

THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATES

Decadence
in Modern Literature

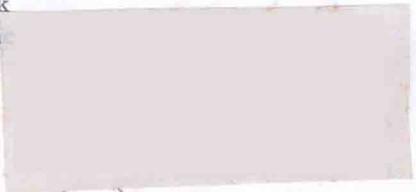
THOMAS REED WHISSEN

Contributions to the Study of World Literature, Number 33



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No one who wholeheartedly shares in a given sensibility can analyze it; he can only, whatever his intentions, exhibit it. To name a sensibility, to draw its contours and to recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion.

Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'"

Preface

Decadence is a term we all use quite freely and with a fairly good idea of what we mean by it. But even when we know what *we* mean, we are not always sure we know what *it* means. Unfortunately, most attempts to pin it down invariably end in frustration.

Rigorous scholarly minds have wrestled with the term with only mixed success. Those who stay within the narrow confines of late nineteenth-century French and English literature have reached a somewhat uneasy compromise on the term's usefulness in describing a significant literary affectation of that period, but the use of the term in any wider context continues to be hotly debated. In the preface to *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890s*, Karl Beckson says that the attempt to state precisely what decadence means "has led numerous literary historians to dash themselves on the semantic rocks" (vii). The frustration of it has even tempted some scholars to abandon the attempt. In fact, in *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet*, Richard Gilman argues almost too convincingly in favor of banishing "this injured and vacant word from history." Otherwise, he says, it "will go on recommending itself to the shallow, the thoughtless and imitative, the academically frozen: monkey-minds" (180).

Who can resist a challenge like that? Gilman is right, of course, in lamenting the fact that decadence is an overused and overworked word and in fearing that one more attempt to define it will only add to the confusion surrounding it and contribute to its uselessness. However, there are certain threads running through modern literature that can be appreciated only if they can be seen as interwoven parts of the fabric known as decadence.

In *Decadence: A Philosophical Inquiry*, a thorough and provocative (if somewhat prejudiced) analysis of the subject, philosopher C.E.M. Joad says that he

does not think there is any word “whose meaning is vaguer and more difficult to define than the word ‘decadence’ [nor one] which is used in a greater variety of senses” (55). This multiplicity of usage is not only a result of the word’s vagueness, he argues, but also a contributor to it. Robert Adams, in *Decadent Societies*, agrees that the word’s offenses are “many and grievous,” but feels that the word is not beyond rehabilitation (2).

Failure to find a common definition for so popular a term is no reason to throw out a word that has such beguiling connotations and for which there is no really acceptable substitute. And why, anyway, must we all agree on what a word means before we feel free to use it? After all, many of the most indispensable words in the language are fraught with ambiguity and contradiction. Lively disagreement about their meaning only increases their vitality.

Because decadence is such a controversial term, any definition that pleases some is bound to offend others. Although I do not presume to settle the matter, I do think that there is common ground on which students of decadence can meet and possibly agree. Therefore, rather than try to suggest a dictionary definition of this protean term, I have chosen to offer a list of what I have found to be the principal elements of decadence, elements derived primarily from a close reading of Joris-Karl Huysmans’ *Against Nature* (*À Rebours*). Published in Paris in 1884, this fictional biography of the quintessential decadent, Duc Jean Floressas des Esseintes, has since become the acknowledged handbook of decadence, influencing (some would say contaminating) everyone it touched when it first appeared and altering the course of literature ever since. Sensitive, sophisticated, cynical, snobbish, and vain, Des Esseintes is a figure whose personality had already been anticipated in the neurotic narrator of Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground* and which was destined to reappear in one form or another from Sherlock Holmes and Dorian Gray to Elliott Templeton in *The Razor’s Edge* and Guy Huber in *Social Disease*. Few of Des Esseintes’s fictional descendants have lived a life of such dedicated decadence as his, but more than a few have come close.

Although there is rarely anything in twentieth-century literature approaching the intensity of the decadent literature of the late nineteenth century, there are nevertheless unmistakable traces of the influence of that movement—certainly of the presence of decadent elements, however they got there—in the works of a surprising number of twentieth-century writers both in Europe and the United States. The fires may have cooled, but they have not gone out. For this reason, decadence continues to attract the attention of critics who see it, according to Beckson, as “not only an absorbing chapter in literary history and taste, but also [as] a significant prelude to and major influence on contemporary literature.” Beckson describes the relationship between the literature of the decadent period and that of modern times as a “similar quest for new experience and for new forms of expression in a world bereft of unassailable truths” (vii).

The danger in tracking a concept like decadence is the risk of forcing the

issue, of begging the question: Which comes first, the definition or the representation? That is why I stay fairly close to the letter of *Against Nature*, although at times I feel justified in making additional claims for the spirit of the work. In spite of its reputation for unrelieved perversity, the book is surprisingly moral and impressively erudite. Fully half of it is devoted to several well-informed treatises on art, literature, and music, not to mention philosophy and religion. And while the opinions of its central character, Des Esseintes, may betray an unrepentant bias, it is the educated bias of an astute critic. Des Esseintes readily admits that his preference in literature is for books that match his own thinking, a good example right there of decadent egoism.

While most of the scholarship that has gathered around this intriguing topic is well intentioned, too much of it has been either needlessly polemical or embarrassingly defensive. One gets the feeling that some scholars think the choice is between chewing the carpet or biting one's nails. Since the word decadence continues to have what Joad calls a "smell" to it, some scholars fear guilt by association. Joad himself worries about the difficulty of scholarly objectivity when one is dealing with such a controversial topic. "It is exceedingly difficult to cite any examples of decadence in literature which would be generally accepted as such," he says, and because of this, one finds oneself "fatally entangled in the relativities and subjectivities of one's own personal taste or of the taste of the times to which one belongs" (64).

Robert Adams maintains that "the person who chooses decadence as a topic is not necessarily contaminated by it, is not to be supposed decadent himself" (6). Be that as it may, I prefer to think that you need to have more than an objective knowledge of anything you get involved in if you do not want your treatment of it to end up lifeless and unconvincing. It would be very difficult, I should think, to write convincingly about decadence if there were no trace of passion in your approach, be it fascination or loathing.

I think I share enough of the decadent temper to be able, like a geiger counter or a dog sniffing for drugs, to detect the presence of decadent elements wherever they appear in modern literature. This affinity with the decadent temper has given me the confidence to make claims, some of them quite bold, about works of literature not ordinarily thought of as having any connection with decadence. I have no doubt that I shall stand accused of stretching the point, of finding decadence wherever I choose to find it or of seeing it when it is not really there. All I can say in response is that the decadent aesthetic has had such a pervasive influence on the modern mind that it would be remarkable if it did not have a discernible effect on modern literature as part of the rhetoric of fiction. This does not make modern literature predominantly decadent by any means, any more than it places in the decadent mainstream those authors who exhibit elements of decadence in their works. What I do contend is that traces of the influence of the decadent movement are to be found throughout modern literature and that it is time we took a look at them to see what they can tell us about what we read and who we are. If, along the

way, the study itself turns decadent, I offer no apologies. After all, what self-respecting author could present to the public a book about decadence unless that book itself had something of the “smell” about it?

Some of the things I like about decadence are the impertinence of its wit, the affectations of its style, the archness of its posturing, the thumbing of its elegant nose. I think it’s all great fun as long as you don’t take it—or at least yourself—too seriously. But I am also keenly aware of the disturbing side of decadence, the dark side that is selfish, elitist, uncharitable, reactionary, and vain, a side all too easily obsessed with those humorless preoccupations that give it its reputation for unwholesomeness.

To those who see only its dark side and are convinced that it is not only a sign of cultural deterioration but a contributor to it, decadence is something to be abhorred. They see no reason to accept, much less celebrate, the decline of civilization. However, to those who find the concept useful both as a critical term and as a cultural attitude, decadence is no more than a mirror of reality. To them, decadence looks the devil in the eye—and winks. If civilization is dying, they say, decadents will see to it that it goes out in style.

It is easier, I think, to *sense* the meaning of decadence if you can personify it. I see a decadent as something of a Beau Brummell, impeccably dressed, with worldly good looks, a sardonic smile, and a devastating wit; a charming skeptic, fighting vainly the old ennui, adrift in a world he finds increasingly unmannered and vulgar, a world devoted to a spiteful egalitarianism, torn by petty rivalries, awash in nasty hypocrisies: in short, a world in which he can survive only if he keeps his distance.

The problem is that a jaundiced view of the world gives one *carte blanche* to indulge in whatever one likes, to get away with whatever one can while there is still world enough and time. And no one would argue that this relaxed attitude is not present in the decadent temper. But to see decadence as indiscriminate intemperance is to miss the point. Decadents are not drunks or dopers or sex fiends or gluttons. They are more apt to be hedonists of the spirit rather than the flesh. In fact, all too often their spirit continues to be willing long after their flesh has grown weak.

The decadent is more a dandy than a Bohemian. As art historian Arnold Hauser describes him, “he is the bourgeois intellectual taken out of his proper class into a higher one, while the Bohemian is the artist who has sunk down to the proletariat. The fastidious elegance and extravagance of the dandy,” he says, “fulfills the same function as the depravity and dissipation of the bohemians” (*Social*, 904).

Like Baudelaire’s image of the dandy, he is “the living indictment of a standardizing democracy,” uniting within himself “all the gentlemanly virtues that are still possible today; he is a match for every situation and is never astonished at anything; he never becomes vulgar and always preserves the cool smile of the stoic.” He is “the last revelation of heroism in an age of decadence, a sunset, a last radiant beam of human pride” (904).

Decadence, then, is simply another way of looking at the world, and like any other *Weltanschauung*, it is, at bottom, a defense against dread. To grant decadence this philosophical status is to accord it the legitimacy it deserves. In a society desperate to increase the length but not the quality of life, decadence is a mockery of such vanity. In a world hasty to accept the wrong answers but reluctant to ask the right questions, decadence insists on raising those questions: Why are we here? Why do we bother? How do we face the unknown—or the known, for that matter? The dread is there in all of us, and as a way of defending ourselves against it, we search desperately for explanations, or at least consolations. Decadence can offer both, and perhaps this is why Beckson believes that “for most modern critics, the term . . . does not carry pejorative connotations” (vii). It may be an attitude, but like all attitudes, it is also something of an answer.

Throughout this study I use the term *decadence* to identify certain elements which, while not new to literature in general, have become increasingly apparent in western literature since the decadent movement of the late nineteenth century. Because I have restricted this study to the literatures of no more than a half dozen western countries, I do not claim to have exhausted the possibilities of finding decadence in unfamiliar or unexpected places. My method throughout this study is to dwell at length on a relatively short list of works, some because they are generally accepted as works that contain elements of decadence, others because I wish to use them to demonstrate the continuing influence of the decadent tradition. This list includes *Against Nature* by J.-K. Huysmans, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, *The Spoils of Poynton* by Henry James, *The Immoralist* by André Gide, *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann, *Seven Gothic Tales* by Isak Dinesen, *Perfume* by Patrick Süskind, and *Social Disease* by Paul Rudnick. These works are sufficient, I think, to set the stage because they contain examples of most of the elements I have isolated. In each chapter, therefore, I return to these works for examples of the particular element of decadence under discussion.

With the exception of *Seven Gothic Tales*, published in 1934, and *Perfume* and *Social Disease*, both published in 1986, these works first appeared at or near the time that decadence was becoming a major concept and an important influence in modern western literature. As for the rest of modern literature, I make use of as much of it as I think fits, referring mostly to familiar names and works, but pausing here and there to acknowledge some less familiar ones who have either been critically neglected or who have yet to make their mark. Among them there are, I am sure, a few who deserve to be relegated to oblivion. I refer to them in order to make a point, not to rescue a reputation.

Some readers are bound to object to some of the authors and titles I dare to associate with decadence while others are likely to regret the absence of names they would like to see added to the list. Since I am constantly revising my own

list as I reappraise familiar voices and discover new ones, I can only beg the indulgence of readers on both sides and urge them to share their lists—and their laments—with me.

Introduction

Although elements of decadence can be found in literary works of all periods, decadence is essentially a modern movement. It has its roots in the romantic movement of the early nineteenth century, and it flowered in the last two decades of that century; but it did not, as some say, wither and die in the twentieth. On the contrary, precisely because it expresses a malaise that commonly pervades both life and art at the end of a century, it would be remarkable if decadence were not even more pervasive in life and art at the end of a millennium.

If decadence seems less obvious now than it did a century ago, the reason is simply that many of the elements of decadence, once rare enough to stand out, are now such a part of our reality that we simply fail to see them as decadent. Or if we do see them, we may misinterpret them, for decadence is relative to the times and will always resist identification with what is in the mainstream. It is time, then, to refocus our vision and look at modern literature—and life—from the peculiar perspective of decadence.

Until the late nineteenth century, it was generally held that literature was supposed to be positive, that regardless of its content, its message ought to be uplifting. Vice appeared only to highlight virtue, and unwholesome behavior, however lovingly depicted, was invariably punished. Literature was meant to be instructive and exemplary, a record of the progress of mankind towards perfection. This is not to say that this was the way literature was always written—or received. But by a sort of silent consensus, this was its accepted purpose, and those who thought otherwise either held their tongues or went underground.

In any age it is not unusual to find an underground literature that runs counter to the mainstream literature of that age. *Fanny Hill* is only the most

famous example of the subculture available to the neoclassicists of the eighteenth century. The graveyard poets, though not disreputable, were certainly not entirely respectable: all that morbidity and melancholy, that languishing over tombstones and baying at gibbous moons.

Decadence might have taken root in romanticism, but its seeds were sewn by the charlatans and macaronies of the preceding age. First there was Macpherson, the Scottish forger who “translated” from Gaelic into English several notorious but highly acclaimed epic poems presumably written by a third-century bardic hero by the name of Ossian, poems which Macpherson claimed he had found in a cave. Then came Thomas Chatterton, that “marvellous boy” and patron saint of the romantics, a brilliant fraud who died by his own hand at seventeen, a “martyr to poetry,” after faking a slew of poems “bye making themme looke lyke thys” and attributing them to a nonexistent fifteenth-century monk, poet, and antiquarian named Thomas Rowley.

What a figure Macpherson and Chatterton would have cut a century and a half later when their forgeries would have been venerated as inspired chicanery worthy of an age practiced in deceit. In his biography of Oscar Wilde, Richard Ellmann says that Wilde was fascinated with Chatterton because of Chatterton’s “criminal propensities” (284). Wilde, he says, found an analogue to his own way of life in this young man who “used his genius to forge Jacobean plays.” Ellmann describes Chatterton as a self-destructive poet with whom Wilde could share “Hamlet’s doubt and Satan’s pride,” and says that Wilde had a sense of forging a life as Chatterton had done, sensing that one day he might “be his own victim, a sacrifice to himself” (285). It turned out, alas, to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Although in its shattered idealism and its melancholy sense of alienation decadence is the pale child of romanticism, it is indebted to the eighteenth century for two powerful influences, one bright, one dark. On the bright side of the legacy is the urbanity of the neoclassical “man of the world,” someone like Lord Chesterfield, a gentleman of wise and witty counsel, a realist, someone in whom charity and cynicism were mixed in equal measure. Satire, the comedy of manners, a preference for style over content, artificiality: these were things the decadents returned to and made their own. And certainly it is not too great a leap from the wigged and buckled fops of the Pump Room to the gilded lilies of a mauve salon.

On the dark side of the legacy is the shadow of the Marquis de Sade, the celebrated erotomaniac who, by giving deviancy his good name, gave decadence a bad one. The truth is that de Sade was too humorless to be a decadent. For a Frenchman, he went about his “sadism” with Teutonic diligence. Moreover, his brand of cruelty was simply too painful, too physical for the decadents of a century later, whose painful pleasures tended to be more cerebral. But his influence is undeniably there, particularly in fostering a taste for the bizarre and in presenting a rationale for moral rebellion. His understanding of abnormal psychology suited the mood of the late Victorians and

prepared them for the liberating influence of Sigmund Freud. While they avoided de Sade's excesses, they admired him for the courage of his perversions.

By the end of the nineteenth century decadence was an idea whose time had come. It had already overtaken French literature where, along with its bedfellow symbolism, it had revolutioned French letters—and scandalized (if that's ever truly possible) French society. Imported into England, however, decadence never did become anything more than naughty. When it surfaced, it almost immediately sought acceptance by acquiring a patina of respectability. This it did by tempering its tone to become more amusing than abrasive, more surprising than shocking.

Set against drab, grim, polluted London of what Robert Adams calls the "gray" nineties, the outlandish fashions and eccentric affectations of Oscar Wilde and his crowd seem more sad than silly. The world they saw, the world they had unwillingly inherited, had been made unbelievably ugly, in a relatively short time, by all the horrors accompanying a rapidly expanding industrial society, especially one that lacked the experience to know how to handle pollution and sanitation, poor working conditions, and overcrowded cities.

Looking about them at what must have seemed a hopeless situation—a social worker's nightmare—the sensitive artists of the times rebelled in the only way they knew how, the only way left—inwardly. They saw no possibility whatsoever of reforming society, and so they set about distancing themselves from it. They fancied themselves "aesthetes," choosing "art for art's sake" as their credo. Since nothing artistic seemed to have any effect whatsoever on a society determined to glorify bad taste, these aesthetes could only conclude that "all art is useless" and take whatever satisfaction they could in producing works that existed only for their own sake. In fact, they soon came to elevate literary criticism to the position of the highest art form, maintaining that if art is a notch above reality, criticism is a notch above art.

"The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible," Oscar Wilde announced. Artificial, he said, not shocking or disgraceful or obnoxious. "What the second duty is no one has yet discovered," he added. People found this remark amusing and inoffensive, and they still do. It has about it the urbanity of a Cole Porter lyric, not the vulgarity of a Lenny Bruce monologue. But beneath Wilde's pronouncement there lurks a serious question: How do you behave in a world that is itself artificial?

The behavior that Wilde and others like him affected as an answer to this question was described as decadent by both admirers and detractors. His detractors associated the term with all that was morally offensive in *fin-de-siècle* France; his admirers preferred to associate it with the high-spirited, nose-tweaking insouciance of *la belle époque*. But when Wilde's life ended in disgrace, the term took on more sinister connotations and has suffered a very dubious reputation ever since. This is why it is easy to dismiss decadence as an aberration peculiar to a short-lived literary period and overlook the fact that it

was the expression of a temper that has influenced much of modern literature in the twentieth century right down to the present time.

One problem a student of decadence in literature has is trying to figure out whether a work is itself decadent or whether it simply deals with decadent themes. In *Decadent Style*, John Reed makes a useful distinction between “decadent novels” and “novels of decadence.” Huysmans’ *Against Nature* he calls a decadent novel whereas Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* he calls a novel of decadence. The fact is that few works are exclusively decadent, and few of those that are have lasted. *Against Nature* is well known among decadent scholars, but it is too esoteric for most tastes, and the five slender novels of Ronald Firbank are now mostly neglected by all but a few devoted fans. The same can be said of such relatively obscure titles as Aubrey Beardsley’s *Under the Hill* or Cyril Connolly’s *The Unquiet Grave*. Even Max Beerbohm, sometimes the scapegrace, sometimes the scourge of the decadents, might find himself ironically consigned to share their oblivion if only because *Zuleika Dobson*, a delightful parody of decadence, shares with such parodies as Robert Hichens’s *The Green Carnation* and G.S. Street’s *The Autobiography of a Boy* the sad fate of no longer having an audience that can appreciate the parody.

After the second world war, Truman Capote was our reigning decadent writer for several decades, but now it looks as if he will be remembered more for *In Cold Blood* than for *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* or *The Grass Harp*. And Gore Vidal is likely to be remembered more for *Lincoln* than for *Myra Breckenridge*, even though *Myra Breckenridge* is much more original—and a lot more entertaining. A more recent addition to the list of decadent novels is Paul Rudnick’s *Social Disease*, a delightful work, fully as outrageous and funny as Firbank’s fluff and probably just as doomed.

Of interest also to students of the decadent influence in modern literature are the novels of Ian McEwan, Michael Chabon, and Patrick Süskind. McEwan is an English writer whose most decadent work, *The Comfort of Strangers*, is a sinister story of perversity and obsession set in contemporary Venice and reminiscent of the menacing atmosphere of *The Aspern Papers* and *Death in Venice*. Michael Chabon is an American writer whose first novel, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, exhibits traces of the decadent influence in the behavior of its offbeat characters and in the atmosphere it evokes. For a first novel, it is stylistically mature, emotionally challenging, and irresistibly believable even when it tests the limits of credibility. Patrick Süskind is a German writer who, in his remarkable first novel, *Perfume*, creates an eighteenth-century monster of a protagonist who becomes almost a parody of most of the major elements of decadence.

Our concern here, however, is primarily with mainstream literature in which elements of decadence appear either as part of a writer’s attitude (e.g., Tom Wolfe’s merry despair) or as rhetorical devices (e.g., the presence of a deca-