

Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe by Charles Bernheimer. Edited by T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002. xviii, 227 pp. + 9 b/w illus. ISBN 0-8018-6740-1. \$43.95.

Cited as a 2003 Honorable Mention for the MLA's Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Award for Comparative Literary Studies, this is an excellent book by a well-known authority in the areas of European literature, culture, and psychoanalysis, who begins by candidly admitting that "after years of reading, studying, and teaching literary and artistic works commonly called decadent, I was still unsure as to just what made them classifiable as such. The content of decadence was so multifaceted that no clear outline was discernible." Decadence in its narrow sense is a late-nineteenth-century phenomenon, and even here critics have disagreed on how to interpret it. (My recent attempt, for example, to include *Heart of Darkness* in *The English Literary Decadence: An Anthology* [1999] was met both with great praise and indignant blame.) In its widest sense, decadence is as old as civilization and literature, as Camille Paglia has argued in *Sexual Personae* (1996). Bernheimer is in the line of Paglia but he focusses on modern European writers only – Nietzsche, Zola, Hardy, Flaubert, Wilde, Moreau, Beardsley, Lombroso, and Freud.

But what is decadence? The first chapter, "Nietzsche's Decadent Philosophy," tries to understand what Nietzsche meant by the word, for he used it often. Bernheimer pinpoints nine different usages in Nietzsche, but they are self-contradictory and irreconcilable. At one point, for instance, he speaks of it as a natural biological excretory function of the individual and society that assures the organism's health. Elsewhere it becomes pathological or even that most terrible thing in Nietzsche's eyes, a woman – "repulsive and unthinkable, except at a distance"! Bernheimer avoids, however, the easy conclusion that Nietzsche did not know what he was talking about: "What Nietzsche teaches me is that decadence is a stimulant that causes a restless movement between perspectives, the goal being the attainment of a position outside decadence that would enable me to judge it as such."

The next chapter deals with Flaubert's *Salammbô* (1862), and here Bernheimer explores decadence in history, arguing that Flaubert's attitude to history is decadent, for he presents it as meaninglessly repetitive and also presents the obsession with history typical of his age as undermining the sources of original invention. History for Flaubert lacks vision and teaches nothing. It is "no more than its objects and exists nowhere else than in its objects." Flaubert is thus a historical nihilist. History's failure to be significant is enacted in the many battle scenes described in *Salammbô*.

Nothing is more typical of these scenes than the way differences evaporate between the clashing opponents, supposedly civilized Carthaginians and