

*The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* by Matthew Potolsky. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2013. 232 pp. ISBN 978-0-8122-4449-6. \$59.95.

Matthew Potolsky traces the conceit of his new book on the decadent movement to the French Romantic philosopher-poet, dramatist, and novelist, Alfred de Vigny, and his 1832 novel, *Stello*. A dialogue, or series of *consultations*, between the fictional Romantic poet, Stello, and the mysterious Doctor Noir, to whom Stello goes seeking relief from fits of depression and *ennui*, the novel recommends a relationship between art and politics that Potolsky argues is characteristic of decadent writing. In telling the stories of three poets who become tragic victims of governmental authority, Doctor Noir warns Stello against the dangers to the poet of direct political engagement, and prescribes a retreat from the public square in favour of a life apart, devoted to the poetic craft. Yet, the Doctor explains, from that solitary vantage the artist will continue to contribute to the public good, exercising a different kind of political influence through his writing and its reception. In his devotion to beauty, free of the everyday play of power, the poet will forge, with other like-minded individuals, new communities and political formations, powerful forms of cultural resistance united by the appreciation and exchange of texts. “The Republic of letters,” counsels Doctor Noir, “is the only one whose citizens are truly free [*la seule qui puisse jamais être composée de citoyens vraiment libre*], for it is composed of isolated thinkers, often unknown [*inconnu*] even to each other.” In referring to the “Republic of letters,” the network of Enlightenment correspondence that joined eighteenth-century intellectuals across national boundaries, Vigny emphasizes the cosmopolitan and politically transformative nature of the republic he describes.

Potolsky’s central argument, then, is that beginning with Charles Baudelaire, who frames his 1852 and 1856 essays on Edgar Allen Poe with references to Vigny’s novel, decadent writers “fashion themselves as contributing members of an international republic of letters.” Opposing the long critical tradition that defines decadence in terms of some essential set of transgressive tendencies – perversity, morbidity, artificiality, and so on – Potolsky regards the movement as a particular “literary stance, a characteristic mode of reception.” As such, he understands decadent writers to be asserting a communal identity founded on a shared enthusiasm for specific cultural figures and forms. Turning to Michael Warner and contemporary public-sphere theory, Potolsky regards the decadent movement as constituting a “counterpublic,” a social body formed through the production, circulation, and reception of text and defined in opposition to dominant discursive communities bound, for instance, by national origin or religious affiliation. The decadent counterpublic founds its