



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Issue 1

Spring 2018

Review: Michel Winock, *Décadence fin de siècle, L'Esprit de la cité* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017)

Fay Wanrug Suwanwattana

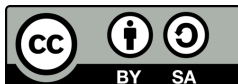
ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 June 2018

Date of Publication: 21 June 2018

Citation: Fay Wanrug, 'Review: Michel Winock, *Décadence fin de siècle, L'Esprit de la cité* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017)', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 1 (2018), 116-18.

volupte.gold.ac.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Michel Winock, *Décadence fin de siècle, L'Esprit de la cité*
(Paris: Gallimard, 2017), 288 pp.
ISBN 9782070107032

Fay Wanrug Suwanwattana

University of Oxford

In his latest publication, Michel Winock, a prolific historian specialising in intellectual history and the history of the French Republic and whose writings have been recognized by many prestigious prizes (*Prix Médicis* 1997 and *Prix Goncourt de la Biographie* 2010), focuses on a network of writers, journalists, pamphleteers, and activists in the last decades of nineteenth-century France (1870s-1890s). These are significant figures who, in their manners, responded and engaged with the generally perceived sentiment of decadence pervading *fin-de-siècle* French society. Alongside more 'literary' writers such as Barbey d'Aurevilly, Léon Bloy, Paul Bourget, Joséphin Péladan, Rachilde, Maurice Barrès, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Octave Mirbeau, and Remy de Gourmont, Winock brings into focus the less studied parodic and subversive vein of decadence illustrated by Charles Cros, Alphonse Allais, the *Fumistes*, and other ephemeral groupings. Writers less often recognized as Decadent *per se*, such as Alfred Jarry and Paul Claudel, are also given particular attention. Alongside these groups of writers, Winock provides an extensive study of influential journalists such as the patriotic Paul Déroulède, the anti-Semitic Henry Rochefort, and Édouard Drumont (author of the notorious anti-Semitic pamphlet *La France juive*), and also the anarchist figures and their sympathisers in literary circles. To deal with such complex materials, the seventeen chapters forming this essay focus on these figures' writings, professional networks and private relationships, as well as exploring key concepts in their historical and cultural development. These key concepts range from nationalism, socialism, communism, antisemitism, anti-immigration, anti-militarism, Boulangism, the fear of the 'mass', and decadent sexuality, to the consolidation of republican ideology and anti-republicanism.

Winock's definition of Decadence as the construction of a collective 'imaginaire', a state of mind, an atmosphere, a moral climate characterized by the perceived decline of French race and society at the turn of the century, is not new. What is however particularly compelling is his close examination of changes in ideas associated with Decadence – both reacting against it and inspired by it – and he unfolds their overlapping, intertwining and, at times, antagonistic relations. Thus, we understand for example how Maurice Barrès' evolving nationalism, which feeds into his literary work, was inspired at once by socialism and antisemitism, how Octave Mirbeau while collaborating with right-wing, monarchist and Bonapartist journals, was at the same time a supporter of anarchist groups and wrote subversive literary texts. This disentanglement of *fin-de-siècle* values and ideas from a historical perspective is particularly welcome for twenty-first century readers, who may otherwise find it difficult to grasp the associations between ideas which today appear to be irreconcilable.

If *Décadence fin de siècle* focuses first and foremost on artists and writers, the aesthetic and thematic aspects of literary works are always examined in relation to politics and historical events. The rejection of the Republic and its parliamentary system, along with contempt for its associated bourgeois values, scientism, and positivism, is primarily held up as the chief reason why writers and artists considered their society to be decadent. While this approach brings out the political dimension of Decadent texts and their potential in posing serious political and historical questions, as opposed to the generally perceived image of Decadence as an aloof and ivory-tower aesthetic, it doesn't do full justice to the ambiguities and ambivalent attitudes of such literary texts (one exception occurs in Chapter 4 dedicated to Joséphin Péladan, where Winock points out, in passing, the ambiguous relationships between eroticism and asceticism, perversion and norms that are cultivated in Péladan's novels). Reading this essay, one is left wondering how the authors studied can be regarded as 'Decadent'. Since their writings are primarily presented as being in reaction against Decadence, they are perhaps fundamentally 'anti-Decadent'. As a result, Decadence as it unfolds throughout this study risks being too narrowly associated with a sentiment of revolt against

modernity, an echo of Antoine Compagnon's notion of 'les antimodernes', yet without the subtlety and nuances attended to in the practice of literary criticism. However, if both the tension between the aesthetics and politics mobilized in Decadent literary writings and the interplay between Decadence and anti-Decadence are left under-explored, this weakness is satisfactorily compensated for by Winock's skills as a historian and essayist. He successfully highlights networks of far-reaching ideas and their circulation in literary, intellectual, and political circles.

Overall, this is an overarching study of Decadence in its nineteenth-century historical context, with a focus on the essentially political nature and implications of the concept played out within a small and limited milieu whose 'mentalité collective' nevertheless represented a 'fait historique'. If Winock's study doesn't provide a new argument about literary Decadence and its aesthetics, it nonetheless puts into perspective the ways in which Decadent authors and their writings were entangled in the politics of their time.

Décadence fin de siècle can be of interest to both the general public seeking an introduction to the French *fin de siècle* period with a focus on history of ideas and intellectual history, and specialists of Decadent studies who wish to extend their approach of Decadence beyond literary aestheticism and towards an interdisciplinary dimension. A brief chronology at the end of the volume situating political and social events along with literary and journalistic publications is very useful for this purpose. Winock's approach to the subject in terms of intellectual history is very welcome at a time when scholars of Decadence have been seeking to open up new perspectives and renew their critical apparatus. Many resonances of so-called Decadent cultural phenomena still haunt our current vocabulary, imagination and debates, and *Décadence fin de siècle* attests to the continuing importance of nineteenth-century Decadence for twentieth and twenty-first century cultural and literary studies.