

ends up hiring “an albino bulimic bisexual genetically challenged troll of corpuscularity and whiteness, with twelve toes and apparently limitless dandruff” (167). The enlightened Meliorite hiring committee, however, is “delighted, for it had hired the best-qualified philosopher it could find to suit its needs, which lay primarily in metaphysics and epistemology” (167).

In spite of its allegiances with the great satires of the West, this novel, like most of those satires, will not change its target. For radical feminists, especially those at the university, tend to regard the criticism that comes their way simply as further evidence of, as the Ovarian professors put it, “the enslavewombent, exploitation and oppression of all womben evherywhere by men” (54). The best Tafler can hope for from them is that they do not gonadtropically challenge him. But like those great satires, this one may well entertain some readers and remain as a significant testimony to the forms of resentment, fanaticism, corruption, and idiocy of which we are capable.

David Weir

*Decadence and the Making of Modernism*

Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995. Pp. 232. \$50.00 \$17.95

Reviewed by Leon Surette

It is a great pleasure to review a book so well written, and so full of well-presented and well-argued analysis. Weir’s argument is that modernity takes shape at least partly in response to nineteenth-century decadence. Specifically, he maintains that “narrative discontinuity, heightened description, [and] erudite allusiveness” were elements of novelistic rhetoric that “had already had their day in France in the form of *le style de décadence*” (149). To advance his thesis, Weir begins with a masterful twenty-page survey of the uses and definitions of “decadence”—including recent feminist assessments—that leaves the term its polyvalence while articulating its range of reference.

In some respects, Weir’s thesis coincides with early assessments of modernism—notably Edmund Wilson’s *Axel’s Castle* (1933). But, until recently, the New Critical formalist take on Modernism had relegated the argument for continuity heretical. Weir resuscitates this view through a detailed and lucid analysis of the phenomenon of decadence itself. Weir notes that decadence, admittedly a rather nebulous category, highlights transition, especially endings, but also beginnings. Modernism, for example, is seen as substituting the sense of ending found in decadence for a sense of beginning. Similarly, decadence may refer to style or to content. Once again, Weir argues that Modernism adopts realistic canons for its content, but decadent canons for its style and rhetoric.

Put in this summary form, the argument sounds almost trite, but there is nothing trite about Weir's substantial and persuasive study. The analyses of Flaubert's *Salammbô* (1863), the Goncourts' *Germinie Lacerteux* (1864), Pater's *Marius the Epicurian* (1885), and of Huysman's *A rebours* (1884) are valuable in themselves, and form an illuminating background to the novelistic practice of Joyce and Gide. Joyce scholars will profit from Weir's placing of Joyce's undoubted originality within the context of decadence, where it is rarely placed—at least by appreciative and well-informed critics. This reader, at least, comes away with a more balanced understanding of Joyce's achievement than that found in the canonical assessments of Hugh Kenner and Richard Ellmann, fine as those were for their time.

*Decadence and the Making of Modernism* is a work of literary history, a genre of scholarly endeavor that New Criticism nearly killed—dismissing it as “source-hunting.” It is now being revived, but in the shadow of “New Historicism” in which the objective is to expose the reprobate opinions and attitudes inscribed in the object texts. Weir's objective, in contrast, is to recover the aesthetic milieu in which early modernist works were conceived and to place them in their historical context.

In a “Postface” Weir draws attention to some of the parallels—also noted by others—between the current end-of-millennium milieu and the previous fin de siècle, the primary focus of his study. He points out that Habermas and Lyotard both characterize postmodernism in opposition to modernism—thereby engaging in a reprise of the polemics of decadence. For Habermas, postmodernism is “a neoconservative reaction to the unfinished business of modernity.” For Lyotard, in contrast, it is an escape from modernism, “a collection of self-legitimizing ‘metanarratives’ that perpetuate the myth of human progress” (196). Weir found the same confrontation in the nineteenth century between the Comtean optimism of the Goncourts and Zola on the one hand and the decadence of Flaubert and Huysmans on the other. Moreover, he finds that “as with decadence, the term postmodernism seems to be a universal antonym, drawing its meaning from whatever it sets itself against” (197).

However, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* is not a polemical work. Rather it is an important contribution to the ongoing reassessment of literary modernism, which was understood for so long only from within itself, and then—no more accurately—from the hostile perspective of varieties of postmodernism. Weir is well read in the critical literature, and moves through it with a grace and generosity that is in stark contrast to so much current literary critical prose. He does not ignore the offensive nature of decadent topics and attitudes as a New Critical formalist would have done, nor does he moralize over them as a New Historicist would. All in all, a very fine study.