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Literary Decadence and the French Occult Revival A Survey Essay with Two New Translations of Joséphin Péladan

Brian Stableford

The history of how the term ‘decadence’ came to be used as a description for certain kinds of literary productivity, eventually spawning a ‘Decadent Movement’ in the 1880s, which expanded to embrace the visual arts as well as poetry and prose fiction, is complicated and curious.

The notion of cultural decadence had been popularized by the eighteenth-century *philosophe* Charles-Louis le Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, in *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur decadence* [*Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*] (1734). Montesquieu argued that the disintegration of the Roman Empire had not been a series of unfortunate accidents, but the inevitable unfolding of a pattern governed by a quasi-scientific law, applicable to all empires, and all civilizations, according to which they follow a life-cycle that guides them inevitably from infancy to virility, and from virility to decrepitude. Implicit within that argument was the notion that France was repeating that inevitable life-cycle, its decadence symbolized by the courts of Louis XIV and Louis XV, and its climactic catastrophe looming.

The anticipated catastrophe was obligingly provided by the 1789 Revolution, but by the time it actually came about, an alternative overview of history had been provided in the philosophy of progress, popularized by Jacques Turgot and the Marquis de Condorcet, which maintained that social progress toward liberty, equality and fraternity went hand-in-glove with technological progress, and that while new technologies continued to improve the scope of human agency, society would continue to improve too, in a utopian direction. Furthermore, the Revolution proved not to be the end of the Bourbon monarchy at all. Badly bruised but alive and kicking, it was restored in 1814. During the first phase of that Restoration, which lasted until 1830, the French Romantic Movement, initially focused on poetry, began to venture extensively into prose. The so-called July Revolution of 1830, which fizzled out when the supposedly absolute monarchy

of Charles X was only replaced by the constitutional monarchy of Louis-Philippe, did not produce a radical historical break either, although the consequent relaxation of political censorship did allow the radicalism of the Romantic Movement to blossom far more freely than before.

The debate contrasting the rival theories of progress and decadence was placed at the heart of the movement's concerns by articles in the *Revue de Paris* by Charles Nodier, an arch-supporter of the theory of cultural decadence, and graphically dramatized by works of fiction such as X. B. Saintine's *Histoire d'une civilisation antédiluvienne* [*The Story of an Antediluvian Civilization*] (1830) and Nodier's 'Hurlublu' and 'Léviathan le Long' (1833). Among the works opposing them was Félix Bodin's defiant, but anxiously progressive, *Le Roman de l'avenir* [*The Novel of the Future*] (1834). The argument took a new turn in 1835, when the critic Désiré Nisard, commenting on the work of Victor Hugo in a highly controversial essay, accused Romanticism itself, and Hugo in particular, of being 'Decadent literature', a retrograde step from the progress supposedly represented by the formal rigor of Classicism.

Hugo was unimpressed, and simply dismissed Nisard's charge as nonsense, but some of the younger writers associated with the Romantic Movement, most notably Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire, elected to adopt another strategy, construing the condemnation as if it were a compliment. They began revelling in the idea that their work was the artistic reflection of contemporary cultural decadence, reproducing many of the features of the ornate literature of the Roman decadence. The eventual culmination of that strategy was Gautier's introduction to the posthumous second edition of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, published in 1868, in which he described Baudelaire's work in these terms:

The poet of *Les Fleurs du mal* loved what is improperly called the style of decadence, which is nothing other than art arrived at the point of extreme maturity, determined by the oblique sunlight of civilizations grown old: an ingenious, complicated, savant style, full of nuances and refinement, always pushing back the boundaries of language, borrowing from all technical vocabularies, taking colours from all palettes, notes from all keyboards, striving to render one's thought in what is the most ineffable, and form in its contours the vaguest and most fleeting, listening in order to translate them to the subtle confidences of neurosis, confessions of ageing passions in their depravity and the bizarre hallucinations of obsession turning to madness.¹

In spite of Gautier's wary insistence on the impropriety of calling the style in question 'decadent', his characterization became and remained definitive of decadent writing, and it was the key inspiration of Stéphane Mallarmé, the doyen and chief theoretician of the Symbolist Movement of the *fin de siècle*. Symbolism overlapped with the parallel Decadent Movement to such an extent that few observers could tell them apart, although some Symbolists wanted to reject the 'Decadent' label and a few writers, prepared to be reckoned Decadent, considered themselves to be Naturalists rather than Symbolists.

The argument took another new turn in 1884 when the art critic Joséphin Péladan published his novel *Le Vice suprême*, which suggested that salvation from the contemporary decadence of Western civilization was only possible by means of a renaissance of occult philosophy and magic. This, he argued, would provide the means of its renewal. The novel appeared almost simultaneously with Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* [*Against Nature*] (1884), which rapidly came to be regarded as a kind of handbook of the Decadent lifestyle, and with Paul Verlaine's essay collection *Les Poètes maudits* [*Accursed Poets*], which constructed a celebratory history of perverse poetry as a homage to the heroic voices of outsiders who not only saw contemporary cultural decadence with exceptional clarity but embodied appropriately anguished and appropriately stylized reactions to it. To many observers, 1884 came to be seen as a crucial moment in literary history. Two years later in 1886, Anatole Baju launched the periodical *Le Décadent littéraire et artistique* (in April) and Jean Moréas published the manifesto 'Le Symbolisme' (in September), cementing the two labels under which the new literary movement was to go forward.

All three writers cited as key exemplars in the previous paragraph continued their literary endeavours, but they also exemplified their variant philosophies as much in their lifestyles as in their literary work. Verlaine became a virtual caricature of the alienated literary 'Bohemian', alternating phases of alcoholism and drug addiction with periods of rehabilitation and repentance; Huysmans began to think and act like martyr, dressing as a monk and living as eremitic an

existence as he could contrive in the outskirts of Paris while maintaining at least some of his literary acquaintances; and Péladan claimed entitlement to the royal title of ‘Sâr’ by inheritance from the ancient Kings of Babylon, and decided to recreate the legendary Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross, spiced with the eighteenth-century mysticism of Martinism.

The original Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross was an imaginary secret society allegedly preserving an ancient wisdom invaluable for human spiritual transcendence. The idea was promoted by three Latin documents published in 1614-17, the first two being brief manifestos of a sort and the third an allegory describing (incompletely) the ‘alchemical marriage of Christian Rosenkreutz’. Numerous scholars of the period strove to discover and join the fictitious brotherhood – which was probably the invention of the Utopian philosopher Johann Victor Andreae, author of *Christianopolis* (1619) – and they speculated extensively about the nature and contents of the secret wisdom that it had allegedly preserved, usually adding the elusive principles of alchemy, the mysteries of neo-Pythagorean philosophy, and the occult lore of the Kabbalah, to the long-lost wisdom of ancient India and Egypt. People continued to yearn to discover and join the imaginary society for the next two hundred years, and more than one lifestyle fantasist claimed to have done so. *Littérateurs* who used the notion in fiction, most famously Edward Bulwer-Lytton in *Zanoni* (1842) – which was as popular in French translation as it was in the original – were routinely supposed to be members, no matter how hard they tried to deny it.

That confusion of literary and lifestyle fantasy had a long history, and understandably so. Writing, if undertaken seriously, becomes a lifestyle, and writers who consider or discover that they are unappreciated and stigmatized outsiders, misunderstood and ‘accursed’, are more likely to cultivate eccentricity in their lifestyle and inevitably become subject to the temptations of fantasization. It is not a coincidence that Baudelaire, the most accursed of Verlaine’s perverse poets, at least in his own estimation, applied his artistry as assiduously to his lifestyle as to his poetry, becoming a determined ‘dandy’ in the truest, most Byronic, sense of the term when he decided that henceforth ‘his only colour would be black’. Nor is it a coincidence that Baudelaire’s

most assiduous disciples followed his example in their literary and lifestyle fantasies alike. Those disciples included Jules-Amédée Barbey d'Aurevilly, author of the classic short-story collection *Les Diaboliques* [*The She-Devils*] (1874); Jean Lorrain, author of the Decadent short stories translated in *Nightmares of an Ether-Drinker* (2002) and *The Soul-Drinker and Other Decadent Fantasies* (2016); and Oscar Wilde.

London was in deep denial about its own cultural decadence and therefore unremittingly hostile to its accursed poets, although not as hostile as America, where Baudelaire's idol and spiritual brother Edgar Poe was hounded to death and then had his work stolen and his name reconfigured by the appalling Rufus Griswold. It is no wonder that Paris, the least-worst place for a poet to be accursed, became the world capital of Decadence, vitriolically castigated as such by the censorious German Max Nordau, who wrote his classic demolition of decadent art, *Entartung* [*Degeneration*] (1892), while living in the city. By the same token, Paris became the capital city of the nineteenth-century Occult Revival. Commonly approached via the primrose path of literature, occultism became the most attractive, extreme, fantasy lifestyle.

The sturdiest roots of the French Occult Revival were buried deep in the Romantic Movement. In the late 1830s, following the dissolution of the so-called *Petit Cénacle* spun off from Hugo's salon, Gautier and Gérard de Nerval continued to form the hub of a circle of ambitious writers, among whom was the young Alphonse-Louis Constant who had dropped out of an intended career in the priesthood. He became a disciple of the radical Churchman Hugues-Félicité de Lammenais, who promoted an idiosyncratic variant of Catholic libertarianism before becoming involved with the Utopian socialism of Fourierism. His early writings on those causes resulted in two terms of imprisonment and deep disillusionment when yet another Revolution, in 1848, only led to yet another backlash in the form of Louis-Napoléon's *coup d'état* of 1851 and the establishment of the Second Empire.

The Second Empire devastated the Romantic Movement, whose core members were radical Republicans. Hugo was banished and refused to take advantage of a subsequent offer of amnesty,

while Alexandre Dumas, similarly exiled, did accept the amnesty, but had to work for the rest of his career under severe censorship (as Gautier, X. B. Saintine and others who had stayed in Paris also had to do). It was even worse for those whose politics had been so radical as to win them prison sentences even under Louis-Philippe. Constant turned to the less politically-contentious mystical branch of Fourierism and after a period of enforced silence he recreated himself, transfiguring his forenames as Éliphas Lévi and publishing one of the great scholarly fantasies of the nineteenth century, *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* [*Transcendental Magic, its Doctrine and Ritual*] (1854-56), which he followed up with *L'Histoire de la magie* [*The History of Magic*] (1860) and *La Clef des grands mystères* [*The Key of the Mysteries*] (1861).

Lévi also published a revised version of two fantasy novellas he had written before the 1848 revolution as *Le Sorcier de Meudon* [*The Wizard of Meudon*] (1861), but the scholarly fantasies massively outsold the literary fantasy and determined the path of his future. Although he continued to promote his political ideas – in his imaginary history, magic is essentially a species of subversion – he was typecast from then on as a lifestyle fantasist, a Magus supposedly practising the rituals he had recorded in his second scholarly fantasy, which became a handbook for many of the lifestyle fantasists of the *fin de siècle*, especially the English Order of the Golden Dawn which was formed in imitation of Péladan's Rosicrucian Brotherhood.

Histoire de la magie, inevitably, is mostly compounded out of previous scholarly fantasies, but it is also a product of the curious sub-genre of 'Romantic history', as practised by a number of authors associated with the Romantic Movement who attempted to rejig Montesquieu's theory of history, adapting it to the intellectual climate of post-Revolutionary France. The way was led by Augustin Thierry, a one-time follower of the Utopian philosophy of Henri de Saint-Simon, a great admirer of Walter Scott, and the author of *Histoire de la conquête de l'Angleterre par les Normands* [*History of the Conquest of England by the Normans*] (1825), in which Robin Hood is cast as the leader of the English resistance. Thierry combined a stern insistence on the consultation of original documents with a colourful style of narration and an imaginative freedom that made history in

general, and French history in particular, into a kind of epic romance. His chief disciples were the close friends Edgar Quinet and Jules Michelet.

Quinet, like Hugo, refused to accept Napoléon III's amnesty after his banishment in 1851. He wrote his masterpiece, *Merlin l'enchanteur* [*The Enchanter Merlin*] (1860) while in exile: a bizarre work of fiction that fuses a transfiguration of his own life story with the history of France, seen through the hypothetical viewpoint of the immortal wizard of Arthurian romance. Michelet spent the greater part of his active life writing a heavily-Romanticized multi-volume history of France (composed between 1847 and 1867), whose various spinoff items included a deliberate scholarly fantasy, *La Sorcière* [*Satanism and Witchcraft*] (1862), published immediately after *Histoire de magie* and probably inspired by it. The narrative reinterprets the witch persecutions of the late Middle Ages as the brutal suppression by the evil Church of a subversive and calculatedly pagan-feminist socialism, which had adopted the false guise of Satanism as a gesture of defiance not dissimilar in spirit to Baudelaire's adoption of the Decadent label, although far more dangerous. Initially, *La Sorcière* was far less influential on the development of the French Occult Revival than *Histoire de la magie*, but its impact grew over time and it became the ultimate source text of twentieth-century witchcraft, reinterpreted as a subversive form of paganism revelling in its survival of long persecution. Aided by his appointment to the Chair of History at the Collège de France, Michelet's history of France, which is nowadays credited with popularizing the idea of the Renaissance as a radical and decisive break in history, retained a certain respectability in spite of his venture into blatant scholarly fantasy to which some of his more inventive contemporaries never came close.

Étienne Lamothe-Langon's *Histoire de l'Inquisition en France* [*History of the Inquisition in France*] (1829) was long taken seriously, although it subsequently turned out that many of the documents he claimed to be citing did not exist.² His trumped-up history of the inquisition became a primary source for his fellow Toulousan, Napoléon Peyrat, who followed up an earnest history of French revolutionary movements from 1685-1789 (published in 1842) with a spectacular three-volume scholarly fantasy, *Histoire des Albigeois* (1870-72), which rewrote the history of the thirteenth-century

‘Cathar crusade’ as an account of the evil suppression of the south of France by the north and represented the Cathars, whose last stand was in the citadel of Montségur, as the custodians of the Holy Grail, supposedly brought to Provence by Joseph of Arimathea – a notion that proved to have remarkable staying power, extensively popularized in the twentieth century in both fiction and scholarly fantasy.

While the contributions made by other rebel Romantic historians remained temporarily muted, Lévi’s *Histoire de la magie* and *Dogme et rituel* took more rapid effect, and they formed one of the key elements of the specific revival wrought by Péladan in the 1880s, in association with two enthusiastic collaborators: the poet Stanislas de Guaita, author of *La Muse noire* [*The Black Muse*] (1883), *Rosa mystica* [*Mystic Rose*] (1885) and *Essais de sciences maudites* [*Essays in the Forbidden Sciences*] (1890); and the occultist ‘Papus’ (Gérard Encausse), author of *L’Occultisme contemporain* [*Contemporary Occultism*] (1887) and *La Science des mages* [*The Science of the Magi*] (1892). Guaita came from an aristocratic Italian family and his independent wealth not only permitted him to indulge the lifestyle fantasies of being a writer and a practising magician but also permitted him to build up a unique library of books on occultism and demonology, which became an important resource for other writers. His friend Édouard Dujardin, who was in regular attendance at Stéphane Mallarmé’s famous *mardis*, used his research in Guaita’s library in several of the short stories collected in *Les Hantises* [*Hauntings*] (1886).

One of Guaita’s principal suppliers of occult books was Henri Chacornac, who started dealing in such material as a *bouquiniste* on the Left Bank in Paris, but was enabled to move into a shop on the Quai Saint-Michel in 1884 when he married Marie-Pauline Lermina, the daughter of the anarchist and *feuilletoniste*, Jules Lermina. Lermina financed the founding of the shop and the specialist publishing business associated with it, and it became an important centre of occult society and activity. It was probably there that Guaita and Péladan met Papus, who also had ambitions to be a writer of fiction but had to persuade Lermina to help him in order to make his

work in that vein publishable. Lermina also contributed to Papus' occult periodical *L'Initiation*, launched in 1888, and the early issues serialized his novella *À brûler* [*Burn This*].³

Although he was an authentic anarchist, and hence a thoroughgoing sceptic, Lermina was also persuaded to preside over a massive 'Spiritist Congress', held in Paris on 9-15 September 1889 and organized by Papus, Guaita, and Péladan, which attracted eighty delegates from thirty-four different occult groups and demonstrated very clearly that the Occult Revival was by then in full swing. The community that the Congress brought together was far from harmonious, however; it was afflicted by all the expectable schisms, rivalries, and hostilities, which went so far as to provoke duels on occasion.⁴

Apart from Éliphas Lévi's scholarly fantasies, the other principal source of the neo-Rosicrucianism adopted by Péladan, Guaita, and Papus was Martinism, a doctrine named for a late-eighteenth-century mystic who called himself Martinez de Pailly but more widely popularized by his disciple Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, who had ventured into fiction himself, in the surreal *Le Crocodile, ou la guerre du bien et du mal* [*The Crocodile, or the War Between Good and Evil*] (written 1792; published 1798), a work very much in the Decadent style and inspired by the Terror. Saint-Martin's mystical writings were heavily influenced by the German mystic Jakob Böhme and the neo-Martinist input into the Occult Revival helped to make Böhme an important reference point for Symbolist writers, most significantly Remy de Gourmont, author of the mystically inclined and melancholy story collections *Histoires magiques* [*Magical Stories*] (1894) and *D'un pays lointain* [*From a Faraway Land*] (1896), and Henri de Régnier, whose early work was reprinted in *La Canne de jaspe* [*The Jasper Cane*] (1897). Gourmont was a close friend of Huysmans while the latter was writing *Là-Bas* (1891), a study of the alleged survival of Satanism in modern Paris and which includes characters seemingly modelled on several well-known figures associated with the revival, including Stanislas de Guaita and Gourmont's then-mistress, Berthe de Courrière.

As well as being an art critic, Péladan was also a music lover, and he was part of a significant group of French Wagnerians. He contributed to the *Revue wagnérienne* (1885-87) edited by Édouard

Dujardin and T  odor de Wyzewa, whose articles for the periodical attempted to construct a generalized ‘Wagnerian’ aesthetic theory closely related to the ‘Decadent aesthetics’ that P  ladan had attempted to build in his criticism. Mallarm   was another contributor, and his aesthetic theories inevitably had an influence on the collaborative exercise as well. The importance of the French Wagnerians had previously been considerable, not only in establishing the composer’s reputation in France but in securing it in Bavaria, and a French contingent had been invited by the composer to attend the first performance of *Die Walk  re*, at the K  nigliches Hof- und Nationaltheater in Munich on 26 June 1870. The party included several writers who were to play key roles in the Decadent Movement, not only as participants but as models: Catulle Mend  s, author of *Zo’har* (1886), an intense tale of incest that borrows its symbolism from the Kabbalah; Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, author of the classic collection of *Contes cruels* [*Cruel Tales*] (1883); Mend  s’ already-estranged wife Judith (Gautier’s daughter, who subsequently reverted to her maiden name), author of *La Reine de Bangalore* [*The Queen of Bangalore*] (1887); and   douard Schur  , a young writer who was yet to make his name but went on to become one of the most influential figures in the Occult Revival. His most important scholarly fantasy, *Les Grand initi  s* [*The Great Initiates*] (1889), contributed greatly to the popularization of the idea of the Hermetic Tradition of Occult lore, as hinted at but not spelled out in the Rosicrucian manifestos. Schur   enumerated and described a sequence of unorthodox philosophers extending over more than two thousand years to the present day, disparate but nevertheless allegedly engaged in a great common enterprise.

One of Schur  s principal sources in drawing up his list and narrativizing its history was Antoine Fabre d’Olivet, perhaps the most esoteric of all the Romantic historians and one of   liphas L  vi’s most significant sources. His esotericism had been guaranteed by his philosophical eccentricities, although his knowledge of languages, including Hebrew, enabled him to consult original documents inaccessible to anyone else at the time, and to become interested in Biblical hermeneutics. Fabre d’Olivet was also interested in neo-Pythagorean and neo-Platonist philosophy, and their connection with ideas condemned by the early church as heretical, and Schur  s

appropriation of that element of his thinking helped to allocate neo-Pythagorean and neo-Platonic ideas an essential place in the imaginary history of the Hermetic tradition as it was understood by the writers of the *fin de siècle*. Fabre d'Olivet had initially attempted to establish a career as a poet before concentrating on philosophical work, and his involvement with Romanticism extended as far as translating Byron's *Cain* into French in 1823, although he appended a 'refutation' of its supposed philosophical implications, by which Byron is said to have been unimpressed.

Before compiling *Les Grand initiés*, Schuré also met Helena Blavatsky and became briefly involved with Theosophy, although his views were considered heretical by the Society she had founded in 1875. Blavatsky had previously been involved with American spiritualism – whose French equivalent was called *spiritisme*, because *spiritualisme* already had a different meaning in the French language – but she had dissented from the notion that the entities contacted by mediums were the spirits of the dead. She was in America when she published her first scholarly fantasy, *Isis Unveiled* (1877), but that book's employment of the ideas of Hermeticism and Neoplatonism suggests that, like Schuré, she had read Fabre d'Olivet (she was not conscientious about acknowledging her sources). When she returned to Europe in 1885, she initially settled in London, where she wrote and published *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), a much fuller account of her ideas which adopted a great deal of fake Oriental mysticism into an elaborate imaginary prehistory and history of the world. Rapidly translated into French, it became one of the most influential sources for the literature associated with the Movement.

That influence is understandable because Blavatsky was not at all shy about copying from literary sources and had borrowed abundantly from Edward Bulwer-Lytton's occult novels in constructing her fantastic metaphysics. In addition to Schuré, who appropriated Blavatskian materials into such novels as *L'Ange et la sphinge* [*The Angel and the Sphinx*] (1897) and *Le Double* (1899), her notions were very influential on a series of seven occult fantasies by Augustin Thierry's nephew, who was baptized Gilbert-Augustin Thierry but switched the hyphen in order to emphasize his relationship and began signing himself Gilbert Augustin-Thierry.⁵

Jane de la Vaudère, perhaps the most conspicuously Decadent of all the occult fantasists, extensively borrowed these theosophical notions in such historical novels as *Le Mystère de Kama* [*The Mystery of Kama*] (1901) and *La Sorcière d'Ecbatane* [*The Witch of Ecbatana*] (1906). Similarly, when Maurice Magre, who was introduced to the Occult community by Gabriel de Lautrec, developed an alternative occult history of his own for his many occult novels, he used Blavatsky's and Schuré's for templates, adapting his own version of the story of Christian Rosenkreutz and his own variation of Napoléon Peyrat's account of the Albigensian heresy and the Holy Grail.

The *spiritiste* movement that Blavatsky had abandoned remained a powerful, if rather peculiar, literary influence. It was primarily associated in Paris with 'Allan Kardec' (Hippolyte Rivali) who was an influential educationist, popularizing the pedagogical methods of Johann Pestalozzi in French schools, before his involvement with spiritism took over his life and his reputation following his first 'magnetization' and contact with the spirit world at a séance in 1855. His publication of *Le Livre des esprits* [*The Book of Spirits*] (1857) and *Le Livre des médiums* [*The Book of Mediums*] (1861) followed rapidly, shortly in advance of Éliphas Lévi's groundbreaking publications. At first the influence of the two writers was separate and there did not appear to most observers to be any overlap between them for some considerable time, at least until the Spiritist Congress of 1888, when the tacit placement of the spiritists in the same category as the neo-Rosicrucians, Martinists, and other would-be contributors to the Hermetic Tradition caused some resentment and hostility.

Kardec's spiritism, like its parent, American spiritualism, was a formal religion, akin in that regard to Swedenborgianism, another esoteric philosophy that had had some literary influence in France, especially on Romantic writers.⁶ Spiritism, however, had the distinction of also becoming a focal point of scientific investigation, principally in England, where the Society for Psychic Research was founded in 1882, but also in France, where the astronomer and popularizer of science Camille Flammarion became intensely interested in the phenomena produced by mediums and hosted many séances in an experimental frame of mind, inviting writers and artists as well as

fellow scientists to participate in his research. Flammarion managed to interest the sceptical Hugo in his work while he was still in exile, and the playwright Victor Sardou produced drawings for Flammarion while hypnotized, notionally depicting spirits reincarnated on other planets.

Other members of the Romantic Movement who became involved with spiritism included Delphine de Girardin, who began hosting séances in her salon before Kardec popularized the movement. She was probably the principal influence on Gautier's spiritist novella *Spirite* (1865), although he did not publish it until some years after her death. It was, however, Flammarion who became the principal popularizer of spiritism in France after Kardec, especially in promoting the notion that spirits might be reincarnated in other worlds, first proposed in the eighteenth century in several speculative *contes philosophiques* but given additional impetus and pseudoscientific support by Flammarion in *Lumen* (1866-69; 1872; revised 1887) and the best-selling *Uranie* [*Urania*] (1889).

The intense scientific scrutiny to which spiritist mediums were subjected had an inevitable effect on the way that the topic was treated by *littérateurs*. Even when, like La Vaudère, they routinely attended séances, they were often wary in their treatment of spiritism, although popular thrillers frequently borrowed the apparatus for purely melodramatic effect. In consequence, spiritism made less impact on Decadent literature than might logically have been expected and 'medicalized' tales of hypnotism, picking up themes from the research of pioneering neurologists like Jean-Martin Charcot and Charles Richet, usually shunned Decadent style in favour of a markedly different narrative strategy. One notable but somewhat belated exception was Gaston de Pawlowski, editor of the humorous periodical *Comoedia* – to which the ubiquitous Péladan was an occasional contributor – and he eventually assembled many of the surreal philosophical fantasies he published there in *Voyage au pays de la quatrième dimension* [*Journey to the Land of the Fourth Dimension*] (1912; revised 1923), which attempted to explain mediumistic and other seemingly-supernatural phenomena with the aid of additional geometrical dimensions.

Another writer who was a significant influence on the scholarly fantasies of Schuré was Louis Jacolliot, whose first venture into scholarly fantasy was *La Bible dans l'Inde* [*The Bible in India*]

(1869), which attempts to prove that the story told in the gospels is based on Indian accounts of the life of Krishna – an idea that had a direct and extensive influence on Jane de La Vaudère's Indian fantasies. He followed it up with the more general *Le Spiritisme dans le monde: l'initiation et les sciences occultes dans l'Inde et chez tous les peuples de l'antiquité* [*Spiritualism in the World: Initiation and the Occult Sciences in India and Among the Peoples of the Ancient World*] (1875), which made an important contribution to the importation of Oriental ideas into the French Occult Revival and their ensuing literary redistribution. He subsequently contributed to popularizing the idea of a lost continent in the Pacific, which, when filtered through Blavatsky, who incorporated it into her fanciful prehistory, became a prolific source of twentieth-century fantastic fiction.

Schuré was one of several writers heavily involved with the Occult Revival who published work in the prestigious literary and political periodical *Le Nouvelle revue*, originally owned and edited by the feminist writer Juliette Adam, a close friend of the Russian occultist and Theosophist Yuliana Glinka. Péladan was a regular contributor, publishing two serial novels in the periodical, and the younger writer Jules Bois also published two novels there.⁷

Sceptical *littérateurs* were, for the most part, eclectic in their selections from the available spectrum, and often reckless in hybridizing them, their interest in the ideas being primarily aesthetic, valuing them for their symbolic utility and narrative convenience. In that regard they contrasted to some extent with 'true believers', who approached the ideas they were deploying much more earnestly and didactically, often to the detriment of the purely literary qualities of their work. Only a handful of writers contrived to maintain a high reputation in both the literary and the occult camps, and the prolific literary works of Péladan, Schuré, and Bois tended to be considered with a rather jaundiced eye by literary critics. One close associate of Guaita, Péladan, and Papus who escaped that prejudice, however, was Victor-Émile Michelet (no relation to Jules), who established a considerable reputation as a poet, and published one collection of idiosyncratic prose tales, *Contes surhumains* [*Superhuman Tales*] (1900).

Later in his career, Schuré moved on to become a disciple of Rudolf Steiner, a one-time pillar of the Theosophical Society who split from it in order to found his own discipline of Anthroposophy. Schuré wrote dramas under Steiner's influence and vice versa, and Schuré played a leading role in introducing Steiner's ideas to France. Their effect, however, like many other effects of the Occult Revival, was somewhat delayed, not beginning until the nineteenth century was over and reserving their maximum influence until the twentieth century was well advanced. As those delayed effects became more pronounced, the manifestations of the Revival and its literary spinoff that had peaked in the *fin de siècle* faded away somewhat, illustrating the susceptibility of lifestyle fantasies and literary fantasies to fashion. Where fashion rules, however, memories are conserved, often nostalgically. Occult fantasies never die, but merely wait to make comebacks when the time is ripe.

A few of the books cited in this essay have never gone out of print and several others, after periods of oblivion, resurfaced even before the Bibliothèque Nationale's gargantuan *Gallica* website set forth to bring all of the library's out-of-copyright material into the public domain. The translations cited in the essay, and the essay itself, would not have been possible without that Herculean labour. Curiously, therefore – perhaps one might almost say magically – it is only in the present day, when simultaneous access to all the elements of the history mapped out here is not merely practicable but easy, that the spectrum of influences it observes can be perceived and mapped. If civilization were not on the brink of collapse, one might almost be able to believe in progress. Unfortunately, no one with an ounce of sanity can any longer believe, even for an instant, that a Péladanian renaissance might save us.

¹ Théophile Gautier, 'Charles Baudelaire', in *Les Fleurs du mal, Oeuvres complètes de Baudelaire*, I (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1868), p. 17. My translation.

² Lamothe-Langon's parallel career as a novelist was also partly fraudulent, some of his publications, including *L'Ermitte de la tombe mystérieuse* [*The Mysterious Hermit of the Tomb*] (1816) being passed off falsely as translations of work by the English Gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe, and he eventually became a full-time faker of fictitious and often salacious 'memoirs' of various famous people.

³ Other writers of fiction who appeared in the periodical's pages included Gabriel de Lautrec, whose early work was collected in *Poèmes en prose* (1898), partially translated in *The Vengeance of the Oval Portrait and Other Stories*, trans. by Brian Stableford (Tarzana, CA: Black Coat Press, 2011).

⁴ Not long before his death Guaita had to fight another of the leading writers of the revival, the novelist Jules Bois, author of the scholarly fantasy *Le Satanisme et la magie* (1895) and the story collection *Le Douleur d'aimer* (1896) and many other works. Both pistol shots missed their targets, probably by design.

⁵ The first three of these stories are translated in the collection *Reincarnation and Redemption* (2019).

⁶ Honoré de Balzac's novella *Séraphita* (1834) was perhaps the high point of Swedenborgian fiction, although it acquired a new influence when Péladan adopted its central motif of the androgyne very enthusiastically, as a kind of holy grail of human transcendental evolution.

⁷ Among several other contributions of a similar stripe was *Amour astral* [*Astral Amour*] (1900-01) by 'Willy,' the only novel written under that pseudonym not to be published by the family firm of Henry Gauthier-Villars, who usually recruited other writers to pen the work that appeared under it but seems to have written the first half of *Amour astral* himself, presenting a satirical view of the contemporary occult fascinations of French society and illustrating the process by which ideas from various sources had by then been thrown into a huge melting pot and vigorously stirred.

Two New Translations of Joséphin Péladan

Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918) came to Paris in 1882 and began a prolific and successful career writing criticism of art, music and drama for the periodicals that were proliferating rapidly at the time. Following the success of his novel *Le Vice suprême* in 1884, which suggested that salvation from the contemporary decadence of Western civilization was only possible by means of a renaissance of occult philosophy and magic, he became the best-known occult lifestyle fantasist in Paris, associating himself with the poet Stanislas de Guaita (1861-1897) and the occultist ‘Papus’ (Gérard Encausse, 1865-1916) to recreate the legendary Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross, fusing it with the more recent mysticism of Martinism. He claimed entitlement to the royal title of ‘Sâr’ by inheritance from the Ancient Kings of Babylon. *Le Vice suprême* became the first of a twelve-volume epic, *La Décadence latine*, of which the eighth volume, *L’Androgyne* (1891), used the prose poem reproduced below as a preface. He published three volumes of art criticism under the general title of *La Décadence Esthétique* in 1888-91, the last of which advertised the founding of an annual Salon de la Rose & Croix, which was held from 1892-97 and became an important showcase for Symbolist artists.

To an Unknown Sister¹

Joséphin Péladan

Why are you hesitating? The heart is a good guide, we follow it in tears, but in tears we live and we climb, wounded but heroic, towards the summit where the angel awaits us, lifting us up on her ocellated wings, trembling and swift.

Stranger, come to the country I detest, what ill wind has ruffled your raiment, and what cross do you bear to the earthly cavalry?

Your spirit has cried out to the mirrors I have sculpted of the desired hereafter, magical reflectors; your spirit has cried out and seen its dream beneath the features of singularity and subtlety, which I have borrowed from da Vinci to adorn my threads with languorous light.

Glory be to God, who gave you an elevated soul; I am merely the bow of the enchanted violin, and if I have awakened the mystical sleepers and idealities lying within you, I am only a clarion of the celestial Diana, glory be to God.

Alas! Son of Satan, demon, if I can sow love and fire along my path and grant divine insomnia to my sisters; errant heart, troubadour, voice whining with the storm's wind, God does not allow me to burn with these flames, and the powerless, outstretched arms of my sisters, vainly rowing shadows in the night, do not embrace me.

Towards a mount I know not where, I carry the Holy Grail of the ideas of my distant ancestors.

Dare I take a sister with me on the fatal ride?

The chimera I mount, without bit or bridle, is perfidious, the hell it has left watching me, harrying me.

All I have left is pride, the golden sword buried in the mud of a Delta. All I have left is pride, the tiara crushed beneath the hooves of giant bulls. All I have left is pride, but I have kept it as is, with the same power that conquered you, predestined woman; I raise my hand before God, with no ring showing servitude, and, son of the first priests, I bless your gentle heart, which has beaten toward me and I draw the graces from Heaven upon his head.

Yet, if you were the virgin chosen to revive my eyes with your pure breath, and if my forehead could sleep, heavy on your breasts; if you were the fairy whose golden wand opens a quiet and sure path through forests filled with the fear of beasts from Reality; if you were the sister, consoling and soft; if you were the woman, sent by angels in answer to my prayer. Oh, be not her; I will bear my misfortune, I will buckle under yours, and destiny's order wants me alone and plaintive. Damned one who presents his heart to the shocks of existence, so that the spark, kindled in the flank of Prometheus, may fly from it before those obscured by instinct.

Yet I would dearly like to see you, if only in image...

When autumn comes, melancholic and russet, I will go to the country where you are, to gather myself together, and will spend a day, distracted or bored, under the tranquil balcony where your dreams soar. Later, much later, when life has put barriers between us, will we not be ashamed, faint-hearted and cold-bodied to have solicited happiness in thought alone.

As we hesitate, the cup proffered by our angel or devil evaporates or pours away. Before emptying it, we examine it for a long time, wanting only that it be inexhaustible.

You do not dare to take my time; I will dare to take your life! Forget, forget the hero in my glimpsed work, the hero who resembles the Beloved; the passion that does not fill me would kill you.

Let our lips not meet; they are red, they are hot, fountains of vertigo, doors of lust; but let us hold hands like the children of the same father that we are.

Yours is trembling, I can feel the artery beating the thin and clear skin, and it is not instinct which pulses in my veined temples, it is not pleasure that incites and impels us; we who seem to

desire one another, my sister, recognize each other; listen to this voice, this voice of the blood that sings the glorious moment of the brother discovered, of the sister encountered.

Yes, you are my sister, since you whisper the hymn of the unreal that I sing at the top of my voice. Yes, you are my sister, because you have never granted the wishes of the mortal stutterers of love or vulgar shakers of women. Yes, you are my sister, and, following the royal tradition of the Race, you have kept your hand withheld from hands extended from below. To encounter a heart you had to descend, and you sensed mine without stooping. Yes, you are my sister and duty demands that I pause for a moment on my chimeric path to kiss your heart, and then close it like a holy tabernacle when mass is over.

Sorority, incest, virtue or sin, ascension or fall, whatever the outcome of our nascent love, whether it rises above us like a mystic dawn, or carries the red and violet shadow of pathetic sunsets, we will emerge, blossoming, from the dream or purer from the sin.

Yes, purer! The noble souls in the athanaton of passion free themselves from the matrix and transcend themselves; and passing through a heart turned towards God, the muddiest current is purified!

The flesh becomes a springboard, launching us bewildered beyond the formal, and this same spasm, which brutifies Bottom, projects the Oelohite² towards the stellar zone.

Love's vibration has waves of sound that rise into the azure, turning blue as they die; sometimes, from the erotic shock of two bodies in turmoil, soar two souls in ecstasy. *Felix culpa!*

Fortunate sin, but sin; emerging from pleasure, vigilant pain always exacts its toll; the Dream can turn no soul to matter; the Dream is a desire, which like the symbolic serpent, joylessly bites itself.

Be my sister; and let us go through life hand in hand. If love one day came to join our lips, we would have made the effort of a great duty and would have struggled, before the decline, against the earth and its instinctive force, we Oelohites, sons of Atlas and Esther.

—*La Grande revue: Paris et Saint Petersburg* (November 1888)

¹ Thanks to Peter Coles for his helpful suggestions on an earlier draft.

² An Oelohite, sometime synonymous in Péladan's work with a Daimon, is a kind of demigod, or what Nietzsche called an *übermensch*: an attainable condition of transcendent being at which humans can and ought to aim.

Hymn to the Androgyne

Joséphin Péladan

I

Ephebe of the small bones, of the scant flesh, mixture of the strength that will come and the grace that is fleeing. O indecisive moment of the body, and the soul, delicate nuance, imperceptible moment of plastic music, sex supreme, third mode! Praise to you!

Virgin with slender arms, small breasts, illusion of strength that plays, hidden in grace, vague hour of the body not confused with the soul; hesitant colour, enharmonic accord, hero and nymph, apogee of form, the only one conceivable to the spirit world.

Praise! to you!

II

Youth with long hair and almost desirable, whom desire has not yet touched, beardless, unconscious of imminent opportunities, perhaps of pride, perhaps of corruption, schoolboy listening to the voices of insomnia, bad lot or cleric and future Knight of Malta or of Meschines. Praise to you!

Young woman with short and almost boyish hair, whose heart is not orientated, bud still closed to carnal blooming, perhaps of sin, perhaps of virtue, maiden spelling life in the song of the wind, vagrant or damsel, soon consecrated to Mary or Venus. Praise to you!

III

Virgin young man, incomparable charm, sole plenary grace, delectable unknown, reticent poem; on the velum of the heart not one name inscribed; on the velum of the body, not one pink trace; flesh that has not weakened, spirit still floating, alabaster from which nothing evaporates. Praise to you!

Virgin young woman, imperial diamond among all the gems of femininity, ornament that defies in comparison celestial crowns, your precious limbs are ignorant of any embrace and your fibres, sentimental strings, have not been subject to any dissonant finger, viol in which harmony sleeps entire, harpsichord of silence. Praise to you!

IV

Man who charms and tomorrow will labour, Siegfried unknown to himself, Cherub awakening and page of today, squire of tomorrow, bachelor astonished and musing on the brink of adolescence; first down on the lips and first trouble in the heart; pretty stammerer who reveals a naked neck as white as a woman's arm. Praise to you!

Woman who thinks and will love tomorrow; she is Desdemona unknown to herself and Juliette before the ball; an effort of reflection ending in the dream; a curious Pandora who interrogates the moon, illuminator of desire, nestling in the shadow of her heart, an ingenuous Bradamante asleep amid her long tresses, and seems an Endymion with a proud and silver body. Praise to you!

V

Sex very pure, which dies of caresses;
Sex very holy, which alone rises to the heavens;
Sex very handsome, which does not deny adornment;
Sex very noble, which challenges the flesh;
Sex unreal, which some traverse as Adamah once did in Eden;
Sex impossible to terrestrial ecstasy! Praise to you who do not exist!
Sex very mild the mere sight of which consoles;
Sex very calm, which sends the nerves to sleep;
Sex very tender, from which pure pleasure emanates;
Sex very caressing, which kisses our soul;
Sex very intoxicating, which leads us on high;
Sex very charitable, which gives us our dreams;
Sex of Jeanne d'Arc and sex of miracle! Praise to you!

VI

You were once called Adonis or Tammuz. Before Mozart you were Alcibiades; ideal chrysalis, from which angels spring, and reduce men to the inferior virility, to the masculinity of larvae. O form so perfect that God has consecrated it as the vestment of the eternal fête! Praise to you!

You were called for Plato Diotima: Sappho, Hypatia, Abbess of Gandersheim, Hrotsvithale¹ designated Polyonime,² whose glory is formed of the complete prism of mortal nuances, illuminated by perpetuity.

O grace so serene that Dante was able, in three bounds, to rise to the clouds. O lady of beauty, wisdom and glory chatelaine of Christian Valhalla! O Beatrice! Praise to you, Valkyrie!

VII

Intangible Eros, Uranian Eros, for the vulgar men of moral epochs you are merely an infamous sin; they called you Sodom, celestial contemptor of all voluptuousness. It is the need of hypocritical centuries to accuse Beauty, that vivid light, of the darkness that vile hearts contain. Keep your monstrous mask, which defends you from the profane! Praise to you!

Anteros, O healer of banal tenderness, powerful alchemist of imperfect desire, Athanor of the Great Work in the world of souls; it is your destiny that wants the temporary errors, the fecund errors, from which, unshackled, you rise to become sublime amid the curious astonishment of the agnostic! Praise to you!

VIII

Signorelli's angels,³ Leonardo's Saint Jean,⁴ punisher of Eden and the culpable Ereck,⁵ messenger of mystery and means of miracle, celestial ambassador, you are the supreme point at which our material eye can conceive spirit; you are the last step at which the celestial Norm can manifest prayer. Praise to you.

True angels of the true Heaven, burning Seraphim and Cherubim, abstractors, tenants of the thrones of the Norm – Lordship and Formless Essence! – Prince of the Septenary, who commands and obeys by turns. O initial sex, definitive sex, absolute of amour, absolute of form, sex that denies sex, sex of eternity! Praise, to you, Androgyne.

—*La Plume* (1 March 1891)

¹ Hrotsvitha of Ganderheim was a tenth-century Latin poet and dramatist who lived as a lay sister in the Abbey of Gandersheim, probably under the patronage of Abbess Gerberga, the niece of the Holy Roman Emperor Otto I.

² Péladan routinely uses the term 'Polyonime' [an entity with many names] in his writings, sometimes personalized and divinized.

³ 'Angels' by Luca Signorelli (c. 1450-1523) is one of a series of frescoes commissioned by Pope Sixtus VI for the shrine of Loreto.

⁴ Leonardo da Vinci's mysteriously androgynous painting of Saint John the Baptist, in the Louvre, impressed several writers of the *fin de siècle*, none more so than the lesbian poet Renée Vivien (Pauline Tarn), who represented herself as 'San Giovanni' in the first version of her autobiographical novel *Une Femme m'apparut* (1904; tr. as *A Woman Appeared to Me*) and reproduced the image as a frontispiece.

⁵ The reference is to the protagonist of Chrétien de Troyes' Arthurian romance *Erec et Enide* (the name is rendered Ereck in the German version by Hartmann von Aue), who is suspected of becoming effeminate and reacts badly.