

# DECADENCE EMBODIED: ANOREXIA, ALLEGORY, MARROW

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## ABSTRACT

My research argues for the recognition of a contemporary phenomenon of literary decadence, one that can be understood only in relation to the aftermath of France's colonial past and subsequent loss of empire. My work calls into question Camille Paglia's formulation that "excess" is the "hallmark of decadence." I examine texts, including Amélie Nothomb's *Robert des Noms Propres* and J.K. Huysmans' *À Rebours*, in which decadence becomes a mode of asceticism, a constraint/restraint, and a quest for purification that pushes both aesthetic and corporeal limitations to their outermost edge. My vision of decadence is thus epitomized not by excess, but by hunger and lack. In the texts I examine, the concept of loss rises to the surface—whether, in Nothomb's case, the loss of the weightless magic of childhood, or in Huysmans' case, the loss of the mysterious "marrow" in art and literature—as the driving force behind this decadent quest for extreme minimization. A close examination of Huysmans' and Nothomb's texts thus informs the disturbing implications of Houellebecq's post-decadent universe, where sensory extremes are replaced by middling states of comfortable neutrality. *Soumission*'s protagonist François—a Huysmanist and scholar of decadence—becomes an embodied allegory of the nation of France and the aftermath of its colonial past. Huysmans' search for a nutritive, marrow-like essence is absent, paving the way to an insidious spinelessness, a stark contrast to the figure of Nothomb's anorexic ballerina, whittled down to the bare minimum of a spinal

column. This pusillanimous indolence ultimately grounds Houellebecq's portrait of societal "submission" in which violence and injustice become normative. That is, the degeneration in *Soumission* lacks the traditional "decadent" descent marked by excess: it is a straight line of infinite flatness and middling neutrality involving no euphoric ascents—what Huysmans calls Mallarmé's *nouvelles ivresses*—and no Baudelarian *descentes aux enfers*. This flatness reveals the disturbing implication behind the novel's last line, which evokes a "neutral" state with "rien à regretter," implying that there is nothing more to lose.