On 6 August 1885, Laforgue remarked in a letter to Kahn, “Le Temps d’aujourd’hui a un grand article de Paul Bourde sur les Décadents, je n’y suis même pas nommé—il a cependant mon volume.” Bourde’s article, “Les Poètes décadents,” was prompted by the second edition of the famous spoof on Decadence, Les Délirences d’Adoré Floupette, and constituted the first serious, though hardly generous, study of the new school of poetry to appear in a major French periodical. Laforgue’s disappointment at being left out of such an unsympathetic survey, which discussed only a half dozen poets anyway, suggests how much he considered himself part of the Decadent movement. The reviews that he wrote clandestinely for his own Complaintes, and also his personal letters, testify to his conviction that his work reflected in both form and ideas the principles of Decadence, considered as the main contemporary trend in poetry, and in turn made a contribution to them. Other reviews confirmed Laforgue’s sentiment and placed him consistently among those writers to whom the term was applied: Verlaine, Mallarmé, Corbière, Rimbaud, Huysmans, Moréas, and Villiers. In his preface to A Rebours, written twenty years after the publication of the novel, Huysmans added Laforgue to des Esseintes’ pantheon of contemporary authors, Corbière, Mallarmé, and Verlaine: “Arthur Rimbaud et Jules Laforgue eussent mérité de figurer dans le florilège de des Esseintes, mais ils n’avaient rien imprimé à cette époque-là.”

Laforgue’s commitment to Decadence, however, did not prevent
a characteristic raillery at its expense, and one all the more mordant for being directed toward himself. Making fun of the very attitudes and forms to which he subscribes is the single most distinctive feature of his work from the very beginning, with the exception of some of the philosophical poems of 1881. This self-irony is particularly suited to parody, for it ensures the ambivalent attitude necessary to it, as described in chapter one. Indeed, the *Moralités* are stories in the best Decadent tradition which use a canonical model to mock the very Decadence on which they draw. Laforgue takes a foundation of the Decadent sensibility, excessive self-consciousness, and turns it back upon itself, paradoxically making of it a source of relief—the sympathetic mockery that is humor—from the intolerable dilemma that it otherwise causes. Self-consciousness becomes self-detachment, and this otherwise unattainable ideal of Decadence is thus achieved. In both realizing and denying the goals of Decadence in this way, humor makes it overcome the limitations inherent in it. Decadence must die out, by the law of its own development, or revert to moderation, being thus defeated; humor takes it beyond itself, precisely by not taking it altogether seriously. Indeed, Laforgue deemed the humor of the *Complaintes* a source of their modernity and originality:

>Ajoutons que l'humour qui circule dans ce volume nous conduirait volontiers à croire que l'auteur n'y est pas toujours dupe de ses tours de force et de ses jongleries et s'amuse simplement à jeter ses gourmes. Cela et les originales qualités de langue et d'observation... nous sont un sur garant que lorsque la nouvelle école prendra sa place au soleil... M. Jules Laforgue y aura contribué par de nouvelles poésies d'une tenue moins décadente et d'un idéal plus sérieusement moderne. (Debauve, 194f.)

Humor makes the work surpass the poetic school in which it participates and achieve a modern rather than simply Decadent ideal. The type of parody exemplified by the *Moralités* fits Laforgue's scheme well. Indeed Wyzewa, in his review of the *Moralités* in 1887, saw them as a further stage in the evolution of the movement, a step beyond Decadence for those seeking something new: "Ces œuvres seront le plus sûr refuge des prochains des Esseintes contre la banalité des chefs d'œuvres quotidiens."
The theory of parody presented in the previous chapter maintains that if Decadence is the principal target of Laforgue's stories, it is also necessarily the material of which they are composed; indeed, the *Moralités* employ the typical features of Decadent writing as they play with them. Laforgue parodies the clichés of the movement and covers a whole range of authors, including, most of all, himself. This chapter seeks to define and clarify specifically the conception of Decadence in the 1880s, to describe its language, from particular words, images, expressions, and stylistic devices to its general themes and ideological assumptions. While, as I have argued earlier, the parody can ultimately be understood without reference to an exterior model because it preserves the original (and the target) within itself, knowledge of these may nevertheless legitimately facilitate interpretation by making more evident the character of the distortion. Identifying the common elements of Decadence locates specifically the language with which the *Moralités* play and consequently transform. Reciprocally, Laforgue's parodies contribute to our understanding of Decadence by their treatment of its stock conventions as such, which, thus mechanized, may be isolated and identified. The movement that was itself a conscious work of art, a pose, offers itself not only as an excellent target for parody, but also as an object for formalistic analysis.

A careful examination of Decadence imposes itself all the more in a study of the *Moralités*, because both the term and the group that it designated have been greatly misunderstood. The extent of the misunderstanding and the abundance of material that undermines it have together motivated the presence and scope of this chapter. Decadence has been defined almost wholly in terms of a single type, exemplified by the peculiar hero of Huysmans's *A Rebours*, des Esscintes. The role of des Esseintes himself in the self-identity of Decadence is important; however, his poor relations—the heroes and heroines of Péladan, Rachilde, Lombard, and others who exploit Huysmans's themes of corrupt aristocratic blood, perversion, vice, and artificiality—have inspired a very limited, even erroneous, impression of the movement. Neurotic recluse with a fascination for the exotic and the unhealthy, an erotic imagination modeled on the Marquis de Sade's, a taste for abusing body and
mind with intoxicants, sexual experiments, and self-imposed tortures, and a ferocious and unscrupulous revolt against nature: to such a portrait have the Decadents been reduced. To persist in these misconceptions, however, not only does a severe disservice to an interesting, varied, and important movement but also ignores some rather obvious and persuasive evidence. Decadence in France was principally an 1880s phenomenon and, when studied as such, produces rather a different picture from the accepted one. The semipornographic, licentious works of those mentioned above are only infrequently acknowledged during the period as belonging to the Decadent school, even the most well-known of them, Péladan’s *Etudes passionelles de décadence*. *Le Vice suprême* (1884), despite its title and an introduction by the venerable Barbey D’Aurevilly. Contemporary sources make clear that these works were not considered at the time a very important part of the movement, or even in many cases taken seriously.  

Huysmans’ *A Rebours*, on the other hand, was cited as the “bréviaire de la décadence” (Richard, *Mouvement décadent*, 250), the supreme example of the attitudes and style that characterized the new literary trend. But if this novel is quintessentially Decadent, it is precisely because it is the *ne plus ultra* of Decadence, the implications of Decadence taken to their outrageous conclusion; it exaggerates the characteristics of the group, deliberately taking them to the extreme in order ultimately to demonstrate their failure and impossibility. Exaggeration is, nevertheless, the distortion of a reality, and the reality of literary Decadence is that it was a serious and distinctly modern response to metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic questions of the late nineteenth century. It was consistent with the philosophy of history prevalent after the Revolution, the pattern of growth-maturity-decline applied to the development of civilizations. It consisted principally not of now-forgotten *fumistes*, aesthetes, and libertines, but of some of the major writers of the second half of the century. Baudelaire was its father, with Verlaine and Mallarmé his most important sons, a genealogy attested in most contemporary articles on the movement. The others consistently named are Rimbaud, Huysmans, Moréas, Laforgue, and Villiers. Decadence thus designated all the Symbolist poets be-
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fore this label existed; it served as the general term for modernity in
poetry from at least as early as Gautier’s preface to the 1868 edition
of Baudelaire’s Fleurs du mal, and in literature overall throughout
the 1880s. It was considered the poetic equivalent of the major
modern movements in the other arts, Impressionism in painting
and Wagnerism in music.

Histories of Decadence have not taken sufficient account of the
prominence of the term and the attitudes that it represented, nor
have they adequately identified these; our understanding of the
movement has thus been unfortunately deficient. One of the
shortcomings of Michaud’s influential Message poétique du sym­
bolisme was his emphasis on Decadence as a transitional, short-lived
period between Naturalism and Symbolism, an early lyrical phase
of a movement of which Symbolism was the mature, more intellec­
tual phase; Decadence merely prepared the way for the great poetic
revolution of Symbolism.15 This view has in general prevailed. Its
inadequacy, however, has been demonstrated by Jean Pierrot’s
important study, L’Imaginaire décadent, which alone begins to indi­
cate the significant and substantial evidence that disproves and
overturns it.16 As his work reveals, Decadence was a varied and
significant phenomenon of literary history, describing distinct at­
titudes to nature, art, aesthetic forms, tradition, sexuality, women,
the unconscious, religion, and metaphysics, and involving many
artists whose importance has continued to grow with time. An
examination of contemporary source material bears this out and
presents a fuller, more diverse picture. This revised notion of Dec­
adence matters for evaluating the Moralités and their achievement,
because in treating the materials of Decadence parodically, La­
forgue takes on not a frivolous and insignificant cénacle with only
topical interest, but rather the modernist movement in its early
phase. In exaggerating it, mocking it, parodying it in the fullest
sense, the Moralités dismantle the Decadent edifice from within and
lay the foundation, on the same spot and with the more resistant of
its materials, for a new modern structure. The Moralités, in short,
suggest the transformation of Decadence into twentieth-century
modernism.

A few points of clarification regarding the term “Decadence”
should be made from the start. First, the advent of Symbolism around 1886 was far less perceptible than has since been thought; this term was merely a euphemism suggested by Moréas in 1885 to replace the more loaded word décadence, which had historically negative overtones. At this point, Symbolism was no more than Moréas’s effort at public relations, a less controversial name for the trend designated universally by décadence. In his essay entitled, significantly, “Les Décadents,” Moréas used décadent and its cognates throughout, except for one casual aside toward the end: “Les poètes décadents—la critique, puisque sa manie d’étiquetage est incurable, pourrait les appeler plus justement des symboliques.”17 The following year he entitled his famous manifesto “Le Symbolisme,” and more aggressively championed the new name: “Nous avons déjà proposé la dénomination de Symbolisme comme la seule capable de désigner raisonnablement la tendance actuelle de l’esprit créateur en art. Cette dénomination peut être maintenue.”18 Moréas makes it clear that his proposal is inspired by a desire to avoid the negative connotations of décadence, which render the term irrelevant to the new school; the contemporary trend is, rather, a renaissance, and décadence “une inexplicable antinomie” to be abandoned (Pakenham, 30). Introducing the manifesto, nevertheless, the editor of Le Figaro persists in using the old, and by that point well-established, décadence. Clearly, no distinction existed between the two terms, both denoting merely “la nouvelle manifestation d’art” (Pakenham, 29, 31).19 Even after the manifesto had appeared in September 1886, they continued to be used interchangeably for several years, particularly in the press.20 “Décadent” was always applied to Laforgue before “symboliste” (or “symbolique,” more frequent at the time) came into use; after September 1886, both terms served.21

Second, theories of symbolism that attempted to detach themselves from Decadence by evolving a theory of the symbol did so on the basis of a specific metaphysical and aesthetic doctrine deriving mainly from the work of Mallarmé, such as the early Moréas, René Ghil, Stuart Merrill, and Gustave Kahn. This distinction, however, has little importance for a definition of Symbolism, because it omits most of the important poets whom literary history has right-
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ly or wrongly included in it: Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé himself, Rimbaud, and Laforgue. These theories provide valuable material for understanding the diverse features of late nineteenth-century poetics but do not reflect the thought or practice of the major writers. Third, the actual differences between Decadent and Symbolist poetry are negligible among the minor writers, who would adhere more closely to the doctrines of a “school” than would the more original and independent ones. The same themes and methods appear in both groups: pessimism, ennui, dream, the unconscious, mysticism, artifice, musicality, free verse, synaesthesia, and a common body of late-Romantic, Baudelairean imagery of gems, flowers, perfumes, the moon, the city, autumn, and twilight.

Fourth, Decadence had extremely close relations with the major avant-garde movements of the period in other genres. Although considered a reaction against Naturalism, Decadence was not wholly antithetical to it and shared with it a common pessimistic view of life, themes of depravity, heredity, and the nerves, and an aesthetic of the sickly. In a youthful defense of Naturalism in 1877, Laforgue quoted Zola in this context: “Mon goût, si l’on veut, est dépravé; j’aime . . . les œuvres de décadence où une sensibilité maladive remplace la santé plantureuse des époques classiques.”

More commonly, Decadence is linked explicitly with Impressionist painting and Wagnerian music in the critical vocabulary of the period: the écriture artiste of the Goncourts is at once impressionist and “décadente” (Bourget, 402); Wyzewa speaks of Laforgue and Mallarmé in terms of “littérature wagnérienne” and the Impressionist and Symbolist painters in terms of “peinture wagnérienne”; the Decadents are the “impressionnistes de la littérature.”

Paul Adam directly compares the stylistic features of the new poetry to “le ton multitonique de Wagner et la dernière technique des Impressionnistes.” The Polish writer Antoni Lange likened the climate in which Decadence developed to that which gave rise to Impressionist plein-air painting and Wagnerism. Laforgue himself perceived a connection between Impressionism and the new style in poetry; impressionnisme is one of the four terms by which he sums up the ideal and processes of Decadence in his
own review of the Complaintes; and in his essay on Impressionism, he remarks that the principle of Impressionist technique "a été non systématiquement, mais par génie appliqué dans la poésie et le roman chez nous".

Despite such confusion, a relatively precise understanding of the notion of Decadence in the 1880s may be had by examining two kinds of source: first, the writings of contemporary theorists, historians, and critics of the movement, and second, literary works thought to belong to it. Although I will sometimes rely on the latter, I have elected not to compile a set of characteristics to be called "Decadent" from so varied a group of writers, but rather have abdicated that task to critics contemporary with them and cited their works only as illustrations. This chapter concentrates on the many essays and articles of the period which formulate some aspect of Decadence as Laforgue would have encountered it. This is the Decadence of the Moralités, the target and substance of their parody; later commentary provides only an incomplete description which must be revised. In spite of considerable diversity, a number of qualities common to the majority of examples studied emerge to form a relatively consistent and coherent picture. Two works stand out in this survey as major expressions of the Decadent sensibility: Gautier's important "Notice" to the 1868 edition of Baudelaire's Fleurs du mal, and Bourget's Essais de psychologie contemporaine.

Aspects of Decadence

Gautier's preface constitutes the first major statement of specifically late-nineteenth-century Decadence. Although histories of the idea frequently begin earlier than this date, with Barbey d'Aurevilly, the Romantics, D. Nisard's influential Études de moeurs et de critique sur les poètes latins de la décadence, the Marquis de Sade, or even ancient Decadence, Gautier's preface provides a starting point more appropriate to this study. It had tremendous influence on the generation of poets that emerged about ten years after Baudelaire's death in 1867 and sought to follow his example. It also had extraordinary exposure, for the edition which it introduced remained the only one available for the following fifty years. Thus the preface largely determined the late-nineteenth century's perception of Baudelaire,
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and the décadence that Gautier considered one of his main characteristics. It definitely affected Laforgue, for he read it and took careful notes on it in preparing his own essay on Baudelaire in 1885.

Gautier’s article was not the first to associate Baudelaire with Decadence; reviews of the Fleurs du mal had done so from the beginning. This view was consistent with Baudelaire’s defense of the Decadence of Poe in the famous opening to his “Notes Nouvelles sur Edgar Poe” (1857). While rejecting the term “littérature de décadence” (levelled against Poe) for implying a scale of value, Baudelaire nevertheless consecrates it by applying to it a favorite metaphor, the setting sun. Decadence is the splendid setting sun of Romanticism: “Dans les jeux de ce soleil agonisant, certains esprits poétiques trouveront de délices nouvelles; . . . une splendeur triste, la volupté du regret, toutes les magies du rêve, tous les souvenirs de l’opium.” But Gautier’s essay actually defines Decadence in terms of Baudelaire’s vision and method, and equates it with modern art. His article by itself identifies most of the themes and issues that would in fact characterize the movement later in the century: dandyism, dilettantism, sensuality, Orientalism, a depravity conscious of itself, an intense spirituality with strong mystical associations, artifice, ennui, neurosis, the Eternal Feminine, and a taste for the bizarre and unnatural.

Gautier prepares the way for the Decadent hero by presenting Baudelaire as a dandy, with “ce culte de soi-même qui caractérise l’homme imbu des principes de Brummel” (Gautier, 273). He describes the exoticism of Baudelaire’s Nature, with its strange plants, exotic flowers, warm tones, and heady odors, a vision apparently inspired by the famous truncated journey to India: “cette magnifique et gigantesque végétation aux parfums pénétrants, ces pagodes élégamment bizarres, ces figures brunes aux blanches draperies, toute cette nature exotique si chaude, si puissante et si colorée” (Gautier, 282). He accordingly insists on Baudelaire’s extraordinary, “oriental” sensuality, especially regarding jewels and fragrances (Gautier, 296). He presents Baudelaire’s taste for the artificial, and his aesthetic of the bizarre and the monstrous, as a Decadent revolt against the tyranny of nature, an assertion of human will against an otherwise uncontrollable power: “ce goût excessif, baroque, presque toujours contraire au beau classique,
était pour lui un signe de la volonté humaine corrigeant à son gré les formes et les couleurs fournies par la matière. . . . La déprava-
tion, c'est-à-dire l'écart du type normal, est impossible à la bête, fatalement conduite par l'instinct immuable" (Gautier, 296).

He traces this emphasis on artifice to the influence of Poe and sees in it an opposition to "bourgeois" ideals of democracy, materialism, and progress. Baudelairean art, rather, reflects the ideals of an aging civilisation, "Part arrivé à ce point de maturité extrême que déterminent à leurs soleils obliques les civilisations qui vieillis-
SENT" (Gautier, 286)—and accordingly portrays its human subject as neurotic, ill, "pâle, crispé, tordu, convulsé par les passions facti-
tices et le réel ennui moderne" (Gautier, 290). Depravity and per-
versity constitute for Gautier important themes of the Fleurs du mal, "ce livre consacré à la peinture des dépravations et des perver-
sités modernes," which paradoxically reflect Baudelaire's spir-
rituality and morality (Gautier, 301). He cites other aspects of the poet's spirituality, notably his Swedenborgian belief in the capacity to perceive synaesthetic correspondances, invisible relations among disparate phenomena, universal analogies, all mysteries accessible to the elected poète-voyant (Gautier, 300ff.).

Gautier distinguishes in Baudelaire's work two principal types of women: the ideal one, beauty incarnate, never attained, like the heroines of Poe or the Seraphita-Seraphitus of Balzac's Sweden-
borgian novel; and the Eternal Feminine, either an unknowing creature of instinct ("prostitution inconsciente et presque bes-
tiale"), or a viciously destructive, perfidiously cruel demon, a Deli-
lah incapable of love and taking pleasure in crushing the hearts of men (Gautier, 305ff.). This last distinction is crucial and yet fre-
quently overlooked; the chief female type of Decadence, the Eter-
nal Feminine, indeed separates into the two natures here described, the instinctual, animal, and unspiritual on the one hand, and the more cruel and evil femme fatale on the other.

Perhaps most importantly, Gautier relates Baudelaire's style to that of the late empire and the Byzantine school, thereby establish-
ing the main terms of Decadent poetics:

style ingénieux, compliqué, savant, plein de nuances et de recherches, reculant toujours les bornes de la langue, empruntant à tous les vo-
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Cabulaires techniques, prenant des couleurs à toutes les palettes, des notes à tous les claviers, s’efforçant à rendre la pensée dans ce qu’elle a de plus ineffable, et la forme en ses contours les plus vagues et les plus fuyants, écoutant pour les traduire les confidences subtiles de la névrose, les aveux de la passion vieillissante qui se déprave et les hallucinations bizarres de l’idée fixe tournant à la folie. Ce style de décadence est le dernier mot du Verbe sommé et poussé à l’extrême outrance. On peut rappeler, à propos de lui, la langue marbrée déjà des verdure de la décomposition et faisandée du bas-empire romain et les raffinements compliqués de l’école byzantine, dernière forme de l’art grec tombé en déliquescence. (Gautier, 286)

These in fact constitute the clichés of Decadent style: complication, nuance, rare words, vocabulary drawn from a variety of specialized sources, ineffability; the expression of neurosis, hallucination, deprived passion, obsession; outrance, déliquescence, refinement; connections between the late Roman and Byzantine empires and the late nineteenth century; decomposition and corruption, faisandé becoming a key adjective for style and language in the 1880s; and, most importantly, freer, less rigid forms. Des Essentiels later adopts Baudelaire’s preference for the late Latin writers like Apuleius, Petronius, Juvenal, Augustine, and Tertullian, over Virgil and Cicero, and his taste for the free forms of the prose poem (Gautier, 336ff.).

Of all the major aspects of Decadence attested in other sources, only two are entirely absent from Gautier’s initial essay, the unconscious and pessimism. That it lacks the first is understandable, for the unconscious is not an explicit theme in Baudelaire’s work, except in so far as it applies to the Paradis artificiels, and these Gautier treats in terms of the poet’s mysticism. His omission of pessimism is more puzzling, and although he does discuss Baudelairean ennui and spleen, he does not relate these specifically to a conviction that life inherently involves suffering. This is an interesting lacuna in Gautier’s otherwise complete description, for nearly all subsequent accounts acknowledge pessimism as the primary cause and feature of Decadence. In emphasizing this, Bourget, notably, made one of the most important contributions to the history and evolution of the movement.

Bourget’s Essais de psychologie contemporaine study ten major writ-
cers of the Second Empire whose work most reflected and influenced the modern sensibility of the 1880s. They appeared in the *Nouvelle Revue* between 1881 and 1885, and every historian of Decadence has since confirmed their importance in formulating the presuppositions, characteristics, even goals of the emerging movement. Bourget’s influence was especially great in Laforgue’s case because of their close personal relations in the early years of Laforgue’s career. He read virtually everything that Bourget ever wrote and consistently recommended his work to his own less appreciative friends; he met weekly with Bourget during 1881; his letters testify to his respect for the *Essais*, each of which he read with interest and admiration. He found the Preface to the collected edition of the *Essais* (1885), on pessimism, particularly compelling and maintained that it had not been fully appreciated. In the draft of his own article on Bourget (1882), he suggests those areas in which Bourget might have influenced him: a profound belief in pessimism, an interest in Buddhism and mysticism, a taste for modernity and the personal in art, dilettantism, and most importantly, the Decadence associated with Baudelaire.

In his Preface, Bourget explicitly states the importance of pessimism to the volume and, accordingly, the authors examined in it:

Le résultat de cette minutieuse et longue enquête est mélancolique. Il m’a semblé que de toutes les œuvres passées en revue au cours de ces dix essais une même influence se dégageait, douloureuse et, pour tout dire d’un mot, profondément, continûment pessimiste. (Bourget, xvi)

He describes this as a late version of the Romantic *mal du siècle*, in modern dress and a Parisian setting: absolute discouragement, misanthropy, ennui, “une mortelle fatigue de vivre, une morne perception de la vanité de tout effort,” an overwhelming feeling of “à quoi bon” (Bourget, xvii). The theme is firmly established in the first essay in a section entitled “Le Pessimisme de Baudelaire.” For Bourget, contemporary European society perceives pessimism as the inescapable universal law, inspiring in modern man a sense of *taedium vitae*, ennui, spleen, melancholy, “une nausée universelle devant les insuffisances du monde”; it manifests itself among the Slavic peoples as nihilism, the Germanic as pessimism, the Latin as “solitaires et bizarres névroses,” or Decadence (Bourget, 10).
Baudelaire represents the modern Parisian pessimist who has an absolute horror of 'being', and an equally powerful desire for 'nothingness' and the Buddhist state of beatitude, nirvana. In his attitude to love, Baudelaire combines the mystic, libertine, and analyseur, that is, spirituality, sensuality, and a critical intelligence. Bourget cites as an example of the concurrence of these three tendencies the poet's unorthodox use of liturgical imagery in a highly erotic, and frequently ironic, context. This convention of Decadence would be exploited also by Verlaine, Huysmans, and Mallarmé, and both employed and mocked by Laforgue, notably in Lohengrin.35

Bourget's theory of Decadence derives principally from that of his mentor, Taine, who attributes it to an unnatural imbalance: the disruption of organic unity by the excessive development of one part to the detriment of the rest.36 Bourget applies this principle in the famous "Théorie de la décadence" section of the Baudelaire essay, describing Decadence in terms of the egoism and individualism characteristic of societies in decline: "Par le mot de décadence, on désigne volontiers l'état d'une société qui produit un trop petit nombre d'individus propres aux travaux de la vie commune . . . L'individu est la cellule sociale" (Bourget, 15). Both heredity and acquired well-being contribute to this development and exaggerate the importance of individual, at the expense of collective, life. This may have serious social consequences, as the Roman decadence attests: "l'entente savante du plaisir, le scepticisme délicat, l'énervevement des sensations, l'inconstance du dilettantisme, ont été les plaies sociales de l'empire romain" (Bourget, 16). But Bourget maintains that these "social evils" can hold an aesthetic and psychological benefit:

Si les citoyens d'une décadence sont inférieurs comme ouvriers de la grandeur du pays, ne sont-ils pas très supérieurs comme artistes de l'intérieur de leur âme? (Bourget, 16)

Laforgue quoted this sentence approvingly in defending modern art against the rigid classical system of Taine, with its hierarchy of aesthetic value ordered according to the degree of moral and formal harmony.37 In particular, he uses Bourget's argument to counter Taine's assessment of Decadence, which ranks low on the scale, its
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perverted inspiration, and notably its individualism, being disproportionate with and insufficient to its technical capabilities. Bourget's portrait of the "concitoyens d'une décadence" justifies them on precisely those grounds condemned by Taine's system: ill-suited for public or private action, they nevertheless excel at solitary thought; uninterested in producing offspring, they have become, by their delicate sensations and exquisite, rare sentiments, the sterile but refined virtuosos of pleasure and pain; incapable of faith, they have rid themselves of prejudice and reached a "supreme equity," which admits and tolerates a variety of doctrines (Bourget, 17).

In literary terms, Bourget sees in Decadence an analogously individual style, in which "l'unité du livre se décompose pour laisser la place à l'indépendance de la page, où la page se décompose pour laisser la place à l'indépendance de la phrase, et la phrase pour laisser la place à l'indépendance du mot" (Bourget, 16). Like the social evils that contain and permit a psychological good, the individualism of Decadent literary style holds an aesthetic advantage. To the objection that such literature would not survive because its subtleties would render it unintelligible to future generations, Bourget responds with a resounding "Qu'importe? Le but de l'écrivain est-il de se poser en perpétuel candidat devant le suffrage universel des siècles? Nous nous délectons dans ce que vous appelez nos corruptions de style, et nous délectons avec nous les raffinés de notre race et de notre heure" (Bourget, 17). The political metaphor plays on a favorite cliche of the nineteenth century—notably following Baudelaire on Poe, and Gautier on Baudelaire—the hatred of democracy. The Decadent exception is really an aesthetic aristocracy and the rest, including an uncomprehending future, merely an ignorant crowd.

Bourget carries out this polemic, however, wholly through the lips of others. A hypothetical "psychologue pur," a student of moral life like the author, is introduced to bring out the positive value of Decadence. And Baudelaire himself speaks through the poetry, favoring morbidity and artificiality over simplicity; odors over all other sensations; late autumn with its melancholy charm over the other seasons; thin, adolescent women, or ravaged aging ones over all other forms of female beauty; languishing music,
Decadence and Parody

strange furnishings, and the evening hours. Baudelaire's Decadence permitted the *Fleurs du mal*, and despite Bourget's contrived objectivity the essay is clearly an apologia, setting forth and endorsing the aesthetic and morality of Decadence for an age to which it offered a relevant, even necessary, approach to life and art.

Bourget's remaining *Essais* (on Renan, Flaubert, Taine, Stendhal, Dumas fils, Leconte de Lisle, the Goncourts, Turgenev, and Amiel) develop the ideas and themes of the article on Baudelaire but also introduce some new ones which contribute to the idea of Decadence. Pessimism is extended to include such issues as dilettantism, nihilism, the overly analytic spirit, the inability to love, and the lack of will. The essay on Renan, which Laforgue called "étonnant" and "merveilleux," concentrates on the modern problem of dilettantism. As P. Moreau notes, this favorite concern of Decadence testifies to the close relation between this movement and the visual arts, from which it borrows the term to apply to its own aesthetic interest in the self. Bourget defines it as the disposition to embrace all forms of life without committing oneself to any, a lack of *parti-pris* that may ultimately paralyse and lead to "une anémie de la conscience morale" (Bourget, 51). In the essay on Flaubert, he sees this attitude as destructive of human will (Bourget, 119), and in the one on Taine links it to the collapse of religious and metaphysical doctrine in modern life, where disparate hypotheses proliferate without there being a credible, integral one to reconcile them. Contemporary moral life is characterized by an extreme and anarchic scepticism with debilitating consequences: "cette disposition à douter même de son doute entraîne avec elle un cortège d'infirmités que nous connaissons trop: vacillation de la volonté, compromis sophistiques de la conscience, dilettantisme à demi détaché et toujours indifférent" (Bourget, 163). The theme recurs frequently in the *Essais*, with respect to Stendhal, the Goncourts, and Dumas (Bourget, 226, 307, 396), and is applied to more contemporary examples, such as Huysmans, Paul Alexis, and Maupassant. Although scepticism may bring pleasure to the true dilettante (as in Renan), it is more often a source of nihilism, the conviction that life is not worth living, which Bourget finds in Flaubert, Dumas, and Leconte de Lisle. The spirit of Spinoza hovers over all the
Essais, and Bourget refers to him frequently as a model for the pessimist’s view: nature is all-powerful and has no purpose but itself; free will is thus a total illusion.

The essay on Dumas fils sets forth the principal Decadent view of love and women. Consistent with Bourget’s pessimism, the attitude described here derives from the tradition of Schopenhauer, whom he presents as a philosophical parallel to Dumas. The female type for both is the “Eternel Féminin” who, in the Schopenhauerian formula, lures men into submitting themselves to the loathsome procreative purposes of the universal life force, the Will. Thinking that they will find the Ideal, or even pure pleasure (“volupté”), men in fact become instruments of the Will in its effort to perpetuate itself and, as a result, prolong the misery of life. Love is a trap set by the Will to ensure the continuation of the species, and women are its chief accomplices. Bourget sums it up thus: “Il y a dans le mirage de l’amour quelque chose de décevant, une duperie mystérieuse qui conduit ceux qui s’y laissent prendre au pire malheur, à travers l’espérance du plus grand bonheur.” Or, in Dumas’s words to a new father from Homme-Femme: “le féminin . . . s’est servi de toi pour l’œuvre qu’il a à faire” (Bourget, 296). Laforgue conveys this attitude more concisely in a favorite ironic rhyme, dupé/jupe; he makes fun of it in Hamlet, where the hero rails constantly against the treachery of women while falling desperately in love with each one who crosses his path; and he parodies it directly in Lohengrin.

In several of the essays (Baudelaire, Renan, Flaubert, Dumas), Bourget exploits the notion of an aging civilization, with its Decadent models (Nero, Heliogabalus, Caesar, Alcibiades) and the symptoms of its physical and psychological degeneracy—neuroses, diminished energy, frailty, impoverished blood, strange excesses, and vice. He also raises the relatively new issue of the unconscious, which he regards as a further complication in the effort to understand the self, and thus to restore a human order (emotional or rational) in the face of the disorder of nature: “Hélas! où donc prendre cet ordre du coeur, où cet ordre de l’esprit . . . si notre moi nous échappe presqu’à nous-mêmes, sans cesse envahi par les ténèbres de l’inconscience?” (Bourget, 183). He mentions this only
with respect to Taine’s positivist theory of the self as a series of phenomena and nowhere discusses either the new experimental psychology of the French school or the metaphysical psychology of Hartmann, which had such an effect on him and the Decadent imagination in general. It is, however, the first mention of the unconscious in an important study of Decadence; the relation between the two would grow as the Unconscious became a major subject and source of imagery.

Like Gautier, Bourget discusses Decadent style in terms of complication and specifically sees the *écriture artiste* of the Goncourts as a model of it, with inversions, unusual combinations, repetition, impressionistic notation, syntactical difficulties, and neologisms. But in his view its dominant quality is the individualism described in the essay on Baudelaire, the shrinking of the literary and aesthetic unit from book to page to sentence to word, like the movement from community to the individual in social life. The *Moralités* confirm (and mock) the Decadent interest in language in itself; Laforgue freely mixes neologisms with archaisms, and colloquial with poetic language, uses assonance and interior rhyme to an exaggerated extent, and exploits the effects of rhythm in a prose work.

The picture of Decadence that emerges from Gautier and Bourget may be completed by the many articles and reviews published in the contemporary press. These begin to appear after Bourget’s first essays of 1881–82; they proliferate after the publication of Verlaine’s *Poètes maudits* in 1883, Huysmans’ *A Rebours* in 1884, and the *Déliquesences* parody of the movement in 1885. The Decadent controversy of 1885–86 was inspired by this last event and, in its turn, provoked more discussion. They articulate the central aesthetic and moral issues understood by the term, i.e. the assumptions and formal conventions of the movement.

One of the most prominent features of Decadence mentioned is (following Bourget) pessimism, particularly its Schopenhauerian variety. Articles acclaim him as the father of Decadence, and cognate forms of his name occur with remarkable frequency: Decadence is “schopenhauérisme à outrance,” born of the “surblasséisme d’une civilisation schopenhauerescue”; one even finds the
verbal form “schopenhaueriser.” 41 “Schopenhauerisme” is part of Laforgue’s own definition of Decadence in 1885 (see above, n. 27). Moreas remarked that “toute revue qui se respecte est tenue de publier son petit article sur l’inventeur de la fameuse volonté,” and himself wrote such articles. 42 His “Notes sur Schopenhauer” insist on the pessimistic assumption of “cette affreuse existence, qui n’est que tourments, aspirations impuissantes, ennui monotone et per­pétuelle désillusion,” and paraphrase closely Schopenhauer’s chapters on love, that “malheur de l’individu pour le bien de l’espèce.” 43 Reviews of A Rebours explicitly call attention to des Esseintes’ espousal of Schopenhauer’s ideas in chapter seven of the novel. 44 A simplified picture of Schopenhauer’s pessimism was drawn and of­fered to the French public in a well-known and highly influential interview published by P. Challemel-Lacour in 1870: “Un Boud­dhiste contemporain en Allemagne”. 45 Several other studies ap­peared subsequently and likewise had a large readership: Ribot’s Philosophie de Schopenhauer (1874), Janet’s articles in the Revue des deux mondes (April–June 1877), and Caro’s Pessimisme au XIXe siècle (1878). 46 These constituted an important source—often the only one—of information on Schopenhauer’s thought, for although French translations of his books began to come out in 1877, his main work was not available until 1886. 47

These studies bring out a few salient traits of Schopenhauer’s system. First, the notion of a universal force governing all of life, the omnipotent Will, whose sole aim is self-perpetuation: it works for the continuation of the species and tricks human beings into contributing to its effort. Second, the fundamental disappoint­ment and suffering of human existence: man’s aspirations and sense of free will are illusions, merely the means by which the Will uses him to realize its own ends. Third, a “metaphysics of love”, by which man is deceived against his will into procreation, thereby extending the suffering of life, precisely that which, in loving, he seeks to escape. As Bourget puts it in the essay on Dumas, man loves in order to reach the Ideal but then discovers that he has been duped into serving the Will. In Schopenhauer’s words, “Les hommes ne sont mus ni par des convoitises dépravées, ni par un attrait divin, ils travaillent pour le Génie de l’espèce sans le savoir,
ils sont tout à la fois ses courtiers, ses instruments, et ses dupes.” 48

Fourth, two means of overcoming the Will, namely, art and asceticism: aesthetic emotion provides only a momentary escape from the Will’s domination, but asceticism and renunciation are more permanent ones, for they suppress desire, the emotion by means of which the Will accomplishes its purpose. In the supreme state of Buddhist nirvana, the intellect frees itself from the Will and achieves the tranquility of detachment.

The variety of pessimism presented by Eduard von Hartmann in his *Philosophy of the Unconscious* (1868) 49 was also linked to the Decadents: “Un système récent de philosophie leur a fourni une solution précisément appropriée à leur tempérament... Rappelons seulement que M. de Hartmann veut voir dans les mouvements réflexes ou instinctifs la révélation d’une substance éternelle qu’il appelle l’inconscient.” 50 Hartmann modifies Schopenhauer’s views in a few important ways. First, he replaces the notion of a blind and evil Will with the Unconscious, an intelligent, teleological power governing all of life, phenomenal, conscious, and unconscious. Unlike the Will, the Unconscious is infallible and omniscient and has a plan that actualizes itself in history as it progressively moves toward its goal of full consciousness, the dispelling of illusion, the perfection of the species, and the elimination of human misery. Because Hartmann attributes intelligence and purpose to the Unconscious, he sees pessimism as a means toward its end, specifically by laying bare the illusions of happiness. Pessimism will ultimately bring man to that degree of perfection where he rejects these and loses all desire, that manifestation of the life-affirming Will so disturbing to Schopenhauer. Hence pessimism, despite the suffering that it entails, leads to the state of tranquility to which all human effort has ever aspired; it provides a modern faith similar to fatalism, which reconciles inevitable pessimistic convictions with belief in a larger metaphysical plan.

Second, although Hartmann’s views on the relation between the sexes resemble Schopenhauer’s and use the same metaphors—love is an avid demon constantly claiming new victims, and women are agents in the deception—this is part of the plan of the Unconscious to redeem humanity from its enslavement to nature. The suffering
caused by women and love is thus justified by the positive goal of the Unconscious toward which they work. This had particular significance for Decadent notions of women, which, as Pierrot remarks, took two main forms, following Gautier's analysis of Baudelaire: first, that of the destructive femme fatale like Salome, Herodias, the Queen of Sheba, Delilah, the Sphinx, Circe, and Astarte, ruthlessly drawing men to their ruin; second, the milder form of the creature of instinct, an unwitting agent of the life process, bound to the physical, animal side of existence and closed to the spiritual. Baudelaire's description of women in Mon Coeur mis à nu and Le Peintre de la vie moderne—governed by their instincts, contemptible because close to nature, and devoid of spirituality—is an especially harsh example of this view. Laforgue qualifies the traditional pessimistic line, however, by portraying women as victims of the same natural law that they are obliged to serve and whose purposes they must work to realize: "O femme, mammifère à chignon, ô fétiche, / On t'absout; c'est un Dieu qui par tes yeux nous triche." This view figures prominently in his notes and constitutes a persistent theme of his work, especially after 1881; women are "pauvres pions sociaux," "victimes," "martyres," and "historiques esclaves," fulfilling a function accorded by nature and sanctioned by culture for which they are not themselves responsible.

Third, Hartmann views both mysticism and aesthetic pleasure as direct and spontaneous manifestations of the Unconscious. They are immediate intuitions, instincts that have not reached full consciousness, in which the self is dissolved and united with the Absolute and the goal of the unconscious momentarily glimpsed. Hartmann's argument provided an impetus for aesthetic exploitation of the psychological Unconscious, through whose communications an ideal could be attained and transmitted. The ideas of Schopenhauer and Hartmann greatly influenced Laforgue's thought, notably his belief in an infallible yet unintelligible universal law in perpetual evolution, his notion of love as an illusory and ultimately disappointing quest for the Ideal, and his qualified pessimism, all themes treated with irony and compassion in the Moralités.

Articles on Decadence insist on its characteristic pessimism, the Romantic mal du siècle taken to an extreme:
Aujourd'hui René n’est plus mélancolique; il est morne et il est âprement pessimiste. Il ne doute plus, il nie ou même ne se soucie plus de la vérité. Il ne sent plus d’inégalité entre son désir et son effort, car sa volonté est morte. Il ne se réfugie plus dans la rêverie ou dans quelque amour emphatique, mais dans les raffinements littéraires ou dans la recherche pédantesque des sensations rares. René avait du “vague à l’âme”; à présent “il s’embête à crever”. René n’était malade que d’esprit; à présent il est névropathe.

Similarly, in a pair of articles devoted to pessimism in literature, E. Hennequin associates it with ennui, inertia, a fundamental sense of the uselessness of life and the futility of human effort, a weakening of the will, and an overdeveloped and hypertrophic sensibility. In a review of _A Rebours_, he characterizes Decadence in terms of excessive self-analysis, irresolution, hypochondria, and a state of sluggish “atonic.”

De leur impuissance volitionnelle, on peut déduire leur incapacité de vivre dans la société, leur aspiration . . . vers une existence monacale, solitaire et récluse, enfin leur absolu pessimisme, leur misanthropie acerbe, leur dégoût de toute vie active.

Other articles repeat the same themes. The paralysing effect of doubt and self-analysis is mentioned frequently, following Bourget’s “nous sommes malades d’un excès de pensée critique” (Bourget, 307). For example, Charles Moricc qualifies the Decadents as “êtres de réflexion à qui trop de science enseigne une défiance prudente et paralysante”, and a review of the _Déliquescences_ describes the target of their parody as “affamés d’analyse; malades de psychologie.” The weakening of the will attendant on this accounts for a favorite Decadent condition designated by a variety of terms: hypochondria, abulia, atony, anemia (considered the illness of the Roman empire), even hamletism; Hennequin, for example, sees Hamlet as the type of the contemporary writer suffering from a paralysing “atonie de la volonté.” But consistent with Bourget’s essay on Baudelaire, the most frequent one is neurosis. “Notre maladie à tous,” neurosis constitutes the Decadent syndrome _par excellence_, and the _névropathe_ a model for the Decadent hero. Laforgue parodies this openly in _Le Miracle des Roses_.

The desire for evasion cited by Hennequin and realized by des
Esseintes is frequently named as a Decadent attribute, especially vis-à-vis Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Flaubert: “Tous ces écrivains byzantins ont en commun . . . un profond mépris pour les suffrages de la foule, dérivant de cette conviction que le véritable artiste ne doit pas s’adresser à une foule mais à quelques esprits élus.”63 Bourde cites evasion as a chief trait in his sarcastic portrait of the “parfait Décadent”: “aversion déclarée pour la foule, considérée comme souverainement stupide et plate” (Pakenham, 11). This attitude comically torments Laforgue’s Hamlet and Lohengrin and, predictably, brings about their downfall.

The important theme of artifice and those related to it—perversity, depravity, sensuality, exoticism—are generally traced to Baudelaire and ascribed to either the tensions of contemporary society or the hereditary corruption of a dying line. They are perceived to express an inversion of conventional values, and thus attitudes of subversion and revolt, the individual’s desperate or cynical protest against the mockery of nature or society. The abnormal, unhealthy, artificial, and monstrous characterize not only Decadent art, but art itself in its relation to reality, and the poet with respect to the normal man: “les poètes, monstrueux parmi les ordinaires, malades parmi les sains, détraqués parmi les raisonnables. Ceux-là seront toujours la proie des révoltes et des nostalgies. Et cela nécessairement, parce que la maladie est l’essence même de toute nature supérieure.”64 They account for the peculiar sexuality of Decadent art: des Esseintes’ complicated experiments; a Baudelairean preference for the sterile woman; Lord Edwards’ love for a mechanical model in Villiers’ Eve future; homosexuality in the work of Verlaine, Jean Lorrain, and others; and incestuous love in Élémir Bourges’ Crépuscule des dieux (1884) and Moréas’s La Faenza (1883).65

Exotic images accordingly proliferate: flowers, plants, perfumes, and gems, following Baudelaire; a vogue for orientalism, following Baudelaire and Flaubert; and a preoccupation with the rare, the bizarre, the exquisite, and the refined, mentioned in nearly all articles on Decadence. In the minor writers, especially, this becomes ludicrous in its intensity: “Car, tu [Désespérance] me crées d’artificiels jardins où croissent, bizarres et contournées, sinistres
aussi, les plantes tropicales, aux senteurs âcres, aux parfums em­
poisonnés. Avec délices, je respire leur atmosphère lourde et véni­
neuse, et la pourpre enflammée de leurs fleurs me comble d’une 
délite et précieuse volupté.” More importantly, Bourde uses 
the strange flower as a metaphor for Decadence itself: “le roman­
tisme épuisé a donné cette dernière petite fleur, une fleur de fin de 
saison, maladive et bizarre” (Pakenham, 21). Consistent with this, 
the Decadent season is by all accounts autumn, with its pale suns 
and its hints of oncoming winter; in Huysmans, it functions di­
rectly as a metaphor for the Decadent sensibility, “l’esprit qui a 
atteint l’octobre de ses sensations.” Gautier, Bourget, and La­
forgue all call attention to this in their studies of Baudelaire, and it 
is amply attested in the literature of the period as well, in Mallarmé, 
Verlaine, Huysmans, and Laforgue, to name only a few. Such an 
aesthetic applied to the day makes the most beautiful hour twi­
light: “M. Paul Verlaine a, comme Baudelaire, l’amour des heures 
crepusculaires.”

The association of late-nineteenth-century Decadence with that 
of the late Empire or Byzantium, as in Gautier’s essay on Baude­
laire, informs many works of the period (e.g., Mallarmé’s “Plaute 
d’automne,” with its “poésie agonisante des derniers moments de 
Rome,” Huysmans’s A Rebours, Verlaine’s famous “Langueur,” the 
parodic Deliquescences published in “Byzance”), as well as articles 
on the movement: “notre époque . . . nous est l’image fidèle de 
l’ère des derniers Césars.” It provided a stock of ancient models 
for the Decadent hero: Nero, especially, but also Heliogabalus, 
Sardanapalus, Alcibiades, and Caesar—these latter two in particu­
lar types of the dandy. “Néron, le plus débauché, le plus ignoble 
de tous les hommes, était un artiste”: depraved, debauched, de­
ranged, the artist of qualis artifex pereo furnished an appropriately 
corrupt example for the Decadent. Laforgue alludes to Nero on 
many occasions, and notably in Hamlet, where the manically aest­
hetic hero dies with the emperor’s words on his lips. The phys­
ical characteristics of the Decadent hero conformed to the idea of 
these ancient predecessors: pale, thin, anemic, frail, and feminine, 
but dressed in the Baudelairean black suit.

The mysticism that Gautier and Bourget discuss in their essays
on Baudelaire becomes a commonplace of Decadence. It is linked to a loss of conventional religious faith, replaced by a less sectarian belief in a spiritual realm beyond the physical world with which the human soul aspires to be united. The Romantic origins of Decadent mysticism are acknowledged from the beginning: Gautier mentions Swedenborg's influence on Baudelaire's spirituality and theory of correspondences; Villiers's spiritist hero of Claire Lenoir reads Swedenborg; Balzac's Séraphita was considered a forerunner of Symbolism; Flaubert's Tentation de Saint-Antoine was one of the most important books of the period, along with the Imitation de Jésus-Christ, both favorites of des Esseintes. Nearly all articles on the movement call attention to its mystical strain: the Decadents are "religieux de mysticisme" and characterized by "un curieux mélange de positivisme et de mysticisme"; Verlaine combines a "mysticité catholique" with refined libertinage; V. Pica cites the mélange of "misticismo catolico e pessimismo alemanno; and Laforgue himself includes "mysticisme" in his definition of Decadence.

Bourget saw the tendency to mysticism as one response to the torturing problem of the age, the conflict between a desire for a stable, unified self and world, on the one hand, and the unsettling results of scientific and psychological analysis, on the other. Mysticism reflects the thirst of the nihilist for an ideal, as with Baudelaire, "assoiffé d'un infini perdu," and Flaubert, "nihiliste affamé d'absolu" (Bourget, 13, 127). In his review of A Rebours, Barbey makes a similar observation about des Esseintes, "une âme malade d'infiniti dans une société qui ne croit plus qu'aux choses finies." But des Esseintes's love for medieval mystics and all the mystical works in his library do not save him from the defeat of the ending, when he is forced, in a choice between suicide and returning to society, to give in to the powers of conformity. The hero's failure points up the shortcomings of mysticism, the ultimate impossibility of a Schopenhauerian union of the self with the absolute. This ideal of Decadence was thus undermined by a basic Decadent conviction, an irony exploited constantly by Laforgue.

Mysticism provided a large stock of imagery: metaphors of dissolution, emanation, expansion, and metamorphosis, as in the
Spinozian pantheistic finale to *La Tentation de Saint-Antoine*, and the parodic title of the *Déliquesences*; underwater, lunar, and liturgical imagery, the latter usually in an erotic context. Bourget had noted this last phenomenon, which derives from a long tradition relating Christian texts to eroticism, in Baudelaire, but it occurs also in other major writers of the period: Verlaine, Laforgue, Mallarmé, and Vièlé-Griffin. It is parodied in the *Déliquesences*, and mocked by Bourd in the article cited above: “Les œuvres de l’école font briller plus d’ostensoirs et resplendir plus d’or sur les chapes, allument plus de cierges, ouvrent plus de missels et fournis­sent plus de décors de basilique que la rue Saint-Sulpice tout entière n’en pourrait fournir” (Pakenham, 14). Laforgue uses the liturgical metaphor ironically throughout his work, especially in the *Complaintes*, and parodies it explicitly in *Lohengrin*.

Bourget had noted the Decadent insistence on individualism and the importance of the self, with respect to both the subject of modern literature and its form; Decadence results when the individual, be it self or word, becomes exaggerated at the expense of the whole, society or text. In the period of the *Essais*, he saw this as a source of aesthetic and psychological interest, even pleasure, despite (or perhaps, because of) the crises that it involved; later he would depart from this position. For Bourget, the self is a complex, variable entity formed by heredity and environment; it has an unconscious domain to which we have limited access; it may be studied, if not—in its variability—securely known; and such self-study reveals the source of an individual’s reality: “Chacun de nous aperçoit non pas l’univers, mais son univers; non pas la réalité, mais de cette réalité, ce que son tempérament lui permet de s’approprier” (Bourget, 98). Bourget emphasized the personal as the sole valid access to the real and the principal source of aesthetic emotion. His subjective idealism was not extreme, however, for he maintained that art had the capacity to communicate the artist’s vision to others by its power of suggestion. To cultivate, examine, and protect the self for the purposes of artistic creation was a cliché of 1880s Decadence: “Les personnages doivent vivre en dedans et y construire le monde intérieur”; “repousser toute réalité de la matière et n’admet[tre] le monde que comme représentation.” Villiers,
for whom the individual consciousness constitutes the only reality, is the extreme figure in the solipsistic trend; cultivating the self allows one to create a reality for oneself, as in *L'Eve future* and, of course, *Axel*. Huysmans illustrates this view in *A Rebours* and proclaims its failure. Egoism, individualism, narcissism, subjective idealism: the terms are used loosely and interchangeably to designate the importance of the self and self-analysis as the basis of an approach to life. Moreover, as Moreau has noted, the self, particularly the unconscious, is repeatedly treated in metaphors of theater and spectacle as a drama to be interpreted, consistent with the ideology of Decadence itself. All life, including the intimate life of the unconscious mind, is a work of art.

Decadent style and form constitute the single most important theme in discussions of the movement during this period. Nearly every article devotes some attention to the technical novelty of Decadent writing and tries to describe it, particularly in terms of decomposition or fragmentation, as Bourget had suggested. Floupette humorously called it "une attaque de nerfs sur du papier" (*Richard, Symbolisme*, 310), with which judgment certain readers of Laforgue's *Complaintes* seemed to agree, as we shall see shortly. But everyone acknowledged that the Decadents had realized the revolution in poetic language and form begun by the Romantics. Although Bourde was sarcastic about the subjects of Decadent art, he nevertheless paid tribute to its language as an original contribution to the history of poetry:

Mais autant ils mettent de vanité à rechercher des sensations inédites, autant ils apportent de soins à les exprimer dans des rythmes rares et dans une langue renouvelée. . . . Les essais que font ces poètes sur la langue sont plus nouveaux en notre pays que leurs sentiments et leurs opinions. (Pakenham, 15f., 21)

Characteristic features cited repeatedly include a neglect of the caesura and of the rule of alternating masculine-feminine rhymes; innovative language, neologisms, rare words, variable rhythms, heavy assonance and alliteration, novel metaphors, synaesthesia, discontinuity, the use of adjectives as substantives, a mixture of popular and *savant* vocabulary, and an emphasis on suggestion. Complication is a major theme, with the questionable justification
that a complicated style is necessary for the expression of complicated sensations, ideas, and the Idea itself. Accordingly, incoherence, imprecision, and unintelligibility form the principal objections of critics: “c'est l'école du flou . . . Les mots, entre leurs mains, sont . . . des instruments destinés à volatiliser les impressions, et à les rendre encore plus fuyantes et vaporeuses qu'elles ne le sont dans la réalité. Ils ont l'amour du vague à la phrase”; and more sarcastically, “avec quelque peu de bonne volonté, tirant les mots au sort dans un dictionnaire, et comptant sur ses doigts le nombre de syllabes nécessaires pour former un vers, on a la grande chance d'atteindre la perfection dans le genre et de devenir un très brillant poète décadent.”

Laforgue’s first published collection, the Complaintes, appeared precisely at the time when the Decadent controversy, touched off by the publication of the Délíquesences, was becoming prominent in the press. For better or worse, his volume was involved in the popularization of the Decadent debate; there were accordingly more than four times as many reviews of the Complaintes as of his subsequent collections. This coincidence had significant consequences, for his poems were read entirely in the light of the “new school,” and nearly all reviews discuss him in these terms. The most important feature to emerge from these articles is his wholly unconventional and original style: his irregular meter, novel and broken rhythms, neglect of the caesura, ellipses, use of a spoken idiom, neologisms, humor, incongruous juxtapositions, a mixture of popular and learned language, and his rhyme for the ear rather than the eye. Charges of unintelligibility abound, and some critics describe his verse as gibberish, delirium, or the random utterances of an halluciné. One of the first readers of the Complaintes predicted of the Laforguian trend: “Si ça continue, il suffira dans six ans: 1. de n'avoir rien à dire; 2. de le dire en mauvais vers et en vers faux; 3. d’écrire comme un javanais: pour être un poète de génie” (Debauve, 198). Even L. Trézenik, who appreciated Laforgue’s innovative form to some extent, noted the incomprehensibility of some of the poems: “M. Laforgue se complait à siéger dans une bouteille à encre de la plus indéniable opacité . . . bon nombre de complaintes sont totalement indéchiffrables. M. Laforgue est un
Sphinx . . . pour les énigmes duquel peu d'Odipès sont nés en­core." Others put it more directly: "Le livre de M. Laforgue demeure parfaitement inintelligible"; its fragmented phrases "paraissent avoir été tirés au sort et assemblés au hasard." The Complaintes were even compared to the Deliquescences as a parody of Decadent writing: "à certaines pages, on se croirait en face d'une parodie plus loin poussée que la brochure des Deliquescences."

Significantly, however, all those who objected to Laforgue's technical innovation acknowledged that it was both original and deliberate. Trézenik admits that his "indépendence prosodique . . . n'est pas le résultat de l'impuissance. C'est voulu" (Debauve, 199). Amédée Pigeon notes the "négligences très voulues de son style" and places him in the rhetorical family of Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Verlaine, and Corbière. F. Nautet likens Laforgue's prosody to the techniques of Wagner, and Wyzewa counts him among the writers of "littérature wagnérienne," particularly for his rhythms. The master of Decadence himself, Huysmans, praises their "langue si avancée": "ce livre des Complaintes m'a trés insi­dieusement requis, avec ses horizons fuyant dans les brumes, ses épithètes suggestives ouvrant des échappées sur lesquelles on rêve, ses verbes fabriqués curieusement, ses vers bizarrement rimés où les pluriels baisent le singulier . . . Ça a été un fin régäl pour des Es­seintes: quelle singulière chose, pourtant!"

Laforgue's own reviews of the Complaintes reveal that he consid­ered his formal originality one of the two most notable features of the volume. He acknowledges his debt to Decadent style, which he defines as "une langue enfilant au petit bonheur des conso­nances imprévues et sans syntaxe presque, les images les plus criardes et les mots les plus exotiques qu'on puisse glaner dans les troisièmes dessous du Dictionnaire de Littre." Of his own, he noted the "originales qualités de langue" and his novel rhymes and meter, meant to impart subtle nuances and create special effects, as well as his neologisms and unusual metaphors (Debauve, 195).

The discontinuity of the Moralités' prose is consistent with the Decadence that they both mock and affirm. It relies, like his po­etry, on puns, sound play, peculiar metaphors, a rapid and wide­ranging association of ideas, repetition, substantivized adjectives,
incongruous allusions, clichés, a variety of specialized vocabularies, autoquotation, neologisms, suspension points, exclamations, apostrophe, and levels of diction ranging from the most poetic to the most colloquial.\textsuperscript{96} As noted in chapter one, the point of view changes frequently from the most personal interior monologue to a disconcerting narratorial intervention; problems of interpretation, and sometimes mere intelligibility, arise frequently. His descriptions of nature are highly stylized, as Moreau has remarked,\textsuperscript{97} and one of the most common aspects of Decadent writing, synaesthesia, is applied brilliantly: a hush is compared to a sweep-net unfolding on the water in \textit{Salomé} (221); in \textit{Pan}, water and breezes are compared to fabrics (306), a fountain to a fan (306), and a melody to a garland unwinding round a statue’s pedestal (307). Sounds are likened to shades of a watercolor, and a scene to a seventeenth-century tapestry in \textit{Hamlet} (11); the countryside is described as a color print in \textit{Le Miracle des Roses} (59). But Laforgue does not mock Decadence merely by exaggerating its favorite stylistic features; his language is more sophisticated and radical, now exaggerating them, now ironically deflating them, now employing them masterfully to communicate his point. It provides an especially good example of how Decadence may parody itself in the fullest sense, creating a new language as it mocks itself. Reviews of the tales consistently praise their stylistic virtuosity: their “imprévues abracadabrances d’images,” their “multicoles et inusités vêtements de phrases,” the “sauts de carpe” of their dialogues, their distinctive “style inouï, bariolé de science, de transcendance, de blague, de calemours, de folie et de raison, un style insoupçonné,” with the suppleness of an acrobat and a clown, and the sleight of hand of a magician.\textsuperscript{98} Their unusual images and strange combinations disconcert (“tour à tour science, art, folie, rêve sont évoqués. Les mots s’emmêlent en un tout bizarre”), but make for a “richesse d’expression” largely responsible for the incomparable originality of the stories.\textsuperscript{99}

It is interesting that, except for Laforgue, critics of the period did not identify humor as an aspect of Decadence, save by an occasional allusion to the \textit{Déliquescences}, Corbière, or Laforgue himself. This omission is understandable, given the utterly, ponderously
humorless quality of many Decadent works; on the other hand, the wry, caricatural humor of *A Rebours* is undeniable. A movement that produced, in addition, the *Délíguescences*, the *Moralités*, and a host of more minor works of *funisterie* and *blague*, and led to the comic works of Jarry after 1893, ought to be examined for its relation to humor. One of its chief features—exaggeration—is indeed one of the oldest devices of humor. This other side of Decadence has been generally ignored. Pierrot’s study, the most complete, never mentions it, and others have merely pointed it out. For example, M. Décaudin considers “l’esprit de blague” an important counterweight to the neurotic element of Decadence. P. Stephan remarks its “parodying, *pince sans rire* side” and states that “parodies of decadence seem almost as typical of the movement as more serious poetic expression.” R. Thornton observes that “the Decadent is grotesque, a caricature from the start,” and “the central figure of Decadence . . . a parody. This self-mocking note of Decadence . . . is a fundamental characteristic, uniting aspects of Lionel Johnson, Max Beerbohm, and Aubrey Beardsley, not to mention *Punch* and Adoré Floupette.” And in his edition of the *Moralités*, P. Pia cites the importance of parody in the nineteenth century, especially parodies of theater and poetry, notably of Hugo.

These remarks depend on varied and free senses of “parody,” somewhat less precise than the one formulated in the preceding chapter; however, they all suggest that Decadence involves, inherently or simply in practice, a comic element—humor, mockery, and self-mockery. While I would not maintain that Decadence ultimately demands parody, according to my view of it, a relation between them certainly exists. The relation has been studied somewhat with respect to the Aesthetic movement in England, which not only offered perfect targets for parody but also was to some extent a product of parody, the aesthete’s conscious pose, an image deliberately exaggerated to mock middle-class values and the realist art associated with them. Exaggeration, self-consciousness, artifice, the spirit of novelty, self-reflexive art: these features of Decadence leave the movement easily open to the comic and to parody, whose distortion is, as it were, already provided.
An examination of the numerous and often short-lived literary reviews of the late-nineteenth century reveals a climate remarkably conducive to the production of parody. Some of the most important periodicals representing the multiple new poetic currents of the anonymous “jeunes” depended upon the comic in their effort to offer an alternative to established values, institutions, writers, critics, and literary works; it assisted the aesthetic of novelty, originality, and modernity which motivated the new poetry. *Le Chat noir* (1882–1894), *Lutèce* (1883–1886), *L’Hydropathe* (1879–1880), and *Le Scapin* (1885–1886), to name some of the more notable feuilles humoristiques, used parody, satire, and pastiche to promulgate a specifically modern art and formulate its relation to past, or even contemporary, standards. Humor provided a means of achieving, in particular, the aesthetic freedom (ideological and technical) that was by all accounts, contemporary and later, a chief characteristic of early modernism.

Some of this was directed toward political targets; certain journals were devoted to it, and other, more literary ones frequently contained a section of political satire. I have not included these examples in the present study, however, for two reasons. First, they are not distinctive to the period, as France has a long and rich tradition of political satire and caricature; on this basis, the period would not be more favorable to parody than any other. Humor applied consistently to the arts distinguishes the early 1880s and creates an atmosphere in which parody might develop. Second, political satire does not present a useful parallel to literary parody, for the theoretical reasons given in chapter one: it does not preserve the target within itself, and the satirist does not share the parodist’s ambivalence toward his object. Forms of the comic became an essential feature, rather, of the literary avant-garde and the aesthetic of the new that it consciously sought to promote. The growing importance of humor in areas other than the political is reflected in the gradual abandonment by some small literary jour-
nals of their political component, as in the passage of the *Nouvelle Rive Gauche* to its more purely artistic successor, *Lutèce*.

Although examples of parody are frequent in the nineteenth century in both published works and scores of periodicals, none reflects the particular procedures or achieves the level of artistry of the *Moralités*. Most are mediocre efforts, in Pia's terms "petites drôleries," which have no reputation today, and suffer from standard flaws: they are often too brief to put the humor in the service of a new aesthetic; the distortion is crude and turns easily into allegory; the humor is doubtful—highly topical or consisting only in the discrepancy between speech and setting. However, by their prominence they deserve some attention, for they reveal a context, as yet unexplored, in which to place the *Moralités*. They indeed exploit many of the same parodic techniques: anachronism, particularly modern speech, dress, and ideas attributed to an older subject; the deformation of a familiar story, or its continuation beyond the traditional ending; all the conventional devices of humor; quotations from the original in a different context; some acknowledgement from within the work of the reader's world outside. They thus provide a contemporary background against which to appreciate the ingenuity and creativity of Laforgue's comic imagination.

Canonical texts of French culture, such as *La Marseillaise* and the Lord's Prayer, frequently function as objects or vehicles of parody in the manner of the schoolboy joke: one finds a "Marseillaise des Infirmes," a "Marseillaise des locataires," a "Notre père Zola, qui êtes à Médan, que vos romans soient payés très cher." Well-known folk tales are also exploited freely. For instance, the story of Red Riding Hood is reversed in an issue of *La Parodie*, with the villain of the original the hero of the parody, and the title accordingly altered from the "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge" to "Le Loup"; the wolf, who has already read Perrault's tale, is figuratively devoured by Chaperon Rouge, a true Eternal Feminine who toys with his love and destroys his heart.

Another common form of parody involves using a famous writer as a character in a new scenario, contrived to foster citations out of context. For example, an issue of *Le Chat noir* features "Les
Poètes, boulevard Rochechouart,” depicting the nocturnal encounters of celebrated poets with the street walkers of the boulevard Rochechouart, location of the Chat Noir literary club:¹¹⁰

RONSARD: Mignonne, allons voir si la rose, qui, ce matin, av . . .
LA FILLE: — Eh, zut! J’ai pas de rose chez moi! Viens-y plutôt.
VILLON: Viens dans notre bourdeau où tenons notre estat.
LA FILLE: Va donc parler argot à tes marmites, sale marlou!
BOILEAU: Ce que l’on conçoit bien s’énonce clairement,
Et les mots, pour le dire, arrivent aisément.

The give and take continues with artists from Racine to the present, including the journal’s editor, Émile Goudeau. The humor derives from the anachronism and the disjunction of poetic and vulgar language; from the citation taken out of context, spoken by its author, and applied to an incongruous but ironically apt situation; and from the self-reference of Le Chat noir (through the presence of its editor and the location of the club). Another spoof, on Félicien Champsaur’s novel, Dinah Samuel, uses a similar type of parody. In an extension of the Inferno, Victor Hugo, dressed as Dante, appears to the sleeping Champsaur in a dream and tells him to go to Paris, a modern Inferno (“enfer des vertus provinciales”), to join the Hydropathes, one of the first literary clubs of the period: “Félicien tu rêves . . . la bouche d’ombre me l’a dit.” Hugo literally applies his own poem, “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre,” to an ironically pertinent context, whose distance from the proper one provokes the humor. As the piece continues, the two enter the second circle, that of Montmartre (home of the Chat Noir), and watch Champsaur’s lover, Dinah Samuel, run off with a banker, “parodiant à la moderne l’antique Francesca di Rimini.”¹¹¹ Again, the journal refers to itself; and more explicitly, the text signals itself as a modern version of Dante’s celebrated story of the adulteress Francesca, thus exposing its own parodic methods.

The specific parodic device of retelling and distorting a well-known story occurs relatively infrequently during this early period, except in the popular theater where parodies of Flaubert, Zola, and Wagner, in particular, were performed regularly.¹¹² Most literary “rewritings,” particularly those involving modernization, come well after the Moralités.¹¹³ This is surprising, for the technique had
been used extensively, and sometimes masterfully, during the Second Empire in the *opéra-comique*. Retelling a familiar story in a comical way is the principle of Offenbach’s works, notably *Orphée aux enfers* and *La Belle Hélène*, which have the additional parodic feature of using a distant story to make fun of something closer to the aesthetic world of the author and audience. Thus *Orphée* parodies Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Eurydice* and the clichés of Italian opera as it trivializes the story, and *Hélène* parodies the singing contest in Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*. In conception, this type of *opéra-comique* resembles the *Moralités*, and Laforgue exploited the likeness by alluding frequently to the *opéra-comique* in the stories. In purpose and result, however, the two differ considerably. Offenbach’s works are *principally* satires (and brilliant ones at that) on Second-Empire Parisian life, which use parodic methods for satirical purposes; Laforgue’s have an occasional satirical component (as in the ridiculous bourgeois parade of *Le Miracle des Roses*), but are essentially parodies of Decadent art. Moreover he puts his humor in the service of a larger and more important effort of modernization, ultimately making the stories *moralités* for modern life; his mockery of Decadence takes the movement beyond its obvious limitations and offers, according to his wishes for the *Complaintes*, a more seriously modern ideal. The connection between the *Moralités* and the *opéra-comique* was made early on, but was criticized by one reviewer: “Il en est qui ne voient dans le livre de Jules Laforgue que des bouffonneries très réussies venant après Offenbach . . . Ce sont là des jugements corticaux. Les *Moralités légendaires* ont toutes plus haute et décisive portée. . . . voici de la profonde psychologie et de la philosophie nette.”

Examples of parodic rewriting that come after the *Moralités* include such works as *Les Aventures du roi Pausole* of Pierre Louÿs (1900), a story based on the *roi d’Yvetot* that lampoons contemporary figures, notably Gide. Georges Fourest’s *Nègresse blonde* (1909) is a series of poems that transposes the subjects of Racine and Corneille into the contemporary world, particularly in speech, dress, and décor: Bérénice rides in a sleeping car and plays golf; Hippolyte is “un jeune homme d’élite”; Pyrrhus wears a frock coat and white gloves. Fourest accordingly mixes grand descriptive al-
exandrines with the rhythms of popular verse. In another example, Paul-Jean Toulet extends and transforms the story of Don Quixote in “Le Mariage de Don Quichotte” (Mon Amie Nane, 1904): the hero, having recovered his reason, becomes an ultrapositivist who seeks to convince the world of the value of science and rationalism. And the work of the established drama critic Jules Lemaître consistently uses this device. Lemaître owned a copy of the first edition of the Moralités, and it is possible that they influenced his own work. As the title of his tales suggests, the Contes en marge des vieux livres (1905) follow parodic principles, lowering gods and heroes to human level, bringing a secondary character to the fore, taking the story to a conclusion implied but not realized by the original narrative itself. The volume contains stories inspired by a variety of genres and periods: the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Aeneid, the Gospels, the chansons de geste, and so on. His procedure consists principally in spinning off a story from a traditional one; the model is clearly identified by the title and usually by a quotation from it in the new version. Thus, “Thersite” makes the most lowly and unheroic character of the Iliad the main character of a story of his own, which begins with Homer’s line itself: “C’était l’homme le plus laid qui fut venu devant Ilion.”

Lemaître’s stories, however, differ markedly from the Moralités. First, they are highly moralistic in the most literal sense of the term, and not in the ironic way that Laforgue uses his title; they have a serious, and usually very simple, moral lesson to tell, which considerably reduces the humor. Second, Lemaître’s modernization consists principally of having the characters use modern speech; his purpose lay, by his own admission, in the past, “rêver dans le passé.” Third, his stories are not parodies, properly speaking, for they do not include the comic element necessary to the genre. Laforgue’s, in contrast, depend on this element as the main mechanism for realizing his aesthetic of modernity, calling even the present into question.

In the 1890s, the “esprit de blague” attained a certain authority and a wide following by its association with the foremost Symbolist journal of the decade, the Revue blanche. In Le Chasseur de Cheveutres, its humorous monthly supplement, one finds various
forms of parody, notably by Tristan Bernard, "informateur du possible," and Pierre Veber, "déformateur du réel." These usually have a topical and often satirical interest. For example, Baudelaire’s "Harmonie du soir" is altered to make fun of the crisis in Parisian theaters:

Voici venir le temps où perdant leur prestige
Les pauvres directeurs sont tous au désespoir;
Plus personne aux fauteuils, hélas! ne vient s’asseoir,
Abandon lamentable et néfaste prodige.

In another, famous poetic lines of nineteenth-century poets are transformed into advertisements for merchandise: Musset, Hugo, Baudelaire, and Verlaine are all integrated into the world of the marketplace. Poetry may indeed be applicable to life; or, more likely, the bourgeois world, confident and simple-minded in its spirit of utility, is open enough to embrace even the mysterious world of art. Other parodies include a dramatic fragment written in the manner of Maeterlinck, featuring a reunion of Parisian critics in the basement of the Bouffes during the intermission of Pelléas; a Gospel according to St. Judas Iscariot, in which, for example, the story of Mary and Martha has Martha telling Jesus off and refusing him dinner; and a Robinson Crusoe who takes his Eternally Feminine bride to a desert island to keep himself from being cuckolded and ends up losing her to a baboon.

The contributions of Bernard, Veber, and Roman Coolus made the *Revue blanche* known for this type of parody. Veber’s, in particular, reflect the Laforguian manner of infusing a familiar story with the characteristics of modern life. "Alceste régénéré" uses Molière’s *Misanthrope* to parody the late nineteenth-century literary hero. Alceste is still a misanthrope, but of a distinctly Decadent variety, a frustrated poet, who has quarreled with Célimène and is thus angry at the world. Using a typical device of parody, Veber makes a comical allusion to the original text and its genre: "[Alceste donne] un solide, misanthrope coup de pied... Après avoir accompli cet acte un peu théâtral, Alceste regagne son carrosse" (emphasis mine). Laforgue does similarly in *Hamlet*, by making the hero count "si tragiquement" on the players to carry out his plan. Typically, Alceste wishes to flee an unappreciative
world: “ Ils n’ont pas soupçonné mes intentions; ils n’ont pas eu la curiosité de soulever mes métaphores pour voir ce qui se trouvait derrière.” He blames his disappointments and failures on a notion of heredity worthy of Laforgue’s hero:

J’ai été singulièrement déçu dans mes aspirations... Il n’y a qu’à regarder mes portraits d’ancêtres; une jolie collection de moroses et de figés-dans-l’Attitude; évidemment ils ont déterminé ma manière d’être.

On m’a fait légataire universel d’une tristesse capitalisée par les grands parents.

But heredity is not all; the formula calls also for milieu, and thus he rails against the false teachings of his youth, which deceived him about the relativism and uncertainty of all things. With a characteristic pun, he remarks, “On ne panse pas les plaies morales avec des antisceptiques.”

Like Laforgue’s Hamlet, Alceste is concerned for his posthumous reputation: his disgust with life makes him want to throw himself into the water, but he hesitates each time at the thought that his suicide would be attributed to something as prosaic and unphilosophical as disappointed love. With the sobering remark that “quand on est mort, c’est pour longtemps,” he decides in a parodic turn to renounce renunciation, defy the world, meet its “sacré générale” with his own, and adopt the cult of the ego. He is only momentarily disconcerted when, trying out his new self on a passerby whom he attempts to rob, the victim turns out to be M. Jourdain. Inserting a character from another of Molière’s plays exploits the common feature of parody described in chapter one, by which the reader, supposedly outside the parody along with Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, finds himself implicated in it. The tale ends when the hero, having lived the life of a total scoundrel, admits that the world contains some good after all. A moral closes it ironically: “Plaise à Dieu que nous parvenions à un âge avancé, après avoir, ainsi qu’Alceste, trouvé le sens de l’existence.” Clearly the answer to modern ennui lies elsewhere than in the despairing philosophy of poets. Moreover, the wish that we may follow in Alceste’s path suggests, in the manner of parody, that we may turn his story inside out, as he, in this parody, did to the original Alceste’s; as I argued in chapter one, parody provides for a revision of itself.
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Veber wrote other stories of this type: for example, a modernized version of *Barbe-Bleue*, where the hero, Max Bluebeard, is a young English lord with monocle and polished shoes, an "imagination de serre-chaude," and a Decadent taste for "livres méconnus et ignorés."¹²²

Pastiche and its more extreme form of mystification were extremely common during the 1880s. Trézenik's *Lutèce* published pastiches of Decadent poetry, such as "Les Fleurs blèmes," complete with flowers, morbidity, verbal play, and a blank epigraph from Verlaine signalling the joke and its object:

Rose arrose d'argyrose
La morose rose rose!
Oh! Phymen d'un cyclamen
Amène un amène amen.

(Richard, *Symbolisme*, 171)

Anatole Baju's journal, *Le Décadent*, was notorious for such games and published a number of apocrypha as jokes, including some fake Rimbaud poems.¹²³ One of these carried a note that pushed to extreme the characteristics of Decadent writing, aiming particularly at the contorted style of Mallarmé with its ellipses, disrupted syntax, neologisms, and use of capital letters:


(Richard, *Mouvement décadent*, 203)

The real authors, Laurent Tailhade and Georges Fourest, responded to accusations of forgery, not by revealing their identities, but by creating a straw man forger with the caricatural name of Mitrophane (reminiscent of "Aristophane" and "shot") Crapoussin, who then went on to have a brilliant career in *Le Décadent* for the next few months. *Le Décadent* printed other such jokes: sonnets supposedly written by the nationalist opposition leader General Boulanger and Louis II of Bavaria, and a fake letter from Sarcey, the venomous conservative critic of *Le XIXe Siècle*, announcing his conversion to Decadence and his collaboration on *Le Décadent*.¹²⁴ Some of these were subsequently twisted ironically
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and parodied again by *La Plume* in its special issue on the Decadents (34, 15 September 1890), where Sarcey, for example, transfers his allegiance (and services) to the rival *Chat noir*.

The parodistic work that received the most publicity during this period, however, was the *Déliquescences d’Adoré Floupette*, a spoof on the new tendencies in poetry, a Decadent version of the earlier one on the Parnassian movement, *Le Parnassiculet contemporain*. It was written by two minor poets, Gabriel Vicaire and Henri Beauclair, and parodied not only the principal figures of Decadence, Verlaine and Mallarmé, but especially, as Richard remarks, the cult that had grown up around them among the young poets. It appeared in May of 1885, ostensibly published by “Lion Vanne” in “Byzance”: Vanier’s name is metamorphosed into a favorite Decadent adjective of lassitude, and the place of publication the model city of those “écritains byzantins” themselves. Even the title implies a parody of the techniques and practices of the Decadent group, so often referred to as the “école du flou” for its vagueness and impressionism. The idea of liquefaction conveyed by “Déliquescences” supports the blurriness of “flou” in a metaphor dear to Decadent writing, and in a term having old and authoritative Decadent origins, Gautier’s preface to the *Fleurs du mal*. It also has the advantage of verbal echoes relevant to the Decadent aesthetic—“délét” and “essence”—a pun that signals the parody. The preciosity of “Adoré” and the comicality of the ending “pette” renders the name appropriately ridiculous.

The *Déliquescences* parody most of the major themes of Decadence: pessimism and the Baudelairean *horreur de l’être*, morbidity, the mixture of mysticism and sensuality, the use of liturgical imagery in a context of libertinage, perfumes, exotic flowers, and gems. It also employs *à outrance* some of the common stylistic devices of the new poetry: repetition, neologisms, unusual vocabulary, syntactical obscurities, capital letters, incongruity, oxymoron, the *impair*, and synaesthesia. The poems play now with individual writers, now with the general features of Decadence; for example, “Pour avoir péché” parodies Mallarmé’s “Prose pour des Esseintes,” while others are more vaguely reminiscent of his manner, and are, more properly speaking, pastiches employing the
techniques of parody. Although the Déliquescences thus differ greatly from Laforguian parody, they nevertheless provide a useful example of a work that, like the Moralités, mocks and targets the conventions of Decadence.

The work appeared at a time when the Decadent aesthetic was being formulated, following Verlaine’s Poètes maudits (1883) and Huysmans’ A Rebours (1884). By its exaggeration of the features of the new poetry, it contributed to the elaboration of the Decadent myth. Trézenik went so far as to maintain, wrongly, that Decadence itself was wholly a creation of Floupette. It had actually been understood as a term and an ideology for several years (Trézenik himself had used it in his essay on Laforgue of the previous week), and Floupette’s comical imitation and distortion of Decadent conventions reveal the extent to which these were identifiable. However, Trézenik’s statement confirms the suggestion made in chapter one that parody may fix the conventions of its target as it exaggerates them, mocks them, neutralises and ultimately even reforms them. It is significant in this respect that the poems of the Déliquescences first appeared in one of the mainstays of the Decadent movement, Lutèce.

Even more blatantly than the poems, the preface that introduced the second edition (June 1885) parodies the conventions of Decadence. Like the preface to the earlier Parnassiculet, this one consists of a long introduction on the life of the Adoré Floupette by his friend Marius Tapora (an anagrammatical pun on the familiar term for his profession, “potard,” pharmacist.) It comically portrays the Decadent hero’s progress from un jeune homme de province to a full-fledged member of the 1880s Parisian literary cénacles, and the parallel evolution of his taste from Racinian classicism, through all the nineteenth-century movements to Decadence. In recounting the experiences of Tapora and Floupette among the poets at the Panier fleuri literary cafe, it uses the standard devices of parody: puns, quotation out of context, exaggeration of Decadent style, themes, and terms, imitating the Parnassiculet and parodying the theme of literary initiation, introducing elements of the real world into the parody (as in Mallarmé’s “Mort de la pénultième”), and parodies-within-the-parody. It even includes a certain self-mockery, when
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at the end the text suggests that, like a good Decadent poem, it may have only a "sens affreusement obscene." Particular contemporary poets are caricatured (the names of Verlaine and Mallarmé become Bleucoton and Arsenal), and poems parodied:

Je voudrais être un gaga
Et que mon coeur naviguat
Sur la fleur du seringa.

This plays not only with a line from Verlaine's Sagesse ("Qu'il faudrait que mon coeur en panne naviguat," I, X), but also with a favorite poetic issue of the Decadents: a ludicrous discussion of the "t" in naviguat targets the rime pour l'œil / rime pour l'oreille controversy of the period.

The preface also presents the clichés of Decadent aesthetics: an insistence on nuance, dream, expressing the inexpressible, the poète-voyant; neologisms, archaisms, popular and erudite vocabulary; exotic flowers, gems, and perfumes; incestuous or perverse love; the pessimistic conviction that all is vain and existence an illusion; mysticism; the use of drugs; opposition to nature and health; the beauty of evil; the religion of Satanism; and the most parodic and parodied of all, perversion, "De la perversité, mon vieux Tapora. Soyons pervers" (Richard, 308).

Laforgue recognized the place of the Déliquescences in the evolution of Decadence as a necessary stage in the coming of age of the new movement, as the Parnassiculet had been for the now-accepted Parnasse; the parody consecrated it as the movement of the future. In his review of the Complaintes, he sketched the pattern thus:

On se souvient qu'en pleine ferveur du cenacle parnassien deux sceptiques anonymes lancèrent, sous le titre de Parnassiculet, une élégante plaquette de vers dont chaque pièce était un pastiche réussi de la manière d'un des coryphées de cette école dite des Impassibles. L'excentrique cenacle d'alors est aujourd'hui arrivé: Sully Prudhomme et Coppée sont de l'Académie, Leconte de Lisle y va succéder à Hugo, Paul Bourget vient d'être décoré, les autres suivent et le Parnassiculet est recherché comme une curiosité par les bibliophiles. Or il faut croire que le nouveau cenacle atteint à son tour le paroxysme de la crise littéraire qu'il traverse, car il vient d'avoir aussi son Parnassiculet. Les Déliquescences, c'est-à-dire de la décadence au dernier degré de la décomposition, de la décadence qui coule, sont datées significativement non de Paris.
This last remark suggests that, as I have argued in chapter one, a parody need not come at the end or decline of a tradition, but on the contrary, may work most effectively at its height. The tradition must be established to some extent, in order for the exaggeration of the parody to be performed and perceived, but it may be flourishing rather than languishing, as it undergoes the criticism and mockery of the parody. In such cases, the parody defines the conventions of the genre and thereby leaves room for their reusage, revision, and even redefinition; in the best of cases, this latter process takes place within the parody itself. One might reasonably argue that the Déliquesences perform the first but not the second of these functions, that is, they identify and exaggerate the distinctive characteristics of Decadence but do not carry out the important transformative function of parody. They employ its devices and methods but do not use the distortion for any purpose other than mockery. This sets them apart from the Moralités, whose playing with the conventions of Decadence under the guise of an old story elaborates both a particular conception of modern art and a lesson for what Laforgue considered the moral quandary of modern man.

The importance of parody in the literary world of this period, roughly from the late 1870s to the early 1890s, makes the later phenomenon of Jarry’s works, with their persistent use of parodic methods, less isolated and more understandable. The title of Ubu Roi of course parodies Sophocles’ Oedipus; its plot takes up that of Shakespeare’s Macbeth, which the famous “hoscha la poire” of the epigraph makes evident; and certain of its lines deform ones from Racine, Molière, and others. Although in general the Ubu plays do not fit the definition that I have given, the devices of parody are frequently responsible for their humor. If these works may be placed at the beginning of twentieth-century theater, they represent also the culmination of a strong comic tradition which had been a mainstay of the avant-garde since the late 1870s. The Moralités are a
very different sort of work, in both form and spirit, from Jarry’s theater, but the comic tradition that Laforgue so masterfully exploited also served Jarry’s creations and should be restored to its position as one of the dominant forces of early modernism.