

Marvick on Desmarais and Condé, editors (2017)

Desmarais, Jane, and Alice Condé, editors. *Decadence and the Senses*. Legenda, Modern Humanities Research Association, Cambridge, 2017, pp. xiii + 243, ISBN 978-1-78188-481-2

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Some people like writing about Decadence that emulates the spirit of its subject. Two of the essays in this collection are of that kind. Catherine Maxwell on decadent odors and Matthew Brinton Tildesley on the little magazines' fight against prudery are fun to read in the same way that des Esseintes's celebration of *la basse latinité* in chapter three of *À rebours* is fun. They relish their subjects and write about them vividly, but refrain from using them to support a specific contemporary theory or academic cause.

The same cannot be said for the proponents of queer theory represented here. Oscar Wilde was devoted to beauty and beautiful things, and for that reason would not have liked the terms "gender-non-conformist" and "gender-bender," which Petra Dierkes-Thrun uses repeatedly in her article on Rachilde and Wilde. "Scholars have rightly noted," Dierkes-Thrun says, the "misogynist and sometimes racist orientalism" of Rachilde's *La Jongleuse* (60). It cannot be denied; the author is guilty as charged. Kostas Boyiopoulos is similarly correct about Decadence and the "eroticized text." He approves the "slipperiness" (a favorite word) of Decadent writing but rightly deplores the "odious" desire of Frederick Hankey to have a copy of *Justine* bound in skin stripped from the buttocks of "une négresse vivante" (104). Yet, considering his fondness for the word "titillating," it is surprising that Boyiopoulos finds it necessary to cite "what Ben Hutchinson calls 'deferral' and Linda Dowling terms 'aesthetics of delay'" to defend his claim that "the text of bliss has the power to precipitate, yet closure never comes" (102) when he might more pungently have called this *edging*. Dierkes-Thrun is troubled by Rachilde's "declared anti-feminism," but takes comfort in Rachel Mesch's assurance that Rachilde "interrogated relationships among sexuality, language and power that much later feminist theorists would explore more explicitly" (64). No doubt; but it is hard to recognize Wilde or Rachilde in these sanitized avatars. Sarah Parker points out that "links between female homoeroticism and the senses" have been infrequently "forged by the critics" (122). Her essay on "Michael Field" and Sappho does much to repair this omission by demonstrating how "the tongue—which is, significantly, the organ of taste, the shaper of lyric speech" can also be "a potential instrument of sexual pleasure" (122). What Parker calls "a specifically *female* homoerotic aesthetic" (her emphasis) can be traced in metaphors such as "the dew," because of its association with "vaginal secretions," and "the oyster," which Sarah Waters "knowingly deploys" in a recent novel (137; the film-maker Russ Meyer "deployed" the same metaphor years ago in his definition of the difference between soft- and hard-core pornography.)

According to Angela Dunstan, Theodore Watts-Dunton's *Aylwin* is "a unique, pleasurable, and decadent intervention" in the genre of the *roman à clef*. It offers "a pleasurable immersion in its celebrity subject" and a "pleasurable confusion between truth and poetry" (84). Yet, Dunstan argues, "our pleasure is *individual*"; it is "the pleasurable process of reading as decoding." "The affective pleasures of reading, the cumulative pleasure of decoding textual clues," she says, are enhanced by "the precariousness of textual pleasure" such that "the pleasurable slippage between reality and *Aylwin*'s imaginary world" induces "a playfully pleasurable confusion" in the reader (85).

The twelve essays engage sporadically with contemporaneous developments in France. Nick Freeman indicates Arthur Symons's debts to Gautier, Huysmans, and Verlaine, but not his debt to Mallarmé: the passage about Impressionism quoted from Symons's 1893 "The Decadent Movement" (17) is closely derived from Mallarmé's "The Impressionists and Édouard Manet," published in English in 1876. Boyiopoulos mentions Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum* in connection with one of Peter Greenaway's movies; but neither Boyiopoulos nor Maxwell, in her superb essay on "Perfume in the Decadent Literary Imagination," mentions Alain Corbin's *Le Miasme et la Jonquille*, the unacknowledged source of much of Süskind's material in that novel.

References to the work of specialists of French Decadence—particularly those writing in French—remain few and far between, and many of the contributors rely on English language translations of works by Baudelaire and Mallarmé. I was not surprised to find no mention of my own work on Decadence, synesthesia and bad taste, but it is harder to understand how Katharina Herold, for instance, in her essay on Mallarmé and dance, can have failed to engage with Mary Shaw's magisterial discussion of Loïe Fuller in *Performance in the Texts of Mallarmé*. Had Herold read Bertrand Marchal's *Salomé entre vers et prose*, or his discussion of the working notes for *Hérodias* in the Pléiade edition of Mallarmé, she might have reconsidered her claim that "Mallarmé's poem captures sensory motion by *not* letting its protagonist dance" (145). Her essay would also have benefited from careful editing both as to grammar (e.g., "Enhanced by the endrhymes of the lines, Symons [*sic*] successfully anatomizes

[. . .] the dancers' bodies"; 151) and content: the references to John Cage and Ezra Pound are gratuitous and the claim that the "Cantique de Saint Jean" is "a synesthetic *Gesamtkunstwerk*" is somewhat far-fetched. Liz Renes quite reasonably brings Baudelaire's paradox about "distilling the eternal from the transitory" to bear on the mixed classical and modern messages she finds in John Singer Sargent's portrait, *Madame X*. I would only question her repeated assertion that Virginie Gautreau's pose is "affected," "unnatural, uncomfortable," and point out that it is her left hand, not her right, "which appears to hold the fabric of her gown bunched in order to aid movement" (187).

This well produced and generously illustrated volume is the product of a conference held at Goldsmiths in 2014. After an off-putting reference to "the perfumed verse of Charles Baudelaire" in the first sentence, the introduction settles down to a workmanlike summary of the twelve contributions without quite making the case for regarding them as "chapters" of a unified work.

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