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Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry*
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Is Decadence the end or the beginning of a series of existential concerns about personal identity, nationhood, and literary tradition? Robert Stilling's *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* addresses this important and long-overdue question. He establishes Western Decadence as a crucial model and foundation to postcolonial poetics.¹ Decadence, Stilling argues, served eminent poets and artists such as Chinua Achebe, Derek Walcott, Agha Shahid Ali, Derek Mahon, Yinka Shonibare, Wole Soyinka, and Bernardine Evaristo as a springboard to shape their countries' own poetics either by adapting or rejecting the Decadent writings of prominent nineteenth-century figures such as J.-K. Huysmans, Walter Pater, Henry James, and Oscar Wilde. Stilling's study considers a wide range of postcolonial (European (Irish), South Asian, African, and Caribbean) narratives. He champions the idea of Decadence as an innovative force, one of cultural renovation. Put more figuratively, he considers Decadence as metaphor describing the 'death in birth' (p. 36) of the emergence of postcolonial aesthetics. For many writers 'the postcolonial nation begins in a state of artistic decadence, a decadence not simply imported from the West but composed of those backward-looking elements of indigenous traditions exaggerated by the colonizers' (p. 63).

In five chapters centred on individual postcolonial literary re-workings of Western and indigenous heritage, Stilling's study successfully brings together nineteenth and twentieth-century texts and authors. Decadence is once again discussed as 'both an organic turn in the cycles of world history and as an immanent problem of modernity' (p. 10) complementing recent publications such as Kristin Mahoney's *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (2015), Vincent B. Sherry's *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (2015), and *Late Victorian into Modern*

(2016), edited by Laura Marcus, Michèle Mendelssohn, and Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr. However, Stilling's contribution moves the field a step further by eschewing the tendency to study Decadence as nation-specific despite its inherent cosmopolitanism. Transnationalism reaching beyond the boundaries of Euro-American canons is viewed as the core of literary Decadence. The cosmopolitanism of Decadence can no longer be regarded as a mere side effect of post-imperial exchange but the starting point for a remodelling of colonial cultures and their own modern aesthetics.

In *Beginning at the End* Stilling describes the ways in which anticolonial writing embraced Decadent traits such as satire, the rejection of realism, imitation, and a liberal approach to historicity in order to oppose the poetic self-indulgence of Modernism. The introduction usefully draws out the conflict of aesthetic and politically revisionary potential united in the cultural concept of Decadence as described by twentieth-century writers. Under the auspices of postcolonial revisionists of the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Modernism no longer automatically stood for the epitome of progress and innovation. All too often an emphasis on social conscience and political activism was sacrificed in favour of pure formalist aesthetics, which remained a key concern in postcolonial writing that attempted to consolidate relationships between histories of empires, new nationalism, and the role of the arts. Instead, Decadence provided a space for negotiations between aesthetics and politics. This, as Stilling notes, is visible in Achebe's literary response to political decadence in Nigeria. Whilst admitting that many of the poems treated in his book do not reflect the *fin-de-siècle* Decadent style elaborated by Wilde and others, Stilling claims that 'decadence is integral to [Achebe's poetic] stance towards the lost revolutionary possibility' of a stable post-independence Nigeria (p. 34). Stilling's book therefore offers no less than a 'new geography of literary decadence' (p. 24) as well as a reassessment of the temporal span of Decadence reaching far into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although Stilling does not strictly maintain the focus on poetry announced

in the introduction (chapter three discusses drama and fine arts; chapter four a verse novel) this testing of generic boundaries is enriching rather than distracting.

The first chapter explores Agha Shahid Ali's weaving and unweaving of national (and poetic) identity modelled on Wilde's taste for the texts and textiles of 'the East'. Stilling uncovers a series of interesting and unexpected interconnections, for example that same-sex attraction ceased to be represented in Ghazal poetry after Wilde's trials in 1895 (p. 61). This chapter makes a convincing case for the interlacing and mutual effects of Western and Eastern Decadence. Chapter two explores the role of imitation in Derek Walcott's rewriting of colonial heritage caught between attempts to mimic Western art and black folk culture, a 'homegrown variety of decadence, one that manifests itself in an artificial African tribalism' (p. 99). Stilling identifies Walcott's 'transnational cosmopolitanism' informed by various strands of visual arts (Katsushika Hokusai, Antoine Watteau, French Impressionism) in conflict with 'his desire to build an independent West Indian aesthetic' (p. 124) in his search for an idiosyncratic language of West Indian Modernism.

Chapter three, which is the most innovative in the study, is devoted to British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare's revision of British history through his artistic engagement with forms of Anti-realism. Commenting on the burgeoning postcolonial art scene, Stilling observes that Shonibare uses the decadent dichotomy of art versus life to expose the artificiality of falsely-constructed European colonial histories. Stilling's engagement with a variety of texts, not only crossing geographical and temporary borders but also understanding texts as different media, makes this chapter an outstanding reading experience. Richly furnished with illustrations of Shonibare's work, this chapter shows how the subversion of Victorian imperial values is visualized in his artistic installations and films through an artificial inversion of political expectations. In a Brechtian manner content and form are 'estranged', or made foreign, in order to challenge the reader/onlooker to rethink their historical preconceptions. For example, Shonibare's cinematic reimagining of *Dorian Gray* (2001) exceeds the parameters of colonialism

and orientalism: ‘the black dandy substitutes for the white, and an oppressive Englishness substitutes for an oppressive Orientalism’ (p. 155). Whether or not this one-for-one inversion helps to overcome a Saidian binary based on uniform stereotypes of West and East remains debatable and is not further addressed by Stilling. However, this chapter offers very intriguing new dimensions for further research on Decadence and colonial materialism and the visual arts. Stilling’s carefully researched connections draw out the power of the ambivalence of attraction and repulsion towards forms of ‘othering’.

Stilling’s rich study includes postcolonial renovations of the Latin Decadence as well. Chapter Four weaves a delicate web of intertextual relations between Petronius’s *Satyricon*, Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, Beerbohm’s *Zuleika Dobson* and Bernardine Evaristo’s 2001 novel *The Emperor’s Babe*. At times this fabric, reiterating Stilling’s playful take on texts, textiles and textures, appears referential. Texts are not always explored in full. Yet the juxtaposition between the African intersections with British history present under the Roman Empire and *fin-de-siècle* neoclassicism is insightful: the comparison of Evaristo’s text exposes the shared cultural roots of two continents and even the multi-faceted inner-European colonial heritage of Celtic traditions, which increasingly became subsumed under the label of British culture. The ‘ghost of lost Celtic languages’ haunts the ‘linguistic decadence of the [Roman] masters’ as portrayed in Evaristo’s verse novel (p. 221).

In his final chapter, Stilling sheds new light on Derek Mahon’s personal reworking of the 1890s Decadent archive in his poetry collection *The Yellow Book* (1997). Taking inspiration from African and Asian sampling of Roman and nineteenth-century Decadent sources (mainly Henry James, the Rhymers’ Club, and Wilde), Mahon ‘locates Ireland’s place within the changing landscape of the global literary market’ (p. 229). As a result, Stilling explains, Decadence might also be understood as an archival methodology of revision. Stilling bases this chapter on some new archival research conducted at Emory University that nurtured Mahon’s ‘cosmopolitan ventriloquism’ (p. 259) in which he aligned Irish, and moreover regional, modernism within the

imagined colonial community. Stilling has discovered some exciting materials, for example Mahon's notes on the biography of Irish independent fighter Roger Casement who, having witnessed atrocities in Belgian-occupied Congo, stirred resistance in Ireland and was executed after the Easter Risings in 1916. Again Stilling convincingly uncovers links between materials that at first sight seem only vaguely related: Mahon's notes and his poems integrate Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with poems on Roger Casement by W. B. Yeats, Joseph Conrad's encounters with Casement in the 1890s, and Casement's own 'black diaries'. The homosexual allusions contained in these diaries were used against Casement by British forces in his trial, similar to Wilde's case and conviction (p. 270). Decadence is, in many ways, an archive of global histories and Stilling poses some important questions on the future of Decadent archives.

A coda on the importance of Wilde's persona for the global perception of Decadence concludes the volume. Decadence as 'an epithet in anticolonial thought initially signalled a desire to break away from the artistic establishments of Europe and the United States', and 'it just as easily came to express a desire to break into existing artistic establishments and reshape them from within.' (p. 288). With its focus on aesthetic hybridity, Decadence thus provides, in Stilling's view, a unique way for postcolonial writers to reclaim national identity through writing whilst avoiding the trap of realist orthodoxies. Stilling's conclusions here extend the constantly contested definition of Decadence which a number of forthcoming studies aim to redress; such as *Decadence: Cambridge Critical Concepts Series* (forthcoming 2019), edited by Jane Desmarais and David Weir, and *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (forthcoming 2019), edited by Alex Murray and Kate Hext. Stilling adds another perspective by maintaining that 'Decadence comes to suggest the dawn of diverse new national cultures, a pluralization of history, and the retrieval of traditions eclipsed by colonialism just as much as it defines the decline of empires and nations from within' (p. 288).

Considering that the figure of Wilde and his departure from Victorian realism provides one essential red thread running through the study, the only criticism that could be levelled

against it is Stilling's side-lining of the Decadents' own engagement in colonial practice (which is mentioned in passing on p. 303). Wilde, to this day the figurehead of British Aestheticism and victim of political abuse, is a central model for various aspects of Decadence that challenged existing societal and poetic conventions. However, Stilling neglects to mention Wilde's own colonial past. In 1895 he undertook a trip to Algeria with Lord Alfred Douglas and André Gide remarks, in a letter of 25 January to Robert Ross, on the 'lovely brown things' who followed them on a tour through the 'mountains of Kabylia'.² However, this very minor point does not in any way diminish the outstanding merit of this project.

Stilling's book will be indispensable for any scholar of Decadence as it offers insight into a long-overlooked wealth of non-European, non-American vernacular Decadences, which still remain unaccounted for in the broader discussion on global Decadence. Its original contribution lies in the truly global and comparative reading of texts and media beyond a Eurocentric canonical range of literatures. Beautifully written and rigorously researched, this book will be immensely significant for Victorianists, Modernists, and postcolonial theorists alike.

¹ For this review I use the term 'postcolonial' with the awareness that the term carries problematic connotations and that not all authors mentioned would identify with the concept of 'postcolonialism' as constructed by academic discourse.

² Oscar Wilde to Robert Ross, 25 January 1895, in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 629.