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Neo-Victorian Decadence

Preface by the Editor-in-Chief
Jane Desmarais i

Guest Editors' Introduction to Neo-Victorian Decadence: Questions, Trajectories, Paradigms
Marco Canani and Anna Enrichetta Soccio ii

CRITICAL

Decadent Paradigms: *Il piacere* by Gabriele D'Annunzio
Francesca Orsetano 1

Neo-Victorian Romanticism and Decadence: The Reconceptualization of Realism from John Henry Newman to James Stephens
Francesca Caraceni 15

'The clouds are grand pianos': Derek Mahon's *The Yellow Book* and Neo-Victorian Decadence
Enrico Reggiani 29

'A series of variations on a theme': Reinvention and Amplification of Decadence in Jeremy Reed's *Dorian: A Sequel*
Kostas Boyiopoulos 53

(Re)writing Wilde's Last Years: From David Hare's *The Judas Kiss* to Rupert Everett's *The Happy Prince*
Pierpaolo Martino 71

Aesthetic Revenants and the Neo-Decadent Afterlife of Vernon Lee
Sally Blackburn-Daniels 88

Variations of Decadence: Reflections on Julian Barnes' *The Man in the Red Coat*
Ivan Callus 105

Decadence in Graphic Novels: An Introduction
Darcy Sullivan 121

Hanging out with 'Archival Al': Decadent Community in Neo-Victorian Comics
Matthew Creasy 145

Japanese Manga Adaptations of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*
Motomu Yoshioka 166

Neo-Victorian Adaptations through the Media: The Representation of the Gothic New Woman in *Penny Dreadful*
Anja Meyer 197

CREATIVE

Bergamot and Cedar
Helena Esser 210

REVIEWS

Tim Mitchell, Albert Mérat, Rimbaud's Seer (Celesta, 2023)
Marie Kawthar Daouda 224

Sarah Green, *Sexual Restraint and Aesthetic Experience in Victorian Literary Decadence* (Cambridge University Press, 2023)
Aaron Eames 229

Adam Alston, *Staging Decadence: Theatre, Performance, and the Ends of Capitalism* (Bloomsbury, 2023)
Julia Skelly 233

Notes on Contributors 239

Preface

As many of our readers will know, the university sector in the UK is under enormous strain currently and many institutions are being forced to make stringent financial cuts, which invariably mean redundancies and the closure of Humanities programmes and projects. Goldsmiths University is no exception, and 2024 has truly been an *annus horribilis* for its academics and a time of deep anxiety for the *Volupté* editorial team. The appearance of this issue, therefore, while late, represents an enormous sigh of relief, because the journal's V-team has survived the second institutional restructure in three years to continue its work alongside the Decadence Research Centre and the British Association of Decadence Studies, all of which were created almost a decade ago in the extraordinary crucible that is research at Goldsmiths.

It is with great tardy pleasure therefore to write this preface for an issue that is all about Neo-Victorian Decadence, that far from straightforward category of scholarly endeavour that brings decadence into contact with Victorianism and modern manifestations of Victorianism. It publishes a selection of papers presented at the Neo-Victorian Decadence conference, co-organized by the Centro Universitario di Studi Vittoriani e Edoardiani (CUSVE) and the Decadence Research Centre at Goldsmiths, at the 'G. d'Annunzio' University of Chieti-Pescara in October 2022, which aimed to highlight the multicultural and multilingual aspects of decadence in its Neo-Victorian afterlives. Our guest editors, Marco Canani and Anna Enrichetta Soccio present us with a wonderfully broad and diverse line-up of articles on a range of writers, movements, and genres, including Gabriele D'Annunzio, John Henry Newman to James Stephens, and Vernon Lee (Orestano, Caraceni, Blackburn-Daniels), graphic novels, manga, and comics (Sullivan, Yoshioka, Creasy), theatre and film (Martino, Meyer), and three fascinating critical studies of the work of Jeremy Reed, Derek Mahon, and Julian Barnes (Boyiopoulos, Reggiani, Callus). The creative piece is a short story by Helena Esser titled 'Bergamot and Cedar'.

On the theme of Neo-Victorian Decadence, on 28 February 2025 the DRC's Global Decadence Lab will be hosting an online Global Neo-Decadence roundtable featuring Justin Isis and a number of his contemporaries from *Neo-Decadence: 12 Manifestos* (2021) and *Neo-Decadence Evangelion* (2022). Please email Cherrie Kwok (mk7kf@virginia.edu) if you would like to be added to the GDL mailing list for updates about the event and other upcoming roundtables and workshops.

Our next volume (on *Yellow Book* women) marks the final contribution of our Reviews Editor, Robbie Pruett-Vergara, who steps down after seven glorious years. He has been quite literally a rock star on the editorial team, and we thank him and wish him all the best for the future. Which means we are now inviting applications for a new Reviews Editor who will solicit and edit reviews of publications, exhibitions, film and theatre performances related to decadence studies for two journal issues per year (summer and winter). This role involves:

- keeping up-to-date with forthcoming publications;
- maintaining an active relationship with large and small specialist publishers and their marketing divisions;
- requesting free review copies of books from publishers and distributing them to reviewers as appropriate;
- soliciting suitable reviewers willing to write reviews of about 2000 words;
- making sure reviews are submitted in good time to be edited and formatted before publication of the journal;
- and submitting final versions of the reviews to the Deputy Editors for uploading to the website.

Applicants should submit a statement of interest with the subject line 'Application for Reviews Editor' to the *Volupté* inbox (volupté@gold.ac.uk) by 31 January 2025. We look forward to hearing from anyone interested in joining the *Volupté* editorial team, and wish you all a warm winter.

Jane Desmarais
Editor-in-Chief
25 November 2024

Guest Editors' Introduction to Neo-Victorian Decadence: Questions, Trajectories, Paradigms

Marco Canani and Anna Enrichetta Soccio

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Neo-Victorian decadence is one of the most fascinating and complex areas of scholarly research, lying at the core of an extremely lively debate where literature, history, the fine and the applied arts, the entertainment industry, and new and digital media converge. This is hardly surprising when one thinks of the clusters of ideas conveyed by the adjective 'neo-Victorian' coupled with the noun 'decadence'. The conventions and the idiosyncrasies of decadent and Victorian cultures are subsumed under a label whose complexity is only enhanced by the prefix 'neo-'. On the one hand, neo-Victorian decadence unambiguously recalls the tension between history and the present, or between historicism and presentism, that Frederic Jameson construed as a pivot of postmodern literature and its cannibalization of past styles.[1] On the other hand, however, this attitude to the past demands self-conscious acts of '*(re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision*'[2] that are as hard to pinpoint as 'Victorian' and 'decadence' are hard to define from a critical viewpoint.

In his study of late nineteenth-century Scottish poet John Evelyn Barlas, Philip K. Cohen rightly foregrounds the discursive and heterodox nature of decadence, emphasizing its intrinsic attempt to challenge normative models. Decadence, Cohen argues, meant to undermine the 'prevailing values and sensibilities' of the late Victorian period, waging a 'guerrilla war against the dominant culture'.[3] For a long time, this countercultural attitude was correctly but somewhat simplistically perceived as the basis of an aesthetic paradigm directed against bourgeois values, opposing its dominant ideology, its morality, and its materialism.[4] In keeping with Cohen's argument, the supremacy of aesthetic disinterestedness, the search for sensual beauty, the social escapism embodied by the dandy and the *flâneur* are indicative of what Michel Foucault termed 'reverse' discourses. In the French philosopher's definition, these are 'tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations' and finding manifold expressions in sociopolitical

dynamics as well as in cultural and artistic productions.[5] As discourse, decadence was a site of resistance acting against dominant ideologies and providing social and political challenges through aesthetic innovation.

The political gesture inscribed in decadence, after all, was already clear to its early detractors, who introduced the label to suggest political decline, which, in turn, was progressively associated with profligacy and dissidence.[6] Yet, the subversive and nonconformist values embedded in decadent aesthetics was to survive the 'Morbid Nineties'. Framed in a freshened up, enlivened past aesthetics that provided writers and artists with the necessary historical distance, decadence is perhaps most effectively defined as a creative framework that deftly conveys aversion to the values shaping the present. In this regard, decadence reveals one of its founding paradoxes, the seemingly reactionary criticism of modernity that Alex Murray interestingly calls 'Decadent conservatism': a set of values and principles that prompted the reimagination of the past to come to terms with modernity and to envisage alternatives to the present.[7]

To account for the persistence of the cultural politics of decadence and its criticism of dominant ideologies, Kristin Mahoney's *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (2015) introduces the concept of *post*-Victorian decadence. This label does not identify a terminus *post quem* in the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century aesthetics, but an aesthetic category *per se* – one that is distinct, yet closely related to, postmodern and neo-Victorian practices. Post-Victorian decadence, Mahoney states, 'provides a backstory for Neo-Victorianism and the postmodern turn to the Victorian period', and in so doing it preludes to the appropriation of the past as a means to re-negotiate the cultural values of the present through specific representational paradigms.[8] This is a point that Matthew Potolsky similarly argues in 'Decadence and Politics' (2020), so far as to suggest that decadent politics contributed to Julia Kristeva's and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, postcolonial theory, camp aesthetics, and even queer theory in the aftermath of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s.[9]

'Much as we read Victorian texts as highly revealing cultural products of their age,' Marie-Luise Kohlke stated in the first issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* in 2008, 'neo-Victorian texts will one day be read for the insights they afford into twentieth- and twenty-first century cultural history and socio-political concerns'.[10] Neo-Victorian and neo-Victorian decadent aesthetics are entangled with a sense of nostalgia for the past that is not at odds with, but functional to, the ways in which intellectuals, writers, and artists explore, scrutinize, criticize and represent issues that are central to contemporary society. The revival of themes, tropes, and styles that characterize the late twentieth-century neo-Victorian vogue raises issues that are also central to neo-Victorian decadence.

For one thing, neither decadence nor neo-decadence are the expression of coherent or organised movements. In *The Decadent Republic of Letters* (2012), Matthew Potolsky perceptively suggests that decadence should be understood as a community whose members shared interests, purposes, and practices.[11] As a cultural mindset endorsing specific perspectives and stances about society and the individual in ways which disclose their proximity to fin-de-siècle aesthetics, the label 'neo-decadence', like 'neo-Victorian', eschews safe and uncontroversial definitions.[12] 'Practically everyone who writes about decadence', David Weir stated in *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* back in 1995, 'begins with the disclaimer that the word itself is annoyingly resistant to definition'.[13] Likewise, the endeavour to define the chronology and the geography of neo-Victorian decadence would necessarily encompass such a wealth of issues that its porosity is only proof of the impossibility of neat classifications. It seems reasonable, or at least cautious enough, to apply to neo-Victorian decadence Emily A. Rabiner's definition of historical decadence as 'an ever-expanding network of texts and intellectuals'.[14] What distinguishes neo-Victorian decadence is, in fact, the multifaceted web of encounters that it rests on – transcultural and transhistorical encounters that challenge customary representational strategies, experiment with media, hybridize genres, and blur chronology.

The multidisciplinary, cosmopolitan, cross-cultural and interart nature of neo-Victorian decadence are the object of a research group that was established in 2021 by the Decadence

Research Centre (DRC) at Goldsmiths, University of London, and the University Centre for Victorian and Edwardian Studies (CUSVE) at the 'G. d'Annunzio' University of Chieti-Pescara, Italy.[15] Directed by Jane Desmarais and Anna Enrichetta Soccio, the project investigated the multicultural and multilingual aspects of decadence in its Neo-Victorian afterlives. At the same time, it interrogated periodization by extending the temporal boundaries of Neo-Victorianism backwards in order to understand what qualifies as a Neo-Victorian text. The 1890s was a self-conscious period, one that was instantly mythologized and culturally consumed, even by its Edwardian successors. By studying the Interwar period to the present day across geographical boundaries, the research group aimed to examine the nature of Neo-Victorian decadence and explore its rich transcultural and cosmopolitan dimensions.

This issue of *Volupté* presents part of the results of this research, following two seminars that were held in April and July 2021 and the first international CUSVE-DRC joint conference, *Neo-Victorian Decadence*, hosted at the 'G. d'Annunzio' University of Chieti-Pescara on 26-28 October 2022. The contributions included embrace a wide range of perspectives in order to discuss neo-Victorian decadence as an aesthetic category in terms of temporal boundaries, artistic framework and inter-artistic output, thus foregrounding its rich transcultural and cosmopolitan dimensions.

In the opening article, Francesca Orestano addresses several issues that are pivotal to understanding neo-Victorian decadence and its complexity. Gabriele d'Annunzio's *Il Piacere* Orestano argues, contains numerous elements that are paradigmatic of decadence, from aristocratic characters and settings to objects and bibelots. In so doing, the novel projects its long shadow on neo-decadence, including its fascination with the poetry – and the poets – of the Romantic period. In *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica*, published in 1930 and translated into English as *The Romantic Agony* three years later, Mario Praz famously argued that fin de siècle and early twentieth-century aesthetics concluded a developmental pattern that had begun with the Romantics, tracing fascinating parallelisms between Sade and Byron, Shelley, and Keats,

and between Swinburne, Pater, Huysmans, Mallarmé, and d'Annunzio.[16] Significantly, the nineteenth-century revival of Romantic aesthetics is addressed as a neo-Victorian phenomenon by Francesca Caraceni, who focuses on the early nineteenth-century origins of Oscar Wilde's and Walter Pater's social realism before examining John Henry Newman's debt to key tenets of Romantic culture such as immaterialism and idealism, and James Stephens's influence on decadent aesthetes.

With a dual focus on poetry and music, Enrico Reggiani explores Derek Mahon's 'Decadent Dilemma', and his articulation of neo-Victorian decadence in *Yellow Book*. A central element of Mahon's poetics, Reggiani contends, is a process of poeticization that is ultimately intersemiotic, resting on the careful imbrication of the musical and the literary codes. The concepts of 'reinvention' and 'amplification' are also key to Kostas Boyiopoulos' article on Jeremy Reed's *Dorian: A Sequel*. Published in 1997, the novel does away with the stereotypical nostalgic evocation of decadent atmospheres. Through a process of intertextual artificiality, Reed exploits rhetorical effects in emulating and re-inventing Wilde's microtext, recounting readers a new, insightful version of his decadent style.

As the prototype of the decadent dandy, a fin-de-siècle celebrity, and a global icon of contemporary pop culture, Wilde provides writers and artists, film writers and playwrights, and musicians and singers with an inexhaustible repository of themes and images. This is an aspect that Pierpaolo Martino tackles in his contribution, which focuses on David Hare's play *The Judas Kiss* (1998) and Rupert Everett's film *The Happy Prince* (2018). While Hare adopts a biographical approach in representing Wilde's days before and after his two-year imprisonment, Everett rewrites Wilde's story beginning from his downfall. Despite their different focus, the movie and the play succeed in creating yet another version of Wilde that is instrumental in reading and deconstructing contemporary concerns such as individualism and the quest for success. The afterlife of writers, artists, and works is a core theme of much neo-Victorian and neo-decadent literature, as Sally Blackburn-Daniels illustrates by focusing on another artist embodying the

cosmopolitan and intellectual sides of decadence, Vernon Lee. The article examines Lee's 'decadent Renaissance' in the supernatural tale 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' (1896) and Mary F. Burns's mystery novel *The Unicorn in the Mirror* (2020). Shifting from the fin de siècle to the present, this metamorphosis of the Victorian fascination with the Renaissance brings about aesthetic and political implications that recur in twenty-first-century neo-decadent writings.

Three contributions shed light on two popular genres that are key to the neo-decadent artistic agenda, that is, comics and graphic novels. Both are characterized by visual efficacy, which offers artists and illustrators diverse strategies for revisiting the past as well as for interrogating the present. The result is a new multimodal whole that has proven able to attract a large and affectionate readership, often leading to spin-offs and media franchises. Darcy Sullivan engages in a fascinating examination of the often neglected but close connections between comics and decadence. With a dual focus on words and images, the article brings to the fore multiple appropriation strategies that range from the adaptation of canonical authors and texts – the French *poètes maudits*, Gabriele d'Annunzio, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* being paramount examples – to allusions and echoes. Verbal and visual intertextuality also serves Matthew Creasy's perceptive discussion of the first two volumes of *The League of Extraordinary Gentleman*, the cross-over comics series created by writer Alan Moore and artist Kevin O'Neill in the late 1990s. As Creasy argues, their work purposefully replicates the community of interests and practices that scholars such as Potolsky see as key to decadence. In so doing, *The League of Extraordinary Gentleman* gives new legitimacy to late-Victorian countercultures and reverse discourses, but it also reassesses ideologies of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity that are all the more compelling at the present.

The representation of the female body is explored by Motomu Yoshioka's article, which presents a detailed case study of the manga adaptations of *Salomé* in Japan. Overlapping cultural and aesthetic paradigms, blurring traditions and negotiating between visual and verbal media, these works offer representations of attractive, seducing women that defy the conventions of manga when it comes to gender. Needless to say, the aestheticization of gender is a central and ever-

present element in Western cultural productions as well, with the cinema and the TV industries providing many an example. Anja Meyer centres on the successful TV series Penny *Dreadful* (2014-2016), a pastiche of literary heroes which, in their role as contemporary cultural memes, re-negotiate the identity and the agenda of women that were long silenced by male and female writers alike. In particular, Lily, the creature's companion that Victor Frankenstein refused to give birth to in Mary Shelley's novel, embodies the prototype of the Gothic New Woman. As Meyer argues, she stands out as a champion of female empowerment against patriarchy despite – or probably because of – the suffering and trauma that she endures.

Addressing topics as diverse as cosmopolitan influences, the cross-cultural and cross-national circulation of texts and ideas, their multiple afterlives across time, genres, and media, this issue of *Volupté* intends to contribute to the current scholarly debates about neo-Victorian decadence. As the articles that follow illustrate, this may ultimately be seen as a cultural phenomenon that has developed distinctive characteristic and features – political and aesthetic, among others – challenging our understanding of the Victorian civilization, as well as our perception and cognizance of the present.

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[1] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 18.
[2] Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewelyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 4 (emphasis in the original).
[3] Philip K. Cohen, *John Evelyn Barlas, A Critical Biography: Poetry, Anarchism, and Mental Illness in Late-Victorian Britain* (High Wycombe: Rivendale Press, 2012), p. 214.
[4] See, for example, Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).
[5] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 102.
[6] Matthew Potolsky, 'Decadence and Politics', in *Decadence: A Literary History*, ed. by Alex Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 154.
[7] Alex Murray, *Decadent Conservatism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 131 and *passim*.
[8] Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 24; also see Alex Murray, 'Introduction: Decadent Histories', in *Decadence: A Literary History*, p. 1
[9] Potolsky, 'Decadence and Politics', p. 163.
[10] Marie-Luise Kohlke, 'Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1.1 (Autumn 2008), p. 13.
[11] Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters*, pp. 8-10.

[12] Daniel Corrick notes the same difficulty in defining neo-decadence, which, he points out, should not be reduced to 'Decadence updated to a contemporary setting and tackling or at least incorporating modern preoccupations'. Daniel Corrick, 'Introduction', in *Drowning Beauty: The Neo-Decadent Anthology*, ed. by Justin Isis and Daniel Corrick (Sacramento: Snuggly Books, 2018), p. 5.

[13] David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 1.

[14] Emily Anne Rabiner, *The Decadent Renaissance: The Antimodern Seductions of Gabriele D'Annunzio and Vernon* Lee, unpublished doctoral thesis, UC Berkley, 2017, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3gm8r02t [accessed 24 February 2024], p. 8.

[15] See the 'CUSVE-DRC Neo-Victorian decadence research group' webpage at https://www.dilass.unich.it/cusve-researchgroups [accessed 05 November 2024].

[16] Mario Praz, *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1930); English transl., *The Romantic Agony* (London: Oxford University Press/Humphrey Milford, 1933).

Decadent Paradigms:
Il piacere by Gabriele D'Annunzio

Francesca Orestano

Università degli Studi di Milano

To build a bridge between decadence and neo-decadence, to compare the funereal landscape of the fin de siècle – dark urban passages and stuffy interiors crammed with the glitter of art replicas, decorated with bibelots and assembled *bricolage* – with today's neo-decadent artefacts made possible by hyperrealism, photorealism, and all that realism is capable of, is a task that requires a strong grounding. Nineteenth century decadence is a magisterial exemplum from which the present can recognize its original form, perspective, and teleology.

Gabriele D'Annunzio, an ambitious young man from Pescara, tried his fortune in Rome, writing feverishly for *Fanfulla della domenica*, *Capitan Fracassa*, *Cronaca bizantina*, and *La Tribuna*. He reported on social gatherings, parties, home decorations and menus, the jewels and clothes of the most brilliant Roman princesses and duchesses. The two volumes of his *Scritti giornalistici* [Journalistic Writings] in the Meridiani Mondadori edition contain over 2,900 pages of articles published between 1889 and 1938. As an indefatigable social climber, he signed these articles with an array of intriguing pseudonyms such as Bull-Calf, Il Duca Minimo, Lila Biscuit, Sir Charles Vere de Vere, Happemousche, Filippo La Selvi, Puck, and Michings Mallecho.[1] His occupation as a journalist did not prevent him from writing short stories, poems, plays, and novels, including *Il piacere* [*Pleasure*] (1889), *Giovanni Episcopo* (1891), *L'innocente* [*The Intruder*] (1892), *Il trionfo della morte* [*The Triumph of Death*] (1894), *Le vergini delle rocce* [*The Maidens of the Rocks*] (1895), and *Il fuoco* [*The Flame of Life*] (1900).

This article focuses on D'Annunzio's *Il piacere* (1889) – originally translated by Georgina Harding as *The Child of Pleasure* (1898) and recently retranslated by Lara Gochin Raffaelli as *Pleasure* (2013) – published when the author was twenty-six. This early novel not only provides a decadent paradigm for D'Annunzio's contemporaries across Europe, but also contains a schema for

contemporary neo-decadence. *Il piacere* evokes many themes and symbols, including objects, icons, spaces, and colours, that resonate with the modern neo-decadent engagement with an aesthetically attractive incipient dissolution. In the words of D'Annunzio's contemporary, Arthur Symons,

> Gabriele D'Annunzio comes to remind us, very definitely, as only an Italian can, of the reality and the beauty of sensation, of the primary sensations; the sensations of pain and pleasure as these come to us from our actual physical conditions; […] And so he becomes the idealist of material things, while seeming to materialize spiritual things. He accepts, as no one else of our time does, the whole physical basis of life, the spirit which can be known only through the body.[2]

For the protagonist of *Il piacere*, Andrea Sperelli, the world of sensations harbours pure material objectivity: but then sensations are ignited by his culture, by memory, by suggestions that act violently on the senses, activating or impoverishing their ideal power. The novel is an archetypal decadent work akin to the writing of Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, Gustave Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant, Oscar Wilde, and Joris-Karl Huysmans, whose works were discussed in the Italian magazines D'Annunzio contributed to, especially *La Tribuna* and *Cronaca bizantina*. Maurizio Serra's recent biography, *L'imaginifico. Vita di Gabriele D'Annunzio* [Magnificent Imagination: The Life of Gabriele D'Annunzio] (2019), places the author at the crossroads of the European literary milieu, focusing on his life as a writer rather than on the scandals and political affiliations that other biographers have emphasized.[3]

From *The Child of Pleasure* to *Pleasure*

Harding's translation of *Il piacere*, *The Child of Pleasure,* was published by The Modern Library, New York, in 1910, with an introduction by Ernest Boyd. The verses interspersed in the novel, especially by Percy Bysshe Shelley, were translated by Arthur Symons. In her new translation, *Pleasure*, Raffaelli remarks that Harding had followed the structure of the French translation by Georges Hérelle and had omitted 'a great many passages that would have shocked a late Victorian reader's sensibilities'.[4] In his study of D'Annunzio, John Woodhouse similarly remarks that the heavily bowdlerized version by Harding not only omitted voyeuristic libidinous descriptions and

references to sadistic and perverted tastes in literature and the arts, but it also excised 'all kinds of intellectual reflections on serious subjects'.[5] Such reflections amounted to a conscious effort to place the work of the Italian writer at the crossroads of the European decadent fashion, animated by a fertile exchange of translations and connections. Woodhouse notes, 'For D'Annunzio, *Il piacere* marked a new move into European fashionability. In particular, there is much in the novel to link it with the European literary trend which came to be known as Decadentism'.[6] Woodhouse quotes a letter from D'Annunzio to Hérelle, in which D'Annunzio remarks that he had crammed into *Il piacere* 'all my predilections for form and colour, all my subtleties, all my preciosities, confusedly' thus composing a *mélange* 'all bursting with art' in which, he added, the protagonist had some correlation with Huysmans's hero Des Esseintes. Thus, according to Woodhouse, with *Il piacere*

> D'Annunzio showed his further awareness of belonging to that new movement in European literary activity under whose banner could also be counted Swinburne and Wilde in Britain and Hugo von Hofmannsthal in Austria.[7]

Raffaelli's new translation is faithful and accurate, undertaken with critical awareness of the larger intellectual context to which the novel belongs.[8] She reinstates the original title, *Pleasure*, which encapsulates the protagonist's quest for experience through ever greater and more transcendent forms of gratification. 'It is this pursuit of pleasure, of attempting to move beyond pleasure', Raffaelli writes, 'that ultimately leads to ruin, exemplifying the Decadent theme of ultimate moral dissolution'.[9]

Human portraits, sentient objects

The protagonist of *Il piacere*, Count Andrea Sperelli, is a young nobleman who lives in luxury in the sensuous, decadent environment of fin-de-siècle Rome. His former and current lovers, Elena Muti and Maria Ferres, two extremely beautiful and cultured women, provide the seduction plot only to finally disappear from the crowded social milieu. *Il piacere* narrates Sperelli's sexual adventures in

which aristocracy, the ambitious middle class, and a cosmopolitan world mix and jealously compete.

I have assembled a tentative list of elements – of features that range from portraits to objects, colours and scents, from the Byzantine Roman atmosphere to peculiar locations – which, taken together, point to a possible decadent agenda according to the sentiment and the material experience of fin-de-siècle Rome in the novel. This list of paradigmatic elements of a decadent nature could be associated with many resurrections from the past which assume the shape of material, symbolic, and metaphorical corpses that in their unquenchable will to life are endowed with the attraction of repulsion we usually attribute to zombies. *Il piacere* teems with such resurrections, incarnated in the protagonists and in characters who bear a resemblance to ancient portraits and objects. To look like a work of art from the past amounts to an act of exhumation conjoining the corpse and the animated body. Andrea Sperelli's mouth,

> pure in form, intense in colour, swollen with sensuality, with a slightly cruel expression when firmly closed, that youthful mouth recalled, for its singular resemblance, the portrait of the unknown gentleman that is to be found in the Galleria Borghese, the profound and mysterious work of art in which fascinated minds believed they could perceive the figure of the divine Cesare Borgia painted by the divine Sanzio.[10]

As for Elena Muti, her classic head 'seemed to have emerged from a Syracusan medal', while the modern spirit in her expression – simultaneously ambiguous, intense, and passionate – recalls 'types of immortal women such as *Mona Lisa* or Nelly O'Brien'.[11] Elena has the mouth of Leonardo's *Medusa*;[12] and after their first meeting, Sperelli boldly declares: 'You, if I am not mistaken […] must have the body of Correggio's *Danae*'.[13] Her eyes might have been imagined by da Vinci 'after having seen Lucrezia Crivelli in Milan'.[14]

The practice of tracing human features back to works of art which are thus resurrected from the oblivion of dusty museum cases and gallery walls, extends to other characters in the novel: the joyful features of Sperelli's cousin, the Marchioness of Ateleta, which recalls 'certain feminine profiles in the drawings of young Moreau, or in Gravelot's vignettes',[15] and Constantia Ladbrooke, who appears to be a creation by Thomas Lawrence, 'a second incarnation of the little

Countess of Shaftesbury'.[16] The Asian cavalier Sakumi, the secretary of the Japanese Legation in Rome, has a 'wide face which seemed to have come straight from the classic pages of the great comic illustrator Hokusai, [which] glowed crimson like an August moon amid the chains of flowers'.[17] The practice of making contemporary life resemble an antique work of art was a source of endless fascination for many decadent writers, who enlarged the realistic boundary of the portrait genre, moving beyond the Victorian grotesque into the imaginary portrait and aesthetic ghosts revived from bygone masterpieces. This strategy, according to Italian scholar Mario Praz, added distinction to whatever was common, and made whatever was ignoble appear noble and ancient.[18]

Eventually, Elena Muti, the first lover of Sperelli, recedes into her portrait hanging on a wall in Lord Heathfield's house, into 'the dark painting where Elena's bloodless face shone, with her eyes that followed one, and her sibylline mouth'.[19] Her features are replicated on the face of Maria Ferres, the woman who comes to replace her in Sperelli's aesthetic and amorous predilections:

> She had an oval face, perhaps slightly too elongated, but with only a hint of that aristocratic elongation overemphasized by fifteenth-century artists in search of elegance. In her delicate features there was that subtle expression of suffering and fatigue which constitutes the human enchantment of the Virgins in the Florentine tondos of Cosimo's era. […] A soft, tender shadow, […] encircled her eyes, which had the tawny irises of dark angels. Her hair encumbered her head like a heavy crown […]. The locks in front had the density and form of those that cover, like a helmet, the head of Antinous Farnese.[20]

The correspondence between the two women is further established by their voices as Sperelli

> from the sounds and modulations of her voice […] recognized the accent of the other. It was an ambiguous voice, one could almost say bisexual, twofold, androgynous; with two timbres. The male timbre, low and slightly veiled, […] became effeminate at times […]. The feminine timbre was the one that recalled the other.[21]

Such artful resurrections of the recent and distant past are intentionally endowed by D'Annunzio with a pervasive notion of *déjà-vu*, which eventually amounts to an overwhelming theatricality. Andrea Sperelli is a skilled set designer, setting the scene for his amorous trysts down to the smallest detail:

> He tried to imagine the scene; he composed some sentences; he looked around to choose the most propitious place for their talk. Then he even got up to see in a mirror if his face was pale; if it was appropriate to the circumstance.[22]

Objects are positioned to appeal to the senses and entice his visitors: 'This delicate actor could not comprehend the comedy of love without the backdrops. Therefore, his house was the most perfect theatre; and he was an extremely skilful set designer'.[23] Sperelli's home at the Palazzo Zuccari, as in other Roman palaces, features objects as allusive elements of the social scene rather than simple stage props. They enjoy a powerful life of their own, in a perfect display of animism that brings them into consonance with the human actors present in the scene:

> For [Sperelli], all those objects among which he had so many times loved and taken pleasure and suffered had taken on something of his sensitivity. Not only were they witness to his loves, his pleasures, his moments of sadness, but they had participated in them. […] Everything around him had taken on for him that inexpressible appearance of life that is acquired, for example, by sacred implements, the insignia of a religion […]. And such a strong stimulation came to him from these objects that he was disturbed by it at times, as by the presence of a supernatural power.[24]

Together with the objects in Sperelli's home, each charged with his memories and associated sensations, the resurrected corpses of the past are enlivened by colours, scents, and odours. D'Annunzio was a skilled colourist, applying the strong tints of gouache to the views of Rome and to the interiors of the Palazzo Zuccari. They display the saturated and seductive colours of souvenir images purchased by tourists in Rome. 'The obelisk' near Piazza di Spagna 'was entirely *crimson*, struck by the setting sun, and cast a long, oblique, slightly *turquoise* shadow. […] The city below was tinged with *gold* against a pale sky on which the Monte Mario cypresses were already traced in black'.[25]

Sperelli's home also boasts Persian carpets, crystal goblets, curtains of red brocade embossed in silver thread, twisted candles of an intense orange shade. The senses work in unison with his aesthetic tastes, vivid in the present of his experience and nourished by remembrances of the past and by his knowledge of the arts. The scent of roses, violets, jasmines, lilacs, and junipers stimulates his sensual memory: Sperelli perceives 'in everything, in shapes, in colours, in sounds, in perfumes, a transparent symbol, the emblem of a sentiment or a thought'.[26] Odours also evoke

strange sensations, such as those arising from the armpits of a lady with 'an overabundant clump of reddish hair[27] who resembles a priestess painted by Lawrence Alma-Tadema. This increased potential for sensation insistently fed by artistic discourse – of the collector and the connoisseur[28] – imparts a ghostly animation to the entire scene surrounding the hero of the story.

Sperelli's mania for interior design and decoration also takes a decadent turn insofar as the art object, once endowed with its own impregnable aura, shrinks into a bibelot, a small *objet de vertu*, the copy being as good as the original, the fragment as good as the whole, the quotation sufficient, in consonance with Walter Benjamin's dictum about nineteenth-century art in the age of its technological reproduction, and the useless task of invoking the signature of a great master to validate the pleasure provided by an art object. In Sperelli's palace,

> Thick fat roses were immersed in certain crystal goblets that rose, slender, from a sort of gilded stem, widening into the shape of a diamond lily, similar to those that appear behind the Virgin in the tondo by Sandro Botticelli at the Galleria Borghese.[29]

In his study of 'D'Annunzio arredatore' [D'Annunzio the interior decorator], Mario Praz remarks that this is 'a precious interior glazed under a pre-Raphaelite coating whose undefinable diaphaneité disguises a fundamental taste for the *bric-à-brac*'.[30]

Another aspect of resurrection in the text is the use of once-precious material in decorative items of lower status, such as 'a large cushion cut from a dalmatic of a rather faded colour, the colour that Florentine silk weavers called saffron pink'.[31] In Sperelli's abode, 'Everywhere, with ingenious taste, other liturgical fabrics were used as ornaments and for comfort'.[32] The re-use or relocation of *objets d'art* includes exotic items, tokens of a fin-de-siècle Orientalist fashion that resurrects the Far East as Japonisme ensconced inside the Roman palaces, further tokens of secular appropriation from distant colonized countries:

> A bronze crane at one side held in its uplifted beak a plate suspended from three chains, like a scale; and the plate contained a new book and a small Japanese saber, a *waki-zashi*, decorated with silver chrysanthemums on the scabbard, on the guard, and on the hilt.[33]

The final evidence of the nature of the resurrected corpses surrounding the actors of this story can be found at Cardinal Immenraet's auction in the Via Sistina, where furniture, paintings, and

tapestries are jumbled in disorderly display: 'fabrics, mostly ecclesiastical', 'the rarest relics, ivories, enamelled objects, glass pieces, carved jewels, medals, coins, prayer books, illuminated codices, ornate silverware' were gathered together, but 'a particular odour, emanating from the dampness of the place and from those ancient things, filled the air'.[34] It is the odour of decomposition, of death. Auctions incarnate the teleology of the aesthetics of decadence:

> That year in Rome, the love of *bibelots* and *bric-à-brac* had reached excesses; every salon of the nobility and of the upper bourgeoisie was cluttered with 'curiosities'; every lady cut the cushions of her couch from a chasuble or from a cope, and placed her roses in an Umbrian pharmacist's vase or in a goblet made of chalcedony. […] The auctions were very frequent.[35]

Sperelli himself is a kind of human bibelot, a fragment of past nobility adrift in the ocean of contemporary fashion, vaguely resembling his masterly originals but far inferior in quality, if not for the aesthetic ambition he incarnates in an era in which the splendours of the past appear tarnished by the inevitable decadence of aristocracy:

> Beneath today's great democratic flood, which wretchedly submerges so many beautiful and rare things, that special class of ancient Italian nobility in which from generation to generation a certain family tradition of elect culture, elegance, and art was kept alive is also slowly disappearing.[36]

According to the young provincial *parvenu*, the same thing happened in Byzantine Rome, where ancient families and irrepressible snobs, impoverished nobility and new rapacious builders loaded with money, co-existed in mutual strife for acquisition and survival. Thus, D'Annunzio's Roman elegy can be condensed, symbolically, in the communion between Eros and Thanatos marking the love stories of Andrea Sperelli, ensconced in the emblems of his human loves as well as his love for objects:

> Passion enveloped them and made them uncaring of anything that would not give them both immediate pleasure. […] And they went so far that often an obscure discomfort possessed them, even at the height of their oblivion, as if an admonishing voice rose up from the depths of their being to warn them of an unknown punishment, of an imminent end. From their tiredness itself desire arose again […] it seemed that they could find no repose except in exertion, just as the flame finds no life except in combustion.[37]

At the auction that marks the beginning of Sperelli's affair with Donna Elena Muti, where the elegant crowd of Roman ladies and art amateurs congregate, Sperelli spots an object which

encapsulates, with the fixed static force and discursive potential of the emblem, the nature of the relationship between humans and objects, the unholy communion between decadence and resurrection:

> It was a small skull carved into ivory with extraordinarily good anatomical precision. Each jawbone bore a row of diamonds, and two rubies glinted at the base of the eye sockets. On the forehead a motto was inscribed: RUIT HORA […]. The skull opened like a hinged box, although the joint was almost invisible. The inner heartbeat of the device gave that small skull an inexpressible semblance of life.[38]

Sperelli wins the auction, and the 'death's head' is his. One could not wish for a more suggestive and emblematic object, in which Eros and Thanatos descend towards a *cupio dissolvi*, insofar as the refined artwork and precious materials were constructed to mark the incessant beat of time within a 'proud and free fantasy of death'.[39]

The novel's closing act is at the second auction in Rome – the sale of all the furniture that belonged to the plenipotentiary minister of Guatemala, husband of Maria Ferres, who quits the Roman scene. This occurs in perfect symmetry with the first auction, and yet with a stronger disgusting odour that carries the suggestion of infection – material and moral – that had been alluded to in the first parts of the novel. Sperelli smells the stench, which 'spread through the warm air, emanating from those impure men', as if the contagion of vulgarity in the greed of buyers, traders, second-hand furniture sellers, junk dealers, had made itself tangible.[40]

> In his mouth he had the sensation of an indescribable bitter and nauseating taste, which was surging up inside him from the dissolving of his heart. It seemed that he was leaving that place infected with obscure and immedicable ills, from the contact with all those strangers. Physical torture and moral anguish mingled in him.[41]

Thus, D'Annunzio drives his reader towards the ultimate, unavoidable perception of decadence, which is apparently provided by the 'impure men' working at the auction, but in reality affects all his deeds with a nauseating smell.

Decadence in gardens and cemeteries

Another paradigm of decadence in *Il piacere* is represented by the use of specific locations. The passion between Sperelli and Donna Elena Muti unfolds across the main tourist spots of Rome, to the extent that some pages of the novel read like Ferdinand Gregorovius' Roman strolls through the eternal city, or even Murray's 1843 overflowing *Handbook for Travellers in Central Italy: Including the Papal States, Rome, and the Cities of Etruria, with a Travelling Map*. Theirs is an odeporic tourism, the tourism of those often graced by nocturnal shades of darkness, the same that would entice Henry James' Daisy Miller – the unfortunate American girl who wanted to see the Roman ruins at night – to her fatal moonlit visit to the Colosseum. Never missing a view, an old church, a gallery of paintings, Sperelli and Elena imbibe the atmosphere of the ruined city with gusto. Their surroundings display the same aspects of dissolution and decay that thematized the eighteenth-century etchings *Rome in Ruins* by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, whose engravings portrayed classical Rome – but a Rome in ruins.[42]

Later, during their walks, the subtle allusions to death mingled with the pathetic fallacy engendered by the aesthetic decomposition of beauty turn into the frightful spectacle of violent slaughter offered by the destruction of the historical gardens nestling at the centre of Rome. Alongside Villa Sciarra and Villa Albani, such was also the lot of the Villa Ludovisi, a large ancient garden in central Rome, decorated with small temples and shrines to pagan deities, with century-old trees under which wild violets grew in profusion, loved, among many, by Johann Wolfgang Goethe. 247,000 square metres were sold to merchants and builders:

> Villa Ludovisi, somewhat wild, consecrated by the presence of Juno, whom Wolfgang adored, where at that time the plane trees from the Orient and the cypresses of Aurora, which seemed immortal, shivered in the presentment of the market and of death; all the ancestral villas, sovereign glory of Rome, were witness to their love.[43]

Contemporary photographs show the exposed roots of the trees felled in the Villa Ludovisi; Hermann Friedrich Grimm wrote about the demolition in *La distruzione di Roma* [The Destruction of Rome] (1886); painters like Guglielmo Mangiarelli in *Una giornata triste* [A Sad Day], or Ernest Hébert, with *Roma sdegnata* [Rome Outraged], immortalized the sacrifice of the ancient sylvan

deities and noble old trees. D'Annunzio, both as a chronicler of Roman events and a novelist, voiced his dirge for the lost gardens of Rome again and again. Not only in *Il piacere*, but also in *Le vergini delle rocce* (1895), and in an article for *La Tribuna*, where he denounced the greed of the owners of ancient gardens in the heart of Rome, and the vulgar industry of the destroyers and the builders:

> Era il tempo in cui più torbida ferveva l'operosità dei distruttori o dei costruttori sul suolo di Roma. Insieme con nuvoli di polvere si propagava una specie di follia edificatoria, come un turbine improvviso, afferrando non soltanto i famigliari della calce e del mattone ma ben anche i più schivi eredi dei majorascati papali, che avevano fino allora guardato con dispregio gli intrusi dalle finestre dei palazzi di travertino incrollabili sotto la crosta dei secoli. […] I giganteschi cipressi ludovisii, quelli dell'Aurora, quelli medesimi i quali un giorno avevano sparsa la solennità del loro antico mistero sul capo di Wolfango, giacevano atterrati (mi stanno sempre nella memoria come i miei occhi li videro in un pomeriggio di novembre), atterrati e allineati l'uno accanto all'altro, con tutte le radici scoperte che fumigavano verso il cielo impallidito, con tutte le negre radici scoperte che parevano tenere ancor prigione entro l'enorme intrico il fantasma di una vita oltrapossente. […] Fu allora, da per tutto, come un contagio di volgarità. Nel contrasto incessante degli affari, nella furia quasi feroce degli appetiti e delle passioni, nell'esercizio disordinato ed esclusivo delle attività utili, ogni senso estetico fu smarrito, ogni rispetto del passato fu deposto.
>
> [This was the time when, in Rome, the industry of destroyers and builders was most fervid and turbid. Together with clouds of dust, a kind of building madness spread itself like a sudden whirlwind, affecting not only those who worked with lime and bricks, but also the shy inheritors of papal privileges, who up to that moment had gazed with contempt at the intruders from the windows of impregnable, century-old travertine palaces. […] The gigantic Ludovisi cypresses, those of the Aurora, the very same which had once spread the solemnity of their ancient mystery over the head of Goethe, lay on the ground (I see them in my memory as my eyes saw them one November afternoon), side by side in a row, with the smoke rising from their naked roots to the pale heaven above, with their black roots all laid bare, and seeming still to hold prisoner within their vast intricacies the phantom of omnipotent life. […] What happened then, everywhere, was a contagion of vulgarity. In the unceasing business strife, in the fierce fury of appetites and passions, in the disorderly action that excluded useful activities, all aesthetic sense was lost, all respect for the past, were deposed.][44]

The contagion of vulgarity attacking the noble features of the past perfectly encompasses the spectrum of decadence and resurrection. The time span between these two oppositional forces – the will to life of antique beauty resurrected by the artist's sensual and ideal worship, and its rapid material demolition performed by vulgar hands deprived of memory, of awe, of elegance – here becomes synchronous. In this strident clash the idealistic aspects of decadence meet with an expeditious and cruel dismissal.

In a duplication of effect, Maria Ferres takes Elena Muti's place 'on various peregrinations across Imperial Rome and the Rome of the Popes. This Lenten Virgilian tour was carried out in the villas, the galleries, the churches, the ruins. Where Elena Muti had passed, now passed Maria Ferres'.[45] Exposing and cannibalizing the private diary of Maria Ferres, whose progressing entanglement with Andrea Sperelli is chronicled daily, D'Annunzio deploys the language of Romanticism.[46] Maria writes, 'I am reading Percy Shelley, a poet he loves, the divine Ariel who feeds on light and speaks the language of the Spirits'.[47] She quotes 'a few passages of Percy Shelley's *Epypsichidion*' interspersed with their wanderings in the park of Villa Schifanoia, and with more references to 'Shelley's lyrics to Jane, the *Recollection*'.[48] The work of the English poet influences her response to the Italian landscape; Maria imagines that 'as in Percy Shelley's poem each pond seemed to be a brief sky engulfed in a subterranean world; a firmament of rose-coloured light spread out above the dark earth'.[49] Sperelli's answer takes the shape of the lines of *Epypsichidion*.[50] Eventually the woman's resistance to the assiduous courtship by Sperelli is sealed in Shelley's verse 'And forget me, for I can never *be thine*',[51] extracted from the 1822 poem 'The Magnetic Lady to Her Patient'.[52]

As a predictable crescendo from their entanglement in poetical quotations, Maria Ferres and Sperelli visit the English cemetery in Rome, a place of solitude that resonates with the verse that has subtitled their relationship. The cemetery encompasses a sense of grief that extends to their own lives and their soon to be aborted love:

> A sense of solitude pervaded the cemetery. […] The funereal cypresses rose up straight and immobile in the air; only their tips, tinted gold by the sun, had a slight tremor. Between the rigid, greenish trunks, like travertine stone, emerged white tombs, square gravestones, broken columns, urns, arches. […] That even regularity of the arboreal shapes and that modest candour of the sepulchral marble gave the soul a sense of grave and sweet repose.[53]

No place but a cemetery, and especially one where eminent poets were laid to rest, could at once quicken memories of art, of the finest achievements of poetry, and the present acknowledgement of the dead nature of their existence. 'The poet's tomb is up there, near the ruin, on the left, under the last tower'.[54] The face of Maria Ferres resembles a marble statue and her

forehead has the whiteness of the moon. 'They walked on, searching for the grave of John Keats, the poet of *Endymion*'.[55] The scents from the oleanders and the light from the moon contribute to a feast of sensations amounting to a pageant of death. One could not wish for a more decadent statement than the one offered by the lovers' visit to the protestant cemetery in Rome, with the desired and aborted resurrection of dead poets, buried in marble, and the feeling of an insurmountable distance from Romanticism and its heroic idealism – a distance suggested by their tombs and their epigraphs. The lovers' visit is a tourist's stroll charged with superficial and vague emotions, perfumed with sheaths of roses, detailed and guided by short epitaphs engraved in marble. Nothing better than a marble monument entombing the voice of the poets of a past age corresponds with D'Annunzio's decadent agenda in *Il piacere*, in accord with the definition of the novel by its latest translator, Gochin Raffaelli: 'This seminal Decadent work'.[56]

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[1] Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Scritti giornalistici 1882-1888*, a cura di Annamaria Andreoli (Milano: Mondadori, 1996), and Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Scritti giornalistici 1889-1938*, a cura di Annamaria Andreoli (Milano: Mondadori, 2003).
[2] Ernest Boyd, 'Introduction' to Gabriele D'Annunzio, *The Child of Pleasure*, transl. by Georgina Harding, verses transl. by Arthur Symons (New York: The Modern Library, 1898), p. viii.
[3] Maurizio Serra, *L'imaginifico. Vita di Gabriele D'Annunzio* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2019).
[4] Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, trans. with a foreword by Laura Gochin Raffaelli, introduction by Alexander Stille (London: Penguin, 2013), p. x.
[5] John Woodhouse, *Gabriele D'Annunzio. Defiant Archangel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 85.
[6] Ibid., p. 86. The importance of the language sources animating the prose and verse of D'Annunzio, from Hugo and Mallarmé to Swinburne, Rossetti, and the Pre-Raphaelites, is studied by Mario Praz, 'D'Annunzio e "l'amor sensuale della parola"', in Mario Praz, *Bellezza e bizzarria. Saggi scelti*, a cura di Andrea Cane (Milano: Mondadori, 2002) pp. 649-716.
[7] Woodhouse, p. 86.
[8] All quotations from *Il piacere* are taken from the English translation by Laura Gochin Raffaelli, published in 2013.
[9] D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. xii.
[10] Ibid., p. 46.
[11] Ibid., p. 24.
[12] Ibid., p. 44.
[13] Ibid., p. 52.
[14] Ibid., p. 56.
[15] Ibid., p. 39.
[16] Ibid., p. 38.
[17] Ibid., p. 45.
[18] Praz, p. 682. Among the many art portraits incarnated by living actors, Clara Green 'had "posed" for a *Sibylla Palmifera* and for a *Madonna of the Lily*. […] She was, therefore, *ennobled* by art'. D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. 221 (my emphasis).
[19] D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. 295.
[20] Ibid., pp. 149-50.
[21] Ibid., p. 153.
[22] Ibid., pp. 14-15.
[23] Ibid., p. 17.

[24] Ibid., pp. 17-18.
[25] Ibid., p .16 (my emphasis).
[26] Ibid., p. 17.
[27] D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. 69.
[28] See Francesca Orestano, 'Ascesa e declino del connoisseur: l'élite del gusto, tra distinzione e ridicolo', in *La formazione delle elites in Europa dal Rinascimento alla Restaurazione*, a cura di Antonella Cagnolati (Roma: Aracne, 2012), pp. 205-224.
[29] D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. 7.
[30] Mario Praz, 'D'Annunzio arredatore', in Praz, pp. 744-54.
[31] D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. 21.
[32] Ibid., p. 212.
[33] Ibid., p. 51.
[34] Ibid., p. 59.
[35] Ibid., p. 62.
[36] Ibid., p. 33.
[37] Ibid., pp. 80-81.
[38] Ibid., pp. 63-64.
[39] Ibid., p. 67.
[40] Ibid., p. 324. The same reaction is described by Charles Dickens in *Dombey and Son* (1848). See Francesca Orestano, 'Spectacular Bankruptcy: Mr Dombey's "Retribution", the Auction at Stowe, and the Melodramatic Imagination', *Rivista di studi vittoriani*, 23.46 (2018), pp. 7-28.
[41] D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. 326.
[42] Ibid., p. 265.
[43] Ibid., p. 82.
[44] Gabriele D'Annunzio, 'Preambolo', *La Tribuna*, 7 June 1893, in *Scritti giornalistici 1889-1938*, pp. 195-200 (my translation).
[45] D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, pp. 281-82.
[46] On D'Annunzio's poetic debt to British Romanticism, and especially to John Keats, see Marco Canani, 'Gabriele d'Annunzio's Keats: Reading Practices, Poetic Traces', forthcoming in *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies* (2025).
[47] D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. 186.
[48] Ibid., pp. 190, 193.
[49] Ibid., p. 195.
[50] Ibid., p. 286.
[51] Ibid., p. 316.
[52] Buried in the novel are frequent quotes from Romantic voices, namely: George Gordon, Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, 'The tree of knowledge has been pluck'd – all's known' (D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. 132); Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Witch of the Atlas*, 'each flame […] / Dissolved in ever-moving light' (Ibid., p. 18), 'A Fragment: To Music' (Ibid., p. 184), 'An Allegory' (Ibid., p. 186), *Epypsichidion* (Ibid., pp. 190, 219, 286), 'To Jane. The Recollection' (Ibid., pp. 193, 316), 'The Magnetic Lady to Her Patient' (Ibid., p. 203), 'Death' (Ibid., p. 317), 'Epitaph' (Ibid., p. 319); John Keats, *Endymion* (Ibid., p. 319); Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Roman Elegies* (Ibid., pp. 81, 83).
[53] D'Annunzio, *Pleasure*, p. 317.
[54] Ibid., p. 318.
[55] Ibid., p. 319.
[56] Ibid., p. xiii.

Neo-Victorian Romanticism and Decadence: The Reconceptualization of Realism from John Henry Newman to James Stephens

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This article explores the late nineteenth-century resurgence of Romantic aesthetics as a neo-Victorian phenomenon.[1] To do so, it tackles realism as the dominant formal and conceptual register of the Victorian age, investigating the reconceptualization of social realism put forth by decadent artists such as Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater and by Irish modernist writer James Stephens (1880-1950).[2] Such a reconceptualization is assessed as a reworking of theoretical principles set forth during the Victorian Age by John Henry Newman. An overview of such tenets, based mainly on Romantic premises such as idealism and immaterialism, is provided to bring into focus the reception of Newman's 'aesthetic idealism' during decadence and High Modernism. In this respect, the use of Stephens for our purpose is grounded on a set of diverse reasons, all resting on his historical placement in the continuum of the very long nineteenth century.

Stephens wrote novels, short stories, poems, plays, and radio shows, as well as essays and articles which he contributed to newspapers and journals such as *The Irish Review* (which he founded and edited), *Sinn Féin*, and *The Times*. He shared his birthday with James Joyce, who declared that, should he die prematurely and never finish *Finnegans Wake*, the whole project had to be handed over to Stephens.[3] Born in 1882, and thus very likely to have absorbed both Victorian and decadent aesthetics, Stephens's cultural background was that of an Irish-born Protestant and active member of the Irish Revival.[4] Such biographical details characterize his discourse as a deliberate challenge to the English Imperial semiosphere and to its practices of meaning-making, including literary realism.[5] Although often deemed a modernist, Stephens's work reveals a decisive influence on decadent aesthetes and their sceptical attitude towards the type of realism codified by the great Victorian novelists.

This attitude is expressed quite vocally by Wilde in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), in which he designs a geometrical opposition between realism and Romanticism, pivoting on a metamorphosis of the nineteenth century into Caliban:

> The nineteenth-century dislike of realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.
>
> The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass.[6]

This Wildean proportion establishes realism and Romanticism as two conceptual registers that coexist, albeit on opposite ends, in the nineteenth century. Wilde also indicates that ugliness and deformity are intrinsic to the nineteenth century: whether it knows its own features or not, the spirit of the age dislikes the artistic practices that return a clear image of itself. Realism, in Wilde's words, becomes a device for self-revelation, like the reflective surface of a glass. The reproduction of the visible qualities of the world through verbal, pictorial, or photographic media ultimately lets the century see his own image, providing a visual and accurate rendition of his monstrous appearance. Romanticism, on the other hand, is despised by this historical and cultural Caliban because it does not possess the ability to make Caliban self-conscious of, and thus angry with, his own ugliness. Instead, it enrages the monster because its set of aesthetic values will not reflect Caliban's internal and inaccurate image of itself, which identifies, by extension, with the theoretical principles of the Darwinist and Benthamite philosophies. Immaterialism, the call for communion with nature and the supernatural, the exploration of the inner self, and tackling the unseen as triggers for artistic practice all fail to align with the century's newer materialistic ideologies. In other words, the nineteenth century disregards Romantic aesthetics because it fails to conform to the century's idea, or inner vision, of itself.

Interestingly, both realism and Romanticism are set out by Wilde at the opposite ends of a dichotomy which has at its centre the act of seeing, self-reflection, and the notion of the image ('seeing his own image' vs '*not* seeing his own image'). Such a dichotomy signals, on the one hand,

how Romanticism as a conceptual register never ceased to exist throughout Victorianism and, on the other, a mutual irreconcilability between Romantic and realistic forms of expression. Yet, Wilde's considerations also acknowledge that Victorian art and philosophy were oscillating, at varying degrees, along the continuum existing between these two aesthetic tendencies. Indeed, Wilde's far-sightedness is confirmed in the literary criticism of the 1910s, where it is stated that a 'great movement […] which began in Romanticism, is ending in Realism'.[7] Hence, anything neo-Victorian, whether decadent or modernist, should replicate this dichotomic episteme between Romantic idealism and the modes and ways of literary realism in Victorian novels. Moreover, while the source for the realistic end of Wilde's equation can be traced back to nineteenth-century novelists, the Romantic one might seem more elusive, and this is where James Stephens comes into play.

Our object of enquiry is 'An Essay in Cubes', which Stephens published in *The English Review* in April 1914.[8] It is a dense theoretical essay where Stephens exposes his views on prose writing and literary criticism – views which seem to owe quite a lot to Wilde's *The Critic as Artist*, especially in Stephens's elaboration of Wilde's concept of 'second-rate littérateurs':[9]

> We are overrun by a set of people who, when poet or painter passes away, arrive at the house along with the undertaker, and forget that their one duty is to behave as mutes. But we won't talk about them. They are the mere body-snatchers of literature. The dust is given to one, and the ashes to another, and the soul is out of their reach.[10]

By characterizing contemporary writers as 'body-snatchers', quick to collect the material remains of great writers but unable to reach their inner essence (their 'soul'), Wilde once again plays on the duality of material and immaterial as the opposing philosophical tenets driving artistic enterprise. Aptly illustrating the artistic faults of the present in the mindless disposal of the great artists' mortal remains on behalf of this 'set of people', Wilde is, in fact, implying the crucial importance of connecting to the inner invisible qualities of a work of art, rather than concentrating on a forgetful reproduction of its exterior attributes. Stephens, on his part, begins 'An Essay in Cubes' by cutting through the clutter, providing a variation on Wilde's theme that wants to give clear instances of

some 'detestable' writers or, in Wilde's words, 'cheap editions of great men'.[11] Stephens thus taps into Wilde's celebration of the 'soul' of literature by morphing it into the 'heart', declaring 'our novelists' to be 'peculiarly heartless people' who, 'masked by the current fashion in ethic and religion', are responsible, like Caliban, for an 'unconscious' and 'horrid self-revelation':

> It is a matter for astonishment at how mediocre is the intellect which the best of these writers will display. The masters of fiction have seldom risen above the level of an after-dinner speaker who has ascertained his own glibness and the silliness of people who have dined, and who knows that it is seldom necessary to give of his best, even if he had it. The thought of these men does not often rise above banality.[12]

Stephen then continues by indicating Henry Fielding as the epitome of such an after-dinner speaker, by elaborating a technological analogy between these types of writers and phonographs, and by asserting that their 'duty', instead, should entail the mastery of a keyword for decadent aesthetics such as 'vision'. Stephens writes:

> Just as many artists are no more than animated photograph-machines which project rigorously the inessential of something seen but not visualized, so many writers have been phonographs, and they have authoritatively the most banal ideal of their day floating in a solution of the then-current scientific small-talk. […] [T]heir duty is to see the external world not with their eyes but with their minds, and to pass it through that crucible before they reproject it (interesting cinematic metaphor); but if they are unable to digest their vision, we are entitled to inquire whether they remain in an intelligent profession.[13]

Stephens's insistence on 'seeing the external world not with their eyes but with their minds' as an inescapable duty of the artist and of man had been laid out quite conspicuously by Walter Pater in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). Through the motive of religious conversion in this historical novel Pater dramatizes the development of Marius from a materialistic pagan worshipper to an idealistic follower of Christianity, embracing the 'reasonable Ideal' of God. Throughout the novel, Marius comes to his realisation through a progressive detachment from a blind trust in visible materiality. This detachment will eventually lead him to embrace a thorough questioning of the visible. Such a progression is dramatized in the culminating chapter, titled 'The Will as Vision':

> Through one reflection upon another, he passed from such instinctive divinations, to the thoughts which give them logical consistency, formulating at last, as the necessary exponent of our own and the world's life, that reasonable Ideal to which the Old Testament gives the name of Creator, which for the philosophers of Greece is the Eternal Reason,

> and in the New Testament the Father of Men – even as one builds up from act and word and expression of the friend actually visible at one's side, an ideal of the spirit within him.[14]

Marius' realization is a 'build up from act and word and expression […] actually visible' to an understanding of 'The purely material world [as] the unreal thing',[15] thus formalizing a type of idealism that, while undoubtedly tinged with Romantic premises, can be said to be resting on a Platonic philosophical set-up, eventually made explicit by Pater with the publication of his lectures on *Plato and Platonism* (1893).[16] What is often overlooked in criticism is Pater's exquisitely Victorian source for his appreciation of Plato, an Eminent Victorian who sought to harmonize Platonic Idealism, Romanticism, and the teachings of the Fathers of the Church: St. John Henry Newman. A monumental thinker to whom both Wilde and Pater looked with reverence, Newman elaborated a theory of art resting on the very premises that Pater dramatized in *Marius,* and which were also taken up by Wilde and decadence.[17]

A necessary premise to lay out a synthesis of Newman's thought on art is that his theological understanding and his literary conceptions are deeply ingrained into each other. He deemed literature indivisible from theology, while his own theology is highly influenced by some literary premises.[18] Generally speaking, it is safe to affirm that Newman's overall thought was built on a reprise of Patristic theology on the one hand and on Romanticism on the other. In particular, Newman's studies for *Arians of the Third Century* (1833) had him come in contact with Clement and Origenes, an intellectual encounter which allowed him to incorporate Plato's and Plotinus' hypostatic theology into his own. At the same time, his appreciation of the Romantics' capacity to express 'awe, mystery, tenderness, reverence, devotedness, and other feelings'[19] posit him on anti-rationalistic, anti-utilitarian stances which are often sustained by Berkeleyan, immaterialist views, as he would call them in *Apologia*, 'my mistrust of the reality of material phenomena'.[20] Naturally, this 'mistrust' entails a recourse to individual perception as a reliable measure to assess the real, a principle which Newman expanded on in his theology of Conscience[21] and which ultimately rests on the paradigm of subjectivity which moulds Romantic aesthetics. In other words, Newman's

thorough knowledge of platonic philosophy via the Church Fathers, along with his immaterialist views, all concur in assessing his philosophical, theological, and literary set-up as 'idealistic'. However, for its structural reliance on Patristic gnoseology, Newman's premises rest on an etymological kind of idealism, one where the Idea, in its true platonic sense, harks back to the Greek root of the word, *-ἰδ-*, which forms the aorist tense of the verb *ὁράω*, and therefore refers to an aspectual, subjective way of seeing, untied from material, seeable referents. Hence, Newman's idealism rests on the notion of the Idea as vision and on the ultimate Idea, that of God, as showing itself to the believer as an 'image', which, being 'no warrant for the existence of the objects which those images represent',[22] ultimately entails a full engagement of the subject's perception. Thus, I propose to define Newman's idealism as 'aesthetic'.

It must be noted that Marius' change of conscience occurs after a vision, a spiritual experience transmitting to him complex meanings that he seeks to unravel, which ultimately lead him to convert to Christianity.[23] This type of experience is at the core of Newman's aesthetic idealism, being in truth a re-enactment of the mystical experience, by which the vision of an 'image', often accompanied by sensory perceptions, triggers a rational comprehension of God's existence – in Newman's terms, 'real assent', which he connects to a 'change in the character of that apprehension' that happens 'so often […] in what is called religious conversion'.[24] Newman's conception of poetry and literature finds an almost exact correspondence in his broader theological understanding as based on real assent. In his Dublin lecture on the subject, he defined Literature as the *mise en forme* into the language of the aesthetic perception of an ideal, unseen reality – a definition which perfectly resonates with real assent as an act of rational apprehension of the truth: 'why should not skill in diction be simply subservient and instrumental to the great prototypal ideas which are the contemplation of a Plato or a Virgil?'.[25] Literary activity is thus the result of a contemplative act harking back to what Wordsworth called 'turning the mind upon herself' while looking for 'universal things'.[26]

It is therefore in mysticism, in the ability to inhabit both the visible and the invisible, that Newman finds a suitable place for poetry as a religious experience:

> Poetry then is our mysticism; and so far as any two characters of mind tend to penetrate below the surface of things, and to draw men away from the material to the invisible world, so far they may certainly be said to answer the same end; and that too a religious one.[27]

The mystical is thus the conceptual foundation for Newman's Catholic literary and theological thought, for he saw Romanticism as the re-enactment or, instead, as the development of that mystical sensitivity even though, he says, 'it may appear to some far-fetched, of course, to draw any comparison between the mysticism of the ancients, and the poetry or romance of the moderns, as to the religious tendencies of each'.[28] Newman's frequent praises of Romantic authors often trespass their literary merits to evaluate Wordsworth, Scott, and Coleridge in their own philosophical and theological weight. Of Coleridge, in particular, Newman said during the spring of 1835: 'I for the first time read parts of Coleridge's works; and I am surprised how much I thought mine, is to be found there'.[29] What Newman calls 'Shelleyism, Coleridgism' had the merit of proposing 'a richer and warmer philosophy' thriving upon the ashes of 'old Benthamism shrivelling up […] edging forward and forward, no one knowing how, to a more Catholic theology'.[30] It should not come as a surprise, then, that in *A Letter to Jelf,* Newman went so far as to establish a clear parallel between Romantic literature and Catholicity:

> In truth there is at this moment a great progress of the religious mind of our Church to something deeper and truer than satisfied the last century. […] The poets and philosophers of the age have borne witness to it for many years. Those great names in our literature, Sir Walter Scott, Mr. Wordsworth, Mr. Coleridge, though in different ways and with essential differences one from another, […] still all bear witness to it. […] The age is moving towards something, and […] this something, is the Church of Rome. She alone […] has given free scope to the feelings of awe, mystery, tenderness, reverence, devotedness, and other feelings which may be especially called Catholic.[31]

The Romantics' catholicity rests precisely on their visionary immaterialism and on their sacramental conception of the real – two tenets which Newman himself had explored in 'Poetry' in 1829. In the essay, poetry is defined as a 'gift', hence as a charismatic bestowal, from an ideal entity that lingers beyond the 'written composition' – in Wordsworth's verse, 'the vision and the

faculty divine'.[32] The written composition, for Newman, is therefore the projection, or rather, the active formalisation of an aesthetic experience of the ideal, which men can access through the imagination. 'Figure' and 'language' are thus necessary but 'poor means' to express their imaginative contact with the ideal:[33]

> Poetry, according to Aristotle, is a representation of the ideal. Biography and history represent individual characters and actual facts; poetry, on the contrary, generalizing from the phenomenon of nature and life, supplies us with pictures drawn, not after an existing pattern but after a creation of the mind. […] Hence, while it recreates the imagination by the superhuman loveliness of its views, it provides a solace for the mind broken by the disappointments and sufferings of actual life; and becomes, moreover, the utterance of the inward emotions of a right moral feeling, seeking a purity and a truth which this world will not give. It follows that the poetical mind is one full of the eternal forms of beauty and perfection; these are its material of thought, its instrument and medium of observation, – these colour each object to which it directs its view. It is called imaginative or creative, from the originality and independence of its modes of thinking, compared with the commonplace and matter-of-fact conceptions of ordinary minds, which are fettered down to the particular and individual. […] Figure is its necessary medium of communication with man; for in the feebleness of ordinary words to express its ideas, and in the absence of terms of abstract perfection, the adoption of metaphorical language is the only poor means allowed it for imparting to others its intense feelings. There is an ambiguity in the word 'poetry', which is taken to signify both the gift itself, and the written composition which is the result of it.[34]

On his part, Stephens fully embraces this Paterian/Newmanian subjectivity principle in art by dismissing 'objective art – realism as it is usually known'[35] and harshly criticizing 'novelists […] who have seldom been artists'[36] on the basis of their proneness to scientific objectivity, giving instances that go from Hardy, whose *Jude the Obscure* is defined as a 'miserable book',[37] to George Meredith, and George Moore. Of Moore, in particular, Stephens says that he 'ought to have been the greatest writer of his contemporaries […] but he had the misfortune of having been born too soon'.[38] Stephens lucidly singles out the causes for Moore's hit-and-miss as a writer in having come 'into a world entirely dominated by Charles Darwin and the theories of his time: a world absolutely reeking of the most matter-of-fact intellectualities', which prevented him, and Hardy and Meredith, from developing 'the free minds of artists'.[39] Instead, Stephens advocates once again for a Paterian motive, inviting writers to engage with 'the only subject' worthy of their attention, namely 'showing the growth of a soul to some maturity'.[40] He then continues by criticizing any pretence of

objectivity in art, again wanting to shift the subject matter of the writer from a 'physical' conception of life to a tension towards 'heaven', which, in Stephens's understanding, coincides with the act of looking 'inwards'. Moreover, he openly advocates for scientists to return to the 'sacred books of the world' as 'the record of human progress', hence attempting to reintroduce a religious paradigm in his present epistemological realm, a move that is surprisingly reminiscent of Newman's own intellectual strife during his own time:

> Their whole conception of life is physical, and when they try to look upwards, which is inwards, they cannot see heaven because of the red haze in their brains; […] The term objective, as applied to art, has only a temporary significance, if it has any. […] I am more inclined to believe that there is no such thing as objective writing in fiction, but in science there has been much, and it has paralyzed science for centuries. […] We will have no belief in scientists until we are assured that they are deeply read in poetry and are as deeply interested in the sacred books of the world; then we will know that they are really pursuing their *metier*, for poetry and the sacred literature are the record of human progress.[41]

Stephens's arguments, as exposed so far, with their insistence on mistrusting visible materiality in favour of the inner vision as a trigger for art, follow a distinct Wildean and Paterian, thus decadent, track. Yet, Stephens is also arguably drawing on a blatantly Victorian cultural paradigm, namely the dichotomy between Science and Art. In particular, he dwells heavily on the mechanization or, rather, 'technicalization' of writing, painted out in the initial analogy between writers and reproducer machines. Stephen's reliance on this widely Victorian epistemological binarism, while replicating and reaffirming decadent aesthetics, is also indirectly reproducing motives put forth by Newman when he denounces the inherent dangers of massification and technical reproducibility in his 1850s Dublin lectures:

> Our writers write so well that there is little to choose between them. What they lack is that individuality, that earnestness, most personal yet most unconscious of self which is the greatest charm of an author. The very form of the compositions of the day suggest to us their many deficiencies. They are anonymous. So was it not in the literature of those nations which we consider the special standard of classical writing […]. The Epic was sung by the voice of the living, present poet. The drama, in its very idea, is poetry in persons […]. Pindar is all through his odes a speaker. Plato, Xenophon, and Cicero, throw their philosophical dissertations in the form of a dialogue. Orators and preachers are by their very profession known persons, and the personal is laid down by the Philosopher of antiquity as the source of their greatest persuasiveness.[42]

Newman's influence on Stephens reads quite pervasively; in particular, when Stephens mentions 'matter of fact intellectualities' and the novelists' conception of life as 'physical', one can hear Newman's voice echoing through, especially in his consideration of Bentham as 'a stern realist' who 'limits his realism to things which he can see, hear, taste, touch and handle'.[43] Moreover, both authors concur on the intrinsic self-reflexivity of the work of art and on style as the blueprint for the artist's mind. Where Newman talks of 'the personal' as the 'source of their greatest persuasiveness',[44] Stephens tells us that 'As our aspiration, so our inspiration. There is never an exception to this rule. We reproduce ourselves."[45]

In this sense, even though Newman's influence on a writer like Stephens might be indirect, it is safe to affirm that Stephens's rejection of realism can be defined as neo-Victorian for his reliance on Newman as the enabler of a Romantic persistence through the Victorian Age and beyond – a persistence which is still speaking to our present not just in literature, but in pop culture and fashion, and that needs to be more thoroughly interrogated.[46] In dismissing the identification of the seeable with the real, Stephens is not just dismissing social realism and its pretences of scientific objectivity as viable forms of representation. He is also re-enacting Newman's understanding of realism, which was ingrained in the sacramental, or mystical principle according to which all that is seeable, touchable, or hearable is a type and a manifestation of unseen 'realities greater than itself'.[47] Such immaterialism, like an underground current, made its way through the Victorian Age, springing back to the surface with Wilde and Pater all the way to modernism. Unsurprisingly then, in conclusion to his essay, Stephens comes full circle and, while discussing emotion as a synonym for wisdom, proposes William Blake, 'in whom emotion and intellect almost balance each other'[48] as the epitome of the artist.

Having traced so many conceptual assonances connecting Stephens's idea of art with Wilde's and Pater's, and having found in Newman an authoritative source for the rebound of Romantic principles during the late nineteenth century and beyond, the status of decadence and modernism as cultural moments of 'rupture' with their immediate past should be further

questioned. If anything, these findings prove that decadence and modernism carry the kernel of an exquisitely neo-Victorian resurgence of themes and motifs that run through the century in the words and thoughts of Newman. Such themes and motifs rely on Romantic paradigms, such as a general mistrust of the sensible in favour of an exploration of the aesthetic experiences, the immaterialism of poetic vision, a conscious use of emotion in writing to form a personal style, and reclaiming the sacred, religious dimension as foundational aspects of art and life.

Conclusion

Rather than clear-cut argumentations, a tentative conclusion to these findings entails a considerable number of questions, the most urgent of which is the rediscovery of Romantic aesthetics as the prime foundation for modernism. This is an argument that Frank Kermode has already made present, and which is gaining momentum in recent studies.[49] Embracing the perspective that modernism's yearning towards 'the New'[50] was, simply put, an almost nostalgic rediscovery of a Romantic ethos via the mediation of Newman, Wilde, and Pater would possibly prompt scholars to review the periodization of the very long nineteenth-century to include much more of the twentieth. Moreover, it would require looking at Romanticism as the original matrix for change and revolution in literary modes, tropes, and language, which kept disseminating and re-emerging constantly through time until this day. As Newman astutely knew, such a change was founded on a thorough experimentation with language as a means to express the self and on a general conception of the real as something existing beyond the scope of the visible. Romantic immaterialism might thus be at the basis of the paradigmatic strive for religiosity that attempted to counter-balance Victorian materialism, a strive that decadent authors quickly took up to differentiate themselves from their contemporary mainstream. It would be disingenuous to believe that this yearning for transcendence ended once modernist authors came to be, as proven by Stephens's writings. Instead, it is safe to affirm that this constant search for an adequate representation of this 'invisible visibility' is a conceptual pillar of art from time immemorial, which

shaped itself according to given historical conditions, and that it constitutes, at the present day, a hermeneutic question still 'somewhat neglected by literary scholarship', that is, 'the problem of the relation between an author's religious convictions and his artistic technique'[51] – a question that definitely needs to be confronted again.

[1] In order to set up a comprehensive methodology for this article, and to avoid the lures of rigid periodization, the adjective 'neo-Victorian' is here used in accordance with the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition. In 1916, 'neo-Victorian' was used as a noun meaning a person or thing whose 'values, attitudes, or behaviour hark back to' the Victorian Age. Interestingly, about twenty years later, it had become an adjective signalling 'resembling, reviving, or reminiscent of' the Victorian Age. See 'neo-Victorian, n. and adj.', *OED Online*, http://www.oed.com [accessed 9 August 2023]. My intention is to provide the reader with other evidence for the temporal ubiquity of cultural and artistic phenomena, so as to further question the notion of historical periods as 'vertical pile[s] of neatly stacked boxes'. Art and culture are therefore considered as complex modes of meaning-making that, manifesting in the historical continuum, keep iterating kernels of shared universal sense by refashioning it in forms and modes suitable to the period they appear in. In other words, and to borrow Felski's perspective, the aim of this article is to observe 'the transtemporal movement' of 'particular texts'. See Rita Felski, 'Context Stinks!', *New Literary History*, 42.4 (2011), pp. 577; 574.

[2] An in-depth discussion of realism in its theoretical or semiological formulations is beyond the scope of this article. Hence, realism as a literary phenomenon is going to be observed in its *formal* transformation from a generally ekphrastic modality of representation during the Victorian Age [cf. J. R. Ehnenn, 'Haptic Ekphrasis', *Victorian Studies*, 64.1 (2021), pp. 88-114], overall driven by pedagogical and scientific approaches [see Jerome Meckier, *Hidden Rivalries in Victorian Fiction: Dickens, Realism, and Revaluation* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1987), pp. 5 *et passim*], to the modernist 'realist ambition' [see Salado, Régis, 'Stream of Consciousness et Monologue Interieur. Contribution a l'histoire de deux notions critiques "modernes"', *Modernité/Modernism*, *Textuel*, 53 (2006), p. 114] of shaping the non-visible for the page – in Rene Gladman's words, putting 'the complex shape of our interiority […] into the straight line of the sentence' [see Rene Gladman, as quoted in Timothy Bewes, *Free Indirect. The Novel in a Postfictional Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, New York, 2022), p. 7]. Therefore, realism will be here understood according to Watt's comprehensive definition of it as a discursive practice aimed at rendering an 'authentic report of human experience' [Ian Watts, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), p. 32)].

[3] Joyce wrote to Miss Weaver on 20 May 1927: 'As regards that book itself and its future completion I have asked Miss Beach to get into closer relations with James Stephens. I started reading one of his last books yesterday Deirdre. I thought he wrote The Return of the Hero, which I liked. His Charwoman's Daughter is now out in French. He is a poet and Dublin born. Of course he would never take a fraction of the time or pains I take but so much the better for him and me and possibly for the book itself. If he consented to maintain three or four points which I consider essential and I showed him the threads he could finish the design'. Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 591-92.

[4] See Patricia McFate, *The Writings of James Stephens: Variations on a Theme of Love* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), p. 10 *et passim*.

[5] Revival writers in Ireland shunned from realistic depictions of Irish everyday life to re-forge their national alterity by means of a rediscovery of myth and legend. As an indirect form of critique towards Englishness, such a tendency shares the same sets of intentions of Aestheticism, and Wilde's own remodulation of social realism. See Alison Harvey, 'Irish Aestheticism in Fin-de-Siècle Women's Writing: Art, Realism, and the Nation', *Modernism/Modernity*, 21.3 (2014), p. 806: 'Revival writers including W. B. Yeats, Augusta Gregory, and J. M. Synge fused aestheticist modes – symbolism, myth, legend, allegory, and dream, among others, with nationalist politics as part of a project of forging and fostering a sovereign Irish identity and nation-to-be. […] [R]evivalist authors emphasize Celtic and Gaelic myth and legend over contemporary Irish life, an emphasis that aligns their works formally with central aspects of British aestheticism while also differentiating them nationally from British imperialist depictions of

Ireland and Irishness. Like Wilde, revivalists critique Englishness, though their works focus on Ireland, not England; they counter British colonialism by proffering "authentic" Irish forms and figures in place of colonial representations of Irishness'.
[6] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: Barnes & Nobles, 2003), p. 1.
[7] William Francis Barry, *Heralds of Revolt. Studies in Modern Literature and Dogma* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909), p. 192. This perspective seems to be considered by recent critics such as Meckier, p. 5: 'Indeed, the major varieties of competing Victorian realisms – George Eliot's and Dickens's – each had both a scientific and a poetic component. Pro-Darwin, George Eliot and Mrs. Gaskell were also strongly imbued with Wordsworth. Dickens and Collins had grave reservations about the positive implications George Eliot drew from the biological sciences; they preferred a perspective colored by Coleridge'.
[8] James Stephens, 'An Essay in Cubes', in *Uncollected Prose of James Stephens*, edited by Patricia McFate, vol. 2 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), pp. 115-24.
[9] Ibid., p. 123: 'The great novelist will forever be less than the great critic. The novelist is the food-carrier to genius; the genius is the critic, and the critic, when he is truly competent, is the great poet.'
[10] Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Blitz Editions, 1990), p. 949.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Stephens, pp. 115-16.
[13] Ibid., p. 118.
[14] Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean. His Sensations and Ideas* (London: Macmillan, 1885), p. 235.
[15] Ibid., p. 236.
[16] Ibid., p. 250: 'In truth, it was the Platonic Idealism, as he conceived it, which for him literally animated, and gave him so lively an interest in, this world of the purely outward aspects of men and things. Were not all visible objects – the whole material world indeed, according to the consistent testimony of philosophy in many forms – "full of souls"?'
[17] Although a small number of excellent studies on Newman's influence on Pater and decadence do exist, none of them considers Pater's Platonism as an intellectual heritage he drew from Newman. Among those studies, it is worth citing David J. DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England: Newman, Arnold, and Pater* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), and Jude V. Nixon, *Gerard Manley Hopkins and His Contemporaries: Liddon, Newman, Darwin, and Pater* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994).
[18] See John Henry Newman, 'Bearing of Theology on other Branches of Knowledge', in *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated* (London: Longmans, 1907), pp. 67-8: 'from time immemorial [theology] meets us at every turn in our literature, it is the secret assumption, too axiomatic to be distinctly professed, of all our writers'.
[19] John Henry Newman, *A Letter Addressed to the Rev. R. W. Jelf, D. D., Canon of Christ Church, in Explanation of no. 90 in the Series Called The Tracts for the Times* (London: Rivington, 1841), p. 386.
[20] John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua. Being A History of His Religious Opinions* [1865] (London: Longmans, 1908), p. 108.
[21] As formalized in his *opus magnum*, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870).
[22] John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Longmans, 1907), p. 80.
[23] See Pater, pp. 227 *et passim*.
[24] Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, p. 80.
[25] John Henry Newman, 'Literature', in *The Idea of a University*, p. 283.
[26] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 3, ll. 110-18 (London: Edward Moxon, 1850), p. 60: 'I looked for universal things; perused / The common countenance of earth and sky: / Earth, nowhere unembellished by some trace / Of that first Paradise whence man was driven; / And sky, whose beauty and bounty are expressed / By the proud name she bears – the name of Heaven. / I called on both to teach me what they might; / Or turning the mind in upon herself / Pored, watched, expected, listened, spread my thoughts / And spread them with a wider creeping'.
[27] John Henry Newman, *Essays, Critical and Historical*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, 1907), vol. 1, p. 291.
[28] Ibid.
[29] *Letters and Correspondence of John Henry Newman During His Life in the English Church: With a Brief Autobiography*, edited by Anne Mozley, 2 vols (London: Longmans, 1890), vol. 1, p. 35.
[30] Newman, *Essays*, vol. 1, p. 304.
[31] Newman, *Letter to Jelf*, p. 386.
[32] William Wordsworth, 'The Wanderer', in *The Excursion* (London: Edward Moxon, 1853], p. 6: 'O, MANY are the poets that are sown / By nature; men endowed with highest gifts, / The vision and the faculty divine; / Yet wanting the accomplishment of verse'.
[33] 'What are words but artificial signs for ideas?' asks the protagonist of Newman's 1848 conversion novel, *Loss and Gain* (London: Longmans, 1907), p. 245.
[34] John Henry Newman, 'Poetry. With Reference to Aristotle's *Poetics*', in *Essays*, vol. 1, pp. 10-11.
[35] Stephens, p. 120.
[36] Ibid., p. 119.
[37] Ibid., p. 121.
[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., p. 118.
[41] Ibid, pp. 118-19.
[42] John Henry Newman, 'English Catholic Literature', in *The Idea*, p. 329.
[43] John Henry Newman, 'The Tamworth Reading Room', in *Discussions and Arguments on Various Subjects* (London: Longmans, 1907), p. 269.
[44] Newman, 'English Catholic Literature', p. 329.
[45] Stephens, p. 118.
[46] In post-modern and contemporary culture, Romanticism seems to have regained a paradigmatic status, especially when it comes to ecocriticism – see Kate Rigby, *Reclaiming Romanticism. Towards an Ecopoetic of Decolonization* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022) – and epistemology, as in *Constellations of a Contemporary Romanticism*, ed. by Jacques Khalip and Forest Pyle (New York: Fordham University Press). Pop culture seems to have anticipated such a resurgence ever since the New-Romantic movements in music and fashion, prompting Robert Pattinson to associate Romanticism with rock music in *The Triumph of Vulgarity: Rock Music in the Mirror of Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). What is all the more interesting is that a Romantic paradigm harking back to its Biblical and Neo-Platonic premises is currently being retraced in African-American culture, in Gospel and Work Songs, as in the case of Pastor T. L. Barrett's work – see John Kimsey, '"Go Out and Bring Me Lazarus": *O Brother*, Allegory, and a Work Song's Circuitous Journey', *Popular Music and Society*, 45, 5 (2022), pp. 531-52 – so much so that it became politically tinged and reappropriated by the Black Community, as in Paul Youngquist, 'Black Romanticism: A Manifesto', *Studies in Romanticism*, 56, 1 (2017), pp. 3-14.
[47] Newman, *Apologia*, p. 28.
[48] Stephens, p. 122.
[49] See Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 193: 'the twin concepts of the isolated artist and the supernatural Image to which he gains access continue to be influential, and indeed stand behind these modern developments'. Also see Audrey Wasser, *The Work of Difference: Modernism, Romanticism, and the Production of Literary Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016). Wasser suggests the epistemic kinship between the Romantic and the Modernist aesthetic of the fragment as they both stem from 'the context of a philosophical crisis in the concept of system' (p. 19).
[50] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, SC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. ix.
[51] Joseph Ellis Baker, *The Novel and the Oxford Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1932), p. 60.

'The clouds are grand pianos': Derek Mahon's *The Yellow Book* and Neo-Victorian Decadence

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By (almost) unanimous consent 'in literary history', *The Yellow Book* 'is always *the* magazine of the 1890s', or, 'more than usually assumed, *is* the nineties'.[1] Its literary authority was such that, according to Stanley Weintraub,

> in *The Yellow Book*, literature stands on the threshold of the twentieth century. Concealed beneath such familiar tags as 'The Aesthetic Decade', 'The Beardsley Period', 'The Yellow Nineties' and others, is the transitional nature of the 1890's; and the prevalence of yellow in many of the descriptions suggests the symbolic importance of that famed but ephemeral yellow-hued quarterly.[2]

Published in London from 1894 to 1897, it sold 'only 5,000 copies an issue'[3] and counted among its literary contributors hard and pure decadents like George Gissing (1857-1903), Ernest Dowson (1867-1900), Max Beerbohm (1872-1956), Richard Le Gallienne (1866-1947), plus Arthur Symons (1865-1945) and William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) in their youth. The 'almost' between parentheses, which appears above, is justified by remarks like Cyrena N. Pondrom's, which point to the fact that although *The Yellow Book* 'justly deserves its assigned place as the leading journal of the English decadence, its prominence has generally obscured the fact that it was neither the first nor the most exclusively 'decadent' of the English journals of the 'nineties'.[4]

However, *The Yellow Book* was not just *literature*. Like Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), whose 'polymorphism' extended 'even to an eclecticism among the arts',[5] its nature, identity, and mission were polymorphically oriented in a perspective that was intersemiotic, intermedial, and interdisciplinary by vocation and that permeated all its issues. This notwithstanding, the study of such perspective has almost always been restricted to the mere acknowledgement of its juxtaposition of verbal and figurative codes and products: no investigation has been carried out on the semiotic features and consequences of their micro- and macro-textual interaction in every number of *The Yellow Book* and in the megatext of the twelve numbers of the whole series.

Even less (honestly, no) attention has been paid to the contribution of music to their intersemiotic orientation and multilayered textuality. The musical components, implications, and epiphenomena of *The Yellow Book* have been constantly downplayed and overlooked, in perfect coherence – for instance – with the neglect on the part of decadent scholars of both Beardsley's 'perhaps […] deeper feeling for music than for'[6] books and pictures, and his experience as an infant 'musical prodigy, not only performing in semi-public but performing his own compositions, even before he was a precocius draughtsman or writer'.[7] Very few exceptions to this critical omission are available and two of them deserve special mention here: the two enthusiastic (though 'non peer-reviewed') commentaries by undergraduate students at Ryerson University to their 'exhibits' of music-related images from *The Yellow Book* in the context of a classroom of a course on Advanced English Research Method.[8] Such scholarly indifference to the traces of music in an intersemiotic enterprise that was received as one of the 'outrage[s] by one of that desperate and dangerous band of madmen',[9] is all the more short-sighted given, for instance, Max Beerbohm's idea that 'the art of music' is 'rather akin' to 'the painting of the face' because the latter lasts, 'like music's echo, not for very long' – an idea which makes music, by analogy with cosmetics, 'one of the chief planks in the decadent platform'.[10]

Among the multifarious and strategically unconventional musico(-)literary [11] signs disseminated in *The Yellow Book*, those in *The Gospel of Content*, a short story written by the English journalist Frederick Greenwood (1830-1909) and published in its second issue,[12] are paradigmatic of the decadent approach to the homology between language/literature and sound/music, and deserve special mention here. Its protagonist is a Monsieur Vernet, a former Russian revolutionist and political exile in London – 'whose real name ended in 'ieff'' (p. 15) – who was 'a splendid radiant creature of a man' (p. 15) and 'was loud in praise of English liberty' (p. 17). In the long second section of Greenwood's narrative, Vernet, who has undergone profound physical and spiritual mutations, shares his views on 'the greater mutations that affect all mankind' (p. 19) with a homodiegetic narrator thirty years after their first meeting (i.e., in the specified year 1887). He

preaches his 'Gospel of Content' ('with a very very little of this world's goods, or even contentment in poverty', p. 31) against the 'Gospel of Rancour' (p. 30), sermonized by 'the coolest Encyclopedist' (p. 23), 'the Darwinian process', the 'strict materialists' (p. 24) *et al.*

While preaching, Vernet predicts a transition towards 'heart-growth' (p. 24), 'spiritual perfectioning' and 'spiritual advance' (p. 28), and, just as predictably, vents a seemingly Romantic conception of music as 'a *language* that speaks to the deeper thought and finer spirits in us as words do not' (p. 29; italics mine). However, despite its music-oriented appearance, the very literarization of his prediction starts from a word-oriented expectation of 'the time' when 'an entirely new literature will have a new *language*' (p. 28) and consistently ends up confirming the ancillarity of music to verbal language and revealing the paradoxical nature of a transitional functionality that annihilates its Romantic extralinguistic autonomy and unearths the oxymoronic tangle of its decadent musico-literary elaboration:[13]

> It is music; music, which is felt to be the most subtle, most appealing, most various of tongues even while we know that we are never more than half awake to its pregnant meanings, and have not learnt to think of it *as becoming the last perfection of speech*. But that may be its appointed destiny. […] There is more, however, in what music is – a voice always understood to have powerful innumerable meanings appealing to we know not what in us, we hardly know how; and more, again, in its being an exquisite voice which can make no use of reason, nor reason of it; nor calculation, nor barter, nor anything but emotion and thought. […] What do you think? What do you say against *music being wrought into another language for mankind*, as it nears the height of its spiritual growth? (pp. 29-30; italics mine)

In his passionate peroration on *The Gospel of Content*, Monsieur Vernet oxymoronically props physically and literally, spiritually and metaphorically, rhetorically and semiotically, against a piano – in all likelihood, a small upright piano, given the chronotopic smallness of the dining room which contains it. More specifically, in Greenwood's short story, Monsieur Vernet:

a) goes 'lightly over the keys' of 'a piano in the little room we dined in' (p. 28);

b) sustains his discourse strategy by pointing 'to the piano with the finger of interrogation' (p. 29);

c) climaxes his verbal elucubrations 'with a delicate sweep of the keyboard' (p. 29).

By so doing, Vernet pushes the (a) immaterial, (b) extralinguistic, and (c) organicistic features of music in Romantic culture 'to the point of apparent dissolution'[14] by oxymoronically hybridizing or decadently contaminating them with some of their 'cultural antonyms',[15] which may be synthetically labelled as

a) materiality, which concretizes and historicizes his reference to music and is 'a projection of culture entangled with the social';[16]
b) indexicality, which 'identifies the semiotic process that makes it possible for participants […] to link particular forms of speech or conduct to types of social situation and participant in these';[17]
c) a blend of decorativism, whose 'economic function […] *proffers* the truth',[18] and ornamentation, whose late nineteenth-century linguistic interpretation was rooted in *The Grammar of Ornamentation* published by Owen Jones (1809-1874) in 1856.

Unsurprisingly, the piano was the same technological marvel that, in those very same years, Shaw aptly defined as 'the most important of all musical instruments' whose 'invention was to music what the invention of printing was to poetry',[19] and which, programmatically enough, appeared on the title page of the first volume of *The Yellow Book*, where, 'in the middle of an open field', a typically elongated Beardsleyan lady is touching a pianoforte. Very relevantly to the coeval socio-literary controversy on the piano as 'the very symbol of Victorian "respectability"' and 'the focus around which every middle-class household revolved',[20] Matthew Sturgis recalls that

> on the letters page of the *Pall Mall Budget* Beardsley defended his 'unpardonably affected' al fresco pianist by quoting an account (very probably [*sic!*] invented) of how Gluck, 'in order to warm his imagination […], was accustomed to place himself in the middle of a field; and how […] with the piano [*sic!*] before him […], he wrote in the open air […] his 'Orpheus' […]. […] *And yet we do not call Gluck a decadent.*[21]

The Yellow Book and Neo-Victorian Decadence

Faith Bickes has remarked that 'nowhere are [the complex lines of connection and difference running between the final decades of the nineteenth century and the opening decades of the twentieth] more apparent than in the world of little magazines'.[22] Perhaps surprisingly for ideologized supporters of their incurable conflict, *The Yellow Book* was an appreciated and effective interpreter of their dialogical connection (in its strictly verbal and figurative constituents), as witnessed for example by Ford Madox Ford (1873-1939), who 'presented [the] ambition […] of creating "an *aube de siècle* Yellow Book"' in his *English Review* (1908-1937); Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) and John Middleton Murry (1889-1957), who 'recalled [the] desire to make *Rhythm* [1911-1913] "the *Yellow Book* for the modern movement"'; and Margaret Anderson (1886-1973), who 'emphasized the *Yellow Book*'s literary significance and lasting value' for her *Little Review* (1914-1929).[23]

At the turn of the new millennium, predictably in the coeval unrestrainable wave of multiplication and commodification of (literary) anniversaries, the abovementioned connection has found room and evidence in some exhibitions designed and/or hosted by cultural and academic institutions in the Anglosphere. To mention just a few examples, in 1983, two English arts experts – the arts administrator Gavin Henderson (1948-) and the art gallerist and curator Michael Parkin (1931-2014) – and the Belfast-born barrister, politician, and Wilde biographer Harford Montgomery Hyde (1907-1989), issued the catalogue of the art-focused exhibition *The Artists of The Yellow Book & the Circle of Oscar Wilde* that was held in London from 5 October to 4 November 1983.[24] In 1994, another catalogue was edited by American Victorianists Margaret D. Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner: it accompanied *The Yellow Book: A Centenary Exhibition* that had been hosted by The Houghton Library at Harvard University to commemorate 'the most important and notorious British magazine of the 1890s, the first to market High Culture to mass audiences in England and America through modern advertising strategies'.[25] More recently, after the abovementioned 'exhibits […] created by undergraduate students at Toronto's Ryerson University' in 2015 (tutored by the digital Victorianist Lorraine Janzen Kooistra and the British

magazines specialist Alison Hedley), 'a complete set of *The Yellow Book* periodical' was included in *Colour Revolution: Victorian Art, Fashion & Design*, an exhibition at Oxford's Ashmolean Museum that opened on 21 September 2023, and which focused 'on the changes that took place in attitudes to colour in the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly in Victorian England, then in the vanguard of the industrial revolution'.[26]

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century poets writing in English seem to have dedicated very scant attention to the literary theory, poetical practice, and textual politics of *The Yellow Book*. Relevant exceptions are very hard to find in this case, let alone any reference to its strategic and/or tactical musico-literariness. John Betjeman (1906-1984) passingly mentioned it in his 1930s poem 'The Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the Cadogan Hotel',[27] while in the 1950s D. J. Enright (1920-2002) hyenically versified a student's answer ('Dr. Jonson [*sic*] edited the Yellow Book') as the eleventh line of a poem titled 'University examinations in Egypt'.[28] Apparently, one has to wait until 2019 to find a direct group response of 'contemporary UK-based poets […] to [that] short-lived but influential quarterly magazine' in the form of the exploration of 'the possibilities of visual and object poetry': such a response was offered 'in an exciting and cosy exhibition curated by poet Astra Papachristodoulou at [London's] Westminster Reference Library from the 1-27 November 2019' and featuring, besides the curator, Steven J. Fowler, Sarah Cave, Simon Tyrrell, Imogen Reid, Michał Kamil Piotrowski, Nic Stringer, Karen Sandhu, Vilde Valerie Bjerke Torset, Luke Thompson, and Lisa Kiew.[29]

However, these superficial appearances can be deceiving, says the ancient adage, and, in fact, between the 1960s and 2020, there has been an important Irish poet who has constantly nourished and literarized a strong and competent interest in the so-called 'Decadent Dilemma'.[30] His name was Derek Mahon (1941-2020) and his poetical re-readings of the 'Decadent Dilemma' materialized, above all, in two noteworthy and, in a way, diachronically and semiotically complementary poetical works:

1. the early poem 'Dowson and Company', no. 3 in the poetry collection *Night-crossing* (1968)[31] and no. 2 in his *Poems 1962-1978* (1979)[32] with no textual changes, and the more inclusive and encyclopaedic microtitle *The Poets of the Nineties*;
2. the later organic and panoramic poetry sequence *The Yellow Book*, published autonomously in 1997[33] and significantly revised in 2021[34] to be included in his posthumous and testamentary *Poems 1961-2020* with the unmistakeable macrotitle *Decadence*.

Mahon shared such interest with many other predecessors and successors in the evolutionary line of Irish poetry: suffice it to mention Louis MacNeice's 'Elegy for Minor Poets' in his poetry collection *Holes in the Sky* (1948), Austin Clarke's definition of 'Naughty Nineties' in his book on *The Celtic Twilight and the Nineties* (1969), and, *primus inter pares*, Yeats, who, in an emblematic passage of *Book IV. The Tragic Generation* (of the nineties) in his *Autobiographies* (section 'The Trembling of the Veil', written between 1920 and 1922 and published in 1922), asked himself and his fellows in the Rhymers' Club (e.g., Dowson, Johnson, Davidson, Wilde, and Beardsley): 'Was it that we lived in what is called "an age of transition" and so lacked coherence, or did we but pursue *antithesis*?'[35]

In those poems, Mahon poetically re-semiotized in a Neo-Victorian decadent perspective what J. B. Mayor (1828-1916), Professor of Classical Literature (1870-1879) and Moral Philosophy (1879-1882) at King's College, London, had etymologically identified in 1871 as the 'barbarous Gallicism'[36] *decadence*, both unveiling a characteristically politico-cultural chauvinistic bias, and stigmatizing what he saw as a genetic link between decadence's xenophilic proneness to new and superfluous linguistic fashions, and the elitist awareness of the '*décadent* school', which, according to a coeval anonymous piece of scorching criticism in the *Athenæum*, 'under the pretext of symbolism, of metaphysics, of "ultra-fineness", of "rare impressions", applies its resources to writing unintelligibly'.[37] As is well known, such a genetic link was oppositionally interpreted also

by Max Nordau, who applied to it a disparaging subsense of the adjective 'ichsüchtig',[38] which was paroxysmally rendered as 'ego-maniacs' in the 1895 English translation of Nordau's *Entartung*.[39] However, Stanley Rosen, Professor of Philosophy at Boston University, has proposed a more unbiased and holistic view of the decadents' dynamic and centrifugal 'search for/of the I' (a different translation of 'Ichsucht' from the usually static and centripetal ones of 'egoism', 'egotism', 'egocentricity', and 'egocentrism') in a brilliant paragraph of his 1987 *Hermeneutics as Politics*, which deserves full quotation:

> Decadence may be understood as an exacerbation of the nervous sensibility. Experience does not merely transpire; it accumulates. The result, as Nietzsche showed in such brilliant detail, is both intensification of perception and a concomitant deadening of the critical faculty. As the artist becomes more refined and penetrates to a deeper level of psychological analysis this increase in self-reflection leads also to a dissatisfaction with the traditional languages and forms of art. The ensuing creation of new forms becomes indistinguishable, not merely from a rejection of the old but from the dissolution of what is at first called 'the traditional concept of form' and, eventually, of form itself.[40]

In their 'search for/of the I', the decadents' dissatisfaction with language and form made them 'survive by packaging theories on decadence' like Umberto Eco's 'apocalyptics',[41] privilege conjunctive logic[42] and apply the textual resources of a conjunctive approach to literarization that Michel Riffaterre identified as follows: 'le romantisme avait substitué l'antithèse à l'harmonie et à l'unité dans le canon esthétique: les Decadents remplacent l'antithèse par l'oxymore'.[43] Their literarized version of the 'struggle against disharmony', which was 'the unifying theme' and, I would add, world model, 'of Victorian culture',[44] extensively semiotized the conjunctive potentialities of the oxymoron, in which – unlike opposition, which 'is a minimal paradigm, one term being *in praesentia* the other *in absentia* [–] both terms are *in praesentia*' and 'mutual exclusion (the condition of paradigmaticity) is subordinated to mutual inclusion (the condition of syntagmaticity)'.[45] Thus, with its 'smart saying[s] that at first may seem foolish',[46] the oxymoron-prone decadent community sought 'solace in elaborate methodologies and abstruse terminologies'[47] against the disjunctive strictures of the Victorian 'hegemonic syntagmatic model, contrasted and eroded from within by semantic and symbolic categories'.[48]

Derek Mahon and Neo-Victorian Decadence

Derek Mahon, 'poet of the perimeter meditating on the centre, with a mixture of amusement and pain',[49] is aware of the semiotic import of oxymoronity on the decadents' cultural experience and process of literarization to the point that he makes it the textual backbone of his early poem 'Dowson and Company' and the cypher of his first organic contribution to Neo-Victorian decadence. He inflects it in the (predominantly) [50] verbal intersemioticity of the dramatic monologue, i.e., 'the primary Victorian genre',[51] which, like all dramatic poetry, is itself 'at best an intrinsically contestable critical category and at worst *a violent oxymoron*, sparking the theoretical and historical friction between performance and poetry, theater and writing, action and language'.[52] In 'Dowson and Company', the poetic 'I' experiences the apparition of each and every of his silent decadent interlocutors, who manifest themselves on its two-dimensional literarized stage with three oxymoronic features, at the same time, general and idiosyncratic: 'important carelessness',[53] a 'spirit-sculptured face' (p. 2), and 'eyes bleak from discoveries' (pp. 3-4). He addresses them both individually *and*, collectively, as a 'kind' (p. 2), since this was the oxymoronic way in which they experienced decadence – i.e., the semiotically separative 'process of falling away or declining from a prior state of excellence, vitality, prosperity, etc.'[54] or, better, from the 'state[s]' that the coeval mainstream considered as such (whatever their meaning, function, and worth): in point of fact, theirs was a 'process of declining' that also aimed to defuse the very antithesis *individuality vs collectivity*, and that was at the core of their exacting and exhausting 'Ichsucht' for a semiotic niche from which they could both *individually and collectively* reconceive and reformulate their world model through the conjunctive logic of oxymoron.[55]

Mahon's actualization of the Victorian decadent world-model in 'Dowson and Company', apparently incompatible in both historical and cultural terms with late-sixties Belfast (while the Troubles were flaring up in Northern Ireland), clearly indicated that his world-model had been 'extended' to include them, since his 'attitude towards *Dowson and Company* is neither celebratory,

nor drastically "malicious": it activates the same scourging irony that this Belfast poet applies to the oxymoronic totality of the world and of his own human experience'.[56] Such verbal-oriented 'extension' may be rightly adjectivized as Neo-Victorian decadence and interpreted as a result of 'the postmodern assault upon the Enlightenment' which, according to Stanley Rosen, 'is in general an example of decadence'[57] and arises not from 'revolutionary fervour' – i.e., the intense zeal that aims to forcibly trigger a radical communitarian change – but from 'political despair' – i.e., the hopeless awareness that what regulates the relations of any kind within any given community at any given time cannot be mended or reformed, since, as Michelle Goldberg has recently written of American political life, 'dystopia no longer has an expiration date'.[58]

Thirty years or so after 'Dowson and Company', in 1997 (one year before the Irish landmark event of the so-called Good Friday Agreement), Mahon published the first version of his second and major poetical contribution to Neo-Victorian decadence, paradigmatically entitled *The Yellow Book*, which intensively and extensively re-semioticizes and re-poeticizes Decadence – past, present, and future – both as an 'ineluctable stage in history'[59] – populated by persons, actants, and personas in chronotopes Irish, British, European, global, cosmic – and as an anthropological matrix embedded in 'a forest of intertextuality' (*MYB97*:8, 29:56), explored by creative artists and critics lost among texts of any kind and transcodifications from any textual format to any other textual format. Mahon's *The Yellow Book* includes a Baudelairean prefatory 'Landscape' in verse plus twenty poems that, in the following years, he will submit to his habitual and inexhaustible revision process, and to editorial adjustments that are assembled in the following chart:[60]

The Yellow Book	*The Yellow Book*	*Decadence*	*Decadence*	*Decadence*
	Collected Poems of Derek Mahon	*New Collected Poems*	*New Selected Poems*	*The Poems (1961-2020)*
Loughcrew, The Gallery Press, 1997, pp. 57	Loughcrew, The Gallery Press, 1999, pp. 223-65	Loughcrew, The Gallery Press, 2011, pp. 195-229	London, Faber & Faber; Loughcrew,	Edited by Peter Fallon, Loughcrew, The

	[cf. *Literature Online*]		The Gallery Press, 2016, pp. 75-78	Gallery Press, 2021, pp. 201-33
Abbr. *MYB97*	Abbr. *MYB99*	Abbr. *MD11*	Abbr. *MD16*	Abbr. *MD21*
To the memory of Eugene Lambe (1939-1994) [9]				
[Epigraph:] 'Palinurus', *The Unquiet Grave* [10]				
0 Landscape (after Baudelaire) [11] (26)	0 Context: Baudelaire [223] (26)			
1 Night Thoughts [12-13] (52)	1 Night Thoughts [224-5] (47)	1 Night Thoughts [195-6]		1 Night Thoughts [202-2] (47)
2 Axel's Castle [14-15] (54)	2 Axel's Castle [226-7] (57)	2 Axel's Castle [197-8]	1 Axel's Castle [75-76]	2 Axel's Castle [203-4] (57)
3 At the Shelbourne [16-17] (54)	3 At the Shelbourne [228-9] (54)	3 At the Shelbourne [199-200]		3 At the Shelbourne [205-6] (50)
4 'shiver in your tenement' [18-19] (52)	4 'shiver in your tenement' [230-1] (52)	4 'shiver in your tenement' [201-2]		4 'shiver in your tenement' [207-8] (51)
5 Schopenhauer's Day [20-22] (68)	5 Schopenhauer's Day [231-3] (87)	5 Schopenhauer's Day [203-4]		
6 To Eugene Lambe in Heaven [23-25] (82)	6 To Eugene Lambe in Heaven [234-6] (81)	6 To Eugene Lambe in Heaven [205-7]		5 To Eugene Lambe in Heaven [209-11] (74)
7 An Bonnán Buí [26-27] (57)	7 An Bonnán Buí [237-8] (38)	7 An Bonnán Buí [208-9]		6 An Bonnán Buí [212-3] (39)
8 Remembering the '90s [28-29] (64)	8 Hangover Square [239-40] (60)	8 Hangover Square [210-11]		7 Hangover Square [204-5] (60)
9 At the Gate Theatre [30-32] (64)	9 At the Gate Theatre [241-2] (51)	9 At the Gate Theatre [212-3]		8 At the Gate Theatre [216-7] (43)
10 The Idiocy of Human Aspiration [33-34] (48)	10 The Idiocy of Human Aspiration [243-4] (58)			

11 At the Chelsea Arts Club [35-36] (59)	11 At the Chelsea Arts Club [245-6] (63)	10 At the Chelsea Arts Club [214-5]		9 At the Chelsea Arts Club [218-9] (54)
12 Aphrodite's Pool [37-38] (40)	12 Aphrodite's Pool [247-8] (41)	11 Aphrodite's Pool [216-7]		10 Aphrodite's Pool [220-1] (37)
13 Dusk (after Baudelaire) [39-40] (39)	13 Dusk (after Baudelaire) [249-50] (39)			
14 Rue des Beaux-Arts [41-43] (67)	14 Rue des Beaux-Arts [251-2] (67)	12 Rue des Beaux-Arts [218-9]		11 Rue des Beaux-Arts [222-3] (65)
15 Smoke [44-45] (63)	15 Smoke [253-4] (60)	13 Smoke [220-1]		12 Smoke [224-5] (48)
16 America Deserta [46-48] (70)	16 America Deserta [255-6] (75)	14 America Deserta [222-3]		13 America Deserta [226-7] (43)
17 The World of J. G. Farrell [49-50] (53)	17 The World of J. G. Farrell [258-9] (54)	15 The World of J. G. Farrell [224-5]		14 The World of J. G. Farrell [228-9] (34)
18 Death in Bangor [51-53] (80)	18 A Bangor Requiem [260-1] (70)	16 A Bangor Requiem [226-7]	2 A Bangor Requiem [77-78]	15 A Bangor Requiem [230-1] (64)
19 On the Automation of the Irish Lights [54-55] (50)	19 On the Automation of the Irish Lights [262-3] (44)			
20 Christmas in Kinsale [56-57] (62)	20 Christmas in Kinsale [264-5] (61)	17 Christmas in Kinsale [228-9]		16 Christmas in Kinsale [232-3] (41)

The critical reception of *The Yellow Book* has often blatantly understimated Mahon's theoretical and practical competence in nineteenth-century decadent poetic theory and practice (the one relevant to this article), as shown, for example, by the intuitive definition, unsupported by adequate textual evidence, of Mahon as 'the most remorseful aesthete'[61] or by the shallow remark that '*The Yellow Book* seems not to have paid much attention to some of the *fin-de-siècle* writing it addresses'.[62] As a corollary to this, it has also frequently overlooked the semiotic

relevance of oxymoronity in Mahon's late-twentieth-century poeticization of Neo-Victorian decadence, for instance when critical suggestions have taken the forms of

1) a (simplistically escapist) reference to his speculation 'about the new millennium and the possibilities of *alternative* ways of living';[63]
2) a reductive mention of his knowledge of the (unspecified) 'ambivalence' of 'the best [*which?*] decadent writers';[64]
3) an insightful (though hermeneutically naive) perception that the two terms 'literature' and 'litter' are not 'mutually exclusive, but […] overlap so frequently'.[65]

Such views do not take into sufficient account some strategically oxymoronic features of the poetic 'I' ('Our Protagonist', *MYB97*:8, 28:26) of Mahon's *The Yellow Book*, who keeps 'alight the cold candle of decadence' (*MYB97*:8, 29:41) in the name of late nineteenth-century anglophone decadents (*lato sensu*) like 'Wilde and Yeats' (*MYB97*:1, 12:21), George Moore (*MYB97*:2, 14:epigraph), Austin Clarke (*MYB97*:4, 18:epigraph), 'Dowson, Johnson, Symons and Le Gallienne' (*MYB97*:8, 28:25). From the view of the poetic 'I', all these 'desperate characters of the previous '90s' (*MYB97*:8, 28:23) are 'heroes' – i.e., etymologically, demi-gods in service to mankind – who, like some kindred personas in Mahon's first poetry collection, *Night-Crossing*, bring 'dangerous tokens to the new era' of a logocentric and ratiocentric world by combining intersemiotic 'wonders'[66] of a distinctly musico-literary kind. As counter-Odysseus 'slaves of the Siren', they are paradoxically forced to re-establish 'the archaic supremacy of the song'; as 'consorts of the Sphinx' (*MYB97*:8, 28:26), they are destined to the same fate as the lovers in Wilde's *The Sphinx*: their rational capacity is nullified by her anti-rationalist 'loathsome mystery', and their verbal (and literary) potentialities are silenced by her anti-verbal 'poisonous melodies'[67] despite the 'enlightenment's stereotyped message' of 'Oedipus' answer'.[68] In their sphinxian experience of 'their world of siren-song' (*MYB97*:19, 55:30), those 'desperate characters of the previous '90s' are radically different from Wilde's ideal critic, who

> will certainly be an interpreter, but he will not treat Art as a riddling Sphinx, whose shallow secret may be guessed and revealed by one whose feet are wounded and who knows not his name. Rather, he will look upon Art as a goddess whose mystery it is his province to intensify, and whose majesty his privilege to make more marvellous in the eyes of men.[69]

Two strategically paratextual interlocutors of the 'protagonist' of Mahon's *The Yellow Book* anticipate and support his self-identification as

> a decadent who lived to tell the story,
> surviving even beyond the age of irony
> to the point where the old stuff comes round again. (*MYB97*:8, 28:27-29)

These are the 'eccentric Irishman'[70] Eugene Lambe (1939-1994), 'colloquial yet ornate, | one of those perfect writers who never write' (*MYB97*:6, 23:19-20), who is the dedicatee of this macrotext of Neo-Victorian decatent dramatic monologues; and the English literary critic Cyril Connolly (1903-1974), from whose 'war book' *The Unquiet Grave*, written under the pseudonym 'Palinurus' 'to proclaim his faith in the unity and continuity of Western culture in its moment of crisis', Mahon took his epigraph to *The Yellow Book*: 'to live in a decadence need not make us despair; it is but one technical problem the more which a writer has to solve' (*MYB97*:epigraph, 10).[71] With such (Greimasianly) prestigious adjuvants in the conception and institutionalization of twentieth-century Neo-Victorian decadence, its 'protagonist' deliberately and coherently articulates the oxymoronic inheritance of those 'old boys of Yeats's 'tragic' (pathetic) generation' (*MYB97*:8, 28:18) in 'the pastiche paradise of the post-modern' (*MYB97*:4, 19:52). Their 'old stuff', which keeps seamlessly coming round again from cultural epoch to cultural epoch in Western experience, resurfaces in its oxymoronic conception of 'the pleasures of the text, periphrasis and paradox' (*MYB97*:2, 14:16).

However, Mahon's competent articulation of Neo-Victorian decadence in *The Yellow Book* is definitively personalized and authenticated by how he poeticizes some textualizations of intersemiosis, which, in the palimpsestic 1890s *Yellow Book*, was oxymoronically literarized as both the unrestrainable potentiality and the pathological symptom of a late nineteenth-century (imperfectly anaesthetized) dilemma that was impacting both ordinary *and* poetic language with

their symbiotic semiospheres. Mahon's intersemiotic investments include both those between (predominantly) verbal-oriented systems that feature also in 'Dowson and Company', and the ekphrastic ones between verbal and pictorial systems that abound in the whole of his creative output[72] and are authoritatively epitomized by Gustav Klimt's *Mermaids* (painted in the landmark year 1899) on the yellow cover of Mahon's 1997 *The Yellow Book*. However, its overall compositional approach to Neo-Victorian decadence cannot be judged only by its bookcover. What is unusually coherent, organic, and programmatic in the contextural counterpoint of its macrotext and microtexts is the creatively intensive adoption of musico-literary intersemioticity, i.e., that between literary systems and musical systems. The (abovementioned) oxymoronic complementarity of Siren and Sphinx is only one example of the still uninvestigated inheritance from the musico-literary intersemioticity of the originary 1890s *Yellow Book* (sketchily delineated in the first section of this article).

In elaborating the homology between language/literature and sound/music, which is the culture medium of musico-literary intersemioticity, the 'protagonist' of Mahon's *The Yellow Book* poeticizes the transposition of the otherwise irrecoverable soundsphere of the very long nineteenth century (with its logocentrically and ratiocentrically 'hegemonic syntagmatic model')[73] to the oxymoronic sonic world model of Neo-Victorian decadence. Anticipated in the paratextual areas of the epigraph from Connolly's *Unquiet Grave*[74] and the prefatory poem 'Landscape (after Baudelaire)',[75] this macrotextual process sustains the most organically musico-literary of its dramatic monologues and is carried out by simultaneously:

1. exploding the canonical Victorian soundsphere through a systematically oxymoronic sonic design, derived from an oxymoronic sonic imagination;
2. conceiving a new type of sonic disharmony (or post-harmony), whose (metaphorical) dissonances are not temporary instabilities to be resolved within the solar system of *one* tonal culture, but are themselves the permanent stabilizers of an oxymoronic network of *many* post-tonal cultures;

3. (re)composing the soundscape of Neo-Victorian decadence as a new sonic chronotope governed by an oximoronic sonic episteme, whose cross-fertilized and interactive DNA is regulated by both idiosyncratic individuality and homological coherence.

A first and highly emblematic case in point is the elaboration of a complex musico-literary isotopy in the fifth dramatic monologue, 'Schopenhauer's Day'. As its microtitle announces, it evokes the 'old bastard' (*MYB97*:5, 20:1) Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), who was one of the most competent in music and conversant in musico-literariness among the philosophers of his time, and strategically poeticizes a very relevant quote from his *World as Will and Idea*: 'music, the panacea for all our woes' (*MYB97*:5, 21:53).[76] Its Neo-Victorian decadent actualization of a daily soundscape in Schopenhauer's later life, it composes Frankfurt's dissonant sonic chronotope in an oxymoronic way which intertwines:

a) the presence in the imperial *Kaiser*saal of 'a thicket of fiddle-bows' (*MYB97*:5, 20:14) (with their unexpectedly folk terminology for violin-bows) and a polysonic/polysemic chiming from the Catholic Cathedral of St. Bartholomew (which is the *Kaiser*dom of Frankfurt) that Schopenhauer experiences in the poem 'as the Buddhists do' (*MYB97*:5, 21:43);

b) Schopenhauer's cultured 'flute practice' (which he had 'started […] as early as 1799')[77] of the flute part of the *Konzert C-Dur KV 299 für Flöte*, *Harfe und Orchester* by Mozart (*MYB97*:5, 20:8), and its metaphorization as the primaeval 'Pan-pipes in honour of a previous life' (*MYB97*:5, 20:9);

c) such non-rational metaphorization and the rational definition of the compositional process in Mozart, Schopenhauer's favourite composer after Rossini,[78] as the (in itself inherently oxymoronic) 'heartfelt calculus of Mozart'[79] (*MYB97*:5, 21:54).

'At the Chelsea Arts Club', the eleventh dramatic monologue of Mahon's 1997 *The Yellow Book*, takes his Neo-Victorian decadent actualization of Victorian decadence to one of the latter's most symbolic chronotopes. The (still existing) Chelsea Arts Club, founded in March 1891 by a cenacle of 55 members among artists and intellectuals living and working in that area of London, was a programmatically intersemiotic enterprise with aims both intellectual and practical, i.e., oriented both to the 'empyrean of aesthetic ideal' and 'to solve as far as possible the domestic problems of the Artist'.[80] The Neo-Victorian decadent fabrics of Mahon's actualization are woven with unmistakeably musico-literary threads[81] through a combination of oxymoron, paradox, and synaesthesia that 'tests the limits of language and perception',[82] and 'challenge[s] the limits imposed by dualistic thinking and binary logic'.[83] Thus, in the 1990s, in a way not unlike that in the 1890s, while an omnivorous and indistinct 'everywhere' popularizes and commodifies the Paterian aspiration of 'all art' to music into 'rock music'[84] (*MYB97*:11, 35:1), the poetic 'I"s culturally selective and exclusive 'we' takes 'refuge' against metaphonologically and semiotically 'raucous trivia' (a refined syntagmatic loan from George Steiner)[85] in the 'citadel' of the Chelsea Arts Club (*MYB97*:11, 35:3 and 9) beside a Thames intersemiotically poeticized through a double Whistlerian loan from both his 'Ten O'Clock Lecture'[86] and his pictorial and music-modelled[87] 'nocturnes consecrating wharf and bridge' (*MYB97*:11, 35:10-13 and 19).

Last but not least, 'Death in Bangor', the eighteenth and antepenultimate dramatic monologue in *The Yellow Book*, opens on the poetic 'I"s maternal burial in 'a new cemetery | on a cold hillside in the north of Co. Down' on the southern side of Belfast Lough 'half hidden by great drifts of rain' (*MYB97*:18, 51:1-2, 4). It maps the domestic chronotope of a mother who was 'a kind of artist, […] | setting against a man's aesthetic of cars and golf | your ornaments and other breakable stuff' (*MYB97*:18, 52:33-35) in 'a cold epitaph from your only son, | the wish genuine if the tone ambiguous' (*MYB97*:18, 53:69-70). Such tonal ambiguity finds an authoritative intertextual source in a quotation from the novel *December Bride* (1951) by the Scottish-born Northern Irish novelist Sam Hanna Bell (1909-1990), whose 'Nature, with her continual and

invariably indiscreet fertility, was a bad example to simple folk' is abridged to 'Nature's a bad example to simple folk' in a line within parentheses (*MYB97*:18, 51:30), surrounded by many examples of the mother's oxymoronic 'mingling of the orderly with the arbitrary',[88] hardly acceptable in a member of a strict Presbyterian community dominated by Orangists.

Like the artists in 'At the Chelsea Arts Club', Nature too 'indefinitely' and 'innocently' (*MYB97*:18, 52:49 and 66) ignores 'the limits' of both 'language and perception' and 'dualistic thinking and binary logic', and her ignorant unawareness brings about the culturally paradoxical coexistence of her home's 'intimate spaces' and 'provincial time' (*MYB97*:18, 51:6 and 20) with her 'frantic kitsch decor' (*MYB97*:18, 51:28) and 'incurable ache | of art' (*MYB97*:18, 53:75-76). On the 'score' (*MYB97*:7, 26:14) of Mahon's macrotextual elaboration of his Neo-Victorian decadent musico-literary intersemioticity, such coexistence corresponds to a dense maternal soundscape composed by the following oxymoronic oppositions of irremediably dissonant soundspheres:

a) the inevitable clash of the mother's paradoxical 'idea of the beautiful, not unrelated to Tolstoy | but formed in a tough city of ships and linen' (*MYB97*:18, 52: 41-42) with the urban 'dance-hall' euphoria (*MYB97*:18, 52:46) and 'daft musicals at the Curzon and the Savoy [cinemas]' (*MYB97*:18, 52:50), which, as Tolstoy wrote in *What is Art?*, like 'all the filthy operas, operettas, songs, romances, which are thriving in our world', show 'that contemporary art has one definite aim – spreading corruption as widely as possible';[89]

b) two apparently conflicting references to the mother's originary Protestant soundsphere in the blazing line in italics '*Remember 1690; prepare to meet thy God*' (*MYB97*:18, 52:59). This line conflates the sectarian sonicscape of 'the slogan 'Remember 1690', sometimes abbreviated to 'REM 1690', which is 'the reminder of present threats to the Ulsterman's security and independence',[90] and a quote from the Book of Amos (*King James Bible*, 4:12), which is the title of a famous Wesleyan hymn

and appears, now like then, in religious signs erected in rural Protestant areas of Northern Ireland;

c) the seemingly conflictual sonic design poeticized in the lines 'a hum of drums above the summer glens | echoing like *Götterdämmerung* over lough water' (*MYB97*:18, 52:63-64), whose superficial 'folk music *vs* art music' features hide a caricatural (and, thus, oxymoronic and paradoxical) equivalence between the 'drums' of 'the Orangemen practis[ing] for the July walk'[91] and Wagner's twilight of the gods. These two lines may have been influenced by the soundtrack written by the German composer Jürgen Knieper (1941-) for the movie *December Bride* (1991), based on Bell's novel, although their Wagnerian reference is diffused to a mere 'twilight' in the revised 1999 version of Mahon's *The Yellow Book* (*MYB99*:18, 261:54);

d) the oxymoronic counterpoint between the sonic design mentioned in c), which resounds 'in a violent post-industrial sunset blaze' (*MYB97*:18, 52:65), and the mother's 'innocently' humming of three pop music hits of her youth with their agile melodies, culturally adequate harmonies, swinging rhythms, and the centrifugal (from Bangor) perspectives of their lyrics (*MYB97*:18, 52:66-67): the 'Mexico way' of *South of the Border* (1939) by James Kennedy and Michael Carr, the 'slow boat to China' of the homonymous song (1948) by Frank Loesser, and the 'new horizon' of *Beyond the Blue Horizon* (1930) by Leo Robin, Richard Armstrong Whiting, and William Franke Harling.

These illustrative pieces of soundscape evidence in Mahon's *The Yellow Book* should not be neglected or downplayed. Just as those in the originary 1890s *Yellow Book* were paradigmatic of how the homology between language/literature and sound/music could be functional to the oxymoronic decadent approach to cultural semiotics and textual politics,[92] these re-write and re-read the 'old stuff' in the perspective of Mahon's approach to Neo-Victorian decadence. Although

the 'protagonist' in 'At the Chelsea Arts Club' prefers 'the traditional kinds of art' (*MYB97*:11, 35:31) whose 'song' he would have sung 'had I known the score' (*MYB97*:7, 26:14), the 'significant form'[93] (*MYB97*:11, 35:24) of Mahon's *The Yellow Book* shows that he knows it very well. In fact, he oxymoronically intensifies its vocal fragmentations, harmonic dissonances, rhythmic clashes, and timbre clusters in the ironic attempt to organize the compositional centre of his Neo-Victorian decadent semiosphere and personalize 'the postmodern assault upon the Enlightenment', arisen 'from political despair, not from revolutionary fervour',[94] by appropriating the 'elaborate methodologies and abstruse terminologies' of 'a kind of epistemological (or postepistemological) aestheticism'.[95]

In the first decade of the new millennium, Mahon applied the same intersemiotic treatment to one of his most prestigious (quasi-)decadent interlocutors in a magnificent poem on the poet's trade, first published as 'The Seagull (Trigorin, Act 4)' in an interim collection,[96] then included as 'Trigorin' in the book of poems *Life on Earth*,[97] and finally posthumously selected as 'Trigorin – Chekhov, The Seagull, Act 4' for his definitive *The Poems (1961-2020)*.[98] Its dialogical interaction with Anton Checkov's *The Seagull* (wr. 1895, perf. 1896), which 'confirmed him as the life and soul | of the new drama'[99] with strong decadent predilections,[100] gives preminence to musico-literary intersemioticity and, above all, to the semiotic value of the piano(forte), which has also been emphasized above as one of the (neglected) foundational musico-literary resources of the 1890s *Yellow Book*. While seemingly observing the culturally numb Trigorin from a Tryeplyev-like viewpoint, in fact, Mahon's poetic 'I' overshoots both Paulina Andreyevna's indexical association of Tryeplyev's 'playing a melancholy waltz' with depression, and Trigorin's reduction of the intersemiotically restraining simile of 'a cloud […] shaped like a piano' to a verbal 'note in his notebook'.[101] His oxymoronically intersemiotic metaphor 'the clouds are *grand* pianos' surpasses the world models of both, and the insurmountable semi-colon that separates its hemistich from the logocentric 'he makes a note'[102] in the following one, is a semiotic choice that definitively seals

Mahon's mastery of the transcodification of Victorian decadence into Neo-Victorian decadence also in the new millennium.

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[1] Ian Fletcher, 'Decadence and the Little Magazines', in *Decadence and the 1890s*, ed. by Ian Fletcher (London: Arnold, 1979), p. 192.
[2] Stanley Weintraub, '*The Yellow Book*: A Reappraisal', *The Journal of General Education*, 16 (1964), p. 136.
[3] Nicholas Freeman, *1895: Drama, Disaster and Disgrace in Late Victorian Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 4.
[4] Cyrena N. Pondrom, 'A Note on the Little Magazines of the English Decadence', *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter*, 1 (1968), p. 30.
[5] Brigid Brophy, *Black and White: A Portrait of Aubrey Beardsley* (London: Cape, 1968), p. 46.
[6] Arthur Symons, *The Art of Aubrey Beardsley* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918), p. 23.
[7] Brophy, p. 46.
[8] Cf. Edward-Ian Manapul, 'Music Halls and Operas: The Class Divide in *The Yellow Book*', and Roxanne Frazer, 'Musical Performance, Audience, and Class Relations: *The Yellow Book* Blurs the Lines', in *Situating the Yellow Book: Image, Text, Context*, https://nines.org/groups/62 [accessed 27 September 2023].
[9] Max Beerbohm, 'A Letter to the Editor', in *The Yellow Book*, 1, April 1894 (New York: AMS & Arno Press, 1967), pp. 77-78.
[10] Max Beerbohm, 'A Defence of Cosmetics', in *The Yellow Book*, 2, June 1894 (New York: AMS & Arno Press, 1967), p. 281.
[11] On the hermeneutic use of the hyphen in the adjective 'musico(-)literary' see Enrico Reggiani, *Introduzione* a *Il do maggiore di questa vita. Cinque saggi sulla cultura musico-letteraria di lingua inglese* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2016), p. 19.
[12] Frederick Greenwood, 'The Gospel of Content', *The Yellow Book*, 2, pp. 11-33. Henceforth cited in line.
[13] See, for example, Arthur Symons's version of such an oximoronic tangle in Jane Desmarais' paper 'The Musical Aesthetics ('such as it is') of Arthur Symons (1865-1945)', delivered at the conference *Arthur Symons: Writing across Arts and Cultures* organized by Elisa Bizzotto and Stefano Evangelista at the IUAV University of Venice, Italy, in 2015, https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/17584/ [accessed 31 October 2023].
[14] John Robert Reed, *Decadent Style* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985), pp. 10-11; cf. also Fraser Riddell's remarks on pianism and pianistic semiotics in 'Hearing: Bodies Resounding in Decadent Literature', in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 507-24.
[15] Juri Lotman, *Culture and Explosion* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), p. 123.
[16] Kim de Wolff, 'Materiality', in *Society for Cultural Anthropology*, https://culanth.org/fieldsights/materiality [accessed 5 October 2023].
[17] Robert Moore, 'Registers, Styles, Indexicality', in *The Cambridge Handbook of Discourse Studies*, ed. by Anna De Fina and Alexandra Georgakopoulou (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 10.
[18] Roland Barthes, *Image – Music – Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 56 (italics mine).
[19] George Bernard Shaw, 'The Religion of the Pianoforte', in George Bernard Shaw, *Shaw's Music. The Complete Musical Criticism in Three Volumes. Volume III: 1893-1950*, ed. by Dan H. Laurence (London: Max Reinhardt / The Bodley Head, 1981), p. 105.
[20] Cf. Philip Gilbert Hamerton, 'The Yellow Book, criticised', in *The Yellow Book*, 2, p. 187; cf. also the semiotic role of the pianoforte in *Natalie*, a short story by Aline Herminie Merriam (1860-1939) in *The Yellow Book*, 12, January 1897 (New York: AMS & Arno Press, 1967), pp. 245-47.
[21] Matthew Sturgis, *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 165.
[22] Sturgis, p. 166.
[23] Faith Binckes, *Modernism, Magazines and the British Avant-garde: Reading Rhythm, 1910-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 46-47.
[24] *The Artists of The Yellow Book & the Circle of Oscar Wilde* (London: Clarendon & Parkin Galleries, 1983).
[25] Stinehour Press, Lunenburg, Vermont, 1994, p. 64; cf. also Margaret D. Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner, '*The Yellow Book:* A Centenary Exhibition', *The Victorian Web*, https://victorianweb.org/decadence/yellowbook2.html [accessed 17 December 2023].
[26] Charlotte Ribeyrol, in 'Colourful Rare Books from Trinity's Library Collection on Display at Ashmolean Exhibition', 19 September 2023, https://www.trinity.ox.ac.uk/news/colourful-rare-books-trinitys-library-collection-display-ashmolean-exhibition [accessed 17 December 2023].
[27] John Betjeman, *Continual Dew: A Little Book of Bourgois Verse* (London: John Murray, 1937), pp. 1, l. 13.
[28] D. J. Enright, *The Laughing Hyena and Other Poems* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), pp. 38, l. 11.

[29] Cf. 'The Yellow Book Exhibition, 1-27 November 2019', *Poem Atlas*, https://www.poematlas.com/yellow-book [accessed 19 December 2023].
[30] R. K. R. Thornton, '"Decadence" in Later Nineteenth-century England', in Fletcher (ed.), *Decadence and the 1890s*, p. 26: the decadent dilemma is when 'a man [is] caught between *two opposite and apparently incompatible pulls*: on the one hand he is drawn by the world, its necessities, and the attractive impressions he receives from it, while on the other hand he yearns toward the eternal, the ideal, and the unwordly' (italics mine).
[31] Derek Mahon, 'Dowson and Company', in *Night-Crossing* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 4. For a detailed (cumulative/contextural) analysis of 'Dowson and Company', see Enrico Reggiani, *In attesa della vita: introduzione alla poetica di Derek Mahon* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1996), pp 135-44. On contextural analysis, cf. Neil Fraistat, *Introduction: The Place of the Book and the Book as Place*, in Neil Fraistat, ed., *Poems in Their Place: the Intertextuality and order of poetic collections* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 3-17.
[32] Derek Mahon, *Poems 1962-1978* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 2.
[33] Derek Mahon, *The Yellow Book* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1997).
[34] Derek Mahon, 'Decadence', in *The Poems (1961-2020)* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2021), pp. 201-33.
[35] William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Works of William Butler Yeats. Volume III. Autobiographies*, ed. by W. H. O'Donnell and D. N. Archibald (Scribner: New York 1999), p. 236 (italics mine). Mahon makes a direct textual reference to this chapter of Yeats's *Autobiographies* in section VIII. 'Remembering the '90s', in *The Yellow Book* (*MYB97*:8, 28:18; henceforth quoted as follows: edition [cf. the chart on pp. 38-40 of this article]: poem number, page number: line number).
[36] Joseph B. Mayor, 'Decadence', *The Journal of Philology*, 3 (1871), p. 347; cf. also p. 348: '"decadence" seems to have made little way in England until the last quarter of a century, when, possibly owing to the influence of Comte, it came into fashion, apparently to *denote* decline, and *connote* a scientific and enlightened view of that decline on the part of the user'.
[37] 'Continental literature in 1886: […], France, […]', *The Athenæum*, 1 January 1887, p. 10.
[38] Max Nordau, *Entartung* (Berlin: Carl Duncker, 1893), p. 106.
[39] Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: Heinemann, 1895), p. 302, where the German noun 'Ichsucht' is coherently translated as 'ego-mania'.
[40] Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 143.
[41] Umberto Eco, 'Apocalyptic and Integrated Intellectuals: Mass Communications and Theories of Mass Culture', in *Apocalyptics Postponed*, ed. by Robert Lumley (London: Flamingo, 1995), p. 28.
[42] See Giovanni Bottiroli, 'An Introduction to (Conjunctive) Scissional Logic', in *Paradoxes*, ed. by Stefano Arduini (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2011), p. 54: 'the most fascinating rhetorical figures (metaphor, oxymoron, etc.) are actually conjunctive'. On conjunctive logic see also Giovanni Bottiroli, *Che cos'è la teoria della letteratura* (Torino: Einaudi, 2006), esp. pp. 160-65 and 388-93.
[43] Michel Riffaterre, 'Traits décadents dans la poésie de Maeterlinck', in *La production du texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1979), p. 203.
[44] Francesco Marroni, *Victorian Disharmonies. A Reconsideration of Nineteenth-century Fiction* (Roma: John Cabot University Press, 2010), p. 11.
[45] James Jakob Liszka, 'A Critique of Lévi-Strauss's Theory of Myth and the Elements of a Semiotic Alternative', in *Semiotics 1981*, ed. by John N. Deely and Margot D. Lenhart (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1983), p. 464.
[46] Charles L. Bartow based this intriguing definition of oxymoron on its etymology in his *God's Human Speech. A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 12.
[47] Rosen, p. 142.
[48] Franco Marucci, *Introduzione*, in *Il vittorianesimo*, ed. by Franco Marucci (Napoli: Liguori, 2009, p. 5); the English translation of Marucci's definition of the Victorian code, based on Lotmanian cultural semiotics, is mine.
[49] Brendan Kennelly, 'Derek Mahon's Humane Perspective', in *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry*, ed. by Terence Brown and Nicholas Grene (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 150.
[50] On the ekphrastic features of Mahon's allusion to Gustave Moreau's *L'apparition* in 'Dowson and Company', see Reggiani, *In attesa della vita*, p. 138, n. 49.
[51] Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 12.
[52] William B. Worthen, 'Dramatic Poetry', in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Roland Green, fourth edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 376 (italics mine).
[53] Mahon, 'Dowson and Company', p. 1. Hereafter cited in line.
[54] *OED Online*, s.v. 'decadence (*n.*)', https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5361262747 [accessed 19 December 2023].
[55] Cf. Matthew Potolsky, 'The Decadent Counterpublic', *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 48 (2007), p. 6, https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/017444ar [accessed 5 October 2023]: 'The cosmopolitan impulses of decadent writers were specifically cultural, and for that reason, perhaps, limited in their broader political impact – but not in their political intent. […] Judgement of taste are, for decadent writers, politics by other means'.
[56] Reggiani, *In attesa della vita*, p. 144 (English version mine).
[57] Rosen, p. 141.
[58] Michelle Goldberg, 'The Problem of Political Despair', *New York Times*, 22 November 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/22/opinion/american-democracy.html [accessed 18 October 2023].

[59] Richard Drake, 'Decadence, Decadentism and Decadent Romanticism in Italy: Toward a Theory of Decadence', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 17 (1982), p. 69.
[60] Page numbers are in square brackets; the numbers of lines per poem are in round brackets.
[61] Kevin Barry, 'Review: Cigarette Papers. Reviewed Work(s): *The Yellow Book* by Derek Mahon; *Journalism: Selected Prose, 1970-1995* by Terence Brown', *The Irish Review*, 23 (1998), p. 151.
[62] Peter McDonald, 'Review: Incurable Ache. Reviewed Work(s): "The Yellow Book" by Derek Mahon', *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 56 (1998), p. 117.
[63] David G. Williams, '"A Decadent Who Lived to Tell the Story": Derek Mahon's "The Yellow Book"', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 23.1 (1999), p. 118 (italics mine).
[64] Jefferson Holdridge, 'Night-Rule: Decadence and Sublimity in Derek Mahon from *The Yellow Book* to the "Italian Poems"', *Journal of Irish Studies*, 17 (2002), p. 62.
[65] James Fitzpatrick Smith, 'Review. Reviewed Work(s): *The Yellow Book* by Derek Mahon', *Chicago Review*, 44.3/4 (1998), p. 212.
[66] 'Glengormley', l. 15, in Mahon, *Night-Crossing*, p. 5. For a detailed (cumulative/contextural) analysis of this poem see Reggiani, *In attesa della vita*, pp. 145-52.
[67] Oscar Wilde, *The Poems and Fairy Tales* (New York: The Modern Library, 1930), respectively p. 278 (l. 155) and p. 279 (l. 167).
[68] The mythological references in line 24 of 'Remembering the '90s' in Mahon's *The Yellow Book* (*MYB97*:28, 8:24: 'slaves of the Siren, consorts of the Sphinx') seem indebted to Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 46 ('the archaic supremacy of the song'), p. 4 (the 'enlightenment's stereotyped message' of 'Oedipus' answer'). It is also relevant in this perspective that a quotation from Adorno's *Minima Moralia* figures as the epigraph of *MYB99*:232, 5.
[69] 'The Critic as Artist', in Oscar Wilde, *The Complete* Works, vol. IV, *Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man*, ed. by Josephine M. Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 164.
[70] James Cahill, *David Hockney* (London: Hachette UK, 2022), p. 98.
[71] Cyril Connolly, *The Unquiet Grave: A Word Cycle by Palinurus* (London: Hamilton, 1951), pp. xi, xii, 54.
[72] In the last decades, contemporary Irish poetry specialists have frequently anointed Mahon as one of the most distinguished champions of *ekphrasis*, which John Heffernan has labelled as 'the verbal representation of visual representation' ('Ekphrasis: Theory', in *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature – Image – Sound – Music*, ed. by Gabriele Rippl (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), p. 35.
[73] Cf. Franco Marucci's definition of the Victorian code, based on Lotmanian cultural semiotics, which reads as follows: 'hegemonic syntagmatic model, contrasted and eroded from within by semantic and symbolic categories'. Marucci, p. 5 (translation mine).
[74] By borrowing its epigraph from Connolly's *Unquiet Grave*, Mahon's 'protagonist' articulates the Neo-Victorian decadent project of a musico-literary intersemioticity that intertwines the semiotically oxymoronic elegiac echoes of both the death of Virgil's Palinurus and 'and old border ballad in which a lover haunts the grave of his mistress and troubles her sleep' (Connolly, p. xiii). On the homonymous 'old border ballad' *The Unquiet Grave, or, Cold Blows the Wind*, see e.g., *English Folk Songs Collected and Arranged with Pianoforte Accompaniment,* selected edition, vol. II, *Songs and Ballads*, ed. by Cecil J. Sharp (London: Novello and Company, 1916), pp. xii, 18-19.
[75] For the 'protagonist' of Mahon's 1997 *Yellow Book*, the compositional (though still sight-dominated) process of writing 'chastely' his (urban) 'eclogues' requires, nonetheless, an oxymoronically Baudelairean soundscape that intersemiotically combines both hearing the (averbal) 'grave hymns wind-blown' from the 'church spires' ('masts of the ocean-going city') to 'my ivory tower' and seeing (imperceptibly verbal) 'workshops full of noise and talk' (*MYB97*:11, 0:1,4, 6-7).
[76] Cf. Schopenhauer's 'Musik […] als Panakeion aller unserer Leiden', in *Die Welt als Wille un Vorstellung*, Erster Band, Erster Teilband (Köln: Könemann, 1997), p. 386.
[77] David E. Cartwright, *Schopenhauer: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 30.
[78] Cf. Yael Braunschweig, 'Schopenhauer and Rossinian Universality: On the Italianate in Schopenhauer's Metaphysics of Music', in *The Invention of Beethoven and Rossini: Historiography, Analysis, Criticism*, ed. by Nicholas Mathew and Benjamin Walton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 28.
[79] This Mozartian reference is extended to 'the heartfelt calculus of Bach and Mozart' in *MYB99*:5, 233:54; instead, the whole poem is omitted in *MD21*. Cf. Louis Zukofsky, *'A'* (New York: New Directions, 1959), p. 258: 'Why write an essay | Saying Bach took from the folk | Their church for a calculus | And Mozart from the folk | Their stage for his calculus, | And some of us | Folk as we are from | Two wars what calculus'.
[80] Tom Cross, *Artists and Bohemians: 100 Years with the Chelsea Arts Club* (London: Quiller Press, 1992), pp. 42, 90.
[81] The 'symphonies in white', which the poetic 'I"s 'we' 'treasure' (*MYB97*:11, 35:18) against the 'exhausted chrome | grumbling at funeral pace' (*MYB97*:11, 35:14-15), may be a complex Neo-Victorian decadent derivative from the synaesthetic decadent matrix exemplified in both the '*Symphonie en blanc majeur*', in Gabriele d'Annunzio's *Il Piacere* (Milano: Fratelli Treves, 1889), p. 383, and Oscar Wilde's poem 'Symphony in Yellow' (1881). On the musical meaning of 'chrome' see e.g., William Wilson, *A New Dictionary of Music* (London: William Hughes, 1835), pp. 57, 73, 100.

[82] Fabien Desset, 'Synesthesia in Percy Bysshe Shelley's Ekphrasis: From Audible Paintings to Tangible Ideas', *Interfaces*, 36 (2015), p. 189.
[83] Rostam J. Neuwirth, 'Equality in View of Political Correctness, Cancel Culture and Other Oxymora', *International Journal of Legal Discourse*, 8 (2023), p. 2.
[84] Cf. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1904), p. 140. In *MYB99*:11 (245-246), the semiotic gap between 'everywhere' and 'we' is strengthened through both the substitution of 'rock music' with 'pop music' (*MYB99*:11, 245:1, italics mine), and the conflict between the former's '*white noise* of late-century consumerism' and the latter's '*symphonies in white*' (*MYB99*:11, 245: 2 and 20, italics mine).
[85] George Steiner, *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1995* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 15.
[86] James A. McNeill Whistler, *Ten O'Clock. A Lecture* (Portland, ME: Thomas Bird Mosher, 1916), p. 13.
[87] On Whistler's synaesthetic, oxymoronic, and paradoxical creative process in *Nocturnes* (*et al.*), cf. Arabella Teniswood-Harvey, 'Whistler's Nocturnes: A Case Study in Musical Modelling', *Music in Art*, 35 (2010), pp. 71-83.
[88] Sam Hanna Bell, *December Bride* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1974), p. 143.
[89] Alexandra Tolstoy, 'Tolstoy and Music', *The Russian Review*, 17 (1958), pp. 258-59. Derek Mahon also explicitly and extendedly refers to Tolstoy's conception of art in his poem 'New Space', included in the collection *An Autumn Wind* (Loughcrew, The Gallery Press, 2010), p. 20, ll. 23-30.
[90] Peter Burke, 'Co-memorations: Performing the past', in *Performing the past: memory, history, and identity in modern Europe*, ed. by Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree, and Kay Winter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), p. 113.
[91] Bell, p. 127.
[92] On textual politics, see Jay L. Lemke, *Textual Politics: Discourse and Social Dynamics* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1995).
[93] Steiner, p. 142.
[94] Rosen, p. 143.
[95] Ibid., p. 141.
[96] Derek Mahon, *Somewhere the Wave*, Drawings and Watercolours by Bernadette Kiely (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2007), no page numbers.
[97] Derek Mahon, *Life on Earth* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2008), pp. 15-16.
[98] Mahon, *The Poems (1961-2020)*, pp. 294-95.
[99] Derek Mahon, 'Chekhov at the Grove', in *The Poems (1961-2020)*, p. 495, ll. 28-29.
[100] Anton Chekhov, 'Letter to A. S. Savorin, Nov. 2, 1895', in *Letters on the Short Story, the Drama and Other Literary Topics*, ed. by Louis S. Friedland (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964), p. 197.
[101] Anton Chekhov, *The Plays of Anton Chekhov*, trans. by Paul Schmidt (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999), pp. 148, 133.
[102] Mahon, *The Poems (1961-2020)*, p. 294, l. 9 (italics mine).

'A series of variations on a theme': Reinvention and Amplification of Decadence in Jeremy Reed's *Dorian: A Sequel*

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In 2021 a book of twelve manifestoes was published by a group of writers, spearheaded by Brendan Connell and Justin Isis, who call themselves neo-decadents and are against what they term 'Neo-Passéism', a symptom of capitalism in which 'we are trapped in numerous overlapping "era markets" running on commodified nostalgia'.[1] One of the contributors to these manifestos is the London-based, Jersey-born writer Jeremy Reed (1951–). Neo-decadence is reflected in what Reed calls the 'new real', whose distinguishing feature is '[i]ntensified visual imagery'; writing without it would be like a 'non-alcoholic drink'.[2] He hallows *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/1891) as 'the epitome of decadence' and 'the first British underground novel' in which Oscar Wilde excels at 'saturated imagery',[3] and goes on to consider the work of William Burroughs, J. G. Ballard, and William Gibson as worthy of the aesthetic embodied in Wilde's novel. For Reed, neo-decadence is not about resuscitating the past, but about 'being sucked forward into ultimate novelty by the forces of imagination that shape the new real into its appropriately expansive psychic postcode'.[4] What does Reed mean by 'expansive psychic postcode', and how does he embrace 'absolute novelty'? This is somewhat perplexing as his œuvre is obsessed with the past.

Reed has been a prolific writer of queer decadence since the 1970s. His work has been praised by Ballard himself, and poets David Gascoyne and Seamus Heaney, among others. A flamboyant performer, Reed has been described as 'provocateur extraordinaire'.[5] He is a maverick, a visionary poet, novelist, and biographer who wears his influences on his sleeve. He is drawn to the obscure, the experimental, and the avant-garde, represented by such figures as Wilde, Arthur Rimbaud, Jean Genet, Iain Sinclair, Anne Sexton, and especially Ballard, as well as rock musicians David Bowie, Marc Almond, Lou Reed, and Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones. Reed is fascinated with the iconography of glam rock stardom, but he also specializes in reinventing or reimagining

figures and writers associated with transgressive decadence, publishing biofiction and memoirs on Caligula, the Marquis de Sade, Rimbaud, and the Comte de Lautréamont, just as Wilde was obsessed with the cult of personality in nonconformist, marginal artists such as Thomas Chatterton and Thomas Griffiths Wainewright.

At the turn of the millennium, Reed published the homoerotic *Dorian: A Sequel to the Picture of Dorian Gray* (1997) with Peter Owen's publishing house. It is a book about hedonism, anguish, and introspection, peppered with Wilde's aphorisms and soundbites, muted by a sombre style. This is a poet's novel: hypnotic and hieratic in its tone, obscene yet elegant in its diction, saturated, hyper-visual, and filmic in its style, an exemplar of neo-decadence as the 'new real'. Three years after the publication of *Dorian: A Sequel*, Reed edited the *Lippincott's* magazine version of Wilde's text (including Chapter 16 of the 1891 version) for Creation Books. Writing long before he contributed his own manifesto of neo-decadence, Reed describes *Dorian Gray* in the introduction as the 'blueprint for the subversive genre' of the twentieth century as it is expressed by Burroughs, Ballard, and Genet; Dorian 'prefigures the metamorphic character of Divine' in Genet's debut novel *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* [*Our Lady of the Flowers*] (1943).[6] Reed's *Dorian: A Sequel* may aspire to be in the company of these writers' underground works, but, crucially, it carries its Wildean 'blueprint' in a double sense: by subverting the narrative and yet reinforcing its message. In other words, it does so not only in its intertextual allegiance, but in its overt intertextual self-reflexivity as an element with which Wilde's text is already invested.

The movement against neo-Passéism, to which Jeremy Reed belongs, is in a sense a counter-neo-Victorian movement: it is suspicious of streamlined homage. The new real shifts emphasis to the derived text of the present and even to the future, a phenomenon acknowledged by Marie-Luise Kohlke. In what Kohlke calls 'appropriative reuse', the emphasis of certain neo-Victorian works is on reimagining rather than on recreating.[7] Taken to the extreme, this idea can lead to the neo-Passéist polemic against reconstructing and rewriting the past. Even though Reed falls in with the neo-decadents' antagonistic approach, his novel appeared in the heyday of neo-

Victorian writing, in the 1990s, and so it cannot be neatly extricated from it. My aim in this essay is to focus on how Reed's *Dorian* re-uses Wilde's *Dorian Gray* in a unique manner that pivots on self-reflexivity: it amplifies and reinvents Wilde's decadence, measuring its tropes up against the arch-paradox of life as a work of art. Reed indulges in Wilde's novel not as something that lends itself to straightforward postmodern adaptation or historical nostalgia, but as an ur-text of decadent mythology that contains a map of its possibilities, a golden template, a formula of narrative transformation and amplification that projects into the future.

'[N]ot intended as a literal sequel'

Reed's *Dorian: A Sequel* predates Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002) by five years. Even though Self's neo-Victorian take on Wilde's novel enjoys the limelight, Reed's *Dorian* remains in obscurity. Self's novel updates Wilde's backstory by faithfully adapting it in the technological, cultural, and political milieu of the 1980s and 1990s: Dorian is an HIV-positive man who infects others but remains unchanged. Dorian's decaying portrait here is a 'video installation' created by Baz (Basil) and 'called *Cathode Narcissus*'.[8] Self's narrative rationalizes Dorian's story while treating it as a universally repeatable twentieth-century myth that can be apparelled accordingly in each decade, splicing together all the decade-long fashions that have come before, the 'arithmetic cultural progression of modal repetition'.[9] On the other hand, Reed's brand of neo-Victorian decadence is peculiar. Across its eight chapters, it opens up a discursive channel of a multi-layered and strangely incestuous intertextuality with Wilde's novel. Its plot is a roadmap to a metafictional Dorian, bifurcated into a literal and an anachronistic or parallel version.

The year is 1897 and Dorian has survived the mutilation of his portrait. He has schemed and murdered his illegitimate lookalike half-brother Jim, placing 'his own rings on the dead man's defaced body', giving rise to the belief that Dorian Gray is dead.[10] Now Dorian lives in Paris with Lord Henry Wootton. The two are in a fraught homosexual relationship. The roles are here reversed as it is Dorian who exerts an influence on Lord Henry. Lord Henry feels he is becoming

a 'parody' of Dorian and returns to his wife Victoria who has discovered the pleasures of infidelity.[11] To fend off his conscience, while alternating between narcissism and self-loathing, Dorian becomes a dabbler in the occult. He is a nocturnal creature, choreographing elaborate, orgiastic S&M ceremonies, embodying a kind of satanic messianism as 'the leather-crown king of the underworld'. He is hounded by an obsessive transvestite by the name of Nadja who threatens to expose Dorian's crimes and kill him. He encounters real-life homosexual decadent writers Paul Verlaine and Wilde when the latter is released from prison. At Le Procope, Harry comes across an absinthe-inebriated and dissolute Verlaine accompanied by Lucien Letinois, a feminine 'blue-denimed worker'.[12] In an extensive passage Verlaine reminisces about Rimbaud and the latter's work and suicide.[13] Dorian moves to Venice, 'a city that to [him] personified decadence'[14] to prepare for his death – an obvious nod to Thomas Mann's famous novella. In Venice he presides over and is apotheosized by a court of transvestites. He takes up rooms with Florentino, a smitten beautiful young painter that he marries in an ostentatiously planned, sacrilegious wedding ritual, consummating his marriage at the centre of a magic circle under the gaze of his disciples.

The ending of the novel is an intertextual inversion or transposition of Wilde's ending: Dorian is on the verge of paranoia as signs of ageing and decay mar his beauty. The now grotesque-looking Dorian attempts to stab his portrait while Nadja, his pursuer, stands menacingly behind him and stabs him. But to his surprise the portrait has been restored to its perfect beauty, just as Basil Hallward had painted it.

What Wilde glosses over or leaves understated in his novel, Reed brings to the fore and explores in detail, especially Dorian's nocturnal city sojourns. Reed fills in gaps, overwrites characters, and fleshes out narrative permutations. He sketches out Dorian's clandestine activities and unuttered sins, follows narrative possibilities to their logical conclusion (such as Dorian's relationship with Harry), entangles the historical world of the 1890s with fiction (Dorian meeting Wilde and Verlaine, for example), and toggles or reverses plot details (such as Dorian influencing Harry; Dorian ageing with his portrait being intact). In taking advantage of the elasticity of Wilde's

text, what Reed imaginatively employs is the narrative device of retcon (a portmanteau of 'retroactive continuity'): this term means that a sequel or spinoff reworks or elaborates the parent narrative in a way that does not violate its internal logic and cohesion. Retcon is a popular term originally associated with graphic novel franchises and is often suspicious of distorting the ideas of the original.[15] An example of a Wilde-inspired neo-Victorian retcon novel, also set in 1897, is Philip Purser-Hallard's *The Spider's Web* (2020), in which Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson step into the world of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) to solve a murder mystery. Even though retconning is linked with genre fiction, Reed employs it in his poetic novel. He retcons *Dorian Gray* not because he wants to revise it or use it as background cloth, but to showcase its inbuilt potential for neo-decadent transformation.

Reed's retconned sequel, however, seems to be marred by a curious inconsistency. We know that it is set in 1897, and in the preface Reed clarifies that the 'novel begins where Wilde's ends'.[16] But does Wilde's narrative end in 1897? In Wilde's novel Dorian comes across Huysmans's *À rebours*, so the original novel is set between 1884 and 1890, most likely in 1890, the year of its first publication. We also know that at the beginning of Wilde's novel Dorian is 20 years of age, and when he dies 18 years have elapsed – this is what Sybil Vane's enraged brother James tells Dorian towards the end of the book.[17] That makes Wilde's Dorian 38 years of age, and the year of his death circa 1908. Further, Reed's Dorian meets Wilde in 1897, yet he listens to Charles Aznavour, Juliette Gréco, and Serge Lama on his audio system,[18] a combination of French chanson singers that push the time to the 1960s. Is, then, 1897, a glaring blunder? In the preface Reed explains that

> The book is not intended as a literal sequel to Wilde's novel, but more as the expansion of a theme into its modern equivalents. I have taken liberties with the time-frame, and juxtaposed historic with contemporary associations. I have tried to maintain the spirit of Wilde's authoritatively decadent novel, and to transpose his *fin de siècle* aesthetics to a corresponding set of values existing at the end of the twentieth century. […] In giving Dorian Gray another face-lift, I have not altered the predominant characteristics with which Wilde invested his creation. It is quite simply another time, another place, and so the story continues.[19]

Reed tacitly perceives Wilde's *Dorian* as a 'metamorphic' text (to use Reed's own characterisation of Genet's Divine) that is configured in such a way that it lends itself to future projections and extrapolations. In Dorian's perfumed room, surrounded by his *objets d'art* and books, Harry muses that Dorian has perhaps 'multiple lives', '1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, all the way to a thousand'.[20] It should be noted that this technique of amalgamating the time period of the subject matter with contemporary aesthetics is routinely found in Reed's œuvre. In his neo-decadent novel *Boy Caesar* (2004), for example, Jim is a doctoral student who writes his dissertation on Heliogabalus, embellishing the historical record in order to reconstruct the emperor's life by employing a heavily anachronistic style. In the preface, Reed explains that he has 'taken the liberty of fusing classical and modern times', thus 'giving Boy Caesar another bite at the apple'.[21] Reed may be a serial narrative revamper, and 'another bite at the apple' may be similar to 'another face-lift', but his *Dorian Gray* is not like other decadent stories. Wilde's original text turns out to be a narrative of infinite side-shadowing possibilities as well as a sequel-making machine. Dorian himself exhibits an extraordinary metafictional awareness:

> He knew he could never again begin to retell his story. There was something so intractable about personal narrative that it could be committed only once, and after that it became a series of variations on a theme. Any number of untruths constellated around a quasar hidden in the unconscious.[22]

Dorian, the 'ultimate enigma',[23] represents an inscrutable centre that undergoes a continual neo-Victorian transfiguration. The eternal 'theme' of Dorian's secret of beauty in the face of life's limitations can be repeated in 'variations', both within the novel and across existing and hypothetical sequels. The retconned story set in 1897 and its anachronistic 'face-lift' correspond to two visual styles that are fused.

In the first one, the novel bears the characteristic decadent signature of the collector's exquisite *objets d'art*, recasting Wilde's and Huysmans's iconography of elegant sensuality and excess. Reed emulates the artificiality of Des Esseintes' *château*, which in Huysmans's novel is designed to resemble a ship's cabin. Correspondingly, with its star-studded 'ultramarine ceiling'

Dorian's 'bedroom resemble(s) a galactic *annus mirabilis*'.[24] Echoing Des Esseintes' gem-studded tortoise, Dorian has two pet snakes named Sodom and Gomorrah, a menagerie of reptiles and stuffed animals, and mannequins modelled on aliens and extraterrestrials.[25] He has an extensive collection of 'ostentatious ensembles', a 'textural density of velvets, satins, heavy sequins', a description that applies to Reed's own scintillating writing style as well. Dorian is a connoisseur of the occult, and his bookshelves are lined with 'the works of John Dee and Thomas Vaughan, lives of Gilles de Rais, the Marquis de Sade's scatological novels, the works of Eliphas Levi and J. K. Huysmans, and a whole compendium of privately printed erotica', with the 'ritualistic accoutrements' to his reading being a collection of 'perfumes, ceremonial robes and sex toys'. He owns a 'specially bound copy of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*', 'bound in black silk from an item of Jeanne Duval's lingerie'; the narrator here notes that 'Baudelaire's fingers must also have lived on the fabric in its tight adherence to his mistress's curves'. And *À rebours* has a synaesthetic effect on Dorian, reminding him of 'semen and perfume, incense and ripe hayfields before thunder'.[26] Within the trope of the collector's eccentric repertoire of objects and tastes, that of the decadent book that exerts its influence on the main character is of key importance. By having Dorian revering *Les Fleurs du Mal* (also cherished by Des Esseintes), *À rebours* (the 'yellow book'[27] that haunts Wilde's Dorian), and *Dorian Gray* itself (a book that consumes Reed's Dorian), Reed amplifies Wilde's trope of multiple nesting of books within books as well as forking out a shortcut within this nesting. Reed's Dorian is not just culturally appropriated in the manner of Self's adaptation. The text he inhabits is caught in a bidirectional relationship between literary influence and response.

In the other, anachronistic visual style (anticipating Self's techno-cultural updating) Reed's retconned sequel is, in fact, a reimagined neo-Victorian sequel. As such, it invests Wilde's Victorian tale with imagery and vocabulary evocative of the 1990s, Reed's own time when he wrote the book. Reed's approach is distilled in a nonconformist translation of a poem by Baudelaire, 'Les Métamorphoses du vampire' [The Vampire's Metamorphoses'], which he contributed to an

anthology in 1992, opting for such pornographic renderings as 'scarlet lipstick mouth' and 'sucked the pearl beads from my cock'.[28] Incidentally this poem by Baudelaire resonates with Dorian. Reed's textual patina in the novel is decisively Ballardian. Dorian often seems like a character out of Ballard's experimental, transgressive novels, such as *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) and *Crash* (1973). He is written in a twentieth-century psycho-technological vernacular that belongs to the province of science fiction and echoes advanced biology, computer science, and intersecting geometries, expressing movement and speed in the evening cityscape:

> Neons, logos kaleidoscoped into jerky cryptograms.
>
> The cab took the length of a sizzling avenue, bucking the sparkling wall of sustained sibilants. They were moving at speed again, the lights fizzing as geometric fractures, the night breaking up around them. It was like looking at scrambled brain cells.
>
> [Dorian's] past was floating on the waters like a data-based hologram. He imagined seeing his image cloned right across the lagoon: *Dorian Gray*.
>
> [Dorian's] life appeared to be the chemical printout of an uninterrupted future. His informational DNA, his gene pool, his endorphin buzz, his biochemistry were all programmed for a future in which Dorian would share.[29]

These ultramodern Ballardian images do more than serve as stylistic devices. They participate in the novel's neo-decadent status as a metafiction in a dynamic conversation with the original, especially in capturing the interstices between Dorian's split selves. Reed even grafts the mythology of decadent archetypes onto Ballard's twentieth-century mythology. In the final chapter Dorian imagines a labyrinth full of 'banks of television and computer screens on which the dead would show': a 'psychopathic pantheon' including 'Caligula, Heliogabalus, Pope Pius V, the Marquis de Sade', and Wilde himself.[30] Reed replaces Ballard's hagiographic gallery of such figures as Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, and John Kennedy, with a rollcall of historical figures associated with decadence.

The difference between Self's and Reed's immersion of *Dorian Gray* in a sea of technological postmodernism is that the former remakes Wilde's novel more conventionally, mapping it onto his own contemporary era, while the latter maps his era onto the novel. If for Self

the story of Dorian Gray is accessorised by the imagery of a late-twentieth-century decade, for Reed this imagery is the very breathing style of the story. The examples quoted above tend towards Reed's idea of neo-decadence as the 'new real' and the aesthetics of 'novelty' in reflecting the past being pushed into the future.[31] The novel's strategy of amplification goes beyond decadent iconography; it pivots on an unusual metafictional axis in which the narrative frame is hybridized and bifurcated: Reed's Dorian is Wilde's Dorian and at the same time he is not, in the sense that he is a Dorian from a parallel universe.

Dorian meets his author

Dorian's interaction with Wilde himself, especially their extended chance encounter in Chapter 3, makes Reed's novel stand out. It is what pushes Reed's retconning ingenuity and novelty into the territory of self-reflexivity. In his introduction to Wilde's novel in its *Lippincott's* version, Reed makes the claim that Wilde's double life as a homosexual man in the West End is injected into the figure of Dorian.[32] Reed's sequel reconfigures this avatarial relationship, but unsettles it by having Dorian meet a post-penitentiary lackadaisical Wilde in Paris. In keeping with the anachronization of the narrative, Dorian enters a club on the 'corner of Rue de Richelieu' with a 'pink neon cat' as its sign and 'pink' table lamps. His attention is arrested by Wilde's photograph on the wall, a discreet in-joke that parallels Dorian and his portrait. It turns out that the club is a haunt Wilde frequents, going under the name of Sebastian Melmoth.[33] The two have a conversation, and a rent boy enters the scene and dances for Wilde. The scene crescendos to a chaotic situation in which the dancing young man produces a knife and creeps up on Wilde who is whisked away by Dorian in a taxi that takes them to his apartment. By having Dorian and Wilde meet and interact, Reed introduces what Gérard Genette has called 'metalepsis', in which intertextual diegetic thresholds are transcended, evoking the metafictions of Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino.[34]

The author-as-character is as old as literature itself, from Euripides and Aeschylus in Aristophanes' *Frogs* to Virgil in Dante's *Divina Commedia*, from the quasi-historical reconstruction

of Shakespeare in Wilde's *The Portrait of Mr W. H.* to Victorian writers as characters in neo-Victorian novels. Particularly faddish in that regard have been genre fiction sleuth mysteries, such as Howard Engels's *Mr. Doyle and Dr. Bell* (1997), James Reese's *The Dracula Dossier: A Novel of Suspense* (2008), William Palmer's 'Mr. Dickens' series (1990s), or more pertinently Gyles Brandreth's Oscar Wilde murder mysteries (2007–2012). In Reed's case, however, we have something different. The novel shares with the aforementioned examples what Richard Saint-Gelais calls 'transfictionality', but in a particularly specialised manner.[35] This is a type of narrative in which the character confronts the author that created them, and it has its own precedents: in *True Histories* by Lucian of Samosata (second century CE), for instance, Odysseus meets Homer. A more relevant example of neo-Victorian decadence is Ken Russell's symbolist camp film *Salome's Last Dance* (1988), where the character-meets-author trope is staged: Wilde plays audience to a private performance of his own play in a brothel, even occasionally interacting with the actors/characters.[36] According to Paul Franssen and Ton Hoenselaars, this kind of appropriation, rather than confrontation, is 'a subtler form' of Bloomian anxiety of influence, 'in which an author neutralises his predecessor by rewriting him in his own image'.[37]

Dorian and Wilde '[a]imed for a collisional future', retreating 'into the precincts of inner space'.[38] The phrase 'inner space' famously sums up Ballard's theory about science fiction. With reference to the dreamworld interiority of Surrealist painting, Ballard defines 'inner space' as 'the internal landscape of tomorrow that is a transmuted image of the past, and one of the most fruitful areas for the imaginative writer'.[39] Reed paraphrases this definition loosely and repurposes it. In the neo-decadent literature of the future that *Dorian: A Sequel* represents, Wilde the author has receded and become just another character, a virtual fiction within the text.

Yet, in a further retconning narrative contortion, Reed's Dorian is only Wilde's fiction insofar as he is a farfetched coincidence in the sequel's intradiegetic reality: Reed's Dorian is not Wilde's Dorian, but something of a reverse simulacrum: a random individual whose life closely resembles that of Wilde's protagonist by chance, thus substantiating the motto in 'The Decay of

Lying' that 'Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life'.[40] Reed's Dorian has fallen under the spell of Wilde's *Dorian Gray* (alongside *À rebours* and Baudelaire's poetry). Wilde's text as a 'blueprint' (to go back to Reed's introduction to Wilde's text) reveals the way to 'create a self distinct from the past'.[41] Reed's Dorian is inspired by the original Dorian's desire to annihilate the past and escape into a realm where everything impossible becomes possible. He confesses to Wilde: 'I had the feeling that you had created me through your book. That I had stepped out of your mind and committed the crimes you had imagined on the page'.[42] This metaleptic trick mirrors Wilde's own Dorian, whose life is an imitation as well as a prefiguration of the fictional Des Esseintes:

> The hero, the wonderful young Parisian in whom the romantic and the scientific temperaments were so strangely blended, became to him a kind of pre-figuring type of himself. And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it.[43]

Reed helps to underscore the original as a sequel-making machine. It is not surprising that in a similar moment in Peter Ackroyd's *The Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), a quasi-imaginary autobiographical memoir of Wilde in 1900, Bosie Douglas falls under the spell of Oscar's novel and so he was 'determined to meet its author' as 'he felt he had read in *Dorian Gray* the history of his own life'.[44]

The metafictional possibilities generated by such an encounter unravel further. Wilde replies to Dorian: 'Your story involves me in the despair I had anticipated'. The conversation makes the intertextual narrative fold and loop over itself. Then Dorian says: 'Time is always blacked out in my life. Drugs, sex and manipulated states of consciousness do the rest. I am not sure that I am not dead and exist in an extratemporal state.'[45] Reality becomes just another layer of fiction when it is enveloped and co-opted by another narrative. The effect of a lifestyle of decadent indulgence is to extricate life from the ravages of time. Hence, the libertine Dorian is a walking paradox as he imagines himself a fiction, static and frozen in time. Reality and fiction converge to a vanishing point.

With the infinite regress triggered by juxtaposing reality with fiction, Reed circumscribes art-imitating-life as a continual process. Wearing 'a dark-blue suit with a pink carnation splashed over the buttonhole',[46] Wilde is sitting at a table, reading a book, his body now large, unmuscular and neglected. Dorian orders champagne cocktails and approaches him. Reed brings the scene to life strategically by injecting vividness of detail. By doing so, the metafictional encounter between character and author acquires a thrilling effect of ambiguity between happenstance and verisimilitude. The conversation explores the full potential of such an encounter:

> 'You are just as I imagined Dorian Gray', [Wilde] said. 'I knew I wouldn't find or see him until after I described him in my book. You see, my idea is right, that art inspires and directs nature. You would never have existed had I not described Dorian. Do sit down, Mr Gray.'[47]

Wilde's hypothesis here contains the novel's double reading: in the logic of 'sequel', Reed's Dorian now turns into the exact same fictional Dorian from Wilde's original novel, both retconned and reimagined. Reed's Dorian exists because of Wilde's novel: 'I had the feeling you had created me through your book. That I had stepped out of your mind and committed the crimes you had imagined on the page'. And in a further blurring of epistemological boundaries, Wilde says: 'ideas expressed in my novel were used against me. Fiction was used to seem a reality.'[48]

'You must reinvent yourself again'

If Reed highlights the original *Dorian Gray* as a textual artefact that contains its own formula for future reinventions, Wilde as a character embodies change and transformation, paralleling Dorian, when he says: 'My life is like a work of art. An artist never starts the same thing twice.' Double meanings hover like a penumbra over Reed's sentences. These double meanings suggest neo-decadent metamorphism; that is, how Wilde's *Dorian Gray* keeps generating fictions in which the self, vizarded by the artificiality of beauty, transcends diegetic boundaries. The lesson of the original *Dorian Gray* is not the mere imitation of life as art, but the imitation of its formula of protean reinvention. Like a Plato-like mentor, Wilde advises Dorian: 'You must *reinvent* yourself *again* in order to stay free.' Wilde's words reach beyond Reed's text, mapping out a trajectory of

intertextuality. In reinventing himself, Dorian is also a synecdoche for *Dorian Gray*, the text of the myth of decadence that must 'reinvent' itself 'again', a deliberately superfluous phrase that points to both the diegetic expansion of Dorian's character, as well as to the continual reimagining of Wilde's original novel. As Wilde aphorizes at the club in rue de Richelieu, 'All life is a limitation. Escape with yours and continue to expand it.'[49]

Self-reinvention is at the heart of Reed's sequel, which begins with Dorian's reinvention of his identity when he murders his illegitimate half-brother Jim and places his rings on his disfigured victim's fingers. The second murder is not only a plot device that demonstrates Dorian's moral depravity, but also emblematic of intertextual continuity. Dorian may be the paragon of perpetual beauty, but he exists within a time-bound reality that he strives to transcend or escape through ritualistic identity changes. Early in the text, we follow Harry as a spectator in the S&M club Dorian frequents, a carnivalesque space teeming with transvestites, voyeurs, and fetishists. This is a space that chimes with Reed's queer aesthetics of drag, cross-dressing, and gender fluidity, embodied in the world of music camp stardom of the 1970s and 1980s, as in the chameleonic personae of Almond and Bowie. Here, Dorian resembles Odysseus as he 'compare[s] the sexual outlaw's journey to heroic descent into the underworld. The day-world ritualistically reversed itself into a network of sexual contacts.'[50] The S&M club, as well as all the clandestine lurid scenes in the novel, is characteristically neo-Victorian as an articulation of the obverse of decorum in Victorian fiction. It imbues the tantalizing lacunae of Dorian's secret London life in Wilde's novel, when he 'consorted with thieves and coiners and knew the mysteries of their trade', and '[h]is extraordinary absences became notorious'.[51]

In order to escape the human (and novelistic) condition, Dorian's self-reinvention takes on a religious formality in Reed's sequel. At the club, Dorian performs a bombastic ritual crucifixion, a parodic imitation of the Passion of Christ: in his 'masochistic apotheosisation' in the underworld, he uses '[p]ain' as 'a trajectory to re-creating himself'. He is like a 'sacrificial and dying god'. By being crowned 'an S&M divinity', Dorian hopes 'to elude his former self and convert to

a Dorian free of the past' in an effort 'to get away' from it 'by driving a car at burn-out speed towards the future'.[52] Reed invests faux religious sacredness with the language of Ballardian futurism to express Dorian's desperate desire to escape reality. But the succession of 'past' and 'future' also suggests the neo-decadent novelistic reincarnations of Dorian, with the added paradoxical irony that a succession of Dorian's life histories is a succession of realities, albeit intradiegetic ones. Throughout the sequel, Dorian, both self-deprecating and grandiose, becomes a living myth that undergoes reinvention, with Wilde's *Dorian Gray* serving as a kind of guiding scripture, its theology of amoral beauty remaining constant.

The pattern of deification and ritual continues when Dorian is in Venice, where, following Walter Pater's gospel of experience for its own sake, he perfects 'the art of living in the moment, extending the pulsating nanosecond to a full beat'. Dorian decides with his Roman *puer*, Florentino, to 'push perversity to its limits' by marrying one another in a secret ceremony in a chapel on the Lido. The preparations involve Dorian dabbling in arcane knowledge and 'sexual magic'.[53] With the endorsement by a retinue of transvestite disciples, Dorian consummates his 'profane rite' by offering 'Florentino's body to the altar'. Dorian enters into a strange reverie: he imagines that his union with Florentino will result in a kind of 'parthenogenesis' (virgin birth) in the form of a 'brainchild' from Florentino's left eye – 'a child no larger than a gold insect', 'balanced on an eyelash, waving its filigree arms and legs like antennae', with its own 'conscious perception of the world'.[54] This surreal vision, almost sacrilegious in its oblique associations with the New Testament, carries the theme of both intradiegetic and intertextual reinvention into the domain of allegory.

The self-reflexive transposition and dislocation of intradiegetic reality in the sequel is completed at the end when Reed revisits the classic stabbing of the portrait. This is a moment of doom in which Dorian Gray's self-reinventions appear to be mere snakeskin-shedding. And yet, this is a moment where he has 'orchestrated his own grand dénouement', again playing upon the Christian theme of determined self-sacrifice, forming a symmetry with his apotheosized

masochistic performance in the gay club in Paris at the novel's opening. Just as with Wilde's original novel, the portrait is restored to its original state of perfect beauty, 'staring back' at his double. In Reed's version, the reverse transformation of the portrait takes place before the final confrontation: in Venice, signs of ageing and decay had already gradually appeared on Dorian's body, and in a desperate attempt at self-illusion he paints a mask over his face.[55] At the 'dénouement' he slashes at the portrait's 'protective clinging' – in a sense, its costume, or mask – expecting to see the portrait putrefying. Instead, he sees the beautiful youth whom Basil Hallward had painted, and 'It was [Dorian] who was old and who embodied the catastrophic physical blemishes that had grown to be the painting's biographical identity.'[56] It is at this moment that Dorian gets his comeuppance when he is stabbed by and falls dead into the arms of Nadja, his nemesis, a character reminiscent of the chthonic Furies of Greek myth.[57] In a notable detail, the convergence of these three entities is fraught with ambiguity and instability that fosters further narrative amplification. Dorian wonders whether Nadja is present, 'or if he was hallucinating a simulacrum of his blackmailing adversary'.[58] We are not sure if Nadja is just another split self just as the portrait is, at least symbolically.

Reed tweaks Wilde's ending but not the outcome: Dorian's decline and death. The outcome is mundane if taken in a vacuum, without the neo-Victorian connection with Wilde. It only becomes a novelty, a cunning twist, by reversing the ending of Wilde's novel. Reed's ending is entirely novelistic because it feeds on the original text, and so it is Wildean in a double sense. On the one hand, Dorian is aware of himself as a fiction, a supreme example of life imitating art. On the other hand, he is now the ageing 'painting'; he is the written biography ('biographical identity'), attached to the painting, the work of art. The painting emerges as the real character, with Dorian, the fictional character, as the portrait's secondary, reflected self. With just a few sleight of hand tricks, supported by a laden, introspective style, Reed amplifies the play of paradoxes in an infinity of metalepses and frame narrative violations. If anything is reinvented, it is Dorian Gray

as an amoral myth of quasi-religious self-sacrifice to beauty that rises and falls with every neo-decadent response.

Conclusion

In Reed's lyrical novel of supercharged decadence, we come across the following sentence: 'Dorian's capacity for decadence was voracious beyond Harry's most extreme imaginings.'[59] The word 'decadence' here is a loaded sign, a demarcated and measurable cultural territory. And yet it is extricated from its fin-de-siècle milieu. To come back to Reed's definition of neo-decadence as a forward thrust of 'the new real into its appropriately expansive psychic postcode', Reed anticipates the new real in a poem appositely titled 'The Nineties':

> One looks for a new poetry,
> Something animated, a renaissance
>
> Of imagery, a futuristic
> Dynamic […].[60]

Throughout the novel, Dorian strives to annihilate the past and reinvent himself in the future. His demise could simply be a gesture towards resurrection in another fiction, the fiction of the future. Wilde's novel, the text within the text, is the 'expansive psychic postcode' – postcode being a symbol of both origin and destination, original and sequel. Reed amplifies Wilde's decadent text not by amplifying its familiar tropes, but by amplifying its formulas for the amplification of decadence. If Reed's novel makes a statement, it is that Wilde's text is a map, a blueprint, and a template for future neo-Victorian reincarnations. As Reed says in the preface, 'and so the story continues'.

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[1] Justin Isis *et al*, 'Against Neo-Passéism', in *Neo-Decadence: 12 Manifestos*, ed. by Justin Isis (London: Snuggly Books, 2021), p. 135.
[2] Jeremy Reed, 'English Poetry: Neo-Decadence as the New Real', in *Neo-Decadence: 12 Manifestos*, p. 114.
[3] Ibid., pp. 107, 108.
[4] Ibid., p. 114.
[5] Gillian McCain, 'Jeremy Reed: Ruined by Poetry', *Please Kill Me: This is What's Cool*, 4 March 2019, https://pleasekillme.com/jeremy-reed-poetry/ [accessed 22 December 2023].

[6] Jeremy Reed, 'Introduction', in Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Volume 5 of Creation Classics (London: Creation Press, 2000), pp. 5, 9.
[7] Marie-Luise Kohlke, 'Adaptive/Appropriative Reuse in neo-Victorian Fiction: Having One's Cake and Eating It Too', in *Interventions: Rethinking the Nineteenth Century,* ed. by Andrew Smith and Anna Barton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 169-87.
[8] Will Self, *Dorian: An Imitation* (London: Penguin, 2009 [2002]), p. 13.
[9] Ibid., p. 43.
[10] Jeremy Reed, *Dorian: A Sequel to The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Peter Owen, 2001), p. 20.
[11] The bulk of Chapter 6 focuses on Victoria.
[12] Reed, *Dorian*, pp. 24, 26, 15.
[13] Ibid., pp. 14-17.
[14] Ibid., p. 89.
[15] See Mark J. P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 212-13.
[16] Reed, *Dorian*, n.p.
[17] See Oscar Wilde, *Complete Works*, introduced by Vyvyan Holland (London: Collins, 2002), p. 145.
[18] Reed, *Dorian*, pp. 147-48.
[19] Ibid., n.p.
[20] Ibid., p. 25.
[21] Jeremy Reed, *Boy Caesar* (London and Chester Springs: Peter Owen, 2004), p. 9.
[22] Reed, *Dorian*, p. 32.
[23] Ibid., p. 116.
[24] Ibid., p. 25.
[25] Ibid., p. 29. These bizarre collections are a direct biographical reference to Marc Almond. See Jeremy Reed, *The Last Star: A Study of Marc Almond* (London and San Francisco: Creation Books, 1995), p. 69.
[26] Reed, *Dorian*, pp. 25, 83, 26, 34, 89.
[27] Wilde, *Complete Works*, p. 101.
[28] Charles Baudelaire, 'The Vampire's Metamorphoses', transl. by Jeremy Reed, in *Blood and Roses: The Vampire in 19th Century Literature*, ed. by Adèle Olivia Gladwell and James Havoc (London: Creation Press, 1992), p. 91.
[29] Reed, *Dorian*, pp. 62, 64, 77, 80.
[30] Ibid., p. 155.
[31] Dorian acknowledges that Huysmans's novel influenced Wilde's decadence: 'What he [Dorian] would have liked was a literature that blew the back out of the sky. He had made a ritual burning of all realist novels' (Reed, *Dorian*, p. 89).
[32] Reed, 'Introduction', p. 6.
[33] Reed, *Dorian*, pp. 46, 47.
[34] See John Pier, 'Metalepsis', in *Handbook of Narratology*, ed. by Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier, and Jörg Schönert (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2009), pp. 190-91.
[35] See Richard Saint-Gelais, 'Transfictionality', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010), *ProQuest*, https://www.proquest.com/encyclopedias-reference-works/transfictionality/docview/2137959357/se-2 [accessed 4 February 2024].
[36] Wilde as a character in fiction has fascinated numerous writers since the 1890s. See Angela Kingston, *Oscar Wilde as a Character in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
[37] Paul Franssen and Ton Hoenselaars, *The Author as Character: Representing Historical Writers in Western Literature* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1999), p. 25.
[38] Reed, *Dorian*, pp. 62-63.
[39] J. G. Ballard, 'Time, Memory and Inner Space', in *A User's Guide to the Millenium: Essays and Reviews* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 200.
[40] Wilde, *Complete Works*, p. 982.
[41] Reed, *Dorian*, p. 31.
[42] Ibid., p. 50.
[43] Wilde, *Complete Works*, p. 102.
[44] Peter Ackroyd, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (London: Sphere Books, 1984 [1983]), p. 125. Incidentally, in a further parallel, in his biography of Marc Almond, Reed dedicates a few paragraphs to how *À rebours* was an instrumental influence on the pop star. See Reed, *The Last Star*, pp. 69-70.
[45] Reed, *Dorian*, p. 52.
[46] Ibid., p. 48.
[47] Ibid., p. 49.
[48] Ibid., pp. 50, 51.
[49] Ibid., pp. 54 (my emphasis), 55.
[50] Ibid., p. 14.
[51] Wilde., *Complete Works*, p. 112.

[52] Reed, *Dorian*, pp. 29, 25, 28.
[53] Ibid., pp. 69-70, 70, 104.
[54] Ibid., pp. 104, 91.
[55] Ibid., pp. 165, 167, 151.
[56] Ibid., p. 167.
[57] A possible reference to *Nadja* (1928), the second book published by André Breton.
[58] Reed, *Dorian*, p. 166.
[59] Ibid., p. 152.
[60] Jeremy Reed, *Nineties* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), p. 6.

(Re)writing Wilde's Last Years: From David Hare's *The Judas Kiss* to Rupert Everett's *The Happy Prince*

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De Profundis (1905) is perhaps the most important work and resource for reading and rewriting Oscar Wilde's final years. Guy and Small note that Wilde's notorious letter seems to be 'the least analysed of Wilde's works'.[1] Indeed, *De Profundis* is at once a marginal and a central work in Wilde's œuvre and possibly the one that best projects towards a responsive and intelligent reading of Wilde as a central author and character on the late Victorian scene. *De Profundis* is a liminal, unstable text that tells of an unstable, contradictory, double character. Wilde's *epistola* is not simply a biographical document, and yet it cannot be fully understood as a philosophical inquiry into the nature of suffering and redemption. In a sense, Wilde wrote his own partial autobiography in *De Profundis*, acknowledging – through a complex exercise of literary artifice and invention – his 'symbolic' status while revealing the very reasons and events that turned his success and celebrity into infamy and failure. Wilde' s was to be a dramatic and yet magnificent fall, transforming his social failure into eternal literary fame, translating 'Oscar Wilde' into a global celebrity and cultural icon, a paradigm of otherness to be performed and 'reproduced' in a number of different rewritings and contexts.[2] In this article, I will focus on David Hare's play *The Judas Kiss* (1998) and Rupert Everett's film *The Happy Prince* (1998) as cultural texts that rewrite and extend *De Profundis* in different ways.

Writing his last years: Wilde's *De Profundis*

After two trials at the Old Bailey on 25 May 1895, Wilde was sentenced to two years' imprisonment with hard labour for acts of gross indecency with other men. He was first sent to Wandsworth Prison and then, in November, after being declared bankrupt, he was transferred to Reading Gaol.[3] It was during the last period of his imprisonment that he composed the long letter that came to be known as *De Profundis* – a title suggested by Robert Ross, to whom Wilde entrusted the manuscript

on his release from prison – addressed directly to Douglas, but also to all those who had loved and hated him. With this in mind, as Frankel stresses, 'it is vital to understand that the picture Wilde draws in *De Profundis* of his relationship with Douglas is shaped by the bitterness of his imprisonment'.[4] Frankel also quotes the words of Regenia Gagnier, for whom 'if there had not been an Alfred Douglas, Wilde would have had to invent one […]. Douglas was the image of all unworthy audiences."[5]

Wilde, whose successful career had made him a celebrity, now had to face failure and shame for the very first time. *De Profundis* offered him an opportunity to deal with this complex situation in literary terms; indeed, *De Profundis* works on many different levels simultaneously; it is a long letter addressed to Bosie, inhabited by many different texts; there are, of course, many quotations, from the Bible and other literary works, but we can speak of a text, or rather of texts, within the text, as Wilde self-consciously wrote passages, even very long ones, in which there seemed to be less room for immediacy and urgency and more for artifice and (careful) construction.

De Profundis was first published by Ros in 1905 in an abridged version which – omitting all direct references to Douglas, which were included in the later editions such as Rupert-Hart Davis' 1962 canonical edition – resulted in a powerful essay touching on such diverse topics such as suffering, redemption, the conditions of prison-life, and famously Christ as the precursor of the Romantic movement in life. Wilde, as Small and Guy put it, had undoubtedly thought of these passages – in other words, of what is known as Ross's *De Profundis* – for future publication.[6]

De Profundis records through the author's voice what Wilde suffered; in short, there is a meta-textual dimension to the text that is always there, between the lines. One of the most quoted passages in Wilde's letter is the one in which he offers a portrait of himself and of his position in his own time; he speaks of his literary achievements and skills, with a tone, with an inflection, which powerfully constructs Wilde's (late-Victorian) celebrity for the generations to come:

> I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. I had realised this for myself at the very dawn of my manhood, and had forced my age to realise it afterwards. Few men hold such a position in their own lifetime, and have it so acknowledged. It is usually discerned, if discerned at all, by the historian, or the critic, long

> after both the man and his age have passed away. With me it was different. I felt it myself, and made others feel it. Byron was a symbolic figure, but his relations were to the passion of his age and its weariness of passion. Mine were to something more noble, more permanent, of more vital issue, of larger scope. The gods had given me almost everything. I had genius, a distinguished name, high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring; I made art a philosophy and philosophy an art. I altered the minds of men and the colours of things; there was nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder. I took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or sonnet; at the same time I widened its range and enriched its characteristics. Drama, novel, poem in prose, poem in rhyme, subtle or fantastic dialogue, whatever I touched I made beautiful in a new mode of beauty. To truth itself I gave what is false no less than what is true as its rightful province, and showed that the false and the true and are merely forms of intellectual existence. I treated art as the supreme reality and life as a mere mode of fiction. I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me. I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram.[7]

As Guy and Small observe, 'Wilde's summation of his life here does not seem to be addressed only to Douglas; it feels more as if [he] is self-consciously fashioning a version of his life for posterity, and perhaps attempting to control the shape of subsequent narratives about him'.[8] In the *epistola,* Wilde never questions those controversial aspects of his persona that, although criticized in some Victorian contexts, had helped him achieve his celebrity status, such as his notorious individualism:

> People used to say of me that I was too individualistic […] my ruin came not from too great individualism of life, but from too little. The one disgraceful, unpardonable, and to all time contemptible action of my life was to allow myself to appeal to society for help and protection. […] Of course, once I had put into motion the forces of society, society turned on me and said, 'Have you been living all this time in defiance of my laws, and do you now appeal to those laws for protection? You shall have those laws exercised to the full. You shall abide by what you have appealed to.' The result is I am in gaol.[9]

In this passage, the author – whose very life had been the staging of a very complex *play* in the theatrical space represented by London society (a position that allowed him to be, simultaneously, both inside and outside that space) – refers for the first time to his condition as an outsider, a condition that implies something different from that of the failed artist and man with which *De Profundis* is usually associated with and which fully emerges at the end of the manuscript. Of course, he understands that his biggest mistake was to 'appeal to' the laws of that very society he had mocked in his lifetime, and he is able to translate this discovery through a tone which recalls that of his short stories (such as 'The Selfish Giant'); in short, he is able to speak about Wilde through Wilde, conveying power and effectiveness to the whole narrative and to its impact on the 'public'.

Wilde's fall was very often discussed, especially in official late-Victorian contexts, in terms of a parable. Wilde's punishment was considered as the natural outcome for a life lived with the single aim (according to the restricted views of a few people) of pursuing pleasure. Any reader of Wilde knows perfectly well how vital those experiences were for the very existence and substance of his writings; those experiences were in themselves capable of articulating a sort of third space in-between life and art, they were a bridge between street and paper, blood and ink:

> People thought it dreadful of me to have entertained at dinner the evil things of life, and to have found pleasure in their company. But they, from the point of view through which I, as an artist in life, approach them they were delightfully suggestive and stimulating. It was like feasting with panthers. The danger was half the excitement. […] What I do feel ashamed of is the horrible Philistine atmosphere into which you brought me. My business as an artist was with Ariel. You set me to wrestle with Caliban.[10]

Wilde, here, is intimating – through the image conveyed by the 'horrible Philistine atmosphere' – the discourse on 'Christ as a pre-romantic figure', which characterizes one of the best sections of *De Profundis*.

Wilde's narrative – in its self-conscious effort to create a continuum between the private and the public – establishes a very subtle connection between pleasure and sorrow, one which allows him to see them as both fundamental for the full development of the individual:

> I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure. I did it to the full, as one should do everything that one does. There was no pleasure I did not experience. I threw the pearl of my soul into a cup of wine. I went down the primrose path to the sound of flutes. I lived on honeycomb. But to have continued the same life would have been wrong because it would have been limiting. I had to pass on.[11]

For the writer 'to pass on' meant accessing a completely new territory, in which sorrow rhymed with isolation and desperation with the mortification of the self, a territory which allowed Wilde to rethink and rewrite in fresh and original terms the figure of Christ himself, whose iconicity, according to Wilde – being fostered by Jesus' artistic temperament – inspired artists of different ages:

> To the artist, expression is the only mode under which he can conceive life at all. To him what is dumb is dead. But to Christ it was not so. With a width and wonder of imagination that fills one almost with awe, he took the entire world of the inarticulate, the voiceless world of pain, as his kingdom, and made of himself its eternal mouthpiece. […] His desire was to be to the myriads who had found no utterance a very trumpet through which they

> might call to heaven. And feeling, with the artistic nature of one to whom suffering and sorrow were modes through which he could realise his conception of the beautiful, that an idea is of no value till it becomes incarnate and is made an image, he made of himself the image of the Man of Sorrows, and as such has fascinated and dominated art as no Greek god ever succeeded in doing.[12]

The author praises different aspects of Christ: his love for children and for ignorant people, his preference for exceptions over laws, his capacity of conceiving the divided races as unity. Wilde knew Christ's place was with the poets; most importantly, Wilde praised Christ's extraordinary imagination and his capacity of being in tune with different people, to the extent of becoming the other. There is of course a narrative level in *De Profundis* which suggests Wilde identified himself as Christ and yet, as Kelli M. Godwin observes, Wilde used Christ's narrative to position himself in the condition of a sinner worthy of Christ's forgiveness.[13]

The reader is faced with Wilde's doubleness.[14] His narrative positions him in-between saint and sinner, he is a Christ-like figure (suffering his own crucifixion) who is paradoxically asking for forgiveness.[15] Wilde's doubleness can be conceived as part of that process of becoming immortal. According to Fenton Johnson his imprisonment, as we will see with Hare and Everett, elevated his life from the merely brilliant to something closer to the immortality – sainthood – to which he aspired.[16] This kind of celebrity – achieved through martyrdom – is written in Wilde's story; it is, in other words, part of him. We read Wilde through his personal tragedy as, today, we listen to Kurt Cobain and, in a way, to John Lennon, proleptically through the lenses offered by our knowledge of the tragic epilogues of their existences. Johnson insists on how any approach to Wilde should dispense with specific or restrictive labels, such as the one which identifies him with the archetypical 'gay writer'.[17] It would be more appropriate to think of him as a contemporary outsider; in this, *De Profundis* rearticulates the concept of (social) failure into something different: the failed man (and artist) becomes a self-conscious loser, an outsider, who refuses to come to terms with reality , or who can find no place within it, 'Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me',[18] he states in *De Profundis*.

De Profundis is rich in contradictions and in this sense, as suggested above, it resembles Wilde himself, who loved to take different, even contrasting, positions. In the manuscript, the same event is often recorded several times, each time showing a different mood of the author, and this does not allow us to read *De Profundis* as a reliable, authentic autobiography. From this perspective, *De Profundis* should be approached as Wilde's literary testament, as a work that, as we have already seen, cannot be reduced to a specific function and which, as such, suggests the best way to read it, to access Wilde as a literary icon. Every expression, sound, or passage of Wilde's *epistola* is the fruit of the most self-conscious effort. In his annotated edition of Wilde's prison writings Frankel – after evoking early responses to the *epistola*, notably those of E. V. Lucas, for whom the value of the letter is in 'the triumph of the literary temperament over the most disadvantageous conditions', and Max Beerbohm, who famously wrote that 'one does not seem to read a written thing. The words sing' – notes that 'the power of *De Profundis* derives ultimately from its majestic and impassionate prose'.[19] In short, in *De Profundis* Wilde turned suffering into beauty, sorrow into music.

Staging Wilde's last years: *The Judas Kiss* by David Hare

One of the most lyrical, musical, powerful (and most quoted) passages from *De Profundis* can be heard towards its conclusion. It represents the perfect synthesis of the life and meaning of a cultural icon, of a celebrity whose failure and fall gave birth to the myth of the outsider, of the loser, of the artist who, learning to say 'no', turned art into a better place to live:

> All trials are trials for one's life, just as all sentences are sentences of death; and three times have I been tried. The first time I left the box to be arrested, the second time to be led back to the house of detention, the third time to pass into a prison for two years. Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole.[20]

This iconic passage was chosen by David Hare as the epilogue of his 1998 play *The Judas Kiss*, which focuses on Wilde's days immediately before his arrest and after his release from Reading Gaol. More specifically, Act 1 – significantly entitled 'Deciding to Stay' – takes place at the Cadogan hotel in between the second and third trials, while Act 2 – 'Deciding to Leave' – is set in Naples and recounts his last days with Bosie. During a talk given at The American Library in Paris, Hare reveals how the genesis of the project goes back to when he was asked by director Mike Nichols to write a biopic on Wilde. Bored of finding himself trapped in the role of a reporter, he discovered that the best sections of what he was writing were – according to Nichols – about the most mysterious and less known moments of Wilde's life, as for instance his Naples days. For Hare, 'what lies at the heart of Wilde is mystery'.[21] In this sense, the two acts of the play investigate two great mysteries in Wilde's life, that is why, given the chance he was offered to leave England, he decided to stay at Cadogan hotel to be arrested and after his release from prison he returned to Bosie.

Hare's professional background and the specific moment of his artistic involvement with Wilde is of great significance to the play. As Andrew Calcutt observes, when 'Hare came to the British stage he was one of a batch of controversial, left-wing playwrights which also included Edward Bond […] and Howard Brenton. By the mid-90s Hare had become a highly respected, if somewhat staid, figure', to the extent that he was offered a knighthood in the very year his Wildean play was staged. 'Once an outsider on the fringes of British theatre, Hare', Calcutt adds, became 'one of its most admired dramatists.'[22] In a way, Hare's parable represents an inversion of Wilde's, who, once a successful dramatist, turned, in his last years, into an outsider and a pariah.

Hare had always been fascinated by Wilde's life, yet in *The Judas Kiss* he is less interested in Wilde's biography than in 'the authorial persona created in his texts, especially in his resolute adherence to a life lived in art'.[23] From this perspective, a key passage in Act 1 contains a very relevant exchange between Bosie and Wilde:

> BOSIE: Oh Oscar, I beg you… I beg you, do not give up.
> WILDE: Give up? Give Up? Why should it matter? 'Shall I give up?', 'Shall I carry on' Either? Neither? Guilty! Not guilty! How can it make a blind bit of difference? The simple

> fact is: I am cast in a role. My story has already been written. How I chose to play it is a mere matter of taste. The performance of the actor will not determine the action.[24]

Hare's focus is on the fatal destiny of the Wilde character. The fatalism which emerges from this passage, and more in generally from the play as a whole, connects in an important way with issues of class, another key area of interest for Hare. Wilde – though fascinated by the aristocracy – was not, unlike Douglas, an aristocrat, and this, of course, turned him into a victim of Victorian classism.

During an exchange between Ross and Wilde at the end of Act 1, Ross overtly points to the class difference between Wilde and his lover, exclaiming that Bosie 'escapes prosecution because he is a lord!'[25] Discussing with Ross and Wilde the eventuality of Oscar being arrested, Douglas ironically invokes the influence of the name Queensberry on English politicians, and on the possibility of defending his lover, through his friend George Wyndham, a Member of Parliament, to which Wilde replies, 'I wish I shared your faith in the English. Nation to them is just as important as class. They have united in hatred of the foreigner. Yes, because I'm Irish'.[26] Wilde's Irishness and middle-class background turned him into the perfect scapegoat to be prosecuted by the English class system. And yet Wilde decides to stay, to face his destiny and to complete the 'story' that has already been written, albeit 'unfinished':

> WILDE: Yes. I can run but I choose not to. Die of embarrassment in some hovel abroad? Admit to society they have driven me out? No, I will not give them that pleasure. […] If I run now my story is finished. For as long as I stay it is not at an end, I prefer my story unfinished.[27]

Within the economy of the play, this choice turns Wilde not only into a martyr but also, and most importantly, as we have seen, into an immortal icon for future generations of outsiders.

One fascinating aspect of the play is undoubtedly its style. Hare defines Wilde 'the most quotable writer of all time' and notes how his epigrams turn 'upside-down the conventional wisdom'.[28] Terry Eagleton – who, like Hare, approaches Wilde in terms of an 'Irish socialist' – considers the Wildean epigram 'a piece of linguistic perversity, which seizes upon some English commonplace and rips it inside out, deconstructs it, stands it on its head'.[29] Wilde's epigrams stand

for – and literally contain – a caesura, an interruption, a critical hiatus in relation to the order of discourse that is capable of generating a short-circuit in verbal communication. Hare embraces Wilde's taste for paradox and inversion, his capacity for unmasking English hypocrisy through language, and yet in his play he escapes the cliché of having Wilde speaking through aphorisms (a choice which defines many rewritings of Wilde's life both in literature and cinema) and invents all Wilde's dialogues. Especially in Act 2, Hare's words convey a sense of urgency, and yet they seem to powerfully connect with some of the best passages written by Wilde – the suffering man – in *De Profundis*, as emerges in this final, intense exchange between the protagonist and Bosie:

> WILDE: Ideally, I like to drink anise. My favourite anise is the second. I drink it not because it makes me sleep – nothing makes me sleep – but because at the moment I drink it I *believe* that I shall sleep. An illustration of the perfect usefulness of science. The position necessary to make me sleep does not exist. But the potion that provides the illusion that I shall does.
> BOSIE: Yes.
> WILDE: Indeed.
>
> *He stubs out his cigarette.*
>
> I drink the second anise. I am filled with the conviction: 'I shall sleep tonight'. Belief is everything. Faith is everything.
>
> *He is thoughtful a moment.*
>
> It is the same with love.
> BOSIE: With love?
> WILDE: Yes.
> BOSIE: In what way?
> WILDE: The vulgar error is to think that love is a kind of illusion.
> BOSIE: Is it not?
> WILDE: No. It is the fault of bad poets who encourage this mistake. 'I am completely enraptured' lovers say, as somehow they were being deceived. When the affair ends they say, 'I have been stripped of my illusions.' When they cease to love, they say, 'Oh. I see him clearly now.'
> BOSIE: Are they not right?
> WILDE: No, Bosie. The reverse is the truth.
>
> *The two men look at each other.*
>
> The everyday world is shrouded. We see it dimly. Only when we love we see the true person. The truth of a person is only visible through love. Love is not the illusion. Life is.[30]

Hare points to how Wilde developed a 'complete identification with the Christ story' but notes how, if in the Catholic religion you have the belief that 'if you give love, you will be rewarded',

Wilde 'got nothing in return'.[31] Yet, as twenty-first century readers and fans, we continue to love and perform him.

The Judas Kiss was first presented by the Almeida Theatre Company, in association with Robert Fox and Scott Rudin, at the Playhouse Theatre, London, on 12 March 1998, with a cast featuring Liam Neeson as Oscar Wilde. This was not a particularly successful production, whereas the 2012 revival, directed by Neil Armfield at London's Hampstead Theatre, with Wilde played by Rupert Everett and Bosie by Freddie Fox, was a much more convincing effort.

Everett's recent memoir, *To the End of the World. Travels with Oscar Wilde* (2020), interestingly features the same structure of *The Judas Kiss*, with – as the author confesses – the first half of the book 'written while making a film [and which] remained a wonderful dream' and the 'second half written on waking from the nightmare of having made it'.[32] The book documents the ten years the actor dedicated to *The Happy Prince* film project and interestingly starts with Everett's involvement in the new production of *The Judas Kiss*. The author defines Hare's play as 'a marvellous play that has been performed once before in the UK to disastrous effect, savaged by the press in reviews that even our excellent production cannot quite bury'.[33] The main problem of the 1998 production had to do with the casting of Liam Neeson, described by Hare as 'the island's most famous heterosexual'.[34] Everett, a long-term fan of Wilde – even though apparently physically closer to the Bosie character – became instead the perfect Oscar. In the memoir he asks himself a series of key questions about Wilde and his decision to stay at the Cadogan Hotel:

> Why does Wilde not run when he has a chance? Does he know that his place in history is being carved as he sits there waiting to be arrested? Or does he, as David Hare infers, simply think that if he gets bail he and Bosie can still dine at Willis' that night […]? Is he immobilised by indecision (Hamlet), or carrying his cross all the way to Reading Gaol (Jesus)?[35]

In the first Act, Robbie urges Wilde to leave for the station, while Bosie wants him to stay; but, as Everett knows, 'it is finally immortality that Oscar is playing for – not life'.[36] Commenting on his performance as Oscar during a sold-out night in London, he writes:

> just a century ago a man, Oscar could be imprisoned and ruined simply for being gay, but tonight […] a homosexual stands on equal ground with the rest of society. […] Oscar winks at me in the mirror as I apply more eyeliner.[37]

In the memoir, Oscar becomes a character with whom the writer constantly interacts in a fascinating dialogue with a past which becomes our now. We travel, in short, with Oscar through Rupert finding ourselves part of the incredible world that Everett – the multi-talented (writer, actor, director) – creates with his film.

Filming the outsider: Rupert Everett's *The Happy Prince*

Everett's *The Happy Prince* stands almost as a cinematic variation and expansion of Act 2 of Hare's play, recounting Wilde's magnificent fall and his last 'gutter' days as a pariah and exile, first in France and then in Italy. Everett rewrites Wilde starting from those years and experiences, which are usually left outside conventional narratives about him. In this sense, Ken Hughes' *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1960) had Oscar – charmingly played by Peter Finch with an Irish accent – coolly refusing to speak to Bosie on the railway station platform before he headed off to his unimaginable future, while Gilbert's acclaimed film *Wilde* (1997) – based on Richard Ellmann's 1987 biography, and in which Stephen Fry plays Oscar in a performance that exceeded the screen to become a kind of visual reincarnation of Wilde for the late nineties – halted after a sentimental embrace between the reunited Oscar and Bosie in Naples.

Everett emphasises how these films are not able to convey what society really did to Wilde in terms of punishment, both in prison with hard labour, and after prison, in exile, which could be considered another form of imprisonment. In this perspective, Everett's idea – which expands Hare's – of the last great vagabond of the late nineteenth century, the celebrity famous for being famous, the pop idol on the skids, becomes a potent and poignant story to address. Focusing on the origins of the project in his memoir, Everett confesses:

> Several years ago, encouraged by the success of my first book of memoirs [2006], I turned my attention to screenwriting my dream being to create work for myself as an actor […]. Oscar Wilde in exile seemed to be the obvious choice. If the only role I was permitted to

> play in world cinema was the gay best friend, then I would take it all the way back to the prototype.[38]

As emerges from this passage the film becomes a dialogical site in which two *lives* – Everett's and Wilde's – meet and redefine themselves; interestingly, in *The Happy Prince* Everett is both director and main actor of Wilde's drama. As Peter Bradshaw observes, 'that of Wilde is a part Everett was born to play, and he does it with exactly the right kind of poignantly ruined magnificence'.[39] Besides, Everett can be defined as an outsider in the world of cinema, one who, as we have seen through his memoir, suffered discrimination because of his homosexuality. In this sense, the film establishes a fascinating dialogue across time and space between two artists and actors who have lived as outsiders.

In Everett's film, the actor/director takes us through the devastating horror of poverty and humiliation, which, however, Wilde faces with gallows humour and wit. In one of the first sequences we see him vomiting in agony on his deathbed before declaiming: 'Encore du champagne!'[40] In this sense, even in his last, very difficult days, Wilde, the lifelong performer and man of theatre, found a new world to perform to, where the stars were rent boys, petty thieves, and street urchins. He was endlessly being cited for extraordinary empathy and generosity with people, while at the same time being an incredible snob. Wilde's most interesting feature is his determination to escape fixed identities, which implies a capacity to harmonize dissonant, contrasting positions. The film shows how the appeal of Wilde was his humanity. He had some of the bad traits most of us have as human beings, that is snobbery, greed, vanity, and egomania, but he got caught out for it. As Everett himself notes, many people desire to throw themselves over the edge, but most of them have a natural constraint and natural borders before going that far, pulling themselves back. Wilde, for some reason, didn't.

Commenting on the film – and comparing it to screen portrayals by Morley, Finch, and Fry – Merlin Holland affirmed that Everett's can be considered probably the most fascinating of the biopics on his grandfather.[41] Whereas Gilbert's film with Fry is very intellectual, Everett's is mostly emotional.[42] If it is true that in Wilde there is both the intellectual and the emotional, at this stage

of his life the author is living on what is left of his emotions, and that is exactly what Everett excels at conveying. On a stylistic level, Everett was inspired by what happens when the brain starts to collapse and how it throws off images and ideas and starts to play with a kind of spatial awareness. More specifically, he was impressed by his own father's death and how his brain was falling apart, coming up with bubbles of memory. There is, indeed, a sort of feverish dimension, a magical, dreamlike quality to the film, with a room that seems to shrink and expand (with his brain's last memories) as Wilde dies.

One key scene of the film portrays an iconic event where in Clapham Junction train station Wilde is transferring trains on his way to prison[43] and is left for thirty minutes on the platform to be yelled at and spat on. It is the rush hour and the policeman escorting him is just reading the newspaper while a big crowd gathers around him. In a way, what happens is one of the most extraordinary scenes in the whole of Wilde's life. A man, who until recently had been the most famous, lauded author in London, is reduced to being spat on by a crowd of commuters. Wilde himself describes the event – and its lasting effect on him – in *De Profundis*:

> On November 13th, 1895, I was brought down here from London. From two o'clock till half-past two on that day I had to stand on the centre platform of Clapham Junction in convict dress, and handcuffed, for the world to look at. I had been taken out of the hospital ward without a moment's notice being given to me. Of all possible objects I was the most grotesque. When people saw me they laughed. Each train as it came up swelled the audience. Nothing could exceed their amusement. That was, of course, before they knew who I was. As soon as they had been informed they laughed still more. For half an hour I stood there in the grey November rain surrounded by a jeering mob. For a year after that was done to me I wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time.[44]

The Clapham Junction episode is – as emerges from Wilde's words – an extremely strong and dramatic scene, which significantly resembles a moment from the passion of Christ (and as we have seen, in *De Profundis* Wilde is insistently fascinated with the Christ figure). Experiences and humiliations such as these, suffered by the man during the last years of his life, and recounted by the writer in *De Profundis*, turned him into 'Saint Oscar', the first homosexual martyr of history.[45] Significantly Wilde's connection with the Queensberry family was, again, at once a gender and a class transgression. In another sequence Everett shows Wilde with a portrait of Queen Victoria by

his deathbed; he died one year before her, and the film hints that Wilde's vindictive treatment was part of the ugly sense of shame and mortification at aesthetic indulgence which the manly and masculine slaughter of the First World War was supposed to redeem.[46]

In *The Happy Prince* we have sequences of Wilde in London, Dieppe, Paris, Naples – in each of these cities and villages Everett, as he confesses in his memoir, finds spaces of almost religious connection with Wilde. Significantly, the film opens and ends in Paris where Oscar died on 30 November 1900. In the script the director imagines Wilde, *in extremis*, befriending a young Parisian rent boy and his kid brother, holding them spellbound with 'The Happy Prince' story. Everett's 2020 memoir indeed opens with the memory of little Rupert in his bed listening to his mother reading him 'The Happy Prince': 'introducing me to Oscar Wilde is Mummy's most audacious move, and her greatest contribution to my emotional development'. It is through Wilde's stories that Everett learns 'for the first time that there is a thing called love and that it usually has a price'.[47]

The first sequence of the film shows Oscar Wilde in happier times reciting, to his entranced sons, the iconic tale of a statue allowing a swallow to denude him of all his gold to feed the poor. The story was included in the collection entitled *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* published in May 1888, which was extremely well-received. As Matthew Sturgis writes in his recent biography of Wilde, at the time of its publication 'there was general recognition that, although there was much for children to enjoy, the stories were likely to appeal rather more to adults'.[48]

Writing in 1888, an *Athenæum* reviewer noted that 'there is a piquant touch of contemporary satire which differentiates Mr Wilde from the teller of pure fairy tales',[49] and yet in these stories, which very often involve an ultimate sacrifice on the part of their main characters, the satire seems to be, as Ellmann puts it, 'subordinated to a sadness unusual in fairy tales'.[50] Focusing on *The Happy Prince* story, in his 2007 monograph on Wilde's fairy tales, Jarlath Killenn writes that

> it is society that must align itself with the Prince, not the Prince who must somehow forcibly alter society. The Prince does not overthrow capitalism, but he sets an example of radical self-sacrifice for others to follow. The major point is that only the Prince and the Swallow are blessed by God which justifies them both.[51]

From this perspective, in Everett's film the embedding of ""The Happy Prince" tale becomes an ambiguous parable for Wilde's passion and (possible) redemption, the unhappy prince who makes a lonely discovery that love is the only thing worth worshipping',[52] something which also emerges in the last act of *The Judas Kiss*. *The Happy Prince* is indeed a story that somehow reflects Wilde: we have a gilded, jewelled character who is gradually stripped of everything and ends up being thrown on the rubbish heap. And yet, in a sense, even then, as we have shown, Wilde experienced a different kind of happiness, one which allowed him to retain his irony and humour. The film recounts the great drama of Wilde's life constructing the whole narrative on the powerful intertext represented by the story of *The Happy Prince*. What characterizes Everett's film is, in this sense, a fairy-tale-like quality. As a bitter-sweet fairy tale constantly retold by contemporary cinema and drama, Wilde's life as writing becomes immortal.

In conclusion, Hare's play and Everett's film focus on Oscar's dramatic yet magnificent fall, portraying the alterity of a writer whose liminal position can serve as a lens through which to read and deconstruct our (success-obsessed and self-centred) age. This fall – which, as we have seen, Wilde writes about so effectively in *De Profundis* – is a source of inspiration, not only for Hare and Everett but also for writers, directors, and actors who have performed Wilde's paradigm of outsiderness using different artistic languages, questioning the idea of polarity, and inviting us to cross the boundaries between genders, bodies, art forms and, most importantly, between innocence and guilt, failure and success. These rewritings allow us not only to re-read Wilde from new perspectives, but also to rewrite him ourselves, turning Oscar Wilde into a critical perspective for reading the world.

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[1] Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, 'Reading *De Profundis*', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 49.2 (2006), 123-49 (p. 123).
[2] See Pierpaolo Martino, *Wilde Now. Performance, Celebrity and Intermediality in Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Palgrave Macmillan 2023).
[3] On Wilde's trials and his imprisonment see the recent and exhaustive monograph by Joseph Bristow, *Oscar Wilde on Trial. The Criminal Proceedings, from Arrest to Imprisonment* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022).
[4] Nicholas Frankel, 'Introduction', in *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Nicholas Frankel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 12.

[5] Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1986), p. 180.
[6] Guy and Small, p. 129.
[7] Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis and Other Prison Writings,* ed. by Colm Tóibín (London: Penguin 2013), p. 100.
[8] Guy and Small, p. 30.
[9] Wilde, pp. 134-35.
[10] Ibid., pp. 135-36.
[11] Ibid., p. 113.
[12] Ibid., p. 120.
[13] Kelli M. Godwin, 'Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*: A Narrative of Sexual Sin and Forgiveness', *The Explicator*, 67.1 (2008), 58-61 (p. 60).
[14] See Terry Eagleton, 'The Doubleness of Oscar Wilde', *The Wildean*, 19 (2001), 2-9.
[15] On the Christ figure in *De Profundis* see also Jan-Melissa Schramm, 'Wilde and Christ', in *Oscar Wilde in Context*, ed. by Kerry Powell and Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 253-60.
[16] Fenton Johnson, '*De Profundis*, 1895-97; published 1905 and 1962', in *50 Gay and Lesbian Books Everybody Must Read*, ed. Richard Canning (New York: Alison, 2009), p. 84.
[17] Ibid., pp. 84-5.
[18] Wilde, p. 158.
[19] Frankel, p. 16.
[20] Wilde, pp. 158-59.
[21] 'Sir David Hare @ The American Library in Paris, 12 June 2014', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUoLe2M5P60 [accessed 4 November 2023].
[22] Andrew Calcutt, *Brit Cult: An A-Z of British Pop Culture* (London: Prion, 2000), pp. 30-1.
[23] Heather Marcovitch, '*The Judas Kiss*, *Gross Indecency*, *Velvet Goldmine*: The Postmodern Masks of Oscar Wilde', in *Quintessential Wilde: His Worldly Place, His Penetrating Philosophy and His Influential Aestheticism*, ed. by Annette M. Magid (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), p. 140.
[24] David Hare, *The Judas Kiss* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 37.
[25] Ibid., p. 50.
[26] Ibid., p. 30.
[27] Ibid., p. 56.
[28] *Hare @ The American Library.*
[29] Eagleton, 'The Doubleness of Oscar Wilde', p. 4.
[30] Hare, p. 97.
[31] *Hare @ The American Library*
[32] Rupert Everett, *To the End of the World. Travels with Oscar Wilde* (London: Abacus, 2020), p. 119.
[33] Ibid., p. 35.
[34] *Hare @ The American Library*
[35] Everett, p. 35.
[36] Ibid., p. 36.
[37] Ibid., p. 39.
[38] Ibid., p. 47.
[39] Peter Bradshaw, '*The Happy Prince* Review – Rupert Everett is Magnificent in Dream Role as Dying Oscar Wilde', *The Guardian*, 22 January 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/22/the-happy-prince-film-review-rupert-everett-oscar-wilde [accessed 4 November 2023].
[40] Ibid.
[41] Holland and Everett first met in 2011 when Wilde's nephew asked the actor to read some passages from Wilde for the unveiling ceremony of the renovated Oscar Wilde tombstone at Père-Lachaise in November 2011.
[42] Dalya Alberge, 'Oscar Wilde's Grandson "Terribly Moved" by Rupert Everett's Ciopic', *The Guardian,* 5 June 2018 https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/jun/05/oscar-wilde-grandson-terribly-moved-rupert-everett-biopic-merlin-holland [accessed 4 November 2023].
[43] It is interesting to note that in 2016 Everett read *The Ballad of the Reading Gaol* at *Inside: Artists and Writers in Reading Prison*, an intermedial series featuring exhibitions and readings organized by the immersive art group *Artangel* in the notorious prison where Wilde served his sentence from 1895 to 1897.
[44] Wilde, *De Profundis*, p. 133.
[45] Terry Eagleton, *Saint Oscar* (Derry: Field Day, 1989).
[46] On this aspect see John Beynon, *Masculinities and Culture* (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2002).
[47] Everett, pp. 14-15.
[48] Matthew Sturgis, *Oscar: A Life* (London: Head of Zeus, 2019), p. 364.
[49] Unsigned Notice, *Athenæum*, 1 September 1888, p. 186, in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Karl Beckson (London and New York: Routledge, 1970), p. 60.
[50] Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin 1987), p. 282.
[51] Jarlath Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 38.

[52] Bradshaw, '*The Happy Prince* Review'.

Aesthetic Revenants and the Neo-Decadent Afterlife of Vernon Lee

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Anglo-Italian author Vernon Lee (1856-1935) and Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938) shared a style of writing which has been described by Emily Anne Rabiner in *The Decadent Renaissance: The Antimodern Seductions of Gabriele D'Annunzio and Vernon Lee* as 'Decadent Renaissance: a revival of, or a neo-Renaissance approach to aesthetics and sexuality'. It suggests 'a version of Renaissance Revivalism that privileges fantastical transformation' and is 'concerned with the possibility of embodied, often dangerously erotic, encounters with the past'.[1] In collections such as *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890) and *Pope Jacynth and Other Fantastic Tales* (1907), Lee creates a fantasy in which individuals permeate the boundaries between the historic Renaissance and fin-de-siècle present, allowing for what Rabiner rather sensuously describes as 'lingering in and lingering of the past'.[2] This concept of 'lingering in' the past is a frequent touchpoint for Lee scholars. Stefano Evangelista's 'The Remaking of Rome: Cosmopolitanism and Literary Modernity in Gabriele D'Annunzio's *The Child of Pleasure*' describes both Lee's and D'Annunzio's use of layering of the past and present in the historic Italian city.[3] Alice Oke is a malingering presence in the lives of her ancestors in Lee's 'Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover'.[4] The slippage between Victorian Alice and seventeenth-century Alice is the focus of Athena Vrettos' '"In the Clothes of Dead People": Vernon Lee and Ancestral Memory', while Sophie Geoffroy and Sally Blackburn-Daniels's '"Traces of the exotic" in Vernon Lee's "Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover"' also explores the permeation of colonial narratives into Lee's text.[5] Patricia Pulham considers the transformative effects of the pagan past on the physical body in Lee's supernatural tales in *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (2008).[6]

This article will briefly consider the neo-Renaissance narratives which are present in Lee's fantastic fictions and examine the ways in which they have permeated or transcended the spatial and temporal boundaries of the decadent text. It will proceed to explore the afterlife of one of

Lee's short stories, 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady', and consider the ways in which the text has been collected, curated, and adapted.[7] Furthermore, by using Rabiner's thesis as a point of scholarly departure, I will extend its premise and investigate how the Renaissance revival style continues to connote in a decadent text and survive when transposed into a twenty-first century neo-decadent mystery novel? And how does Lee herself fare when she is transposed from writer to protagonist, Vernon Lee to Violet Paget, in Mary F. Burns's mystery novel *The Unicorn in the Mirror* (2020)? In order to assess this, this article will consider decadent symbolism as it appears within Lee's and Burns's texts, and how Burns's mystery novel adapts the transformative revelry and dissolution of sexual boundaries of the Renaissance revival. These are potentially subverted by its transposition into a neo-decadent piece of detective fiction: a modern, yet formally conservative genre.

Decadent Renaissance

Lee's reputation in the late nineteenth century was shaped by her textual output and social circle: she was understood to be a writer of fantastical tales, a non-professional historian of art and a friend and correspondent of Walter Pater. Two of Lee's works, *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Medieval in the Renaissance* (1884) and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895), include dedications to Pater. Through Pater's teachings and her own extensive research on the Renaissance, Lee understood it to be a mode, rather than a temporal absolute. Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* described the period as a 'many-sided but yet united movement' during which

> the desire[s] for a more liberal and comely way of conceiving life, [made] themselves felt, prompting those who experience this desire to seek first one and then another means of intellectual or imaginative enjoyment [and] directing them not merely to the discovery of old and forgotten sources of this enjoyment, but to divine new sources of it, new experiences, new subjects of poetry, new forms of art.[8]

Hilary Fraser states that Pater and his followers were 'captivated' by Renaissance Italy's 'paradoxical mix of purity and corruption, pleasure and pain; by its embrace equally of the spiritual and the carnal, the exquisite and the grotesque' that provided a vocabulary for 'experience adequate to the

complexity, perversity even, of their own tastes and desires'.[9] Combining her own research with the shape of Pater's imaginary portraits (the downfall of men born out of their time), Lee developed a style of fantastic narrative that allowed for the historic imaginary (frequently Renaissance) to bleed into the present reality, creating an encounter between the past – now an embodied revenant – and the present, and thus leading to a narrative conflict and/or liberation. Lee's fantastic draws upon the desire for 'old and forgotten sources of enjoyment' whilst simultaneously divining a new form of art. This is certainly true of Lee's 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady', first published in *The Yellow Book* in 1896. The story is a fantastical fairy tale, and its notion of the Renaissance is an adaptation of Pater's Renaissance sensibility rather than a consideration of the period's history.

As Alex Murray argues in *Decadence: A Literary History,* the publication of 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' provides a case for its inclusion in the decadent œuvre, stating that a 'means of identification by association was to look to those who published in the two most notorious periodicals of British decadence – *The Yellow Book* (1894-97) and *The Savoy* (1896)'.[10] Margaret Stetz warns against decontextualized readings of the story, suggesting that it is an 'elaborate bind, concealing a narrative that refers to late nineteenth-century British matters'– a political allegory or a young man confined for his unusual focus of love. Lee's folk/fairy-tale, Stetz continues, is in dialogue with Oscar Wilde's *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), with both narratives set in European courts and sharing decadent 'themes, images, and devices', including highly elaborate drapery[11] – in Wilde, 'rich tapestries representing the Triumph of Beauty',[12] and in Lee a tapestry of 'old and Gothic taste, extremely worn', representing 'Alberic the Blond and the Snake Lady Oriana'.[13]

Prince Alberic, an orphan, is kept in the Red Palace of Luna by his grandfather, the Duke. The room is resplendent with antiques including an uncared-for Renaissance tapestry. The young Alberic loves this dearly and is enchanted by the tapestry's depictions of flowers, fruits, rabbits – all symbols of fertility and fecundity – and the partial image of a woman with golden hair. When an ebony crucifix is shifted during a reorganization of the room revealing her fully embroidered form, he is struck by the fact that the woman he adores is a serpent from the waist down. Furious

at the young Alberic's obsession with the Snake Lady in the tapestry, the Duke has it removed and replaced, but Alberic destroys its dupe. Angered, the Duke sends his charge to the ruined Castle of Sparkling Waters. The Castle reminds Alberic of the map woven into the embroidered art – he has stepped into the tapestry itself, Sparkling Waters representing both the spatial (reality and art) and temporal (historic and present-day) fluidity.

While walking through his new kingdom, Alberic drinks from a well, quenching his thirst from a bucket carved with roses and snakes. As he sits sated, a serpent approaches him, and Alberic desires the snake as a pet. He attempts to capture the animal, but his clumsy approaches allow it to escape. The reader is then faced with a gap in the plot, and we return to the Castle several years later when Alberic reaches the age of sixteen. Then we see Alberic as a well-provided for young man, although this is not due to the generosity of his grandfather. The Duke sends spies to the Castle, yet Alberic appears to be living a quiet life, just him, his pet snake, and occasional visits from his 'godmother', whom the reader knows nothing of. All the same, Alberic's curiosity about the tapestry is unquenchable. His grandmother refuses his requests for information, but one day Alberic convinces an old teller of fairy-tales who – rather conveniently – wanders into the grounds to tell him the story. The teller explains that Alberic's ancestor had sworn to kiss the fairy Oriana three times to deliver her from her fate, but he recoils when he realizes that she is a snake. After pulling himself together he kisses her and she takes her human form, but due to the ancestor's lack of fidelity, Oriana reverts to her serpentine form. This ancestral shock makes Alberic unwell. Furthermore, the generosity of his godmother arouses the suspicions of his grandfather who attempts to find Alberic a bride. He refuses and the grandfather, in a fit of anger, orders the court jester to kill Alberic's snake in retaliation, which he does in a most brutal way, slashing the creature with a sword. Later, it is noted that where the corpse of the snake should have been lies the body of a beautiful woman, beaten and bruised, but easily identifiable as the woman from the tapestry: the snake has transformed back into the body of Alberic's godmother, Oriana. While the love Alberic has for Oriana is on the surface normative and heterosexual, Oriana's enchanted body

defies expectations: she has lived for hundreds of years, while Alberic is only sixteen, and she shifts between snake and human forms – the human form arousing desire, and the snake arousing repulsion from all but Alberic. The murder of the snake reveals Oriana's true form, 'the body of a woman, naked, and miserably disfigured with blows and sabre cuts',[14] an attempt by Alberic's uncle to eliminate, as Sonja Pinto argues, 'the object of Alberic's desire'.[15]

Oriana's fairy-tale woven through the tapestry allows for a Renaissance past to linger in the narrative past, opening up a space for non-normative relationships. Yet, whilst this aesthetic object might enable transcendence, it is, as Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood suggest, a 'transhistorical realm that it constructs is always fragile. To be outside of the stream of linear time, it seems, is at once liberating and melancholy'.[16] Stetz's reading returns Lee's transcendent object back to its decadent origins stating that when restored to its 'place in the *Yellow Book* milieu' the tale becomes 'a passionate defence of over-the-top Wildean aesthetic writing' as well as an 'equally passionate declaration of the importance of Wilde himself and of the right of artists to choose their own love objects, however unconventional'. Lee's text, Stetz concludes, stands as a work of 'great immediacy', one which attempted to influence the literary and social worlds of the 1890s' despite its seventeenth-century framing.[17]

Lee's 'lingering in and lingering of the past' in 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' shows her contradictory side, she is 'a conjurer of pictures of the far-away whose deepest interest was in the near-at-hand'.[18] Both Alberic and Lee look back to understand their own presence in the future, a contradiction Murray notes was not unheard of in the period: 'a large number of Decadent writers looked backward in their attempt to come to terms with modernity'. Literary decadence provided a way to articulate 'at moments of crisis' a way to live – 'beautifully, queerly, excessively'. 'Writers and artists continue to draw on the literary styles and transgressive lives of Decadent writers in the twenty-first century', Murray observes, suggesting that in this 'rancorous age of populism in politics and linguistic impoverishment in public discourse it is hardly surprising that Decadence should

offer resources to those wishing not to revel in decline, but to foment elegantly insouciant revolutions'.[19]

Mary F. Burns's literary (neo-)decadence in *The Unicorn in the Mirror* allows for the lingering of the past in the present. The novel is one of five 'John Singer Sargent – Violet Paget murder mysteries' penned by Burns. It is part historical fiction, fecund with the fruits of research of the early lives of the American painter and British writer, part neo-decadent detective story. *The Unicorn* extends or further allows the temporalities of 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' to merge, intertwining a 'present day' mystery solving a plot set in 1881 Paris, with a narrative set in 1738 Boussac, threaded together by the tapestries of *The Lady and the Unicorn*.

The Unicorn in the Mirror

Burns's books in this series reimagine biographical material from the lives of her protagonists as a fiction, transposing Lee's natural sharpness and analytical nature into the character of mystery-solver extraordinaire. To avoid confusion, this article addresses the published writer Vernon Lee as *Lee*, and the character in Burns's novel as *Paget* (as Burns chooses to do). *The Unicorn* is narrated by Paget during 1928, 47 years after the action takes place, when Paget/Lee is 72. Burns's neo-decadent rendering of Paget in 1881 is not the decadent Lee contemporary readers have come to recognize – the short-haired, wire-rim bespectacled, rigid white collared, black masculine-tailored woman of Sargent's portrait. Burns's rendering is of Violet Paget, an intelligent, if naïve, woman of 25.

The 1881 thread is focused on uncovering an art thief named 'The Revenant' who steals a contested Titian painting of Saint Sebastian from the Musée de Cluny. During the theft, the Revenant murders the museum's young art historian, Sébastien, and stages a scene in which the body of the historian is laid upon a table and apparently pierced through with arrows like his saintly namesake. The attractive young historian had travelled from Boussac with his sister and another artwork recently acquired by the Cluny collection – *The Lady and the Unicorn* tapestry. Violet and

John meet Sébastien on Friday 6 May 1881, when he opens the faded red wooden door and welcomes Violet, John, and John's younger sister to the Musée de Cluny:

> '*Bienvenue, mademoiselle* Sargent', said he, and I noted with approval that he was indeed handsome, though slightly built – fair-haired, smooth-faced with no hint of beard or moustache, with animated features and bewitching blue eyes, almost turquoise in their intensity.
>
> '*Monsieur* Sargent!' he exclaimed, reaching out a hand to shake John's – very unlike a Frenchman, I thought, but perhaps he knew that John was American? Even so, he clicked his heels together and bowed slightly, after the handshake. 'Sébastien Bayard, *à votre service*'.[20]

Violet is observant from the first, noting both the youthfully attractive visage of Sébastien and the offering of his hand to John. She keenly lists the

> scattered implements, paintbrushes, pots of congealing liquid, and piled in one corner, strange artefacts I took to be items of mediaeval armoury and weapons – a large wooden crossbow, an ancient leather quiver filled with arrows […] Slightly behind the small paintings was what appeared to be a much larger one, some five feet or so high and three feet across, but it was covered with a white sheet.[21]

The sheet obscures a painting which John uncovers. It shows a young man, the only covering on his body a draped cloth around his middle, who is 'loosely tied to a tree and pierced by arrows – two in his left arm, and two more in his abdomen' with 'the fifth arrow, as if shot from the right, embedded in his chest'.[22] John excitedly recognizes Titian's style, but his sister Emily is focused upon the distressing content. The group in the Musée try to make her feel better by explaining that the Saint did not die from his wounds – he was nursed by Saint Irene, but then unluckily, beaten to death with cudgels.[23]

The figure of Saint Sebastian was a popular symbol in Renaissance art. The Renaissance embodied ideals of ephebic beauty, whilst the decadent and contemporary fascination with Saint Sebastian has often focused upon what Flora Doble explains as the 'pleasure and pain dichotomy within Christian martyrdom' – that is, that one must endure pain on earth to receive the 'pleasure of eternal salvation'. This echoes Fraser's comments on Pater's captivation by Renaissance art and history as a 'paradoxical mix of purity and corruption, pleasure and pain', providing a vocabulary for 'the complexity, perversity even, of their own tastes and desires'.[24] Burns's Saint is literally uncovered, revealing both the Renaissance martyr, and the decadent fascination in the pierced

figure embodied by John. Doble's 'Saint Sebastian as a Gay Icon' explains the ways in which the 'Christian fixation with the desirable bodies of its saints and the permeable boundaries between the bodily flesh and the divine have been seen as homoerotic or queer' with the barely dressed paintings of the Saint Sebastian to be 'understood as inviting voyeurism'.[25]

Lee's companion in the decadent Renaissance style, Gabriele d'Annunzio, was fixated on the figure of Saint Sebastian, penning a mystery play set to music about the life of the Saint. The role of the Christian Martyr in D'Annunzio's *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* (1911) was written for the author's lover, Ida Rubinstein, a young attractive woman and a Jew, and the role, the actor, and the performance caused a scandal. It is only appropriate then, that Burns's Sebastian/Sébastien should bridge the gap between the decadent Renaissance and neo-decadence.

Burns's neo-decadent rendering of a work of decadent Renaissance into a mystery novel is particularly interesting (and counterintuitive) when we consider its 'possibility of embodied, often dangerously erotic, encounters with the past'.[26] In 'Critical Investigations: Convention and Ideology in Detective Fiction', William W. Stowe suggests that the mystery/detective fiction genres' perceived conservatism stems from its tendency to 'politically, morally and epistemologically affirm rather than question, and takes social structures, moral codes, and ways of knowing as givens rather than subjecting them to criticism'.[27] Indeed, the works published by *The Yellow Book* and the *Savoy* were a world away from the middle-class mysteries that 'drew a large and loyal readership' for journals such as *The Strand Magazine*.[28] Yet, despite its being identifiable through its strict adherence to ethical codes and justice, the genre should no longer be seen as a monolith: crime fiction and its typologies such as mystery and detective fiction are seen by Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King and Andrew Pepper to 'appropriate pre-existing generic tropes, features, forms and characteristics' becoming 'distinctive and even unique, so that genre itself is something we need to understand not in fixed, static terms (e.g., as a container) but as mutable, fluid and transgressive'.[29] This hybridity and mutability of form allows for Burns to pull together the various timeframes – timeframes that are themselves multitemporal hybrids – and symbols into the plot and to realign

the temporal realities within the text. But the murder of the young art historian is not the only mystery Violet and John have to contend with: the painting of Saint Sebastian has been apparently stolen.

> 'The Titian! It's gone!' Indeed, the easel on which it had been placed was not only empty, it was broken in pieces and lay on the floor.
>
> 'Sébastien!' cried Geneviève, running now to the far end of the workshop, to the door that led to the room with the *Lady and the Unicorn* tapestry. I called to her, running to catch up.
>
> 'Wait! Geneviève, wait!'
>
> But she had reached the door, and flinging it open, almost tumbled inside. I was right behind her with a lantern, which I had grasped on my way. I held it high, and turned to hand it to John, who was fast behind me. He held it higher, and as we stepped into the room, we saw revealed to us, in the wavering light, the figure of Sébastien, laid out upon the large wooden worktable, tied with ropes, and with arrows piercing his body through his clothing at several points.[30]

Violet announces that she was 'shocked by the grisly sight of Sébastien […] carefully laid out in the imitation of the saint whose name he bore', exclaiming 'the arrows – those horrid arrows!'[31] Thomas Heise suggests that the function of a corpse in the detective or mystery genre is to provide a 'shocking presence' which 'breaks the seamless flow of time and throws into relief the world around it'. It is a 'past that has to be recovered and reconstructed and a spatial disruption that has to be contextualised and explained'.[32] The theft of a potentially valuable work of art is perhaps less of a mystery than the question of why Sébastien would be murdered, and the body staged in such a tableau.

As Violet and John (in communication with both international detectives and French police) begin to investigate the murder, and support Sébastien's twin sister Geneviève, we begin, as readers, to gain some insight into the fictionalized lives of our real-life protagonists. John's prior acquaintance with the victim is brought to light: the artist and Sébastien had met previously at a Parisian society of gentlemen, whose 'approach to life', John notes, is 'off the beaten track, what might be seen as *bohemian*, and yet, which is a path of beauty, and love, and a deep connection to the Ideal, the Unique'.[33] This closeted admission of a Bohemian scandal raises questions for Violet, not only regarding the murder of the art historian, but also regarding the tastes of her closest friend John.

> As the carriage crawled through the busy streets, I [Violet] thought intently about what John had said—and what he had not said. What was one to make of this bohemian order of which he had spoken? […] I had a rather imperfect understanding of the variety of relationships in which men and women would entangle themselves—but one hears things, you know—and I was not unacquainted with the concept of the 'Greek friendship' as it pertained to men.[34]

The autopsy of Sébastien is requested and the report sent to Charles, Violet, and John. As an official investigator on the case, Charles is the first to read the report and Violet notes his palpable shock:

> 'What?' I said, clutching his arm. 'What is it?'
> 'Three things', he said, looking grim but stunned. 'First the arrows did not even pierce the flesh, and drew no blood, therefore – applied lightly through the garments, *post-mortem* as you thought, Violet', he said, nodding in my direction. 'Second, the time of death was between seven and ten o'clock […]'. He inclined his head toward John, then took a steadying breath.
> 'And third, Sébastien Bayard was, however unaccountably, a woman.'[35]

The death Sébastien and the birth of Aurore

The death of Sébastien, like that of the snake in 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' is a transformative act. Through the brutal act of murder both bodies return to their previous female form. It is heart-rending that Oriana only achieves a stable, female form, through her murder which facilitates the end of the enchantment that has bound her to the Castle of Sparkling Waters and the men of the dukedom of Luna. It is equally agonizing to see Sébastien's gender revealed via an autopsy report. It is, of course, no surprise to those close to both Oriana and Sébastien, who understood the nature and external presentation of each. Sébastien's twin sister Geneviève does not show any sign of uncomfortableness (nor should she) when gently asked by Violet and John her 'sister's' name: Geneviève simply replies 'Aurore'.[36]

While I have shown that there are obvious narratological synergies between 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' and *The Unicorn*, I also want to show that Burns's novel develops a 'sisterhood' between the figures of Oriana and Aurore, connecting them through the parallels of nominative meaning: Oriana deriving from the Latin for 'rising' or sunrise, Aurore from the Roman goddess of the dawn. As Oriana's form is fixed by death, Sébastien's/Aurore's takes on one of flux: at the vigil Violet narrates:

> The vigil for Aurore, as I was beginning to think of her, was in the Roman Catholic style, with an open casket past which people could walk and gaze upon the poor face, her hair beautifully arranged, her fingers entwined with a rosary of pearls. I smiled, a sad smile, when I saw that her sister and her aunt had dressed her in a man's shirt and bowtie, with a dark jacket, and I glanced at John who was standing next to me, sorrow suffusing his brown eyes. I think he was particularly affected by the way that Aurore looked once more so like Sébastien, that he felt a double sorrow.[37]

Violet's phrasing referring to Sébastien as 'her', seems odd in context. There is no shame or anxiety from Sébastien's family, no hiding away the masculine presentation preferred by Sébastien in life: the open casket does not conceal from those who knew the art historian their choice to live in this way. Violet's comment that the family 'had dressed her [Sébastien/Aurore] in a man's shirt and bowtie' seems unusual – was this not Sébastien's own clothing or was it loaned from a male friend for the vigil and funeral? If, as Heise suggests, the corpse signifies for the detective(s) a past that must be recovered and reconstructed, what is being recovered and reconstructed in the case of *The Unicorn and the Mirror*?

Violet and John's enquiry into the death of Sébastien and the theft of Titian's *Saint Sebastian* reveals the art historian's connections to Aurore Dupin, Baroness Dudevant – or George Sand, the author, as she was better known. Geneviève explains that Sand was a family friend who 'would write little plays for us all to perform […] and we would be allowed to dress up in all manner of beautiful dresses and suits, coats, and hats […] I was often a fairy-tale princess and […] Sébastien! Loved playing the *chevalier* on a gallant steed'.[38] Violet asks, 'who knew about this… *charade*?', 'did it not cause a scandal?',[39] to which Geneviève states: 'I believe she [Aurore] found her true spirit in being Sébastien. Her intent was not to deceive for any bad reason – she just became more – *herself* – when she was him.'[40]

Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin de Francueil, most often known by her pseudonym, George Sand (1804-1876), published over seventy novels, plays, and political works in her lifetime. To better understand Sand's influence upon Sébastien, Violet reads a copy of Sand's memoir, *Story of my Life* in which Sand discusses wearing masculine tailoring. Violet reads with 'great interest, not the least because', she admits, she is 'drawn to attempt the practice' herself. Sand's memoir explains:

> At first this idea [dressing in male clothing] seemed amusing to me, and then very ingenious […]. My clothing made me fearless. I was on the go in all kinds of weather, I came in at all hours, I sat in the pit at every theatre. No one paid attention to me, no one suspected my disguise. Aside from the fact I wore it with ease, the absence of coquettishness in costume and facial expression warded off any suspicion. […] Women understand very little about wearing a disguise, even on the stage. They do not want to give up the slenderness of their figure, the smallness of their feet, the gracefulness of their movements, the sparkle in their eyes; and yet all these things – especially their way of glancing – make it easy to guess who they are […]. Further to avoid being noticed as a man, you must already have not been noticed as a woman.[41]

Sand's masculine presentation made her 'fearless'; her masculine presentation afforded her freedom and the ability to appear unexceptional and blend into the crowd, her behaviour, her use of cross-dressing to appear unexceptional, was itself exceptional.

> 'You must already not have been noticed as a woman' I repeated softly. This sentence, this *truth* resonated to a very deep ache inside my heart. I have never been thought pretty, or even minimally attractive, in the conventional sense. The attentive male gaze rarely shone upon me, and when it did, I was realistic enough to know it was the strength of my mind and not the beauty of my face that drew that gaze – a much more satisfying principle to be sure, but not one given to romanticizing about. It had been some time now since the attentive *female* gaze had struck a more receptive chord – and I thought again of dear Mary, waiting for me in London.[42]

Whilst rather anachronistically discussing the male gaze, Violet's point stands: she was rarely (if at all) mentioned by anyone as physically attractive, but her mind was fiercely admired and occasionally feared. Therefore, Violet sees a potential opportunity to move through the world clothed a man, with the freedom that it affords a young, curious, and intellectual woman. In this novel, Violet is given the inspiration for Lee's adoption of dress *à la garçon*. This choice –which Sargent captured in his iconic 1881 portrait of Lee – is the image of the author that contemporary audiences associate with Lee. Could we then suppose that Burns's mystery does not so much pivot on the unravelling of a murder plot, as on an attempt to fictionalize a reason for Lee's clothing choices outside of Lee's gender or sexuality? Burns's Violet, like Sébastien (and Sand) chooses to wear masculine clothing, in an action that confirms their identity as an intellectual who wants to move with freedom through the world, taking up a masculine pseudonym to further enable their pursuits as writers and art historians.

Conservatism, genre, and recovery

If we return to Murray's quote that 'Decadence is then fundamentally a response to the conditions of modernity, a means of articulating at moments of crisis and change the need to live, beautifully, queerly, excessively', then we have to consider what this neo-decadent text is responding to, and the ways in which it does this, and how this interplays with the conservative origins of the mystery or detective genre. If the function of a corpse in the novel is to signify a 'past that has to be recovered and reconstructed and a spatial disruption that has to be contextualised and explained' then this appears at first glance to be counter to Murray's decadence.[43] Yet I would like to argue that the crisis and change that Burns's decadent mystery novel is responding to is the act of recovery itself, and the need to reconstruct, contextualize and explain, particularly in relation to historical figures. Burns's characters are essentially accepting of Sand's and Sébastien's choices, and when Violet and John attempt to explain the revelation to John's younger sister Emily (who was an admirer of the young art historian), they are surprised by Emily's reaction:

> You could have knocked us both over with a feather, when we heard Emily's response to our revelation.
>
> 'Yes, I know', she said, looking down at her hands in her lap, then looking up at us, sad but just a little bit mischievous.
>
> 'But I promised not to tell! And even though I imagined the truth would come out, with the… autopsy, and all that… well, then you both went away and there was not time to talk about it […] should I have said? I did so enjoy her company'.[44]

Emily's attraction to and enjoyment of Sébastien's/Aurore's company was not dependent upon the way in which they presented themselves: Emily takes them as they are. So, what is Burns's narrative doing? Is the body of Sébastien/Aurore an act of recovery? And is it problematic? How does this work of neo-decadent, historic fiction, woven together using a mystery plot, stay true to conventions and to Lee?

Lee's gender and sexuality has been a source of speculation throughout her life, and beyond. Her use of a pseudonym, choice of dress, and Lee's close relationships with women have led to discussion and the attempt to classify the identity of the women. Much of the discussion of Lee's identity has been brought about by early biographies of Lee, for example Burdett Gardner's *The*

Lesbian Imagination, Victorian Style (1987) and the important archival recovery work undertaken by second-wave feminists in the 1970-1980s. In more recent history, Lee's work was published under the author's *real* name in honour of the Women's Prize for Fiction's 25th anniversary in 2020, a collection of books was re-released with what the publisher called the author's *real* name. The publication of Lee's 'Oke of Okehurst, or, The Phantom Lover' as 'A Phantom Lover' by Violet Paget under the 'Reclaim Her Name' collection aimed to have 'the real, female author's names finally printed on the covers, to honour their achievements and give them the credit they deserve'.[45]

This reclamation of Lee's work, and the recovery of this narrative is, I would argue, counter to what we know of Lee from the correspondence and texts she left behind, the archives of Lee's curated letters, manuscripts, photographs, and published works that exist in special collections in the US, Italy, France, and the UK. Despite some of the contents being embargoed according to Lee's wishes until 1980, some research from the 'Reclaim Her Name' team would have found Lee happily using Vernon in both personal and commercial correspondence. I would also argue that the recovery of 'A Phantom Lover' was hardly needed. Lee's fantastic fiction was republished twenty-eight times during her lifetime, under the name of Vernon Lee, including in magazines, novellas, and collected stories. Since Lee's death in 1935 there have been eighty-four publications containing one or more of Lee's fantastic fictions, and fifty-six published collected works under the name of Lee prior to 'recovery'. Translations of Lee span the globe, with works in press in Argentina, Denmark, Turkey, Japan, South Korea, Russia, Portugal, Spain, Netherlands, as well as in the four languages Lee was fluent in: English, German, French, and Italian.

Did Lee's work require this recovery, and its identification as being the product of a repressed 'lesbian imagination'? Do we need to recover and honour poor Violet, a woman forced into using a pseudonym to collect her laurels? Several contemporary literary critics, such as Talia Schaffer, are now reflecting on the work of literary recovery. Schaffer writes that '[r]ecovery feminism was […] appealing because it fostered a powerful personal connection between the researcher and the subject', and perceived commonalities between authors and the feminist

archivists were seen as constructive and important in terms of representation.[46] It can also, Schaffer notes, 'tacitly imagine a woman writer who was suppressed, and who is rescued by an ardent, energetic researcher bravely surmounting all obstacles', a woman who has been '*lost*, silenced, or made mad or demonic by a world that refused to accommodate her', a woman who was 'victimized, yearned for freedom, covertly rebelled', whose writing 'reveals this historical trauma'.[47] Burns's recovery of Violet and Aurore overtly creates a fiction of the reasons that lie behind their choice of masculine clothing and name. But by ultimately not claiming these characters' choices being underpinned by the trauma of repression and oppression, or by aligning the character's identities with contemporary understandings of non-binary and trans-gendered people, and with homo- and bi- sexualities, Burns's act of recovery is one of temporal accuracy not anachronistic attempts to pathologize and label. It is, unlike Burns's use of Renaissance revivalism, neo-decadent murder mystery, of its time. It allows the aspects of Violet/Vernon that Violet/Vernon does not explicitly explain – perhaps because she does not yet have the vocabulary or feel the need to do so – to remain unfixed, in flux, and uncategorized.

Lee's works, particularly those that draw upon stylistic or thematic motifs from the Renaissance, have been available to the reading public across the boundaries of Europe and beyond, travelling further than the cosmopolitan Lee did in her own lifetime. This mode of narrative, which enabled a lingering of the historic past into the narratological present, allowed for exploration of non-normative sexualities mediated by a historic, aesthetic object, such as the tapestry of 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady'. Burns's 'John Singer Sargent – Violet Paget murder mysteries' extend or further allow these temporalities to merge, intertwining Renaissance tapestries, eighteenth-century action, and nineteenth-century mysteries with a neo-decadent framing text such as *The Unicorn in the Mirror*. Unlike the decadent Renaissance revivalism of Lee where the art object is a clue to be deciphered, Burns turns her attention to her characters' (Violet and Sébastien) visual presentation. But unlike traditional mysteries and detective fiction, Burns refuses the moral conservatism of the genre, the categorisation tied-up with the recovery of *lost* women authors, and

the contemporary cultural flashpoint of trans and non-binary-ness, allowing both Sébastien and Lee to exist as Murray suggests at a 'time of crisis', 'beautifully, queerly, excessively'.[48]

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[1] Emily Anne Rabiner, *The Decadent Renaissance: The Antimodern Seductions of Gabriele D'Annunzio and Vernon* Lee, unpublished doctoral thesis, UC Berkley, 2017, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3gm8r02t [accessed 24 February 2024], p. 5.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Stefano Evangelista, 'The Remaking of Rome: Cosmopolitanism and Literary Modernity in Gabriele D'Annunzio's *The Child of Pleasure*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 53.3 (2017), 314-24.
[4] Vernon Lee, 'Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover', in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Plymouth: Broadview Press, 2006).
[5] Athena Vrettos, '"In the Clothes of Dead People": Vernon Lee and Ancestral Memory', *Victorian Studies*, 55.2 (2013), pp. 202-11, and Sally Blackburn-Daniels and Sophie Geoffroy, '"Traces of the exotic" in Vernon Lee's "Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover"', *Women's Writing*, 28.4 (2021), 569-88.
[6] In particular, the chapter 'A White and Ice-cold World', in Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).
[7] 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' was first published in *The Yellow Book*, 10 (July 1896).
[8] Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 9.
[9] Hilary Fraser, 'British Decadence and Renaissance Italy', in *Decadence: A Literary History*, ed. by Alex Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 48.
[10] Alex Murray, 'Introduction: Decadent Histories', in *Decadence: A Literary History*, p. 6.
[11] Margaret Stetz, 'The Snake Lady and the Bruised Bodley Head: Vernon Lee and Oscar Wilde in the *Yellow Book*', in *Vernon Lee Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 113, 116.
[12] Wilde, quoted by Stetz, p. 115.
[13] Vernon Lee, 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady', in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, p. 183.
[14] Ibid., p. 48.
[15] Sonja Pinto's wonderful online exhibition, *Decadent Desire and Queer Victorians: A Digital Exhibit*, has some illustrative digitised artefacts and clear synopses of 'Prince Alberic'. See https://omekas.library.uvic.ca/s/decadentdesire/page/intro [accessed 24 February 2024].
[16] Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), p. 53.
[17] Stetz, p. 122.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Murray, pp. 7, 15.
[20] Burns, pp. 10-11.
[21] Ibid., p. 13.
[22] Ibid., pp. 13-14.
[23] John suggests the painting is 'very much in the style of Titian' (Burns, p. 14), yet Titian's known painting of the Saint was acquired by the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg in 1850, after being sold by the Barbarigo Gallery, Venice.
[24] Fraser, p. 48.
[25] Flora Doble, 'Saint Sebastian as a Gay Icon', *Art UK*, 20 Jan 2020, https://artuk.org/discover/stories/saint-sebastian-as-a-gay-icon [accessed 24 February 2024].
[26] Rabiner, p. 5.
[27] William W. Stowe, 'Critical Investigations: Convention and Ideology in Detective Fiction', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 31.4 (1989), 570-91 (p. 570).
[28] Reginald Pound, *The Strand Magazine 1891-1950* (London: Heinemann 1966).
[29] Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper, 'Introduction: New Directions in Crime Fiction Scholarship', in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 4.
[30] Burns, p. 47.
[31] Ibid., p. 61.
[32] Thomas Heise, 'Time and Space', in *Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, p. 219.
[33] Burns, p. 111. Emphasis Burns's own.
[34] Ibid., p. 125.
[35] Ibid., pp. 161-62.
[36] Ibid., p. 174.

[37] Ibid., p. 266.
[38] Ibid., p. 128.
[39] Ibid., p. 175.
[40] Ibid., p. 176.
[41] Ibid., p. 272.
[42] Ibid., pp. 272-73.
[43] Heise, p. 219.
[44] Burns, p. 334.
[45] *Women's Prize for Fiction*, https://www.womensprizeforfiction.co.uk/features/features/reclaim-her-name [accessed 25 February 2024].
[46] Talia Schaffer, 'Victorian Feminist Criticism: Recovery Work and the Care Community', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 47.1 (2018), 63-91 (p. 66).
[47] Ibid., p. 68.
[48] Murray, p. 15.

Variations of Decadence: Reflections on Julian Barnes' *The Man in the Red Coat*

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Why are we drawn to decadence? No single answer on the complex variations of decadence's allure will suffice. The task is no easier in the context of a special issue on neo-Victorian decadence. Nevertheless, some form of response must be tried, if only because of the reflections it can prompt through the (mis)readings it repeats and the (re)readings it invites. And so, inadequately, we take a stab at an answer. We are drawn to decadence because of the validation it offers to personal or collective enervation, exquisiteness, and excess. It countenances the luxuriant, the dissipative, and the aesthetic. These categories are too loosely run together, admittedly, and the words deployed seem to bear, implicitly and incongruously, tones of reproof. Yet what's not to like in looseness (*volupté*: one need hardly say more) if not for a peculiar unease which, even and as it is repressed, makes decadence more tantalizing in its prospect and chancier in its actuality? The cares and uncertainties of the world are kept at bay by a cocooning of one's self – *soi*, in French – in the *soie*, the silk, of Apollonian attitudinizing. This is only one mode of decadence and seems to constitute some play of delusion, but all forms of decadence must act like there's no tomorrow. The decadent attitude must be flaunted, vaunting its contempt for measure. But this mostly holds if we are, in fact, committed to decadence and lost *to* or lost *in* it: for instance, and in another of its modes, by making ourselves at one with the languor, the affectation, the fastidious disdain of its costumed, flâneuring drift (all words used here, as befits the context, without negativity). If, on the other hand, the decadent existence proves too consuming – so that we swerve away from affirming and totalizing it as our *life/style* – then we are drawn to it differently. We still regard it in fascination, but we indulge it at a distance, only vicariously intent on the disposition for the flamboyantly unconstrained and on the fall that can be visited upon it by the world and by fate. Decadence, in

this sense, has some affinities with tragedy. As with observation of the tragic, there is something of the cathartic in witnessing decadent trajectories. And, as it happens, could anything be stagier than decadence – or its undoings?

That is by way of initial answer. But there are significant problems with this description. For one thing and for all the disclaiming gestures, it is too general, as well as less than precise about the discontinuities between Aestheticism and decadence, the distinctions between and across which generate ample scholarship within Victorian and Edwardian studies. The hint of some level of judgemental suspicion is not easily dispelled either. For reasons that will hopefully become more justifiable over the course of this article's argument, there is, however, strategic purpose to these liberties over definition and category, and to the overtones that intrude. A consideration related to this is best mentioned at the outset. It involves the vernacular understanding of decadence that is associable with jeremiads decrying sociocidal decay in a culture's vigour, verve, and values. That understanding is one that this article would also like to keep in view, as there is some value in an unsophisticated construction of decadence which can both expose and throw light on the label's finer extensions, which will come more centrally into frame in the second section of this article on Julian Barnes' *The Man in the Red Coat* (2019). This other less specialist perspective on decadence presumes that what is being contemplated is a vitiating of ideas and mores, a tension between robust tradition and shiftless modernity. In other words, and to return to a literary equivalent, in the frame would be decadence as seen by someone like Alexander Pope, who in the remarkable conclusion to Book IV of the *Dunciad* (1743), and against the vexed backdrop of the eighteenth-century debate on the contending merits of the Ancients and the Moderns, perceives the whole of culture and civilization imploding upon itself as a consequence of an all-pervasive 'Dul'ness' and decay. In that 'dread Empire' of 'CHAOS!', ruled by the 'great Anarch' of Dullness in which 'Nor *human* spark is left, nor Glimpse *divine!*', the outcome is that 'Universal Darkness buries All.'[1] This is the extreme hyperbole of the mock-heroic, positioning itself at the most extreme variation of decadence. It is the bleakest vision of decadent reduction.

Or, indeed, as we are talking Victorians, in the frame would be the stance of Matthew Arnold in 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (1864) or of *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). What could be more high-Victorian, more *non*-decadent, than Arnold's resonant injunction upon criticism to act on (indeed the equation of criticism with) '*a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that has been known and thought in the world*'?[2] As is well-known, Arnold felt that the consequence of rejecting this course is, in fact, decline. Dramatically, he describes it as 'mere anarchy and confusion', thereby echoing the Dunciad's fear of the 'great Anarch', quoted above, and anticipating W. B. Yeats's 'mere anarchy […] loosed upon the world' in 'The Second Coming' (decadence, it appears, always comes again, with variations).[3] It is rather wonderful, in fact, that the words *decline* and *decadent/decadence* are not actually used by Arnold in those texts, and *decay* only twice and in a different context, but the sense of what is at stake is clear in various sequences. In none of these sequences is Arnold shy about how anarchy takes hold. He equates it, conventionally, with 'social disintegration', with 'rowdyism', with how

> this and that man, and this and that body of men, all over the country, are beginning to assert and put in practice an Englishman's right to do what he likes; his right to march where he likes, meet where he likes, enter where he likes, hoot as he likes, threaten as he likes, smash as he likes.[4]

Against this, 'culture is the most resolute enemy of anarchy, because of the great hopes and designs for the State which culture teaches us to nourish': the opposing impulse to that which drives those expressions of decadence seeking to upset the prevailing order, in a politics which, as Alex Murray and Matthew Potolsky, among others, have shown, is itself more complex and varied than might be assumed.[5]

And yet, by a curious paradox, Arnold's injunctions are not so far removed as one might think from the discriminating commitment to that which within decadence (a tradition gradually installing itself across this article with accruing modulations and variations) is held to be most worthy of a life's devotion. In the words of Walter Pater, a very different kind of Victorian, that loyalty is most rewardingly due to 'art', which famously 'comes to you professing frankly to give

nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake', thereby enabling you to 'burn with a hard gemlike flame'.[6] There is, of course, the risk that the call of the high-minded will find itself betrayed or trivialized by a rarefied posture. And the vulnerabilities in the idea of *l'art pour l'art* were rehearsed early and often in criticism: not least and predictably, as Irving Singer wrote long ago, in relation to the morality of the idea and a certain 'pervasive irresponsibility' associated with it, as well as to whether the decadent gesture and the compulsions of 'a predominance of sensuous intuition and creative imagination' is in and of itself radical and subversive.[7] G. H. Bell-Villada later observed that 'The vulgar-Marxist belief that Art for Art's Sake is a phenomenon of the decadent bourgeoisie simply ignores the historical record', adding that 'The most superficial knowledge of literature and the other arts since 1820 tells us that *l'art pour l'art* has always been present as a component sect somewhere in bourgeois Culture.'[8]

The character of Cecil Vyse in E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908) embodies aspects of this attitude, which is designed to provoke more complex reactions than the mockery that, for example, prefigures the simpler affectations of the fops of Restoration comedy. Asked by another character – Mr Beebe, a clergyman – what he does for a profession, Cecil responds,

> I have no profession, […] It is another example of my decadence. My attitude – quite an indefensible one – is that so long as I am no trouble to any one I have a right to do as I like. I know I ought to be getting money out of people, or devoting myself to things I don't care a straw about, but somehow, I've not been able to begin.[9]

'Doing as one likes': it is striking how often scenarios and debates involving decadence come back to this idea, against which the whole of the second chapter of Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* is situated (and titled). Significantly, one other characteristic is remarked of Vyse and his decadence (the word is directly used only that one time in the novel, though the affinities are clear enough). Lucy Honeychurch, the heroine of the novel, is warned by another character, Mr Emerson: 'You cannot live with Vyse. He's only for an acquaintance. He is for society and cultivated talk.'[10] Pointedly, in a novel that is singularly replete with references to characters being 'tired' and finding

situations 'tiresome', he adds: 'Have you ever talked to Vyse without feeling tired?'. As Lucy attempts to interrupt, Mr Emerson presses home the point:

> No, but have you ever? He is the sort who are all right so long as they keep to things – books, pictures – but kill when they come to people. […] Next, I meet you together, and find him protecting and teaching you and your mother to be shocked, when it was for *you* to settle whether you were shocked or no. Cecil all over again.[11]

Decadence all over again, were it not for the fact, or even because of it, that there are variations to decadence that transcend this kind of attitudinizing. But decadence, it is true, can be exhausting. Charles Baudelaire's ideas in 'The Painter of Modern Life' (1863) on the 'aristocratic superiority' of the mind of the 'perfect dandy', and 'the *burning* desire to create a personal form of originality' are the more acceptable and celebrated, if potentially equally consuming, variation and attestation of this.[12] Burning, again: there's a strange propensity for it, it seems, in decadence. Decadence, in Aestheticist mode or otherwise: it burns you out, it burns you up.

Meanwhile, the other ascription of decadence – involving sociocultural vulnerabilities, readable within Habermasian sentiment on the unfinished project of modernity, or Lyotardian diagnoses of 'incredulity toward metanarratives', or Jamesonian reflections on 'waning of affect', or 'postmodernity and its discontents' as discussed by Zygmunt Bauman (all perspectives on the postmodern condition) – evolves into speculation on what might be thought of, in a more current paradigm, as posthumanist decadence.[13] Although not as comprehensively covered in scholarship as one might expect, this is potentially an expansive subject, rendered more intractable by the manner in which transhumanist visioning and contemporary technoscience apotheosize that very belief in 'machinery', in its hyper-evolved instantiations, that Arnold suspected, and which in different ways are critiqued in, for instance, Roberto Calasso's *L'innominabile attuale* [The Current Unnameable] (2017) or Bernard Stiegler's *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism* (2016).[14] It is of course far from clear that posthumanism must be thought of as in and of itself decadent. The counter-argument is eminently viable and certainly, in a different setting, worth pursuing. But it is not difficult to see why the correspondence with

decadence suggests itself, possibly a little facilely, in the context of discussions around the 'post-humanities' and the end of the human and, indeed, of everything else, or of those representations of the (post)apocalyptic that are coextensive with dystopian imminence and which allegorize, to repurpose a title of Anthony Trollope, the way we decadently live now.[15] It is only another confirmation that whatever the variation of decadence in play, the sense will be that things tend pleasurably but ominously. This seems to ring with a sense of lapsarian inevitability, and of postlapsarian wallowing *or* bewilderment *or* resentment *or* defiance *or* insouciance *or* regret *or* … but there will be many variations of reaction to many variations of decadence and their many upshots and downcastings. To paraphrase Bruno Latour: we may never have been modern, but we have always already been decadent. The decadent condition is always already, in successive *and* simultaneous variation, the human state.

Consequently, the question of why we *are* drawn to decadence, in whichever of its forms we find ourselves compelled by, returns more sharply. One response could well go: how could we not be, if that is where we are all already at? But to answer the question requires possibly less generality and more exemplifying focus. What, for instance and in narrowed variation, is the beguilement of a supercilious, overweening attachment to the fineries of beauty and art, unless it has also something to do with the Wildean drama of the inevitability of its undoing that we witness (creeps that we are) with possibly sympathetic, but also savvy, fascination – and distance?

Julian Barnes' *The Man in the Red Coat* looks, precisely, at aspects of that beguilement. Before considering it, one last preparatory move is useful, taking in the definition of *decadence* not in the *Oxford English Dictionary* but in Samuel Johnson's 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*. Johnson – can we imagine anybody more robustly, pre-Victorianly non-decadent than him? – gives decadence short shrift. His definition is one of his tersest and most unappealing. '*Decadency*', he writes, is 'decline, decay'. And that's that. The thought does occur that Johnson himself provides a curious instance of how the exemplars of the non-decadent can be revealed to have a side perceivable as not undecadent. How else are we to regard Johnson's predilection for holding court, or his

indulgence of discipleship and of awed circles of conversation in the (self-)theatricalizing of his own literary eminence? Then again, and for all the relevance of pre-Victorian self-regard in relation to neo-Victorian decadence, this opens up too much distracting scope. It is why the rest of this article grounds the question, 'Why are we drawn to the decadent?', in a close look at *one* text: *The Man in the Red Coat* – after all, the act(ing) of discriminating selectiveness is always opportune in and around decadence, or a certain conception of it. Not before observing, however, that the moves just rehearsed prime an important, and converse, question. 'What antitheses does decadence draw?' We must ask, squarely, 'What *is* the opposite of decadence?' Squareness itself, possibly, could be one answer, especially as we are not going to follow Arnold and insist upon 'Culture!' Squareness, bearing the staid securities of the proper, the correct, the steady, the reliable. Is that it, though? No: the contention will be that *The Man in the Red Coat* offers a more prismatic and revealing response to why we are drawn to, *and away from*, decadence.

The Man in the Red Coat: Scientific rationalism and decadent association

There is something rather delectable in approaching decadence in the context of work by Julian Barnes. The impression, after all, would be that he is another of the exemplars of the non-decadent. His writing is justifiably famed for its *control*. It is unaffected and self-aware to an almost painfully recursive degree. *Nothing to be Frightened Of* (2008), a memoiristic book-length essay on death that starts with the sentence 'I don't believe in God but I miss him' and instantly goes on to critique it, as it does with its repeated recourse to the use of the past conditional ('It's what she would have wanted'), is a good example of this, seamlessly weaving anecdote and self-questioning reflection into a tapestry of intertextual reference to death and bereavement, doing so across literature, philosophy, biography and more.[16] It is a different kind of elegance to that conveyed in the wit of decadence, and in fact, as we shall see, Barnes will question aspects of the latter. This other stance is marked, rather, by suave restraint, though it is also true that it is possible to discern there a narrative rhetoric of quite performed poise. There can in fact be something very urbane, very

dapper in the fine performance of the *un*decadent. It is perhaps telling that *silken* is a term that comes to mind to describe Barnes' style. Silk, like velvet, is a material of choice for decadence (recall, also, the opening of this article) and Barnes, as he himself records, was in his time not above a velvet 'bottle-green' suit, 'the uniform of young litterateurs' in a bygone London (a different shade could have made it very Wild(e)).[17]

However, it does not take an impressionistic or invasive point about Barnes' style or persona for the surprising affinity with decadence in his work to come through. It is arguable that a crypto-fascination (and indeed, it is hardly cryptic) with decadence in all its forms runs through his writing. An article could be written on variegations of decadence in *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989), or Barnes' translation of Alphonse Daudet's *In the Land of Pain* (1829) – he who was the son of a silk merchant – or indeed on the awareness of many of his protagonists that they are declinedly short of their potential. But since Barnes, in *The Man in the Red Coat*, did write a wide-ranging portrayal of French decadence in the Belle Époque and of its prefigurations in and involvements with Victorian and Edwardian England, it is to that book, almost too apt for the theme of this special issue, that the immediate decadence-minded critical gaze turns.

The book is structured in the form of essayistic vignettes. Each depicts characters, encounters or episodes involving decadent elects in the late Victorian period in England and the Belle Époque in Paris. *The Man in the Red Coat* is not, therefore, a novel. It is probably best thought of as a form of essayistic documentarism, which makes much of its not being a novel. Barnes notes of the past, 'We may speculate as long as we also admit that our speculations are novelistic, and that the novel has almost as many forms as there are forms of love and sex.'[18] Quite like decadence and its variations then, some of which are imprinted with the influence of certain proper names:

> Some names and works recur pressingly in the fin-de-siècle litany, both as precursors and exemplars: Baudelaire, Flaubert, Antinous (Hadrian's lover), Salomé, Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon, Parsifal, Burne-Jones, plus a supporting cast of androgynes, sadists, cruel mythological women and cruel English milords.[19]

Elsewhere, as he considers gaps and puzzles in the historical record, Barnes adds: 'All these matters could, of course, be solved in a novel.'[20] But *The Man in the Red Coat* is not a novel, heightening the reader's sense of how its neo-Victorian inter-generic nature sharpens the poignancies of its distinctive mode of life writing and chronicle. A longer analysis of the volume would need to address that characteristic, reading it also in the light of the poetics, or at least the attributes, of essayism discussed by Brian Dillon.[21] And indeed, the suitability of the documentarism and essayism to the decadent context emerges from Barnes' own remarks and quotations: he cites Mallarmé referring to *À rebours* [*Against Nature*] as 'an absolute vision of the paradise of pure sensation' but one which remains 'strictly documentary', while himself noting how Huysmans's novel 'diverts into essayistic mode'.[22] For reasons of space, and as it is (neo-)Victorian decadence that is in view, it is best to steer the discussion to Barnes' contrasting depictions of Oscar Wilde and the man in the red coat himself, Samuel Jean Pozzi. Into that contrast can be read, as if in parable, why it is that we are drawn to decadence.

Some contextualizing is needed for Pozzi that is not required for Wilde. An eminent gynaecologist but also a socialite acquainted with a bewildering number of canonical decadent figures, Pozzi remains largely overlooked, despite the consistency of his own observing presence in the scene. *The Man in the Red Coat* begins thus: 'In June 1885, three Frenchmen arrived in London. One was a Prince, one was a Count, and the third was a commoner with an Italian surname. The Count subsequently described their purpose as "intellectual and decorative shopping".'[23] During 'the previous summer', notes Barnes in the next vignette, Oscar and Constance Wilde are on their honeymoon in Paris, with 'Oscar reading a recently published French novel'.[24] We later learn that the book is Huysmans's *À rebours*, that classic of decadence which Barnes describes as a 'dreamily meditative bible of decadence'.[25] Meanwhile, the Count is Robert de Montesquiou-Fézensac, 'a society figure, dandy, aesthete, connoisseur, quick wit and arbiter of fashion',[26] who models himself on Huysmans's Des Esseintes; the Prince is Edmond de Polignac. They come to London, Barnes notes, 'bearing a letter of introduction to Henry James', who

'devoted two days, 2 and 3 July 1885, to entertaining these three Frenchmen who', James subsequently wrote in a remark quoted by Barnes, 'had been "yearning to see London aestheticism".'[27] The letter was written by John Singer Sargent, who in 1881 had painted a portrait of Pozzi in a red coat, 'Unless it is better described as a dressing gown', though it remains resplendent 'Red – or more exactly, scarlet – full length, from neck to ankle, allowing the sight of some ruched white linen at the wrists and throat'.[28] Well might the painter have told his subject, 'It's not about *you,* it's about the coat', and indeed 'the coat is now remembered more than its young inhabitant'.[29] Dress and effect prevail over the man who Sargent described to James as 'a very brilliant creature': this too is decadence.[30]

Here, then, in Barnes' book, with its non-novelistic rendering of neo-Victorian decadence, the beginnings of the Belle Époque meet Victorian decadence. And of the Belle Époque, Barnes writes:

> Merrie England, the Golden Age, la Belle Epoque: such shiny brand names are always coined retrospectively. No one in Paris ever said to one another, in 1895 or 1900, 'We're living in the Belle Epoque, better make the most of it'. […] The Belle Epoque: locus classicus of peace and pleasure, glamour with more than a brush of decadence, a last flowering of the arts, and last flowering of a settled society before, belatedly, this soft fantasy was blown away by the metallic, unfoolable twentieth century […]. Well, it might have been like that for some. […] But then, as Douglas Johnson, wise historian of France, once wrote, 'Paris is only the outskirts of France.'[31]

The wistfulness discernible here will become important for comparative reasons in the third section below, but for the moment this passage may remain in suspension here. And so, with this first contextualizing done, we can return to Pozzi, who is described by Leon Edel, James' biographer, as 'a society doctor, a book-collector, and a generally cultivated conversationalist'.[32] Barnes describes him later as having 'what might be called "the bourgeois pleasure of pleasing"', in canny contradistinction to '"the aristocratic pleasure of displeasing" (the phrase is from Baudelaire)'. He 'was from the start an adroit social tactician'.[33] Barnes notes how, as a result and in what becomes something of a refrain in the book, 'Pozzi was everywhere, so Pozzi was here too, at the centre of the action',[34] such that the book is a tracing of just how ubiquitous the now

almost unremembered Pozzi is in the Paris society of his time.[35] Pozzi moves in society without insidiousness but, rather, with approved grace. The book becomes an account of that society.

Everyone is here, from Sarah Bernhardt to Maupassant, Mallarmé to Proust, Montesquiou to the Goncourt brothers and all the *Célébrités Contemporaines* featured on the cards enclosed in the confection boxes of the chocolatier Félix Potin, reproductions of which punctuate Barnes' account and line the inside and back covers of the hardback. Pozzi, it seems, knew them all. In other words, and this is central to the argument of this article, what *The Man in the Red Coat* offers is a displaced immersion, focalized through the overlooked and overlooking ubiquity of Pozzi, of sundry variations of decadence. Through it all, Barnes notes,

> Pozzi was always well-dressed, and his 'English frock coats' were commented upon; he was described as 'almost a dandy'. He was one in the loose, vernacular sense: but he could never be one in the fullest meaning of the term. The dandy was an Anglo-French phenomenon, criss-crossing the Channel throughout the nineteenth century. […] The French dandy was more of a writer than the English version: Baudelaire was the poet-dandy's poet-dandy. […] The dandy is an aesthete, one for whom 'thought is of less value than vision'.[36]

And there, in that 'almost', is the crux. Pozzi, not quite a dandy but pleasingly acquainted with and inserted within all the decadent and Aestheticist strains of his time, is just the person to look to in responding to the question, 'What draws us to decadence?' Pozzi is drawn to it but unclaimed by it. He is decadent only in 'the loose, vernacular sense'. He remains what Barnes describes as a 'highly intelligent, swiftly decisive, scientific rationalist'.[37] He sails, 'a sane man in a demented age',[38] consorting with decadence but not overcome by it. This can be contrasted with Wilde, who has the vision that Barnes speaks of in the quotation above. Reading *The Man in the Red Coat* it becomes clear that Barnes does not have much regard for this kind of vision.

Barnes' references to Wilde are at best ambivalent. He refers to Wilde's 'glitterdust'.[39] He speaks scathingly of Wilde's inability to read the room, the *courtroom*, no less, when Wilde famously responds during his cross-examination, 'No work of art ever puts forward views of any kind',[40] which becomes a gift to the prosecuting Edward Carson, QC, MP. Elsewhere, there is an account of Wilde being rude to Proust about the interiors of his home. 'How ugly your house is!', he tells

him.[41] The thought occurs that a necessary attribute to being an aesthete is a lack of graciousness (Pozzi, in contrast, comes across in Barnes' portrayal as a man of some grace). Barnes reports Wilde describing Sargent's art as meretricious,[42] but it is hard not to feel that he sees the word rebounding on Wilde. He cites Jean Lorrain's description of Wilde as a faker.[43] He refers also to Arthur Conan Doyle's declining regard for Wilde and ebbing 'gentlemanly instincts'.[44] And then there is this prime example of a Barnesian dig: 'Arriving in America, Wilde explained to the natives, "I am here to diffuse beauty". The Artist as Aerosol, perhaps.'[45]

Yet the depiction is at its most devastating when it centres on one of the easiest of draws to decadence: the epigram. 'The epigram', writes Barnes, is like

> a verbal dandy. And like the dandy, most epigrams, except the greatest, come with a 'best before' label. Time is equally the enemy of the butterfly, the dandy and the epigram. […] [Wilde] was, socially and intellectually, a juggler, a tightrope walker, a trapeze artist, quick on his feet and quick in his head, a whirl of rhinestones caught in a spotlight while the rising clatter of the snare drum urges him and us towards that final cymbal clash. And then the applause – oh yes, the applause is vital.[46]

The snare drum indeed. Decadence, ever performative, traps even those who are wary of it. And what form might an undrawing from decadence take? Here, in the most salient quotation for the argument developed in this article, is Barnes on that point:

> When I was a young man I first heard Wilde's epigrams on the lips of actors who knew exactly what effect they would have. I was startled by their elegance and confidence and therefore assumed their truth. Later, I began to realise how many of them relied on a slick reversal of a normal assumption or *idée reçue*. Then, in middle age, I began to doubt their essential truth, or even their moderate truth, or even their vestigial truth, and a fierce literary moralism set in. Finally, I realised that the Wildean epigram (whether in dramatic or prose form) is actually a piece of theatrical display rather than any serious distillation of truth. And then, post-finally, I discovered that Wilde was aware of this all along. As he once wrote to Conan Doyle: 'Between me and life there is a mist of words always. […] the chance of an epigram makes me desert truth'.[47]

This is Barnes as, in effect, literary critic (the passage is somewhat reminiscent of Joseph Addison's essay of 11 May 1711 in *The Spectator* on distinctions between 'True Wit' and 'False Wit'),[48] engaged in a close examination of how we are drawn to decadence, or at least to one variation or performance of it, but with a potential for disaffection too. Charmed and beguiled, we might yet seek, and find, distance from it. Distance: this, in the end, is the key to Pozzi, who is 'almost a

dandy' but stands in for Barnes' own regard for the decadent. Drawn to it, yes, intimately and narratingly interested, such that the relation is affinitive and elective, not merely vicarious – but, in the end, unclaimed and capable of detachment, possibly wary of being undone by it. So it is ironic that Pozzi does not waste away as a result of any decadent indulgence but still comes to abrupt end. He dies murdered, shot 'three times: in the arm, the chest and the gut' on 13 June 1918 by a disturbed patient that he had treated, while he was engaged in the very undecadent activity of visiting and performing duties in a military hospital.[49] The scientific rationalist is (over)taken by the irrational.

Varying away from decadence, manageably

So, in conclusion, what is there to say about this figuration, in the contrast between Wilde and Pozzi, about how Barnes – and we – view decadence? The decadent burn is not for everyone. It is hard not to think that some burn so that others, fascinated by the (self-)consuming act but wary of it, might not. Barnes, notably, likes Pozzi. He watches him navigate the decadent waters. Barnes drops Wilde but takes up Pozzi's watchfulness (in its double sense) in relation to decadence. Above all, he approves of Pozzi's dictum, 'Chauvinism is one of the forms of ignorance.'[50] Pozzi is remarkably unignorant in that sense. Contrasting this in his Author's Note with his own dismay at Brexit, Barnes' closing comment reads thus:

> Still, I decline to be pessimistic. Time spent in the distant, decadent, hectic, violent, narcissistic and neurotic Belle Epoque has left me cheerful. Mainly because of the figure of Samuel Jean Pozzi. […] He was, thankfully, not without faults. But I would, nonetheless, put him forward as a kind of hero.[51]

The nature of that heroism lies in the tactical rational distance in the face of the allure of decadence in all its senses. Yet this is a puzzling note for the book to end on. What is the connection between this anti-Brexit stance and what Pozzi – this 'hero' of the Belle Époque, who is 'almost a dandy', who is *in* and *of* and *with* decadence, yet rather *without* – embodies? Possibly it must be read in the context of the quotation that was left in suspension in the second section: with that sense in view

of an age that we never knew as delicious and teeming, or as precarious and vulnerable to history, when we were in it. Possibly it has to do with nostalgia for smooth and easy flow across contexts, for which decadence arguably has a genius.

Even so, the impression one is left with by the characters encountered in *The Man in the Red Coat* is that the decadent alternative can be overbearing in the end, its own stagey act becoming a little predictable to itself and others, a little tiresome and tiring, perhaps. 'Cecil all over again.' And the propensity for self-destruction is strong, which is why one might wish to move away. What *The Man in the Red Coat* allegorizes, then, is the broader instance of how variations across temper and temperance – for this has always been, in the end, about those attributes – modulate the regard of, and for, decadence.

Of course, this can seem feeble, tepid, square, bourgeois: everything that an aesthete *or* a decadent must disdain. It must also be reemphasized that *The Man in the Red Coat* revisits, in good neo-Victorian and neo-Edwardian fashion, a wider cast of decadent dispositions than is represented by Wilde, though few of the other characters emerge with calibrated balance in character or conduct. More interestingly still, the suggestion above that *The Man in the Red Coat* is in the end a study of temper and temperance (or lack thereof) across the Belle Époque cues a comparative point from which some insight could be drawn. It can seem like in registering the book's restaging of subtle and guarded veerings away from decadence what is being witnessed is, in fact, a neo-Victorian *and* neo-Elizabethan variation – admittedly, at a distant remove on the continuum, though the overriding point ought perhaps to be that there is in fact a discernible continuum of (non-)decadent proclivities – of a determining episode in the twelfth Canto of Book II of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. That episode famously depicts the sacking of that *locus classicus* of decadence, the Bower of Bliss, by the righteous Sir Guyon, the Knight who is a model of temperance but is wildly intemperate in the destruction. We could do worse than to revisit Spenser for reflections on how we cannot resist the richly varied allure of decadence, and why any disengagement from it can range from the gently dissociative participation of Pozzi to Guyon's

violent break, though that work of interpretation, at least in regard to the latter consideration, has already been done to fine effect in an article by Angela D. Bullard on the Bower of Bliss episode in *The Faerie Queene*. Bullard concludes, 'there is a degree of manageability that early moderns believed they could exert over an outside environment with the potential to shape their affectivity'.[52] Whether such manageability of decadence and its effects and variations over time, which can only be a matter of 'degree' anyway, is configurable or illusory is kept in ambiguous, tantalizing suspension. It could hardly be otherwise, for like the protagonist of *The Man in the Red Coat*, this neo-Victorian parable on how and why we are forever drawn to and away from decadence, it is ultimately we ourselves who are most variable in what we think and desire.

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[1] Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. by John Butt (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 800. Emphasis in the original.
[2] Matthew Arnold, *Selected Prose*, ed. by P. J. Keating (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 156. Emphasis in the original.
[3] See Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. by J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 97; W. B. Yeats, *Poems of W. B. Yeats: A New Selection*, ed. by A. Norman Jeffares (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), p. 246.
[4] Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, pp. 82, 76-77.
[5] Ibid., p. 204; Alex Murray, *Decadent Conservatism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Matthew Potolsky, 'Decadence and Politics', in *Decadence: A Literary History*, ed. by Alex Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 152-66.
[6] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, introduced by Arthur Symons (New York: The Modern Library, 1900), pp. 197, 199.
[7] See Walter Lippman, *A Preface to Morals* (New York: Macmillan, 1929) and Irving Singer, 'The Aesthetics of Art for Art's Sake', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 12.3 (1954), p. 344.
[8] Gene H. Bell-Villada, 'The Idea of Art for Art's Sake: Intellectual Origins, Social Conditions, and Poetic Doctrine', *Science & Society*, 50.4 (1986), p. 419.
[9] E. M. Forster, *A Room with a View* (London: Edward Arnold, 1908), p. 139.
[10] Ibid., p. 254.
[11] Ibid., pp. 254-55.
[12] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (New York: Phaidon Press, 1964), p. 27, emphasis added.
[13] See Jurgen Habermas, 'Modernity: An Unfinished Project', trans. by Nicholas Walker, in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, ed. by Maurizio Passerin d'Entreves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997 [1981]), pp. 38-55; Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1975]); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991); Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (London: Polity, 1997).
[14] For a different conceptualization of correspondences between decadence and posthumanism see also Dennis Denisoff, 'A Disembodied Voice: The Posthuman Formlessness of Decadence', in *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin-de-Siècle*, ed. by David Hall and Alex Murray (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 181-200.
[15] See the opening to Ali Smith, *Winter* (London: Faber and Faber, 2017), for a memorably comprehensive yet terse portrayal of the contemporary obsession with things ending.
[16] Julian Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened Of* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), p. 1.
[17] Julian Barnes, 'One famous writer brought him a piece and was told it might serve as cat litter', *The Guardian*, 17 April 1999. https://www.theguardian.com/books/1999/apr/17/julianbarnes [accessed 7 December 2023].
[18] Julian Barnes, *The Man in the Red Coat* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2019), p. 113.
[19] Ibid., pp. 100-1.

[20] Ibid., p. 251.
[21] See Brian Dillon, *Essayism* (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2017).
[22] Barnes, *The Man in the Red Coat*, p. 37.
[23] Ibid., p. 1.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., p. 9.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., p. 6.
[28] Ibid., p. 2.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., p. 6.
[31] Ibid., p. 26.
[32] Ibid., p. 4.
[33] Ibid., p. 21.
[34] Ibid., p. 51.
[35] There is one biography of Pozzi: Claude Vanderpooten, *Samuel Pozzi: Chirurgien et ami des femmes* (Ozoir-La-Ferrière: In Fine; Neuilly: V & O, 1992).
[36] Barnes, *The Man in the Red Coat*, pp. 56-57.
[37] Ibid., p. 54.
[38] Ibid., p. 168.
[39] Ibid., p. 97.
[40] Ibid., p. 16.
[41] Ibid., p. 150.
[42] Ibid., p. 115.
[43] Ibid., p. 74.
[44] Ibid., p. 116
[45] Ibid., p. 65.
[46] Ibid., pp. 209-10.
[47] Ibid., p. 210.
[48] *The Spectator* 62, 11 May 1711.
[49] Barnes, *The Man in the Red Coat*, p. 257
[50] Ibid., p. 265.
[51] Ibid., p. 266.
[52] Angela D. Bullard, 'Tempering the Intemperate in Spenser's Bower of Bliss', *Spenser Studies: A Renaissance Poetry Annual*, 31-32.1 (2018), 167-87 (p. 183).

Decadence in Graphic Novels: An Introduction

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Let us begin with disappointment. There is no decadent movement in comics, graphic novels, *fumetti* or *bandes dessinées*. In fact, there is no correspondence between any literary or artistic movement and the medium that the French call the 9th art. Comics – a word used in this article to describe narrative pictorial works, as distinct from illustrations, caricatures, or animation – have their own trends, just like television or film. This article will therefore not discuss decadence as a phase or sub-genre in comics, but rather works in the medium that relate to the decadent literary tradition, and to a lesser extent, to the Symbolist movement that corresponded with decadence. Here, too, the sample is relatively small. This is because the decadent spirit is at odds with the comics medium for several reasons.

The first of these is thematic. Much of the literature described as decadent deals with themes of sin and corruption, from Joris-Karl Huysmans's *Là-bas* to Jean Lorrain's *Monsieur de Phocas*. As Jane Desmarais and David Weir note in their introduction to *Decadence and Literature*, 'Decadence has been used to describe racial degeneration, historical decline, philosophical pessimism, personal immorality, physical entropy, artistic imperfection, and more.'[1] Stories of this kind, especially those concerning personal immorality, tend to be subsumed within the horror genre.[2] The decay of a man's soul must find some kind of objective correlative in his actions, as in the case of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which is the most frequently adapted decadent novel in the medium, precisely because the supernatural element tips it into the horror or 'weird fiction' genre, and the plot resembles that of many horror stories.

The second is structural. Much of decadent literature is concerned with mood or atmosphere, often conveyed through description rather than action; *À rebours* is an ideal example. While comics can and do convey mood through both words and pictures, action and events are

the building blocks. In his seminal work, *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud notes that panels in comics are separated by what the industry calls 'the gutter' – the space between panels. 'Nothing is seen between the two panels, but experience tells you something must be there! Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments.'[3] In general, the content of these panels are the peak moments of action. While there are many exceptions, and artists who make exceptions their speciality, this concept of hopping from high point to high point determines the structure of most comics.

The third is commercial. Adaptations of literary sources constitute a very small proportion of comics, and these are generally not bestsellers. There have been highly regarded adaptations of literary classics, such as Stéphane Heuet's multi-volume version of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, illustrated in the *ligne claire* style popularized by Hergé, the creator of Tintin. But most of the adaptations of literature have been by famous genre writers such as Arthur Conan Doyle, Jules Verne, and Stephen King.

Our focus here, therefore, is to find what examples we can of the strange flowering of decadence in comics, and, in the case of this article, in Western comics not Japanese manga. We will explore five themes:

1. adaptations of works by decadent authors, and biographical works about these authors;
2. notable adaptations of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*;
3. the influence of symbolist art on comics artists, particularly on the American artist P. Craig Russell;
4. decadent narrative and linguistic tropes in 1970s horror comics;
5. as a special case, the representation of Gabriele d'Annunzio in Italian *fumetti*.

As noted above, decadent literature has not had much of an influence on the comics medium. However, through these five themes, we can find different pathways for studying the *reflection* of decadent authors and styles in comics. Those reflections, though rare, are fascinating.[4]

Decadent authors in comics

Among French authors, Charles Baudelaire has frequently appeared in comics. However, while illustrated versions of *Les Fleurs du mal* proliferate, including one illustrated by the prominent Italian comics artist Liberatore,[5] actual comics versions of his poetry are rare, because comics generally rely on a linear narrative. Poems do not need pictures for the same reason that paintings do not need captions. However, in the collection *Poèmes de Baudelaire en BD,*[6] 16 poems are adapted by various writers and artists. It is aimed at younger readers and includes brief notes on Baudelaire's life and poetry. As is often the case, the juxtaposition of verse and literalized drawings is generally disappointing, although there are a couple of notable examples, such as the appropriately seedy *mise en scene* for 'Le Jeu' by the artist Espe and the writer Ceka.

More common are biographical representations of Baudelaire himself, in volumes such as *Baudelaire* (Noël Tuot & Daniel Casanave, 2006), *Baudelaire ou le roman rêvé d'E. A. Poe* (Tarek and Aurélien Morinière, 2006), *Baudelaire* (Andreas Lapovitera and Gian Marco de Francisco, 2021), and *Crénom, Baudelaire!* (Dominique et Tino Gelli, 2023).[7] The increase in number of these adaptations demonstrates the enduring appeal of Baudelaire's persona, as well as the growing interest in biographies in the Franco-Belgian comics tradition (commonly abbreviated as 'BD' – 'bande dessinée' meaning literally 'drawn strips'). Among the later volumes is one that more successfully marries its subject and treatment: *Mademoiselle Baudelaire* (2020) by the Belgian artist-writer Yslaire (Bernard Hislaire) and published by Dupuis. Focusing on the relationship between Baudelaire and his mistress Jeanne Duval, Yslaire's book is erotic to the point of pornographic, frenzied, doleful, sumptuous, and macabre. Strange apparitions such as a blue, winged sphinx give its pages a heady dose of symbolist beauty, and one page features a magnificent homage to Goya's *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*. It is one of the few gems of truly decadent *bandes dessinées* to be discussed here [fig. 1].

Fig. 1: Cover and Goya-inspired page from Yslaire's *Mademoiselle Baudelaire* (Marcinelle: Dupuis, 2020).

Another inspired work was created not by an artist of the Franco-Belgian tradition but by the British artist-writer Nick Hayes. His 2018 book *The Drunken Sailor: The Life of the Poet Arthur Rimbaud in His Own Words* weds lines from the poet with dreamlike images, a fluid form (no panel borders) and a muted colour palette of greys, olives, and rust [fig. 2]. One doesn't so much read it as float through it, as indeed through a poem. A stylized Rimbaud, his hair swirling to a leaflike point (possibly an allusion to Tintin), dances from youth to death, through Paris and Africa, and through a relationship with Paul Verlaine. *The Drunken Sailor* is one of a new breed of artistic graphic novels marketed to adults in Britain and America, a phenomenon that, after several misfires, began in earnest with Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in 1991.[8]

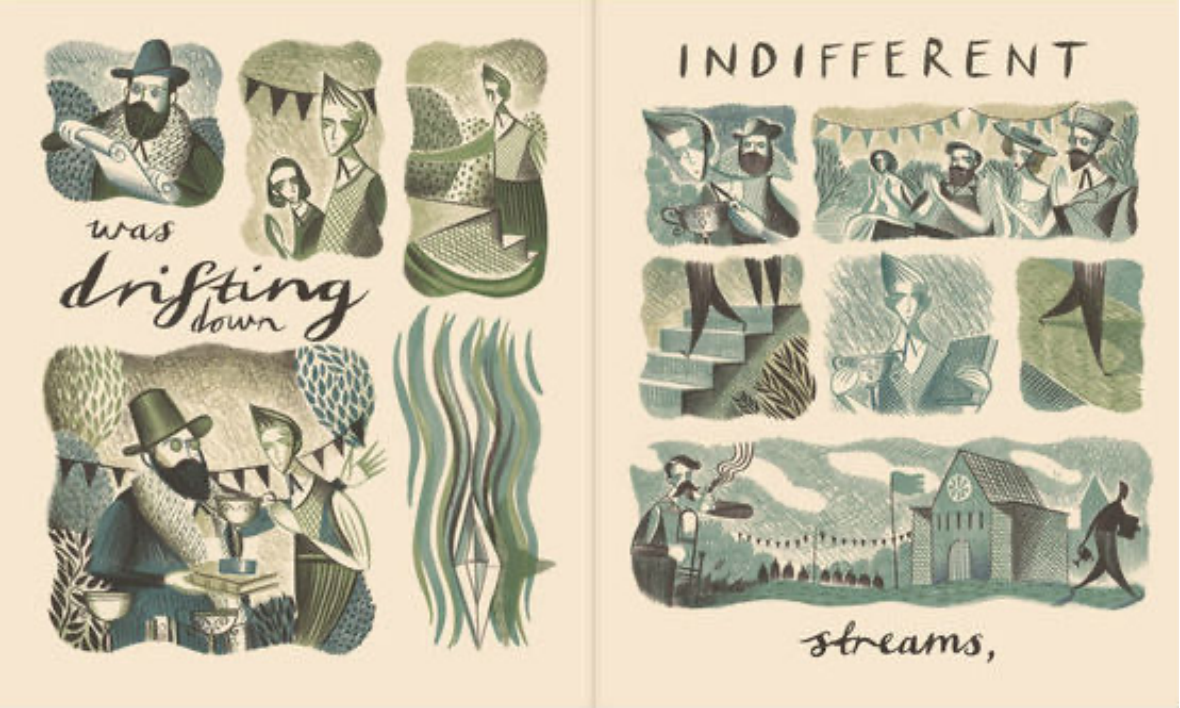

Fig. 2: Nick Hayes' *The Drunken Sailor: The Life of the Poet Arthur Rimbaud in His Own Words* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018).© 2018 Nick Hayes

The Drunken Sailor includes Rimbaud's time in Africa, and this period is the primary focus of other books, such as *La ligne de fuite* (Christophe Dabitch and Benjamin Flao, 2007), *Le chapeau de Rimbaud* (Christian Straboni, 2010), *Arthur Rimbaud: l'explorateur maudit* (Philippe Thirault and Thomas Verguet, 2022), and *Le dernier voyage d'Arthur Rimbaud* (Bernard Chiavelli, 1991).[9] It is partly due to that adventure, and partly due to his status as the James Dean of the *poètes maudits*, that Rimbaud has captured the imagination of so many BD artists, resulting in a greater number of books than even Baudelaire. Like Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe, another writer frequently fictionalised in comics, Rimbaud makes a great character.

There are also BD devoted to the rascal, muckraker, decadent writer, and Proust duellist, Jean Lorrain. A very rare 1977 book by the artist Guy Puccio, *Le prince dans la forêt suivi de Histoires de masques d'après Jean Lorrain*, contains homoerotic versions drawn in a floridly detailed art nouveau style that is more akin to fan art than that of a mature artist [fig. 3]. Issued by the poetry publisher Éditions Arcam, it features an introduction by Philippe Jullian, who is perhaps best known among English-speaking readers for his book *Dreamers of Decadence* and for his biographies of personalities

such as Oscar Wilde, Robert de Montesquiou, and Lorrain himself.[10] Puccio's drawings do convey the decadent spirit, despite or perhaps even because of their lack of mature talent: details matter more than form, effect more than substance, sensuality more than symmetry. In this, Puccio's artwork appears to have been influenced by two mainstream American comics artists who reached popularity in the mid-1970s, Barry Windsor-Smith and P. Craig Russell, the latter of whom we shall examine shortly.

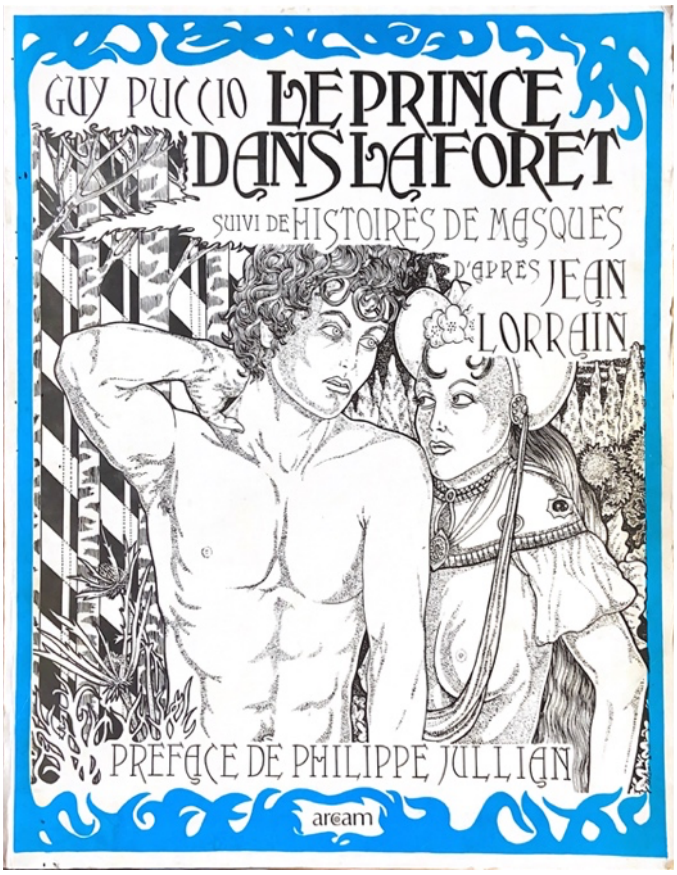

Fig. 3: Guy Puccio's rare graphic novel *Le prince dans la forêt suivi de Histoires de masques d'après Jean Lorrain* (Paris: Éditions Arcam, 1977) © 1977 Arcam.

Odder still, Lorrain's stories have found favour with the young artist Jahyra, who has published three volumes of French-language manga-style work adapting his stories of princesses and princes, *Princesses d'ivoire et d'ivresse* (Népaonthès, 2018), *Princesses d'ambre et d'Italie* (Népaonthès, 2019), and *Princesses de nacre et de caresse* (Népaonthès, 2021) [fig. 4].[11] It is a jarring juxtaposition to see the smiling, prettified characters caught in Lorrain's *contes cruels*.

Fig. 4: Cover of *Princesses d'ivoire et d'ivresse* (Paris: Népaonthès, 2018), one of Jahyra's three volumes of stories based on Jean Lorrain. © 2018 Jahyra

It is surprising that Huysmans, one of the 'founding fathers' of French literary decadence, is not to be found in comics yet. Neither he nor his 'breviary of the decadence' *À rebours* seem to have made a mark on the 9th art. Obviously, this is not because he has been forgotten: he was the subject of an exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay in 2019-2020, which occasioned a lavishly illustrated catalogue and edition of *À rebours*. Just as some novels are deemed 'unfilmable', it may well be that *À rebours* is considered 'undrawable'. It is, after all, a work of description and mood, not of story or arc; even *Là-bas*, while probably more marketable due to its occult theme, has not been adapted, and probably for the same reason. Nevertheless, the woodcut-style drawings by Arthur Zaidenburg for the first American edition of *À rebours* look very much like comics panels and may one day tempt an artist to turn des Esseintes into a BD anti-hero.[12]

The Picture of Dorian Gray

Undoubtedly the most adapted decadent work in comics is *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.[13] There are several reasons for this, including Wilde's brand recognition, the clear fairy-tale structure of the story, the opportunity to visualize the decay of the painting, and the story's location within the horror genre – long popular in Western comics. However, many adaptations remove the story from the realm of decadence, ignoring the subtext and even changing the story to fit a more 'wholesome' crime or horror template. The most extreme example of how the decadent atmosphere and homosexual themes of the novel were at odds with the youth-oriented comics industry is the very first adaptation, for the British series *Thriller Comics Library* in 1956.[14] Rather than an effete man about town, Dorian is a man's man who, freed from moral compunction by the magical painting, runs a London gang of criminals as a sort of Moriarty or Fagin. This version even reins in Dorian's evil inclinations, having him accidentally kill the painter Basil Hallward in a swordfight rather than outright murdering him.

While subsequent comics adaptations have taken fewer liberties, most have failed to match the mood and the sensual aesthetic of the original novel. There are, however, two notable exceptions. The first is in *Scream* 5 (1974), a horror magazine published by the short-lived publisher Skywald, to which we will return later. Although the story is radically condensed to nine pages, writer Alan Hewetson and artist Zesar Lopez (credited as Cesar) convey a sense of decadence largely through the artwork, which has an art nouveau revival feel to it, inviting associations with Aubrey Beardsley. This is one of the few comics versions of the story to make Dorian's pansexuality evident, with a single panel showing a shirtless Dorian lying in bed and smoking next to both a boy and a girl *en déshabillé* [fig. 5]. While the caption describes Dorian's 'perverted, endless pleasure', the image is neither perverted nor sinister – it is beautiful.[15] This sort of thing would never pass the Comics Code Authority operating in the USA at the time, and which had been formed some twenty years earlier, partly and specifically to censor horror comics. But comics

published as magazines were outside their jurisdiction, even though the magazines were available in the same stores as the comic books and could be bought by the same children the CCA was set up to protect.

Fig. 5: A remarkable sequence from 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' in *Scream* 5. Adaptation by Alan Hewetson, art by Zesar Lopez. Copyright information unavailable.

By far the most decadent version of the story came from Enrique Corominas in 2011. *Dorian Gray* is a tour de force of visual lavishness and corrupt atmosphere. This is a painted comic, and Corominas uses colour to mark the moral decay, moving from more naturalistic colours to more expressionistic hues. While the book is awash in pink and aqua, Corominas uses yellow for the pages that represent the poisonous book Gray reads, an imaginative melding of the book's real-life model, *À rebours*, with the colour most associated with decadence, in part due to *The Yellow Book*. As Corominas says in his introduction, a heavy dose of symbolist art is evident and the twisted images we see in the yellow section were taken from Comte de Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror* [fig. 6]. Corominas also added a brief epilogue to the story, in which Lord Henry completes the tale of Dorian's death as a story told to an amused audience at a fin de siècle dinner party. In his essay, Corominas says that Wilde shows us how 'hedonism leads to the most terrible

loneliness', and contrasting Dorian's death with this sense of community is powerful.[16] Of course, like Wilde, Corominas revels in the hedonism before seeming to pass judgement on it, and it must be noted that the Mephistophelean Wotton – never more diabolical than here – has the last laugh.

Fig. 6: The portrait and a representation of the 'poisonous book' from *Dorian Gray* by Corominas. © 2021 DM

Decadence in horror comics

There are ways in which horror comics, and horror literature more generally, have a decadent streak, in that they feature themes of decay, amorality, madness, and cruelty. However, it is fairly easy to separate the two, as it is to separate crime comics from decadence, though there are decadent works like Jean Lorrain's *Monsieur de Phocas* that are preoccupied by crime. There are auteurs whose work reflects both genres, such as the French filmmaker Jean Rollin, but in general the aim and even the mood of most horror stories is quite different from that of decadent works.[17]

In comics, the formula for horror tales emerged in the 1940s and was fully defined in the 1950s, when the immensely popular series of comics from EC Comics concocted it. Horror comics depended on Saki-style 'gotcha' or twist endings more than on the sustained and depressing mood

of Poe, who was both the father of American horror literature and, of course, an important inspiration for the French decadents. The EC stories ended

> with the protagonist virtually always exacting a well-deserved measure of poetic justice against the antagonist, even if the protagonist had to somehow return as one of the walking dead to exact his revenge. This was Old Testament, an eye-for-an-eye style retribution.

noted Grant Geissman in a history of EC Comics.[18] However gruesome they were, horror stories in comics were generally morality plays – as is, for that matter, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This formula is still evident in comics such as *Shudder* and TV series such as *Tales from the Crypt* (1989-1996), based on EC stories, and *Creepshow* (2019-present).

Horror comics came back onto the American market in the 1960s, in magazine format so as to skirt the Comics Code Authority (as noted earlier) but following the EC formula. In the 1970s, a new publisher called Skywald introduced three horror comics magazines,[19] and editor Al Hewetson brought a distinctly different feel to the books: intelligent, deranged and fiercely unwholesome. Hewetson called his approach the 'Horror-Mood' and aided by a talented clutch of Spanish and Filipino artists he produced surprisingly literate stories of depravity and existential angst that broke from the horror comics story formula. As Richard Arndt put it:

> What exactly the Horror-Mood was even Hewetson couldn't really explain, even years later, but the end result of the advent of the Horror-Mood were B&W magazines that oozed mood, even more than story integrity. […] Thus, the Skywald stories often resembled fever dreams that drifted above, below and around horror motifs rather than traditional horror stories.[20]

Hewetson was an avid Poe fan, and adapted several stories for his magazines, but beyond that Poe's essential pessimism and morbidity seeped from the comics pages. As noted earlier, comics are generally focused on action more than characters' state of mind, but the Skywald characters would spill forth their corrupted thoughts at great length, and often in the first person, addressed to the reader. Decay – or, to use the genre's jargon, 'rot' – affected not only characters but the structure of the stories, which often shambled to an end without conclusion, in clear opposition to the snappy endings of traditional comics horror stories.

To further infect readers with the Horror-Mood, Hewetson even departed from a longstanding comics typographical tradition. Most sentences in comics ended with exclamation points, both to amplify the sense of excitement and because simple periods would often disappear due to the inexpensive printing methods used. Hewetson replaced these with ellipses and dashes – on some pages, all sentences in captions and word balloons ended with nothing else. If an exclamation point conveys closure and drama, an ellipsis conveys drift and uncertainty.

The story 'Kill, Kill, Kill, and Kill, Again' by Hewetson and Ferran Sostres demonstrates the move away from traditional horror tropes and into an unsettled domain.[21] After a page where a *commedia dell'arte* style devil exhorts his legions of normal-looking people to 'go and kill – go – and maim and slaughter…' we are introduced to Simon Ingels[22] with a full-page image and a long caption describing him as 'a pawn, in the complete sense of the word – a very angry man – a very brutal man – determined to be brutal and bloody'.

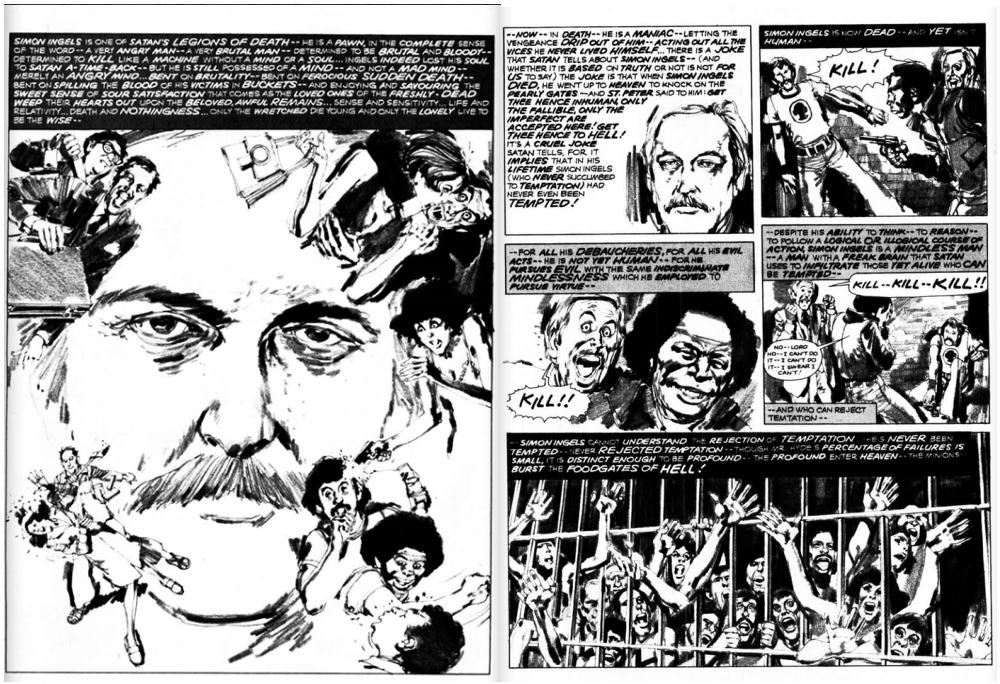

Fig. 6: Two pages from 'Kill, Kill, Kill, and Kill, Again', written by Alan Hewetson and illustrated by Ferran Sostres, from *Nightmare* 22. Copyright information unavailable.

The next three pages illustrate his spirit causing ordinary people to murder or commit other crimes. But when Ingels tries to possess an armed black man to kill, the man refuses the temptation. The final panel shows an array of caged and angry people, with the caption:

> Simon Ingels cannot understand the rejection of temptation – he's never been tempted – never rejected temptation – though Mr. Hyde's percentage of failures is small it is distinct enough to be profound – the profound enter heaven – the minions – burst the floodgates of hell![23]

Despite the concession to closure and punctuation that ends this story, there is really no narrative closure at all, nor any narrative to close. We are given a sort of illustrated hypothesis as to how supernatural forces might be adding to the violence of the world (and particularly in a post-Vietnam, post-Manson America), and that's all. Following the opening page, there are just five word-balloons for dialogue across six pages, further eroding the connection with comics storytelling, which is largely based on dialogue and the expectation, as in film, that we are experiencing the story in real time. This is not an EC-style morality play, it's an existential essay that works to establish a grim mood and then says, 'Th-th-th-that's all, folks!'[24]

> Decades after the magazines folded, Hewetson told an interviewer,
>
> Sanity is perverse. Absolute sanity perverts absolutely. A good horror story *always* perverts sanity. Which is why a really good horror story *always* makes perfect sense. Whereas, most things in everyday life make absolutely no sense at all. Only in utter madness will you find pure truth and sanity.[25]

This statement clearly shows the influence of Poe. By mutating the narrative structure of a well-defined genre, Al Hewetson and the artists and writers for Skywald created arguably the first decadent American comics.

Decadence and symbolism in comics art

The influence of the decadent tradition on individual artists and their œuvre is difficult to ascertain. Certainly there are artists, particularly in the Franco-Belgian tradition, whose work repeatedly returns to themes of physical corruption, spiritual alienation and morbidity that suggest an affiliation with decadence. An excellent example is the Belgian artist Frédéric Bézian, whose dark

stories and unique, semi-scribbled style weave together on stories such as his Adam Sarlech trilogy.[26] Certainly Sarlech – a troubled dandy figure with degenerative bloodline issues – has echoes of Des Esseintes, though the greater correspondence is with Roderick Usher, and with Poe rather than Huysmans. Here again, we see the comics tradition even in France aligning more naturally with the gothic horror tradition, which shares with decadence the tropes of illness, madness, and alienation.

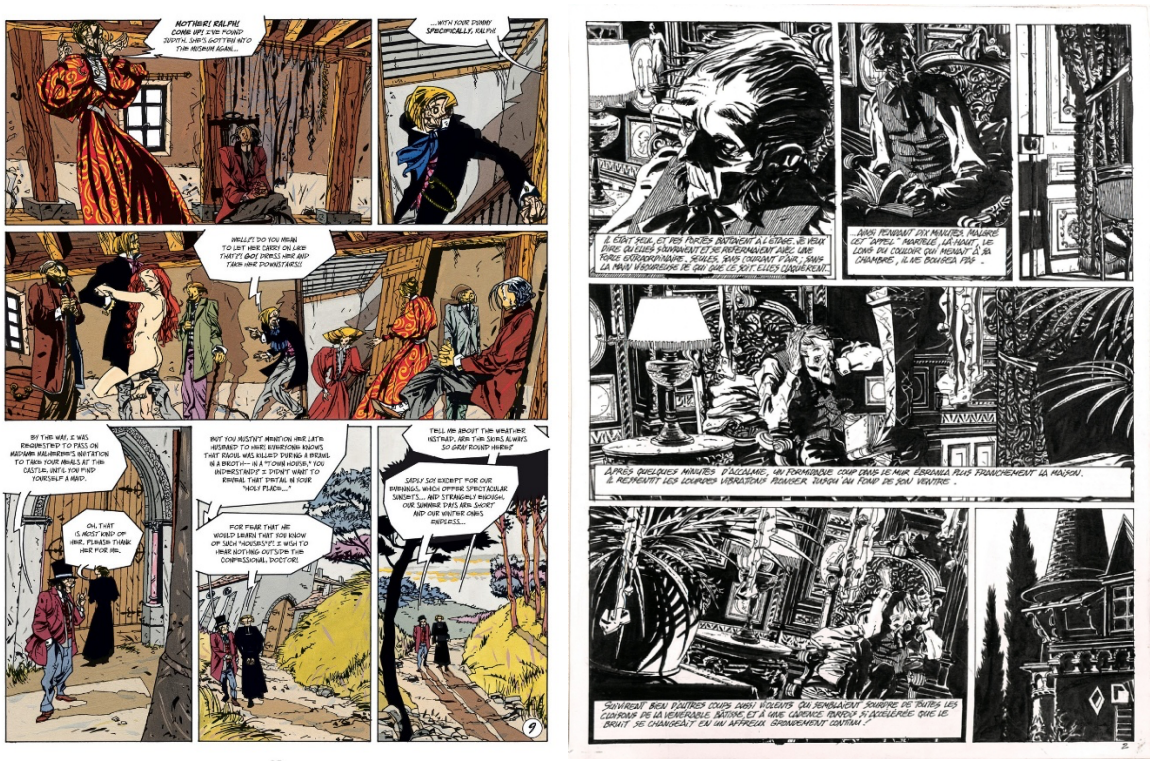

Fig. 7 Frédéric Bézian's most decadent series, *Adam Sarlech* (©1989 Les Humanoïdes Associés), and a scene from his *La danse des morts* (© Point Image 1986)

One artist who self-identifies with the symbolist tradition is the American artist P. Craig Russell. Russell came to American mainstream comics in the 1970s, following in the wake of the hugely popular Barry Windsor-Smith, a British artist who brought Pre-Raphaelite touches to comics, beginning with Marvel's adaptations of Robert E. Howard's pulp hero Conan. After gaining cult status working on Marvel books such as the science fiction comic *Killraven*, Russell became known for his independent adaptations of opera, particularly Wagner's Ring cycle, and the stories of Oscar Wilde.

In the introduction to his 2021 collection, *Symbolist Fantasies and Other Things*, Russell described the day in 1972 when he first discovered *Dreamers of Decadence: Symbolist Painters of the 1890s* by Philippe Jullian: 'It was a revelation', he wrote:

> Four years of art history studies at the University of Cincinnati – without a single reference to this movement and its importance and influence – had not prepared me for the astonishing artists that it recalled to life. Artists who sought to visualize the unseen and invisible world of dreams, spirit, and emotion – a world revealed through suggestion rather than statement.[27]

Fig. 8: Symbolist-influenced art by P. Craig Russell. © 2021 P. Craig Russell

Russell's artwork combines the flowing lines and decorative framing of Art Nouveau with elegant human forms and an emphasis on mythological figures, as befits his love of grand opera. While he hearkens to the symbolists, that tradition's historical connection with the decadents is

largely absent in his work, if only because of his overwhelming focus on beauty. His work is ideally suited to magical and mystical scenarios, ranging from *The Magic Flute* to Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* to Marvel's *Dr. Strange*. While he has illustrated *Salomé*,[28] being both an opera and Wilde buff, the grace of his lines and his gift for composition emphasized the musicality of the text rather than the grotesqueness of its scenario and protagonist. Ultimately, Russell's work is too idealistic to be considered decadent.

D'Annunzio indomitable

As this research was first presented at a conference co-organized by the Centro Universitario di Studi Vittoriani e Edoradiani (CUSVE) at the 'G. d'Annunzio' University of Chieti-Pescara, Italy, and took place at that university near d'Annunzio's birthplace of Pescara, it seems imperative to review the career in *fumetti*[29] of the war hero, poet, playwright, sex addict, aesthete, decadent and city-state ruler himself. While far too fond of technology and nation-building to align perfectly with the decadents, his lifelong devotion to aestheticism and his literary posing make him at least a decadent at heart.

Before comic artists took out their pens, d'Annunzio had already been the subject of hundreds of caricatures and *ex libris*. When he began to appear in comics, the focus would of course be on his wartime exploits, war being a popular comics genre. What his many appearances in *fumetti* reveal is the consolidation of his many personae into two primary characters: the poet-lover and the war hero.

As one would expect, d'Annunzio's real-life adventures in World War I and his bold takeover of the coastal city Fiume/Rijeka after World War I naturally dominate his appearances in *fumetti*. He is portrayed as a sort of Red Baron style hero in *Il folle volo* (Fabrizio Capigatti and Samuela Cerquetella, 2008), which focuses on his flight dropping wry propaganda pamphlets over Venice.[30] The more expansive *Fiume o morte* (Manilo Bonati, Carlo Sicuro, Yildirim Örer and Mauro Vecchi, 2018)[31] uses the talents of two writers and two artists to explore the Fiume saga, with

d'Annunzio represented as he undoubtedly would have wished – as a patriot, idealist, and martyr for the Italian state.

Other notable *fumetti*, told more or less from d'Annunzio's perspective, include a romanticized three-part biography *Gabriele d'Annunzio: La vita a fumetti*[32] (1992) and *Gabriele d'Annunzio: Tra amori e battaglie*[33] (2013). Both works were illustrated by Marco Sciame, and to some degree idealize their subject, not least in his physical appearance. For instance, one of the three covers of the first series shows d'Annunzio in the style of Boldini's famous portrait of dandy extraordinaire Robert de Montesquiou, a very flattering comparison for the man sometimes called a gargoyle. In the latter, d'Annunzio is represented in much the same way – tall, thin, with his trademark pointed moustache and goatee, although in the period covered by the *fumetto* he was short, stout, and completely hairless.

Fig. 9: Three covers by Marco Sciame for the *fumetti* version of d'Annunzio's life, the third one based on Boldini's portrait of Robert de Montesquiou. © 1992 Affari Srl

In a 2022 email conversation with this writer, Marco Sciame said,

> The representation of d'Annunzio was actually debated. In the first series our poet was in his early Roman youth and therefore still handsome and with more hair, let's say. We complied with historical photos and we made some calculations. The choice on the comic strip released with the theatrical show [the 2013 fumetto] is quite different, and there were various disagreements there. Originally I had done a series of comic strips with a very old

and bald Gabriele, which was challenged by the publisher. I agreed to rejuvenate the Vate, but without taking responsibility for the recommended choice. I didn't support it but I still did the work and I satisfied the publishing house in Milan.[34]

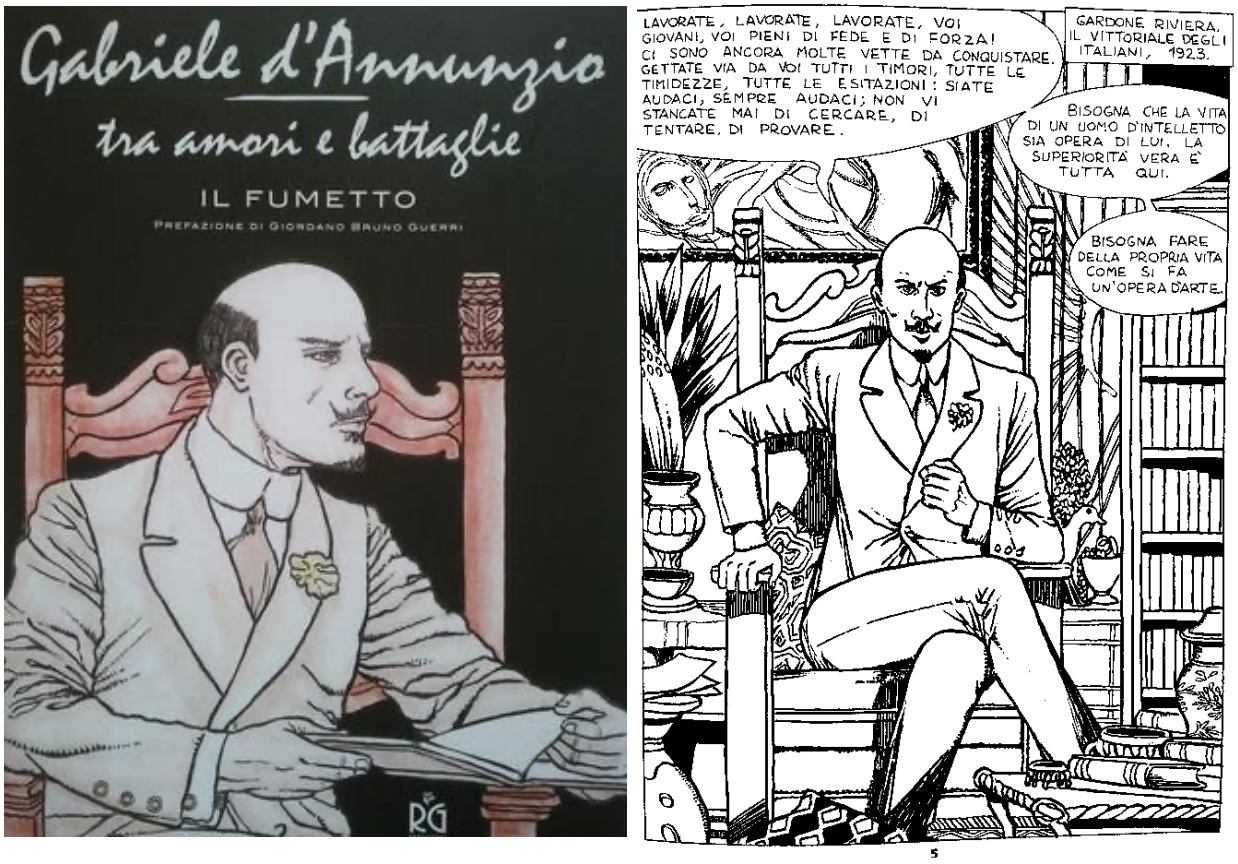

Fig. 10: (*left*) Marco Sciame's 'idealized' d'Annunzio; (*right*) an adaptation of a play. © 2013 RG Produzioni

This, then, is d'Annunzio the icon, the d'Annunzio Italians want to see and the image that connotes his literary career more than his military one. It is this d'Annunzio that appears in *fumetti* where he is a supporting character in someone else's narrative (an idea that surely would have appalled him). These stretch way back to his appearance in *Favola di Venezia* (Hugo Pratt, 1977), an adventure of Corto Maltese, one of the most critically and commercially successful Italian adventure series.[35] The story, set in 1921, includes a cameo from d'Annunzio, who announces himself as a poet. He takes a similar role as a literary adventurer in an offshoot of the long-running Italian adventure series *Martin Mystère*. In *Storie da altrove: L'isola che giaceva in fondo al mare* (Alfredo Castelli, Carlo Recagno, and Sergio Giardo, 2005), set in 1902, he helps the Altrove organization uncover a sinister plot.[36]

The most recent graphic novel featuring d'Annunzio was *La Casati: La Muse Égoïste* by Vanna Vinci, a biography of the Marchesa Casati, one of d'Annunzio's lovers and a woman whose theatrical flamboyance and idiosyncrasies rivalled his own. Here, d'Annunzio is portrayed as a caring, thoughtful partner.[37]

Fig. 11: (*left*) D'Annunzio arrives in Hugo Pratt's *Corto Maltese: Favola di Venezia*. © 1977 Cong S.A.; (*right*) a selection of d'Annunzian moments from Vanna Vinci's *La Casati*. © 2013 Vanna Vinci

A decidedly more complex characterization, one that breaks from d'Annunzio as icon, is given in the independent graphic novel *Black Paths*. Author David B. (David Beauchard) is an accomplished French cartoonist whose work, as here, often covers political themes. Beauchard portrays Fiume as a chaotic and violent state that attracts philosophers and criminals in equal measure. The story's main arc concerns a young couple, but d'Annunzio features heavily as the city's default ruler; while he is not lionized as in some Italian comics, he comes across as intelligent, if idiosyncratic and narcissistic.

Fig. 12: Two pages from David B's *Black Paths*, the first showing his compatriot Guido Keller.

In an interview with comics writer Paul Gravett, Beauchard described d'Annunzio's intentions in taking over Fiume:

> So it was [a] kind of poetic republic he wanted to create here. Lots of intellectuals came here from all over Europe to create something new after the horrors of the First World War. He wanted an idealistic republic of artists and he succeeded at the beginning, but after the war was going on and the Fascist part of the people helping him seized power, all that collapsed. […] D'Annunzio tried to create something from all that and he succeeded for a moment but politics and reality took over. He was also a collector so everywhere he went, he takes his collection with him. He mixed up all kinds of things. He had this precious medieval statue of St Francis of Assisi and he put on it a belt with two guns that someone offered to him. It was his way to collect things, as an artist, also a surrealistic joke.[38]

In this brief statement, Beauchard reveals his interest in d'Annunzio as a fellow *creator* – someone who put his talent to work not only in art but in life, attempting to create a kind of artistic paradise while also curating his own collection. In his book, Beauchard fuses the seemingly irreconcilable aspects of d'Annunzio – poet, aesthete, warlord – into a flawed but most importantly *creative* force, a man who treated an entire city as an artistic project. There is a priceless scene in *Black Paths* where

d'Annunzio shows a Commissioner Crispi around a room stuffed with his statues and other curios. 'Oh!' Crispi utters. 'It's your famous collection of objets d'art.' D'Annunzio, fists on hips, replies with pride, 'Only part of it…'.[39]

The wealth of d'Annunzian comics and other graphics (there have been at least two books on caricatures of him, and at least two exhibitions of d'Annunzian *ex libris* art) demonstrates not only his enduring mystique but also the remarkable appeal of his image, which became as familiar in Italy as, say, Oscar Wilde's in Britain or Pushkin's in Russia. What sets his representations in comics apart from those Wilde or Pushkin, and indeed from the likes of Baudelaire and Rimbaud as well, is that his image is not fixed. While there are clear variations in, say, the comics biographies of Baudelaire, they are stylistic variations on a culturally accepted 'take' on who Baudelaire was and what his work means to culture. Attitudes toward d'Annunzio – an author of some renown but also a proto-fascist who inspired Mussolini – vary greatly. This makes him perhaps the most interesting of the decadent figures in terms of representation in comics, though it is also true that he has never reached the iconic status of Baudelaire or Wilde outside his native Italy.

Let us leave d'Annunzio with a last strange comics-related image. In his book *D'Annunzio Story*,[40] artist Francesco di Lauro offers a number of caricatures of d'Annunzio, one of which shows the poet held aloft by an Olympian athlete. The athlete's face will be familiar to American comics fans as that of Alfred E. Neuman, the mascot of the humour comic magazine *MAD* (the only publication of EC Comics to survive after the creation of the Comics Code Authority wiped out its horror and crime books). It seems ironic that d'Annunzio, who so loved mottoes such as 'Io ho quel che ho donato' that they appear all over his home at Il Vittoriale, should find himself twinned with Neuman, who had his own famous slogan: 'What, me worry?'

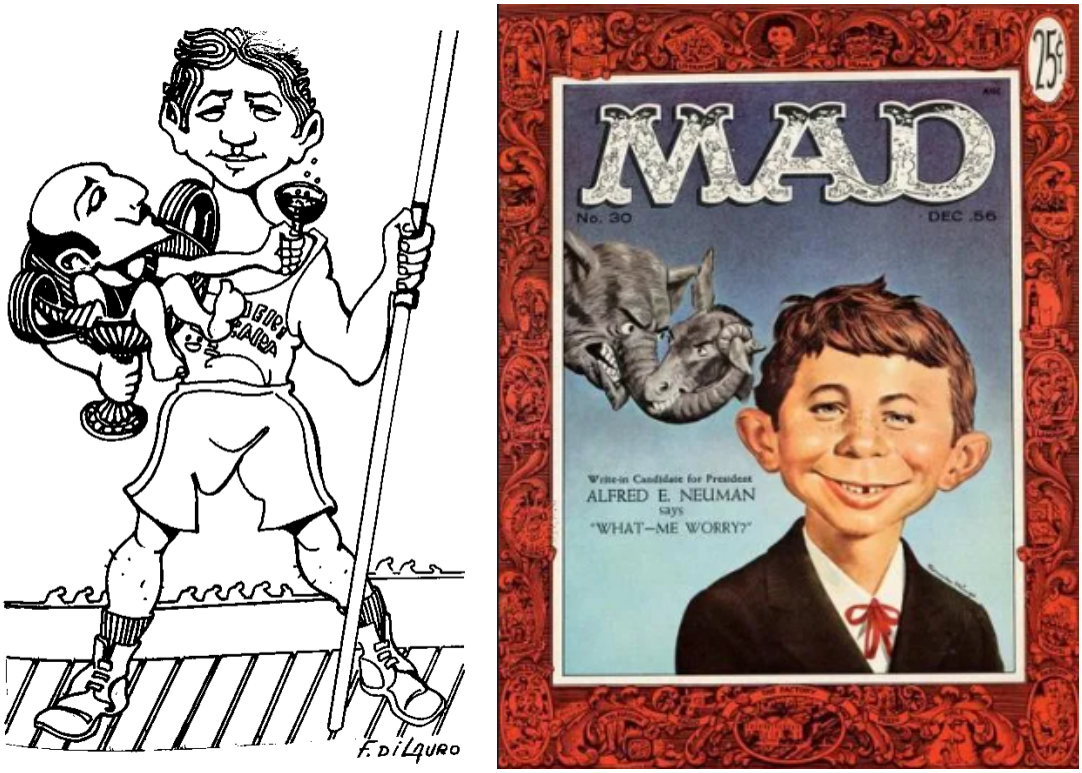

Fig. 13: (*left*) 'Lo Sponsor' by Francesco di Lauro, from *d'Annunzio Story*. © 2003 Edizioni Noubs; (*right*) Alfred E. Neuman and his catchphrase on the cover of *MAD*, 30 (1956). © 2023 DC Comics

The dawning age of decadence in comics

Comics as an industry is just a century old, younger even than cinema. It may seem surprising then that so many of the works discussed in this article were published in the twenty-first century. This reflects the evolution of the industry and the artform in the West. In America and Britain, there is now much greater acceptance of comics aimed at adults, and a much greater market for comics generally. As recently as twenty-five years ago, it would have been difficult to find a large bookstore with a comics section, whereas now it would be hard to find one without. In Europe, which had an adult comics market much earlier, the proportion of non-genre comics has grown rapidly.

These changes have given artists and writers the freedom to explore topics that would have been too *risqué* or just too niche for publishers in the past, and to devote the time to create beautiful artwork that would have been compromised by the shoddy printing techniques of the past. We can appreciate works such as Yslaire's *Mademoiselle Baudelaire*, Nick Hayes' *The Drunken Sailor*, and Corominas's *Dorian Gray* not only for their union of decadent themes and art, but for the influence

they may have on other creators. These works may be the first rays of a new dawn for decadence in comics.

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[1] Jane Desmarais and David Weir, eds, *Decadence and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 3.
[2] Other authors have noted the absorption of decadent motifs into the horror genre. In particular, Brian Stableford discusses the transition of the short-lived British decadent tradition 'into the still evolving tradition of British weird fiction', citing authors such as Arthur Machen, M. P. Shiel, and Vernon Lee, who straddled both genres. He also notes that this can be viewed as 'reversion to an earlier phase', given the influence of Poe on Baudelaire and other French decadents, before citing twentieth-century weird fiction authors whose work has decadent elements, H. P. Lovecraft, and Robert Chambers. Brian Stableford, *Glorious Perversity: The Decline and Fall of Literary Decadence* (Cabin John, MD: Wildside Press, 1998).
[3] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Northampton, MA: Tundra, 1993), p. 63.
[4] I do not have the space to cover underground comix, which burst out of the hippie scene in the 1960s. Political, taboo-busting and often pornographic, they have some resonance with the decadents but are probably more in the spirit of the anarchists.
[5] Liberatore, *Les Fleurs du Mal de Baudelaire* (Grenoble: Glénat, 2015).
[6] Various, *Poèmes de Baudelaire en BD* (Paris: Petit à Petit, 2001), reprinted with new covers in 2006 and 2017.
[7] Noël Tuot et Daniel Casanave, *Baudelaire* (Montreuil: Les Reveurs, 2006); Tarek and Aurélien Morinière *Baudelaire ou le Roman rêvé d'E. A. Poe* (Saint-Egrève: Mosquito, 2006); Andreas Lapovitera e Gian Marco de Francisco, *Baudelaire (*Teramo: Lisciani, 2021); Dominique et Tino Gelli, *Crénom, Baudelaire!* (Paris: Futuropolis, 2023).
[8] Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991). The first publication in book form followed its serialization in the oversized anthology comic *RAW*, edited by Spiegelman.
[9] Christophe Dabitch et Benjamin Flao, *La ligne de fuite* (Paris: Futuropolis, 2007); Christian Straboni, *Le chapeau de Rimbaud* (Bordeaux: Akileos, 2010); Philippe Thirault et Thomas Verguet, *Arthur Rimbaud: l'explorateur maudit* (Boulogne-Billancourt: Glénat BD, 2022); Bernard Chiavelli, *Le dernier voyage d'Arthur Rimbaud* (Paris: Dargaud, 1991).
[10] Jullian was himself a talented artist, as seen in his illustrations for Proust.
[11] Jahyra, *Princesses d'ivoire et d'ivresse* (Paris: Népaonthès, 2018), *Princesses d'ambre et d'Italie* (Paris: Népaonthès, 2019), and *Princesses de nacre et de caresse* (Paris: Népaonthès, 2021).
[12] Huysmans does appear as one of several dandies, including Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, and Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, illustrated in the frontispiece of Stanislas Gros' 2020 BD *Le dandy illustré*.
[13] See Darcy Sullivan, 'Picture Stories: Dorian Gray in the Comics', *The Wildean*, 48 (2016), pp. 28-48. There is also a recorded Zoom presentation by myself, 'Dorian Gray in Comics', hosted by the British Association of Decadence Studies and the Oscar Wilde Society, which can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCTV-KSJnY4&t=112s [accessed 5 November 2023].
[14] *Thriller Comics Library 148: The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Leonard Matthews (London: Amalgamated Press, 1956). The writer and artist are uncredited, which was standard practice in comic books until the 1960s, when Marvel Comics began providing credits.
[15] Alan Hewetson and Zesar Lopez, 'The Picture of Dorian Gray', in *Scream* 5 (New York: Skywald, 1974), pp. 9-18.
[16] Corominas, *Dorian Gray* (Paris: Daniel Maghen, 2011).
[17] See note 1.
[18] Grant Geissman, *The History of EC Comics* (Köln: Taschen, 2020), p. 151.
[19] *Nightmare*, *Psycho* and *Scream.*
[20] Richard J. Arndt, *Horror Comics in Black and White* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Company, 2013), p. 163.
[21] Alan Hewetson and Ferran Sostres, 'Kill, Kill, Kill, and Kill Again', in *Nightmare* 22 (New York: Skywald, 1974) pp. 7-13, rpt. in Alan Hewetson, *The Complete Illustrated History of the Skywald Horror-Mood* (Manchester: Headpress, 2004), pp. 142-48.
[22] The name is a reference to 'Ghastly' Graham Ingels, who drew for EC Comics.
[23] *Nightmare* 22.
[24] The reference is to the end of Warner Brother cartoons.
[25] Interview by David Kerekes and Stephen Sennitt, qtd. in Hewetson, p. 23.
[26] *Adam Sarlech* (Paris: Les Humanoïdes Associés, 1989), *La chambre nuptiale* (Paris: Les Humanoïdes Associés, 1991), and *Testament sous la neige* (Paris: Les Humanoïdes Associés, 1993). All three volumes were collected into an English translation as *Adam Sarlech: A Trilogy* (Los Angeles: Humanoids, 2016).
[27] P. Craig Russell, *Symbolist Fantasies and Other Things* (Hudson, OH: Wayne Alan Harold Productions, 2021), p. 5.

[28] P. Craig Russell, *Salomé* (Staten Island, NY: Eclipse Comics, 1986).
[29] *Fumetti* are so-called for the word balloons that resemble little puffs of smoke.
[30] Fabrizio Capigatti e Samuela Cerquetella*, Il folle volo* (Jesolo: Edizioni del Vento, 2008).
[31] Manilo Bonati, Carlo Sicuro, Yildirim Örer e Mauro Vecchi, *Fiume o morte* (Roma: Ferrogallico, 2018).
[32] Marco Sciame e Paolo Cerasoli, *Gabriele d'Annunzio: La vita a fumetti* (Pescara: Marketing Research, 1992), published as supplements to *PescarAffari*.
[33] Edoardo Sylos Labini, Francesco Sala e Marco Sciame, *Gabriele d'Annunzio: Tra amori e battaglie* (Milano: RG Produzioni, 2013). The *fumetto* is an adaptation of a play by the same name by Labini and Sala.
[34] It is worth noting that, in the play on which the *fumetto* was based, co-author and actor Edoardo Sylos Labini looked just like this more glamorous version. By contrast, the 2020 film *Il cattivo poeta* featured Sergio Castellitto in a much more accurate representation of the older d'Annunzio.
[35] Hugo Pratt, *Favola di Venezia*, published in *L'Europeo* 21/22-51 (1977).
[36] Alfredo Castelli, Carlo Recagno e Sergio Giardo, *Storie da altrove: L'isola che giaceva in fondo al mare* (Milano: Sergio Bonelli Editore, 2005).
[37] Vanna Vinci, *La Casati: La muse égoïste* (Paris: Dargaud, 2013). Vinci also included an image of d'Annunzio in her book *Parle-moi d'amour: Vite esemplari di grandi libertine* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2020), along with none other than Jean Lorrain.
[38] Paul Gravett, 'David B.: The Armour of the Night', *Paul Gravett: Comics, Graphic Novels, Manga*, http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/david_b [accessed 5 November 2023].
[39] David B., *Black Paths*, transl. by Nora Mahoney (London: SelfMadeHero, 2011), p. 31, originally published as *Par les chemins noirs* (Paris: Futuropolis, 2008).
[40] Francesco di Lauro, *D'Annunzio Story* (Chieti: Noubs, 2003).

Hanging out with 'Archival Al': Decadent Community in Neo-Victorian Comics[1]

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Recent scholarship has explored the various social aspects of decadence, debunking older models which conceived of it in terms of alienated individuals, working on highly stylized texts in isolation. Criticism by Matthew Potolsky, Dennis Denisoff, and, most recently, Joseph Thorne has, instead, explored the value of community to decadence in different forms, from networks of writers and publishers to allusive interconnections between texts, objects, and artworks.[2] In this article, I shall use this to unlock the decadent aesthetics of Neo-Victorian comics produced by Alan Moore, working with Kevin O'Neill and others. Central to Potolsky's exploration of decadent communities is a recognition that they can be problematic in various ways, from the loose and fractured nature of the connections between members of a group to the complex political and aesthetic tensions between individuals and the collective. Focusing on the first two volumes of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* series, I shall draw parallels between these central developments in decadence studies and Moore's depiction of a complex imagined and imaginary community within decadence and the fin de siècle.

Imagined Communities

Always a slippery term, decadence and its meanings have broadened considerably since Paul Bourget's observation in the nineteenth century:

> A style of decadence is one in which the unity of the book is decomposed to give place to the independence of the page, in which the page is decomposed to give place to the independence of the phrase, and the phrase is decomposed to give place to the independence of the word.[3]

Whilst matters of form and 'style' remain central, critics such as Potolsky have sought to move in recent decades beyond thinking about decadence in terms of 'a familiar set of themes, images and stylistic traits'. For Potolsky, it is instead 'a stance that writers take in relationship to their culture

and to the cosmopolitan traditions that influence them'.[4] Parallel with Charles Bernheimer's description of decadence as a 'dynamics of paradox and ambivalence', emphasis has started to shift to what decadent writers and artists do, as well as how they do it. The result is a considerable expansion of the community of writers and artists discussed under the aegis of decadence to include figures who would not have recognized the term, indeed even rejected it.[5] In the process, the historical parameters have widened to take in 'post-Victorian Decadence';[6] as Alex Murray points out, the canon has also begun to recognize the contribution of neglected women writers;[7] and, in the recent turn towards 'global decadence', critics have begun to embrace to a more diverse array of writers and artists in terms of race.[8]

The question of who or what counts as 'decadent' is central to my argument, which starts from Potolsky's exploration of these questions in *The Decadent Republic of Letters* (2012). Where Bourget saw disintegration and decomposition, Potolsky discerns a set of common purposes and interests across writers and artists of the late nineteenth century, which he construes as a form of 'imagined community' – a term popularized by the historian Benedict Anderson. Discussing the rise of nationalist movements, Anderson draws attention to the way in which various media enabled the development of common ideas and shared intellectual resources. Members of such imagined communities, Anderson notes, 'will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'.[9] Applied to decadence, we might surmise that if writers and artists did not always play nicely together, they nevertheless had much in common.

As an example of the mechanisms by which this decadent imagined community was formed, Potolsky observes the importance of the 'epideictic mode' to late nineteenth-century writers and artists. This figure from rhetoric describes 'the oratory of praise and blame' and corresponds to the frequency with which decadent writers point to the other writers of which they approve.[10] The extensive catalogues of books and artworks admired by the character of Floressas des Esseintes in Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel *À rebours* (1884) provide an obvious paradigm here.

Chapter Three itemizes his taste for the kind of decadent Latin literature to which Bourget alluded in his description of Baudelaire's decadent style. Chapter Fourteen catalogues Des Esseintes' tastes in more recent writers, from Stéphane Mallarmé to Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Paul Verlaine. Hence Arthur Symons's famous reference to Huysmans's novel as a 'breviary of the decadence', comparing it to a collection of religious texts.[11] 'Each decadent writer', Potolsky argues, 'forges his or her own language of appreciation' and he draws attention to work by Walter Pater, George Moore, Michael Field, and Oscar Wilde, amongst others, which also assembles sets of favoured writers, texts, and artists.[12]

Despite the broadening parameters of decadence studies, it may seem unclear how Alan Moore and his comics fit into this. Moore made his name at the forefront of the 'British Invasion' wave of comics writers and artists in the 1980s, establishing a reputation for introducing narrative and psychological complexity into the superhero story through *Watchmen* (1987).[13] During the 1990s, however, his fascination with Victorian history and culture emerged within works such as *From Hell* (1989-1998), *Lost Girls* (1991-2006), and the first two volumes of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* series (1999-2019). My argument rests largely upon identifying an analogous epideictic effect in the latter, which draws extensively upon texts from the fin de siècle. Set in a fictional version of 1898, the comics feature a team of agents recruited by the British secret services, consisting of Allan Quartermain from the novels of H. Rider Haggard, the invisible man from H. G. Wells, Mina Murray from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), the double figure of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde from Robert Louis Stevenson, and Captain Nemo from the novels of Jules Verne. The plot of the first volume has them thwarting an attempt to obtain mastery of the air by Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu using 'cavorite', from Wells's *The First Men on the Moon* (1901). The second volume re-works another of Wells's novels, *The War of Worlds* (1898), by pitting the same characters against a Martian invasion. The creation of an imaginary community of characters lifted from Victorian literature, I suggest, forges an imagined community with decadence.

Two obvious initial objections arise: firstly, Moore's tangled creative evocation of this

source material might seem at odds with the aesthetics of cataloguing and itemisation that constitute epideixis. But there is precedent within Potolsky's account: as well as explicit, critical works of praise, such as the art writings of Pater, his imagined decadent community is fashioned through more indirect or allusive forms such as John Gray's assemblage of translations from Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Arthur Rimbaud in *Silverpoints* (1893). It is also expressed in works such as Michael Field's poem 'Watteau's *L'Embarquement pour Cythère'*, which is more diffusely evocative of poetry by Verlaine and Baudelaire, as well as the visual art of Antoine Watteau.[14] Moore's complex Neo-Victorian practice of dense overlapping allusion, I propose, can be compared to such nineteenth-century decadent allusive practice.

The other objection to this approach relates to a potential weakness within Potolsky's account. The 'epideictic' effects that he describes are not exclusive to decadence. Most, if not all, literary movements invest energy in articulating the topics, writers, and texts that best exemplify their values. Here it is important to recognize that Potolsky's resort to 'imagined community' is premised upon the apparently dissipated relations between the decadent writers and artists he explores. Hence his appeal to models such as Michael Warren's 'counterpublic' and Jean-Luc Nancy's 'inoperative community' to justify his core claim that the decadent imagined community served as a site of resistance to reactionary political forces.[15]

My reading of Moore seeks another parallel here in the problematic nature of the community depicted in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* volumes. Recruited by the mysterious figure of Campion Bond, Mina must first drag Quartermain from his drug-induced stupor in an opium den, then extract Jekyll from the Parisian slums, where his alter-ego Hyde is wreaking havoc upon the local population of prostitutes. With Captain Nemo, they then forcibly remove Hawley Griffin from a girl's boarding school, where he has been exploiting his invisibility to take sexual advantage of the pupils. As Alison Halsall points out, the very title 'League of Extraordinary Gentlemen' is problematic, since the group is led by a woman and none of the members behave in a fashion that corresponds to Victorian notions of the 'gentleman'.[16] I am hopeful that the doubtful,

poorly cohesive character of this 'league' strengthens the parallel with Potolsky's conception of a problematic imagined decadent community, since it is central to Moore's Neo-Victorian negotiation with nineteenth-century values.

Decadent World-Building

Moore's penchant for combining multiple points of reference extends across his varied career. Jackson Ayres cites Moore's own itemisation of around twenty sources that fed into his depiction of a fascist alternative history in *V for Vendetta* (1982-1985). This ranges from literary texts by George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, to visual source material such as 'Max Ernst's painting "Europe after the Rains"' and more diffuse influences, such as 'The atmosphere of British Second World War films'.[17] As Annalisa Di Liddo observes:

> Most of Moore's comics start from an intertextual assumption: a quotation, or an allusion to an existing character, a distinctive genre, or a particular work. They are built on a proper web of references that are not only mentioned or suggested but challenged and recontextualized in order to convey new meanings. Thus transcended, intertextuality is stripped of the status of mere formal device to become a proper narrative motif.[18]

The League of Extraordinary Gentleman multiplies this: it overlaps settings, plot lines and characters in dense collocation. Consider the scene between Mina and her spymaster, upon her return to London in first issue of the first volume [fig. 1].

The dialogue in this scene alludes in rapid succession to Sherlock Holmes ('the great detective'); to Anthony Trollope's Palliser novels ('Prime Minister Plantagenet Palliser') and *The Warden* ('the Reverend Septimus Harding'); to works by Jules Verne, including *Robur le Conquérant* (1886; Robur the Conqueror) and *Maître du monde* (1904; Master of the World); as well as to less-well known figures from popular Victorian culture, such as 'Inspector Donovan'. Moore himself glosses the latter reference in his script for the artist Kevin O'Neill:

> This is Inspector Dick Donovan, a Victorian police detective created by Joyce Emmerson Preston Muddock and the hero of over 200 short stories between 1888 and 1899 – Archival Al (*L1* II.2.8) [19]

Fig 1: Alan Moore, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen – Volume One*, issue 2 'Ghosts and Miracles', pp. 8-9.

As well as explaining this point of reference, Moore's self-description as 'Archival Al' jokingly acknowledges the way that *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* serves as a creative archival repository for a large range of material, much of which has slipped from general awareness.

Moore's gloss for O'Neill also reflects the way in which that these allusions are woven into the fabric of dialogue between the characters about other matters. They are not overtly identified or signalled as references and may require such commentary to clarify their provenance. In their visual presentation, these allusions play out in the dialogue positioned in white text bubbles lettered by William Oakley. As such, they stand out against the muted palette employed by Benedict Dimagmaliw to colour O'Neill's line art depicting character and setting. A complex counterpoint emerges between the dialogue, the visual unfolding of the physical world of the comic, and the gradual exposition of plot points.

This rapid sequence of allusions acquires a world-building effect which is comparable to

O'Neill's visual depiction of the docklands in which Moore's characters are situated. Whilst the dilapidated warehouses, cranes and hoists can be attributed to the localized setting of this scene in Wapping, they also contribute to the broader vision of Britain in 1898 within *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. The very first pages of the first volume open with a depiction of an incomplete bridge across the Channel between France and England. As Halsall observes, this alternative vision of the fin de siècle is characterized by a continuous state of construction and decay.[20] In other words, the first two volumes of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* offer a decadent version of Victorian Britain as a corrupted imperial power.

Moore's use of literary and fantastical elements means that these comics are often classified as 'steampunk'; indeed, he also refers to himself in his scripts as 'Alternative Worlds Al' (*L2* II, n.p.). Such details of setting and background, however, also evoke the kind of real-world historical tensions between expansion and decline in the nineteenth century that have been explored by literary scholars of decadence and degeneration, such as Vincent Sherry and Stephen Arata.[21] Whilst the frame of reference in these comics is broad, the decadent character of this vision is reinforced by the prevalence of fin-de-siècle and decadent source material amidst the array of allusions to the nineteenth century. In addition to texts such as *Dracula* and *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1884), there are passing references to works by Émile Zola, Edgar Allan Poe, and Arthur Machen. The material in the end papers to the first volume reimagines Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) as a child's colouring-in exercise: readers invited to complete 'Basil Hallward's Painting by Numbers' are presented with the outline image of a suave and youthful Dorian Gray, only to find that the final, coloured painting shows him in the aged and corrupted version that features in Wilde's novel.

The latter example indicates how closely allusions to decadent works are woven into the fabric of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. There are clear echoes in the frontispiece to the first volume of the visual style and the distinctive aesthetics of the front covers of the *Yellow Book* designed by Aubrey Beardsley in in 1894 [fig. 2]. O'Neill's use of silhouette also recalls Beardsley's

'Night Piece', which appeared opposite Arthur Symons's 'Stella Maris' in the first issue of *The Yellow Book*. Jess Nevins suggests that a knife in Mina Harker's hand recalls Beardsley's 'Oriental Dancer' (1898) – although O'Neill has denied this was a conscious influence.[22] Scrutinising the representation of dress in this image, Rebecca Mitchell discerns multiple points of allusive visual reference: 'Mina's style', she observes, 'is expressly not Aesthetic – others in the comic take that role, with Hawley Griffin adorning his invisible body in quilted-lapel smoking robes that denote Oscar Wilde's Sarony photographs or […] Du Maurier's Aesthetic parodies.'[23] O'Neill's artwork in the frontispiece and across the volumes, then, compresses a range of allusive reference to nineteenth-century culture comparable to Moore's dialogue and plotting. The decadent imagined community in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* is thoroughly embedded in form and content.

Fig. 2: Frontispiece to the first volume of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*

If Moore's depiction of an imaginary community of figures from nineteenth-century literature and art entails an imagined community, it is important to note here the workings of a

more literal community, intrinsic to comics. The distinctive mix of verbal and visual allusion in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* arises from Moore's collaborative relationships with the artist, O'Neill, as well as his colourist, Dimagmaliw, and the letterer, Oakley. A practical example of such creative community emerges from the reference in dialogue quoted previously to the 'so-called miracles at Miss Cootes' school in Edmonton'. The characters are sent to a boarding school run by one 'Rosa Cootes' to investigate why the girls at her school keep mysteriously becoming pregnant. It turns out that the invisible man has been hiding out at the school and having sex with them. But the atmosphere at the school is already hypersexualized. For Rosa Cootes is a character from various pornographic stories published in *The Pearl*.[24] Moore relishes this clash of literary registers: the names of pupils in the school draw upon a variety of texts including Olive Chancellor from Henry James' *The Bostonians*, Katy from the novels of Susan Coolidge, and Pollyanna from Eleanor Porter's novels. Moore's script encourages O'Neill to keep proliferating this juxtaposition of sexual material in design elements of the scene:

> Page 13 – Panel 1 as before, if you want to replace any of the musty framed prints on the walls with Beardsley or Von Bayros drawings then go ahead. Maybe banister ends and stuff like that could be carved into priapic satyrs, just to give the school a bit of 19th century licentious detail. (*L1* II.2.13)

O'Neill's artwork in the published version of scenes follows Moore's suggestions closely. In one scene, a statue placed in the foreground recalls pagan and erotic (interestingly androgynous) elements from Beardsley's work on Wilde's *Salomé*, while a painting in the background of the panel is reminiscent of visual elements from Franz von Bayros' pornographic *Erzählungen am Toilette-tisch* (1911) series of images and tales [fig. 3].

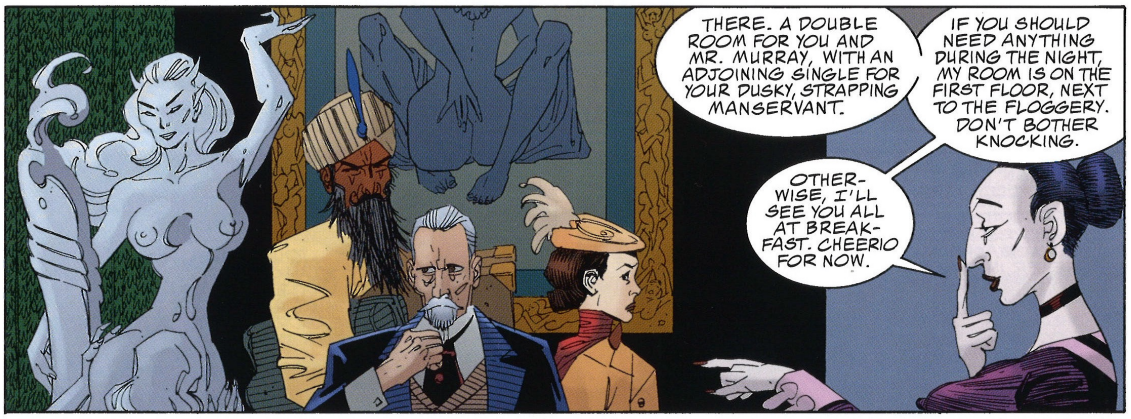

Fig. 3: *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen – Volume One*, issue 3 'Ghosts and Miracles', p. 14 (panel 2.)

Lara Rutherford connects this interdisciplinary community between visual and verbal elements to a self-conscious approach to the material form of the book: 'Moore's "borrowing" from Victorian culture extends well beyond the appropriation of plots and characters to include allusions to the visual and material properties of Victorian print forms'.[25] Scholars sensitive to decadence might compare Moore's collaborative relationships here with the fin-de-siècle fascination with the materialities of art and with book design – especially given the references to Beardsley and his work for *The Yellow Book* discussed previously. Rutherford, however, draws attention to specific visual connections between *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* volumes and 'juvenile' texts from the nineteenth century. So, for example, a prose narrative entitled 'Allan and the Sundered Veil', which is presented at the end of the first volume, directly imitates layout and design elements from *The Boy's Own Adventure*. Rutherford concludes:

> In juxtaposing characters from children's novels and erotic magazines Moore makes the point that Victorian literature is not limited to the canonical triple-decker realist novel. Rather, the whole range of Victorian print culture – spanning novels, magazines, newspapers, and penny fiction – functions as an archive of the Victorians' competing and often contradictory desires.[26]

This chimes with Moore's joking self-identification as 'archival Al', suggesting that his allusive practice is motivated by a desire to correct canonical accounts of the nineteenth century which do not consider 'the whole range of Victorian print culture'.

Adopting a similar approach, Jeff Thoss argues that Moore's interests are more reflexive.

The combination of allusions to different cultural registers in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen,* he suggests, is a response to the questionable cultural status of comics, which have been dismissed in the past as a 'low' popular genre. 'As good Neo-Victorians', Thoss notes, 'Moore and O'Neill reinterpret the past mainly to negotiate the present'.[27] There is, however, greater dialogue between Moore's work and his Victorian source material than this might suggest, since the distinction between 'high' art and 'low' popular culture stems from the work of Victorian critics such as Matthew Arnold.[28] The presentation of Mr Hyde in the second volume of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* illustrates clearly how Moore's allusive practice manages to draw past and present concerns into a complex relationship. Questioned about the relationship between his two identities, Hyde describes his alter ego as 'a flinching little Presbyterian spinster frightened by his own erection' and reflects on Jekyll's motives for separating the two halves of his personality:

> Panel 2
> Should I tell you what they were, eh? These EVILS he was so desperate to get rid of.
> Well he'd once stolen a BOOK.
>
> Panel 3
> More borrowed and never returned, but STILL…
> Oh, and he played with himself, sometimes while he thought about other men.
> That's about it.
>
> Panel 4
> Anyway, what the silly bastard DID, he thought if he quarantined all these BAD parts, what was LEFT would be a ****ing ANGEL.
> *Huh- huh.* (*L2* I.5.21-22)

These dismissive observations are rooted in Stevenson's text, since they make fun of the paucity of explanation in Jekyll's supposedly 'Full Statement of the Case'. Describing 'a profound duplicity of life', the original character records:

> And indeed the worst of my faults was a certain impatient gaiety of disposition, such as has made the happiness of many, but such as I found it hard to reconcile with my imperious desire to carry my head high, and wear a more than commonly grave countenance before the public.[29]

In contrast, Moore's creation unpacks the euphemism, innuendo and evasion in this paragraph ('a certain gaiety of disposition'). Di Liddo, however, quotes an interview which indicates that this is more than smug hindsight, for Moore describes Jekyll as 'a metaphor for the whole of a Victorian

society': 'where virtue was never lauded so loudly in public nor vice practised so excessively in private. You can almost see in that novel the exact point where the mass Victorian mind became uneasily aware of its own shadow'.[30]

The uneasy awareness described here suggests that Moore believes that nineteenth-century readers would have recognized Jekyll's evasions too. The effect is comparable to Wilde's famous observation regarding the ambiguous and unspecified nature of some of Dorian Gray's transgressions: 'Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray.'[31] Such Victorian writings resonate with 'the mass Victorian mind' because they evoke an implicit private community of knowledge that readers bring to the text about matters which cannot be uttered in public discourse. Decadence precisely sought to test those limits.

Moore's transgression of historical conventions for a modern audience incorporates implicit commentary on Hyde's relationship with 'Victorian society' in the visual presentation of this scene. The conversation derives from a dinner on the eve of a confrontation with the Martian invaders. Hyde is dressed formally, but this contrasts with his hulking physical depiction. This is established in a broad opening horizontal panel across the page. As O'Neill remarks about his own design, 'Hyde's face has visible muscle tissue and very pronounced veins as if the shifting from Jekyll to Hyde over the years has torn away all trace of humanity' (*L1* I, n.p.). The dialogue that follows is split across a series of vertical panels in rows of three. As well as breaking up Hyde's speech, this division underscores a visual counterpoint: during his conversation, panels show increasing spots of blood on Hyde's white shirt front. Unbeknownst to his fellow diners, Hyde has raped and murdered Hawley Griffin, the invisible man, for defecting to the Martians and assaulting Mina Harker in the process. With Griffin's death, his powers of invisibility fade – hence the appearance of his blood, a revelation which horrifies, disgusts and enrages the other characters present.

This is presented in another broad horizontal panel at the end of the sequence. In his script for O'Neill, Moore describes the intended effect: 'This looks like a brutish parody, a deliberate

mockery of civilized discourse. His eyebrows are raised questioningly as if he was fucking Noel Coward or somebody' (*L2* II,174). The result is a visual analogue for Moore's understanding of Hyde as the ugly truth repressed by Victorian society.

As Di Liddo observes, there is a strong correlation between Moore's presentation of Hyde and contemporary psychoanalytic theories of the gothic,[32] but Hyde's passing reference to masturbation and homosexual desire suggests a slightly larger acquaintance with the field of critical writing. If, for example, Moore was working from the Penguin Classics edition of Stevenson, he might have encountered Robert Mighall's introduction, which summarizes critical work connecting Jekyll and Hyde to cases of homosexual blackmail, contemporary theories of evolution, race and degeneration and nineteenth-century accounts of 'masturbatic insanity'.[33]

Moore's theorising about the broader cultural implications of the Jekyll and Hyde story, however, does not derive exclusively from Stevenson's scholarly reception. Sent to delay the Martian invasion whilst the British forces prepare to unleash a chemical weapon, Hyde is depicted sauntering towards the tripods singing 'You Should See Me Dance the Polka'. In an interview with Nevins, Moore confirms that this detail was inspired by the 1941 cinematic adaptation of Stevenson's story, directed by Victor Fleming and featuring Spencer Tracy as both Jekyll and Hyde:

> Oh, it's really, it's the scene I remember. There are these sort of semi-naked – you probably can't see a nipple, but it was pretty racy for the time – these semi-naked girls harnessed to a coach with Mr. Hyde whipping them on, while 'You Should See Me Dance the Polka' plays deliriously in the background. One of my favourite film sequences.[34]

This refers to surreal hallucinatory montages deployed in the film when Jekyll consumes the mixture which transforms him into Hyde. In this (heteronormative) version of Stevenson's story, Jekyll is caught between his desire for two women: his fiancée Beatrice, played by Lana Turner, and a barmaid called Ivy, played by Ingrid Bergman. On the occasion of his first transformation, he is imagined as whipping on horses which metamorphose into the two women. In a subsequent montage, the heads of these women are shown as corks being removed from wine bottles.

In both cases, these scenes of hallucination manifest desires Jekyll must repress in his everyday life: the uncorking of the bottles is hardly subtly about this. Notably, the logic of this

popular cultural adaptation of Stevenson corresponds with the 'gothic' reading of Hyde as 'the shadow' for the sexual feelings repressed by conservative Victorian society. During the first of these montages, there is a brief snatch of the melody from George Grossmith's popular song 'You Should See Me Dance the Polka'. This recalls a first encounter where Ivy sang lines of the song to Jekyll, but also anticipates Hyde's visit to a music hall, where performance of this song becomes the soundtrack to a bar-room brawl that he initiates. Within *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen,* then, a gesture of defiance in the face of death by Moore's version of the character is connected with his reading of the text as a paradigm of the forces repressed by public Victorian discourse and the re-mediation of Stevenson's work in popular culture.[35]

Neo-Victorian Decadence

The imagined community in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* with Victorian literature is shaped by and responds to a broader community of readers and readings too. As Sebastian Domsch observes, 'Moore lets us perceive the late Victorian period filtered through the collective prism of its literary imagination, while highlighting the necessary constructedness of such a vision, and thereby providing a genuine neo-Victorian perspective'. [36] Domsch and Thoss share an understanding of what constitutes a 'good' or 'genuine neo-Victorian perspective' with Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, who claim 'The "neo-Victorian" is *more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century. To be part of neo-Victorianism [...] texts [...] must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*'.[37]

On this reading, works such as *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* which take liberties with historical detail could be said to qualify as more emphatically *neo*-Victorian than novels such as A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), and Moore's own work, *From Hell*, which tend to observe the limits of historical knowledge. Indeed, speculative works such as *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* are commonly classified as 'steampunk' precisely because of the way that they combine the nineteenth century with fantastic elements or

technologies associated with science fiction. They belong to another community of transformative '(re)visions' of the nineteenth century, such as Bruce Sterling and William Gibson's *The Difference Engine* (1990) or Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age* (1995).

Despite the implicit gatekeeping by Thoss, Domsch, Heilman, and Lewellyn regarding what can be considered 'good' or 'genuine' neo-Victorian writing, imagined communities amongst creative practitioners overlap here considerably. Through their visual or imaginative transformations of the nineteenth century, steampunk neo-Victorian texts tend to write large a significant anxiety that underlies most (if not all) neo-Victorian work regarding the political implications of representing the nineteenth century. This can be traced back to the earliest usages of the term 'neo-Victorian', which the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates to 1916. Citing work by Arnold Bennet, *OED* suggests the term 'originally' referred to 'a person living in the latter or most recent part of the Victorian period', but it also quotes Robert Graves' *The Long Weekend* (1940) as evidence of shift in the meaning of the term to 'resembling, reviving, or reminiscent of, the Victorian era'. By contrast, contemporary usage of the term is premised (as Heilmann and Lewellyn indicate) upon a concern to avoid simple revival and a desire to criticize aspects of the nineteenth century which no longer seem palatable, particularly regarding attitudes towards key issues such as gender, popular culture, race, and imperialism.

As Simon Joyce and others have pointed out, an important motivation here is the way that subsequent right-wing conservative ideologues sought to co-opt the nineteenth century for their own purposes.[38] Perhaps most famously, Margaret Thatcher publicly espoused 'Victorian values' in the 1980s, writing to fellow MP, John Evans in May 1985:

> When I speak of Victorian values, I mean respect for the individual, thrift, initiative, a sense of personal responsibility, respect for others and their property and all the other values that characterized the best of the Victorian era.[39]

Moore's distaste for Thatcher is widely reported: his biographer even describes her as 'Moore's archnemesis'.[40] Accordingly, the 'gothic' revision of Jekyll and Hyde in the *League* can be seen to redress the kind of selective approach to the nineteenth century witnessed here by Thatcher's

reference to 'the best of the Victorian era', by pointing to the fissures, contradictions and ruptures within its public sphere. *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* thus recalls the general opposition to contemporary conservatism found in Moore's works such as *V for Vendetta, Skizz* (1983), and *Brought to Light* (1988).[41] In contrast with Thatcher's emphasis on 'thrift' and 'personal responsibility', Moore offers a vision of decadent Victorian society where the comically hypersexualized desires of Rosa Cootes and her pupils jostle with fallen heroes of empire and incomplete grand projects. In this version of the nineteenth century the official British secret service turns out to be run by Victorian arch-villain, Professor Moriarty, and the government resorts to undiscriminating chemical warfare to bring the war against the Martians to an end: 'Officially, the Martians died of the COMMON COLD**.** Any HUMANS died of MARTIANS' (*L2* I.6.23).

Decadent Uncertainties

This is hardly a ground-breaking conclusion. Moore's Neo-Victorian credentials are well-established. Claire Nally draws on Linda Hutcheon to argue that his steampunk combination of historical detail and the fantastic serves to resist the pressure of 'nostalgia' for the Victorian period.[42] Where Thoss and Rutherford focus upon the literary politics of his treatment of sources from popular culture, Elizabeth Ho and Domsch have explored the value and importance of Moore's representation of empire, and Halsall and Nally have probed his depictions of gender and sexuality.[43] Approaching these issues in terms of a decadent imagined community has the benefit of emphasising the strength of the presence of the fin-de-siècle within Moore's wider allusive practice, connecting it to his alternative decadent historiography. It also suggests two further considerations.

Firstly, the imagined community of direct allusion to decadence in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* recognizes the historical roots of the modern horror and fantasy tradition that emerged during the twentieth century out of responses to the work of H. P. Lovecraft.[44]

Allusions to Poe, Wilde, Machen and others in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* acknowledge significant precursors to Lovecraft in decadent and weird fiction from the late nineteenth century.[45] The presence of fin-de-siècle elements in comics by Moore's contemporaries suggests that this recognition is shared more broadly: Grant Morrison and Steve Yeowell's *Sebastian O* (1993) pits a central character moulded on Wilde and the witty dandies in his writings against a totalitarian society manipulated by a megalomaniac artificial intelligence modelled on Queen Victoria and Thatcher; Bryan Talbot's *Grandville* series (2009-2017) crosses Sherlock Holmes with elements from Tintin and the distinctive anthropomorphic illustrations of J. J. Grandville, to depict a Badger detective, Archie LeBrock and his rat sidekick, Roderick Ratzi; *Aetheric Mechanics* by Warren Ellis and Gianluca Pagliarani crosses Sherlock Holmes with Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894) and stories from the Sexton Blake library; and *The New Deadwardians* (2012) by Dan Abnett and I. N. J. Culbard merges historical details of early twentieth-century conflict with vampires and zombies. Like a zombie bite, Moore's decadent imagined community is infectious, drawing on and inspiring others.

Secondly, decadent elements within *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* help draw out the sense of dialogue and negotiation with the nineteenth century outlined by Halsall: '[Moore's] neo-Victorian pastiches bespeak a fascination with the paradoxes of this past historical time that link, as opposed to separate, the Victorian period with our present cultural moment.'[46] Moore's relationship to the historical and literary past is double. On the one hand, his depictions of a decadent steampunk society offer a critique of British Imperialism and outdated attitudes towards sex and gender ('a waspish tongue', etc.). On the other hand, his evocation of historical decadent material from the nineteenth century serves as a corrective to conservative ideologues who offer only a partial account of the period.

This is shown starkly by *Lost Girls*, a work conceived by Moore with Melissa Gebbie before *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen,* but not fully published until 2004. Deploying similar narrative strategies, *Lost Girls* re-imagines characters from Lewis Carroll's Alice books, L. Frank Baum's *The*

Wizard of Oz (1900), and J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1904) in various pornographic scenarios. The central plot has the female protagonists of these works meeting up at a hotel in the Austrian alps shortly before the First World War, where they share their sexual histories and enter into new relationships. Whilst this may seem like a deliberate subversion of revered children's texts, Moore's pornographic imagination is rooted once again in historical material. The hotel's proprietor 'Monsieur Rougueur' leaves copies of a 'white book' for his guests which contains stories and images derived from Beardsley, Félicien Rops, and Franz von Bayros, amongst others. As Halsall and others have observed, Moore offers his own pastiche of nineteenth century writings, but deliberately bases this in authentic historical material. The first images of the 'white book' clearly reproduce Beardsley's frontispiece to 'Under the Hill', a version of the Tannhauser myth that was first published within the *Savoy* and then re-issued in an unexpurgated, sexually explicit form by Leonard Smithers in 1906, after Beardsley's death. In this way, as Halsall points out, Moore's re-working of the nineteenth century recalls the work of historians such as Ronald Pearsall and Steven Marcus by drawing attention to a thriving Victorian subculture of pornography that contradicts po-faced conservative accounts of sexual probity in the period.

Halsall attributes this aspect of Moore's writing to the influence of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, but I would argue that it strengthens my comparison between his work and the imagined decadent community described by Potolsky, which is also conceived as a counterculture of resistance to reactionary ideologies from within the nineteenth century. Conjoining Moore to this community, however loosely, reveals that the decadent roots of contemporary fantasy offer a potential continuity of resistance.

It is nevertheless important to recognize that this is not without its risks. The anxieties about 'nostalgia' described by Nally which underlie Neo-Victorianism still pertain and the density of allusion in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* does not always disambiguate clearly where Moore evokes the nineteenth century to make fun of it or draws upon its power of critique. For example, the monstrous size and ape-like features of Mr Hyde in his earliest appearances may be

intended to evoke the kind of nineteenth century ideologies regarding evolution, race and degeneration that Daniel Pick and others have discussed in relation to Stevenson's original story, but a passing remark by O'Neill sheds doubt on this.[47] Discussing how this physical appearance developed through collaborative efforts with Moore and others, he notes 'as an aside':

> Hyde is coloured darker than Jekyll, which I've always assumed was colourist Ben Digmagliw's misreading of one of my rather odd colour notes - but it looks great so why tamper with it?! (*L1* I, n.p.)

Where Hyde's skin colouring in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* might bring implied racial overtones that confirm a critique of Victorian biological essentialism, O'Neill's flippant disavowal ('it looks great') makes this seem less clearly intended. There is a risk that the comic slips into the racist ideologies it might otherwise be thought to explore critically. As several critics have observed, similar issues arise around Moore's depiction, for example, of stereotypically villainous Arab characters in the opium den where Allan Quartermain is discovered in the opening issue, or Hyde's free use of racial slurs (he calls the Martian invaders 'sky wogs').[48]

From one perspective, it is these uncertainties that most closely align Moore with decadence. Bernheimer's description of the 'dynamics of paradox and ambivalence' that characterizes nineteenth-century decadence captures the way in which nineteenth-century writers and artists sought to transvalue the received aesthetics and ideologies they found in the culture around them. While this refusal to leave conventional values in their place is the source of the decadent power of critique which appeals to Moore, 'paradox' remains open to misinterpretation. It may not be clear where the representation of race indicts or replicates racism, but such uncertainty aligns with the profound ability of decadence to disconcert. Indeed, such ambiguities connect *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* to the problematic character of decadent imagined community as described by Potolsky. The positioning of Hyde is, like the cohesion of the 'League' itself, deliberately questionable. Moore has continued to probe the problematic nature of literary history in subsequent volumes in the series, which explore more recent periods, from Modernism to the 1960s. Central to these works is a transtemporal, cross-dimensional space known as 'the

blazing world' in which counter-cultural figures from across the centuries jostle in a loose coalition of resistance to repressive and reactionary forces. Importantly, Moore first sketched the blazing world in 'The New Traveller's Almanac' – a short story appended to the second volume of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, described by Nevins as 'a deliberate recreation of the style of *fin-de-siècle*, Yellow Nineties Decadent writers […], as if one of them had written a boys' magazine story'.[49] Even as the series began to move away from the nineteenth century, then, it is imbricated in a Neo-Victorian imagined decadent community.

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[1] I'm grateful to Alan Moore for permission to use images from his work in this article and would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to his artistic collaborator Kevin O'Neill, who passed away while I was working on this project.

[2] See Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Dennis Denisoff, *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860-1890* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); and Joseph Thorne, *Decadent Sociability and Material Culture at the Fin de Siècle: 'A genius for friendship'* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Liverpool John Moores University, 2019, https://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/11254/1/2019thornephd.pdf [accessed 4 November 2023]).

[3] Paul Bourget, 'Essai de psychologie contemporaine: Charles Baudelaire' (1881), translated in Havelock Ellis, 'A Note on Paul Bourget' (1887), in *View and Reviews: First Series, 1884-1932* (London: Harmsworth, 1932), p. 51.

[4] Potolsky, *Decadent Republic,* p. 1.

[5] Stefano Evangelista, for example, points out in a recent essay that Lafcadio Hearn condemned decadence as 'totally false'. See Stefano Evangelista "'Clothed with Poetry": Lafcadio Hearn's Decadent Aesthetics of Translation', *Modern Philology*, 121.1 (2023), pp. 104-23.

[6] Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*, ed. by T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 5. Also see Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[7] Alex Murray, 'Introduction: Decadent Histories', in *Decadence: A Literary History*, ed. by Alex Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 10-11.

[8] See, for example, *French Decadence in a Global Context: Colonialism and Exoticism*, ed. by Julia Hartley, Wanrug Suwanwattana, and Jennifer Yee (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022); and Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

[9] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 1991), p. 6.

[10] Matthew Potolsky, 'In Praise of Decadence: The Epideictic Mode from Baudelaire to Wilde', in *Decadent Poetics,* ed. by Jason Hall and Alex Murray (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 100.

[11] Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature,* ed. by Matthew Creasy (Manchester: Fyfield, 2014), p. 73.

[12] Potolsky, 'The Epideictic Mode', p. 103.

[13] Jackson Ayres, *Alan Moore: A Critical Guide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 25-54.

[14] I'm indebted here to a presentation by Anne Jamison, 'Michael Field and Verlaine', at *Decadence and Translation*, University of Oxford, 2 November 2018.

[15] Potolsky, *Decadent Republic*, pp. 133; 146.

[16] Alison Halsall, "'A Parade of Curiosities": Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and *Lost Girls* as Neo-Victorian Pastiches', *Journal of Popular Culture,* 48.2 (2015), pp. 257-58.

[17] Ayres, p. 46.

[18] Annalisa Di Liddo, *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), p. 27.

[19] Quotations from the first two volumes of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* are taken from the 'Absolute' editions, published by Knockabout Comics, which reproduce the comics and Moore's scripts in two separate volumes: Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen Volume One: The Absolute Edition* (La

Jolla: America's Best Comics, 2003); Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen Volume Two: The Absolute Edition* (La Jolla: America's Best Comics, 2005). References are given in the text using the abbreviations *L1* and *L2* followed by volume, issue and page numbers.
[20] For an extended discussion of this, see Halsall, pp. 253-55.
[21] See Stephen Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
[22] Jess Nevins, *Heroes and Monsters: The Unofficial Companion to The League of Extraordinary Adventures* (London: Titan, 2003), pp. 21-22.
[23] Rebecca N. Mitchell, 'Before and After: *Punch*, Steampunk, and Victorian Graphic Narrativity', in *Drawing on Victorians. The Palimpsest of Victorian and Neo-Victorian Graphic Texts*, ed. by Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2017), pp. 257-58.
[24] Nevins, pp. 55-57.
[25] Lara Rutherford, 'Victorian Genres at Play: Juvenile Fiction and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 5.1 (2012), p. 130.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Jeff Thoss, 'From Penny Dreadful to Graphic Novel: Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's Genealogy of Comics in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*', *Belphégor*, 13.1 (2 June 2015), p. 2, http://belphegor.revues.org/624 [accessed 4 October 2016]
[28] See, for example, John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 5th edn. (Harlow: Pearson, 2009), pp. 18-22.
[29] Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales of Terror,* ed. by Robert Mighall (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 55.
[30] Di Liddo, p. 107.
[31] Oscar Wilde 'To the editor of the *Scots Observer*, 9 July 1890', in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Michael Patrick Gillespie (London: Horton, 2007), p. 373.
[32] Di Liddo, p. 107.
[33] See Robert Mighall, 'Introduction', in Stevenson, pp. ix-xxxviii.
[34] Jess Nevins, 'Alan Moore: Interview' (2004), in *Alan Moore: Conversations*, ed. by Eric Berlatsky (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), p. 147.
[35] Jason B. Jones points out Neo-Victorian versions of Sherlock Holmes are frequently as indebted to cinematic adaptations of Conan Doyle's stories as the original material in 'Betrayed by Time: Steampunk & the Neo-Victorian in Alan Moore's *Lost Girls* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 3.1 (2010), pp. 101-2.
[36] Sebastian Domsch, 'Monsters against Empire: The Politics and Poetics of Neo-Victorian Metafiction in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*', in *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), p. 99.
[37] Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 4. Italics in original.
[38] See Simon Joyce, *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007) and John Kucich and Dianne Sadoff, *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
[39] Margaret Thatcher to John Evans, M.P. (5 May 1983), *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/132330 [accessed 15 September 2023].
[40] Quoted in Ayres, p. 15
[41] See Ayres, pp. 14-18, 27-32.
[42] Claire Nally, *Steampunk: Gender, Subculture and the Neo-Victorian* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 173-80.
[43] See Elizabeth Ho, *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
[44] Lovecraft's debts to the nineteenth century are now more widely recognized, as in *The Age of Lovecraft,* ed. by Jeffrey Weinstock and Carl Sederholm (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
[45] Contributors to Matthew Green's edited collection *Alan Moore and the Gothic Tradition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016) frame this historical awareness in similar terms across his *oeuvre.*
[46] Halsall, p. 266.
[47] See Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848-c.1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel: 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
[48] Ayres discusses more recent controversy regarding Moore's exploration of the figure of the Golliwog in subsequent volumes of the series (pp. 176-80).
[49] Quoted in Thoss, p. 8.

Japanese Manga Adaptations of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*

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Western Fin-de-Siècle Culture in Japanese *Shojo Manga*

Oscar Wilde's *Salome* (1894) has been a popular play in Japan for a long time. Imura Kimie 井村君江 points out that *Salome* was first introduced to Japan in 1907 by a writer named Mori Ogai 森鴎外, who promoted the modern improvement of Japanese theatre and would publish *Salome*'s first Japanese translation two years later.[1] Since then, as Sato Miki 佐藤美希 has observed, it has probably been more popular in Japan than in the UK: more than twenty versions of the Japanese translation have been published and the play has been repeatedly performed on the Japanese stage.[2] There have been many adaptations in various media, including novel, plays, and movies.

The most characteristic Japanese adaptation is in manga, which no academic research on Wilde's *Salome* has mentioned so far. As far as I have been able to find, there are more than fifteen manga adaptations of *Salome*. Interestingly, most of them are written for female readers by female-oriented manga artists, most of whom are women themselves. By 'female-oriented manga' I mean manga works or genres for a mostly female audience. As Jennifer Prough has pointed out, 'gender is the principal publishing classification for manga' in Japan.[3] Most manga are categorized into *shonen manga* 少年漫画 [boys' comics], *shojo manga* 少女漫画 [girls' comics], *seinen manga* 青年漫画 [comics for adult men], and *josei manga* 女性漫画 [comics for adult women], each of which has its own subgenres. In fact, Wilde's play and Western fin de siècle culture have deeply influenced Japanese female-oriented manga. Many epochal female-oriented manga artists, such as Matsunae Akemi 松苗あけみ, Maya Mineo 魔夜峰央, and Yamagishi Ryoko 山岸凉子, have discussed the visual and thematic influence of Pre-Raphaelites such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti or John Everett Millais, Art Nouveau artists such as Aubrey Beardsley or Alfons Mucha, or even decadent writers like Wilde, on their manga:[4] the flamboyant idealization of women often seen in the works

of Pre-Raphaelites and Mucha has inspired the *shojo manga*'s mainstream visual style to beautify femininity with 'girly' attributes like ornamental flowery backgrounds, fluttering clothes and hair, or vivid colouring.[5] Simultaneously, many manga artists have been drawn to the queerness of Beardsley's black-and-white illustrations or Wilde's literary works, consequently producing the female-oriented manga's homoerotic subgenres called *Yaoi* やおい or Boys' Love. *Salome*'s popularity in Japanese female-oriented manga circles should be contextualized in terms of the influence of fin de siècle culture.

In an interview focusing on the Pre-Raphaelites' influence on *shojo manga*, Matsunae expresses her sympathy with fin de siècle artists' ambivalence towards modernization and thirst for a new aesthetic style.[6] Such seeming commonality between fin de siècle European artists and twentieth-century Japanese female artists should be examined carefully. Female manga artists' adaptations do not necessarily praise fin de siècle aesthetics as a whole, especially in terms of the treatment of women's subjectivity. As many scholars have pointed out, the fin de siècle decadent culture arose from concerns about the rapidly growing economic materialism in modernity that seemed to be ruining morality and beauty;[7] nevertheless, as Bram Dijkstra demonstrates in his study of the female figures in fin de siècle culture,[8] the artists of the period, mostly men, exploited the stereotypical, misogynistic, fetishizing symbolism of women to express their discontent with modernity. *Shojo manga*, on the other hand, has dramatized heroines' struggles for happiness in postwar Japanese society, in which the economy and industry had rapidly grown but women still had great difficulty accessing the social mainstream because of deep-rooted patriarchy.[9] Even though the heroines' happiness is usually depicted as the heteronormative achievement of romantic love, female manga artists have remained sympathetic to romantic heroines. Their criticism does not appear as a direct political statement or satire but as fantastic escapism from reality into the aesthetic world. According to Hashimoto Osamu 橋本治, *shojo manga* artists, especially in the 1960s to 70s, tended to depict the impossible dream of girls who have been

deprived of possibilities by patriarchal ideology.[10] While visually and thematically approaching Western decadence in their aesthetic escapism based on social modernization, Japanese *shojo manga* artists, through their dramatization of women's subjectivity, have unintentionally criticized their fin de siècle precursors' misogyny.

Reflecting such difference between the fin de siècle culture and female-oriented manga, one idiosyncrasy of the manga adaptations of *Salome* by women is that they characterize Salome not as a dreadful *femme fatale*, but as an adolescent girl with vulnerability and subjectivity, struggling to escape from – and sometimes to transcend – the violent order of patriarchy. Japanese female manga artists of *shojo* and *josei* manga, which, compared to the male-oriented manga genres, tend to detail characters' complex psychology rather than advancing the plot, imaginatively expand Salome's realistic aspects from Wilde's text and re-invent heroines with whom female readers can easily sympathize. Salome, whether based on Wilde's text or other versions of the legend, has been traditionally depicted as the embodiment of 'women as monsters, predators, seducers and destroyers of men, symbols of evil and perversity'.[11] Diane Long Hoeveler further argues that Salome 'has never been real to the patriarchy, which has always been compelled to read her as a sign in the text for blankness, absence, or a variety of self-projected fantasies: woman as virgin, woman as whore, woman as moon, woman as cesspool'.[12] Even some feminist adaptations that emphasize Salome's aggressive sexuality very often fall into what Petra Dierkes-Thrun calls 'regressive feminism', which 'rob[s] Wilde's original Salomé of her ambiguous complexity and also problematically replicate[s] earlier misogynist, naively dehistoricized notions, such as the femme fatale and the militant feminist'.[13] With a few exceptions, such as Ella Ferris Pell's painting *Salome* (1890) or Atom Egoyan's reinvention of Richard Strauss's Opera version (1996),[14] most visualizations of Salome have contributed to the positive or negative symbolization of the *femme fatale*. However, the exploration of Wilde's original Salome's 'ambiguous complexity', especially her realistic aspects as an adolescent female character, can radically deconstruct the misogynist

mode of *Salome*'s interpretation by rediscovering the text's (self-)criticism against the Symbolist aesthetics and, to borrow Eve Sedgwick's term, its 'reparative'[15] potential to sympathize with the vulnerable but romantic heroine. The female artists' realistic/sympathetic characterization of Salome gives us an excellent opportunity to positively understand *Salome*'s femininity.

Through *Salome*'s manga adaptations, Japanese female manga artists have self-reflexively explored the genre limitations and potential of female-oriented manga in its treatment of femininity. As many critics have pointed out, the female-oriented manga genres, especially *shojo manga*, have always struggled between their heteronormative conventionality with the dominance of the romantic love plot, feminist expressions of women's discontent with androcentric society, and self-empowering affirmation of femininity. While Wilde's Salome bears major attributes of typical *shojo manga* heroines, such as admiration for chastity, fear of men's lust, and longing for romantic love, the plot itself enables female manga artists to reflect on their own genre by dramatizing the heroine's romantic imagination that kills both her and her beloved, but simultaneously empowers her. Consequently, these adaptations of *Salome* work as critical but sympathetic metacommentary on the *shojo manga* genre itself from Japanese female artists through Wilde's ironical perspective.

This article analyses two adaptations of Wilde's *Salome* by female manga artists: Teradate Kazuko 寺館和子 and Maki Miyako 牧美也子. Instead of simply visualizing scenes or following the original plot, these manga adaptations often imagine aspects of Salome not included in Wilde's play or put her into totally different settings such as post-WWI Japan. By reading the specific manga texts and analysing their common features, I will consider the reciprocal interpretations of Wilde's aesthetics and Japanese female-oriented manga, especially regarding gender and sexuality.

Fig. 1: Maya Mineo's illustration influenced by Beardsley. Maya Mineo, *Asutaroto Kuronikuru* アスタロト・クロニクル [*Astarot Chronicle*] (Tokyo: Shogakkan, 2017), p. 3. Kindle edition.[16]

Fig. 2: Matsunae Akemi's illustration influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites, especially Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Matsunae Akemi, *Hinoke no Kyodai, Kagake no Simai* 緋野家の兄弟 花賀家の姉妹 [*Hino Brothers, Kaga Sisters*] (Tokyo: Office Man, 2014). Front cover, Kindle edition.

Salome's Victimization and Resistance as an Adolescent Girl: Teradate Kazuko's 'Sarome'

Since the 1970s, Japanese *shojo manga* artists have often borrowed visual designs from Western fin de siècle art, quoted lines or characters, including Salome, from decadent literature, or tried to visualize or narrate decadent themes like aestheticism or homoeroticism. However, even when Salome is directly mentioned in those early adaptations, she usually represents the stereotypically sexy and dangerous *femme fatale* of decadent culture. Although many *shojo manga* artists in the 70s and 80s had already created various female characters who suffer from and fight against patriarchal society, and Wilde's Salome may have inspired those artists, they were not interested in directly re-telling Salome's story. As opposed to early adaptations, which symbolically depict Salome as a destructive power or a human vice, female artists' adaptations in the 90s sympathetically explore realistic aspects of Salome as an adolescent girl. Despite their obvious attachment and homage to decadent culture, female manga artists do not follow the decadent writers' conventional characterization of Salome but empathetically create their own vulnerable Salomes.

The first manga adaptation that interprets Salome as a realistic adolescent girl character was written by a female manga artist, Teradate Kazuko (1959-), in 1992. Besides adapting Wilde's play, this short manga, titled 'Sarome' 紗鷺女 ['Salome'], contains several decadent characteristics in its plot and style. The story is set at a Japanese highland summer resort in Showa 5 (1930 in Japanese calendar). The 21-year-old protagonist, Iwamura Masahiko, has been confined in a huge family villa with his bedridden grandfather and several servants because he is suffering from tuberculosis. The group of servants include a beautiful middle-aged woman, Tamamo, with whom Masahiko has secretly been in love. One day, Masahiko's father, Mr Iwamura, brings a 16-year-old girl named Kuzuha to live in the villa. The girl's mother, Mr Iwamura's mistress, was a prostitute at a brothel named 'Salome', and he decided to adopt Kuzuha after her mother's death. Masahiko and Kuzuha gradually become intimate, but he disappoints her with his lack of determination when she asks him to take her away from the villa. Shortly after, Masahiko realizes

that Tamamo has been the mistress of both his father and grandfather and that Mr Iwamura has made Kuzuha his grandfather's sexual slave while Tamamo contrives to disinherit Masahiko. Deeply shocked, Masahiko runs into his grandfather's forbidden bedroom, where he finds Kuzuha being raped by his grandfather. Masahiko kills his grandfather with an ornamental Japanese sword and then beheads his father, and Kuzuha wanders away with Mr Iwamura's head, leaving Masahiko behind.

Considering the history of Japanese politics and literature, this adaptation's setting seems typically decadent. Teradate focuses on the interwar period, which connects the Taisho period (1912-1926), when 'Taisho Decadence', that is, 'one of the conspicuous offshoots of fin-de-siècle Decadence', developed, and the Showa period (1926-89), when 'the notion of dekadansu ("decadence") turned out to be an ideological banner for a number of literary schools and movements'.[17] In this period, some Japanese writers and artists, 'reclusive individuals who could not conform to the pragmatism of the social mainstream', subtly criticized the contemporary social optimism about rapid modernization through their decadent works, which, in this manga, Masahiko adores.[18] One of Masahiko's favourite authors, Tanizaki Junichiro 谷崎潤一郎, for example, is usually considered a typical example of this decadent literary school. As Ikuho Amano observes, 'during the interwar period of the 1930s, the cultural phenomenon known as ero guro nansensu (a term made up of abbreviated Japanese words and translated into English as "erotic, grotesque, nonsense") appeared to be "the decadent pivot"'.[19] Another of Masahiko's favourite authors, Edogawa Rampo 江戸川乱歩, is known as a writer of 'ero guro nansensu', which 'was a phase of Japanese Decadence in which consumers actively responded to the mass cultural trend of montage' in the interwar period. 'It reflected the social climate of the pre-fascist epoch of the 1920s and 1930s, while masking its revolutionary ethos behind a libratory outlook.'[20] Teradate's plot itself is grotesquely erotic and violent just as 'ero guro nansensu' culture usually is. In this sense, Teradate's adaptation is her homage not only to Wilde's play but also to the culture of

Japanese Decadence.

While adopting the fancy and relatively unrealistic taste of Taisho Decadence, Teradate also realistically depicts Salome's vulnerability and subjectivity. Kuzuha appears in the story as a coquettish girl who seductively and sadistically orders Masahiko to wash her legs [fig. 3]. His washing of her legs becomes their erotic habit, during which Kuzuha ecstatically moans and even rubs Masahiko's groin with her foot, saying, 'ここで硬くなっているものは…?' [What's this hardening thing here?].[21] In this instance, she seems to behave like a typical *femme fatale*.

Fig. 3: Teradate Kazuko, 'Sarome' ['Salome'], in *Jidai o Ikita Onnatachi 6* (Tokyo: Amazon, 2018), p. 83. Kindle edition.

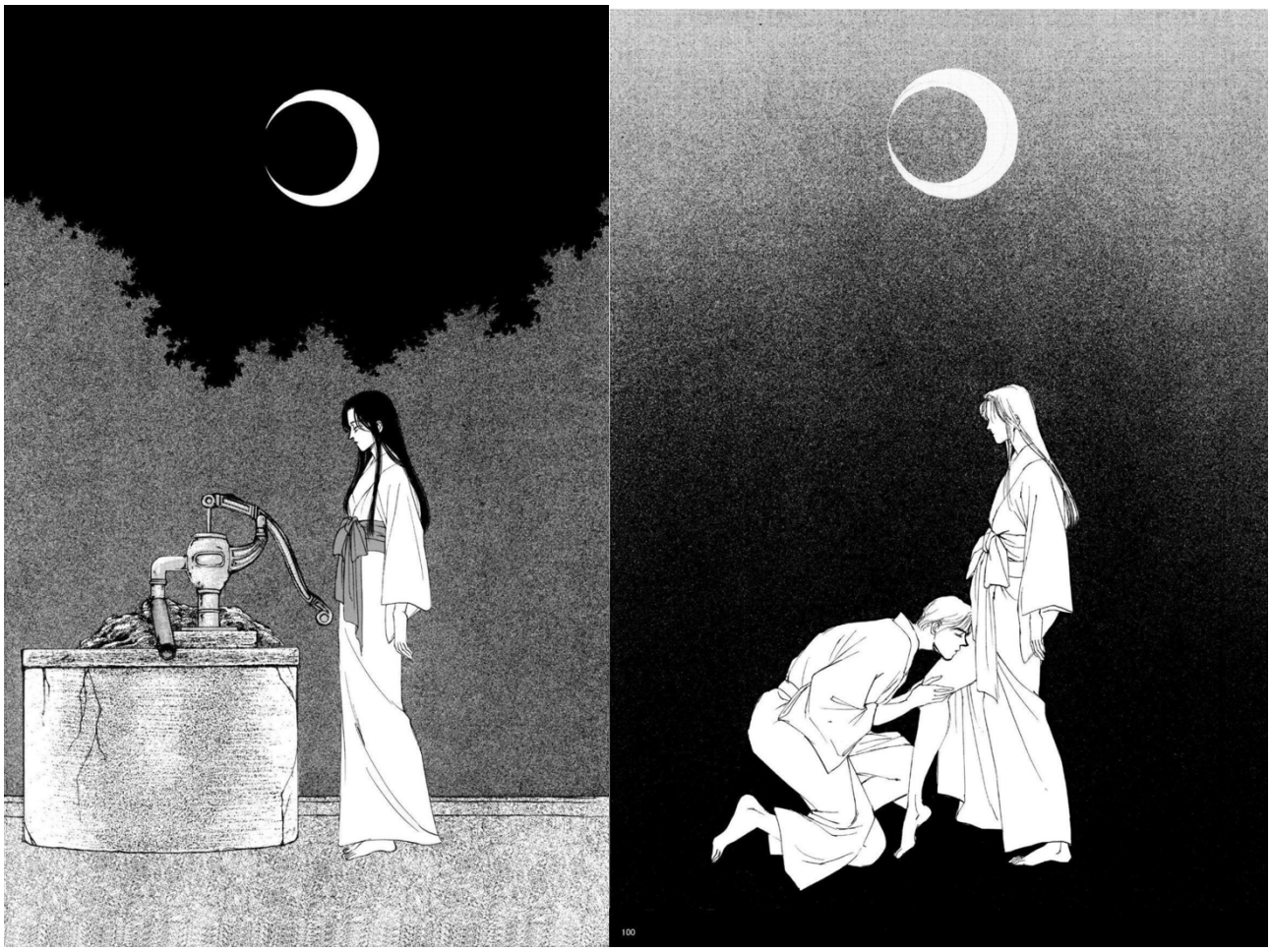
Their relationship resembles that of Salome and the Young Syrian in Wilde's play, in which Salome manipulates the Young Syrian with her charm and sweet words. However, in 'Sarome', just before beginning the sequence of their erotic practice, Teradate shockingly mimics Kuzuha's scream when she was raped by Masahiko's grandfather. It is thus suggested that she wants her legs washed because she needs a symbolic cleansing of herself after being sexually abused by the former patriarch. Kuzuha even asks Masahiko to run away with her. Her seductive behaviour towards Masahiko is thus actually representative of her desperate struggle to escape from the sexually exploitative environment.

These episodes remind us of Salome's very first line in Wilde's play:

> I will not stay. I cannot stay. Why does the Tetrarch look at me all the while with his mole's eyes under his shaking eyelids? It is strange that the husband of my mother looks at me like that. I know not what it means. Of a truth I know it too well.[22]

Wilde's protagonist appears onstage as a girl who has just escaped from the gaze of Herod's 'mole's eyes'. Although she admits she knows 'what it means', she first resists recognizing her stepfather's sexual desire for her. As Corinne E. Blackmer points out, 'Salome knows his gaze is sexual, and that he objectifies her'.[23] Leaving the feast, she now admires the moon as a symbol of 'the beauty of a virgin'.[24] At least at her first appearance, she is never a seductive coquette but a vulnerable girl who honours female chastity and suffers from her stepfather's lustful gaze. Teradate's characterization of Kuzuha emphasizes Salome's original girlish and fragile purity. Inspired by Wilde's maidenly moon, Teradate also uses the moon symbolically, though in a totally different way. The moon first appears when Masahiko finds Kuzuha at midnight in her traditional Japanese nightdress standing by the well where he once washed her legs. He soon notices tears on her cheeks. Then, she opens the slit of the nightdress to show blood running down from her thigh to her foot. Kuzuha's tears and blood, as Masahiko probably presumes, would suggest that she might be shocked by her first menstruation; simultaneously, the reader, who has already seen Kuzuha

being raped, can assume that they allude to sexual violence or that, even if her bleeding does mean menstruation, she laments her physically-matured female sexuality destined to be exploited by men.



Figs. 4 and 5: Teradate, p. 97; p. 100.

Whether or not he is aware of the ambiguity of the scene, Masahiko masochistically kneels to kiss Kuzuha's thigh as if trying to appease her humiliation by showing his slavish admiration. The sequence ends with their kissing each other on the lips. Throughout the sequence, the moon conspicuously appears. In the whole-page-sized panel showing Kuzuha by the well, the moon is static in the upper centre of the panel above the heroine [fig. 4]. The moon's whiteness against the pitch-darkness is compositionally compared to Kuzuha's white profile and her long pitch-black hair. Unlike most visual adaptations of Wilde's play that portray a full moon as a symbol of

Salome's virginity and innocence, Teradate displays the crescent moon. Its distinct rim is unrealistically long and round so that the darkness of the night sky appears to encroach on the moon in a penetrating fashion. Here, the crescent moon represents Kuzuha's humiliating situation in the Iwamura house, including her virginity lost to rape. Simultaneously, however, the whiteness and contour of the crescent moon are so distinct from the background, as if it refuses to merge with the darkness, symbolizing the remnant of Kuzuha's pride. On the ground, Kuzuha is staring at the third highlighted object in this composition: the well, which connotes her symbolic purification potentially activated by Masahiko. In contrast to Tamamo, who intentionally weaponizes her sexuality like a traditional *femme fatale*, Kuzuha at least spiritually refuses to yield to the patriarchal exploitation and, although barely, has faith in her potential salvation. The crescent moon embodies the realistic ambiguity of Salome, who suffers but resists.

Having indulged in the erotic play of washing Kuzuha's legs, Masahiko now assumes his slavish role by kneeling and kissing her thigh, turning Kuzuha from a forlorn girl into a sadistic princess, without her consent [fig. 5]. His attitude towards Kuzuha reminds us of male artists' and writers' misogynistic admiration for virginal *femmes fatales*, of which Salome is the best embodiment. As Dijkstra acutely points out, in fin de siècle culture, where most men often felt marginalized and debilitated in the turbulence of modernity,

> Woman […] now found herself pushed into the role of the surrogate sadist, so that the male could vent his pent-up frustrations in an orgy of masochistic self-indulgence. With her apparent hunger for gold, her outward purity and inward lust, her seeming self-sufficiency and blood thirsty virginity, she was the perfect foil to the pervasive masochism of the artists and intellectuals – the cultural middlemen – of the turn of the century.[25]

A belated counterpart of the fin de siècle decadents, Masahiko, who is too conscious of his own physical weakness and social uselessness to be Kuzuha's guardian lover, sets her on a pedestal as a sadistic virgin, masochistically making himself a slave begging for her mastery over himself. Their sequential kissing virtually dramatizes for the reader the ironic distance between Masahiko's

masochistic illusion and her deep wound and desperate struggle. In the panel of Masahiko's 'service', whose composition is similar to that of the panel of Kuzuha looking down at the well, the author, as if stressing their miscommunication, omits Kuzuha's facial expressions in contrast to Masahiko's intoxicated face, visualizing his masochistic objectification of her. By emphasizing the arbitrariness of Masahiko's masochistic dream, Teradate, if unconsciously, criticizes the misogynistic aesthetics of fin de siècle male artists and their followers who have eroticized Salome or, generally speaking, adolescent girls' sexuality, by imposing their unrealistic but convenient illusions of virginal *femmes fatales*.

The climactic sequences are composed of Masahiko's discovery of his grandfather's sexual abuse of Kuzuha and his murder of both his father and grandfather. When Masahiro rushes to his grandfather's room, the multiple *fusumas* (Japanese-type sliding doors) blocking the way symbolically allude to Wilde's seven veils [fig. 6]. The panels of this page alternately show the opening fusumas and abstract images of dancing Salome. On the next page, the first panel shows the curtained shadow of Kuzuha being raped by the grandfather with the caption, 'そのためなら踊りましょう あなたが望むままに' [For my wish, I will dance as you want].[26] The second panel shows Masahiko's shocked eye and the third shows Kuzuha's shadowed face and the sound of her moan. In this panel, Masahiko's hand finally opens the curtain, that is, the last veil, but instead of directly showing the rape scene, the next two pages visualize Masahiko's scream echoing throughout the night garden and then show the illusory vision of dancing Salome, who resembles Kuzuha, under the crescent moon on the stage [fig. 7]. This sequence symbolically compares Kuzuha's forced sexual service to the grandfather to Salome's dance of the seven veils. While many readers of Wilde's play have interpreted Salome's dance as her seduction of the male audience, Kuzuha's 'dance' reminds us that Salome is compelled by Herod to perform the erotic dance: in Wilde's original text, she repeatedly refuses Herod's wish before she finally gives consent in order to gain Jokanaan's head. Teradate's adaptation again detects Salome's profound repugnance for

Herod's lust in her repetitive refusal and her vulnerability in her consent to his persistent request.

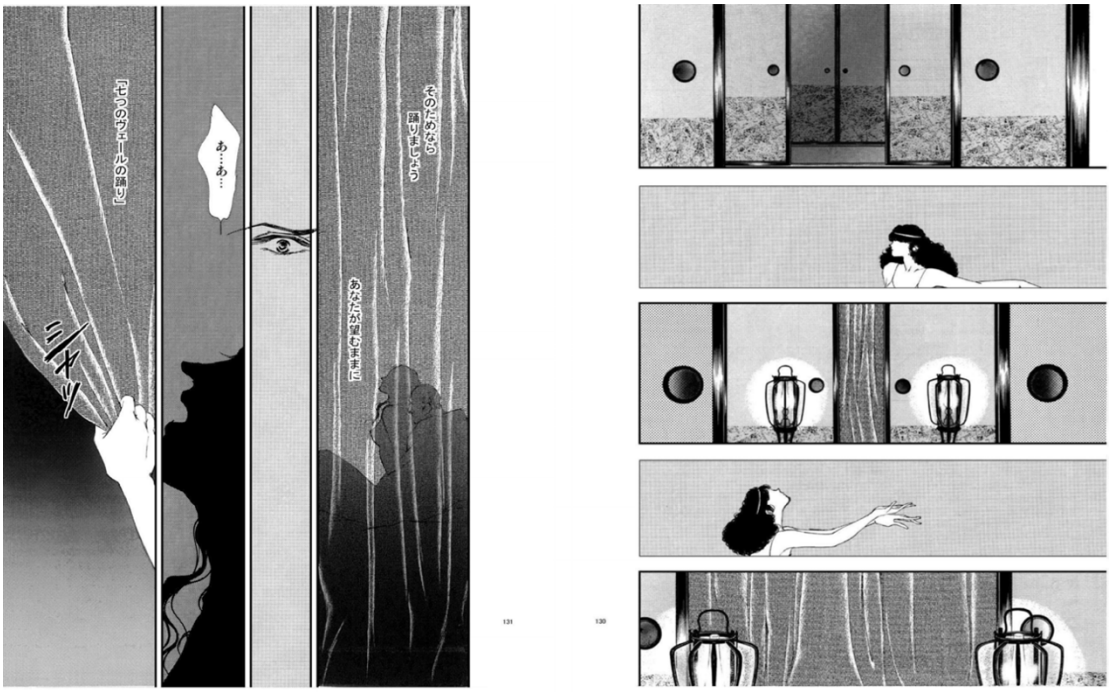


Fig. 6: Teradate, pp. 130-31.

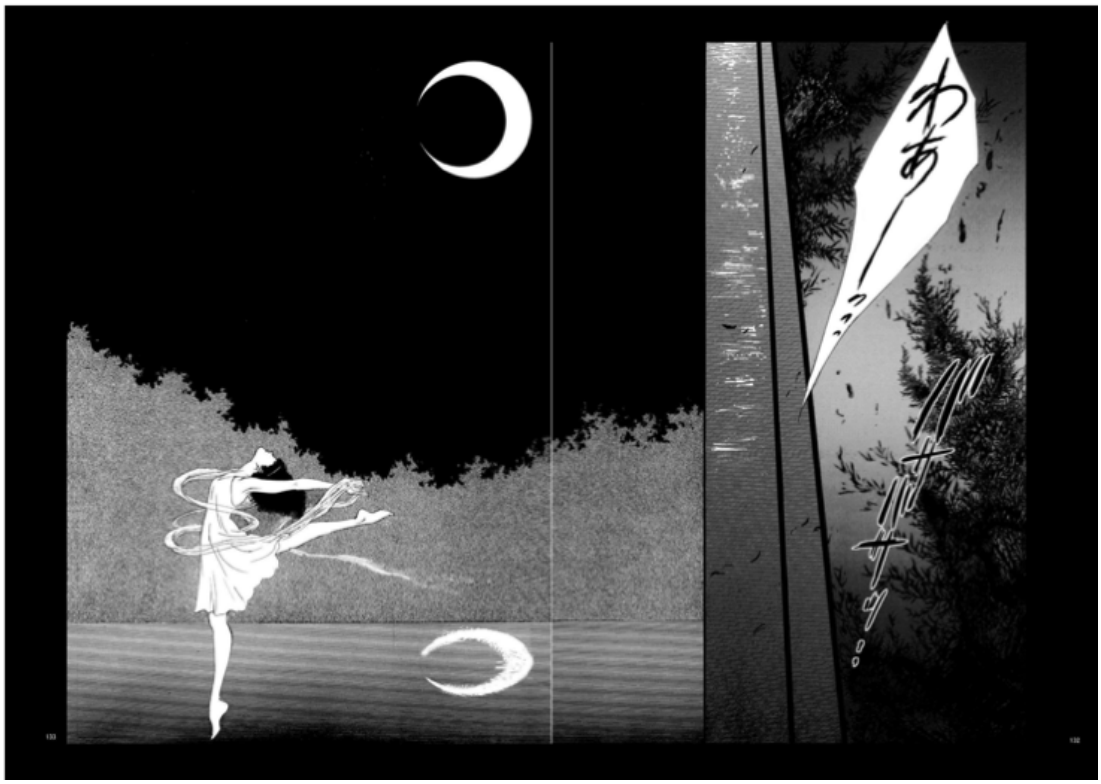


Fig. 7: Teradate, pp. 132-33.[27]

While dramatizing Kuzuha's victimization, Teradate adds the last twist to her Salome's character by alluding to Kuzuha's attachment to Mr Iwamura. In Kuzuha's flashback sequence, little Kuzuha meets Mr Iwamura, her mother's patron, for the first time [fig. 8]. He gives her sweets and Kuzuha thinks, '優しい瞳——' [He has gentle eyes…].[28] Having no real father, she seems to seek a paternal figure in Mr Iwamura. In the very last sequence, Kuzuha picks up Mr Iwamura's head, thinking, '私の欲しかったもの——' [This is what I have wished for…],[29] and then kisses it, just as Wilde's Salome does with the head of Jokanaan. Although Kuzuha's kiss probably includes a romantic nuance, the episode from her childhood emphasizes her innocent desire for fatherly love. We should remember here that Wilde's Salome also lost her biological father. Adding to this, as Kate Millet points out, almost all the male characters in the play, 'from the king to the lowest guard', cast their sexual gaze on her instead of giving her non-lustful, protective intimacy.[30]

Figs. 8 and 9: Teradate, p. 114; p. 119.

Jokanaan is the only male character who does not desire her. Instead of demonising Salome as a lustful *femme fatale*, Teradate recognizes in Salome's desire for Jokanaan the childlike wish for a father figure. Her adaptation re-creates a victimized, forlorn Salome who struggles to escape from sexual exploitation and wishes for fatherly intimacy.

Does this story, while mocking the masochistic desire of fin de siècle artists, comfort the more traditional and straightforward patriarchal desire of men who want to be respected, desired, and loved by symbolic daughters? Of course not. Instead, Teradate repeatedly criticizes both patriarchal tyranny and the masochistic aestheticism as two sides of the same coin. For instance, Masahiko's masochistic escapism never denies his participation in the maintenance and reproduction of misogynistic patriarchy. When Kuzuha comes to the house, Mr Iwamura assures his son of his position by saying, '心配するな 私の子供は この家の後継は お前だけだ' [Don't worry. My child, the heir to this House is only you].[31] The father symbolically gives his heir the novels of Japanese decadents Tanizaki and Edogawa, some of whose works, such as Tanizaki's *Naomi* or Edogawa's 'The Human Chair' and 'The Caterpillar' are famous for their protagonists' masochism. Masahiko's masochistic, escapist taste is ironically established in his patriarchal male bond with his father. Dijkstra reveals the tacit conspiracy between the fin de siècle male masochists and the 'true masculine', arguing that the masochism of the late nineteenth-century male

> was not at all a backhanded compliment to women's power over him; it was rather the creation of a surrogate master who could be sacrificed – indeed, destroyed, if necessary – once the true masculine, the true 'Aryan' master-slave bond of collaboration in man's depredation of the 'inferior species' of being had established itself.[32]

Masahiko, the Japanese counterpart of the fin de siècle masochists, has unconsciously inherited their hidden machismo, which never saves any versions of Salome but helps the 'true masculine' exploit them. Despite his dignified, explicitly patriarchal appearance, however, Mr Iwamura cannot disobey his bedridden father and leaves him sexually exploiting Tamamo; moreover, his vicious

scheme to monopolize Tamamo at Kuzuha's expense only results in dishonorable decapitation by his own son. Though seemingly controlling the House with his patriarchal authority, Mr Iwamura is actually the slave of the patriarchal system, whose struggling efforts to maintain the House consequently accelerate its degeneration. Kuzuha's sincere longing for paternal love and protection ironically foregrounds the absence of such ideal masculinity in reality.

Masahiko's grandfather is the most ambiguous male character in the story. He still wields a tacit but predominant influence on his descendants' minds and also hints at his lecherous masculinity, but Masahiko, who is forbidden to enter his grandfather's bedroom, never sees his whole face and body. Even to the reader, only his body parts and blurred shadow behind the veil indicate his existence as if he had already become a ghost – in fact, he is a dying old man who could not live without nursing care. In one sequence where Tamamo comes to Masahiko's grandfather's bedroom to take care of him, he cannot even drink water by himself [fig. 9]. Lying on the Japanese futon, however, he extends his arm to the slit of Tamamo's kimono to finger her pubic region. Tamamo, though initially declining, accepts his hand, saying, 'それとも 私の言うことを聞くなら…' [but, if you obey what I will say…],[33] before moaning ecstatically. Her words suggest that this bedridden patriarch still maintains the authority to determine the Iwamura House's succession. On the wall behind his futon are displayed two Japanese swords in their sheaths (among other antique art works), symbolizing his financial and phallic power. This scene equivocally suggests the great former patriarch's potency and impotence: his unabashed sexual exploitation and the precious swords allude to his tacit influence in the house where the 'ownership' of female members always matters; however, they simultaneously mean that he is nothing but a sexually impotent old man who needs phallic surrogates such as fingers or swords to ensure his power, both physically and symbolically. The dying patriarch signifies the paradoxical potency/impotence of the male authority in the rigid patriarchal system.

Teradate, nevertheless, does not aggrandize the grotesque power of patriarchy but

demystifies it in the climax. Breaking the taboo, Masahiko finally enters his grandfather's bedroom to find Kuzuha's 'seven veils dance'; however, what exactly does he witness here, and what did the 'seven veils' conceal? Although obviously sexually abusing Kuzuha, the bedridden grandfather can never complete his sexual intercourse; all he can do is humiliate her with his phallic surrogates. Thus, Masahiko finds here that instead of the 'true masculine' who valiantly conquers the dangerous *femme fatale*, an impotent old man haunted by the unquenched lust or patriarchal authority is miserably clinging to the remnants of his power by sexually exploiting an innocent girl. The mysterious core of the patriarchal order of the House maintains its power just as long as it stays behind the veils; the 'last veil' conceals not only Kuzuha's victimization but also the emptiness of the House's authority, which the masochistic heir had tacitly enshrined. Masahiko's killing of his grandfather suggests his hysteric reaction to the traumatic discovery of the House's grotesque decay rather than his heroic motivation to save Kuzuha. Soon afterwards, he faces his father, who has turned out to be another powerless vassal to the bedridden patriarch. Shutting down his father's miserable pleading for his life, Masahiko beheads him without hesitation. The masochist cannot forgive his forefathers' treachery to the 'true masculine'.

In the final sequence after Kuzuha kisses the lips of Mr Iwamura's severed head, Teradate presents a composition in which, against the big crescent moon, Kuzuha walks offstage embracing Mr Iwamura's head, leaving behind a stunned Masahiko with the sword drooping down from his loin like a flaccid penis [fig. 10]. As opposed to Wilde's original play, in which Herod commands the soldiers to 'Kill that woman!',[34] there is no patriarch to fulfill 'his ultimate responsibility to the realm of the world, to the transcendent realm of the masculine spirit'.[35] Kuzuha, who once begged Masahiko to take her away, is now voluntarily leaving by herself with quiet satisfaction on her face. Her bare legs, which Masahiko has fetishized, are performing balletic tiptoe steps to the exit as if the prima donna gracefully concludes her stage, symbolizing her autonomy. The crescent moon, which was flatly white in the other moonlit scenes, has now gained its realistic, almost three-

dimensional texture with gritty shadows on its surface: it is no longer white enough to symbolize a virginal *femme fatale* or victimized innocent, but looks firm enough to represent Kuzuha's determined independence. While the crescent moon has never waxed, as if indicating the irreversibility of Kuzuha's victimization, its current solidity does not convey the impression of being encroached by the darkness; rather, it embraces the darkness, overlapping with Kuzuha, who now exclusively possesses her surrogate father's head, which has lost the violent authority but reminds her of the fatherly love she has wished for since childhood. She never looks back or says any words, and she does not prolong the decaying patriarchy by making Masahiko a valorous hero who has saved the princess from the villain. Although she could neither control nor defeat it by herself, Teradate's Salome chooses to flee from the hell of patriarchy, in which male zombies, whether sadistically or masochistically, always seek the sacrifice for their 'true masculine'.

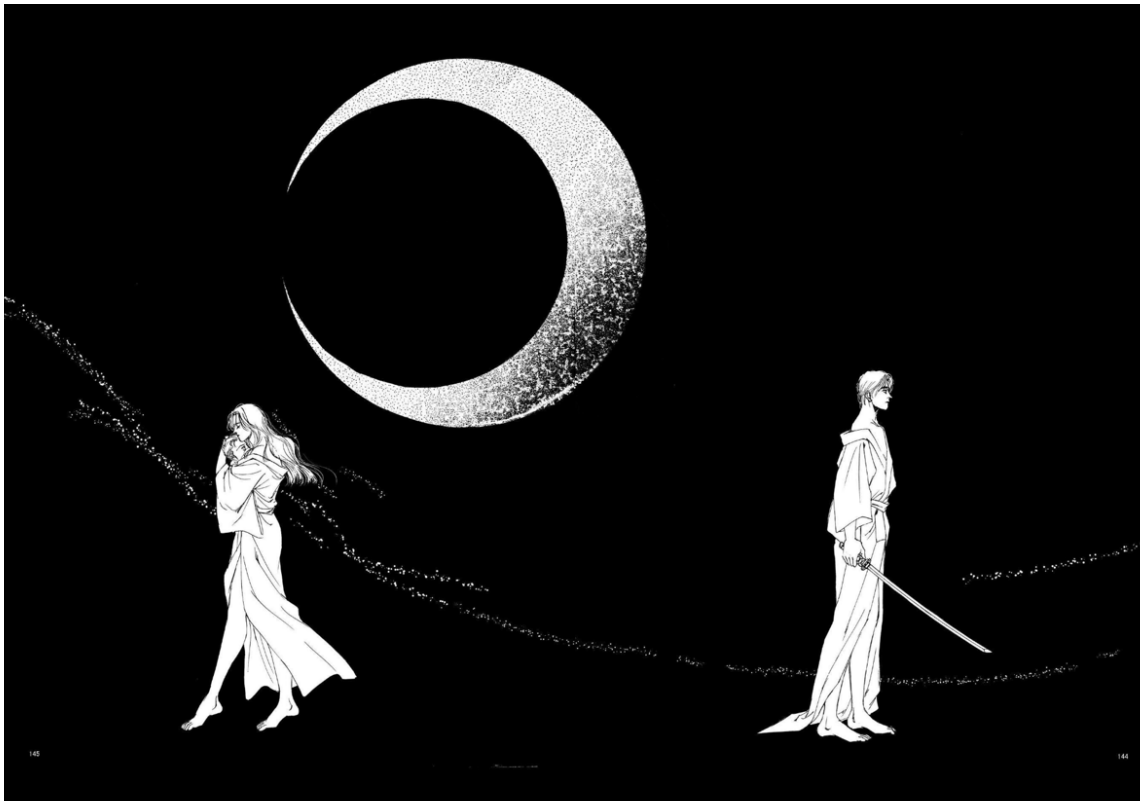


Fig. 10: Teradate, pp. 144-45.

The Reciprocal Criticism between Wilde and *Shojo Manga*: Maki Miyako's *Sarome*

Another female manga artist, Maki Miyako (1935-), also emphasizes Salome's vulnerability in her adaptation, *Sarome* サロメ [Salome], written in 1996. This adaptation is relatively faithful to the original play but adds many details about Salome's background. Using biblical and historical resources besides Wilde's text, Maki dramatizes how Herod stole Herodias from his own brother and adopted Salome as his daughter.[36] In Maki's story, Herod kills his brother in order to possess not only the hegemony of Jewish society but also beautiful Herodias and innocent Salome. Salome is characterized at first as a vulnerable female infant who is buffeted about in the rivalry between his father and uncle [fig. 11]. After being taken to Herod's palace, Salome's nursemaid tells her to call Herod, who has killed her real father 'father'. Despite her youth, Salome realizes the instability of her position. Here, by sympathetically describing the infant Salome's helplessness, Maki, like Teradate, allows us to rethink how and why she became the *femme fatale* we know. Wilde's Salome initially appears in the play as an innocent young girl who hates Herod's lustful 'mole's eyes' and praises 'the beauty of a virgin' of the moon, but she starts to take advantage of her sexual charm soon after she is aware of her desire for Jokanaan. Helen Tookey argues that 'any innocence she [Salome] does possess at the beginning of the play is lost through her encounter with Jokanaan'.[37] Nevertheless, Teradate and Maki seamlessly bridge Salome's innocence and seductive behaviours by narrating her harsh childhood. In their adaptations, Salome is aware of her vulnerable position and her sexual charm as her only weapon. By imagining Salome's harsh childhood, both manga artists remind us that she is a victim of the androcentric society before she is a dangerous *femme fatale*; or, she must become a dangerous *femme fatale because* she is a victim. In this sense, opposing fin de siècle decadent artists and writers or psychoanalysts who have naturalized penis envy through the *femme fatale* Salome, Teradate and Maki reveal the contingency of such a sexist concept by contextualizing Salome's character.

Fig. 11: Maki Miyako, *Sarome* [*Salome*], (Tokyo: Sekaibunka-sha, 1996), pp. 35-36.

Just as in Wilde's original play, Maki's Salome falls in love with Jokanaan when they meet at the underground prison, where Jokanaan hurls curses at Salome. Despite his abusive words, especially towards her femininity, Salome is fascinated by his voice. In Herod's feast, being exposed to Herod's '父親とは思えぬ目で私の体をなめまわす 私をみる男たちの濁った目' [unfatherly eyes hungrily looking over my body, and those men's impure eyes looking at me],[38] Salome wants to hear Jokanaan's '悪しざまにののしられてもなぜか心に沁みる不思議な声' [mysterious voice that somehow touches my heart deeply even when it abuses me roundly].[39] The author's emphasis on Salome's difficult childhood and repugnance to her current environment enables us to understand that 'it is through love that Salome hopes to enter that new and unknown world that she perceives in Jokanaan and that so fascinates her' to get away from her constraining environment.[40] Maki's adaptation explores what Elliot L. Gilbert calls 'an empathic dimension' of

Wilde's play, more explicitly than the original by depicting the mechanism of Salome's seemingly cruel mentality: 'Without neglecting terror, [Wilde] draws the subjective observer into the corresponding subjectivity of the characters, most notably of Salome.'[41] Even though Jokanaan hurls only curses, for Salome he can be the one who releases her from the repressive royal family and gives her a new identity in the potential love between them.

Salome's repugnance toward the violent male gaze and longing for Jokanaan as her potential lover/liberator indicate the thematic node where Wilde's play meets the spirit of *shojo manga*, which, according to Yukari Fujimoto, has always explored, usually in romantic love relationships, one question for women, 'Where is my place in the world?', that is, women's wish to be accepted as they are. Fujimoto states that women have more difficult struggles with identity crises than men due to the patriarchal systems and ideologies, which expose women to evaluating eyes, including those of their parents, that prize their amiability rather than their competence.[42] Moreover, while women's existence is approved in the patriarchal culture only by 'coupling with men', extramarital sex is stigmatized as 'lifelong dishonour' for them; therefore, as opposed to boys who discover their sexuality first as desire, girls learn it initially as fear.[43] Fujimoto persuasively argues that *shojo manga* has long expressed, usually in its romantic love discourse, girls' dilemma of struggling for being loved with their always already vulnerable sexuality:

> the wonder drug that resolves this anxiety about the existence and acceptance of sexuality is a member of the opposite sex, someone you love telling you that he loves you and affirming your own existence. It is at that moment that the negative marker 'woman' is changed dramatically into a positive one, and, it seems, the moment the woman begins to shine.[44]

Fujimoto's remarks on love for women as the 'wonder drug' cannot help but remind us of one of the most famous lines of Wilde's *Salome*, 'Love only should one consider', which indicates Salome's wholehearted, life-risking commitment to love.[45] If so, Wilde's Salome, who loathes men's lust, loves the only man who never desires her, kisses the man only after his decapitation (the castration), and loses her virginity only in her imagination ('I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity

from me'),[46] both ideally and grotesquely embodies the archetypical *shojo manga* heroine. As Fujimoto quickly adds, 'This process of anxiety and desire […] reveals a dexterous form of control in which male-dominated society has imprinted girls with an anxiety about themselves and then led them to believe that only men can save them from their anxiety'.[47] In this sense, if Wilde's Salome is a Victorian counterpart of the romantic heroines of Japanese *shojo manga*, the plot, in which the heroine's struggle for love is completely rejected by the too-ethical Prince-Charming but pervertedly rewarded by his decapitated head and her own ultimate death, anachronistically parodies the genre convention of romantic love story in *shojo manga*, which is simultaneously controlled by and struggling against patriarchy.

One of the visual highlights of Maki's *Salome* is, as in many other adaptations of Wilde's play, the dance of the seven veils. Historically speaking, Salome's dance has been depicted as a striptease that unites the men's lewd gazes and the *femme fatale*'s seduction.[48] Even though some paintings simultaneously foreshadow her terror by adding the silver shield or platter – sometimes with Jokanaan's head already on it – most visual adaptations have thematized the erotic confrontation between male voyeurism and vampish artifice. The motif, even while suggesting Salome's tacit control over the captivated audience, is basically rooted in the misogynist aesthetics that, whether sadistically or masochistically, objectify Salome as a *femme fatale*. At least partly following such a tradition on the one hand, Maki's Salome strips her seven veils while dancing through seven illustrations in nine pages, though never exposing her breasts. On the other hand, however, Maki has completely erased from her heroine's dance all the visual coquettishness of her predecessors. The first double-page illustration looks the most traditional among the seven for its spatial arrangement of the characters [fig. 12]. Salome dances in a monkish white robe with the long sleeve fluttering; Herod and Herodias are watching her from the thrones while other male audience members look on from the dining tables. Although this composition clearly thematizes the comparison between the watchers and the watched, Maki stresses Salome's emotional – or

even existential – distance from the secular voyeurs through the contrast between the realistic depictions of the luxurious banquet and the abstractedly blank space around the dancing heroine; furthermore, the bird's-eye distant view alienates the reader's voyeuristic desire. Without casting any flirtatious eyes, Salome, with her eyes closed, dances almost contemplatively on the serene stage: her aloofness subverts the reader's expectation of the erotic spectacle and prepares the unveiling of self-proud beauty in the following illustrations.

Fig. 12: Maki, pp. 200-01.

The next six illustrations of Salome dancing are drawn in an aesthetic mode that is totally different in its temporospatial treatment from the one that controls the whole series of panels to provide a consistent narrative. The second illustration of the seven, for example, shows Salome in the second veil standing at an angle on her toes of one leg against a pitch-black background [fig.

13]. With her eyes still closed, she is gently crossing her arms before her breast as if praying, but her right hand's fingers slightly extend to the void as if pointing to something transcendent; though she should be dancing now, her body itself, despite its unbalanced pose, gives a stationary impression. Her second, lightly coloured veil has multiple, unrealistically long tails, which, as opposed to the body's stillness, are gracefully but unrestrictedly fluttering into the space; they even flow beyond the panel and the white margin of the page, partly wiping out the panel frames. Shining particles radiating from the veil against the black make a starry impression. Overall, the illustration seems to show the half-imaginary scene that Salome is freely and elegantly floating in the starry night sky with the wing-like fluttering tails of the veil. The other five illustrations are more or less similar to this one in their style and theme, except Salome wears a different veil in each [fig. 14]. All six illustrations respectively capture the serene moments of Salome's dance on the abstract backgrounds, which transcend the realistic time and space of the plot.

Figs. 13 and 14: left: The second-veil dance, Maki, p. 202; right: The seventh-veil dance, p. 208.

Here, Maki employs quintessential techniques of *shojo manga*'s visual expression, which prioritize Salome's romantic imagination over the seamless plot (artifice/storyline) of seduction. The form of the illustrations, that is, the series of full-page-sized portraits that temporarily and spatially deviate from the plot's reality, have roots in a traditional visual technique called 'three-row overlay style picture' or 'full-body portrait': 'a full length-drawing of the main character laid alongside the panels depicting action'.[49] Manga scholars have argued this technique, as opposed to the plot-based style of traditional boys' comics, enables *shojo manga* artists to depict the psychological complexity by breaking the narrative flow.[50] The full-body portraits of Salome force 'readers to stop to take stock of the emotional atmosphere of the moment, as the emotions of the characters are more important than what happens next'.[51] Simultaneously, Maki enhances the romantic impression of the scene by emphasizing the fluttering movement of the veils, which belongs to the Japanese 'girlish' aesthetic category called ひらひら [*hirahira* imagery]. By analysing Japanese girls' fiction including manga, Honda Masuko 本田和子 suggests 'the significance of the notion of *hirahira*, the term I use to describe the movement of objects, such as ribbons, frills, or even lyrical word chains, which flutter in the breeze as symbols of girlhood'.[52] Honda argues that, in Japanese culture, since 'clothing covering a body softly sways or flutters, the life force generated by this movement extends the defined outline of the concealed body and flows beyond its borders', the fluttering, swaying, wavering movements of clothing, such as frills, ribbons, or long sleeves, on the one hand suggest "'female coquetry", although with the notable condition that the woman expressing herself thus is "not yet fully mature"'; on the other hand, however,

> [t]he wavering movement also expresses the freedom of a spirit that longs for the faraway sky. […] When we place the act of swaying in the context of everyday life, it helps to clarify our relationship with the other, including the 'extra-ordinary', 'the foreign', and the distant other. […] By its constant association with 'another world to be dreamed', [*hirahira* imagery] blurs the border between ordinary reality and the world of the imagination.[53]

While the former function of *hirahira* accounts for the traditional interpretations of the seven veils dance as seduction, Maki's illustrations of the fluttering veils extending beyond the panel frames,

along with Salome's aloofness, self-sufficient ecstatic look, and stretching fingers, stress the latter to symbolize the heroine's romantic desire for 'another world to be dreamed', which Jokanaan, the extra-ordinary, distant other, indicates. These two *shojo manga* techniques, the full-body portrait and *hirahira*, seemingly in contradiction to each other in their treatments of movement, paradoxically generate the aesthetic chemistry here to foreground Salome's romantic aspiration for transcendence behind the seduction plot. In this sense, by visualizing Wilde's original text from the *shojo manga* perspective with *shojo manga* techniques, Maki deconstructs the plot-based interpretation of the dance of the seven veils as the femme fatale's sensual spectacle/vampish artifice.

Fig. 15: Maki, pp. 252-53.

As Honda adds, however, the girlish aesthetics represented by *hirahira* 'has, by its nature, the transience and elusiveness of an illusion. While it may express the expansion of the body or the yearning for freedom, it is, after all, but a "momentary dream", a "vanity"'.[54] Directly after Salome fulfils her romantic desire to kiss Jokanaan, Herod orders soldiers to kill her. Surrounded by soldiers' shields ready to crush her, Maki's Salome again becomes a vulnerable girl, showing her fear and loneliness. While re-emphasizing her victimhood, however, Maki adds another scene of Salome's romantic imagination. She wishes in her mind for the decapitated head to perform a miracle, indirectly asking her imaginary lover to save her; suddenly, Jokanaan's head answers by rising up in the air and staring at her full in the face [fig. 15]. The scene is obviously based on Gustave Moreau's *The Apparition* (1874-76), but unlike Moreau's biblical Salome, who never looks welcoming of the bloody prophet's zombie-like resurrection, Maki's Salome delightedly extends her arm to the floating head, saying, 'ヨカナーン やっと私を視てくれたのね ヨカナーン 私だけのヨカナーン' [Jokanaan, you finally see me. Jokanaan, just mine, Jokanaan].[55] Here, Salome's romantic femininity finally possesses her transcendent lover by changing reality. Analysing Salome's monologues in Wilde's text, Rosina Neginsky maintains:

> Everything that happens in her is reflected in her language, and the language is so real to her that it culminates in her being convinced that she had been John's lover, although in reality he never even looked at her. […] Thus, in a way she reflects Wilde's theory of art: She is like an artist who, through her imagination, creates her own reality which, in the process of its creation, becomes more real and more powerful than the physical reality surrounding her.[56]

While Neginsky's discussion proceeds into Wilde's potential (self-)parody of Symbolism, which puts too much priority on art over ethics, Maki radically visualizes Salome's imaginative creativity as romantic femininity that, if only temporarily, surpasses not only the physical reality but also the Symbolist conceptualization of the *femme fatale* exemplified by Moreau's painting. Maki's Herodias finally confirms her daughter's transient femininity, saying, 'あどけない少女から一瞬女に変わりまた少女へ戻る' [she changes from an innocent girl into woman for a moment, and then

returns into a girl].[57] Even in the last sequence of the original play, which many have interpreted as the destruction of the *femme fatale* and the patriarch's exclusion of the risk to his order, Maki's Salome resists being symbolically conceptualized by swaying in her multilayered femininity: the victimized girl, the romantic adolescent, and the transcendent woman.

As we have seen, both Teradate's and Maki's adaptations realistically and sympathetically explore both the severe background and romantic subjectivity of Salome as an adolescent girl rather than a symbolic and abstract *femme fatale*. These female manga artists have sought a victimized, imaginative, and resisting girl archetype in Wilde's characterisation of Salome. In the imagination of these female manga artists, Salome is never a vamp with mysterious power but just a girl struggling in the androcentric world. The two manga artists criticize the androcentric ideology and social system not by idealizing Salome as a destructive heroine but by expressing their deep compassion for her.

Fig. 17: Ide Chikae, *Hadairo no Sarome* [The Flesh-Coloured Salome], (Toyko: A-Wagone, 2019), p. 26.

Conclusion

Although I cannot introduce and analyse all of them due to limitations of space, there are many other adaptations of *Salome*, some of which, such as Ide Chikae 井出智香恵's *Hadairo no Sarome* 肌色のサロメ [The Flesh-Coloured Salome] (2019) [fig. 17] or Makiko 魔木子's 'Sarome' サロメ ['Salome'] (2005), even stress the heroine's potential to be a sexual subject instead of an object. This phenomenon seems somewhat subversive in the history of the reception of Wilde's *Salome* because, historically speaking, the play was often consumed erotically by male audiences drawn to Salomania.[58] Based on the history of Japanese *shojo manga*'s reception of Western decadence, manga adaptations of *Salome* have critically reinterpreted Wilde's *femme fatale* protagonist into more realistic heroines who struggle to escape from the patriarchal society or seek their own sexual desire in the misogynistic culture. This phenomenon not only suggests the feminist potential in Wilde's Salome's character but also shows the significance of Western decadent artists, especially Wilde, in the thematic and expressive development of Japanese manga culture. As we have seen, the sociopolitical commonalities between the fin de siècle Western Europe and post-WWII Japan prepared *shojo manga*'s reception of decadent culture; Wilde's aesthetic escapism and his focus on queer characters who mock or resist patriarchal modernity have offered the source of imagination beyond time and space to Japanese female manga artists who seek to liberate and express their subjectivity and desire.

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1 Imura Kimie 井村君江, *Sarome no Henyou* サロメの変容 [Transformations of Salome] (Tokyo: Shinsho-kan, 1990), p. 64.

2 Sato Miki 佐藤美希, 'Bunka niyoru *Sarome* no Henyou: Nihon deno Juyo o Megutte' 文化による『サロメ』の変容: 日本での受容をめぐって [Transformation of *Salome* Caused by Cultural Difference: On Its reception in Japan], *Hokkaido Eigo Eibungaku* 北海道英語英文学, 48 (2003), 23-32 (p. 23). For the popularity of *Salome* in Japan and Japanese theatrical adaptations, see also Maho Hidaka, 'The Sexual Transfiguration of the Japanese *Salomé*', in *Wilde's Other World*, ed. by Michael F. Davis and Petra Dierkes-Thrun (New York: Routledge, 2018).

3 Jennifer Prough, 'Shojo Manga in Japan and Abroad', in *Manga: an Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. by Toni Johnson-Woods (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), pp. 93-106 (p. 98).

4 See Maya Mineo 魔夜峰央, 'Patariro & Flying to Saitama', *TOKYOWISE*, March 2017, http://tokyowise.jp/special/vol16/16_10_patariro_saitama.html/2 [accessed 11 October 2023]; Matsunae Akemi

松苗あけみ, 'Shojo Manga-ka wa Rafaeruzenpa no Yume o Miruka' 少女マンガ家はラファエル前派の夢を見るか [Do *Shojo Manga* Artists Dream of Pre-Raphaelites?], *Geijutsu Shincho* 芸術新潮 65, (2014), 78-84; Yamagishi Ryoko 山岸凉子, 'Kuro Nakushite ha Ikite Ikenakatta Hito—Biazurii' 黒なくしては生きていけなかった人—ビアズリー [The Man Who Could Not Live without Black—Beardsley], in *Aaru Nuuvoo no Sekai 4: Biazurii to Rondon* アール・ヌーヴォーの世界 4: ビアズリーとロンドン [The World of Art Nouveau 4: Beardsley and London], ed. by Aikawa Shunichiro (Tokyo: Gakushu Kenkyu-sha, 1987), pp. 62-63.

[5] For the influence of Art Nouveau and the Pre-Raphaelites on early Japanese *shojo manga*, see Otsuka Eiji 大塚英志, *Myusha kara Shojo Manga e: Maboroshi no Gaka Ichijo Narumi to Meiji no Aaru Nouveau* ミュシャから少女漫画へ: 幻の画家・一条成美と明治のアール・ヌーヴォー [From Mucha to *Shojo Manga*: the Illusory Artist, Ichijo Narumi, and Art Nouveau in Meiji era] (Tokyo: Kadokawa, 2019), pp. 8-16; pp. 329-81.

[6] Matunae, 'Shojo Manga-ka', pp. 82-84.

[7] See, for instance, Guri E. Barstad and Karen P. Knutsen, 'Introduction', in *States of Decadence*, ed. by Guri E. Barstad and Karen P. Knutsen (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), pp. x-xxvi (p. xi).

[8] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[9] See Hashimoto Osamu 橋本治, *Hanasaku Otomme Tachi no Kimpiragobou* 花咲く乙女たちのキンピラゴボウ [Blooming Girls' *Kimpira* Burdock] (Tokyo: Kawade-shobo, 1984), pp. 75-88.

[10] Hahimoto, p. 102.

[11] Rosina Neginsky, *Salome: The Image of a Woman Who Never Was* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), p. 72.

[12] Diane Long Hoeveler, 'Reading the Emotions of Salome: Sympathy for the Devil or Fear and Loathing', *Prism(s): Essays in Romanticism*, 9 (2001), 87-108 (p. 101).

[13] Petra Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), p. 188.

[14] For the early feminist visualization of Salome, see, for example, Dijkstra, pp. 390-93; Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle* (New York: Penguin, 1990), pp. 156-64. For the late twentieth-century and contemporary visualizations, see Richard A. Kaye, 'Salome's Lost Childhood: Wilde's Daughter of Sodom, Jugendstil Culture, and the Queer Afterlife of a Decadent Myth', in *The Nineteenth-Century Child and Consumer Culture*, ed. by Dennis Denisoff (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 119-34 (pp. 125-29); Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity*, pp. 161-96.

[15] For 'Reparative Reading', see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123-52.

[16] The author has obtained written permissions to reproduce all cited figures in print and electronic formats.

[17] Amano Ikuho, *Decadent Literature in Twentieth-Century Japan* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 21-22.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., p. 22.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Teradate Kazuko 寺館和子, 'Sarome' 紗鷺女 [Salome], in *Jidai o Ikita Onnatachi 6* (Tokyo: Amazon, 2018), pp. 46-146 (p. 84), Kindle edition.

[22] Oscar Wilde, 'Salome: Tragedy in One Act', in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Vol. V: Plays, Vol. I: The Duchess of Padua; Salomé: Drame en Un Acte; Salome: Tragedy in One Act*, ed. by Joseph Donohue (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 709-10.

[23] Corinne E. Blackmer, 'Daughter of Eve, Femme Fatale, and Persecuted Artist: The Mythic Transgressive Woman in Oscar Wilde's and Richard Strauss's *Salomé*', *Amaltea*, 8 (2016), 1-15 (p. 9).

[24] Wilde, p. 710.

[25] Dijkstra, p. 374.

[26] Teradate, p. 131.

[27] Japanese manga is read from right to left and from top to bottom.

[28] Teradate., p. 114.

[29] Ibid., p. 142.

[30] Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 152.

[31] Teradate, p. 71.

[32] Dijkstra, p. 374.

[33] Teradate, p. 119.

[34] Wilde, p. 731.

[35] Dijkstra, p. 398.

[36] In the postscript, Maki writes that she referred to not only Wilde's play but also the Bible, and other sources on ancient Palestine's history, politics, religion, culture, etc. See Maki Miyako 牧美也子, *Sarome* サロメ [Salome],

(Tokyo: Sekaibunka-sha, 1996), pp. 268-69.
[37] Helen Tookey, '"The Fiend That Smites with a Look": the Monstrous / Menstruous Woman and the Danger of the Gaze in Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*', *Literature and Theology*, 18.1 (2004), 23-37 (p. 25).
[38] Maki, p. 155.
[39] Ibid., p. 157.
[40] Neginsky, p. 177.
[41] Elliot L. Gilbert, '"Tumult of Images": Wilde, Beardsley, and "Salome"', *Victorian Studies*, 26.2 (1983), 133-159 (p. 144).
[42] Fujimoto Yukari 藤本由香里, *Watashino Ibasho wa Doko ni Aru no?: Shojo Manga ga Utsusu Kokoro no Katachi* 私の居場所はどこにあるの？: 少女マンガが映す心のかたち [Where Is My Place in the World?: The Shape of the Heart as Reflected in Girls' Comic Books] (Tokyo: Asahi-bunko, 2008), p. 144.
[43] Ibid., p. 72.
[44] Fujimoto Yukari, 'Where Is My Place in the World? Early Shōjo Manga Portrayals of Lesbianism', trans. by Lucy Fraser, *Mechademia,* 9 (2014), 25-42 (p. 35).
[45] 'Il ne faut regarder que l'amour' in the original French text (see Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol. V: Plays I*, p. 561). Though the first English translation by Alfred Douglas in 1894 omits this line, Robert Ross's 1907 and 1912 translations add the line that I cite here (see Donohue's commentary to *The Complete Works*, p. 749).
[46] Wilde, p. 730.
[47] Fujimoto 'Where', p. 36.
[48] See Cecily Devereux, 'Salome, Herodias, and the "Curious Transition": The Cultural Logic of Reproductive Fetishism in the Representation of Erotic Dance', *English Studies in Canada*, 43.2 (2017), 121-47.
[49] Deborah Shamoon, *Passionate Friendship: The Aesthetics of Girls' Culture in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012), p. 95.
[50] See Yonezawa Yoshihiro 米澤嘉博, *Sengo Shojo Manga Shi* 戦後少女漫画 [History of *Shojo Manga* after the Second World War] (Tokyo: Chikuma-shobo, 2007), pp. 79-82; Mizuki Takahashi, 'Opening the Closed World of Shōjo Manga', in *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime*, ed. by Mark W. MacWilliams (London: Routledge, 2008), 114-36 (pp. 125-26); Fujimoto Yukari, 'Takahashi Macoto: the Origin of Shōjo Manga Style', trans. by Rachel Thorn, *Mechademia*, 7.1 (2012), 24-55 (pp. 47-49); Shamoon, pp. 95-98.
[51] Takahashi, p. 126.
[52] Honda Masuko, 'The Genealogy of *Hirahira*: Liminality and the Girl', trans. by Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley, in *Girl Reading Girl in Japan*, ed. by Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 19-37 (pp. 19-20).
[53] Ibid., pp. 34-35.
[54] Ibid., p. 35.
[55] Maki, pp. 252-53.
[56] Neginsky, p. 182.
[57] Maki, p. 242.
[58] See Devereux, p. 126.

Neo-Victorian Adaptations through the Media: The Representation of the Gothic New Woman in *Penny Dreadful*

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Penny Dreadful is a popular television series created by American playwright John Logan and directed by English director Sam Mendes, which aired in three seasons between 2014 and 2016.[1] The series, set in Victorian London, features several well-known characters from nineteenth-century British literature, including Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), as well as various witches, monsters, and vampires who contribute to the overall gothic and supernatural atmosphere. The main protagonists of the series are brought together in a fantastical representation of late nineteenth-century London and revolve around the prominent figure of Vanessa Ives, a fictional character who serves as the focal point of the plot, which develops and becomes increasingly intricate over the course of the twenty-seven episodes.

In this 'exemplary piece of pastiche',[2] the *Penny Dreadful* characters do not think or behave in the same way as their literary predecessors, but they are part of a broader narrative universe and can therefore interact with each other, creating multiple and original storylines in which the viewer also participates in the co-creation of meaning.[3] As Benjamin Poore asserts:

> *Penny Dreadful* is neither an adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, nor of *Dracula*, nor of *Frankenstein,* but rather a hybrid appropriation, combining fragmented and transformed characters and plots from British Victorian fiction, as well as cultural references of the period, […] such as spiritualism, […] the late-Victorian fascination with Egyptology and imperialism.[4]

The narrative complexity of the contemporary serial format serves as a powerful tool to subvert and reinterpret the established literary archetypes embodied by iconic characters, such as Frankenstein or Dorian Gray, as well as to narrate their quest for identity, a central theme of the series. In fact, as Lourdes Monterrubio Ibáñez argues, 'the mythical characters gain density and complexity thanks to the deep relationships they establish among themselves and the gradual

revelation of their past life experiences'.[5] This is evident from the first season, in which Vanessa Ives and Sir Malcolm Murray embark on a mission to rescue Mina Harker, Sir Malcolm's daughter and Vanessa's childhood friend, from the grasp of a vampire. They are assisted by the gunslinger Ethan Chandler, who turns out to be a lycanthrope, and Dr Victor Frankenstein. As the series progresses, the intrigue and mystery becomes increasingly centred on Vanessa, whose mission to assist Malcolm in finding Mina is revealed to be, at its core, a search for her own identity.[6] Nevertheless, considerable space is also devoted to a number of subplots involving the other characters: Doctor Frankenstein's scientific experiments result in the generation of three different creatures, each of which will search for their past identities: Dorian Gray, a charismatic yet isolated individual who possesses immortality, seeks to rediscover the joy of life through the pursuit of hedonistic pleasures; Sir Malcolm Murray portrays the archetypal British explorer, while Dracula assumes the role of a sophisticated and refined gentleman in the third season, revealing a strong connection with Vanessa. All these characters establish relationships with one another that are constantly evolving, thereby revealing their respective virtues and vices.[7] The result of this cross-textual contamination leads to a significant reshaping of their identities, exemplifying the postmodern trend for reconfiguring and appropriating mythology to illustrate one's search for identity.

As Linda Hutcheon highlights in her seminal work, *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), we 'retell – and show again and interact anew with – stories over and over; in the process, they change with each repetition, and yet they are recognizably the same'.[8] This is especially true in *Penny Dreadful*, which, in a complex network of intertextual and intermedial references, engages in both the deconstruction and reconstruction of iconic gothic characters and plotlines from the nineteenth century while still feeling familiar to the modern viewer. According to Hutcheon, stories of this type can be classified as 'memes of modernity',[9] referring to narratives that can be retold in various forms within different cultural contexts and media forms. Similar to genes, which possess the ability to adapt to new environments through mutation, such stories 'do get retold in different

ways in new material and cultural environments; […] And the fittest do more than survive; they flourish'.[10] In fact, as Alison Lee and Frederick D. King point out, the coexistence and interaction in the series between characters who originally appeared in novels written approximately eighty years apart, such as *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, is of secondary importance. What matters, instead, is the way these texts and the original characters intertwine with one another, reconfiguring the viewer's connection to the past. The popular characters of the TV show have thus become 'cultural memes that continue to live on in contemporary culture as much as they did in nineteenth-century British literature'.[11] They represent and address anxieties and concerns that arose in the late Victorian era but are still relevant and universal to Western society. These include the abuse of power, psychological harm, women's struggle for autonomy against patriarchy, rape, the use of technology to control human creation, and the marginalization of individuals who deviate from societal norms.

As the name of the TV series suggests, director John Logan chose to interpret nineteenth-century British fiction and culture through the literary perspective of the 'penny dreadful', the cheap popular fiction of the time aimed at a mass audience. Published serially on a weekly or monthly basis for the affordable price of a penny, they were notable for their sensational and thrilling content, often featuring gothic narratives, bloody murders, and horrifying violence, which entertained the impoverished Victorian urban population. Authors combined stories from a variety of sources, reusing plots and repeatedly using stock characters such as super heroes and mad scientists to create 'a world of dormant peerages, of murderous baronets, and ladies of title addicted to study of toxicology, of gypsies and brigand-chiefs, […] grave-diggers, resurrection-men, lunatics, and ghosts'.[12] Like the original penny dreadful, the television series uses similar literary tropes and narrative techniques, capturing the attention of contemporary audiences by drawing on their familiarity with pre-existing works of fiction and using them as a basis for the development of a new narrative.[13] In this sense, it can be argued that *Penny Dreadful* is a form of

media that caters to the 'age of contamination',[14] because it combines the terror of penny dreadfuls with iconic Victorian gothic characters and renowned film and television actors.

Most of the action in *Penny Dreadful* is set in a late-Victorian decadent London, depicting the opulence of the fashionable West End, where social events and spiritualistic sessions take place, and the degradation of the East End, marked by horrific crimes such as the massacre at the Mariner's Inn. The characters move fluidly between these two urban environments, demonstrating the versatility of their cultural and social contexts. Such representation of the urban space is significantly shaped by the nineteenth-century concept of the flâneur, a nomadic seeker of urban views and experiences. This figure is prominently embodied by the character of Dorian Gray, who, through his mobile gaze and desire for sensory experiences, provides the audience with a deeper understanding of the diverse forms of entertainment available to different social classes in London.

A notable aspect of *Penny Dreadful* is the redefinition of previously marginalized or secondary female characters as strong and leading figures. Miss Vanessa Ives, Hecate Poole, and Lily Frankenstein exemplify this transformation as they navigate the British fin de siècle, a period of cultural anxiety and social change in which women began to demand new rights of access to education, work, and politics.[15] In fact, the series alludes to the first feminist movements' attempts to alter societal norms regarding gender roles, and thus to the New Woman, a character who appears in late Victorian literature as an emancipated woman seeking independence. Both an icon of the female avant-garde and a symbol of decadence, the New Woman was seen as a threat to Victorian morality and social order because of her alleged sexual immorality and her anti-maternal instincts. Similarly, the women in *Penny Dreadful* strive for independence and attempt to break free from Victorian restrictions while displaying almost supernatural abilities and embodying characteristics typically associated with gothic heroines.

Miss Vanessa Ives, played by the French actress Eva Green, embodies the multifaceted figure of the gothic New Woman, a complex character who emanates mystery due to her psychic abilities and profound gaze, but who also undergoes a personal and painful transformation

throughout the narrative. Usually dressed as a mournful Madonna in black or purple, Vanessa is an adventurous and sophisticated woman who is an active member of the investigation party established by a league of gentlemen – Sir Malcolm Murray, Victor Frankenstein, and Ethan Chandler – with the purpose of finding Mina. Throughout the series, the league must descend into a world known as the Demimonde, which serves as a bridge between the real and the fantastic, while Vanessa undergoes a personal journey in search of her identity and social acceptance. Her Catholic faith is put to the test when she discovers she is a witch, and she must therefore come to terms with this new identity.[16] The classical figure of feminine monstrosity is thus reinterpreted by combining elements of a vampire, an Egyptian goddess, and a demon to create the ultimate version of Miss Ives, whom Dorian Gray defines as 'the most mysterious thing in London'.[17] Similar to earlier gothic heroines, who were often encouraged to 'explore the limits of identity',[18] Vanessa is subjected to a great deal of physical and mental suffering and is called upon to demonstrate her personal integrity as the narrative unfolds.

Vanessa also displays behaviours and attitudes typical of the New Woman. From the beginning, she shows herself to be autonomous, but also a fine intellectual and a writer, as evidenced by the many letters she writes to her friend Mina during her research. She also often walks alone through dangerous districts at night and is frequently seen smoking with her companions. In contrast to the typical Victorian conception of the woman as the 'angel of the house' – an ideal exemplified by the character of Mina – Vanessa has strong sexual inclinations, going so far as to seduce Mina's future husband, and interacts with male partners without being submissive. In fact, she is often more capable of making important decisions and taking action than male characters.

Another notable female character who best exemplifies the idea of the gothic New Woman is Lily Frankenstein, played by Billie Piper. She is introduced in the first episode of the second season, when Dr Victor Frankenstein reanimates the corpse of the prostitute Brona Croft. First introduced in the first season as the romantic partner of Ethan Chandler, Lily is created to be a

female companion for his first creature, named John Clare. Previous versions of the bride of Frankenstein's monster, like the female partner in Shelley's and James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), were created from human remains and then destroyed. Lily, on the other hand, is a new industrial creation made from the entire body of a woman.[19] The scene of her birth, set in a dark dungeon filled with enormous machines, embodies the industrial gothic subtext that permeates the entire series, and the motif of unnatural disorder caused by technological advancement. As exemplified by some of the texts on which *Penny Dreadful* draws – *Frankenstein, Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* and *Dracula* – the 'eruption of horrific fantasy into the everyday' becomes a common theme aimed at exploring the concept of a brutally mechanized urban civilization with its repressive institutions.[20]

Victor names his new creature Lily after 'the flower of resurrection and rebirth',[21] associating her with the values of chastity and purity that are traditionally connected to the symbolism of the Lilium flower.[22] Lily emerges from the mechanical gears of her creator's laboratory as a beautiful, innocent young woman with no memory of her past. She becomes the object of desire of her creator, Victor, who proceeds to shape and train her according to the conventional Victorian ideals of femininity, beginning with her outer appearance: he dyes her hair from brown to blonde and dresses her in high-necked lace garments and constricting corsets. He also teaches her how to speak and read properly, as well as how to behave in social contexts as a perfect Victorian wife, gentle and submissive.[23] Victor views Lily as his own property and desires control over her. This is evidenced by his growing possessiveness and jealousy, to the point where he no longer wants her to be with John Clare, for whom she is destined. However, things take an unexpected turn when she undergoes a radical personal transformation, partly due to the resurfacing of painful memories from her former life as a prostitute. This brings out her darker and more violent side, which leads her to rebel violently against patriarchal authority, beginning with her rejection of Victor and his creature, John. As a result, after serving as a symbolic

representation of chastity and purity, Lily undergoes an antiphrastic transformation in which she acquires opposing values associated with death and revenge.

A first glimpse of Lily's emancipation comes in the scene where she puts on a corset for the first time. Barely able to breathe, she asks Victor why she should wear it. Victor ironically answers that it prevents women from 'tak[ing] over the world',[24] reflecting the general attitude towards Victorian women who were constrained not only by clothing, but also by social norms of obedience and submission. Lily realizes that everything women do is to please men: 'Keep their houses. Raise their children. Flatter them with our pain',[25] which is exactly what Frankenstein intended when he created the bride. After this dialogue, Lily frees herself from the corset and, together with Victor, attends a ball given by Dorian Gray, with whom she develops a close friendship: from this moment on, things change significantly. As time passes, Lily begins to remember the violence and suffering she endured in her former life as a prostitute, but she also realizes that she possesses an extraordinary strength that is almost impossible to destroy.[26] She understands that she no longer needs to be submissive like a child or dependent on Victor, and she wants to take revenge on men for the cruelty and abuse she has experienced. As a result, she becomes a rebellious and murderous female character who, according to Stephanie Green, 'reconfigures the *fin de siècle* persona of the proto-modern New Woman to embody the far more forceful gothic New Woman and become the harbinger of a world without men'.[27]

As noted above, the New Woman emerged as a trope of social and cultural change in the late nineteenth century, becoming a popular theme and character in the periodicals and novels of the time. The figure arose as an emblem of emancipation, giving voice to women's interests, and developed alongside the first women's movements, with public campaigns for property rights, the right to vote, and access to higher education.[28] The concept of the New Woman also became intertwined with the cult of decadence, associated with literary figures such as Wilde and the artists of *The Yellow Book*.[29] Seen as someone who deviated from conventional norms in order to pursue a more liberated lifestyle, the New Woman was also perceived as a sexually promiscuous figure,

and thus as a potential threat to moral values. Wilde's first British edition of his play *Salome* (1894), with the popular and controversial illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley, best exemplified the image of the dangerously sensual woman, depicting the protagonist as she eagerly grasps the severed head of Jokanaan, her lips parted in a lustful manner.[30] Such images embody the essence of feminine desire and revenge which is also reflected in Lily Frankenstein, who, from being destined to be a disciplined and faithful 'angel of the house', becomes a cynical and evil figure seeking revenge on her exploiters.

As Stephanie Green claims, Lily incorporates aspects of the New Woman archetype as a symbol of independence. However, a more accurate characterization of Lily is that of a gothic New Woman as she exhibits threatening and evil elements: 'she is darkly independent, seductively resistant to domination, brilliantly articulate, refusing the rules of femininity and feminism in favour of power's bloodier embrace'.[31] In fact, Lily's extremist political philosophy does not really coincide with the late Victorian feminist movements, which she dismisses as too naïve in their aims and strategies. Indeed, in a scene from season three, Lily is sitting in a café in a London square when she sees a group of suffragists marching and remarks on their efforts as:

> so awfully clamorous, all this marching around in public and waving placards. It's not it. Our enemies are the same but they seek equality. And we? Mastery… How do you accomplish anything in this life? By craft. By stealth. By poison. By the throat… quietly slit in the dead of the night.[32]

Originally created by men, Lily undergoes a process of self-transformation: she rejects each man's attempt to romanticize her, and rebels against the predetermined role they have assigned to her life. In episode seven of season two, when Lily is seduced by a man in a pub after an evening out with her new friend Dorian, she commits her first revenge murder, strangling her lover during intercourse and lying next to his body until morning. This event is the first demonstration of Lily's new-found power and aggressiveness: she is neither horrified nor afraid of who she is but embraces her villainous strength in all its forms. This episode is only the beginning of the character's development into a vicious and murderous 'predator',[33] unveiling her frightening manifesto to John

Clare: 'We were created to rule, my love. And the blood of mankind will water our garden. We are the conquerors. We are the pure blood. We are steel and sinew, both. We are the next thousand years. We are the dead.'[34] According to Sarah Artt, the series effectively draws attention to the risks and consequences of 'creating a gendered body through deliberate technological invention', emphasizing 'how that body is then subjected to narratives of abjection and monstrosity'.[35] If, at the start of season two, Lily is secretly testing her strength under the tutelage of her adoring creator Victor, by the end of the series she has become aware of her incredible power and found her purpose in the bloody plans to eradicate the male gender.

Lily's extremely violent behaviour and her aim of world domination reflect some of the deepest fears of the late nineteenth century. The New Woman was heavily criticized and labelled as a 'beast of regression' and 'a threat not only to the social order, but also to the natural order'[36] because of her alleged sexual promiscuity and her anti-maternal instincts, as she eschewed the reproductive duties ascribed to her sex. Lily perfectly embodies this image, becoming a cynical and coarse woman who regards marriage as slavery and manipulates men like Victor with promises of love or false admiration. She becomes the embodiment of the common *fin de siècle* fear that women are not interested in men and could live quite well without them.[37] Moreover, Lily's ultimate plan to create a superior race of female warriors in order to destroy male dominance echoes the theories that emerged within the New Woman discourse, such as that of the Edwardian suffragette Frances Swiney. The feminist theosophist argued that from a biological point of view women represented a more advanced stage of evolution than men, and that they had the ability to alter human evolution through their will. Thus, she focused on the idea of woman's 'cosmic progression' towards a supreme, androgynous being with a feminine essence that would eliminate gender differences.[38] Evolution would reach its highest stage only in a future sexless society.[39]

Lily's plan to create a super race of women is strengthened by her encounter with Dorian Gray, a fellow immortal whom she first meets at a ball at his mansion. The two form a special bond, much to the disappointment of both Victor and his creature John. In the final episode of

the second season, Victor, having discovered Lily's recent actions, is determined to confront and destroy her. He attempts to shoot Lily and Dorian, but they remain unharmed and indifferent. They taunt him and Lily reveals that she has always been aware of how she was created and finds him repulsive. Immediately afterwards, Lily and Dorian dance a sophisticated bloody waltz in Dorian's ballroom, in a concluding scene that is aesthetically decadent and macabre, combining elements of monstrosity, beauty, and sensuality. As the couple elegantly circle the room, blood flows down their backs, staining their clothes and creating a red stream behind them. Victor is horrified by the scene of undying evil unfolding before him, and Lily tells Dorian: 'let him live with what he has created, a monster race'.[40] Together, the characters anticipate a new narrative of supremacy that will be further developed in the third and final season of the series.[41]

In the concluding chapter of *Penny Dreadful*, Dorian and Lily have begun to implement their plan for supremacy by gathering some formerly victimized women with the promise that they will take revenge against those who hurt them. Meanwhile, a visit to the graveyard reveals an important moment of Lily/Brona's traumatic past, the loss of her one-year-old daughter Sarah. The viewer understands that Lily was a mother in her previous life and begins to comprehend the depth of her existential ambiguity as a woman who has endured abuse and loss and now turns her pain into revenge.[42] Having had her body exploited by men and then reanimated for male scientific purposes, she now decides for herself how she wants to use it, and embarks on a personal crusade against patriarchal society. In an act of revenge reminiscent of Wilde's Salome and her demand for the severed head of Jokanaan on a platter, Lily instructs her followers to bring her the severed hands of every man in London.[43] The dead hands are, in fact, horrific trophies representing the sexual and physical abuse perpetrated by men now rendered lifeless.[44] Lily demonstrates to her subordinates the power of female agency in reclaiming ownership of their bodies. Then, determined to go one step further, she sends out her army of women to kill men in the night.

At this point in the story, Lily's alliance with Dorian will soon prove fatal; like the other men in her past, he betrays her out of fear of her growing power. As a result, he forms an alliance

with Victor and Dr Henry Jekyll, who have developed a serum capable of erasing Lily's memory and restoring the submissive 'angel of the house' to obedience. The three men kidnap Lily and take her to Henry's laboratory, where 'a very powerful multiplex-image of this myth syncretism materializes': three male literary characters, Victor, Dorian, and Henry, are shown in the process of subjugating a female figure who comes from a contemporary appropriation of one of the three narratives and represents the feminist struggle against male power.[45] With a syringe in his hand, Victor threatens Lily and assumes the patriarchal role: 'We are going to make you better […]. We're going to make you into a proper woman.'[46] However, when she breaks down and reveals the tragic loss of her baby daughter in her past life, Victor decides to release her, recognizing her restored feminine role as a mother: 'It is too easy being monsters, let us try to be human.'[47] Motherhood, then, is the experience that softens the previously unbeatable and formidable female warrior. Indeed, Lily is terrified by the idea of losing her past because, as she explains in her final conversation with Victor, it would imply losing the memory of her daughter. Her identity is made up of memories of her traumas, and even the most painful can contain beauty. In other words, erasing her past would be to erase who she was as a person.

Lily realizes that violence is not always a productive solution, and that her vulnerability has ultimately saved her life. Like Frankenstein's original creature, she escapes from her creator and has a last encounter with Dorian, who has since disbanded the female army. In a final monologue, Dorian explains the sad loneliness to which immortals are doomed, but Lily leaves in search of a new life that can counteract such a sad fate, and thus disappears from the narrative without a clear resolution. Lily finally experiences a new sense of independence as she distances herself from the man who created her and breaks off her relationship with Dorian. However, she must now confront her past and process her traumatic memories. As Monterrubio Ibáñez observes,

> she does not renounce commitment but transforms it by facing her otherness, her past existence. By accepting and integrating it into her current identity, she gives a powerful example of feminist resilience, another feature of the series' female characters.[48]

By the end of the series, the viewer is aware of the non-linear development of a multifaceted character who is much more than just a vindictive immortal. As Barbara Braid maintains, the act of transforming the classic plot of *Frankenstein* into a narrative that centres around the female creature serves to highlight underlying themes concerning the position of women in a patriarchal society, as well as the significant influence of trauma on the formation of one's identity.[49] While Vanessa dies at the end of the series, Lily's narrative remains open to potential future developments, maintaining her character as ever-evolving with the potential to reconcile her darkest sides and inner traumas.

The multiple narrative possibilities created in *Penny Dreadful* through the appropriation and adaptation of various Victorian source texts enable its creators to present new perspectives which appeal to the contemporary audience. In this context, Lily's story transcends the boundaries of time and space, as it encapsulates the point of view of a marginalized character who is objectified and manipulated against her will. In fact, the traumas experienced in her life become the driving force in shaping her identity and resilience.

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[1] *Penny Dreadful* (Showtime, 2014-16).
[2] Michael Fuchs, 'It's a Monster Mash! Pastiche, Time, and the Return of the Victorian Age in *Penny Dreadful*', in *Horror Television in the Age of Consumption: Binging on Fear*, ed. by Kimberly Jackson and Linda Belau (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 148-60.
[3] Stephanie Green, 'Lily Frankenstein: The Gothic New Woman in *Penny Dreadful*', *Refractory: A Journal of Entertainment Media*, 28 (2017), https://refractoryjournal.net/green/ [accessed 13 July 2023].
[4] Benjamin Poore, 'The Transformed Beast: *Penny Dreadful*, Adaptation, and the Gothic', *Victoriographies*, 6.1 (2016), 62-82 (p. 66).
[5] Lourdes Monterrubio Ibáñez, '*Penny Dreadful*. Postmodern Mythology and Ontology of Otherness', *Communication and Society,* 33 (2020), 15-28 (pp. 15-16).
[6] Elisabete Lopes, 'The Curious Case of Vanessa Ives: The Portrait of a Witch in *Penny Dreadful*', *Journal of Dracula Studies*, special edition, *The Witch* (2020), 119-43 (p. 120).
[7] Monterrubio Ibáñez, p. 17.
[8] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 177.
[9] Hutcheon refers to Richard Dawkins's conception of 'meme', which he defined in *The Selfish Gene* (1976) as a 'unit of cultural transmission' that evolves much in the same way that genes evolve over time (p. 189). Hutcheon takes this further in postulating that stories, as units of cultural transmission, 'change with time' and are 'subject to constant mutation' (p. 177).
[10] Hutcheon, p. 32.
[11] Alison Lee and Frederick D. King, 'From Text, to Myth, to Meme: *Penny Dreadful* and Adaptation', *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 82 (2015), https://journals.openedition.org/cve/2343 [accessed 13 July 2023].
[12] George Augustus Sala, *The Seven Sons of Mammon: A Story* (Boston: T.O.H.P. Burnham, 1862), p. 148.
[13] Lee and King.

[14] David Greetham, *The Pleasures of Contamination: Evidence, Text, and Voice in Textual Studies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 1.
[15] Green, p. 5.
[16] Lopes, p. 120.
[17] 'Demimonde'*, Penny Dreadful*, season 1, episode 4 (2014).
[18] Claire Kahane, 'The Gothic Mirror', in *The Mother Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, ed. by Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, and Madelon Spregnether (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 342.
[19] Green, p. 7.
[20] Martin Parker, 'Organisational Gothic', *Culture and Organization*, 11.3 (2005), 153-66.
[21] 'Verbis Diablo', *Penny Dreadful*, season 2, episode 2 (2015).
[22] In classical and religious iconography the lily, or *lilium,* is the white and fragrant flower symbolizing candour, purity, and nobility of the soul.
[23] The showrunners create a humorous allusion to George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* by addressing Frankenstein's amazement at Lily's ability to speak.
[24] 'Evil Spirits in Heavenly Places', *Penny Dreadful*, season 2, episode 4 (2015).
[25] Ibid.
[26] Green, p. 6.
[27] Ibid., p. 7.
[28] Sandra Stanley Holton, 'The Making of Suffrage History', in *Votes for Women*, ed. by June Purvis and Sandra S. Holton (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 13-33.
[29] Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 94.
[30] Green, p. 8.
[31] Ibid., p. 9.
[32] 'Good and Evil Braided Be', *Penny Dreadful*, season 3, episode 3 (2016).
[33] Meghan Harker, 'Till Death Do Us Part: Reinventing the Bride of *Frankenstein* on *Penny Dreadful*', *Girls in Capes* (17 July 2015), https://girlsincapes.com/2015/07/17/reinventing-the-bride-of-frankenstein-penny-dreadful/ [accessed 3 November 2023].
[34] 'Memento Mori', *Penny Dreadful*, season 2, episode 8 (2015).
[35] Sarah Artt, 'An Otherness That Cannot Be Sublimated: Shades of *Frankenstein* in *Penny Dreadful* and *Black Mirror*', *Science Fiction and Television*, 11.2 (2018), 257-75 (p. 258).
[36] Ledger, p. 5.
[37] Ibid.
[38] These ideas were also based on the latest theories on eugenics by Francis Galton, whose anthropological vision aimed at improving human evolution through selective breeding.
[39] George Robb, 'Between Science and Spiritualism: Frances Swiney's Vision of a Sexless Future', *Diogenes*, 52.4 (2005), 163-68.
[40] 'And They Were Enemies', *Penny Dreadful*, season 2, episode 10 (2015).
[41] Green, p. 12.
[42] Monterrubio Ibáñez, p. 23.
[43] 'No Beast so Fierce', *Penny Dreadful*, season 3, episode 6 (2016).
[44] Stephanie Green, 'The Killing Characters of *Penny Dreadful*', in *Serial Killers in Contemporary Television: Familiar Monsters in Post-9/11 Culture*, ed. by Brett A. B. Robinson and Christine Daigle (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 112.
[45] Monterrubio Ibáñez, p. 24.
[46] 'Ebb Tide', *Penny Dreadful*, season 3, episode 7 (2016).
[47] 'Perpetual Night', *Penny Dreadful*, season 3, episode 8 (2016).
[48] Monterrubio Ibáñez, p. 25.
[49] Barbara Braid, 'The Frankenstein Meme: *Penny Dreadful* and *The Frankenstein Chronicles* as Adaptations', *Open Culture*, 1 (2017), 238, https://doi.org/10.58079/shop [accessed 3 November 2023].

Bergamot and Cedar

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> For art comes to you proposing frankly to give
> nothing but the highest quality to your moments as
> they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.
>
> Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873)

SERAPH

The keen April light slanted past the heavy azure velvet curtains, striking into hot gold the nacre-coloured swans on Crane's wallpaper. Lysander, loosely wrapped in a teal dressing gown embroidered with gold, looked idly past Grosvenor Square, lofty and quiet in the dim roar of London. He mused at the gothic turrets of skyscrapers over Paddington, towering in the haze. He traced the lazy concourse of solitary airships, drifting to and fro between aircraft warning lights flickering, gem-like, against the lavender sky. He did not contemplate the rivers of silky black hair cascading across his bedlinen, nor the alabaster limbs stretched languidly beneath them. Would indeed be hanged if he did.

Deuced nuisance, this. What a dashed chomp he'd been. He should have gone to the Club.

'You don't mind, old boy, do you?'

The boy stretched, rolled upright, splendid and unselfconscious in his nakedness. Katsuo Saito: an intoxicating deluge of black tea and ink-stained cuffs, soft bruised skin and burnt copper, wicked smiles and the soft crackle of impending thunder. Reaching now for a green tea cigarette from the nightstand, masses of black hair tumbling around his shoulders, the glint of a single pearl earring matching the youthful avarice in his mahogany eyes.

Lysander deLeucy, Marquis of Rockingham, future Duke of Lyonesse, and first-rate fool, sighed deeply.

Thrill of the chase, and all that rot.

Walking from fire unto fire, chasing what Wilde called passionate pains and deadlier delights. He threw himself on a long chaise of turquoise brocade, watching jade-green smoke coil indulgently from Katsuo's sore lips, and thought of Verlaine, describing the collapse among the flames of races exhausted by the power of feeling, to the invading sound of enemy trumpets. Of Elagabalus, smothering his guests with rose petals.

Katsuo sat himself cross-legged on the carpet, bathed in early afternoon light, a small tattooed lotus just visible above his dark silk drawers. Still bringing faint notes of bergamot and cedar. Beautiful in his hues and shadows, his sinewy lines. Beautiful in the way of painters. He nodded at a Burne-Jones of Saint Sebastian.

'Friend of yours?' He tilted his head.

'Dashed bloody patron saint, I suppose.' Lysander smiled languidly, let smoke curl upwards from his lips. 'First time I knew what… or who I was.'

'How so?'

Lysander taxed the young man. One wondered rather about the Japanese sometimes.

'You know some frightfully clever people with extremely polished top hats have decided our nightly… activities… are simply not on?'

'Why, of course, they're deciding it all over the place, these days.' Katsuo flicked his cigarette. 'Right up into the Emperor's palace.'

Lysander nodded. 'Well, dear boy, for all their bloody laws and fears and clever books, they're dashed well not deciding what one feels when one looks at… an exquisite painting.'

'And what', asked Katsuo with what one could only call an impish glint in the eye, 'is that?'

Confound you, young hell-hound, thought Lysander, hiding a smile. He looked expressly at the Burne-Jones. 'I say, weren't you at Oxford just now?'

Katsuo yawned. 'Mhhh. Soaking up the West's eternal wisdoms and all that.'

Lysander eyed the dove-grey waistcoat that had got stuck on a bust of Apollo, with its purple lining and bronzed gold appliqué, the mauve silk tie dangling from the chandelier, the

slightly crumpled chrysanthemum buttonhole under the bed. According to Keziah, Katsuo was an engineer. He dashed well didn't look like one.

'Paterian, are you? The way you were carrying on with that Beardsley chap at dinner.'

'For my sins', said the boy, 'although I never know why you English say that.'

And I hope you never find out, thought Lysander. Out loud, he said: 'Then you'll understand that beauty cannot be coerced, nor harnessed, nor lectured. It simply is. Between you and your senses, a secret laid open.' He took a long drag from his green tea cigarette. 'That longing… that desire… It brings condemnation, but clarity, too. Peace, even.'

Right up until you remember what it will cost you.

Katsuo raked a hand across the bristles behind his ear, where his dark hair was shaven closely. 'Jolly well, as you say', he said thoughtfully, 'I understand all that. What I can't compute is this hysterical decreeing from pulpits at the first sniff of a good time. All this huffing and harrumphing from books and laws and newspapers. What's so dangerous about a little pleasure?'

Lysander gave him a long, pensive look. By Jove, the pup was a bloody powder-keg. This whole dashed business simply wasn't on. He'd better put a stop to it. Soon-ish.

He leaned back and closed his eyes, long legs crossed on the chaise's armrest. 'The English are wonderfully tolerant', he said, 'They'll forgive anything except an unbecoming truth.'

Like a note, or a photograph.

RŌNIN

It was only a short walk from Grosvenor Square to the Langham, but Katsuo was itching for the sprawling bustle of London, its rowdy sturdiness and ant-hill restlessness, its clang and clamour, its atmosphere of smoke, soot, and spice. He donned his tinted glasses and top hat, adjusted the blue iris deLeucy had given him for his buttonhole, and dove into the city's roaming multitudes; sauntering past vans and horse-drawn omnibuses, swaying with their freight of sombre shopkeepers and serious-minded women, past chugging steam-cars and teetering mono-wheels,

newspaper stands, sweetmeat vendors, flower shops, apothecaries, drapers and cobblers, sandwich men and organ players, past traders, shoppers, vagrants, rent-boys and dolly-mops, who ran past him like numbers through an Analytical Engine.

Between Oxford and Regent Street, his gaze lingered on young men and boys in subtly patched coats and soot-stained caps, idling about the book shops, telegraph offices, and street corners, scanning the crowd with piercing eyes, occasionally murmuring, winking, or sneering at passing gentlemen. One such renter caught Katsuo's eye and opted for the old mock curtsy. Katsuo vaguely inclined his head and turned towards Savile Row, with its tailors and air of quiet dignity, suddenly weary of the bellowing cacophony and incessant flashing of neon lights.

His thoughts invariably drifted back to a certain, golden-haired Apollo, with his clear blue eyes and sharp jawline, all nonchalance and wry ennui, lily-sweetness and citrus… Absently, he tucked at the stiff, Western collar which hid the soft-bruised imprints of a pearl choker on his neck – souvenirs of a whirlwind night.

Haikara – high collar – was the sobriquet given to young Japanese men who styled themselves as Western dandies. His father always spoke the word with disdain. Shimazu Noburo wanted his son educated in Western ways, to learn its technology and ruthless ambition, yet expected him to retain the sober, military discipline of his *samurai* ancestry. In typical fashion, Katsuo had got it exactly the wrong way around.

Amid Oxford's cloisters and perpetual sense of early autumn, he'd studiously avoided his assigned mentor and his stuffy chambers where algorithms came to die – to be acrimoniously charted, pinned, dissected, logged, and entombed – and had instead taken every opportunity to have his head turned by the Oxonians, those youthful men in suits and boaters, and ladies on bicycles, with their rowing teams and summer picnics, their stained-glass windows and secret societies, their Hellenism and their gem-like flames.

Beauty cannot be coerced, nor harnessed, nor lectured… A secret laid open.

A soul, reaching out for an echo.

He had wanted to build beautiful things, once. To leave his Western *savant* tutors and create something intricate, incorruptible, magnificently useless. Something animated by the spirit of old Japan, that honoured the splendour and transience of life itself, and opened only when one suspended oneself to it.

She had been transient, his porcelain geisha. A delicate contraption of bamboo wood and gold paint, animated by the daintiest clockwork, the cleverest algorithms. Dressed in his sister's embroidered kimono, white cherry blossoms on midnight blue silk, she had been animated by a wireless telegraph of his devising, doing little things like bowing low and pouring tea.

Noburo watched her in silence.

The next day, his men came to claim her, and Katsuo's geisha disappeared into the military's hidden workshops.

Fukoku kyōhei: The battle-cry of modern Japan. What it meant was 'strong army, rich country', but it also meant Western clothes, military reforms, and quiet talks of invading its neighbours. It meant trains, trams and airships, and the furtive abandonment of age-old traditions, like *irezumi* and *wakashudō*.

Lysander reminded him of those age-old warrior tales. With his herculean build and languid joviality, his softly raised eyebrows and booming laughter, and a sense of quietly brewing fury somewhere deep underneath, he seemed a sort of Hellenic incarnation of the *samurai sensei* in *nanshoku* stories. Katsuo had always cherished those tales about brave and noble comrades-in-arms, whose mentorship and brotherhood endured across battlefields and bedrooms. The Greeks, apparently, had had similar ideas that certain youngsters at Oxford were dedicated to reviving – but to those chaps love of the male form was some absolute aesthetic ideal. It had baffled him at first, this Western supposition that loving men meant some fundamental difference in one's code, like a switch turned the wrong way. In Japan, male love had been considered commonplace, completely separate from loving women, neither attraction infringing on the other. Personally, Katsuo had always found both avenues alluring – he'd always felt pleasure to be fluid, intuitive,

part of the ebb and flow of life. And then the Westerners came, and *nanshoku* was quietly, abashedly, brushed under the carpet.

Lost in thought, Katsuo wandered past the eminent Royal Geographical Society headquarters, its monuments to Livingstone, Burton, and Isabella Bird edged with soot. Strolling through Piccadilly, where the sky's dusty opalescence reflected back from shop windows and hotel dining rooms and the air smelled of confectionery, strong tea, and machine oil, he headed towards Kensington, with its museums and colleges enshrined in neo-Gothic façades, and the Babbage Institute with its friezes of binary code. This Western mania for sandstone and brick; bulky and stolid, always planting itself, investing. With the air of the debonair flâneur, Katsuo ignored the occasional rude gawk from strangers, the sporadic, but inevitable catcalls of 'chink' and 'Nanki-Poo', and idled towards Hyde Park where small leisure-cruisers under balloons of fuchsia and sun-yellow canvas drifted above the trees, and his fellow countrymen had some years ago populated a model village to promote that inordinately silly concoction, *The Mikado*.

Sunset loomed, fringing the teeming, smoking city with apricot and dusty rose, before he turned his steps back towards Soho, where the neon lights of Leicester Square hummed into gear, beckoning with their dazzling entertainment. Contemplating a particularly gaudy variety theatre advertisement – promising trapeze acts, ballet dancers, and all manners of women with enticing legs – Katsuo bought a cigarette pack from a newspaper stand. The cigarette card inside showed a guardsman, looking dapper and valiant with his scarlet uniform and twinkling blue eyes.

Bathed in flashing pink light, Katsuo smiled.

By the time they trotted homeward to Hyde Park barracks in a long file, cuirasses and scabbards jangling, Lysander was still thinking about dark, silky hair and pearl earrings, cocky smiles and teasing kisses, and vague impression of bergamot and cedar.

'I say, old boy', he rumbled thoughtfully, lighting himself a leisurely cigar, 'how do you do it?'

'Do what, old chap?' Nicholas Roscoe, known throughout the Household Regiments as 'Galahad', steered his charger Maraschino back into line with languid ease.

'How's a fellow to enjoy himself with the dashed bloody DC and the papers looming at every corner?'

Nicholas' handsome features and languid dark eyes grew sombre for an instant, but the feeling passed quickly. Galahad, dashing and penniless, a libertine, dandy, and duellist of the first order, always involved in some dalliance or other with the young, married beauties, would not have earned his place in the Horse Guards – notoriously the most exclusive and 'fastest' cavalry regiment – had he extended thoughts to that ghastly nuisance, the Divorce Court, that were better spent on dinner plans, button-holes, and horseflesh.

'My dear Seraph', he said, shrugging with charming insouciance, 'A fellow simply can't bother with these things. They're only a beastly nuisance.'

Lysander gave his friend a sidelong glance. With his chestnut hair and rakish ways, Galahad sometimes looked like a *beau sabreur* escaped from an Ouida novel. But he wouldn't have to contend with police whistles and sudden raids. His back-door escapes made for smoking-room gossip of the amusing kind.

Passing through the speckled shadows beneath the plane trees, Lysander puffed slowly at his cigar, watching the light play on their scarlet uniforms, the horses' black coats, the young grass, the budding foxgloves and marigolds.

Komorebi. The Japanese had a word for it. Light filtering through trees.

He nudged Béroul, his charger, to keep pace, and said nothing.

But the whole damn business of bergamot and cedar was still on his mind the next day, in the spacious, placid sanctuary of his Pall Mall Club, strewn across the lazy divans amid Turkish and meerschaum, with his compatriots carrying on about Paris escapades and summer intrigues, yachting and flirting and casino feuds, about September hunting, and the odds for the Sandown steeplechase.

On and on it coursed among the old braincells when he retreated to his other, more discreet Club, a lofty affair flanked by two strapping Atlantes in blue granite. The Ganymede was virtually undistinguishable from the Athenæum or the Traveller's, safe perhaps for his Hellenic décor – those amber marbles, cerulean velvets, ivory stucco, and walls painted with panoramas of the Aegean Sea – and the fact that some of its members preferred sitting on one another's lap at the cards table. Usually, the sight of eminent society men giving into their penchants for emerald earrings and waxed moustaches, rouge or rococo costumes, while they quietly hummed an aria at the billiards table or rifled lazily through *Sins of the Cities of the Plain* was a sight to soothe Lysander's nerves. This time, not even the prospect of those 'nymphs' or 'satyrs', the young, handsome boys thoroughly vetted and handsomely paid by a discreet concierge, could entice him.

It was no use: bergamot and cedar remained firmly fixed amid his grey cells, even as he sat, long legs crossed indolently, on one of Lulu's powder blue sofas, contemplating the Watteaus and Fragonards, pink chinoiserie, and Louis VXI furniture with which his sister outfitted her Mayfair home. With wise forethought, he had chosen a Bond Street affair of brightest azure, with mother-of-pearl embroidery, to match his surroundings.

Madame d'Esterre, floating near in a tea gown of peach and pink satins, that infernal dodo of hers waddling after her lace-lined hem, set down tea in dainty Sèvres porcelain that had once – so the rumour – belonged to Madame Pompadour.

'You must have seen that preposterous ballet dancer of hers', she was saying as she flopped down beside him, put her dainty, stockinged feet up in his lap, and popped a lemon sherbet macaroon between her rosebud lips. 'She's always carrying on with those dreadful artist types, and no husband to safeguard her reputation. I really don't know what to do with her.'

Duchess, the snow-white dodo, settled smugly on the sofa's armrest. Why the deuce one would exert scientific breakthroughs in genetics to resurrect a species that had rightfully gone extinct for sheer uselessness and then install them in every fashionable household as pets was entirely beyond Lysander.

'Pardon?', he said absently, realising a lull in chatter had occurred, and he was expected to chime in. 'What on earth are you talking about?'

'Keziah, of course. Do keep up.'

Ah. Lysander nodded; She was talking about Fedya, Keziah's latest – a symphony of sinew and brawn that would have haunted his dreams, had that honour not been bestowed on a certain Japanese engineer…

'You know Keziah's views on marriage', he said, turning a raspberry macaroon in his long fingers.

Lulu pouted. 'I don't see what love has to do with any of it', she said, irritably waving a rose-scented papelito. 'It's simply the smart thing to do.'

He smiled thoughtfully. Not for nothing, Lulu had earned the moniker *La Génerale* at finishing school. To her, being a high society lady came with ordinance maps and battle plans with carefully painted toy soldiers.

Now, she turned her bright blue eyes on him. 'And you! You keep indulging her. Always encourage her absurdly wayward ideas.'

Lysander contemplated a bust of Marie Antoinette on the mantle. *At least one of us*, he thought, *deserves to indulge in wildly inappropriate escapades with bohemians and revolutionaries*.

'How's Trizzy, anyway?', he asked aloud, raising a lazy eyebrow.

It was plain that Viscount Trysdale, one of Lulu's many, ardent followers tasked with consoling her with incessant flirtations for the absence of her own husband – who was always incorrigibly in Indochina or some such place – had had his marching orders for elsewhere. Possibly he was securing theatre tickets or pacifying one of those imposing aunts of his. Or patiently hiding away upstairs, or simply Being Shooed Away while Lulu embarked on one of her sudden inclinations to seduce a débutante, or a house maid.

She gave him a long look down her perky nose. 'Heavens, Sandy, what's gotten into you? Tell me his name.'

Lysander sighed. 'I'm afraid I can't, old girl.'

'One of ours?'

He nodded.

'Thrill of the chase?'

He shrugged.

That was the fun of it, wasn't it, sometimes? The flirting without knowing. Throwing fate the old glove. Keziah called that 'his fatalist mood.'

Lulu angled for a sugar-powdered strawberry from the tray. 'Well, I dare say at least he won't be unpleasant about it.'

He chomped absently on the blueberry macaroon she handed him. 'Unpleasantness', in *La Génerale*'s world, meant anything from a scene – horrid, beastly things – to a peeress forsaking all good taste and actually running away with some long-limbed air fleet officer or some such thing. That sort of absurd romanticism only ruined the fun for everyone else.

No, thought Lysander, fiddling with his emerald cravat pin, his sister knew, at least from keen observance, that society's Olympian wrath, once incurred, was swift and merciless. Its good graces, once lost, remained so. Hence poor Arthur Somerset, fellow guardsman, still languished away at the French Riviera after that deuced revolting business on Cleveland Street, rather than risk the indignity of a trial – or worse.

Unpleasantness, indeed! One could usually handle the occasional blackmail note from enterprising renters – it practically counted as good manners to pay up, like tipping your waiter – and, to Lysander, anyone foolish enough to gamble on the rough fare one encountered in railway stations and public restrooms richly deserved their trouble. But there were professional thugs about some of the hotels on Fleet now, lying in wait with cameras behind peep-holes, and if on top of that whole dashed business, private clubs and homes weren't safe from ghastly peelers and their whistles, what was the world coming to?

There was that passage in Wilde's latest play, currently at the St. James.' He had been to see it again last night.

There are moments when one has to choose between living one's own life, fully, entirely, completely – or dragging out some false, shallow, degrading existence that the world in its hypocrisy demands.

Only that was Oscar for you, with his green carnations and his bonhomie.

'Heavens, Sandy, all that brooding for a measly *affair de cœur*.' Lulu, feeding Duchess a pistachio macaroon, frowned.

'I say, old girl, we can't all have our Trizzys and Therèses going about in plain sight.'

'Don't be absurd, of course you can.' Lulu took his hand. 'Society's a spoiled child. As long as you play its charades and give it sugars, you may do whatever you please. Just be smart about it.'

Lysander sighed and contemplated the stuccoed ceiling. Was that bergamot he smelled?

What's so dangerous about a little pleasure…?

Rōnin

Keziah's Park Lane house had been built by Henry Cole and outfitted largely by Morris, back when the Pre-Raphaelites were considered eccentric dreamers. But then her grandfather had always sympathized with those, being one himself.

Even after many visits, Katsuo was amused to find Japanese vases, screens, and prints, and furniture of orange wood and gold lacquer liberally strewn across this unwieldy house, which

boasted, after all, no end of Tissots and Dicksees and Alma Tademas, murals by avant-garde Austrians, Burne-Jonesian Florentine knights in the dining room, and a Moroccan atrium with mosaic tiles. At least, he thought, strolling about in the cathedral-like library, she had bought the artefacts herself, from her travels in Tokyo.

No doubt she'd meant him a kindness by receiving him here, imagining he'd be intrigued to see again the dusty prototypes of the forty-seven and fifty-three Analytical Engines poised reverently under Collier's portrait of their inventor, Dame Ada, the Queen of Engines, and Keziah's grandmother. Unfortunately, algorithms were about the last thing on his mind, and he'd much preferred the velvet cosiness of one of the lesser drawing rooms, or indeed the atrium where an army of housemaids were at this moment setting up for the evening's entertainments, of which he himself was to form a considerable part.

He was politely contemplating the archived collections of her grandfather's geodes, fossils, bones, and teeth, labelled 'Galapagos', trying to evade the stares of Clarabella, the taxidermied dodo, and the Amazonian fertility icons on the wall, when she hurried in, a whirlwind of zest and amber-gold satins. A stone-faced butler brought tea in her wake.

'Darling!' She kissed his cheeks in the French manner, then threw herself on a leather sofa. 'Didn't you have the most marvellous time the other night?'

Katsuo's made his face carefully blank, searched her green eyes for impish twinkles. She was an intrepid, lissom girl sporting an air of exuberance and irony and perpetually rowdy black hair that was no doubt the bane of French maids everywhere.

'At my little salon!' she added, but he thought perhaps she was hiding a grin.

It had been that evening, lulled by hookah smoke and wine, that he had met a certain, golden-haired Marquis.

'Thoroughly enjoyed myself, all thanks to you.' He winked. 'Although no affair throwing you among the likes of Oscar Wilde and Singer Sargent can count as little, as you well know.'

Keziah beamed. She'd lately rather had her heart set on this salon business, and was tonight endeavouring to woo a gang of artistic aristocrats – who were, so the grapevine, simply dying to meet her Japanese gentleman-friend!

'Did young Beardsley talk your ear off rather frightfully?' She offered him her jasmine-scented cigarettes from a gold case and, leaning forward eagerly, plopped hers into a lacquer holder. 'Isn't he wonderfully charming? He looks quite like one of his clever drawings!'

'A striking profile if ever I've seen one.' Katsuo let the nacre smoke curl about his face. 'And such ardour for the Japanese arts!' Even to himself, he sounded half-hearted.

Keziah narrowed her eyes at him, and was no doubt about to say something annoyingly perceptive, when the butler returned with a teleprinter message on a silver tray.

'Oh dear', she said, 'I hope there hasn't been some disaster with the cucumber sandwiches. I hear they matter rather awfully.'

Katsuo gave her a long look. Keziah prided herself on being a dauntless, convivial Bohemian, who cared not one jot that her mother being one of Paris' most celebrated courtesans – a considerable embarrassment, he was told, at least to the English – put rather a spanner in the works of her social standing. Contrary to regular programming, then, these so-called 'Souls' had her all in a tizzy – and for what?

He leaned forward meaningfully. 'Keziah-san. Someone recently told me that art is an intensely personal affair. A covenant, if you will, between self and truth. That beauty doesn't bow to coercion – nor applause.'

She gazed at him across the thin teleprinter paper, something strange in her wide eyes.

Then she handed him the message without a word.

He read, and his own eyes grew wide.

Something slight but monumental shifted underneath, just as chatter downstairs announced the arrival of one Lady Desborough and one Miss Pamela Wyndham.

A sudden, insurmountable restlessness seized him, and short-circuited his heartbeat.

'Fiddlesticks!' Keziah, he realized, had jumped up and run to the door, beckoning him. One ear poised for the corridor, she brandished her cigarette holder at the far end of the room. 'Behind the glass-case with the finches is a servant's staircase', she whispered, shooing him wildly. 'It'll take you all the way to the stables!'

Katsuo, top hat already in hand, hesitated. 'Won't that rather devastate your friends?'

'Oh, pish-posh!' She straightened defiantly. 'I'll just have to charm them myself. I can be endlessly charming, you know.'

'I do', he said, bending to kiss her on the cheek.

On the staircase, he unwisely broke into a run, all but careering downwards, shouting apologies when barging haphazardly through kitchen and stables, startling the housemaids and interrupting the horses, mind firmly echoing with the message in his breast-pocket, next to the cigarette card of a guardsman:

Kez old girl, would you mind terribly if I nabbed that splendid friend of yours? I don't think I can endure another minute without him. – L.

Thoroughly out of breath, he almost slammed into the lacquered brougham waiting in the mews.

Its door opened, and out leaned a blonde Apollo with sea-green eyes.

Lysander smiled.

Katsuo bit his lip.

Tim Mitchell, *Albert Mérat, Rimbaud's Seer* (Celesta, 2023), 526 pp. ISBN 9781915787231

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In the history of French poetry, the last third of the nineteenth century offers an intricate network of names, movements, figures, and publications. The names of Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud stand out, of course; some more experienced readers will remember lesser-known Symbolists such as Albert Samain, but most names fade into a blur, and the whole period seems rather like Henri Fantin-Latour's painting, *Un coin de table* (1872), where only two figures would be known to the public of good will. Yet to contemporaries, one face in particular was missing from Fantin-Latour's painting: that of Albert Mérat.

Mérat is hardly known to the modern reader of fin-de-siècle poetry. In *Rimbaud's Seer*, Tim Mitchell sets out the ambitious project of presenting Mérat in the wider picture of the late nineteenth century. The reader is led to discover Mérat's poetic work and his singular character within the complex framework of relations that united or disunited the Parnassians, the Symbolists, the Zutistes, the Decadents, or the Hydropathes, names and labels that varied as much as the people who bore or created them.

When Rimbaud came to Paris in 1870, Mérat was recognized as one of the finest poets of his time. Rimbaud and Verlaine admired him; yet after a fight with Rimbaud, Mérat refused to appear on Fantin-Latour's *Un coin de table* in their company. Posterity recognized Rimbaud as the revolutionary poet whose career, short as it was, influenced both the poetry and the popular culture of the following century. Mérat was a more institutional poet. Mérat was a Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur and received many awards and distinctions. Like Rimbaud, he stepped away from poetry, he came back to it much later, in the changed landscape of the Belle Époque; but he never was assimilated to the *poètes maudits* of his generation.

From Mérat's childhood, Mitchell shows the reader the world through the eyes of the poet he calls 'Rimbaud's seer'. Mitchell admirably intertwines his narration of Mérat's life with fragments of letters and scholarly works but also of poetry, so much so that the biography itself seems at times like a poem. The historical accuracy with which Mitchell builds his book takes the reader from the dusty printing rooms of artistic Paris to the loud cafés-concerts where the floor is shaken by a furious can-can. Mérat is, after all, the 'Poet of Paris', a seer of ideal beauty who was also the lover of *chahut* dancer Nini-Patte-en-l'air. Mitchell's biography of Mérat is as full of contrasts as the period it describes. The reader is carried back and forth between the 'Paris interlope' of Montmartre's dodgy cafés and the heights of poetic theory, not only in the company of Mérat but with the many characters of the time, famous or forgotten.

The world, through Mérat's eyes, is a shimmering field of appearances, sometimes pinned down by a nimble pen, sometimes seen just long enough before they disappeared to give an everlasting yearning. Like Gérard de Nerval, Mérat skillfully crafts his poetry into a world of longing and regret; like Baudelaire, he grasps the reality of the world so as to express its eeriness. In many aspects of his poetry, Mérat unites Nerval's idealism (both poets wrote a collection entitled *Les Chimères*) and Baudelaire's modernity. The urban landscape is as propitious to poetic reverie as the immensity of the sea; and the mystery of longing love never errs far from the intoxication of earthly beauty. Mérat appears as a junction figure between the generation of Nerval and Baudelaire and that of Catulle Mendès and Stéphane Mallarmé.

Who was Albert Mérat? This biography sketches him, through the descriptions of his contemporaries, as an almost mythical figure, an incursion of medieval grandeur in the commonplace, satirical Paris torn by the violence of the Sedan defeat and the Commune. Emile Blémont said that the blond, tall, clear-eyed Mérat 'had the haughty looks of a feudal baron' – whereas he described Léon Valade, in contrast, as good-natured, brown-haired and medium-sized (p. 11). Verlaine often dubbed him 'Albert le grand', a description not just of his height but also

of his bearing which, combined with the *franchise* [frankness] which Verlaine also notes, gave Mérat a presence that was to draw admiration from some, but animosity from others.

Mérat, first sketched in broad, almost legendary, traits, appears more and more as a man of flesh and feeling. Behind what some saw as a distant haughtiness was a burning generosity with which he welcomed Rimbaud to Paris and orchestrated a fundraising campaign among his circle of poet friends to support the rowdy seventeen-year-old fugitive from Charleroi during his time in Paris. Yet Mérat, as Mitchell paints him, saw the best and the worse in Rimbaud: despite his charity, he had little patience for Rimbaud's teenage antics (which included stabbing Verlaine as part of an experiment) and, more importantly, perceived both his poetic genius and his debt towards the poets of the day – himself included. Rimbaud's 'Le Bateau ivre', celebrated as early as its first public reading, is indeed reminiscent of Mérat's earlier poem entitled 'Le Courant'.

The last chapters of the biography, covering the early 1900s until Mérat's death in 1909, leave the reader with the bitter impression of a declining world. The poets of Mérat's generation have aged. He attends the funeral of the poet François Coppée, which seems to mark the burial of the Parnassian era. Two other friends of Mérat, Charles Frémine and Maurice Rollinat, die too, one after a painful disease, and the other by suicide. The heritage of Baudelaire takes a different turn at the hands of the Symbolists who, although influenced by Mérat's sense of sound and rhythm and his passion for fleeting images, claim Mallarmé and Rimbaud as their masters. Mitchell accurately identifies the change that Baudelaire, Rimbaud, then Mallarmé imposed on French poetry and why Mérat could neither lead nor follow that new direction in the stream of poetic creation. The idea of correspondences, of subtle connections between the perceptions of one sense and those of another, is highly suspicious to someone who, like Mérat, had a long history of mental illness in his family. Not that Mérat would deny the poetic power of such a process; but synaesthesia, far from being a mere artistic effect, loomed on him like a menace of madness. As Mitchell writes, 'For Mérat, the thought of consciously seeking a "derangement of the senses" was terrifying. It was the way to madness and had the potential to destroy him "unsure whether it is

the lark that shines or the cornflower that sings'" (p. 101). Either the *dérangement des sens* was a mere artistic tactic, or it marked the collapse of sanity and reason.

The last year of Mérat's life bears the burden of grief and insanity; but the very way he ended his days seemed to usher him into a Parnassian eternity: his head shrouded in fabric, two holes at his temple, his face keeping the marble-like serenity admired by his contemporaries.

Mitchell's book raises a crucial question of literary history: What makes poetic genius? Mitchell's keen historic and poetic research shows that poetic creation owes a lot to encounters, friendships, and even feuds. Words echo one another, sometimes as a willing homage, sometimes as a biting parody, like Verlaine and Rimbaud's 'Sonnet du trou du cul' [Sonnet on the Asshole], offering a final touch to Mérat's collection of blasons, *L'Idole*. But Mitchell also presents the power of Mérat's words to linger in the reader's memory and to become part of the vocabulary of an entire generation. In the teaming flow of fin-de-siècle creation, Mérat's name might be forgotten, but his influence is unquestionable.

Mitchell's *Rimbaud's Seer*, however, enriched by numerous illustrations and varied with a collection of Mitchell's own translation of more than a hundred of Mérat's poems from his early to his latest works, could not be reduced to a simple biography. This might be both the strength and the weakness of the book. While the book could be appreciated by both specialists and non-specialists of French cultural and literary history, it would delight historians while remaining below the expectations of French literature specialists. One would have enjoyed seeing Mitchell's book enter into deeper conversation with the rare elements of French academic articles dealing with Mérat, such as Yves Reboul's 'Mérat le Voyant' (in *Rimbaud poéticien*, Classiques Garnier, 2015), or 'Rimbaud et Albert Mérat' by C. A. Hacket (in *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 1992).

Mitchell presents his translation of a broad selection of Mérat's poems. The translations are remarkable; but as the titles of the original poems are presented in a separate section, the layout makes it rather difficult to read Mitchell's translations and the originals simultaneously without a fair amount of juggling. The chapters have numbers but no titles or dates. In the body of the

biography, the quotations are given in English within the text; and if at times Mitchell provides a glimpse of the original French, Mérat and his peers' language remains inaccessible without additional research by the reader. Although this does not remove anything from the intellectual quality of *Rimbaud's Seer*, it might make the book too detailed for a general audience and not accurate enough to academics for lack of access to the French sources. Despite these shortcomings, the book remains a much-needed piece in the fin-de-siècle jigsaw puzzle, and the way it brings together history and poetics, and grants anglophone readers access to Mérat's life and work, will be of value to many.

Sarah Green, *Sexual Restraint and Aesthetic Experience in Victorian Literary Decadence*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 266 pp. ISBN 9781108917490

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Sexual Restraint and Aesthetic Experience opens with a reading of Walter Pater's short story 'Hippolytus Veiled' in which the author presents the Greek myth of Phaedra and Hippolytus in an unexpected way. In Pater's telling, Green contends, Phaedra's filicidal madness is a product of her inability to understand her son's willingness to resist her incestuous sexual advances. Hippolytus himself, despite his horror at his mother's actions, is shown to remain 'cheerfully and healthily celibate' as a result not of his ignorance or naivety but of his self-conscious restraint (p. 1). Drawing on Pater's approach to the myth and similar examples, Green argues that in the late nineteenth century the idea of sexual restraint, a withholding of or refraining from sexual activity, was frequently conceptualised as a positive, even beneficial, behaviour that was artistically and aesthetically productive for the individual who practised it. This concept of fruitful restraint is shown to be an influential part of contemporary discourse on sexuality in medical and popular literature, and to have had a significant impact on British literary decadence, suggesting an unfamiliar attitude. This aesthetically or sexually restrained decadent figure is at variance with those we are accustomed to reading about, the archetypal epicures with Beardsley leers who *flâne* into view when we imagine the fin de siècle.

This work makes a compelling case for understanding restraint as more than a coded means of indicating sexual deviance or queerness that could not be expressed in the Victorian context, but as a vital element in a wider discourse of 'continence'. This 'sexual continence', Green's preferred term since it is frequently instanced in period literature, 'presented genuine non-sexuality as a perfectly possible state', one that could have the effect of 'intensifying sensuousness, without such sense experience becoming sensual' in of itself (p. 8 & 11). Green proposes this

sexually continent decadent as co-existent with the 'queer sexual radical' that has been a significant focus of scholarship. These two decadent types are not mutually exclusive but the discourse of continence permitted a means of exploring 'new ways of being' that did not depend on sexual transgression (p. 75).

Chapter 1, 'Loss and Gain: The Victorian Sexual Body', is an excellent review of mid-to-late nineteenth-century medical writing, encompassing William Acton and Havelock Ellis as well as lesser-known figures such as James Richard Smyth, that relates contemporary currents of medical thought to wider preoccupations with the New Woman, Platonism, and Tractarianism. In a survey that will be of great utility to historians of sexuality, Green traces the concept of productive continence by noting its pre-Victorian origins and highlighting its surprising adaptability. It is latent, for instance, in the common injunction to take periods of abstinence from certain activities or substances, and it is versatile, not allied in principle to any one model of bodily health and capable of being applied to most. It aligns, for example, with the concept of the human body as a regulatory system wherein the loss of fluids, especially sperm (the posited 'spermatic economy' in the terminology of Ben Barker-Benfield (p. 39)), was perceived as debilitating, an anatomical approach that was being supplanted by a psychological and psychiatric understanding of health; and yet, just as successfully, the idea of continence could be compatible with emerging ideas around 'radical politics, changing gender roles, and non-normative sexualities' (p. 33).

Chapter 2 pursues a further objective of this work: to provide 'an alternative Paterianism to that generally explored by Decadent Studies' (p. 4). Building on the work of Linda Dowling, Gerald Monsman, Adam Lee, William Shuter, Kate Hext, and Herbert Sussman, Green reads Pater's *Renaissance* alongside the unpublished 'The Aesthetic Life', and *Marius the Epicurean* in parallel with the unfinished novel *Gaston de Latour*. These texts evidence a recurrent return to an aesthetically selective and discerning form of restraint as an active and productive stance; indeed, in Green's reading of Pater this is a necessary part of the 'process of aesthetic self-cultivation' prompted by engagement with the world of the senses (p. 113). This chapter acknowledges the

significance of, and discussion generated by, the object of sexual desire in Pater's work, and indeed his life, but qualifies this in light of his depiction of continence. For example, Green's treatment of Pater's 'Winckelmann', often of particular interest to scholars for its handling of homoeroticism, sees this theme as being tempered and balanced by Pater's notion of a restraint that informs aesthetic decision-making. In general, Green argues that Pater's 'aesthete-heroes' recognise that 'while sex is an important part of the world and, within certain limits, of the lives of most people, their aesthetic temperaments make continence the more comfortable and productive choice' since it does not place them in direct conflict with conventional standards of conduct (p. 96).

The remaining chapters are also focused on individual literary figures: Lionel Johnson, Vernon Lee, and George Moore. Johnson, as the paradigmatic male decadent poet, is proposed as an inheritor of Pater's version of productive continence. His poem 'The Dark Angel', for instance, is not to be read as primarily concerned with alcoholism or repressed homosexuality, but as expressing the conflict between innocent and sensual experience of the world. This chapter adroitly explores this Paterian heritage but is less successful in defining the precise form that productive continence takes in Johnson's work, perhaps because the idea, as Green shows, was often implicit rather than explicit in contemporary thinking. Vernon Lee is included as an emblematic female decadent and as another writer who utilises the idea of continence as a means of 'filtering good from bad' (p. 148). Like Johnson, with his interest in sainthood, Lee idealises a form of love that is pure and spiritual, drawing on medieval poetry such as Dante's *Vita Nuova*. Green skilfully constructs Lee's concept of continence by close reading of her pre-1900 non-fiction works: *Althea*, *Baldwin*, *Belcaro*, *Euphorion*, *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, and more, thereby also creating a basis for future scholarship on Lee's discourse of continence in later publications. This chapter provides a framework for understanding Lee's conception of the artist as a person who requires harmony to function; self-control and sexual restraint are key components of artistic equilibrium.

Chapter 5 develops Green's previous work on George Moore and undertakes to establish a discourse of continence in the work of a writer who was vehemently pro-sexual experience.[1] As

with Lee, Green strives to make sense of Moore's articulation of this concept, not simply as a consequence of his own personal dysfunction in later life, but as a vital element in his idea of life as an 'art-sex-humanity nexus' (p. 184). The hyphenation suggests the difficulty in grappling with Moore's thinking and attempting to crystalise a system out of his unsystematic and disparate writings on the topic. Persuasively though, Moore is seen as reconciling art and sex through a 'non-reproductive, imaginative, "intellectual" sexuality' akin to the aesthetic selectivity of Pater or Lee's advocacy of aesthetic filtration (p. 200).

This work will be of particular use to historians of sexuality, Pater studies and in the study of late nineteenth-century decadence. It opens many avenues for further research and demonstrates the effectiveness of single-author studies; Green recommends a similar approach to Henry James' use of continence and one wonders if the poise of Oscar Wilde's dandies, Lord Goring or Lord Henry Wotton, owes something to their aesthetic or sexual discernment, in contrast to the hedonistic failure of Dorian Gray. This work succeeds in finding 'new coherence in the tangle of discourse' about sexual continence and presents scholars with a productive alternative to the stereotypical decadent libertine forever in pursuit of direct sensory experience (p. 206).

[1] See Sarah Green, 'Impotence and the Male Artist: The Case of George Moore', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 24.2 (April 2019), 179-92.

Adam Alston, *Staging Decadence: Theatre, Performance, and the Ends of Capitalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 248 pp.
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Who among us, we dedicated decadents, have not read at least one of Gyles Brandreth's mystery novels in which Oscar Wilde, sometimes with an assist from his friend Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, is an amateur detective. The novels overall are harmless escapism for mystery lovers who also love arch, aesthetic dialogue. One of the more memorable aspects of the novels was Wilde's frequent refrain of *nomen est omen*, the Latin proverb used in Ancient Rome that translates as 'the name is the sign', that is, the idea that names are indicators of a person's character or destiny. This brief preamble is directed towards establishing the fact that in Adam Alston's fascinating new book, *Staging Decadence: Theatre, Performance, and the Ends of Capitalism*, the author shows admirable restraint; restraint that I do not share. Because one of the artists who Alston discusses in this Marxist approach to decadent theatre from around the globe is named Julia Bardsley. Bardsley! In a book about decadent art! But Alston does not go for the low-hanging fruit. I, on the other hand, am not so classy, and I want to point out that Alston's book elegantly, even urgently, given his concerns about capitalism (which will kill us all), establishes that Julia Bardsley is part of the lineage of decadent artists that includes gone-too-soon decadent illustrator Aubrey Beardsley. There! With that out of the way, I can begin the review in earnest.

Alston is very much concerned to show that the artists he identifies as staging decadence are anything but apolitical. Indeed Alston argues carefully and effectively throughout his text that the performances that he has chosen are not disinterested, as the aesthetes and decadents of the fin de siècle were accused of being, but rather deeply invested in the world in which they live, creating art that is informed by intersectionality, compassion, and an awareness of the destruction that capitalism has wrought, including the climate crisis in which we find ourselves. Alston could

have simply chosen performances and theatrical pieces that included a lot of shiny objects, a lot of pleasure, and a lot of excess, though he does not ignore this particular facet of decadence, pointing to the decadent 'love of *too much*' (14). If you hear echoes of Lord Alfred Douglas' famous line 'the love that dare not speak its name', then congratulations, you are a decadent! More to the point, Alston has chosen artworks (a term that I use broadly to encompass performance, plays, happenings, and everything in-between) that incorporate lots of shiny things but are also political. The book, then, is deliberately political, in that Alston is engaging critically with the neo-conservative discourses that, like Max Nordau in the 1890s, use the term 'decadent' as a blunt instrument to bludgeon anyone who does not fit into the safe category of white, straight, and cis. Nordau's straw man was of course Wilde. Neo-conservatives nowadays have any number of straw-people, including immigrants, people of colour, and LGBTQ2S+ individuals.

The greatest strength of Alston's book is that he illuminates why decadence as a framework for art is still relevant. Neo-conservatives, the Christian Right in the United States, and populists around the world, are using decadence, or related terms, to other, to pathologize, to punish. To employ decadence as a critical framework for art is decidedly political in a book that discusses not only queer artists, but queer artists of colour. This is, to my mind, the most important contribution that Alston makes to the literature on decadence. He shows how decadence is still used as a weapon of hatred, and in turn shows how decadence can be used as a weapon of compassion, solidarity, and progressiveness. Alston demonstrates that decadence is dangerous, but it is most dangerous to those who wish to make their countries white again. According to Alston, 'By studying the cultural politics of decadence in historical context, I argue that we will be better placed to respond to those moments when the arts and humanities are most threatened' (p. 23).

In his introduction, Alston identifies four core theses of his book that provide 'markers in the cultivation of a decadent sensibility' (p. 9). In brief they are: theatre is useless, theatre is wasteful, theatre is outmoded, and lastly 'For all of these reasons, and despite the influence of many of its commercially minded stakeholders, theatre has the capacity to resist forms of

productivity based on economic imperatives' (p. 10). In other words, rather than being negative traits, in Alston's view, uselessness, wastefulness, and outmodedness are strengths of theatre. Whether or not you're convinced that theatre is useless, it's important to know that one of Alston's key objectives in the text is to critique capitalism. Uselessness, for Alston, does not mean that theatre lacks inherent value. To the contrary, it is clear that Alston loves theatre and that he thinks it is one of the most important things in life. Rather, theatre is 'useless' in the realm of capitalist logic where human beings are cogs in the machine who are perceived as valuable only if they produce (or reproduce).

The book is divided into five chapters, in addition to the introduction and a conclusion in which Alston details a performance that took place on 29 July 2022. This is one of the book's major strengths, namely examining very recent artworks. In this case, the performance, *Fairy Boudoir*, was by Hasard Le Sin and it was staged at Iklectik Arts Lab in London. The performance checks many decadent boxes, including 'plush velvet drapes', a 'shimmering velvet cloak', a 'dandyish' artist with 'two fabric phalluses protruding from their groin, like the pistils of an orchid' (p. 141). So we have haptic pleasure in textiles (Alston refers to the 'crafting of abject costumes' [p. 146]), materiality, embodiment, queerness, and sexual deviance. As Alston observes:

> Decadence is an art of border crossing. Decadence relies on borders in order to breach them—for instance, by staging the undoing of gendered types and binaries… or by transgressing the mores that shape the horizons of social acceptability, especially where sexuality, taste, and demeanor are concerned. (p. 143)

In Alston's introduction, he provides a historiography of decadence, as well as an anti-capitalist critique of the current exploitative ethos of extractivism and productivism that permeates the UK, as well as the United States and Canada. Chapter 1 will be of particular interest for scholars of illness and disability, focusing as it does on British artist Martin O'Brien. The chapter, entitled 'Zombie Time: Sickness, Performance, and the Living Dead', discusses O'Brien's work that engages with, and showcases, his chronic illness, specifically cystic fibrosis. Alston grounds his discussion in the context of Covid-19, observing that 'O'Brien's invitation to consider what might

happen to desire in the kingdom of the sick has taken on fresh significance in the years since the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic' (p. 27). The artist's laboured performances – such as *The Last Breath Society* (2021) – point to the physical and affective labours that are expected of humans in the context of advanced capitalist economies (p. 32). While O'Brien does not explicitly frame his performances as decadent, Alston sees in them evidence of queer desire, queer temporalities, and a 'taste for the distasteful, which the decadence scholar David Weir identifies as a key feature of decadence' (p. 38).

Chapter 2, 'Para-sites and Wired Bodies: Decadence, Scenography, and the Performing Body' examines the work of British multimedia artist Julia Bardsley and Marcel·lí Antúnez Roca, a Spanish artist who transgresses the skin boundary with tubes and technology, creating machine-human hybrids. Bardsley's work will be of interest to scholars of textiles and fashion, as well as feminist scholars concerned with monstrosity and embodiment. As Alston remarks: 'All three parts of [Bardsley's] "Divine Trilogy" explore transgression, transformation, and transcendence… and the relationship of patriarchy and capitalism to the meatiness of human, animal and monstrous bodies' (p. 47). Later in that chapter, Alston observes that 'By embracing monstrousness as an engine of desire, desire is brought back to the body' (p. 52), and he acknowledge the important work of feminist film theorist Barbara Creed and her theoretical framework of the 'monstrous-feminine' (p. 53).

Chapter 3, 'Alien Nation: Afropessimism, Afrofuturism, and the Decadent Society', is a crucial contribution to decadence scholarship in broadening the scope of the artists (read: white artists) who are usually discussed. Alston investigates the work of jaamil olawale koko, a non-binary Nigerian American theatre maker, poet, and teacher, and The Uhuruverse, a Black non-binary musician and live artist. According to Alston:

> If philosophical pessimism served as the outlook favoured by European decadents in the nineteenth century, then Afropessimism may well have something important to offer to our understanding of decadence in performance today, and in the wider sociocultural field. Equally, Afrofuturism—as a philosophy as much as an aesthetic—would seem to be at odds with the supposedly reactionary or apolitical turnings of fin-de-siècle decadence. But

> if we accept that decadence can be mobilized in contexts that bear little connection to the European fin de siècle, then Afropessimist and Afrofuturist performance have the potential to shift how we approach and come to understand decadence as a political concern, especially by engaging with the friction between them, enabling us to appreciate the cultural politics of decadence afresh. (p. 67)

Again, a major strength of Alston's book is showing the political potential of decadence as a critical framework for art.

Chapter 4, 'Frenetic Standstill: Decadence, Capitalism, and Excess on the Japanese Stage', takes decadence global. Alston discusses the work of Toshika Okada in terms of 'unstoppable motility' (p. 91) and describes Toco Nikaido's work as 'theatre as explosion' (p. 96). This is the only chapter in which I thought that Alston was, perhaps, stretching his decadent framework a bit uncomfortably in order to encompass these two performers. He writes:

> I will be arguing that the work of Okada and Nikaido lends themselves to decadence, but not simply because they stage excess (too fast, too slow, too much, too little). Decadence is not synonymous with excess, although bodies, things and actions that are in a state of excess can be attuned to decadence. […] I will be reading contemporary Japanese theatre and popular culture in light of a protracted economic crisis that followed the bursting of Japan's asset bubble in 1991. (p. 90)

Alston concludes that 'These historical factors are what allow us to understand Okada's and Nikaido's work as "decadent", as they offer a frame for understanding the cultural politics of uselessness, wastefulness, and forms of productivity that run counter to productivist enterprise' (p. 90). While I'm not wholly convinced that these two artists lend themselves to decadence, their work is certainly interesting from an anti-capitalist perspective.

It is in Chapter 5, entitled "'A Dangerous Form of Decadence": Decadence, Performance, and the Culture Wars', in which Alston really shows the urgency of issues related to art and decadence. It is significant and appropriate that Alston would discuss queer American performance artist Ron Athey in this chapter, as Athey was one of the key figures in the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, along with Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) and David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992), both of whom created artworks concerned with HIV/AIDS that created fear and loathing among the Christian Right and led many conservatives to call for the National Endowment for

the Arts to stop funding artists who created political art. Jennifer Doyle discusses Athey's work in her book *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (2013). One of her arguments in that book is that people on the left, including curators and academics, should not use the defence 'It's only art' in the face of threats of censorship. To his credit, Alston does not fall into this trap. Rather, despite his suggestion that theatre is 'useless' according to capitalist logic, he insists throughout his book that art has the potential to be radical, transgressive, and thus world-changing, or at the very least, life-changing.

There are so many great passages that I would like to quote, but I'll conclude with this one, which is in Alston's conclusion:

> What I do want to encourage […] is recognition of the desirability of art, literature, theatre, and performance *as* luxuries, provided these luxuries are not foreclosed to those who stand to gain most from their pleasures. I have hope for luxury yet: hope for the redistribution of bounty by means of its anticipation and manifestation in public spectacles; hope for the magic of unconventional glamour conjured by dissident bodies who refuse to conform with a culture that is not made for them; and hope for the radical potential of pleasure and its capacity to shift how we come to see particular things and activities as important or unimportant. There is a case to be made for the apparently frivolous, as frivolity can point towards things of great importance. (p. 151)

This passage strikes me as a rallying cry to those of us lucky enough to be working in the arts. As someone who was told (by a female TA, no less) to stop shoving my politics down people's throats in my (feminist!) art history classes, Alston's book, which combines abjection, excess, and glamour with progressive, compassionate politics, was intensely restorative, even consoling.

Notes on Contributors

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