

Decadence and the Making of Modernism by David Weir. Amherst, Mass.: U of Massachusetts P, 1995. xxii, 232 pp. ISBN 0-87023-992-9. \$17.95 (paper).

The chief aim of this book is to demonstrate that decadence can be interpreted as a transitional enterprise between modernism and those other isms that preceded it. I am sympathetic to this approach because a few years ago I tried to urge a similar argument in quite different terms. David Weir sees the distinctive feature of decadence as one or another form of “interference” with a conventional or established genre or mode. Thus Flaubert’s *Salammô* represents a departure from romanticism by way of decadence because the novel exhibits a thematics of decadence (fascination with a barbarous past, disease, pain) while at the same time substituting static poetic description for narrative progress. Weir explains that “the sculpturelike poetry of *le Parnasse* cannot be grafted onto narrative prose without resulting in *le style de décadence*” (36). Similarly the Goncourts’ *Germinie Lacerteux* is a naturalistic novel whose focus on disease is not moral or scientific but aesthetic and hence artificial. The Goncourts therefore succeed in taking “the natural out of naturalism” (53). This reversal constitutes decadence.

Many people have tried to deal with the evasive term “decadence.” Some years ago Richard Gilman recommended scrapping the term altogether, but Weir, like so many others (myself included), cannot leave the term and the concept alone. But none of us has made a genuinely convincing case, including Weir in the present book. Weir’s strongest case is with the one text everybody seems to agree satisfies the definition of decadent--Huysmans’s *A Rebours*. Here the argument that theme and technique come together in a unified and describable manner works, whereas with *Salammô* and *Germinie Lacerteux* and other texts there is always some inharmoniousness between the thematics of decadence on the one hand and decadent style on the other. A chapter on Pater indicates some of the problems. Pater, Weir explains, was well-acquainted with French literature, both creative and critical. His sensibility was more cosmopolitan than many of his English contemporaries. But his aesthetic views, which may be seen as constituting an intermediary stage between romanticism and decadence, were misinterpreted by subsequent critics and artists, such as Oscar Wilde. The problem here is that Weir reads Pater as though he were the clear beginning of a new phase of aesthetic judgement, whereas Pater follows a tradition of sensitivity to French literature (represented most notably in Matthew Arnold) that found in the romantic literature of that nation the beginnings of those themes later to be associated with decadence. See Arnold’s view of Obermann, for example.

Weir is a solid scholar. He has covered most of the literature on decadence, though he tends to be particularly dependent upon a few limited sources. His readings are always intelligent, even when they do not always convincingly support his dominant theory. His contributions to the relationship between decadence and modernism – particularly in the works of Gide, Joyce, Huneker, and Hecht are genuinely illuminating. In short, this is a book well worth reading for the richness