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Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42624-4 — Decadence and Literature
Edited by Jane Desmarais , David Weir
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Introduction

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> To master the concept of decadence and to free it from inconsistency has been for students of nineteenth-century European cultural history, if not exactly the quest of the Grail, at least an important part of their intellectual agenda.
>
> (Richard Drake, 1982: 69)

The observation that Richard Drake made in 1982 seems more pertinent than ever, now that decadence has gained a secure place as the object of scholarly investigation. But the concept is no longer solely confined to the domain of 'nineteenth-century European cultural history'. Since 1982, the study of decadence has been extended well into the twentieth century, and some would argue, as several of our contributors do here, that the concept has contemporary relevance as well. Moreover, nineteenth-century concerns about decadence did not occur in a cultural or historical vacuum, which means that earlier investigations of decadence need to be taken into account. At the same time, decadence has assumed a multidisciplinary dimension, broadening the concept beyond the field of cultural history alone into such areas as philosophy, sociology, psychology, and more. In some instances, decadence seems to have served as a kind of shadow concept haunting the thought of those writers engaged in more traditional disciplines, while in others the concept appears to have played a role in the very foundation of new fields of inquiry. A well-known example of the former is the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, for whom the concept was at once troubling and inescapable: 'Nothing has occupied me more profoundly than the problem of decadence' (1967: p. 155). A lesser-known example of the latter is the sociology of Émile Durkheim, for whom disharmony between individual interests and the good of society at large emerged as a signal concern. Durkheim may not have always used the word *décadence* in the analysis of such disharmony (he preferred the word *anomie*), but the concept is clear, in part because earlier writers, such as

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the critic Paul Bourget, had used that very word to identify precisely the condition Durkheim described: ‘The word “decadence” is often used to designate the state of a society that produces too few individuals suited to the labors of communal life’ (2009: 98).

Bourget’s analysis of social disharmony dates from 1883 and owes its origins to the critic’s interest in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, whose 1857 collection *Les fleurs du mal* [*The Flowers of Evil*] remains a touchstone text of literary decadence. Bourget understood Baudelaire’s poetry as ‘decadent’ because of an earlier analysis by Théophile Gautier that emphasized the relationship between literary style and the state of society at large. In particular, Gautier understood certain stylistic features of Baudelaire’s poetry as reflective of imperial decline, finding in *The Flowers of Evil* a number of elements also evident in the literature of the Latin decadence. For Gautier, Baudelaire’s style

> recalled the speech of the Lower Empire that was already veined with the greenish streaking of decomposition and the complex refinement of the Byzantine school, the ultimate form of decadent Greek art. Such, however, is the necessary, the inevitable speech of nations and civilizations when fictitious life has taken the place of natural life and developed in man wants till then unknown. (1903: p. 40)

Gautier’s analysis of ‘le style de décadence’ has been influential for a number of reasons. First, the analysis shifts the meaning of the term *decadent* as a literary descriptor: whereas in the past a work might have been understood as decadent because of a lack of originality or an excess of conventionality, now a work of decadence could be regarded as something innovative and necessary, a means of expressing the new and hitherto unknown feelings produced by the experience of historical decline. Second, the analysis conveys the sense that decadence is more than a style because of the sense of social malaise the style conveys. The style, in short, shows that society itself has changed: no longer healthy, it is now decadent. Third, and most important, the analysis argues for an alignment of artistic values and social values under the shared rubric of decadence as a concept common to both. This is the point at which complications inevitably ensue, because the concept has become so dynamic as to belie coherence. This semantic instability results from the double interference of artistic and social meanings alongside the negative and positive valorization of those meanings. No single artistic context allows for positive aesthetic judgement in every case, just as no single social context permits negative moral judgement in every case. The poetry of the

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fourth-century Roman poet Ausonius and that of the nineteenth-century English poet Ernest Dowson are both decadent, but in different senses. Paedophilia in ancient Greece was noble, but in Victorian England it was so decadent as to be criminal.

Conceptually, decadence accommodates such contradictory meanings; it has been used to describe racial degeneration, historical decline, philosophical pessimism, personal immorality, physical entropy, artistic imperfection, and more. The fact that decadence has been studied using the analytical procedures of such disparate disciplines as eugenics, history, philosophy, psychology, physics, and aesthetics illustrates just how complex the concept is. Decadence appears to be what linguists call a semantic field, the understanding of which depends on an aggregation of related associations. The temporal and spatial dimensions of decadence are captured by 'decline' and 'decay', decline necessarily occurring over time and decay (or degeneration) being a property of objects. These two dimensions may merge through a metaphorical process, as when we speak of 'the decay of society', as if a society were an object – like a human body – subject to dissolution. Of course, decay occurs over time, so decadence is mostly an organic metaphor (rooted in the Latin verb *decadēre*, formed by the root verb *cadēre* 'to fall' plus the prefix *de-* 'down') with a wide range of associations.

To explain what we mean when we say that decadence is 'conceptually complex', and to speak in less metaphorical terms, we need to start from the basic idea that decadence is the resultant of both etymology and history, that the root sense of decadence as 'falling away' or decline gained currency because of certain historical instantiations of that meaning, with the fall of Rome as the paradigm case subsequently applied to other periods and cultures. Aesthetic meanings of decadence follow from this etymologically grounded historical assessment of certain cultures as 'decadent', that is, artistic inferiority is seen as an effect of imperial decline and social decay. Interest in decadence as historical decline begins in the eighteenth century just as the modern nation-state emerges in something like its full maturity, at least in Great Britain and France, for understandable reasons: as modern nations began to extend their political and commercial powers territorially into new colonial domains, it made sense for Montesquieu, Edward Gibbon, and others to examine the history of empires, the reasons for their successes and failures. Such concerns were part of the enlightenment project and the ideology of progress. Decadence originates as a cautionary component in the progressive paradigm of enlightenment thought, the obverse 'other' of reason and progress. The dynamism and complexity of decadence inheres in the way this otherness is valorized. For some, decadence is simply negation: it is *not* moral, *not* tasteful, and so on. For others, such negation is necessary as a critique of social norms or as a creative alternative to artistic conventions. Most artistic expressions of decadence combine the two and offer creative alternatives that include social critique. The way decadence functions, conceptually, allows for some remarkably dynamic reversals of meaning, such that the idea of decay or decline becomes – or can become – generative, inventive, creative, even progressive. The cross-over is evident in a number of areas, whether historical, social, or aesthetic, as in the aforementioned example of Gautier's assessment of Baudelaire as a poet whose powers of artistic invention proved adequate to the decadent era in which he lived. The critic had nothing but praise for the poet because of his capacity to create new forms of expression to capture sensations and ideas hitherto unknown.

In 1898, the critic Remy de Gourmont took stock of the conceptual transmutations of decadence in late nineteenth-century France, beginning with this essential observation:

> Just as the political history of the Romans has furnished us with the conception of historical decadence, so the history of their literature has furnished us with the conception of *literary* decadence – the double face of the same conception, for it is easy to point out the coincidence of the two movements, and easy to establish the belief that their developments were necessarily connected. (de Gourmont, 1966: p. 68)

De Gourmont takes issue with this formulation by questioning the connection between literary and political history. He casts doubt on the idea by noting that 'it is precisely now, when their political power has become nil, that the Scandinavian kingdoms find themselves adorned with original talents'. The comment about the originality of Henrik Ibsen and other Scandinavian authors reflects the critic's signal concern with 'the idea of decadence' as 'identical to the idea of imitation' in an effort to understand how the most original of his literary contemporaries, Stéphane Mallarmé, has come to be construed – and valued – as *décadent.* The effort is all the more interesting in the light of de Gourmont's rejection of political decline as a means of explaining literary decadence: 'no reasonable relationship can be established between the strength of a people and the genius of a man'; on the contrary, it might well be that 'political decadence is the condition most favourable for intellectual flowering' (p. 69). In making that last point, de Gourmont follows Gautier in his earlier analysis of Baudelaire's innovations as a necessary response to historical decline, but de Gourmont

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perhaps goes further than Gautier by allying the decadence of Mallarmé to an artistic rebellion against certain aesthetic conventions that appear to have been more persistent in the literary culture of France than elsewhere. Those conventions include imitation itself, understood in the positive sense as a respect for tradition; and clarity, another positive value that, like imitation, descends from the *classicisme* of Racine and other seventeenth-century writers. Mallarmé's cultivation of a contrasting aesthetic of innovation and obscurity, then, is a noteworthy departure from classical conventions that traditionalist critics inevitably decry as 'decadent'. While this juxtaposition of 'decadence' and 'classicism' is nothing new, de Gourmont's explanation of their relationship is: if Mallarmé's originality and obscurity are decadent, so much the better – such decadence is far preferable to obligatory imitation and vacuous clarity. In other words, classicism itself has become decadent, which opens the way for the innovative *décadence* of Mallarmé.

But it is not solely in literature that the concept of decadence serves as an impetus to renewal. Various inflections of decadence play a foundational role in a number of liberal arts fields, an obvious example being art history. Johann Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* [*History of Ancient Art*] (1774) established the modern field of art history by proposing that culture is subject to organic development – periods of growth, maturity, and decline. His theory that Greek art provided a pattern of perfection and that subsequent periods of art were therefore decadent in relation to classical perfection was to be far reaching. Other examples of the foundational role of decadence in the development of entire intellectual fields are less well known but no less important. Again, the modern social science of sociology might not exist if the founders of that field had not engaged with the concept of decadence. In addition to the conceptual echoes of Bourget's decadent discourse in Durkheim's descriptions of the breakdown in the social bonds between the community and the individual, other social theories during the early years of sociology reveal a certain conceptual kinship with decadence. Thorstein Veblen, another foundational figure in sociology, described the theory of conspicuous consumption in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), a theory with a clear debt to decadence. That debt is clear because the American decadent novelist Henry Blake Fuller had earlier described the same Chicago social scene – and the same consumerist dynamic – in his fiction that Veblen analysed in his social theory some years later. It is a harder argument to make, but one could also argue that anthropology is another field that emerged in its modern form as the result of an intellectual dialogue with decadence.

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A classic formulation understands decadence and primitivism as the dialectical terms in a social process of decay and renewal, and this positive conception of primitivism as socio-cultural renewal may lie behind the foundational thinking of certain anthropologists, notably Franz Boas and Edward Sapir, both of whom rejected the racist paradigm that construed Native American and other indigenous cultures as somehow 'primitive'. The larger point here is that decadence, conceptually considered, has a range and a relevance that is not limited to literature alone.

For this reason, the essays in this book often investigate decadence as something more than a cultural moment or movement in an effort to establish its value as a critical concept whose origins may lie in history and literature but whose relevance and application extend to areas outside those two seminal fields. At the same time, the discussion of the concept of decadence in the context of such non-literary disciplines as philosophy, science, geography, sociology, and so on, should prove invaluable to students of literature because all those disciplines are variously represented in literature itself. Our multidisciplinary approach comes at a crucial time in the brief history of decadence as an academic field. Prior to the recent academic burgeoning of decadence as a discipline (which began sometime in the late-1970s to the mid-1990s), 'decadent' existed as little more than a term of opprobrium for literature that was construed as mannered, derivative, or unoriginal. The assessment of inferiority also made the term useful for certain periods of literary history, notably the Roman fourth century or the last decade of the nineteenth century in Great Britain, where 'The Decadence' once functioned as a period label to describe the work – and the lives – of such figures as Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley. The label was given life by the idea that this fin-de-siècle literature formed a kind of aesthetic parallel to the precious, excessively artificial poetry of Ausonius and other authors of the late Roman Empire – the original Decadence.[1] With the publication in 1987 of Linda Dowling's *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* and the expanded edition of Matei Calinescu's *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, decadence was well on its way to becoming a complex topic in its own right that merited serious research. Dowling's book was notable for depth of investigation, Calinescu's for breadth of coverage. Two years later Barbara Spackman's *Decadent*

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[1] Usage varies with respect to capitalization, but the convention seems to be that 'decadence' is capitalized when it refers to the late Roman Empire but not when it refers to more recent cultural and social developments.

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Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio combined depth and breadth by taking a comparative approach to decadence. The approach was comparative in two senses, in that Spackman sought to engage with more than one national literature while also interpreting literature itself in the light of the nineteenth-century science of eugenics. The comparative approach continued in 1995 with David Weir's *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, which argued for the transitional role of decadence in the cultural modulation of romanticism into modernism by examining works by Gustave Flaubert, Walter Pater, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Gabriele D'Annunzio, James Joyce, André Gide, and others. The study of decadence seemed poised to develop along the broad, comparative, interdisciplinary lines that marked its emergence thirty years ago.

Generally speaking, the ensuing development of decadence as an academic field has been less comparative and interdisciplinary than scholarship at the end of the last century seemed to portend. In our view, some of the recent scholarship on decadence has become specialized to the point that the concept risks losing the status it once had as a major cultural trope with broad explanatory power, as it was in the eighteenth century, for example, in the historiography of Gibbon; in the nineteenth century, in the philosophy of Nietzsche; or, in the twentieth century, in the critical theory of Theodor Adorno. Taught within the confines of late-Victorian literature and culture, or its more cosmopolitan variant, fin-de-siècle studies, decadence is understandably perceived as a niche area. Hence our purpose here is to restore a sense of depth and complexity to the concept by including essays that examine the role of decadence in fields other than the literary, a manoeuvre that does not, by any means, gainsay the considerable value of the numerous specialized, monographic studies that have appeared over the last twenty years or so.

The approach to the concept of decadence represented here is both multidisciplinary and chronological, or, rather, developmental, as reflected in the three main sections of the volume: 'Origins', 'Developments', and 'Applications'. The 'Origins' section of the volume sees decadence originating in ancient Rome, in Enlightenment France, and in nineteenth-century modernity, with decadence being a particularly complex response to the dual industrial and political revolutions that produced the urban, bourgeois values of liberal society. This section includes two chapters on the decline of Rome, the first describing Roman decadence from the perspective of the Romans themselves (although, strictly speaking, the Romans did not have a word for what was later termed 'decadence', but their *luxuria* [extravagance, luxury] comes close to the modern concept), the second from that of Roman historiographers. These two chapters are followed by an essay on the literary and artistic extensions of Roman historiography, in which the decline of Rome and Roman history in general are treated as a kind of cultural template for creative explorations of contemporary anxieties over both the failures (e.g., the 1848 revolutions) and the successes (e.g., urban renovation programs) of modernity. The second point of origin for decadence is the libertine enlightenment, a culture closely associated with the reign of Louis XV (Chapter 4). Not only the libertine hedonism of that period but also the aesthetic contrast of rococo art with the earlier classicism associated with Louis XIV's reign acquired resonance for later decadents. These two points of origin – the Roman decadence and French libertinage – combined in the nineteenth century to provide a means of reacting against both the politics and the morality of bourgeois modernity, as Thomas Couture's 1847 painting, *The Romans of the Decadence* (fig. 3.1), an allegory of contemporary France, reveals. The third point of origin for decadence is a less allegorical and more direct challenge to the progressive paradigm of modernity, wherein progress itself is regarded as a form of decadence. This foundational phase of decadence is the subject of the two chapters on nineteenth-century bourgeois modernity – one on urban experience and the decadent sensibility (Chapter 5), the second on decadence as a critique of the modernity that urban experience entails (Chapter 6). Both show the foundational importance of the modern metropolis to cultural manifestations of decadence. The 'Origins' section also includes a transitional chapter on aesthetics, a discipline that originates with enlightenment thought but is critical to the development of decadence as a retreat from both the old morality that modernity negates and the new ideology of progress that modernity entails (e.g., art for art's sake, *l'art pour l'art*).

The chapter on aesthetics forms the link to a chapter on the art-historical meanings of decadence, the first of several chapters in the 'Developments' section that show how the concept has evolved in different ways, depending on the discipline or field under examination. We understand aesthetics as originary and art history as developmental because aesthetic philosophy provided the critical rationale that made the assessment of decadence possible with respect to particular works of art. The fact that 'decadent' began to serve as a positive designation for the work of certain artists (Gustave Moreau, Aubrey Beardsley, Gustav Klimt) only in the late nineteenth century is a further justification for the inclusion of the chapter on art history in the 'Developments' section. The relationship between aesthetics and art history illustrates a critical dynamic because art history is not the only field where the concept of decadence 'crossed over', ameliorated, or otherwise underwent some kind of transvaluation in meaning. We understand such transvaluation as developmental, not least because Nietzsche described the process as occurring in the field of philosophy in the late nineteenth century. Surely it makes sense to take note of occurrences of the same process in other cultural fields as one way of justifying and unifying the chapters designated as 'Developments'. Additional unifying strategies include the complementary positioning of certain chapters (religion and science, for example) and the continuity of topics and issues from the 'Origins' section to the 'Developments' section (both the philosophy and the psychology chapters echo, in different ways, the enlightenment chapter in the 'Origins' section). The chapter on parody, pastiche, satire, and New Women's writing might seem out of place at first, but our thinking is that this particular literary and cultural dimension of decadence is one form of the aesthetic development of the concept, hence its positioning along with the chapters on visual arts and music, which also echo the transitional chapter on aesthetics.

The 'Developments' section focuses mostly on traditional disciplines and fields that emerged in the nineteenth century or prior. This point needs stressing because it is what distinguishes development from application. The focus of the 'Developments' section is on those fields that were either well established in the nineteenth century or were in the process of becoming so. Various branches of the physical and biological sciences were sufficiently established in the nineteenth century to allow physicists, for example, to elaborate a theory of entropy that could be transposed as a social theory of decadence, as happened in 1895 with Brooks Adams's *Law of Civilization and Decay.* Most of the social sciences, psychology especially, were in the process of becoming established in the nineteenth century, and here again the concept of decadence plays a role in that establishment. After all, it is hard to imagine Sigmund Freud's invention of psychoanalysis without such 'sexological' precursors as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, whose *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) remains a foundational text for anyone seeking to investigate the development of decadence in terms of sexual perversion. The chapters in the 'Developments' section move from such aesthetic fields and topics as visual arts, music, and literature to other types of nineteenth-century disciplines, either established or emerging. Just as Chapter 7, 'Decadence and Aesthetics', serves as a transition to the discussion of decadence and aesthetic topics in the 'Developments' section, so Chapter 15, 'The Sociology of Decadence', serves as a bridge to the 'Applications' section, which includes several chapters that take stock of the social meanings and implications of the concept of decadence.

The 'Applications' section employs a different logic from the 'Developments' section (where, again, the principle of selection is grounded in fields of human knowledge that were familiar or becoming familiar in the nineteenth century) by seeking to elucidate the ways in which the concept of decadence has been or might be applied to fields that have emerged most forcefully in the twentieth century (cinema studies and popular culture being good examples). Here also the chapters echo earlier ones, with the chapter on urban geography combining with the transitional chapter on sociology, for instance, to carry forward the emphasis on decadence and the urban condition from the 'Origins' section. The 'Applications' section includes theoretical and historical examinations of literary applications that are becoming somewhat familiar (such as the use of decadence to investigate modernism), plus some applications that are quite new and unusual (cinema, again, as well as interwar avant-garde culture). The opening chapter on urban geography functions almost as an introduction to the section, given the emphasis on the urbanist importance of Vienna 1900 and Weimar Berlin, as well as interwar Paris, to the broader application, or set of applications, of the concept of decadence. The chronological progression of the closing chapters merits emphasis, beginning with transnational applications that originate in the fin de siècle but extend well into the twentieth century. These chapters are followed by the modernist application of decadence to both fiction and poetry, and then by a further application during the interwar period that includes not only fiction and poetry, but also photography (e.g., Brassaï). The final chapter brings decadence into the twenty-first century, revealing the continuing relevance and application of decadence to our own times. To that assessment we might add that not only is the concept of decadence still a part of contemporary life, but also that it may be, in some sense, necessary to an informed understanding of the anxieties and uncertainties that beset us today.

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