
H-France Review Vol. 14 (February 2014), No. 39

Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. 232 pp. Notes, bibliography, index, and acknowledgements. \$59.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8122-4449-6; \$59.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-0-8122-0733-0.

Review by Jennifer Forrest, Texas State University.

In his *The Decadent Republic of Letters*, Matthew Potolsky offers a new approach to an understanding of nineteenth-century Decadence. Rather than situate the literary products of the period in terms of style and theme, a somewhat unstable method of categorization, he proposes to define Decadent writers as members of a real community of men and women of letters. He describes a republic of letters whose members, coming from different countries, may not know each other but share an appreciation of the same authors and artists, a passion for beauty, a hatred of bourgeois culture, a rejection of nationalist programs, and enjoy the same status as outsiders. Decadence is a continually evolving category whose works not only “move within a recognizable network of canonical books, pervasive influences, recycled stories, erudite commentaries, and shared tastes,” but also ceaselessly contribute to its enrichment (p. 5). These authors’ participation in the Decadent republic of letters, Potolsky contends, possesses not merely an aesthetic politics, but an explicitly political agenda representative of a wide range of stances both from the left and the right. In this way, he moves away from the tendency to view Decadence according to national origin and distinguishes his project from others in a focus on the cosmopolitan and international nature of the movement, a component present from the very movement’s beginning. Indeed, he claims, Decadence is all about the opening and the crossing of borders, not the restriction to a canon of national identity.

In chapter one, “Partisans Inconnus: Aesthetic Community and the Public Good in Baudelaire,” Potolsky identifies Charles Baudelaire as the foundational figure in the Decadent republic of letters, and his *Salon de 1846* and writings on and translations of the work of Edgar Allan Poe are crucial texts in the formation of an aristocracy of taste. Potolsky argues that civic humanism à la Joseph de Maistre, not social withdrawal, informs Baudelaire’s aesthetic ambitions.[1] In chapter two, “The Politics of Appreciation: Gautier and Swinburne on Baudelaire,” Potolsky examines Théophile Gautier’s “Notice” to the third edition of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal*, a preface that accompanied all subsequent reissues of the collection until 1917 and hence, introduced generations of readers to the poet, and Algernon Charles Swinburne’s “Ave atque Vale,” an elegy dedicated to the memory of Baudelaire, as instrumental texts in the nascent community’s recognition of the prominent place of the poet in their republic.[2] While they adapt Baudelaire’s civic humanism, however, to their own purposes, both recognize his contribution to the creation of a community united in taste and mutual appreciation.

Chapter three, “Golden Books: Pater, Huysmans, and Decadent Canonization” treats the creation of alternative canons, whether in Decadent collections of books or objects, as a political gesture against and a critique of national lists of works deemed to possess recognized quality by official voices. He offers the term “mimetic canonization” (p. 93) as a description of the method used by aspiring members to the republic of letters: they imitate and modify works within their mutually acknowledged canon to earn acceptance in the fraternity of persons of taste. The distinction between this and standard canon

formation is that the former reflects a horizontal distribution among members and the latter, a vertical one from “institutional insiders to the mass of outsiders” (p. 93).

In chapter four, “A Mirror for Teachers: Decadent Pedagogy and Public Education,” Potolsky builds on the preceding chapter’s discussion of establishing counter-canons in an examination of the official effort to impose national cohesion through universal education. “Education was (and still is) promoted as a crucial element in the social contract the nation-state maintains with its citizens,” he argues (p. 112). The Decadent attack on this social contract, he adds, is implied rather than expressly stated, manifested in tales of problematic influence such as the three modified versions of the Pygmalion myth produced in the Decadent canon: Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs*, Rachilde’s *Monsieur Vénus*, and Vernon Lee’s *Miss Brown*.^[3]

In chapter five, “A Republic of (Nothing But) Letters: Some Versions of Decadent Community,” Potolsky offers readings of Vernon Lee’s *Euphorion*, Walter Pater’s *Gaston de Latour*, and Aubrey Beardsley’s *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, all which identify the Renaissance as an exemplary period of aesthetic sharing, influence, and creation within an international communal environment facilitated by the political instability of individual states.^[4] He introduces here Michael Warner’s idea of the “counterpublic” to describe the “ongoing space for oppositional discourse” established by members of the Decadent republic (p. 134).^[5] The counterpublic resembles the Renaissance system of patronage, which was “organized by personal taste,” and which “enabled the circulation of books as something other than commodities” (p. 159).

In his postscript, “Public Works: Stéphane Mallarmé’s ‘Le Tombeau de Charles Baudelaire,’” Potolsky’s study comes full circle in two different ways.^[6] First, he begins his volume with Baudelaire as the father of a movement and ends with Mallarmé’s tribute to Baudelaire, the telltale sign of a movement in decline. Second, and in opposition to the notion of the poem ringing the death knell on Decadence, his reading of Mallarmé’s difficult poem leads not to an interpretation of resignation about the end of a movement, but rather to one about resurrection in the implied reference to Lazarus. Drawing on recent scholarship arguing for Mallarmé as a poet of political engagement, Potolsky contends that Mallarmé embraces the Baudelaire who championed the “public function of art” (p. 167).

The Decadent Republic of Letters is a well-written volume reflecting an impressive wealth of research and thought, especially for the English contingent of the study. There is a paucity of references, however, to important scholarship on Decadence in French from the last twenty-five years. Notably missing are references to Pierre Citti’s *Contre la décadence: Histoire de l’imagination française dans le roman, 1890-1914*, Pierre Jourde’s *L’Alcool du silence: sur la décadence*, and Sylvie Thorel-Cailleteau’s edition *Dieu, la chair et les livres: une approche de la décadence*.^[7] Guy Ducrey’s introduction to his anthology, *Romans fin-de-siècle*, in particular, would have provided a greater historical dimension to the argument regarding the small world of Decadent authors in his discussion of publishing in Paris where novelists enthusiastically supported their imaginary community in the robust dedication of works to each other and in the writing of book reviews, even when their personal relations were less than friendly.^[8] This mutual recognition and appreciation surpassed any that could have come from traditional sources.

Finally, Potolsky presents authors from that small community with whose signature works most scholars of the era are familiar: Baudelaire, Beardsley, Gautier, J.K. Huysmans, Pater, Rachilde, Sacher-Masoch, Swinburne, and Oscar Wilde. While he does focus on two pseudonymous authors lesser known to readers outside of English literature (Vernon Lee and Michael Field), one is aware of the omission of other authors who would have added greater support to his argument regarding the cosmopolitan nature of Decadence: lesser discussed authors from other European countries and less translated French authors, some of whose works one finds readily, for example, in the Bibliothèque décadente under the direction of Jean de Palacio.

NOTES

[1] Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Claude Pichois, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1975-1976).

[2] Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes* and Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Bonchurch Edition of the Complete Works of of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, ed. by Edmund Gosse and Thomas James Wise, 20 vols. (London: William Heinemann, 1926).

[3] Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, transl. by Joachim Neugroschel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000); Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus: roman matérialiste*, ed. by Melanie Hawthorne and Liz Constable (New York: MLA, 2004); and Vernon Lee, *Miss Brown*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1884; reprinted, New York: Garland, 1978).

[4] Vernon Lee, *Euphorion: Studies of the Antique and the Medieval in the Renaissance* (London: Unwin, 1890); Walter Pater, *Gaston de Latour: The Revised Text*, ed. by Gerald Monsman (Greensboro, N.C.: ELT, 1995); and Aubrey Beardsley, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser or Under the Hill*, ed. by Robert Oresko (London: Academy Editions, 1974).

[5] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005).

[6] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1979).

[7] Pierre Citti, *Contre la décadence: Histoire de l'imagination française dans le roman, 1890-1914* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987); Pierre Jourde, *L'Alcool du silence: sur la décadence* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1994); and Sylvie Thorel-Cailleteau, ed., *Dieu, la chair et les livres: une approche de la décadence* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000).

[8] Guy Ducrey, *Romans fin-de-siècle: 1890-1900* (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1999).

Jennifer Forrest
Texas State University
jf05@txstate.edu

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.