

POLISH DECADENCE: LEOPOLD STAFF'S *IGRZYSKO* IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

Julia Przybos

Turn-of-the nineteenth-century Decadence is an international literary movement that continues to elude theoreticians of literature. Many scholars have attempted to define Decadence and given diverse sometimes conflicting answers. French, Italian or English readers have often less difficulty recognizing a decadent work. It is, first of all, a question of a specific mind set. When decadent fiction takes place in fin-de siècle France authors show aesthetes and intellectuals disgusted with contemporary democratic society. Joris-Karl Huysmans's *A Rebours* and Remy de Gourmont's *Sixtine, roman de la vie cérébrale*, for example, are permeated with Schopenhauer's pessimism and Nietzsche's individualism. When decadent fiction is set in the past, French authors often chose periods of political turmoil or moral decline, preferably Rome or late Byzantium (e.g. Jean Richepin, *Contes de la décadence romaine*, Jean Lombard, *Byzance*). And there may be a unique tonality to Decadent fiction: a mélange of pessimism and humor that can be traced back to Verlaine's poem "Langueur".¹ Thus Jules Laforgue's intellectual Salomé in the eponymous tale has, quite appropriately, a very large head. When she throws from the cliff the severed head of John the Baptist, she loses her balance, takes a fall, topples from rock to rock, and drowns in the sea.²

In my *Zoom sur les Décadents* I argue that French Decadent authors who write about the past share not only a classical and religious education but also a common artistic practice: revisionist creativity that recombines legends, myths, and historical events. Religious, cultural, and historical figures are revisited and shown in a new often iconoclastic light. Two examples will suffice to illustrate revisionist creativity. In "Une saison à Baia" (1901), Hugues Rebelle shows Saint Paul's proselytizing eloquence wasted on Roman patricians who mercilessly point out its incoherencies. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, in a short story called "Impatience de la foule" (1883) conflates two crucial battles of the Ancient world: Marathon (490 BC) and Thermopyles (480 BC). The final result of Villiers's artful telescoping of separate

¹ See my *Zoom sur les Décadents*, Paris, Librairie José Corti, 2002, pp. 163-166. This particular kind of humor was not lost on André Breton who included a passage from Joris-Karl Huysmans' *En Rade* in his *Anthologie de l'humour noir*. (1940)

² "Salomé" is one of six *Moralités légendaires* published in 1887. Jules Laforgue's writings were well known in Poland. Stanisław Brzozowski considers Laforgue to be the best thinker among French writers of fin-de-siècle France. "Malo istnieje w nowoczesnej literaturze pisarzy o tak skondensowanym znaczeniu psychologicznym jak to, które cechuje wszystko niemal, co wyszło spod piora Juliusza Laforgue'a. Wydaje mi się, że jest on najgłębszym z tych wszystkich myślicieli i poetów francuskich, którzy starali się ująć i przewyczyć zagadnienia współczesnej świadomości kulturalnej." [Few contemporary writers can match the psychological importance of almost anything that was written by Jules Laforgue. He is in my mind the most profound thinker among all French thinkers and poets who tried to grasp and overcome problems of contemporary cultural conscience] Stanisław Brzozowski, *Legenda Młodej Polski. Studia o strukturze duszy kulturalnej* [*The Legend of Young Poland: Studies about the Structure of Cultural Soul*], Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997 (1909), p. 273.

historical events is a seamless narrative full of suspense that brings to mind *The Persians*, a famous play by Aeschylus.

Decadence appears to be the last literary movement with a vast international appeal. Originating in fin-de-siècle France the decadent literature found many imitators, followers, and continuators in Great Britain, Spain, Italy, Romania, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The Slavic literary realm was not impervious to decadent influence. In Russia, for example, there is Valery Bryusov's *Altar pobedy* [Altar of Victory] and Mikhail Kuzmin's *Krylya* [Wings] that feature many traits typical of revisionist creativity.

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But was there decadent literature in Poland? At first, we are tempted to answer this question in the negative. Indeed, traditional historians of turn of the nineteenth-century literature generally adopt the term *Młoda Polska* [Young Poland], a term that doesn't suggest decline but national renewal. Critics writing about Polish literature of the period point out that pessimism and nihilism associated with decadence undermine the dominant view of literature as a means to uplift the Polish nation's sinking morale after the lost of independence at the end of the eighteenth-century. And they quote Henryk Sienkiewicz's programmatic "*ku pokrzepieniu serc*" [to uplift sinking morale].³

And yet the classical and religious education that was the norm in Western, Central and Eastern Europe created conditions in which decadent literature could blossom also in Poland. If the artistic practice of Decadence is combinatory and revisionist creativity, then a person who wants to be a decadent writer should have distinctive intellectual features. Specifically, in the turn-of-the-century central European context, an aspiring decadent writer should, in my mind, meet two basic conditions. First, the aspiring decadent writer should have an excellent humanistic education: classical languages and literature, mythology, philosophy, and history both religious and profane should be mastered because they are the building blocks of decadent works. Second, the would-be decadent must have a perfect knowledge of the French language: it allows an aspiring central European decadent to be *au courant* with the latest literary achievements of French predecessors and masters. To these two basic conditions I will add a third one of somewhat lesser importance: a turn-of-the-century sojourn in Paris that allows an aspiring central European decadent to be steeped in the atmosphere that permeates the Parisian cultural scene of the times.⁴

Young Leopold Staff fulfills all conditions that are desirable in a prospective central European decadent: excellent humanistic education, perfect knowledge of French, and a year long stay in France. Leopold Staff was born in Lwow in Galicia in 1878 where he received a first-rate classical education in a local lyceum. His

³ More recently, critics tend to view Polish literature of the period as a complex phenomenon in which different tendencies were expressed. See Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska's *Somnambulicy, dekadenci, herosi: studia i eseje o literaturze Młodej Polski* [Somnambulists, Decadents, Heroes: Studies and Essays on Young Poland's Literature], Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1985.

⁴ Stanislaw Przybyszewski is a case in point. He was educated in a Prussian lyceum and before returning to Poland and writing in Polish he spent many years in Berlin.

knowledge of Ancient languages and cultures would later prompt him to translate several Greek and Latin authors not yet available in Polish. At the University of Lwow Leopold Staff studied philosophy and modern languages. With a diploma in Romance philology he was well prepared to translate French literature into Polish. Writers as diverse as Ronsard, Diderot, Stendhal, and Romain Rolland found in him a gifted translator. And there are his renditions in Polish of Nietzsche's seminal works - *The Birth of Tragedy*, *The Antichrist*, *Toward a Genealogy of Morals* - that account for his familiarity with Nietzsche's philosophy.⁵

Leopold Staff's knowledge of European culture had been deepened by his travels to the West. During his formative years, he went to Paris where he joined hundreds of Polish expatriates who came to study, paint and write in the capital of the cultured world.⁶ At the time, decadent fiction was still being published in France: Rachilde's *Contes et nouvelles* in 1900, Jean Lorrain's *Monsieur de Phocas* in 1901, Alfred Jarry's *Messaline, roman de l'ancienne Rome* in 1901.

And above all there was Kozakiewicz and Janasz's French translation of Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis?* published by *Revue Blanche* in June 1900.⁷ Review's editors welcomed new ideas and trends in their journal which was an important medium for writers associated with decadent literature. With a stamp of approval from *Revue Blanche* Sienkiewicz's novel was a curious phenomenon on the French literary scene. Here is why: in *Quo Vadis?* Sienkiewicz developed the subject that was dear to Decadent authors but infused his novel with a very different message. Like Jean Richepin and Alfred Jarry, Sienkiewicz paints a decadent Rome in *Quo Vadis?* However, his main protagonists are not degenerate emperors and epicurean patricians but Saint Peter, Saint Paul, and intrepid Christians who firmly believe in the afterlife. *Quo Vadis?* optimistic religious message is in striking opposition to the nihilistic pessimism that oozes from decadent novels.⁸

When Staff came to Paris in 1903 *Quo Vadis?* was literally the rage of the day. In addition to *Revue Blanche*'s first abridged version of 1900 four different translations have been published in the span of seven years. There were also a decadent prequel and a sentimental sequel to Sienkiewicz's novel. A drama adaptation was staged in

⁵ Throughout his productive life Leopold Staff published some eighty book length translations from Greek, Latin and modern languages, namely English, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, and Swedish.

⁶ "Kilka czy kilkanascie miesiecy, kilka czy kilkanascie lat przebywali w Paryżu twórcy wielcy i mali, uznani i debiutanci, starzy i mlodzi. Historycy literatury przypominaja wiec, ze odwiedzali to miasto Wyspianski i Przesmycki, Zapolska i Lange, Reymont i Berent, Lesmian i Potocki, Strug i Sieroszewski, Staff, Ostrowska i dziesiatki innych." [Artists major and minor, well-known and unknown, old and young were staying in Paris for few or several months, a few or several years. Historians of literature remind us that visited Paris Wyspianski, Przesmycki, Zapolska, Lange, Reymont, Berent, Lesmian, Potocki, Strug, Sieroszewski, Staff, Ostrowska and dozens of others]. Franciszek Ziejka, *Paryż młodopolski* [A Young Poland's Paris], Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1993, p. 35. Ziejka's book offers a comprehensive study of Polish expatriates in Paris at the turn of the nineteenth-century.

⁷ For the first time since Adam Mickiewicz's lectures at Collège de France a Polish author had gained high visibility in France.

⁸ Gustave Le Rouge speaks fondly of Hugues Rebell in his memoirs. See "Avec Hugues Rebell" [With Hugues Rebell] in *Verlainiens et décadents*, Paris: Julliard, 1993.

1901 at Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin that run for hundreds of performances.⁹ An opera followed in 1908.¹⁰

International travel and freshly acquired familiarity with newest literary trends and fashions in France were followed by the most creative period in Leopold Staff's life.¹¹ In the years leading to the First World War Staff published, in addition to five collections of poems,¹² five plays. The first three dramas of the series reflect diverse influences on an impressionable young writer eager to try in his own language what he has just discovered in the West. The first, *Skarb* [Treasure], has been viewed by critics as an allegorical rendition of Nietzschean ideas, the second, *Godiva*, as a symbolic version of an Anglo-Saxon legend.

Of interest to us is the third play called *Igrzysko* [Game].¹³ Here's why: *Igrzysko*'s action takes place in Antinoopolis in Egypt at the end of the third century under the rule of Emperor Diocletian. In this play, Staff shares with Decadent writers a fascination for Rome in decline and with Sienkiewicz the main subject of *Quo Vadis*: the struggle between a weakened Empire and growing Christianity.

The main character of *Igrzysko* is an actor, Filemon, who is the darling of the Roman Empire. His performances invariably attract enthusiastic crowds; ardent women throng to him. However, the superstar has grown indifferent to his thespian and amorous successes. At an orgy given by a rich man, Filemon recognizes in one of the guests a dear companion of his early years, Crispin. Both Filemon and Crispin

⁹ *Quo Vadis?* is the first international bestseller that, before being available in French, has been translated into English, Russian, Czech, Italian, German, Bulgarian, Armenian, Danish, Portuguese and Latin. Its immense popularity secured Sienkiewicz's the Nobel Prize for literature in 1905.

¹⁰ In two years Sienkiewicz's novel sold two hundred thousand copies in France alone. For details see Maria Kosko's *Un "Best-seller" 1900. Quo Vadis?* Paris: Editions José Corti, 1960 and Mieczysław Giergielewicz's *Henryk Sienkiewicz: A Biography*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968. *Quo Vadis?*'s success on Parisian stage was followed by the adaptation of *Ogniem i Mieczem* [With Fire and Sword] in Théâtre Sarah Bernard in 1904. See Tadeusz Sivert, *Polacy w Paryżu: z dziejów polskiego życia kulturalnego w Paryżu na przełomie XIX i XX wieku* [Poles in Paris: from the History of Polish Cultural Life in Paris at the turn of the Nineteenth Century], Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1980.

¹¹ In his essay "Rekonwalescencja końca wieku (szkic z literatury ostatnich czasów)" [End of the Century's Convalescence (an Essay about the Literature of Recent Years)] Leopold Staff analyzes pessimism in fin-de-siècle life and literature. He also discusses the appearance of various forms of optimism inspired by Nietzsche's writings and Max Messer's "optimism for optimism sake." However tenuous and arbitrary individual forms of optimism make life bearable. Before being published in *Teka*, an academic journal in Lwów, this text was presented by Staff to students at a meeting of Kolko Literackie Czytelni Akademickiej na Uniwersytecie Lwowskim in 1900. Staff's essay has been included in the anthology edited by Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska and entitled *Programy i dyskusje literackie okresu Młodej Polski* [Literary Programs and Discussions of the Young Poland Era], Wrocław, Warszawa, Kraków, Gdansk: Zakład Naukowy imienia Ossolińskich-Wydawnictwo, 1973, pp. 558-569.

¹² Many Staff's poems of this period bring to mind Baudelaire and Verlaine's pessimistic poetry. One poem in particular, "Deszcz jesienny deszcz" [Autumnal rain], echoes in its subject and melancholic tone Verlaine's arch popular "Chanson d'automne" [Autumnal Song].

¹³ Leopold Staff, *Igrzysko* [Game], Warszawa: Instytut wydawniczy "Biblioteka polska", 1922 (new edition). So far *Igrzysko* has attracted little critical attention. Staff's scholar, Irena Maciejewska doesn't discuss *Igrzysko* but mentions Staff's letter to his friend Ortwin in which the author writes about his difficulties in finishing the play. See Irena Maciejewska, *Leopold Staff. Lwowski okres twórczości* [Leopold Staff. The Lwów Period], Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1965, p. 49.

were orphans that were taken care of by the kind Apolonius. Apolonius used to talk to the young boys about a prophet from the East. Whereas Filemon forgot all about Apolonius' teaching, Crispin became a fervent Christian. Crispin came to the orgy seeking Filemon's protection for their old and frail teacher imprisoned by the prefect Arianus.

Crispin explains to Filemon that under torture Apolonius might pay tribute to pagan gods. And because Apolonius is the deacon of local Christians his denial of Jesus Christ will have disastrous consequences for the fledgling sect in the city. Crispin hopes that the superstar will dissuade the prefect from having Apolonius tortured in public. When all attempts fail with the incorruptible Arianus, Filemon devises a plan to save his old teacher and benefactor. He visits Apolonius in prison to learn how to mimic his words and gestures. Once he perfected his new role he exchanges his clothes with the imprisoned Apolonius. The old man walks free while Filemon takes his place in the prison cell.

The next day Filemon, under the disguise of Apolonius, delivers a brilliant speech that brings comfort and strength to the assembled Christians and irritates civil and religious authorities. He is carried away by his own art and for a moment believes in the meaning of the words he has been saying. In fact, his fiery preaching is tantamount to a semi-conversion because Filemon doesn't know anymore whether he was acting or being sincere. Confronted by a furious prefect and indignant Roman archpriest Filemon's friends urge him to stop the game and take off his mask. However, his portrayal of old Apolonius was so convincing that authorities want him to pay tribute to Roman gods as proof that he was only acting. Ambiguous about his own convictions Filemon refuses and is condemned to death by torture. His loving mistress surreptitiously gives him her poison ring. He drinks the poison and dies lamenting that his life of artifice has been so unlike his heroic and honest death. Horrified Christians quickly disperse crying out that Filemon committed mortal sin, killed his soul, and sold out to the powers of Hell.

Leopold Staff's *Igrzysko* features many characteristics that are typical of decadent works. First, there is Staff's choice of an actor as the protagonist of his play. Histrionics, actors, and mimes are prominently featured in turn-of-the-century literature. Works as diverse as Jean Betheroy's *Le Mime Bathylle*, Félicien Champsaur's *Pierrot et sa conscience*, and Jean Richepin's "L'Etoile éteinte" illustrate how important was the Baudelairian distinction between life and art to turn-of-the-century writers. This thespian tradition that confronts sincerity and acting goes back to Verlaine's "Langueur" of 1883.¹⁴ In this programmatic poem of the decadent movement, Verlaine shows a bored Roman patrician who confides his despair to a laughing Bathylle, the famous comic mime of Roman antiquity.¹⁵

In keeping with "Langueur" double tonality - one serious the other comical - humor is present along with despair and boredom in many decadent works. For example, in Hugues Rebell's "Une Saison à Baia," a decadent prequel to *Quo*

¹⁴ Books on thespian tradition in fin-de-siècle France include Jean de Palacio's *Pierrot fin-de-siècle*, Paris: Librairie Séguier, 1990 and Guy Ducrey's *Corps et graphies: Poétique de la danse et de la danseuse à la fin du XIX siècle*, Paris: Honoré Champion, 1996.

¹⁵ The reader will find a detailed analysis of Verlaine's "Langueur" in my *Zoom sur les décadents*, Paris: Librairie José Corti, 2002, pp. 163-166.

Vadis?, Roman parasites expose each others' schemes to win the favors of a bored and aging patrician. Similarly, Leopold Staff shows in *Igrzysko* competing parasites who flatter in hilarious speeches a rich, uneducated, and snobbish merchant. Clearly, after his return to Poland from France, Leopold Staff wrote a play in which he combined several features that we associate with decadent literature: a late Roman Empire setting, a disenchanted actor for main character, and comical secondary characters.

However, *Igrzysko* is more than a clichéd imitation of French literary models. The young author revives a religious legend to dramatize the life/art dichotomy that is the gist of his play. It is a legend of Saint Genesius, an actor in Arles who died a martyr's death in 286 under Diocletian.¹⁶ Genesius life and death have been recorded in an old French manuscript¹⁷. His cult spread from Arles throughout Europe. In Spain, Genesius legend inspired Lope de Vega who wrote *Lo fingido verdadero* [Acting is believing] (1607). In France, Jean Rotrou further developed the art/life dichotomy: in his *Saint Genest* (1646), Diocletian is a spectator who watches his own character being played by an actor. This mirroring effect is a well known marker of Baroque aesthetics. All told, Genesius legend is an important subject matter for artists who wish to explore the distinction between art and life. Staff's *Igrzysko* is a valuable addition to this old and distinguished tradition.

Staff's version of Genesius legend has a final unorthodox twist. True, this version mimics the legend but it radically changes its ending. To preempt martyr's death, Filemon takes on stage his own life. By contrast, Lope de Vega's play ends with an impaled Genesius delivering an uplifting speech.¹⁸ Jean Rotrou's Genesius is being tortured offstage and his serenity in face of death is reported in the play's last scene. In *Igrzysko* however, Filemon's gesture of ultimate despair and freedom, clearly echoes the tragic ending of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.¹⁹ Staff takes up an old religious legend and, by adding a Shakespearian conclusion, undercuts its clearly optimistic message. The final product is a work of art that is a result of Staff's skillful "combinatory revisionist creativity" with pessimistic undertones. This very quality distinguishes a simple imitation of models from truly original decadent works.

Leopold Staff's decadent take on Saint Genesius is in stark contrast with Henryk Sienkiewicz's use of Saint Paul and Saint Peter who uphold an optimistic message in

¹⁶ Saint Genesius is relatively little known because his life and martyrdom were not recorded by Jacobus de Voragine in his famous *Legenda Aurea* [The Golden Legend], a thirteen-century work, dated about 1260. At a later date, Leopold Staff translated into Polish *The Golden Legend*.

¹⁷ It is kept at the manuscript division of Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris.

¹⁸ "People of Rome, hear me: In the world I played its wretched stories, its vice and wickedness throughout my life. I was a pagan and worshiped pagan gods. Then God received me. I'm now a Christian actor. The human comedy, all meaningless nonsense, is done. I've played the divine comedy instead. Now I go to heaven to receive the reward for my exceptional faith, hope, and charity. I owe them to heaven, and heaven owes me for them. Tomorrow I'll see the sequel to this play." Lope de Vega, *Acting is Believing*, San Antonio, Texas: Trinity University Press, 1986, p. 103. I would like to thank my colleague Diana Conchado for her help in getting information about Saint Genesius in Spanish literature.

¹⁹ Another important detail shows Shakespeare's influence on Staff: like Hamlet, Filemon gets poison from a person sympathetic to his plight.

Quo Vadis? If Leopold Staff had written his play in French²⁰ and had it published in Paris abuzz with discussions about *Qui Vadis?*' artistic merits, his work might have been singled out for its clever new take on an ancient legend. Learned Parisian critics might have pointed to the young Polish writer's originality and contrasted it with his compatriot Sienkiewicz's moralizing re-creation of ancient Rome.²¹

However, in Polish context, Staff's *Igrzysko* had a very different connotation. In Poland that lost its independence in 1794 and was ever since seeking to regain it, Catholic Church was perceived as an essential ally in the struggle against main occupying powers: Orthodox Russia, and Protestant Prussia. In the course of the nineteenth century Catholicism and patriotism had been effectively fused in Polish national conscience. Sienkiewicz admits that, when he wrote religious *Quo Vadis?*, he had a patriotic goal in mind. Simply put, he wrote the best-seller, like his other books before, "ku pokrzepieniu serc" [to uplift his compatriots' sinking morale].²² In Polish context, Staff's play, when it was first produced in Lwow in 1909, had a doubly iconoclastic coloration. It could be viewed as undermining the power of the Catholic Church and, by the same token, as weakening the resolve of Poles who were struggling to be free from Russian, Prussian and the Austro-Hungarian domination and oppression. No wonder that *Igrzysko* run for a limited number of performances, failing to please critics and attract an enthusiastic audience alike.

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²⁰ Recognizing the role and preeminence of French writers for Decadent aesthetics Oscar Wilde produced the original version of *Salomé* (1893) in French with the help of his Parisian friends, probably Pierre Louÿs and Marcel Schwob. Gabriele D'Annunzio must have felt the same way when he wrote his play *Saint Sébastien* (1911) in French.

²¹ For instance, Hugues Rebell's "Une Saison à Baia" was favorably compared to *Quo Vadis?* by an anonymous journalist in *La Revue bleue*, N0 12, XV, March 23, 1901.

²² "Il s'agissait, en l'occurrence, de galvaniser l'énergie des Polonais découragés par des années de joug étranger. L'intention moralisante est devenue encore plus nette lorsqu'il s'est essayé à traiter, en 1889, dans *Sans dogme*, des 'tares' de la société contemporaine. L'orientation chrétienne se confirme, en 1892, dans *Suivons-le !* Elle éclate enfin dans les deux thèmes qu'il aborde en 1893, l'un moderne: *La Famille Polaniecki*, l'autre historique: *Quo Vadis?*" [It was important to stimulate the energy of Poles who were discouraged after many years of foreign domination. Moralizing intention is more perceptible in 1889 when he addressed weaknesses of contemporary society in *Without Dogma*. His Christian conviction is confirmed in *Let Us Follow Him* written in 1892. It becomes instantly recognizable in two themes that he develops in 1893: a modern theme in *Polaniecki's Family* and a historical one in *Quo Vadis?*]. Daniel Beauvois, "Introduction" to Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Quo Vadis?*, Paris: GF Flammarion, 1983, p. 5.

Biographical note

Julia Przybos is a Professor of French and comparative literature at Hunter College and The Graduate Center, City University of New York. Her *L'Entreprise mélodramatique* was published by Librairie José Corti (1987) and received the Gilbert Chinard Literary Prize. For José Corti's "Collection romantique" she edited *Un Sceptique s'il vous plaît*, a collection of short stories by Albert Lhermite, an unknown 19th century author she discovered and *Emma ou quelques lettres de femme* by Jacques de Crèvecoeur de Boucher de Perthes, a forgotten 19th century author. In her book entitled *Zoom sur les Décadents* (José Corti, 2002) she examines decadent fiction in the cultural context of fin de siècle France. Her publications on Naturalism include essays on Goncourts' *Germinie Lacerteux*, J.-K. Huysmans' "Sac au dos", Zola's *Assommoir*, Octave Mirbeau's *Sébastien Roch*, and Paul Bonnetain's *Charlot s'amuse*. She is currently writing a book on the role of physiology in realist and naturalist fiction.

Summary

Decadent authors writing about the past share a common artistic practice: revisionist creativity. I argue in my *Zoom sur les décadents* that this particular type of creativity uses as its main device recombination of legends, myths, and historical events. Historical, cultural or religious figures are reexamined and shown in a new unexpected light. I show in my book how Villiers de Isle-Adam conflates two crucial battles of the Ancient world: Marathon (490 BC) and Thermopyles (480 BC) in a short story called "Impatience de la foule." The final result of Villiers's telescoping of separate historical events is a seamless narrative. In Hugues Rebell's "Une Saison à Baïa," Saint Paul attempts to convert Roman patricians who mock his incoherent speeches. In "La Gloire de Judas," Bernard Lazare departs from the Gospels and tells the tragic story of Judas whose betrayal made the salvation of the human race possible. In Lazare's short story, Judas is a self-effacing figure who doesn't act on his own but on Jesus Christ's specific order, who sworns him into secrecy.

Common in French decadent fiction, religious revisionism was largely tolerated in the secular Third Republic. Whereas censorship was quick to punish naturalist authors writing about debauched clergy in contemporary France (e.g. Louis Deprez and Henry Fèvre's *Autour d'un clocher*) decadent authors reinventing ancient religious stories and retelling the life of catholic saints enjoyed a relative freedom of expression.

It is my hypothesis that taken out of its secular context, religious revisionism of the kind practiced by French decadents may be seen as shocking transgression in a fiercely catholic country like Poland. In the country that lost its independence in 1794 and was ever since seeking to regain it, Catholic Church was perceived as an essential ally in the struggle against main occupying powers: Orthodox Russia, and Protestant Prussia. In the course of the 19th century Catholicism and patriotism had been effectively fused in Polish national conscience. In this charged political context a Polish author revisiting Church dogma or tradition was at risk of being perceived not only as a religious outcast but also as a traitor to the cause of Polish independence.

To test my hypothesis I propose to examine *Igrzysko* (Game), a forgotten play by Leopold Staff. Admired today chiefly as a poet, the young Staff wrote *Igrzysko* in

Poland after a long sojourn in Paris where he had lived among the international crowd of *fin de siècle* writers and artists. The play was first produced in Lemberg in 1909 and after a few performances vanished forever from Polish theatrical repertoire.

Leopold Staff's play is set in ancient Rome and depicts tribulations of an actor who, while impersonating a Christian awaiting crucifixion, converts to Christianity. In his play, Staff revives the legend of Saint Genesius, an actor in Arles who died a martyr's death in 286 under Diocletian. In Spain, Saint Genesius's legend inspired Lope de Vega who wrote *Acting is Believing* (*Lo fingido verdadero*, 1607). In France, it was the source for Jean Rotrou's *Saint Genest* (1646). All told, the legend of Genesius is a popular theme for artists who wish to explore the distinction between art and life. An important addition to this old tradition, Staff's play contains, however, a decadent and potentially scandalous twist. Unlike in *Acting is Believing* and *Saint Genest*, the protagonist's conversion is very short lived in *Igrzysko*. Fearing pain, Staff's character commits suicide and is, therefore, condemned for eternity. In my paper, I will discuss the significance of Staff's religious transgression in the context of the turn of the century arch-catholic and patriotic Poland.

Key words

Poland, Decadence, Leopold Staff, Saint Genesius legend, thespian tradition in Decadence