

# The Provocative Flora of Decadence: From Charles Baudelaire and Émile Zola to Octave Mirbeau

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## RÉSUMÉ

*Fort consciente des valeurs positives associées aux fleurs, la littérature décadente n'en chérit pas moins la représentation de celles-ci ainsi que l'usage de métaphores florales. Le démon de la perversité n'est jamais loin dans ces représentations et ces métaphores: les fleurs sont utilisées à rebours, leurs charges positives sont inversées ou rendues ambivalentes et elles suscitent des émotions négatives. Notre article s'attache à retracer une trajectoire de ces utilisations provocatrices des fleurs, qui culmine dans la fameuse description du jardin chinois dans *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899) d'Octave Mirbeau. Nous explorons les différentes façons dont use le mouvement décadent pour gâcher le plaisir des fleurs et des jardins, et considérons comment des exemples tirés d'œuvres d'Émile Zola, Charles Baudelaire et J.-K. Huysmans informent l'utilisation des fleurs dans le roman de Mirbeau. Il s'avère que l'étude des fleurs ne constitue pas seulement un trope ou un ensemble de tropes, mais révèle des aspects majeurs de la littérature fin de siècle.*

Flower-metaphors and descriptions of flowers, including gardens filled with flowers, are abundant in Decadent literature; but, far from being the delightful elements of idyllic scenes or ideal places (*locus amoenus*) in traditional ways, they are most often involved in something scandalous or shocking. Decadence, well aware of the positive values of flower imagery, still cherishes the representation of gardens and flowers and the use of flower-metaphors, but twists the expected meanings and emotions connected to them. The demon of perversity always lurks in these representations and metaphors: flowers are used *à rebours*, their positive semiosphere<sup>1</sup> is turned upside down or made ambivalent and evokes emotions that are often extremely negative.

In this paper, I trace a trajectory of these provocative uses of flowers that ends with Octave Mirbeau's infamous Chinese garden in *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899). I explore the various Decadent ways of spoiling the delight in flowers and gardens and see how examples from Émile Zola, Charles Baudelaire and J.-K. Huysmans relate to the use of flowers in Mirbeau's novel.

## Founding Metaphors

Normally, flowers in life and the arts evoke beauty, happiness and joy and are also used as symbols and metaphors in mainly positive contexts. Perhaps the most established type of flower metaphor refers to beautiful girls and women. Decadence, of course, frequently resorts to this practice of metaphors in its own characteristic way, as the example from Mirbeau will illustrate. Nevertheless, the metaphor that set the tone for metaphorical flowers in Decadent literature focuses on a carcass. The poem "Une charogne" in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* – very often cited as the signature

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<sup>1</sup> About this term, see Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. Ann Shukman (London & New York: I. B. Tauris & Co, 1990).

poem of Decadence<sup>2</sup> – presents the most repulsive flower one can imagine, although it maliciously describes the carcass as “superb”: “Et le ciel regardait la carcasse superbe / Comme une fleur s’épanouir.”<sup>3</sup> Here we find the kind of connection between flowers and disgusting things or phenomena which became a trademark of Decadent style. Decaying bodies provoke what has been called “core disgust” and seeing in this decay a similarity with a blossom means reversing or shattering our categories. Following this example and echoing this image, the flora of decadent literature mixes beauty with things disgusting and horrible. As such, these images shock and, at the same time, fascinate the reader.<sup>4</sup> This allure of the disgusting in contexts where the spectator is safe from contamination or any real danger is familiar in the study of horror sublime, but Baudelaire adds an element of calm contemplation that emphasizes not only resignation but also the analytic attitude later attributed to him by Paul Bourget.<sup>5</sup> Finding beauty in the disgusting and horrible or contaminating beauty with what is disgusting, and remaining analytical about it, becomes the hard core of Decadence.

The individual metaphor in “Une charogne” is only one indication of the whole program that is also expressed as a flower-metaphor. The metaphorical flowers of Decadence also and primarily include the central metaphor that figures in the title of the collection by Baudelaire: *Les Fleurs du mal*. Both the title of the collection and the dedication of the collection to Théophile Gautier, which designates the poems as “ces fleurs malades,” thus connecting them to malady, morbidity and abnormality, are important: they initiate another trade mark of Decadence. The idea that Decadent poems or other texts are flowers connected to sickness, evil, and suffering; and they are sometimes even considered to be poisonous and deadly.<sup>6</sup> The poetic beauty of these flowers serves to reveal the perversities of human nature and modern society and, at the same time, they fatally reflect the putrid ground from which they grow.

Even the more idealistically minded Symbolists frequently used the image of the waterlily. The pure beauty of the white flower on the surface of mirroring waters – the ideal shown in Symbolist poems – was understood to hide the underwater realm where the roots of the flowers fed from the muddy depths.<sup>7</sup> But Decadence tore the veil and revealed the dark reverse behind the purity of these “waterlilies” or the Symbolist poems dwelling in spheres of the ideal. The forgetfulness of Symbolism was met with the painful or even sadistic will to remember and revel in Decadence.

In one of his essays on art, Huysmans develops the metaphor of art-flowers in an interesting way. He interprets Decadent artworks as the strange and rare flowers that grow from the soil of the dreams of exceptional individuals in modernity; he considers this era to be dominated by the disgusting materialistic tyranny of money:

Et en effet, quand le moment est définitivement venu où l’argent est le Saint des Saints devant lequel toute une humanité, à plat ventre, bave de convoitise et prie; quand un pays avarié par une politique accessible à tous, suppure par tous les abcès de ses réunions et de sa presse; quand l’art méprisé se ravale de lui-même au niveau de l’acheteur; quand l’œuvre artiste, pure, est universellement considérée comme le crime de lèse-majesté d’un vieux monde, soulé de lieux communs et d’ordures, il arrive fatalement que quelques êtres, égarés dans l’horreur de ces temps, rêvent à l’écart et

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Roger Bauer, *Die schöne Décadence. Geschichte eines literarischen Paradoxons* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> “Une Charogne,” *Les Fleurs du mal* (1861), in Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975) 31.

<sup>4</sup> See Sibylle Baumbach, *Literature and Fascination* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993) 4-7.

<sup>6</sup> The French word “maladif” signifies morbidity, liability to get sick easily, abnormality and excess (excessive fear etc.).

<sup>7</sup> I have explored these images in French and Finnish literature in Pirjo Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja Sfinksi* [“Narcisse and the Sphinx”] (Helsinki: SKS, 1997) 64-72.

*que de l'humus de leurs songes jaillissent d'inconcevables fleurs d'un éclat vibrant, d'un parfum fiévreux et altier, si triste!*<sup>8</sup> (my emphasis)

These art works are reactions against the times, and they are both mysteriously magnificent and sick. Although the main reference in this essay is to Puvis de Chavannes, who is today seen rather as a Symbolist, the aim is more general and extends to Decadent authors like Huysmans himself. We must remember that the (still often indistinct) line between Symbolism and Decadence was not yet drawn.<sup>9</sup> The rebels of modernity as the most exquisite blossom of the genius of the decadent age, not only manifest the creative spirit of the new art but also show that it is the outgrowth of the muddy soil of a decaying culture. This opposition to modernity outlines the only truly “enlightened” way to react to the developments of modern society, and it unites Symbolists and Decadents.

To explain the emergence of these extraordinary blossoms, or artworks, Huysmans resorts to the theory of milieu à rebours! He continues:

– La théorie du milieu, adaptée par M. Taine à l'art est juste – mais *juste à rebours*, alors qu'il s'agit de grands artistes, car le milieu agit sur eux alors *par la révolte, par la haine* qu'il leur inspire; au lieu de modeler, de façonner l'âme à son image, il crée dans d'immenses Boston, de solitaires Edgar Poe; il agit par retro, crée dans de honteuses Frances des Baudelaire, des Flaubert, des Goncourt, des Villiers d'Isle Adam, des Gustave Moreau, des Redon et des Rops, des êtres d'exception, qui retournent sur les pas des siècles et *se jettent, par dégoût des promiscuités qu'il leur faut subir, dans les gouffres des âges révolus, dans les tumultueux espaces des cauchemars et des rêves.*<sup>10</sup> (my emphasis)

These strange “flowers” of Decadence spread all over in European literature and, amongst them, the works that themselves contain descriptions of strange and ambivalent or outright horrible flowers and gardens and use the flower metaphors to evoke the entanglement of beauty with decay, death and violence. Variants alluding to the flowers of evil flourish even in Nordic countries. Swedish author Ola Hansson's *Sensitiva Amorosa* (1887) refers with its title to the inspiring spirit of the work itself, since it is the supposed Latin name of a strange poisonous herb invented by the author. The book begins with an introductory chapter commenting on the title: it claims to refer to “a herb growing in the overcultivated soil of modern society.”<sup>11</sup> This herb, with its morbid veins, “sickly sweet scent” and color resembling “the light in a sick-room”<sup>12</sup> is a trope for the modern sensibility. In other cases, the flower metaphor refers to the poet.<sup>13</sup> In his novel *Mataleena* (1905), the Finnish author Joel Lehtonen portrays his decadent poet figure as a golden but thorny flower from the swamps.<sup>14</sup> This flower metaphor, which is repeated several times, as well as the whole style of the work, draws inspiration

<sup>8</sup> Essay “Du dilettantisme – Puvis de Chavannes” in J.-K. Huysmans, *Écrits sur l'art* (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 2008) 251.

<sup>9</sup> For an illuminating account about how the distinction between the two movements was forged in Anglo-American literary history, see Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 4-21.

<sup>10</sup> Huysmans, “Du dilettantisme” 251.

<sup>11</sup> Ola Hansson *Sensitiva amorosa* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wikcells, [1887]1957) 10.

<sup>12</sup> Hansson 11.

<sup>13</sup> See Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1999) 41.

<sup>14</sup> Joel Lehtonen, *Mataleena* (Helsinki: SKS, [1905] 1998) 16, 19, 21, 22, 25, 32, 33-34, 82. About this novel see Pirjo Lyytikäinen “Female Monsters, Visionary Protagonists: Epiphanies in Nordic Decadence,” in *States of Decadence I: On the Aesthetics of Beauty, Decline and Transgression across Time and Space*, eds. Guri Barstad and Karen P. Knutsen (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016) 23-27.

from the flaming and dynamic Nietzschean vein of late Decadence. The vital energy of this poet-flower, like the blossoms of real flowers, is quickly spent and doom is imminent. The poet-narrator and the male protagonist of the novel, an *alter ego* of the young author, present the flower metaphor to emphasize his notion of being the late blossom of a family of madmen. He combines the Decadent sense of ending – he is the last scion of the family – to the flourishing.<sup>15</sup>

### Mirbeau's metaphors

Turning to Mirbeau and his late Decadence, we enter the phase (in French Decadence) where Decadent tropes have become quite familiar, but where the decay of modern society and pessimism concerning the future (or past) of the human race is as acute as ever. Mirbeau does not focus on the idea of new literature but presents us with a dire and naturalistic picture of modern society as well as one of the most revolting pictures of the *femme fatale* – a figure cherished by all Decadents. *Le Jardin des supplices* uses flower metaphors abundantly precisely to present the female protagonist, who epitomizes the rotten ground of all decay. She is a monster equally combining refined culture with primitive nature and associated with the Chinese garden.

Clara, the *femme fatale* of the novel, is the exotic flower who fascinates and poisons the narrator's life. The beginning of the relationship, however, promises a paradise for him. When the protagonist meets Clara on the boat trip to China, the *femme fatale* first appears as the dream-come-true for the man – seen through his amorous ecstasy. Accordingly, the first flower metaphor in Mirbeau's novel is attuned to this positive tone. It also functions as a component of the rhetoric emphasizing the initial innocence or naivety of the male victim.

The first flower metaphor conveys the thoughts of the protagonist about Clara – the flower not only as the flower of erotic fulfillment but, by extension, as a whole garden of flowers and the whole earthly paradise.

Elle était vraiment la joie du bord, et comme l'âme de ce navire, en marche vers des pays vierges, des tropiques de feu... Eve des paradis merveilleux, fleur elle-même, fleur d'ivresse, et fruit savoureux de l'éternel désir, je la voyais errer et bondir, parmi les fleurs et les fruits d'or des vergers primordiaux, [...] dans la splendeur surnaturalisée de sa nudité biblique.<sup>16</sup>

The conventional flower-woman is imagined in her “biblical nudity,” as Eve, an Eve before the fall but, nevertheless, from an erotic garden of Eden that already has a Decadent flavour. This eroticized Eden alludes to the imaginary of the Golden Age, with free and natural love in a paradise often represented as an ideal in the *fin de siècle*.<sup>17</sup> The idyllic wish-fulfillment dream of the narrator-protagonist is also the first allusion to the garden motif.

The presentation of a perfect idyll serves as indication that something quite opposite is to follow. This contrast occurs in many horror stories, but is also common in works of satire. As

<sup>15</sup> The idea of Decadent sensibility as a sense of ending has been elaborated in Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 29-36.

<sup>16</sup> Octave Mirbeau, *Le Jardin des supplices* (Paris: Eugène Fasquelle, [1899] 1910) 76.

<sup>17</sup> Mirbeau's text also refers to the idea of natural free love, but in Chinese context. This argument is given by Clara:

- Vois comme les Chinois, qu'on accuse d'être des barbares, sont au contraire plus civilisés que nous; comme ils sont plus que nous dans la logique de la vie et dans l'harmonie de la nature!... Ils ne considèrent point l'acte d'amour comme une honte qu'on doit cacher... Ils le glorifient au contraire, en chantent tous les gestes et toutes les caresses... de même que les anciens, d'ailleurs, pour qui le sexe, loin d'être un objet d'infamie, une image d'impureté, était un Dieu!” (Mirbeau 157–58).

strange as Mirbeau's novel is, it has a clear satirical vein, although the satirical parts seem to alternate with naturalistically presented decadence that, at the same time, becomes an allegory. The garden of Eden, in the satirical and allegorical context, anticipates the horrors to come.

Already the boat trip prepares the reader discretely for the horrors and the misogynist anchoring of all horror in the *femme fatale*. The reader is given many hints of the more sinister character of this female flower early on: her eagerness to dwell on stories of cannibalism and cruelty suggests to the reader that this Eve of the paradise will be revealed to be the ally of the devil. Even the description of jellyfish, with their comparison to flowers and appellation in French, contributes to the portrait of Clara: "Puis des bandes de méduses, des méduses rouges, des méduses vertes, des méduses pourprées, et roses, et mauves, flottaient, ainsi que des jonchées de fleurs, sur la surface molle, [...]"<sup>18</sup> Although the reference is to real jellyfish floating in the sea, the mythological Medusa also lingers in the horizon, so favoured by writers and artists of Decadence.<sup>19</sup>

Before the narrator and Clara visit the garden in China, the flower appears in connection with sickness in a most revolting – and Baudelairean – way, when Clara tells about the death of her friend Annie:

Annie est morte de la lèpre... de cette lèpre effrayante qu'on appelle l'éléphantiasis... car tout est effrayant ici... l'amour, la maladie... la mort... et les fleurs! [...] son corps était tout couvert de petites taches pourprées... Sa peau, plus rose et d'une plus fine pulpe que la fleur de l'althæa, se durcit, s'épaissit, s'enfla, devint d'un gris cendreau... de grosses tumeurs, de monstrueux tubercules la soulevèrent.<sup>20</sup>

The metamorphosis of this flower-like woman to a living carcass already echoes Baudelaire's carcass, but when the narrator is dragged by Clara to the prison to feed the prisoners with rotten meat, the eager crowd brings forth the explicit juxtaposition of carcasses and flowers:

Je crus que le cœur allait me manquer, à cause de l'épouvantable odeur du charnier qui s'exhalait de ces boutiques, de ces bassines remuées, de toute cette foule, *se ruant aux charognes, comme si c'eût été des fleurs*.<sup>21</sup> (my emphasis)

The reference to Baudelaire's poem is quite explicit here. We are also implicitly reminded of the connection that Baudelaire's speaker establishes with his loved one and the carcass at the end of the poem. In Mirbeau, the latent sadism of Baudelaire's speaker is transformed into the horror of the bestial woman who is aroused by violence, suffering and decay:

Elle tendait son corps – tout son corps svelte et vibrant – aux brutalités, aux coups, aux déchirements. Sa peau, si blanche, se colorait de rose ardent; ses yeux avaient un éclat noyé de joie sexuelle; *ses lèvres se gonflaient, tels de durs bourgeons prêts à fleurir*...<sup>22</sup> (my emphasis)

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<sup>18</sup> Mirbeau 97.

<sup>19</sup> Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 137–39, 309–11. This image, again, spread to the North; see Claes Ahlund, *Medusas huvud: Dekadensens tematik I svensk sekelskiftsprosa*, Acta Universitatis Upsalensis, Historia litterarum 18 (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> Mirbeau 128-29.

<sup>21</sup> Mirbeau 152-53.

<sup>22</sup> Mirbeau 170.

Clara epitomizes the monstrous femininity of Decadence, connected to perverse sexuality, although she may be the most extreme example. Here the flower-like qualities, including the lips like buds flourishing in the putridity and extreme cruelty, are associated with forces of destruction. The female is an emblem of flourishing death.

Furthermore, the pairing of women, flowers and sadism extends to all the women waiting to be let into the prison to see the prisoners and to feed them with rotten meat. The crowd excited about the tortures and executions resembles a bouquet, their colorful garments decorated with flowers and metamorphoses (“robes brodées de fleurs et de métamorphoses”). The narrator fantasizes:

[J]e vis des robes et des robes, et des ombrelles, et des éventails, et des visages heureux, et des visages maudits danser, tourbillonner, se précipiter... C'était comme *une poussée de fleurs immenses*, comme un tournoiement d'oiseaux féeriques...<sup>23</sup> (my emphasis)

This crowd evoking the fantastic introduces exotic beauty into the narration, only to emphasize the gloomy and horrifying hell-visions inside the prison; and all these metaphorical flowers anticipate the abundant description of real flowers in the garden of torture where the metaphorical pairing gives way to the juxtaposition of real, naturalistically depicted flowers and the cruelest punishments in the fictional world.

### **Decadent gardens: from Zola and Huysmans to Mirbeau**

Like flowers, gardens in literature traditionally tend to be pleasant and peaceful places, evoking joy and happiness and symbolizing positive things and values – *locus amœnus* or *arcadia*. Representations of gardens often imply the Paradise.<sup>24</sup> In Romanticism, planned gardens and wild nature are in opposition, bringing a new dimension of values into play, with a new type of natural garden, that is, wild nature, now coded as freedom and favoured over order. The dark Romanticism which interested the Decadents, however, also opened vistas into the darker powers of nature – including the threatening aspects of the more domesticated nature of gardens. The Decadents built on the older connotations but, obviously, always sought death in *arcadia* and fixated on the devilish serpent and the realm of evil and the sins it represents. Furthermore, the new Darwinist and materialistic ideas about nature also contributed to replacement and reinterpretations of the old imaginary of evil.

The ambivalent significance of flowers is paralleled by descriptions of whole gardens well before Octave Mirbeau published his *Le Jardin des supplices*. Émile Zola's *Paradou* in *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* (1875) functioned as an important forerunner. Zola connects the concrete description of the garden to the inventory of different species of flowers in a way that became popular and “flourished” in many decadent texts. Zola's flowers in the Edenic garden of love already figured the ambivalence that inspired the decadents. The eroticized flowers are vaguely threatening and intruding.<sup>25</sup> They display the excess of nature and its life energy that transgresses moral considerations, polluting the supposed moral purity of the male protagonist. The excess of life and fertility is lethal by itself, comprising within it the processes of decay; and, when it meets with Christian “puritanism,” its antagonist, an excess of life leads to disaster. Here, the garden is not opposed to wild nature but is part of it, and a manifestation of the powers of nature. Zola's garden is a horror only from the point of view of Christian morality: the fullness of nature is an excess of fertility accompanied by the

<sup>23</sup> Mirbeau 166.

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the word paradise itself derives from the Arabic word meaning garden.

<sup>25</sup> Zola is even accused of “turning a bower of flowers into a house of ill repute,” Dijkstra 242.

unavoidable decay, with the power of Eros dominating in Zola's descriptions. Paradou is actually a paradise for lovers accepting natural love, even if not for priests who are the enemies of earthly paradises. In Huysmans, the garden of the chateau of Lourps in the novel *En rade* already evokes the more Decadent attitude towards nature, emphasizing a lethal rather than fertile nature. Many vegetal horror scenes by Huysmans's followers also tend to accentuate the decay and the opposition of nature and culture.

Nevertheless, if we include the hothouses, the picture changes and Zola's place as the first Decadent on the garden path is confirmed. In *La Curée* (1871) Zola establishes the Decadent garden. In that novel the exotic and tropical hothouse garden (which is repeatedly called "ce jardin de feu," an expression that refers also to burning lust) is a scene of wild vegetal orgies and the coupling of plants ("noces puissantes de la terre"). This jungle-like environment already combines the monstrous with the superb, the sickly and decaying with the beauty of flowers that is then turned into the venue of illicit desire, the perversion of sexual roles and the monstrous caprices of *ennui*, the beast always in need of "un frisson nouveau."<sup>26</sup> The incestuous seduction scene in the hothouse is echoed in many later texts and, in Mirbeau, the relationship between Renée the flower (the "étrange fleur de volupté")<sup>27</sup> and her effeminate stepson Maxime is resurrected in Clara's relationship with the narrator, who is "la petite femme" de Clara.

To stretch the notion of garden to include the indoor collection of exotic monster plants that des Esseintes buys on a whim in *À rebours* also seems pertinent. Firstly, Huysmans's monster plants largely derive from Zola's hothouse in *La Curée*, where the descriptions of plants featuring the loaded comparisons to diseases and their symptoms in *La Curée* are surprisingly similar to those of Huysmans, although the function of the garden-episode in Huysmans is quite different. Secondly, Huysmans's collection and the significance given to the monstrosity of nature manifested in these plants play a role in the allegorical dimension of Mirbeau's garden.

The botanical survey of des Esseintes's exotic collection is a conspicuous example of the technique of inventory used elsewhere in the novel, but the only one focused on natural objects. The list illustrates the perversity of nature itself: these truly decadent flower species are described in detail in such a way as to provoke disgust and horror in the reader. After his earlier obsession with artificial flowers imitating natural flowers he now wants natural flowers to imitate fake ones. These tropical flowers display a disgusting resemblance to the visible symptoms of illnesses like syphilis and leprosy, as well as rotten meat, internal body parts (for example, the bladder of a pig) and skin diseases and defects. The writer creates a suffocating and sickly atmosphere with his descriptions of leaves sweating wine and blood, or in the shape of fish-slices, sword-shaped petals that open to reveal gaping flesh-wounds, blossoms like stumps of amputated limbs and with reminiscences of hospital patients. The grotesque gallery of monsters reaches its climax in the carnivores like the most eccentric *Nepenthes*:

Elle imitait le caoutchouc dont elle avait la feuille allongée, d'un vert métallique et sombre, mais du bout de cette feuille pendait une ficelle verte, descendait un cordon ombilical supportant une urne verdâtre, jaspée de violet, une espèce de pipe allemande en porcelaine, un nid d'oiseau singulier, qui se balançait, tranquille, montrant un intérieur tapissé de poils.<sup>28</sup>

The ecstasy des Esseintes experiences in the presence of these plants that seem to defy all the normal qualities of flowers is accompanied with the remark that all this finally is syphilis, for

<sup>26</sup> Émile Zola, *La Curée* (Paris: Fasquelle [1871] 1984) 54-58, 203-09.

<sup>27</sup> Zola 194.

<sup>28</sup> J.-K. Huysmans, *À rebours* (Paris: Gallimard, [1884] 1977) 191.

him, the virus that is responsible for the endless suffering of the human race: “l'éternelle maladie qui a ravagé les ancêtres de l'homme, qui a creusé jusqu'aux os maintenant exhumés des vieux fossiles.”<sup>29</sup> In des Esseintes's vision syphilis becomes the root of all maladies, all suffering, all misery – the ultimate truth of nature and the allegory of human condition.

The garden in Mirbeau's *Le Jardin des supplices* builds on the predecessors but is, by far, the oddest specimen. In the literal sense, the garden referred to in the title has very little to do with the erotic paradise of Paradou or the erotic hothouses – let alone Huysmans's collection of bizarre flowers. It reworks the – admittedly ambivalent – nature-artifice opposition of the earlier Decadents. Huysmans's protagonist professes his loathing of nature but seeks to entertain himself with the most “artificial” species in the natural flora: the horrors of nature in both plants and women fascinate him. Mirbeau, however, seems to deny the opposition. His garden is an artwork itself. It is nature but also culture: it combines the finest art of gardening with the most refined art of torturing, but both arts are intimately linked to nature; both work on natural and living “material.” The nature/culture it describes echoes Marquis de Sade's imaginings. All in all, the entanglement of nature and artificiality in this garden is complex, but its function in the whole novel is also ambivalent.

## Chinese horrors

The sinister atmosphere and satirical tone with which Mirbeau's *Le Jardin des supplices* begins, as well as the title, already indicate that this is not Eden. From the Parisian milieu and company entertaining itself with stories about horror and violence, the journey of the reader follows that of the embedded narrator, who tells about his journey to China and the mysterious Chinese garden. Nominated to function as a head of an expedition, this narrator is only a fake naturalist totally ignorant of the field on which he is supposed to be an expert. He even confesses his former indifferent attitude towards nature: before he was sent to the Orient he used to think that the trees made him nervous and that he tolerated flowers only when they appeared in garments and ladies' hats: “Moi, les arbres me portent sur les nerfs et je ne tolère les fleurs que chez les modistes et sur les chapeaux...”<sup>30</sup> This attitude, fully in line with the anti-nature commitment of Huysmans's hero des Esseintes and other notorious Decadent figures, has now – at the time of telling – changed and he professes anti-Decadent values. His own judgement of his former self is as follows:

Ah! la brute aveugle et sourde que j'étais alors!... Et comment ai-je pu, avec un si écœurant cynisme, blasphémer contre la beauté infinie de la Forme, qui va de l'homme à la bête, de la bête à la plante, de la plante à la montagne, de la montagne au nuage, et du nuage au caillou qui contient en reflets, toutes les splendeurs de la vie!...<sup>31</sup>

But this statement appears in a weird light when we consider the story he tells. The changed attitude towards nature, which seems to lead from the Decadents' preference for artificiality to the admiration of the beauty of nature, is an understatement that hides the horrors to come. It is, however, also indicative of the way in which many of the late Decadent novelists in France introduced the most lurid decadent themes and motifs. In Catulle Mendès's *Méphistophéla*, for example, the lesbian heroine is carefully and vividly painted to the reader as a most horrible monster and a carcass-like figure right at the beginning of the novel. After this warning description, the narrator finally tells the life story of the sinister female devil. The

<sup>29</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours* 193.

<sup>30</sup> Mirbeau 72.

<sup>31</sup> Mirbeau 72-73.

condemnation of Decadence is combined here with a sensational interest in what is indeed most lurid and Decadent.

The concrete description of the Chinese garden where Mirbeau's narrator first enters with a sense of relief after the horrors he has experienced in the prison, follows a pattern of alternation between exquisite beauty and extreme horror. The depiction of the magnificent beauty and elegance of its garden architecture and the flowers blooming there is followed by the revelation of the horrible violence happening behind and within this beauty. The narrator's initial sense of relief is indeed short-lived, when the hidden function of the garden comes into view. The naturalist style now lingers in detailed visions of torture. Clara adds her philosophy of violence to the scenes as she guides him and interprets, in her own way, this extravagant hell that creates the illusion of paradise.

The garden is presented by Clara as the most refined product of Chinese culture. While the high level of the art of gardening and the architecture of gardens in China is admirable, Clara is the only one who truly appreciates the whole. She complains that even the best European imitations of Chinese gardens lack something:

Mais ils sont loin encore de la beauté pure des modèles chinois. Selon les dires de Clara, il leur manque cette attraction de haut goût qu'on ait mêlé les supplices à l'horticulture, le sang aux fleurs.<sup>32</sup>

Mixing blood and flowers, a quintessentially Decadent notion, is here driven to the extreme and the most refined culture is connected to the cruelest sadism imaginable. And mixing the art of gardening with the art of torture, which is the new thrill ("frisson") in Mirbeau, is sardonically suggested to be the finest perfection of Chinese culture which is lacking in all other cultures. The Chinese as well as the woman are thus viewed in a most perverse light. The narrator is given a dual role. He is aware to be a helpless victim of the Satanic woman, in that he allows her to vaporize his will. Thus, he is the typical Decadent weakling surrendering to Satan: "le riche métal de notre volonté / Est tout vaporisé par ce savant chimiste," to cite Baudelaire. Nevertheless, he also presents the other perspective that could be adopted by the anti-Decadent readers of the novel, when he argues with Clara in the garden:

[E]st-il donc naturel que vous recherchiez la volupté dans la pourriture et que vous meniez le troupeau de vos désirs s'exalter aux horribles spectacles de douleur et de mort?... N'est-ce point là, au contraire, une perversion de cette Nature dont vous invoquez le culte, pour excuser, peut-être, ce que vos sensualités ont de criminel et de monstrueux?<sup>33</sup>

The narrator, thus, poses as an opponent of this refined corruption although his weakness makes him unable to abandon the seductress. The unwilling witness to the monstrosities is subdued by his own desire for the perverse woman, while retaining his reason.

But is this all an allegory, as the satirical mode seems to indicate? At the end of his story, Mirbeau's narrator, indeed, tries to turn everything into an allegory of human life:

[...] le jardin des supplices!... Les passions, les appétits, les intérêts, les haines, le mensonge; et les lois, et les institutions sociales, et la justice, l'amour, la gloire, l'héroïsme, les religions, en sont les fleurs monstrueuses et les hideux instruments de l'éternelle souffrance humaine...<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Mirbeau 187.

<sup>33</sup> Mirbeau 158.

<sup>34</sup> Mirbeau 294.

The monstrous flowers now refer to human desires, interests and emotions as well as social institutions; and the Chinese garden is supposed to be an allegory of human suffering. The reference to flowers resonates with the Decadent flowers and flower metaphors that serve as instruments for revealing the pessimistic truths professed by the movement. The parallel with Huysmans's "all is syphilis" is clear, but we may well ask if the all-inclusive allegory really works. The shocking naturalism of the descriptions, the detailed and patient depiction of a variety of garden plants, always transformed into equally detailed descriptions of refined torture, defies the allegorical dimension. And Clara's constant erotic excitement in the midst of these horrors also has the effect of embedding the reader in the "reality" code, in the literal rather than the allegorical.

Thus, the concrete, sensationalist descriptions of the garden's horrors, and the underlying orientalist and misogynist thinking and allegations, undermine the allegorical dimension. The rotten and lethal smell of China and the flesh and blood presence of the perverse woman, the Venus Verticordia ("the changer of hearts") dominate the scene. The overall impression and atmosphere foreground the horror and disgust against the concrete mimetic scenarios of the novel. This huge amalgamate of horrors may no doubt have an effect of disgust on the reader, not only for the Decadent in literature but also for the hideous in life.

## Conclusion

Concentrating on the poisonous flowers of Decadence reveals the entrails of this movement to a remarkable extent. This central trope opens a whole semiosphere or a network of meaningful connections. But we may ask why flowers were so important. One explanation is given by Elaine Scarry, who argues that flowers are something we easily imagine vividly. Thus, flowers add to the imaginative power of art.<sup>35</sup> Decadence uses this power to pursue its shocking poetics. To turn the normal semiosphere of flowers upside down by combining the vivid beauty with monstrosities and perversions produces a most scandalous effect, while at the same time combining a latent nostalgia for the lost innocence of beauty with the pessimistic blasphemy practiced by the Decadents. In Mirbeau, as in many works of late Decadence, we also sense the critique of Decadence. From the garden of tortures the only way out leads away from this pessimism. It indicates a time for "fruitfulness." Zola now pursues his own crusade against cultural decadence: *Fécondité* was published in the same year as Mirbeau's satire.

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<sup>35</sup> Scarry 40-46.