

Jean Pierrot. The Decadent Imagination: 1880-1900. Translated by Derek Coltman. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981. Pp. 309. \$22.50.

As the historical boundaries of its subtitle hint, Jean Pierrot's The Decadent Imagination: 1880-1900 takes as its subject decadence considered as a movement. Thus Pierrot's view of decadence differs essentially from that of another recent writer on the subject, Richard Gilman, whose 1979 study Decadence bore the subtitle The Strange Life of an Epithet. Gilman's book is an investigation of a word, an attempt to examine the variety of ways it is used, to trace the historical career of a concept; he observes the term "decadence" shifting meaning in different contexts, acquiring and jettisoning connotations and value judgments. Pierrot, on the other hand, begins with a different assumption. For him decadence was a literary and artistic movement which flourished at a particular time and in a particular place. Reacting to the "limited view of decadence as merely an early and gestatory stage of symbolism" Pierrot argues that it was "much less transitory and much less negative than such a hypothesis might suggest," that decadence does have a distinctive aesthetic, and that its aesthetic "constitutes a major stage in the continuous development that had its source in romantic 'fancy' and led eventually to the equivocal wonderland of surrealism."

The difference in subject -- that is, the difference between studying decadence as a word and as a movement -- requires a difference in methodology. Where Gilman explores associations, Pierrot is analytic. He defines movements (decadence, symbolism, surrealism, naturalism, Parnassianism), investigates their causes (literary, philosophical, and historical), and distinguishes their attributes both as defined explicitly by the theorists of decadence, Paul Bourget and Oscar Wilde, and implicitly by their admired fore-runners Baudelaire, Poe, De Quincey, Flaubert, and Gautier. Pierrot's analytic historical method has certain advantages. It sharpens and clarifies our notion of the term: for him decadence is never a vague epithet, but rather a definable ideology, with metaphysical, psychological, and aesthetic assumptions, like the pessimism, the pathological nervousity, and the escapism noted by Bourget in his Essais de psychologie contemporaine and the radical antinaturalism and complementary "assertion of the sovereign powers of the imagination" advocated by Wilde. For Pierrot decadence is not a negative, reactionary movement detached from the past, but one with a reputable literary and philosophical ancestry in the nineteenth century.

Because of this historical concern, Pierrot's study is broad in scope. Although he devotes most of his space to consideration