



## Lorrain, Jean (Paul Duval) (1855-1906)

by Michael D. Sibal

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Jean Lorrain was a French poet, novelist, and journalist of the "decadent movement" during the Belle Époque (1890-1914), almost as renowned for his homosexuality and depravity as for his literary achievements.

Lorrain was born Paul Duval, only child of a ship-owner in the port of Fécamp in Normandy, on August 9, 1855. He was a nervous and sickly boy, suffocated by a doting mother. In order to toughen him, his parents sent him to boarding schools in the Parisian suburbs of Vanves and Arcueil (1864-1872), where he felt (as he wrote in 1871) "all alone, all alone, far from my home and family, without a friend." His homosexual tendencies first appeared at fifteen or sixteen, when he developed a strong crush on a fellow student.

Lorrain returned to Fécamp in 1872, but resisted his father's pressure to embark on a business career. He fulfilled his military obligations in 1875-1876, then began law studies in Paris in 1878, only to abandon them in 1880 in order to dedicate himself to literature.

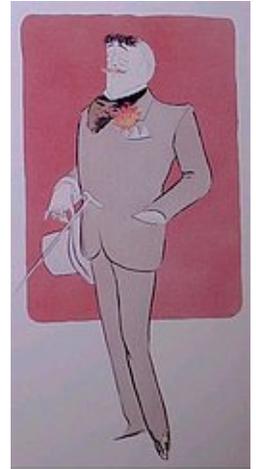
At his father's insistence, he adopted a pseudonym: Jean Lorrain. He published his first volume of poetry in 1882 at his own expense and thereafter turned out a steady stream of poems, short stories, and novels. He published about forty volumes during his lifetime; another dozen appeared posthumously.

Lorrain's work often evokes a seamy urban underworld of sodomy, lesbianism, drug-addiction, and crime. His best novels appeared in his final years. *Monsieur de Bougreton* (1897), *Monsieur de Phocas* (1901), and *Le Vice Errant* (1902) center on men mired in decadence, vice, and (implicitly) homosexuality; *La Maison Philibert* (1904) gives a picture of life in a provincial brothel and a panoramic tour of Parisian prostitution and criminality.

Most of Lorrain's income derived from journalism. Beginning in the mid-1880s, he wrote regular columns for a series of mass-circulation newspapers, most notably *Le Courrier français*, *L'Événement*, and *L'Écho de Paris*. He chronicled Parisian life of the day--the literary, theatrical, and artistic worlds, as well as French society, both high and low--using his savage wit to attack and ridicule many of the era's leading figures. In the process, he made countless enemies.

Edmond de Goncourt wondered in 1895, "What's Lorrain's dominant trait? Is it spite or a complete lack of tact?" (Most people thought it the former.)

But as Sarah Bernhardt once wrote Lorrain, "inside the abominably depraved being that you are, there beats the heart of a great artist, a genuinely sensitive and tender heart."



Two caricatures of Jean Lorrain attributed to George Goursat.

Lorrain, always lucid about his own contradictory nature, based one of the characters in his novel *Très Russe* (1886) on himself: "At one and the same time naive and skeptical, biased and generous, cruel as a woman, gentle as a child, changeable in his affections, tenacious in his hatreds, good, irascible, impressionable, haughty and informal . . . : such was Mauriat."

Lorrain's greatest love was his mother. He wrote to her (when he was thirty-one!): "My dear and beloved mama, my only passion, I truly love only you. . . . If one day Death separate us, . . . and one of us survive the other, at least we will have . . . the consolation of having adored each other." After his father died in 1886, Lorrain took charge of Madame Duval, who came to live with him until his own death (she outlived him by twenty years).

As a young man, Lorrain had strong feelings for one or two women who rejected him, but his most recent biographer's claim that he was a bisexual who turned to exclusive homosexuality only "out of disappointed love" is psychologically unconvincing. Whatever the case, by the early 1880s Lorrain was leading an openly homosexual life, apparently limited to one-night stands with "rough trade."

He wrote to a friend in the 1890s: "I have a great fondness for hoodlums, fairground wrestlers, butcher-boys and assorted pimps, both ordinary and extraordinary, who, along with some absolutely exquisite women and some men of talent, such as yourself, are the only company that I keep in Paris."

Lorrain detested those upper-class homosexuals who concealed their sexual tendencies. In contrast, he provocatively flaunted his own. For example, one evening he shocked fellow diners in a fashionable restaurant by declaiming the following verse: "This night I have lain between two stevedores / Who have relieved me of all my ardors."

He was, in biographer Philippe Jullian's words, "truly, at the fin de siècle, Sodom's ambassador to Paris." The abbé Mugnier summed up Lorrain's reputation this way in his private journal in 1897: "a sodomist, a sadist, fiendish, [someone] who takes pleasure in perverting [others]."

Lorrain was also addicted to ether, which he began taking to calm his nerves but which undermined his health. It is said that when his grave was opened in 1986, the body still reeked of ether.

Lorrain never much liked Paris and the aversion grew as he aged. In his early years, he divided his time between Fécamp and the capital; in his later years, he traveled extensively in the French provinces and abroad. "Ah! How nice it is to be far from Paris," he wrote from Toulon in December 1899, and exactly one year later he and his mother settled in Nice.

It was in Paris, however, that he died on June 30, 1906, his fifty-year-old body worn out by a life of drugs and debauchery.

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## **About the Author**

**Michael D. Sibal** is Associate Professor of History at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. He specializes in the history of modern France and has published articles and essays on the Napoleonic police state (1799-1815), the nineteenth-century French labor movement, and French homosexuality. He has co-edited, with Jeffrey Merrick, *Homosexuality in French History and Culture* (2002) and is currently writing a history of the gay male community of Paris since 1700.