

volupté

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 4, Issue 1

Summer 2021

Ends of Worlds: An Introduction by the Guest Editor

Ellis Hanson

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 June 2021

Date of Publication: 21 June 2021

Citation: Ellis Hanson, 'Ends of Worlds: An Introduction by the Guest Editor', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 4.1 (2021), ii–vii.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v4i1.1504.g1617

volupte.gold.ac.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Ends of Worlds An Introduction by the Guest Editor

Ellis Hanson

Cornell University

“The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all “the ends of the world are come”, and the eyelids are a little weary.”
(Walter Pater, ‘Leonardo da Vinci’, in *The Renaissance*)

The phrase about the ‘ends of the world’ is familiar enough, not just to readers of the Bible, where it appears amid dire warnings about temptation in 1 Corinthians 10:11, but of course also from Pater’s quintessentially decadent description of the *Mona Lisa*, where the biblical quotation is taken splendidly out of context to evoke a modern sensibility, the very ‘symbol of the modern idea’,¹ as he writes, a sweeping together in the knowing countenance of a Renaissance portrait all human temptations, all spiritual and worldly aspirations, whole networks of global trade and cultural exchange extending back much farther than those mere thousand years, extending not just to various nations and continents, but also to the depths of the sea and the secrets of the grave. Pater evokes one fallen empire after another as he deftly, if improbably, refigures *Mona Lisa* as a pearl-diver, a silk-trader, a goddess, a mother, even a vampire. At the droop of that weary eyelid, he is reminded that ‘modern philosophy has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life.’² So many ends of worlds in a sublimely weary eyelid! Decadence is ostensibly a theory of the end of a world, but it has a way of collecting worlds without end. Pater elsewhere challenges us to see the visible outlines of the face as ‘a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it’,³ extending indefinitely, beyond imagination – and yet continuing to twitch and vibrate like delicate nerves, transmitting messages we can scarcely begin to read.

How might we read the ambiguity of the phrase ‘ends of the world’ in such a formulation? Ends in the sense of culminations, ambitions, distant locations? Given the punishing moral severity

of the biblical context for this phrase, we might begin with its apocalyptic overtones, ends as ultimate conclusions finally unveiled, the realization of a divine logic, the complete destruction of the known world and its replacement by an alternative we could hardly imagine on our own. A singular event of course, but it is tempting to think of it as plural, an end with many endings that assume new beginnings, a hardy perennial, almost a breath of spring each time its whiff of fire and brimstone is ritually evoked. The decadent in us likes to skip to the final chapter of the Gospels, relish the imagery and the phrasing of our damnation, and of course reread and reimagine: decadence as ‘apocalyptic overtures’,⁴ to use Richard Dellamora’s phrase, at once erotic and musical, a seductive refrain for a changing occasion and a new audience.

If the teaching of decadent literature now has taught me anything, it is that my students often have an intense appreciation for apocalypse that is less religious than environmental, an unprecedented sense of political urgency and existential dread about climate change, pandemics, and mass extinction, that makes the readings for a course on decadent literature seem either unbearable or indispensable, depending on one’s capacity for irony. How did it feel to read Edgar Allan Poe’s decadent tale ‘The Masque of Red Death’ during Covid lockdown? When you are even more aware than Charles Baudelaire of the human causes of climate change and environmental collapse, how would you fail to recognize yourself in his ‘hypocrite reader’, who would ‘devastate the earth’ in one great opiated yawn of ennui?⁵ How do you read *Against Nature*, with its resounding proclamation, ‘Nature has had her day’,⁶ when you already suspect it might literally be true. Would it seem urgent then to read less decadent literature, or more?

My own candidate for most decadent novel of the current century is DBC Pierre’s *Lights Out in Wonderland* (2010), which pays explicit homage to Baudelaire, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Aubrey Beardsley, Oscar Wilde, and especially J.-K. Huysmans. The main character, an overeducated and underemployed addict named Gabriel, has just escaped from a rehab clinic, and joins forces with an old friend named Smuts, an adventurous chef who specializes in hosting adventures in extreme gastronomy. Gabriel, who is nothing less than the damaged archangel of

the piece, has decided he wants to commit suicide, but not just yet. This decision changes his whole outlook on life. He feels himself to be in a Master Limbo, as he calls it, an overextended sensual present that is late capitalism itself in all its suicidal glory. The novel culminates in an orgiastic banquet, one of the most disturbing and ingenious parties in all of literature, which takes place at the Tempelhof, the vast abandoned airport built by the Nazis in Berlin. Pierre writes,

And here waiting for the greatest bacchanal since the fall of Rome, waiting for the feast of Trimalchio, Des Esseintes's last stand, Dorian Gray's big night out, waiting for the spiritus of Salomé, Abbé Jules, Caragiale, Baudelaire, Hlavacek, Mirbeau, and Tonegaru, we smoke cigarettes at the curbside and bask in the cool sun.⁷

The frequent namechecking of touchstones of literary decadence amid all his recipes for cooking endangered species reminds us, again, how apocalyptic irony still has bite. In a line reminiscent of the concluding prayer of *Against Nature*, Pierre writes,

We will all be destroyed whether we like it or not. I say let's like it. May this small book of certainties from a short life be your compass in a decadence, your mentor in times of ruin, your friend when none is near. And may its poking from your pocket be a beacon to all who share our spirit in these end times.⁸

Whether this beacon in end times is leading us away from a disaster or toward one may be unclear, but it was in a similar spirit that I decided to host a conference on decadence last year. I gave it the title 'Fin du Globe: Decadence, Catastrophe, Late Style', in honor of Dorian Gray's French sigh of ennui over a revision of the phrase *fin de siècle*: "I wish it were *fin du globe*," said Dorian with a sigh. "Life is a great disappointment."⁹ I suppose I was tempting fate with my title. Because of the Covid pandemic, life was a greater disappointment than usual last year, and it was with yet another sigh that I had to cancel the conference and announce the 'Fin du "Fin du Globe"'. The selection of essays here are expanded versions of talks that were proposed for that conference, and so I have at least the pleasure of hosting the conference issue of a journal, if not the event itself. I also had the pleasure of reading several dozen proposals that gave me a broad survey of current debates in the field. The ecocritical and postcolonial approaches were especially plentiful and fresh, as were arguments about literature and images created after 1900. Especially given the national reckoning on American racism and police brutality that summer, discussions of

race would have come even more to the fore at the conference, and so it made still more sense to intensify racial focus for this issue of *Volupté* by gathering together the essays about the globalization of decadent aesthetics and its communication across continents and temporalities, especially as an anti-racist or anti-colonial critique. Despite the title ‘Fin du Globe’, many of the proposals were far from apocalyptic, and some were even rather hopeful about the power and beauty of that transcontinental conversation – a perverse sort of beacon after all.

So I shifted the title somewhat to ‘Ends of Worlds’, with its ambiguous suggestion not just of apocalypse and global catastrophe, but also of world-connections and world-building in a decadent mode. ‘Ends’, we might say, in the sense of conflicting political goals or ambitions in a pluralistic meeting of ‘worlds’, in all the personal and geopolitical richness of that term. Many worlds with many ends, each world serving as the distant vanishing point for others and raising the question of those disorienting reversals of perspective so essential to decadent cosmopolitanism. To embrace the ‘ends of worlds’ also invites a certain valorization of remoteness and belatedness. The outpost may serve as retreat, as critical distance, rather than mere dislocation. The late arrivals have a myriad of pasts to contemplate, perhaps with a sense of relief at what they managed to miss. The essays here are a contribution to the study of decadent orientalism as well as decadent anti-colonialism. Decadence is inevitably a theory of empire and its collapse, though the trope itself seems inexhaustible despite its penchant for self-destruction. ‘Nero and Narcissus are always with us’,¹⁰ as Wilde reminds us. Edward Gibbon and Oswald Spengler are always with us too. At the conference we would have discussed their latest incarnation, Ross Douthat, whose book *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success* (2020) is a bracing survey of the lapse of contemporary American culture into mediocrity and stagnation.¹¹ Decadence as a social theory still has traction as a demeaning epithet, but one would never know from this book that it has also been an important inspiration to the artistic and intellectual avant-garde for the past two centuries.

The essays here engage with that decadent aesthetic inspiration, specifically with regard to imperial and postcolonial things that fall apart. In *Beginning at the End* (2018), Robert Stilling has deftly summed up the paradoxes and challenges of decadent aesthetics as a critique of colonialism:

Despite the propensity of early anticolonial writers to view decadence in the arts primarily as a symptom of the historical decadence of various imperial formations, as disillusionment with postcolonial regimes set in, postcolonial writers and artists were increasingly willing to make use of the fin-de-siècle decadents' most critical and oppositional tools, their wit, satire, paradoxical formulations, attention to form, resistance to realism, sexual dissidence, and revisionist approach to history, to critique what they saw as the failures of postcolonial societies. In the process, postcolonial artists submitted texts by Baudelaire, Pater, Wilde, Huysmans, Henry James, and the writers of the *Yellow Book* era to new scrutiny, discovering new uses for the social radicalism of what seemed like a thoroughly outmoded aestheticism.¹²

In his essay for this occasion, Stilling further elaborates on this thesis with an argument for two West Indian poets, Walter MacArthur Lawrence and W. Adolphe Roberts, as figures of colonial protest who engaged the aesthetic language of the decadent tradition as an oppositional poetics, not simply an imitation of an earlier generation of European artists. Neil Hultgren, in his essay on the most apocalyptic of the texts under consideration here, discusses M. P. Shiel's 1901 fantasy novel, *The Purple Cloud*, a bizarre narrative of the surviving witness of a polar expedition that discovers a vast, devouring whirlpool, as well as a spreading, purple cloud capable of exterminating life on the planet. Hultgren discusses the whirlpool as a particularly decadent figure for convolutions of time and geography, and he relates it to Shiel's own complicated racial politics in his narrative of world destruction. Suvendu Ghatak also considers fantasy fiction in his discussion of the occult 'Oriental garden' in Victorian London in Arthur Machen's novella *N*. The puzzled witnesses to this uncanny, impossible, genre-bending garden offer a decadent rereading of the landscape of London that literally includes its imperial frontier as a ghostly trace that defies explanation. Thomas Vranken discusses a very different instance of the colonial reception of London. He seizes on Wilde's numerous witticisms at the expense of Australia to consider not just the meaning of Australia for Wilde, but the meaning of Wilde for Australia and the figuration of the technology of communication between opposite ends of the Victorian world.

Gathering just these few essays from the conference that never happened makes me regret all the more that the pandemic kept us from meeting in person last year, along with the authors of dozens of other fascinating proposals whose topics and approaches have gone unmentioned here. The choices for this issue are indeed only one focus among a great variety of ideas proposed for the conference, and there is even an accidental focus that I was working to avoid, namely the exclusive attention to literature by men in English even though, obviously, the study of decadence has a long tradition of criticism about other arts, other languages, and other genders. From my work on this project, however, I can at least assure you that, despite this difficult year of new maladies, the study of decadence is showing surprising signs of wellness.

¹ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 80.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 150.

⁴ Richard Dellamora, *Apocalyptic Overtures: Sexual Politics and the Sense of an Ending* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

⁵ Charles Baudelaire, 'To the Reader', in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. by James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 7.

⁶ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. by Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 20.

⁷ DBC Pierre, *Lights Out in Wonderland* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), unpaginated.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 30.

¹⁰ Oscar Wilde, 'Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young', in *Complete Works*, p. 1245.

¹¹ Ross Douthat, *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

¹² Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 12.