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Review: Arthur Machen, *Decadent and Occult Works*, ed. by Dennis Denisoff  
(Cambridge: MHRA, 2018)

Nick Freeman

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Arthur Machen, *Decadent and Occult Works*, ed. by Dennis Denisoff  
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Nick Freeman

Loughborough University

Arthur Machen ('rhymes with blacken,' as he used to say) is one of the most intriguing writers and personalities of the *fin de siècle*. A major reason for this is that he seems to at once embody and yet stand apart from so many of its defining characteristics. A cigarette may have been Oscar Wilde's 'perfect pleasure' but Machen preferred the less exquisite, more richly satisfying briar, hymning the joys of languorous nicotine consumption in *The Anatomy of Tobacco* (1886). While Decadents from Charles Baudelaire onwards have been devout ailurophiles, Machen stalked the backstreets of Bloomsbury in the company of Juggernaut, a bulldog fierce enough to frighten even George Egerton. He loved France but preferred the vineyards of Touraine to the fleshpots and cabarets of gay Paris. He was a Celt, but his Welshness gave him a perspective on the world quite different from that of Irish nationalists such as W. B. Yeats. He relished the homosocial spaces of the pub and the club, but he was unambiguously heterosexual in outlook, and while others swooned over the 'bells and smells' of High Church ritual and went over to Rome, Machen refused to accept that the Reformation had made any significant difference to the landscape of faith. He loved the theatre and was, for a time, a professional actor, but his enjoyment of the stage was a world away from Arthur Symons's fetishization of the ballet (and ballet girls). His literary tastes ran from medieval Grail romances to Robert Louis Stevenson, but while Decadents pored over transgressive fiction from France or the transgressive realism of *Jude the Obscure*, his most powerful allegiances were to William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens. Thomas Hardy's novel was, he said in *Hieroglyphics* (1902), 'a long pamphlet on secondary education for farm labourers, with agnostic notes', and he hailed *The Pickwick Papers* as England's version of the *Odyssey*.

Nevertheless, for all the bluffness of his public image, Machen was as capable of recondite intellectualism as any of his peers: one suspects he could have written the type of arcane reference works Wilde pillaged when writing *Dorian Gray*. He was well read in classical and European literature, translating Casanova and the *Heptameron* of Marguerite de Navarre. His occult knowledge was wide-ranging; he catalogued books and manuscripts for the publisher George Redway, he belonged briefly to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and was a life-long friend of the mystic and historian A. E. Waite. He wrote some of the most original and influential Gothic fiction of the late-Victorian period. *The Great God Pan* (1894), *The Three Impostors* (1895), and the short stories of *The House of Souls* (1906) were filled with startling ideas and set pieces (notably the astonishingly sadistic finale of *The Three Impostors*), while elsewhere he offered radical reformulations of metropolitan space in *The Hill of Dreams* (1907) and his visionary late tale, 'N' (1935). His unique body of challenging and bizarre works continues to influence horror fiction and film over seventy years since his death.

Machen's reputation has fluctuated wildly since he first came to public notoriety with *The Great God Pan*. At first, he seemed poised for a *succès de scandale*, but the changes in public taste initiated by Wilde's downfall in the spring of 1895 led to harsh reviews of *The Three Impostors* and a period of cultural exile: it took him a decade to find a publisher for *The Hill of Dreams*. In September 1914 he returned to the public eye with his story, 'The Bowmen', which caused a sensation by appearing to be a news report of the British Expeditionary Force being aided by ghostly archers from the Battle of Agincourt, but his fame (or notoriety) was again short-lived. In the 1920s, however, a new generation of American enthusiasts became interested in his work, and this set the pattern for the subsequent century – periods of obscurity alternating with fashionable acclaim. We seem at present to be in the latter cycle of Machen's reputation, with high-profile advocacy from figures such as Stephen King and the film director Guillermo del Toro, reprints of his fiction from Dover, Penguin, and Oxford World's Classics, the ongoing elegance of the Tartarus Press editions of his fiction and autobiographical writings, and the publication of impressively original academic

works such as Alex Murray's *Landscapes of Decadence* (revelatory in its treatment of Machen's Wales in 2016) and James Machin's *Weird Fiction in Britain* (which demonstrated Machen's importance to a new Gothic aesthetic in 2018). To this roster we must now add Dennis Denisoff's contribution to the MHRA's excellent 'Jewelled Tortoise' imprint, a much-needed edition of Machen's *Decadent and Occult Works*.

Denisoff is not the first to annotate *The Great God Pan* – Roger Luckhurst provided useful notes when it appeared in his eclectic World's Classics anthology, *Late Victorian Gothic Tales* (2009) – and David Trotter did an edition of *The Three Impostors* for Dent in 1995. Denisoff has, however, gone further than his predecessors in providing a detailed scholarly introduction, copious annotations, contextual material and a selection of Machen's essays. The result is an essential collection of Machenalia, though by no means an entirely unproblematic one.

Machen's career began in the 1880s and he was still publishing important fiction as late as 1937, the year he appeared on the BBC's Welsh Programme discussing his beloved Dickens. The Friends of Arthur Machen, the literary society whose work Denisoff generously acknowledges, has done much to bring to light his many essays for newspapers and books such as St John Adcock's *Wonderful London* (1926), but its members' investigations only go to show how much Machen wrote, particularly once, having exhausted a small legacy, he was forced to make a living by his pen. Denisoff's selection runs from 'The Lost Club' (1890) to 'Ritual' (1937) via the full text of *The Hill of Dreams*, the compilation being rounded off with an extract from *The Three Impostors* ('The Recluse of Bayswater' which incorporates the better-known 'The Novel of the White Powder', a staple of horror anthologies), 'The Bowmen', and four prose-poems from *Ornaments in Jade*, published in 1924 but composed in the mid-late 1890s. In addition, Denisoff reprints Machen's essay, 'The Literature of Occultism' (1899), extracts from his critical manifesto *Hieroglyphics*, explaining his concept of 'ecstatic' art, and a handful of reviews, parodies, and other contextual pieces. It is a revealing selection, but it is surprising not to see the one of the Grail visions from 'The Great Return' (1916) or *The Secret Glory* (1922), the remarkable suburban epiphany, 'A Fragment of Life'

(1904), anything from Machen's three autobiographies, 'N', and so on. The dust-jacket claims the contents are 'the gems of Machen's oeuvre', but this is a tricky claim to substantiate. Machen's importance as a writer of mystical Christian fiction ought to be acknowledged more fully, not least because such mysticism was so important an aspect of Decadent (or at least, Symbolist) culture on both sides of the Channel. Perhaps *The Hill of Dreams and Other Writings* would have been a truer reflection of the edition's content, though 'decadent' and 'occult' are undeniably eye-catching.

Denisoff's textual selections are interesting (if a little contentious) and his edition contains very valuable notes which evidence Machen's wide knowledge of literature, mysticism, and the occult. Having edited a 'Tortoise' myself, I know something of the demands which Decadent writers place on their annotators, and I continue to marvel at Lene-Østermark Johansen's edition of Walter Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* (2014) which initiated the series. Denisoff and his research assistants track down allusions, quotations, translate Machen's frequent Latin tags, and indicate suggestive connections with other works. Whereas Pater and Symons, the subjects of earlier MHRA editions, range across visual art and music in their allusions, Machen is more solidly literary and often Biblical. Denisoff's notes therefore demonstrate something of the pattern of his wider reading and intellectual engagement as well as enlightening the reader as to the meaning of specific references.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the edition however is its title, and the central claim that Machen should be considered part of the Decadent movement of the 1890s. Denisoff rightly claims Machen for Symbolism, and one wonders when Symons identified Yeats as its 'chief representative' in Britain and Ireland in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1900) how familiar he was with Machen's work. As late as *The London Adventure* (1924), Machen was using Plato's cave analogy to depict the narrowness of human 'reality', suggesting that another order of being existed alongside and beyond it: this is a further reason why 'N' would have been such a valuable addition to the book. Earlier critics have allied Machen with Symbolism, but the links Denisoff makes between his work and wider Symbolist thought are persuasive ones.

Claiming Machen for Decadence is perhaps a more difficult task, not least because Machen himself insisted that he stood apart from it. He was published by the Bodley Head, but this is in itself no guarantee of decadent outlook: William Watson, who led the campaign to sack Aubrey Beardsley from *The Yellow Book*, was one of John Lane's most successful writers of the 1890s. Machen had enjoyed Wilde's conversation in the early 1890s but a few years later found himself repelled by his physical grossness, memorably comparing him to an obese washerwoman. When considering Machen then, a distinction needs to be drawn between those whose personal decadence underpinned the production of their Decadent works, and those whose more modest, even 'respectable' lives did not prevent Decadent artistry and attitudes. These Machen's stories certainly possess. His lush style, especially in *The Hill of Dreams* and parts of *The Secret Glory*, often suggests Pater, though he claimed to have little knowledge of his work. His fondness for transgressive and provocative subject matter, particularly in his first two novels, draws partly on Robert Louis Stevenson (might his *New Arabian Nights* (1882), which supplied the epigraph for the notorious *Chameleon* magazine in 1894, be another addition to the Decadent canon?) but seems equally close to the lurid fantasies of French writers such as Jean Lorrain, Rachilde, and Octave Mirbeau, the morbid mixture of sex and eroticism in *The Great God Pan* anticipating the more extreme manifestations of such in the latter's *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899).

Denisoff considers the affinities between Machen and 'nineties decadence in some detail in the course of his introduction, concluding that because 'Aestheticist', 'Decadent' and 'occult culture' were so 'interwoven' during this period, 'the tendrils of Decadence did not have to rely on Machen's conscious veneration and adaptation in order for them to insinuate themselves into his literary career' (pp. 15-16). Such influence is reinforced by his 'practical publishing arrangements and opportunities' (albeit drastically curtailed after 1895), 'overlapping cultural interpretations', 'avant-garde literary interests, and extended networks of personal relations' (p. 16). Whether or not Machen is 'D/decadent' is therefore a secondary concern. He swam in decadent seas and was stained by their purple waters.

This conclusion seems to slightly downplay the claims of the jacket blurb and the book's cover, which reproduces Beardsley's slyly leering faun from *The Great God Pan's* first edition. It does however serve a valuable purpose in that it removes Machen from a narrowly Gothic sphere of influence and situates his early work in its wider milieu. In Denisoff's edition, Machen emerges as an imaginative and ambitious writer who synthesized a variety of influences and concerns, from the high-spirited but dark comedy of Stevenson to the sonorous prose of the King James Bible.

Any selection from Machen's output will be problematic: an editor can never please every reader, and Machen is someone who inspires fervent devotion, as Denisoff's introduction acknowledges. What's here will certainly enliven the reading lists of many undergraduate courses on the Victorian Gothic, but, hopefully, it will also allow Machen to be seen not simply as a writer of 'shockers' but as a significant and distinctive contributor to the wider literature of his day. The edition is bolstered by a helpful bibliography of secondary works and a chronology of Machen's life and times. It is well produced and very competitively priced, meaning that it should find a home on university reading lists as well as on the hungry shelves of acquisitive Machenites such as myself.