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Michel Winock, *Décadence fin de siècle*. Paris: Gallimard, 2017. 288pp. Chronology, selected bibliography, index. €23.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-0701-0703-2.

Review by Matthew Potolsky, University of Utah.

There was a predictable surge of interest in decadent literature and art at the very end of the twentieth century. I recall a display table at one of my local bookshops in 1999 offering up, for Valentine's Day no less, a collection of relevant titles: the collected works of Oscar Wilde, academic books on the fin de siècle, as well as books featuring sex tips and recipes for rich chocolate cakes. With the Y2K bug making waves in the media, there was a certain millenarian anxiety in the air, but it all felt kind of forced, as if prompted by the mere change of the calendar rather than anything truly akin to the upheavals reflected in the culture of the late nineteenth century in France and England. Hence the books on sex and cakes. Decadence was fun and indulgent, encapsulated in a witty Wilde quote or a decontextualized Beardsley illustration on a tote bag. Journalists and public intellectuals did their best to draw parallels between the two turns of the century, but at best they satisfied the intellect. No one really felt it in their bones.

Looking back now, from the gilded discomfort of quarantine, the "fin" of the twentieth century seems like a golden age of light and innocence. Wracked in the past two decades by terrorist attacks, draining foreign wars, financial crises, drug epidemics, and cultural fragmentation, populations in much of the West find themselves at an affective crossroads, their abiding (if typically disavowed) belief in progress shaken. For many of us in the United States, this sense of historical pessimism dates to the surprise election of Donald Trump, the closest American equivalent to Louis Napoleon—the vaguely ridiculous scion of an illustrious family, equal parts buffoon and idiot-savant Machiavel, who rode a wave of political and economic discontent to high office. Like Louis Napoleon, Trump has attracted the ire of intellectuals and the tacit but crucial support of capitalists who have propped up his regime for their own anticipated gain. Now, faced with a global pandemic he is ill-equipped to handle, Trump drags the country into his own personal Battle of Sedan, though with an invisible enemy rather than the Prussian army as his mortal foe.

In his recent book, *The Decadent Society*, the *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat, borrowing from the old fin-de-siècle playbook, argues that Western states now find themselves in a condition of cultural exhaustion, economic stagnation, and political stalemate. Victims of their own success, they have ceased progressing. Like his spiritual ancestor Oswald Spengler, Douthat views the West as a culture in decline, bathed in a distinctly crepuscular light. All too many citizens in Western democracies have been forced by the pandemic into a stark quotidian

recognition of this decline, as they put their lives at risk in hospitals ill-equipped for the demand, struggle with their physical and mental health because they lack insurance or adequate social support, or face bills they cannot pay because they have lost their jobs. For those of us fortunate enough to work in fields that afford us the luxury of mere social distancing, the decline--if there is indeed such a diagnosable historical state--registers as a collective feeling of dread, a feeling that will be very difficult to shake anytime soon.

It is hard to know now, in the midst of this latest crisis, what social and political effects the current of dread will yield: a turn to the left or still further to the right; a stronger commitment to building community and aiding the disenfranchised or a still deeper retreat to our private spaces. Perhaps we will simply return to business as usual. But one thing seems clear: our *fin de siècle* has arrived twenty years too late. It is only now that most of us can actually understand what decadent writers were feeling near the turn of the last century.

We are thus fortunate--finding benefit wherever it lies--to be working at a time of great academic interest in literary decadence, particularly among Anglo-American scholars. The past decade has seen yearly international conferences on the subject, new scholarly societies and journals like *Volupté*, and a raft of innovative monographs that have reevaluated decadent writing from a range of critical perspectives. Fiction writers have also found value in looking back to the period. The protagonist of Michel Houellebecq's controversial *Soumission* is a dyspeptic Huysmans scholar; Julian Barnes' new novel, *The Man in the Red Coat*, focuses in part on the life of Count Robert de Montesquiou, the model for Jean Des Esseintes, the protagonist of Huysmans' *À rebours*. All of this interest now feels proleptic rather than reflective. The product of (relatively) good times, it has nevertheless given us new resources for understanding the current bad times.

Michel Winock's recent book, *Décadence fin de siècle*, is a lively and authoritative contribution to this productive ferment. It has the signal virtue of powerfully capturing the mood of artists and intellectuals in late-century France. More than anything, Winock suggests, decadence was a collective feeling. This feeling had many sources and many social and political effects, but it is ultimately an affective state that defines the era. As Winock writes in his "Epilogue," "une mentalité collective... est un fait historique aussi bien qu'une guerre ou un coup d'État" (p. 256). The book effectively vindicates this claim, and in this way speaks to our own emerging collective historical pessimism.

A highly productive historian of the literary, political, and intellectual history of the second half of the nineteenth century, Winock is the author of more than two dozen volumes. He wears his erudition lightly in this book, an entry in Gallimard's "L'Esprit de la Cité" series, which aims to produce works that cross disciplinary boundaries and speak to an informed general public. Given this intended audience, Winock takes a broad view of the period, avoids engaging in current scholarly disputes, and does not push a strong organizing thesis. There are few notes and little apparatus, save a useful Chronology of major events in the period covered (1882-1897). Still, the book provides an outstanding overview of the French *fin de siècle*, with an emphasis on the increasingly apocalyptic tone of Catholic revivalists and their various allies (nationalists, racists, populists) on the far right, a tone that found its way into the literature, art, and theater of the day.

The book opens, appropriately, with a funeral--that of Victor Hugo in June of 1885--an event that could not help but signal the end of an era, inspiring thoughts of French literary greatness,

and, given Hugo's history of political dissidence, of conflicts like the Paris Commune, whose leaders had only recently been granted amnesty by the government of the Third Republic. This sense of decline was only accelerated by an economic depression, fears of depopulation and racial degeneration, and a simmering conflict between the secular republican government and Catholic monarchists. These fears and conflicts were felt in the pessimistic plots of literary Naturalism and the nascent decadent movement, as well as in Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy of resignation, which achieved great popularity in the period. Politically, they registered in the rise of nationalism, populism, and antisemitism, and in the shocking success of General Boulanger in the 1889 elections—a notable high-water mark of their influence.

To his credit, Winock does not conflate these various tendencies, but instead, in seventeen tightly structured chapters, traces their interplay across cultural fields and in the careers of exemplary public figures. He narrates the rise of right-wing Catholic rage against the secularization efforts of Third Republic through the early career of Léon Bloy, for example; charts the contemporary fascination with the occult via the works of the eccentric author Joséphin Péladan; maps the expanding terrain of antisemitic polemics with the 1886 publication of Édouard Drumont's book *La France juive*; and weaves an account of the increasing influence of nationalism with a description of the early writings and political career of Maurice Barrès. In one particularly lively chapter, Winock juxtaposes the republican government's plans for a grand celebration of the centennial of the French Revolution in 1889 with preparations for the Exposition Universelle that same year. While conservative Catholics decried the celebration of the Revolution, advanced writers and artists decried the erection of that now-iconic symbol of the Exposition, the Eiffel Tower.

Nearly all of the usual suspects are represented in the pages of *Décadence fin de siècle*. In addition to Bloy and Péladan, Winock devotes chapters or substantial discussions to Huysmans, Rachilde, Zola, Bourget, and Mirbeau. There are accounts of Satanism, Boulangism, Anarchism, and Socialism. Winock also gives attention to the emergence of academic Sociology, and to the early careers of rising stars who would have their most important impact on the twentieth century, like Paul Claudel and Alfred Jarry.

With its clear prose and consistently smart organization, this book will be of interest both to specialists looking for an authoritative overview of the period and to more general readers. It does not break new ground in research on the period so much as plow arable scholarly terrain in an appealing new way. There are some missed opportunities. It is unfortunate that the book does not provide a full appreciation of the central role sexual dissidents of various stripes played in the culture of the period, or much attention to the contributions of racial or religious outsiders. There is a chapter on "Decadent Eros" that discusses a number of women writers, but that's about it. One misses, too, any detailed discussion of important literary works beyond plot summaries, though given Winock's background as a historian (one who has written a well-received book on Flaubert, however) the focus on ideas and contexts is understandable. Given the aim of the series, moreover, these omissions will probably be acceptable for many readers. I found the attention Winock gives to political currents quite useful and very much admired his organization of topics. As a synthesis of historical details and a portrait of the "mentalité collective" (p. 256) that marked the era, it is a fine addition to the literature.

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