French Decadent Tales

New translations by Stephen Romer

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FRENCH DECADENT TALES

French Decadent Tales contains thirty-six stories from fourteen authors, spanning the period from the mid-1870s to the beginning of the twentieth-century. While 'Decadence' was a European-wide movement, its epicentre was Paris, the cultural capital of the *fin de siècle*, glittering and fascinating, sordid and corrupt. The vast majority of the stories here take place in this modern laboratory of the human spirit, their heroes or anti-heroes caught in a time of bewildering transition. Richly varied though they are, these writers are united in their hatred of an age of rampant commercialism and vulgarity. Self-styled 'aristocrats of the spirit', influenced by the dandyism of Charles Baudelaire, they sought to escape from an optimism they deemed ungrounded and philistine. In their writings they explored extreme sensation and moral trangression; drugs, spiritualism and the occult, and every variety of erotic experience. Another efficient remedy was the philosophical pessimism of Schopenhauer: men such as Guy de Maupassant, Octave Mirbeau, and Jules Laforgue were steeped in his thought. The writings of Freud, on hysteria and fetishism, are also prefigured in some of the stories here. In an age when the spread of mass newspapers and journals created a voracious appetite for 'copy', the *fin de siècle* seethed with literary experiment. Describing Remy de Gourmont's stories as 'little tops' revolving violently and erratically before returning to inertia, Marcel Schwob speaks for the art of the short story in general, which reaches a type of perfection in this period: brief, incisive, trenchantly ironic, and often cruel.

Stephen Romer is a specialist of French and British modernism. He lives in the Loire Valley, where he is Maître de Conférences at Tours University. He has translated widely from the French and has edited, amongst others, *20th Century French Poems* (Faber, 2002). He has published four collections of poetry, the most recent of which, *Yellow Studio* (Carcanet/Oxford Poets, 2008), was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize.

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French Decadent Tales

Translated with an Introduction and Notes by

STEPHEN ROMER

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CONTENTS

Introduction ix

Note on the Selection xxxvi

Select Bibliography xxxviii

Chronology of Major Events and Literary Publications of the French fin de siècle xli

FRENCH DECADENT TALES

JULES BARBEY D'AUREVILLY (1808–1889)
Don Juan's Crowning Love-Affair 3

VILLIERS DE L'ISLE-ADAM (1838–1889)
The Presentiment 22
The Desire To Be a Man 36
Sentimentalism 44

CATULLE MENDÈS (1841–1909)
What the Shadow Demands 52

LÉON BLOY (1846–1917)
A Dentist Terribly Punished 64
The Last Bake 68
The Lucky Sixpence 72

OCTAVE MIRBEAU (1848–1917)
On a Cure 76
The Bath 80
The First Emotion 83
The Little Summer-House 87

JEAN RICHEPIN (1849–1926)
Constant Guignard 92
Deshoulières 96
Pft! Pft! 100

GUY DE MAUPASSANT (1850–1893)
At the Death-Bed 105
A Walk 108
The Tresses 114
Night 120

GUSTAVE GEFFROY (1855–1926)
The Statue 125

JEAN LORRAIN (1855–1906)
An Unsolved Crime 130
The Student's Tale 135
The Man with the Bracelet 138
The Man Who Loved Consumptives 143

GEORGES RODENBACH (1855–1898)
The Time 148

REMY DE GOURMONT (1858–1915)
Danaette 159
The Faun 162
Don Juan's Secret 164
On the Threshold 168

JULES LAFORGUE (1860–1887)
Perseus and Andromeda 173

MARCEL SCHWOB (1867–1905)
The Brothel 192
The *Sans-Gueule* 194
52 and 53 Orfila 198
Lucretius, Poet 202
Paolo Uccello, Painter 205

PIERRE LOUŸS (1870–1925)
A Case Without Precedent 209

Explanatory Notes 215

INTRODUCTION

THIS volume is called *French Decadent Tales*, in that it assembles a group of writers associated in varying degrees with the so-called Decadent school that flourished in *fin-de-siècle* Paris. The first story here, by Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, was published in 1874, and the last, by Pierre Louÿs, in the first years of the twentieth century. The term *décadence*, applied to a literary phenomenon which spread across the Channel, to include, most famously, Oscar Wilde, but also Aubrey Beardsley and Ernest Dowson, appears to have had its most direct origin in the short-lived literary journal *Le Décadent artistique et littéraire*, founded by Anatole Baju in 1886. As is frequently the case (one thinks in art of 'Impressionism' and 'Cubism'), the term was originally used as an insult by a journalist, but adopted with delight and defiance by the writers thus insulted. Verlaine had already, in the 1880s, danced an arabesque around the term:

> I love this word decadence, all shimmering in purple and gold. And I refuse, obviously, any damaging connotations it may have, or any suggestion of degeneracy. On the contrary, the word suggests the most refined thoughts a civilization can produce, a profound literary culture, a soul capable of the most intense enjoyments. It suggests the subtle thoughts of ultimate civilization, a high literary culture, a soul capable of intense pleasures. It throws off bursts of fire and the sparkle of precious stones. It is a mixture of the voluptuous mind and the wearied flesh, and of all the violent splendours of the late Empire; it is redolent of the rouge of courtesans, the games of the circus, the panting of the gladiators, the spring of wild beasts, the consuming in flames of races exhausted by their capacity for sensation, as the tramp of an invading army sounds.[1]

Verlaine captures here the trappings and ornamentation of a certain Decadence, both in style and content, but the tales collected here cover a wider range, and have more satiric bite and acrid energy than the term denotes. Also, by far the majority of them are tales of 'Modern Life' in the Baudelairean sense, where however disturbing or horrible the events, they take place in a recognizable, urban setting, of boulevards and gaslight, hansom cabs and frock-coats. Some of the

[1] Quoted in Guy Ducrey (ed.), *Romans fin-de-siècle, 1890–1900* (Paris: Laffont 1999), p. xxvi.

stories belong to the genre defined in French as *le fantastique*, constituted by 'the abrupt intrusion of the mysterious within the framework of real life', and by 'the hesitation of a being who recognizes only the laws of nature, confronted with an apparently supernatural event'.[2] Hence, in one tale, the dreadful pall of apparently interminable darkness that falls upon Paris, when the protagonist is out enjoying an evening stroll. Frequently, a predisposition to nervous excitement, exacerbated by stress, breeds its own psychological terrors.

'La Décadence'

Verlaine is right in his graphic, late-imperial imaginings, for the Decadent style modelled itself (or so it was given out) on the late Latin literature which the classical scholar from the Sorbonne, Désiré Nisard, in his voluminous study *Études de mœurs et de critique sur les poètes latins de la décadence* (1834) had brought to light. It was Nisard, in fact, who put the term *décadence* into circulation; but he meant it pejoratively, as pertaining to works in which mere description, from being an ornament, becomes an end in itself. He notes also that decadent art is extremely erudite, even recondite; it is a literature of exhaustion, weighed down by the weight of past masterpieces, and it therefore has to seek 'extreme' effects in the quest for originality. As we shall see, this is highly relevant to this period, the tail-end of the nineteenth century. It is an elaborate, descriptive, *recherché* author like Petronius that holds the most appeal: his *Satyricon*, gleaming in its rich, gold-tooled leather binding, has its place on the shelves of the blue-and-orange *cabinet de lecture* lovingly decorated by the Duc Jean de Floressas des Esseintes, the seminal creation, or rather confection, of Joris-Karl Huysmans in his celebrated novel *A Rebours* (1884). We shall have occasion to return to this book, the 'Bible of Decadence', which provided, among other things, the model for Dorian Gray. In the long disquisition on the Latin authors, Des Esseintes professes an allergy to the poets of the Augustan Age—Virgil, 'one of the most sinister bores the ancient world ever produced'—and Horace, with his 'elephantine grace' and (hardly a quality for our writers) his good sense. The richness of the style—inlaid with precious and false stones, with silvery flights and terse barbarisms—that could carve

[2] The definition is by Tzvétan Todorov, quoted in Guy de Maupassant, *Le Horla*, ed. Alain Géraudelle (Paris: Hachette, 2006), 208–9.

out a vivid slice of Roman life and present it whole, without moralizing or satiric intent, was what appealed to the dandy, and through him to Huysmans and to other major writers of the school, like Barbey d'Aurevilly or Remy de Gourmont, who translated from the poets of the Latin Decadence. It would be an error, however, to look too closely to Lucan or Tertullian, Ausonius, Rutilius or Claudian, St Ambrose or Prudentius for genuine analogies with our period. Remy de Gourmont, who emerges as the most perspicacious critical intellect of the time, hints that the whole of chapter 3 of *A Rebours* was an elaborate hoax on the part of Huysmans, to send the critics baffled by his style scuttling off to Latin poets they had never read.[3]

One definition of Decadence (the painter Braque puts it finely, when criticizing the academic work of the *pompiers*, painters like Bouguereau or Cabanel) is a complete facility of technique, that sets no limits to its material, and imposes upon itself no constraints. Huysmans's fertile neologisms and preposterously *recherché* descriptions actually earned praise from the Surrealists. A sentence like 'Shrunken by the shadow that had fallen from the hills, the plain appeared, at its middle, to be powdered with starch and glazed with the white of cold cream' (. . . *poudrée de farine d'amidon et enduite de blanc cold-cream*)[4] is a prize example of this Decadent straining for effect. The implacable Byzantine despots of Gustave Moreau, or Petronius Arbiter organizing, with dandified elegance, to tickle the taste of Nero, carnal and gustatory orgies, fuelled the imagination of Des Esseintes more than any genuine engagement with the literature of the Latin Decadence.

Symptomatology and the Dissociation of Ideas

If there is one quality that these Decadent Tales share on every level, it is that of self-consciousness. *A Rebours*, with its vertiginous intertextuality, is a case in point. But it is a self-consciousness so developed that it comes to resemble a set of symptoms. The nature of the illness is unclear, the prognosis uncertain, and there seems little hope of a cure. Is the consciousness itself diseased? Or is it infected by something rotten outside of it? What is the nature of the mysterious

[3] See Remy de Gourmont, 'Stéphane Mallarmé et l'idée de décadence', in *La Culture des idées*, ed. Hubert Juin (Paris: Éditions 10/18, 1983), 119–37.

[4] J.-K. Huysmans, *A Rebours* (Paris: Gallimard, collection Folio, 1983), 98.

mal du siècle, whose genealogy really begins with Chateaubriand's pale young aristocrat René, and descends through Byron's Manfred and Childe Harold, through the ascetic, hysteric dandyism of Baudelaire, down to the authors of the Decadent *fin de siècle*? Remy de Gourmont, whose stories were described by Marcel Schwob as small spinning-tops reaching their final, convulsive circuits, also wrote *Sixtine* (1890), with its subtitle, 'novel of the cerebral life'. The hero of this novel, Hubert d'Entragues, is the type of many of the protagonists gathered here, an intelligent, vaguely aristocratic young man, paralysed by inaction, fascinated by his own incapacity to function, and yet who experiences sufficient vestigial 'drives' to woo a woman, Sixtine, who is as much an extension of his own idealization as she is a being of flesh and blood. He loses her, of course, to a passionate, hot-blooded, and practical-minded Russian, who sweeps her off, leaving d'Entragues to his sepulchral solitude, where he 'resurrects' her in literature. One useful definition of the term Decadence may be drawn from this, and it is contained in the word 'effete', which means, literally, exhaustion from childbearing. These melancholy individuals are the fruit of exhausted loins, they are sapped of vital energies. They are also, like d'Entragues, or Huysmans's hero Des Esseintes, *sated* by cerebral and sensual experience. They are effete, and they are sated. Above all, they are the victims of an inexplicable boredom or, to use the august French word, *ennui*, and its Baudelairean variant, *spleen*.

Writing of Des Esseintes and his kind, Marc Fumaroli has described the *fin-de-siècle* hero as being 'afflicted by a schizophrenia which spares nothing and which dissociates everything: his soul, his sexuality, but also his bodily health. He feels death corroding and working away at his mortal tatters.'[5] Fumaroli risks the clinical term schizophrenia (itself notoriously slippery and open to diagnostic error), but it did not exist in the vocabulary of the time. Instead we find terminology like hysteria, neurosis, neurasthenia, and madness, which may be generally subsumed today under the rubrics depression and psychosis. One shorthand way of delimiting our complex period is to say that it succeeds Baudelaire who, with his usual pitiless insight, describes his own moral state on a particular day, thus: 'I have cultivated my hysteria with voluptuousness and terror. Now I feel perpetually dizzy, and on the brink, and today, 23 January 1862,

[5] See Marc Fumaroli's preface to J.-K. Huysmans, *A Rebours*, 26.

I have received a singular warning, I have felt upon me *a breath from the wing of imbecility*.'[6] As we shall see, in *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), Baudelaire was the first modern poet deliberately to *dissociate ideas*, that is, he broke apart their perennial pairings: virtue–reward, vice–punishment, God–goodness, crime–remorse, effort–reward, future–progress, artifice–ugliness, nature–beauty; and it was the new configurations he found for them that made him (and makes him still) such a scandal. The 'schizophrenia' of the Decadent protagonist is in fact related to dissociation of this kind—a condition T. S. Eliot came to call, in a famous phrase, the 'dissociation of sensibility'.[7]

The period is also contemporaneous with Charcot's studies of neurotics and the symptomatology of hysteria at the Salpêtrière clinic in Paris, where in 1895 he was assisted by one Sigmund Freud, who published (with Breuer) his *Studies in Hysteria* in the same year. Given Freud's eminence, and his incalculable contribution to our notion of modernity, it is tempting, if too reductive, to describe the literature of the *fin de siècle* as a kind of raw material awaiting analysis and the talking cure. Adam Phillips has remarked, in the context of Freud's work, how 'a more-or-less secular capitalism produces its own counter-culture of symptoms',[8] and it was as true of the mid-to-late nineteenth century as it is now. Several of the stories here describe symptoms that might have come from the clinical casebook of the Salpêtrière, and indeed Maupassant, great psychologist that he was, followed the work of Charcot and carried out his own investigations (see in this collection his story 'Night' and, in particular, the fetishistic case study 'The Tresses'). Maupassant's curiosity, and his compassion (which reminds one of Freud's urge to explore motive, and to listen to the sufferer rather than dismiss him or her as 'mad' or 'degenerate') led him to explore what 'fetishism' might be, even before the term had been invented.[9]

[6] See Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1983), 668.

[7] Eliot uses the term in his essay 'The Metaphysicals' (1921); but he draws on Gourmont's seminal essay 'La Dissociation des idées' (1899), in *La culture des idées*, 81–116.

[8] See Adam Phillips, 'Introduction' to Sigmund Freud, *Wild Analysis* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. xxiv.

[9] See Philippe Lejeune's study 'Maupassant and Fetishism', in Asti Hustvedt (ed.), *The Decadent Reader: Fiction, Fantasy, and Perversion from fin-de-siècle France* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 774–91.

Schopenhauer, Baudelaire, and Huysmans

The Decadent writers, and their commentators, invariably cite two authors or rather two texts, that are indispensable to understanding the period. The first is Baudelaire, already evoked, and his *Fleurs du mal*; the second, which hails Baudelaire as an almost divine precursor, is of course Huysmans's *A Rebours* (*Against Nature*) (1884). These are the immediate sources, and behind them is the surging pessimism of Schopenhauer's philosophy, and the blind, biological necessity of Darwinism, and of Social Darwinism, as revealed in the tooth and claw of High Capitalism. Schopenhauer precedes Darwin, and his rigorous atheism, combined with his eloquent account of the automatic, necessary nature of human will, bent solely upon its own perpetuation (by means of biological reproduction) in the context of a meaningless universe, proved irresistible and even comforting to the writers of the time. For *progress*—mocked as a delusion by Schopenhauer—whether in the social, economic, scientific, or political sphere, is a term universally derided by this group of writers, who are in shock and recoil at the homogenizing effects of what Flaubert called *la démocrasserie*, and the banalization of the sacred mysteries wrought by scientific positivism. For the German philosopher, it was art, and notably music, which alone could provide some consolation, being in itself disinterested and freed from the chain of biological necessity and blind cosmic Will. In this feckless retinue of disabused young men, seeking to lose themselves in art and novel experience, the influence of Schopenhauer is all-pervasive.

Politically, our period falls within that of the Third Republic of Thiers and the bourgeois republicans, which was one of social reform and middle-class enrichment, following the traumas of the Franco-Prussian War (1870) and the Commune (1871). It was a period which saw, in no particular order, Bell's telephone, Edison's incandescent light-bulb, Pasteur's vaccines, the Eiffel Tower, the Universal Exhibition (1878), the first great department stores, free secular primary education for all, the legalization of divorce, the French *cancan*, child labour laws, anarchy, and the Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906), that *cause célèbre* which divided France into (essentially) radical anti-militarist Left and nationalist, anti-Semitic Right. *L'Affaire*, in which the Jewish Captain Dreyfus was accused (falsely, it turned out) of spying for the Prussians, crystallized two opposed visions of France,

and it exercised the best minds of the period. This divided vision of France can be traced in the writers here; on the one hand there is a man like Mirbeau, who was drawn to anarchy, and on the other, craggy Catholic aristocrats, like Barbey d'Aurevilly and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, who were the penurious scions of noble if etiolated lineage. The latter were unashamed elitists and monarchists, and in their writing they wage a ferocious rearguard action (and here they find common cause with Mirbeau) against everything that may be summed up by the word *bourgeois*: new money, complacency, positivism, optimism, and vulgarity. Léon Bloy, whose satirical flair and misanthropic rage rises to epic heights in his *Histoires désobligeantes* (1894), admitted to disposing of his bourgeois protagonists exactly as the fancy took him—he treats them like marionettes or even voodoo dolls.

The Victorian prophets, men like Matthew Arnold, William Morris, and John Ruskin, were equally on their guard against triumphalist capitalism and industrial 'progress'; but they were none of them voluptuaries of vice; and the contrast between their antidotes—touchstones of poetry, muscular Christianity, artisanship, and socialism—and the heady, decidedly *anti-social* attitudinizing of the Decadents over the Channel is instructive. Rather than the Victorian sages, it was the Oxford aesthete Walter Pater who begat Oscar Wilde. Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, and the sensual conclusion to his *The Renaissance* (1868), which he originally refrained from publishing 'because it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall', have the makings of another Decadent bible: 'While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend.'[10] This can be read as a sublime contribution to the 'art for art's sake' movement, whose leaders in France were Théophile Gautier and Baudelaire; and Pater's 'Conclusion' was fated to fall into the hands of Oscar Wilde, who span out of it his witty, dangerous paradoxes. The stark symbolism of Wilde's downfall and public humiliation was only the most spectacular backlash of bourgeois respectability. In private, such torments were ubiquitous: Baudelaire, whose late notes in his private

[10] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1978), 233–9.

journals, with headings like 'Hygiene. Conduct. Morale', read like a set of spiritual memoranda to the self—to a self now terrified by the spectres it has called up—provides the crucial 'reality check' which a life of assiduous dandyism must incur. Huysmans, in his 1903 preface to *A Rebours*, and writing now as a Catholic convert, is similarly eloquent, the book having come to represent for its author a staging-post on the mysterious progress of Grace within his soul. 'Only slowly did I start to become detached from my shell of impurity; I began to feel disgust with myself... [. . .] I found myself praying for the first time, and the revelation happened.'[11] Barbey's brilliant insight, when reviewing Huysmans's book (the two did not yet know each other), that 'after such a book, the author has no alternative but to choose the muzzle of a pistol, or the foot of the Cross', is a reminder that 'Decadence', understood as a congeries of attitudes, opinions, and 'dissociations', when pushed as far as it was by the writers gathered here—in particular by Gourmont, Lorrain, Maupassant, or Mirbeau—could be a game with deadly serious consequences.

Decadence versus Naturalism

The problem for the Decadents was to locate a space in which they could express their contempt for the materialist culture in which they found themselves, and where they could be free, so to speak, to cultivate their own hysteria. In practical terms, this involved finding a physical location as protected as possible from the rising tide of vulgarity and what Baudelaire calls the 'tyranny of the human face'. In *A Rebours*, Des Esseintes removes from Paris to Fontenay-les-Roses, where he proceeds to do up a house with the exquisite furnishings, paintings, and exotic flowers of his caprice. He ventures once into the nearby village, sees a group of 'pot-bellied bourgeois with sideburns', and recoils in horror. Similarly, in *Axël*—the play by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam—the effete aristocrat Axël retires for good into the crypt of his castle, with the immortal phrase: 'Living? The servants will do that for us.' A dandified solitude characterizes several of the protagonists in the stories gathered here, who live either in Parisian apartments, hung with heavy drapes and well insulated from the *hoi polloi*, or in crumbling familial chateaus, inspired by the Gothic, and in particular by Poe's languid scion in 'The Fall of the House of Usher'. A part of

[11] Huysmans, *A rebours*, 69.

Decadent taste involves a hyper-sensitivity to anything too loud or flashy or vulgar, and by the same token, a horror at the overly utilitarian excrescence of modernity. For example, the functional, anonymous room in the *hôtel garni* or *meublé*, in all its 'sepulchral horror', then as now, is frequently the setting of choice for clandestine encounters, squalor and despair in all its forms. Jean Lorrain, for one, displays a keen sensitivity to atmosphere, whether of the sordid hotel room or the disreputable *bouge*—the low dive of Parisian night-life. As for the brothel, Marcel Schwob's story of that name conveys all the sealed mystery and suggestive horror of the place, viewed as it is through the eyes of a band of curious children, ignorant as to its true nature and function.

Another practical difficulty, though of a different order, that faced the writer of the *fin de siècle* was, quite simply, what exactly was there left for him to write about? By the end of the nineteenth century the literary landscape in France must have looked like the aftermath of a comprehensive scorched-earth policy, the giants Balzac, Hugo, and Flaubert having, in their different ways, shared out the *Comédie humaine* and the *moeurs provinciales*—not to mention the *Légende des siècles*—between them. And there was another contemporary force, of formidable influence and popularity, to be reckoned with: Émile Zola and the school of Naturalism. Zola embraces scientism, and he is the founding father of the 'statistically' researched, documented novel that draws on the welter of new information about the species made available in every kind of report, whether socio-political, economic, or medical. Faced with these monuments, who between them exhausted the art of realist description, it is not surprising that the Decadents, and their close relatives the Symbolists, clustered around Baudelaire, who hated the things they hated, who deliberately chose a rarefied, spiritual ambivalence, whose perceptions are essentially those of a solitary, and whose attractive melancholy stemmed in large measure precisely from an overdose of 'reality'. Poetry had nothing to do with description, or with reportage; it was not the things themselves, 'but the relations between them' that counted, as Mallarmé explained, in an influential essay in which the great Symbolist tries to carve out a space in which his own art could exist.[12] Mallarmé uses

[12] See Mallarmé's essay 'Crise de vers', in *Oeuvre complètes*, ed. H. Mondor et G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1945), 360–8.

the word 'reportage' advisedly, for this period saw the heyday of the written press; the things themselves lay everywhere to hand, in the great plethora of journals which purveyed every kind of miscellanea and *fait divers*—a form of reportage that even gave rise to a literary form, in Félix Fénéon's '*Nouvelles en trois lignes*' ('Stories in Three Lines'), that consisted of barely rearranged dispatches from press agencies like Havas which landed on his editorial desk at *Le Matin*. 'Em. Girard received a chimney upon his head, at Saint-Maur. At Montreuil, R. Taillerot, who was emptying his septic tank, fell in and drowned', reads one of them.[13] Such fragments were the sustenance and delight of savage satirists of petty-bourgeois existence, like Mirbeau or Bloy. What the papers reported, day after day, was a drop in the birth-rate, the ravages of alcoholism, drugs, sexually transmitted disease, and tuberculosis, and every variety of sordid crime—things that seemed to announce a *fin-de-siècle* reversal of meliorism or 'evolution'. The Naturalists, especially, were avid devourers of the newspapers. But Mallarmé's witty riposte to the apparently incontrovertible 'facts' purveyed by the daily paper was to claim that a column of print might hold the key to the universe, if only the words were arranged otherwise. The task of the 'Décadent' or the 'Mystique' was to suggest the 'horror of the forest, or the mute, scattered thunder in the foliage', but to *exclude* 'the intrinsic, dense wood of the trees'.[14]

In the circumstances, which were crowded, to choose 'vice' as a subject, and the rare, perverse, and novel sensations and pleasures associated with it, was thus a deliberate ploy. It helped, of course, that such pleasures were deemed out of reach, shocking, and even incomprehensible to the bourgeois mentality. Pierre Louÿs has a story called 'Une volupté nouvelle' ('A Fresh Pleasure'), and it could stand as a title of many of these tales. Jean Lorrain's 'The Man Who Loved Consumptives', which is included here, describing the erotic tastes of a man in rude health who seeks out women dying of consumption, is a queasily effective example of the genre. Victor Hugo's remark in a letter thanking Baudelaire for his poems—'vous créez un frisson nouveau'—literally, 'you are creating a novel shudder', was an ambition that federates the writers of the period. So they sought out the *bouge* and the *maison close*, the opium den and the

[13] Félix Fénéon, *Nouvelles en trois lignes* (Paris: Éditions Macula, 1990), p. 114.

[14] Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, 365–6.

bordello—Jean Lorrain, who moved seamlessly from the smartest salon to the lowest dive, was to introduce his friend Huysmans to polymorphous pleasures. When Huysmans converted to Catholicism the friendship faltered—but Catholic ritual itself, blasphemously inverted, had been the target of choice for decadents and voluptuaries, at least since the Marquis de Sade, and it continued to be so throughout this period, culminating in writers of the modern era like Pierre Jean Jouve and Georges Bataille. Vice, and the fascination attendant upon it, is of course everywhere present in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu.* In one of his projected prefaces to *Les Fleurs du mal*, Baudelaire, envisages the attempt to extract the *beauty* that lies in evil—the smiling serpent has its hypnotic charm, after all. He remarks in passing that, in any case, many illustrious poets that went before him had dwelled much in the 'more flowery provinces of the poetic domain'.[15] Huysmans says much the same in his 1903 preface, where he explains how it came to be that Lust, *luxure*, was the one capital sin fastened upon by his contemporaries. Writing with the retrospective smugness of the convert, he suggests that Pride would have been a better one.

'La femme'

It is in this context that the misogyny which fires these writers, almost without exception, needs to be understood. Their misogyny is obvious, generalized, and virulent. It seems to infect their very style: the use of particular adjectives to describe a woman's physicality—either to praise or to blame—recurs in all of them. American feminists who have set to work on misogyny suggest it is a form of male hysteria.[16] It is perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the Decadent period, in that it is so widespread. Once again, it is the dissociation of ideas which enables, and indeed inflames, the misogyny of these writers, and frees them from the statutory requirements of Romance chivalry; and there is a sense in which, knocked from her restrictive pedestal, woman is freed too, her sexual power unleashed. The cerebral sensualist Remy de Gourmont applies his theory of dissociation to woman, and finds that her beauty is associated with happiness because of the accompanying promise of sensual fulfilment, which is how he

[15] Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 181.

[16] See the introductory essays by Emily Apter, Janet Beizer, Jennifer Birkett, and others in Hustvedt (ed.), *The Decadent Reader*.

interprets Stendhal's definition of beauty as 'the promise of happiness'. Strip away the partiality of male desire, then woman, viewed aesthetically, is no more beautiful than the male, indeed, is less so. Schopenhauer had already concluded thus, in his notorious, jaundiced aphorisms on the fair sex. Baudelaire decided she was 'natural' and therefore 'abominable', Tristan Corbière had dubbed her 'la bête féroce' ('savage beast'), Jules Laforgue the 'mammifère à chignon' ('mammal with her hair in a bun'), and T. S. Eliot, a latecomer following Laforgue, called her 'the eternal enemy of the absolute'. Maupassant is violently ambivalent about women. His story 'Fou?' ('Mad?'), in which a possessive lover, derailed by his wife's apparently insatiable sensuality—in fact a projection of his own—and the 'infamy' housed in the sumptuous vessel of her body, finds she is taking satisfaction from horse-riding and wreaks his vengeance on both her and the horse, is a truly nasty case in point. Octave Mirbeau is perhaps the most energetic woman-hater of them all, his personal experience of marriage—to the sensual, and apparently faithless, *cocotte* and former actress Alice Regnault—explaining much. His male subjects suffer humiliation at the hands of women, who are often unconscious sadists, withholding sexual favours or placing them elsewhere. In recent readings of 'Decadent sexology' mentioned above, feminist psychoanalysts recuperate female agency in the form of a power-struggle or sadomasochistic bind; but it is often merely the persistence of their own desire, faced with the bland facts of sensuality and beauty which echo back at them (a form of the *femme fatale*, if you will), that seems to enrage and baffle the male protagonists. This is especially so in Maupassant and Mirbeau and in the quasi-pornographic stories by Mendès, and it leads them on occasion to murderous intent. Whatever the emphasis we choose to give, female sexual power is never more insistent than here, and the New Woman is threatening. The writings of these male authors constitute a kind of allergic reaction. The black humour of Mirbeau's cruel little tale included here, 'The Bath', speaks volumes.

Of course, below the surface the ancient instinct to idealize, even to idolize, remains intact—this tendency, common to both sexes, in Freud's refrigerated language, to overvalue the love-object at the expense of the ego, which becomes depleted: it is the recognition of this drive which makes woman not only the indispensable foil to the Decadent writer, but his match. In this at least, he is at one with

Catholic prejudice: woman calls forth sensuality in man—she is thus the formidable temptress that must be shunned. With her hysteria, her caprices, her swooning desires, her possessiveness, her sentimentality, her imperious moods, and her sensuality, in the *fin-de-siècle* period woman comes up against something more redoubtable even than religious censure: the glacial stare of the dandy. And the dandy strives to be the reverse of all these things, to live his life perpetually in front of a mirror. He must always be immaculately turned-out, never emotionally spontaneous, always self-controlled. He is, eternally, the detached observer; he is everything contained in that loaded phrase of contemporary discourse, 'the male gaze'. And it was to this gaze, indeed, that Charcot's beautiful female hysterics were overwhelmingly submitted in the theatre of his clinic. But the dandy, whether he be called Baudelaire or the fictionalized Des Esseintes, is dismayed to find that, come what may, he finds all these 'weaknesses' in himself. And woman, undivided in herself, will always win out, just as nature will always win out. In his misogyny, Schopenhauer is cold and simply derides, but cerebral voluptuaries like Louÿs, Gourmont, or Mendès are subjugated, and indeed obsessed, by women in their sensual abandon, at least as they like to picture them. The Symbolist-Decadent painters and engravers—Gustave Moreau, Fernand Khnopff, Félicien Rops—helped to feed the flames.

There are distinctions to be made: it was chiefly the 'legitimate spouse' of the complacent bourgeois marriage that fuelled the most venomous invective—woman as the perpetuator of the hated tribe. And it is when one of these virtuous wives proves to be whorish, and to cuckold her husband everywhere, from the marital bed to the cheese-shop floor, and with everyone (as in one of Bloy's stories here), that she is to be applauded. The Decadents, who revel in hyperbole and the grotesque, have little time for the subtler psychology of adultery *à la* Flaubert. Women whose 'career' is vice—the *filles* and prostitutes that are omnipresent in this literature—are frequently natural allies, for they are enemies of the 'normative'; as are polymorphs, nymphomaniacs, androgynes, hermaphrodites. For all of these appear—along with a subliminal homosexuality, frequently, if obliquely, evoked by Lorrain in particular—to incarnate new and forbidden pleasures. The one celebrated female Decadent writer, Rachilde (whose texts are too long to be included here), made inversion and comprehensive role-reversal her subject in *Monsieur*

Vénus (1884). Zola, reviling what the Decadents would flock to, spoke of the androgyne as 'the man-woman of rotted societies'. The woman is also admired for her use of artifice, in her *toilette* and in her make-up—the key text here being Baudelaire's 'Eloge du Maquillage' ('In Praise of Make-Up'); Baudelaire's dandy prefers the made-up woman to the natural one, just as Villiers fantasizes Hadaly, a perfect, mechanically operated automaton, as the coming ideal, the 'Future Eve', as he calls her in his novel of that name, a kind of robotic precursor to the Stepford Wives. Sometimes this apparently compulsive misogyny takes a comic form. It infects literary style, but it also effects furniture: there is a passage in *A Rebours* in which the arabesques and scrollwork of Louis XV furniture are said to envelope woman in an atmosphere of vice, by imitating her charms, even in her spasms and transports of pleasure. In his story 'Pft! Pft!', included here, Jean Richepin makes parodic play of stock misogyny; the dandified, erudite, and cynical protagonist falls into the fatal trap of falling in love with the object observed, and suffers all the torments of sexual jealousy. His behaviour exasperates his mistress, who finally acts to confirm his worst suspicions. Male hysteria and projection are shown up to comic, if gory, effect.

Dandies of the Unpredictable

Different types of pathology are everywhere attendant or consequent upon sexuality—and Freud's formal pronouncement on the matter, that sexuality, from the polymorphous perversity of babies onwards, was fundamental to all areas of human experience, was only a step away. 'There is nothing but syphilis', is the jaded view of Des Esseintes. In the famous eighth chapter of *A Rebours*, the Duke introduces a selection of exotic plants, including the carnivorous varieties, into his house; this is followed by a dreadful nightmare, in which a woman is metamorphosed into a particularly savage form of the Venus Flytrap, and the final image of him being drawn towards a gaping 'Nidularium' at the centre of the flower, that bristles with blades, is unmistakably a version of that ancient terror, the *vagina dentata*. But sexuality can also provide, obviously, the extremes of pleasure, the 'novel shudder' of the Decadent quest. It takes other forms as well—this quest for the essence and the rarefied. In the vision of *luxe, calme et volupté* that exists in his country of Cocagne, heightened by

the effects of opium or *hachisch*, in the prose version of 'L'Invitation au voyage', Baudelaire declares that he has found his 'black tulip' and his 'blue dahlia'. Jean Lorrain, who was addicted to ether, liked to sport such flowers in his lapel, and his own dandified hero, Monsieur de Phocas of the eponymous novel (1901), travels the world in search of a particular shade of glassy-greenish transparency to be found in the 'dead water' of certain precious stones, or in the eyes of Astarte, or in those of young prostitutes. A sado-erotic streak—something Lorrain is brilliant at isolating—fuels an ancillary passion of Monsieur de Phocas: rigid with a 'dreadful' anticipation, he watches acrobats performing without a safety net.

One could pass in review other quests for the *nouveau frisson*. In politics, at a time of 'mediocre' republican democracy, some passionately anti-establishment men, like Fénéon and Mirbeau, ardent supporters of Dreyfus, were attracted to the thrill and promise and sporadic violence of anarchism. There was the music, or rather the 'total art form', of Wagnerian opera (a deep and universal passion among this group of writers); recreational drugs for Lorrain; classical erudition and esoterica for men like Gourmont and Schwob; a brand of zealously reactionary Catholicism for Barbey and his protégé Léon Bloy. Many of them dabbled in spiritualism and table-turning, so prevalent at the time that it became little more than a parlour game. The new 'sciences' of mesmerism, magnetism, hypnotism, telepathy, and the like fired the imagination of Villiers, and Maupassant explored 'modern' pathologies like hysteria, neurosis, and fetishism. Jean Richepin anatomizes this quest for originality at all costs in his little comic satire included here, 'Deshoulières'. Whatever their chosen way, the Decadents were united in their hatred of the epoch, so favourable to the complacent, money-making bourgeois with his sideburns, his pot-belly, his vulgarity. Baudelaire recoiled from it, as intensely as any man, and his great cry, to be 'Anywhere out of the world', finds its echo in his followers.

The Stories

(*In discussing the stories I have tried to avoid 'spoilers', but the reader may care to read the stories first, and then return to this section of the Introduction.*)

This selection of thirty-six tales by fourteen authors aims to show

several facets of French *fin-de-siècle* writing, from the richly orchestrated addition to the literature of Don Juan by Barbey d'Aurevilly, through the more traditional ghost story by Villiers, and the inner psychic terrors described by Maupassant, to the savage anti-bourgeois satire of Bloy and Mirbeau. Aspects of the French Decadent movement described above infiltrate these stories to a greater or lesser degree; but any idea that decadence implies a lack of *stylistic* energy should be immediately expelled. They have been chosen not only for their sumptuous powers of description, but also for their verve and bite, and for their fearlessness: the common sobriquet *contes cruels* is, after all, an apt one. It is probably these aspects of the *fin-de-siècle* tale—its energy and, often, its violence that still has the capacity to shock—which strike the first-time reader.

These writers were in fact a close-knit group, so mutual influence, admiration, affection—followed not infrequently by a cooling of affections, if not execration—was common. It was also an age in which writers used the dedication ubiquitously and pointedly. Villiers, Richepin, Schwob, and others dedicate every single story to a *confrère*. Many of them dedicate to Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly, with whom this selection opens. Barbey was born in 1808, in the Premier Empire under Napoleon, so belonged to an earlier generation entirely than the *décadents*, and indeed he was of the same generation as Victor Hugo, the one preceding Baudelaire. Dubbed by his peers *le Connétable des Lettres* (the High Constable of Letters), Barbey was a great writer and a grand *personnage*, descended from the nobility, a monarchist and a staunch Catholic reactionary. It is his well-documented loathing of the growing mercantilism, democratization, and general secularization of the age that served to rally the Decadents around him. Above all, he loathed Zola (the feeling was mutual), and one of his final critical acts was to recognize the genius of *A Rebours* and hail Huysmans's escape from the 'sordid toils' of Naturalism. The story selected here is taken from his most famous collection, *Les Diaboliques*, published when he was sixty-six, in 1874. Part of the print-run was seized by the public prosecutor, and Barbey only avoided a trial for assault on public morals by settling out of court, unlike Flaubert and Baudelaire before him. 'Don Juan's Crowning Love-Affair' prolongs the august lineage of the Don, who takes, this time, the aristocratic form of the Comte Jules-Amédée-Hector de Ravila de Ravilès. In a sumptuous set-piece description, the Comte is

invited by a group of female society hostesses to a very private dinner, in the peach boudoir of the Comtesse de Chiffrevas. Barbey relishes the kind of baroque description—of decor, costume, and of the sumptuous forms of mature women—in a vocabulary that becomes a stock feature of Decadent writing. There is in Barbey a genuine love of, and an almost chivalric respect for, women, even, or perhaps especially, when they are at their most perverse or capricious—a quality that fades out with the later writers. Barbey was one of the great French dandies: he sported ruffles on his shirts, and wore sleeves hemmed with lace. He wrote on Beau Brummel and Byron, and along with Baudelaire he attempted a theory of dandysim. The elegant, feline pasha of this story, Ravila, is one of its purest expressions. His charms may be 'satanic' and fatal to women, but it is worth noting the plangent, elegiac note that sounds through the story—Ravila is described as the Don Giovanni of the fifth act: he and his elegant listeners are a breed threatened with extinction, they are passing into history before our eyes.

Although of a different generation, Barbey has much in common with Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (1838–89). Villiers was also of noble extraction, from a Breton family that had fallen on hard times. Bad luck, inflexible patrician pride, and hopeless idealism in love ensured he would be lonely and penniless in an age whose scientific positivism he particularly abhorred. Neglected by the general public, he was, however, the centre of a very exclusive clique of distinguished writers, including Mallarmé, Bloy, and Gourmont, who treasured his eccentricities and between them helped to ensure his literary immortality. Villiers was cruelly rebuffed by an English heiress, whose beauty was only matched by her vulgarity. There is a legendary, tragi-comic adventure in which Villiers travels to London in astrakhan coat and new dentures—neither of which were paid for—to claim his new bride. The lady in question, perhaps understandably, took fright at the peculiar Frenchman, and fled. Coat and teeth then had to be returned. This episode probably explains the tinge of misogyny in the story 'Sentimentalism', which is in part a meditation on the 'artistic sensibility'. It involves the dandified notion of strictly controlling emotion: such is the explanation of the young Count Maximilien de W***, when confronted about his lack of 'reactivity' and unbending elitism by his companion Lucienne Emery. This is one of Villiers's most realistic and subtle stories, in its setting and

psychology, and it reads like a sincere attempt on the author's part to 'explain' his own reactions and behaviour. As such, it is a valuable addition to our picture of the *fin-de-siècle* dandy. 'The Presentiment' is a more classical ghost story in the tradition of Poe, while 'The Desire To Be a Man', despite the dreadful, gratuitous crime it recounts, is more in the vein of Maupassant, dwelling on fears and insecurities that are bred in the mind, and feed off the mind.

'What the Shadow Demands' by Catulle Mendès (1841–1909) is a tour de force in the same vein, in which a terrible crime is committed not through any easily recognizable, externally driven motive like jealousy or greed, but through a type of obsession (we would probably call it a psychosis today) that comes to haunt the afflicted narrator, who in everything else is a respectable, orderly petty-bourgeois in the haberdashery business. Mendès, who resembled, in one account, 'a debauched Christ', was a prolific writer in every genre, and a prodigious 'networker', at the literary epicentre of our period. His star has mysteriously been eclipsed, partly through his own derivative and often torrid style, sometimes verging on the pornographic, and partly, one suspects, through the malign agency of others (like Maupassant and Bloy) who mistrusted him, and later on André Gide, who dismissed his work. In this story, however, which becomes apocalyptic in its monomania, Mendès manages an extended, finely modulated dramatic monologue in which comedy and terror are curiously blended.

Comedy is also to be found in the astonishing *Histoires désobligeantes* by Léon Bloy (1846–1917), but it is of the blackest kind. Bloy is a fascinating figure, possibly the most difficult, touchy, reactive, and reactionary figure in the whole writhing snake-pit; a fundamentalist dogmatic Catholic, the protégé of Barbey, to whom he was attached with almost filial devotion. His hatred of 'filthy lucre' and his championing of the poor and downtrodden (he 'saved' and had a relationship with a young prostitute he picked up off the streets) remind one more of Dostoevsky than of any of the other writers represented here. Bloy's faith was of the most intransigent kind: convinced of man's fallen nature, and seeing evidence of this all around him, Bloy believed that only intense suffering could bring him to salvation (but he did believe in salvation, which was not an option for the 'pessimists' among the Decadents, steeped in Schopenhauer and Darwin). He described himself as the *enragé*

volontaire (the willingly, or readily, enraged); certainly, there was nothing of the emotionally self-controlled dandy about him. If he belongs here, it is because of the venomous and hilarious treatment he metes out to his bourgeois victims, whom he admitted to treating pretty much as the fancy took him. In a preface he wrote to the stories he confesses: 'I cannot remain calm. When I am not out to massacre, I have to be disobliging. It is my destiny. I am a fanatic of ingratitude.'[17] Bloy was so inflammatory (he was a born pamphleteer) that he fell out not only with every editor but with all his friends as well. One of the glories of this writer, in the three nasty little tales of lust and cupidity included here, lies in his style, which has been much admired—a unique mixture of epigrammatic latinate concision and a blatant, almost bullying irony.

No sooner are the palms awarded to Bloy than they have to be taken away again, possibly, and re-awarded to Octave Mirbeau (1848–1917) for the sheer energy of his hatreds. Both writers came from backgrounds they grew to despise; and Mirbeau suffered from a brutal, even abusive, education at the hands of the Jesuits (if his novel *Sébastien Roch* is taken to be autobiographical). When they came to Paris from the provinces, both were obliged to take humiliating jobs—in Bloy's case as an office clerk in the railways; Mirbeau spent years as secretary and general factotum to various conservative politicians, which did little to enamour him to the breed. When he later came out as a full-blown anarchist, defender of Fénéon and a supporter of Dreyfus, the Establishment as a whole became his target. Like so many others here, he also earned money as a prolific, and ferocious, journalist and critic. Mirbeau's brand of anti-bourgeois satire, mixed with a sulphurous, entirely sadomasochistic vision of sexuality, in such novels as *Le Calvaire*, *Sébastien Roch*, *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (later made into a film with Jeanne Moreau), and *Le Jardin des Supplices*, have ensured his literary survival. The stories here reflect different facets of this complex personality; 'The Little Summer-House' shows Mirbeau's fascination with crime and its 'metaphysical' consequences, and sketches a memorable portrait of the ordinary-looking personage, Jean-Jules-Joseph Lagoffin, whose eyes are quite dead. 'The Bath' is a little fable about a complacent fool, who opts for marriage as a quick means to ensure his own

[17] Léon Bloy, *Histoires désobligeantes* (Talence: L'Arbre Vengeur, 2007), 7.

home comfort. 'The First Emotion' is of interest in that it belongs to a particular type of satire, more Naturalistic than Decadent, which is really an early treatment of what, in the succeeding century, would become a major theme in a writer like Kafka, urban *angst* and alienation. Monsieur Isidore Buche (like Maupassant's Monsieur Leras in 'A Walk', also included here) is an office-worker who has become, through grinding routine, an automaton; but here these figures are the butt of satire. Roger Fresselou, the protagonist of the powerful little story 'On a Cure', is again a type of the melancholic, decadent young man, who withdraws, not this time to a familial chateau, but to a remote mountain village, a victim, literally, of pessimism when adopted as a philosophical position. The narrator recoils from this, reminding us that Mirbeau is too energetic, too politically engaged, and too angry to conform entirely to the Decadent aesthetic; indeed, in some of his work he parodies the type.

Jean Richepin (1849–1926) is possibly less familiar than many here, though he deserves to be known better. Richepin is an incisive, epigrammatic, and at his best an extremely funny writer. He is, so to speak, the joker in the pack. His natural talent is for satire, and few have targeted the dandyish type, and the 'quest to be unpredictable', as brilliantly as he does in his story 'Deshoulières', the tale of an eccentric who pushes this quest to a murderous extreme. Richepin was an extravagantly bohemian, larger-than-life character himself, his wild hair topped by fantastical hats; his family hailed from deeply rural areas of France, Picardy and the Aisne. His first popular success was a poem, *La Chanson des gueux* (1876), which landed him in prison for a month. He pursued his career as a poet, but if he survives today it is thanks to his stories, which are sometimes horrible, and always *piquant*. Like an unexpected, and hilarious, twist in one of his own stories, in 1908 Richepin was elected to the Académie française. The eponymous anti-hero of 'Constant Guignard', on the other hand, suffers from his name—*avoir la guigne* means 'to be dogged by bad luck'—and Richepin is ruthless in his pursuit of the theme. 'Pft! Pft!' is a clever little story, which reads as a parody of stock Decadent misogyny (and as such it comes as something of a relief); for here the target is less the woman—considered by the male so absolutely empty that her sole riposte to the reproaches of her lovers is a kind of charming sulky *moue*, a *tut-tut*, though the noise given here is *pft! pft!*—than the men who fall for her, including a self-styled and