



An
Anthology of
British Poetry
and Prose

*With an Introduction
and Notes by
Karl Beckson*

REVISED EDITION

**AESTHETES
AND
DECADENTS
OF THE 1890s**

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Revised Edition

WITH 16 ILLUSTRATIONS
BY *Aubrey Beardsley*





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*To my wife, Estelle,
and
To my sons, Mace and Eric,
who are neither Aesthetes nor Decadents*

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In 1961, Ian Fletcher, calling the 1890's a "lost decade," pointed out that our understanding of that decade had suffered from two approaches that were both "viciously constricting." The first presents the nineties as a "period piece": "with its green carnations, gas lamps blooming in a Whistlerian Thames, music halls, smoky-crocketed pub interiors, Sherlock Holmes' deerstalker, it is all safely dead." The other approach is by way of Yeats's mythic view of the "Tragic Generation," which, as Fletcher states, "concentrates on the heroic failures." If the nineties have indeed provided journalistic entertainment, Yeats attempted to lend dignity to disaster, a vision that, despite its "constricting" effect, still haunts us, as it did him, precisely because it is history heightened by imagination.

In the twenty years since Fletcher's article, which gave us a view of the "variety and vivacity of the decade," the scholarship lavished upon this period has been quite extraordinary. Many figures who do not come within the scope of this anthology have particularly benefited—for example, Shaw, Hardy, Wells, and Gissing, among others. Fletcher's insistence that "we need more fundamental texts" has been partly answered by the appearance of editions of primary works and letters, the latter by such figures represented in this volume as Pater, Wilde, Dowson, Bardsley, Beerbohm, and Symonds. In addition, the appearance of the "Makers of the Nineties" series, edited by Dr. G. Krishnamurti, Honorary Secretary of the Eighteen Nineties Society (London), is providing new material on the lesser-known figures of the decade and reprints of almost forgotten works. (In addition to publishing biographies of such writers as Olive Custance, John Oliver Hobbes, and Henry Harland, the Society has reprinted *The Cameleon*, the notoriously homosexual periodical that died with its first issue.) Indeed, the establishment of the Eighteen Nineties Society in 1972 (which incorporated the Francis Thompson Society, in 1963) has given much-needed direction and stimulus to scholarly activity. In addition to the annual *Journal of the Eighteen Nineties Society*, the Society publishes a newsletter, *Keynotes*, which serves as a clearinghouse for information and inquiry. Such publications augment the valuable work published by *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, edited by the late Helmut Gerber, who for many years had been a driving force in the study of this period.

While the nineties continue to exert their special fascination for those who work its rich ore, in recent years the decade, often called "transitional," with its multitude of "isms" (such as Aestheticism, Impressionism, Symbolism, and Naturalism), has been slowly absorbed by a new "ism" that, like Hamlet's crab, has been going backwards. Once widely used to describe literary experimentation with its development of new

styles and sensibilities between the two world wars, the term *Modernism* has been extended by many literary historians to the late nineteenth century (as far back as the 1870's by some). In their anthology, *Modernism: 1890-1930*, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane argue that Modernism is "the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos." With the failure of Victorianism as cultural compromise in the late nineteenth century, Modernism arose as a response and challenge. Therefore, the nineties, both end and beginning, acquire crucial significance.

In preparing this volume for re-issue, I have expanded the bibliography in recognition of significant scholarship published since 1966, and I have provided selective annotations (especially where titles of works are inadequately descriptive) as a guide for students undertaking a study of Aestheticism and Decadence in the nineties. Since my original "Introduction" advanced the view that the Aesthetic Movement led to twentieth-century Modernism (though I did not use the latter term), I have not seen the need to revise what I have said there. However, had I done so, I would have revised some rather demeaning remarks on Wilde to reflect current critical estimates (as well as my own). In their recent view of research on Wilde, Ian Fletcher and John Stokes have written:

A clever graduate student once observed, "How can I write anything about Wilde? He is always right about everything." Some have written about Wilde, holding an opposite belief; but more truth subsists in the remark than in the notion that Wilde is insincere, shallow, immoral, irremediably minor. It needs to be said unequivocally that Wilde is a major figure, a master of the moral life. In all their dealings with Wilde, the English have been wrong about practically everything.

And much current criticism on Wilde has asserted that he was less a slavish borrower than a brilliant originator. One final correction to the "Introduction": *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was never serialized. The first version appeared complete in the July, 1890, issue of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* (London and Philadelphia.)

K.B.

November 1, 1981

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

To most students of the period, the 1890's in England—more specifically, London—are less a chronological designation than a state of mind. For some, the decade conjures yellow visions of Decadence, of putrescence in life and art, with its loss of the “complete view” of man in nature, perhaps best symbolized by fetid hothouses where monstrous orchids, seemingly artificial, are cultivated as a challenge to nature and an assertion of man's cunning. For others, the 1890's suggest the artist's protest against a spiritually bankrupt civilization, his imagination striving for the unattainable to restore his wholeness.

Limited as the phenomenon of Decadence was—one writer has rightly referred to it as but a single stone in the mosaic of the Nineties¹—in recent years it has attracted the attention of critics who see in its curious posing, its desire to shock with excursions into perversion, its devotion to artifice, and its desire to pull down the decaying temples of Victorian respectability, not only an absorbing chapter in literary history and taste but also a significant prelude to and major influence on contemporary literature. In both the Decadence of the Nineties and in our current literature, one encounters a similar quest for new experience and for new forms of expression in a world bereft of unassailable truths.

The attempt to state precisely what Decadence and Aestheticism mean has led numerous literary historians to dash themselves on the semantic rocks. For most modern critics, the term “Decadence”—when used to describe certain nineteenth-century works—does not carry pejorative connotations. In the Nineties, however, it generally implied marked condemnation and on many occasions was used to characterize the artist's moral and spiritual depravity.² In 1893, Arthur Symonds turned its pejorative suggestions into praise by describing Decadence as a “beautiful and interesting disease,” though later in the decade he limited the term to style alone. (There was confusion in the Nineties—and to some extent today—in the use of “Decadent” to characterize the artist, his work, or both; Ernest Dowson is still widely referred to as a Decadent because of his erratic life, though his poems reveal few decadent qualities.) Similar problems exist with the term “Aesthete,” which in the 1880's evoked visions of effeminate poets holding various floral displays in characteristic poses, as in the case of Wilde, who welcomed the label. However, Aestheticism implies certain attitudes rather than forms of behavior, attitudes associated with the concern over aesthetic form and experience divorced from moral judgment. Despite the attendant difficulties, both terms can be usefully employed to delineate attitudes, style, and subject matter.

In the Introduction that follows, I have attempted to set down some main lines of the “Aesthetic Movement”—the term “movement” is itself misleading, for actually it refers to a great number of writers who subscribe, with varying degrees of assent, to some loosely defined aesthetic principles. In choosing selections, I have been generally guided by the dual principle of quality and relevance.³ Consequently, I have included such works as the imitative verse of Theodore Wratislaw, whose representative decadent poems occupy as much space here as the early verse of Yeats, whose work in the Nineties is associated with Aestheticism. In the Appendix, I have included selections from two works that inspired the English Aesthetes and Decadents (Pater’s *Renaissance* and Huysmans’ *A Rebours*), as well as two satires (one of Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas, and one of *The Yellow Book*) which indicate late nineteenth-century attitudes toward the Aesthetes and Decadents.

Since no editor is infallible (one recalls the motto that Symons, as editor of *The Savoy* used in the July, 1896, number: *Ne Juppiter Quidem Omnibus Placet*—“Not even Jupiter pleases everybody”) and since limitations of space are a major consideration, the reader may be disappointed by certain inclusions or omissions; to have included all that I wished would have resulted in a volume at least twice its present length.

In the preparation of this volume, several friends and colleagues generously offered their assistance whenever textual problems arose. To my colleagues in the City University of New York—namely, Konrad Gries, of Queens College; Gloria Glikin and Jules Gelernt, of Brooklyn College—I wish to express my gratitude. To John M. Munro, of the American University of Beirut, I am especially grateful for his careful reading of the Introduction (which remains my responsibility) and for enlightening me on several troublesome allusions in the text. I should also like to thank Miss Berenice Hoffman, of Random House, for her patience and helpfulness in the preparation of the manuscript.

The co-operation of the New York Public Library and the Butler Library of Columbia University in reproducing various works has saved me countless hours of tedious copying. And, finally, I am grateful to the Princeton University Library for providing me with a copy of the text of Aubrey Beardsley’s *Venus and Tannhäuser*, which had been available only in a privately printed edition prior to its appearance in this volume.

KARL BECKSON

*Brooklyn College,
The City University of New York,
November 1, 1965*

¹ This was also the period, one recalls, of Shaw, Wells, Kipling, and Thomas Hardy, among others.

² Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* (1892), which attacked such writers as Baudelaire, Ibsen, Tolstoy, and Zola as degenerates, discovered evidence of madness in their works. “Who but a ‘decadent’ would treat all these alike?” quipped Nicholas Butler, then a young professor at Columbia University. In the Nineties, Shaw’s *The Sanity of Art* and A. E. Hake’s *Regeneration: A Reply to Max Nordau* argued against Nordau’s thesis.

³ I have omitted William Morris and John Ruskin from the discussion, for though they are certainly a part of the movement they are at the same time apart from it since they were animated primarily by the desire to reform society’s tastes for moral ends, believing not in “art for art’s sake” but in art for society’s sake.

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INTRODUCTION

*Oh Wilde, Verlaine, and Baudelaire,
their lips were wet with wine,
Oh poseur, pimp, and libertine! Oh
cynic, sot, and swine!
Oh voteries of velvet vice! ... Oh
gods of light divine!*

ROBERT SERVICE

When *The Yellow Book* appeared in April, 1894, a “universal howl” went up, wrote John Lane, its publisher, because of Beardsley’s cover and title page designs. The London *Times* decried Beardsley’s efforts as “repulsive and insolent” and labeled the entire enterprise “a combination of English rowdyism and French lubricity,” despite the fact that such contributors as Henry James, Edmund Gosse, and George Saintsbury—little known as rowdies or libertines—provided proper balance to Beardsley and Beerbohm. Reacting to the latter’s “Defence of Cosmetics,” the *Westminster Qazette* clamored for an “act of Parliament to make this kind of thing illegal.” In the United States, the prominent literary journal *The Critic*, heading its initial review “A Yellow Impertinence,” called *The Yellow Book* “the Oscar Wilde of periodicals,”¹ and later referred to a subsequent number as “A Yellow Bore,” both “indecent and dull.” By February, 1895, *The Critic*, its hostility increasing, declared that the fourth number pandered to “depraved tastes.”² Though for much of the press the daring of *The Yellow Book* was interpreted as a deliberate and dangerous assault upon respected codes of decency, for *Punch*, less inclined to hysteria, this newest expression of Decadence provided comic inspiration for doggerel verse.

Not since the publication of Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads* (1866), attacked for its paganism and satanism, had there been such a sensation in the literary world. Swinburne had been charged with perversity, unwholesomeness, and morbidity—terms later flung at the Aesthetes and Decadents, who wore them as badges of their sensitivity and superiority. In this they had been instructed by their counterparts in France, who declared that the bourgeoisie was not only their natural enemy but also their sport, for in order to demonstrate their moral superiority, they would have to shock and dazzle the dull and muddy mettled middle classes—*épater le bourgeois*.³ For

a brilliant exponent of the pose, the English needed only to turn to Théophile Gautier (1811–72), who, more than any other figure of the nineteenth century, had publicized the idea of “art for art’s sake”—*l’art pour l’art*⁴—and who had developed shocking as a fine art.

At the age of nineteen, Gautier attended the stormy premiere of Hugo’s anticlassical drama *Hernani* (1830) dressed in a bright pink waistcoat, to which he later ironically attributed his fame as a young man. He was, however, not in complete sympathy with Hugo’s belief in art for progress’ sake. Gautier felt that Hugo, like other leading Romantics, such as Vigny and Lamartine, was debasing art by lending his pen to humanitarian causes. In the introduction to his second volume of poems, *Albertus* (1832), he wrote: “In general, when a thing becomes useful, it ceases to be beautiful,” an idea he developed in the celebrated preface to his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), which advanced the idea that art was concerned only with itself in opposition to the idea of *l’art utile* held by political radicals and bourgeois writers. In an attempt to force a cleavage between art and social reform, he contended that beauty and usefulness were mutually exclusive:

Nothing is really beautiful unless it is useless, everything useful is ugly, for it expresses a need and the needs of man are ignoble and disgusting, like his poor weak nature. The most useful place in a house is the lavatory.

As the foremost inspiration in the “Aesthetic Movement,” Gautier established what was to become a central concept of Parnassianism: the supremacy of form. In his *Victor Hugo* (1835), he announced that the difference between a block of stone and a statue lay in its form, that the poet, too, was a sculptor, for he carved ideas and images out of words. The separation of form from content was, he contended, incomprehensible, for “line belle forme est une belle idée.”

By stressing the analogy with the plastic arts, Gautier attempted to make poetry objective and impersonal. In his poem “L’Art,” which he added to his 1858 edition of *Emaux et camées* (*Enamels and Cameos*), he issued a manifesto urging poets to avoid easy rhythms and to forge hard, clear lines. Only an art purified of irrelevant intrusions of morality and social-political ideas could resist time.⁵ Spontaneity, he cautioned, was the reckless outpouring of emotion without suitable control, a fault he noted in the Romantics. Art required the chisel and the file.

To achieve the impression of hardness and clarity, Gautier employed such images as exquisitely carved cameos, porcelains, marble statues, and gems. The lapidary quality of his verse was sufficiently distinctive and attractive to influence both the French and English Parnassians.⁶ To preserve artistic purity and autonomy, Gautier employed what the Romantics had called *transposition d’art*, by which poetry, for example, attempted to suggest the effects produced by the other arts. Sonnets were called pastels; and pastels sonnets. Thus, in *Emaux et camées*, “Symphonie en blanc majeur” is designed to suggest a musical composition.⁷

Though the English Parnassians agreed with Gautier that form and craft were of primary importance, the doctrine of *Vart pour Vart* was alien to their temperaments.

Essentially moral in their attitude toward art, they adopted the poetic fashions and ignored the slogans, for the aestheticism they were attracted to did not imply hostility to the bourgeoisie. They wished to avoid the unrestrained verbal fleshliness of Swinburne, who, like the earlier Spasmodics, valued spontaneity. Traditional form and restraint, the English Parnassians agreed, were suitable to a British man of letters, an ideal expressed by Dobson in "In After Days," which he regarded as his epitaph: "He held his pen in trust/To Art, not serving shame or lust."

Dobson's declaration of purity was an attempt to dissociate himself from French Decadence as well as from "The Fleshly School of Poetry" in England. The latter phrase, coined by Robert Buchanan in an article which appeared in the *Contemporary Review* in 1871, had ignited a controversy that involved Dante Gabriel Rossetti, one of the primary targets of the moralists. As leader of the Pre-Raphaelites, Rossetti was attacked for his fleshliness in verse ("fleshly all over from the roots of his hair to the tips of his toes"), his lack of wholesomeness, his erotic daydreams and for his aestheticism. Preferring medievalism to materialism, he was both poet and painter who, like Gautier, saw the possibility of combining the arts. Though he held ideas somewhat similar to those of the French Aesthetes, he was convinced that subject was more important than mere form and that *Vart pour Vart* was a meaningless doctrine. The sensuality of Rossetti and other aesthetic poets, Buchanan raged, was "shooting its ulcerous roots deeper and deeper, blotching more and more the fair surface of things."⁸ For many young Aesthetes, however, Rossetti, despite his hostility to Aestheticism and artifice, provided inspiration rather than discoloration.

Though the Pre-Raphaelites were far from being apostles of amorality in art, they were regarded by their later worshippers as the archetypes of anti-Philistinism. Rossetti, the cloistered dreamer devoted to beauty, appealed to those young writers who saw nineteenth-century science and progress, industrialism and prosperity as forces destructive to the imagination.⁹ Yeats considered him a "subconscious influence" on the Rhymers' Club (1890-95), which included Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Arthur Symons, Richard Le Gallienne, and Yeats himself, who had helped to found it.

Buchanan's other major target in his attack was Swinburne, who deserves more than anyone before him the distinction of being called "the first Decadent in England." Already hailed by an anonymous reviewer for the London *Saturday Review* as "the libidinous laureate of a pack of satyrs," Swinburne was amused by Buchanan's fulminations over *Poems and Ballads* and the evil influence of Baudelaire, whom Buchanan referred to as "a fifth-rate *littérateur*" and "the godfather of the modern Fleshly School."

When Gautier died, Swinburne was asked to contribute to a memorial volume, *Le Tombeau de Gautier* (1873; the only other English contributor was John Payne, a minor Parnassian poet). Swinburne's contribution—which Tennyson called "poisonous"—was a sonnet in praise of Gautier's novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, about which he wrote: "This is the golden book of spirit and sense,/The writ of beauty ..." The novel, which Mario Praz has called "the apologia of lesbian love" and "the

Bible of the Decadence,” reveals Gautier’s love of physical beauty and his interest in sexual perversion. (Gautier himself took up weight-lifting and spent much time in the Greek rooms at the Louvre.) The Chevalier d’Albert, its hero, suffers from a feeling of spiritual impotence and ennui. In his craving for the impossible—which Gautier believed was a central characteristic of the decadent sensibility—he yearns to be a woman in order to taste new experiences. At the estate of his mistress, d’Albert falls in love with a handsome young man who he suspects is a woman in disguise. The “young man” is, of course, Mademoiselle de Maupin, who confesses to her epistolary confidant that she cannot love either a man or a woman completely. Before leaving the estate, she appears in d’Albert’s room. Disrobing before d’Albert, she poses like a Greek goddess at the Louvre; enthralled by the perfection of her body, he studies her as though she were a work of art, reluctant to take his eyes from the vision. After a night of love, she leaves d’Albert, but not before spending some time with his mistress as well.¹⁰

Though Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads* was universally condemned—*The Athanaeum* said that Swinburne was “unclean for the sake of uncleanness” and a letter from Dublin threatened him with castration—it did not suffer legal prosecution as had Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal*. In the first essay on Baudelaire to appear in England, Swinburne in 1862 defended him by taking the position of *l’art pour l’art*, thus becoming the first English exponent of the idea: “The critical students there in France, as well as here ... seem to have pretty well forgotten that a poet’s business is presumably to write good verses, and by no means to redeem the age and remould society.” Countering the charge of immorality to which Baudelaire had been subjected in France—and to which *Poems and Ballads* would be subjected later—Swinburne saw “not one poem of the *Fleurs du mal* which has not a distinct and vivid background of morality to it,” despite the fact that it was, admittedly, poetry of “strange disease and sin.” Most Englishmen, including Swinburne, did not grasp the complexities of Baudelaire, but they acknowledged his power and originality. Though Swinburne believed he was doing in English what Baudelaire had done in French, T. S. Eliot has remarked that “had Swinburne known anything about vice or sin, he would not have had so much fun out of it.”¹¹

The most perceptive essay on Baudelaire in the century was unquestionably Gautier’s, which appeared as the “Notice” to the 1868 edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*. As A. E. Carter states in his important study, *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature* (1958), Gautier was in reality summing up his own work while discussing Baudelaire’s, for he had anticipated virtually all that one may find in *Les Fleurs du mal*. Gautier perceived that Baudelaire’s concern with artifice—which had developed into a cult by mid-century—was of metaphysical significance—that man in a state of nature was evil and that virtue, since it was artificial, was good. In his “Eloge du maquillage” (“Praise of Cosmetics”), Baudelaire had written:

All that is beautiful and noble is the result of reason and calculation. Crime, the taste for which the human animal draws from the womb of his mother, is natural in its origins. Virtue, on the contrary, is artificial and supernatural, since gods and prophets were necessary in every epoch and every nation to teach virtue to bestial humanity, and man alone would have been powerless to discover it. Evil is done effortlessly and naturally by fate, the good is always the product of some art.

The employment of make-up, therefore, results in the transcendence of nature:

Woman performs a kind of duty when she endeavors to appear magical and supernatural, she should dazzle men and charm them, she is an idol who should be covered with gold in order to be worshiped. She should therefore borrow from all the arts the means of rising above nature in order to better subjugate all hearts and impress all minds.

Similarly, the Decadents' fascination with such drugs as hashish and opium and their preference for absinthe—the official beverage of the movement—enabled the ego to transcend itself and thus improve its natural state.

The artist, too, must proceed from nature to a transcendent reality in order to invest his art with spiritual beauty. For Baudelaire, unlike the earlier Romantics, nature was not an inspiration to his creative genius but the material from which to forge new images; it existed only because it had its origins in the spiritual world. Under the influence of the mystic Swedenborg, Baudelaire adopted the Platonic idea of the universal analogy between the natural and spiritual worlds and Swedenborg's belief that forms, numbers, colors, and perfumes in both worlds were reciprocal. The latter idea was not new, for there had been experiments with synaesthesia in the previous century.¹² Baudelaire's sonnet "Correspondences," which had an enormous influence on the Symbolist movement, sets forth the doctrine that nature is a "forest of symbols" and that perfumes, colors, and sounds "answer one another." The imitation of nature was to be avoided; the poet must interpret the vast storehouse of symbols which revealed the spiritual world, the source of all beauty. Asked to write nature poetry, Baudelaire replied in a famous letter to Fernand Desnoyers in 1855 that he was incapable of being moved by vegetables, adding, to indicate his preference for artifice, that he preferred to swim in a bathtub rather than in the sea and that a music box pleased him more than a nightingale.

A believer in original sin, Baudelaire had contempt for humanitarian ideals and the nineteenth-century faith in progress. As a dandy, he cultivated a cold, precise exterior which masked intense suffering brought about by a perverse will. He said that Milton's Satan was just such a figure; and indeed Baudelaire's admirers were attracted to the Satanic elements of his dandyism. In his vision of man and nature, Baudelaire inspired the cult of artifice, a challenge to Rousseau's cult of nature, to which most Romantics subscribed. In this connection, Carter describes the paradox of the revolt:

The decadents, even when they refused to live by Rousseau's gospel, never denied its truth. They were like unfrocked priests celebrating the Black Mass—perfectly aware that their cult was blasphemous. They accepted Nature as their norm, and primitivism as synonymous with virtue. They admitted, either tacitly or enthusiastically (depending on the individual writer's desire to shock or astonish) that anything different, anything civilized or "artificial" was a priori unnatural and depraved. From the very beginning, decadent sensibility is thus self-consciously perverse, and its cult of the artificial distinguishes it sharply from Romanticism, whatever traces of depravity may be found in certain Romantics.

Indulgence in the abnormal became, moreover, "proof of man's superiority to natural law." The exercise of individual will thus superseded adherence to universal principles. The Romantic—emotional and flamboyant—pursued an ideal love rooted in the natural relations of the sexes; the Decadent—intellectual and austere—sought new sensations in forbidden love, for sexual depravity revealed a desire to transcend the

normal and the natural.

Gautier himself did not identify artifice with Decadence, though he had suggested as much in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. He was, like many Decadents, absorbed by paganism and exoticism (such as one finds in *Une Nuit de Cleopâtre*), which for Baudelaire held no interest Baudelaire did, however, see that modernism, artifice, and Decadence were intimately related. As a Decadent, he envisioned the decay of civilization and the horrifying, seductive evils of men in a style which, as Gautier has described, contains

*the morbidly rich tints of decomposition, the tones of mother-of-pearl which freeze stagnant waters, the roses of consumption, the pallor of chlorosis, the hateful bilious yellows, the leaden gray of pestilential fogs, the poisoned and metallic greens smelling of sulphide of arsenic, ... the bitumens blacked and browned in the depths of hell, and all that gamut of intensified colors, correspondent to autumn, to the setting of sun, to overripe fruit, and the last hours of civilization.*¹³

All the themes and images which had absorbed the Decadents from Gautier on are to be found in the novel that was to have a profound effect upon the English Decadents—Joris-Karl Huysmans' *A Rebours* (1884), usually translated as *Against the Grain*, which Arthur Symons called "the breviary of the Decadence." Its sexually perverse hero, Des Esseintes, like many fictional Decadents, is an aristocrat, the last of his tainted line, who suffers from severe neurosis, later complicated by indigestion, for which he takes—with considerable pleasure—enemas to provide nourishment. His genius and delight is to cultivate an interest in artifice and the abnormal. Thus, in his strange house outside of Paris, where he has secluded himself from a hated bourgeois society, he becomes absorbed in the authors of the Latin Decadence, and exotic gems, diseased flowers and monstrous orchids that look artificial.¹⁴ Suffering from boredom, he seeks new sensations which are *a rebours*: he builds a "mouth organ" which instead of musical tones releases various liquors in symphonic arrangements to suit changing moods; he collects and mounts precious gems on the back of an enormous turtle that dazzles the eye.

In "The Decadent Movement in Literature" (1893), Symons wrote that Huysmans "has concentrated all that is delicately depraved, all that is beautifully, curiously poisonous, in modern art." Barbey d'Aurevilly, the dandy whom Mario Praz calls "a Holy Father of the Decadent Movement" wrote of *A Rebours*: "After such a book, it only remains for the author to choose between the muzzle of a pistol or the foot of the cross." Like Des Esseintes, who at the end of the novel returns to bourgeois society to embrace the Church, Huysmans became a devout Catholic.

Though young Aesthetes found in Rossetti and in Keats, whom the Pre-Raphaelites had "discovered," a devotion to beauty and to the world of the imagination, and in Swinburne an extraordinary sensibility which had dramatically widened the area of subject matter in Victorian literature, it was in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) by Walter Pater, the Oxford don, that they discovered their "golden book." The famous "Conclusion" talked of the flux of life and of the necessity of experiencing with intensity the constantly fleeting impressions: "To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life." And the equally ambiguous: "Not the

fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end.” And finally, what earned Pater a reputation as the foremost Aesthete of his day: “For art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake.”

Pater’s subtle, evocative prose, with its sinuous ambiguities and attention to strangeness, had brought to criticism a new sensibility. His admirers saw in *The Renaissance* an unmistakable manifestation of Decadence: in his essay on Leonardo da Vinci, for example. Pater writes that the artist’s life was one of “brilliant sins and exquisite moments” and finds that in his work “the fascination of corruption penetrates in every touch of its exquisitely finished beauty.” The famous description of Leonardo’s *La Gioconda* is Pater’s impression of that corruption. Wilde is reported by Yeats to have said of *The Renaissance*: “It is my golden book. I never travel without it; but it is the very flower of decadence: the last trumpet should have sounded the moment it was written.” Arthur Symons, who had become friendly with Pater in the late 1880’s and to whom he dedicated his volume of poems *Days and Nights* (1889), wrote that *The Renaissance* seemed to him “to be the most beautiful book of prose in our literature. Nothing in it is left to inspiration: but it is all inspired. Here is a writer who, like Baudelaire, would better nature.... An almost oppressive quiet, a quiet which seems to exhale an atmosphere heavy with the odour of tropical flowers, broods over these pages; a subdued light shadows them.”

Pater became known as the apostle of art for art’s sake—he had unfortunately used the term in his “Conclusion”—with all the misunderstandings which that term is heir to. He was, however, concerned with moral development through art, and was not—as some of his professed disciples were—opposed to moral considerations in art. Aware that he was misinterpreted by those who claimed him as their spokesman, Pater removed the “Conclusion” from the second edition (1877), but restored it in the third edition (1888) after he believed that his position had been made clear in his novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). In restoring the “Conclusion,” he wrote:

This brief “Conclusion” was omitted in the second edition of this book, as I conceived it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall. On the whole, I have thought it best to reprint it here, with some slight changes which bring it closer to my original meaning. I have dealt more fully in Marius the Epicurean with the thoughts suggested by it.

Pater was indeed far less decadent than his disciples. When someone once tried to convince him of the excellence of Huysmans and his style, he is reported to have said, “Beastly man!” One of Pater’s unwelcome disciples was George Moore, who in 1888 sent Pater a copy of his *Confessions of a young Man*, a semi-autobiographical account of his adventures in Paris during the 1870’s, which Moore seems to have envisioned as the English equivalent of Huysmans’ *A Rebours*.¹⁵ In a letter to a friend, Moore referred to his *Confessions* as “satiric,” but whether it is a satire of the Decadence or of himself he does not say. Pater, too, regarded it as satirical, but he subtly perceived in a letter to Moore, who published it in a preface to the *Confessions*, that the pretense was too thin to escape detection: “‘Thou com’st in such a questionable shape!’ I feel inclined to say on finishing your book; ‘shape’ morally, I mean; not in reference to style