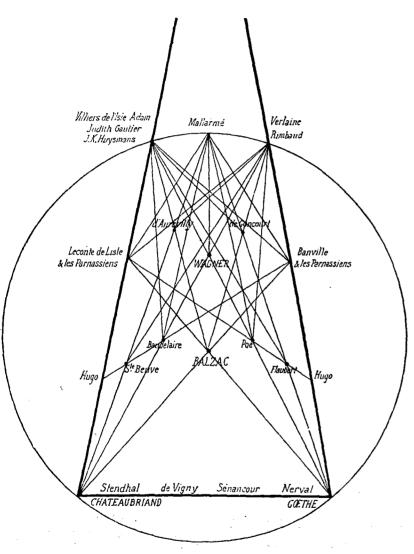


Figure 1. 'La Pyramide Symboliste', from Charles Morice, La Littérature de tout à l'heure (1889).

c'est la différence de la lumière crue, blanche et directe du midi écrasant toutes choses, à la lumière horizontale du soir incendiant les nuées aux formes étranges de tous les reflets. [...] Le soleil couchant, pour être moins simple de ton que celui du matin, est-il un soleil de décadence digne de mépris et d'anathème?¹¹

[it is the difference between the raw, white and direct light of a midday beating down on all things equally, and the horizontal light of evening firing the strange clouds with reflections. [. . .] Is the setting sun of decadence deserving of contempt and anathema for being less simple in tone than the rising sun of morning?]

Against the hard, equalizing light of noon, Gautier posits the intricate and nervy fires of a dying sun. Baudelaire's image of the robust being, moreover, suggests a change of state rather than a decline, and an almost ascetic denial of the flesh in readiness for the spiritual life. In Decadent temporality, it is the giddying but near-uncapturable state of betweenness that fascinates and compels.

Paul Bourget's Essais de psychologie contemporaine (1883) and Nouveaux essais de psychologie contemporaine (1885) were influential in creating a Decadent genealogy flexible enough to take in Stendhal, Chateaubriand, Taine, Zola, the Goncourt brothers and Baudelaire himself, while Zola lauded the 'sensibilité maladive' ['sickly sensibility/sensitivity'] that animated the 'oeuvres de décadence' of the Goncourt brothers. In 'La Littérature et la gymnastique', published in 1866, Zola writes:

Ce n'est plus l'âme qu'on exalte, ce sont les nerfs, la matière cérébrale. La chair est endolorie des secousses profondes et répétées que le cerveaux imprime à tout l'organisme. [. . .] Cette victoire des nerfs sur le sang a décidé de nos mœurs, de notre littérature, de notre époque toute entière. 12

[We no longer exalt the soul but the nerves, cerebral matter. The flesh has been weakened by the deep and repeated shocks with which the brain marks the entire organism. [. . .] This victory of the nerves over the blood has determined our customs, our literature, our whole period.]

In chapter XIV of A Rebours, Des Esseintes muses on the need for a glossary that could do for the French language of the fin de siècle what du Cange had done for the 'dernière balbuties, les derniers spasmes, les derniers éclats' ['the last stutters, the last spasms, the last flashes'] of Latin. When Paul Adam, Jean Moréas, Gustave Kahn and Félix Fénéon brought out the (quasi-parodic)

Petit Glossaire pour servir à l'intelligence des auteurs décadents et symbolistes, it was attacked as signalling the 'aphasia' and 'phtisie' of the French language. 14 Well before Max Nordau's Degeneration, medical and quasi-medical terms had become part of the modern poet's lyric resources, the modern novelist's great descriptive challenges and the historian's and social scientist's explanatory arsenal. 15 The extent to which the Naturalist writers were complicit in medicalizing and sociologizing ideas of decadence and of mythologizing heredity and social conditioning is a substantial subject in itself, and one which several of the essays in this book touch on.

In the vicinity of symbolistes, however, décadents designates both a phalanx of poets who consider themselves healthy, optimistic, and ascetic, and an insult, often used by Symbolists to attack both their enemies and their former selves. 16 The title of décadent could be claimed with pride as a synonym of 'modern', 'experimental' and 'energetic' (as by Anatole Baju, editor of Le Décadent), but it could also be brandished as an insult. The battles between Decadents and Symbolists were confusing, seeming to derive more from the narcissism of marginal difference than from genuine artistic programmes. Symbolist and Decadent writers often shared the same publishers and journals, and the part played by the dizzying succession of small magazines (Le Décadent, Le Symboliste, La Lutèce, La Revue blanche, La Wallonie among many others), and of Symbolist and Decadent 'bibliopoles' (publishers and booksellers) such as Léon Vanier in Paris (whose shop sold fishing equipment as well as the latest collections of poems) and Edmond Deman in Brussels, was instrumental to the literary culture. Even now it is difficult to disentangle the various strands of misinformation and imprecision, and the evidence suggests that contemporary readers were no better informed. Anatole Baju and his collaborators repeatedly sought to distinguish between the 'décadence' of the ruling class and ideology, of the republican body politic, and the modernity and progressiveness of the décadent writer. In 1887, in the best neologizing tradition, Baju coined the term Décadisme in order to fend off the idea of Décadence, and in the belief that the gravitas of of an 'isme' would counteract the dying fall of an 'ence'. At first the word was successful, with Verlaine congratulating Baju on his 'trouvaille' ('find'); 'décadisme' denoted 'une littérature éclatant par un temps de décadence, non pour marcher dans le pas de son époque, mais bien tout "à rebours", pour s'insurger contre' ['writing bursting forth in decadent times, not in order to walk in step with the times, but rather to go "aganist the grain", to rise up against it']. Many literary 'décadents' were opposed to the idea of 'Décadence', thus pitting adjective against noun, and saw their project quite explicitly as regenerative. In their own understanding of the term, such 'decadents' as René Ghil considered themselves socialist, progressive and scientific, and repudiated all imputation of exhaustion or tormented ill health. Baju saw his role as reinvigorating language by enabling it to keep pace with the ever-new, ever-changing experiences of urbanism and modernity:

Notre but consiste à éveiller le plus grand nombre de sensations possibles avec la moindre quantité de mots. Notre style doit être tourmenté, parce que la banalité est l'épouvantail de cette fin de siècle, et nous devons rajeunir les vocables tombés en désuétude ou en créer de nouveaux pour noter l'idée dans la complexité de ses nuances les plus fugaces. ¹⁷

[Our goal is to awaken the largest possible number of sensations with the smallest number of words. Our style must be tormented, because banality is the scourge of this fin de siècle, and we must rejuvenate the words that have fallen into disuse or create new ones in order to capture the idea in the complexity of its most fugitive nuances.]

Though these sentiments are in no way original (they can be found in the context of Decadence in Flaubert, Gautier, Baudelaire, the Goncourts and Zola among others), there is little here that corresponds to the pejorative aura of the adjective décadent, and much that is indistinguishable from the declarations of Symbolists such as Paul Adam, Gustave Kahn or Moréas himself. Instead, Baju emphasizes regeneration of language, economy of expression, and—crucially—a position of resistant engagement with modernity, a desire both to reflect and to intervene in the contemporary. The Decadent writer, like Baudelaire's Dandy (also conceived as the honourable mode of response to a 'temps de décadence'), was both symptom and solution; no escaper into the vague beyond, he was a product of his time even as he railed against it.

Despite the personal rivalries and aesthetic differences, many of these writers remained able to contemplate themselves ironically. Symbolism and Decadence fostered their own subculture of self-parody: Les Déliquescences d'Adoré Floupette, 18 deft parodies of the decadent voice, appeared alongside the real thing in the same magazines, while Paul Adam and his friends Jean Moréas and Félix Fénéon produced a pseudo-glossary of Symbolist and Decadent language, drawing the majority of their examples from their own works. 19 Fake Rimbaud poems were being published in Le Décadent, while Mallarmé wrote for the Chat Noir journal, produced by the avant-garde's avant-garde: the Montmartre 'Hydropathes', who performed both their works and their daily lives in the cafés and brasseries of the Left Bank. 20 Literary history has been unkind to the Decadents, literary Mensheviks to the victorious Bolshevism of the Symbolists, though various critics have seen

beyond the Symbolist propaganda and explored a rich and original legacy.²¹ The décadent writer has been perceived as more politically radical and more socially committed than his Symbolist 'other', while Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the class backgrounds of Symbolists and Decadents argues that the Symbolists were metropolitan, patrician and wealthy, whereas the Decadents were provincial, lower-class and financially straitened. Such a typology is revealing if somewhat reductive, but prevents the décadents from being subsumed into a pre-history of Symbolism. They were not, like the Symbolists, a school: they were unwilling and unable to theorize beyond a vague and permissive individualism. The Symbolists (or at least those involved with the launch of the manifesto) were adept self-publicists, while the Decadents were inept at managing the media and accumulating what Bourdieu has called 'symbolic capital'. 22 Furthermore, most of the poets associated with the Decadents were also associated with the Symbolists, to the extent that the two factions were perceived not as alternatives denoting different attitudes of mind but as phases of literary development whereby, in its most basic formulation. Symbolism attains the status of a theory whereas Decadence is perceived as a mood. This is the Symbolist version of events. and obscures the extent to which even the coiners of phrases and launchers of movements were themselves uncertain of their terrain. In 1885 Jean Moréas was calling his confraternity of poets 'Les Décadents', 'cherch[ant] avant tout le pur Concept et l'éternel Symbole' ['seeksing] above all the pure Concept and the eternal Symbol'. Within a few months he was calling the new poetic school 'Le Symbolisme', and using the pages of a major newspaper to air his polemics.²³ Amid these shifting allegiances, declarations and counterdeclarations, several of the essays in this book explore questions of theory and practice among the Symbolist and Decadent writers in prose and in poetry.

Next door to *fin de siècle*, however, and outside the literary sphere, 'Decadence' strikes different attitudes, and despite its terminal connotation proves extraordinarily versatile. Another likely reason for the Decadents' relative neglect is perhaps that they struggled in vain against a word that had become too successful and too difficult to control. Gaining branches in most domains—race theory, linguistics, politics, medicine and literature—Decadence was one of the most enduring ideas of the nineteenth century, but in so many shapes that it is only with precaution that we can consider it *one* idea at all. As with 'Degeneration', with which Decadence is *not* synonymous, no single discourse or idiom 'owned' the idea: outside the literary sphere, but exerting itself upon it, the word 'Decadence' connotes socio-political, racial, intellectual and imperial decline, or a synthesis of all of these, freely used and —as several of the essays in this book reveal—highly figurative even in the

so-called analytical disciplines which employed it. Moreover, the French vision of 'la fin des races latines' did not exist in isolation, but was perceived in relation to a Germanic and Nordic renaissance. When Georges Rodenbach claimed that 'tous les pays de race latine présentent les signes de civilizations épuisées' while 'les races germaniques sont restées fort riches de sang. équilibrées de cerveau, habiles à l'action' ['all the countries inhabited by Latin races show the signs of exhausted civilizations [...] the Germanic races have remained very rich in blood, balanced in mind, able to act'], he was voicing a widespread anxiety, rooted long before the late nineteenth century, and extending well into the twentieth century.²⁴ Joséphin Péladan's La Guerre des idées, published in 1916, shows how a generation fostered on a post-1870 amalgam of thwarted idealism, reactionary ideology and pose (in Péladan's case leavened with Wagnerism, mysticism and Rosicrucianism) found it hard to abandon these compelling models of decline and resurgence as they set about comprehending the Europe of World War One. 25 This volume explores a number of these vexed questions not only in the contexts of the 'Latin' cultures of Italy and Spain, but also the 'Germanic' cultures of Austria and Germany. It also includes an essay on the liminal Franco-Nordic literature of Belgium, caught between two conflicting projections and finding in their very tension the source of its richest literary prospects.

What of Fin de siècle? Many centuries have ended, but there was only one fin de siècle. It is identified with France, like other untranslatables such as ennui, savoir faire and je ne sais quoi, but its applications, and the associations it conjures up, have no cultural or national boundaries. In our context, it designates a European-wide extended farewell to the nineteenth century, a farewell complicated by the fact that, in some cases, it had already been bidden long before 1900, and in others had yet to be pronounced. In the orbit of the word 'Decadence', fin de siècle takes on airs of exhaustion and decline, or of anarchy and counter-cultural activity. It stops being a date and becomes a mood, or perhaps a mood in search of a date, opportunistically seeking out practices or ideas already in existence. Thus we have 'liberté fin de siècle' [finde-siècle freedom)] applied to the poets and performers of the Chat Noir café in the 1870s and 1880s;²⁶ we have Georges Rodenbach blaming the lost souls of Adolphe Murger's 'Bohème' (mid-century) for the damaging belief, later to become the Wildean creed, that an artist's duty was to live, rather than to produce, his art.²⁷ In 1878 Robert Louis Stevenson, in an essay on Walt Whitman, had already seen the century come full circle, referring to the 'Maladie de René', in which 'Young gentlemen with three or four hundred a year [...] look down from their pinnacle of doleful experience on all the grown and hearty men who have dared to say a good word for life'. 28 These models and metaphors—circles and pyramids, rising and setting suns, Paris

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and Rome—seem to hesitate between a sense of return, a sense of the cyclical, and a sense of culmination and finality.

Even these prefatory remarks risk oversimplifying the subject. This book seeks to complicate it more coherently. The volume is comparative and interdisciplinary because the subject is itself a complex of intersections. It is also methodologically varied, but in a manner designed to cohere: examining individual artists, but also the movements with which they were associated and the intellectual currents they drew from and added to. Though arranged into sections, these essays contextualize, interact and engage with each other across themes and specialisms, languages and literatures.

Between March and July 1891, Jules Huret, a journalist with L'Echo de Paris, published sixty-four interviews with contemporary writers spanning an impressive range of poets, novelists and critics, from Zola to Mallarmé, Leconte de l'Isle to Maupassant, Verlaine to Anatole France. Huret's selection aimed to satisfy a 'public, friand de toutes les cuisines, [qui] s'est imiscé de lui-même dans les querelles intestines de l'art' ['a public, greedy for all manner of dish, [which] has willingly embroiled itself in the internecine quarrels of art']. 29 The resulting Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire was a pioneering piece of cultural journalism, whose unprecedented success warranted publication as a book later the same year. We cannot tell how many of Huret's readers would have encountered Joséphin Péladan or Remy de Gourmont, Saint-Pol-Roux or Maurice Maeterlinck, or tarried over doctrinal differences between Parnassians and Symbolists, or between Neo-Realists and Naturalists in the normal run of their affairs; but the fact that the Enquête should have met with such startling success among readers of a daily paper is instructive. It suggests that the intense polemics and rivalries of the period, normally pursued through the pages of small, short-lived periodicals, in cafés or in intimate gatherings, had seized the public's attention. They had done so not as burning issues to rival elections or the building of canals, public monuments and metro stations, but as forms of esoteric spectacle, bouts of intellectual gladiatorship for which L'Echo de Paris provided the 'arena', and in which Huret cast himself as ringmaster.

It is under the sign of spectacle that Roger Shattuck begins his magisterial account of the life, literature and mores of fin-de-siècle France, The Banquet Years, 30 and Huret's preface, where he calls himself a 'reporter-imprésario', draws heavily on spectacular expectations, promising his readers 'pugilats et [...] estafilades' ['fistfights and [...] knife-wounds'] in plentiful supply. 31 Sensationalism aside, the book's popularity also suggests that the readers of L'Echo de Paris were aware that this was a unique period in the literary culture of France, and that at a time of extraordinary social, economic and scientific

change, the activities of writers and artists still retained some measure of raw newsworthiness.³² For today's reader, its documentary value lies not simply in the way it enables Mallarmé or Huysmans, Zola or Maupassant to discuss their ideas in what passed for layperson's terms, but that it shows them doing so alongside writers of less conspicuous posthumous fortune, such as Paul Adam, Charles Vignier and René Ghil (whose Traité du Verbe Mallarmé memorably prefaced, but who later became one of Mallarmé's most ardent detractors). Whether interviewing Verlaine in a café, travelling to Ghent to visit Maeterlinck, or calling on Huysmans in his apartment, Huret gives us a sense of the pace and bustle of literary life, and seeks to render something of the 'atmosphere' of the time. His book does more than restore the major writers to the contexts from which they have often been abstracted; in so doing, it reveals the richness and diversity of French literary culture at the end of the nineteenth century. It is testimony to Huret's literary judgment as well as his eye for a story that in time the Enquête has passed from news item to historical document. If a culture can be judged not just by its leading figures, but also by the calibre and ambitions of its secondary figures, and perhaps even by the bravura and panache of its failures, then the last two decades of the nineteenth century are among the most rewarding that we can study. But they can also be among the most confusing.

When Des Esseintes, the hero of Huysmans's 1884 A Rebours, hones down his Decadent canon (the word 'Symbolist' to designate a school or set of practices had not yet been coined) to create a new, post-Hugolian constellation which included Baudelaire, Poe, Verlaine, Mallarmé and Villiers, the modern reader is struck by the prescience of his selection. From the silence of his pleasure-fortress in Fontenay, Des Esseintes gathers in his writers, far from the clamour of the century he despises, yet which produced both him and them. His selection foreshadows today's canon which, like all canons, has accrued an air of inevitability about its formation. But Huret's Enquête shows us a world (merely seven years later) in which such constellations were by no means established, where instead of precedence there is simultaneity, and around which a variety of very different futures could be envisaged for literature and the arts.³³ Huysmans and Huret are concerned with much the same literary landscape, and each of their books is, in very different ways, a critical resource. Huysmans is fond of applying the word 'ozmazôme'—the concentrated and reduced juice of meat, and the only food Des Esseintes's delicate stomach can keep down-to the literary sphere; where Des Esseintes selects and distills, Huret extends and broadens, as authors and movements jostle for prominence in the literary arena. Though one book masquerades as a novel and the other as news, the approaches they suggest should not oppose but complement each other.

The Enquête unfolds a spectrum of manifestos and artes poeticae, but it also tells us a great deal about how the writers of the day perceived themselves and their work. Saint-Pol-Roux—poet, dramatist and literary theorist—stands out as the most vibrantly optimistic surveyor of the literary landscape:

Nier l'imminence d'une Réforme et d'une Renaissance, c'est-à-dire d'une novation de systèmes et de formes, serait nier l'étoile polaire. Toutes proportions gardées, la contemporaine avant-garde de l'Art Prochain rappelle, par son bariolage, les précurseurs scientifico-philosophiques du seizième siècle. La Renaissance d'autrefois comme la Renaissance de demain, offrent à leur début une confuse mais fertile variété de crédos et de formules. N'avons-nous pas Luther-Wagner, Pic de la Mirandole-Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Montaigne-Taine, Machiavel-Zola, Rabelais-Rodin, Théodore de Bèze-Mendès, Vinci-Puvis de Chavannes, Jacob-Boehm-Mallarmé, Paracelse-Huysmans, Copernic-Mirbeau? Le collectif volcan où fermentent ces esprits divers érupte chaque jour davantage.³⁴

[To deny the imminence of a Reformation and a Renaissance, that is to say a renewal of systems and of forms, would be to deny the pole-star. It is no overstatement to say that the contemporary avant-garde of the Art to Come necalls, in its bright diversity, the scientifico-philosophical precursors of the sixteenth century. That Renaissance, like tomorrow's Renaissance, reveals a confusing but fertile variety of credos and formulae. Do we not have Luther-Wagner, Pico della Mirandola-Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Montaigne-Taine, Machiavelli-Zola, Rabelais-Rodin, Theodor de Brèze-Mendès, da Vinci-Puvis de Chavannes, Jacob Boehme-Mallarmé, Paracelsus-Huysmans, Copenicus-Mirbeau? The collective volcano in which these diverse spirits are fermenting erupts more each day.]

Saint-Pol-Roux is at once excessive and modest in his estimation: this is not a Renaissance, but a pre-Renaissance. His response summarizes, in miniature, the attitude of those future-focused writers (like Mallarmé) for whom the present was itself precursive (as Peter Dayan shows in the opening essay of this book). At the opposite end of the spectrum is Joséphin ('Sâr') Péladan, playwright, cultural critic and Rosicrucian leader (Huret interviews no fewer than four 'magi' and cult leaders), who invoked a long-established trope in his response: 'je crois à la fatale et imminente putréfaction d'une latinité sans Dieu et sans symbole' ['I believe in the terminal and imminent putrefaction of a latinity without God and without symbol']. 35

These images of the period conjure up stark and elementary contrasts: where Saint-Pol-Roux bristles with words of anticipation, Péladan has already

moved beyond decline into putrefaction. Asked to pronounce on the same cultural moment, one writer invokes the end of the end, and the other the beginning of the beginning.

Such contrasting and contradictory perspectives are familiar confusions. As students of *fin-de-siècle* literature, what are we to make of such conflicting approaches? How must we work with the contradictory ways of classifying literary production represented by Huret and Des Esseintes? And how can we reconcile the equally contradictory ways of viewing a literary climate represented by Saint-Pol-Roux and Péladan? They represent ways of organizing material, and ways of narrating its development, that seem to offer themselves as alternatives. But it is not a matter of choosing between them, since they are emblematic of the contradictions and contrasts that lie at the heart not only of the period, but of the literary, cultural and social histories written of it.³⁶

The present volume does not propose to remove these contradictions and paradoxes. Instead, it seeks to enlist them into a manageable but sophisticated picture. It partakes of Huret's inclusiveness and of Huysmans's discriminations; it also acknowledges, following Péladan, the significance of images of crisis and decline, whether historically founded (the defeat of 1870–71, for instance) or imaginatively projected (by dates, periodization or the lure of 'culture rhymes' between French and Roman empires). But the animating force behind this collection of essays is most closely evoked by Saint-Pol-Roux's emphasis on optimism, innovation and renewal. Each of our essays looks ahead. While this book provides the reader with a number of ways into the artistic culture of Symbolism, Decadence and the fin de siècle in France and Europe, it sets equal store by showing a variety of ways out. These essays, individually and as a project, consistently point beyond the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, as they explore the multiple beginnings that characterize the period.

It is fitting, for a volume which questions the very notion of endings invoked in its title, to begin with Peter Dayan's exploration of Mallarmé's avoidance of the finisecular discourse that drew so many of his contemporaries and followers. Mallarmé is a protean figure in this book, and emerges in a variety of forms: Dayan's Mallarmé is a democrat, concerned with the accessibility of the 'Idéal' and with resisting the rhetorics of decadence and decline; Michael Holland's Mallarmé is a theorist of real and virtual theatre, while Dee Reynolds's Mallarmé is a virtual choreographer. Mallarmé returns later as a seminal influence on European poetries in the contributions by Shirley Vinall, Patrick Laude, Robert Vilain and Richard Cardwell. Like one of his own poems, Mallarmé proves a multi-faceted and paradoxical figure: the

writer who told Jules Huret that 'le cas d'un poète, en cette société qui ne lui permet pas de vivre, c'est le cas d'un homme qui s'isole pour sculpter son propre tombeau' ['the case of the boet, in this society which does not permit him to live, is that of a man who shuts himself away to carve his own tomb'137 was also fruitfully immersed in the topical, the ephemeral and the contemporary. It is also Mallarmé who closes the proceedings in the final essay, as a pivotal but elusive figure on the Franco-Anglo-American axis. These essays also explore the literary practices behind the labels 'Symboliste' and 'Décadent', as Clive Scott, Jennifer Birkett and Alison Finch assess the innovations of the Symbolist and Decadent writers in poetry and prose. These are later developed by the contributions of Vinall, Cardwell, Laude and Vilain, as they investigate the process of transfer between the French avant-garde writers and their European neighbours. Clive Scott elaborates a distinction between the poetries and theories of Symbolism and Decadence, revealing their subtle but germane differences. Jennifer Birkett's essay, focusing on the prose of Jean Lorrain and Remy de Gourmont, is also concerned with discriminating, but between the superficially similar narcissistic projects of two key 'Decadent' novelists in their treatment of self and other, identity and alterity in the modern world.

Alison Finch examines the work of women writers, focusing in particular on Gyp and Marie Krysinska. Gyp (as extraordinary a biographical personage as was ever invented in fin-de-siècle fiction) and Marie Krysinska, a poet with the peculiar distinction of being a rare woman to perform her work at the nearexclusively male Chat Noir café, emerge as bold innovators in their respective forms. Ian Christie traces the ways in which cinema, a nascent art but also a new technology, was imagined before being invented, and explores the responses of the Symbolists and their predecessors to recorded sound and moving images as phenomena on the cusp of science and the occult. Michael Holland examines the rich theoretical dimensions of Symbolist theatre. focusing on Mallarmé's responses to the need to bridge the 'difficult distance' between poet and audience. Dee Reynolds, in her exploration of Mallarmé and avant-garde choreography, offers close readings of Mallarmé's writings on dance and of his poem Un coup de dés alongside modern and post-modern dance theories. Peter Cooke, using Des Esseintes's emblematic Symbolist painter Gustave Moreau, examines the vexed relations between the verbal and the pictorial in Moreau's work. In the tensions between his *Jupiter et Sémélé* and its bizarre notice, Cooke unravels a dynamic interplay between painting and the language of Symbolist art criticism in the fin de siècle. The first part of this volume concludes with an exploration of the interpenetration of the literary, the (pseudo-) scientific and the hermetic, as Jeremy Stubbs seeks out a fin-de-siècle unconscious that draws freely on a variety of sources: medicine, neuroscience, psychical research, hermeticism, spiritism, literature and art.

It is the city (whether the bustling metropolis of Baudelaire or Benjamin or the dead cityscapes of Rodenbach's Flanders) that has tended to absorb attention as the locus of finisecular activity. 'Part Two: European Perspectives' begins appropriately enough with a relocation: from centre to margins, from urban metropolis to rural edges, as Scott Ashley explores the significance of travel—in space and in time—in the decadent and fin-de-siècle imagination. Focusing on Celticism and Primitivism, Ashley also reveals the complex interrelations between the urban cultural elites and the societies-Breton, Irish, Scottish, Cornish—onto which they project their images of racial and linguistic death and renewal. As Ashley suggests, it was the languages of the Celtic 'peripheries'—Brittany, Wales, Scotland and Ireland—that were to feel the more-than-metaphorical substance of such projections. The Belgian writers Maurice Maeterlinck, Georges Rodenbach and Emile Verhaeren play crucial roles in the development of Symbolism as an international movement and in the forging of a Belgian national literature. Belgium's linguistic and cultural duality, as well as its geographical proximity to France, made it a fascinating breeding-ground for a non-French 'francophone' literary imagination, and the Belgian writers discussed by Patrick Laude themselves return in the essays on German, Italian Spanish and Anglo-American literature as influential players in an international and cosmpolitan avant-garde. Robert Vilain examines the sources of German and Austrian Symbolism and Decadence, maps the different receptions of French-language poetry in the German-speaking cultures, and traces their development from the 1890s to the Expressionism of the early 1900s. Shirley Vinall explores the determining influence of French poetry on Italian literature, from the crepuscolari to the more aggressive postures of the Futurists, as well as assessing Italian reception of such poets as Mallarmé and Verlaine. As Vinall shows, the poets and critics of the Italian fin de siècle, while in communication with France, had a culturally-specific sense of what constituted a 'Latin' decadence and renewal. Richard Cardwell examines the reception of French Symbolism and Decadence in Spain, exploring in particular the interplay between the literary and the political, the religious and the medical spheres. In the final essay, Patrick McGuinness examines the formation of what Ezra Pound was to call the 'Franco-Anglo-American' axis through Mallarmé and his American connections.

This book steers not one course but many. It tells a variety of stories: about new or developing genres, about the transfer between cultures and languages, about the borrowings that enrich disciplines and the dialogues that subtly transform them. Like Des Esseintes, each of these essays stands freely (though more sturdily). Together, however, they do something else: like Jules Huret's interviewees, they configure into a various and complex whole.

PART ONE

Mallarmé and the 'siècle finissant'

PETER DAYAN

FIN . . .—[Dans des expr., souvent avec l'idée de déclin et d'élégance surannée, impliquant de la fragilité]

Fin(-)de(-)siècle. Dernière partie du siècle. Et quel coup, si (...) un maître [un peintre] se révélait, réalisant la formule avec l'audace de la force, sans ménagements, telle qu'il fallait la planter, solide et entière, pour qu'elle fût la vérité de cette fin de siècle!

[FIN ...—In expressions, often evoking decline or outmoded elegance, implying fragility

Fin(-)de(-)siècle. Last part of a century. And it really would be a revolution if a master [painter] appeared and put the theory into practice boldly and forcefully, without compromise, producing something solid, deeprooted and whole, to stand as the truth of this century's end!]

Zola, Oeuvre, 1886, p. 223

One obvious place to start, given the theme of the fin de siècle in Mallarmé to work on, is the dictionary. The result is puzzling. On the one hand, by putting the expression 'fin de siècle' in the subsection of the article 'fin' which deals with implications of decline, outmoded elegance, and fragility, the Trésor de la langue française clearly supposes that 'fin' in fin de siècle has precisely those connotations. On the other hand, in the quotation from Zola given to illustrate the use of the expression, those connotations are completely absent. Does this mean that the expression's connotations were not fixed at the time when Zola wrote? Or was he deliberately refusing them? I shall suggest an answer to this later. Meanwhile, what about Mallarmé? What would the

Mallarmé and the 'siècle finissant'

phrase have meant to him? Is there any evidence that he believed in such a thing as the 'fin de siècle' as a symbolic or Symbolist moment of decline or decadence? I began my search for an answer to this last question by examining all the occurrences of the key words (or rather, of their French equivalents) in *Divagations*. I was encouraged in my choice of this method by having to hand the invaluable two-volume concordance to *Divagations*, prepared by a team in Tokyo and published in 1991.²

This concordance gives no occurrences of 'symbolisme'; only one of 'décadence' ('décadence latine', in *Plainte d'automne*); and one of 'décadent' (to which we will return). But there are plenty of 'fin', 'finir', etc. and thirty-four occurrences of 'siècle'. As one goes through them, it becomes plain that Mallarmé believes he lives in a 'siècle finissant' which happens to coincide with a fundamental revolution, not only in literature, but also in the relationship between human thought in general and the material world. But is this revolution a decadence? Or is it rather, as in the Zola quotation that serves as epigraph to this essay, rather a splendid triumph of the new? Let us try to define it before proceeding further.

The most obvious symptom of this revolution is the 'crise de vers', the crisis of French verse in the literary-historical sense: the fact that there is no longer a tenable technical definition of what constitutes poetry. Its clearest symptom is the emergence of a modern kind of free verse best qualified, according to Mallarmé, by the adjective 'polymorphe': it is not just free, its freedom is indefinable. The official canonical verse forms still exist, but each poet now claims the right to create his own instrument. This freedom has never been known before; it is occurring now in France, he says, 'pour la première fois, au cours de l'histoire littéraire d'aucun peuple' ['for the first time in the literary history of any people']. A major, indeed a millenarist, claim. (Incidentally, there are no occurrences in Divagations of 'millénaire' or its cognates.)

But Mallarmé goes on to suggest that this new freedom is really only a symptom of a wider change. 'Au traitement, si intéressant, par la versification subi, de repos et d'interrègne, gît, moins que dans nos circonstances mentales vierges, la crise' ['Less in the treatment, so interesting, undergone by versification, as in repose or interregnum, than in our virgin mental state, lies the crisis']. And what are these 'circonstances mentales vierges'?

Décadente [this is the one occurrence of that word], Mystique, les Ecoles se déclarant ou étiquetées en hâte par notre presse d'information, adoptent, comme rencontre, le point d'un Idéalisme qui (pareillement aux fugues, aux sonates) refuse les matériaux naturels et, comme brutale, une pensée exacte les ordonnant; pour ne garder de rien que la suggestion.⁵

[Decadent, Mystic, these Schools proclaiming themselves or hastily labeled by the press, meet at the point of an Idealism which (like fugues, like sonatas) refuses natural materials and, as brutal, precise thought ordering them: retaining from all nothing but suggestion.]

Too often this passage is read as if only the last word of it mattered. I prefer to concentrate on 'Idéalisme', defined by analogy with wordless music ('like fugues, like sonatas'). This musical analogy, of course, serves to point to the dissolution or devaluation of reference characteristic of the poetry of these schools (music being seen as the abstract art, the art which does not refer); this dissolution of reference is a stablemate of the dissolution of the rules of poetry which I have mentioned, and also, as we shall see, of the dissolution of religious faith. But the point I want to make here is that these dissolutions, in Mallarmé's theory, never lead to a simple sense of decline or of decadence. He does not see them as a loss. He sees them rather as a unique and exciting opportunity. For when 'natural materials', poetic props and religion are taken away, what is left is not nothing, but, precisely, a new and more truthful Idealism.

And what is the ideal of this idealism? I shall briefly follow in the footsteps of Bertrand Marchal⁶ and approach this question via an analysis of Mallarmé's views on the evolution of religion. In one sense, his opinion of Christianity is simple: it is dead, because God is dead. But although it is dead, we can make good use, if we are careful, of the space it used to occupy. So, as Mallarmé says in Catholicisme, we should not simply let Catholicism go:

Tout au moins, pareil effacement sans que la volonté du début, après les temps, appelât, intimement comme elle frappe une solitude, l'esprit à résumer la sombre merveille—

Lequel préfère, en dédain des synthèses, égarer une recherche—vide s'il ne convient que l'ahurie, la banale et vaste place publique cède, aussi, à des injonctions de salut. Les plus directes peut-être ayant visité l'inconscience, les plus élémentaires: sommairement il s'agit, la Divinité, qui jamais n'est que Soi, où montèrent avec l'ignorance du secret précieuse pour en mesurer l'arc, des élans abattus de prières – au ras, de la reprendre, en tant que point de départ, humbles fondations de la cité, foi en chacun.⁷

[At the very least, such an effacement without the original ambition, after an epoch, calling, intimately as it strikes solitude, the spirit to sum up the dark marvel—

Which spirit prefers, disdaining synthesis, to stray in search—an empty search unless it allows that the dazed, vast and banal public arena is also

vulnerable to injunctions towards salvation. The most direct ones perhaps ever to have visited the unconscious, the most elementary: in sum, the Divinity, which is never other than Oneself, towards which rose with that ignorance of the secret precious for allowing us to take the measure of the parabola described, prayers rising then falling back—the task is to take it up again, but from the beginning, as a starting point, humble foundations of the city, faith in each one.]

A rich passage . . . I would like to begin my reading of it at the start of the last sentence. The kind of injunctions to be found today are different in nature from those of earlier generations: 'les plus directes peut-être ayant visité l'inconscience, les plus élémentaires'. No longer do we believe in the elaborate myths of past ages: we have reached the bare and elementary bedrock. But at the same time, the 'place publique', the public of the modern democratic state, has lost the ability to think consciously about those 'injonctions de salur'. It was easy to think about them when they were incarnated in the narrative mythical world of religion; but now that they have been stripped of their visible or narrative manifestations, they seem unable to emerge from their home in the unconscious. (Mallarmé's use of the word 'inconscience' is delighfully pre-Freudian, as are many aspects of his analysis of the bedrock of humanity.) The result, and it is visible in all Mallarmé's writing on the state of literature in contemporary society, is a bizarre dichotomy. On the one hand, his fin de siècle is the first period in history in which it is possible to think about the true nature of poetry, and to see how universally relevant it is. On the other hand, the vast majority of his contemporaries, having lost their religious faith, have lost with it their ability to think consciously about the ideal. No generally accessible medium has developed which could replace the Church as a site where the average Frenchman can feel himself in contact with the Absolute. The fin de siècle is thus a time of unique intellectual excitement and promise, but of social difficulty for the poet. Indeed, the subject of Mallarmé's great series of essays Variations sur un sujet, of which Catholicisme was originally one, is precisely this question of how art, with its new awareness of its true nature, can gain a position in society although it has lost the ability to pretend to tell the truth narratively, by concrete reference.

But let us return to our quotation. 'Sommairement il s'agit, la Divinité, qui jamais n'est que Soi, où montèrent avec l'ignorance du secret précieuse pour en mesurer l'arc, des élans abattus de prières – au ras, de la reprendre, en tant que point de départ, humbles fondations de la cité, foi en chacun' ['in sum, the Divinity, which is never other than Oneself, towards which rose with that ignorance of the secret precious for allowing us to take the measure of the parabola described, prayers rising then falling back – the task is to take it up again, but from

the beginning, as a starting point, humble foundations of the city, faith in each one'l. If, following the now generally recognized method for rendering Mallarmé's prose comprehensible, one wished to separate out this sentence into a main clause or central proposition, plus a number of 'incises' or parentheses, one would have to suppose that the main clause is: 'Il s'agit de reprendre la Divinité, . . . en tant que point de départ' l'the task is to take up the Divinity, . . . as starting point']. However, one should note the effect, not only of the 'incises' that interrupt this statement, but also of the inversion that places 'la Divinité' so far in front of the verb 'reprendre'. The point made by this convoluted and imbricated syntax is that the action of 'reprendre la Divinité' cannot take place until we have carefully redefined 'Divinité'—as, in the first place, originating in the human self ('qui jamais n'est que Soi'). The interference of the redefinition of Divinity with the readability of the sentence is symptomatic of the difficulty of the new idealism. In the new literature, words cannot be allowed to get away with referring simply to what they have always referred to. They need to be stopped and taken back to first principles. Stopping them has stylistic consequences which are only too plainly connected with the difficulty that the average reader has with modern poetry. Unfortunately for the average reader, that's his problem. A modern poet simply has to go back to those disturbing first principles.

Tout s'interrompt, effectif, dans l'histoire, peu de transfusion: ou le rapport consiste en ceci que les deux états auront existé, séparément, pour une confrontation par l'esprit. L'éternel, ce qui le parut, ne rajeunit, enfonce aux cavernes et se tasse: ni rien, dorénavant, neuf, ne naîtra que de source.⁸

[All, in history, effective, ends interrupted, transfusion is rare: or, the link consists herein that the two states will have existed, separately, for the purpose of their confrontation in spirit. The eternal, that which seemed so, does not recover its youth, sinks into caverns and settles: nor will anything, henceforth, new, arise except from the wellspring.]

That wellspring, as we have already seen, is 'la Divinité, qui jamais n'est que Soi'; Oneself as the absolutely and therefore impersonally human, the modern form of the divinity. One can always, of course, refuse this truth, and cling to one's 'precious ignorance'. Mallarmé even suggests, as Flaubert and Zola do, that it is easier to find an 'élan' towards the ideal if one maintains the religious fiction that divinity exists outside man. But he clearly thinks the poet of his time has a task at once more difficult and more noble: to achieve

a new kind of élan, starting, not from the lie of religion, but from the 'humble foundations of the city, faith in each one'.

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To summarize our findings so far: Mallarmé sees a unique revolution in ideas and in art going on around him, a revolution that he entirely identifies with and approves of in intellectual terms. However, in practical terms, its relationship with contemporary society remains difficult, and is characterized by incomprehension. One of Mallarmé's main concerns in Divagations is to examine how and why society is blind to this revolution, what can be done about it, and what an ideal future might look like-in other words, how society can be brought to appreciate the new and more truthful art of the future.

It is time to return to my concordance, and to the question: to what extent did Mallarmé connect this bogged-down revolution with the fin de siècle? After all, given his well-known fondness for analogy, one might have expected him to take advantage of the coincidence between the calendar and the evolution of his art. But in fact, he never really does. The passage in which he comes closest to it is this:

La littérature ici subit une exquise crise, fondamentale.

Qui accorde à cette fonction une place ou la première, reconnaît, là, le fait d'actualité: on assiste, comme finale d'un siècle, pas ainsi que ce fut dans le dernier, à des bouleversements; mais, hors de la place publique, à une inquiétude du voile dans le temple avec des plis significatifs et un peu sa déchirure.9

[Literature here undergoes a crisis exquisite, fundamental.

He who gives this function its place or the first, will recognize, therein, the new development: we are witness, as the finale to the century, not as in the last, to turmoil; but, outwith the public arena, to a worried agitation of the veil in the temple with significant folds and a suggestion of tearing.]

The evocation of the 'finale d'un siècle' (so near to and yet so far from the expression 'fin de siècle') is carefully contextualized not as an evocation of decadence, but as an invitation to compare and contrast the end of the nineteenth century with the end of the eighteenth, in other words, social revolution with poetic revolution. We have seen, I think, why Mallarmé should want to evoke such a contrast: he is constantly concerned with the relationship between the new revolution and the public sphere it has so far failed to reach. And the meaning of the veil should be starting to emerge, too. The tearing of the veil is synonymous with revelation, not decadence. The biblical reference is clearly to the revelation of Christ, at the critical moment of which the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; the new revelation, as yet incomplete, but already tweaking the yeil. is that of humanity as the new divinity. After the non-human lewish God came the Christian Trinity uniting God and man; after the Christian Trinity comes the Mallarméan divinity which is in man alone.

There are two other passages in which Mallarmé refers to the end of the century. It is from the first that the title of this paper comes; here again. Mallarmé is not saying anything about the decadence of art, but merely about a difficulty in the contemporary relationship between art and the general public.

Notre seule magnificence, la scène, à qui le concours d'arts divers scellés par la poésie attribue selon moi quelque caractère religieux ou officiel, si l'un de ces mots a un sens, je constate que le siècle finissant n'en a cure, ainsi comprise; et que cet assemblage miraculeux de tout ce qu'il faut pour façonner de la divinité, sauf la clairvoyance de l'homme, sera pour rien.10

[Our only splendour, the stage, on which the concourse of divers arts sealed by poetry confers in my view a character somehow religious or official, if either of these words has a meaning, I see that the century drawing to its close cares nothing for it, understood thus; and that this miraculous assembly of all one needs to fashion divinity, except for human clear-sightedness, will lead to nothing.]

And finally, the last of our 'siècle' quotations:

Chimère, y avoir pensé atteste, au reflet de ses squames, combien le cycle présent, ou quart dernier de siècle, subit quelque éclair absolu—11

[Vain hope, chimaera, the fact it has been thought of shows, in the reflections of its scales, how much the present cycle, or last quarter of the century, is illuminated by the lightning bolt of the absolute—1

'Quelque éclair absolu' . . . once again, the new idealism is not decadent, a falling-off or a descent into darkness. On the contrary, it is a movement uniquely illuminated by the absolute.

But it is interesting that at this point, rather than referring vaguely to the 'siècle finissant', he uses an expression that seems a more precise and prosaic reference to a particular point in time: the last quarter of the century. This dates the revolution from the 1870s; and there are good reasons for seeing that decade, rather than the 1890s, as the decisive one for Mallarmé. The