volupté

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 3, Issue 1

Summer 2020

Review: Robert Azzarello, *Three Hundred Years of Decadence: New Orleans Literature and the Transatlantic World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019)

Tanfer Emin Tunç

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 May 2020

Date of Publication: 21 June 2020

Citation: Tanfer Emin Tunç, 'Review: Robert Azzarello, *Three Hundred Years of Decadence: New Orleans Literature and the Transatlantic World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019)', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 3.1 (2020), 134–39.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v3i1.1410.g1524

volupte.gold.ac.uk

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Robert Azzarello, *Three Hundred Years of Decadence: New Orleans Literature and the Transatlantic World*
(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019), 224 pp.
ISBN 9780807170885 (e-pub)[1]

Tanfer Emin Tunç

Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey

As Robert Azzarello expresses in *Three Hundred Years of Decadence*, when embodied in human form, decadence evokes a tableau of pleasure, indulgence, and excess – a decadent is someone 'who has had too much – too much nicotine or caffeine, too much liquor or morphine, too much literature or philosophy or art – and is thus reduced to a state of being that seems to oscillate between comatose and enlightened.' The decadent individual is almost always a late nineteenth-century western European, a Parisian or Londoner who has read 'too much' Baudelaire or Wilde and consumed 'too much' absinthe. However, as Azzarello argues in this groundbreaking work, the decadent tradition also has a long, if yet unexcavated, tradition in the United States. To date, most of what has been studied focuses on a coterie of fin-de-siècle, transatlantic American poets, novelists and critics including James Huneker, Vance Thompson, Robert William Chambers, Vincent O'Sullivan, David Park Barnitz, and brothers Edgar and Francis Saltus, all of whom spent time in Paris and London at the turn of the twentieth century and were heavily influenced by Joris-Karl Huysmans, Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, and Henry James. After returning to the United States, they attempted to popularize the decadent tradition through their own works, but were generally unsuccessful. Today, these American decadents remain unknown and understudied, with the exception of a few contributions to the secondary literature such as David Weir's books, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (1995) and *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature against the American Grain, 1890–1926* (2008).

Three Hundred Years of Decadence expands the geographical and chronological scope of Weir's work beyond fin-de-siècle New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco to the South, specifically to New Orleans, arguably the most decadent city in the American literary and cultural imagination. After all, as Alecia P. Long contends in *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865–1920* (2004), '[p]eople believe two things about New Orleans. The first is that it is different from the rest of the United States.' The second is 'that the city is decadent, and that its cultural distinctiveness is related to its reputation for tolerating, even encouraging, indulgence of all varieties', thereby rendering the city fertile ground for decadence in all of its forms. Azzarello excavates the three-hundred-year-long history of decadence in the

literature of New Orleans across all genres – from poetry, to short stories, novels, and plays – from the colonial era to the present. In the process, he ventures beyond the expected English-language, post-Civil War, regionalist and local colour fiction of New Orleans, into works in other languages and from other genres, including non-fiction essays and expository prose. Moreover, by emphasizing the role of four continents – Europe, Africa, and the two Americas – in shaping the decadence of New Orleans literature, Azzarello's study also represents a major intervention in the fields of Transatlantic, Hemispheric, Gulf, Environmental and Urban Studies, as well as in critical examinations of the Global South.

Over the course of the eight chapters that comprise this work, Azzarello chronologically explores the concept of decadence through four different sites: bodies, languages, literatures, and environments. In his introductory chapter, 'New Orleans Decadence in Theory', he claims that as a theoretical framework, decadence 'provides a distinct avenue into the story of New Orleans and the transatlantic world, and one that takes us from the city's very founding in 1718 to contemporary speculations about the city's future.' Within this framework, bodies are particularly complicated since they exemplify the fecundity of New Orleans's cross-pollination of races, nations, and cultures, as well as the futility of the artificial colour line drawn by the US Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). As Azzarello contends, *Plessy* both underscored and obscured the troubled racial history of the city, adding to the atmosphere of decay, decline, and degeneration. Anxieties concerning the body, and all of its decadent manifestations are, according to Azzarello, further amplified by 'the litany of vices' associated with the city:

> prostitution and miscegenation, homosexuality and gender deviance, and more than one of the seven deadly sins. Add to this list the city's stubborn Francophilia, its Afro-Caribbean connection, its Catholicism, its air of mystery and detection, its preoccupations with the dead and the undead, its seemingly perpetual state of human violence, and a strange pattern starts to emerge.

Part of this 'strange pattern' is language which, for European decadents and their American counterparts, went hand-in-hand with bodies, especially those marked by race, class, religion, and ethnicity. In the context of New Orleans, this tension emerges in the conflict between mono- (English) and multi- (indigenous, French, Spanish, creole) lingualism. New Orleans literature, Azzarello asserts, has been shaped by moments of corporeal and lingual crisis, such as 'the French takeover of the natives, the Spanish takeover of the French, the American takeover of the Europeans, the breakdown of state relations that reached a crisis in the Civil War, [and] the segregation and desegregation of the public sphere.' Moreover, the physical environment of New Orleans, with its hurricanes, fires, and epidemics, further connects its bodies, languages, and literatures.

The second chapter of *Three Hundred Years of Decadence* traces New Orleans decadence from its colonial beginnings to the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, when the city became a US territory. It begins with Antoine-François Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* (1733), a French novel set in Paris and New Orleans that deals with an aristocrat's fall into the decadent underworld of illicit sex, gambling, theft, and murder. Azzarello reads the work 'as part of the prehistory of decadence that emerged more fully articulated and practiced in the nineteenth century.' As such, it lays the foundation for decadence by paving 'the way for a further descent into the world of vice', and the intoxication that comes with passion and pleasure. However, *Manon Lescaut* is also significant because it interweaves various literary traditions – 'Parisian, French, European, transatlantic, American, Southern, Louisianian, and New Orleanian' – on a scale that transcends time, place, language and culture. As Azzarello argues, the European writing from the colonial period to 1803 – from the travel narratives of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish and French colonizers, to Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* and François-René de Chateaubriand's *Atala* (1801) and *René* (1802) – all 'constitute a prehistory of decadence, an intellectual fertilizer that helped to spawn a more developed, consolidated, self-conscious, and recognized movement that exploded in Paris during the final quarter of the nineteenth century.' Rarely considered part of American literary history because they are written in French and are from the colonial period, these transatlantic works also prompt us to rethink the definition of American literature.

Chapter three, 'American New Orleans, 1803 to 1865', opens with Pierre Clément de Laussat's *Memoirs of My Life* (1831), which recounts his role in the transfer of the Louisiana Territory from France to the United States in 1803, and the traumatic loss of his extensive library as he quickly made his way to Martinique after the handover. Azzarello reads this dispersal of French classics by Montaigne, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Corneille, and Racine throughout New Orleans as fertilizing what would become New Orleans literature. In this chapter, Azzarello also discusses the impact that new settlers, printing presses, and print culture had on the creative output of the city. While anglophone travellers and settlers 'recoiled when they encountered the prevailing French language of the city, its dominant Catholicism, its bawdy sensual delights, or its proud free black population – in short, its deeply rooted creole traditions', New Orleanians took pride in their difference, which included their unpredictable weather and unstable environment, and their connection to France. Moreover, the city's francophone, romantic poets (e.g., Charles-Oscar Dugué, Louis Allard, and Alfred Mercier), and writers of African, Caribbean, Spanish, and German origin (e.g., Ludwig von Reizenstein) – reinforced the preexisting 'transatlantic routes of intellectual exchange' that would feed the decadence of the post-Civil War era.

Structured around George Dessommes' French language poem, 'Un Soir au Jackson Square' ['An Evening in Jackson Square'] (1880), chapter four captures a period of transition and change in New Orleans between the end of the Civil War (1865) and the fin de siècle. The poem is an apt framework for the chapter as its 'vision of old and childless men walking around in circles, dreaming in foreign languages about other times and places fading now into memory, plays into a larger myth' of French decadence in New Orleans. In the rest of the chapter, Azzarello traces Dessommes' decadent formulations in the works of George Washington Cable and Lafcadio Hearn. Set in the years immediately following the Louisiana Purchase, Cable's *The Grandissimes* (1880) focuses on 'two half-brothers, one white and one black, who share a name and a father but whose different mothers set their racial fate.' While in Paris, they are truly brothers; however, as in Prévost's *Manon Lescaut*, once they make the transatlantic voyage to New Orleans, they experience 'moral degeneration' and 'ethical decay'. Their lives become dominated by the racial hierarchy and white supremacy of the city, rendering them tragically unequal adversaries. In 'The Creole Patois' (1885), Lafcadio Hearn laments the disappearance of bodies and languages – specifically of octoroons (people with one-eighth African ancestry) and their creole patois – from the multicultural tapestry of New Orleans. Moreover, in the environmental novella *Chita* (1889), he depicts how the hurricane of 1856 devastated human, animal, and plant life and how, much like Hurricane Katrina would do a century and a half later, it traumatized New Orleans and its fragile ecosystem.

Azzarello concludes chapter four with a brief analysis of fin-de-siècle writer Kate Chopin, whose oeuvre is comprised of works dealing with New Orleans, French creole culture, and the transatlantic world. He concentrates on *The Awakening* (1899), whose overt sensuality, sexuality, and transgression of traditional gender roles was so scandalous when it was published that it ended Chopin's career. However, an analysis of Chopin's 'Désirée's Baby' as a transatlantic (Paris-New Orleans) text would have been a much more relevant selection for this chapter as it iterates many of the concerns of *The Grandissimes* while emphasizing how racism and sexism impacted women's lives in the nineteenth century. The short story would have also strengthened the transition into Alice Dunbar-Nelson's 'The Stones of the Village' (1905) and Charles Chesnutt's *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* (1921), which are the focus of chapter five.

In this chapter, which spans the fin de siècle to the end of World War II (1945), Azzarello charts the trajectory of New Orleans's bodies and languages through the changing legal status of French in the ten state constitutions that were passed between 1812 and 1974. During this period, English monolingualism dominated, with French gaining and losing power as a second (un)official language. As Azzarello argues, the shifting status of French and the creole

dialect – and those who spoke them as native languages – was reflected in the literature of the period, especially works dealing with racial passing, colourism, and the colour line within the African American community, such as 'The Stones of the Village' and *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* Azzarello also positions these texts as examples of early twentieth-century New Orleans transatlantic decadence since, much like Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* and Cable's *The Grandissimes,* they involve the 'double bind' of individual and social illness, and the notion that 'human beings are haunted not by some supernatural spirit or demon but by their very selves. […] one's own mind and body and the surrounding social structures.' However, while the works of African American writers such as Dunbar-Nelson and Chesnutt are certainly part of the decadent tradition, for these authors 'there was very little that was redeeming in the concept of decadence.' Here, Azzarello poses one of the most interesting questions in his work: 'To what extent is decadence itself a white European and Euro–American phenomenon?'

Emphasizing the period between World War II to Hurricane Katrina (1945-2005), chapter six extends Azzarello's analysis to the contemporary world, starting with Tennessee Williams's autobiographical play *Vieux Carré* (1977) and the decadent New Orleans characters – 'drunks and drug addicts, hardened bouncers, gay-for-pay male prostitutes, bat-crazy women, orgy enthusiasts, and transvestite artists' – who inhabit a boardinghouse in the French Quarter. Set in the late 1930s during the Great Depression when New Orleans was just becoming a tourist city, *Vieux Carré* complements Eudora Welty's short story 'No Place for You, My Love' (1952), which depicts the experiences of two tourists visiting the city. The chapter then takes an unusual turn towards Tom Dent's play *Ritual Murder* (1978), straying from *Three Hundred Years of Decadence*'s transatlantic theme and rendering this the most disjointed chapter in the entire work. Here, Azzarello could have examined the contributions that the Modernist, Southern Renaissance, and Southern Gothic literary movements made to New Orleans decadence. After all, Azzarello begins the chapter with two of their most prominent writers – Williams and Welty – and at various points in *Three Hundred Years of Decadence* mentions other New Orleans authors associated with these movements, such as Truman Capote and John Kennedy Toole, but unfortunately only in passing. A presentation of their texts, especially Toole's *Confederacy of Dunces* (1980), which is set in New Orleans and is replete with decadent characters (beats and phony intellectuals) and themes (excessive food and sex, and parodies of European snobbishness), would have been an interesting addition to this work. Moreover, an examination of Southern Gothic literature, and its obsession with decay, decline, and degeneration, the haunting ghosts of the past in the present, and nonnormative (or 'grotesque') bodies and environments, is also a missing element in this work. Williams's play *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1958), for example, would

have been a better choice for this study than *Ritual Murder*, as it is set in both New Orleans and Europe and explores the physical, sexual, racial, and murderous violence associated with decadent excess.

The last two chapters of *Three Hundred Years of Decadence* consider New Orleans literature after Katrina, from 2005 to the present. While chapter seven emphasizes the environmental literature of Katrina, such as John Biguenet's *Rising Water* (2006), Martha Serpas' *The Dirty Side of the Storm* (2007), Katie Ford's *Colosseum* (2008), Yusef Komunyakaa's 'Requiem' (2008), and Rebecca Solnit's *A Paradise Built in Hell* (2009), much like chapter six it, at best, provides an uneven treatment of the transatlantic. Chapter eight continues the ecological themes of the previous chapter with works like Moira Crone's *The Not Yet* (2012), providing additional insight into the connections between environments and bodies, yet, once again, this is at the expense of *Three Hundred Years of Decadence*'s overarching transatlantic theme. Despite these shortcomings, however, Azzarello ends his ambitious and overall successfully-executed project by conveying an intriguing message: that even though most of the works examined in *Three Hundred Years of Decadence* were written and/or set in the past, they continue to pose and answer questions about the present and the future.

[1] Due to the COVID-19 pandemic an unpaginated e-pub version of the text was consulted; this review is therefore lacking page references after quotations.