

Decadence and Modernity

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The Fall of the Empire in Barbey's *Les Diaboliques*: « Notre décadence littéraire... »

In November of 1874, Barbey d'Aurevilly's scandalous collection of six short stories, *Les Diaboliques* was condemned for « outrage to public morals. » This is indeed ironic considering that Barbey claimed to represent the « social hell » (*O.C.II* 230) of his time.

The following essay explores Barbey's masterpiece as an allegory of decline. Specifically, it contrasts Barbey's figuration of decadence with his critical appraisal of the publishing industry. As a writer who made his living as a literary critic and who contributed over a thousand articles to a wide range of 30 journals, he was immersed in the daily politics and culture of the press. Barbey's allusions to empires past in his fiction inscribe his work in literary tradition while similar references in his criticism expose his opinions about the 19th century: “an old materialist society” (*O.C.II* 231), « ce moment très lamentable et très particulier ou toute littérature se résout dans un journalisme qui la tue. » (*Articles inédits* 1868, 194).

Despite the differences in genre of Barbey's fiction and criticism, the controversial *Diaboliques* that was initially published in serial form beginning in 1850 with “Le Dessous de cartes d'une partie de Whist”, offers an implicit critique of 19th-century French literary culture. Barbey's escatological and apocalyptic images are in part a performative practice that distinguishes his work from that of his contemporaries; but they also reveal both individual and social responses to modernism and cultural change, particularly in relation to literary culture. Signs of cultural collapse in Barbey's fictional and critical discourse are integrally linked to changing roles of the writer, writing, and the print industry in 19th-century France.

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Peindre les ruines de l'empire

La chute du Second Empire, suite à la « débâcle » de la guerre de 1870, propagea en France un sentiment d'inquiétude quant au destin de la civilisation française, accentué par le siège de Paris et la répression sanglante de la Commune en 1871. Les écrivains de l'époque n'ont eu de cesse d'accuser la *décadence* d'une culture française qui, à travers une analogie organiciste, se serait transmise du corps social et politique au domaine des arts et des lettres, comme le souligne Paul Bourget dans sa *Théorie de la décadence*.

Paradoxalement, ce sentiment de décadence coïncida avec un fleurissement sans précédent de la production culturelle en France, dont témoignent l'émergence des avant-gardes artistiques (le premier Salon des Indépendants date de 1874) et la prolifération des mouvements littéraires.

Or, dans un tel contexte culturel, le thème de la décadence – souvent associé à un motif exotique – se trouvait lui-même impliqué dans certains sujets privilégiés par les artistes de la fin du siècle, à l'instar de Salomé, cette « Muse de la Décadence » d'origine orientale, qui inspira tant de peintres et d'écrivains à partir des années 1870, de Flaubert et Gustave Moreau à

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Mallarmé et Redon. À propos d'un tableau de Moreau, notamment, un critique remarquait qu'« Hérode est pareil à un spectre et incarne le vieux monde, prêt à s'écrouler avec lui ».

C'est précisément ce thème 'fin-de-siècle' de la « décadence de l'empire », prétexte à une fuite de l'imagination vers un Orient mythique où se déploie la danse de Salomé, que je me propose d'étudier dans mon exposé.

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Maurice Barrès: French Nationalism and "La Revanche"

In 1870 when the Prussians invaded France, taking Alsace-Lorraine, Maurice Barrès was eight years old. While the rest of France could distance themselves from this occupation, Barrès could not for this was his "terre maternelle." In this sense, Barrès is a child of defeat. Though the pessimism of the 1880s was well pronounced in Paris by artists, critics, and historians—particularly by Taine and Renan, two of Barrès' intellectual masters—the sense of defeat and humiliation was acute for this young radical. Already poetically inclined toward romantic literature (i.e. Stendhal), Barrès saw himself as a national product of decadence and decomposition. The remedy for this "mal," as he saw it, would be self-cultivation as explained in *Le Culte du moi* and a sense of national identity and regional pride as explored in *Les Déracinés*, the first work in his *Le Roman de l'énergie nationale* cycle.

This presentation proposes to explore the decadent notion of self-cultivation (le Moi) as it relates to politics and nationalism, from the Boulanger affair to a desire of revenge against the Germans.

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J.-K. Huysmans: From Second Empire Naturalism to the Exoticism of Decadence

J.-K. Huysmans's identity as a writer encompasses the transition from the naturalist literature that depicted the Second Empire to the exoticism of decadence in late nineteenth-century France. After his debut as a naturalist writer, both in his own right (*Marthe, Les Sœurs Vatard*) and through his participation in Émile Zola's pioneering *groupe de Médan*, Huysmans diverged from that orientation toward his unique inauguration of decadence in *A rebours* and an evolution into his own conception of a "naturalisme spiritualiste" in *Là-bas*. Although Huysmans is most often identified with his decadent novel *A rebours* and the eccentric character of des Esseintes, his naturalist roots hold firm throughout his career.

This paper will address Huysmans's naturalist development through two of his characters, both archetypes of idiosyncrasy, like their creator. Eugène Lejantel in "Sac au dos," Huysmans's contribution to *Les Soirées de Médan*, relays the experiences of an out-of-place soldier in the War of 1870, embodying features both naturalist and decadent. Indeed, Lejantel is a precursor to des Esseintes. In *A rebours*, Huysmans twists the naturalist practice of documentation to leave behind the portrayal of the ordinary in favor of a study in elitism. Des Esseintes's peculiar interests and

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obscure references are, of course, the result of Huysmans's extensive study and thus promote the identification of the author with his protagonist. Therefore, *A rebours* is not only the story of des Esseintes's idiosyncrasy, but also that of Huysmans in his unusual combination of naturalism and decadence.