



Monsieur De Phocas

Jean Lorrain , Francis Amery (Translator) , Brian Stableford (Translator)

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Monsieur de Phocas (1901) has been ranked with Huysmans' ? Reboours (1884) as the summation of the French Decadent Movement. In the novel, Jean Lorrain presents experiences of the darker side of his life in Paris as the adventures of the Duc de Fr?neuse (Phocas) and his relationship with the svengaliesque English painter Claudius Ethal This book ranks with 'A Reboours' as the summation of the French Decadent Movement. Modelled on 'The Portrait of Dorian Gray, ' it drips with evil and certainly would have been unpublishable in fin de siecle England. "The madness of the eyes is the lure of the abyss. Sirens lurk in the dark depths of the pupils as they lurk at the bottom of the sea, that I know for sure - but I have never encountered them, and I am searching still for the profound and plaintive gazes in whose depths I might be able, like Hamlet redeemed, to drown the Ophelia of my desire." ? Jean Lorrain, Monsieur De Phocas

Monsieur De Phocas Details

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Author : Jean Lorrain , Francis Amery (Translator) , Brian Stableford (Translator)

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Download and Read Free Online Monsieur De Phocas Jean Lorrain , Francis Amery (Translator) , Brian Stableford (Translator)

From Reader Review Monsieur De Phocas for online ebook

Shawn says

What problem plagues Monsieur De Phocas? Fabulously rich, rumored to be a deviant of the most twisted sort, or a drug addict, or impotent, or a monstrous despoiler of reputations, or a million other things - he starts this novel by running away to travel the world. But he leaves behind a manuscript which we, dear readers, are privy to. And in this document he, well....bares his soul might be a bit strong, as he's unsure he has a soul to bare. But Monsieur de Phocas IS a very, very troubled man and an explication of his recent history will take us on a vast tour of the decadent underworld of the fin-de-siecle, rife and seething with a host of aberrant "larvae" while providing us with few solid answers, which was probably Jean Lorrain's point.

Pity poor Jean Lorrain, student of arch-dandy Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, member of the generation to follow the initial Decadents (and thus younger than Joris-Karl Huysmans, d'Aurevilly, et. al.), a sharp and savvy writer, a thoroughly "out" homosexual with a taste for what we would come to call "rough trade", a drug addict and occasional duelist (thanks to his savage critiques of writers like Émile Zola, Guy de Maupassant and even Marcel Proust - it turned out okay, they both discharged harmlessly into the air), Lorrain never had the title or connections (or money) to be a "true" Dandy, but he gave it his all and he stood at a pivot point in literary history, able to know both Huysmans and Alfred Jarry, able to watch Decadence come in, live it fully, and then usher it out. And he had the chops to write about it all as well.

Francis Amery (aka Brian Stableford) makes an argument in the introduction that MONSIEUR DE PHOCAS (1901) is Lorrain's attempt to provide the finishing bookend for the Decadent movement (the initial bookend being Huysmans' *A Rebours* (aka *Against Nature*) (1884)). At first this seemed unlikely to me, as Decadence is such a wide, sprawling, tentacled beast of perversity that no one book could hope to sum it up with a suitable capstone - and that's about right. But what MONSIEUR DE PHOCAS does do is attempt one last, grand slice at the ripe, decaying body; a slice carefully chosen to expose both guts and bowels, brains and muscle, spilling them across the floor of a burgeoning twentieth century so that they can't be denied - DE PHOCAS is an attempt at an autopsy of a hydra-headed "movement" that seethed in all directions at once. So, there is no summing up, really, rather a presentation of all the thoughts and obsessions felt, experienced and observed by our Decadent Superman, Monsieur De Phocas. The book starts with questions and ends with questions (and maybe even answers some of them, but with a shrug - there are no real answers to the problems of modernity that plagued the Decadents).

A word of plot. The Duc de Freuense (he only takes on the name of De Phocas at the conclusion, which is where the prelude begins) is plagued by a color - something like a turquoise - that gazes out at him from various eyes and seems to sum up his entire, inexplicable inability to rest, as well as his impotence at dispelling thoughts of violence and death that he is compelled to visit on others (yet never acts on). He attempts to capture this blue-green gaze, and the drives it symbolizes, by collecting jewels (he is endlessly wealthy) and attempts to thwart it in various maneuverings through his midnight worlds of actresses, painters, poets, sexual deviants, drug users, artists and perverts. Nothing helps. He has a nightmare of an abandoned city peopled only with mannequins of prostitutes wearing masks - under the masks they are living creatures, yet their flesh is rotting (this scene is a highpoint of the writing, simply amazing). A notorious, dwarf-like painter (Claudius Ethal - did he really poison his models so as to capture their wan features in his morbid portraits?) arrives from England, immediately assesses de Freuense's malady and promises a cure - until an earlier associate of the painter warns that within Ethal's circle of morbid artistes (his "larvae"), Ethal himself is an arch-decadent, a man whose perversion is to collect the perversions of others; to observe and

feed these perversions, to goad them on.

Still, Ethal leads du Freuense into a dark world of hashish parties, decaying royalty, wax sculptures of dying invalids, incestuous artists, and acts of violence and degradation (you'll learn how much a former actress of much fame -now a fallen prostitute - charges to allow men to put cigarettes out on her, for example). There is much meditation on the art of Gustave Moreau. Duc de Freuense is appalled and repulsed by Claudius Ethal, but also intrigued by his promises of an absolute cure for the Duc's "condition". De Freuense attempts some forms of relief on his own (a return to his humble origins in healthy rustic living is an abject failure and the moment is both blackly comical and sardonically touching) but still finds himself pulled into the dwarfish painter's orbit. How can it end, when the "condition" Ethal promises to cure is the affliction of Decadence itself?

You'll have to read the book to find out, but keep in mind that the beginning is the ending, so your hopes for an ultimate answer have, perhaps, already been spelled out for you...and they're both brave and yet no answer at all...

lisa_emily says

I have a soft spot (maybe because it is rotten) for over-the-top decadent writers. I was searching around on Dedalus's website and I found this novel, which I had to read.

I recommend reading it only after the sun sets while drinking this concoction I call, "The Monk's Revenge": equal parts Benedictine and Chartreuse. This will create an atmosphere fitting for this atmospheric novel.

The plot is not terribly original: bored lord with a bad reputation falls under the influence of a spurious, malevolent painter. There are some loose women thrown in for decoration and a sad-eyed Scotsman for redemption.

Of course, there are going to be comparisons to Huymans's "A rebours", written in 1884- the original Decadent novel. Monsieur de Phocas, written in 1901, would be the bookend of that odd movement. Where "A Rebours" is very systematic with its anti-hero's withdrawal from the world-even posing this as an answer to the ennui and horror of the modern world; Monsieur de Phocas plunges sensually into the world: the gleam of gems, Moreau's paintings, masks, poisonous flowers, conversation. And it read like a mystery too. How did the Duc de Freuense become Monsieur de Phocas? What depraved act did he finally succumb to? Could Ethal Claudius ever cure him? etc, etc.

And then there is the prose: florid, psychological, poetically embellished. Some examples: "...the hallucinatory portrait came to life. First the midget leapt like a toad from the frame, then the huge and skinny giant sallied forth with vulturine wingbeats. Around the woman overwhelmed by consternation, a strange Sabat commenced. With atrocious convolutions of the arms and the torso they repeated the act which she has seen at the Aquarium two days before, but in the solitude of the deserted studio it was a ghostly phantasmagoria; the dance of the two larvae, made far more horrible by shadow and solitude."

"Whether it is the gleam of a gem or a gaze that I lust after-worse, that I am bewitched by- I am possessed by a certain glaucous transparence. It is like a hunger in me. I search for this gleam-in vain!- in the irises of eyes and the transparency of gemstones, but no human eye possesses it. "

Fun stuff.

James says

Somewhat unfairly dismissed in some literary circles as a poor man's *Against Nature*, Jean Lorrain's 1901 novel *Monsieur De Phocas* is required reading for anyone interested in the 19th-century French Decadent movement: in some ways it could almost even be seen as the archetypal Decadent novel. Written as a final summary of the literary and artistic movement itself, Lorrain saw the book as completing a circle that had begun with Huysmans' own celebrated novel of 1884. Certainly one can see that *Against Nature* was a strong influence on this book (this can be seen most clearly in the chapters devoted to art), and Lorrain barely even bothers to hide this literary debt (at one point he even mentions the infamous forest of Tiffauges scene from Huysmans' own novel *Là-Bas*), yet at the same time it is also a reflection of Lorrain's own quirks and obsessions (for example, he seems to have very little interest in the theological questions that Huysmans' narrators always agonized over). Told in the form of a diary that spans the years 1891 to 1899, it chronicles the mental and spiritual decay of a young and rich Parisian dandy named the Duc du Freneuse, who finds himself tormented by certain types of eyes (and, later on, masks). He eventually befriends a disgraced English painter (and poisoner) named Claudius Ethal, who could be best described as a Satanic Oscar Wilde (and who bears a startling resemblance to the Duc D'Albe's dwarf, as painted by Antonio Moro). Much of the book deals with Ethal's attempts to utterly corrupt the narrator, a campaign that gradually leads to madness and murder. While the book has many standout moments (the aforementioned chapters that analyze artists such as Gustave Moreau, James Ensor, and Toorop are quite good), to me its most interesting moments were chapters 14-18, in which the narrator attends a tea party held at Ethal's studio. These chapters give us a good idea of just how these sickly French Decadent types liked to party (and thus serve as a time machine back to that era): bitchy gossip and backbiting, dramatic recitations of the poetry of Baudelaire, the imbibing of green tea, exotic and androgynous Javanese dancers performing a striptease/magic act, and, of course, the smoking of opium and the cultivation of bizarre drug-induced hallucinations straight out of the etchings of Redon. I can see why some people might find the narrator insufferable (I lost count of how many times he wrote how he would sever all ties with Ethal and never speak to the man again, only to go seek him out a page later, like a dog returning to his vomit), but there's something almost comical about how overdramatic he is. Highly recommended.

On a lighter note, someone should invent a Jean Lorrain drinking game. You'd have to take a shot whenever he a.) mentions any sort of precious stone, b.) likens a nightmarish situation to something out of a tale by Poe or Hoffmann, c.) makes a reference to the biblical story of Salome and Herod, d.) compares a woman to the goddess Astarte, e.) namedrops Gustave Moreau, f.) has his narrator driven to the point of a complete hysterical over-the-top nervous breakdown after viewing a piece of artwork that 99.9% of the world's population would consider maybe slightly disquieting at the best, but certainly nothing to lose your mind over. See also: masked balls, ether addiction, absinthe quaffing, and so on. Though to be honest, you could probably get severe alcohol poisoning from a.) alone.

Anders says

Great fun in strange ways. A very odd story, some very beautiful language. Atmospheric!

Glenn Russell says

“The madness of the eyes is the lure of the abyss. Sirens lurk in the dark depths of the pupils as they lurk at the bottom of the sea, that I know for sure - but I have never encountered them, and I am searching still for the profound and plaintive gazes in whose depths I might be able, like Hamlet redeemed, to drown the Ophelia of my desire.”

? Jean Lorrain, *Monsieur De Phocas*

Is not Jean Lorrain's aristocratic aesthete, Monsieur de Phocas, the decadent precursor of our ravishing glamor stars, dressed to the nines, diamonds sparkling, forever striking a pose in the celebrity spotlight? Perhaps so, but then again, as compared with Monsieur de Phocas, which diamond-studded celebrity could express themselves with such colorful, lush, eloquent language when describing their glamorous, oh-so-special lives?

By way of example, here is a diary entry where Phocas pens his reflections on a young exotic beauty: “And her eyes, what are her eyes like? Very beautiful – eyes which have looked long upon the sea. Eyes which have looked long upon the sea! Oh, the dear and distant eyes of sailors; the salt-water eyes of Bretons; the still-water eyes of mariners; the well-water eyes of Celts; the dreaming and infinitely transparent eyes of those who dwell beside rivers and lakes; the eyes which one sometimes rediscovers in the mountains, in the Tyrol and in the Pyrenes . . . eyes in which there are skies, vast expanses, dawns and twilights contemplated at length upon the open seas, the mountains or the plains . . . eyes into which have passed, and in which remain, so many horizons! Have I not encountered such eyes already, in my dreams?”

And Jean Lorrain's novel can be seen as his own creative twist on Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À Rebours* (*Against Nature*). For example, similar to Huysmans' main character, Des Esseintes, Monsieur de Phocas is nauseated by the modern, bourgeois, everyday cloth of humanity. Here are Phocas' haughty, disdainful remarks whilst attending the theater: “The ugliness of that room, the ugliness of the whole audience! The costumes! The disgrace of that sheet-metal pomp which constitutes the ideal outfit of modern man: all those stove-pipes which enclose the legs, arms and torso of the clubman, who is strangled meanwhile by a collar of white porcelain. And the sadness: the greyness of all those faces, drained by the poor hygiene of city life and the abuse of alcohol; all the ravages of late nights and the anxieties of the rat race imprinted in nervous tics on all those fat and flabby faces . . . their pallor the colour of lard!”

For lovers of that cult favorite, that jewel of decadent literature, *À Rebours*, Jean Lorrain's novel is a treasure. I enjoyed reading every single luscious page since, unlike Huysmans' classic, *Monsieur de Phocas* is written in intimate first-person and the aesthetic abode of Phocas isn't a personalized and aestheticized retreat house but the entire city of Paris.

And, of course, Phocas is the complete Decadent, suffering at various point from ennui (boredom), spleen (gloomy ire), impuissance (lack of energy) as well as intense highs and devastating lows fueled by opium and hashish, the exotic and the erotic, nightmares, masquerades, monsters and his association with a famous

English painter of most peculiar temperament and murky disposition by the name of Claudius Ethal. We read: "That Claudius! When I am with that Englishman, I have the sensation of plunging into dirt and darkness: the tepid, flowing and suffocating more of my opium nightmare. When I listen to him the air becomes thick and his atrocious confidences stir up my basest instincts and dirtiest desires."

Lastly, as a special bonus, not only does this book published by Dedalus included a 15-page introduction on the life and times of Jean Lorrain but there is also a 8-page essay on the novel itself, both authored by Francis Amery aka Brian Stapleford.

But, alas, I couldn't conclude this review without one more quote from a novel bathed in the golden hues of Gustave Moreau, a novel written as if every sentence is meant to breath the poetry of Charles Baudelaire: "Black irises! It had to be black irises, and all that they implied, which greeted me on my return. Some unknown hand had caused these monstrous blooms to be distributed throughout the ground floor of my apartment in the Rue de Varenne. From the antechamber of the morning-room to the parlor every single room was beset by a disquieting flowering of darkness: a mute outburst of huge upstanding petals of greyish crêpe, like a host of bats set within the cups of flowers."

Seregil of Rhiminee says

Originally published at Risingshadow.

Jean Lorrain's *Monsieur de Phocas* is a stunningly decadent and depraved literary novel, the contents of which offer a lot to enjoy and explore for readers who want to read something out of the ordinary. It's a fascinating literary novel about human frailties, obsessions and perversions.

During the recent years I have developed an ever growing fondness for this kind of a decadent literary fiction. When an author combines decadence and depravity with beautiful prose, it often results in an addictive reading experience. It's great that Tartarus Press has published this novel, because readers seldom have an opportunity to read this kind of decadent masterpieces.

One of the reasons why I'm fascinated by this kind of fiction is that nothing seems to be too delicate an issue for talented authors to write about when they concentrate on writing decadent fiction. This novel demonstrates that you can write about almost anything when you're brave enough to break a few unwritten rules that have become the norm for literary fiction and dare to shock readers. I think that this breaking of the rules will be of interest to many speculative fiction readers, because speculative fiction readers are perhaps more used to reading something different than readers who read mostly mainstream fiction.

Jean Lorrain's *Monsieur de Phocas* is one of the most intriguing, mesmerising and memorable novels I've read in a long while, because once you've read it, you won't be able to forget it. It lingers on your mind and you'll be thinking of its contents for a long time after the final page has been read. It's a perfect literary marriage of decadence and depravity, visioned by an author who himself had personal knowledge and experiences about many things described in the story.

It's slightly difficult to categorise this novel, because it's literary fiction that contains many elements and themes that are often found in sub-genres of literary speculative fiction (especially in literary strange fiction).

It defies easy categorisation, but it's possible to categorise it either as literary fiction or literary horror fiction because of its contents.

Here's a bit of information about the story:

A man meets the Duc de Fréneuse who informs him that he has forsaken his old name and is now called Monsieur de Phocas. He asks the man to read what he has written down on paper about his illness and temptations. The man becomes the confidant of the Duc de Fréneuse and begins to read his manuscript. The manuscript contains strange and morbid revelations about the Duc de Fréneuse's life and his fascination with an English painter, Claudius Ethal. The Duc bares his most intimate secrets in the manuscript. He reveals what has happened to him and to what lengths he has gone to free himself of his obsession...

This is the beginning of an intriguing story that gradually grows into a glorious display of uninhibited decadence and magnificent grotesqueness that drips with evil and depravity.

The prose is stunningly beautiful, poetic and florid. Francis Amery (Brian Stableford) has clearly done his best to convey the atmosphere and the happenings of the original novel to English-speaking readers (there was something in this translation that reminded me a bit of Guido Gozzano's 'Requiems & Nightmares', which was translated by Brendan and Anna Connell). The rich and florid prose highlights the decadent happenings in a mesmerising way, and the descriptions of different people and happenings are amazingly vivid. Some of the scenes are wonderfully lush and strangely enticing with hints of something macabre.

This novel shares intriguing similarities with Oscar Wilde's 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' and Joris-Karl Huysmans' 'Against Nature' ('À Rebours'). If you've read either or both of these classic novels, you'll easily recognise that there are a few similarities between them and this novel, but you'll also notice that this novel is different from them. I won't go into details about these similarities and differences, but I'll mention that this novel is an interesting reading experience, if you've read Wilde and Huysman.

Duc de Fréneuse (aka Monsieur de Phocas) is an interesting character, because he is bewitched by jewels and gems and is plagued by a certain colour that gazes out at him from various eyes and from the eyes of the statues and portraits. This colour becomes his obsession and he tries to capture it by collecting jewels, but it doesn't help him. Neither does his various and sinister dealings with painters, drug users, androgynes, actresses, other men's wives, artists, perverts and sexual deviants, because he is still a haunted man and can't find peace. He believes that he is haunted by a Demon of Lust, and seems to be mad.

The author writes captivantly about how the Duc de Fréneuse is almost helplessly fascinated and repulsed by the malevolent and odd English painter, Claudius Ethal. Claudius Ethal is a notorious man who has removed himself from England and has set up home in Paris. He leads the Duc to a sinister world of decay, incestuous happenings, violent acts and degradation. As the Duc de Fréneuse tries to find a cure for his illness and obsession, he is drawn deeper and deeper into the depraved world of Claudius Ethal.

It was interesting to read about how conjoined the Duc's feelings of fascination and repulsion were, because he was unable to resist the lure of Claudius Ethal, because the painter might have a cure for his condition. Because he looks to others for possible salvation, he believes that the painter could offer him a cure.

The revelations about Claudius Ethal's dealings with the British aristocracy are wonderfully macabre and weird. By shocking his clientèle with his acts and paintings, he exhibits signs of disturbing behaviour and insanity speckled with ingenuity. He's a man who perverts ideas and explores different kinds of pleasures that most people shy away from.

I enjoyed reading about what happened between the Duc, Claudius Ethal and Thomas Welcome. When Thomas Welcome informs the Duc about alternative ways to cure his illness, things become increasingly intriguing, because Ethal tells him that Welcome is even sicker than him. What follows afterwards leads the Duc towards a path that ends in brutal murder.

Duc de Fréneuse's nightmare about an abandoned city inhabited by prostitutes who are plague-stricken and whose flesh is rotting under their masks is simply amazing in its shocking grandeur. This scene reminds me a bit of Edgar Allan Poe's classic 'The Masque of Red Death'. This novel also has a few other scenes that have a Gothic Poe-esque feel to them.

This novel contains intriguing sensuality and grotesqueness that will simultaneously fascinate and shock readers. The descriptions of some of the decadent happenings are so vivid and amazing that you are momentarily transported to another place and time when life was different and people had different values. You'll find yourself astonished by the story and its nuances.

What makes this novel is especially compelling is the fact that it's partly a brilliantly grotesque and inventive black comedy. There are scenes and happenings in this novel that border on the line of being deliciously ironic, but are almost as sharp as pieces of glass. These scenes are simultaneously shocking and entertaining, because the author evokes remarkable feelings of fascination and repulsion in the reader and provokes the reader's imagination.

There's a sense of darkness and grotesqueness in this novel that I found fascinating. The author fluently weaves a web of dark sensuous wonders and terrors over the reader when he writes about what happens between the Duc and the painter.

The milieu is refreshingly different, because the events take place in France. It gives this novel a nice touch of elegance.

The Introduction and the Afterword have been written masterfully by Francis Amery (Brian Stableford), who seems to have a passion for the author's works. They give insight into the author's life and works, and allow readers to examine and explore the novel in a deep way. The translator delivers useful information about the author's life in his Introduction. He tells of the author's life, family, friends, career and homosexuality in an informative way. He also tells of the author's contemporaries who had an impact on him. The Afterword is an excellent and interesting essay about the novel.

The illustration on boards and dustjacket is 'Anger' from 'The Temptations of St Anthony' from Fifty Drawings by Alastair. It looks beautiful and fits this novel perfectly.

Jean Lorrain's *Monsieur de Phocas* is one of the finest examples of turn-of-the-century French decadence, because it's a literary masterpiece and a tour-de-force of brilliantly dark imagination. It deserves to be read by as many quality-oriented readers as possible, because it's one of the best and most unforgettable novels of its kind. If you're a speculative fiction reader or you enjoyed reading literary fiction, don't hesitate to buy this novel, because you'll be deeply impressed by it and its literary values.

This novel will strongly appeal to readers who are familiar with the works of Joris-Karl Huysmans, Oscar Wilde, Henry James, Edgar Allan Poe and Brendan Connell, but it will also appeal to those readers who are fascinated by the weirder side of literary fiction. When you delve into the wonders and sensual terrors of this novel, you'll find yourself wholly immersed in the story. I highly recommend this novel to all who enjoy reading literary fiction, because it's a ravishing feast of decadence and depravity. It's unique in the best

possible way.

Highly recommended!

Eric says

Another chestnut of French decadence, a kind of commentary on Huysman's *En Route* and Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, playing with themes of dandyism and madness. Loved it.

Nancy Oakes says

there is much, much more at my online reading journal about this book here; or you can be content with what's written here.

This is a book that is so right up my alley -- it is dark, intelligent, filled with references to literature, mythology and art, and best of all, it really really pushed my reading somewhere it hasn't been before. I had to work extremely hard to read this novel and it paid off in spades. I just loved this book not simply for the story, but because of the challenge it presented.

The problem I'm having with trying to collect my thoughts about this novel is that there's so much here to think about; so much here I want to talk about, so much I really would love to share. I didn't go and check, but there's enough in this one volume to feed several PhD dissertations so trying to come up with a focus here is really tough. Masks, narcissism, misogyny, eyes and the "gaze," instincts/nature, death and beauty, Paris itself -- there's just a LOT going on here, so I'll leave it to readers to discover how these all help to shape this novel and how they play out thematically from beginning to end. I would caution anyone who wants to read this book not to gloss over the art, the mythology or the literary references here -- there are reasons they are there and in my opinion, their importance culminates in a visit made by the main character to the Musée Gustave Moreau.

There is just so very much to say about this dark, dark novel -- it is one of those books that refuses to let go, one that gets down deep into the psyche, making me wonder at several points where this story was taking me and sort of being afraid to move on because it was getting very deep into Phocas' head, which trust me, is a very scary place to be. However, no one should take my word for it since this novel is another one that absolutely must be experienced on one's own. Very much recommended -- I absolutely loved it, but it is certainly not for everyone, since it is not an easy read on many levels.

Ignacio Senao f says

No es para todos. Tiene una escritura ardua que dificulta no salirte de la historia. Siendo este libro el diario de un duque, que cuenta cómo va volviéndose loco de soledad y ansia. Es bastante típica de la época, describiendo personajes, sentimientos de deseos y ambición por parte del personaje. Siento todo esto el centro de la novela y agudizándose hasta la locura.

Eadweard says

What's with the book's cover art? I forgot his name but isn't that a character from the film *Les Enfants du Paradis* (1945)? That film takes place during the 1820's-1830's, way off!

I am just going to share a lengthy bit that I adored, if you want an actual review you should read Glenn's (great as always). I don't have the words to describe how -pleasing- this book was to read, if you've read a decadent work before you already know what you're in for. I am slowly making my way through all the decadent / fin de siècle books I can find and I'm dreading the day when I have no new ones to read... but for now, I'll enjoy the ride.

(Spend a few minutes on the internet looking at Gustave Moreau's oeuvre if you haven't seen it and then read the following bit)

"Gustave Moreau: the painter of svelte Salomés streaming with precious stones, of Muses bearing severed heads, and of Helens in robes woven in living gold, posing with lilies in their hands – similar to huge blooming lilies themselves – on dungheaps of bleeding corpses! Gustave Moreau: the manipulator of symbols and the perversities of ancient theogonies; the poet of charnel-houses, battlefields and sphinxes; the painter of Dolour, Ecstasy and Mystery; the one artist, out of all modern painters, who has most closely approached Divinity – and in the course of that approach has discovered so many murderesses: Salomé; Helen; the femme fatale Ennoïa; the Sirens, bane of seafaring men.

Gustave Moreau; the painter and philosopher whose art has always troubled me more than any other! Has any other man been so haunted by the symbolic cruelty of defunct religions and the divine debauchery that was once adored in long-lost lands? A visionary without compare, he is the acknowledged master of the realm of dreams, but insofar as his works embody an uneasy frisson of anguish and desperation, he has cast a spell on his era. The master sorcerer has bewitched his contemporaries, contaminating the entire fin de siècle of bankers and stockbrokers with a morbid and mystical ideal. An entire generation of young men has been bathed by the radiance of his paintings, becoming dolorous and languid, their eyes obstinately turned towards the splendour and magic of former ages: a whole generation – its writers and poets in particular – nostalgically enamoured, like him, of the long naked bodies, the fearful eyes and the morbid voluptuousness of his dream-enchantresses.

For there is sorcery in the pale and silent heroines of his water-colours. His princesses, armoured in their nakedness by goldsmiths and jewellers, communicate ecstasy and are themselves ecstatic. Lethargic as they are – as though half-asleep – and so distant as to be almost spectral, they only serve to stir the senses all the more vigorously, and to subdue the will all the more certainly. Their charm is like that of great passive and venereal flowers brought to us from sacrilegious centuries – still in full bloom – by the occult power of

damnable memories. Moreau! This is a painter who can boast of having forced the threshold of mystery, and claim the glory of having troubled an entire century! This man, with the subtle art of the lapidary and enameller, has given powerful aid to the forces of decay which afflict my whole being. He has given to me, as to a whole modern generation of sick visionary artists, a dangerous erotic fascination with dead women and their set and empty expressions: the hallucinatory, long-dead women of yesteryear, resuscitated by him in the mirror of time.

[...]

All around me in the high room – a true museum of the master's works, which cram the walls from the ceiling to the skirting-board – were the dangerous phantoms with which I was already familiar: the images of Salomé dancing before Herod, with her hair encircled by sardonyx, and the hieratic gesture of her fully extended arms; the dream-cathedrals with cupolas of bright amber which serve as settings for that immemorial scene of lust and murder; variations on the theme – repeated as many as ten times – of the tragic and bejewelled group of Sirens gathered upon the seemingly-foaming rocks; representations of Helen wandering with half-closed eyes on the walls of Troy ...

And everywhere – in the images of Helen as in the images of Salomé; in representations of Messalina at Subura as in depictions of Hercules in the house of the daughters of Thespius or in the marches of Lerna – the same obsession with ancient myths is manifest. Those elements which are the most sinister and the most cruel are perpetually on display: the purulent charnel-house of the corpses slain by the Sphinx; the bleached bones of the victims of the Hydra; the heaps of wounded, agonised and dying, dominated by the placid and silent figure of Ennoia; the bleeding heads of John the Baptist and Orpheus; the final convulsions of Semele, consumed by lightning on the knees of an impassive Zeus...

I wandered about, unsteadily, in an atmosphere of massacre and murder; it was as though an odour of blood floated in the air of that hall. I recalled what Ethal had said to me, boastfully, one evening in his studio in the Rue Servandoni, about the atmosphere of beauty and of dread which always envelops the man who has killed."

(Glorious! I died a little bit!)
