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Edyta Kociubińska, ed., *Romanciers fin-de-siècle*. Leiden, Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2020. xxiii+ 205 pp. €98.00 (pb). ISBN 9-78-9004443716.

Review by Diana Holmes, University of Leeds.

The title of this edited book uses “fin-de-siècle” to designate not so much an historical period as a particular mood and aesthetic that have come to be associated with the years (roughly) 1880-1910. This can be summed up as Decadence: a stance of world-weary disgust with both nature and the contemporary social world, and a consequently high value placed on art and the artificial as transcending mere reality, together with a proclivity for all that the mainstream culture of Third Republican France considered transgressive. Decadent literature was of course only one small, if striking, element of the cultural landscape, but it has come to dominate perceptions of the era, and the “romanciers fin-de-siècle” are here all, to differing extents, practitioners of the Decadent mode.

A very considerable body of scholarship already exists on Decadence, much of it rigorous and authoritative (for example Jean Pierrot’s indispensable *L’Imaginaire décadent*, much cited in the volume).^[1] Some of the acknowledged authorities on the period are also contributors, notably Jean de Palacio and Marie-France de Palacio whose chapters open and close the volume. The introduction sets this book within the context of existing critical work, including to a limited extent the substantial body of English-language studies of both the Decadent movement and the authors whose work is to be explored. In most of the chapters, however, only French-language scholarship is cited and in some instances the analysis would have been helpfully complemented by awareness of work from beyond the French critical canon.

The book’s objective is to enrich comprehension of the Decadent scene in fin-de-siècle France by focusing on a number of what one contributor calls “grands écrivains mineurs” (p.15), and by adopting new perspectives on some of the better-known figures of the period such as Jean Lorrain, Catulle Mendès, and Rachilde. As its title suggests, the volume’s emphasis is solely on the novel, thus contesting the view that the novel form did little of real interest between Zola and Proust. Though each chapter is devoted to a different author, the sustained concern with the relationship between Decadence and the novel genre enables the development of recurring threads of argument: on the interplay between naturalism and an emerging modernism in the Decadent novel; on the nature of influence between writers of a particular era; and on what constitutes a significant minor author and why marginal figures matter.

Six of the chapters throw light on such relatively little-known novelists, both for their intrinsic interest and because they illuminate, sometimes with particular clarity, the aesthetics, values and contradictions of the fin-de-siècle mode. Marie-France de Palacio analyses two novels by Nonce Casanova, uncovering a literary career somewhat lost from history, and showing how in two tellingly titled, generically quite distinct novels—*Messaline: L'Image des ténèbres* (1902) and *Le Sanglot* (1906)—Casanova exemplifies the sense of despairing “À quoi bon?” and the paradoxical fear of and longing for death that run through the period’s art. In his study of novels by Georges Darien, Aurélien Lorig shows how, despite the elitism and contempt for democracy that largely characterised the Decadents, reaction against bourgeois complacency could lead in more than one political direction. For the “decadent anarchist” Darien, “decadence” was not a stance to be embraced as a form of revolt against bourgeois conformity but a term of condemnation for the ideology of the early Third Republic, in particular its theatrical nationalism and commitment to the *redressement* of the nation. Darien’s novels, which include the 1889 *Bas les coeurs!*, express a sense of being confined and repressed by a set of stale moral codes, an urgent desire to “vivre, vivre complètement, et libre” (p. 26) that would echo forward to later generations of alienated youth. Darien uses Decadent motifs and themes to attack a society he sees as corrupt, complacent, and antithetical to freedom.

The argument that minor writers can distil the literary character of an era with particular clarity runs through this volume, and is articulated well in Manon Rafford’s discussion of Luis d’Herdy. The short-lived d’Herdy (1875-1902) consciously cited and imitated his more successful contemporaries and in doing so, Rafford suggests, foreshadowed a postmodern sense of the inevitable intertextuality of all writing. All the key Decadent themes are united in his three novels: the fluidity of gender and sexuality at once celebrated and pathologized; the desire to replace mere living with life as artistic creation; the haunting fear of creative impotence and fascination with death. Anxiety of authorship as well as ephemeral brilliance link d’Herdy to Jean de Tinan (d’Herdy died at 27, de Tinan at 24), one of Willy’s stable of ghost-writers. Fabrizio Impellizeri traces the specificity of de Tinan’s style in Willy’s market-oriented, mildly pornographic fiction as well as in his own 1897 novel *Penses-tu réussir!* (1897), raising more than answering the interesting question of the relationship between the Belle Époque’s development of literature as a profitable industry, and the “art for art’s sake” stance of the Decadents. The characterisation of the fin-de-siècle novel as a pivotal form posed between naturalism and modernism is further developed in Federica d’Ascenzo’s eloquent essay on two novels by Henry Céard. D’Ascenzo presents the earlier *Une belle journée* (1881) as a sort of apotheosis of naturalism’s mimetic portrayal of the everyday, but pushed to its limits in a manner that implies the exhaustion of this vein of fiction. With the later *Terrains à vendre au bord de la mer* (1906), a Decadent weariness with life’s banality suffuses the naturalist representation of the contemporary world, yet the fin-de-siècle belief in the transcendence of art is also deconstructed. Céard’s work illustrates how realism’s emphasis on the banality of everyday modern life fed into the artistic sensibility of the Decadents, but Céard also demystifies their idealisation of art as an alternative to living.

Jean de Palacio’s closing essay on another writer lost from literary history, the Belgian Hector Fleischmann, is the final contribution on significant minor writers of the fin-de-siècle, again showing how such authors exemplify the varied deployment of Decadent forms and motifs, and also raising the issue of the relationship between Decadence and dandyism. But the volume is concerned too to offer new perspectives on some of the better-known literary figures of Decadence. Yoann Chaumeil’s chapter on Léon Bloy focuses on Bloy’s diagnosis of the return of

repressed religious spirit in the early Third Republic, with the proliferation of quasi-religious imagery and discourse now masked as secular rationalism. For Bloy, the Republic “se réapproprié la puissance symbolique de l’ancienne religion” (p. 69) and deploys magical thinking camouflaged as pure reason. Though this chapter moves away from Decadence towards a rather different spirit of the fin-de-siècle, Bloy is connected to his Decadent contemporaries through his rejection of modernity and horror of an encroaching materialism that he sees as cultural degradation, Notre Dame being replaced by the Tour Eiffel as iconic national monument, the spiritually heroic figures of the saints ceding their place to mere *grands hommes* of the secular Republic. In Chaumeil’s analysis, Bloy is another precursor figure in that he pinpoints and critiques what Barthes would later term the mythologies of his era and illuminates the first signs of a developing *société du spectacle*.

Octave Mirbeau appears in Marie-Bernard Bat’s study as a versatile author who despite his effective deployment of Decadent themes and style differed from most of his *fin-de-siècle* contemporaries by remaining engaged in the debates of his age, rather than retreating into aestheticism. Her chapter details Mirbeau’s Decadent-style narrative innovations, including attempts to write a novel stripped of plot and composed purely of ideas and sensations, and his move back towards forms of realism as he became more politically engaged with both anarchism and the cause of the Dreyfusards. If the Decadents favoured flight into the past through novels set in classical times, Mirbeau favoured a *fuite en avant*, prefiguring Futurism through his fascination with new forms of transport and notably the automobile in *La 628-E8* (1907). For Mirbeau, literature’s job was to reveal and critique social inequalities rather than to oppose individual genius to the mediocrity of the masses, and Nature was part of the solution to humanity’s problems rather than a fatefully oppressive force. Though a skilled practitioner of Decadence as literary mode, Mirbeau’s later writing also highlights by contrast the reactionary, elitist politics of much Decadent writing.

Far less humanist than Mirbeau but also poised between naturalism and modernism is Jean Lorrain, as presented in Noëlle Benhamon’s study of his 1904 *La Maison Philibert*. Benhamon situates the novel within the fin-de-siècle vogue for narratives about prostitution (citing the Goncourts, Maupassant, Zola, and many more), emphasising its naturalist *pris sur le vif* dimension and showing how other dark sides of the period’s culture, notably antisemitism, are also reflected in Lorrain’s work. But the novel’s apparent realism is interwoven with features that mark it as a Decadent novel and look forward to modernist techniques: the non-linear plot, shifting narrative voice, mixing of registers, use of irony and paradox. Pierre Louÿs’ *Aphrodite* (1896) exemplifies the Decadent predilection for classical settings, less out of historical interest in the cultures of antiquity than as a means to explore transgressive values by placing them safely in an imagined past. Julie Moucheron’s analysis detects in Louÿs’s apparent celebration of mutual erotic passion rather than romantic love something less savoury, namely a fear of supposedly feminine emotion and of women, beneath which also lies a fear of sterility and the loss of creativity. Warren Johnson acknowledges the misogyny equally evident in the novels of Catulle Mendès—here too, women are consistently seductive, corrupt and dangerous—but nonetheless sees in Mendès’ fusion of “masculine” power and “feminine” weakness in protagonists of both sexes a search for an ideal to oppose to the dominant values of the age. The disturbance of rigid gender boundaries, for Johnson, is part of Mendès’s idealistic resistance to the “banalité de la vie bourgeoise ordinaire” (p. 172). And the volume’s editor, Edyta Kociubńska, tackles the ur-text of Decadence with an essay on Huysman’s *À rebours* (1884) that examines the function of neurosis (*névrose*) in the novel and by implication in Decadent texts more widely. Again, the naturalist roots of much Decadent

writing are apparent, for Huysmans --Zola-like--researched his era's new medical interest in psychological disorders in preparation for the fictional creation of his neurotic hero. Good health, for the Decadents, was too close to mere bourgeois normality to be desirable, and the derangement of mind and body became a mark of heroic status. Kociubínska shows too how the novel's conclusion condemns its protagonist, des Esseintes, to a return to the hostile world of the ordinary as the only alternative to death, opening the way for the author's subsequent embrace of religion as an alternative path to transcendence of the banality of mortal life.

It comes as no surprise that only two of the book's fourteen chapters are devoted to women authors. Decadence was a mode of imagining the world that was deeply inflected with the phallogocentric bias of the age. Though apparently oppositional to mainstream gender codes in its predilection for fragile, precious heroes and metaphorically or literally whip-wielding heroines, in fact the Decadent novel gave melodramatic narrative form to male fears of loss of control, of creative and sexual impotence in an era when women began to make a few small advances towards equality. One recurring theme in this volume is the way that so many Decadent novels condemn their female protagonists to humiliation, death and/or rejection in favour of male-fashioned facsimiles of real women. The form's attraction for women was not obvious, and the considerable number of women authors who were publishing during the years of the *fin-de-siècle* opted rather for the more flexible genres of the middlebrow, largely realist *roman de mœurs* or the popular *roman-feuilleton*. This was in part because most of them were struggling to make a living through writing and needed a wider readership than the specialised and largely male public attracted by the Decadents. But it was also because the looser narrative forms of these mainstream genres allowed them to tackle contemporary issues of immediate relevance to women's lives, from a woman's point of view.

Nonetheless, there were women authors who took on Decadence and attempted to use its style and motifs for their own ends. Rachilde is now the most famous of these, thanks in large part to feminist studies of her work. Anita Staroń discusses Rachilde's representation of women artists (in the broader sense of the word), placing this in the context of a misogynistic culture. Rachilde was no feminist, and the artistic creators in her work--as in that of most of her Decadent peers--are almost all men. However, Staroń shows how in the writing itself Rachilde's oppositional stance as a woman takes some interesting forms: her heroines may not create art, but they are artists of their own lives especially in the domain of love relationships. They act out versions of femininity, at once parodic and adversarial, through disguise and performance, always uncompromising, maintaining a dignified absolutism in their fashioning of their own identity, even at the cost of death. Staroń argues that Rachilde's male artists, on the other hand, fail or in the end compromise with what for the Decadents was the pitiful mediocrity of mainstream culture. Though displaying all the hallmarks of Decadent style, Rachilde thus in some sense turns the tables on its inherent contempt for women, a reversal that is made more explicit in the work of Renée Vivien. Her strange, hybrid novel *Une femme m'apparut* (1905) was long disregarded by critics as merely derivative of Decadent motifs or as, at best, the result of Vivien's internalisation of a Baudelairean image of the *femme damnée*--though in her outlining of the novel's previous critical neglect, Camille Islert seems unaware of some excellent English-language work on this novel, not least that by Tama Engelking. Islert makes a convincing case, though, for reading the novel as both saturated in Decadent forms, and parodic of these as the codes of Decadence are heightened to the point of caricature, in a manner (she points out) typical of subordinate groups when they appropriate genres and styles that seem to belong to the dominant (in this case masculine, heterosexual) culture.

This is a useful, well-written volume that adds many original insights to the body of scholarship on fin-de-siècle literature and specifically on the Decadent novel. There are two ways in which it might have been even better. One is that it suffers from an apparent lack of awareness of so much important work on this period and its literature published in English. For instance, the whole issue of the class and gender politics that underpin Decadent aesthetics, themes and narrative patterns is touched on variously in many of the chapters, and here, to cite just one example, Jennifer Birkett's *The Sins of the Fathers: Decadence in France 1870-1914* could have provided an illuminating reference point.^[2] In discussions of the novels of Rachilde and Renée Vivien, much feminist scholarship that is wholly relevant to the arguments made is bypassed where it could have supported or nuanced the analysis. My second reservation is this: as should be apparent from my rapid critical overview of the fourteen chapters, many connecting themes and lines of argument weave through the volume, but these are never developed into a synthesised whole. A more substantial introduction and above all a strong conclusion drawing together the threads would have enhanced the value of the entire volume. As it stands, this is a helpful addition to knowledge and understanding of work by a number of interesting, relatively little-known authors and by some of the canonised authors of Decadence. It raises numerous valuable questions and indicates lines of enquiry that could profitably be pursued in future research.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Marie-France de Palacio, "Nonce Casanova: les Faces (désespérées) de l'Être"

Aurélien Lorig, "Georges Darien: un anarchiste sous le signe de la décadence"

Manon Raffard, "Un mystère emblématique: le cas Luis d'Herdy (1875-1902)"

Fabrizio Impellizzeri, "Jean de Tinan écrivain 'nègre' à l'ombre de Willy"

Yoann Chaumeil, "Léon Bloy et l'envers de la sécularisation"

Federica d'Ascenzo, "Variations sur le thème de la déconstruction dans l'oeuvre romanesque d'Henry Céard"

Marie-Bernard Bat, "Octave Mirbeau romancier: les paradoxes d'une écriture entre deux siècles"

Noëlle Benhamou, "*La Maison Philibert* de Jean Lorrain: entre réalisme et décadence"

Anita Staroń, "Artistes de la vie: les femmes créatrices chez Rachilde"

Camille Iskert, "*Une femme m'apparut* de Renée Vivien: paroxysme ou parodie fin-de-siècle?"

Julie Moucheron, "Poétique d'une passion fin-de-siècle: l'éros marmoréen dans *Aphrodite* de Pierre Louÿs"

Warren Johnson, "Dédoublement, séduction et idéal chez Catulle Mendès"

Edyta Kociubińska, “Le dandy fin-de-siècle en proie à la névrose: les (més)aventures de Jean des Esseintes dans *À rebours* de Joris-Karl Huysmans”

Jean de Palacio, “Le somptuarisme de la décrépitude: sur un roman d’Hector Fleischmann”

NOTES

[1] Jean Pierrot, *L’Imaginaire décadent, 1880-1900* (Rouen: Presses Universitaires de Rouen, 1995).

[2] Jennifer Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers: Decadence in France, 1870-1914* (London, New York: Quartet Books, 1986).

Diana Holmes
University of Leeds
d.holmes@leeds.ac.uk

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