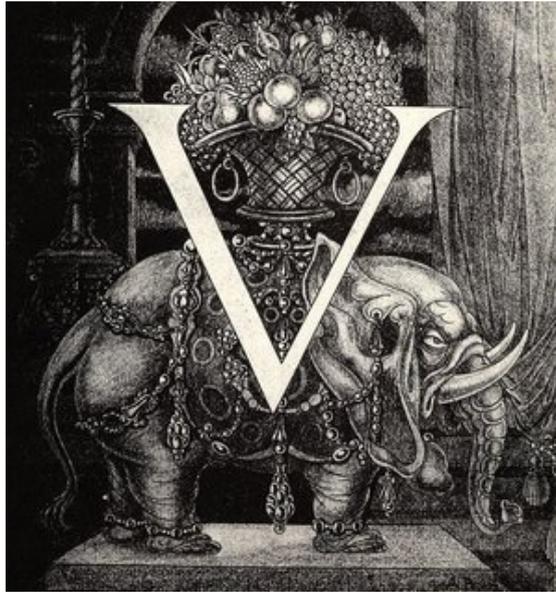


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Preface

Katharina Herold and Leire Barrera-Medrano

Despite its many famous female and queer icons, Decadence is still perceived as a male domain of aesthetic production. The narrowness of this perception does not do justice to the large proportion of female Decadent writers and artists who, often subversively, collapsed strict gender binaries. In 1979, Linda Dowling asserted that the New Woman and Decadence were ‘twin avatars of the “New”’.¹ Following Dowling, Sally Ledger observed in 2007 that ‘the discursive and aesthetic resonance between aestheticism, the Decadence and the New Woman writing is indisputable. For the cultural movement that embraced aestheticism and Decadence was broader and more eclectic than is sometimes allowed.’² Ledger also agreed with Laurel Brake ‘that “Impressionism, feminism, naturalism, dandyism, symbolism, and classicism all participate in the politics of decadence in the nineties” and with Linda K. Hughes’ account of aestheticism’s ability to combine “everything from impressionist nature poems to perverse sexualities”.’³ Ledger’s comments frame the purpose of this issue of *Volupté*, which seeks to re-establish the creative importance of female Decadent authorship by emphasizing its international scope.

Decadence as an international literary and artistic phenomenon traditionally features women as objectified *femmes fatales*, sphinxes, dancers, and demi-mondes. However, feminist scholarship over the last three decades has retrieved many prolific women writers of the period. Over twenty years ago, Elaine Showalter’s volume *Daughters of Decadence* (1993) brought together twenty of the most original and important stories penned by women, re-introducing little-known writers such as Vernon Lee and Charlotte Mew. Yet while there have been forays into French studies exploring questions of female authorship and female creativity in the field of Decadence studies, the English-speaking canon fell short of comprehensive studies of women as active agents of Decadent production.

Exploratory studies such as *Women and British Aestheticism* (1999) edited by Talia Shaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades, and Shaffer's *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (2000), set the scene for the academic consideration of female Decadence. Shaffer reframes New Women writers such as Lucas Malet (Mary Harrison); Ouida (Marie Louise de la Ramée); Rosamund Marriott Watson; Una Ashworth Taylor; Elizabeth Robins Pennell; Mary and Jane Findlater; and John Oliver Hobbes (Pearl Craigie) as female Aesthetes who made significant contributions to the development of feminist ideologies and pioneered new literary strategies that were incorporated by their successors.⁴ Ana Parejo Vardillo, Marion Thain, Catherine Delyfer, and Sarah Parker, amongst others, established and expanded the field which considered female British Aestheticism as it was practised, interpreted, and reconfigured by women writers and painters of the late-Victorian period. Their work pays special attention to Alice Meynell, Mary F. Robinson, Vernon Lee, and Michael Field.⁵ Joseph Bristow's 2016 study of female Decadence, *The History of British Women's Writing, 1880–1920*, liberates queer writers of the late-nineteenth century from a limiting connection to the New Woman phenomenon by emphasizing their contributions to *The Yellow Book*. As one of the tradition's staple literary platforms, *The Yellow Book* had a decidedly inclusive avant-garde profile. Many male editors and publishers failed to acknowledge the prominent connections between women and Decadence. As Bristow argues, it was the female authors and illustrators in particular (such as George Egerton, Netta Syrett, Evelyn Sharp, Olive Custance, and Victoria Cross) who helped fashioned the journal's reputation as the 'organ of these ubiquitously decadent times'.⁶

In 2010, Judith R. Walkowitz addressed the extensiveness of female creativity, not only on the page, but also on the stage, in 'Cosmopolitanism, Feminism, and the Moving Body'. Walkowitz drew attention to actress Maud Allan who 'would satisfy the cultural distinctions of high art and also manifest disturbing signs of animated modernity and sexuality'.⁷ One of the most recent contributions to the field is *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Poetry* (2019), edited by Linda K. Hughes. This generalist volume is important not only because it is dedicated to the

scholarly analysis and contextualization of female-authored literature, but because it reflects the increasing focus on Decadent literature authored by women.

And yet, there is a persistent Anglo-French angle to the research that has emerged to date. This issue of *Volupté* widens this angle by introducing and expanding the knowledge of female writers and artists in and beyond Anglo-French networks. This feminist internationalism maps onto a broader current of interest in British and European cross-cultural relations and cosmopolitan studies and pays attention to the active role played by women as creators in the Victorian era and beyond. Indeed, the international and interdisciplinary nature of female artistic networks in Decadence has so far been overlooked. In July 2018 a conference organized at Oxford's English Faculty addressed this gap in the record of women creating Decadent texts and art; *Women Writing Decadence: European Perspectives 1880-1920* formed the starting point of this publication.

Focused on relatively unknown writers from six European countries – Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Poland, and Spain – the articles published in this issue illustrate the wealth of European female Decadent writers and emphasize particular national strands and international connections. In her introduction to the issue, Melanie Hawthorne demonstrates how the transnational perspective on *fin-de-siècle* women writers sheds new light on Decadence. With a special focus on the cosmopolitan figure of Renée Vivien (Pauline Tarn, 1877-1909), Hawthorne highlights the importance of enlarging our understanding of Decadence to create a more accurate picture of its multifaceted and international networks.

Yvonne Ivory's article on the German actress Gertrud Eysoldt (1870-1955) is a good example of the rich diversity of Decadent women's art. In her examination of Eysoldt's role as an interpreter of Decadent aesthetics for German audiences, Ivory offers a paradigmatic case of the Decadent links between gender, the arts, and (inter)national identity. Heidi Liedke moves into more uncharted territory for the English-speaking world, as she introduces the work of Polish translator and poet Kazimiera Zawistowska (1870-1902), whose poems epitomize the aesthetics

of the Modernist period in Polish arts known as ‘Young Poland’. Liedke shows how Zawiatowska’s voice was not strictly nation-bound; it was also in dialogue with that of the French Symbolists. The afterlives of Decadent femininities are present in Sarah Parker’s re-reading of Olive Custance’s (1874-1944) Decadent verse. For Parker, Custance’s style is representative of what Kristin Mahoney has recently called ‘post-Victorian decadence’.⁸

Viola Parente-Čapková and Riikka Rossi explore quintessential Decadent themes such as irony and sickness in the work of Finnish writers L. Onerva (Hilja Onerva Lehtinen, 1882-1972) and Maria Jotuni (1880-1943). Jotuni’s blending of Naturalism and Decadence and her emphasis on the contradictions of modernity recall the work of the Spanish writer Emilia Pardo Bazán (1851-1921), demonstrating again the existence of what Regenia Gagnier terms ‘global literatures of Decadence’.⁹ The first chapter of Pardo Bazán’s relatively unknown novel *La Sirena Negra* (*The Black Siren*, 1908) is here translated for the first time in English by Leire Barrera-Medrano. The inclusion of translations in this issue (Katharina Herold translates three poems by the German-Jewish poet Else Lasker-Schüler (1869-1945)) is not incidental. The role of translation for Decadence is of manifold importance: translation *was* key for Decadent writers and it *continues to be* if we are serious about disseminating and understanding the variety and wealth of Decadent literary production.

Alongside cutting-edge critical essays and new translations, we also feature here original artwork by Matthew Creasy. In the style of Max Beerbohm’s *Fifty Caricatures* (1913), Creasy delights us with eleven caricatures of seven *fin-de-siècle* women artists. In line with the spirit of the issue, the (wo)men have been ‘melted down, as in a crucible, and then, as from the solution, be[en] fashioned anew’, to paraphrase Beerbohm.¹⁰

Indeed, this issue of *Volupté* fashions Decadence anew; it offers a fascinating selection of trans-European and interdisciplinary papers, as well as translations and images that shed new light on the wide array of forms in which women contributed to Decadence across the continent. Instead of looking for the ‘daughters of Decadence’, the articles published here from the 2018

conference on Women Writing Decadence reveal the ‘mothers of Decadence’ and their exciting theoretical and practical approaches to authorship, gender, modernity, and cosmopolitan exchange.

¹ Linda Dowling, ‘The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890’s’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33.4 (1979), 434-53 (p. 453).

² Sally Ledger, ‘Wilde Women and The Yellow Book: The Sexual Politics of Aestheticism and Decadence’, *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 50.1 (2007), 5-26 (p. 7).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (London: University Press of Virginia, 2000).

⁵ Ana Parejo Vadillo and Sarah Parker, eds, *Michael Field: Decadent Moderns* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2019).

⁶ Joseph Bristow, ‘Female Decadence’, in *The History of British Women’s Writing, 1880–1920*, ed. by Holly A. Laird (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 85-97 (p. 85).

⁷ Judith R. Walkowitz, ‘Cosmopolitanism, Feminism, and the Moving Body’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 38.2 (2010), 427-49 (p. 442).

⁸ Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁹ Regenia Gagnier, ‘The Global Literatures of Decadence’, in *The Fin-de-Siècle World*, ed. by Michael Saler (Oxford: Routledge, 2015), pp. 11-28.

¹⁰ For Beerbohm, ‘the perfect caricature (be it of a handsome man, or a hideous or an insipid) must be the exaggeration of the whole creature [...]. The whole man must be melted down, as in a crucible, and then, as from the solution, be fashioned anew’. Max Beerbohm, ‘The Spirit of Caricature’ [1901], in *A Variety of Things* (New York: Knopf, 1928), p. 119.

Women Writing Decadence: An Introduction

Melanie Hawthorne

Texas A&M University

There was a time when the *fin de siècle* seemed to be an all-male club. The dandies, Decadents, dukes, drug-addled dreamers, and sundry other down-and-outs lolled or strutted across the pages of turn-of-the-century literature and the literary history of that period, and if women entered the story, they figured only as muses, unattainable visions, or regrettably available resources who licensed men's most vicious failings, such as prostitutes. As the explosion of interest in women writers and women's writing shone a light on the neglected corners and forgotten by-ways of the literature of yesteryear, it was allowed with grudging reluctance that maybe there had been one or two women Decadents. In France, the name of Rachilde (Marguerite Eymery Vallette, 1860-1953) would often come up in this context, for example, as though the concession proved the general truth. Such women were still presented as an exception, however, and the paradigm remained unchanged.

Measure then, the shift in perspective that occurs when women are put not on the margins, as an afterthought, but at the centre of *fin-de-siècle* literary activity, as nodes in networks that stretch across time and space linking entire coteries of writers as well as lone maverick individuals. What if one were to focus on the women themselves, and their transnational maps of movement and influence, with a view to uncovering the hitherto overlooked (or at least understudied) patterns of life and work (since life sometimes *was* work for Decadents) that surge through the currents of literary history of a century ago?

Of course, this re-visioning hinges on what definition of 'Decadence' one is prepared to allow. Was it a short-lived, aesthetically specific fraternity, such as Oscar Wilde plus those associated with *The Yellow Book*, say, in England, or contributors to Anatole Baju's journal in Paris? Such a narrow definition may have its place and its merits, but widening the lens for writers of all

stripes and genders offers a more accurate picture of the extensive international movement that linked multi-faceted reactions against the realisms of the nineteenth century to the innovative Modernist experiments of the early twentieth century. This more generous embrace takes in a wealth of talent. In French, the panoramic frame includes, in addition to Rachilde, an entire 'lost generation' of women writers who delved into more or less Decadent matters: Marguerite Coppin (1867-1931), Camille Delaville (1838-1888), Jane Dieulafoy (1851-1916), Tola Dorian (Kapitolina Sergeevna Mestcherskaya Dorian, 1839-1918), Judith Gautier (1845-1917), Gisèle d'Estoc (Paule Courbe, 1845-1894), Marie Krysinska (1857-1908), Jean Marni (Jeanne Barousse, 1854-1910), Marc de Montifaud (Marie Amélie Chartroule, 1845-1912),¹ Georges de Peyrebrune (Mathilde-Marie de Peyrebrune, 1841-1917), Jane de la Vaudère (Jeanne Scrive, 1857-1908), Renée Vivien (Pauline Tarn, 1877-1909). In Britain and Anglophone Ireland, one can cite Olive Custance (1874-1944), George Egerton (Mary Bright, 1859-1945), Michael Field (Katharine Harris Bradley, 1846-1914, and Edith Emma Cooper, 1862-1913), Vernon Lee (Violet Paget, 1856-1935), and Ada Levenson (1862-1933). And lest it be assumed that Decadence flourished only in Western Europe, examples of women writers from around the continent (and beyond) flock to mind: the Norwegian Dagny Juell-Przybyszewska (1867-1901); Maria Jotuni (1880-1943) and L. Onerva (Hilja Onerva Lehtinen, 1882-1972) in Finland; Emilia Pardo Bazán (1851-1921) in Spain; Zinaida Gippius (1869-1945), Sophia Parnok (1885-1933), and Lydia Zionvieva-Annibal (1866-1907) in Russia; Eleonora Kalkowska (1883-1937) and Kazimiera Zawistowska (1870-1902) in Poland.

The transnational nature of the Decadent movement that spread far and wide, creating eddies and ripples around the world, reflects something that was in the cultural air, and calls out for further exploration. On the one hand, the nineteenth century that gave rise to the *fin-de-siècle* mood of Decadence was *the* century of nationalism, as so many experts from different perspectives agree (Benedict Anderson, Isaiah Berlin, and Stefan Zweig, among others).² As an ideology, the notion that 'nations' existed and had certain characteristics, a shared sense of place, history, and culture, was an increasingly accepted truth. And yet these nations had borders that could be

surprisingly porous when viewed through modern eyes, accustomed as we are at the beginning of the twenty-first century to the ever-more intrusive ability of the modern state to track the movement of people.

While ideas and cultural movements may have flowed freely, there were still many controls on the movements of individuals at the turn of the century. These restrictions were not only at international borders, however, but operated even within the boundaries of a particular state. Many people today take for granted the freedom to move around within their own country, but in the nineteenth century, restrictions on domestic travel was a common way to exert political control (to prevent popular protests) and to maintain economic control (over the labour market, for example). In France, a passport might be required simply to travel from one region to another. Writing to his mother from Saché in 1832, the novelist Honoré de Balzac explained that he was terribly tired from his journey there because ‘everywhere there was a *gendarmerie*, they asked to see our passports.’³ Flaubert’s eponymous characters Bouvard and Pécuchet, though fictional, worry about being asked to produce theirs while on their lunch hour in the streets in Paris.⁴ As such, passports had little to do with foreign travel (the use most closely associated with them today), and were seen as repressive documents destined to disappear in more liberal, progressive times.

It wasn’t until the upheavals of World War I and the Russian Revolution, which redrew maps and wrote entire countries out of existence, brought massive population displacements and cases of statelessness, and introduced new concerns about spying, military intelligence, and surveillance, that the modern passport system took root in the form we know today: a government-issued form of identification required mainly for crossing national boundaries. Prior to this clampdown, at the *fin de siècle* and throughout the Belle Époque, those who enjoyed a certain status and class privilege were not required to submit to the same levels of scrutiny as others. The fact of being rich and/or of coming from certain families (the nobility) was guarantee enough. Those who sailed to the United States and entered the country via the port of New York, for example, were processed through the now-famous site of Ellis Island. Here, the ‘poor and huddled masses’⁵

had to disembark and present themselves to immigration agents who required proof that they would not become a public burden (that they had an income or a way of earning one, and did not present a threat of costly infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis). Those who were *not* poor and did *not* need to huddle – because they enjoyed the space and comfort of first class – were interviewed by agents who came to them and interviewed them on board ship, conveniently, in their cabin.⁶ The agents had no cause to worry that these passengers would drain the public purse; the very fact that they travelled first class was the proof of their wealth, and their wealth was the manifest sign that they merited admission to the country.

This was not a world that pretended to treat everyone equally regardless of status. Membership in an elite class had its privileges, and no one pretended that public servants should be blind to such differences. For the upper echelons of society, then, national borders had little meaning. Beyond just a certain cultural cosmopolitanism – a feeling of being at home in various cities around the world where elite culture looked more or less the same – there was a certain transnationalism, a feeling that national borders did not exist (or at least, that they were only for other people, not for oneself).

Not all the women who participated in the Decadent movement were of this class, but Renée Vivien was one. Not only did her class background insulate her from the constraints of national boundaries, she was transnational by birth and by upbringing. Born in London, England, in 1877 to an English father from Yorkshire and an American mother from Michigan, the family moved to Paris when she was very young, and she grew up speaking both French and English and thinking of the Bois de Boulogne as home (she once referred to it as her ‘patrie’). Independently wealthy, she settled in Paris permanently when she came of age, but she travelled extensively, regularly going to Nice for the carnival season in spring and Bayreuth for the Wagner opera festival in summer, for example.

Vivien became most famous for her poetry. Though she also wrote prose, she is often remembered as a kind of *poète maudit* in the tradition of Charles Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine, which

is to say as that a sort of latter-day Decadent. She had a tempestuous and legendary affair with the American heiress and salonnière Natalie Barney beginning in the winter of 1899-1900, and travelled to the US with Barney, whose family split their time between Washington, D.C. and a summer home in Maine. Vivien went on to have many affairs with other women, most notably the Rothschild heiress Hélène de Zuylen who was a keen automobilist. Vivien found inspiration in the work of the Greek poet Sappho, and learned Greek in order to be able to translate her work. Sappho was a touchstone not only for women writers in general, but for women who loved other women, particularly as she lived in a pre-Christian time in which same-sex love was considered noble, and not tainted by religious notions of sin. Not content merely to study Sappho, Vivien travelled to her home island of Lesbos and toyed with the idea of setting up a community for women writers there that would echo the school founded centuries ago by her role model.⁷

This thumbnail sketch of Vivien can be summed up by the label of a mid-century book that looks back on the turn of the century. In *L'Époque 1900* (1951), André Billy describes Vivien as ‘Sapho 1900, Sapho 100%’.⁸ The words work better in French than in English: ‘Sapho mille neuf cent, Sapho cent pour cent’ has a pleasing symmetry. Each phrase comprises just four words, of which the first and last are exactly the same in both phrases (‘Sapho’ and ‘cent’). The second word of each phrase consists of a number (‘mille’, ‘cent’) so that while the exact word is different, they share a semantic field. It is only the words ‘neuf’ (nine) and ‘pour’ (per) that are really different, so that the two aspects of Vivien that are conjoined in this phrase – her *fin-de-siècle*-ness and her sapphism (both affective and poetic) – seem to echo and reinforce each other.

Both aspects – the Sapphic and the Decadent – are evident in her published work. Following the first signs of trouble in the relationship with Barney, Vivien began publishing furiously, starting with a volume of poems inspired by Barney, *Préludes et études*, in 1901. She continued publishing at a furious rate of several books a year – books of poetry, but also short stories, novels, and translations, sometimes under yet other pseudonyms. By the time of her premature death at the age of thirty-two in 1909, she had published about twenty books (an average

of over two a year), and that is not counting revised editions that appeared during her lifetime or posthumous publications. The exact causes of her death are still debated, but there is general agreement that it involved a combination of what might be called the ‘three A’s’: Alcohol, Anorexia, and the Abuse of drugs.

Vivien was one of the first modern women to write openly about female same-sex love, to celebrate women’s physical beauty, not just their intellectual powers, and to do so unapologetically (which is not to say that she did not feel the brunt of negative public opinion). Taking control of the narrative of female same-sex desire is one of Vivien’s most significant contributions to literary history. The roster of ‘classic’ texts of lesbianism in French, for example, runs as follows: Diderot’s *La Religieuse*; Balzac’s *La Fille aux yeux d’or*; Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin*; Baudelaire’s ‘femmes damnées’; Zola’s *Nana*; and Pierre Louÿs’ *Les Chansons de Bilitis*. In each case, a male author controls the discourse. Why did this topic remain in the hands of men for so long? Where was the testimony of women themselves? Why do we not hear the voices of women until the twentieth century? Part of the answer, I submit, has to do with the discourse of nationalism.

When a modern discourse about homosexuality began to emerge in the nineteenth century, the way people thought about nationalism provided a lens through which to filter and understand it. At this time, nationalism was one of the dominant ways of classifying people, generating an ideology (an ‘-ism’) based on the notion that people who shared a country also shared certain other characteristics. At the same time that stereotyped notions about national character were evolving, the idea that ‘the homosexual’ was a *type* of person (not just the agent of certain actions) was also taking root. To paraphrase Foucault, it was not just that certain actions were wrong, ‘sodomitical’ acts (variously defined), for example. It was the idea that the person who committed such acts belonged more generally to a type, in Foucault’s words: ‘a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, [...] a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology.’⁹ This person was inherently immoral, regardless of any particular action they may or may not perform. To illustrate, consider the identity of someone who might

choose to self-identify as an ‘alcoholic’ or perhaps more readily as a ‘recovering alcoholic.’ An alcoholic who does not drink alcohol is not a contradiction in terms given our understanding of that disease today. It is a person who refrains from certain actions, but is still prone to certain patterns of behaviour. That is the homosexual who is emerging in the nineteenth century.

Foucault and others name this type the ‘homosexual’, but of course that word was not really in circulation until the very end of the century. It was coined by a German speaker in 1869, and it leads Foucault to date the origins of ‘the homosexual’ to 1870 (neater, though of course less accurate, than 1869). The word gets picked up by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, but it does not circulate much until it is used in French in a medical journal in 1891 and then a year later in English in 1892 in a translation of Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*. These are somewhat specialized publications, however, and it is only at the very end of the century, in 1897, when Havelock Ellis uses the word in his *Sexual Inversion* that it really gains currency.

But the gay men who were interested in identifying each other did not wait around for this medico-juridical label to come along in order to facilitate interactions. They got on with their lives, using a variety of euphemisms and signals to make their interests known. Proscribed forms of sexuality (and other inadmissible behaviours) have always been identified as coming from somewhere else, because nobody nice ‘from around here’ would ever admit to doing evil things, so there is a long tradition of attributing vice to foreigners. The origin of the word ‘bugger’ is ‘Bulgarian’, for example, because those heretics indulged in non-procreative sexual practices. Syphilis spread to France and England from Italy, and so unclean sexual morals were ‘the Italian vice’ (though if you were Italian you would blame the French). And allusions to ‘Greek’ love were perfectly transparent as ways of naming pederasty. So there was already a predisposition to associate non-normative sexual practices with other nationalities, but in the nineteenth century this link was strengthened by the increasing perception that there were national ‘types’. Gay men used this isomorphic thinking to communicate. Euphemisms for gay-ness and pick-up lines borrowed national stereotypes, so that ‘do you speak German’ served as a pick-up line for gay men in France.

When, in the early twentieth century, the German leadership was caught up in a gay sex scandal surrounding Philip von Eulenburg, the French started referring to ‘Eulenburgres’, punning on the name’s resemblance to the slang ‘bougre’ (or bugger).

This means of communication seems to have worked well for men, but examples of women borrowing from the discourse of nationalism to articulate their own ideas about sexual identity are lacking. Indeed, there is even a kind of obtuseness about such questions, a refusal to understand, as the following anecdote suggests. Just over a hundred years ago, a young and naive Lady Aberconway, then known as Christabel McLaren, found herself making polite conversation at a shooting party luncheon in Wales. She later recounted the exchange in her memoirs:

The daughter-in-law of the house, also newly married, sat beside me and asked: ‘Are you a Lesbian? I am!’

‘No,’ I answered, ‘I’m Irish and Scottish and partly English.’

[...]

That night at Bodnant I said to my father-in-law: ‘Do you know that today I was asked if I was a Greek!’¹⁰

The humour of the misunderstanding is partly about naivety: Christabel is asked point-blank about her sexuality, but mistakes the question and gives an answer that references nationality. But it is also revealing that when she relays the conversation to her father-in-law (an indiscretion excused on account of her innocence), she paraphrases and substitutes ‘Greek’ for ‘Lesbian’. In her account of the conversation, she goes on to explain to her father-in-law: ‘The island of Lesbos is a Greek island, isn’t it? A--- asked me if I was a Lesbian.’¹¹

The details McLaren supplies allow us to identify her interlocutor and to date the anecdote. Christabel Mary Melville Macnaghten, born 12 December 1890, married Henry Duncan ‘Harry’ McLaren (1879-1953) in 1910. Harry’s father (and hence Christabel’s father-in-law), the politician Charles McLaren (1850-1934), inherited the Bodnant estate in north Wales in 1895 through his marriage in 1877 to Laura Pochin. Harry had only one brother, so there can be no confusion about the identity of the other daughter-in-law of the house. Harry’s brother Francis (1886-1917) married

Barbara Jekyll (niece of the garden designer Gertrude) on 20 July 1911, allowing us to place the anecdote as occurring most likely some time later that year. McClaren identifies her interlocutor by the initial ‘A’, but perhaps either she confused Barbara with her mother (Agnes Graham), or she meant something like ‘[Person] A’, the way one might refer to people as X and Y, or as ‘Person 1’.

Consider how differently the same question (‘Are you a Lesbian?’) is received a century later when it is put at another luncheon in 1994. At the second of the four weddings in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (dir. Mike Newell, 1994), Fiona (played by Kristen Scott Thomas) is sitting alone at a wedding reception when one of the other guests, an older woman who looks like a maiden aunt, engages her in a polite conversational exchange by asking her if she is a lesbian. It is a very *fin-de-siècle* moment in a number of ways. To begin with, all the weddings in this film are between men and women, gay marriage being not yet legal. The only ceremony that the token gay couple is allowed is a funeral. If weddings don’t happen for gay people yet at this end of century, death does, as it always has, although unusually for this cultural moment, it is not an AIDS-related death. Also, the audience is invited to think that the intrusively personal question is a progressive moment. The maiden aunt reveals herself to be anything but prudish and explains her startlingly frank question by noting that ‘[being a lesbian] is one of the possibilities for unmarried girls nowadays.’ Especially as the question comes from what may be perceived as the ‘older generation’, it acts as a sign of changing times from a surprising quarter. Fiona, for her part, shows no confusion about the question, at least, no confusion that she is being asked about her national origins. Instead, her only hesitation in answering revolves around ‘what counts’.

Christabel McLaren’s anecdote provides some insight into how women communicated with each other (or, as in this case, failed to communicate) about sexual matters in the pre-World War I years of the Belle Époque, Vivien’s milieu until her death in 1909. Men asked each other ‘are you Greek?’ and heard a coded question about sexual preference. Women asked each other a direct question about sexual preference – ‘are you a Lesbian?’ – and instead heard a question about

nationality: ‘are you Greek?’ The discourse of nationalism was clearly working differently for men and for women. Why?

Up to this point, my argument has been that men could think of themselves as having a sexual ‘identity’ because they already perceived themselves as having a national identity, but how does one become ‘nationalized’? As the political philosopher Montesquieu once put it, ‘Comment peut-on être français’ [How can you be French]? How can existence – ‘being’ – enter a national mode? History suggests examples of many loyalties that might shape a person’s sense of who they are, from family to tribal affiliations and beyond. One might feel defined by and beholden to a feudal lord (and hence a place) or to an institution such as a church. But channelling these ideas into the concept of national belonging is a different order of magnitude. In thinking about how one acquires the sense of ‘imagined community’ that is a nation, Benedict Anderson has privileged phenomena such as print culture, so literacy may be one general prerequisite. In France specifically, the historian Eugen Weber has described the grand project of the nineteenth century as that of turning ‘peasants into Frenchmen’, that is, taking a rural population with an identity primarily shaped by regional connections and making all those people feel part of one single, bigger, all-encompassing entity: France.¹² Of course, Weber is talking not about all people, but about French *men*, ‘Frenchmen’, des français.

How did French men learn that they were part of France? The answer seems to be through a combination of military service and participation in national political activities such as voting. Women, of course, were excluded from both activities until well into the middle of the twentieth century (as far as France is concerned), and until after WWI as far as Britain and the US are concerned. In all cases, Vivien was long dead by then. In the world that she knew, women were not thought of as having a claim to national belonging in their own right. Women took the citizenship of their nearest male relative. Fathers could confer citizenship on sons and daughters, but it was clear that this passed through the male – not the female – line. And just to make sure, a number of countries formalized laws that stipulated that married women took the citizenship of

their husband. One example will illustrate: in 1907, the US Congress passed a piece of legislation that came to be known as the Expatriation Act. Section 3 of this Act stated ‘that any American woman who marries a foreigner shall take the nationality of her husband.’ The hitherto American painter Romaine Brooks, who had married a British man in 1903 (but went on to have an affair with Vivien in around 1908) suddenly found herself expatriated and a British subject. Loss of citizenship could have consequences for property rights and for those practising a profession that required them to be a citizen, so more was at stake than just a piece of paper. The Expatriation Act was challenged in the US, but it was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1915 in a case known as *Mackenzie v. Hare*. That is but one illustration, but gender asymmetry in claims to citizenship was commonplace. As late as 1930, only five countries in the world made no distinctions at all based on sex in their nationality laws, and it is an interesting list: Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay – all in South America – and the Soviet Union. *All* European countries, *and* the US, continued to discriminate until relatively recently (and some continue to do so in certain matters).

So women didn’t learn that they were ‘citizens’ of a country by being called to fight and defend it, they weren’t given a stake in national matters by having a vote in national elections (even though the suffrage movement was beginning to militate for this at the end of the nineteenth century). In short, women had no ‘nationality of their own’.

An obvious objection arises here, which is that anyone who travelled as much as Vivien did must surely have been aware of what country she was ‘from’. Today the experience of crossing national borders is a common one, and reinforces an awareness of national belonging. To travel, a person must have a passport, so it is hard to avoid knowing where you are ‘from’, and the knowledge is reinforced in various ways that call upon people to sort themselves into groups, such as ‘EU passports’ and ‘non-EU passports’ or ‘US citizens and permanent residents’ and ‘other’. Vivien travelled constantly. In 1905, for example, her travels took her to Constantinople, Greece, Amsterdam, Cologne, Basel, Bellagio, Milan, Genoa, Florence, and back to London. At the end of the year she travelled around the Mediterranean, visiting Italy, Greece, Palestine, and Egypt. These

are her movements for 1906: Constantinople, Nice, Blois (in France), Constantinople, Mytilene, Marseille, Nice, Amiens, London, Utrecht, Constantinople, Vienna, Constantinople. In 1907, the last year she would still have the energy to travel before her death in 1909, she visited Naples, Nice, London, Japan, Honolulu, and Nice again. How could she not know where she was ‘from’?

Part of the answer lies in the fact that the document that we think of today as the emblem of our nationality, the passport, was not tied to national origin that way in the *fin de siècle*. In the nineteenth century, it was not uncommon for citizens of one country to travel using a passport issued by a completely different country. Thus, when Robert Browning eloped with Elizabeth Barrett, he was travelling on a French passport. Similarly, it is enlightening to learn that passports were considered such a repressive system that just over a century ago the collective diplomatic wisdom in Europe was that passports would soon be obsolete. In addition, as discussed above, Vivien was shielded by class privilege from many intrusive regulations. In short, it is entirely possible that Vivien never had a passport, never possessed a single document that told her where, exactly, she fit.

There was very little, then, in the way of formal structures that imposed an awareness of national identity on Vivien. And her personal family history gave her plenty to play with that encouraged the opposite. Her mother Mary, born in Michigan in the US, had attended school in Canada before being orphaned, at which point she went to live with an aunt in Hawaii (not yet part of the US, though soon to be). It was there that Mary met and married John Tarn, an English gentleman from Yorkshire, a region that likes to tout its Viking roots, so that Vivien also felt an ethnic connection to Norway and ‘the North’. Add to this that she grew up in Paris, which is where she felt most at home, and it’s easy to see that she may not have felt that she belonged to any one single ‘nation’ at all.

And this brings us back to the question of what it might have meant if Vivien had been at that shooting party luncheon in Wales instead of Christabel McLaren. I have argued that a woman’s sense of national identity was not as well established at the beginning of the twentieth century as

by its end, and that Vivien's extensive travel, rather than consolidating a sense of national belonging, might instead have brought home how fluid (for women) such a national identity still was for those with class privilege. But if Vivien shared the widely-held perception that there was somehow a connection between nationality and sexuality, then the sense of fluidity of the one perhaps suggested an analogy with sexual identity. For there is one point in Vivien's work where national and sexual identity clearly intersect, and that is her understanding of the term 'lesbian'. Vivien was a great admirer of Sappho, studying Greek in order to be able to translate her work into French, and consciously borrowing metrical forms and trying to adapt them to French prosody. An extension of this admiration was Vivien's dream of re-creating Sappho's community of women in Mytilene, the capital city of the island of Lesbos, and she made several trips there before finally abandoning the project. Vivien sought a lesbian community, then, but what seems significant about that search is that it was understood partially as a sexual identification, but also a national one. For Vivien, one became a lesbian by living on Lesbos.

Lacking a solid sense of national belonging may have provoked a feeling of insecurity at times: one could be expatriated by the stroke of a governmental pen without recourse, as some of Vivien's peers discovered. But the experience may also have suggested a way of inhabiting a category without the alignment becoming a form of identity, a way of negotiating affiliations without being constrained by them. While the male homosexual became a species (Foucault's word), then organized into taxonomies, the lesbian briefly remained something more amorphous, for better or worse.¹³ Vivien's contemporaries who lived longer, such as Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks, lived long enough to experience ways that women were corralled into categories of national belonging in the twentieth century, and they perhaps not uncoincidentally express a more clearly-defined sense of their sexual identity. In the course of the twentieth century, legal reforms eventually granted women a claim to a nationality of their own, one they could claim in their own right. On the other hand, women were increasingly subject to the effects of a repressive system of national control that took the form of the passport as guarantor of identity. Alongside

this nationalization came the emergence of a clearer sense of lesbian identity, also with its pluses and minuses (the advantage of visibility being traded off against the constraint of a label). Women experienced a hardening of the arterial conduits that allowed one to circulate among different categories. Where previously, permeable boundaries allowed for exchange, rigidity brought clearer definition but less flexibility. As Heather Love has put it, in her examination of the historical investment in looking back at gay lives in the past, ‘One may enter the mainstream on the condition that one breaks ties with all those who cannot make it.’¹⁴ Negotiating this emergence into the mainstream and its implications for accepting limits would be the work of Modernist women – Barney and Brooks, but also women such as Djuna Barnes, Radclyffe Hall, and Virginia Woolf. (It is no coincidence that Woolf made her famous proclamation of transnationalism in *Three Guineas*, that as a woman she had no country.) But Vivien died before this transformation in the way we perceive sexual categories was complete, and lived at a time when being in between things was potentially empowering, at least for a financially comfortable woman of independent means.

This precarious moment emerges at the *fin de siècle*, when women are not quite yet full citizens with predictable national and other characteristics, but are on the verge of claiming that embrace of the fatherland (or motherland) implicitly through their involvement in the growing demands for suffrage. Whether or not individual women were active in this movement, the discourse around the public role of women as political agents contributed to changing the understanding of women’s civic status for everyone. And this moment of morphing identity forms the backdrop to women’s participation in Decadent movements (taken in the broadest sense) across Europe and beyond. Like certain women themselves, this movement was transnational in that it exceeded national discourses and flowed across boundaries that were still porous. Russian women were in Paris, and French women were from London or the US. If women writers did not physically travel themselves, then their works did, like those of Rachilde, whose novels were translated into Polish and whose plays were performed in Copenhagen. The transnational perspective on women writers of the turn of the century thus sheds a new light on Decadence.

Geographically dispersed, women were not all congregating in the same club, either literally or figuratively, yet they formed a fraternity of sorts, as demonstrated by the articles gathered in the pages that follow.

¹ The exact date of death of Marc de Montifaud has long remained uncertain. I am indebted to Cheryl Morgan and Mathilde Huet for establishing definitively that she died in 1912 after a long illness.

² See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991); Isaiah Berlin, 'The Bent Twig: On the Rise of Nationalism', in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 238-61; Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday: An Autobiography* (New York: Viking, 1945).

³ Honoré de Balzac, *Correspondance*, vol. I (1809-1835), ed. by Roger Pierrot and Hervé Yon (Paris: Gallimard-Pléiade, 2006), p. 539. My translation.

⁴ Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), p. 39.

⁵ This is a slight paraphrase from Emma Lazarus' sonnet 'The New Colossus' (1883), written to raise money for the construction of a pedestal for the Statue of Liberty – 'Give me your tired, your poor, | Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free'. See 'The New Colossus', in *The Poems of Emma Lazarus* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1889), p. 203.

⁶ See Erika Rand, *The Ellis Island Snow Globe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁷ For more on the life and work of Vivien, see (in French) Jean-Paul Goujon, *Tes blessures sont plus douces que leurs caresses: Vie de Renée Vivien* (Paris: Régine Desforges, 1986); and (in English) Karla Jay, *The Amazon and the Page: Natalie Clifford Barney and Renée Vivien* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

⁸ André Billy, *L'époque 1900: 1885-1905* (Paris: J. Tallandier, 1951).

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1990), pp. 42-43.

¹⁰ Christabel Aberconway, *A Wiser Woman?: A Book of Memories* (London: Hutchinson, 1966), p. 112.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).

¹³ See George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985). 'Lesbianism was also particularly difficult to face. As an expression of female sexuality, it was ignored through most of the nineteenth century. This was not merely a "love that dared not speak its name" – it did not even have a name', pp. 90-91.

¹⁴ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 10.

Gertrud Eysoldt and the Persistence of Decadence on the German Avant-Garde Stage

Yvonne Ivory

University of South Carolina

In October 1901, Max Reinhardt's avant-garde Berlin cabaret 'Schall und Rauch' ['Sound and Smoke'] added to its line-up a new skit entitled 'Die Dekadenten' ['The Decadents'].¹ The piece was based on a parody of Decadent and Aestheticist sensibilities that had appeared in 1898 in the magazine *Jugend* [see Fig. 1]. In it, two young men lounge in a *fin-de-siècle* café, smoking, drinking absinthe 'the way Verlaine used to', and discussing the effects of specific colours on their nerves. After basking in the notion of a blue house with a green roof lit from within by a cadmium-yellow flickering light, the two barely escape dying of 'an excess of bliss' by getting up and leaving the café, carrying on their shoulders 'the great weariness of the declining century'.² The clichéd, overwrought Decadence of this 1898 vignette clearly still has traction in October 1901, as can be seen in a magazine illustration of Reinhardt's 'Schall und Rauch' version [see Fig. 2].³ Reinhardt had already lampooned the aesthetics of the Yellow Nineties in 1901, when his cabaret ensemble parodied Maurice Maeterlinck's Symbolist play *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1893) as 'Ysidore Mysterlinck's "Carleas und Elisande"';⁴ but with 'Die Dekadenten', he underscored his apparent rejection of the Aestheticist, Decadent, and Symbolist traditions. It was on that very same 'Schall und Rauch' stage one year later, however, that the company gave its famous private performance of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* with Gertrud Eysoldt (1870-1955) in the title role – the performance that would inspire Richard Strauss to write his 1905 opera.⁵ Over the course of the next several years, as 'Schall und Rauch' morphed into the Kleines Theater and Reinhardt also took on directorship of the Neues Theater and the Deutsches Theater, the same ensemble that had mocked 'The Decadents' in 1901 performed *Salome* over 140 times and brought a number of other Decadent and Symbolist plays to the attention of Berlin audiences.⁶ The association of

Reinhardt with Decadence was soon strong enough that the critic Leo Berg could write in 1906 of there having been two types of young playwright at the turn of the century: ‘the Idealists ... who clung to Shakespeare and Schiller, and the Decadents, who were adopted with great success by Max Reinhardt’.⁷

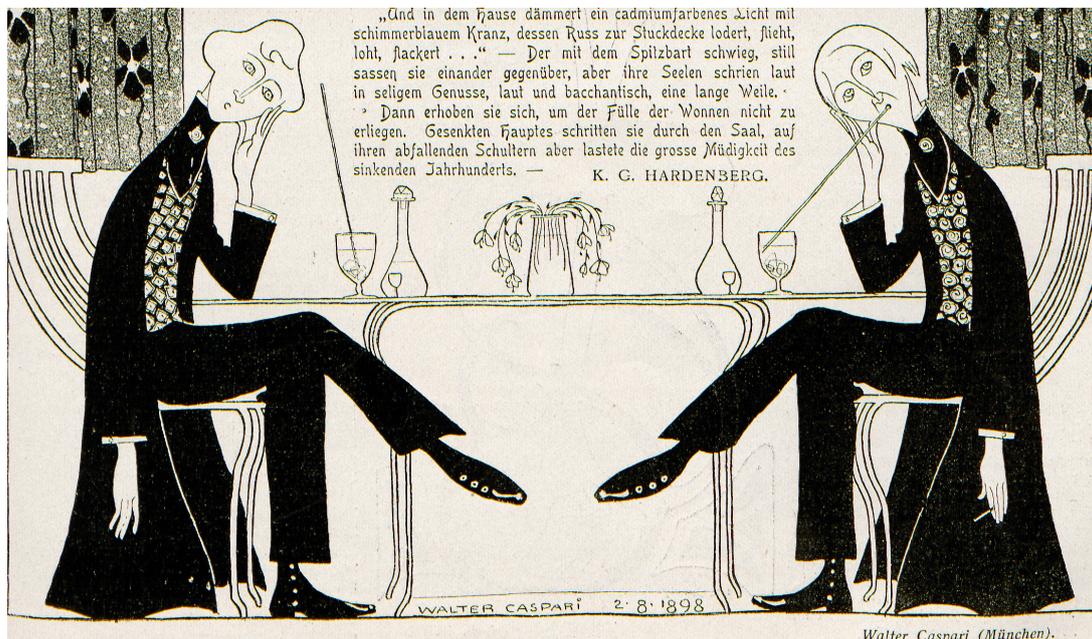


Figure 1. Walter Caspari, ‘Die Dekadenten’, in *Jugend*, 3 (1898), p. 695.

Source: Digitalisierungszentrum der Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg, Signatur: G 5442-10 Folio RES



Figure 2. C. Hall, ‘Aus Schall und Rauch: Die Dekadenten’

Source: *Bühne und Brett*, 2 [25 October 1901], p. 13.

We could read Reinhardt's vacillations about Decadence as a typical artefact of the period during which he was fighting to modernize German dramaturgical practices.⁸ For almost two decades, scholars of Decadence have been demonstrating how modernists and avant-garde innovators (like Reinhardt) represented themselves as breaking away from Decadence in order to obscure – consciously or unconsciously – the ways in which they were in fact indebted to it.⁹ But in Reinhardt's case, the move from ridiculing Decadence to giving the Decadent canon a new lease of life was part of a broader, self-conscious effort to break the dominance of a particularly hide-bound mode of Naturalism in Berlin's theatre world.¹⁰ Gertrud Eysoldt, I argue in this article, helped Reinhardt develop his post-Naturalist repertoire by drawing his attention to serious Decadent plays. Eysoldt, who joined Reinhardt's ensemble in December 1901, two full months after he had produced 'Die Dekadenten',¹¹ steered Reinhardt's 1902-1903 rehabilitation of Decadence and Symbolism because she was drawn to the opportunities she found in the works of Wilde, Maeterlinck, and Hugo von Hofmannsthal to defy the limits of language with stylized movement and gesture, to explore the modern psyche, and to represent sexually dissident figures on stage. Reinhardt's commitment to an intimate theatre of emotional connection between audience and actor provided her with a platform to explore the intense emotional and psychic lives of the Decadent women she played. Eysoldt's 'post-Victorian Decadence', to use Kristen Mahoney's phrase, was not reactionary – not a means for her to '[refuse] to assimilate to a modern moment that [she] found fundamentally wanting' – but rather an aesthetic practice that allowed her to help create that moment, disturbing the status quo of the German stage and paving the way for avant-garde innovations in German theatre.¹² As a celebrated actress in the decade leading up to the Great War, she did so by taking on such roles as Salome, Frank Wedekind's Lulu, Hofmannsthal's Elektra (a character written for her), and Maeterlinck's Selysette; and, as a theatre director in the early years of the Weimar Republic, by fighting a legal battle to stage Arthur Schnitzler's classic of *fin-de-siècle* Viennese Decadence, *Reigen* [*La ronde*]. After a brief sketch of Eysoldt's career and the scholarship that has addressed it, I will

elaborate on her Decadence in two ways in this article: first, by exploring the queer and New Woman circles in which she moved in the 1890s, networks typical of those that for Matthew Potolsky help constitute ‘the decadent republic of letters’, and spaces where Eysoldt cut her political teeth;¹³ and second, by examining in greater depth the active role that she played in deploying the canon of theatrical Decadence (through her association with Reinhardt) with a view to forwarding her modern understanding of gender, sexuality, and social politics on the early twentieth-century German stage.

Eysoldt’s Background and Early Career

Gertrud Eysoldt was an actress, acting teacher, radio actor, and theatre manager who was active between 1890 and 1933. She was a star in her day, but is remembered now for two main reasons: because she was a renowned portrayer of *femmes fatales* under (the even more famous) Reinhardt and because a prestigious annual acting prize was established in her name in 1986.¹⁴ Since the 1980s, German theatre historian Carsten Niemann has made a valiant effort to recover Eysoldt’s story, publishing some of her writings as well as a short biographical essay based on his dissertation; while Leonhard Fiedler and Dagmar Walach, respectively, have edited Eysoldt’s letters to playwright Hofmannsthal and to theatre director Max Martersteig, Eysoldt’s first husband.¹⁵ In much of this work, Eysoldt is produced as a figure worth remembering either because hers is an exemplary case of a talented actor who embraced the radical transformations of dramaturgical culture at the turn of the century, or because she was close to some of the great and influential men of her day – Reinhardt and Hofmannsthal, especially.¹⁶ Only two scholars have recognized a feminist or political streak in Eysoldt’s oeuvre, and celebrated her as a thoroughly modern figure in her own right: Sara Jackson has shown how Eysoldt complicated the figure of the *femme fatale* with portrayals of Salome and Lulu that ‘contested the patriarchal paradigm of the fantasy’;¹⁷ and, in her magisterial biography of Johanna Elberskirchen (the life partner of Eysoldt’s sister), Christiane Leidinger has outlined the political and socially

progressive networks within which the Eysoldts moved.¹⁸ But much is still lacking in the secondary literature on Gertrud Eysoldt: studies downplay her intellectual prowess; her feminist background and resistance to heteronormativity has been almost erased from the record; little has been made of her engagement with progressive political and social developments during her lifetime; and the extent of her involvement with transnational networks of writers, artists, and photographers remains underexplored. While the present article cannot elaborate fully on each of these aspects of her biography, it can point to some promising lines of investigation.

Eysoldt studied at the Royal Bavarian School of Music and took on her earliest minor roles as a trainee at the Munich Hoftheater [court theatre] in 1889. Her first professional contract was with the Hoftheater Meiningen, a forward-thinking company committed to the kind of theatrical innovation that was later championed by Reinhardt.¹⁹ Although she was trained in the Fach [category] of the ‘naïve and sentimental young girl’ [see Fig. 3], and played such roles in Meiningen, Riga, and Stuttgart in the 1890s, Eysoldt was anything but a naïve and sentimental young girl.



Figure 3. 1890s publicity postcard of Eysoldt in aesthetic dress and with an Easter lily; photographer unknown. Source: author’s own collection.

In her teenage years she had been exposed to feminist and socialist circles through her mother, Bertha Eysoldt. Bertha had divorced Gertrud's father in the 1870s and was raising Gertrud and her sister Anna as a single mother. When Anna expressed an interest in studying medicine, Bertha did what she could to ease Anna's path into the University of Zurich, the first European university to admit female students into its medical programme. She arranged for Anna to be tutored for the entrance exam alongside Frida Bebel, daughter of the German socialist politician and Eysoldt family friend August Bebel, and she moved the family to Zurich in anticipation of Anna's acceptance.²⁰ Here Bertha opened a boarding house designed to help the young female pioneers of the medical field to find a supportive home in the city; this is where Gertrud lived until moving to Munich to study acting in 1888.²¹ In Zurich, Anna socialized with a group of medical students in the orbit of the author Ricarda Huch, and became friends with many of the women who would become the first female physicians in the German-speaking world. (These Zurich circles of gender non-conformists would be captured in Aimee Duc's 1901 novel *Sind es Frauen? Roman über das dritte Geschlecht* [*Are They Women? A Novel about the Third Sex*].)²² Anna's studies soon took her to Bern, where she met, married, and very quickly started divorce proceedings against a lawyer named Ernst Aebi. It was during this tumultuous time that she met the medical student with whom she would share the rest of her life, Johanna Elberskirchen.²³

Gertrud had meanwhile embarked on her drama studies in Munich, where she was joined by her mother. This time Bertha set up a photography studio and a school for female photographers to provide the family with a reliable source of income.²⁴ Here Gertrud trained to be a photographer even as she was developing her acting credentials.²⁵ Bertha's business partner at the Atelier Therese was Anna Deneken, an author and translator who would go on in 1906 to publish a pamphlet on lesbianism, gender norms, and the law.²⁶ Bertha, too, was engaged in feminist activism in Munich: she lobbied for women's access to the kinds of secondary school ('Gymnasien') that prepared students to enter university, and was elected to the board of the

‘Club for the Founding of a Gymnasium for Girls’ in May 1894.²⁷ The Eysoldts also socialized with Anita Augspurg and Sophie Goudstikker, the lesbian feminists who ran Munich’s more famous photography studio, the Atelier (later Hof-Atelier) Elvira.²⁸ This studio, run solely by Goudstikker – ‘Puck’ to her friends – from the mid-1890s on, was a gathering place for Munich’s bohemians and social dissidents: anarchists, socialists, New Women, homosexuals, and such figures as Heinrich Mann, Lou-Andreas Salomé, and Rainer Maria Rilke. ‘In the world of Munich cultural, artistic, and gender politics’, as Irit Rogoff has put it, ‘it is the Hof Atelier Elvira [sic] which stands out as [...] the site of convergences’.²⁹ Ernst von Wolzogen’s 1899 novel *Das dritte Geschlecht* [*The Third Sex*] is set in a fictionalized Hof-Atelier Elvira, and portrays the world of Sophie Goudstikker, dubbed ‘Box’ in the novel.³⁰ Whenever work took Gertrud Eysoldt to Munich in the late 1890s, it was in the Hof-Atelier Elvira that she stayed with her good friend Puck [see Fig. 4].³¹



Figure 4. Portrait of Gertrud Eysoldt in Munich in 1898, taken by Sophie ‘Puck’ Goudstikker at the Hof-Atelier Elvira. Source: Porträtsammlung Manskopf, Universitätsbibliothek Johann Christian Senckenberg, Frankfurt am Main, Signatur S36/F08537.

Another ‘site of convergence’ in Munich at the time was the Akademisch-dramatischer Verein [Academic-Dramatic Club], a mostly amateur drama group run by Wolzogen that specialized in presenting avant-garde plays for private audiences so as to evade the censor.³² In 1895 Eysoldt performed in their production of Ibsen’s *Wild Duck* alongside the young Thomas Mann,³³ and in 1897 she joined the group for *Dämmerung* [*Twilight*], an Ibsenesque play by Elsa Bernstein.³⁴ *Dämmerung* deals with women’s emancipation through the story of a young woman with poor eyesight and the doctor called in to treat her. Her widower father is shocked to find that the eye specialist is a short-haired New Woman – even more so when the doctor hints that the daughter’s condition might be a nervous complaint, or the result of a sexually transmitted disease he may have picked up in his youth. He rejects this latter suggestion outright, but slowly comes to trust in the doctor’s expertise. She successfully operates on the daughter (suggestively named Isolde and played by Eysoldt), but when the physician gets engaged to the widower, Isolde attempts suicide, breaking up the romance.³⁵ The amateur dramatist Sophie Goudstikker received rave reviews for her portrayal of the short-haired doctor.³⁶

Gertrud, Anna, and Bertha Eysoldt were very well established, then, in the ‘two overlapping circles’ of ‘new women of the fin de siècle’ that Marti Lybeck has identified as key forces in the German women’s emancipation movement: ‘the first generation of women university students in Zurich and the radical feminist activists living in Munich’.³⁷ The anarchists, free thinkers, and ‘life reformers’ among whom Anna Eysoldt lived with Johanna Elberskirchen in Tessin in the 1890s constitute yet another counter-cultural group to which Gertrud was exposed before her career took off in Berlin.³⁸ But biographies of Eysoldt leave out this aspect of her intellectual development, focusing instead on her attempts to further her acting career in the 1890s, or on the fact that she married her older theatre manager in 1894 and tried to start a family. In these accounts, Eysoldt’s adventures in Bohemia only began when she moved to Berlin around 1900, but clearly she already moved in feminist and New Women circles in her late teens, and the ‘happy families’ narrative must be disturbed by the newly-married Eysoldt writing

to a friend in 1894 that ‘being a wife and a mother can never be my goal in life. I work towards my artistic goals, and have every right to do so’.³⁹

Eysoldt’s career, however, was stagnating in the 1890s. While she was gradually trusted with more substantial roles at the Königliches Hoftheater [Royal Court Theatre] in Stuttgart, throughout the decade she could be more regularly found playing trouser roles, many of them minor, but some as important as Shakespeare’s Richard III.⁴⁰ This was a phenomenon that would continue over the decades: at the height of her fame, Eysoldt played a genderbending Puck in Reinhardt’s production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* [see Fig. 5] and the sexually amorphous Euphorion in Goethe’s *Faust II* [see Fig. 6]; while Hofmannsthal even created the male role of Kreon’s Sword Carrier specifically for her in his 1906 play *Oedipus and the Sphinx*.⁴¹ Trouser roles were not uncommon for female actors of the era, of course, but in Eysoldt’s case there is evidence that theatre managers, playwrights, and critics found her looks plain, child-like, or even masculine, and sought less feminine roles for her.⁴² Carsten Niemann has found a note in which Ludwig Chronegk, the theatre manager in Meiningen, describes the actress as “‘funny-looking” – a *genuinely* naïve girl’, suggesting perhaps that her looks made her unfit for any man’s advances.⁴³

Perceived issues with her looks notwithstanding, by the end of the 1890s Eysoldt had graduated to more substantial roles, including such oppressed but resilient heroines as Ibsen’s Nora (*A Doll’s House*) and Gerhardt Hauptmann’s *Hannele*. Her breakthrough came when in 1901 she began to work with Reinhardt, and her association with his Deutsches Theater would continue for the next thirty-three years. It was in Reinhardt’s troupe that she played the roles that would make her a household name in the pre-war years: the prostitute Nastja in Gorki’s *The Lower Depths*; Wedekind’s Lulu, Hofmannsthal’s Elektra, and of course, Wilde’s Salome.



Figure 5. Portrait of Gertrud Eysoldt as Puck in Reinhardt's hugely successful production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
Source: author's own collection.



Figure 6. Postcard of Eysoldt as Goethe's Euphorion, ca. 1911, photographed by Hans Böhm.
Source: author's own collection.

Max Reinhardt's Kleines Theater

Max Reinhardt had emerged in the 1890s as an important actor at Otto Brahm's Deutsches Theater, a venue closely associated with programmatic Naturalism. His first move towards independence was a foray into cabaret: he set up an informal pop-up club, 'Die Brille' ['The Spectacles'], with a group of colleagues as a kind of comic relief from the gloomy, socially responsible repertoire they were presenting on Brahm's stage. This was the group that went on to found the more permanent 'Schall und Rauch' in 1901. In both of these endeavours, Reinhardt was experimenting with post-Naturalist stances, ways to counteract the prevailing mode in which he had been working for the previous decade. Satire was clearly the first route he explored, but in August 1902 he wrote to Arthur Schnitzler that he had founded a 'purely artistic' theatre, the Kleines Theater [Little Theatre], and that he had negotiated a release from his contract with Brahm to focus fully on developing the unprecedented 'potential' of his new venture in 'intimate theatre'.⁴⁴

At the Kleines Theater Reinhardt would revolutionize the praxis of German theatre by allowing productions to emerge from the work of an ensemble rather than through some slavish devotion to the words of a playwright – a practice that had typified the theatre of German Naturalism. In this intimate, actor-centred space, Reinhardt was more concerned with the creation of an emotional bond between actor and audience than he was with instrumentalizing theatre in support of some specific social or political message.⁴⁵ As he told his assistant Arthur Kahane,

What I have in mind is drama that gives people joy again. That takes them out of themselves, out of the grey misery of their everyday lives into the bright and pure air of beauty. I feel it, how people are fed up with always seeing their own hardships on the stage, and how they yearn for brighter colours and a heightened life.⁴⁶

Reinhardt cast a wide net when it came to material that would serve these ends, practising what Peter Marx has called a kind of 'programmatic eclecticism'.⁴⁷ Reinhardt, writes Marx, did 'not make the typical avant-garde move of establishing one style by discarding all others; rather, he

demonstrate[d] the strength of the new theatre by means of pluralism, of a diverse range of parallel, coexisting modes'.⁴⁸ If one of the modes 'adopted with great success' by Reinhardt was Decadence,⁴⁹ it was thanks to Gertrud Eysoldt. Eysoldt had joined Reinhardt's acting ensemble at this turning point in his professional career, when he was moving from satire ('Schall und Rauch') to 'purely artistic' theatre (Kleines Theater) and was actively looking for new material with 'brighter colours and a heightened life'.⁵⁰ It was the well-read Eysoldt who introduced him to Wilde's *Salome* as well as the works of Frank Wedekind, just as it was Eysoldt who ensured that Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* premiered on Reinhardt's stage in 1903.⁵¹

Eysoldt was no passive vessel through which Decadent texts, subjected to Reinhardt's methods, were transmitted to German audiences. It was Eysoldt's own intervention that brought about this cultural moment: in an interview in the 1940s, Eysoldt recalls that because she was a great reader, Reinhardt often turned to her for new material for the stage. It was she who proposed *Salome* to him:

I had read a lot, and I can tell you now, I was a great support for him [Reinhardt] back then, a motivator, because I was really spirited, and had read such a lot [...] [He] was always asking me 'What could we put on now?' and all kinds of things occurred to me [...] that had not yet been produced in theatres at all. Things like, well, *Salome* by Oscar Wilde and Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*, which the censor at the time found abhorrent.⁵²

This is no idle boast. There is plenty of evidence that Eysoldt was a voracious and intelligent reader, one who saw reading as the cornerstone of self-education.⁵³ In her letters she is constantly describing literary, historical, dramaturgical, philosophical, psychological, and even medical books that she has been reading, and always surprised that her correspondents are not as well read as she is.⁵⁴ She writes to Hofmannsthal in 1905, for instance, that she has been reading Edward Gordon Craig's *Die Kunst des Theaters* [The Art of the Theatre], and finds it cold and contrived – quite the opposite of Reinhardt's approach to theatre, or Wilde's 'beautiful', imaginative reflections in 'The Truth of Masks'.⁵⁵ Eysoldt, then, is at work on and beyond the stage, helping build what will become the German canon of Decadent literature. Her *Salome* inspires Strauss to write his opera, her *Nastja* inspires Hofmannsthal to write his play *Elektra*,

and her radically new performance in that play is translated by Strauss into some of the most radically new music of the early twentieth century.

Eysoldt was interested in these figures because their Decadent traits allowed her to represent, in her own words, ‘modern, problematic female characters’.⁵⁶ She rejected the idea that they were archetypes, *femmes fatales*: for her, each was a specific, idiosyncratic psychological case to be presented to an audience.⁵⁷ For this reason she was pleased that reviewers found an incongruity between her own looks and the presumed beauty of the character she was playing. It upset the expectation that the *femme fatale* was a simple seductress and paved the way for a portrayal that would use gesture and movement to convey the character’s deeper psychological dimensions.⁵⁸ In terms of audience experience, it is a winning strategy for Eysoldt, though she does come up against a certain amount of resistance behind the scenes – with Wedekind, for instance, lobbying to have different Reinhardt actresses take on the role of Lulu, afraid that Eysoldt’s psychological approach to the character would damage the simple superficiality with which he had invested the character. Nevertheless, for a short period of time, Eysoldt’s praxis as an actor, as Sara Jackson has argued, undermined and complicated prevalent notions of the *femme fatale*.⁵⁹ Her fellow Reinhardt actor Eduard von Winterstein, who remembers Eysoldt as a ‘small, dainty little thing, almost infantile in appearance, without any striking vocal power’, recognized that it was her ‘passionate temperament’ in ‘difficult’ and ‘demanding’ roles that allowed her to achieve ‘entrancing’ effects. She ‘set trends’, he adds: ‘people talked of “Eysoldt roles”, and all young girls who took to the stage in those years wanted to play nothing but Eysoldt roles’.⁶⁰

Eysoldt’s Post-Victorian Decadence

Salome, Lulu, and Elektra were figures who helped define Decadence in popular German culture in the early twentieth century. Critics who saw the private staging of *Salome* on 15 November 1902, its reprise the following February, or its official public run in the autumn of 1903, were quick to label the play Decadent, some in a positive, some in a negative sense. The reviewer for

the *Nationalzeitung* admired Wilde's 'hyper-refined, almost morbid taste for the unusual, the shocking, and also the perverse. If the buzzword "Decadence" is ever to be used appropriately, it is here', he writes, in this play with an 'artistic core' but a 'decayed rind'.⁶¹ Another critic finds that 'never has decadent culture been brought to life on the stage with such ingenious fantasy as it is in this terribly sultry drama by this Englishman [*sic*];⁶² while a later reviewer calls on all critics to protect young people from seeing a play by an 'effeminate weakling', filled as it is with 'hysterical images' that will lead them to find 'sexual perversity' 'wonderful and brilliant'.⁶³ Such press responses to *Salome* and to Eysoldt's performance in it have been documented and analysed elsewhere,⁶⁴ but while W. Eugene Davis is right in thinking that we ought to avoid making sweeping generalizations about the German critical response to the play, reviews of the Reinhardt production indicate a consistent trend among reviewers to see *Salome*, the play and the figure, as exemplifying Decadence at the turn of the century.⁶⁵

Reflecting later in life on this and her other famous roles, Eysoldt characterized them not as Decadent but as avant-garde. 'I belonged to the avant-garde from the very beginning', she told her friend Carl Seelig, '[n]ew shores, new oceans – that's what I longed for. That's why I was chosen by directors with a preference for modern, problematic female characters. Wedekind, Maeterlinck, Strindberg, Claudel'.⁶⁶ For her, there is no great contrast between Strindberg and Maeterlinck: both are different expressions of what she characterizes as 'avant-garde' in that they cover new dramatic territory, and people that territory with challenging, modern women. In her correspondence with Hofmannsthal she claims that what sets her apart as an actress is that she has the 'courage to suffer',⁶⁷ a commitment to embracing the psychological make-up and psychological scars of her troubled female characters. Hofmannsthal, still in the throes of his famous loss of faith in the power of language to express feelings,⁶⁸ finds that her genius lies in her ability to 'take something that cannot be said, something buried deeply within, and translate it into a gesture',⁶⁹ an aspect of Eysoldt's talent that Fiedler calls her 'rhetoric of the body' and Jackson identifies as one of the ways Eysoldt 'asserted significant autonomy in performance and

staged feminist interventions in socio-cultural constructions of female subjectivity'.⁷⁰ In her use of stylized, exaggerated, and even grotesque gestures – movements encouraged by the style and content of Decadent and Symbolist dramas – Eysoldt expresses the psychological suffering of her characters in a profoundly avant-garde way [see Fig. 7]. Her work brings to life the same anguish captured by the twisted figures of Expressionist painters like Oskar Kokoschka or Egon Schiele.⁷¹



Figure 7. ‘Gertrud Eysoldt as Elektra, after a photograph by A. Hartwig’.
Source: Rudolph Lothar, *Das deutsche Drama der Gegenwart* (Munich: Müller, 1905), p. 225.

Decadent texts provide Eysoldt with an opportunity to portray devastating human emotion within the tightly controlled rhythms of a stylized text; her grotesque poses and awkward movements produce a discomfort that only works within a rhythmically taut framework. This balance is a crucial element of avant-garde theatre for her. In December 1905, she writes to Hofmannsthal that she has just played Elektra in Bremen and Magdeburg. Both performances were well received by critics, but she was very dissatisfied as other characters on stage began to mimic or echo the gestures and movements she had developed to express Elektra’s suffering and this meant a dreadful loss of ‘the rhythm of the piece as a whole’.⁷² It is

also a lack of balance between chaos and order that leads her to critique the performances of Russian innovator Konstantin Stanislavski's touring company in April 1906. She is not moved by them, as they are too controlled, too 'vollendet' [complete]; they lack the 'Erschütterung' [unsettling tremors] of a Reinhardt production, and so will never disturb the 'bequeme Bürgerlichkeit' [comfortable bourgeois existence] of the audience.⁷³ Eysoldt is repeating here a point that she has already made to Hofmannsthal: the 'coldness' of Gordon Craig's dramaturgy will never be as transformative as the anti-pedantic, imperfect, open-ended theatre of illusion championed by Wilde in 'The Truth of Masks'.⁷⁴

Eysoldt and Weimar Decadence

Over the course of the next thirty years, Eysoldt also taught at Reinhardt's acting school, training over 2,000 men and women in the psychologically intensive and collaborative style demanded by the Deutsches Theater,⁷⁵ and for two seasons at the start of the 1920s she directed the Kleines Schauspielhaus, where she defied the censor and survived a show-down in court to give Arthur Schnitzler's notorious, sexually licentious play *Reigen* (1900) its belated world premiere.⁷⁶ The production was targeted for political reasons, and Eysoldt and her director, Maximilian Sladek, were warned that they would be arrested if they went ahead with opening night. They resisted these threats, and before the curtain went up on 20 December 1920 Eysoldt made a 'moving speech' to the audience: 'Frau Eysoldt declared', reports Wilhelm Heine, 'that she would rather go to prison than sacrifice a work of art due to personal fear of philistine persecution'.⁷⁷ Eysoldt and her team dodged this initial short-lived legal threat, and the play became a roaring success, but social conservatives and anti-Semites successfully lobbied for a new prosecution on the grounds of offenses to public morals. This time the case went to court, where the defendant, Frau Eysoldt, defended her actions using the Wildean argument that works of art cannot be moral or immoral: the play could not be considered 'obscene' as it was a work of art.⁷⁸ The only judgement that can be made of a theatrical production is whether or not it does justice to the

work of art on which it is based. ‘I said to myself’, she testified, ‘if a true artist is driven by some inner need to produce a work of art, then that work is artistically sublime’, regardless of what the public or even the artist says about it.⁷⁹ Eysoldt’s arguments won the day; the case was dismissed when the court watched a private performance of the play.

As the 1920s progressed, Eysoldt was given fewer roles by Reinhardt, and supplemented her income with some radio work, but as a single widow supporting her ageing mother she struggled financially. Still, she remained committed to political and social change. She supported the socialist cause, telling Carl Seelig that political systems should ensure a fair distribution of wealth, one in which people ‘possess the things that they need’ to maintain their individual freedom, but should not be consumed by money, ‘for wealth can enslave people’.⁸⁰ Throughout the Weimar Era she supported progressive causes, doing public readings in honour of the socialist revolutionaries of 1919 and at Magnus Hirschfeld’s Institut für Sexualwissenschaft [Institute for Sex Research]; signing the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee’s petitions to abolish the law against homosexuality; and volunteering for such charitable organizations as ‘Women in Need’.⁸¹

Despite the financial precarity of her domestic situation, she travelled when she could to Colpach, where she participated in the renowned intellectual salon of Aline ‘Loup’ Mayrisch, a wealthy writer and translator who cultivated Franco-German cultural exchange in the early twentieth century, and gathered such figures as Annette Kolb, Paul Claudel, and Hermann Graf Keyserling around her.⁸² Before becoming a wealthy arts patron, Mayrisch had worked with Eysoldt’s first husband Martersteig; she and her good friend André Gide had also been great fans of Eysoldt since seeing her perform in 1903, and may well have socialized with her that year in Weimar with their mutual friend, the dandy Harry Graf Kessler.⁸³ Eysoldt was able, too, to enjoy the Berlin of the Roaring Twenties, where she was very much at home. The most famous out lesbian of the era, Claire Waldoff, recalls seeing Eysoldt regularly at a dance club called ‘The Pyramid’, with a ‘mixed clientele’ of mostly lesbians, but also actors, dancers, artists, and even

‘beautiful elegant women who wanted to visit the underbelly of Berlin’ – a scene, Waldoff adds, ‘typical of Berlin nightlife with its sin and its colour’.⁸⁴ I am not trying to label Eysoldt a lesbian here. She was married twice, bore three children, and lived for almost a decade in an open relationship with Edmund Reinhardt, Max’s brother,⁸⁵ and we have no evidence of any romantic involvement with another woman, but there is a queerness to Eysoldt’s gender presentation both offstage and on – one reviewer in 1915 praises outright the ‘lesbian’ aspect of her performance as Elektra⁸⁶ – that testifies to the continuity of her commitment to the Decadent texts and counter-cultures of the modern era.

Conclusion

Decadent dramas served differing aims for Reinhardt and Eysoldt. While he had initially caricatured Decadence as the realm of ennui, exhaustion, aestheticism, and excess [see Fig. 2], Reinhardt (guided by Eysoldt) began to include Decadent works in the broad repertoire of plays that he could use to break with the conventions of Naturalism and express the ‘pure air of beauty’, ‘brighter colours’, and ‘heightened life’ he thought lacking on German stages.⁸⁷ Eysoldt found in them characters that allowed her to show her commitment to ‘modern’, ‘problematic’ women and to practise her own particular brand of physically, emotionally, and psychologically demanding acting. Eysoldt’s commitment to the Decadent tradition was deeper than Reinhardt’s, and was expressed in multiple ways: she read Decadent texts and urged others to read them, too; she inspired a generation of German actresses to play Salome, Lulu, and Elektra; and she even used Decadent philosophy in court to justify the staging of a Decadent work. She can perhaps best be characterized as a member of ‘the decadent republic of letters’, a broad, transnational ‘counterculture’ that imagined ‘new forms of affiliation and sociality’ around the turn of the century.⁸⁸ For Potolsky,

Decadent texts describe a striking range of quasi-utopian communities and promote new ideas about affiliation in the ways they address their readers. Significantly overlapping with the emerging gay and lesbian countercultures, decadence also provided a medium

for writers to define communities united by sexual dissidence and non-normative desires.⁸⁹

Eysoldt exemplifies the kind of figure for whom dissident countercultures and Decadent texts are mutually constitutive. Her networks – from the Zurich and Munich New Women circles of the 1890s, through the subcultures of 1920s Berlin, on to such transnational intellectual communities as those around Kessler in Weimar or Mayrisch in Colpach – constitute the kinds of ‘amenable imagined communities’ that for Potolsky are ‘composed of like-minded readers and writers scattered around the world and united by the production, circulation, and reception of art and literature’.⁹⁰ She is Decadent, then, not just because she ‘realize[s] a doctrine or make[s] use of certain styles and themes, but because [she] move[s] within a recognizable network of canonical books, pervasive influences, recycled stories, erudite commentaries, and shared tastes’. By committing herself to the physical embodiment of Decadent figures, she herself became the ‘decadent text [that] borrows from and expands the network, locating itself by reference to the names or books it evokes, and leaving its own contributions behind’.⁹¹

¹ For a history of this ground-breaking, if short-lived, Berlin cabaret, see Peter Jelavich, ‘From Artistic Parody to Theatrical Renewal: Reinhardt’s Sound and Smoke’, in *Berlin Cabaret* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 62-84; Harold B. Segel, *Turn-of-the-Century Cabaret* (Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 137-42; and Peter W. Marx, *Max Reinhardt: Vom bürgerlichen Theater zur metropolitanen Kultur* (Tübingen: Francke, 2006), pp. 43-54.

² K. G. Hardenberg, ‘Die Dekadenten’, *Jugend*, 3 (1898), 695. Unless otherwise noted, translations from the German throughout this article are my own.

³ Triboulet, ‘Vor der Rampe’, *Bühne und Brett*, 20 October 1901, pp. 2-13 (p. 12).

⁴ Under the title ‘Don Carlos an der Jahrhundertwende’ [‘Don Carlos at the Fin de Siècle’], Reinhardt presented three short parodies of Friedrich Schiller’s classic play at ‘Schall und Rauch’ in the spring of 1901: one in the style of a sub-par provincial acting troupe, one in the Naturalist style, and one as a Symbolist play. See Max Reinhardt, *Schall und Rauch* (Berlin: Schuster und Loeffler, 1901), pp. 27-125.

⁵ *Salome* (the German translation uses no acute diacritical mark on the name) was part of a double bill with *Bunbury* [*The Importance of Being Earnest*] on 15 November 1902. This was not the first time Wilde’s play had been performed for a German audience, although it is often referred to as such. *Salome* had been produced by the Munich Akademisch-dramatischer Verein [Academic-Dramatic Club] on 4 March 1901, with the Wiesbaden-based actress Jenny Rauch (1878-1904) in the title role; and by the Lobetheater in Breslau on 12 May 1901, where Marie Wendt (1876-1961) took on the role of Salome. See ‘Akademisch-Dramatischer Verein’, *Allgemeine Zeitung* (Munich), 6 March 1901, p. 6; *Deutscher Bühnen-Spielplan 1900-1901* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1902), p. 663.

⁶ Such titles would include Frank Wedekind’s ‘Lulu’ play *Erdgeist*, Wilde’s *A Florentine Tragedy*, Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Elektra*, Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Aglavaine und Selysette*, and Friedrich Freska’s *Sumurun*. For a full list of Reinhardt productions, see Heinrich Huesmann’s encyclopaedic *Welttheater Reinhardt: Bauten, Spielstätten, Inszenierungen* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1983). For a list that focuses solely on Berlin productions from 1901 to 1910, see Huntly Carter, *The Theatre of Max Reinhardt* (London: Palmer, 1914), pp. 316-26.

⁷ Leo Berg, ‘Echo der Bühnen: Berlin’, *Das literarische Echo*, 1 December 1906, pp. 365-68 (p. 365).

⁸ Reinhardt's innovations were both technical (using cutting-edge technology in set design, stage management, sound, and lighting) and dramaturgical (actors rehearsed for longer periods, worked as an ensemble, and paid more attention to the vision of the director than to the stage directions provided by the author). He also dispensed with the old 'Fach' [category] system, whereby each actor specialized in a particular type of character and could be relied on by a theatre company to already know the lines and standard blocking for the most famous roles in that 'Fach'. He advanced reforms in German theatre that had begun at the Meiningen court theatre in the 1870s and introduced a mode of 'Regietheater' [director-driven theatre] that still dominates in the German-speaking world. See Huntly, and J. L. Styan, *Max Reinhardt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

⁹ In 2001, Jessica Feldman cautioned that 'when modernist writers insist upon radical discontinuity, we should not take them at their word. We should examine those words and the resulting works of art carefully, because Victorian practices often vitally inform modernist works. What is dismissed is also summoned' (Jessica R. Feldman, 'Modernism's Victorian Bric-à-Brac', *Modernism/modernity*, 8.3 (2001), 453-70 (p. 454)). Scholars who took up Feldman's challenge to 'examine these [...] works of art carefully' include Vincent B. Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Stephen C. Downes, *Music and Decadence in European Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and Kate Hext and Alex Murray, eds, *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019). Kristin Mahoney, meanwhile, has focused on those writers of the early twentieth century who continued to defiantly embrace Decadence in the face of modernism. See Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015). In a recent review essay, Robert Volpicelli has helpfully characterized this entire turn in the field as 'The New Decadence'. See *Modernism/modernity*, 26.1 (2019), 213-18.

¹⁰ See Rudolf Kommer, 'The Magician of Leopoldskron', in *Max Reinhardt and His Theatre*, ed. by Oliver Martin Saylor (New York: Brentano's, 1924; repr. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968), pp. 1-15 (p. 6); Marx, pp. 29-30.

¹¹ Her first Reinhardt engagement was to sing 'Danish Street Songs' for a 'Schall und Rauch' evening in December 1901. Carsten Niemann, ed., *Gertrud Eysoldt (1870-1955): Bilder aus einem Schauspielereleben* (Bensheim: Stadt Bensheim, 1989), p. 45.

¹² Mahoney, p. 15.

¹³ Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardesley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

¹⁴ The prize was established by theatre critic and Eysoldt devotee Wilhelm Ringelband; the winner is awarded a monetary prize as well as the honour of wearing a specially-designed ring (the Eysoldt-Ring) for the year.

¹⁵ Niemann, ed., *Gertrud Eysoldt*; Carsten Niemann, 'Die Schauspielerin Gertrud Eysoldt als Darstellerin der Salome, Lulu, Nastja, Elektra und des Puck im Berliner Max-Reinhardt-Ensemble' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Johann-Wolfgang-Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main, 1993); Carsten Niemann, 'Ein Leben für das Theater: Die Schauspielerin Gertrud Eysoldt (1870-1955)', in *Das Herz meiner Künstlerschaft ist Mut: Die Max-Reinhardt-Schauspielerin Gertrud Eysoldt* (Hannover: Theatermuseum, 1995), pp. 16-93; Leonhard M. Fiedler, ed., *Der Sturm Elektra: Gertrud Eysoldt, Hugo von Hofmannsthal Briefe* (Salzburg: Residenz Verlag, 1996); Gertrud Eysoldt, *Das schöne Muster unseres Erlebnisses: Briefe an Max Martersteig*, ed. by Dagmar Walach (Berlin: Institut für Theaterwissenschaft der FU Berlin, 2002). A helpful biography of Eysoldt has been published online by Stephanie d'Heil, 'Gertrude Eysoldt' <http://www.steffi-line.de/archiv_text/nost_buehne/04e_eyoldt_gertrud.htm> [accessed 29 December 2017]. Niemann, who manages the Gertrud-Eysoldt-Sammlung in the Stadtarchiv Bensheim, was at one point collaborating with Fiedler on a lengthier biography of Eysoldt. See Leonhard M. Fiedler, 'Gertrud Eysoldt: Ein Festvortrag' in Niemann, ed., *Gertrud Eysoldt*, pp. 10-18 (p. 15).

¹⁶ See for instance Elke-Maria Clauss, 'Nur Schaffen will ich und geschaffen werden': Zum Verhältnis zwischen Schauspielerin und Dichter am Beispiel von Gertrud Eysoldt und Hugo von Hofmannsthal (Oldenburg: Bis, 2001).

¹⁷ Sara E. Jackson, 'Embodied Femmes Fatales: Performing Judith and Salomé on the Modernist German Stage', *Women in German Yearbook*, 31 (2015), 48-72 (p. 65).

¹⁸ Christiane Leidinger, *Keine Tochter aus gutem Hause: Johanna Elberskirchen (1864-1943)* (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2008), pp. 40-53.

¹⁹ Niemann, 'Ein Leben', p. 20. See note 8 for a discussion of some of these innovations.

²⁰ Leidinger, pp. 40-44.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-50.

²² Aimee Duc [Minna Wettstein-Adelt], *Sind es Frauen? Roman über das dritte Geschlecht* (Berlin: Eckstein, 1901; repr. Berlin: Gabrielle Meixner, 1976). Broadview Press's English edition of this novel is forthcoming.

²³ Leidinger, p. 41. Leidinger offers an extraordinary account of the complications of Anna Eysoldt's marriage and divorce. Elberskirchen wrote a series of pamphlets in the 1890s accusing Aebi of physical and mental abuse of his young wife, and of trying to force Anna to live in a ménage-à-trois with the 'sexual psychopath' Clara Willdenow. The pamphlets caused a cascade of legal problems, including multiple arrests, for Elberskirchen, who eventually had to flee Switzerland. It took a decade for Anna Eysoldt to finally get her divorce and for Elberskirchen to clear her name. Gertrud was supportive of the couple during these difficult years. Anna Eysoldt's death notice in 1913 listed

Elberskirchen as the first mourner, and only then her mother and sister, Bertha and Gertrud. Leidinger, pp. 57-68; 276.

²⁴ Niemann, 'Ein Leben', p. 19; Leidinger, p. 50.

²⁵ Leonhard M. Fiedler, 'Nachwort', in *Der Sturm Elektra*, pp. 113-26 (p. 123).

²⁶ Anne von den Eken [Anna Deneken], *Mannweiber, Weibmänner und der §175: Eine Schrift für denkende Frauen* (Leipzig: Spohr, 1906).

²⁷ G. U., 'Verein für Gründung eines Mädchengymnasiums', *Das humanistische Gymnasium*, 5 (1894), 104-06.

²⁸ See Rudolf Herz, 'Das Fotoatelier Elvira (1887-1928)', in *Hof-Atelier Elvira, 1887-1928: Ästheteten, Emanzen, Aristokraten*, ed. by Rudolf Herz and Brigitte Bruns (Munich: Münchner Stadtmuseum, 1985), pp. 63-128.

²⁹ Irit Rogoff, 'Tiny Anguishes: Reflections on Nagging, Scholastic Embarrassment, and Feminist Art History', *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 4 (1992), 38-65 (p. 56).

³⁰ Ernst von Wolzogen, *Das dritte Geschlecht* (Berlin: Eckstein, 1899). For a helpful contextualization of this *roman-à-clef*, see Brigitte Bruns, 'Das dritte Geschlecht von Ernst von Wolzogen', in Herz and Bruns, eds, *Hof-Atelier Elvira*, pp. 171-90.

³¹ Leidinger, p. 50.

³² See note 5, above, for a discussion of how this club was responsible for the German premiere of Wilde's *Salome*.

³³ Niemann, 'Ein Leben', p. 37.

³⁴ Ernst Rosmer [Elsa Bernstein], *Dämmerung* (Berlin: Fischer, 1893).

³⁵ This account is taken from a contemporary, unsigned review. 'Feuilleton', *Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 April 1897, p. 1.

³⁶ The anonymous reviewer in Munich's *Allgemeine Zeitung* found that her 'diction, stage presence, and acting were all excellent'. 'Feuilleton', *Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 April 1897, p. 1.

³⁷ Marti Lybeck, *Desiring Emancipation: New Women and Homosexuality in Germany, 1890-1933* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), pp. 14-15.

³⁸ Bensheim's Gertrud-Eysoldt-Sammlung contains a photo of Gertrud visiting the two women in Tessin in 1897. See Leidinger, pp. 53-59.

³⁹ Quoted in Leidinger, p. 45.

⁴⁰ Niemann's dissertation reproduces several images of Eysoldt in these early trouser roles. See Niemann, 'Die Schauspielerin', pp. 23, 42, 45.

⁴¹ Fiedler, ed., *Sturm*, p. 24; Marx, p. 59.

⁴² William Grange, 'Eysoldt, Gertrud', *Historical Dictionary of German Theater*, 2nd edn (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), p. 142.

⁴³ Niemann, 'Die Schauspielerin', p. 19.

⁴⁴ The contract officially came to an end on 1 January 1903. *Der Briefwechsel Arthur Schnitzlers mit Max Reinhardt und dessen Mitarbeitern*, ed. by Renate Wagner (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1971), p. 41.

⁴⁵ Reinhardt famously avoided expressing his theories of theatre in writing: he believed his work was about revolutionizing practices and should therefore be inferred by audiences and critics from what they experienced in the theatre. Scholars have looked mainly to letters and the memoirs of others for most of their evidence as to his methods and aims. See Hugo Fetting, ed., *Max Reinhardt: Ein Leben für das Theater: Schriften und Selbstzeugnisse* (Berlin: Argon, 1989).

⁴⁶ Quoted in Sally McMullen, 'From the Armchair to the Stage: Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* in Its Theatrical Context', *MLR*, 80 (1985), 637-51 (p. 641).

⁴⁷ On Reinhardt's 'programmatische[r] Eklektizismus', see Marx, p. 33, emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ Marx, p. 45.

⁴⁹ Berg, p. 365.

⁵⁰ *Der Briefwechsel Arthur Schnitzlers*, p. 41.

⁵¹ Fiedler, ed., *Sturm*, pp. 5-9.

⁵² Michael Berneis, a descendant of Eysoldt and her second husband Benno Berneis, has uploaded this interview to YouTube under the simple heading 'Gertrud Eysoldt Nachruf', <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kc2C7ab3WKI>> [accessed 30 May 2018]. It is in all likelihood the interview conducted on 6 December 1949 with Karl Ebert and listed by Carsten Niemann as 'Ich aber nannte ein Geschlecht, das starb'. See Niemann, 'Die Schauspielerin', p. 244.

⁵³ Niemann, 'Ein Leben', pp. 19-20.

⁵⁴ She tells Hofmannsthal that she loves Göttingen because 'it has so many bookstores'. Fiedler, ed., *Sturm*, p. 35.

⁵⁵ The book in question is Edward Gordon Craig, *Die Kunst des Theaters*, trans. by Maurice Magnus (Berlin: Seemann, 1905). Fiedler, ed., *Sturm*, p. 31.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Carl Seelig, *Walks with Walser*, ed. and trans. by Anne Posten (New York: New Directions, 2017), n.p. Google ebooks.

⁵⁷ Fiedler, ed., *Sturm*, p. 35.

⁵⁸ For a discussion of criticism of Eysoldt's physical traits in this context, see Niemann, 'Ein Leben', p. 79.

⁵⁹ See Jackson, 'Embodied', *passim*.

- ⁶⁰ Eduard von Winterstein, *Mein Leben und meine Zeit* (Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 1982), p. 248.
- ⁶¹ M. O., *Nationalzeitung*, 18 November 1902. This review is in a clippings folder labelled 'Wilde: Salome' at the University of Cologne's extensive theatre archive, the Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung. No page number is recorded.
- ⁶² R. Kr., 'Bühnen-Telegraph: Stuttgart', *Bühne und Welt*, 5 (1903), 479.
- ⁶³ G. Z., 30 September 1903. This review is in a clippings folder labelled 'Wilde: Salome' at the University of Cologne's Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung. No newspaper title or page number is recorded.
- ⁶⁴ W. Eugene Davis, 'Oscar Wilde, *Salome*, and the German Press 1902-1905', *English Literature in Transition*, 44.2 (2001), 149-80; Yvonne Ivory, 'The *Skandalautor*-Funktion: Oscar Wilde and the Theatre Critics in Fin-de-Siècle Germany', *Skandalautoren: Zu repräsentativen Mustern literarischer Provokation und Aufsehen erregender Autorinszenierungen*, ed. by Andrea Bartl and Martin Kraus (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2014), pp. 403-14.
- ⁶⁵ Davis, p. 167.
- ⁶⁶ Quoted in Seelig, n.p.
- ⁶⁷ Fiedler, ed., *Sturm*, p. 38.
- ⁶⁸ See, for instance, Thomas A. Kovach, 'Hofmannsthal's "Ein Brief": Chandos and His Crisis', in *A Companion to the Works of Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, ed. by Thomas A. Kovach (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2002), pp. 85-95.
- ⁶⁹ Fiedler, ed., *Sturm*, p. 18.
- ⁷⁰ Fiedler, 'Nachwort', p. 120; Sara E. Jackson, 'Staging the Deadlier Sex: Dangerous Women in German Text and Performance at the Fin de Siècle' (doctoral thesis, University of Michigan, 2013), pp. xi, 177-79, <<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015089700200>> [accessed 28 February 2019].
- ⁷¹ Compare Fig. 7 with the figures in Kokoschka's 1907 work *The Dreaming Boys*, say, or Schiele's agonized portraiture. Oskar Kokoschka, *Die träumenden Knaben* [The Dreaming Boys], MoMA, The Louis E. Stern Collection, <<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/26721>> [accessed 28 February 2019]; Egon Schiele, Portrait of the Publisher Eduard Kosmack (1910), Belvedere, Vienna, Austria, <<https://www.wikiart.org/en/egon-schiele/portrait-of-the-publisher-eduard-kosmack-1910>> [accessed 28 February 2019].
- ⁷² Fiedler, ed., *Sturm*, p. 35.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- ⁷⁴ Oscar Wilde, 'The Truth of Masks', in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 8 vols to date (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000-), IV (2007), pp. 206-28 (p. 228). For Eysoldt's praise of Wilde's essay, see Fiedler, ed., *Sturm*, p. 31.
- ⁷⁵ Gerhard Ebert, '100 Jahre Schauspielschule Berlin: Von Max Reinhardts Schauspielschule des Deutschen Theaters zur Hochschule für Schauspielkunst Ernst Busch Berlin', <<http://www.berliner-schauspielschule.de/>> [accessed 13 June 2018]; Niemann, 'Ein Leben', p. 80.
- ⁷⁶ A thorough explication of the *Reigen* case as well as a transcript of the court proceedings was published that same year by a prominent politician: Wolfgang Heine, ed., *Der Kampf um den Reigen. Vollständiger Bericht über die sechstägige Verhandlung gegen Direktion und Darsteller des Kleinen Schauspielhauses Berlin* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1922). For more scholarly treatments of the case, see Annette Delius, 'Schnitzlers *Reigen* und der *Reigen*-Prozess: Verständliche und manipulierte Mißverständnisse in der Rezeption', *Der Deutschunterricht*, 28.2 (1976), 98-115; Otto P. Schinnerer, 'The History of Schnitzler's *Reigen*', *PMLA*, 46.3 (1931), 839-59.
- ⁷⁷ Heine, p. 6.
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22. It is in the epigrammatic 'Preface' to the 1891 version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that Wilde makes these assertions, which he, too, would later paraphrase on the witness stand. See *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 8 vols to date (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000-), III (2005), pp. 167-68; H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), pp. 109-10.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- ⁸⁰ Quoted in Seelig, n.p.
- ⁸¹ On 5 January 1919, Eysoldt recited poems at a 'Feier zu Ehren der Revolutionskämpfer' [Celebration in Honour of the Revolutionaries] whose musical entertainment included the Marseillaise and the 'Internationale'. See 'Lebenslinien: Otto Gross & Zeitgenossen', <<http://www.dehmlow.de/index.php/de/database/lebenslinien>> [accessed 2 February 2019]. For a discussion of Eysoldt's association with Hirschfeld's circle, see Leidinger, p. 51. A poster for the 'Women in Need' event can be seen in the online collection of the Berlinische Galerie. See 'Ausstellung "Frauen in Not"', <<http://sammlung-online.berlinischegalerie.de/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=209210&viewType=detailView>> [accessed 30 June 2018].
- ⁸² Eysoldt, *Muster*, pp. 23-24, 30, 48-51. For a discussion of Colpach, see Elana Passman, 'The Cultivation of Friendship: French and German Cultural Cooperation, 1925-1954' (doctoral thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2008).
- ⁸³ On Gide and Mayrisch seeing Eysoldt in Berlin, see *Muster*, p. 51. There is circumstantial evidence that the three knew each other in Weimar. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Kessler was trying to establish a new German cultural hub in Weimar, the city of Goethe, Schiller, and, more recently, Nietzsche. Hofmannsthal and Eysoldt were among the artists he brought to the city as part of his push to establish a new National Theatre (*ibid.*,

pp. 101, 108). Gide came to give a reading as Kessler's guest in August 1903. See Klaus Bellin, *Das Weimar des Harry Graf Kessler* (Berlin: A.B Fischer, 2013), pp. 26-27. For photos showing Gide in Weimar, see 'Fondation Catherine Gide', <[https://www.fondation-catherine-gide.org/component/abook/tag/tag/129-Weimar%20\(Allemagne\)?Itemid=398](https://www.fondation-catherine-gide.org/component/abook/tag/tag/129-Weimar%20(Allemagne)?Itemid=398)> [accessed 2 February 2019]. (The anonymous figure in photo PH-30-21 is clearly Kessler.)

⁸⁴ Ilse Kokula, 'Lesbisch leben von Weimar bis zur Nachkriegszeit', in *Lila Nächte: Die Damenclubs der zwanziger Jahre*, ed. by Adele Meyer (Berlin: Edition LIT Europe, 1994), pp. 101-23 (p. 106).

⁸⁵ Fiedler, ed., *Sturm*, p. 99 and p. 118.

⁸⁶ Reviewing a performance of *Elektra* in Vienna in 1915, Fritz Blank praises Eysoldt's artistry in an otherwise poor production: 'Like a flame, she grows ever taller, flickering blindingly; hatred abides not only in her heart but in her throat, and there is something Lesbian [etwas Lesbisches] about her tenderness to Chryosthemis. Here the actress has captured the precise sense in which the poet pushed Elektra into the realm of the Third Sex'. Fritz Blank, 'Theater und Kunst', *Der Humorist*, 10 September 1915, p. 2.

⁸⁷ McMullen, p. 641; see also Fetting, ed., pp. 73-74.

⁸⁸ Potolsky, p. 6.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 5.

Herodias' Story, *Herstory* –
Kazimiera Zawistowska's Poetry, Young Poland, and Female Decadence

Heidi Liedke

Queen Mary, University of London

The contradictory currents that shaped Europe at the turn of the century were reflected in the literary production of the time. The Polish literature of the *fin de siècle* is an especially interesting case in point: Poland, which had disappeared from the map of Europe completely for 123 years (from 1795 to 1918), was partitioned at that time and its own literary past was blended with cultural influences from Habsburg Austria, the Kingdom of Prussia, and the Russian Empire. As a consequence, a distinctly new Polish literature emerged, one that captured the essence of cosmopolitanism.¹ Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska refers to the literature produced between 1890-1918 as 'Młoda Polska' [Young Poland] and chooses this term because of its neutrality that nevertheless captures the divergent tendencies within it, spanning Symbolism and Expressionism. In contrast to other scholars, Podraza-Kwiatkowska dismisses the terms 'Decadence' and 'Modernism' because they encompass broader phenomena than literature.²

These dynamics of blending were in tension with the lived realities of all Poles. Travelling from one partition to another was impossible without a passport and visa and the situation was even worse for women who needed their husbands' permission to travel. There was no exception to this rule, and it concerned even already well-known political figures such as the writer and women's rights activist Maria Konopnicka (pen name Jan Sawa). What united those travellers and travelling artists was the fact that they read the same literature: the Latin and Greek classics, French poetry, and German philosophy.³ Thus, 'cosmopolitanism' meant speaking the same literary and cultural language and sharing the same texts and culture. Women writers all over Europe made particularly powerful contributions to the body of Decadent cultural production during that time, as translators, conversationalists, artists, and poets.⁴

In Czesław Miłosz's seminal *The History of Polish Literature* most individual chapters cover one century each, yet an entire chapter is devoted to 'Young Poland', which shows both its important position in the history of Polish literature and perhaps even European literature more broadly. What this also points to is its in-between status with regard to the literatures of Positivism and Realism, with which it partly overlapped historically, and the impossibility of fitting it into either category.

Europe [...] enjoyed both peace and prosperity, but underneath the buoyant expansion of capitalism, destructive forces were at work, and the more *sensitive minds* felt this. The *enigma* we have to cope with is the genesis of *a new approach to reality and art*, emerging simultaneously in various European countries despite their respective differences in economic and social development. Whether we speak of a *mutual 'contamination'* or of a *'natural growth'* out of local conditions or simply refer to *an unidentifiable Zeitgeist*, the fact is that similar tendencies in France, Germany, Poland, and Russia sprang up more or less at the same time.⁵

In the following article, I will contextualize the 'agenda' of Young Poland and then turn to a neglected representative of the period, the poet and translator Kazimiera Zawistowska,⁶ in order to initiate her into the company of the other overlooked European Decadent women writers treated in this issue of *Volupté*. I will briefly consider her Parnassian poems depicting the seasons before focusing on her sonnet 'Herodiada' (1903) of which I have provided the first translation into English. When situated in 'conversation' with Gustave Flaubert's *Hérodiade* (1877), Zawistowska's text emerges as one in which the demonic Herodias is the speaking agency; it thus forms a contribution to 'herstory' and that of Decadent female writers in particular. It is also an example of a bi-textual text in Elaine Showalter's sense, reflecting 'a double-voiced discourse influenced by both the dominant masculine literary tradition and the muted feminine one.'⁷ Through it, Zawistowska, who was a voracious reader and translator of French literature, establishes herself in cross-cultural dialogue with other Decadent female sonneteers, most strikingly Renée Vivien, whose 'Sonnet féminin' will also provide a foil to Zawistowska. In her poetry which is infused with and inspired by an enigmatic longing, Zawistowska not only writes on (about) the female body but lets that body write.

‘Young Poland’: The Context of Kazimiera Zawistowska’s Writing

Until 1899, the writers and artists of the late nineteenth century were referred to as both Modernists and Decadents. They were rebels against the Establishment; they had no programme or agenda and were especially critical of Positivism, which in the view of the ‘Young’ had compromised itself with timid utilitarianism and faith in harmonious progress belied by the violence of social conflicts. The writers were fuelled by a deep sense of crisis, as Miłosz emphasizes, and were influenced by readings of Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer whose translations arrived in Poland at that time (the first book on Nietzsche’s philosophy was written by Maria C. Przewóska, in 1894).⁸ They were torn between a feeling of doom and the Romantic dream of national independence and revolution, reignited by the Russo-Japanese War, which shook the Russian Empire in 1905 and weakened the tsardom.

In the late nineteenth century, Kraków was a minor Galician town within the boundaries of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. While not the capital of Galicia – this was Lwów – Kraków, the royal capital of Poland until the sixteenth century, ‘reinvented itself as the intellectual center of Polish Galician life and the ideological crucible of Polish Galician identity’.⁹ It was a city that cherished its traditions and its Polishness and a place where two of the most important opinion-forming magazines, the daily *Czas* and the Jesuit magazine *Przegląd Powszechny*, were published. The Jagiellonian University was one of two Polish universities, apart from Lwów, where Polish was the language of instruction. By 1914, one third of all students were female.¹⁰ The art scene in Kraków responded probably more swiftly than in other cities to the novelties imported by Polish artists returning from European metropolises such as Vienna, Munich, Paris, or Berlin. The city at the time was a sort of melting pot of anachronism, ornamentality, and the avant-garde.¹¹

It was Artur Górski, critic and co-editor of the Kraków-based journal *Życie*, who coined the term ‘Young Poland’ as analogous with Young Germany and Young Scandinavia, and in a series of polemical essays underlined the dark nature of this literature. While its representatives were indebted to the Romantics, God was accused and a peculiar Satanism was sometimes

celebrated. The writers' work was characterized by a desperate hedonism and poems were dedicated to Lady Death (the word for 'death' in Polish, *śmierć*, is grammatically feminine). Against this background, and because of the interest in orientalism and Buddhist philosophy among Young Poland writers, there was a preoccupation with the desire to ease the constant fear of the suffering soul tormented by the limitations of the mind. The 'future' was viewed an illusion.¹² The soul was regarded as a cipher, a vault containing unnameable secrets, an encounter with which would be the most violent and dramatic experience imaginable.¹³ As Górski put it:

Over all souls a terrible darkness is spreading in which even doubt is extinguished; nothing is certain but horror and pain; all the walls between the real and the incomprehensible are broken. There is nothing but a dust of souls tossed by fate and crashing against each other over the abysses. [...] As disillusionment with the life of society and with its typical product, a modern philistine, grew, ties between the individual and that society loosened; disgust and protest against the banality and soulless existence of the organized mass increased. [...] More *sensitive and profound minds*, after having lost their respect for the philistine and their sympathy with social movements, began to withdraw from life and look for its other, more durable values.¹⁴

One such sensitive mind was Kazimiera Zawistowska. In her introduction to the writer's collection of poems, the editor Agnieszka Baranowska, probably unwittingly, does what is often done to female writers. She writes: 'She died in Kraków at the end of February in 1902. She was thirty-two years old, she was beautiful.'¹⁵ Only then, in fourth place, follows the information that she was a poet. Yet Baranowska's following observation is apt – Zawistowska has been largely forgotten¹⁶ and it seems that both during and after her lifetime great care was taken to depict her life as a quiet one, certainly not one involving any kind of turmoil. Indeed, she was born in 1870 into a well-off family, studied in Switzerland, and travelled in Italy. One can place her in a similar context to that in which many English Victorian women were protectively brought up, fully coming into being at a somewhat late stage in their lives.

Some sources say that Zawistowska's marriage to her husband Stanisław was motivated by the necessity of solving her formerly wealthy parents' financial problems and that this caused her to sink into the depths of dullness, a conventional fate for many upper-middle class women at the time. French journals and the literature of Charles Baudelaire, Albert Samain, and Paul

Verlaine served as a refuge.¹⁷ Embodying the Young Poland obsession with the lost soul, she writes in a letter to her friend Idalia Badowska:

I search and search – always in vain. With my head I plunge into the waves of life but ... perhaps I'm too good a swimmer, reason always takes me back to the shore and again entirely alone, and again all I have in front of me is the vast 'view' of life.¹⁸

In Kraków she became part of the Young Poland circle and from around 1897 she began publishing her first poems in the journals *Życie*, the exclusive *Krytyka*, and others.¹⁹ Shortly before her death she asked Zenon Przesmycki (pseudonym 'Miriam') in a letter whether he thought the time was ripe for her to publish the poems she had written up to that point in a collection.²⁰ Prior to that, she had only shown them privately to friends, among them Stanisław Wyrzykowski, the now-forgotten translator of Edgar Allan Poe and Nietzsche.²¹ It is not entirely clear if she actually committed suicide or fell ill. According to a neighbour, she was visiting her brother in Kraków, discovered his revolver, and may have accidentally fired a bullet which directly hit her heart.²² Both Baranowska's and Grażyna Różańska's references to Zawistowska's untimely death are written in a melodramatic vein, as if to echo the pathos often found in Young Poland literature.²³ Zawistowska herself referred to her work as being quite simple, like a naked soul adorned with flowers and jewels.²⁴

Many critics praised her perfection of form, although an exception can be found in Maria Dąbrowska's account of Zawistowska's poetry in *Bluszczyk* in 1923:

there is a mysterious melancholia of a generation which was robbed of all weapons, we encounter the despair of a fiery and passionate woman, a spontaneous nature, straightforward and unconditional – who was forced to live only in half, or in a quarter, who couldn't find her way in the sluggishness of the Galician semi-freedom, in the tragedy of the cramminess emanating from other parts of Poland.²⁵

I agree with Dąbrowska that there is an almost grotesque contrast between Zawistowska's repeated use of the sonnet form and the content she presents.²⁶ It should also be noted that her use of the form was not unusual in the context of the 'sonnet mania' among Young Poland writers.

An essentialist notion of ‘femininity’ in connection with Zawistowska’s poetry is problematic: the journal *Krytyka* referred to her work as ‘one of the deepest and most sincere expressions of femininity’.²⁷ Indeed, and this will also become obvious in my reading of ‘Herodiada’, one can observe forthright praise of female sexuality and eroticism that sometimes borders on the pornographic, mixed with a longing for death and a vague existentialism kept in check by a cool aestheticism. A defining feature of Zawistowska’s work is thus the constant struggle between desire to break free from the sonnet scheme and at the same time to use it as a vehicle for powerful emotions.²⁸ Occasionally, her writing is pierced with outbursts of despair and agony and one can see how she was influenced by the reception of Schopenhauer and Eduard von Hartmann among Polish writers at the time.

Zawistowska’s choice of the sonnet form situates her in conversation with another Decadent woman author, the Anglo-French poet Renée Vivien. As Tama Lea Engelking has argued, Vivien’s use of the sonnet (to which I return below) was certainly striking, ‘not only because of the sonnet’s exalted position in a male-dominated French literary tradition where it is perhaps the most respected and enduring of poetic forms, but also because of its inherent difficulty’.²⁹ In France, the sonnet became popular again for a brief period at the turn of the century, a renaissance associated with Sainte-Beuve;³⁰ several studies on the form were published at the same time.³¹ This connection to the French literary context is helpful because for Zawistowska, it was the primary point of reference and reading French authors helped her overcome the feeling of boredom experienced in her home village of Supranówka (in present-day Ukraine).³²

Zawistowska’s Parnassian Poetry

Among Zawistowska’s many sonnets, there are four depicting the seasons that I have grouped together – ‘Lato’ [‘Summer’], ‘Jesienią’ [‘In Autumn’], ‘Spadłe Liście’ [‘Fallen Leaves’], and ‘Śnieg’ [‘Snow’].³³ Notably, there is no sonnet about spring, adding a bleak dimension to such an

imagining of the seasonal cycle. 'In Autumn' presents itself as the most conventional and sentimental poem: the speaker is closed in by a longing for different times. Yet from the second poem onwards, in which the sky is described as a blue rag (blue from being beaten; the Polish word here, 'siny', is not a homonym for the colour blue as in English), the tone changes. In the third and fourth sonnets especially, one detects a distinctly Parnassian skill that conveys detachment and dark mysticism. While all the poems express a sense of longing and loss, the well-known reassuring sonnet form clashes with the increasingly bleak, Schopenhauerian vision: the autumn sonnet especially seems almost obsessively concerned with decay and rot and repeatedly invokes an apocalyptic vision of a bleeding world:

Spadłe Liście³⁴

Na srebrne stawu zwierciadło lecą
I świecą złotem, i miedzią świecą,
I lecą trwożne jak błędne duchy,
Jak serc porwanych krwawe okruchy.

Wiatrem rzucone serc krwawych strzępy
Między pobrzeżne szuwarów kępy,
Jakby lzy lecą, jakby krew kwiatów,
Jak pocałunki słane z zaświatów.

Więc lecą... lecą – a gdy na fali
Pierścień się mglistych świateł rozpali,
To się w tej smętnej plonia jasności.

Niby korowód cmentarnych gości,
I w mętne stawu zwierciadło lecą,
I świecą złotem, i jak krew świecą...

Fallen Leaves

Onto the silvery mirror of the pond they are falling
And they shimmer like gold, and like bronze they shimmer,
And they fall like erring ghosts
Like the bloody crumbs of abducted hearts.

The rags of the bleeding hearts tossed by the wind
Amidst clumps of nettle rushes,
As if tears were flowing, as if it was the flowers' blood
Like kisses sent from the beyond.

So they are falling... falling – and when on the wave
A ring of foggy lights starts to burn,
They drown in this dull brightness.

Like a parade of graveyard visitors,
And into the dim mirror of the pond they are falling
And they shimmer like gold, and like blood they shimmer...

The original sonnet follows the rather atypical rhyme scheme of aabb ccdd eef faa, with the words 'lecą' [falling] and 'świecą' [shimmer] both starting and ending the poem. Yet the lines between the beginning and end take up the role of a macabre alchemist, as the shimmering object is turned from bronze into fresh blood, a twisting effect that is reinforced by the chiasm employed in lines 2 and 14. Autumn, as the season anticipating winter, death, and infertility, is conflated with a very raw image of life and birth and thus femininity: instead of being dry, the leaves are given bloody attire. This poem articulates one of the greatest fears surrounding

women as the Other – the ability to create, to give birth even in the face of death. This fear of otherness, however, is based on a concept of woman’s ‘nature’ that is created by men and from which they profit, as Simone de Beauvoir has shown.³⁵ One could argue, at least at first glance, that Zawistowska’s poem precisely accepts this ‘feminine essence’ ascribed to all women and by taking it up only perpetuates the self/other, man/woman binary oppositions so familiar to Western culture. I would suggest, however, that there is more to it. Most importantly, the primary site of experience is shifted from an abstract notion of nature to the very specific location of the body. Zawistowska gives the female body an even greater agency than the mind can allow, a notion that will become clearer when analyzing her sonnet ‘Herodiada’.

Gustave Flaubert’s *Hérodias*

The image of blood functions as a gateway into the biblical gloom of the story of Herodias. In brief, Herodias, the wife of the tetrarch Herod Antipas, commands the beheading of John the Baptist after her daughter Salome has enchanted the king to such a degree that he wants to grant her every wish. Gustave Flaubert’s tale *Hérodias* (1877) is told from the perspective of the King Herod, who is torn between the threats of the Arabs, the Roman claims to power, the prejudices of the Jews and the attempt to regain the love of his wife. As C. H. Wake points out,

Hérodias gives her name to the story, not because she is its ‘heroine’, since Antipas is in fact the central character, but because she incarnates the dream, the illusion of which Antipas, like all Flaubert’s heroes, is victim. Although his dream has grown sterile, he finds he cannot discard it, partly because he is too weak-willed to do so, and partly because, secretly [...] he prefers not to.³⁶

From the beginning, a sense of disappointment and despair pervades the story – yet it is not only the King’s but also Herodias’ disillusionment and fear of abandonment by her husband:

Elle songeait aussi que le Tétrarque, cédant à l’opinion, s’aviserait peut-être de la répudier. Alors tout serait perdu! Depuis son enfance, elle nourrissait le rêve d’un grand empire. C’était pour y atteindre que, délaissant son premier époux, elle s’était jointe à celui-là, qui l’avait dupée, pensait-elle. [...] *Hérodias sentit bouillonner dans ses veines le sang des prêtres et des rois ses aïeux.*

[She was wondering too whether the Tetrarch, yielding to public opinion, might not decide to put her away. Then all would be lost! Since she was a child she had nourished dreams of a great empire. It was in her furtherance of that ambition that she had left her first husband and joined this one, who had made a fool of her, as she now thought. [...]
Herodias felt the ancestral blood of priests and kings boil in her veins.]³⁷

Even at the moment of great despair and fear, the image of 'boiling blood' hints at the tops of the powerful woman that originates in attempts within medieval and Renaissance literature to expose conflicting ideas about dominant gender roles and thus, according to Susan L. Smith, is not merely a manifestation of medieval antifeminism. It was typically

the representational practice of bringing together at least two, but usually more, well-known figures from the Bible, ancient history, or romance to exemplify a cluster of interrelated themes that include the wiles of women, the power of love, and the trials of marriage.³⁸

In the context of the Herodias story, not only the title but also the invocation of boiling blood immediately create intrigue and fascination. Fascination, as Sibylle Baumbach points out, is seductive:

It captures and occupies the senses and directs the attention of readers or viewers to people or objects, which absorb their full responsiveness in a liminal state of desire and dread. [...] fascination, at least until the twentieth century, is also highly gendered. As a result, narratives of fascination often revolve around an archetype of dangerous female seduction [...] the *femme fatale*. Representations of the *femme fatale* are often used as pervasive and powerful images to create narratives of seduction, that is, narratives which are deeply invested in preserving the elicited yet essentially unfulfilled desire of beholding, conquering or overpowering the fatal woman, which is played out in favour of the (poetic) artifact.³⁹

The reader of Flaubert's story is fascinated with someone who initially exists only 'behind the scenes'. One has to wait until Zawistowska's poem for a more explicit vision of Salome because in line with the more pervasive fascination with Salome as the *femme fatale* representing, according to Baumbach, 'an amalgamation of allurements, sensuality and violence in a dangerous mixture of evil and beauty, responding to one of the greatest anxieties in nineteenth-century society and challenging established value systems',⁴⁰ Flaubert's tale leads to her dance as the climax in which she mesmerizes the King:

Mais il arriva du fond de la salle un bourdonnement de surprise et d'admiration. Une jeune fille venait d'entrer. Sous un voile bleuâtre lui cachant la poitrine et la tête, on

distinguait les arcs de ses yeux, les calcédoines de ses oreilles, la blancheur de sa peau. [...] *C'était Hérodias, comme autrefois dans sa jeunesse.* Puis, elle se mit à danser. Ses pieds passaient l'un devant l'autre, au rythme de la flûte et d'une paire de crotales. Ses bras arrondis appelaient quelqu'un, qui s'enfuyait toujours. Elle le poursuivait, plus légère qu'un papillon, comme une Psyché curieuse, comme une âme vagabonde, et semblait prête à s'envoler.

[But coming from the far end of the hall could be heard a buzz of surprise and admiration. A young girl had just come in. Under a bluish veil which concealed her head and chest, one could make out the arches of her eyes, the chalcedony stones in her ears, the whiteness of her skin. [...] *It was Herodias, as she used to look in her youth.* Then she began to dance. Her feet slipped back and forth, to the rhythm of the flute and a pair of castanets. Her arms curved round in invitation to someone who always eluded her. She pursued him, lighter than a butterfly, like some curious Psyche, like a wandering spirit, and seemed on the point of flying away.]⁴¹

Even though this is the moment when Salome enters the scene, we are not given her name here. It was Herodias, the text says, confusing us for a moment as to who is actually being presented. In the ensuing sensual description of her body (her feet, her arms, and the lightness with which she dances) one seems to be looking at Herodias, embodied by the young form of her daughter and by her own. This oscillating between mother-daughter and past-present keeps the reader in a thrall that overlaps with the King's mesmerized state after the dance is over. He exclaims:

Viens! viens! [...] Mais le Tétrarque criait plus fort: *Viens! viens!* Tu auras Capharnaüm! la plaine de Tibérias! mes citadelles! la moitié de mon royaume! [...] *Un claquement de doigts se fit dans la tribune.* Elle y monta, reparut; et, *en zézayant un peu,* prononça ces mots, d'un air enfantin: — 'Je veux que tu me donnes dans un plat ... la tête ...' Elle avait oublié le nom, mais reprit en souriant: 'La tête de Iaokanann!'

['*Come! Come!* [...] But the Tetrarch cried louder still: '*Come! Come!* You can have Capernaum! The plain of Tiberias! My citadels! Half my kingdom!' [...] *Someone in the gallery snapped their fingers.* She went up, reappeared; and *lisping slightly* pronounced these words, with a childlike expression: 'I want you to give me on a dish ... the head ...' She had forgotten the name, but then went on with a smile: 'Iaokanann's head!']⁴²

Zawistowska's 'Herodiada' as a Key to the Story

What remains elusive and shadowy – a clicking of fingers, a certain incantation by the woman simultaneously on stage and backstage which turns her daughter into a proxy and leaves her lisping and forgetting the name of the man who will be beheaded a moment later according to 'her' wish – is made explicit in Zawistowska's poem. One should note that she presented an

entire gallery of *femmes fatales* including Eve, Cleopatra, Madame Pompadour, and Mary Magdalene in her poetic cycle *Dusze* [*Souls*].⁴³ There was a general fascination with hedonistic women in the context of Young Poland literature and women were portrayed in such a way as to free them of their unnatural asexuality as erotic and sensual agents.⁴⁴ Zawistowska's poem is noteworthy because it adopts one of the most opaque (hitherto silent) *femmes fatales* in Western culture and lets her speak for fourteen lines⁴⁵ – indeed, she *is* only because of the consequences of her command:

Herodiada⁴⁶

Czy wiesz, co rozkosz? Czy Cię nie poruszy
Szept białych kwiatów w takie noce parne?
Pójdź!... ja Ci włosy me rozplotę czarne,
Wężem pożądań wejdę do Twojej duszy!

Plomiennym szeptem odemknę Twe uszy,
Podam Ci usta drżące i ofiarne
I ust tych ogniem ciało Twe ogarnę,
Aż pieszczot moich fala Cię ogłuszy!...

Pójdź!... ja rozkoszą ściami Tobie Jehowę...
Zapomnisz, twarzą padłszy na me łono,
Pijąc źrenice me błyskawicowe...

Lecz pójdź!... bo czasem w oczach mi czerwono
I z piekielnymi zmagam się widmami,
I wiem, że dłonie krew mi Twoja splami.

Herodias

Do you know what pleasure is? Or will you be unmoved
By the whisper of pale flowers in those sultry nights?
Go!... For you I will untangle my dark hair,
I'll be the snake of desire that enters your soul!

My fiery whisper will unclasp your ears
I will offer you my trembling and willing lips
And with the fire of these lips I will wrap your body
Until you're numbed by the wave of my caresses!...

Go!... my sweetness will make you forget Jehovah...
You'll forget, when you cradle your face in my bosom,
Drinking my flashing pupils...

But go!... because sometimes my vision is red
And I wrestle with devilish phantoms,
And I know my hands will be soiled with your blood.

As Engelking has noted with regard to Renée Vivien, '[p]erfecting the sonnet form may have been one step more toward earning the "gloire" she sought as a serious poet, who relied on her skills as a writer to compensate for the perceived weakness of her sex'.⁴⁷ Here, Zawistowska takes up the slightly altered form of the Italian sonnet rhyme scheme, abba abba cdc dee. Her sonnet is unsettling in several regards. First of all, it is daringly explicit, almost pornographic. The first three stanzas depict a seduction and the verbalization of a sexual act ('łono' means both bosom in a figurative sense and pubic hair) and the metaphor of the snake transforms female agency into the typical act of male penetration. More importantly, it contaminates the 'soul' – one of the central concepts of Young Poland literature – robbing it of its transcendental quality

and tearing down the barrier upholding a soul/body duality. Without mentioning the context or the mythical inspiration for the poem, Róžańska reads it as the story of two lovers in which the soul is the connective tissue between the two. ‘The snake of desire’ is the symbol of sinful, passionate love, to which the soul opens its gates.⁴⁸

But the text gives us more than this, and raises several questions: The female agency is powerful, threatening, and at the same time the playfully ‘willing’ victim. And who exactly is the speaker? This remains rather elusive. The line ‘my sweetness will make you forget Jehovah’ would suggest an attempted seduction of John the Baptist, yet this does not correspond with the biblical story. We know that Salome is the famous seductress, yet the poem is titled ‘Herodiada’. Linking this to my previous observation that Salome becomes a kind of proxy for her mother, I argue that the speaking agency here is a hybrid of mother and daughter. Herodias is the puppeteer directing Salome and is at the same time pulled back by a current in the opposite direction – it seems that the speaker warns herself and her ‘victim’ (who could be both John the Baptist and King Herod) against herself, commanding him three times to go away. After the third warning (and the somewhat belated volta in the middle of the final sestet) an explanation for the warnings follows: the puppeteer herself is pulled by demons.

The image of blood on Herodias’ hands connects her to another complex literary canonical female character typically also reduced to a mere *femme fatale* figure: Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth. After conspiring to kill the reigning monarch Duncan with her husband, she loses her mind, despairs of the ‘damned spot’ and asks whether her hands will ‘never be clean’ again.⁴⁹ In Zawistowska’s poem, the moment of empowerment lasts for three stanzas only to be crushed in the final one. The anticipation of death (John the Baptist’s, but also King Herod’s moral corruption) is imminent; as Mikhail Bakhtin articulates,

death, as is always the case with the Romantics and the Symbolists, ceases to be an aspect of life itself and becomes again a phenomenon on the border between my life here-and-now and a potential other kind of life. The whole problematic is concentrated within the limits of the *individual* and *sealed-off* progression of a single life.⁵⁰

Death is a liminal phenomenon. Zawistowska, I would argue, presents the female body in a similar vein, as being located neither here nor there, both dead and alive, both the mother and the daughter. It is both everything and nothing and it desires everything and nothing. There is an echo of Charles Baudelaire's 'Femmes damnées' that Zawistowska translated as 'Potępienie' in the journal *Chimera* in 1902: the female soul is described as a text that has a demonic quality. This is not criticized by the lyrical subject, however, but praised for what it entails: woman, too, is characterized by both an insatiable thirst, a despairing longing, and the power to love,⁵¹ there is a constitutive and productive friction between her 'duchowość' (literally inwardness, but more aptly translated as 'soulness') and 'cielesność' (corporeality, or 'bodyness').⁵² As Luce Irigaray has demonstrated in her rewriting of Freud's and Lacan's paradigm, woman's sexuality is not a lack but 'always at least double, [it] goes even further: it is *plural* [...] [*W*]oman has sex organs more or less everywhere. She finds pleasure almost anywhere.'⁵³ She continues:

Thus what they desire is precisely nothing, and at the same time everything. Always something more and something else besides that *one* – sexual organ, for example – that you give them, attribute to them. Their desire is often interpreted, and feared, as a sort of insatiable hunger, a voracity that will swallow you whole. Whereas it really involves a different economy more than anything else, one that upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of a desire, diffuses the polarization toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse . . .⁵⁴

What is described here is the utter irony of how the female body has been subjugated to a rigid categorization, pressed into a corset of patriarchal, linear (hi)story-telling even though it is irrevocably connected to the striving towards an all-encompassing desire, towards *becoming*. While the potentially essentialist portrayal of sexual difference in Irigaray's work and its use of the female sexual organ as a starting point from which to define female desire can be regarded as a troubling one, it is more helpful to approach her theory without this concern over essentialism.⁵⁵ Her approach is precisely one in which the (female) body cannot be inscribed upon because the language available is now invalid, unfeasible for this purpose. What Irigaray suggests is that female sexuality 'can be translated into a language which might seem to operate in a nonlinear, *antilogical* way'.⁵⁶ The female imaginary is excluded from the dominant male imaginary, relegated

to the margins and destined not to become but to be.⁵⁷ Seemingly incomplete, the female body must struggle for a conceptual space to articulate her striving, her desire.⁵⁸

What can be observed in ‘Herodiada’ is precisely an articulation of this desire and of the pleasure and guilt it entails. The first three stanzas present both the ‘everything’ woman is able to desire and enjoy and the fact that this yearning has been interpreted as audacious. Yet the speaker’s perspective is omniscient, aware of both the position of the interpreter and the subjugation of the interpreted. The ‘devilish phantoms’ in the final stanza could be both the (masculine) ‘subjects’ ascribing ‘woman’ a fixed set of attributes, and – with regard to the biblical story – those phantoms haunting the version of Herodias that is passed on throughout history. In both cases, femininity speaks up; not as a linear entity, but as fragmented and struggling, defying logic and seemingly puzzling (to) itself – we now understand the ‘en zézayant un peu’ [lispings slightly] in Flaubert’s text.

Female Sonneteers: To Conclude, Renée Vivien Strums her Lyre

As I initially stated, Zawistowska took inspiration from the French literature. Vivien started publishing her poetry in 1901, so there would have been one year of overlap before Zawistowska’s death; but Vivien only published a few short pieces in reviews and paid to have her first books published in small print runs.⁵⁹ Thus, while it cannot be determined exactly whether Zawistowska was familiar with Vivien’s work, it is illuminating to use her aforementioned ‘Sonnet féminin’ to illustrate how these two Decadent poets were both articulating a vision of female embodiment through and as language: in Zawistowska’s case by reworking a biblical myth and in Vivien’s by playing with that foundation of all discourse that produces binary oppositions and grammar. Just like Zawistowska, who lets the silenced *femme fatale* Herodias speak for fourteen lines, Vivien hands the lyre over to the ‘sonnet’ itself (or rather herself).

Sonnet féminin⁶⁰

Ta voix a la langueur des lyres lesbiennes,
L'anxiété des chants et des odes sapphiques,
Et tu sais le secret d'accablantes musiques
Où pleure le soupir d'unions anciennes.

Les Aèdes fervents et les Musiciennes
T'enseignèrent l'ampleur des strophes érotiques
Et la gravité des lapidaires distiques.
Jadis, tu contemples les nudités païennes.

Tu sembles écouter l'écho des harmonies
Mortes; bleus de ce bleu des clartés infinies,
Tes yeux ont le reflet du ciel de Mytilène.

Les fleurs ont parfumé tes étranges mains creuses;
De ton corps monte, ainsi qu'une légère haleine,
La blanche volupté des vierges amoureuses.

Sonnet/woman

Your voice holds the laziness of lesbian lyres,
The anxiety of Sapphic songs and odes,
And you know the secret of oppressive music
Where the sighs of ancient unions despair.

The fervent minstrels and the musicians
Will teach you the opulence of erotic verses
And the gravity of succinct couplets.
Before that, you only saw pagan nudities.

You seem to listen to the echo of harmonies,
Dead; the blue from the blue of infinite light,
Your eyes reflecting the sky over Mytilène.

The flowers have perfumed your strange creased hands;
What arises from your body, like a light breath,
Is the white pleasure of amorous virgins.

French grammatical gender is a central metalinguistic element in this poem that cannot be translated into English. As Engelking shows in her beautiful reading of the poem, it is 'woman-centred' from the beginning in several regards: it is loaded 'with a disproportionate number of grammatically feminine words'⁶¹ (each line ends with a feminine noun, for instance); the opening line speaks of 'lyres lesbiennes', with 'lyres' being a homophone of 'lire' (to read) and thus an appeal to its/her readers; and 'ta voix' could be either 'the voice of the poet, the person reading the poem, or the voice of the sonnet personified'.⁶² In the course of the sonnet, this voice is built up towards a fully formed sound; it is as if speaking in the feminine would make it/her come to terms with her (the voice's) femininity in an empowered way. After embedding it/her in and endowing it/her with its/her cultural heritage in the first and second stanzas, from the third stanza onwards she is given the ability to feel: her senses allow her to hear ('écouter'), see, smell, and touch – the sense of touch could refer both to the poet having hands and the female body coming to terms with its sensuality and sexuality.⁶³

The struggle that Vivien imagines here between the masculine and the feminine, later the battlefield of feminists such as Hélène Cixous,⁶⁴ Irigaray, or Monique Wittig, is swiftly carried out on the page, with no actual blood spilled. Wittig's remark on how gender is 'the linguistic index

of political opposition between the sexes and of the domination of women',⁶⁵ ties in well with Vivien's sonnet which seeks to establish a rearrangement of the sexual hierarchy of women's disadvantage through a rearrangement of language.⁶⁶

In 'Herodiada', Zawistowska, too, rearranges: not only the male/female active/passive binary (Who is the victim? Who is the perpetrator?), but also the role that has been given to the biblical figure of Salome's mother. The Flaubertian intertext, the most well-known literary adaptation of this story,⁶⁷ is subtly taken up but she skillfully weaves her story into the final scene in Flaubert's tale: each 'Viens!' [Come!] uttered by Herod to Salome in Flaubert's text is countered with a 'Pójdź' [Go!] uttered by Herodias/Salome to the King. The fact that Herodias and Salome are given a voice means that they can articulate refusal or at least elaborate the history that is constructed around them: they can refuse to become merely ciphers for bestial femininity. In that sense, Zawistowska's poem does not turn Herodias into either a dangerous enigma or a silenced shadow, nor does she lose her mind – in the final line we see that she *knows* what awaits her and what is most important, it is still *she* who is speaking.

¹ The same holds true for the art produced at that time. See Irena Kossowska and Łukasz Kossowski, 'Manifesty Symbolizmu – młodopolski Kraków', in *Malarstwo Polskie – Symbolizm i Młoda Polska* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Arkady, 2010), pp. 24-47.

² Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska, *Symbolizm i Symbolika w Poezji Młodej Polski. Teoria i Praktyka* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1975), pp. 8-9.

³ Czesław Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, 2nd edn. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 322.

⁴ See, for instance, Elaine Showalter, ed., *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1993), and Adrianna Paliyenko, *Genius Envy, Women Shaping French Poetic History, 1801-1900* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016).

⁵ Miłosz, *Polish Literature*, p. 322. My emphasis.

⁶ The only two studies on Zawistowska's work are an edited collection of a selection of her poetry by Agnieszka Baranowska – *Kazimiera Zawistowska. Wybór Poezji* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1981). Baranowska relies heavily, yet in a self-reflexive and critical manner, on excerpts from Stanisław Wyrzykowski's accounts and diaries (he was supposedly Zawistowska's lover) and Grażyna Różańska's *Węzłem Pożądań Wejść do Twojej Duszy... O Kazimierze Zawistowskiej* (Krawów: Dante, 2017). Mateusz Skucha has recently included her among the most important female poets of Young Poland literature and provides thorough readings of her work in *Niesytosć Pragnienia. W kręgu młodopolskiej liryki kobiet* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2016).

⁷ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own. British Women Writers, from Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing*, revised and expanded edition (London: Virago, 2014), p. xv.

⁸ Miłosz, *Polish Literature*, p. 325.

⁹ Larry Wolff, 'After the Revolution: The Rise of *Czas* and the Advent of Franz Joseph', in *The Idea of Galicia. History and Fantasy in Habsburg Political Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 188-230 (p. 194).

¹⁰ See Krystyna Kulig-Janarek, 'Krakow in the Period of Young Poland', in *Zawsze Młoda! Polska Sztuka około 1900 – Forever Young! Poland and Its Art around 1900*, Exhibition at the National Museum in Kraków, September 2012 – September 2013 (Kraków: Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie, 2012), pp. 24-39 (pp. 26, 27).

¹¹ Marta Wyka, 'Kraków literacki na przelomie wieków', in *Kraków Przed Stuleciem. Materiały Sesji Naukowej Odbytej 1 Marca 1997* (1998), 50-51.

¹² Grażyna Różanska, "'Moja Dusza Jest Łąką Chaotycznych Kwieci'". Pejzaż Wewnętrzny "Ja" Lirycznego.', in *Antropologiczno-Językowe Wizerunki Duszy w Perspektywie Międzykulturowej*, ed. by Tom Drugi, Świat Oczyma Duszy Magdalena Kapeluś, Ewa Masłowska, Dorota Pazio-Włazłowska (Warszawa: Instytut Sławistyki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2016), pp. 115-128 (p. 116).

¹³ Marian Stala, *Pejzaż Człowieka* (Kraków: Znak, 1994), p. 101.

¹⁴ Artur Górski, in Miłosz, *Polish Literature*, p. 327. My emphasis.

¹⁵ Baranowska, *Kazimiera Zawistowska*, p. 5. My translation.

¹⁶ Puzzlingly enough, in her *Alienated Women. A Study on Polish Women's Fiction 1845-1918* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001), Grażyna Borkowska calls Zawistowska 'one of the best female poets of Young Poland' (p. 296), but only writes a couple of sentences about her love affair with the poet and writer Stanisław Wyrzykowski and her suicide. Apart from that, she only mentions her twice in passing (admittedly, the focus of Borkowska's study is on women's fiction but such a treatment nevertheless seems ironic). At least in Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska's important study on *Symbolizm i Symbolika w Poezji Młodej Polski* (1975) there are several references to Zawistowska's writings.

¹⁷ Her first publication was a translation of a poem by Ferdinand Pradel which was published in *Życie* in 1897. Other translations and poems were published in *Głos Narodu*, *Nowe Słowo*, *Ruch Katolicki*, *Ilustracja Polska*, *Krytyka*, *Chimera*, and *Błuszczyk*. See Grażyna Różańska, *Węzeł Pożądań Wejść do Twojej Duszy... O Kazimierze Zawistowskiej* (Kraków: Dante, 2017), p. 33.

¹⁸ Zawistowska to Idalia Badowska, in Baranowska, *Kazimiera Zawistowska*, pp. 6-7. My translation.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁰ Baranowska, *Kazimiera Zawistowska*, p. 12. My translation.

The tone of the letter is extremely humble – she writes that her brother has encouraged her to ask this question and she is doubtful whether it would be advisable to go forward with the project of such a 'little volume' at all (she uses the diminutive 'tomik' instead of 'tom', underlining the insignificance of her poetry from her point of view). She is unsure whether it would not be best for her to stick to translating texts rather than produce something that may be original but 'very weak' (again, she uses a diminutive here, the word 'slabiotkie' instead of 'slabe', weak).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²² Różanska, 'Moja Dusza', p. 126.

²³ The same holds true for Podraza-Kwiatkowska's reference to it, albeit she groups her together with other (male) Young Poland writers who committed suicide and suggests they suffered from depression. See *Symbolizm i Symbolika w Poezji Młodej Polski*, p. 141.

²⁴ Krystyna Niklewiczówna, 'Zawistowska A Ówczesna Moda Literacka', in *Pamiętnik Literacki: Czasopismo Kwartalne Poświęcone Historii i Krytyce Literatury Polskiej*, 37 (1947), 218-26 (p. 218).

²⁵ Baranowska, *Kazimiera Zawistowska*, p. 23. My translation.

²⁶ Indeed, she tried to break out of the rigid scheme of the sonnet but kept returning to it. This struggle contributes to their palpable energy, which makes it impossible to speak about them 'in a calm and cold manner. In them we find the power of a feeling forever captured, such a dose of honesty, such an immediate freshness of poetic expression, that they belong to the most authentic gems of Polish sonnets.' Władysław Folkierski, *Sonet Polski. Wybór Tekstów. Wstępem i Objasnieniami Zaopatrzył W. Folkierski* (Kraków 1925) in Baranowska, p. 13. My translation.

²⁷ Quoted in Baranowska, *Kazimiera Zawistowska*, p. 19.

²⁸ See Folkierski, *Sonet Polski*, p. xv.

²⁹ Tama Lea Engelking, 'Genre and the Mark of Gender: Renée Vivien's "Sonnet féminin"', *Modern Language Studies*, 23.4 (1993), 79-92 (p. 79).

³⁰ See Paliyenko, *Genius Emy*, pp. 100-01. The studies were H. Vaganay, *Le Sonnet en Italie et en France au XVIe Siècle* (Lyon, 1902-03); Max Jasinski, *Histoire du sonnet en France* (Douai, 1903); J. Viancy, 'Les Origines du sonnet regulier', *Revue de la renaissance* (Aux bureaux de la Revue, 1903), 74-93.

³¹ See Paliyenko, *Genius Emy*, pp. 100-01. The studies were H. Vaganay, *Le Sonnet en Italie et en France au XVIe Siècle* (Lyon, 1902-03); Max Jasinski, *Histoire du sonnet en France* (Douai, 1903); J. Viancy, 'Les Origines du sonnet regulier', *Revue de la renaissance* (Aux bureaux de la Revue, 1903), 74-93.

³² For an overview of the sonnet in Poland at that time see Folkierski, *Sonet Polski*.

³³ All these sonnets are in Baranowska, *Kazimiera Zawistowska*, in the order mentioned here: pp. 55; 34; 35; 53. They are also all available online: https://poezja.org/wz/Zawistowska_Kazimiera/

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35. My translation.

³⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. xxix.

- ³⁶ C. H. Wake, 'Symbolism in Flaubert's "Hérodiade": An Interpretation', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 4.4 (1968), 322-29 (p. 322).
- ³⁷ Gustave Flaubert, 'Hérodiade', in *Trois Contes* (Barcelona: Folioplus, 2017), pp. 101-150 (p. 111) / Gustave Flaubert, 'Herodias', in *Three Tales*, trans. by A. J. Kralishimer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 71-105 (pp. 77-78). My emphasis.
- ³⁸ Susan L. Smith, *The Power of Women. A 'Topos' in Medieval Art and Literature* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), p. 2.
- ³⁹ Sibylle Baumbach, *Literature and Fascination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 114.
- ⁴⁰ Baumbach, *Fascination*, p. 202.
- ⁴¹ Flaubert, 'Hérodiade', pp. 144-45 / Flaubert, 'Herodias', p. 101. My emphasis.
- ⁴² Flaubert, 'Hérodiade', p. 147 / Flaubert, 'Herodias', pp. 102-03. My emphasis.
- ⁴³ Skucha, "'Święte kurtyzany": O dwóch cyklach poetyckich Kazimierzy Zawistowskiej', in *Niesytość Pragnienia* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2016), pp. 105-28 (p. 109).
- ⁴⁴ Wiktor Czernianin, *Młodopolski Erotyk Hedonistyczny: Problemy Poetyki* (Wrocław: TArt, 2000), p. 138.
- ⁴⁵ As Skucha elaborates, the name Salome is not mentioned in the Bible which is why Salome is occasionally also referred to by her mother's name ('Święte kurtyzany', p. 117). According to this logic, this poem would be about Salome. As my interpretation and interweaving with Flaubert's tale shows, however, it is more illuminating to think of the poem's subject as the mother – which does not exclude the notion, of course, that a conflation between mother and daughter occurs.
- ⁴⁶ Zawistowska, 'Herodiada', in Baranowska, *Kazimiera Zawistowska*, p. 79. My translation.
- ⁴⁷ Engelking, 'Genre and the Mark of Gender', p. 82.
- ⁴⁸ Różańska, 'Moja Dusza', p. 121.
- ⁴⁹ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.1, ll. 34-41 (Surrey: Arden Shakespeare, 1997).
- ⁵⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 84-258 (p. 200).
- ⁵¹ Skucha, 'Święte kurtyzany', p. 105.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- ⁵³ Luce Irigaray, 'This Sex Which Is Not One', in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 23-33 (p. 28). Emphasis in original.
- ⁵⁴ Irigaray, 'This Sex', pp. 29-30, emphasis in original.
- ⁵⁵ See Helen Fielding, 'Questioning Nature: Irigaray, Heidegger and the potentiality of matter', *Continental Philosophy Review*, 36 (2003), 1-26.
- ⁵⁶ Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury, eds, 'Introduction', in *Writing on the Body. Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 10-12 (p. 10). My emphasis.
- ⁵⁷ There is a struggle between 'becoming' and 'being' at the core of woman's existence. The lack, or castration of the ability to strive towards something, is reflected semantically when 'come' (which suggests movement and energy) is removed from the verb 'become' creating a state of stasis.
- ⁵⁸ Irigaray, 'This Sex', pp. 253-54.
- ⁵⁹ I am grateful to Melanie Hawthorne for her insight on Vivien's publishing history.
- ⁶⁰ Renée Vivien, 'Sonnet féminin', in *Oeuvre poétique complète de Renée Vivien: 1877-1909*, ed. by Jean-Paul Goujon (Paris: Régine Deforges, 1986), p. 87. My translation.
- ⁶¹ Engelking, 'Genre and the Mark of Gender', p. 86.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- ⁶⁴ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1.4 (1976), 875-93.
- ⁶⁵ Monique Wittig, 'The Mark of Gender', in *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. by Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 63-73 (p. 64).
- ⁶⁶ Engelking, 'Genre and the Mark of Gender', p. 83. My emphasis.
- ⁶⁷ Other crucial contexts here are Stéphane Mallarmé's (unfinished) poetic fragment *Hérodiade* that he started writing in 1864 and Oscar Wilde's *Salome* (1891 in French, 1894 in English). For a discussion of the latter see Petra Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

Olive Custance, Nostalgia, and Decadent Conservatism

Sarah Parker

Loughborough University

Olive Custance was one of the most prolific women poets published in *The Yellow Book*, with poems appearing in eight of its thirteen volumes.¹ She is also mentioned in several studies of the *fin de siècle*; as her 1972 bibliographer Nancy J. Hawkey states: ‘her name is invariably included in contemporary lists of representative poets’ of the 1890s.² For example, in 1925, Richard Le Gallienne fondly recalled her ‘flower-like girlish loveliness’ at John Lane’s teas and includes her in a list of prominent ‘minor poets’ of the period.³ In *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913), Holbrook Jackson groups her among ‘those poets who give expression to moods more attuned to end-of-the-century emotions’.⁴ This fosters the impression that Custance did not continue writing beyond the *fin de siècle*. Modern critics perpetuate this notion, observing her apparent poetic silence following her final volume, *The Inn of Dreams* (1911), which itself consisted largely of reprints from *The Blue Bird* (1905).⁵ However, Custance in fact continued publishing long after 1911, producing work throughout the 1920s, 30s and 40s, until her death in 1944. In this article, I will consider why her later work has been overlooked, contextualizing her position in the twentieth century. This investigation provokes challenging questions about how we might address the disquieting political uses to which Decadent poetry may be put.

Despite the often self-consciously ‘girlish’ tone of her letters, Custance was a shrewd negotiator of the periodical market of the *fin de siècle*; in addition to *The Yellow Book*, she published poems in the *Savoy*, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and *The Sketch*. Therefore, it is little surprise that she continued to successfully source locations for her work in the twentieth century, publishing poems in the *English Review*, the *Academy*, *Plain English*, and the *Border Standard*. But as a cursory glance reveals, these venues are contentious due to the right-wing and anti-Semitic material found within their pages. They reflect the conservative politics of Custance’s husband Lord

Alfred Douglas who used them to wage aggressive campaigns, culminating in his imprisonment for libel in 1924.⁶ The presence of Custance's lyrics in these contexts raises a series of difficult questions. What do we do when Decadent icons 'go bad'? How can we reconcile feminist recovery work with right-wing politics? Should we separate the poet from her publication context, or would doing so risk white-washing the ways in which writers are implicated in the racism of their times? What do we *do* with conservative poets like Custance, Douglas, and their associate T. W. H. Crosland? Should we simply refuse to read them? And how might reading them prompt us to redefine Decadence? To answer these questions, this article will contextualize Custance as a continuing cultural presence in the twentieth century. In the first part, I look at the self-fashioning strategies that she developed to promote her work in the Edwardian era. Utilizing photography and fashion, I show how Custance draws on romantic images of eighteenth-century women and cultivates a childlike mood that situates her Decadence in nostalgic realms, which are also echoed in her poetry. In the second part, I turn to the troubling venues in which Custance published her work. I ultimately bring both sections together to define Custance as a Decadent conservative who used nostalgia as a keynote to the politics of her persona.

The categorization 'Decadent conservative' may seem paradoxical. The Decadent is more usually associated with transgression and rebellion than conservatism. As Alex Murray explains in his work on Decadent conservatism, Decadence has long been associated with a rejection of politics in favour of individualism or, in the case of New Woman writers and female aesthetes, with progressive political activism in favour of women's rights and socialist causes.⁷ Therefore, when Decadence *has* been politicized, it is usually through its transgressive female writers – making Custance's conservative positioning even more difficult to recognize. Custance's 'Decadence' is, moreover, a contentious issue; early critics consider her Decadent 'mood' fleeting and imitative. Hawkey argues that her work is 'neither consistent nor emphatic enough to be representative of either Decadence in particular or aestheticism in general. She was, rather, a poetess of mixed moods in a period in which flamboyance was a prerequisite for fame'.⁸ We can

counter this assessment on several fronts. Firstly, one could argue that it is more appropriate to refer to Decadent *poems* rather than to Decadent *poets* since Decadence is often a mode adopted within a wider oeuvre. For example, a glance at Theodore Wratislaw's *Caprices* discloses 'Song in Spring', which sings of roses and love fulfilled, whilst John Gray's 'Green' (in *Silverpoints*) begins: 'Leaves and branches, flowers and fruits are here | And here my heart, which throbs alone for thee' – precisely the kind of topics that Hawkey claims disqualify Custance from the Decadent label.⁹ Secondly, the 'flamboyance' of the poet's life should be distinguished from the Decadent qualities of the work; Decadence is more than a matter of lifestyle. As an upper-class woman, Custance could not express her Decadence through the kind of bohemian existence lived by Arthur Symons or Ernest Dowson even if she had desired to.¹⁰ Finally, Patricia Pulham has recently argued that Custance's 'mixed moods' are precisely what makes her work Decadent: her 'mood' poems 'function simultaneously as conscious constructions of decadent artificiality and emotional expression'.¹¹ Thus, as Pulham claims, the self-conscious changeability of Custance's 'moods' reflects her adherence to Decadent artificiality, blended with Paterian impressionism and Romanticism.

I have addressed the question of Custance's Decadence then, but how could such Decadence signify a conservative position? As Murray asserts, whilst Decadence and conservatism 'seemingly make uncomfortable bedfellows [...] the lines of demarcation between conservatism and Decadence are much less clear' than we have been led to believe.¹² Particularly in the case of a poet like Custance – a female aesthete associated with both the New Woman's creative ambition and the Decadent's sexual transgression – conservatism hides in plain sight. The key to identifying Custance's conservatism lies in her belated adherence to Decadent aesthetics. Custance remained doggedly committed to Decadent poetics in the twentieth century, when such 'moods' were becoming outmoded. For example, the *Saturday Review* criticized Custance's commitment to outdated Decadent conventions in a 1906 review of *The Blue Bird*:

Lady Alfred Douglas' 'Blue Bird' is very full of honey indeed. Here the spirit and manner of a school of verse which flourished in Oxford early in the last decade, and of which Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson were the most typical representatives, are reproduced with monotonous fidelity. We have a poem on Endymion, on Hyacinthus, on S. Sebastian. [...] [We] regret that Lady Alfred Douglas should continue to believe that subservience to outworn convention of form and language can take the place of a real insight into and interest in the human soul.¹³

Lord Alfred Douglas (true to form) responded with a letter of rebuke, stating that his wife used forms such as the sonnet 'which are to be found in our best lyrical poets, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Swinburne, Blake and the rest' and mocking the reviewer's opinions on poetic innovation: 'it would be amusing to hear his views on what he would probably describe as the "latest up-to-date" forms and conventions'.¹⁴ This skirmish captures the tensions over what constituted poetry in 1906: should 'modern' poetics build on previous poetic conventions, or should it reject them? A similar tension permeates Richard Le Gallienne's later account of the 1890s. He defends the minor poets of the period, including Custance, with an aside:

the 'free verse', 'imagist', and general anti-tradition poets of the moment, morbidly afraid of 'rhetoric' [...] would do much better to go to school to one of the masters rather than attempt by wilful eccentricity to 'fake' a fictitious personality for themselves – though these and their sympathetic critics would relegate many of the poets in this list to the dustbin of superannuated song, there is little doubt in the minds of more catholic and central lovers of poetry that several of them have come to stay, and that all of them contributed something valuable to the general chorus. Almost all these poets [...] were fathered by the Bodley Head.¹⁵

In an era increasingly dominated by Modernism, to adhere to Decadent conventions could signify a multiplicity of ideological positions. As Kristin Mahoney reveals, Decadent writers in the twentieth century (such as Max Beerbohm and Vernon Lee) tended to portray themselves as detached from the times in which they lived. This strategy enabled them to coolly critique the present moment, including its hot-headed jingoism.¹⁶ Elsewhere, Cassandra Laity has argued that Modernist writers such as H.D. used allusions to their Decadent forebears to signal queer affinities, drawing on the *fin-de-siècle femme fatale* and androgyne to encode alternative sexualities.¹⁷ These examples, combined with Murray's recent study of Decadent conservatism in *The Senate*, gesture to the variety of political ends to which Decadence could be put in the twentieth century.

This suggests that Decadence as an aesthetic mode has no inherent politics and can be mobilized to express a range of ideological positions. As I will propose in the next section, in Custance's case, her continued adherence to Decadence expressed conservative nostalgia founded on a sense of inherent superiority tied to both her class and her sexual identity as an aristocrat and a queer woman. Custance's Decadent poetry repeatedly laments the loss of youth and beauty, qualities she perceives as under threat in the twentieth century. In the process, allusions in her 'child-like' poetry to an unspecified past idyll or otherworldly dreamland become ways of expressing both alternative sexualities and a conservative nostalgia that is anything but politically neutral.

'What a child I am!': Girlishness and Nostalgic Self-Fashioning, 1902-1906

The scathing criticism in a 1906 edition of the *Saturday Review* was particularly disappointing as Custance was trying to revive her career. 1902 had been an intense year, in which she eloped with Douglas, published her second volume *Rainbows*, and gave birth to her son Raymond. After a hiatus in 1903, she began publishing poems again; for example, 'The Photograph' appeared in the *Saturday Review* on 30 April 1904 (Douglas pointed out the irony of this in his response to the paper's criticism of his wife). As 1904 progressed, Custance corresponded with John Lane, asking him to source publication venues for her work (he had assisted with this when *The Yellow Book* was still active):

Would you be kind enough I wonder to place the enclosed sonnet for me in some paper or magazine. [...] I am writing as much as I can for my next volume *The Blue Bird*. [...] I hope to come and see you ... and bring my boy to show you – he is a beauty and walks alone now... [...]. I was ill and depressed all last year – but things are going very well now and I am much better – and we having such a gay and happy time – we often go into Monte Carlo.¹⁸

This letter suggests Custance was anxious to revive her career following a period of possible post-natal depression. Presumably Lane's reply was discouraging as Custance's poems were instead published in the *English Review*. This journal was under the control of T. W. H. Crosland, a close associate of Douglas. Crosland ran the paper from October 1905 to February 1906 and

established the Marlborough Press around the same time. In his sycophantic biography *The Life and Genius of T. W. H. Crosland* (1928), William Sorley Brown writes that the *English Review* ‘deserves to be specially remembered because of the excellent standard of verse that appeared in its lively pages. [...] The chief contributors of verse were Lord and Lady Alfred Douglas’.¹⁹ Custance published at least three poems in the magazine: ‘Grief’, ‘Autumn Day’ and ‘In Praise of Youth’.²⁰ ‘Grief’ – possibly the sonnet that she wished Lane to place – expresses a sense of weariness and nostalgia:

I, that was once so eager for the light,
The vehement pomp and passion of the day,
Am tired at last, and glad to steal away
Across the dusky borders of the night.
The purple darkness now is my delight,
And with great stars my lonely sorrows play,
As still, some proud and tragic princess may
With diamonds make her desolation bright.

Night has become a temple for my tears ...
The moon a silver shroud for my despair,
And all the golden forests of the spheres
Have showered their splendours on me leaf by leaf
Till men that meet me in the sunlight, stare
To see the shining garment of my grief!²¹

The melancholy speaker longs to retreat into Decadent twilight, where she will become a ‘tragic princess’ clad in stars, moonlight, and fallen leaves. This poem expresses the yearning for youth and the past and the rejection of the present, here represented by daylight that is found in many of Custance’s poems. This nostalgia is reinforced on a formal level through her use of the Petrarchan sonnet (although Custance interestingly innovates within the convention, with the sestet employing a variation on the traditional rhyming pattern). ‘In Praise of Youth’, published in the *English Review* in 1906, expresses a similar desire to avoid maturity, concluding:

... And when at last, with sad, indifferent face,
I walk in narrow pathways patiently;
Forgetful of thy beauty, and thy truth,
Thy ringing laughter, thy rebellious grace ...
When fair Love turns his face away from me ...
Then, let me die, O delicate sweet Youth!²²

The speaker desires death if they ever forget the beauty of ‘Youth’, here personified as an androgynous figure recalling Douglas’ allegorical poem ‘Two Loves’: ‘Thy whiteness, and thy brightness, and the sweet | Flushed softness of thy little restless feet ... | The tossed and sunny tangle of thy hair’.²³ But such sorrow is of course inevitable, as ageing is a fact of life. The speaker strives to hold this reality at bay by evoking a timeless dreamland in which Youth is an eternal spirit that can be continually returned to, implying that if one continues to praise ‘Youth’ (‘thy praises shall be sung | While yet my heart is young’) – presumably through writing and reading such poetry as Custance’s – maturity can be indefinitely suspended.



Figure 1. Photograph of Olive Custance by Lallie Charles, *Tatler*, 3 January 1906, p. 25.

Such nostalgia also infuses Custance's self-fashioning strategies at this time. Crosland agreed to publish Custance's third volume of poems, *The Blue Bird*, through his Marlborough Press. The first advert for *The Blue Bird* appears in *English Review* on 28 October 1905 and then in every subsequent issue. The book did not sell well, however, and in early 1906, Custance set about trying to promote this new volume herself. Photography and self-fashioning were central to her publicity strategies. She had utilized photography early in her career to pique the interest of Douglas and she continued to use her image in this manner, sending a photograph to Lane in 1906, along with a copy of *The Blue Bird*, to pass onto Le Gallienne so he would not 'forget her'.²⁴ Her portrait appears in *Tatler* in January 1906 captioned 'A Pretty Poet' [see Fig. 1].²⁵ *Tatler* was (and still is) a publication devoted to showcasing aristocratic beauty, thus the photograph promotes Custance's work via her romantic appearance. The photograph is by Lallie Charles who, inspired by the success of other female studio photographers such as Alice Hughes, opened her first studio in London in 1896. She became one of the most sought-after photographers of the Edwardian era, specializing in portraits of society women which were published in *Country Life*, *Bystander*, *The Sketch*, and *Black and White*. A piece in the latter praised her as a photographer of women, writing:

It is almost a proverb that woman is never appreciative of woman: Madame Garet-Charles is a living contradiction to that saying, for women make the greater proportion of her sitters, and that she is kind to them, in that she brings out all their good and beautiful points, is abundantly evident.²⁶

Custance clearly appreciated Charles' talent as she had other portraits taken by her. For example, another photograph by Charles of an elaborately coiffured Custance also appeared in *The Sketch* in February 1906 [see Fig. 2].²⁷



Figure 2. Photograph of Olive Custance by Lallie Charles, *The Sketch*, 21 February 1906, p. 170.

Custance evidently made concerted efforts to fashion herself as a glamorous figure. Her diary contains detailed plans for gowns and hats alongside drafts of poems. A 1906 entry describes a new dress in terms that encode the eighteenth-century aesthetics that she admired:

My dress-maker has made me a blue chiffon evening frock – which is a most glorious colour, like the blue ribbon Lady Hamilton wears in her hair in one of Romney’s pictures – a blue that – by day – makes one dream of summer skies, blue flowers and youth – and at night reminds one of peacocks, precious stones and poets ... Oh, a frock for a Princess... A mysterious frock – suggestive of many delights ... a snare for the curious eyes of Pleasure, a net for the Winged Love ...²⁸

Custance then observes that some may regard her attention to dress as ‘trivial’: ‘See! how I am inspired by a little gossamer garment ... and being a woman am not ashamed of it ... for is not everything in the world trivial and transitory ... and all our wisdom foolishness?’²⁹ This careful self-fashioning is entirely in keeping with aestheticism, in which the self becomes a work of art. Custance clearly regarded her image as a crucial aspect of her poetic career; her dresses *were* poems. Reviews also picked up on the connection between gowns and poems; in a review of *The Inn of Dreams*, *The New York Times* wrote that: ‘her singing robes are made in Paris, and are strictly up-to-date in the cling of their sentiment and the hang of their rhythm’.³⁰ Of course, this statement is incorrect on both fronts: Custance’s poetic style was far from ‘up-to-date’ and her sartorial style was also composed of historical references. The contradiction may be explained by the fact that nostalgia *was* the order of the day for many poets, particularly conservative aesthetes like Custance.

In Custance’s case, this nostalgic ideal is inflected by the eighteenth century, with her frilled, lacy, light-coloured dress and rose-trimmed bonnet in Charles’ portrait suggestive of that era [see Fig. 1]. Talia Schaffer observes that for many female aesthetes, the eighteenth century signified ‘a period of idyllic, deliciously flirtatious, virginal girlhood’.³¹ Rather than an absence or repression of sexual desire, the eighteenth century represented ‘a way of critiquing normative marital reproductive sexuality’ as it was considered a period of ‘eternal romantic courtship’ in which women could ‘flirt forever’ – with men and with each other.³² Custance’s costume therefore represents an attempt to emphasize her girlishness and express nostalgia for an earlier era, whilst also subtly conveying her flirtatious, fluid sexuality. Such nostalgia also has a conservative purpose. As Alison Light observes of Margaret Jourdain – an expert of eighteenth-century furniture and fellow contributor to Douglas’ later journals the *Academy* and *Plain English* – the eighteenth century functioned as a ‘a tidied-up patrician version of the past’ that was particularly appealing to conservatives in the early twentieth century, for ‘in the “bad times” of

social egalitarianism, this imaginary past could serve as an escape from, and indictment of, the alarming present'.³³

In Charles' photograph, Custance's performative stance – head resting on hands, face tilted, direct, longing gaze, fallen flowers on the bench before her – manages to be both innocent and knowing, a pose that she also adopts in her poetic work, using girlishness to mask self-aware seductiveness. With titles like 'The Child' and 'Angels', these poems turn wistfully away from the hardships of the world, finding refuge in innocence, angels and fairies. Contemporary reviewers anticipate Douglas Murray in deriding the 'childishly simple sentiment' and 'little girl's emotions' expressed in Custance's poetry.³⁴ But, as I have argued elsewhere, in a poem sequence like 'Songs of a Fairy Princess', writing in a child-like voice enabled Custance to project innocence whilst expressing potentially transgressive adult desires – in her case, bisexual desire for Douglas, represented as a homoerotic fairy prince.³⁵ The fairy-tale genre offered a comparable opportunity to Hellenism for enabling covert depictions of homoerotic desire; Oscar Wilde, Renée Vivien, and Douglas himself all embraced its queer potential for imagining new configurations of gender and sexuality beyond the bounds of adult judgment and censorship.³⁶

We can see how this operates in a poem like Custance's 'The Child' (1905). The poem imagines a 'dreaming girl' at sunset: 'A rose in heaven, the sunset glows | Behind her flushed and happy face; | O golden rose, and wild pink rose'.³⁷ The adjectives 'flushed' and 'wild' suggest that all is not as innocent as it may seem. Blushes were often sexualized within Victorian culture, associated with sexual self-consciousness, but also with secret vices such as masturbation.³⁸ As with other Custance poems, the ellipses throughout the poem increase this sense of suggestion. The second stanza asks: 'What does she see?' – and the answer is fluttering green leaves, like butterflies, suggestive of the fecundity of spring. However, the third stanza alludes to the 'darkening sky' above her head, hinting that this fantasy may cause the hours to waste away as the girl matures. Twilight features repeatedly in Custance's work, representing both Decadence and the liminal period between girlhood and maturity. The girl has '[b]uilded castles in

Wonderland’ – a deliberately ungrammatical line, in which Custance adopts the child’s babyish voice. The final stanza addresses the prince, who is to awaken the girl from this fairyland:

The world for her is a mystery...
Child princess of the prince to be.
(The rose has faded out the sky)
Ride swift, fair prince, by Love’s sweet grace,
To win the wild rose of her face
Before it too shall fade and die.³⁹

As with Custance’s other poems, the danger here is maturity. Though the princess is a child, her beauty and youth will soon fade. For all its infantilized innocence the poem is imbued with a sense of ephemerality and decay. It also encodes a knowing sexuality; essentially urging the prince to deflower the princess before her bloom fades.

‘The Child’ complements Custance’s photographic self-fashioning. Like Charles’ photographic portraits, it projects a nostalgic, innocent image of youth detached from the sordid modern world but is in fact highly aware of itself as a sophisticated construction. In her quest to project childishness, Custance enlisted her infant son Raymond, writing in her 1906 diary: ‘This morning Raymond and I went to be photographed together ... He was taken alone ... and I hope they will be good ... I took off all his clothes for one picture taken with me in the Melisande frock ...’.⁴⁰ This photograph, also by Charles, appears in *The Sketch* in December 1907 [see Fig. 3]. Although this whimsical image chimes with the fairy land often depicted in Custance’s poems, it also potentially raises concerns regarding Raymond’s agency in such a scenario, bringing to mind more disturbing contexts of pederastic exploitation at the *fin de siècle*, such as the photography of Wilhelm von Gloeden and the writings of Baron Corvo (Frederick Rolfe).⁴¹



Figure 3. Photograph of Olive Custance with Raymond by Lallie Charles, *The Sketch*, 11 December 1907, p. 277.

Although she never published poems explicitly *for* children, naivety was one of Custance's dominant poetic 'moods'. In letters and poems, she often describes herself as a changeling or fairy's child. For example, in a letter to Siegfried Sassoon of 1918 (written when she was forty-four), Custance writes with characteristic flirtatiousness:

I think it may amuse you to know what I look like? I always want to know what people look like ... so important!

I have blue eyes and short golden-brown hair ... and of course I'm rather old!

How horrible this war is ... I don't understand it and I want to stop it! – 'a pacifist!' – my father says ... but of course he is an old soldier ... and utterly different from me ... I am a changeling! as you will see by my poem ... or fairy's child really and it's always felt lonely in this world ... especially with my own people ...⁴²

These sentiments are expressed in her poem 'The Changeling' which was published in *The Inn of Dreams* (she sent Sassoon the volume along with her letter):

My father was a golden king,
My mother was a shining queen;
I heard the magic blue-bird sing ...
They wrapped me in a mantle green.

[...]

They stole the crying human child,
And left me laughing by the fire;
And that is why my heart is wild,
And all my life a long desire ...⁴³

By identifying as a changeling, Custance expresses a sense of otherness and separation from the mundane world. This can be seen in the speaker's reference to her 'wild' heart and 'long desire', echoing Custance's 'Opal Song': 'Shy and wild ... shy and wild | To my lovers I have been. | Frank and wayward as a child, | Strange and secret as a queen'.⁴⁴ As I have argued elsewhere, this poem reflects Custance's fickle nature and her queer desires. The changeling too, belongs to a royal lineage; the fairy inheritance as one of inherent superiority (a birth line even finer than the blood of Custance's 'own people', with whom she is reluctant to identify). The reference to the 'blue bird' not only refers to her earlier collection, but also to its epigraph, taken from Wilde's 'The Decay of Lying': 'over our heads will float the Blue Bird singing of beautiful and impossible things, of things that are lovely and that never happen, of things that are not and that should be'.⁴⁵ Custance's speaker hears the 'magic blue-bird sing' and is therefore in tune with the time when (as Wilde's Vivian describes) Beauty becomes superior to Truth. The changeling thus has access to an alternative set of values which enables them to escape from the rules of the present:

The old enchantments hold me still ...
[...]
I dance and revel with the dead ...

[...]

'Vain lies!' I hear the people cry,
I listen to their weary truth;
Then turn again to fantasy,

And the untroubled Land of Youth.

As with 'In Praise of Youth', 'The Changeling' captures Custance's position in the twentieth century. She preferred to live in 'the Land of Youth' and to lament the loss of the past, turning to fantasy rather than the more difficult reality of the present (including her troubled relationship with Douglas, the trials of motherhood, and the war).

This begs the question: was Custance in touch with reality? Returning to her letter to Sassoon, we can discern a disturbing flippancy as she transitions rapidly from the ongoing First World War to fairy fantasy. What is the function of such childishness? In this instance, it allows Custance to blithely express ignorance ('I don't understand it!'), softening her actual political convictions ('I want to stop it [...] a pacifist') in a manner that protects her insouciantly Decadent, conservatively feminine façade. Elsewhere, in poems like 'Songs of a Fairy Princess' and 'A Child', as we have seen, it enables her to write about desire whilst evading the censorship associated with adult sexuality. Finally, Custance's use of a child's perspective permitted her to express conservative politics under the mask of innocent detachment from the world. In a similar manner to Dickens's Skimpole, Custance regarded Douglas and herself as 'mere children' – as she once wrote to him during their courtship: 'What a child I am! But you will understand because you are a child too'.⁴⁶ But whilst the child voice may seem to absolve one of adult responsibilities through its depoliticized tone, as we will now see, in reality this was far from the case.

Decadence and Anti-Semitism: *The Academy* and *Plain English*, 1907-1921

Custance's portrait with Raymond is captioned: 'Wife of the rejuvenator of "The Academy", Lady Alfred Douglas, with her son' [see Fig. 3]. Douglas ran the *Academy* from 1907 to 1910. With the help of his friend Crosland, the periodical moved from a liberal to an extremely conservative position, railing against the threats of socialism, suffragism, and frequently voicing anti-Semitic views.⁴⁷ In 1909 W. H. Smith withdrew the magazine from sale and Douglas had to

relinquish the editorship.⁴⁸ The *Academy* provided a venue for Custance's work after the folding of Crosland's *English Review*. She published twenty-three poems in the magazine between 1906 and 1909; all but one of these are reprinted in *The Inn of Dreams*.⁴⁹ Many of these poems express the same turning away from the world in favour of a land of fantasy. For example, in 'A Song Against Care' (April 1908), the speaker urges the reader to cast off 'care' as a 'cloak too heavy to be borne', arguing that it is better to be a carefree 'gay beggar' than wear such weighty finery:

O Care!

[...]

[...] thou art fair
To look at, O thou garment of our pride!
A net of colours, thou dost catch the wise;
He lays aside his wisdom for thy sake ...
And Beauty hides her loveliness in thee ...
And after ... when men know the agony
Of thy great weight of splendour, and would shake
Thee swiftly from their shoulders, cast aside
The burden of thy jewelled bands that break
Their very hearts ... often it is too late.⁵⁰

It is unclear precisely *what* the 'care' is, but the implication is that engagement with the world may come at too high a price, risking loss of 'beauty' and jeopardizing the intellectual detachment of the 'wise'. This poem praises detachment from the concerns of the world and upholds individualism: 'But some are brave ... but some among us dare | Cry out against thy torment and be free!'⁵¹ As Murray notes, individualism was 'core to both the vision of classic Conservatism [...] and to the ideals of Decadence'.⁵² Moreover, in her study of women and conservatism, Light observes that the conservative 'emphasis upon private life and personal feeling, has especial significance for women' in comparison to the 'more rigorously collective-minded outlook of socialisms'.⁵³ Custance's seemingly apolitical poem therefore expresses a covert conservatism entirely in keeping with its publication context. If we reject 'care', the poem implies, we will be happy in our lot, rather than experiencing the discontentment that could lead to activism and change. The poem echoes a 1907 article in the *Academy* on the 'conservative view of life':

The good Conservative holds that it is not only vain but wrong to aim at happiness in this world, whether through individual effort or political combination. [...] [T]hose who stake their all upon this life and waste their powers in trying to make it happy are fighting against facts and the will of God.⁵⁴

Such attempts will result in ‘confusion and shame’ – as ‘A Song Against Care’ also warns.⁵⁵

Reading articles in the *Academy* alongside Custance’s poem helps make its submerged politics explicit. The apparent rejection of politics in ‘A Song Against Care’ is itself political.

The poem was published just above Ethel Talbot’s intriguing sonnet ‘Swinburne’. Both poems hark back to an idyllic time; the ‘tender morning of the world | When the old gods had speech with common men’.⁵⁶ Custance’s poem ‘Hyacinthus’, published in the *Academy* in May 1909 evokes a similar Hellenic idyll, recounting the tragic love of Apollo and his boy lover:

Fair boy, how gay the morning must have seemed
Before the fatal game that murdered thee!
Of such a dawn my wistful heart has dreamed:
Surely I too have lived in Arcady
When Spring, lap-full of roses, ran to meet
White Aphrodite risen from the sea ...

Perchance I saw thee then, so glad and fleet;
Hasten to greet Apollo, stoop to bind
The gold and jewelled sandals on his feet,
While he so radiant, so divinely kind,
Lured thee with honeyed words to be his friend,
All heedless of thy fate, for Love is blind.⁵⁷

Custance’s poem manages to be doubly homoerotic; not only do we witness the intimacy between Hyacinthus and Apollo, we also have a union between Spring and Aphrodite, a Botticellian reference that subtly encodes lesbian desire. In Arcady, these same-sex couples live together in sensual bliss. The poem can be read in the context of Wilde and Douglas’ affair, and Wilde’s imprisonment. In one version of the myth, Apollo is responsible for Hyacinthus’ death, but Custance alludes to the version of the story in which the wind god Zephyrus, jealous of such love, causes the discus to fatally strike Hyacinthus:

For Love is blind and cruel, and the end
Of every joy is sorrow and distress.
And when immortal creatures lightly bend
To kiss the lips of simple loveliness,
Swords are unsheathed in silence, and clouds rise,

Some God is jealous of the mute caress ...⁵⁸

The swords ‘unsheathed’ give this revenge distinctly phallic undertones, whilst the ‘mute caress’ recalls Douglas’ notorious ‘love that dare not speak its name’, used in the trial. It is difficult to resist reading in this scenario the wrath of Queensbury and the public condemnation of Wilde and Douglas’ relationship. Whilst some critics have argued that such homoerotic Decadent verse became more difficult to publish following Wilde’s trial, Linda K. Hughes argues that after 1895 ‘women, already marginal, could more safely articulate thoughts that had become dangerous for men’.⁵⁹ Custance’s work shows that women poets were still publishing such poems in 1909. However, these poems did not completely escape censure. As we have seen, the enduring Decadent homoeroticism of this poem was criticized by the *Saturday Review* in 1906 – it is no coincidence that the ‘honeyed’ poems they object to most are those addressed to boy-muses: ‘We have a poem on Endymion, on Hyacinthus, on S. Sebastian’.⁶⁰ These poems attest to Custance’s commitment to keeping the Decadent homoerotic spirit alive, regardless of the disapproval of others.

However, what is most intriguing – and disturbing – is that Custance’s poems appear in the pages of a deeply right-wing magazine. For example, the same issue as Custance’s ‘Hyacinthus’ features an article (unsigned, but likely by Douglas) on ‘How the Law Favours Women’ – in tone and content, this piece is a striking anticipation of the modern Men’s Rights Movement.⁶¹ A few months earlier, Douglas writes of the ‘Tottenham Outrage’ (an armed robbery committed by Jewish Latvian socialists): ‘The Act for excluding undesirable aliens was passed with the very object of keeping out of the country such monsters [...]. But the Home Secretary [Herbert Gladstone], in obedience to the canting howl about “political refugees” which was raised in the Radical press at the bidding of certain Jews and Socialists, has rendered this wise law to no effect’.⁶² A month later, Douglas reports George Bernard Shaw’s interview with a ‘celebrated Jew’ in which Shaw praised Jewish participation in revolutionary movements. Douglas comments: ‘That last observation happens to be profoundly true, and while it explains

Mr. Shaw's love of Jews, it also explains why [...] even in England, a strong anti-Semitic feeling exists'.⁶³ Such anti-Semitic articles appeared consistently during Douglas' term as editor.⁶⁴ Therefore Custance's seemingly apolitical Decadent escapism expressed in poems such as 'Hyacinthus' is deeply entangled in the political racism of the day.

After his dismissal as editor, Douglas continued his project, following the *Academy* with *Plain English*, a weekly magazine that he started with Crosland and Harold Sherwood Spencer in 1920. He used this venue to publish deeply anti-Semitic articles, including a series entitled 'The Jewish Peril' by Major-General Count Cherep-Spiridovitch, and his own claims of Jewish conspiracies regarding the Battle of Jutland.⁶⁵ Douglas later admitted that *Plain English's* policy was 'strongly anti-Semitic'.⁶⁶ Custance once again published poems in these pages. Her poem 'The Call', for instance, appears in *Plain English* in July 1920:

Come away!
But not to the secret woods, or the wind-swept fields today,
And not to the shining sands with their little waves upcurled ...
No! let us be brave at last and wander out of the world!

Come away!
To the other side of the stars, where the Angels are at play!
And our friends shall run to meet us with laughter in their eyes,
From the perfumed galleries of Heaven, and the golden galleries ...⁶⁷

Once again, the child-like speaker urges an escape from the mundane world into a world on 'the other side of the stars', populated with angels. This seems to be a version of heaven, reflecting Douglas and Custance's Catholic beliefs. Douglas had converted to Catholicism in 1911, and Custance supposedly converted herself in 1917 but lapsed shortly after. She returned to the Church in 1924 only to lapse again by 1927. Her religious commitment does not appear to have been particularly strong, and the theological vision in her poems is vague, to say the least; the 'perfumed gardens' and 'golden galleries' in the final line sounds sensuously Decadent rather than spiritual, and the poem floats off into ellipses before more details of the afterlife can be revealed.

‘The Call’ is published on the same page as Douglas’ ‘Eve and the Serpent’, a satirical poem about the court case in which the couple (unsuccessfully) battled Olive’s father Colonel Custance for custody of their son Raymond. Douglas’ poem is an attack on the courts, and is once again anti-Semitic. He aims his barbs primarily at Sir George Lewis, Colonel Custance’s solicitor.⁶⁸ Using biblical allegory, Douglas depicts Lewis as a dragon/snake that seduces ‘Eve’ with money – a reference to Mr Justice Eve, the judge who ruled in the Colonel’s favour. In a final ‘song’ performed by a chorus of demons, Douglas emphasizes Lewis’ Jewish and ‘German’ identity, lamenting the case’s outcome:

When Englishmen pay German Jews
 To prosecute their ‘son-in-laws’,
When advocates their skill abuse
 To make the worse the better cause.⁶⁹

Custance’s ‘call’ to escape the world is therefore tethered to a context that not only reflects the tensions of her own life, but also her husband’s anti-Semitic views. Her poems and the appalling content of the magazine do not speak *directly* to one another – indeed, one suspects that Custance’s poems function as convenient filler for Douglas’ journal. Nonetheless, the mere presence of Custance’s lyrics in such a context raises the question: what sorts of work are these seemingly detached, apolitical poems of dreamland and Arcady doing in *Plain English*? These poems ask to be read apolitically, emphasizing their innocence (in every sense of the word), but they are surrounded by virulently hateful journalism. The poems and the articles taken together create a complex ideological blend, balancing Decadent feminine nostalgia, with masculine political invective. Douglas must have been aware of this on some level, even if he was partly using his wife’s poems as filler. But was Custance fully aware of the content of Douglas’ magazine, and did she endorse its views? It is difficult to say for certain; I have not found any explicit expression of anti-Semitic beliefs in her letters. But Custance clearly read *Plain English* and was aware of its contents – consider her note to Douglas in 1920: ‘what a joy, Darling, to see my poem “The Call” in your paper – a thousand thanks! And I am delighted with your Article –

is it yours? – called “The Tin Whistle” – and Stuart Ellis’ Disraeli is very good – altogether it is a capital number ... and so amusing!⁷⁰ Given that the pages preceding ‘The Call’ feature Douglas’ attack on Lewis and the *Morning Post* (for refusing to print an advertisement for *Plain English*): ‘it is petty and mean – and *Jewish*. There’s the rub. [...] It takes a Jew or something very like one, to descend to such methods’, Custance could be in little doubt about the journal’s position.⁷¹ I suspect that making her own explicit political statements would not be in line with Custance’s particular feminine brand of conservatism; such outspokenness was reserved for men. But we must also credit her with some agency and choice in where she placed her poems and we must therefore read the inclusion of her poems in such venues as silent assent with the politics contained within their pages.

Immortal Youth!: Custance’s Late Poetics

For the rest of the 1920s, Custance lived a relatively quiet life on the Isle of Wight, where Douglas would come to visit her occasionally. In the 1930s, she moved to Hove where she and Douglas had seaside flats near to one another. She continued to write during the 1930s and 40s, until her death in 1944. For example, she crafted at least three poems in the early 1940s in response to the Second World War, entitled ‘England shall still be England’, ‘To the Wounded’, and ‘Immortal Youth’, though it is unclear if she actually published these.⁷² The latter is printed on a small card and dedicated ‘to His Majesty’s Royal Air Force’. The poem apostrophizes ‘Immortal youth!’ in a similar manner to ‘Hyacinthus’:

Immortal youth! Some people dared to say,
Hard things of you when England was at peace,
But cowering now in sorrow and dismay,
They see you as bright spirits that release,
Dread forces to protect them night and day ...
While they can only hope, and watch and pray.

Immortal youth! the earth, the sea, the sky,
Make mighty backgrounds for your victories
And your divine defeats – your chivalry,
Your gay and gallant ways ... for ever these

Shall shine undimmed, even though beauty die.⁷³

Custance thus reworks her particular brand of nostalgic Decadence for war time. This poem combines a wistful desire for ‘chivalry’ and ‘gallant ways’ with a sense of jingoistic enthusiasm – RAF bombers are transfigured into ‘bright spirits’ protecting the people of Britain. Death in wartime becomes once again a way of praising ‘youth’ and ‘beauty’. The death of these young men is a triumph for aestheticism; they die as martyrs for ‘Beauty’: ‘all that’s lovely shall be born again, | So long as age is wise and youth is brave | And Beauty shall be overthrown in vain’.⁷⁴

Thus forty-five years on from her work in *The Yellow Book*, Custance maintained her commitment to Decadent nostalgia. Her poetry troubles definitions of Decadence both historically, by extending into the twentieth century, and politically, through its alignment with extreme right-wing ideologies. But rather than concluding that Custance doesn’t fit the Decadent label, this rather suggests that we need to redefine Decadence to include such complex ideological positionings. For as Murray states:

The gamut of ideological positions held by Decadents and Aesthetes, as contradictory as they are, need to be acknowledged if we are to place Decadence effectively into its historical context, and to understand its textual strategies as engaged rather than arbitrary or solipsistic. In the case of conservatism and Decadence, it is crucial that we grasp the uneasy alliance between the two in the charged climate of late-Victorian political culture, as well as that culture’s relationship to the press.⁷⁵

To conclude, closely examining poets like Custance – those individuals associated with *The Yellow Book*, who continued publishing in the decades after – reveals the varied ways that Decadence endured in the twentieth century. In Custance’s mature work, Decadent nostalgia, homoeroticism and anti-Semitism are disturbing bedfellows. But although engaging with this work might make us uncomfortable, I believe that reconciling the queer Decadent glamour of this *Yellow Book* poet with her later manifestation as poetic filler in racist publications, is necessary, enabling us to perceive further facets of the complex functions of Decadent poetry in the twentieth century.

¹ The same number of poems as Graham R. Tomson/Rosamund Marriott Watson. As with Tomson, it is difficult to trace Custance through her various publication names (she publishes as 'Lady Alfred Douglas,' 'Olive Douglas,' and 'O.D.' among others). I have chosen to refer to her as Olive Custance throughout, as this is her most consistent authorial name.

² Nancy J. Hawkey, 'Olive Custance Douglas: Introduction to a Bibliography', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 15.1 (1972), 49-51 (p. 50).

³ Richard Le Gallienne, *The Romantic Nineties* (New York: Doubleday, 1925), p. 165; p. 173.

⁴ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties* (London: Grant Richards, 1913), p. 192.

⁵ For example, Hawkey writes that her poetic production 'ceased completely in 1911' (p. 51).

⁶ In his pamphlet entitled 'The Murder of Lord Kitchener and the Truth about the Battle of Jutland and the Jews' (later published by William Sorley Brown in the *Border Standard*, 18 August 1923), Douglas accused Winston Churchill of falsifying a 1916 report into the Battle of Jutland. He implied that Kitchener had been murdered as a part of an 'international Jewish conspiracy' and that Churchill had been corrupted by the Jews. See Stephen Heathorn, *Haig and Kitchener in Twentieth-Century Britain: Remembrance, Representation, and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 67-73 (p. 68).

⁷ Alex Murray, 'Decadent Conservatism: Politics and Aesthetics in *The Senate*', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 20.2 (2015), 186-211 (p. 189).

⁸ Hawkey, p. 51.

⁹ Theodore Wratlslaw, 'Song in Spring', in *Caprices* (Oxford: Woodstock, 1994), p. 9; John Gray, 'Green', in *Silverpoints* (Oxford: Woodstock, 1994), p. xxviii.

Hawkey dismisses Custance's work for dealing with 'roses, tender green plants, soft rain, and new love' (p. 50)

¹⁰ Although she certainly exercised her independence through her lesbian liaisons and defying her father's wishes in marrying Douglas.

¹¹ Patricia Pulham, 'Writing "end-of-the-century emotions": Decadence and Artifice in Olive Custance's Mood Poetry', *Women Writing Decadence, 1880-1920*, 7-8 July 2018, University of Oxford, p. 6 (conference paper kindly shared with the author).

¹² Murray, 'Decadent Conservatism', p. 186.

¹³ 'Little Verse', *Saturday Review of politics, literature, science and art*, 2 June 1906, pp. 694-95 (p. 694).

¹⁴ Lord Alfred Douglas, 'The Blue Bird', *Saturday Review*, 9 June 1906, p. 725. The war of words received attention in the press elsewhere: see *Bystander*, 11 July 1906, p. 67.

¹⁵ Le Gallienne, *The Romantic Nineties*, pp. 173-74.

¹⁶ Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), passim.

¹⁷ Cassandra Laity, *H.D. and the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Gender, Modernism, Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), passim.

¹⁸ Custance to Lane, 18 April 1904, British Library, Add MS 81728.

Custance frequently uses ellipses in both her letters and her published poetry. Whilst contemporary reviewers and modern critics often remark on how irritating this can be, I consider it yet another way that Custance can subtly imbue flirtatiousness into her work and her (often professional) interactions. It also implies what is left unsaid in ways that resonate interestingly with Douglas' 'love that dare not speak its name'.

¹⁹ William Sorley Brown, *The Life and Genius of T. W. H. Crosland* (London: C. Palmer, 1928), p. 183.

Sorley Brown also authored *The Genius of Lord Alfred Douglas: An Appreciation* (Galashiels, Scotland: W. Brown, 1913).

²⁰ 'Grief' (21 October 1905, p. 15); 'Autumn Day' (28 October 1905, p. 40), and 'In Praise of Youth' (3 February 1906, p. 348), all signed 'O.D.' in *English Review*.

²¹ 'Grief', *English Review*, 21 October 1905, p. 15.

²² 'In Praise of Youth', *English Review*, 3 February 1906, p. 348.

²³ Ibid.

In Douglas' poem, the figure of Love is 'fair and blooming, [...] | His eyes were bright, and 'mid the dancing blades | Of golden grass his feet did trip for joy' whilst the first figure encountered has 'wind-tossed' hair and shields himself from the sun ('Two Loves', *Poèmes* (Paris: Edition du Mercure de France, 1896), pp. 104-111). Like Douglas', Custance's poem is also structured as an allegorical journey in which she is accompanied by 'Life' and encounters 'wild Folly' as well as 'Youth'.

²⁴ Custance to Lane, 13 October 1906, British Library, Add MS 81728.

²⁵ *Tatler*, 3 January 1906, p. 25.

²⁶ *Black and White*, 16 April 1898, p. 528.

²⁷ *The Sketch*, 21 February 1906, p. 170. Custance's portrait appears alongside a photograph of 'Miss Whitelaw Reid,' also by Charles, with the same bench and a near-identical composition. The same photograph appeared in the *Bystander*, 11 July 1906, p. 67, in a feature recounting Douglas' skirmish with the *Saturday Review*.

- ²⁸ 7 July 1906, Holograph Diary 1906-1909, Berg Collection, New York Public Library. See also the entry on the Melisande frock inspired by Maeterlinck's play (13 February 1906).
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ 'Sophisticated Verse', *The New York Times*, 26 November 1911, p. 744.
- ³¹ Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), p. 99.
- ³² Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, p. 101; p. 99.
- ³³ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 35; p. 57.
- ³⁴ Douglas Murray, *Bosie: A Biography of Lord Alfred Douglas* (London: Hodder and Stoughton), p. 149.
- ³⁵ See Sarah Parker, "'A Girl's Love': Lord Alfred Douglas as Homoerotic Muse in the Poetry of Olive Custance," *Women: A Cultural Review*, 22.2-3 (2011), 220-40.
- ³⁶ Douglas published a Uranian poem entitled 'Prince Charming' (1892), whilst at Oxford. Renée Vivien also wrote a short story entitled 'Prince Charming' (1904), in which a girl masquerades as her brother and marries a princess. Wilde's fairy tales are well known.
- ³⁷ 'The Child', *The Blue Bird* (London: Marlborough Press, 1905), p. 19.
- ³⁸ See for example, Diane Mason, *The Secret Vice: Masturbation in Victorian Fiction and Medical Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 57.
- ³⁹ 'The Child', *The Blue Bird*, pp. 19-20.
- ⁴⁰ 22 February 1906, Holograph Diary 1906-1909, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.
- ⁴¹ Custance was an admirer and defender of Corvo, praising Mr A. J. A. Symons's biography: 'And I fancied to myself that he was a rich but melancholy widower!!! living in Italy surrounded by lovely boys ... [...]. I do think that he was most unfortunate in youth ... &, of course, abominably treated by all sorts of mediocre people' (Custance to A. J. A. Symons, 9 January 1932), Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware. Corvo also contributed to Douglas' *The Academy*.
- ⁴² Custance to Siegfried Sassoon, 23 August 1918, Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware.
- ⁴³ 'The Changeling', *The Inn of Dreams* (London: John Lane, 1911), p. 11.
- ⁴⁴ 'Opal Song', *The Inn of Dreams*, p. 47.
- See my reading of the poem in *The Lesbian Muse and Poetic Identity, 1889-1930* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 85-86.
- ⁴⁵ Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', *The Decay of Lying and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2010), pp. 1-38 (p. 35).
- ⁴⁶ Custance to Douglas, c. October 1901, British Library, Add MS 81703.
- ⁴⁷ See, for example, the 'Life and Letters' column (unsigned, but very likely by Douglas) which condemns suffragists, socialists and Jews, *Academy*, 13 February 1909, pp. 771-73.
- ⁴⁸ See 'Ourselves and W. H. Smith', *Academy*, 21 August 1909, pp. 437-39.
- ⁴⁹ This poem is entitled 'The Visible God', *Academy*, 14 September 1907, p. 885.
- ⁵⁰ 'A Song Against Care', *Academy*, 4 April 1908, p. 633.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Murray, 'Decadent Conservatism', pp. 201-02.
- ⁵³ Light, *Forever England*, pp. 13-14.
- ⁵⁴ Arthur Clutton-Brock, 'The Other Point of View', *Academy*, 28 December 1907, pp. 290-91.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 291.
- ⁵⁶ Ethel Talbot, 'Swinburne', *Academy*, 4 April 1908, p. 633.
- Talbot is today remembered as an author of girls' school stories, and she lived with an intimate friend, Edith Mary de Foubert, also an author of school stories. Murray describes the older Swinburne as a 'Decadent Conservative of sorts' (p. 190).
- ⁵⁷ 'Hyacinthus', *Academy*, 1 May 1909, p. 54.
- This poem was originally published in *The Blue Bird* (1905) and was later reprinted in *The Inn of Dreams* (1911).
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ Linda K. Hughes, 'Women Poets and Contested Spaces in *The Yellow Book*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 44.4 (2004), 849-72 (p. 859). Hughes cites Custance's poems 'A Madrigal' (July 1895) and 'The White Statue' (October 1896) as proof that risqué work could still be published in *The Yellow Book* after May 1895.
- ⁶⁰ 'Little Verse', *Saturday Review*, 2 June 1906, p. 694
- ⁶¹ 'How the Law Favours Women', *Academy*, 1 May 1909, pp. 61-62.
- ⁶² 'Life and Letters', *Academy*, 30 January 1909, p. 724.
- ⁶³ 'Life and Letters', *Academy*, 13 February 1909, p. 772. The 'celebrated Jew' was playwright was Reuben Brainin.
- ⁶⁴ See for example Rowland Strong, 'Israel in Europe', *Academy*, 27 July 1907, pp. 730-31.
- ⁶⁵ See endnote 6.
- ⁶⁶ *The Autobiography of Lord Alfred Douglas* (London: Martin Secker, 1931), p. 302.
- ⁶⁷ 'The Call', *Plain English* (17 July 1920), p. 30.

⁶⁸ Lewis had previously been involved in covering up a blackmail scandal on Douglas' behalf in 1893 (at Wilde's behest). He was also approached by both Wilde and Queensbury in relation to the first libel trial. He declined to act for either, perhaps because he knew the case was doomed to fail. See H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1962), p. 79.

⁶⁹ Lord Alfred Douglas, 'Eve and the Serpent', *Plain English*, 17 July 1920, p. 30. Lewis was not actually German, but his wife was, and Douglas believed Lewis too was of German descent.

⁷⁰ Custance to Douglas, 21 July 1920, British Library, Add MS 81703.

⁷¹ 'Life and Letters', *Plain English* (17 July 1920), p. 28.

⁷² 'To the Wounded' (c. 1940) and 'England Shall Still Be England' (December 1940), both Berg Collection, New York Public Library. 'Immortal Youth' (c. 1940), MC: P204/2/1MS/4, Magdalen College, University of Oxford.

⁷³ 'Immortal Youth'.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Murray, 'Decadent Conservatism', p. 190.

Decadent New Woman's Ironic Subversions: L. Onerva's Multi-layered Irony

Viola Parente-Čapková

University of Turku

Miten kaunis mies oli Bengt! Miten ylhäinen oli viiva, joka yhdisti pään ja olkapään! Liian kaunis mies! Se panee helposti epäilemään miehen neroa... Sitä paitsi oli kai todellakin Bengtin neron laita niin ja näin, mutta sivistynyt oli hän ainakin sen sijaan, ei yhtään viljelemätöntä kohtaa, ei muokkaamatonta maata.

[How beautiful a man was Bengt! How sublime was the line that connected the head and the shoulder! Too beautiful a man! That makes one easily doubt his genius... Apart from that, Bengt's genius was, indeed, so and so, but he was educated at least, no uncultivated place, no unworked land.]¹

This extract is taken from the novel *Mirdja* (1908) by the Finnish writer L. Onerva (pen name of Hilja Onerva Lehtinen, 1882-1972), often referred to as the most Decadent novel and one of the first 'subject-centred novels' in the literature written in Finnish.² One of the minor characters, the painter Bengt Iro, becomes the object of the female protagonist Mirdja's gaze. Mirdja tries to upend the usual dynamics of the man as an artist-creator and woman enjoying the role of *musa inspiratrix*. The text feels ironic at first sight – upon closer reading, the novel appears literally permeated by irony. However, after a second reading, the irony appears to work on various levels, leaving the reader in a state of confusion.

The exclamations at the beginning of the paragraph feel exaggerated, but when rereading the extract, one understands that the irony expressed is not simply verbal, based on saying the 'opposite' of what one means. The sentence 'How beautiful a man was Bengt!' does not imply that Bengt was not beautiful; it is the gendered concept of beauty that is being ironized here, as are the ideas of (in)compatibility of physical beauty with genius, and stereotypical images of masculinity and femininity in *fin-de-siècle* artistic discourses. The irony is also directed at the concept of the androgynous artist, who, however, was supposed to be a man. Only men were supposed to exhibit a modern 'harmony of soul and body'³ – this was not to be shared or evaluated by women. Irony acquires humorous and comic overtones when we learn that the main issue with Bengt's genius is not the artist's excessive beauty. The metaphor of workable land ironizes the idea of Bengt's artistic

subjectivity, referring, again, to feminine features incompatible with the desired effeminacy of the Decadents. Moreover, the ironic meaning is closely tied to the fact that the subject of the gaze is a woman.

In this article, I show how irony functions in L. Onerva's Decadent novel *Mirdja*, with brief reference to some of her other early texts. I discuss the workings of various kinds of irony, from verbal irony, extended or complex irony⁴ to dramatic and tragic irony,⁵ intertextual irony, which often intermingles with parody, contextual or context-determined irony,⁶ emphasizing historical, social and aesthetic context. In *Mirdja*, different kinds of irony serve as devices for constructing the Decadent female subject, disturbing and shattering gender boundaries within the ethical and political framework of the surrounding world. I pay attention to the narrative irony in the text, as well as to how the text ironizes various literary strategies, figures, motifs, ideas and whole genres, intertwining the rhetorical devices of irony with the parody and intertextuality so typical of the Decadent mode. Multiple ironic voices, levels, and hierarchies of irony subvert each other and are supported by the devices of Decadent poetics. I argue that the analysis of irony in this novel gives us important insights into the gendered dimensions of this Decadent text.

L. Onerva – A Finnish Decadent New Woman Writer

L. Onerva published *Mirdja* at the age of twenty-six, after studying French literature and art history at the University of Helsinki. She belonged to the liberal cultural circles of writers well-versed in European culture and interested in cosmopolitanism, but she also cared about the 'national awakening' in Finland and was concerned with developing the Finnish language culture. Hence she is a good example of various tensions and contradictions encountered by *fin-de-siècle* women writers who lived in countries marked by the nineteenth-century national renaissance, whose work was influenced by Decadence, and who were concerned with women's emancipation. L. Onerva began her career as a poet in 1904; *Mirdja* was her debut as a prose writer. She went on publishing poetry and prose, writing essays, contributing to newspapers and journals, translating and

mediating the culture of France and wider Europe; she has been called the most prolific mediator of French culture of her generation.⁷

L. Onerva's main concern in her early twentieth-century writing was the search for new humanity and, especially, for figurations of it from the point of view of women. She mapped and tested various ways of constructing female subjectivity with an emphasis on women's opportunities as artists and intellectuals. L. Onerva would also explore various kinds of queer subject figurations with patterns of identifications and desire shifting constantly, impossible to pin down. Irony plays a key role in this enterprise, 'since it does not simply negate the utterances it conditions [...]. [I]t is the ambivalence of irony, this double movement of positing and negating its effects in one and the same utterance'⁸ that, added to the poetics of ambivalence inherent in the Decadent mode, achieves the effect of destabilization of any kind of fixed gender identities.

However, it makes sense to discuss L. Onerva's heroines within the debates about the *fin-de-siècle* New Woman. While experimenting with various ways of questioning gender identities and gender politics, L. Onerva was deeply concerned with women's emancipation; she was one of the first women in Finland who did not need the special permit to study at university. At the turn of the twentieth century, Nordic women enjoyed relatively more freedom than women elsewhere; in Finland, they were given the right to vote and stand for election in 1906. However, many women writers of L. Onerva's generation felt that there was still much to be achieved. The 'Women's question' was part of the agenda of the Finnish patriots, but seen as secondary to the 'liberation of the nation' (Finland gained its independence in 1917).⁹

L. Onerva's writing was received positively within her own cultural circle assembled around the Finnish radical cultural weekly *Päivä*; outside it, it was commented upon rather negatively. Like many other women authors who employed the Decadent mode in their writing – the Norwegian Dagny Juel Przybyszewska, the Russian Zinaida Gippius, or the Baltic German Laura Marholm – L. Onerva was treated by literary historians as a muse and epigone of a male Decadent: the versatile *fin-de-siècle* writer Eino Leino, who entered the Finnish literary canon during his lifetime. L. Onerva

was accused of lacking originality, objectivity and clarity; the alleged subjectivity of her works was regarded as feminine and negative, though other critics labelled her work as ‘unfeminine’ or ‘masculine’, which was also considered negative. The conservative critic V. A. Koskenniemi accused L. Onerva of being incapable of irony and analytical thought;¹⁰ this view was perpetuated later by other critics including the liberal humanist Lauri Viljanen.¹¹ Irony in L. Onerva’s works went largely unnoticed; the only critic who mentioned it before twentieth-century feminist scholars was the literary historian Rafael Koskimies, who was also the first to notice the centrality of the Decadent mode in L. Onerva’s early twentieth-century writing and to connect it with the author’s concern for women’s emancipation.¹²

L. Onerva’s complex heroines have been called Decadent New Women.¹³ This label is something of an oxymoron and a paradox, discord or dissonance typical of women writing Decadence.¹⁴ As such, it perfectly fits L. Onerva’s protagonist of *Mirdja*. The whole novel can be described by various oxymoronic or paradoxical characteristics as a female Decadent *Künstlerroman*/dilettante novel or Decadent *picara* novel.¹⁵ The generic analysis of *Mirdja* leads us to see it as a parodic or ironic mutation of the *Bildungsroman*, where the development of the main character ends with her madness and death. The whole novel oscillates between depicting empowering and debilitating realities and choices for a woman (artist).¹⁶

The book begins with the heroine as a young orphan educated by her uncle and other male Decadent dilettantes, Pygmalion figures who decided to create a ‘kaikkeusolento’ [universal creature], a kind of an Overman in the figure of woman.¹⁷ Mirdja tries to appropriate various male roles as a Decadent Don Juan or a *flâneur*, while simultaneously styling herself as a *femme fatale* or the sphinx. As an aspiring singer and actress, she searches her art, self, love, sexuality, motherhood (both her mother’s and her own) or some higher ideas she can identify with and for spirituality, while exploring various physical and mental environments. After many disappointments, she ends up in a marriage with an enigmatic man named Runar, a teacher who is, nevertheless, also inclined to be a Decadent dilettante. After a period of torment in the marital relationship, Mirdja and Runar

achieve a kind of total symbiosis or fusion, in which all the tensions of gender and other differences cease to exist. However, this amorous mimicry happens too late: Mirdja becomes mentally ill and Runar dies.¹⁸ The novel ends with Mirdja slowly sinking into a bog, covered by its ‘valkeaan käärinliinaan’ [white shroud].¹⁹

Irony within the Polyphonic Narrative

Though (self-)irony is one of the founding strategies of Decadent writing²⁰ that has been tackled and explored vis-à-vis individual writers such as Wilde or Huysmans, according to Peter Butler, ‘nobody has ever seriously proposed Decadent irony as a type’.²¹ Irony, Decadence, and women (writers) form an especially challenging triad,²² since traditionally, women were supposed to be neither ironists nor Decadent authors and subjects. No matter which of the many definitions of irony we adopt, we find much of it in the work of Decadent women authors. L. Onerva’s principal mode of narration is extradiegetic. In *Mirdja*, only one section (called ‘Yksinpuheluja maailmassa’ [Monologues in the World]) is narrated in the first person, while the rest of the novel (like almost all of her other prose works) is a third-person narrative. The extradiegetic narrator is omniscient; focalization happens mostly, but not only, through the main character whose thoughts and dreams the narrator seems to know, although, in accordance with the poetics of Decadence, there is no certainty about anything.

All narration is pronouncedly polyphonic. Various voices compete, as if (often ironically) commenting on the protagonist’s thoughts as well as on each other’s utterances; this polyphony makes the irony multi-layered. All these devices are familiar from the earlier modes of authorial narrative with the perspective ‘from above’,²³ but, combined with the inherently ambivalent, at times oneiric mode of Decadent narratives, it is often unclear who is speaking. Neither the narrator nor the other voices are a concealed presence as in Realist or Naturalist texts. On the contrary, although L. Onerva does not use metanarrative devices, narrative voices are highlighted and foregrounded, emphasizing the materiality of language and the artificial nature of literary artefacts.

The competing voices sometimes seem to depart from the heroine's thought, or her inner monologues, on which they often comment. At times, in tune with the Symbolist mode, the voices belong to natural phenomena such as the sea waves, or inanimate sources of sounds like (church) bells. Occasionally, the ironic style involves a kind of 'doubling': either when one voice affirms and then negates something, suggesting narratorial unreliability,²⁴ or when two parties or voices quarrel.

The ironic narrator, who dominates many sections, steps forward at the closing chapter of the first, nameless, part of the novel, when Mirdja is indulging in contemplating the *sisällistä sielun mysteriaa* [inner mystery of her soul], her *'pahat ajatukset'* [wicked thoughts] about plunging *'rikollisissa bakkanaalijuhlissa'* [into criminal Bacchanalia] and the longing for *'sairasta nautintoa'* [sick pleasures].²⁵ She feels frustrated that she does not have the opportunity to commit as many sins as she would like to; but she is even more frustrated knowing that if the opportunity arose, she would not be able to realize her fantasies. They would demand too much cruelty and Mirdja knows that, in principle, she is good. *'Oi kuinka kalpea ja voimaton oli hyvyys! Ja Mirdja rakasti nautintoa ja voimaa ... Mirdja raukka!'* [Oh, how pale and weak goodness was! And Mirdja loved pleasure and strength ... Poor Mirdja!]²⁶

Closer analysis reveals various levels of irony. First, a young girl's *naïveté* is ironized: her longing to be 'bad', or 'wicked', which feels more appealing than being 'a good girl'. The exclamation 'Poor Mirdja!' which could come from a patronizing, ironic narrator, points to the same level. The next paragraph concludes with a question: *'Miksi ajatella aina, punnita aina? Sellaisilla taipumuksilla ajatella ja punnita! ... Mirdja raukka!'* [Why contemplate all the time, why ponder? To contemplate and ponder when having such inclinations! ... Poor Mirdja!]²⁷ The allusion to the idea of the (Decadent) subject being passive, unable to act and inclined to unrealized perversion evokes the Decadent concept of 'cerebral lechery'.²⁸ Since a female cerebral lecher was not easily imaginable as a figure of Decadence, we can read the exclamation 'Poor Mirdja!' as ironic with regard to woman's problematic position in Decadent discourses of sexuality. At the same

time, within the context of the novel, the sentence about ‘inclinations’ can be read as an allusion to queerness, which elevates the narrator’s irony to yet another level.

The closing sentences of the third paragraph with the final exclamation give us an image of congregations in ‘tuhansissa kirkoissa’ [thousands of churches], singing a heartfelt hymn about raising one’s soul to God, after which the chapter closes with the third exclamation, ‘Poor Mirdja!’²⁹ The primary irony here lies in the juxtaposition of one young girl’s ‘sinful thoughts’ with the thousand-times-greater power of the discourse of institutionalized religion. Within the context of the novel, this extract appears cataphorically ironic as, despite Mirdja’s contempt of religious institutions, years later she will be married, although unwillingly, in church by her husband’s father, who happens to be a Lutheran minister. Finally, the exclamation following the church image reads as tragic irony, since Mirdja’s lifelong and most painful search will be for spirituality, a vain quest for her own kind of deity, till the tragic end of her life, which evokes the concept of the irony of fate.³⁰

Decadent Heroines and Ironization of Nationalism and of the *kansa*

The narrator of *Mirdja* appears strongly ironic from the very first chapter. The novel opens in a bourgeois home, where ‘Kaikki puolueen terävimmät päät olivat kokoontuneet neuvottelemaan pian toimeenpantavan iltaman ohjelmasta.’ [all the sharpest minds of the party gathered to discuss the programme for a [cultural] evening they were soon to organize.]³¹ The leading figure is Elli Kailo, the committed wife of a secondary school teacher, who could:

hyvällä omatunnolla olisi saattanut arvata kaikkien jalojen aatteiden yleisen asianajotoimiston. Mutta sitä hän ei kuitenkaan tehnyt. Hän oli vaatimaton eikä koskaan tuonut esille ansioluetteloaan. Sen takivät hänen edestään muuta, ja itsestään oli selvää, että hänelle aina annettiin etusija, kun oli kysymyksessä jonkin uuden yrityksen onnistuminen. Niinpä toimi hän nytkin puheenjohtajana.

[in good conscience, open a general law office of noble ideas. However, she did not do that. She was modest and she would never show off her achievements. Others did that for her, and it went without saying that she was always given precedence, should a new undertaking be successful. That was why she was also acting as chairperson now.]³²

The bourgeois ladies, evoking the negative dilettantism of Goethe's 'semi-knowledgeable patrons and half-competent enthusiasts',³³ are discussing the programme of the evening and decide to invite only singers whose surnames are Finnish, regardless of their artistic abilities. All participants are happy with the decision. The absent Mirdja Ast is said to be a most talented singer, but she is quickly disqualified due to her 'foreign' surname as well as the bad influence she could exert on the patriotic young men. Ironization of the conservative bourgeois strata of *fin-de-siècle* Finnish society, with their nationalist zeal and lack of understanding of art, is rather straightforward here. The irony is partly verbal – the narrator means the opposite of what s/he is actually saying (cf. Elli Kailo's 'noble ideas' and her alleged modesty) – and partly contextual or context-determined. Knowledge of the historical context helps us to appreciate the irony more fully, but, on the whole, the ironic tone can be grasped even without any specific knowledge of Finnish history.

The ironization of the patriotic zealots' incapacity to understand art appears in more of L. Onerva's early texts. The best example is the short story 'Kuvittelija' ['Fantasy (Wo)Man'], from the collection *Murtoviivoja* [*Broken Lines*] (1909). Its protagonist Tuulos makes up an ideal androgynous creature in his fantasy, incomprehensible to the petite bourgeois narrator of the story whose lack of understanding Tuulos' aestheticizing fantasies finally becomes the target of the irony in the text. As such, this is not that thematically different from Decadent writing from France and elsewhere. However, Decadents from the European peripheries adopted far more complex stances towards nationalism and its gendered aspects.³⁴ A key aspect was the way in which the patriotic, mainly Swedish-speaking upper and middle classes (the active force in the Finnish 'national project') venerated the ordinary, mostly Finnish-speaking countryfolk, the *kansa*, which in Finnish, stood for nation, people and folk. As in some other 'awakening nations' in Europe,³⁵ the ideal of pure Finnishness was the *kansa*, cherished, celebrated and serving various aspirations of Finnish patriotic circles.

L. Onerva also ironized the often-hypocritical relationship of the middle and upper classes to the *kansa* in her early short stories, both before and after *Mirdja*. In ‘Veren ääni’ [‘The Voice of Blood’] from the collection *Nousukkaita* (1911), the protagonist Kaarina appears first as a passive, languid variant of the Decadent New Woman, a second-generation upstart from a Finnish-speaking merchant family who climbs the social ladder through marriage to an old, Decadent, but ardently patriotic Swedish-speaking aristocrat. When Kaarina’s Finnish-speaking father comes to visit his in-laws, he ‘yritti puhua ruotsia, jota hän äänsi yhtä virheellisesti kuin aatelisperhe suomea. Se oli kansallinen kuolemansynti tässä vastaperustetussa fennomaanitaloudessa ja vanha vapaaherra, periaatteen mies, osoitti mieltään uhkaavalla vaikenemisella.’ [he tries to speak Swedish, which he pronounces just as inaccurately as the Swedish-speaking family pronounced Finnish. That [speaking Swedish] was a deadly sin in this newly established Fennoman home and the old baron, a man of principle, demonstrated his disdain by threatening silence.]³⁶ The narrator’s irony escalates further when s/he comments on the way the upper classes venerate the abstract notion of the *kansa* but despise real people from a humble background, especially social climbers. The narrator’s ironic and ambivalent stance towards the character of Kaarina shows the ‘impossible’ position of this kind of a female parvenu in relation to the discourse of Decadence and nationalism.

Mirdja is also ambivalent towards her own roots; she searches for them by travelling to the countryside and visiting the poor countrywoman Loviisa, who used to be her nanny. Loviisa is dying, ill and abandoned by all, and *Mirdja* finds her in an isolated, dilapidated hut. Loviisa can be read as a bitter parody of the ideal of sacrificial motherly femininity, revered in Finnish patriotic rhetoric as a reminder of the realities of hardworking countrywomen, old mothers abused by alcoholic husbands and suffering their fate in silence.³⁷ At the encounter with Loviisa, *Mirdja* is a proud young (New) woman, raised by male bohemians and Decadent dilettantes and indoctrinated with ‘Over(woman)’ egotism, unable to recognize another woman in need, even her former nanny. Loviisa’s character appears ironic when considered in the context of *Mirdja*’s desperate search for a mother figure and her laments about being a motherless daughter.

Hence in *Mirdja*, the ironization of the hypocritical relation towards the *kansa* concerns not only upper- and middle-class patriots, but also the more liberal circles of bohemian artists, including Decadents, and, in a way, also the heroine who is educated by them. All Mirdja's 'intimate' encounters with the *kansa* end in disaster, presented through multi-layered irony by the narrator. After the Loviisa episode Mirdja visits a folk festival, where she is, again, in search of herself, trying to identify with the *kansa* as something higher or greater than she is. Her question: 'Mitä on tuo ns. kansa?' [What is that so-called folk?]³⁸ sounds strongly ironic, given that Mirdja oscillates between the disgust she instinctively feels for the *kansa* and the desire to merge and fuse with this overwhelming, liberating force.³⁹ Typically for a Decadent text, Mirdja's mental ideals resounding with pathos and exaltation turn into their opposites in reality. Mirdja feels threatened by the crowd, and experiences the situation as a kind of collective rape. However, after running away and overhearing a patriotic song sung by the 'folk', she feels enchanted again. The confused, ambivalent feelings towards the folk, which are the main source of irony here, appear as L. Onerva's response to the various contemporary discussions about the *kansa*, expressing the impossibility of functional communication between the mostly middle-class Finnish patriots and the 'people'. Mirdja's thoughts, reported by the narrator, range from ecstatic exclamations like, 'Jumalan juhla!' [God's feast!] to expressions of distance and disgust as 'tuo kansalle niin ominainen yhteistuoksu (...) työn hikeä, likaisia vaatteita, tupakkaa, lapsia' [this common smell, so typical of the people (...) the sweat of hard labour, dirty clothes, tobacco, children].⁴⁰ They oscillate from considerations mirroring the discourses of decadence and degeneration 'Me olemme eri lailla sairaita' [we are sick in different ways] to a conclusion that, after all, the *kansa* is the only strong and vital force in mankind.⁴¹

By means of mixing various voices, the (Decadent) aesthetes' discourse is juxtaposed with a socialist one, conveyed through revolutionary rhetoric. Cutting irony is aimed at the very discourses of 'disappointment' of Finnish *fin-de-siècle* intellectuals and artists whose own roots were, very often, in the *kansa*, but who had denied them when moving to the city. The gendered reading

of the passage adds another layer of irony, foregrounding the protest against the restrictive constructions of femininity within all available discourses.⁴²

The multi-layered irony in the passages I have discussed is mostly determined by the historical and cultural context, targeting the incompatibility of various contemporary discourses. The prism of the Decadent opposition between the ideal and reality and the highlighted gender dynamics of the respective situations add extra layers of tragic irony, showing the complex position of a female (Decadent) subject in the historical context.

Echo, Irony, and the Decadent Woman Artist

A gender-sensitive reading of *Mirdja* reveals the ways in which ironic attention is paid to male Decadent aesthetes who indulge in Decadent effeminacy and ‘gender parasitism’⁴³ but do not want to allow women to become creative subjects of the gaze. In the scene in the artist’s studio involving the painter Bengt,⁴⁴ quoted at the beginning of this article, Mirdja tries to appropriate the objectifying gaze and act as a Decadent Don Juan. However, the dynamic eventually changes and the man becomes the master again, delegating the woman to the position of an objectified muse. When he celebrates Mirdja’s beauty, complexity and undecidability and asks ‘[I]ell me, who you are!’ she answers: ‘sano minulle, mikä sinä olet!’; ‘Älä kysy, mikä mina olen, enpä sitä itsekään tiedä ... tai ... mina olen kaikkea, mitä uskot...’ [Don’t ask who I am, I don’t know that myself ... or ... I am everything that you believe me to be.]⁴⁵ The answer sounds bitterly ironic in the context of their previous interaction when Mirdja seemed to be in control, commenting ironically on Bengt’s beauty and genius. However, Bengt obviously does not understand the irony on any level.

The homosocial artistic milieu is ironized when depicting the circle around Mirdja’s most important Decadent educator-Pygmalion, the ‘pub philosopher’ Rolf, who was allegedly modelled on Eino Leino, L. Onerva’s aforementioned mentor and partner. A chapter in which Mirdja’s exceptionality and complexity are once again discussed in her absence suggests that her persona, a subject of the bourgeois ladies’ gossip at the beginning of the novel, now serves as a disposable

conduit for bonds between men.⁴⁶ The chapter ironizes a whole set of specific intertexts⁴⁷ and suggests the difficult, often impossible, position of a Decadent woman artist among Decadent men. Eventually, Rolf assumes responsibility for his detrimental Pygmalion-like authority. When, as usual, he indulges in inventing various paradoxes to describe Mirdja, she exclaims: ‘Oh, sinä filosofi!’ [You philosopher!]⁴⁸ Rolf obviously does not understand this rather ‘easy’ example of verbal irony, since he replies: ‘Minä! Kaikki ihmiset ovat enemmän tai vähemmän filosofeja.’ [Me! All people are more or less philosophers.]⁴⁹ Rolf’s continued dialogue is an explicit repetition (including a quote from a French song) of that which occurs in a scene at the beginning of the novel. Mirdja says she remembers their earlier conversation and Rolf’s quoting the song and he answers: ‘Niin, niin, mina olen sanonut sen jo ennen. Siitä nyt näet, miten kulunut mina olen, en keksi enää mitään uutta. Aina mina vain siteeraan ja kopioin.’ [Yes, yes. I have said it before. Now you see how worn out I am, I don’t come up with anything new. I am just quoting and copying all the time.] Mirdja snaps: ‘Ja mina kopioin sinua. Kaksinkertainen kunnia!’ [And I am copying you. A double honour!]⁵⁰

This time, irony is verbal and direct; the statement expresses Mirdja’s painful awareness of being an Echo, a copy of a copy, endlessly recycling worn-out quotes, a female imitator of a tired male Narcissus-dilettante, unable to produce her own original thoughts. When Mirdja says ‘I am copying you’, she refers directly to the ‘pedagogy of seduction’⁵¹ and processes of identification in her childhood and early youth. She is not only copying Rolf’s ideas, but identifying with him, imitating a dilettantism which in his case is pallid and unproductive. However, though the restrictive role of Echo is emblematic of woman’s fate as an unoriginal imitator, emphasized in Decadence, it affords Mirdja the opportunity to interrogate the gender dynamic by being ironic about the very Narcissus-Pygmalion whose words she repeats. As Echo, Mirdja can, through repetition, become an ‘initiator of the ironic’,⁵² evoking the relationship between Echo and irony: ‘Oh Echo, yes Echo, thou great master of irony!’⁵³ Frustration turns into ironizing (exploring, from still another viewpoint, the association of irony and dilettantism),⁵⁴ which sustains the ambivalence

and multiplicity of meanings within the text, enriched by the asymmetry between male and a female dilettantism. ‘Ah, miksi minä ajattelen toisten ajatuksilla? Siksikö että olen nainen vai siksikö että olen kaksinkertaisuus?’ [Oh, why do I still think with the thought of others? Is it because I am a woman or because I am mediocre?]⁵⁵ asks Mirdja.

The gendered asymmetry of artistic creativity and originality within the Decadent framework is a key theme in *Mirdja*, as in L. Onerva’s other early works, including the novel *Inari* (1913) about an aspiring woman intellectual, which addresses similar questions with a similarly bitter irony. Mirdja, praised for her extraordinary talent in acting and singing, is asked to play a leading role in a new play called *Odalisque*, but, after she learns its author comes from the provinces, she makes many ironic and sceptical judgements about him and about the name of the play. She ends up fully identifying with the character she plays, proclaiming she will ‘itseäni näytellä’ [play herself], ‘eikä sinun odaliskillasi saa muuta sielua olla kuin minun.’ [the odalisque would not ever have a soul different from hers, Mirdja’s.]⁵⁶ She gives a brilliant performance and is very disappointed when she cannot meet the playwright. Instead, she meets his friend Runar, her future husband, and later learns that in a way he had ‘co-created her’, that is, he had in fact written the play, as well as other texts she had identified with.

In their conversation after the performance, Mirdja alludes to debates on the ‘paradox of the actor’, the actress in Decadence, and *fin-de-siècle* artistic and aesthetic discourses.⁵⁷ She ironizes actors, or, better, actresses, as creatures who just ‘ihmissielun apinoita’ [ape human souls], who ‘Kaikkea he antavat ja omistavat paitsi itseään, se on varma.’ [give and own everything apart from themselves.]⁵⁸ Runar reprimands her for her excessive self-irony and offers a much more empowering vision of what an actor can be: the most magnificent talent in all humankind, ‘suuren ihmisen suuri sielu’ [a great soul of a great human being], ‘uudestisyntymisen luova taito joka sekunti,’ [a creative will of being reborn every second] – s/he is ‘hän onkin sielujen mahtavin hallitsija ja kasvattaja.’ [the most magnificent ruler and educator of souls.]⁵⁹ The conversation ends in a feeling of profound mutual comprehension. Within the context of the novel, however, the

positive and encouraging moment appears as another case of tragic irony, being subverted by the fact that the empowering view is held by the most enigmatic, and, eventually, the most powerful of Mirdja's Pygmalions.

Conclusion

The novel concludes with Mirdja's sinking into the bog.⁶⁰ The aspiring Over(wo)man, a kind of an upstart, who tried to 'rise' in all possible ways, meets a slow death by drowning, which can be easily viewed as dramatic and tragic, or even cosmic irony, and/or an irony of fate.⁶¹ The bog is much more ambivalent than the 'hells' which threaten Mirdja and laugh at her, contributing to the choir of ironic voices which torture the heroine with their paradoxical outcries throughout the novel:

Mikä altruisti sinä olet, sinä paha, itsekäs Mirdja!
Miten tyhmä sinä olet, kun et löydä parempaa ratkaisua, sinä visas, itsekylläinen Mirdja!
Miten heikko sinä olet, kun sinut kärpänen kaataa, sinä voimakas, ihmisiä hallitseva Mirdja!
Kummallisia ajatuksia!
Mirdja naurahtaa.
Helvetit nauravat myös.

[What an altruist are you, you bad egoist Mirdja!
How stupid you are, if you don't find better solution, you wise, complacent Mirdja!
How weak you are, when a fly can overturn you, you strong Mirdja, who dominates people!
Strange thoughts!
Mirdja laughs.
Hells laughs as well ...]⁶²

L. Onerva's irony is set in motion, 'made [to] happen'⁶³ by the polyphonic nature of the text, a technique intertwined with parody and intertextuality, typical devices of Decadent poetics. The irony is employed to convey the endless chain of undecidable, ambivalent, and paradoxical discords and dissonances brought about by the dilemmas of the female Decadent subject. As Claire Colebrook points out, 'in any collection of competing voices it is always possible that the underlying or unifying intention is undecidable.'⁶⁴ In the case of *Mirdja*, irony can often be understood as self-irony and, in accordance with the Decadent aesthetic, as a shield of the multiple self.⁶⁵ Irony itself is being ironized on many levels.

The multi-layered irony in L. Onerva's text shows the complex web of contradictory discourses and the uncertainty in which the Decadent New Women writers/artists and creative female subjects had to operate. The shifting edge of irony allows for scrutiny of a large scale of *fin-de-siècle* discourses: from those expressing the paradoxes of the nationalist idealizations of Finnish *kansa* to those showing the paradoxes in the gendering of the artistic discourse; from those showing bourgeois narrowmindedness to those exposing the narrowmindedness of homosocial bohemian circles. Analyses of the uses of irony by women writing Decadence help us to foreground 'the social, conventional and political aspects of language,'⁶⁶ and of the whole society in the given context. They show us new ways of seeing irony 'as a phenomenon that serves both discursive activism and critical disruption'.⁶⁷ Many of these elements are continued in the queer aesthetic of recent decades.⁶⁸

¹ L. Onerva, *Mirdja* (*Valitut teokset*, Helsinki: Otava, 1956), p. 102. All translations in this article, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

² Leevi Valkama, *Proosan taide. Viisi tutkielmaa* (Helsinki: WSOY, 1983), p. 216.

³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990; Berkeley: University of California Press 2008), p. 137.

⁴ Irony is a notoriously elusive concept; see for example Peter Butler, *Beyond Decadence: Exposing the Narrative Irony in Jan Opolsky's Prose* (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2015), p. 52. In verbal irony, the ironic meaning is 'local', originating from the incongruity of the surface meaning and the intended meaning of a word or a sentence, the 'irony of words'. See D. C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic* (New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 11. However, irony tends often 'to extend across a whole idea' (Claire Colebrook, *Irony*, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 9) and involves larger units than words or sentences.

⁵ Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 14.

⁶ There are various ways of looking at contextual or context-determined irony – see for example Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 3; Dan Shen, 'Non-Ironic Turning Ironic Contextually: Multiple Context-Determined Irony in "The Story of an Hour"', *Journal of Literary Studies*, 38 (2009), 115-30.

⁷ L. Onerva translated and/or wrote about a wide range of francophone authors, from Voltaire to Philippe Soupault, including Madame de Staël, Alfred de Musset, George Sand, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Paul Bourget. The heroine of *Mirdja* shares some features with Sand's Lélia and Consuelo, as well as with Hellé, the protagonist of Marcelle Tinayre's eponymous novel from 1898.

⁸ Damon R. Young, 'The Living End, or the Love without a Future', in *Queer Love in Film and Television: Critical Essays*, ed. by Pamela Demory & Christopher Pullen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 17.

⁹ The Finnish patriots spoke mostly in favour of women's education and even of their literary activities. Finland's 'national philosopher' J. V. Snellman (1806-1881) considered women's education very important, but he expressed his reservations about signs of any 'excesses' in women's public and artistic activities. See Pertti Karkama, *Järkevä rakkaus. J. V. Snellmanin kirjallisuuspolitiikka* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura 1989), p. 228.

Originally the Eastern province of the Swedish kingdom, Finland existed as a Grand Duchy within the Russian Empire from 1809 to 1917 and the turn of twentieth century can be considered the period of culmination of the Finnish national movement. See, for example, Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations*, trans. by Ben Fawkes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985); Hroch, *Hledání souvislostí. Eseje z komparativních dějin Evropy*, 2nd edn (Prague: SLON, 2018); and Matti Klinge, *Let Us Be Finns – Essays on History*, trans. by Martha Gaber Abrahamsen, Mary Lomas, Mirja Lavanne and David Morris (Helsinki: Otava, 1990).

¹⁰ V. A. Koskenniemi, 'Mirdja', *Aika* (1908), 876-78 (p. 877).

¹¹ Lauri Viljanen, 'L. Onerva 50-vuotias', *Helsingin Sanomat*, 28 April 1932.

¹² See Rafael Koskimies, 'L. Onerva (s. 1882)', in L. Onerva, *Valitut teokset*, ed. by Rafael Koskimies (Helsinki: Otava, 1956), pp. 5-14 (especially pp. 5-7); Rafael Koskimies, *Der Nordische Dekadent. Eine Vergleichende Literaturstudie* (Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia, 1968), p. 105. For more on L. Onerva's reception, see Viola Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound: Mimetic Strategies in L. Onerva's Mirdja* (PhD Thesis, Turku: University of Turku, 2014).

¹³ Viola Parente-Čapková, 'Decadent New Woman?', *NORA – Nordic Journal of Women's Studies*, 6.1 (1998), 6-20; and *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound*: L. Onerva's work was 'rediscovered' by Finnish feminist literary critics (Lea Rojola, Päivi Lappalainen) and included in the new wave of the scholarship on literary Decadence, mostly in the 1990s; see, for example, Pirjo Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja sfinksi. Minä ja Toinen vuosisadan vaihteen kirjallisuudessa* (Helsinki: SKS, 1997). My own studies from the last two decades have explored figurations of gender and the gendered subject in L. Onerva's work within a transnational, intertextual framework of what Matthew Potolsky (2012) has called the 'Decadent Republic of Letters', and within *fin-de-siècle* writing by women in the European centres and peripheries (for example Katja Mihurko Poniž and Viola Parente-Čapková, 'The New Women from the Margins', *Interlitteraria*, 20.2 (2015), 184-98).

¹⁴ One of the collections of George Egerton's short stories was called *Discords* (1894); L. Onerva's poetical debut was entitled *Sekasointuja* [Dissonances/Discords] (1904).

¹⁵ See Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound*.

¹⁶ Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound*, p. 219.

¹⁷ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 125.

In her early texts, L. Onerva lead an intense dialogue with Nietzsche, including the gendered idea of the Overman (see Viola Parente-Čapková, '(Un)Masking Woman: Decadent and Nietzschean Figurations of Woman in the Early Work of L. Onerva', in *The New Woman and the Aesthetic Opening. Unlocking Gender in Twentieth-Century Texts*, ed. by Ebba Witt-Brattstrom (Stockholm: Södertörn högskola), pp. 67-81. *Mirdja*'s Overman fantasies are connected to her artist aspirations, but they end up in failure, since she is unable to free herself either from the stereotypical *femme fatale* images or from the encumbering aspects of decadent dilettantism.

¹⁸ See Viola Parente-Čapková, 'Free Love, Free Love, Mystical Union or Prostitution? The Dissonant Love Stories of L. Onerva', in *Changing Scenes. Encounters between European and Finnish Fin de Siècle*, ed. by P. Lyytikäinen (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society), pp. 54-84 (pp. 60-61), and *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound*, p. 167.

¹⁹ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 297.

²⁰ See Robert Pynsent, 'Conclusory Essay: Decadence, Decay and Innovation', in *Decadence and Innovation: Austro-Hungarian Life and Art at the Turn of the Century*, ed. by Robert Pynsent (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), pp. 111-248, and *Questions of Identity. Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality* (London: Central European University Press, 1994).

²¹ Peter Butler, *Beyond Decadence*, p. 83.

²² Rachilde wrote a novel called *La Sanglante Ironie* [*The Bloody Irony*] (1891). For discussion of irony in the work of Rachilde, see Melanie Hawthorne, *Rachilde and French Women's Authorship: From Decadence to Modernism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001); Diana Holmes, *Rachilde: Decadence, Gender, and the Woman Writer* (Oxford: Berg, 2001). For Vernon Lee and irony, see Andrew Eastham, *Aesthetic Afterlives: Irony, Literary Modernity, and the Ends of Beauty* (London: Continuum, 2011).

²³ See Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 124-30.

²⁴ Compare with Sari Salin, *Hullua hurskaampi. Ironinen kahdentuminen Jorma Korpelan romaaneissa* (Helsinki: WSOY, 2002).

²⁵ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 44.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Cerebral lechery or 'mental erethism' was one of the typical ways in which the Decadents distanced themselves from reality, especially from 'lower' sexuality, associated with heterosexual intercourse and therefore despised. Cerebral lechery was a kind of 'higher sensuality', perverse and morbid stimulation of the senses with metaphysical overtones, reserved, of course, for men. See for example A.J.L. Busst, 'The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth Century', in *Romantic Mythologies*, ed. by Ian Fletcher (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 1967; Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination 1880-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Pynsent, Robert Pynsent 1989: 'Conclusory Essay: Decadence and Innovation', in *Decadence and Innovation: Austro-Hungarian Life and Art at the Turn of the Century*, ed. by Robert Pynsent (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989). On the possibilities of a female cerebral lecher see Parente-Čapková, 'Free Love', pp. 60-61.

²⁹ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 45.

³⁰ According to Claire Colebrook's discussion of ironic endings, 'the word irony refers to the limits of human meaning; we do not see the effects of what we do, the outcomes of our actions, or the forces that exceed our choices. Such irony is cosmic irony, or irony of fate. Related to cosmic irony [...] is the more literary concept of dramatic or tragic irony', when we see the character at the mercy of the plot or destiny. Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 14.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³² *Ibid.*

- ³³ See Richard Hibbitt, *Dilettantism and Its Values: From Weimar Classicism to the Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Legenda, 2006).
- ³⁴ See Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound*, p. 12; on Decadence and nationalism see Matthew Potolsky, 'Decadence, Nationalism and the Canon Formation', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 67.2 (2006), 213-44 (p. 215).
- ³⁵ See for example Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).
- ³⁶ L. Onerva, *Nousukkaita* (Helsinki: Yrjö Weilin & Kump., 1911), p. 204-05. In ethnonationalistic manner, the Fennomans identified the Finnish nation with the Finnish language, advocating the process of nationalizing (ie. Fennicizing) the Swedish-speaking educated classes (Reetta Eiranen, Fennomania. In *Encyclopaedia on Romantic Nationalism in Europe*, ed. by Joep Leerssen, Study Platform on Interlocking Nationalisms, Amsterdam 2016 <<http://ernie.uva.nl/viewer.p/21/56/object/122-250804>>).
- ³⁷ In an unpublished manuscript, L. Onerva wrote about the patriotic icon and folk singer Larin Paraske who 'died of hunger and misery'. See Viola Parente-Čapková, 'The Old Woman, Decadent and Folkloristic', in *States of Decadence. On the Aesthetic of Beauty, Decline and Transgression across Time and Space*, Vol. 1, ed. by Guri Barstad and Karen P. Knutsen (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), pp. 61-79, and 'Vanhan naisen hahmo 1800- ja 1900-luvun vaihteen kirjallisuudessa: kansanrunouden ja sen tekstualisaation kaikuja', in *Satuperinteestä nykyrunoon. Suullisen perinteen ja kirjallisuuden kytköksiä*, ed. by Niina Hämäläinen, Hanna Karhu and Silja Vuorikuru (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura 2019), pp. 209-36.
- ³⁸ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 134.
- ³⁹ Mirdja's desire points to many *fin-de-siècle* tendencies in various currents of thought and art. The Finnish writer Arvid Jämfelt popularized the image of the 'sea of life', into which the individual dissolves in the desire for symbiosis and longing for 'wholeness'. As Robert Pynsent has pointed out, the Decadent often perceived 'his self as an expression of the history of his nation or of the human race as a whole'. Robert Pynsent, *Questions of Identity*, p. 110.
- ⁴⁰ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 135.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- ⁴² See Parente-Čapková, 'Decadent Women Telling Nations Differently: The Finnish Writer L. Onerva and Her Motherless Dilettante Upstarts', in *Women Telling Nations*, ed. by Amelia Sanz, Francesca Scott, and Suzan Van Dijk (Amsterdam: Rodopi 2014), pp. 247-70.
- ⁴³ See Ebba Witt-Brattström, *Dekadensens skön. Ola Hansson och Laura Marholm* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2007).
- ⁴⁴ An allusion to Christina Rossetti's poem, see Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound*, p. 118.
- ⁴⁵ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, pp. 108-09.
- ⁴⁶ Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 131.
- ⁴⁷ See Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound*, p. 118.
- ⁴⁸ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 87.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- ⁵¹ See Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture – Art – Society*, trans. by Don Reneau (1992; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 213-14; Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound*, pp. 42, 49-50. For the concept of 'erroneous apprenticeship' vis-à-vis dilettantism, see Hibbitt, p. 20.
- ⁵² Denise Riley, *Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 157.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 160, quoting Kirkegaard. The thematization of the issue of imitation, typical of Decadent texts (see for example Matthew Potolsky, 'Pale Imitations: Walter Pater's Decadent Historiography', in *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, ed. by Lisa Constable, Dennis Denisoff and Matthew Potolsky (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 235-53) is ironized here by the pronouncedly gendered perspective.
- ⁵⁴ Compare with Richard Hibbitt, 'Dilettantism and Irony: Jules Laforgue and C. M. Wieland', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 43.3 (2007), 290-300.
- ⁵⁵ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 145.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- ⁵⁷ L. Onerva knew Diderot's essay as well as the debates around it; her teacher, aesthetician Yrjö Hirn wrote on the subject and L. Onerva translated his essay from Swedish into Finnish. She was also familiar with Baudelaire's and other Decadents' views on the actress, and followed the international developments in theatre and the strategies of the famous actresses and divas. See Lucia Re, 'D'Annunzio, Duse, Wilde, Bernhardt: Author and Actress between Decadence and Modernity', in *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde*, ed. by Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 86-129.
- ⁵⁸ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 167.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 171.
- ⁶⁰ For the meaning of the bog in Nordic Decadent literature see Rafael Koskimies, *Der Nordische Dekadent*; for the gendered reading of the bog as a Decadent space see Viola Parente-Čapková, 'Spaces of Decadence: A Decadent New Woman's Journey from the City to the Bog', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková and Mirjam Hinrikus (New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2020).

⁶¹ See note 26, Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 14.

⁶² L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 233.

⁶³ See Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 6.

⁶⁴ Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 12.

⁶⁵ See Pynsent, 'Decadence and Innovation' and *Questions of Identity*.

⁶⁶ Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 16.

⁶⁷ Tarez Samra Graban, *Women's Irony: Rewriting Feminist Rhetorical Histories* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015), p. 2.

⁶⁸ See Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 195.

Primitive Passions and Nostalgia for Nature Decadence and Primitivism in Maria Jotuni's Work

Riikka Rossi

University of Helsinki

An allegorical short story entitled 'Luonto ja ihminen' ['Nature and Man'] (1905) by Maria Jotuni (née Haggrén, 1880-1943) depicts the ruin of the ancient union between Man and his beloved Nature. One day Man, who is wandering in the forest of life, is led towards a mysterious, misty bog. Intoxicated by the tranquillizing scent of the bog, Man encounters Culture, in the shape of a seductive *femme fatale*. When Man and Nature later reunite, 'Hän oli väsynyt – silmäin kirkas kiilto himmennyt – ja pää oli painunut maata kohti' [the Man was tired, the bright shining of his eyes was fading – and his gaze was lowered towards the ground].¹ Man admits his error and asks to return together with Nature again. She refuses and, shocked by the betrayal of Man, Nature freezes to death: 'Ja tuli talvi ja peitti Luonnon kääreliinoihinsa' [And then winter came and covered Nature with its shroud].²

The story of Man and Nature featured in Maria Jotuni's debut collection *Subteita: Harjoitelmia* [*Relationships: Sketches*] (1905) exemplifies the general outlook of civilization and its discontents in Jotuni's work. The Finnish author, whose collections of short stories *Relationships* and *Rakkautta* [*Love*] (1907) shocked reading audiences, presents a melancholy vision of modernity as a condition of alienation and over-cultivated tiredness. The titles of the collections are rather ironic in the affections to which they refer: erotic and romantic relationships are torn apart by a constant power struggle between the sexes and end in disappointment and suffering. Marriage is a trap and love is revealed to be a lie. The individual stories hint at taboo topics that extend well beyond the conventional shock effects of Naturalism: from paedophilia to psychological and physical violence to veiled sadism. At the same time, the vision of sickening modernity is paired with a nostalgic quest for nature and its vital potential. As a kind of compensation for the

loathsomeness of modernity, there is a search for the primordial in nature, opening onto a mysterious sacred space beyond the violent struggle of everyday life.

In this article, I investigate Decadent aspects in the prose writing of Maria Jotuni, whose work represents the perpetuation and reconfiguration of Naturalism and Decadence in early twentieth-century Nordic literature. In my reading I explore Jotuni's contribution to Decadence and Naturalism by tracing the primitive impulse in her fiction. Looking at the ways in which the ambivalent notion of the primitive and its tropes permeate Jotuni's work allows for a consideration of the affiliation of primitivism and Decadence in the *fin-de-siècle* constellation of cultural thought. The critical stance towards modernity and its alleged progress form a central idea in the Decadent imagination, which builds on ideas of the decline of the West. The desire to escape modernity is paired with a quest for a primordial condition of humanity. This anti-modern view of the world nourishes nostalgia for a pre-civilized condition of harmony with nature.

Here I understand primitivism broadly as a constellation of narratives and tropes entwined with the ambiguous notion of the primitive, particularly prominent in the literature and culture on either side of the year 1900. The concept of the primitive oscillates between two almost diametrically opposed ideas: what is primordial and pure in origin and what is crude, undeveloped and barbarian.³ We may also speak of chronological, cultural, and biological aspects of this notion, meaning the ancient forms of human civilization, as well as the exotic, peripheral cultures outside of Western modernity or the instinctive, animal remnant in modern man. In literary works these various categories tend to overlap, producing new metaphors and re-imaginings of the primitive. While the notion of the primitive is as old as the idea of civilization, these discourses increased towards the *fin de siècle*. As discussed by Marianna Torgovnick, in modernity the primitive became a metaphor for discussing otherness, not only outside the Western world but also within the dominant culture: the primitive thus became an important element of defining and representing the modern self-identity, the primitive in us.⁴

It is also important to emphasize the critical potential of primitivism, or even its decolonial horizon, to quote Ben Etherington.⁵ The conventional idea of primitivism as a colonial project of the imperialist age and as a unidirectional projection from centres to peripheries is not accurate. Instead, as discussed by Etherington, for many authors primitivism offered a reactionary aesthetic project away from the margins.⁶ Narratives of the primitive frequently express a critical stance towards the civilization they escape and challenge the hierarchies of social domination and colonial attitudes they depict.⁷ This kind of ‘empathic primitivism’, as it is called by Etherington, extends to women who write primitivism, including Maria Jotuni. While Jotuni’s stories employ and represent contemporary tropes of women as primitive and close to nature, they also subvert, appropriate and critically challenge these tropes, showing the tragic aspects of these assumptions from a female perspective, and revealing how these tropes hark back to the gendered hierarchies of society. The play with mimesis and irony typical of women who write Decadent literature thus extends to the uses of primitivism as well.⁸ As a result, Jotuni’s work features a catalogue of alternating images of the primitive, from nostalgia for the primordial in nature to cynical visions of the beast lurking in civilized modern man. In my reading I illustrate these various configurations of the primitive in Jotuni’s work by analysing a selection of her short stories, a novella *Arkielämä* [*Everyday Life*] (1909) and her posthumously published novel *Huojuva talo* [*The Swaying House*] (1963).

In Finnish literary history, Jotuni’s work has generally been considered as neo-Romanticist, neo-Realist, early Modernist, or part of the tradition of the Finnish peasant novel.⁹ The notions of Naturalism and Decadence were largely effaced in literary history until the 1990s, when a re-evaluation of the national canon took up these concepts for discussion.¹⁰ This reinterpretation of the Finnish *fin de siècle* also directed attention to women writing literature of Decadence. In recent years the work of L. Onerva (1882-1972) in particular has prompted new research from the perspective of Decadence.¹¹ Jotuni, on the other hand, has been less often discussed in this context, as her work is detached from so-called ‘core’ Decadence and moves towards primitivism, Naturalism, and rural Decadence, frequently enveloping Decadent themes of decay, eroticism, and

the morbidity of life in an allegedly realist setting. Annamari Sarajas and Pirjo Lyytikäinen have nevertheless evoked the *fin de siècle* in their critical discussions of Jotuni, especially with regard to her early work.¹² In the following, I extend these perspectives to Jotuni's later prose fiction, hoping thereby to advance the reappraisal of her work as part of neo-Naturalism and neo-Decadence in twentieth-century fiction.

Maria Jotuni, née Maria Kustaava Haggrén, was born in 1880 in Kuopio, a rural town in the region of Northern Savonia, to a tinsmith and a farmer's daughter. Despite their modest origins, the Haggréns encouraged their children to read and educate themselves. The spirit of the era, including a national awakening and Finland's cultural and economic rise, was favourable to the kind of social mobility exemplified by Jotuni's life. Her hometown of Kuopio had become the centre of literature written in Finnish in the late nineteenth century; the members of the intelligentsia in the capital, Helsinki, were still in many respects Swedish-speaking. In Kuopio there were prominent female role models to follow, in particular, Minna Canth (1844-1897), an eminent Naturalist author and advocate of women's rights.¹³ In 1900 Jotuni moved to Helsinki to study literature and art history at the university, which at that time still required special permission for a woman to enrol. In the capital she soon became acquainted with cultural circles and young authors, notably Otto Manninen (1872-1950) and Joel Lehtonen (1881-1934), whose contribution to Finnish Symbolism and Decadence was later acknowledged.¹⁴ There she also met her future husband, Viljo Tarkiainen (1879-1951), who became a professor of Finnish literature at the University of Helsinki. In 1906 Maria Haggrén-Tarkiainen started to publish under the pen name Maria Jotuni. The name is not without its primitivist implications, as 'Jotuni' refers to 'giants' in Nordic mythology, ambiguous entities who were constantly in conflict with the gods.¹⁵ In folklore these mysterious spirits had both negative and positive connotations. With regard to the positive aspects, Jotuni lived up to her name: she became a well-regarded award-winning author, novelist, aphorist, and playwright, whose plays are still staged in Finnish theatres.

Woman, Nature and Primitive Passions

Maria Jotuni's debut collections, *Relationships* and *Love*, were met with controversy among reading audiences. Many critics acknowledged the artistic merit of Jotuni's writing and her original aphoristic style favouring dialogue and irony,¹⁶ yet at the same time her focus on erotic affairs and female sexuality, often tinged with pessimism and even cynicism, bewildered even those who appreciated the literary value of the collections. To quote a critic writing in a conservative journal, 'How should we evaluate this intense, extremely passionate sensuality, which in these stories manifests itself even more unconcealed than perhaps ever before in Finnish literature?'¹⁷ Terms such as 'love instinct' and 'ecstasy' recurred in critiques. In contrast, in the context of the time Jotuni's reception was not exceptional. In Finland, as in many Nordic countries, Naturalism and Decadence were generally perceived as a malicious French invasion that threatened the progress and modernization of the young and healthy nation.¹⁸ In general, the atmosphere was hostile to Decadence regardless of gender, but female authors employing Naturalist and Decadent modes were the targets of particularly harsh criticism. Naturalism, Decadence, and Symbolism reached the North more or less at the same time as they emerged in Western and Central Europe, although no actual 'schools' were formed under these banners. Naturalism often went by the name of Realism, and few dared to mention what can be identified as Decadent literature by that name.¹⁹

In the *fin-de-siècle* context, Jotuni's short fragments and stories correspond with the contemporary Western and Central European Decadent and Naturalist fiction of Jeanne Marni, Peter Altenberg, Ola Hansson, and August Strindberg.²⁰ Strindberg's *Giftas I–II* [*Married I–II*] (1884–1886) is clearly echoed in Jotuni's pessimistic short stories, which circulate and reinterpret the Strindbergian depiction of love and marriage as scenes of constant power struggle between the sexes.²¹ Jotuni, however, distances herself from the misogyny permeating *Married*. In contrast to Strindberg, who satirized the emancipated and educated 'Cultural woman' as a materialist and egoist, Jotuni presents us with a tragic quest for love and happiness. Moreover, if Strindberg caricatured the Cultural Woman as a sterile creature alienated from nature and thus the epitome

of degeneration, Jotuni's portraits of upper-class women are not devoid of primitive passions.²² The volume *Relationships*, for instance, begins with a kind of eulogy to female sexuality. The eponymous protagonist of the first story, 'Aina', resembles a New Woman figure who feels liberated from the guilt of sexuality: 'Nyt hän ajatteli mielellään ruumiinsa muotoja – kunnioitti itseään ja nautti siitä, että hän oli nainen – että hän oli elävää lihaa ja verta' [She thought of the shape of her body with pleasure – she honoured herself and she enjoyed – enjoyed being flesh and blood].²³ The human body is seen as a vital site of erotic life forces and a 'sacred temple of love', to quote Aina: 'Ja eikö ollutkin pyhä koko luonto kaikissa muodoissaan – eikö ollutkin pyhä koko ihmisolento – eikö ihmisruumis rakkauden pyhä temppeli?' [And was not nature sacred in all its forms – was not the whole human creature sacred – was not the whole human body a sacred temple of love?]²⁴ 'Päiväkirjasta' ['From a Diary'], a story from the collection *Love* provides another example of this tendency. The protagonist confesses her agonizing desires: 'Ruumistani polttaa. Ja tiedän, mitä minä tahdon. Tahdon kerrankin tyydyttää kaipaukseni, monet tukahdetut haluni' [My body is burning. I know what I want: I want to satisfy my longing and my many repressed desires, for once].²⁵ The protagonist of an epistolary story, 'Kirjeitä' ['Letters'], also from *Love*, presents an adulterous upper-class woman writing to her secret lover as she remembers their moments together and awaits the next meeting: 'Sellainen yö, kuin se siellä luonasi, kannattaa taas kuukausia kitua' [A night, like that there with you, it is worth suffering for months].²⁶

The provocative trope of the female body as a 'sacred temple of love', which oxymoronically blends spirituality and eroticism, can be seen as an allusion to the new liberal conceptions of female sexuality emerging in contemporary Nordic feminism. Jotuni was interested in the radical and liberal ideas of Laura Marholm and Ellen Key.²⁷ Inspired by Nietzsche's philosophy and evolutionism, Key, an author who was also well recognized in Finland, criticized the conservative and Christian views of women as less sexual creatures who were supposed to tame the 'naturally wild' male sexuality.²⁸ These liberal and empowering ideas of female sexuality extend to Jotuni's descriptions of femininity, yet her female figures seldom conform to

stereotypical ideas of New Women.²⁹ The use of primitive tropes of women tends to result in conflicting images, in keeping with the Decadent aesthetics of contradiction. The ambiguity arises largely from the multi-faceted notion of nature, which evokes both vital life forces and violent life struggles. These alternating images are exemplified by the story 'From a Diary', for instance, which builds on a contrast between 'sick' life in the city and the empowering paradise of nature. However, the nature of human beings never becomes a paradise but shatters and leads to suffering. The Nietzschean Dionysian pathos of transgression combines with regression to animal instincts or even to a sadomasochistic fantasy of being dominated and enslaved by men. 'Sinun pitää rakastaa minua voimakkaasti kuin metsän peto' [You must love me powerfully as a beast of the forest], demands the protagonist of 'From a Diary'.³⁰ 'Miksi en siis saanut olla sinun kanssasi. Elää ja kärsiä sinun kanssasi, sinun orjanasi' [Why could I not be with you, to live with you. To live and suffer with you, as your slave], demands the protagonist of 'Letters'.³¹

Another oxymoron emerges in Jotuni's depiction of maternity. Jotuni's work has been associated with Key's ideas of female sexuality and maternity.³² Key distanced herself from conventional ideas of modern women as self-sufficient creatures transgressing against the family traditions, and instead united sexual anarchism with maternalism, emphasizing the positive power of maternity as a life-continuing force.³³ In Finland, as in many countries, Key's ideas divided minds in cultural circles. Conservative feminists attacked Key, even considering her as an anti-feminist and renegade who tried to smuggle the patriarchal concept of femininity into the new rhetoric of female emancipation.³⁴ These contradictions also reverberate in Jotuni's depiction of maternity. In a positive sense maternity endows women with a particular life-shaping force, even stimulating a mystical feeling of union with others. However, joining the chain of generations simultaneously signals a submission to others, as suggested in 'From a Diary': *'etten se ole enää minä, ei minun oma ääneni, vaan elämä minussa, tulevien sukujen elämä, joka kauttani elämäänsä kaipaa.'* [it is no longer me, not my own voice, but the life in me, the life of the future generations, which yearns for life through me].³⁵

The protagonist feels taken by an uncanny other life, which she has no right to repress, and her own voice is replaced by the mystical voice of generations.

These examples from Jotuni's work illustrate how the blending of evolutionism and emancipation generates contradictory ideas of agency and sexuality. Jotuni's stories alternate between a quest for empowering sexuality and vitality, echoing a Nietzschean will to transgress, and pessimistic views of realizing the dynamic potential of life and nature in current society. The resignation is illustrated by the way in which Jotuni's female protagonists are frequently trapped in lost illusions, sickness, and death. In the story 'Aina', the empowering feeling of love and erotic passion turns to deception. Love is just a deceptive 'mirage', to quote the protagonist. The ending of the story 'Letters' hints at the death of the protagonist, who is suffering from tuberculosis. In 'From a Diary' the female protagonist loses her beloved to death. The story concludes with a depiction of the protagonist searching for consolation in spiritual emotions triggered by nature. Many stories present narratives of illness, in which primitive passions evolve into hysteria and neurosis. The gloomy vision of society and mankind echoes the philosophical pessimism of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Reciprocity of love is seldom realized in life, which is fundamentally seen as a vicious circle of desires and suffering. Although Jotuni distances herself from Strindberg's misogyny, her diagnosis of civilized modernity as decay forms part of the general anti-Modernist hostility to modern times. The ending of the volume *Love* illustrates this view of civilization as corruption: the collection ends in a depiction of two servants peeping through a keyhole to see into the gentlefolk's dining room, which is compared to a mental asylum.³⁶

The austere view of life and love extends even to Jotuni's original literary style. Her style does not represent Decadence in terms of voluptuous or ornamental writing. Rather, her prose is characterized by a distinctly laconic and aphoristic manner, which effaces the narrator and renounces abundant description, instead favouring dialogue, short phrases, and dense expressions. The depiction of the love passion of a female protagonist in the short story 'From a Diary' provides a pertinent example: 'Kaipaus täytti väkivaltaisena sieluni. Tunsin vaan yhtä. Rakastin sinua. Niin

se oli. Rakastin. Miksi en siis saanut olla sinun kanssasi. Elää ja kärsiä sinun kanssasi, sinun orjanasi’ [My soul was violently filled with a longing. I felt only one thing. I loved you. It was such. I loved].³⁷ There is an obvious contrast in the content and form of expression: the passionate feeling of the protagonist is cut through with short phrases and constrained into a short, laconic form. In a way, the concise style illustrates the repression of passion, which the protagonist experiences as violent and painful. Jotuni’s style was also appreciated by her Nordic contemporaries: she sent a copy of the Swedish translation of *Love* to Knut Hamsun. In a complimentary letter, Hamsun praised the volume: ‘My God, how hot and beautifully you write about topics that can be written in an ugly and dirty manner. I admire you.’³⁸

Another feature typical of Jotuni’s writing is the use of the so-called ‘zero-person’ subject in the Finnish language. In these constructions, there is no overt subject, and the verb is in the third-person singular; the implied subject is translated into English as *you* or *one*:³⁹ ‘Sitä on yksinkertainen ja lapsellinen, kun on kokematon’ [One is childish when one is young and has no experience], says the female protagonist of the short story ‘Hilda Husso’ as she reflects on her relationship to her former lover, the father of her illegitimate child.⁴⁰ The use of this structure produces an effect of self-distance and generalization: the protagonists use the zero-person form to express personal feelings and experiences, thus distancing themselves from these intimate emotions, regarding and analysing life from a general perspective.⁴¹ This distancing strategy can function as a means of survival, which helps in coping with painful memories and life’s sufferings. At the same time, by distancing themselves from the subjectivity of emotions, an author moves from spontaneity to cerebrality and reasoning. The passionate primitive is thus transformed into a self-reflective modern individual. This twist is not without its cynical aspect, as it suggests an alienation from the self and from emotions.

Rural Decadence and Mystical Spirituality

Several stories in the volume *Relationships* focus on various forms of decay and degeneration in the upper classes. We may speak of ‘core decadence’ in the sense that Decadence has traditionally been associated with the urban and the modern or defined as refined decay amongst the upper classes.⁴² But the idea that the *fin de siècle* happened or was situated exclusively in the metropolitan centres of the industrial age is far from accurate. In their disappointment with modernity, many authors of Decadence and Naturalism turned away from the metropolis to alternative spaces of imagination outside the realm of civilization and its discontents. As discussed by Scott Ashley, the cultural history of the nineteenth century is focused on great cities, but the Decadents were always somewhere else, either imaginatively or physically.⁴³ Rural paradises, savage seas, and other primitive realms became central to the imaginative geography of both Decadence and Naturalism and their varied combinations. In the Nordic context this kind of ruralist tendency became prominent in the Naturalist work of Jotuni’s contemporaries like Strindberg and Hamsun. In the spirit of Rousseau’s cultural pessimism, introduced to Nordic intellectual circles by Strindberg in particular,⁴⁴ rural Naturalism and Decadence present us with a nostalgic escape from the entanglements of modern life. At the same time the rural setting frequently turns into an exploration of the primitive in its most negative sense: the Naturalist descriptions of rural life tease out the beast in man lurking in the natural paradise.

Jotuni’s novella *Everyday Life* provides an example of this kind of rural Naturalism, which envelops motifs of decay and Decadent characters within story worlds that depict everyday realities. *Everyday Life* describes the life of ordinary rural people on a summer day in a remote countryside village. It thus sets out a kind of naturalistic narrative of *tranche de vie*, ‘a slice of life’ in the framework of a summer paradise. The episodic text affords a view of the life of a collective through a male protagonist, a solitary vagabond called Nyman, a student dropout from theology, called ‘priest’, who frequently visits the village. He meets the villagers and listens to their joys and sorrows, in particular those of ordinary peasant women. They all stand at the threshold of life-long choices in love and marriage. In effect, the brief time-span of the novella covers pivotal events of

human life from death to birth. The existentialist anxiety that colours the novella is fortified by flashbacks to the villagers' past. The beauty of the summer day unfolds in a painful struggle of good and evil: Nyman meets, for instance, an infanticidal mother; and he is told about an incest case recently revealed in the village.

Nyman, who guides the reader into the 'Heart of Darkness' in the primitive countryside, is affiliated with a recurrent character type in Nordic Naturalism, a dilettante drifter figure, whose sentimental education ends in deception and resignation. Loneliness and existential disgust for the human condition in modernity is prominent among young bohemians and appears in the works of such authors as Herman Bang, J. P. Jacobsen, Arne Garborg, and Juhani Aho.⁴⁵ In the context of French Naturalism and Decadence, this character type resembles over-reflective and analytical modern man in terms of Paul Bourget, and sentimental 'bovarists' and melancholic bachelors in the works of Gustave Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant, and early J.-K. Huysmans.⁴⁶ The Nordic bohemian has also some affinity with Charles Baudelaire's spectators of modern life. Yet in the Nordic context, these figures frequently lack the calculation of a cerebral dandy: sensitivity to emotions combined with a tendency to melancholy is their prominent feature, which posits a contrast to cool and even cynical figures in French Decadence exemplifying 'la froideur de la jeunesse, ce grand signe de la seconde moitié du XIXème siècle' [the coldness of youth, this great symbol of the second half of the nineteenth century], as the Goncourt brothers described the *fin-de-siècle* young in *Renée Mauperin* (1864).⁴⁷ Calculation and cerebrality are also lacking in Jotuni's Nyman, who is prone to sentimentality. In particular, he feels a continuous, passive suffering: 'Ei kukaan osannut kärsiä niin kuin hän. Kaikesta hän nytkin kärsi, kehnoudestansa, ihmiskurjuudesta, jonka hän yksin tunsu, kaikesta' [Nobody could suffer like he did. For everything he suffered, even now, for his poorness, for human misery, everything that only he could feel, for everything].⁴⁸

Everyday Life was compared to Strindberg's *Hemsöborna* [*The People of Hemsö*](1887), another novel that illustrates the ruralist tendency in Nordic Naturalism.⁴⁹ In *The People of Hemsö* the archipelago idyll is transformed into a morbid satire of Nordic rural life; the power struggle

between the sexes typical of Strindberg is coupled with a struggle for life amidst the harshness of nature. Strindberg's work is highly satirical, caricaturing the primitive in nature and the way nature takes over civilized man. In Jotuni's work the affective tone of the text is very different. The existential struggle experienced by the characters prompts a mystical sense of sacredness that is prominent in the novella. Many contemporary critics had directed their attention to the peaceful mood of the text.⁵⁰ In Jotuni's novella, the pessimistic view of love and the human condition is contrasted with the beauty of nature in summertime. Through the protagonist, Nyman, *Everyday Life* opens up a view to an ecstatic experience of nature, even a kind of oceanic sense of merging with the world, a vanishing of the boundaries of the self. The male protagonist experiences the beauty of nature in the summer: 'Maan ja kuivuvan viljan huumaava tuoksu päihdytti aistit ja tukahdutti tunnon omasta olemisesta' [The heady scent of the soil and the drying grain intoxicated the senses and effaced the sense of being].⁵¹ These scenes echo Hamsun's rapturous descriptions of nature, which Jotuni praised in an essay on Hamsun and his mystical description of the scenery of the North.⁵² At the same time, the ecstatic experiences of nature remind us of the theories of vitalism that inspired Nordic authors at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the framework of the ideas of Henri Bergson, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Ernst Haeckel, the concept of nature was reconfigured into an empowering force of life, or *l'élan vital*, to use Bergson's term. In this view the primitive in nature reflected not only savage animal instincts and the atavistic libidinal past, but also designated its vital potential, ranging from erotic life-forces to spiritual and mystical transcendence beyond the visible reality.

Everyday Life has tenors of mystical spirituality and ecstatic experiences of nature's beauty, but the peaceful tone of the text in Jotuni's novella also reveals a critical view of the gendered community. Nyman refers to a New Man (Swedish: *en ny man* means 'a new man'), yet the name is somewhat ironic. As a melancholy, anguished dilettante and drifter figure, Nyman rather exemplifies an anti-modern attitude and a comforting nostalgia for nature. While Nyman consoles the villagers, he remains a passive eyewitness incapable of true change and action. The changing

narrative perspectives are also suggestive of this passivity and further evoke inequality of gender. The ecstasies of primordial nature are experienced by the male character, viewed through the lens of Nyman's experiences, but what is mainly left for the female protagonists is the feeling of being trapped in the anxiety of the human condition. The novella concludes with an exaltation of motherhood in a scene depicting a young mother with her new-born baby, on a beautiful Sunday morning in the Nordic summer sun. Through the lens of the male protagonist, there is a sense of the sacred – Nyman witnesses the Madonna-like scene with awe and wonder, viewing maternity 'pienen elämän salainen päämahti' [as the secret. leading power of little life].⁵³ Yet the final phrase depicts the desolate cry of servant maid, who has chosen to submit to a man whom she does not love.

Savage Intellectuals and Gothic Affects

Narratives of the primitive tend to develop into allegories of civilization, projections of discontent with the civilized mind. According to Torgovnick, the primitive frequently becomes a convenient locale for the exploration of Western dullness and degeneracy.⁵⁴ Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) can be considered a founding text in this respect: the colonial voyage into 'dark Africa' turns into an investigation of the corruption of the imperialist West. The savage landscape illustrates a civilized mindscape, hinting at the heart of darkness within the civilized person. In this view the primitive also signals the unknown depths of the human psyche. As D. H. Lawrence put it, 'The wild creatures are coming forth from the darkest Africa inside us.'⁵⁵

The frustration with civilization, combined with an ambivalent allure and fear of the primitive, formed an underlying theme in Jotuni's work from the debut of her collection *Relationships*. The theme of civilization and its discontents is powerfully encapsulated in Jotuni's posthumously published novel *Huojuva talo* [*The Swaying House*] (1963), which sets out to explore a nightmarish marriage, the corruption of modernity and the dangerous instincts lurking behind civilization's façades. The vast, almost 600-page novel, written in the 1930s, remained unpublished

for decades. Jotuni wrote *The Swaying House* for an international ‘All-nations Prize Novel Competition’, organized by the British company Pinter Publishing Ltd. in 1935. Perhaps her shocking and sinister narrative did not appeal to the Finnish review board, which decided to send another work to London.⁵⁶

The Swaying House presents a catalogue of Decadent themes entangled with power and the struggle between the sexes: narcissism, manipulation, sadism, lack of empathy, and evil. The novel features a male human beast and a tyrannical husband, Eero, who tortures his submissive wife both psychologically and physically. Eero represents a savage intellect *par excellence*: in the eyes of society he is a successful journalist and a politically active speaker, but at home he cheats, manipulates and thrashes his wife. The wife’s altruism and understanding lead to a vicious circle of aggression, pardon and submission. The primitive trope of the human beast is explicitly used in *The Swaying House* to depict the brutal husband in whom the atavistic instincts trigger blind aggression. As the wife, Lea, recalls after a violent attack by her husband:

Gorilla. Hän oli ollut gorillan syleilyssä. Pitikö Eero ottaa tuollaisena gorilla-ihmisenä, jonka sielussa liikkui tiedottomia voimia epäselvinä ja vastuuttomina kuin eläimillä? Ja minkälainen on se maailmankuva, joka heijastuu tuollaisen ehkä sairaalloisen eläinihmisen aivoihin ja hänen tajuamattaan ärsyttää hänen kiihtynyttä hermostoaan ja nostattaa ihmisen kannalta katsoen rikollisia haluja, haluja, joita oli varmasti eletty kymmeniä- satojatuhansia vuosia sitten, haluja tuhota ja hävittää vaikkapa vain pelkän tuhoamisen ja liian voiman vuoksi?

[A gorilla. She had been in the embrace of a gorilla. Should one consider Eero as a gorilla-man, whose soul was occupied with all kinds of unconscious powers, obscure and irresponsible like the animals had? And what kind of worldview would be reflected in the brain of that kind of being, who was perhaps a morbid human beast, a worldview that stimulated his excited nervous system and instigated criminal instincts in him and held an unconscious influence on him, triggering desires that harked back to tens or hundreds of thousands of years, desires to devastate and ruin only because of sheer destruction and excessive power?]⁵⁷

Jotuni’s version of the *bête humaine* motif is represented as even more brutal and monstrous than classic naturalistic descriptions of this topic. Émile Zola’s violent criminal, Jacques Lantier of *La Bête humaine* (1890), feels horror at the libidinous, atavistic other self that invades him and compels him to murder. Jotuni, in contrast, keeps her distance from the interior of the male character,

leaving out self-reflection and ideas of remorse. The description of the brutal husband is equated with the horror of civilization and the horror of the primitive beast: the hyper-civilized and the primitive in the man are both collapsed. What is more, in the cerebrally-orientated modern individual archaic, atavistic instincts flourish and trigger new forms of violence. This type of beast expresses an affirmative 'yes' to primitive brutality and draws on Nietzschean ideas of the Superhuman and Dostoyevsky's criminal figures, which were the demonic, intelligent male characters that inspired Jotuni.⁵⁸ 'Ihminen on vaistoiltaan verenhimoinen ja julma. Sen syvimät nautinnot ovat alkuvaistoisia ja yhteisessä veressä asustavia' [Man is bloodthirsty and cruel in instincts. His deepest pleasures arise from primitive instincts, and they inhabit a common blood], to quote one of Jotuni's aphorisms.⁵⁹

In *The Swaying House* the primitive trope of the human beast is coupled with other discourses that tie the primitive to the instinctive, unknown force beyond the visible surface. Ideas of the mysterious power of blood and enigmatic origins of humanity permeate the narrative discourse. In the context of *The Swaying House* we may speak of an aesthetics of an uncanny primitive, which is reinforced by the novel's generic interplay with Gothic fiction. In the Gothic tradition, 'evil' is often defined by the threat it poses to 'civilization'.⁶⁰ As the title of *The Swaying House* suggests, Jotuni's work draws on the repertoire of the Gothic novel, as it reminds us of the motif of a mysterious house as a symbolic element of Gothic fiction. In Jotuni's novel, the trope of 'the swaying house' is explained as an allusion to the biblical parable of the wise and foolish builders: the foolish builder built his house on the sand and it fell in a storm.⁶¹ Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), one of Jotuni's favourite novels, is featured among the subtext in *The Swaying House*; in some respects the narcissistic, orphaned male protagonist is reminiscent of Heathcliff and his demonic powers.⁶² Although the novel is set in a modern city, we find here a classic Gothic setting of an innocent woman captivated by a primitive monster, plagued in a Gothic house of horrors by effects of shock, fear, and disgust.

The affective tone of the text confirms the generic affiliation. *The Swaying House* is characterized by an uncanny, dreamlike mood, typical of Gothic fiction. An alternating sense of the real and the unreal in this novel generates a kind of epistemological uncertainty at many levels. From the perspective of the female protagonist, the husband remains a mystery, which the woman attempts in vain to understand. With his glassy green-yellow eyes, he even reminds her of a paranormal monster from their very first meeting: ‘Hän muistuttaa jesuiittaa, tahi mitä kummaa, pyöveliäkin tahi villiä talonpoikaa, tuollaista alkukantaista’ [He resembles a Jesuit or something strange, hangman or savage peasant, something primitive].⁶³ And yet the wife falls in love and marries him. From the perspective of the implied reader, the characterization detaches from the psychological consistency of realism and moves towards an aesthetics of strangeness. Madness commingles with love, love with hate, eroticism with disgust and horror – the Decadent combination of contrasting emotions intensifies the power of affect, as is typical of the Gothic and of Decadence.

The effects of Gothic horror demonstrate how *The Swaying House* is inscribed in the fiction of the long *fin de siècle*, which, as David Weir and Vincent Sherry have argued, was re-invented and reconfigured in Modernism.⁶⁴ This view of literary Modernism as a continuation of Decadence extends to Jotuni’s novel, in which the tropes of the primitive are used to uncover the Decadent faces of modernity. The marriage depicted in the novel is set in a brand-new modern apartment in the city, and the primitive, again, is used to hint at the savage lurking in modern civilization and to mirror modernity as sickness. Along with this general anti-modern attitude, the uncanny primitivism of *The Swaying House* evokes the gloomy political and affective atmosphere of the 1930s. The primitive powers mobilize strange political ideas that manifest themselves in the *bête-humaine* husband. In some respects, the marriage depicted in the novel can be interpreted as totalitarian power in miniature. The narcissistic male protagonist fantasizes about violence and destruction: ‘Sweep the whole life away -- send us to prisons, send us to concentration camp’ he wishes in anger.⁶⁵ The Janus-faced concept of the primitive achieved its most horrific meaning in

Nazi ideology, which adopted the primitive vocabulary of the animal origin of mankind to reinforce racism. The motto 'Blood and Soil' was supposed to indicate the continuing link between the blonde beast of today and the blonde beast of primitive times.⁶⁶ In this context, the Gothic primitivism of *The Swaying House* hints at the sinister discourse of 'blood' and 'origin' of the 1920s and 1930s.⁶⁷ Jotuni, however, employs these discourses in a critical way, showing the horror and the evil of the savage intellect who is using primitive power.

The Swaying House provoked a public scandal when it was published in 1963 after the author's death. The novel's cynicism and pessimism did not convince the critics. What is more, Jotuni's grandson later claimed that *The Swaying House* featured a *roman à clef*, a portrait of Jotuni's own marriage.⁶⁸ While the biographical layer of the novel has divided critics,⁶⁹ the mystery of this Gothic novel, and its mysterious primitivism, has continued to appeal to the reading public up to the present time – *The Swaying House* has been staged, filmed and presented on radio.

Concluding Remarks

While Jotuni has enjoyed the position of a well-recognized author in Finnish literary history, her work has never been easy to situate in the canon of women writers in Finland. The pessimism and anti-modern attitudes permeating Jotuni's work have prompted various interpretations and have even seemed incompatible with ideas of emancipation or 'the woman question', as it was called in the Nordic context.⁷⁰ The narratives of the primitive discussed above are illustrative of the poetics of contradiction prominent in Jotuni's work. A nostalgia for the vitality of nature and its reinvigorating condition seems to be doomed by the sickness of modernity, which feeds the Darwinian beast in man. But although Jotuni's works remain ambivalent about women's possibilities in the stranglehold of primitive passions and patriarchal culture, they are nevertheless detached from the misogyny featured by many male authors of Decadence. Jotuni's emphatic primitivism uses tropes of the primitive for their critical potential. The effects of disgust and shock attached to these tropes were intended to challenge conservative reading audiences, prompting

them to reflect on the female condition. Jotuni's pessimism is reactionary. As she wrote, 'Maailmanparantaja on aina epämielinen' [A reformer is always unpleasant].⁷¹

¹ Maria Haggren, 'Luonto ja ihminen', in *Subteita: Harjoitelmia* (Helsinki: Helsingin uusi kirjapaino, 1905), p. 76. The English translations of Jotuni's work, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

In Finland, Maria Jotuni is generally known under her pen name Maria Jotuni and is referred to as Jotuni throughout this article. References in these notes retain the names under which she published (Maria Haggren and Maria Haggren-Jotuni).

² Haggren, 'Luonto ja ihminen', p. 77.

³ Michael Bell 'Primitivism: Modernism as Anthropology', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, ed. by Peter Brooker, Andrzej Gajdurek, Deborah Longworth, and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 353-67 (p. 354).

⁴ See Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive. Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 11-18.

⁵ See Ben Etherington, *Literary Primitivism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), p. xiii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. xii-xiii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 10; 25.

⁸ On these strategies, see Viola Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound: Mimetic Strategies in L. Onerva's Mirdja* (Turku: University of Turku, 2014).

⁹ See, for example, Annamari Sarajas: 'Maria Jotuni', in *Suomen kirjallisuus V*, ed. by Annamari Sarajas (Helsinki: SKS & Otava, 1965), pp. 67-94, and Kai Laitinen, *Suomen kirjallisuuden historia* (Helsinki: Otava, 1997), pp. 316-28. In *Suomen kirjallisuushistoria II* (Helsinki: SKS, 1999), Jotuni is featured among the authors of modernization.

¹⁰ The notion of Decadence was introduced notably by Pirjo Lyytikäinen's study *Narkissos ja Sfinksi. Minä ja toinen vuosisadanvaihteen kirjallisuudessa* (Helsinki: SKS, 1997); on the reconsideration of Naturalism, see Päivi Lappalainen: *Koti, kansa ja maailman tabraava liika. Näkökulmia 1880-luvun ja 1890-luvun kirjallisuuteen* (Helsinki: SKS, 2000) and Riikka Rossi, *Le naturalisme finlandais: Une conception entropique du quotidien* (Helsinki: SKS, 2007).

¹¹ See Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja Sfinksi*, and Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound*.

¹² See Annamari Sarajas, *Orjens nukkuu. Tutkielmia kirjallisuudesta* (Porvoo-Helsinki-Juva: Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö, 1980), p. 177, and Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja Sfinksi*, pp. 235-36.

Despite the position of Jotuni as a classic of Finnish literature, her work has remained long under-researched. Irmeli Niemi's biography *Arki ja tunteet. Maria Jotunin elämä ja kirjailijantyö* (Helsinki: Otava, 2001) has provided an important source for the study of Jotuni. New research is currently in progress, and in recent years Jotuni's work has prompted several essays and articles from the perspective of dialogue studies and narratology, studies of the everyday up to Modernism, and primitivism and pessimism. See Lea Rojola, 'Puhetta siitä. Lukijuuden rakentuminen Maria Jotunin novellissa Rakkautta,' in *Kokouspaikkana kieli. Näkökulmia persoonaan, muutokseen ja valintoihin*, ed. by Taru Nordlund, Tiina Onikki-Rantajääskö, and Toni Suutari (Helsinki: SKS, 2006), pp. 475-98; Lea Rojola, 'Konstit on monet kun kahvihammasta kolottaa,' in *Täysi kattaus. Ruokaa ja juomaa kirjallisuudessa*, ed. by Siru Kainulainen ja Viola Parente-Čapková (Turku: Turun yliopisto, 2006), pp. 269-96; Riikka Rossi, 'The Everyday in Nordic Modernism: Knut Hamsun's *Sult* and Maria Jotuni's *Arkielämää?*, *Scandinavian Studies (Provo)*, 82.4 (2010), 417-38; Riikka Rossi, 'Villainen ja soturi. Alkukantaisuus ja pessimismi Maria Jotunin naiskuviissa,' *Kirjallisuuden naiset. Naisten esityksiä 1840-luvulta 2000-luvulle*, ed. by Riikka Rossi and Saija Isomaa (Helsinki: SKS 2013), pp. 113-40; and Anna Kuutsa, "'Konstitpa on vaimollakin": Dialogikerronta yhteiskunnallisen teeman esiintuojana Maria Jotunin novellissa "Kansantapa"', *Kirjallisuudentutkimuksen aikakauslehti Avain*, 4 (2017), 20-35.

¹³ For more on Naturalism in Finland and Canth's Naturalism, see Rossi, *Le naturalisme finlandais*.

¹⁴ On Lehtonen's decadence, see Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja Sfinksi*, and Antti Ahmala, *Miten tulla sellaiseksi kuin on? Autenttisuus ja itsestä vieraantuminen Joel Lehtosen varhaisuutannossa* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, Faculty of Arts, Department of Finnish, Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian Studies, 2016).

¹⁵ According to Niemi, Jotuni chose this name deliberately, conscious of its mythic connotations. See *Arki ja tunteet*, p. 70).

¹⁶ On Jotuni's reception, see Niemi, *Arki ja tunteet*, pp. 66-68; 77-82.

¹⁷ See the review in *Uusi Suometar*, 14 November 1907.

¹⁸ See Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Decadence in Nordic Literature: An Overview', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus (New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2020), pp. 3-5.

¹⁹ On Naturalism in Finland, see Rossi, *Le naturalisme finlandais*; on Nordic Decadence, see Lyytikäinen et al., 'Decadence in Nordic Literature: An Overview'.

²⁰ On the influence of Altenberg and Marni, see Annamari Sarajas, *Orfeus nukkuu. Tutkielmia kirjallisuudesta* (Porvoo-Helsinki-Juva: Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö), pp. 178-83.

²¹ A novella *Kaksoskasvettuma* [*Double excrescence*] in a collection of short stories *Kun on tunteet* [*When there are feelings*] (1913) is dedicated to Strindberg on his birthday in 1909. See Maria Jotuni, *Kun on tunteet* (Helsinki: Weilin & Göös, 1913), p. 74.

²² In the preface to *Giftas*, Strindberg criticized the upper-class 'cultural woman', whom he considered degenerate in comparison with peasant women. Strindberg attacked Henrik Ibsen's *Et dukkehjem* [*A Doll's House*] (1879) in particular, considering Nora, 'the ideal of all degenerate cultural women', as a liar and a hypocrite. See August Strindberg, *August Strindbergs Samlade Verk 16. Giftas I-II. Äktenskaphistorier* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell Förlag, 1981), p. 13.

²³ Jotuni, 'Aina', in *Subteita*, p. 6.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Maria Haggrén-Jotuni, 'Päiväkirjasta', in *Rakkautta* (Helsinki: Yrjö Weilin, 1907), p.170.

²⁶ Haggrén-Jotuni, 'Kirjeitä', in *Rakkautta*, p. 138.

²⁷ She probably knew Marholm's *Zur Psychologie der Frau* (1897-1903), a Swedish translation. Niemi, *Arki ja tunteet*, p. 61.

²⁸ On Key's conception of sexuality and maternity, see Claudia Lindén, 'Moderlighetens idé hos Ellen Key', in *Ny syn på Ellen Key*, ed. by Siv Hackzell (Nacka: Bembo Bok, 2000), pp. 35-48.

²⁹ See Rojola, 'Konstit on monet kun kahvihammasta kolottaa', p. 497.

³⁰ Haggrén-Jotuni, 'Päiväkirjasta', p. 170.

³¹ Haggrén-Jotuni, 'Kirjeitä', p. 145.

³² See Lea Rojola, 'Lea Modernia minuutta rakentamassa. Veren ääni', in *Suomen kirjallisuushistoria 2. Järkiuskosta vaistojen kapinaan*, ed. by Lea Rojola (Helsinki: SKS 1999), pp. 162-63.

³³ See Lindén, 'Moderlighetens idé hos Ellen Key', pp. 44-46.

³⁴ On these discussions, see Tiina Kinnunen, 'Ellen Key (1849-1926)', in *Klassikkogalleria. Feministisiä ajattelijoita 1600-1950-luvulta* <<http://www.helsinki.fi/sukupuolentutkimus/klassikkogalleria/key/index.htm>> [accessed 17 June 2019].

³⁵ Haggrén-Jotuni, 'Päiväkirjasta', p. 170. Italics in original.

³⁶ The scene is depicted in the first edition of the collection, but not included in all further editions. See Haggrén-Jotuni, *Rakkautta*, p. 175.

³⁷ Haggrén-Jotuni, 'Päiväkirjasta', p. 145.

³⁸ See Niemi, *Arki ja tunteet*, p. 86.

Jotuni also sent the volume to the Danish critic Georg Brandes, an advocate of the Naturalist movement in the North. Brandes was especially impressed by the story 'Letters'; see Niemi, *Arki ja tunteet*, p. 87. The story 'Love', from the volume *Love*, appeared in French translation (probably translated from the Swedish version) in the French review *Lettres Scandinaves* in 1909. A selection of Jotuni's short stories was published in French translation as *Cours de femmes* (1929), and selections of her stories have been published in English in various anthologies.

³⁹ See Lea Laitinen, 'Zero Person in Finnish: A Grammatical Resource of Construing Human Reference', in *Grammar from the Human Perspective: Case, Space and Meaning in Finnish*, ed. by Marja-Liisa Helasvuo and Lyle Campbell (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2006), pp. 209-33 (p. 209).

⁴⁰ Maria Jotuni, *Kun on tunteet* (Helsinki: Yrjö Weilin, 1913), p. 59.

⁴¹ See also Rossi, 'Villinainen ja soturi', pp. 113-40.

⁴² On 'core decadence', see Lyytikäinen et al., 'Decadence in Nordic Literature: An Overview', p. 5. A relatively broad understanding of Decadence serves to underpin the various forms of Decadence in Nordic literature. As discussed by David Weir, various nineteenth-century movements, from Romanticism to Modernism, are based on some concept of Decadence. The notions of Naturalism and Decadence can be seen as overlapping concepts, which coincide in several ways. See David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), pp. xvi; 44.

⁴³ See Scott Ashley, 'Primitivism, Celticism and Morbidity in the Atlantic *fin de siècle*', in *Symbolism, Decadence and the Fin de Siècle: French and European Perspectives*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), pp. 175-93 (p. 175).

⁴⁴ For Rousseau's influence on Strindberg, see Poulénard, Elie, *Strindberg et Rousseau* (Paris: PUF, 1959).

⁴⁵ The figure of a vagabond reminds us of similar figures in contemporary fiction, including the narrating 'I' of Hamsun's *Sult* (1890) or the wandering Romany figures in Maxim Gorky's short stories, and the figure of the eponymous character in Selma Lagerlöf's *Gösta Berlings saga* (1891).

⁴⁶ Regarding Huysmans, the Scandinavian drifter figure is even more reminiscent of the weak pessimist M. Folantin in *À van-l'eau* (1882, translated as *Drifting* or *With the flow*) than des Esseintes from *À rebours* [*Against Nature*] (1884), a novel for which *À van-l'eau* creates a Naturalist precedent.

⁴⁷ See Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, *Renée Mauperin* (Paris: Charpentier, 1864), p. 71. The coldness of the youth is attributed to Renée's brother, who, represented in a satirical tone, epitomizes the cerebrally oriented, calculating type of the young bourgeoisie.

⁴⁸ Maria Jotuni, *Arkielämä* (Helsinki: SKS, 1994), p. 7.

On themes of existential anxiety in *Everyday Life*, see also Riikka Rossi, 'Vapauden muunnelmia. Naturalismi ja eksistentialismi Maria Jotunin *Arkielämää* -kertomuksessa', *Kirjallisuudentutkimuksen Aikakauslehti Avain*, 1 (2011), 5-23.

⁴⁹ See Niemi, *Arki ja tunteet*, p. 96.

⁵⁰ See for instance the review in the journal *Valvoja* 1909, reprinted in Jotuni, *Arkielämää*, pp. 124-27.

⁵¹ Jotuni, *Arkielämää*, p. 9.

⁵² See Maria Haggren-Jotuni, 'Knut Hamsun. Hajanaisia ääriiviivoja', in *Valvoja*, no. 11 (Helsinki: Söderströms, 1908).

⁵³ Jotuni, *Arkielämää*, p. 116.

⁵⁴ Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, p. 153.

⁵⁵ Lawrence, however, used this trope in a positive way to refer to the empowerment of the primitive feelings inside us. See D. H. Lawrence, 'The Novel and the Feelings', in *Thomas Hardy and Other Essays*, ed. by Bruce Steele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 202.

⁵⁶ Jotuni's husband, Professor Viljo Tarkiainen, had received an invitation to the competition. However, the Finns chose to send Auni Nuolivaara's novel *Paimen, püika ja emäntä* [*The Shepberd, the Maid and the Farmer's Wife*]. Jolán Földes's *The Street of the Fishing Cat* received the first prize in the All-Nations Competition. See Niemi, *Arki ja tunteet*, pp. 244-50.

⁵⁷ Maria Jotuni, *Huojuva talo* (Helsinki: Otava, 1963), pp. 328-29.

⁵⁸ Dostoyevsky's *Bésky* (1871-72, translated as *Demons*) was one of Jotuni's favourite novels. See Niemi, *Arki ja tunteet*, p. 254.

⁵⁹ Maria Jotuni, *Kootut teokset IV. Tobvelisankearin rouva. Tyttö ruusutarbassa. Avonainen lipas* (Helsinki: Otava, 1930), p. 341.

⁶⁰ See Andrew Smith, *Gothic Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 100.

⁶¹ See Matthew 7: 24-29, and Jotuni, *Huojuva talo*, p. 269.

⁶² See Niemi, *Arki ja tunteet*, p. 254.

⁶³ Jotuni, *Huojuva talo*, p. 85.

⁶⁴ See Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, and Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁶⁵ Jotuni, *Huojuva talo*, p. 392.

⁶⁶ As discussed by George Boas, the Nazis would readily have claimed that civilization had distracted men from their original condition, for it was no longer the civilization of the Germans, but a degenerate international style of culture. See George Boas, 'Primitivism', in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas. Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, ed. by Philip P. Wiener (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 577-98, (p. 597). See also Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, p. 6.

⁶⁷ As Monica Žagar has shown, the ideas of the purity of the white Nordic race influenced Hamsun's conceptions of race and gender. See *Knut Hamsun. The Dark Side of Literary Brilliance* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2009).

⁶⁸ Kari Tarkiainen, *Viljo Tarkiainen. Suomalainen humanisti* (Helsinki: SKS, 1987), p. 220.

⁶⁹ The author of Jotuni's biography, however, challenges the autobiographical interpretation of Jotuni's husband as the human beast of *The Swaying House*. See Niemi, *Arki ja tunteet*, pp. 256-57.

⁷⁰ On these discussions, see Rossi, 'Villainainen ja soturi', pp. 132-34.

⁷¹ Jotuni, *Kootut teokset IV*, p. 391.

Chapter I of *The Black Siren* (1908) by Emilia Pardo Bazán
A New Translation with Introduction and Notes

Leire Barrera-Medrano

University of Bath

Countess Emilia Pardo Bazán (1851-1921) was one of the most influential and controversial Spanish writers and literary critics of the nineteenth century. The only female writer mentioned by Arthur Symons in his 'Decadent Movement in Literature' (1893), she is primarily known for introducing French Naturalism into Spanish literature at a moment when Naturalism was seen as little less than a sin.¹ A staunch Catholic, she added to this semi-imported style her own 'Spanish' hints of Catholic spirituality, creating what has been almost paradoxically defined as 'Catholic Naturalism'. Her most famous work is perhaps *Los Pazos de Ulloa* [*The House of Ulloa*] (1886). Set in a rural town in Pardo Bazán's native Galicia, it recounts the story of a degenerate aristocratic family and delineates an unsurpassed portrait of Galician rural society in the midst of the liberal revolution. The novel depicts the ongoing conflict between social classes, the modern and the old, the urban and rural, the moral and the amoral.

Indeed, Pardo Bazán's work is characterized by unresolved aesthetic and ethical tensions and contradictions. Throughout her life, there were constant strains between her ethical and Catholic considerations and her art. Her personal life was equally complex and contradictory. A devoted Catholic, she was also a prominent feminist figure who separated from her husband and had an extramarital relationship for more than twenty years with the Spanish novelist Benito Pérez Galdós, as well as with other younger men. She also maintained close friendships with renowned Decadent Spanish figures like Antonio de Hoyos y Vinent, open homosexual and dandy, who aspired to be the decadent antihero he described in his novels. While Pardo Bazán is primarily known as a Naturalist writer, her late writing increasingly makes use of a Symbolist and Decadent style, evident in her exploration of aesthetic, sensorial and psychological issues, of female aesthetes

and male dandy characters, and in her ornamental language. Another salient element of her late novels is her engagement with the supernatural and the occult, in response to established esoteric doctrines in *fin-de-siècle* Spain.

Her relatively unknown 1908 novel *La Sirena Negra* [*The Black Siren*] is a fine example of Pardo Bazán's late Decadent-Catholic style, packed with the spiritualist elements that permeated Spanish society of the time: spectres, life in inanimate objects, premonitory dreams, the transmigration of the soul and, most prominently, demonic practices. The book offers a character study of a satanic dandy, a luxury-loving sensualist named Gaspar de Montenegro, who is obsessed with Death, and haunted by a desire for self-destruction. He feels that his world-weariness is due to an inheritance from a worn-out, degenerated family. After a hundred pages of perversely Decadent descriptions, with Gaspar reflecting on and committing all sorts of depravities, including a rape, Pardo Bazán returns, somewhat artificially, to her Catholic message in the last five pages of the novel.

For the first time in English, we include here a translation of the first chapter of the novel.

Translator's note

This translation uses the original text published in Madrid in 1908 by M. Pérez Villavicencio. Emilia Pardo Bazán's style in this piece is ornate and baroque, and her meaning is ambiguous at times. She also uses abundant and sometimes obscure punctuation. This translation preserves these idiosyncrasies in order to retain the strangeness of the text.

The Black Siren, Chapter I

Emilia Pardo Bazán

At the corner of Red de San Luis and Caballero de Gracia,² I separated from the group that was walking with me from the Apolo theatre, where we had just attended a successful premiere.³ If I were to be speaking aloud, I would have said ‘group of friends’, but, for my own sake, what need have I to sugar the pill? I hope not to have any friends; not so much for the faults of those close to me, but because of my own. If I have ever let myself be carried away by the longing to communicate, to expand, to search my soul and to reveal a little of its dark side — within half an hour of doing so I felt ashamed and regretful, like a Hebrew priest who permits a layman to touch the Ark of the Covenant.

For that same reason, I refused to get involved in the controversy they created around ‘the idea’ of the play. Such an idea was already familiar to me: for the sixth time this winter, an author takes it up. According to the *zarzuelilla*’s recitations, songs and dialogues, life is good, joy is holy and those who do not walk around gushing satisfaction are stupid.⁴ I do not know why (perhaps because of the debates among the group that bounced off my brain with a drumroll of dry and light hammer blows on a sounding board) the question, at that time, worried me. No question, for the living, will be of more interest than this question of the quality of life itself.

And, despite my uneasy state, through that self-splitting facility that we, the sensual, meditative types, possess, I could not help but notice a series of insignificant circumstances. Under my steps the metallic pavement reverberated. The night was clear; the cold, sharp; and in the shelter of the silk-mesh mask, my breath settled into icy droplets, moistening my beard. I considered taking a coach; then decided to keep walking. The harsh cold pricked me into thought, and in that same moment I decided to pose the question to myself, taking advantage of all the opportunities leading to its resolution, not for the benefit of the human race, but for mine only. The ‘human race’ is the emptiest of terms; there is no humanity, there are men. If something is said of the human race, men deny it at once. While ruminating on these statements, I took out my handkerchief and dried the droplets that wet my beard, fragrant with brilliantine.

Upon entering Jacometrezo street, a grey-shawled, gloomy-eyed creature interrupted my musings. What will this woman, whom I flick away like an irritating fly, think of living? I do not need to ask: if there is anything expected, known, of rudimentary psychology, it is the mood of these coy streetwalkers. They call them *of life*, par excellence, and, even, *of joyful life*.⁵ In order to

forget for a moment the joy of their life, they smoke, shout, quarrel, drink, insult, — and their aim, their golden dream, is to lie down early and sleep soundly.

A hundred steps away, the night watchman leans over a man lying spread-eagled on the floor. The guard responds to my helpful gesture and to my question in a solicitous manner, and with compassionate disdain to the fallen man. Nothing, the everyday: a drunkard who falls every night exactly in that same corner ... He never reaches his house, which is two steps away ... And it's a shame for him: a carpenter, expert in his trade, with five kids that fit beneath a basket ...

When we managed to stand him upright, something liquid, slimy, slipped down my hand; I shook it with disgust. It was blood. 'He is wounded,' I warned the night watchman; and we took him with great care to his dwelling, a narrow and obsolete building, one of those that abound in the most central roads of old Madrid. The wife came out, stupefied with sleep, dishevelled: she saw the wound in her husband's head, and cursed disdainfully: 'Now we'll need to pay for doctors and drugs!' Upon hearing the gloomy comforts of the night watchman — if he had hit the edge of the sidewalk in a different manner, instead of wounded, we might have brought him dead — the mother complained: 'The dead don't feel nowt. He's always saying the poor folk we never better than belly up.'⁶

I left some money for the chemist's and asked for some water to wash my spotted hand. A basin was taken from the back room; it was so dirty that I chose to wipe my hand with a handkerchief. I walked away, feeling a sting of irritation, a dull anger. The night offered me nothing but 'dark-coloured' impressions, like the words read by Dante on the gates of hell. Notwithstanding, celebrated works do stem from impressions of this nature, where the themes of vice and drunkenness are occasion for rejoicing. Wisdom must consist of looking at all things from a gay and lively point of view; surely, I do not know how to place myself there: worse for me, what the hell!

Yet I reproached myself again. Despite not believing in humanity — hollow concept, a word used in *meetings*⁷ — an instinct for moral aesthetics induces me to appear pious to the unfortunate and the insignificant, when I meet them along the way. I regretted not having stayed to care for the carpenter, not having sought a doctor and remedies and having even failed to give him advice on the evils of alcohol. What were the reasons behind my abstention? I will declare two reasons. The first, a sort of shameful prudishness to practise what is called *good, charity*, which I do not comprehend in relative terms, but as a whole — devoting one's whole existence. — Doing something charitable entails being pursued doggedly, or being praised for one's goodness, and other utter nonsense, for what kind of goodness is there in being deprived of our leftovers? — The second, a fear of action that I cannot (nor want) to overcome. Action is the enemy of reveries

and reflections, in which I find singular attraction. Nor is there any action as noble as an idea: to think what I am thinking is worth more than running to Alejandro San Martín's house and bringing him to the bedside of a drunkard who had done himself an injury on a protruding paving slab.⁸ Psst! It's up to him, whether there's more or less sediment in the barrel...

Shrugging my shoulders, I continue towards my house — without haste —. At this late hour, workers of the sewer system and the canal labour in the small square. It looks as though their work cannot be interrupted. A stream of icy water runs under their feet. Trying not to freeze, they have lit a brazier that they use in turns, snorting and stretching their stiff hands. To prevent accidents to pedestrians, they have hung a warning lamp on the dislodged cobblestones that had been stacked there. Rather than engaging in such work, would I prefer ... *something else*? Could it be that they, like the chorus girls that were singing out of tune an hour ago in the Apolo, also think life is

rich and good,
a divine garment
full of charms...?

A little further on — a tumble that could be fun — two women, not badly dressed, neatly shod, advance along the sidewalk close to the houses, suspicious of their surroundings. I recognise them: they are the dressmakers from the third floor of my building, girls from San Sebastian, who have come to settle in Madrid. I usually encounter them on the stairs. The older one is graceful, still fresh, despite the work and sedentary lifestyle. The youngest is a cripple; her uneven leg makes her jump like a quail, an exceedingly ridiculous image. I approach them and proffer my company: I toy with the idea of finding out if they also think life is good. They presume my intentions are otherwise: sinful and pleasurable ones. The older woman takes credit for the conquest; the other, in the humility of the crippled, never imagines that such things might happen to her. To get to the point, I ask them if they are happy with Madrid and how things are going.

— So, so. We don't know as yet ... Ladies are strange! We must get used to their whims ... Where were they coming from? — A most surprising coincidence! From the same theatre as me, with the only difference that, when they left, some friends had invited them for a hot chocolate ... The premiere? Beautiful; very lively music.

— And what do you think about life being good? Pilita ... Manola ... Are you glad to have been born?⁹

The question was answered with laughter and bywords. They thought that I was in jest, and they were not wrong. Probably (it occurred to me later) these two bees whose sting is sharp as a needle are not unhappy. I had been ingenuous indeed to have lighted upon such subjects for my inquiry. In order to divert the conversation, I paid them a few insipid compliments, before leaving them at my door. Going up with them as their chaperone was an unbearable task, and I preferred to wander a little more.

I do not know what it is about them, the streets of a crowded capital, during those hours before dawn, especially in winter, when the night feels deeper and more itself. Behind the imposing palace doors; behind the windows, like eyes that close their eyelids when falling asleep — what infinitude of mystery! Why is it that life pauses in the whole city at the same time? — The crowd, secluded in their miserable or comfortable chambers, are they really not as if they had died? Is not every bedchamber, enclosed and warm, a tomb's entrance hall? And this silence, this lethal peace of the night, is it not the one delicious, sweet, peaceful period of the twenty-four hours that knit up the course of the day?

When, by chance, the night owl meets another night owl, do not both feel a sense of distrust, of fearful curiosity? Only the souls abandoned to misery, to crime or to clandestine love, stay awake and leave the grave that is their bedchamber. If I see a defeated night owl, beggar or criminal; or a rich well-dressed man, with a mask, the overcoat collar turned up: hidden lover. And the thing is that I am neither one nor the other, but lazy, tormented and already stiff with that early, dormant cold, which is not like that at dusk, because it is aggravated by tired, nervous, insomniac exhaustion. — This thought makes me stop at the foot of the white, upstanding, reassuring façade of the Royal Theatre.¹⁰ — What am I doing in the streets, with my teeth chattering? Do I not have my silent, cosy chamber, my comfortable, golden bronze bed, with a frame and a welcoming mattress, with a duck-feather eiderdown that bounces softly up and down at the touch of a hand?

— How many would envy me? — I thought; but when commencing the retreat towards my hole, my will failed me and I continued along Arenal street. A livid clarity spread across the firmament: the dawn. — The parish church opened its doors for the first mass. I climbed the stairs, crossed the atrium, slipped into the shady sacristy, — and entered the nave through a small door. The touch of the rough matting was sympathetic to my feet, which, despite the walk, were two lumps of ice. In a corner, a bench welcomed my fatigue; I fell on it; and, without being able to resist, defeated, livid, I gave in to a sudden lethargy, like that which accosts the horseman on his saddle, or the helmsman with his hand on the tiller.

When I awoke, it was already daylight, I did not know where I was, and was startled to see, out of the corner of my eye, the altarpiece and, next to me, a pulpit. To tell the whole truth, I woke up to the sacristan patting me on the shoulder; infuriated, he whispered ‘Psst, oy! Sir!’ into the hollow of my ear. It seems that there is a type of night owl that exists and has been classified: those who enjoy decapitating dreams in the peaceful precincts of the churches at dawn; altar boys are rightly chary of this breed and throw them out as they would stray dogs.

I genuflected and left the temple unnerved, with the discomfort of the dissatisfied, whose bodily rhythms have been interrupted. I drank a hot coffee in the first place I saw to sober up, but, instead, it only increased my longing for rest, my yearning for temporary death, my thirst for nothingness. I jumped into a coach and gave my address. Drowsy and nodding against my chest in the corner of the coach, where I did not dare to lie down in fear of the wanton stains left there by so many heads, I was thinking that fearing certain ways of dying is a human triviality, for however it is that we die, the thing is that we rest. The sleep that I was looking for in my chamber, where refinements are not lacking, would not be sweeter and fuller than the one stolen on a hard bench in the corner of a church. Once sleep has been tracked down, annihilation achieved, what matter what came before?

I entered with my latchkey; the servants would probably be asleep; my sister, certainly; the house was silent. I turned on my gas ring and, four minutes later, I had hot water for my ablutions. Once lathered up, and the thousand-eyed sponge applied, I put on my nightgown, bony, exhausted, and the magical instant arrived: I lifted the bedclothes and slid, nimble yet exhausted, into the wide bed, sighing with pleasure. The coldness of the sheets soon yields to the warmth that the body gives off; the mattress bounces with soft elasticity when I turn and wrap myself up; the street noises are no more for me ... For the last time, I sigh with bliss ... I sleep.

¹ In ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’, Symons wrote of Pardo Bazán that she had ‘formed herself, with some deliberateness, after Goncourt, grafting his method, curiously enough, upon a typically Spanish Catholicism of her own’. Arthur Symons, ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, November 1893, p. 866.

² Central streets in Madrid. The whole chapter takes place in central Madrid.

³ The Apolo Theatre in Madrid was one of the most important venues for traditional Spanish operettas (see note 4). It opened in 1873 and closed its doors in 1929.

⁴ *Zarzuela* is a traditional Spanish operetta. It stages alternating sung and spoken parts, generally of a light character. Historically, we can divide *zarzuela* in two types: Baroque (c. 1630-1750), and Romantic (c. 1850-1950). The latter can be further divided into two: *género grande* and *zarzuelilla* or *género chico*.

⁵ In Spanish, prostitutes are euphemistically called ‘women of joyful life’ or ‘mujeres de vida alegre’. In italics in the original.

⁶ The Spanish grammar is also non-standard in the original text to represent working-class vernacular.

⁷ In English in the original.

⁸ Alejandro San Martín (1847-1908) was a Spanish doctor and politician.

⁹ Spanish nicknames for women called Pilar and Manuela.

¹⁰ The Royal Theatre is a major opera house in Madrid, founded in 1818.

Three Poems by Else Lasker-Schüler New Translations and Notes

Katharina Herold

Brasenose College, Oxford University

Note on the Author

Else Lasker-Schüler (11 February 1869 – 22 January 1945) was a German-Jewish author who, besides her eccentric lifestyle, is known for being an Expressionist poet and one of the most influential writers of early twentieth-century German literature. Lasker-Schüler spent most of her life in Berlin where she was well connected within the circles of the Berlin Bohème around 1900. She counted painter Franz Marc, poet Rainer Maria Rilke, poet Peter Hille, and critic Karl Kraus amongst her close friends. Under threat of Nazi persecution, she travelled to Palestine in 1934 and finally settled in Jerusalem in 1937. The outbreak of World War II prevented her return to Europe. In the winter of 1945 she died and was buried in Jerusalem.

Her poetry is rich in evocative imagery and is especially resonant with French and English poetic tropes of Decadence, aligning her with some of her European female predecessors who helped shape a female notion of Decadence. Lasker-Schüler also published plays, journal articles, and several prose pieces. Her most notable collections of poetry include *Styx* (1902), *Der siebente Tag* (1905), *Meine Wunder* (1911), *Gesammelte Gedichte* (1917), and *Mein blaues Klavier* (1943). Some of the poems have previously been published in translation; her most widely read collection of poems *My Blue Piano* was translated by Brooks Haxon and published by Syracuse University Press (2015).

Note on Translation

The following are literal translations that alter the rhyme scheme of the original German. They are given in preference over available translations by other poets because they capture more faithfully the themes of Lasker-Schüler's work. The following poems are taken from *Else Lasker-Schüler: Sämtliche Gedichte*, ed. by Karl Jürgen Skrodzki (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2013): 'Karma' in *Styx*, 1902, p. 23 / 'Weltenende' in *Meine Wunder*, 1903, p. 149 / 'Frau Dämon' in *Gedichte, 1899 bis 1944*, p. 230.

Karma

Hab' in einer sternlodernden Nacht
den Mann neben mir ums Leben gebracht.
Und als sein girrendes Blut gen Morgen rann,
blickte mich düster sein Schicksal an.

Karma

In a night aflame with stars
I killed the man by my side.
And when his cooing blood trickled towards dawn,
his fate stared at me, sombrely.¹

Weltenende

Es ist ein Weinen in der Welt,
Als ob der liebe Gott gestorben wär,
Und der bleierne Schatten, der niederfällt,
Lastet grabesschwer.

Komm, wir wollen uns näher verbergen ...
Das Leben liegt in aller Herzen
Wie in Särgen.

Du, wir wollen uns tief küssen –
Es pocht eine Sehnsucht an die Welt,
An der wir sterben müssen.

World's End

There is lamenting in the world,
As if the Lord had died,
And the leaden shadow, dropping down,
Weighs heavily, as a grave.

Come, let us hide closer ...
Life lies in everyone's heart
As if in coffins.

Oh, my dear, let us kiss deeply –
A yearning knocks on the world,
From which we must die.

¹ 'girrendes': In German, the word evokes the high-pitched sound of a cooing bird (low-pitched would be 'gurren'). It thus suggests desire, urgency, and audible courtship display. Blood as a symbol or metaphor for life is metonymically linked with expression of lust. The English counterpart does not have the same sound qualities, so the suggestive potential is not quite matched. But the German also has a slightly catachrestic effect. With thanks to Professor Frank Krause.

Women Writing Decadence
Eleven Illustrations

Matthew Creasy

University of Glasgow



Renee Vivien



7-VI-2019

Renee Vivien



7. VII. 2019

Gertrude Eysoldt



6.VI.2019

Kazimiera Zawistowska





Olive Eleanor Custance



MHC 8.vi.2019

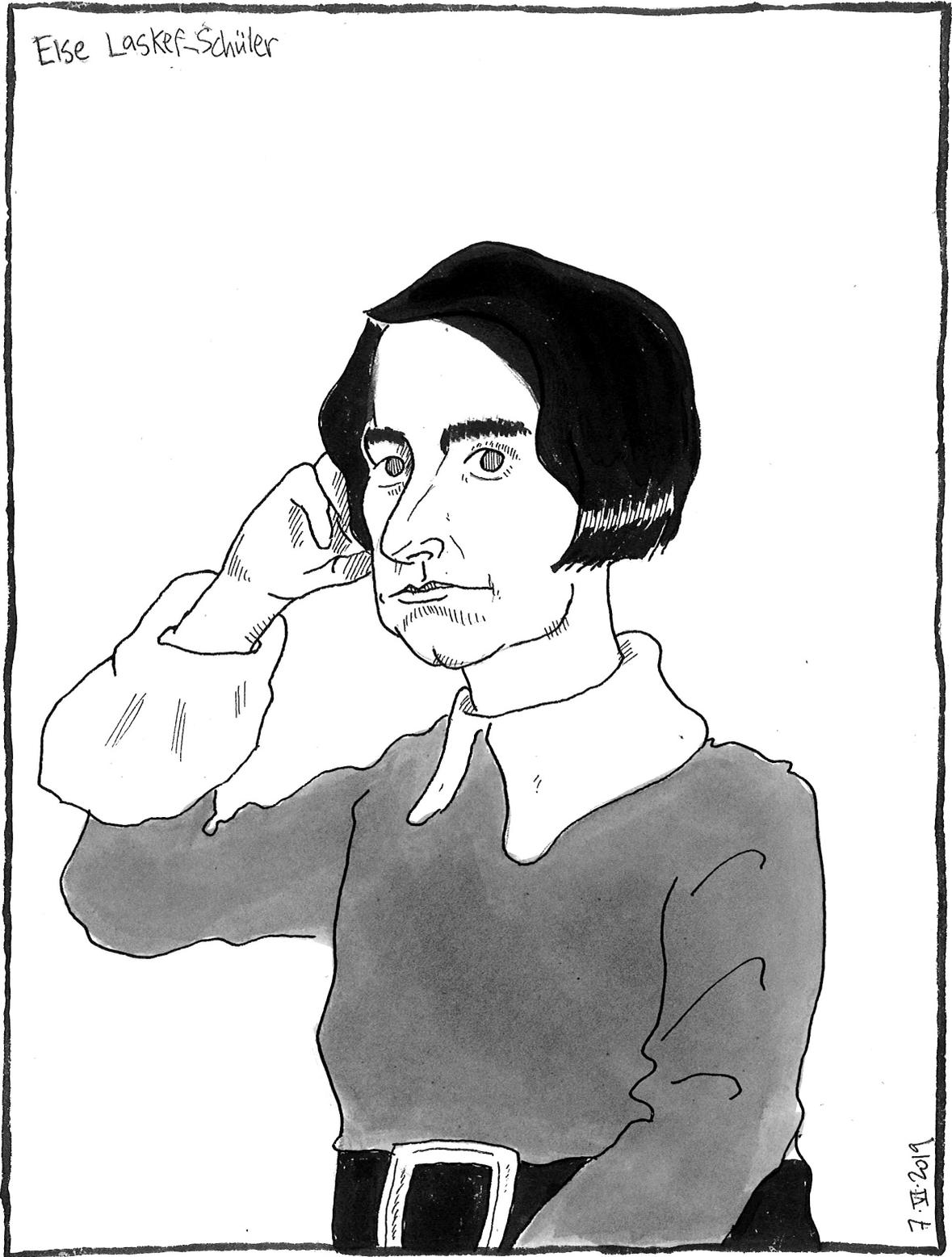
Maria Totuni



Emilia Pardo Bazan



Else Lasker-Schüler



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Helena Esser

Birkbeck, University of London

Wånggren's study offers insight into two phenomena of *fin-de-siècle* culture and literature that have not often been considered in conjunction, namely the New Woman and her relationship with emerging technologies. Whereas the archetype of the bicycling New Woman has become iconic in contemporary media and prominent in New Woman scholarship, Wånggren argues that an even wider variety of technologies provided New Women with the skills necessary to participate actively in the public sphere and modern life at large. Focusing on the typewriter and the bicycle, but also less evident technologies such as medical knowledge and forensic skills, Wånggren employs a suitably wide concept of 'technology' and provides productive readings of lesser-known Victorian popular fictions. These readings are embedded into considerations of the larger socio-historical context, while also introducing us to interesting texts lying beyond the scope of a now-established New Woman canon, focused mostly on Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird, George Egerton, or Sarah Grand. *Gender, Technology, and the New Woman* considers not only the New Woman as an active user of *fin-de-siècle* technologies, but also examines the public interest in this figure and her appearance in commercial fiction. Wånggren's study may be valuable for those interested in the New Woman and textuality, *fin-de-siècle* culture, and technology, as well as Victorian popular fiction and publishing practise.

Throughout her introduction and first chapter, Wånggren persuasively lays out the rationale for her approach against the backdrop of historical context. She draws attention to the much-quoted 'semi-fictionality' of the New Woman ideal to highlight how the New Woman has been constituted by textuality and how the multiplicity of (often conflicting) voices of New Woman writers on issues such as motherhood, marriage, and suffrage, share a rejection of conventional gender roles and a demand for opportunities in education and careers. Technology, according to

Wånggren, provides the democratizing and widely accessible means to attain these shared goals. Commercial fiction, she posits, with its consumerist ideologies of individual choice, marketed the New Woman as a novelty figure ripe for mass consumption and soon configured her as a pop culture archetype. The New Woman arose at an intersection between a group of signifiers assigned by and perpetuated through fictional representations, as evidenced by Girton College graduates, typists, medical women, and teachers emerging alongside a media revolution which brought about the telephone, the typewriter, the X-ray, and the safety bicycle. This draws together the two main aspects of her study in a convincing way and illustrates how an analysis of popular New Woman fiction may provide new and valuable insights into the New Woman as a feminist figure.

Wånggren's theory of technology is particularly productive. Challenging a masculinist definition of technology as purely material, she widens her definition to accommodate the cultural dimension of technology as techniques and knowledge as well as the material aspect of technology in the form of tools and devices. In so doing, Wånggren argues that technology cannot be inherently progressive. It is neither neutral nor autonomous (p. 27), but harbours potential for various outcomes and gains potency from a socio-cultural context. It is vital, therefore, to consider gendered user agency within Foucaultian reciprocal power relations. In accordance with this, Chapter 2 explores the identity of the typist in relation to the machine which, on the one hand, provides access to the male-dominated public sphere of the office, but, on the other, may also become synonymous with the woman behind it.

Wånggren contextualizes her close readings against a skilfully sketched socio-historical background in which she considers fiction by Bram Stoker, Arthur Conan Doyle, and George Gissing, and illustrates how both typewriter and the New Woman emerged as symbols of modernity, progress, and a new metropolitan experience. She argues that although typists may become the object of voyeurism or be treated as mechanical themselves, they were also often well-educated and also inscribed their physical presence into the office space (p. 44). Wånggren then provides attentive close readings of Grant Allen's *The Type-Writer Girl* (1897) and Tom Gallon's *The*

Girl Behind the Keys (1903), in which a typist cleverly reworks gendered power relations in order to expose her criminal employers.

Chapter 3 focuses on the bicycle as an emblem of the New Woman's personal freedom. Wånggren draws a concise and evocative portrait of the bicycle as a democratic, accessible, and affordable symbol of mobility and emancipation, and considers cycling manuals and journals, poems, illustrations, and medical discourse as well as short fiction by George Egerton, Kate Chopin, Alice Meynell, Mary E. Kennard, and Conan Doyle. She recapitulates the relationship between rational dress and bicycling, as well as illustrating how the bicycle came to characterize the New Woman as single, educated, and rational, so that popular fiction may employ it to signal a character's politics. Wånggren then provides a closer look at H. G. Wells's 'cycling romance', *The Wheels of Chance* (1896) and Grant Allen's *Miss Cayley's Adventures* (1899). Both, according to Wånggren, portray New Woman cyclists as energetic, audacious, and determined, but also demonstrate that feminist liberation is dependent on user agency, not the bicycle itself.

Chapters 4 and 5 consider medicine as a less evident domain for the New Woman, with Chapter 4 focusing on the 'New Style' nurse (p. 102) and Chapter 5 on the woman doctor. Wånggren outlines how, throughout the late nineteenth century, the technological revolution increasingly configured medicine as scientific, to be measured, monitored, and analysed. This shift enabled nursing to become more well-regarded as a legitimate set of skills and knowledge, embodied in the New Style, by a sober, elegant, vigilant and dedicated nurse. However, Wånggren still finds medical knowledge to be caught in a gendered network of power relations with male doctors remaining the source of authority. She illustrates this by considering fictions by Margaret Harkness, Ella Hepworth Dixon, L. T. Meade, and Florence Marryat, followed by a close reading of Grant Allen's nurse-detective *Hilda Wade* (1900), who exposes a ruthless doctor through her own extensive medical knowledge, which is repeatedly dismissed as 'feminine intuition'. Chapter 5 outlines the history of women becoming doctors, arguing that the latter's struggle for education and careers is inextricably bound up with the larger feminist project of claiming citizenship and

participation in the socio-political sphere. Wånggren considers fictions by Olive Schreiner, Charles Reade, L. T. Meade, and lesser-known writers such as Charlotte Yonge, Henry Curwen, George Gardiner Alexander, Annie S. Swan, and Hilda Gregg, before presenting close readings of Arabella Kenealy's *Dr Janet of Harley Street* (1893), Margaret Todd's *Mona Maclean, Medical Student* (1892), and Conan Doyle's short story *The Doctors of Hoyland* (1894). These fictions, as Wånggren shows, become elaborate arguments in an ongoing debate on gender and femininity in a rational, male-dominated profession, as well as coming to symbolize the struggle of the New Woman to enter higher education and challenge traditional gender roles.

The last chapter considers the lady detective as the ultimate conjunction of the New Woman and forensic technology. She arises at the intersection of technological knowledge (law and medicine), emancipation, education, and personal freedom. As well as being a commercially successful *fin-de-siècle* detective figure, she is an emblem of the liberated woman. Wånggren again provides a comprehensive overview of female detectives in *fin-de-siècle* fiction, highlighting fiction by Conan Doyle, Catherine Louisa Pirkis, George R. Sims, Fergus Hume, and Baroness Orczy, against the backdrop of *fin-de-siècle* criminology. An extensive and intriguing close reading of Matthias McDonnell Bodkin's *Dora Myrl, the Lady Detective* (1900) then presents the eponymous detective as a hyperbolic New Woman figure: a Girton graduate, bicyclist, former telegraph girl, journalist, and doctor who enjoys tennis, croquet, and golf, and challenges gender roles with her vast knowledge of modern technologies. Her surprising knowledge of the telegraph, railway, chemistry, electrical engineering, photography, and aviation is adeptly contextualized in cultural history by Wånggren. Dora Myrl's cleverness and astute deployment of Holmesian rational deduction, which often surpasses the skill of male colleagues, exemplifies the New Woman's ability to question gendered networks of power through the use of deductive reason and modern technology.

Wånggren's study skilfully draws together a variety of socio-historical and cultural discourses to examine intriguing connections and intersections between feminist and technological

progress. Criticisms remain few and faint, but some small amendments would certainly have enhanced this illuminating study. For example, citing Max Nordau and Cesare Lombroso as evidence for certain cultural developments, as Wånggren does on a few occasions, is a precarious venture given both authors' notoriety and controversial political projects in relation to Decadence and *fin-de-siècle* culture. These citations would have benefitted from a short, contextualized reflection, even a footnote. While Chapter 4 is well-written and interesting, it is less evident here than in other chapters how the figure of the nurse intersects with that of the New Woman outside of Allen's *Hilda Wade*. Most notably, a study which opens up and draws together such a variety of discourses across history, culture, literature, and technology, would have benefited from a longer conclusion in which these strands are brought together in a final reflection. Here, the author might have reflected on the fact that while, in the beginning of the study, she deconstructs earlier dismissals of male authors as New Woman authors, the works which Wånggren chooses to close-read are predominantly written by men. This raises the question of what might be said about this emphasis on popular fiction, especially in relation to the mostly female New Woman writers. Lastly, Wånggren comments briefly on twentieth- and twenty-first century techno-feminist re-imaginings through the figure of the cyborg (p. 197) but given the impact of Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), especially in feminist discourse, even a short evaluation of this cyborg myth against the backdrop of her study would have been a fascinating afterthought.

However, Wånggren's engaging study remains full of interesting connections between, as yet, seldom explored discourses embedded in larger readings of the socio-cultural historical context. It makes a convincing argument for the New Woman archetype as an active user of new technologies, and introduces us to lesser-known New Woman fictions and their potential to enrich our understanding of *fin-de-siècle* culture.

David Weir, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction*
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 132 pp.
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Kostas Boyiopoulos

Durham University

There are as many definitional models of decadence as there are applications. The history of scholarship fixed upon defining and describing the term is long and rich, indicative of the term's elusive and convoluted nature. David Weir's book is a roadmap of decadence along historical and geographical coordinates. It offers a bird's-eye view of what the term represents in its multifaceted aspect, while zooming in on its milestone documents and pivotal moments. In many ways it builds on Richard Gilman's *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (1979). But although Gilman's valuable, yet at times meandering and impressionistic study hazarded that 'decadence' is a distended term that disguises its own emptiness of meaning, Weir's *Very Short Introduction* persuasively argues that decadence is the product as well as the obverse of urban modernity. – it 'emerges' as what Weir calls 'dark humanism' (p. 107) in which the paradigm of decline and decay provides an alternative to progress.

Varying the discussion of decadence fruitfully between *lato sensu* to *stricto sensu*, Weir offers a crisp, distilled narrative of the term as a self-conscious nineteenth-century artistic phenomenon situated firmly against a wider cultural-historical backdrop that stretches from antiquity to the present. Ancient Rome serves as a perennial model for modern decadence. As Weir argues in the introduction, the 'historical decline' associated with the fall of Rome leads to 'social decay', and that is conducive to 'aesthetic inferiority' (p. 1). By 'aesthetic inferiority' Weir refers to culture that has deviated from a standard of Classical excellence.

From the outset, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction* attempts to formulate a unifying theory of decadence. Weir is quick to emphasize that 'decline' is inseparable from 'renewal' (p. 3), a deep-seated paradox that contributes to the term's complexity. This 'conflicted attitude toward

modernity' (p. 4) was articulated by Charles Baudelaire in *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863) and Théophile Gautier, and Decadence proper begins with these figures, who were the first to embrace it as a positive attitude. Their mistrust of modern progress and the celebration of decline cannot be borne out of 'urban experience' (p. 8). Weir, a master of analogies, stresses the urban artifice and multidimensional character of decadence (such as its association with 'hedonism', 'degeneration', or 'homosexuality') by comparing it to an 'old-fashioned magic lantern' whose various colour filters emphasize a different aspect when slid into place (p. 8). This remarkable and elaborate conceit enables a compelling reading of Paul Verlaine's 'Langueur' (1884) where, in the dense space of the sonnet form, the variegated hues of decadence are reflected through multiple 'filters' (pp. 9-12).

Weir sees a migration and exportation of decadence as a conscious cultural phenomenon which travels from urban centre to urban centre. Specifically, he detects a movement from elitist exclusivity to a 'democratization' of decadence – from 1880s Paris, to *fin-de-siècle* London, to Weimar Vienna and Berlin (p. 8). The book's chapters are refreshingly structured around this socio-geographical pattern. They consider the impact of city planning and infrastructure on how decadence evolved and branched off, and they cover a range of genres: historiography, fiction, poetry, painting, and film. In the first chapter, Weir begins with the 'classical decadence' of Rome, a discussion that complements 'The Matter of Rome' section of Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick's excellent *Decadence: An Annotated Anthology* (2012). Weir lingers on the paradox of 'classical decadence', making an edifying distinction between the two senses of the phrase: the imitation of classical perfection and 'the decadence of antiquity' (p. 13). By paying attention to historiographical texts as Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* (AD 121), Weir samples ultra-lurid snippets from the reigns of Caligula, Nero, Vitellius, Elagabalus, and Commodus. Even the most iconic decadent character Des Esseintes seems *manqué* by comparison. The examination of Petronius' *Satyricon*, in particular, provides a footprint for the association between the cultural and social dimensions of decadence, the two fulcra that support the book's following chapters. By

claiming that ‘positive decadence belongs to the modern era’ (p. 20), Weir steers his analysis towards the artificiality of historiography itself and the idea of the past as a misconstrued narrative that mirrors the present. The chapter is appropriately entrenched in backward-looking and retrospective approaches, yet it does not ignore the idea of decadence (or lack of it) within antiquity itself. Weir acknowledges the importance of how the decline of the Roman Empire was regarded during the Enlightenment; especially illuminating are Montesquieu’s and Edward Gibbon’s views on the detrimental role of Christianity. The discussion of the obscure fourth-century poet Ausonius (also mentioned by Gibbon), whose *Technopaignion* with its ‘pointless complexity’ (p. 21) exemplifies Verlaine’s ‘Languueur’, is a refreshing surprise. Through targeted analyses of Alma-Tadema’s Rome paintings, Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) and Flaubert’s *Salammbô* (1862), Weir shows how nineteenth-century literature and art recalibrated narratives of the excesses of antiquity and imperial decline.

The series of successive revisionist perspectives of the first chapter are further sharpened in the close-up imagining of the past in the second chapter on the ‘cultural decadence’ of Paris. Weir explores the historical forces that gave rise to decadence in France, where the alternation of two empires and three republics in the space of a century feeds into fictions of decline. In light of this, Thomas Couture’s painting *The Romans of the Decadence* (1847) emerges as a work of emblematic importance, a prophetic ‘political and cultural allegory’ (p. 35) of French history. In the cultural sphere, France’s political turbulence is also mirrored in the architecture of Paris – the clash between medievalism and modernity, and between idle reflection and utilitarianism. These tensions are consciously embodied in Baudelaire’s poetry and in the famous preface to Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835). Weir revisits social diagnoses and linguistic ideas of decadence by Désiré Nisard, Paul Bourget, and Friedrich Nietzsche, but, again, it is Baudelaire and Gautier’s active celebration of indolent inertia and *l’art pour l’art* that kick-starts Decadence proper. However, the high point is of course J.-K. Huysmans’s *À rebours* (1884), and in an in-depth discussion Weir reveals the novel’s *style faisandé* (p. 50). He makes the valuable claim that, contrary to Nisard’s and Bourget’s respective

negative and neutral assessments of decadence, for Huysmans '[d]ecay [...] has become desirable' (p. 51). Commentary on the somewhat underrated gem Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénuis* (1884) with its highly imaginative sexual eccentricity adds to the ever-specialized gamut of deviancy and artifice.

For a long time, the general consensus has been that English Decadence is a pale imitation of its French counterpart. Nonetheless, Weir makes some intriguing claims to the contrary. At the close of the second chapter he avers that decadence in 1890s London was 'more than just a style of writing: it was also a way of life' (p. 56). And in the book's introduction we find a similar claim: 'London decadence appears to integrate aesthetic style and personal behaviour more so than Parisian decadence does' (p. 7). This is a fascinating position, not least because French Decadence is a first-hand phenomenon, whilst English Decadence is imported from Paris and hence, in a way, is itself 'artificial'. In the third chapter, on London's 'social decadence', Weir draws a sharp comparison between the civic, architectural, and socio-political distinctiveness of Paris and that of London, the political instability of the former and the political stability of the latter, leading to different constructions of decadence. Against this background, Pater's insistence on momentary experience for its own sake in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) was a response to Ruskin's moral purpose of beauty formulated in *The Stones of Venice* (1851–1853). The joust between these Oxonians helped lay the groundwork for a generation of British Decadents. Weir builds his mosaic of the 1890s by commenting on George Moore; Arthur Symons; 'Michael Field', whose 'La Gioconda' (1892) provides a parallel to Pater's *Mona Lisa* from a female authorial perspective; Ernest Dowson who emulates Verlaine and Horatian 'classical decadence (or decadent classicism)' (p. 77); Oscar Wilde; and Aubrey Beardsley, particularly *Under the Hill* (1896) and the vital role of small presses in promulgating decadence. Although decadence is often considered as confined to aristocratic quarters, in London 'the origins of the decadent author lie precisely in the social class his art most opposes: the modern, urban bourgeoisie' (p. 80).

The fourth chapter posits that the 'bourgeoisification' (p. 81) of decadence becomes more pronounced in the Weimar era, in 1900s Vienna and 1920s Berlin where decadence 'is the

mainstream' (p. 94). In these two cities, Weir argues, urban infrastructure facilitated the intermingling of social classes and a wider propagation of decadent practices. Mirroring the academic conflict between Ruskin and Pater in England, Weir explores how the urban planner Otto Wagner's idea of '*necessitas*' and 'purposeful functionalism' (p. 84) opposed Gustav Klimt's *art décoratif* (p. 86), the aesthetic and the triumph of artifice over nature. Through a piece of trivia, Klimt's art becomes associated with the Viennese lady Ida Bauer who became the subject for Freud's study in hysteria (Freud referred to her as Dora). Stefan Zweig's memoir *The World of Yesterday* (1942) speaks back to the myth of the fall of Rome. In comparing Berlin with ancient Rome, Zweig writes that the deviant sexuality of decadence in Berlin (transvestite balls, for example) became 'the bourgeois norm' (p. 95). The legendary American actress Louise Brooks embraced this culture as Lulu in the film *Pandora's Box* (1929). Weir alludes to other relevant silent films of Weimar Berlin, writing that they only offer glimpses of what he calls 'the erotic capital of Europe' (p. 96). In discussing Christopher Isherwood's *The Berlin Stories* (1945), Weir illustrates how decadence in the Weimar era had 'a broad social base' (p. 98). The population's risqué behaviour came under attack by the Nazi regime in the 1930s. Weir reconfirms decadence as an iconoclastic current by paralleling Hitler's indictment of the 1937 Munich Art Exhibition's 'degenerate art' (p. 100) with Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892).

Weir concludes the chapter on the Weimar era with the remark: 'if the promise of liberal modernity cannot be kept, then decadence is far preferable to its authoritarian alternative' (p. 103). This is reflected in the 'Afterword', which adopts a thought-provoking Marxist slant. Here Weir considers decadence in light of Theodor Adorno's rejection of the cold rationality of Enlightenment in the aftermath of mechanized war and the Holocaust. He argues that for Adorno 'decadence entails an implicit critique of modernity' as its '*mirage*', its 'reverse image' (p. 105). This is what Weir designates as 'a kind of dark humanism' (p. 107) that resists the political failures of the rationality of progress. This critique of modernity is seen outside of Europe as well, in Bohemian Rio de Janeiro and Meiji Japan. He pulls the 'Afterword' in different directions, both

casting an eye on the disparate legacies of decadence – such as Djuna Barnes’ novel *Nightwood* (1937); Ken Russell’s film *Salome’s Last Dance* (1988); and a long analysis of Michel Houellebecq’s *Soumission* (2015) – and closing his study on a pensive note: ‘The mirage of decadence that once shimmered before modernity is matched by the shadow of decadence now cast after it’ (p. 114).

For all of the malleability and iridescent shape-shifting of decadence, Weir’s slim tome upholds that decadence is a discrete cultural phenomenon. By taking into account historical fermentations, it provides new perspectives. And yet it does not lose sight of the relationship between the thematic foci of decadence and its insistence on style, nor of the nettlesome paradoxes stemming from this relationship. By foregrounding less well-known figures alongside major players, the book provides a balanced overview of the history of decadence as a cultural tendency and artistic credo. Yet it is more than an overview as it raises productive questions at every turn and therefore serves as an indispensable toolbox of ideas for scholars and enthusiasts of Decadence for decades to come.

Notes on Contributors

Kostas Boyiopoulos is Teaching Associate in English Studies at Durham University. He has published essays on Oscar Wilde, Arthur Machen, and others. He is the author of *The Decadent Image: The Poetry of Wilde, Symons, and Dowson* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), partly funded by the Friends of Princeton University Library. He has co-edited the essay collection *Decadent Romanticism: 1780–1914* (Ashgate, 2015) and *The Decadent Short Story: An Annotated Anthology* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014). His co-edited volumes *Aphoristic Modernity: 1880 to the Present* (Brill/Rodopi) and *Literary and Cultural Alternatives to Modernism* (Routledge) are forthcoming in 2019.

Matthew Creasy is Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Glasgow. With Stefano Evangelista he is leading the AHRC Network: Decadence and Translation and his critical edition of Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* was published by Fyfield-Carcenet during 2014. He has published essays and articles on the work of James Joyce, Arthur Symons, Decadence and late-Victorian periodical culture. He is currently editing *Confessions of a Young Man* by George Moore for the MHRA-imprint 'Jewelled Tortoise'.

Helena Esser is pursuing a PhD at Birkbeck College, London. Her research examines how steampunk fiction repurposes shared urban imaginaries of Victorian London. She has published on steampunk in the *London Literary Journal* (11.2, 2014), *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* (87, 2018), and *Otherness: Essays & Studies* (7.1, 2019), and on the TV series *Ripper Street* in *Neo-Victorian Studies* (11.1, 2018). She also enjoys researching *fin-de-siècle* culture and Ouida.

Melanie Hawthorne is Professor of French at Texas A&M University, in the United States. She is best known for her work on Rachilde, in particular the critical biography *Rachilde and French Women's Authorship: From Decadence to Modernism* (Nebraska, 2001) and the MLA edition of *Monsieur Vénus*. Hawthorne specializes in the decadent period and women writers. In 2013 she published *The Woman Who Didn't Exist: The Curious Life of Gisèle d'Estoc*, a biographical project that attempts to demystify and defend humanities research in addition to recovering a lost figure of the decadent period. Hawthorne's current writing projects focus on the *fin-de-siècle* writer Renée Vivien (Pauline Tarn, 1877-1909).

Yvonne Ivory is Associate Professor of German and Comparative Literature at the University of South Carolina. Her work explores cultural interactions between German and British intellectuals around 1900; and her first book focused on the queering of the Italian Renaissance by such figures as Walter Pater, Vita Sackville-West, John Addington Symonds, Thomas Mann, and Oscar Wilde. She has also published on German news reports of Oscar Wilde's 1895 scandal and on Wilde as a German gay icon. Her current project examines how Wilde and his works were reimagined by German and Austrian composers, artists, playwrights, dancers, and directors before 1939; it contends that Wilde and Decadence haunts German Modernism. She is co-editor with Joseph Bristow and Rebecca Mitchell of Wilde's unpublished writings for OUP's *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*.

Heidi Liedke is Assistant Professor at the English Department at the University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany, and from 2018-2020 Humboldt Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow at Queen Mary, University of London, working on her *Habilitation* (working title: *21st-Century British Performance on the Threshold? The Materiality of Livecasting*). She obtained her PhD in 2016 at the University of Freiburg with a dissertation that explored the experience of idleness in Victorian travel writing and for which she was awarded the Dissertation Prize of the German Association for the Study of English in 2018. Heidi's research interests are Victorian travel texts, idling in

literature, contemporary British drama, and performance philosophy. Her book *The Experience of Idling in Victorian Travel Texts, 1850-1901* (Palgrave Macmillan) and her co-edited book on *Muße und Moderne* (Mohr Siebeck) were published in 2018. Articles she has recently been working on address topics such as feeling spectators, the role of the ‘amateur critic’, and Mary Shelley’s travels. They are forthcoming in *Performance Matters, Platform: Journal of Theatre and Performing Arts* and *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*. She’s also working on a collaborative book project on the cultural history of sloths.

Viola Parente-Čapková is Docent (Adjunct Professor) at the University of Turku, Finland, and a Docent of Theory of Literature at Charles University, Prague. She has published widely on decadence as well as on decadent and other *fin-de-siècle* women writers in Finland and elsewhere in Europe (L. Onerva, Rachilde, Matilde Serao) and on the transnational networks of *fin-de-siècle* women writers in journals and collections. Her monograph *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound: Mimetic Strategies in L. Onerva’s Mirdja* was published in 2014, and she is co-editor of the volume *Nordic Literature of Decadence* (forthcoming). She is the Leader of the Joint Research Project *Texts on the Move* (Emil Aaltonen Foundation) and a Board Member of the DARIAH-EU Working Group *Women Writers in History*.

Sarah Parker is Lecturer in English at Loughborough University. Her first monograph, *The Lesbian Muse and Poetic Identity, 1889–1930*, was published by Routledge in 2013. A co-edited collection, *Michael Field: Decadent Moderns* (with Ana Parejo Vadillo) is forthcoming from Ohio University Press in 2019. Her current research focuses on the continuing activities of so-called ‘*fin-de-siècle*’ women poets in the twentieth century.

Riikka Rossi is Docent (Adjunct Professor) of Finnish literature at the University of Helsinki, Finland, and currently a university researcher in the Academy of Finland project *The Literary in Life*. Her main interests include the poetics of naturalism and decadence from a comparative perspective, primitivism, and the study of literature and emotions. She has authored *Le naturalisme finlandais. Une conception entropique du quotidien* (2007), co-edited several volumes, such as *Re-reading Zola and Worldwide Naturalism* (2013) and *Nordic Literature of Decadence* (forthcoming 2019), and published essays in journals and collections such as *Les Cahiers Naturalistes*, *Excavatio*, *Scandinavian Studies*, and *Nordlit*.

GUEST EDITORS

Leire Barrera-Medrano is Teaching Fellow in Spanish at the University of Bath. She recently completed a PhD in English at Birkbeck, University of London entitled ‘Spain and British Decadence, 1880–1920: Aesthetics of Extremes’. Her research is based on comparative approaches – across periodic, linguistic and artistic boundaries – with an emphasis on the cultural exchange between Britain and the Hispanic world, women’s writing, and cosmopolitan, national, and regional identities. She has a forthcoming chapter on Michael Field and Spanish mysticism in the volume *Michael Field: Decadent Moderns* (Ohio University Press, 2019). Other publications include ‘“Inarticulate Cries”: Arthur Symons and the Primitivist Modernity of Flamenco’, *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 1 (2018), and ‘“Dolls in Agony”: Vernon Lee in Southern Spain’, *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 83 (2016). She is also co-editor of Girasol Press.

Katharina Herold is Lecturer in Victorian and Modern Literature at Brasenose College, Oxford. Her research focuses on comparative models of literary and cultural enquiry at the European *fin de siècle*. She is especially interested in the transnational nature and political application of literature. She is currently a lead member of *Transnational Citizenship*, a research project jointly funded by Oxford University and Berlin’s Humboldt University. The project explores the challenges of

literature and theory concerned with nationalism, imperialism, and cosmopolitanism through the centuries. Her publications include book chapters on 'Decadence in Germany' in the *Oxford Handbook of Decadence* (forthcoming 2021) and 'Socio-aesthetic Histories: Vienna 1900 and Weimar Berlin', in *Cambridge Critical Concepts: Decadence and Literature* (2019). More recently, she contributed a chapter on Arthur Symons and the Gypsy Lore to *Arthur Symons: Poet, Critic, Vagabond*, ed. by Elisa Bizzotto and Stefano Evangelista (Legenda, 2018). She is currently preparing her first monograph *The Indispensable East in Decadent Literature 1880-1920* for publication with Oxford University Press.

EDITORIAL

Jane Desmarais (Editor-in-Chief) is Professor of English and Director of the Decadence Research Unit in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London. She has written numerous essays on the theme of Decadence and has co-edited several works, including *Decadence: An Annotated Anthology* (with Chris Baldick, Manchester University Press, 2012), *Arthur Symons: Selected Early Poems* (with Chris Baldick, MHRA, 2017), and *Decadence and the Senses* (with Alice Condé, Legenda, 2017). She is co-editor with David Weir of *Decadence and Literature* (2019), a volume in the Cambridge Critical Concepts series, and is currently co-editing with David Weir the *Oxford Handbook of Decadence* (forthcoming in 2021). Her monograph, *Monsters Under Glass: A Cultural History of Hothouse Flowers, 1850 to the Present*, was published by Reaktion in 2018. She is a core member of the AHRC Network: Decadence and Translation, and is currently working on the vogue for Decadent song literature of the early twentieth century.

Alice Condé (Deputy Editor) is Associate Lecturer in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London. She is co-editor of *Decadence and the Senses* (with Jane Desmarais, Legenda, 2017) and *In Cynara's Shadow: Collected Essays on Ernest Dowson* (with Jessica Gossling, Peter Lang, 2019). Her essay on 'Decadence and Popular Culture' is forthcoming in Jane Desmarais and David Weir's volume on Decadence for the *Cambridge Critical Concepts* series, and she is currently working on Decadence and its contemporary contexts.

Jessica Gossling (Deputy Editor) is Associate Lecturer in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London, and Assistant Editor of *The Literary Encyclopedia*. She has a forthcoming chapter on Decadence and interior design in the *Oxford Handbook of Decadence* (forthcoming in 2019) and is co-editor of *In Cynara's Shadow: Collected Essays on Ernest Dowson (1867-1900)*. Her essay on 'À rebours and the House at Fontenay' is published in *Decadence and the Senses*. Alongside researching the relationship between black magick and yoga, Jessica is working on her first monograph on the Decadent threshold poetics of Charles Baudelaire, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Arthur Symons, and Ernest Dowson. Alice and Jessica are the webmistresses of volupte.gold.ac.uk.

Robert Pruett (Reviews Editor) is a DPhil student in French at St Cross College, Oxford, where he is preparing a thesis on eros and idealism in the work of Remy de Gourmont. Alongside the Cercle des Amateurs de Remy de Gourmont (CARGO), he co-organized the *Fin de Siècle Symposium* (Balliol College, Oxford, 2016). In 2018, he co-organized *Decadence, Magic(k), and the Occult* at Goldsmiths College, University of London. His chapter on 'Dowson, France, and the Catholic Image' appears in *In Cynara's Shadow: Collected Essays on Ernest Dowson* (ed. by Alice Condé and Jessica Gossling).