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Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Transnational Poetics, Aestheticism, and Decadence at the *Fin de Siècle*

New York University, 14 May 2018

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New York City receives thousands of visitors daily, but perhaps none were more delightful than the scholars who arrived on 14 May 2018 to attend Transnational Poetics, Aestheticism, and Decadence at the *Fin de Siècle* at New York University. Organized by Professor Marion Thain (New York University), Dr Kate Hext (Exeter), and Professor Jane Desmarais (Goldsmiths), and sponsored by their respective institutions, the one-day symposium comprised a keynote by Professor Regenia Gagnier (Exeter) titled ‘Transcultural *Poiesis* and the Making of Community’, thirteen ten-minute position papers, and a discussion about fostering a transnational Aestheticism and Decadence network in the future.

Gagnier’s keynote began by outlining the ancient Greek term *poiesis*, which refers to creating or bringing something into being, often through transformation. These processes, she explained, were fundamental to the rise of global Decadence – especially in the long nineteenth century. After all, the well-documented conflicts between tradition and the forces of modernization in multiple countries during this period drove non-European writers to produce Decadent literatures of their own, as well as to transform the European Decadent texts that they encountered. Take Oscar Wilde’s *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (1891), for example. While scholars have recently used approaches from textual history to question *The Soul’s* seriousness, Gagnier argued that regardless of the text’s perceived tone for nineteenth century British readers, its global circulation meant that it was interpreted in multiple ways by other major figures. One of these was André Gide, who developed Wilde’s stance on individualism’s compatibility with socialism to promote international universality through national particularity at the International Congress for the Defence of Culture in 1935. Gide’s work then circulated in Vietnam, a country

that was, at the time, experiencing a power struggle between French colonial rule and the nation's communist parties. Activists like Hoài Thanh eventually transformed Gide's views to argue that encouraging individualism could bolster national culture and help produce a more beneficial version of communism. The astounding circulation of Decadent texts, however, does not stop there: Gagnier's remaining case studies carefully swept the audience to other areas of the globe, from examining how Wilde's work was also used in China and Latin America, to investigating the reception of D. H. Lawrence in Australia and Mexico. Together, these studies suggested that there are many more sites of global Decadence waiting to be unearthed.

Indeed, the audience soon discovered that one of those sites is the land Down Under. The symposium focused on Australia, race, and postcolonialism in the first position papers session, opening with Nicholas Birns's (New York University) 'The Australian 1890s: More Decadent Than We Knew?', which outlined how Aestheticism and Decadence was used in Australia's artistic and political spheres. Birns highlighted figures like painter Charles Conder, who promoted impressionistic articulations of Australian landscapes and later befriended Wilde when working for *The Yellow Book*, and Australia's first female political candidate, Catherine Helen Spence, whose firm stance on minority representation countered white nationalist attitudes and evoked an admirable Kantian modernity.

Fortunately, Spence was not the only Australian political figure who opposed white nationalism. Jason Rudy's (University of Maryland) 'Xenophobia and the Dawn of Australian Aestheticism' demonstrated how, despite the development of the White Australian Policy in the early 1990s, Chinese-born merchant Quong Tart fostered interracial and international connections by advocating for Chinese-Australians, and, surprisingly, by maintaining a network of lavishly decorated tearooms. Not only did Tart's tearooms visually represent the intersection of Aestheticist and oriental glamour, but they were also the meeting place for The Dawn Club, a group of Sydney suffragettes who fought for women's rights and celebrated Aestheticism through their interest in women's fashion.

Australian national poetry flirted with Aestheticism and Decadence, too. Timothy Chandler's (University of Pennsylvania) "'Wild Erratic Fancy': Decadence and Nationalism in the Settler Colony', stressed that, despite first impressions, Australian writer A. B. 'Banjo' Paterson's notable poem 'Clancy of the Overflow' (1889) partially incorporates Decadent elements in its content and form, such as indulging in escapist fantasies, lamenting city life, and struggling with frustrated homoerotic desires. Moreover, the poem's kitschy tone and unusual trochaic meter (which puts it in relation to Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Raven'), Chandler argued, all suggest that Paterson's 'Clancy' exhibits a peculiar Decadent strain.

Yet, there exist writers who, despite possessing stronger associations with Decadence than Paterson, spurn the movement altogether. Robert Stilling's (University of South Florida) 'Looking Beyond *Fin de Siècle*: The Transnational Poetics of Postcolonial Decadence' focused on Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, who maintains a provocative stance on Wilde and his followers: 'Art for art's sake', Achebe once announced, 'is dog shit.' Ironically, Achebe's work is closely linked with Decadence; one only has to turn to the title of his award-winning novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1959), to encounter his allusion to W. B. Yeats. While such behaviour appears paradoxical, however, Stilling argued that Achebe and other anti-colonial African writers often use Aestheticism as a subversive strategy to critique the earnestness of Empire.

Meanwhile, Harlem Renaissance writers were using Aestheticism and Decadence for another purpose. As Kristen Mahoney's (Michigan State University) 'Richard Bruce Nugent: Decadent Poetics and the Harlem Renaissance' demonstrated, African-American writers like Nugent repeatedly turned to Wildean models to articulate the experience of being queer people of colour in America. After leading the audience through Nugent's 'Smoke, Lilies and Jade' (1926) – a striking short story where the queer protagonist is literally named Beauty – and displaying gorgeous photos of Nugent's meticulously-decorated manuscripts from Yale's Beinecke Library, Mahoney argued that he used Aestheticism to transform racial and sexual trauma into beauty.

Can aesthetic beautification, however, sometimes step too close to fetishization? Katherina Herold's (University of Oxford) 'Orientalism and Decadence' claimed that although European Decadents like Wilde developed cosmopolitan views, they also engaged with reverse orientalism by promoting the fetishization of Eastern cultures and corresponding with each other through the concept of a 'Decadent East'. Future studies, Herold concluded, should further interrogate the relationship between Decadence and colonial histories.

After a lovely lunch, the symposium turned to the second position papers session focused on Asia, Translation, and Anglo-American Influences. Justin Sider's (United States Military Academy, West Point) 'Toru Dutt among the Parnassians: Genre, Abstraction, and Transnational Poetics' analysed the English and French verses of Indian Anglophone poet Toru Dutt, who used a French literary style that later influenced Aestheticism's rise: Parnassianism. Interestingly, her Parnassian poetry depended on transnational exchanges. Dutt's Cambridge University education, for example, trained her in English and French in addition to Bengali and Sanskrit, and connected her to British poet Edmund Gosse, who became her literary mentor. Yet, as Sider explained, Dutt's cosmopolitan background and her interactions with British influencers like Gosse may have also diluted the cultural authenticity of her poetry.

Nevertheless, Gosse fostered cultural authenticity in the work of Sarojini Naidu, another Indian poet who produced English poetry. Rochelle Almeida's (New York University) 'How the Nightingale of India Spread Her Wings: The Influence of Edmund Gosse and Arthur Symons on the Poetry of Sarojini Naidu' drew from a range of archival materials to show how Naidu, as a result of her British education, initially wrote lyrics that seemed to focus exclusively on European subject matter. However, Almeida demonstrated the way in which, after Gosse examined Naidu's early verses, he encouraged her to draw on themes from her national origin.

The question of authenticity continued in Alexander Bubb's (University of Roehampton) 'Translation as a Conceptual Framework in *fin de siècle* Studies', which investigated Rudyard Kipling's translations of non-Anglophone literature. Although Kipling preached that translations

should maintain cultural authenticity, Bubb argued that not only was the cultural authenticity of Kipling's own translations highly questionable, but that his adoption of a mysterious persona also deliberately sensationalized his translations for the public. Paying attention to how translations like Kipling's operated in the nineteenth century more broadly is critical since translations were often the primary way for European writers and readers to learn about other cultures.

Bénédicte Coste's (University of Burgundy) following paper, 'Translating the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti into *fin-de-siècle* France and After' was a case in point. By leading the audience through her extensive archival investigations of six French periodicals and seven French writers who were early translators of Rossetti's work (Emile Blémont, Gabriel Sarrazin, Ianthe Cleveland, Clémence Couve, Alfred Debussy, Robert Baignières, and Francis Vielé-Griffin), she revealed how Rossetti's verses were often translated as fragments for the French literary community.

In addition to translation, there is another site where dynamic transnational exchanges occur: the city. Veronica Alfano's (Delft University of Technology) 'In Much Abundance Lost: The City as Transnational Space' highlighted the centrality of urban experience in Decadent literature by way of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd' (1840). Poe's descriptions, she argued, suggest that cities are more closely linked to cosmopolitanism than nationalism. His work also demonstrates how some of the competing desires that torment urbanites are connected to the Decadent Movement, such as the thirst to fulfil individual ambitions versus the yearning to become part of the urban crowd.

The contradictory longings for both detachment and intimacy, however, were not the only desires that preoccupied Decadent writers. As Richard Kaye's (Hunter College, CUNY) 'Utopias of Law and Artifice: Shaw, Wilde, and Sexual Modernism' demonstrated, the Decadent Movement's celebration of same-sex desire influenced the re-imagining of legal and social structures. For example, although George Bernard Shaw was linked to fascist politics, Kaye

argued that Shaw also passionately supported homosexual rights, private individual rights, and freedom of expression. As for Wilde, Kaye stressed that *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* promoted a society that is best for the artist because it is precisely the artist who is the most important for developing well-functioning communities. Both writers, Kaye continued, articulated their political concerns in their plays, such as Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893) and Wilde's *Salomé* (1891).

Since the audience had, by this time, soared across multiple countries and historical events in a single day, Ellis Hanson (Cornell University)'s 'Teaching Decadence Now' closed the session by asking whether '*fin de siècle*' was the best category to associate with the field. After all, he asked, doesn't its 'French sigh' conceal how other cultures and time periods also engaged with Decadence? He stressed Americanness and Modernism in particular, citing Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* (1904) and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) to argue that American Decadents were engaging with Decadence before (and, perhaps, better than) the Europeans. Moreover, Hanson explained that Wilde's celebrated *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), which contains melodrama and stuffy moralizing in addition to Decadent themes, might not be the most important book for us. That honour, he suggested, should be bestowed upon a major Decadent novel of our century, D. B. C. Pierre's *Lights Out in Wonderland* (2010), which depicts the consequences of capitalism and foregrounds the Anthropocene's political cynicism.

The symposium concluded with an engaging roundtable comprised of Tanya Agathocleous (Hunter College, CUNY), Laurel Brake (Birkbeck), Alex Murray (Queens University Belfast), Peter Nicholls (New York University), and Alex Wermer-Colan (Temple University), and a lively brainstorming session about the future of the field. While there is still much to discuss, the symposium participants did come to a consensus about removing '*fin de siècle*' from our name to reflect the field's transnational nature, proposing instead to use 'Aestheticism and Decadence' in the future. Closing the day with the promise of many more

symposia to come, the Aestheticism and Decadence network is poised to establish a permanent space in academia, and we very much hope that you will join us in this endeavour.