Paul Fox (ed.)

Decadences

Morality and Aesthetics in British Literature

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Preface

This collection seeks to examine the intersections of aesthetics and morality, of what Decadence means to art and society at various moments in British literature. The inclination toward either the artistic or social perspective in each essay has been rendered more straightforwardly by employing capitalization for aesthetic Decadence, and the lower-case to illustrate moral decadence.

Both artistic and social values are inflected by their histories, and, as time passes, so the definition of what it means to be D/decadent alters. The very ideas of the decline from a higher standard, of social malaise, of aesthetic ennui, all presume certain facts about the past, the present, and the linear nature of time itself. To reject the past as a given, and to relish the subtleties of present nuance, is the beginning of Decadence.

Purportedly decadent artists focused upon the fleeting present, ascribed value to experiencing the aesthetic moment in its purest form, and it was precisely due to this focus upon living in, and for, the moment that society often responded by expressing moral contempt for the perceived hedonism of art. The aesthetic rejection of contemporary value added to the conflict between the literary and social inflections of Decadent interpretation. The *truly* decadent was condemned by artists as the stranglehold society maintained on individual interpretation and the interpretation of oneself. This conflict underlies the range of essays in the collection.

Decadent artists would perhaps argue that it is precisely in the emphasis upon the value of the present moment that a higher system of evaluating life is produced. It adds a greater import to every action, to every perception of the world. It provides an ethical standard of interaction between the individual and society, a communion that aesthetes found lacking in the strictures of conventional morality. The reinterpretation of these restrictions upon the individual, favor-

ing an ethical interaction between the artist and the world, becomes the counterpoint to society's moral condemnation.

The Decadent artist encouraged reading the world as a text written for each individual. The first essay in this collection suggests how one might read as a Decadent, to reconstitute the textual in personal terms and for the present. As the reader moves between the points charted by the several contributors, it is hoped that suggestions will be presented that both revise what it means to be Decadent and that afford a new and valuable means to perceiving our present.

Paul Fox

Containing the Poisonous Text: Decadent Readers, Reading Decadence[1]

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Abstract: In re-reading representative texts by Huysmans, Lee, Pater and Wilde, in this essay I will aim to demonstrate that the history of Decadent writing is inseparable from a concept of decadent reading, and specifically, from a socially constructed, aesthetically self-conscious, and fictionally mediated practice of reading: a practice of reading that offers a possible epistemology of Decadence.

Reading Petronius' *Satyricon* in the blue and orange hued safety of his asylum and ancestral library room, Des Esseintes, the aristocratic anti-hero of Joris-Karl Huysmans' book without a plot, *À rebours* (1884), responds to the fragmentary Latin narrative from the age of Nero with a heady mixture of desire, disgust, and dispassionate analysis. Observing the "extraordinary vigour and precise colouring" of Petronius' narrative, a "realistic novel" of "Roman life in the raw," he applauds the episodic nature of "this story with no plot or action in it" and "no need to fake a conclusion or point a moral" that relates in a "style that makes free of every dialect" and "makes every man talk in his own idiom" the "erotic adventures of certain sons of Sodom" (43). Reading synchronically rather than diachronically, Des Esseintes' partial, focalised re-reading of a familiar (perhaps even, over-familiar) narrative problematises extant classical paradigms of reading practice.

The emotional impact of Des Esseintes' bravura act of reading Petronius and re-imagining the decadent past is intriguing. This particular reading act, potentially both intensive and extensive, is an

[1] I am grateful to Josephine Guy and Adrian Poole for reading and commenting on drafts of this paper.

example of the logocentrism of Decadence, its determination, as Sharon Bassett (261-62) has noted, to "live its bookish education" through its reading of the classics. Such an approach is not without risk. Filled with disgust at the state of modern literature, Des Esseintes' reading experience rapidly degenerates into a tactile and bibliophilic handling of his "superb copy" of the text, an "octavo edition of 1585 printed by J. Dousa at Leyden" and glossed with marginalia and a commentary on the text; Des Esseintes' most prized Latin work is explicitly intertextual (44).[2] The influence of the *Satyricon* is manifold. It excites Des Esseintes' imagination with images of the "minor events," "bestial incidents" and "obscene antics" of "everyday life of Rome" while at the same time, it fuels his disgust at the majority of contemporary French literature, which unlike the *Satyricon*, has failed in his judgment to depict "in a splendidly wrought style" the "vices of a decrepit civilization, a crumbling Empire" without a "word of approval or condemnation" (42, 44).

This solipsistic reading experience provokes both intimacy with an irretrievable classical (and decadent) past, and alienation from an inexorably more remote and unpalatable present. Increasingly, Des Esseintes defines himself, and the experiential world around him through his reading from within the secluded asylum of his library, but the reading experience itself, while facilitating self-identification with Decadent writers and their readers past and present, does not offer any form of emotional consolation; after reading the *Satyricon* for example, Des Esseintes can only take tactile pleas-

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[2] Petronii Arbitri Viri Consularis *Satyricon* and Iani Dousae Nordovicis *Pro Satyrico Petronii Arbitri Viri Consularis* (Lugduni Batavorum, 1585). Bound together in an octavo volume, first part dated 1585, the second part, which is a commentary on the text, dated 1583. The handsome text is glossed throughout with marginal comments and decorated woodcut capitals; British Library call mark 1607/4687.

ure from his reverent handling of the handsome volume, not from reading the text.[3] Indeed, Des Esseintes' re-reading (or perhaps, mis-reading?) fails even to match the tone of Petronius' anarchic, optimistic and episodic narrative.

Des Esseintes' reading practice is invariably fugitive, desultory, unsystematic, fragmentary, inchoate, unmediated, impressionistic, phenomenological and without any semblance of a system of pedagogy; it is a truant re-reading of literature for its own sake, with the entirety of the text subordinated to the individual part that he chooses to read, exemplified by his deliberately perverse reading of seventh- and eighth-century hagiography, "dipping at odd moments into the works" (50), and his constantly interrupted attention to whatever "old quarto" is at hand (78, 83). Des Esseintes' reading practice, clearly a decadent reading practice, recapitulates Paul Bourget's theory of the regressive decomposition of literature from the whole text to the individual word and anticipates Havelock Ellis' (175) designation of Decadence as a "heterogeneous" aesthetic style, a style which is "beautiful because the whole is subordinated to the parts," and one which he affirms, can only exist "in relation to a classic style." Des Esseintes' desultory re-reading fractures established hermeneutic practice, which as Matei Calinescu (168) points out, depends upon interpreting the "significance of each part" in the "light of the whole and that of the whole in the light of each part." By consistently privileging the part over the whole, decadent reading, and more to the point, decadent *re-reading*, conspicuously disrupts this dialectic of hermeneutic exchange.

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[3] Des Esseintes' inability to derive emotional consolation from any reading within Huysmans' anti-naturalist narrative is a repeated and intensifying motif in *À rebours*; see his responses to reading maritime timetables (34), St. Augustine (48), Poe (73), Lacordaire (87), Schopenhauer (92-95), Dickens (132), profane literature (179), Balzac (180) and Flaubert and Gautier (189).

Des Esseintes' truncated reading experience, where part of the text dominates the volume, or even the author's entire oeuvre, invariably results in renewed disappointment, and often precludes, rather than facilitates, an actual reading, or re-reading, of the book at hand. Indeed, by the end of *À rebours*, the emotionally and psychologically exhausted Des Esseintes is almost incapable of reading, for he finds that none of his books are "sufficiently hardened to go through the next process, the reading mill" (179), a comment which is more apposite when applied to the reader than to the text. Sometimes the ostensibly synchronic reading experience itself is fetishised and cathected; examining the binding of an edition of *L'après-midi d'un faune*, with its covering of "Japanese felt as white as curdled milk" for example, precludes the act of reading (aloud or otherwise) the brief lines of Mallarmé's exquisite verse (197-98). Des Esseintes' apparent surfeit of reading and anxiety of re-reading provokes exhaustion and ennui, and in this he prefigures the intertextual dilemma (what to read? when to stop reading?) that has plagued the modern and post-modern reader. This paradox is all the more apposite when we consider the inherently bibliographic nature of the Decadent novel.[4] At once a parataxis and a reader, Decadent fiction is defined through the hinterland of texts it draws upon, inviting the reader to scrutinise named volumes, while at the same time repudiating the effects of those very acts of extensive reading.

What is clear is that Des Esseintes' decadent reading practice has destroyed the much desired nineteenth-century ideal of the "intellectual communion between a hieratic writer and an ideal reader," a communion that he believes can only be re-established through the decomposition and concentration of the novel into a prose-poem of a "page or two" (199). The idea of the dialogic relationship between the writer and the ideal reader was ubiquitous at the time; in Eng-

[4] See, for example, Schoolfield.

land, Vernon Lee, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde all addressed this issue repeatedly in both fiction and criticism. Far from inducing appetite or producing satiety, Des Esseintes' reading practice has instead resulted in literary dyspepsia and a closed list; his "anthology" is to be the "last book in his library" (199), a list of titles that will never be read again (within the narrative, he has no heirs, literary or otherwise). Paradoxically, Des Esseintes' repeated re-reading of his library promulgates and enforces the end of his own reading. Corralling his volumes into the *cordon sanitaire* of his literary asylum/mausoleum, Des Esseintes ironically both anticipates the failed attempts at the policing of literature deemed "decadent" – "poisonous texts"– as well as confirming the potentially debilitating influence, what Jankélévitch (339) describes as the "fever of proliferation" of these titles on their putative readers.[5] Indeed, Des Esseintes' insistence upon constantly selecting, organising and eliminating titles from his library, and his increasing inability to read his favourite texts without a concomitant detrimental physical or psychological effect – even reading his favourite, Poe, leaves him "trembling" (192) – validates the untrammelled, disruptive, potent and unpredictable influence of books, even when confined in the temporal and physical space of a private library. While it articulated an entire school of late nineteenth-century critical thinking that celebrated Decadent literature *and* the decadence of literary culture, Huysmans' "breviary of decadence" also suggested that the direct impact of the

[5] Almost all the contemporary French titles in Des Esseintes' collection were cited for prosecution for obscenity by the National Vigilance Association in their 1888 campaign against Vizetelly's English translation and distribution of Zola in Britain, including Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and *Salammbô*, the Goncourts' *Germinie Lacertaux* and *Renée Mauperin*, Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, Murger's *Vie de bohême*, Maupassant's *Bel-ami* and *Une vie*, Daudet's *Sapho*, and Bourget's *Crime d'amour* and *Cruelle énigme*; see Decker, 93-94.

written word upon the consciousness and identity formation of the individual reader was spectacularly undiminished. In a demonstrative act of decadent disavowal, a narrative that delineates the psychological and emotional exhaustion of re-reading itself establishes the potency of the influence of the book on prospective (and presumably, new) readers.

Petronius' humorous and worldly narrative is not the only influential, potentially "poisonous" text in Des Esseintes' Decadent library, described as "one of the most significant collections of books in the entire history of literature" (Cevasco, *Breviary* 6), in the villa at Fontenay-aux-Roses, but it is remarkable for offering an extended ironic commentary on the reason for literary decadence. In "Eumolpus in the Art Gallery," Petronius satirises the complacent and widespread assumption of literary decline by placing a simplistic analysis in the mouth of Eumolpus, a poet of remarkable unpopularity and ineptitude, who blames the current state of the arts on the "lust for money" and obsession with "wine and the women of the street" and a disrespect for the past: "we censure the old ways, but teach and learn nothing but vices" (Petronius 75).[6] As an example of a Roman work that interrogates the notion of cultural decadence, Huysmans' deployment of Petronius is doubly ironic; Eumolpus' stale opinions anticipate those of many contemporary reviewers, while Petronius' own place in posterity is vindicated by the survival and re-amplification of the *Satyricon* through Huysmans' novel and beyond. Des Esseintes', and the reader's, literary taste and judgment is negotiated through the filter of the *Satyricon*, a narrative in which the determinedly synchronic nineteenth-century reader can observe "subtle style, acute observation, and solid construction" and a "curious similarity" with the "modern French novels" of contemporary decadent fiction (44).

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[6] See Beck.

At the earliest stages of the conception of the work, Huysmans had insisted upon defining Des Esseintes and his sensibility through his reading; writing to Stéphane Mallarmé in October 1882, he noted that his character enjoyed reading "the writers of the exquisite and penetrating period of Roman decadence," the "barbarous and delicious poems of Orientius, Veranius of Gévaudan, Baudonivia," the French of "Poe, Baudelaire, the second part of *La Faustin*," adding that he was "using the word decadence so as to be intelligible" to his readers (Beaumont 44-45). Huysmans' repeated use of the term "decadence" attached a pre-existing "intelligible" context to his relentless use of metafictional strategies to define his novel. Writing to Edmond de Goncourt to express his admiration for *La Faustin* (1882), Huysmans praised the author's ability to write in the same style and register as Petronius, a language he described as being "nerveux, élégant, déprave, cet éréthisme savant que les Latins de la décadence ont eu aussi et qui a été décrit par Pétrone" (Lambert 71). Goncourt's resurrection of the Latin decadence of Petronius is brought to bear upon his own "breviary of the decadence," for Des Esseintes insistently compares Petronius (and to a lesser extent, Apuleius) to the contemporary *décadents* whose work he has amassed in creating his definitive bibliographic catalogue of French literature, which includes Mallarmé, Goncourt, Baudelaire, Verlaine and Gautier (180-200).

Writing to Émile Zola after the publication of *À rebours* in the spring of 1884, and wary of offending the master of Naturalism with his relentlessly heterodox text, Huysmans misleadingly insisted upon the medico-scientific realism of his case study. "I took trouble throughout the book, in a desire for perfect accuracy," he declared,

by following "step by step Bouchut and Axenfeld's books on neurosis" (Beaumont, 54-55).[7] In attempting to defend the realism of his work, Huysmans' rhetoric mimicked the discourse of anti-decadent critics who insisted upon reading Decadent literature as testamentary clinical evidence for mental and physical illness, as a diseased text emanating from a diseased body, as language that had deviated "from the established norms in an attempt to reproduce pathology on a textual level" (Hustvedt 23).[8] Yet while Huysmans presented the novel to Zola as a realist text that illustrated Des Esseintes' psychopathology, the individual acts of reading that he articulated within the work suggested something altogether different: a work defined intertextually through specific acts of desultory, decadent reading, and the interpretative strategies in which its readers would be forced to engage. Huysmans' description of the novel to Zola betrays his own anxiety about how *À rebours* would be read and interpreted, but it also displays his awareness of the potential of the book for influencing, and radically destabilising its readers.

The belief in the direct, determining influence of the Decadent text upon its readers was accepted in equal measure by both the champions and the detractors of Decadent literature. Havelock Ellis, possibly the most sensitive of *fin de siècle* commentators on Decadent writing, observed that the formative effect of Des Esseintes' fictional reading practice was a synecdoche for his creator's self-identification as the leading *décadent* of his age, and that both were

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[7] Huysmans' alleged source texts were Eugène Bouchut's *De l'état nerveux aigu et chronique, ou nervosisme appelé névropathie aiguë cérebro-pneumo-gastrique etc* (Paris, 1860) and Alexandre Axenfeld's *Traité des névroses* (Paris, 1882).

[8] See Lang, Laurent, Nordau. For a recent medico-scientific reading, see Jordanova; for a Kleinian reading of Des Esseintes' orality and regression, see Ziegler.

"moulded" (185) by their reading. "Des Esseintes' predilections in literature," Ellis (181) notes, are "without question" faithfully reflected in "his creator's impressions." For Ellis, the reading experience that took place within Des Esseintes' asylum/library proved the determining influence of books in shaping Huysmans' Decadent literary style *and* defining the self-identification of the decadent through his or her individual reading practice. "The three chapters [. . .] which describe Des Esseintes' library," Ellis (185) observes, "may serve at once both to indicate the chief moulding influence on Huysmans' own style" and to define the "precise nature of decadence in art and the fundamental part it plays". Ellis is unequivocal about the ability of individual books to shape, influence, and even define, their readers. "The final value of any book," he observes, "is in its power to reveal to us our own real selves" (vii). In the potential parallax offered through the filter of the "poisonous book," Ellis' interpretation of decadent identity is unambiguous: you read what you are, but more importantly, *you are what you read.*

The increasingly clamorous debate over the perceived influence of the decadent book, an influence mediated through a reading practice that was invariably fugitive, fragmentary, impressionistic, antinomian and self-consciously reflected in the text itself, was widely articulated in late nineteenth-century public discourse. These anxieties of both influence *and* dissemination were amplified by new developments in psychology, such as the concept of subliminal influence. The parapsychologist F. W. H. Myers (200-01) suggested that the effect of the subliminal on the individual would render "the ordinary senses more acute," and even more disturbingly for the moral censors of the age, claimed that "we seldom give the name of genius to any piece of work into which some uprush of subliminal faculty has not entered." The potentially uncontrollable nature of decadent reading, as both a practice and a subject, brought out the moralist in Vernon Lee. Drawing upon the importance of a moral economy of

reading, Lee's homologue Baldwin (*Baldwin* 228) warned against the danger of Decadent literature: "I would rather that the English novel were reduced to the condition of Sunday reading for girls of twelve," he declared, "than that such a novel as Maupassant's *Une Vie* or Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* should be written in this country."[9]

The immediate effect of an inappropriate reader's inappropriate reading was depicted with some comic relish by the popular novelist William John Locke in his *Stella Maris* (1913). Picking up her uncle's copy of an unnamed French novel which her aunt describes as unsuitable for "young girls" as it deals with "a certain side of life that is not wholesome for young girls to dwell upon," Stella decides to read the book regardless. Stella's reading practice is furtive, fugitive, spontaneous and unsystematic – in other words – decadent; smuggling the book "up to her bedroom," she "opened it in the middle," but "after a few pages her cheeks grew hot and her heart cold, and she threw the book out of the window" (255). For contemporary observers, Stella's reading and the specific neuropathology of her response, a response that echoed and amplified previous anxieties about spasmodic poetry and sensation fiction, was only too common. "The scene is entirely typical" of the period, observed Amy Cruse (68), adding that it was the result of "the younger generation having claimed its right to read what it pleased" from "beginning to end" – something that Stella, despite being a virgin reader, rather than a decadent re-reader of this specific text, consciously does not do.[10] And yet, even while mainstream popular fiction attempted to proscribe Decadent literature by dramatising the allegedly deleterious effect that it had upon its readers, thereby presenting in short-

[9] For Lee's theories of reading, see Towheed.

[10] It is debatable whether Stella's fictionalised reading practice is randomly phenomenological or is informed by knowledge of where to look in the specific text.

hand a titillating simulacrum of reading, it depended upon the very existence of Decadent writing in order to define its own wholesomeness; Locke's popular satirical novel, for example, was published by John Lane, the chief publisher in the 1890s of Decadent literature.[11] Anti-decadent writing depended upon a hinterland of Decadent literature in order to define itself; it also required a reading practice that could be identified and ostensibly contained. As Liz Constable (306-07) has observed, the "strategy of *naming* decadence" was "ineffective in pre-empting truant readings" because when the "supposed decadence in question" was the "practice of *reading*" itself it could not be "quarantined by its naming"; indeed, naming only rendered the "phenomenon more contagious."

In the ostensibly ordered domesticity of Victorian bourgeois life, the Decadent text threatened to destabilize the established, policed norms of reading. At a time when the two most "clearly contested areas" (Flint 103) in the home between the sexes – the library and the bedroom – were also the main loci of individual reading, the circulation of the Decadent text and with it, its fugitive and potentially emotionally bewildering, arousing and exhausting experience of reading, threatened to undermine the policed harmony of bourgeois domestic life, wholesomely symbolized through the domestic pedagogical model: family reading conducted under the gaze of the ever-vigilant *pater familias*. The difficulty of containing an often inchoate and evasive Decadent text within the confines of a private library room, a space that by its very existence, represented male, ostensibly impervious patriarchal domestic authority, was widely noted; despite the strictures of the Victorian home, "once admitted to the house it was difficult, almost impossible, to keep the children" from reading such literature (Cruse 60). Nor did parents often know

[11] See Nelson and Stetz. At twenty-two, Stella is still subject to a debate over her reading, drawing attention to the *perceived* influence of the Decadent book upon readers of all ages.

how to police the reading of minors, with all French literature assumed to be potentially dangerous; "a respectable father of a family," Cruse (58-59) notes, "would have been as shocked to see his daughter reading *François le Champis* as to see her reading *Mademoiselle de Maupin*." The only form of acceptable containment was vigilant exclusion from the home, and in order to maintain this, the householder needed to know the reading habits of the governess who supervised the children's education. In one of her advice books, the novelist and journalist Jane Ellen Panton (321-22) stipulated her criteria for the reading habits of the ideal governess: "she should not understand what 'decadent' and *fin-de-siècle* mean," adding that "if such information is not imported into one area of the house, its contamination cannot spread." The widespread epidemiological discourse about containing the perceived contaminating influence of Decadent literature in the British domestic arena clearly mirrored the wider public debate about the censorship of obscene literature.

Relentlessly self-conscious and defining itself through the parataxis of books that have been previously read, re-read, or misread by its fictional protagonists, Decadent writing is by its very nature gripped by anxieties over the nature, extent and implications of its textual borrowings. For Huysmans, the systematic deployment of the list in *À rebours*, a method derived from naturalism, was in itself a creative problem; as Robert Ziegler (11) has pointed out, "Huysmans grappled from the outset with the problem of acknowledging the authority of his sources," while at the same time "appropriating and adapting them to his own literary art." Nor was this anxiety of influence and authority confined to Huysmans' breviary alone; Oscar Wilde, and to a lesser extent, Walter Pater both suffered from the same irremediable problem.[12] The writers of literature perceived

[12] Described by Pater in *Marius the Epicurean* as "a burden of precedent, laid upon every artist" (91). For Pater's use of and problems with his sources, see

as being decadent often themselves internalised the burden of literary influence and proffered the quandary to their reader, offering textual evidence for the direct influence of a specific work on the self-identification of the protagonist, while publicly disclaiming the ability of literary fiction to influence its readers. Pater's Marius, Flavian and Gaston, Wilde's Dorian Gray, Basil and Lord Henry, and Lee's Anne Brown and Madame Elaguine are, like Huysmans' Des Esseintes, all shaped and defined to differing degrees by their individual and repeated re-reading of Decadent writing, whether classical or contemporary, Latin or French, "yellow," "golden" or "poisonous."

Decadent literature was perceived as being capable of influencing and harming the reader despite his or her (and in the case of the policing of reading, it was often her) own consciousness of what was being actively read, absorbed and assimilated, and in this respect, the spectre of the "poisonous text" bolstered determinist arguments about the influence of fiction. Ellis, Lee, Locke, Myers, Panton, et al. all suggest the potential for Decadent writing – for the "poisonous text" – to shape the reader's consciousness; the reader's theoretical autonomy or putative resistance is barely articulated. Throughout this period, Decadent fiction was embedded in the discourse of multiple anxieties centred upon the act of reading: the author's anxiety of being influenced by his sources, the reader's anxiety of being influenced through the act of reading, and society's anxiety about the influence of the text upon its readers. In a British literary context, there are three writers in particular – Vernon Lee, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde – all of them influential novelists, aesthetes and critics, who in their attempts to negotiate these looming crises in

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Bloom, "Walter Pater" and *Ringers in the Tower*, Donoghue and Inman; for Wilde's, see Martin, Nassar, Riquelme and Schoolfield.

reading, offer us narrative traces replete with the problematic nature of reading (and/or re-reading) Decadent writing.

In her intemperately anti-aesthetic first novel *Miss Brown* (1884), Vernon Lee makes an uncomplicated case for the determining influence of the Decadent novel. A physically imposing and morally uncorrupted Scottish-Italian servant girl, Anne Brown is taken up by the aesthete, artist and pre-Raphaelite poet Arthur Hamlin; in a reprise of the Pygmalion story, he decides to offer her a literary education so that she can "become worthy of him" (1: 208). Taken out of the guardianship of the Perry household in Florence, where despite the loose literary morals of the "Sapphic" Mrs Perry, Anne reads only "Dante" and "Italian grammar" (1: 65), she is soon exposed to the bewildering variety of literature circulating in late Victorian England, including the *Vita Nuova*, Petrarch, and Hamlin's own suggestive verses, poetry which Mr Perry describes unequivocally as "sad trash" but permissible; "all poetry isn't fit for women to read," he observes (1: 136). Despite the risqué nature of his own "fleshy" verse, Hamlin insists upon policing Anne's reading; nothing "save the very best should ever be read by you," he ironically informs her (1: 226).

Introduced to Hamlin's aesthetic set, Anne soon encounters Decadent writing and its proponents. The aesthetic poet Cosmo Chough, whose verse is described by Hamlin's aunt as being "perfectly indecent" (1: 277), transgresses Anne Brown's carefully demarcated and policed territory of reading by "discussing the most striking literary obscenities, from Petronius to Walt Whitman" (2: 25). Worse follows when the artist Edmund Lewis offers her a copy of Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), itself a landmark of Decadent writing, to read. Glancing at "the page, pencil marked all round" and "then at the title," she understands the potential influence of the volume at hand. "I have never read it," she tells Lewis, "but I have often heard that it is a book which a man does not offer a

woman except as an insult" (2: 149-50). "Reading" and identifying the contaminating peril of the decadent book precedes, and sometimes, precludes, a reading of it, but despite her physical revulsion at Gautier's novel, an encounter which perfectly limns contemporary anxieties about the influence of decadent books on their readers, she does in fact, possess at least one Gautier volume herself. Scanning the shelves of her library (Anne's occupation of a contained, male space) her cousin Robert Brown notes a "*Contes des Gautier*" and finds it unbecoming a lady (2: 226). Brown expresses concern about the direction of her reading; paraphrasing and misquoting Pater in an attempt to warn Anne – "the object of the wise man is to make his life consist in as many moments of thrilling impressions as possible" – he once again draws attention to the potent influence of art on life, literature on identity, the Decadent work upon its reader, the Paterian *ur*-text upon its cultural context.[13]

In fact, Anne Brown has already become both a reader of Decadence, and a decadent reader. Reading Hamlin's latest lurid offerings, and worried that she has been subliminally moulded by it, she is left "wondering whether all the impure poetry which she had lately been reading" might "not be making her imagine things which were not meant; and Anne blushed at the thought" (2: 87). The subsequent coercive plot resolution bluntly demonstrates Lee's overriding didactic message; "thrust into the midst of a demoralised school of literature which glorified in moral indifference" (3: 280), Anne's offer to marry the now terminally depraved Hamlin, despite not being in love with him, is both predictable and inevitable. Decadent reading produces a pathetically decadent outcome, even within the context of a satire against aestheticism.

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[13] Clearly garbled from the "Conclusion" to Pater's *The Renaissance*. Ironically, Brown's argument against the influence of Pater's aestheticism is dependent upon his misreading of it.

In case we are left in any doubt about the direct, determining and apparently detrimental influence of Decadent works upon their readers, Lee offers us the haunting spectre of the "extraordinary, charming, intelligent, depraved" (3: 222) Madame Elaguine, one of the earliest depictions of the female *décadent* in English fiction. Madame Elaguine's Kensington house is "strewn with French novels" (3: 5), and her literary tastes mirror Des Esseintes'; she has "a passion for Alfred de Musset, for Gautier, for Catulle Mèndes" (2: 250), she admits to caring "too much for Baudelaire" (3: 90), and her reading habits are similarly desultory and unsystematic: she is often found "lying on a sofa, a heap of books about her, reading none, fidgety and vacant" (3: 91). Sacha Elaguine's polymorphous perversity is explained largely through the filter of a dissipated, unsupervised childhood spent reading French novels, an upbringing which has left her with an appetite for the "forbidden," the "unreal" and the "theatrical" (3: 222). As a commentary on the nexus of anxieties around morality, Decadent literature and reading practice, Lee's novel is both conventional and exemplary.

Written at the same time as Lee's didactic novel, Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) offers the spectacle of a viaticum which insists upon reading as a form of moral improvement and self-development, while at the same time suggests the gratification and self-identification derived from reading for its own sake. Drawing upon the established tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, Pater's narrative is punctuated by specific, staged acts of reading, including perhaps the most famous example of "truant reading" in nineteenth-century literature, Marius and Flavian's idyllic, absorbed, antinomian reading of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, an exegetic reading which violates the temporal and chronological structure of the

novel's narrative. Under Flavian's physical, emotional, idealistic and pedagogical influence, Marius resolves to acquire the "art" of "relieving the ideals or poetic traits, the elements of distinction, in our everyday life" by "exclusively living in them" (65), the part once again superseding the whole, and this consciousness of the aesthetic life, "a revelation in colour and form" (65-66) is roused through his reading of Apuleius. In representing a determining act of reading, Pater's Janus-like gaze casts its eyes upon future readers (glossing both Gautier and Baudelaire), as well as past ones; the identification of the author with his work and of the reader with his reading is unequivocal, for literary and personal influence are inseparable. "A book, like a person, has its fortunes with one," it is "lucky or unlucky in the precise moment of its falling in our way" (87-88), the narrator observes, and yet this fortuitous, overtly phenomenological reading experience has the potential to change the life of the reader forever. For Marius, the ideal type of the absorbed, impressionist (and decadent) reader, reading and re-reading the "Golden Book" redefines his consciousness (it has a "peculiar place in his remembrance"), his purpose, and his identity: "he felt a sort of personal gratitude to its writer," seeing in it "doubtless far more than was really there for any other reader" (88). Marius' determination to live through the text, his over-determined, over-inscribed response to reading Apuleius, accurately depicts the reading experience of the contemporary Decadent.

The pedagogical strategies (Platonic dialogues, Socratic mentoring, symposia and so on) depicted in the novel are largely systematic, institutionalised, policed, and internally interpreted, but in the example of Marius' impressionistic, overreaching "truant" reading,

Pater insistently affirms the autonomous potential for self-fashioning through the individual act of reading.[14] Despite the novel's overtly pedagogical tone and structure, the intellectually seductive, ubiquitously homoerotic subtext – the freethinking truancy of Pater's influence in Oxford at the time – lies perilously visible beneath the diaphaneitè surface of the text.[15] Pater's insistence on the fortuitous influence of the "golden book" and the vitality of the classical past, on its ability to mould the personality of the reader, as well as his potentially autonomous self-identification through his reading, left his novel open to criticism; indeed, his very investment in the determining power of literature increased anxieties of reception and dissemination, anxieties that had been widely circulating since the controversy surrounding the conclusion to *The Renaissance* (1873). While *Marius* is certainly Pater's most profound commitment to the shaping of the reader through the reading experience, "a metafictional meditation upon the act of reading, upon its own reception by a reader" and "upon its efforts to render the reader receptive" (Kaiser 200), it remains playful, even irresponsible about the outcome of that reading; under the pretext of historical realism it also invites the reader to participate in their own phenomenological, impressionistic and subjective acts of interpretation and self-identification. As Denis Donoghue has suggested, "Paterian or impressionist criticism tends to lead, after a while, an independent life" (43), and in this respect, *Marius*, part novel, part manifesto, be-

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[14] This dichotomy between authoritarian and libertarian reading is alluded to repeatedly in the novel; see for example, Flavian's literary programme, "partly conservative or reactionary" and "partly popular and revolutionary" (88).

[15] See Dowling, Kaiser, Monsman, Potolsky and Shuter.

came its own "golden book," an open invitation to the interpretative work (and play) of its readers. Pater could not control the reading of his work or the dissemination of his ideas, nor did he consider it to be aesthetically or ideologically desirable, and in the decade following its publication, truant, decadent readings of Pater's books proliferated.[16] Haunted by the spectre of an influence it could not contain, *Marius the Epicurean* perilously negotiated a path between conflicting late nineteenth-century arguments about the nature and extent of the influence of a "decadent" book upon its readers, a path that Pater would clearly have to retrace, again and again in his literary career.

Both the allure and the danger of decadent reading is central to Oscar Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-91). The unpoliced domestic spaces (sitting rooms, salons, studios, attics, library rooms) of the novel freely circulate both classical and contemporary works of Decadent literature between consenting adult males for their own exclusive, elite consumption; parodying the distribution of censored texts through lending libraries, Wilde's circulating system disseminates Gautier's poems, *Les cent nouvelles nouvelles*, *Manon Lescaut*, and most famously, *À rebours*. Lord Henry's gift of a well-thumbed "book bound in yellow paper, the cover slightly torn and the edges soiled" (96) soon has Dorian's complete attention. Replicating Marius and Flavian's absorbed truant reading of Apuleius, Dorian's reading of "the strangest book that he had ever read," a "psychological study of a certain young Parisian" (113) arrests time and fractures the chronology of the novel; he starts reading at five o'clock, and finishes before nine, but the next chapter opens "years" later (100). As Matei Calinescu (56) has observed, reading, and particularly re-reading, with its tendency to-

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[16] See Bassett, Dowling and Potolsky.

wards ideas of mythic and circular time, can "weaken the sense of irresistible linearity and unidirectionality of both textual time and biological time" within the narrative, despite remaining "subject to the inexorable law [. . .] obviously one does not grow younger while reading or re-reading a book." Unless of course, the reader is Dorian Gray; Wilde's novel articulates the possibilities of an overdetermined decadent reading, where the part totally obliterates the whole, where the freight of the intertext overwhelms the host text, and where the linear narrative time of *Dorian Gray* is usurped by the fictive stasis of Huysmans' novel.

Decadent fiction is explicitly intertextual, and the invasive interjection of Huysmans' text upon Wilde's novel demands from the reader a repudiation of the hermeneutics of traditional teleological narrative. Commenting on Des Esseintes' intertextual reading of Baudelaire's "Le Gâteau" in *À rebours*, Michael Riffaterre has noted that what "appears ludicrous and improbable" in the narrative "disappears as soon as we stop considering it as a narrative progression motivated in a normal fashion"; that is, if we no longer read the novel telelogically, "but consider it instead as an antinomy overdetermined by the intertext" (Riffaterre 77), in other words, by privileging the part over the whole. In Decadent fiction, this overdetermining is represented through individual acts of reading which invite the reader to assess the narrative through the parallax of the cited intertext(s), a "formal eccentricity" (78) which is a stylistic staple of Decadent writing, and brings with it, as Riffaterre suggests, a responsibility to read the text with "full awareness and complete participation" (78) rather than passive, unconscious involvement.

Unlike in Pater's novel however, Dorian's overdetermined reading precludes rather than promotes a closer scrutiny of the text, or indeed, of the process of reading; while Flavian's reading makes him an "ardent, indefatigable student of words" (88), Dorian's absorbed, or rather, *involved* reading of the yellow book is perilously (and

negatively) subliminal: "the mere cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music" produces in his mind "a form of reverie, a malady of dreaming" that makes him "unconscious" (98).[17] In fact, Dorian's reading is dangerous precisely because of his lack of analytical scrutiny, context, or intellectual engagement; reading in the early evening only by the fading "wan light of a solitary star" until he "could read no more" (98), it is open to question whether in this aestheticised *mise en scène*, he even finishes reading his "yellow book."

Wilde's kaleidoscopic, harlequin text, revelling in the 'burden of precedent' of past literature from which it borrows freely and promiscuously, celebrates the impressionist, overdetermined, truant reading practice of the decadent reader; it also implicitly suggests the impossibility of its policing.[18] Dorian's fetishised collection of "nine large paper copies of the first edition" of the "yellow book," all "bound in different colours" to "suit his various moods" (98) visibly demonstrates the end result of a reading practice where the "whole is subordinated to the parts" (Ellis 175), in this case, the niceties of the binding overdetermining the interpretation of the text (like Des Esseintes, Dorian's erotic sublimation is partly bibliophilic, if not bibliomanic). Indeed, mimicking the rhetoric of rereading, the effect of Huysmans' "prefiguring" text has left him with a "nature over which he seemed, at times to have almost entirely lost control" (98). *À rebours* is a work from whose imaginative grasp, interpretative nexus, and above all, influential example of overdetermining reading practice, Dorian Gray cannot escape. Repeatedly returning to his "ancestors in literature," and re-reading the "seventh chapter" (113) of the work – the part, rather than the whole – monomaniacally "over and over again," he sees everything mediated

[17] For a stimulating discussion of involved vs. absorbed reading, see Calinescu.

[18] For Wilde's borrowings (and plagiarism) see Guy and Raby.

entirely through this one work of fiction: he views "the whole of history" as "merely the record of his life" (113). Far from seeing the literary past, as Flavian in *Marius* does, as a spur to new creativity, a "burden of precedent, laid upon every artist" (91) that must be overcome, Dorian's increasingly wrought, fruitless and truncated decadent reading practice exactly replicates that of Des Esseintes, provoking dyspepsia, disgust, accidia and anomie, rather than sharpening the literary appetite. As Matei Calinescu (133) has noted, the "joys of reading intertextually dissolve in the absence of a principle of internal coherence," and Dorian's reading of Huysmans' novel is nothing if not unsystematic and incoherent. Dorian's anti-paradigm of reading practice, where the smallest particle, the Paterian *débris* (a single chapter of a Decadent novel) takes precedent over the whole corpus of imaginative literature, prompts his most infamous accusation at Lord Henry: "you poisoned me with a book once. I should not forgive that" (166). It is Dorian's reading habits, and not his morality, that have in fact been "poisoned". As George Cevasco has observed, Dorian's library is significantly less impressive than that of Des Esseintes, and as a result, his ability to read in context is undoubtedly hampered; re-reading Huysmans' novel precludes rather than encourages further reading, suggesting once again, the disproportionate, overarching, fatal influence of a single work on the untrained, ill-equipped mind.[19] In *Dorian Gray*, Wilde offers a decadent reading of a decadent reader, a fatal, truant misreading of Pater's antinomian espousal of the moral and creative benefit of aesthetic impressionism, and paradoxically, a disavowal of the all pervasive influence of literature on the informed reader; the poisonous "yellow book," despite having many readers within the fictionally limned boundaries of the novel, poisons only Dorian. Decadent writing is inextricably bound up with the question of the

[19] Cevasco, *Breviary*, 80.

interpretative strategies of the reader, and in this regard, Wilde's novel challenges the reader to rise to the interpretative task at which Dorian so patently fails.

While only Dorian falls prey to the "yellow book," the perceived influence of Wilde's novel on the reading public was immediate; the *Daily Chronicle* denounced *Dorian Gray* as a "poisonous book," the *St. James' Gazette* called it "corrupt" and announced that it "ought to be chucked into the fire" (*Dorian Gray* 343, 335). The impact of Wilde's novel was felt beyond the immediate controversy in the periodical press. As Gerald Monsman has demonstrated, the public debate that heralded the appearance of *Dorian Gray* forced Walter Pater back to work on his still incomplete manuscript, *Gaston de Latour* (1898); cancelling a planned trip to Italy in August 1890, he immediately set about distancing his own views from those of his wayward and truant pupil.[20] Pater's unfinished novel is unequivocal about the direct, determining influence of reading creative literature on identity formation and moral development, but unlike Wilde, he insisted open the importance of pedagogy within the confines of the text, as well as outside it. Whether Pater's final fictional work represents a retreat from the argument first articulated in *The Renaissance* or a recapitulation of it remains a matter for debate, but what is clear is that the importance of intertextual strategies of reading and interpretation are if anything, amplified even further in *Gaston*.

Like almost all Decadent novels, Pater's last piece of fiction deals with the idea of the direct influence of one text, in this case, Pierre de Ronsard's *Odes* (1553) on a historicised fictional reader, Gaston; once again, Pater privileges the synchronic process of re-reading and self-identification from a phenomenological encounter with a "golden book". Given to him by his inamorata Jasmin, as "perhaps the best of services" (26), Gaston's repeated reading of Ronsard's

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[20] See Monsman, *Gaston de Latour* xl.

poems opens up a new imaginative world. With its "golden-green binding" and "yellow edges," the portable volume of Ronsard"s verse had "proved the key to a new world of seemingly boundless intellectual resources" (26), and Pater's espousal of a synchronic, imaginative reading is clear. "Just eighteen years old, and the work of the poet's own youth," Ronsard's *Odes* take "possession" of Gaston with the "ready intimacy of one's equal in age, fresh in every point" and the effect of this particular truant reading is one of intellectual renewal rather than anomie: Gaston "experienced what it is the function of contemporary poetry to effect anew for sensitive youth in each succeeding generation" (26). Once again, as in *The Renaissance*, Pater's analogue for the potency of poetry is taken from the plastic arts; "at best, poetry of the past could move one with no more directness than the beautiful faces of antiquity," faces which Pater reminds us, "are not here for us to see and unaffectedly love them" (27).

It is through literature and not sculpture that the "age renews itself," and Pater's claim for the influence of imaginative literature is bold; poetry "grows superb and large" in order to "fill a certain mental situation made ready in advance" (27), and if we are in any doubt about the centrality of the reading experience in defining temporality, Gaston's idyllic, spring reading of Ronsard's verse takes place in chapter three, suitably titled "Modernity." Gaston's reading practice is explicitly decadent, with the part conspicuously superseding the whole; seeing the world through "the ear, the eye, of his favourite poet" (28) leads Gaston to an aesthetic "doctrine" that insists upon seeing the "pleasantly aesthetic [. . .] elements of life at an advantage" until "they seemed to occupy the entire surface" (28-29), a disproportionate, overdetermined perspective acquired from his reading of Ronsard that he controversially considers to be an "undeniable good service" (29). And yet, in the very chapter in which Pater recapitulates the joys of truant reading first expounded in

Marius, he offers the contemporary reader a warning about the potential danger of both decadent reading and reading Decadence. Observing Gaston's own increasingly conflicted sense of the "incompatibility" between the "two rival claimants upon him" – sacred and profane love – Pater glosses Baudelaire's "flowers of evil" (37) in suggesting both the perils of Decadence, and the possible resolution of this seemingly intractable problem that it might offer: "might there be perhaps, somewhere, in some penetrative mind in this age of novelties, some scheme of truth, some science of men and things" which could "harmonise for him his earlier and later preferences" or else "establish, to his pacification, the exclusive supremacy of the latter?" (37). While Gaston is self-consciously brought back from the decadent brink, Pater's rhetorical question to his contemporary readers remains perilously unanswered.

For Pater, the potentially determining, formative influence of the "golden book" had to be mitigated, and this could only be achieved through the aesthetic and moral effort of his readers. *Gaston de Latour* is Pater's last attempt at managing the critical reception of his ideas – in effect, the afterlife of his books – through the sustained fictional depiction of an ideal paradigm of synchronic reading and its intertextual interpretation. Paradoxically, while Pater celebrated the potent, life changing influence of chance reading in *Gaston de Latour*, he consciously disavowed the possibility that truant reading alone could offer Gaston (or his readers) the aesthetic and emotional fulfilment that they sought, caught as they all were, in late Victorian England as much as in Renaissance France, between the simultaneously conflicting and revivifying "bad neighbourship of what was old and what was new" (37). It was effectively Pater's final manifesto for shaping his readers, and a prefiguring of the Modernist need to reinterpret, rehistoricise, and renew the past through the act of reading.

Long before they had been formally identified, policed or circumscribed, Decadent texts, their authors, and their readers, as I have shown, were constructed through the very act of reading. Typically defined by an anxiety of influence that their authors could not contain, and an anxiety of dissemination that their readers could not deny, Decadent literature occupied a radically destabilising, interstitial space in the history of reading. As Linda Dowling (176) has noted, the "poisonous text," the "fatal book of Victorian Decadence," itself fashioned as a simulacrum of the reading experience embedded within the narrative, partly came to "symbolize anxiety about the newly problematic status of written language." As the ambiguous contradictions between authorial intention and narrative contention grew, the "poisonous text" acted as the textual marker for the multiple misreadings that in varying degrees, Decadent narratives self-consciously and intentionally invited from their readers.[21] The Decadent text required a decadent reader, and the decadent reader's own uniquely differentiated and often perverse reading practice insisted upon a self-conscious identification with the text being scrutinised, a process which was invariably validated through the often explicitly intertextual nature of the narrative itself. The decadent reader was trained and not born; his or her ability to read the implied and subliminal rather than the explicatory and seemingly didactic aspects of the narrative was usually evidence of conscious, interpretative reading and membership of an elite reading community.[22] Whether it was through Des Esseintes' reading of

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[21] See for example, Eichner. The perverse "misreading" that he observes is surely intentional.

[22] All of the fictionally depicted influential books I have discussed are in Latin or French; by implication, the self-identification (or otherwise) of the English

Petronius, Flavian's reading of Apuleius, Dorian Gray's reading of Huysmans, or Gaston's reading of Pierre de Ronsard, the self-identification of the fictional Decadent with his chosen, privately circulating text, whether "golden," "yellow," or "poisonous," defined his status, and often his personal library (the locus for the literary sublimation of desire, disgust and disappointment) became the arena for this fugitive exercise in re-reading and self-fashioning.

The history of Decadent writing is inseparable from a concept of decadent reading, and specifically, from a socially constructed, aesthetically self-conscious, and fictionally mediated practice of fugitive reading, with the "whole subordinated to the parts" that defied attempts to control it and offers us both a possible taxonomy and epistemology of Decadence. In this respect, Decadent texts consistently challenged the nineteenth-century theoretical fiction of ideal readers by formally representing self-selecting re-readers – in many senses, today's normal readers – as those who "skip, skim, swim back and forth" (Calinescu 273) in their interaction with the text. There may or may not have been anything approximating a Decadent "movement," in English literature, but there were, and potentially, still are, many decadent readers. Both the advocates of Decadent writing and their opponents in the last decades of the nineteenth century were united by one certainty: that creative literature was of central importance in anatomising and directing the cultural and social tendencies of the era. The decadent reader's reading practice became as much an object of identification and enquiry as the morphological scrutiny directed to its body, and the analytical psycho-pathology directed at its mind. Far from being at the tail-end – the twilight – of an exhausted century, the literature of the *fin de siècle* resounds with the vitality of a debate that placed the impor-

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decadent reader with their book(s) cannot take place in the vernacular. Intertextuality is predicated by translation.

tance of the individual's intertextual re-reading of influential literature (and its policing) at the centre of an increasingly autonomous, self-fashioned, modernist world.

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Arthur Symons' Decadent Aesthetics: Stéphane Mallarmé and the Dancer Revisited

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Abstract: This essay analyzes Arthur Symons' creative reception and adaptation of Stéphane Mallarmé's Symbolist aesthetics, especially the Symbolist dancer figure, in Symons' major theoretical writings and dance poems of the 1890s. I argue that Symons interpreted Mallarmé's work through a decidedly Decadent lens, which reconfigured Symbolist themes of linguistic struggle, poetic evocation, and aesthetic dreaming, to express the sense of an acute spiritual as well as aesthetic crisis of *fin de siècle* literature and culture.

Arthur Symons is most remembered today for his role as a mediator between French and English Decadence and Symbolism, a *fin de siècle* poet and cultural theorist whose seminal work *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) introduced a generation of readers and writers (among them William Butler Yeats and T. S. Eliot) to the writings of Verlaine, Huysmans, Laforgue, and most importantly, Stéphane Mallarmé. In his biography, Karl Beckson stresses the Modernists' acknowledged debt to Symons: T. S. Eliot, for example, described *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* as a "revelation" and "an introduction to wholly new feelings," "one of those [books] which have affected the course of my life" (*Sacred Wood* 5; qtd. in Beckson, *Life* 200). Symons' work on Mallarmé and Symbolism also particularly influenced W. B. Yeats, with whom Symons shared rooms in Fountain Court from October 1895 to March 1896, and who was "always careful to acknowledge a special debt he owed his old friend and confidant, Arthur Symons," "his principal source of information regarding Mallarmé" since his own French was sadly lacking (Morris, "Form" 99-100). Symons first met the Symbolist *maître* on his 1890 visit to Paris, when he attended one of