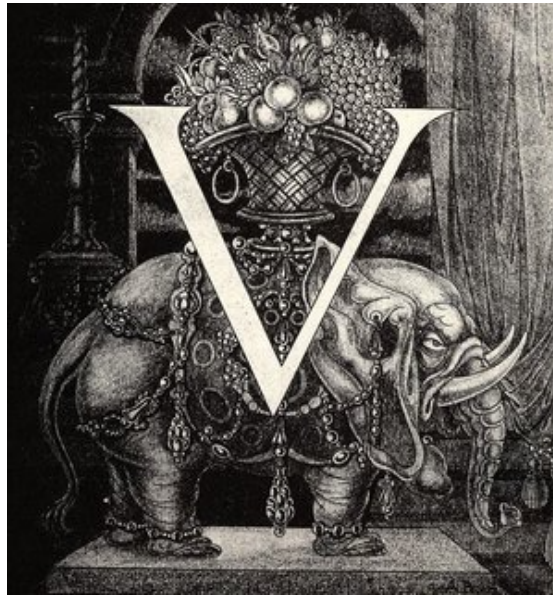


volupté

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES



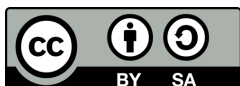
Volume 3, Issue 1, June 2020
Decadent Archives

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Publication: 21 June 2020

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v3i1.1413.g1527

volupte.gold.ac.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON



Volume 3, Issue 1, June 2020

Decadent Archives

Preface by the Editor-in-Chief Jane Desmarais	i
<i>Mal d'archive?</i> : Introduction by the Guest Editor Kirsten MacLeod	ii
CRITICAL	
Decadent Historicism Joseph Bristow	1
Housing the Oscar Wilde Archive: Postmodernism's Curation of Decadence Frederick D. King and Alison Lee	28
Aubrey Beardsley, H. S. Nichols, and the Decadent Archive Gregory Mackie	49
The Journal as Archive: <i>Vesny</i> and the Russian Reader's Encounter with Decadence Jonathan Stone	75
'Struggling with the tempter': the Queer Archival Spaces of Vernon Lee, Mary Robinson, and Amy Levy Sally Blackburn-Daniels	92
CREATIVE	
Rachilde's <i>La Tour d'amour</i> (1899): A Translated Extract Jennifer Higgins	111
Feeling Like an Outsider: Harold Acton, Anna May Wong, and Decadent Cosmopolitanism in China Kristin Mahoney	119
'A strange breath of salty air': Revealing Walter Edwin Ledger's Decadent Collection Elizabeth Adams	124

REVIEWS

- Maxime Foerster, *The Politics of Love: Queer Heterosexuality in Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2018)
Mathew Rickard 129
- Robert Azzarello, *Three Hundred Years of Decadence: New Orleans Literature and the Transatlantic World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019)
Tanfer Emin Tunç 134
- Stéphane Guégan and André Guyaux, eds, *Joris-Karl Huysmans: De Degas à Grünewald* (Paris: Gallimard, 2019)
Matthew Creasy 140
- Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Romans et nouvelles* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade) (Paris: Gallimard, 2019) & *Œuvres complètes, vols. I & VI* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2017 & 2019)
Brendan King 145
- Notes on Contributors** 149

Preface

We hope that readers of *Volupté* are keeping well in these challenging times. Most, if not all, of us have experienced some kind of confinement over the last three months due to COVID-19, and some of us, of course, will have been directly affected by the virus. Our thoughts are with you.

The shocking rampancy of fever and disease – both the physical and political varieties – has meant that scholarly activities like attending conferences and visiting libraries and archives are now out-of-bounds. The kinds of in-person socializing that we were able to enjoy a few months ago have been reduced to Talking-Heads communications via glitchy web platforms and social media. We Zoom, but it is not surprising perhaps that technology falls short of human need. We feel sensory-deprived; we pine for the rust smell of foxed endpapers, for the must of an ancient tome.

It is timely and poignant, therefore, that this issue of *Volupté* is devoted to archives, an aspect of decadence research that is temporarily impossible, and a theme inspired by a two-day international conference on ‘Aesthetic Time, Decadent Archives’ at Goldsmiths, University of London, in July 2019. Our Guest Editor and bibliophile, Kirsten MacLeod, has brought together a wonderful range of contributions from scholars and archivists for an issue that celebrates the ‘archival turn’ in decadence studies, including some treasures: a translated extract from a Rachilde novel, an alluring photographic archive at Villa La Pietra, in Florence, and a tantalizing glimpse of the Walter Edwin Ledger Collection of Wildeana at University College Oxford.

Before I hand over to Kirsten, and as compensation for not being able to spend long days with book snakes and archive boxes, here is a link (kindly provided by Karl Hatton) to ‘The Sound of the British Library’: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eesz6C4dHlw&feature=youtu.be>, one-and-a-half evocative hours of rustling, coughing, and soft knocking sounds. The restorative intensity of library and archive spaces is often underrated, but as all decadents know, they are sensoria of escapist delight. Holbrook Jackson puts it well in *The Anatomy of Bibliomania*:

all manner of passionate readers are a species apart finding their sustenance in the printed word as plants imbibe air and fishes animalculæ; they do not look upon life with their own eyes, but through the eyes of books as through an optical glass, magnifying, intensifying, distorting or glorifying, according as they fancy it; sometimes they eschew all common affairs and use books as kaleidoscopes to make for their own delight fantastic patterns which they use as substitutes for life.¹

Best wishes from the *Volupté* editorial team in these Covidian days. Stay well.

Jane Desmarais
Editor-in-Chief
21 June 2020

¹ Holbrook Jackson, *The Anatomy of Bibliomania* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1950), p. 333.

Mal d'archive?: Introduction by the Guest Editor¹

Kirsten MacLeod

Newcastle University

What does the decadent do in a pandemic? I write this from isolation in Western Canada, not a place conventionally associated with decadence, but the place I chose to flee to during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am far from my collection of books and beloved objects here, so am not so easily able to create the kind of decadent retreat enacted by Des Esseintes in Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours*. I am not the first to invoke Huysmans's iconic hero when contemplating self-isolation in these pandemic times. Indeed, Des Esseintes is trending as a model for how to self-isolate in style in the midst of the latest *maladie du siècle*.² Des Esseintes, of course, faced nothing near as drastic as this. His flight into self-isolation was not from a *maladie du siècle* but, rather, more self-indulgently, from the *mal du siècle*, a psychological illness that manifested itself in ennui, loss, disillusionment, world-weariness, and plagued French Romantic writers and decadents of the nineteenth century. Des Esseintes's response to the *mal du siècle* was, of course, to retreat into a world of objects, books, art, and sensory experiences.

À rebours has long been called the Bible of decadence, but it can equally be understood as an archive of decadence. It is a text motivated by a highly self-conscious drive to collect, catalogue, document, and curate decadent artefacts and sensations. Indeed, Des Esseintes is the most famous of a large body of hero and anti-hero aesthete collectors, and the novel is part of a broader tradition of a decadent catalogue aesthetic found in the novels of writers including the Goncourt brothers, Huysmans, George Moore, Oscar Wilde, James Gibbons Huneker, and Carl Van Vechten. Notably, such decadent texts seem driven by an obsession to document their own histories and origins, repetitively and compulsively. It would seem, then, that a notable aspect of the *mal du siècle*, at least in its decadent iteration, is what Jacques Derrida calls '*mal d'archive*' [archive fever]. "To be

en mal d'archive, he writes, 'is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin'.³ Perhaps equally pertinent to decadence, especially in a COVID-19 context, is Carolyn Steedman's provocative riposte to Derrida's abstract concept of the archive. Steedman asks us to consider the archive in epidemiological terms. Archival encounters can be dangerous. The documents and books of the past are marked by 'many of the industrial hazards and diseases' of the era. Handling them, one breathes in 'the dust of the workers who made the papers and parchments; the dust of the animals who provided the skins for their leather bindings. [...] the by-product of all the filthy trades that have, by circuitous routes, deposited their end-products in the archive'.⁴ One expects that decadents like Des Esseintes and Dorian Gray would have revelled perversely in this knowledge as they pored over the books and ancient manuscripts in their libraries.

These conceptions of the archive, of course, differ significantly from its discipline-specific usage in archival science as a collection of historical records relating to a place, organization, or family, or to the place where such records are kept.⁵ They speak, rather, to the 'archival turn' in scholarship across the humanities and social sciences and in popular culture, which has led at once to 'the conflation of archives, libraries, and museums' and to 'the inflation of the term "archive" [...] as a kind of loose signifier for a disparate set of concepts'.⁶ In scholarship, for example, the archive is now of interest not only as a research resource but as an object of study and theorization in itself. In popular culture, meanwhile, the appropriation of the verbs 'to archive' and 'to curate' is rife in the age of blogging, social-media platforms, the boutique hotel, the pop-up shop, the pop-up exhibition, and the internet archive.⁷ As a consequence, the archive's status as an inviolable representation of institutional and state power has been destabilized: first, through scrutiny of the political and social contexts that determine what is included and what excluded from the archive; second, through the democratization and popularization of the archive brought about by increased public awareness and engagement with these practices.

The archival turn for decadence studies provides fresh avenues for research as well as a new lens through which to consider more established fields of study within the discipline – scholarship, for example, on the preoccupation of decadence with history and temporality, and on collecting and connoisseurship as aspects of the decadent sensibility.⁸ These concerns intersect in Matthew Potolsky’s *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (2012), which conceptualizes decadent writers as mining the past with a creative and connoisseur-like approach:

Decadent writers sort incessantly through the materials of the cultural past, defining their relationship to others in the movement by collecting disparate themes, tropes, and stylistic manners from around the globe and binding them together according to their tastes and proclivities. Foregrounding acts of selection, juxtaposition, and critical discernment, they piece together ostentatiously borrowed parts, rather than purporting to create in any traditional sense or according to a clearly delineated doctrine.⁹

Potolsky is predominantly concerned with demonstrating that, contrary to the established notion of decadents as isolated and withdrawn, their writing is actually invested in community. We can see, however, by his wording (‘sort’, ‘materials of the cultural past’, ‘binding’, ‘collecting’, ‘selection’, ‘juxtaposition’, ‘critical discernment’), why many scholars, including contributors to this issue, have taken this work as a prompt to think in more explicit terms about the archival impulses of decadence. Frederick D. King was among the first to do so in characterizing Potolsky’s conceptualization of decadence as ‘a creative archival methodology for reading and disseminating literary and artistic texts’.¹⁰ King uses this understanding as a means to consider how decadence draws on the past to make sense of the present and how it does so with a high degree of self-consciousness about media forms. More recently, Robert Stilling likewise posits decadence as an ‘archival methodology’ in *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism and Postcolonial Poetry* (2018). Stilling draws on Foucault to theorize the anarchic potential of the archive in his discussion of the production of Derek Mahon’s *The Yellow Book* in the context of the archiving of the author’s own papers. The decadent archive that in Potolsky had positive connotations in its documentation of ‘cosmopolitan community’, becomes suspect in Stilling’s postcolonial approach:

when viewed under the shadow of literary decadence, [the archive] has a reversionary, atavistic quality, one that bites back at modernity. The decadence of the archive can be found in the archive's propensity to unsettle received understandings of literary inheritance as old documents rise up from their dusty coffers to accuse the living of complicity in modernity's barbarism.¹¹

This special issue of *Volupté* on the theme of 'Decadent Archives' was prompted by a desire to generate further productive thinking about decadence in relation to the archive, broadly understood. It invited potential contributors to write about decadence, decadents, and decadent collections in the archive, library, or museum; decadent art as archive; decadence and archival, counterarchival, or anarchival practices; decadence as an archival aesthetic; decadence as an intermedial archive; decadence and the digital archive; decadence and archival practices; lost or hidden decadent archives or collections; etc. The essays included here were presented in earlier and shortened iterations alongside a host of other papers at a conference on 'Aesthetic Time, Decadent Archives' held at Goldsmiths, University of London, in July 2019, which was more broadly concerned with aesthetic and decadent notions of history, temporality, and periodization and featured an array of exciting new research in these areas.

The first contribution to the issue, Joseph Bristow's 'Decadent Historicism', is based on his conference keynote. Bristow's work in this essay speaks both to decadent literary studies and queer studies, notably the latter's early, productive, and longstanding engagement with the notion of the archive.¹² Ann Cvetkovich's conception of an 'archive of feelings' as an exploration of 'cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions which are encoded not only in the content of texts themselves, but in the practices that surround their production and reception' has been particularly influential in this respect.¹³ In the tradition of such scholarship, Bristow, in his essay, identifies a 'historicist impulse to recover the queer past' (p. 10) as a central concern of literary decadence, which he explores in detailed, nuanced readings of Oscar Wilde's 'Portrait of Mr. W. H.' (1889); Vernon Lee's 'A Culture Ghost: or, Winthrop's Adventure' (1881), 'A Wicked Voice' (1890), 'An Eighteenth-Century Singer' (1891); and Michael Field's *Roman Trilogy* (1898, 1901, 1903). For the authors of these works and, in a number of cases, for their protagonists, queer

traces sought out in the historical and archival record are rich resources for constructing and defining noncompliant sexualities.

If Bristow is interested in how decadents, including Wilde, make use of the past to retrieve ‘genderqueer icons’ (p. 5), Frederick D. King and Alison Lee show in their essay how Wilde himself becomes iconic for twentieth- and twenty-first century postmodern queer and decadent engagements with the past. More explicitly, they assert, Wilde has become an archive, subject to different forms of ‘curation’ as part of the present’s conversation with the past. This essay, which builds upon King and Lee’s previous work, provides a provocative new way of understanding the relationship between decadence and postmodernism that identifies a similarly subjective and non-linear critical and creative approach in their engagement with the past. Decadence serves for postmodernism both as a collection on which to draw and a ‘mode for reading the collection’ (p. 32).

Gregory Mackie’s contribution, ‘Aubrey Beardsley, H. S. Nichols and the Decadent Archive’, meanwhile, focuses on a most audacious curation of forged art that shows that decadence was available for creative repurposing well before postmodernism came along. Mackie recounts the details of publisher H. S. Nichols’s circulation in 1919 and 1920, in both exhibition and print format, of what was purported to be a lost archive of Beardsley drawings. Mackie represents these projects as archival in impetus but, more tellingly, understands the forged images as themselves archival, in ways resonant with King’s and Stilling’s notion of decadence as ‘archival methodology’. The forged images draw on and synthesize authentic and plausible Beardsleyan visual tropes that, by this time, had come to be recognizably decadent. New works, then, are created and passed off as old. The forger or forgers of these images might be said to be engaged in a version of the kind of ‘decadent historicism’ defined by Bristow – one ‘that places greater faith in the power of fiction-making than hardnosed evidence’ (p. 11). In this instance, however, rather than serving the interests of decadents in finding queer and transgender allies in the past, the forged images fed the

early twentieth-century bibliomania that was an integral part of the nostalgia for and revival of decadence in the period.

Like Mackie's essay, Jonathan Stone's 'The Journal as Archive: *Vesy* and the Russian Reader's Encounter with Decadence' explores the circulation and production of decadence in the early twentieth century. Stone deploys and broadens Potolsky's sense of how a decadent republic of letters operated by considering the periodical as a canon-forming and community-building medium. Specifically, Stone argues that the Russian magazine, *Vesy* [*Libra*], functioned strategically as a decadent archive in publishing existing foundational texts of decadence from across Europe alongside new Russian material. In so doing, it at once educated a readership in the tenets of decadence and promoted a move away from Russian literature's long investment in psychological realism and towards the more individualist and subjective mode of decadence.

With Sally Blackburn-Daniels's contribution, "'Struggling with the tempter": the Queer Archival Spaces of Vernon Lee, Mary Robinson, and Amy Levy', we return to the concerns – as well as one of the subjects – of Bristow's opening essay. In the piece, Lee is invoked again as a textual chronicler of queer desire, but Blackburn-Daniels's interest is in exploring the queer autobiographical and biographical contours of the published and private writings of Lee's friends and lovers. Along with conceptions of the archive posited by queer theory, Potolsky again provides a framework for thinking about communitarian aspects of decadent interrelations, this time in a highly personal and, indeed, intimate form. Blackburn-Daniels analyses the queer traces, hesitations, intertextualities, and erasures in these women's texts, mapping out their expression of a 'community of queer influence' and desire (p. 95). Ultimately, Blackburn-Daniels proposes a convincing case for the potential of prosopography to illuminate concepts of decadent community in new and productive ways.

This issue's creative contributions also bear on the theme of decadent archives in implicit and explicit ways. Jennifer Higgins's translation of a section of Rachilde's lesser-known and never-translated novel *La Tour d'amour* (1899) reminds us that there are many potential textual pleasures

lying neglected and forgotten in the decadent archives waiting to be integrated into our critical and creative engagements with and construction of decadent literary history.

Kristin Mahoney and Elizabeth Adams, meanwhile, showcase treasures from the archive in their discussions of lesser-known collections of relevance to the history of decadence. While our scholarly work tends to exploit the archive as a source of evidence and truths, the reality, as we all know, is that it often raises as many questions as it solves. Mahoney's musings on photographs contained in the papers of decadent modernist Harold Acton thoughtfully document her encounter with the mysteries and uncertainties the archives throw up as well as the lure and fascination they hold for us. At the same time, she introduces a potentially rich mine of materials for decadence studies that she aims to put to future use in her work on decadent cosmopolitanism. Adams's piece, meanwhile, draws attention to a fairly overlooked Wilde collection – the Robert Ross Memorial Collection at University College Oxford. This collection is not Ross's but was named after him by the somewhat eccentric Wilde collector Walter Edwin Ledger, friend of Ross and of another, more famous, Wilde collector and bibliographer, Christopher Millard (Stuart Mason). The collection consists of books by and about Wilde and a vast array of correspondence, bookseller's catalogues, prospectuses, and other ephemera that testify to a concerted effort to preserve and memorialize Wilde. A collection of this kind has many uses for the scholar of decadence, particularly in light of themes raised in this issue to do with decadent historicism and the desire to recover a queer past and communities of queer influence. Indeed, Mackie's recent book *Beautiful Untrue Things: Forging Oscar Wilde's Extraordinary Afterlife* (2019), which draws on this collection as well as the more famous Oscar Wilde and his Literary Circle Collection at the Clark Library (UCLA), uses this material to argue that 'Wilde was instrumental in community formation' for these queer bibliophiles.¹⁴

Returning to the opening question of this introduction – what would the decadent do in a pandemic? – these essays, as a collection, propose some surprising and counterintuitive claims about decadence and about the archive. Notably, they go against the grain of the iconic image of

the decadent I invoked in the opening of this introduction – a Huysmansian decadent in isolation suffering from *mal du siècle* and *mal d'archive*. In place of this, these essays suggest – in different ways – that a decadent engagement with the past and with textual and cultural archives can be oriented towards community-building, self-affirmation, and generative creative activities and practices. Even the forgeries of Mackie's discussion, derivative though they may be, speak to the enduring and iconic status that decadence achieved as early as the 1910s and that continues today.

In *À rebours*, the doctor orders Des Esseintes to return to Paris and to live an ordinary life as a cure for his neurosis. His prescription might well be different for pandemic times. Could it be that, in this context, a decadent course of self-isolation, of immersion in art and sensation, is just what the doctor would order? The essays collected in this issue suggest that decadents need not suffer from *mal d'archive* but might instead experience a *joie d'archive* that is life-affirming and generative. I hope these essays will encourage you to engage with decadent archives – whether they be on your own shelves, on digital platforms, or, when possible, in real libraries and institutions – with a view to continuing the critical conversation begun here. In the meantime, stay safe and, by all means, stay decadent.

¹ I would like to thank Jane Desmarais for inviting me to guest edit this issue of *Volupté* and for her help in organizing and seeing it through to print. Many thanks also due to the other phenomenal members of her team, Alice Condé and Jessica Gossling.

² See, for example, Samuel Rutter, 'A Dandy's Guide to Decadent Self-Isolation', *Paris Review*, 4 May 2020. <<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/05/04/a-dandys-guide-to-decadent-self-isolation/>> [accessed 14 June 2020], and 'The Art of Confinement?: J. K. Huysmans' Against the Grain', *French Literature Daily*, 7 April 2020. <https://medium.com/@salvadorlopez_34862/the-art-of-confinement-j-k-huysmans-against-the-grain-13e46fef57ff> [accessed 14 June 2020].

³ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 91.

⁴ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 27.

⁵ See the entry for 'archive' and 'archives' in the *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*. <<https://dictionary.archivists.org/>> [accessed 14 June 2020].

⁶ Marlene Manoff, 'Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines', *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 4 (2004), 9-25 (p. 10).

⁷ Manoff covers this to some extent, though the article was written before the explosion of social media. For a consideration of this topic in the mainstream media, see Alex Williams, 'The Word Curate No Longer Belongs to the Museum Crowd', *New York Times*, 2 October 2009.

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/04/fashion/04curate.html>> [accessed 14 June 2020].

⁸ The subject of collecting in relation to decadence is a fairly well-established field that is dominated by approaches foregrounding consumerism and mass culture, fetishism and perversity, bibliophilia, and materiality.

⁹ Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), pp. 4-5.

Works are 'decadent' not because they realize a doctrine or make use of certain styles and themes, but because they move within a recognizable network of canonical books, pervasive influences, recycled stories, erudite commentaries, and shared tastes.

¹⁰ Frederick D. King, 'The Decadent Archive and the Long History of New Media', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 49 (2016), 643-63 (p. 647).

¹¹ Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism and Postcolonial Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 234.

¹² Kate Eichorn notes that the interest of queer studies scholars in the archive predates the archival turn in the humanities and social sciences. See Kate Eichorn, 'Queer Archives: From Collections to Conceptual Framework', in *The Routledge History of Queer America*, ed. by Don Romesburg (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 123-34 (p. 123).

¹³ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 7.

¹⁴ Gregory Mackie, *Beautiful Untrue Things: Forging Oscar Wilde's Extraordinary Afterlife* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), p. 58.

Decadent Historicism¹

Joseph Bristow

University of California, Los Angeles

In what respects might we consider decadence as a historical concept? And in what ways do literary writings associated with the fin-de-siècle decadent tradition approach the question of history? These two interrelated questions need addressing because they converge upon a significant point. Many of the works of fiction, poetry, and drama that critics have identified with decadence demonstrate a concerted interest in the qualities that Classical commentators famously linked with the dissolution of the Roman Empire. As David Weir has shown, the European thinkers who most powerfully conjured the idea of Roman decadence were the French philosopher Montesquieu (1689-1755) and the English historian Edward Gibbon (1737-1794).² In several parts of Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1789), he refers in his notes to Montesquieu's influential *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734). Still, it is worth observing that at no point in the *Decline and Fall* does the term decadence become integral to Gibbon's own discourse. It took until the middle of the nineteenth century before British commentators began to use the phrase 'Roman decadence' to refer to a historical concept. Once criticism took this turn, columnists often kept in mind the wealth of startling evidence that Gibbon had compiled in his mammoth study. Especially significant, as Weir also reveals, were Gibbon's references to the young Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus, who reigned from 218 to 222. After his death, this legendary monarch was memorialized as Elagabalus (or, sometimes, Heliogabalus) because the emperor infamously deposed Jupiter in favour of the sun as Rome's crowning godhead.

It is worth pausing for a moment with the fin-de-siècle fascination with this unsparing despot. Not only a tyrant, Elagabalus was also a corrupt voluptuary and a sexual insubordinate. Even though Gibbon admits that '[i]t may seem probable [that] the vices and follies of Elagabalus

have been adorned by fancy, and blackened by prejudice', it remains the case that the emperor never ceased 'to subvert every law of nature and decency'.³ Not even '[a] long train of concubines, and a rapid succession of wives', including a vestal virgin 'ravished by force from her sacred asylum', could 'satisfy the impotence of his passions' (I, 155). Even more perverse was the emperor's gender presentation. 'The master of the Roman world', Gibbon writes,

affected to copy the dress and manners of the female sex, preferred the distaff to the sceptre, and dishonoured the principal dignities of the empire by distributing them among his numerous lovers; one of whom was publicly invested with the title and authority of the emperor's, or as he more properly styled himself, of the empress's husband (I, 155).

Gibbon would have known that Cassius Dio, in the second-century *Roman History*, recorded that Elagabalus 'had planned [...] to cut off his genitals altogether', though the emperor settled on the ritual of circumcision: a practice that Elagabalus imposed on many companions.⁴

It is fair to say that the transfeminine Elagabalus, whose erotic practices redefined imperial marriage, became a decadent icon. One of the best-known references to the emperor occurs in the fiction of Joris-Karl Huysmans, who knew of the emperor's career from the anonymous late-Roman *Historia Augusta*. In his decidedly anti-realist novel *À rebours* (1884), the French author depicts Elagabalus' 'feet treading on powdered silver and gold, his head encircled by a tiara, his garments studded with precious stones', where he worked by day 'at women's work, giving himself the title Empress, and every night bedding a different Emperor, preferably chosen from among his barbers, kitchen boys, and charioteers'.⁵ Having noted this passage, Weir directs our attention to Lawrence Alma-Tadema's sumptuous painting, *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, which appeared at the Royal Academy's summer exhibition in 1888.⁶ This remarkable work, which displays Alma-Tadema's technical skills at their finest, adapts the episode in the *Historia Augusta* where Elagabalus 'once overwhelmed his parasites with violets and other flowers, so that some of them were actually smothered to death'.⁷ This late nineteenth-century engagement with the Roman decadence drove against earlier approaches to the end of the Classical empire that had little time for the wealth of

details that Gibbon had garnered in the *Decline and Fall*. In a finely researched essay that examines the presence of Classical Rome in Victorian historiography, Linda Dowling observes:

With the shift from the literary, text-centered, providentialist historiography of Thomas Arnold and Charles Merivale to the inscription-based researches of [Theodor] Mommsen and his Victorian inheritor J. B. Bury, Roman decadence disappeared from historical works as a cautionary passage for contemporary moral and political lessons. Indeed, Roman decadence virtually disappeared as a distinct historical episode altogether.⁸

A significant part of the decadent tradition, which respected decadence as a historical category, involved recovering Gibbon's unflinching interest in Classical reprobates such as Elagabalus: an outrageous imperial figure whose breathtaking indulgences and acts of cruelty overwhelmed the imagination.

The appearance of *The Roses of Heliogabalus* at the Royal Academy was not the first occasion when visitors to London exhibitions had witnessed the transgressive emperor in the most exquisitely costumed glory. Earlier artworks returned the public's mind to Gibbon's findings. In 1870, Sidney Colvin in the *Portfolio* magazine made special note of the stunning watercolours that the artist Simeon Solomon had recently presented at the Dudley Gallery, Piccadilly [fig. 1]. Uniquely impressive, Colvin remarked, was Solomon's 'richness and splendour of effect in the imitating of lustrous and metallic surfaces, cloths of gold or silver, or gold and silver ornaments, crowns, chains, caskets or chased work, that no other painter has rivalled'.⁹ 'The Roman decadence', Colvin proceeds to observe, 'with its emperor Heliogabalus, high-priest of the sun, supplied another occasion for such an achievement' (p. 34). Solomon's painting, which dates from 1866, features a sexually ambiguous and magnificently haloed figure, who is swathed in a golden under-dress beneath a loose-fitting deep-red robe.¹⁰ As if lost in reverie, Elagabalus' somnolent head is gently propped by the right arm, while a censer exuding shimmering scent dangles from the left hand. The image summons many qualities linked with fin-de-siècle decadence: opulent textures; exquisite ornamentation; languid demeanour; and ceremonial embellishment. Yet the quality that arguably emerges with greatest force is the Roman emperor's queerness.



Fig. 1: Simeon Solomon, *Heliogabalus, High Priest of the Sun*, 1866, pencil and watercolour, 47.6 x 28.9 cm, private collection. Courtesy of akg-images.

It is this attribute, as I explain in this discussion, that stands at the heart of what I call decadent historicism: an interest among several 1880s and 1890s writers in the enduring authority of perverse personas from the past. The three authors whose works I discuss in some detail here – Oscar Wilde, Vernon Lee, and Michael Field – share the assumption that queer and transgender historical figures, whether real or imaginary, deserve respectful attention. The reason is that the careful study of these personages, a study that often involves detailed archival research, inspired late-Victorian writers to consider how they might modify, rework, and even imagine anew sexual modernity. In each case, Oscar Wilde, Vernon Lee, and Michael Field engage in richly textured scholarly inquiries in order to create their own sexually ambiguous types, all of which have close

connections with artistic performance, whether in the theatre, opera, or dance. Their writings, which rove across not only Roman decadence but also the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, conjure genderqueer icons that – even if they are not as luxuriantly debauched as Elagabalus – possess irrepressible beauty. At the same time, these figures also share a troubling proximity to pain, punishment, and death, in narratives that remind us that these gender-transitive types, both in their time then and in the present of their decadent reimagining, remain imperilled. Furthermore, these exquisite icons of perversity, which are so carefully adapted for late nineteenth-century aesthetic purposes, remain intriguing in our own time, a time that is paying renewed attention to the erotically noncompliant legacy of decadence. Such defiance of sexual orthodoxy, as scholars have begun to explore in increasing amounts of detail, speaks to a current cultural moment that strives to recognize (not always without difficulty) trans identities, queer intimacies, and nonbinary genders.

This decadent approach to history marks an emphatic contrast with the headstrong Whig understanding of cultural and political progress that abounds in the works of Thomas Babington Macaulay, who observed in 1835:

From the great advances which European society has made, during the last four centuries, in every species of knowledge, we infer, not that there is no more room for improvement, but that, in every science which deserves the name, immense improvements may be confidently expected.¹¹

By the 1880s and 1890s, when British imperialism arguably reached its zenith, the potential collapse of empire, in line with the fate of Classical Rome, weighed on the minds of artists and intellectuals. Gibbon's centenary in 1894, which involved an exhibition at the British Museum and a lecture organized by the Royal Historical Society, served as a reminder that his 'attitude toward Christianity was lamented by earlier critics' because he viewed the emergence of the new religion as integral to the empire's fall.¹² About the progress of civilisation, Gibbon held no illusions.

I need to return for an additional moment on Elagabalus, since this transfeminine phenomenon, whose presence in Classical Rome could not be ignored even in Victorian history

textbooks, throws additional light on the manner in which we think about Roman decadence, on the one hand, and the growing nineteenth-century identification with its perverse heritage, on the other. By the late 1880s and early 1890s, when the English use of the word decadence acknowledged its association with the movement of French writers that Anatole Baju had labelled as such, the term carried, more often than not, a pejorative meaning. One of the handful of writers in Britain who ran against the grain was Wilde, whose *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, revised 1891) in part models several of its central passages on Huysmans's *À rebours*. Among the many historical figures whose excesses fascinate Wilde's protagonist is Elagabalus, who (in phrasing that echoes Gibbon's) 'had painted his face with colours, and plied the distaff among women'.¹³ Such allusions to this and countless other miscreants from Classical and more recent times prompted the *Daily Chronicle* to characterize *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a 'tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French *Décadents*'.¹⁴ Wilde himself, as I observe below, most probably viewed this indictment as an unintentional compliment. In his rebuttal to the newspaper, he took great pride in his affiliation with literary works stemming from an 'aesthetic movement' that 'produced certain colours, subtle in their loveliness', works that reacted against the 'crude primaries of a doubtless more respectable but certainly less cultivated age'.¹⁵ Although he does not say it, Wilde is implicitly speaking of decadence as a modern literary concept. Moreover, it is a tradition implicitly suffused with contemporary aniline dyes – those 'strange dyes', as Charlotte Ribeyrol has noted, whose alluring artificiality captured Walter Pater's attention in 'Poems by William Morris' (1868), the essay that formed the core of the 'Conclusion' to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873).¹⁶

Oscar Wilde, the Memory of Shakespeare, and the 'Boy-Actor of Great Beauty'

There were, however, times when Wilde explicitly declared his passion for decadence. If we are to believe the Irish poet W. B. Yeats, during his first meeting with his compatriot at the London home of the poet and editor W. E. Henley in 1886 it became clear that Wilde had already found much to admire in the term. 'That first night', Yeats recalls, 'he praised Walter Pater's *Studies in the*

History of the Renaissance.¹⁷ Yeats goes on to reproduce the acclaim that Wilde bestowed upon this remarkable work of aesthetic criticism, which first appeared – to some controversy – in 1873. Expressly appealing for Wilde was Pater’s proposal that the Renaissance inaugurated a movement that marked ‘the care for physical beauty, the worship of the body, the breaking down of those limits which the religious system of the middle age imposed on the heart and the imagination’ (pp. xi-xii). (It was this crucial emphasis on bodily beauty that made Pater prey to allegations of reckless hedonism.) As Wilde frequently acknowledges in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Pater’s examples of this post-medieval delight in the body’s aesthetic grandeur included artists and writers such as Leonardo da Vinci and Johann Joachim Winckelmann, whose sexual interests were frequently, if not predominantly, homoerotic. Pater claims that this artistic efflorescence, which he witnesses emerging in the sixteenth-century vernacular poetry of the French writer Joachim du Bellay, possessed to ‘the full the subtle and delicate sweetness of which belong to a refined and comely decadence’ (p. xii). (Pater, it is worth noting, qualified his invocation of decadence by quickly asserting that this Renaissance also involved an *ascesis*: a disciplined ‘girding of the loins in youth’, such as we might associate with the exercise of athletic prizemen in ancient Greece [p. xii].) In Wilde’s eyes, the splendid qualities that Pater found in Bellay’s poetry were also those that Pater’s own *Renaissance* embodied. Wilde told the party assembled at Henley’s residence that Pater’s volume was his ‘golden book’ (p. 124). ‘I never’, Wilde said, ‘travel anywhere without it; but it is the very flower of decadence: the last trumpet should have sounded the moment it was written’ (p. 124). Such words, which evoke Revelations 10, suggest that Pater’s 1873 volume had a prophetic quality. It was the kind of book, in the words that follow the seventh and final trumpet in the New Testament, that will ‘make thy belly bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth as sweet as honey’.

Wilde’s remarks, even if wryly cryptic in their biblical allusiveness, hint that Pater’s work created such a break with conventional criticism that its decisive impact on modern consciousness was nothing less than apocalyptic. In his own career, Wilde took many initiatives from Pater to

develop, as he did in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a defiant homoerotic aesthetic at a time when the legal proscription of such desires between males was entrenched. (The eleventh section of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 prohibited acts of ‘gross indecency’ between males, even in private. The law made a striking contrast with the Code Napoléon in France.) Wilde did the same, as is well known, in his personal life, in which he pursued affairs outside his marriage with several young men, including Lord Alfred Douglas, who introduced him to an underworld of homosexual intimacy, male prostitution, and widespread extortion. Douglas’ father, the belligerent 9th Marquess of Queensberry, who could not abide his son’s attachment to Wilde, libelled the Irishman as a sodomite. Wilde sued, only to be faced with a barrage of incriminating evidence that revealed his immersion in the city’s queer networks. After these sexual contacts were exposed through a series of humiliating trials that occupied most of April and May 1895, Wilde was stigmatized as the worst face of what had become a much-discredited decadence. Once Queensberry’s defence had demonstrated that the libel was justified, Henley (or a member of his team) editorialized in the imperialist *National Observer* that the country had ‘a deep debt of gratitude toward the Marquess of Queensberry for destroying the High Priest of the Decadents’.¹⁸ The pointed phrasing makes it sound as if Wilde had paid the price of becoming the Elagabalus of his own time. Several weeks later, as is well known, Wilde was committed to prison for two years in solitary confinement with hard labour.

Queensberry’s leading counsel, the Irish MP Edward Carson, spent many hours at the Old Bailey focusing on the ways in which several of Wilde’s writings offered evidence that they expressed – as Carson put it – the author’s ‘sodomitical’ proclivities. Besides subjecting tell-tale passages from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to scrutiny, Carson turned his attention to Wilde’s ‘Portrait of Mr. W. H.’: a short fiction about the mysterious dedicatee in William Shakespeare’s 1609 volume of *Sonnets*. Wilde’s story, which also focuses on a sexually ambiguous performer, weaves an ingenious tale about three male literary enthusiasts who try to revive Edmond Malone and Thomas

Tyrwhitt's long-dismissed theory about the probable identity of 'Mr. W. H.'. In 1789, Malone had written:

Mr. Tyrwhitt has pointed out to me a line in the twentieth Sonnet, which inclines me to think that the initials W.H. stand for W. Hughes. Speaking of this person, the poet says he is –

‘A man in *hew* all *Hews* in his controlling –’
so the line is exhibited in the old copy. The name *Hughes* was formerly written *Hews*.¹⁹

In the story, which appeared in the 1889 volume of the conservative *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, the unnamed middle-aged narrator recounts a conversation with his older friend Erskine. The topic is the legacy that a youth named Cyril Graham left to Erskine in the form of a 'small panel picture set in an old and somewhat tarnished Elizabethan frame'.²⁰ The tale that subsequently unfolds addresses the theory that Cyril, Erskine, and the narrator – at different moments in the story – strive and fail to pitch their belief. The hypothesis they variously uphold, only to lose faith in it, is that 'Mr. W. H.' – in line with Malone's recapitulation of Tyrwhitt's contention – 'must have been in Shakespeare's company some boy-actor of great beauty, to whom he intrusted the presentation of his noble heroines' (8: 265), since the female parts were performed by an all-male company. The panel that Erskine owns is supposed to serve, at least initially, as incontrovertible proof that it depicts this supposedly historical personage:

It was a full-length portrait of a young man in late sixteenth-century costume, standing by a table, with his right hand resting on an open book. He seemed about seventeen years of age, and was of quite extraordinary personal beauty, though evidently somewhat effeminate. Indeed, had it not been for the dress and the closely cropped hair, one would have said that the face, with its dreamy wistful eyes, and its delicate scarlet lips, was the face of the girl. (VIII, pp. 259-60)

To be sure, this figure is not as luxuriant as that of Elagabalus in Alma-Tadema's and Solomon's respective paintings. The portrait nonetheless has a transfeminine quality that is central to its allure. Once Erskine encourages the narrator to take a magnifying-glass in order 'to spell out the crabbed sixteenth-century handwriting' in the book on which the figure rests his right hand, he discovers that the script reads: 'TO THE ONLIE BEGETTER OF THESE INSUING SONNETS' (see VIII, p. 272). These are, of course, the words in the dedication to 'Mr. W. H.' in the 1609 edition.

What follows in Wilde's fiction is an intricate sequence of events that reveals how Cyril and Erskine pursued a fervid chase through the archives in order to substantiate the theory: 'for weeks and weeks we searched the registers of City churches, the Alley MSS. at Dulwich, the Record Office, the papers of the Lord Chamberlain – everything, in fact, that we thought might contain some allusion to Willie Hughes' (VIII, p. 266). Their inquiries, however, proved fruitless. Before long, it seems, Erskine discovered that the fine Elizabethan portrait of the feminine boy was a forgery that Cyril had commissioned. Once the fake was exposed, Cyril took his life: a high price for not having sufficient skill to substantiate, once and for all, that the Bard's object of adoration was a gorgeous adolescent male.

Be that as it may, this drastic act of self-murder, which prompts the thought that Cyril could never actualize his own sexual desires, scarcely deters the narrator. Immediately, he embarks on his own ventures into the archive so that he, too, can at last prove Malone and Tyrwhitt's theory to be true. At one point, his impassioned efforts lead him to conclude:

it was not improbable that William Hughes was one of those English comedians (*mimæ quidam ex Britannia*, as the old chronicle calls them), who were slain at Nuremberg in a sudden uprising of the people, and were secretly buried in a little vineyard outside the city by some young men 'who had taken pleasure in their performances, and of whom some had sought to be instructed in the mysteries of the new art.' (VIII, pp. 277-78)²¹

Most plainly, the narrator's scholarly impulses have reached a point of absurdity. What matters, however, is the defiant longing that impels him to verify that Shakespeare and 'Mr. W. H.' were lovers.

This historicist impulse to recover the queer past, even though it may well involve acts of preposterous distortion, defines one of most potent aspects of literary decadence. Although it entails faking and appropriating history in the face of contravening empirical facts, Wilde's narrative intimates that there is much to be learned from the extraordinary feats of imagination that Cyril, Erskine, and the narrator, one after another, direct towards the sexual dissidence that they wish to see embodied in both the Bard and the boy. Wilde himself was so charmed by this ruse that he followed Cyril by commissioning his own portrait of Mr. W. H. from Charles Ricketts.

The young gay artist completed the work on a ‘decaying piece of oak and framed it in a fragment of worm-eaten moulding’.²² Ricketts’s portrait of Mr. W. H., which sold for a guinea along with Wilde’s pieces by Solomon and other artists at his bankruptcy sale on 24 April 1895, has not survived [fig. 2]. Even if there is little that elucidates the precise nature of Ricketts’s portrait, its former existence speaks to Wilde’s fascination with developing a decadent historicism that places greater faith in the power of fiction-making than hardnosed evidence. It is therefore troubling to discover what happened during the unsuccessful libel case that Wilde pursued against Queensberry several weeks before an auctioneer sold off his artworks, books, and furniture at rock-bottom prices. ‘I believe’, Carson remarked, ‘you have written an article pointing out that Shakespeare’s sonnets were practically sodomitical’.²³ ‘On the contrary, Mr. Carson’, Wilde replied, ‘I wrote an article to prove that they were not so’ (p. 93). One can understand why Wilde made such a defensive retort. He had to protect himself from the implicit charge that his work celebrated a tabooed male homosexuality. But his denial of Carson’s allegation was also justified in so far as ‘The Portrait of Mr. W. H.’ reveals that such desires endure incredible strain when trying to realize their possibility, especially when such yearnings existed beneath the shadow of the 1885 law.

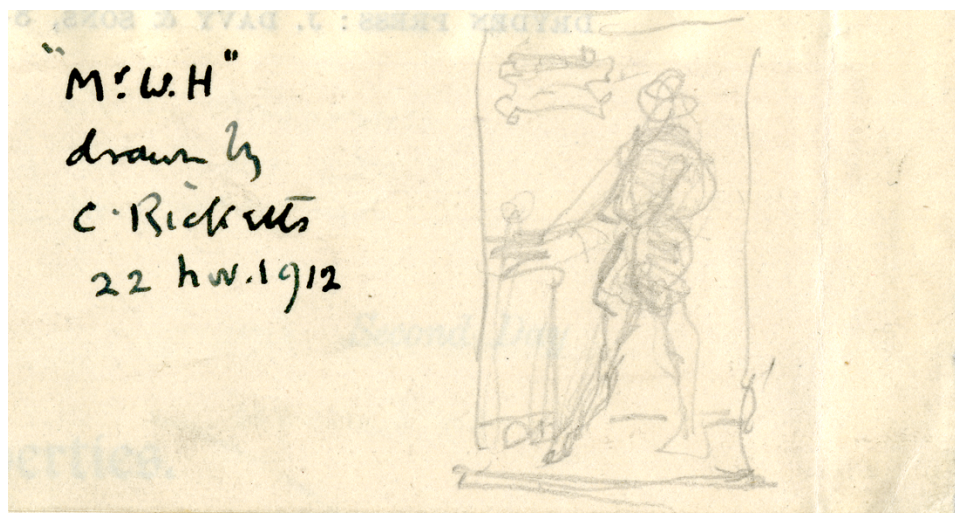


Fig. 2: Charles Ricketts, *Mr. W. H.*, 22 November 1912, pencil on slip of paper given to Christopher Selater Millard, Oscar Wilde and His Literary Circle Collection, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles, Box 54, Folder 3. Courtesy of Scott Jacobs (Clark Library).

Vernon Lee, the Eighteenth Century, and the Castrato's 'voix maudite'

Vernon Lee (the professional name of Violet Paget), who was almost to the day two years younger than Wilde, began to devise her own distinctive decadent historicism in the 1870s, though she did so with greater precocity than her Irish contemporary. Moreover, her writings, from their very beginnings, seldom advert to the term decadence. Even so, her unwavering preoccupation with the artistic cultures of the 1600s and 1700s shares Wilde's interest in sexually unique figures who have close ties to specific types of supreme artistry. This is especially true of Vernon Lee's supernatural fictions, which began with 'A Culture-Ghost; or, Winthrop's Adventure' in 1881, a year after her well-researched critical history, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, had appeared. (This substantial study from 1880, in several ways, follows Pater's lead by uncovering 'a spontaneous efflorescence of national art in Italy', though not in the Renaissance but the neglected later period.)²⁴ She originally placed her story in *Fraser's Magazine* in Britain and *Appleton's Magazine* in America, though forty-six years later she chose to reprint it, with an instructive preface, for reasons that I expound on later. Set in Florence close to the time of its publication, the tale concentrates on a young man, Julian Winthrop, who has a talent for painting, though it is one, we learn, in which he could never succeed because his 'was too ungovernable a fancy'.²⁵ He spends much of his time at the villa of Countess S – (her family name remains discreetly occluded), who is, we are told, 'a great musician' (p. 144). Once she has finished playing a violin sonata, the countess presses Winthrop to stay so that he can hear 'an old air' that she has recently discovered 'among a heap of rubbish in my father-in-law's lumber room' (p. 145). The first-person narrator, who is privy to this scene, remarks that no sooner had the countess ('an uncommonly fine singer') begun to perform the air than it sounded 'so different from all we moderns are accustomed to' (p. 145). The 'exquisitely-finished phrases, its delicate vocal twirls and spirals, its symmetrically ordered ornaments' were such, the narrator observes, that they could move us 'into quite another world of musical feeling' (p. 146). It is this 'other world', which is decidedly different from modern

times, that has a disturbing impact on Julian Winthrop: 'his face was flushed, and he leaned against his chair as if oppressed by emotion' (p. 147).

Vernon Lee's story proceeds to disclose the reasons that prompt this otherwise inexplicable reaction. To begin with, Winthrop urges the countess to reveal what she knows about the history of the air. 'Oh! it is', she exclaims, 'by a very forgotten composer of the name Barbella, who lived somewhere about the year 1780' (p. 148). Once he has apologized for his strange response, he tells her that the music has come as a 'great shock' to him (p. 152). Very quickly, Winthrop shares with the countess one of his sketchbooks, in which she discerns 'some roughly ruled lines, with some notes scrawled in pencil, and the words "Sei Regina, io Pastor sono"' (p. 153). The opening phrases, together with the Italian dedication ('You are the queen, I am the shepherd'), are exactly the same as those in the 'old yellow, blurred manuscript' in her possession (p. 148). The question that naturally arises is how Winthrop had come to inscribe the same text and notes from the ancient document, even though the score appears 'in another clef and tone' (p. 153). 'I either composed it myself or heard it', he says, 'but which of the two was it?' (p. 153). At this juncture, he proceeds to elaborate a highly detailed narrative about an adventure he had, some eighteen months ago, in an archive located in Lombardy.

The dilapidated archive belongs to a collector nicknamed Maestro Fa Diesis (Master F-Sharp), who has sold off property in order to preserve his 'old MSS., his precious missals, his papyri, his autographs, his black-letter books, his prints and pictures, his innumerable ivory inlaid harpsichords' (p. 155), and countless other unkempt items, in a jumbled arrangement that 'formed a grotesque whole' (p. 157). On a tour of his palace, the maestro proudly draws Winthrop's attention to an old picture 'from whose cracked surface he deliberately swept away the dust with the rusty sleeve of his fur-lined coat' (p. 159). The artwork is a portrait that Winthrop, when asked if it has much value, states 'is not a Raphael' but is nonetheless 'quite creditable'. Still, even though he believes it to be a work of only modest worth, the painting leaves a deep impression upon the young artist:

It was a half-length, life-size portrait of a man in the costume of the latter part of the last century – a pale lilac silk cloak, a pale pea-green satin waistcoat, both extremely delicate in tint, and a deep warm-tinted amber cloak; the voluminous cravat was loosened, the large collar flapped back, the body slightly turned, and the head somewhat looking over the shoulder, Cenci fashion. (pp. 159-60)²⁶

As the description unravels, the allusion to the well-known portrait of Beatrice Cenci, who was beheaded for her parricide, hints that there is plenty of intrigue attached to this figure. Winthrop soon understands that the man, if not conventionally eye-catching, is nevertheless enthralling. ‘The face’, he remarks,

was not beautiful; it had something at once sullen and effeminate, something odd and not entirely agreeable; yet it attracted and riveted your attention with its dark, warm colour, rendered all the more striking for the light, pearly, powdered locks, and the general lightness and haziness of touch. (p. 160)

On this basis, Winthrop is drawn towards the captivating oddness of the artwork. Although Maestro Fa Diesis cannot attribute the portrait to any painter, he knows whom it depicts: ‘A certain Rinaldi, who lived about a hundred years ago’ (p. 161). With this information in hand, Winthrop remains haunted by the painting. ‘[F]or me’, he recalls, ‘it had a queer sort of interest’ (p. 161). ‘Those strange red lips and wistful eyes’, he adds, ‘rose up in my mind’ (p. 162). So resonant was this encounter with the artwork that Winthrop took further opportunities to scrutinize it. On closer observation, he could tell that the figure was signing from ‘the mere unintelligible blotches’ on the score, though the phrase ‘Sei Regina, io pastor sono’ was legible (p. 163).

At this juncture, we might well anticipate what happens next in Winthrop’s adventure with this ‘culture-ghost’: the awkward hyphenated term that Vernon Lee devised to summon the spectral pressure that the past can exert upon the present. Before he leaves the palace, the young artist learns that Ferdinando Rinaldi suffered bitterly for his sexual impropriety at the Court of Parma. ‘There, it is said’, the maestro remarks, the singer ‘obtained too great notice from a lady in high favour at Court, and was consequently dismissed’ (p. 166). But instead of leaving the city, Rinaldi lingered, only to be found one day ‘lying on the staircase landing of our Senator Negri’s house, stabbed’ (p. 166). No one, Maestro Fa Diesis comments, knew who had killed him. The

singer's object of affection, he goes on, was the maestro's great-aunt, who owned the portrait. Eager to know more, Winthrop seeks Negri's residence where Rinaldi perished. Once he has identified the presently unoccupied villa, he resolves to spend the night there on a horse-cloth. In this ramshackle setting, with rats scurrying on the floor as a rainstorm rages outside, Winthrop tries to separate certain 'faint and confused sounds' from those of the rain outside (p. 195). Predictably enough, amid these Gothic trappings Winthrop ascends a spiral staircase, climbs on top of an unsteady table, and peers into a capacious room. The tableau he sees is as one might expect:

At the harpsichord, turned slightly away from me, sat the figure in the dress of the end of the last century – a long, pale lilac coat, and pale green waistcoat, and lightly-powdered hair gathered into a black silk bag; a deep amber-coloured silk cloak was thrown over the chairback. He was singing intently, and accompanying himself on the harpsichord, his back turned toward the window at which I was. I stood spellbound. (pp. 197-98)

Yet there is a sexual history behind this culminating scene than Vernon Lee was not entirely ready to disclose in 1881. It took until 1927, when she reprinted the story, before she divulged some additional details about the composition of 'Winthrop's Adventure', which she first drafted in 1872 at the age of eighteen. As she explains in her 'Introduction', the story originated in an experience she had shared with her childhood friend John Singer Sargent, who was about to rise to eminence as a star pupil in the atelier of the French painter Carolus-Duran. When the two pals were fifteen-year-old 'romantic hobbledehoys' (p. xxix), they found themselves, like Winthrop, 'spellbound' in front of a portrait (p. xxix), although on this occasion it depicted a historical personage, the revered Italian castrato Carol Boschi (1705-1782), who was known as Farinelli (*For Maurice*, p. xxix). (Castrati, like the boy-players of Shakespeare's time, traditionally played female parts. They were also trained to play the harpsichord.) The two friends discovered the striking full-length portrait of Farinelli by Corrado Giaquinto, which dates from the mid-1750s, in the Bologna music school, which acquired it in 1850 [fig. 3]. In the painting, Farinelli wears the mantle that shows he is a Knight of Calatrava. With his left foot pointing forward and his left hand resting upon a score, he is poised to break into song. Meanwhile, cupids and nymphs cavort in the

background, which also features portraits of his patrons, King Ferdinand VI and Queen Barbara of Spain, as well as one of Giaquinto, which Farinelli owned. As the two teenagers studied the artwork, they competed in finding the right words to describe it: ‘mysterious, uncanny, a wizard, serpent, sphinx; strange, weird, *curious*’ (p. xxx). The last epithet, which was ‘the dominant adjective in John’s appreciations’, summed up ‘that instinct for the esoteric, the more-than-meets-the-eye’ (p. xxxi). Some years later, Sargent expressed the hope that his friend Violet had ‘not entirely put aside the thought of writing on such a curious subject’ (p. xxxi). Still, as Sargent could tell, the resulting story did not permit the protagonist ‘to indulge in an analysing and labelling all his thrills in rather a vainglorious way, probably, when we used to walk with the cold shivers under the Arcade of Bologna’ (p. xxxviii). On this view, Sargent concluded that such restraint made the story admirable. Vernon Lee, however, had second thoughts.



Fig. 3: Corrado Domenico Nicolò Antonio Giaquinto, *Portrait of Carlo Broschi called Farinelli*, c. 1755, oil on canvas, 275.5 x 185.5 cm, Museo Internazionale e Biblioteca della Musica. Courtesy of akg-images.

In 1927, when she was in her seventies, Vernon Lee looked back upon the forty-six-year-old ‘Winthrop’s Adventure’ as a failure, though not – as far her evolving career was concerned – an insignificant one. She explains that her first attempt at representing this ‘culture-ghost’ (a term that strikes her, all these years later, as a ‘preposterous name’) proved unsatisfactory. ‘I recast it’, she says, ‘some fifteen years afterwards with a full-fledged technique and self-criticism’ (p. xxxix). She realized that the figure modelled on Farinelli had to do more than ‘haunt in pointless solitude merely to sing a posthumous song’ (p. xxxix). The resulting revision appeared initially in French as ‘Voix Maudite’ in *Les lettres and les arts* in 1887. Three years later, it re-emerged as ‘A Wicked Voice’ in *Hauntings* (1890), her first collection of what she called ‘fantastic stories’.

In its renewed framework, ‘A Wicked Voice’ transfers the setting from Lombardy to Venice, and renames Rinaldi as Zaffirino. On this occasion, the English-speaking painter Winthrop has mutated into the Norwegian artist Magnus, an agonized composer who – even though he tells us through his first-person narration that he deplores the ‘execrable art of singing’ – remains intent on completing his opera, *Ogier the Dane*.²⁷ No matter how much he seeks to defy the ‘moral malaria’ that he associates with the ‘cooing vocalisations’ he has found in ‘musty music-books of a century ago’ (p. 157), Magnus cannot shake off a haunting portrait of a singer that he finds in one of these ancient volumes. The engraving features ‘an effeminate beau, his hair curled into *ailes de pigeon*’ (p. 157). Soon, Magnus learns of Zaffirino’s history through the Count Alvisé. The count declares that his great-grand-aunt, the Procuratessa Vendramin, at first dismissed the pride that the castrato took in ‘boasting that no woman had ever been able to resist his singing’ (p. 159). Once he learned of her refutation of his musical skill, Zaffirino rose to the challenge: ‘He sang and sang until the poor grand-aunt Pisana fell ill for love’ (p. 160). Even more troubling was her inability to cure her lovesickness. In the end, her relatives concluded that the only way to revive her was through further exposure to his singing. As it turns out, the moment she heard Zaffirino’s voice at the Villa of Mistrà ‘she began to change frightfully; she gave a dreadful cry, and fell into the convulsion of death’ (p. 161). The exquisite voice, as we can tell, is mortifying. Moreover, Zaffirino’s voice is

trans-historical: it cannot be confined to the anecdotal of the past. No sooner has Magnus learned the terrible fate of the great-grand-aunt than he, too, succumbs to it, except on this occasion it comes from his own act of singing. As he performs an eighteenth-century air before a small audience of friends, he cannot escape ‘the portrait of Zaffirino’, which is perched on the edge of the piano – ‘the sensual, effeminate face, with its wicked, cynical smile’ (p. 162). It is as if Magnus has become possessed.

The remainder of ‘A Wicked Voice’ amplifies this hauntology, in which the ghostly presence of Zaffirino gradually comes to dominate Magnus’ awareness. At first, the spectral voice enters Magnus’ subconscious. The composer, who has been struggling with the score for *Ogier the Dane*, recalls falling asleep; in his dreams, he heard ‘a voice, very low and sweet, almost a whisper, [which] grew and grew, until the whole place was filled with that exquisite vibrating note’ (pp. 164-65). Once it reaches a crescendo, there is a sudden ‘thud of a body on the floor’ (p. 165). The scene that unfolds around ‘a woman lying on the floor’ is one of extreme violence. ‘Her blond hair, tangled, full of diamond-sparkles which cut through the darkness, was hanging dishevelled; the laces of her bodice had been cut, and her white breast shone among the sheen of jewelled brocade’ (p. 165). This is, as Magnus recognizes, his reanimation of the scene that sent Pisana Vendramin to her death. The more he tries to complete his opera, the more the sounds of Zaffirino’s voice float through the Venetian air. No one who hears it, however, can pin it down. ‘[E]ven among those learned in music there was no agreement on the subject of this voice [...] people went so far as to dispute whether the voice belonged to a man or a woman’ (p. 170).

Part of the point of ‘A Wicked Voice’ is to remind us that by the 1880s the castrato’s voice no longer existed in living memory; the last operatic castrato role was performed by Giovanni Battista Velluti in 1824. Still, the larger question that arises here stems from the refusal of this transgender voice to be consigned to a history that has been and gone. What occurs next in Magnus’ story to some degree replicates what we find in ‘Winthrop’s Adventure’. He travels to Mistrà, makes his way ‘through a series of long passages and of big, empty rooms’, and then opens

a door, which leads into an opera theatre (p. 178). As he leans over a balustrade, Magnus witnesses the scene of Zaffirino singing to the dying procuratessa. ‘I recognised at once’, Magnus says, ‘that delicate, voluptuous quality, strange, exquisite, sweet beyond words, but lacking all youth and clearness’ (p. 179). But instead of convulsions, the ‘rich, voluptuous *rifiorituras*’ induce in him an upliftingly aesthetic, if not wholly eroticized, bliss: ‘I recognised now what seemed to have been hidden from me till then, that this voice was what I cared for most in all the world’ (p. 179). Magnus has, in a word, been seduced by the sexually ambiguous castrato. This moment of delight, however, soon turns to fear once he realizes that Zaffirino’s voice is murderous. For this reason, he tries to burst in upon the scene. The space, though, turns out to be empty, and – as his hand crashes down upon the keys of the harpsichord – there is only a discordant ‘jingle-jangle of broken strings’ (p. 180). Ever since this episode, Magnus reveals, he has been ‘wasted by a strange and deadly disease’, in which his head is full of music that he has composed but which is still not his own (p. 181). In the end, ‘A Wicked Voice’ inspires thoughts about the terrifying sacrifices that come from battling noncompliant desires, an idea that becomes most palpable when Magnus grapples with an otherwise vanished sexual past. To resist the historical significance of the castrato, the story intimates, is to deny the future of artistic curiosity.

This point of course asks to be elaborated in relation to several of Vernon Lee’s other compelling writings on the history of music. Especially significant here is her lengthy fictionalized narrative that unfolds the career of the acclaimed castrato Gaspare Pacchierotti (1740-1821). In ‘An Eighteenth-Century Singer’ (1891) – subtitled, after Walter Pater’s short fictions, an ‘imaginary portrait’ – Pacchierotti emerges in the thinly veiled guise of Antonio Vivarelli. The focus of the story, however, rests on Vivarelli’s inspirational discovery of Pietro Metastasio’s drama *Didone abbandonata* (*Dido Forsaken*) (1724) set to music (in one of many adaptations) by Tommaso Traetta in 1757. Particularly enthralling for the twelve-year-old Vivarelli is the splendid recitative of the great soprano Regina Mingotti, who had earned a legendary reputation when she sang at Madrid

under Farinelli's direction in the early 1750s. At this early stage of his development, Vivarelli finds that the diva's tragic voice penetrates him so deeply that he surrenders completely to his emotions:

For when, at the end of play, Dido came forth with her great recitative, accompanied by hurrying violins and double-basses, and interrupted by shrieking trumpets and sighing horns, and flung herself with a great imprecation on the high *la* into the ruins of her burning palace, poor little Vivarelli fairly burst into hysterics, and had to be carried to the neighbouring apothecary's.²⁸

Later, we learn that when Vivarelli enjoyed celebrity for his own performances as a supreme male soprano he remained 'haunted' by 'that wonderful Dido, of that wonderful recitative, of that gesture, and that high *la*' (pp. 849-50). His fame soared in an era when the singer, whose voice was a perfected instrument, 'became the chief artist' (p. 845). Still, the pathos of this story lies in the troubled thought that 'the way in which Vivarelli sang, and the very fact of his existence are long since and entirely forgotten' (p. 846). Lee's yearning to recover this lost moment of the castrato's aesthetic ascendancy certainly contrasts with the dismissive accounts one finds in histories of operas by some of her contemporaries. As he looked back at the eighteenth century, Edward Dannreuther (the German pianist who taught Hubert Parry), for example, remarks scornfully in *Macmillan's Magazine*: 'the heroes of antiquity were presented by *castrati*?'²⁹ 'You might hear', he adds, as if to heighten the sexual absurdity of such art, 'an Achilles or an Alexander with a bushy beard and a high soprano voice, giving vent to his heroic courage in the tenderest shakes and sweetest *fioritura*' (p. 66). Such chauvinism points to the ways in which Lee's finely researched account of the irrecoverable but always-to-be-imagined 'wicked voice' involved her own writing embracing a genderqueer aesthetic that needed – in such an intolerant present – to be creatively re-embodied.

Michael Field, Imperial Rome, and the Pantomime 'Girl-Boy'

By comparison, the co-authors Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who wrote together under the name of Michael Field, turned not to the eighteenth century but the Roman decadence in order to explore the fragile historical power of gender-transitive performance. In their Roman Trilogy, a

series of verse plays that includes *The World at Auction* (1898), *The Race of Leaves* (1901), and *Julia Domna* (1903), Michael Field does not address such a likely candidate as Elagabalus as an icon of sexual dissidence. Instead, the poetic partners look to an altogether different queer figure. In these dramas, they draw attention to the ways in which the male pantomime dancer, whose masked solo performances involved enacting mythological characters through movement and gesture, exerted controversial influence over the populace. In the Trilogy, which (as Ana Parejo Vadillo has shown)³⁰ synthesizes an immense range of Classical sources, Michael Field remind readers of Pylades of Cicilia who – together with Bathyllus, who excelled in tragedy – headed the tradition of pantomimic art. As we can see in the contemporaneous drawings of Aubrey Beardsley, these two Roman pantomimes (the name given to their roles as performers rather than the performance itself) captivated the decadent imagination. But where Beardsley drew upon Juvenal’s sixth satire to visualize the androgynous vulgarity of Bathyllus, Michael Field sought advice from Richard Garnett – Keeper of Printed Books at the British Museum – for diverse materials that threw light on Pylades’ legendary capacity to inspire his audiences to political insurrection.

As Bradley and Cooper recorded in their journals on 30 October 1895, Garnett (‘the “Old Silenus” of bibliophilism’) offered them several leads after they had sought his counsel on suitable sources. Once they began ‘to gyrate round the catalogues’ in the circular reading room, several of the volumes that they located proved intensely satisfying: ‘I find Herodian delightful’, Cooper observes, ‘& Friedländer a book for the hearth’.³¹ From Herodian’s *Roman History* they gleaned information about the Praetorian Guard’s sale of the empire to Didius Julianus, while from Ludwig Friedländer’s *Roman Life and Manners under the Early Empire* – which ran into six editions by 1890 – they learned that ‘Pylades, the Cicilian, founded this branch of the ballet, and credited himself with Augustus’s gratitude for diverting the popular mind to the stage’.³² There were as well late nineteenth-century commentaries on the place the pantomime dancer maintained in the history of players who performed without words, especially in relation to the Pierrot figure from *commedia dell’arte*. Moreover, these historians acknowledge that in its earliest stages pantomime enjoyed a

fierce political impact on the empire. In the *Theatre*, for instance, Joseph Knight recalled that '[s]o great [...] was the licence the actors permitted themselves, that several Roman Emperors, not ordinarily squeamish on points of morality, banished them from Rome, and even from Italy'.³³ Knight notes that Pylades suffered Augustus Caesar's wrath, only to be permitted – 'to the great delight of the Romans' (p. 71) – to return to the imperial household. Similarly, in *A History of Dancing* Gaston Vuillier refers readers to François Henri Stanislas de l'Aulnay's *De le Saltation théâtrale* (1790), where we learn that 'the rivalries of Pylades and Bathyllus occupied the Romans as much as the gravest affairs of state'.³⁴ 'Their theatrical supporters, clad in different liveries', l'Aulnay remarks, 'used to fight in the streets, and bloody brawls were frequent throughout the city' (p. 40). Such information, which depends on works such as Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, places Pylades – together with the fandom that yielded to such violence – firmly within that reign of the first Roman emperor (27 BC – 14 CE).

Still, there was at least one dancer named Pylades who hailed from a later time, as l'Aulnay acknowledged: 'Il y eut fous Trajan un autre Pantomime nommé Pylade, qui mérita les bonnes grâces de cet Empereur. Didius Julianus en fit danser un de même où Pertinax venoit d'être massacré' [There was a mad Trajan, another pantomime dancer named Pylades, who earned the good graces of the emperor. Didius had one of these dancers perform where Pertinax had been assassinated].³⁵ Similarly, Gibbon – whose work had proved such a resource for Michael Field's earlier play *Attila, My Attila!* (1895) – situates Pylades during the time commonly known as The Year of the Five Emperors: the period when Didius Julianus made the highest bid to purchase the Roman Empire. The Praetorian Guard, once they had assassinated Pertinax, put the empire up for sale. (Pertinax himself had been installed after the reckless emperor Commodus was murdered.) 'The first objects that struck [Didius Julianus'] eyes', Gibbon observes,

were the abandoned trunk of Pertinax, and the frugal entertainment prepared for his supper. The one he viewed with indifference; the other with contempt. A magnificent feast was prepared by his order, and he mused himself, till a very late hour, with dice, and the performances of Pylades, a celebrated dancer (*Decline and Fall*, I, p. 115).

Soon after these festivities, however, the newly installed emperor felt besieged by ‘the doubtful and dangerous tenure of an empire, which had not been acquired by merit, but purchased by money’ (I, p. 115).

Even if these studies point to similarly named dancers across the span of two centuries, they draw equal attention to the intensely political impact that pantomime performers enjoyed among the populace. Michael Field appears to have taken the historical elasticity attached to the name of Pylades and applied it in such a way that their trilogy moves back and forth across several of the most violent reigns involving the murder of Commodus (31 December 192 CE), the assassination of Pertinax (28 March 193 CE), and the merciless reign of Caracalla (198-217 CE). Each play, which offers insights into different moments in Pylades’ career, reveals that he occupies a precarious position in relation to the desperate attempts among a succession of brutal emperors who wish to maintain murderous authority over a political universe that is in ruins. Pylades exists in jeopardy because he, more than any of these tyrants, most persuasively embodies cultural history. In *The World at Auction*, which opens the Roman Trilogy, we quickly learn about the hazards facing Pylades’ success at captivating the people’s attention. In the opening dialogue, Didius Julianus and Eclectus (a chamberlain who had conspired in the killing of Commodus) exchange thoughts on the ways that Pylades’ performance of Leda had infuriated Pertinax. The freshly installed emperor – who was to die only nine weeks after seizing power through his purse – remains unsettled by the unmatched influence that the pantomime dancer exerts upon the imperial world:

[...] One day
While dancing Leda with soft witchery,
Beyond all praise, and sure that anything
Would be permitted to his impudence,
When Marcus Curius the Praetor hissed,
Our fair girl-boy with jeering finger showed
His enemy to all.³⁶

Pylades’ defiance, we learn, resulted in a scourging. Such punishment, however, did not break the sexually nonconforming performer’s mettle: ‘He stood’, the emperor continues, ‘against the rods unflinchingly, | His hum of pain was scarcely audible, | And soon as he was loosed with mocking

gesture | He gave salute as if he took applause' (p. xiii). No one, it seems, can succeed, at this stage in history, by disciplining this 'girl-boy'. To Eclectus, such insubordination, which enthralled the people, is politically repugnant: 'to think he sways | The blood of thousands, drawing to his side | Our men and women of supremest rank' (p. xxxvi).

Even so, Michael Field is not prepared to idealize this figure. *The Race of Leaves* (1901) moves back in time to the ferocious reign of Commodus, where we see how Pylades obtained his freedom from slavery by conniving with the emperor's Christian mistress, Marcia. In order to appease Commodus, Pylades devised a dance that celebrated Apollo and the folding of the flocks in honour of his patron's chosen deity. For a while, Pylades earns the title Philocommodus. Still, the main purpose of showing this pantomime's precarity within a disorderly universe of murders and betrayals is that his art remains superior to Commodus' implausible attempts at presenting himself in the guise of Hercules before his people. Gibbon, who builds on the records of Cassius Dio and Herodian, recalls the preposterousness of Commodus' lavish efforts in spectacularizing his heroism: "The dens of the amphitheatre disgorged at once a hundred lions: a hundred darts from the unerring hand of Commodus laid them dead as they raged around the *Arena*' (*Decline and Fall*, I, p. 102). 'In all these exhibitions', Gibbon adds, 'the securest precautions were used to protect the person of the Roman Hercules from the desperate spring of any savage, who might possibly disregard the dignity of the emperor, and the sanctity of the god' (p. 102). As we discover in *The Race of Leaves*, Pylades is at the mercy of Commodus' delusions, which include the megalomaniac emperor hallucinating himself as his father Marcus Aurelius, in a mirror that deceptively reflects an image of his parent's face. By the time we reach the third play *Julia Domna*, which is set seventeen years later, Pylades dies at the hands of the brutal emperor Caracalla's henchmen. Pylades perishes while bending over the corpse of Geta, the younger brother and co-emperor of the bloodthirsty Caracalla. The indignant young emperor, whose incestuous desire for his mother preoccupies much of the play, believed that his sibling threatened his authority in ruling Rome. As he stares at Pylades expressing his grief over Geta's body, Caracalla states

contemptuously: ‘His Leda | By the dead swan’.³⁷ In turn, Caracalla champions his murderous victory. ‘A Titan has prevailed’ (p. xlii), he says triumphantly. The fact that Pylades, at the end of this convulsive period of history, can barely speak, let alone perform, says much about the tenuousness of great art during the Roman decadence. But the fate of Pylades also reminds us that those artists who can arouse dangerous passions and desires through their queer performances might hold some clues about a much more liberating sexual future.

As we turn to these works by Oscar Wilde, Vernon Lee, and Michael Field, we see that their 1880s and 1890s fascination with the Elizabethan boy-actor, the eighteenth-century castrato, and the Roman pantomime dancer summons a powerful thought. Their works suggest that there is great beauty in broadening our awareness of gender-transitive possibilities, particularly at a time when there was much social and legal antipathy against noncompliant sexualities. This is their historicism, just as it is – once we look back at these authors’ compelling decadent writings – a historicism that remains very much our own.

¹ In preparing this essay, several colleagues shared their expertise: Ana Parejo Vadillo; Kristin Mahoney; and Alex Murray. Part of my comments on Wilde’s ‘Portrait of Mr. W. H.’ relates to the study I completed with Rebecca N. Mitchell, *Oscar Wilde’s Chatterton: Literary History, Romanticism, and the Art of Forgery* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), pp. 245-92. My thanks to Jane Desmarais and Kirsten MacLeod for their patience.

² See David Weir, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 22-23.

³ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, second edition, ed. by H. H. Milman, 6 vols (London: John Murray), I, p. 155; further volume and page references appear in parentheses.

⁴ Dio Cassius, *Roman History: Volume 1*, trans. by Earnest Cary and Herbert B. Foster, Loeb Classical Library 32 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), p. 457. This edition publishes Cassius Dio’s name as Dio Cassius.

⁵ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature [À rebours]*, trans. by Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 28. The original French in *À rebours* reads: ‘[Elagabal] [. . .] marchant dans de la poudre d’argent et du sable d’or, la tête ceinte d’une tiare, les vêtements brochés de pierreries, Elagabal travaillait, au milieu de ses eunuques, à des ouvrages de femmes, se faisait appeler Impératrice et changeait, toutes les nuits, d’Empereur, l’élisant de préférence parmi les barbiers, les gâte-sauce, et les cochers de cirque’ (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1884, p. 44). On the enduring interest among Classical historians and modern writers in the emperor, see Martijn Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus: The Life and Legacy of Rome’s Decadent Boy Emperor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁶ See Weir, *Decadence*, pp. 28-29, and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Roses_of_Heliogabalus [accessed 14 June 2020].

⁷ *Historia Augusta, Volume II: Caracalla. Geta. Opellius Macrinus. Diadumenianus. Elagabalus. Severus Alexander. The Two Maximini. The Three Gordians. Maximus and Balbinus*, trans. by David Magie, Loeb Classical Library 140 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), pp. 147-49.

⁸ Linda Dowling, ‘Decadence and Victorian Historiography’, *Victorian Studies*, 28.4 (1985), 578-607 (p. 581).

⁹ Sidney Colvin, 'English Painters of the Present Day: IV. – Simeon Solomon', *The Portfolio: An Artistic Periodical*, ed. by Philip Gilbert Hamerton (London: Seeley Jackson and Halliday, 1870), pp. 33-35 (p. 34); further page reference appears in parentheses.

¹⁰ See https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Heliogabalus_High_Priest_of_the_Sun.jpg [accessed 14 June 2020].

¹¹ Thomas Babington Macaulay, 'Sir James Mackintosh', in *Critical and Historical Essays Contributed to the Edinburgh Review*, 3 vols (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1843), II, p. 219. Macaulay's essay, which discusses Mackintosh's *History of the Revolution in England in 1688* (1834), first appeared in the *Edinburgh Review*, 61 (1835), 265-322.

¹² [Anon.], Editorial, *Morning Post*, 16 November 1894, p. 4. The exhibition and lecture (given by Frederic Harrison) were widely reported in the press.

¹³ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: The 1890 and 1891 Texts*, ed. by Joseph Bristow, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 10 vols to date (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000-continuing), III, pp. 123; 289.

¹⁴ [Anon.], Review of Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Daily Chronicle*, 20 June 1890, p. 7, reprinted in Karl Beckson, ed., *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 72.

¹⁵ Oscar Wilde, 'To the Editor of the *Daily Chronicle*', 30 June 1890, in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 436.

¹⁶ Charlotte Ribeyrol, 'From Via Magenta to Via Solferino: A Chromatic Itinerary through John Singer Sargent's and Vernon Lee's Early Aesthetic Works', *Studies in Walter Pater and Aestheticism*, 3 (2018), 59-75 (p. 61). Pater's comment on 'strange dyes' first appeared in 'Poems by William Morris', *Westminster Review*, 34.2 (1868), 300-12 (p. 311), and was reiterated in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1873), p. 211; further page references appear in parentheses.

¹⁷ W. B. Yeats, *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922), in *Autobiographies*, ed. by William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (New York: Scribner, 1999), p. 124; further page references appear in parentheses.

¹⁸ [Anon.], 'Notes', *National Observer*, 6 April 1895, p. 547.

¹⁹ [Edmond Malone], *Supplement to the Edition of Shakespeare's Plays Published in 1778 by Samuel Johnson and George Steevens: Containing Additional Observations, to which Are Subjoined the Genuine Poems of the Same Author, and Seven Plays that Have Been Ascribed to Him; with Notes by the Editor and Others*, 2 vols (London: C. Bathurst, and Others, 1780), I, p. 579.

²⁰ Oscar Wilde, 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 146 (July 1889), 1-21 (p. 2), reprinted in Wilde, *The Short Fiction, Complete Works*, VIII, p. 259; further volume and page references to the *Complete Works* appear in parentheses. Wilde developed a much longer version of the 'Portrait', most probably after the summer of 1891, which he entrusted to John Lane and Elkin Mathews's publishing partnership, The Bodley Head. By the time of Wilde's conviction, it remained unpublished. A staff member at the publisher, Mitchell Kennerley, had possession of it, and he published it in the United States in 1921. On the complicated textual history of Wilde's 'Portrait', see Small, 'Introduction', *Complete Works*, VIII, pp. liv-lxxxiii.

²¹ Small, in acknowledging the work of John Sloan, notes that the Latin phrase means 'actresses from Britain', which Wilde corrected to the masculine form in the longer version; he adds that the old chronicle did not exist (*Complete Works*, VIII, p. 487).

²² Charles Ricketts, *Oscar Wilde: Recollections by Jean Paul Raymond and Charles Ricketts* (London: Nonesuch Press, 1932), p. 35. In the volume, the persona John Paul Raymond serves as an imaginary collaborator.

²³ Merlin Holland, *Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003), p. 93; further page reference appears in parentheses.

²⁴ Vernon Lee, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (London: W. Satchell, 1880), p. 2.

²⁵ Vernon Lee, 'Winthrop's Adventure', in *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (London: John Lane, 1927), p. 143; subsequent page references to this edition appear in parentheses.

²⁶ Vernon Lee has in mind the c. 1600 portrait of Beatrice Cenci attributed to Guido Reni in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portrait_of_Beatrice_Cenci_\(Guido_Reni\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portrait_of_Beatrice_Cenci_(Guido_Reni)) [accessed 14 June 2020].

²⁷ Vernon Lee, 'A Wicked Voice', in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2006), pp. 154-55; further page references appear in parentheses. 'A Wicked Voice' has garnered several critical noteworthy studies. Patricia Pulham contends that Zaffirino's is a 'maternal voice' (*Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008], p. 25). By comparison, Carol Caballero interprets the narrative in the context of Vernon Lee's conflicted engagement with Richard Wagner's music ('"A Wicked Voice": On Vernon Lee, Wagner, and the Effects of Music', *Victorian Studies*, 35 [1992], 385-408).

²⁸ Vernon Lee, 'An Eighteenth-Century Singer: An Imaginary Portrait', *Fortnightly Review*, 50 (1891), 842-80 (p. 848); further page references appear in parentheses.

²⁹ E[dward] Dannreuther, 'The Opera: Its Growth and Decay', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 32 (1875), 64-72 (p. 66); further page reference appears in parentheses.

³⁰ Ana Parejo Vadillo has explored the wide range of historical sources that Michael Field consulted in their preparation of the three verse plays; see '"This Hot-House of Decadent Chronicle": Michael Field, Nietzsche and the Dance of Modern Poetic Drama', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 26.3 (2015), 195-220.

³¹ Michael Field, 30 October 1895, *Works and Days*, BL Add. MS 46784 f.11^v-f.12^r.

³² Ludwig Friedländer, *Roman Life and Manners under the Early Empire*, trans. by Leonard A. Magnus et al., 4 vols (London: Routledge, 1908-13), I, p. 59.

³³ Joseph Knight, 'Plays without Words', *Theatre*, 29 (1897), 70-74 (p. 71); further page reference appears in parentheses.

³⁴ François Henri Stanislas de l'Aulnaye, *De la Saltation théâtrale, ou Recherches sur l'origine, les progrès, et les effets de la pantomime chez les anciens* (Paris: Barrois l'aîné, 1790), quoted in Gaston Vuillier, *A History of Dancing: From the Earliest Ages to Our Own Times*, trans. by anon. (London: William Heinemann, 1898), p. 40; further page reference appears in parentheses. The French edition of Vuillier's history was published as *La Danse* (Paris: Hachette, 1898).

³⁵ L'Aulnaye, *De la Saltation théâtrale*, p. 70.

³⁶ Michael Field, *The World at Auction* (London: Hacon and Ricketts, 1898), pp. xi-xii; further page references appear in parentheses. (The pagination in the Roman Trilogy is in roman numerals.) On the emergence and ensuing influence of the pantomime dancer, see Ruth Webb, *Demons and Dancers: Performance in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). It is important to note that Ricketts's designs for all three volumes in the Roman Trilogy count among the most dazzling to be found in the finely illustrated and typeset aesthetic books of the time. On Ricketts's achievements in this area of book production, see Maureen Watry, *The Vale Press: Charles Ricketts, a Publisher in Earnest* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll; London: British Library, 2004).

³⁷ Michael Field, *Julia Domna* (London: Hacon and Ricketts, 1903), p. xlii; further page reference appears in parentheses.

Housing the Oscar Wilde Archive: Postmodernism's Curation of Decadence

Frederick D. King and Alison Lee

Dalhousie University and Western University

Since his death, Oscar Wilde has only been accessible through documents: those he left behind, and the documents produced by friends, family, scholars, biographers, and artists. The figure we know is related to the historical original, but it is not Wilde himself. It is a Wilde born of the archive, created by the mingling of documentary evidence with archival decision-making, critical intervention, and creative imagination. Reading Wilde as an archive, then, has implications for both decadence and recent postmodern approaches to archive theory.

This article is based on ongoing research into the relationship between decadence and postmodernism.¹ The figure of Wilde is important, not because of anachronistic claims that Wilde is a proto-postmodernist, but because he offers an important example of the interests in history and the archive shared by decadence and postmodernism. While resisting the notion of any equivalence between postmodernism and decadence, we argue that these literary and artistic movements, separated by nearly a century, nonetheless share similar interests in disrupting notions of progress, linear history, and the objectivity of the archive. Exploring postmodern interest in decadent texts and theories makes it possible to reconsider the artist's relationship to history and the role that the documentary archive plays in creating new histories in the work of contemporary artists and authors. Born of postmodern historiography, archive theory argues for a non-linear, self-conscious narrative that is eclectic and contingent. The historical Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (1854-1900) is not the Wilde who concerns us. That Wilde, however, did contribute many of the documents that help to shape the Wilde discussed in this paper, a figure born of the archive. This article, then, is not about Oscar Wilde, whose history and cultural influence is well rehearsed. Instead, the documentary archive of Wilde's life and art becomes a means to help us

understand this interpretation of the archive as an active, biased, agent of change. Using Wilde's *De Profundis* (1912, 1962), Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), Neil Bartlett's *Who Was that Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (1988), and ArtAngel's installation *Inside* (2016), we will argue that postmodernism's return to the decadent archive brings new material to a never-ending collection of new impressions. Looking at decadence through a postmodernist lens allows us to discover a potential historiography which the decadents themselves did not precisely articulate despite their interest in the past.

In order to understand the importance of the decadent archive's role in defining the reader's historical relationship to Wilde, we have organized this essay into three parts. First, we will examine the archival relationship between decadence and postmodernism, with reference to our existing research and its relationship to the topic at hand. Second, we will explore the decadent idea of the 'House Beautiful' as an archival project in order to understand the specifically decadent approach to history and the relationship of the present to the past. Third, we will examine Wilde as a document of the archive — ever-changing according to who is curating his materials — including the central role played by Wilde's own writing in *De Profundis* in creating this approach to his history. Our goal is to demonstrate that what some incorrectly characterize in Wilde as an anticipation of the future, is actually an important theoretical characteristic of decadent literature that only postmodernism has, as of yet, recognized in its return to the decadent archive for frequent inspiration.

Decadence and Postmodernism

Decadence and postmodernism are by no means the same beast, but a number of postmodern works clearly find affiliation with the decadent archive. Gregory Betts suggests that 'as an act of rupture, historical decadence, like postmodernism in general, opens texts forward and backward in time rather than working toward closures or teleologies of any kind'.² Both reject a linear, progressive model of history, demonstrate a 'disillusionment with their contemporary milieu', and

a ‘falling away from established norms of language-use without falling toward anything — a systematic derangement of the senses [...] an embrace of the end of order, the end of stability’.³ David Weir summarizes the 1980s debate between Jürgen Habermas and Jean-François Lyotard about postmodernism as ‘a type of transition’: ‘although Habermas views the transition as a temporary modulation away from modernity [...] Lyotard imagines that the movement away from the “enlightened” narratives of modernity will go on indefinitely’.⁴ From this discussion, Weir concludes that decadence and postmodernism ‘coincide’ in several ways: in giving temporal transition a particular cultural inflection, in their interest in decline, and in both terms having both positive and negative connotations. Decadence is a non-linear reading practice, or to use Matthew Potolsky’s language, a ‘mode of reception’, where historical archives are accessed in order to critically rethink moments in the past ‘in relationship to their [present] culture’.⁵ In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon coins the term ‘historiographic metafiction’ to describe novels that are self-conscious about their own processes as fiction, while also foregrounding questions of how we come to know about historical events.⁶ Recognizing how the past is put to work is part of the reader’s critical stance; scepticism, therefore, is one of the legacies of postmodern fiction, which aims to revisit historical moments with a critical, ironic eye, while always focusing on the ways in which we come to know history from written traces. Beverley Southgate concurs that postmodernism’s questioning of ‘the most fundamental aspects of our lives’ is in accordance with ‘the original meaning of both “historia” and “scepticism”, both of which implied not any immanent attainment of the end, but rather the need for continuing, even endless, search and inquiry.’⁷ For Southgate, the function of postmodern history is to ‘*destabilise* — endlessly to question certainties, reveal alternatives, and provoke reassessments’.⁸ Both postmodernism and decadence, then, are interested in disrupting the established norms which seek to impose cultural consensus and hierarchies of power for the purpose of establishing an ideal.

Decadence is deeply concerned with artistic and creative expression. Its turn to the past is a turn to a history of philosophers, orators, painters, sculptors, poets, and pornographers in order

to reimagine the present and to create new possibilities for the future. Walter Pater, for example, argues that in Plato's philosophies, 'there is nothing absolutely new' and that 'the seemingly new is old also, a palimpsest, a tapestry of which the actual threads have served before' and 'has already lived and died many times over'.⁹ While 'new perspectives' and 'novel juxtapositions' are possible, the ideas have a pre-existing history and 'only the *form* is new'.¹⁰ Such an approach to the past questions the notion of progress endorsed by Victorian thinkers such as Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold. Striving toward a notion of cultural consensus, based on middle-class notions of Christianity and the Protestant work ethic, Carlyle saw human history as a 'thing ever struggling forward irrepressible, advancing inevitable: perfecting itself, all days, more and more' until the end of days.¹¹ Arnold saw history as a record of humanity's 'progress towards perfection', so that the individual achievements of authors and artists served human culture, or 'the study of perfection'.¹² Such visions of art and of history are dependent upon a linear chain of events that sees the continual improvement of human life and thinking. Pater challenges these notions, as do more decadent thinkers like Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire, for instance, argues that the notion of progress, an 'invention of present-day philosophizing', is illusory.¹³ 'Anyone', he says, 'who wants to see his way clear through history must first and foremost extinguish this treacherous aid. This grotesque idea [...] has discharged each man from his duty, has delivered each soul from its responsibility and has released the will from all the bonds imposed upon it by the love of the Beautiful.'¹⁴ Unique experiences of beauty in art and literature, then, are the novelties that emerge when new form is given to old ideas. Progress suggests that we have nothing to learn from the past other than how much better things are today. Decadence rejects this linear notion of history in favour of fragmentation.

We have elsewhere examined the influence of decadence on postmodern notions of the past in several texts.¹⁵ In John Lanchester's novel *A Debt to Pleasure* (1996), narrator Tarquin Winot hosts a 'black feast' in his rooms at Cambridge. 'Cribbed from Huysmans', the evening's menu includes 'truffles grated over squid-ink pasta, followed by *boudin noir* on a bed of fried black

radicchio'.¹⁶ While Des Esseintes' black feast in Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884) is a 'dinner to mark the temporary demise of the host's virility',¹⁷ Tarquin's emphasizes the 'artificiality of the event' as a 'celebration of art, whim, caprice, set over against the brutal facts of nature and death'.¹⁸ In his novel *Poor Things* (1999), Alasdair Gray makes literary and bibliographic reference to the decadence of Aubrey Beardsley, Robert de Montesquiou, and William Strang not only to query Margaret Thatcher's political revisionism when it came to 'Victorian Values', but also to align his own textual practice with the revival of printing and the creation of beautiful books. These historiographic metafictional texts are not the only examples of the discourses of history that postmodernism and decadence explore. The 2014-16 television series *Penny Dreadful* features Dorian Gray as a decadent character who 'mimics Wilde's concern with social performance and the art of fiction', without, however, rehearsing the plot of Wilde's novel.¹⁹ Instead, Dorian is a postmodern meme, referencing decadent literary history without requiring the viewer to have any prior experience of reading Wilde's work. Such a memetic historical affiliation is also found in Frederick Rzewski's 1992 composition, *De Profundis: For Speaking Pianist*. The piece uses 1,392 words from *De Profundis*, divided into eight sections of text each of which is preceded by a musical interlude in which the pianist also has to shout, whistle, hum, sing, breathe, howl, bark and sigh, as well as recite the text and occasionally spank themselves on the arse. All of these postmodern texts draw on artifacts from the historical archive of fin-de-siècle decadence, while also adding new documents that change decadence to suit the tastes of a postmodern discourse.

Postmodernism's conversation with decadence follows Potolsky's idea that the decadents were a 'community founded on admiration and the exchange of texts [...]. a dispersed phenomenon arising out of discrete moments of artistic production and receptions [...] forged across space and time' through a 'series of encounters and sensations'.²⁰ Postmodernism, by collecting these discrete moments from decadents' literary and artistic history, imagines novel approaches to historiography. Decadence, then, is both the collection and a mode for *reading* the collection.

Housing the Archive

In his study of Pater, Wolfgang Iser explains the Aestheticist's relationship to history as a search for new sensations. Pater diverges from Hegel's approach to history and time because aestheticism does not 'focus on the end of time'.²¹ Instead, Pater is interested in the *means* or the 'in-betweenness of the transition', meaning that 'the possibilities of life become an end in themselves' eliminating the need for an end or goal.²² Art exemplifies the ways in which the aesthete can resist linear notions of time. Art also destabilizes the authority of the archive, opening it to change and a creative assemblage of its contents. Jacques Derrida traces the etymology of the word 'archive' to the Greek word *arkheion*, 'initially, a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrate'.²³ It is not only a home, but a site that houses authority. Decadence and postmodernism both seek to destabilize that authority. By questioning the authority assumed by the housing of documents in an archive, postmodernism enters the 'House Beautiful', an aesthetically pleasing archival space where artists and authors may have non-linear encounters with the collections held in the decadent archive and generate new sensations. Robert Stilling uses Derrida's idea of an "anarchival impulse" to describe how an archive can destroy archival memory even as it induces the desire to conserve memory against such destructive impulses'.²⁴ Decadent archives, however, throw nothing away; instead, their contents can be rediscovered and reread.

For the decadents, the collection of beautiful objects in the home is an archival approach to history. In his famous lecture on the 'House Beautiful', Wilde promotes an eclectic approach to home decoration. Not only does he emphasize the importance of affordability to his middle-class American and Canadian audiences, but he asks them to look at diverse periods of design to assemble a beautiful modern home:

When I advise you to have Queen Anne furniture, I do not want you to send to Chippendale in England for it; it could be made here, and to that end a good school of design should be established. In your school of design let the pupils, instead of painting pictures, work at decoration and designs, and their work will soon be in all your houses.²⁵

Wilde's description is an intersection of cultures, history, and modern ingenuity. The house, for Wilde, is a depository of influences that define the owner's good taste. Wilde's taste is decadent, influenced by James McNeill Whistler's contemporary use of colour, as well as by diverse historical designs, which Wilde collects together in an idealized house. The home is reimagined as an eclectic archive where the old becomes new again, and decoration of the home becomes an act of curation.

Such a relationship to the archive, however, is not limited to those objects on display in one's own house. More important is how new sensations are evoked by historical objects in the everyday experience of life. In her essay 'In Praise of Old Houses', aesthete, author and critic Vernon Lee claims that 'our ancestors knew nothing of the emotion of the past, the rapture of old towns and houses'.²⁶ For Lee, history is a living thing found in the architectural structures created in the past. The past offers Lee a new sensation to explore because it coexists with her present life and gives her 'a sense of being companioned by the past, of being in a place warmed for our living by the lives of others'.²⁷ While those past lives are no more, they haunt the present, and continue to live in the artifacts and documents of the archive. Accessing those archives, however, does not mean unmediated access to the past, and recognizing the role of the reader is key to reading a decadent archive. Self-consciousness regarding the presence of the past, and the influence of the reader or curator of history is as much a legacy of postmodern fiction as it is of decadence. Postmodern fiction aims to revisit historical moments with a critical, ironic eye, focusing on the ways in which we come to know history from written traces. It does not just read archives but interacts with them to create new historiographies. This defining feature of postmodernism makes the moments when it explores the specific historical archive of decadent literature and culture particularly enriching because it draws attention to the history of understanding history.

Archive theory has for several decades recognized that archives are not depositories of empirical evidence. Marlene Manoff argues that the archive is 'contingent' because of 'the way it is shaped by social, political, and technological forces'.²⁸ Manoff's argument puts abstract notions of the archive into conversation with the everyday practice of record-keeping:

regardless of what historians may have once believed, there is currently a widespread sense that even government records that appear to be mere collections of numbers are, in fact, already reconstructions and interpretations. Someone decided what was worth counting and how to count it.²⁹

Terry Cook supports Manoff's rejection of positivist historicism, 'based on the integrity of a scientific resurrection of facts from the past and the record as an impartial, innocent by-product of action', arguing that 'some archivists are now starting to explore the implications of these postmodern ideas for the profession'.³⁰ For Cook, the 'record is no longer a passive object, a "record" of evidence, but an active agent playing an on-going role in lives of individuals, organizations, and society'.³¹ Those who write or produce histories, biographies, plays, novels, performance art or art installations based on Wilde's archive must reflect not simply an accurate portrayal of the historically inaccessible figure, but recognize that the work they produce is the result of a conversation between the documentary archive and their own interpretations.

Archive theory argues for a non-linear, self-conscious narrative that is eclectic and contingent. A non-linear means of reading the archive, then, can be seen as a form of curation. In his study of textual alterity in the curation of art, Joseph Grigley ironically 'use[s] history to interrogate history [...] in order to reveal on the one hand its importance, and on the other, its limitations'.³² For Grigley, curation is an important means of reading our relationship to the past because it 'cannot be studied apart from the language and the narratives that are used to construct it'.³³ Curations are neither linear nor progressive; they are collections of materials brought together to tell a story or narrative about the past in the present. In that sense, a curation is a conversation with the past. In order to understand the past, we must find a commonality with it, and form bonds of companionship the way Lee does with the historical architecture of the city.

Hayden White tells us that 'historians refamiliarize [past events], not only by providing more information about them, but also by showing how their developments conformed to one or another of the story-types that we conventionally invoke to make sense of our own life histories'.³⁴ White calls these elements 'mimetic' because they are the elements of historical narratives that

imitate and repeat familiar tropes from the present. Charles Darwin, for example, based his narration of evolution on the narrative practices of Charles Dickens. Realist storytelling gave Darwin a structure, what White calls an ‘icon’ or a ‘complex of symbols’ employed to give the reader a mimetic experience.³⁵ Non-linear narratives in postmodern fiction, however, interrupt that structure. Realist narrative is only one example of a ‘complex of symbols’ that can be employed. In the examples below, the figure of Oscar Wilde, now himself a meme of popular culture, serves this iconic role. Wilde allows the archive to consider the archive, not as an authority, but as a performance. As Rebecca Schneider argues, that performance is ‘both the act of remaining and a means of reappearance’ which means that the body ‘becomes a kind of archive and host to a collective memory’.³⁶ Wilde’s body holds not only his documentary history, but additional meanings imposed on his body by readers and interpreters of his history, as well as lost histories, acts ‘of securing memory’ that allow those in the present ‘to rethink the site of history in ritual repetition’.³⁷ Wilde the archival document asks the reader not simply to remember the past, but to revise their perceptions of the present based on the archive’s imposition of Wilde’s textual presence on the here and now.

Wilde as Archive

The narrative of Oscar Wilde in modern culture has been revisited and reinterpreted *ad nauseum*, co-opted for commercial appeal in plays, murder mysteries, erotic novels, films, and television comedies including *Monty Python* and *A Bit of Fry and Laurie*. Wilde is many things, but none of them is ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ in the realist sense. Wilde the historical figure makes way for Wilde the tragic artist, the queer martyr, the performer, the whatever-the-archivist-sees-fit-for-him-to-be. At the same time, there is an interest that surrounds Wilde as the mythic forefather of modern queer community in the Western world. This myth follows Alan Sinfield’s notion that identity based on hetero- and/or homosexual identity is ‘constructed within an array of prevailing social possibilities’ that emerged ‘at the Wilde trials: effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance,

decadence, and aestheticism'.³⁸ The characteristics assigned to Wilde during his trial became the characteristics of modern Western queer culture. This reappropriation of Wilde demonstrates an archival impulse that mirrors what Potolsky reads as the communal impulse of the decadents who 'incessantly drew lines of affiliation back in time and across national borders, declaring their (permanent or provisional) allegiance to the movement by asserting a family resemblance with admired contemporaries or figures from the past'.³⁹ An origin story is born, not from his trials and short degraded life in exile, but from the archives drawn on to curate new Wildes for future audiences.

Wilde's own approach to history in *De Profundis* exemplifies the idea of the decadent archive. First and foremost, Wilde is revising his public image after his trials for gross indecency. Prosecutor Edward Carson used literary production by decadent authors to narrate his own story of Wilde's sexual pathology. Carson asked a series of questions about the content of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* (1889) in order to demonstrate that Wilde's works were open to an 'immoral' or 'sodomitical interpretation'.⁴⁰ He puts these works, along with Wilde's letters to his young male associates, into a collection of material that is broader than Wilde alone. His selections include Lord Alfred Douglas' poems, John Francis Bloxam's short story 'The Priest and the Acolyte' published in *The Chameleon* (to which Wilde also contributed 'Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young') and Huysmans's decadent novel *À rebours*. These works have relationships with Wilde's texts: intertextual as with Huysmans, professional as with Bloxam, or personal as with Douglas. Carson calls on Wilde to defend not only his own works, but the works of those who influenced him and the works of those influenced by him. Wilde's critical denouncement in the popular press goes further to condemn Wilde's influence on art. In April 1895, the *Telegraph*, while sniffing that it had had 'enough and more than enough of Mr. Oscar Wilde', nevertheless focuses on condemning less his 'his spurious brilliancy, inflated egotism, diseased vanity, cultivated affectation, and shameless disavowal of all *morality*' than

the spurious *arts* by which he and his like have attempted to establish a cult in our midst, and even to set up new schools in literature, the drama, and social thought. The superfine ‘Art’ which admits no moral duty and laughs at the established phrases of right and wrong.⁴¹

In short, both Carson and the press contribute to an archive of Wilde based on a curation of third-party documents, producing an excess of evidence deemed perverse and indecent. Wilde’s contributions to the archive of sexual inversion and dissidence that decadence embraced as one of its central characteristics, was transformed by the courts and the popular press into a weapon to destroy not just Wilde, but the discourse of decadence more broadly.

Wilde fought against that narrative and used *De Profundis* as a response to these criticisms and as a means by which to write his own narrative for future readers. Reading the letter again, one remembers Ian Small’s warning that the ‘idea of Wilde contriving his self-image for different publics should again caution us against reading the letter simply as sincerely expressive’.⁴² While *De Profundis* is unreliable as a factual record, reading it from a decadent perspective, we discover Wilde’s attempt to re-affiliate, not just his own work, but the philosophies of aestheticism and decadence. Its bibliographic history is itself problematic. When scholars discuss *De Profundis*, they refer to the manuscript held in the British Library and published as a part of Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis’ 1962 collection of Wilde’s letters.⁴³ The letter’s putative recipient, Lord Alfred Douglas, died in 1945 having claimed that he never received it.⁴⁴ The letter was only released in full after the Wolfenden report of 1957, several years before the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, which decriminalized sex between consenting adults of the same sex.⁴⁵ Schroeder argues that the 1962 edition is the first authentic version of the letter because other documents are corrupted. Holland and Hart-Davis note that these corruptions go back to the error-filled typescripts that Robbie Ross had prepared from Wilde’s manuscript.⁴⁶ Such an argument, however, erases the influence that these documents had on Wilde as an archival figure: protecting, damaging, confusing, and changing Wilde’s narrative. All these documents are part of Wilde’s historical archive.

The first section of the letter, in which Wilde directly addresses Douglas and their intimate relationship, is a condemnation of Douglas' character as manipulative and of Wilde himself as a co-dependent victim of Douglas' irrational abuses. It is this portion of the letter that was hidden from the public by both Ross and Holland until the 1962 publication of the letter. The crime Wilde admits to is not gross indecency, but the choice that he made to support Douglas' 'desires and interests in Life' rather than his own 'work as an artist': 'When I compare my friendship with you to my friendship with such still younger men as John Gray and Pierre Louÿs I feel ashamed. My real life, my higher life was with them and such as they'.⁴⁷ Wilde does not express guilt for his sexual practices; he presents his intimate relationships with these other men as positive influences on his life. Wilde seeks to acknowledge Douglas' influence on the diminishment of his art and creative vision and vows to return to his 'higher life' once he leaves the confines of his filthy prison cell.

Wilde continues this narrative later in the letter when he offers a revised reading of the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus Christ as a model for the aestheticist theory of 'art for art's sake'. Recalling a conversation with André Gide, he writes that 'there was nothing that either Plato or Christ had said that could not be transferred immediately into the sphere of Art, and there find its complete fulfilment', meaning that 'the very basis of [Christ's] nature was the same as that of the nature of the artist, an intense and flame-like imagination'.⁴⁸ Drawing on his long-running interest in the classics, as well as Pater's theories of art criticism, Wilde adds the Bible to his archive of the art of the individual in an attempt to revise historical perceptions of his works and to keep his artistic achievements alive. By adding Christ to the decadent archive of eclectic historical influences on his work and his 'intense and flame-like imagination',⁴⁹ Wilde does with Jesus what others have done with Wilde: he allows historical documents of the archived past to influence his reading of aestheticism and decadence in his own time. By positioning Christ as a decadent who, 'through some divine instinct [...] seems to have always loved the sinner as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of man',⁵⁰ Wilde textually incriminates Christianity and offers

a model for a decadent reading of the Bible as an archival document. By positioning the Bible as a text that inspired his flame-like imagination, and Jesus Christ as a decadent who, ‘through some divine instinct [...] seems to have always loved the sinner as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of man’, Wilde re-affiliates his art, and decadent art more broadly, with the tenets of Christianity.⁵¹ In doing so, he also textually incriminates the Bible in any criticisms of his art and offers a model for a decadent reading of the Bible as an archival document.

Wilde’s self-conscious exploration of narrative persuasion in this letter speaks not just to the unreliability of the autobiographical voice, but to the role that interpretation plays in our reading of historical documents. Wilde’s tale is no more authentic than Carson’s. Wilde was aware that he was writing to an audience. He was writing to his lover, Lord Douglas, but he was also responding to the readers of the newspaper accounts of his trial. In addition, he was writing a document under the intense supervision of Reading Gaol’s governor, Major Nelson, who allowed Wilde ‘one quarto sheet of paper a day’,⁵² and likely realized the possibility, if not the likelihood, that the governor, or any prison guard who came in contact with the letter might read it.

Wilde’s creation of a new personal history to give him comfort in the isolation and degradation of his gaol cell is rewritten, once more, by Ackroyd in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*. *The Last Testament* is so detailed in its depiction of Wilde that it may be hard for a reader to remember that this ‘journal’, which he titles *The Modern Woman’s Guide to Oscar Wilde*, is a work of fiction. *The Last Testament* collects detailed information about Wilde’s history and ventriloquizes him so successfully that it masquerades as a work of realism. Ackroyd revisits the last few months of Wilde’s life through a fictional autobiography whose aim, according to the character, is ‘to try to break the habit of a lifetime’ of lying to himself and others, but whose success as a truthful document is queried by his lover Lord Douglas and friend Frank Harris who insist that it is not only ‘nonsense’ and ‘invented’ but composed of ‘stolen lines from other writers’.⁵³ Critics of this novel point unerringly to its postmodern elements. Kirby Joris calls Ackroyd’s Wilde a ‘postmodern character, fashioned out of different interpretations and representations’.⁵⁴ Martin

Middeke goes further in suggesting that Wilde himself is a proto-postmodernist, although the irony of this argument lies in the idea that, somehow, postmodernism was inevitable because decadence came before it, a notion that ignores postmodernism's disruption of the linear progress model.⁵⁵ Jeremy Gibson and Julian Wolfreys argue that 'Ackroyd plays implicitly with historical knowledge not for the purpose of pinning Wilde down, but, ultimately, in order to make us question what we think we can know about both Wilde and, by implication, any historical figure'.⁵⁶ These interpretations focus on the novel's postmodernism and forget the influence of decadence on both Wilde's creative practice and Ackroyd's historiography.

As a postmodern author, Ackroyd has taken full advantage of Wilde's textual remains; in fact, readers may well question the function of documentary evidence in the novel. Little information appears in the novel that could not be accessed through biographies or Wilde's own writing. Even the 'spin' Ackroyd puts on 'Wilde' could well be discerned from *De Profundis*. But when 'Wilde' is accused by Harris and Douglas of telling lies in this journal, and 'Wilde' admits that he 'never saw reality' and that he 'put on a mask as easily as [he] adopted a mood', even the historical traces of Wilde's life are called into question.⁵⁷ And yet, many of those traces are verifiable. 'The Truth of Masks' asserts 'For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true.'⁵⁸ Ackroyd's novel does precisely this: it is both 'resolutely fictive and yet undeniably historical'.⁵⁹ Towards the end of the novel, 'Wilde' laments 'that artifice crumbles — an artificial world will dissolve also'.⁶⁰ Postmodernism, however, concurs with Max Beerbohm that 'Artifice must queen it once more in the town',⁶¹ and *The Last Testament* rejects the referential nature of fiction while foregrounding its illusion-making process.

Ackroyd's novel immerses Wilde in his historical context, portraying friends, publishers, and family and giving detailed pictures of Wilde in both London and Paris. Critics who discuss the novel present Wilde as relevant particularly for issues of the present: homosexual oppression and postmodern thought. And yet, little attention is paid to those details. Ackroyd was writing this novel in Thatcher's England in the early years of HIV/AIDS when gay men were vilified as fears

mounted over 'gay cancer'. That Ackroyd is himself a gay man who wrote his second novel about the world's most famous gay man was both dangerous and admirable. Even more admirable was his attention to Wilde's community – a decadent community of gay men, poets, outspoken women, male prostitutes, and various bohemian figures. Wilde's life post-prison, renting a cheap hotel room in the poorest neighbourhood, unable to work, being spat at in the streets by strangers, is a stark reflection of the lives of LGBT Britons in the 1980s.

Ackroyd does the critic's work by contextualizing his own fiction. However, he is not writing history but historical fiction, which does not require such referential accuracy. Hutcheon tells us that 'what history refers to is the real world; what fiction refers to is a fictive universe'.⁶² Ackroyd's use of the documentary record is a means to a fictitious end. Oscar Wilde is simply another text, a referent. What critics have yet to consider is that perhaps it is not the historical Wilde that interests Ackroyd as much as the decadent texts that Wilde wrote. It is not Wilde the person that he is interested in reviving from the archive, but Wilde's theories of fiction, of anti-realism, and of decadence, in order to create his own postmodern re-reading of those practices.

In effect, Ackroyd creates a decadence out of time. By repeatedly playing with temporality he seems to show how fluidly the figure of Wilde inhabits multiple periods. In fact, Ackroyd's Wilde seems to be peculiarly out of time, and recognizes this toward the end of the novel when he visits the 1900 Paris Exhibition and is asked 'to say something into Edison's speaking machine'. The experience gives him a premonition of death: 'that place, and that machine, were not of my time'.⁶³ Wilde's archive, not Wilde, is transported by Ackroyd into the postmodern 1980s. Wilde here is a product of Ackroyd's research into the documentary archive, his imagination, as well as the social anxiety to which he and so many other gay men were subjected. Hutcheon argues that postmodernism conflates 'documentary materials' of the archive with 'metafictive reflexivity', and in doing so, makes clear that reference to the past, or to a historical figure such as Oscar Wilde, is not the 'actual object'.⁶⁴

Ackroyd's choice of Wilde to explore such a history brings us to the significance of decadence to our understanding of the archive. Decadence collects histories self-consciously to subvert the politics and cultures of the present: bourgeois hypocrisy, income inequality, and elitism. Wilde, and decadence more broadly, offer a model of self-conscious historiography. Wilde was not a proto-postmodernist, he was a decadent aesthete whose creative practice influenced the postmodernism of Ackroyd's novel. There is something in his work and in the historical literary and artistic culture of decadence with which postmodernism could converse. Postmodernism did not turn Wilde into this archival 'Oscar Wilde'; Wilde did, because decadence was itself a self-conscious archival approach to history.

Wilde has, of course, not just been revised for postmodern fiction; he is also a means by which to revise the notion of autobiography and history, particularly for gay men in the twentieth century. In *Who Was That Man?*, Bartlett returns to Wilde's archive in order to write his history of famous gay men during the Victorian era, and his own coming of age in early 1980s London. Bartlett explains this choice in his introduction by saying that he has '*come to understand that I am connected with other men's lives, men living in London with me. Or with other, dead Londoners*' (emphasis in original).⁶⁵ In an attempt to learn his 'own history', Bartlett 'began to see this other London as the beginning of [his] own story'.⁶⁶ His subsequent search for the complete and authentic Wilde reveals other stories outside of Wilde's history but relevant to Bartlett. He reads the homoerotic, pornographic novel *Teleny* (1893) to which Wilde may have contributed. He wants to find information on the rent boys with whom Wilde associated, who have disappeared from the archive. How did they 'wear their hair in Soho a hundred years ago? [Did] they have the same lines around their mouths and eyes as they have now?'.⁶⁷ Their presence, it seems, was not relevant after Wilde's trials and their own stories were not considered worth recording. Bartlett calls the narrative that comes from the documentary record and its various interpretations 'unconvincing', and 'focussed too neatly on one central event, apparently reflecting our own contemporary situation, in which everything can be described as being before or after "coming out"'.⁶⁸ Bartlett, importantly,

does not equate Wilde's story of same-sex desire and social ruin in 1895 with his own feeling of isolation as a young gay man in search of a history and a community. Instead, he draws lines of affiliation and creates a new narrative out of Wilde's story, one inspired by the documentary materials he has read, but focused on his own worldview as a gay man in the 1980s.

Bartlett reads Wilde in order to give historical relevance to his own sense of selfhood as a gay man. He assures the reader that he sees differences between the 'suggestions of effeminacy and aristocracy [...] so central to the homosexual imagery of 1889', and 'the image of a London leather bar in 1985'.⁶⁹ Wilde is not a model of universal homosexual identity, but his history helps Bartlett craft an idea of the gay man that suits his own experience. Bartlett argues that 'some of my most basic ideas about myself as a homosexual man were invented for me by other men, in another time, in another city'.⁷⁰ By reading the documentary materials of Wilde's story, he finds affiliation with the past, and a companion with whom to walk the city streets of London of his then present day. History is not a linear experience, but a living part of the present. It exists in reference, in reinterpretation, and in the buildings and streets of the city. Like Lee before him, Bartlett can experience the past interpreted through his own temporal experience of the 1980s.

Today, it is not just the queer community who can revise the Wilde archive. Performance art gives us a recent example of the role of the decadent archive in understanding the present through the interpretation of the past as a multitude of individual and subjective voices. In the 2016 installation *Inside* at Reading Gaol, Oscar Wilde performs and subverts the role of the unstable historical record for the audience. At the centre of the project (literally so in the catalogue) is *De Profundis*. Cells and other spaces, however, were given over to an international group of artists and writers who wrote letters and created paintings and sculptures on themes of confinement, isolation, homophobia, and same-sex desire.

The subjects of the letters are drawn from fiction and history, both contemporary and ancient. Anne Carson writes a piece from Socrates to Crito, and Jeanette Winterson creates a letter from Hermione to Perdita. Gillian Slovo writes to her murdered mother, anti-apartheid activist

Ruth First. Deborah Levy writes to Wilde himself on the subject of language: ‘Language lifted you off earth [...]. And it is language that crushed you. They asked: “Is this the kind of letter one man writes to another?”’.⁷¹ Along with these voices, performers sitting in front of repurposed cell door C.3.3 read aloud from *De Profundis*. Since the prison was only decommissioned in 2013, other prisoners had come and gone, leaving traces and fragments of their time there. Some history of them is provided in photographs taken between 1885 and 1910 of those prisoners considered likely to reoffend, as well as in more recent graffiti on cell walls. This installation is not, strictly speaking, an archive, but it mirrors Potolsky’s idea of decadence as ‘collecting disparate themes, tropes and stylistic manners from around the globe [...] foregrounding acts of selection, juxtaposition and critical discernment, [and piecing] together ostentatiously borrowed parts’.⁷² The installation both centres and decentres Wilde because the audience is encouraged to read Wilde through and alongside other detainees, letters, and histories. He attracts attention, not just to his own archival record but to the records of other artists around which this ArtAngel project curates its historical archive. Wilde facilitates non-linear affiliations based on contemporary perceptions of historical relations. This use of Wilde is decadent because *De Profundis* is not connected to the projects created by Carson, Winterson, and others until those affiliations are realized within this particular curation of history. As Cook and Joan M. Schwarz write: ‘postmodernism sees value in stories more than structures, the margins as much as the centres, the diverse and ambiguous as much as the certain and universal’.⁷³ In this sense, postmodern art finds affiliation with Wilde’s idea that the ‘highest kind’ of criticism ‘treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation’.⁷⁴ Perhaps this is also a good definition of the archive: recognizing that there are always other stories in a proximate call number or a proximate cell.

Conclusion

By revisiting decadence, postmodernism engages, either directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, with decadent notions of the past. Postmodernism, then, has moments of

reimagining its own theories and ideas of history through juxtapositions with fin-de-siècle decadence. That juxtaposition allows postmodern art to be self-reflexive about history as a conversation with the past in the present. Just as Lee finds companionship in old houses, and Pater makes conversation with Plato, Ackroyd, Bartlett, and the contributors to the ArtAngel project at Reading Gaol find affiliation with Wilde. In the process, each discovers something new about the past that was not possible to know in the past because it is born out of a conversation in the present. Current notions of the archive engage with this concept of the archive as a living discourse. Arlette Farge argues that the role of the archive is to ‘bring forward details that disabuse, derail and straightforwardly break any hope of linearity or positivism’.⁷⁵ Decadence offers this discourse a language of curation and eclecticism, collecting ideas that are historically diverse and not necessarily connected by any sort of linear logic, but the logic of the archivist’s subjective point of view alone.

¹ For previous research by the authors on the relationship between postmodernism and decadence, please see: ‘Bibliographic Metafiction: Dancing in the Margins with Alasdair Gray’, *Contemporary Literature*, 52.2 (2016), 216-44; ‘From Text, to Myth, to Meme: *Penny Dreadful* and Adaptation’, *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 82 (2015), 19 paras; and ‘Consuming Surfaces: Decadent Aesthetics in *The Debt to Pleasure*’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 42.3 (2019), 151-69.

² Gregory Betts, ‘Postmodern Decadence in Canadian Sound and Visual Poetry’, *RE: Reading the Postmodern: Canadian Literature and Criticism after Modernism*, ed. by Robert David Stacey (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010), pp. 151-79 (p. 155).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁴ David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 196.

⁵ Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 1.

⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 5.

⁷ Beverley Southgate, *Postmodernism in History: Fear or Freedom?* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁹ Walter Pater, *The Works of Walter Pater*, 8 vols (1900-1901) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), VI, *Plato and Platonism: A Series of Lectures*, p. 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, ed. by Richard D. Altick (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 25.

¹² Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. by Jane Garnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 144, 9.

¹³ Charles Baudelaire, ‘The Exposition Universelle, 1855’, in *Art in Paris 1845-1862: Review of Salons and Other Exhibitions*, ed. and trans. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1965), pp. 121-29 (p. 126).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ See note 1.

¹⁶ John Lanchester, *The Debt to Pleasure* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1996), pp. 106-07.

¹⁷ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature [À rebours]*, trans. by Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 12.

¹⁸ Lanchester, p. 107.

¹⁹ Lee and King, ‘From Text, to Myth, to Meme’, para. 14 of 19.

²⁰ Potolsky, p. 9.

- ²¹ Wolfgang Iser, *Walter Pater: The Aesthetic Moment*, trans. by David Henry Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 79.
- ²² *Ibid.*, pp. 79, 81.
- ²³ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 2.
- ²⁴ Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 232.
- ²⁵ Kevin H. F. O'Brien, 'The House Beautiful: A Reconstruction of Oscar Wilde's American Lecture', *Victorian Studies*, 17.4 (1974), 395-418 (p. 410).
- ²⁶ Vernon Lee, 'In Praise of Old Houses', in *Limbo and Other Essays to Which is Now Added Ariadne in Mantua* (London: The Bodley Head, 1908), pp. 19-42 (p. 21).
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- ²⁸ Marlene Manoff, 'Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines', *Libraries and the Academy*, 4.1 (2004), 9-25 (p. 12).
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ³⁰ Terry Cook, 'Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts', *Archival Science*, 1 (2001), 3-24 (p. 10).
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ³² Joseph Grigley, *Textuality: Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 3.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Hayden White, 'The Historical Text as Literary Artifact', in *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, ed. by Brian Gay, Philip Pomper, and Richard T. Vann (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 15-33 (p. 21).
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ³⁶ Rebecca Schneider, 'Performance Remains', *Performance Research*, 6.2 (2001), 100-08 (p. 103).
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- ³⁸ Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 11-12.
- ³⁹ Potolsky, p. 5.
- ⁴⁰ *The Real Trials of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland (New York: Perennial, 2003), pp. 80-81.
- ⁴¹ Quoted in 'Oscar Wilde at Bow Street', *Penny Illustrated Paper*, 20 April 1895, p. 3.
- ⁴² Ian Small, 'Love-Letter, Spiritual Autobiography, or Prison Writing? Identity and Value in *De Profundis*', in *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 86-100.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- ⁴⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), p. 683, n1.
- ⁴⁵ Horst Schroeder, *The 'Definitive' Edition of Oscar Wilde's De Profundis*.
<http://horst-schroeder.com/deprofundis.htm> [accessed 18 May 2020].
- ⁴⁶ Wilde, *Complete Letters*, p. 683, n1.
- ⁴⁷ Oscar Wilde, letter to Lord Alfred Douglas [January to March 1897], in *Complete Letters*, p. 686.
- ⁴⁸ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, in *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Nicholas Frankel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), pp. 53-291 (p. 197).
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 223.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵² Ruth Robbins, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 167.
- ⁵³ Peter Ackroyd, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (London: Abacus by Sphere Books, 1984), pp. 160, 161.
- ⁵⁴ Kirby Joris, 'Wilde Rewound: Time-Travelling with Oscar in Recent Author Fictions', *Authorship*, 1.2 (2012), 1-12 (p. 10).
- ⁵⁵ Martin Middeke, 'Oscar the Proto-Postmodern? Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Temptation of Oscar Wilde*', in *The Importance of Reinventing Oscar: Versions of Wilde During the Last 100 Years*, ed. by Uwe Böker, Richard Corballis, and Julie Hibbard (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 207-17 (p. 207).
- ⁵⁶ Jeremy Gibson and Julian Wolfreys, *Peter Ackroyd: The Ludic and the Labyrinthine Text* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 88.
- ⁵⁷ Ackroyd, p. 171.
- ⁵⁸ Oscar Wilde, 'The Truth of Masks', in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Richard Ellmann (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 408-32 (p. 432).
- ⁵⁹ Hutcheon, p. 142.
- ⁶⁰ Ackroyd, p. 179.
- ⁶¹ Max Beerbohm, 'A Defence of Cosmetics', *The Yellow Book: An Illustrated Quarterly*, 1 (1894), pp. 65-82 (p. 66).
- ⁶² Hutcheon, p. 142.
- ⁶³ Ackroyd, p. 179.

⁶⁴ Hutcheon, pp. 142, 144.

⁶⁵ Neil Bartlett, *Who Was that Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988), p. xx.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Deborah Levy, 'Deborah Levy, Letter to Oscar Wilde, 2016', *Inside: Artists and Writers in Reading Prison*, ed. by James Lingwood and Michael Morris (London: ArtAngel, 2017), p. 50.

⁷² Potolsky, p. 4.

⁷³ Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, 'Archives, Records, and Power: From (Postmodern) Theory to (Archival) Performance', *Archival Science*, 2 (2002), 171-85 (p. 182).

⁷⁴ Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Richard Ellmann, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 341-408 (p. 367).

⁷⁵ Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, trans. by Thomas Scott-Railton (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 42.

Aubrey Beardsley, H. S. Nichols, and the Decadent Archive

Gregory Mackie

University of British Columbia

The exhibition of forty-three drawings by Aubrey Beardsley at the Anderson Galleries has an altogether exceptional significance. It rolls up the years like a scroll, takes us back in a trice to what has been called the renaissance of the nineties, and in the process wakes reflections on matters having to do not only with that period but with the present time.¹

The spring of 1919 in New York must have been an exciting time and place for devotees of the work of the decadent British artist Aubrey Beardsley. On 20th March of that year, the Anderson Galleries, a prominent auction house, held a sale of original Beardsley drawings formerly in the collection of Frederick H. Evans. Evans, a British photographer, had been Beardsley's friend, and the artist responsible for the famous portrait photograph of Beardsley posing with his head held in his long, tapering fingers [fig. 1]. The sale, which had been preceded by an exhibition, proved that the appetite for Beardsley's work had only grown in the 21 years since the artist's death; one drawing was reported to have sold for the tidy sum of \$630 – an unequivocal sign that, among art collectors at least, 'nineties decadence could still command a robust market.

Scarcely a month had passed, however, before another altogether larger and more surprising 'treasure-trove' of Beardsley drawings was exhibited to New York audiences.² Not held at an auction house (indeed, the drawings were not intended for sale), this second Beardsley exhibition was mounted by publisher and bookseller H. S. Nichols at his bookshop on East 33rd Street, near Fifth Avenue. Harry Sidney Nichols (1865-1941) was an expatriate Englishman, and the former business partner of Leonard Smithers, the flamboyant 'Publisher to the Decadents' who had brought out several books by Oscar Wilde in the late 1890s.³ Smithers had also employed Beardsley in the artist's final years: for instance, he published the Beardsley-illustrated decadent periodical the *Savoy* after the artist was fired by *The Yellow Book's* publisher John Lane during the Wilde trials. By 1919, however, these fin-de-siècle figures were all long dead: Beardsley had died in 1898; Wilde in 1900; and Smithers in 1907. Nichols lived on, and his background, however

selectively presented,⁴ thus supplied an attractive provenance narrative to what were enthusiastically described in the press as ‘new Beardsley originals’.⁵ And if the Anderson Galleries exhibition could turn back time, ‘roll[ing] up the years like a scroll’ by transporting its attendees back to the 1890s with familiar images from Beardsley’s career-making *Morte D’Arthur* series of illustrations, the Nichols display of ‘new originals’ seemed a veritable time capsule. For these 70 drawings apparently comprised a lost archive of decadent artworks previously unseen by the public. ‘Most of these originals have never been reproduced’, the New York *Evening Post* enthused, ‘and all estimates and accounts of Beardsley’s art will therefore have to be reconsidered and amplified’.⁶

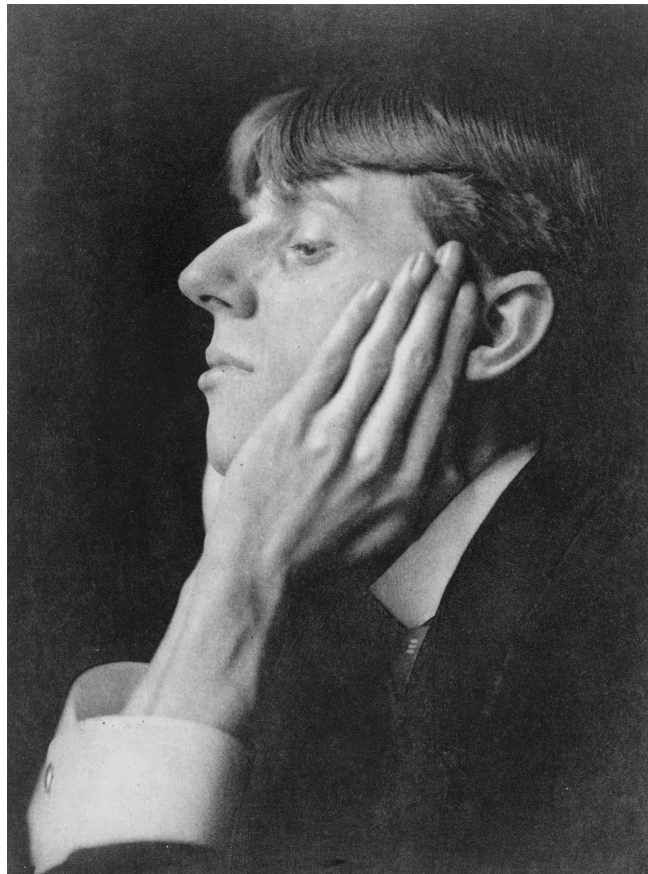


Fig. 1: Aubrey Beardsley by Frederick H. Evans, 1894.
Source: Wikimedia Commons; public domain image.

Collectors and critics in New York and beyond were indeed unprepared for the display of the Nichols hoard. In a printed invitation to his exhibition, Nichols announced that ‘the peculiar

and compelling charm of this collection is that none of these drawings have ever been published, none of them were even known to be in existence; they are consequently a complete and startling surprise.⁷ Because its contents ranged from early sketches, to book designs, to unpublished illustrations related to well-known commissions (such as *The Rape of the Lock*), to portraits of literary and artistic luminaries, the Nichols collection encompassed images that appeared to represent every phase and aspect of Beardsley's career. They constituted a Beardsley retrospective comprised entirely of unknown artworks. The emergence of the Nichols collection brings into focus the place in twentieth-century cultural memory occupied by 1890s decadence, and particular images, as we shall see, also make up miniature archives of decadent meaning and associations in themselves.

Connoisseurs of the artist's distinctive black-and-white aesthetic were certainly startled by what they saw at the exhibition, so much so that they quickly cast doubt on the authenticity of Nichols's 'peculiar' Beardsleys and caused 'no little stir in [New York] art circles', according to *Vanity Fair*.⁸ Indeed, a lengthy and acrimonious correspondence involving Nichols himself, his critics, and his defenders seethed for several months in the pages of the *Evening Post*, with the combative Nichols declaring his 'utter indifference' to the opinion of a 'plague of experts'.⁹ This debate positioned connoisseurship of collectors and scholars in contention with provenance and ostensible first-hand knowledge of Beardsley and his work. For Nichols's 'peculiar' Beardsleys turned out not to be the 'new originals' touted by the press: instead they were outright fakes.

Although Nichols's critics stopped short of directly accusing him of forgery, they were convinced that the drawings were bogus, and badly done at that. Writing in the *Evening Post* in May 1919, for example, the British art journalist C. Lewis Hind archly remarked that the drawings Nichols displayed 'are a travesty of [Beardsley's] work; they are an insult to his memory. I went to the Nichols exhibition with high hopes. I stayed fifteen minutes. Five minutes, one minute would have sufficed. These feeble, pretentious things by Beardsley? Pooh!¹⁰ Hind had been the co-founder, in 1893, of the art periodical *The Studio*, the cover of whose inaugural issue had been decorated by Beardsley, so he spoke with some authority on matters related to the artist's output.

He was a relatively late entrant into the contretemps, however, as several other Beardsley experts had already aired their decidedly disparaging views of the Nichols collection. In high dudgeon, Nichols publicly replied to his earlier critics in the press. Responding in the *Evening Post* to Joseph Pennell and A. E. Gallatin, for instance, the publisher indignantly countered their veiled allegations of fraud: ‘I know a great deal more about Beardsley than either Mr. Pennell or Mr. Gallatin’, he wrote, ‘but I absolutely decline to make known to the world what I do know’.¹¹ Nichols claimed access to privileged knowledge about his subject, apparently hard-won by years in the publishing and bookselling business. He set this expertise against the opinion of the wealthy American art collector and critic Gallatin, who was an early and prolific scholar of Beardsley and whose first publication on the artist had appeared in 1900, and Pennell, whose 1893 article ‘A New Illustrator: Aubrey Beardsley’ had announced the artist’s ‘discovery’ in *The Studio*.¹² Nichols’s protestations did not succeed in authenticating the drawings, however, and as the controversy dragged on, a consensus emerged among the contributing critics that they were most definitely forgeries. According to these experts, the Nichols images contained easily-identifiable errors inconsistent with Beardsley’s genuine work: all of the drawings were signed in full, something that Beardsley rarely did; they were quite large in size, and indeed much larger than any known authentic Beardsley drawings; and they were all executed on Bristol board, a medium that the artist was not known to have used. Despite his personal connections and memories of 1890s London, these were hard material facts for Nichols to dispute.

If we ask whether or not Nichols *knew* that his ‘startling’ Beardsleys were fakes, it is difficult to come up with a definitive answer. On the one hand, the *Evening Post* quoted him making numerous flimsy, self-credentializing claims to bolster his collection’s disputed credibility. For instance, Nichols stated that he was with Wilde in Paris after Wilde was released from prison, and that he played a significant role in the 1898 publication of the Smithers-issued *Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Neither of these assertions is accurate. On the other hand, he also complained of being misquoted in the press, and his brazen follow-up to the 1919 exhibition in his New York bookshop

hardly seems like the action of a shadowy forger. Nichols was foremost a publisher, and it was in the realm of book-making that he most abundantly (if ultimately unsuccessfully) pressed his case as memorialiser of 1890s decadence. In 1920 he published a visually arresting compilation of black-and-white drawings boldly entitled *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley* [fig. 2]. It is a sumptuously produced, large-format tome in an edition limited to 500 copies, each signed – and thus authenticated – with Nichols’s florid autograph [fig. 3]. The title itself contains a misleading statement, since those eponymous fifty drawings are reproductions of fakes exhibited in April 1919. It is hard to imagine a more audacious riposte to the critics who assailed the publisher in the press. Nichols’s book made a brash argument: his *Fifty Drawings* were the real thing because *he said so*.

Even if Nichols declined ‘to make known to the world’ what he did know, the publisher’s secret is perhaps less an insider’s expertise about Beardsley’s art than it is a canny attempt at marketing the afterlife of 1890s decadence for twentieth-century audiences – especially in the United States. For Nichols’s compendium of ‘new originals’ had the potential not only to disrupt the still-amorphous canon of Beardsley’s artwork, as the *Evening Post*’s Joseph Gollomb had observed, but also to assert their publisher’s role as an important archivist – and curator – of late-Victorian decadence itself. As Kristin Mahoney has observed in relation to the 1920s Beardsley-inspired work of artist Beresford Egan, ‘Decadence persisted beyond the turn of the century as it was received, revised, and practiced by authors and artists around the globe.’¹³ Unlike Egan’s pointedly contemporary and satirical work, however, the forged images in Nichols’s book are distinctly backward-looking in their attempt to channel Beardsley and decadence more broadly. They retail a commercial future for the 1890s by inventing a past for it that never existed, and they offer a reading of decadence that, I want to argue, can be understood as particularly *archival* in nature. I explore this idea by examining two of Nichols’s images, one that appeared only in the archive of newsprint, and one that appears in the book: they are portraits of Beardsley and Wilde, respectively.

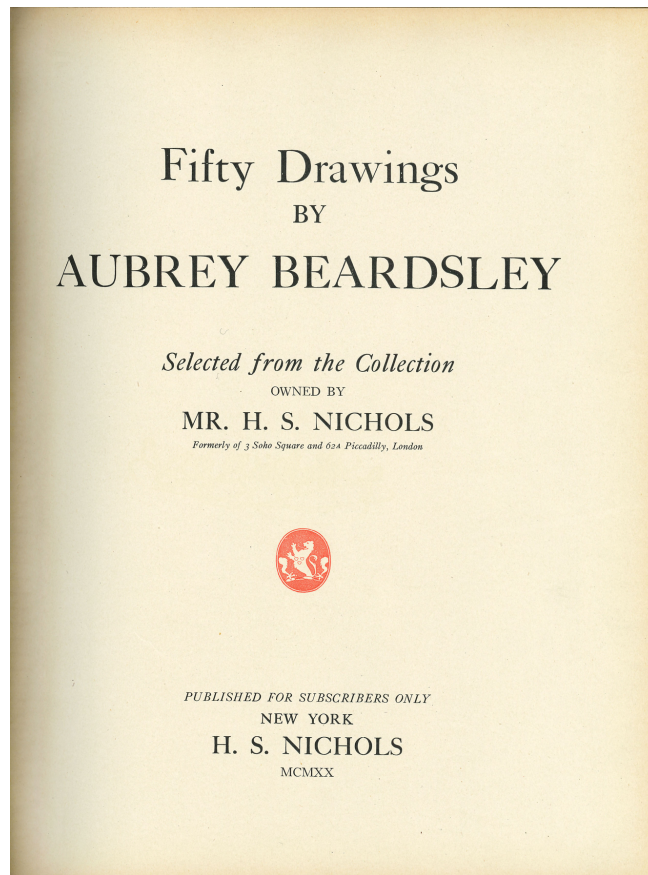


Fig. 2: Title page of *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley*.
Source: author's collection.

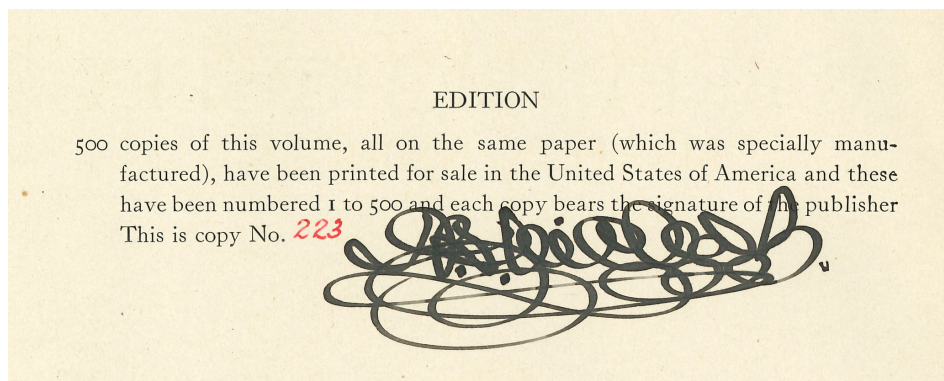


Fig. 3: Signature of H. S. Nichols in *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley*.
Source: author's collection.

New Beardsleys in Print

In an article entitled 'New Beardsley Originals', which appeared in the New York *Evening Post* on 12 April 1919, Joseph Gollomb directly links the announcement of Nichols's collection and

exhibition to recent developments in the art market, coming as it did so swiftly after the Anderson Galleries sale the previous month. In that article, Gollomb discusses the drawings' provenance – especially the partnership between Nichols and Smithers – at some length. Beardsley, we are told, was apparently in the habit of settling debts to Nichols with drawings, and over time, Nichols's holdings grew with such payments. Gollomb further quotes Nichols's reminiscences of that period, although some of these, as we have seen, are less than entirely factual. Nichols, for instance, is quoted as describing himself as the 'patron and paymaster' of Beardsley and Wilde – an appellation that could more plausibly be attached to his former business partner Smithers. He also indulges in some rather predictable mythologizing descriptions about the decadent group of 'improvident geniuses' 'avid for every sensation' whose work Nichols printed and Smithers published. 'To know Beardsley and his group was a remarkable experience', according to Nichols, establishing himself as a first-hand witness. 'It was like watching the flight of meteors. They burned themselves up, in their work as well as in their pleasures.'¹⁴ By describing the famous dead burning with such hard, gemlike, Paterian flames, Nichols confirms what *Evening Post* readers might think they already know about such figures as Beardsley and Wilde, or indeed what they could plausibly believe. Such is certainly the case in Nichols's reminiscence of 'a little scene in Paris where Smithers, Wilde, Beardsley and myself were together [and] Smithers persisted in trying to talk French'.¹⁵ The only problem with this appealing recollection is that it did not occur in real life: Nichols was in South Africa at the time,¹⁶ and so he could not have witnessed Wilde quipping 'Isn't Smithers wonderful! He can make himself incoherent in two languages.'¹⁷ This anecdote is akin to the fake Beardsley drawings themselves: plausible in style and content, and attractive in its capacity to evoke 1890s nostalgia. But also like those drawings, it represents a strategic misrepresentation of the past.

A prominent feature of that first *Evening Post* article was an arresting image placed in the centre of the page. It depicted the extinction of one of those 'meteors', and was captioned 'Beardsley's Portrait of Himself Dying'¹⁸ [fig. 4]. In this interior scene, a robed male figure with

shoulder-length hair sits sternly upright in a wingback chair, directly facing the viewer. It is night-time, and the floor beside him is littered with discarded books or papers. Behind him to one side, on a table adorned with an oil lamp, sits a glass of absinthe and a small jug of the water used to dilute the spirit (the absinthe ritual's slotted sugar spoon is absent). In the background, behind two gathered and parted curtains, we see a full moon through a muntined window partly obscured by some spectral clouds. Most bizarrely, the long tail-feathers of a diaphanous, ghostly peacock perched on the artist's chair cascade down one side of his face. In its composition and its associations it is a decidedly lugubrious image – Beardsley's face is set in grim determination, as if welcoming death on his own terms – but it does reinforce the artist's reputation for eccentricity and unrepentant decadence. Of course, the image is a pure fantasy: although Beardsley depicted himself several times, he never executed a death-bed (death-chair?) self-portrait. Beardsley's authorship notwithstanding, this forged self-portrait does an impressive job of symbolic and archival aggregation, as it successfully conjures up the artist's affiliation with nocturnal scenes, interiors, creative work, and peacocks, whose feathers were a recognizable decorative element in some of his best-known authentic drawings. With the ghost peacock seemingly emerging from the artist's head as if in a dream, perhaps this image also depicts the mind-altering effects of consuming absinthe, the signature drink of the decadents – and a substance whose depraved reputation had, since 1912, led to its prohibition in the United States.

It was less the content of the image than the text caption that attracted attention, however. That caption, 'Beardsley's Portrait of Himself Dying', appeared in close proximity on the page to an anecdote of Nichols's about seeing Beardsley in Brussels. Pennell and Gallatin misinterpreted this detail as an erroneous claim that Beardsley had died in the Belgian capital, when he in fact died in Menton, France. Although Nichols defended himself by claiming (implausibly) that the image had been mislabelled and was intended to illustrate Edgar Allan Poe's poem 'The Raven',¹⁹ his critics thought they had caught him in a fatal mistake. A war of words ensued, which turned on the question of who had the greater knowledge of Beardsley's life and work. Understandably,

perhaps, Nichols did not include 'Beardsley's Portrait of Himself Dying' in the 1920 book. Indeed, he omitted twenty of the seventy drawings shown at his exhibition.



Photo. by Edwin Levick.

Beardsley's Portrait of Himself Dying

Fig. 4: 'Beardsley's Portrait of Himself Dying'.
Source: *New York Evening Post Magazine*, 12 April 1919, p. 1.

'Mr. Nichols very frankly told me [...] that he was a bookseller, not an art dealer', A. E. Gallatin reported in the *Evening Post*,²⁰ and indeed Nichols turned his hoard of 'hitherto unpublished' Beardsleys to account not by selling the individual images, but by going to print. 'I am actively engaged in having reproductions made of the whole of my collection', he announced in June 1919 for *Evening Post* readers still following the controversy, 'and [I] shall publish these reproductions in book form as soon as possible, and when published Mr. Gallatin will be able to have as many copies as he may require'.²¹ Stung by the controversy but inspired by the favourable

market conditions suggested by the recent Anderson sale of Beardsley drawings,²² the publisher, grandly described by one of his defenders as the ‘Quaritch²³ of Book Making’, came out with a suitably opulent volume the following year [fig. 5].²⁴ In a note tipped into British art historian G. C. Williamson’s copy of *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley*, and dated 6 June 1929, Williamson praises the totality of the images, regardless of their status as fakes. ‘[A]lthough based upon Aubrey Beardsley’s work, none of them are original drawings by him’, he notes. Nevertheless, ‘the book is a great triumph of skill’.²⁵ The aesthetics of book-making were not Nichols’s only concerns, for he was also careful to assert his ownership of these images, and copyright statements in his name – all dated 1920 – appear throughout *Fifty Drawings*. His production costs have yet to be traced, but if Nichols managed to sell all 500 signed and numbered copies at the considerable price of \$15, he would have grossed an impressive \$7,500 – a suitable yield for a publisher likened by his allies to Victorian London’s most celebrated antiquarian bookseller.

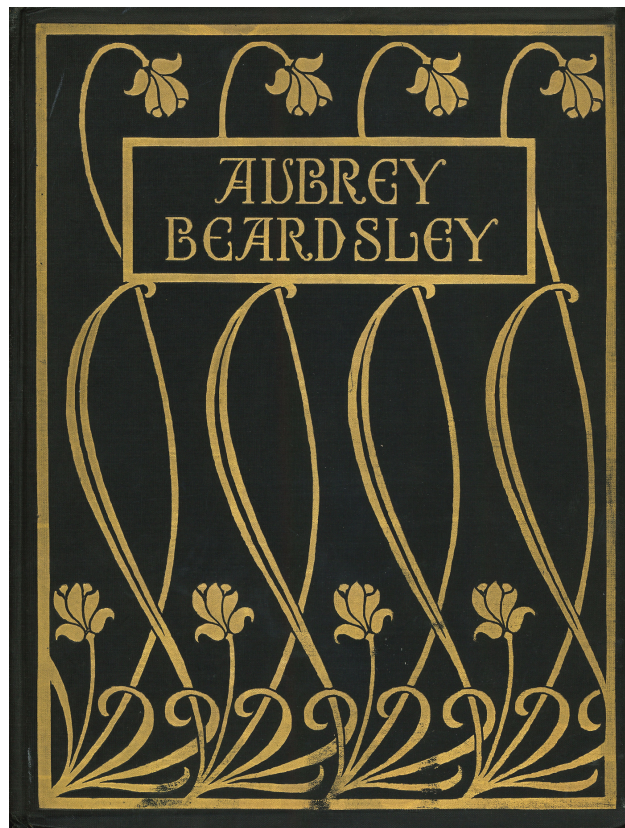


Fig. 5: Binding design for *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley*.
Source: author’s collection.

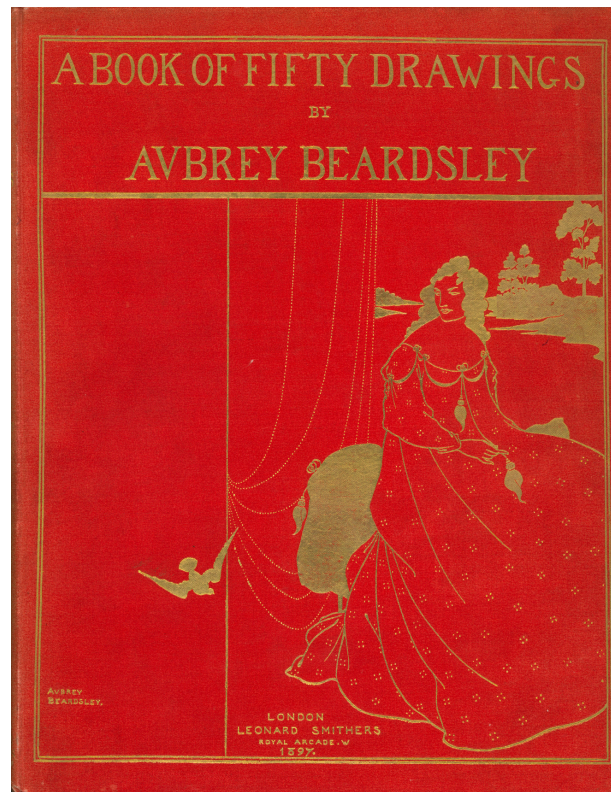


Fig. 6: *A Book of Fifty Drawings*, 1897.
Source: University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections.

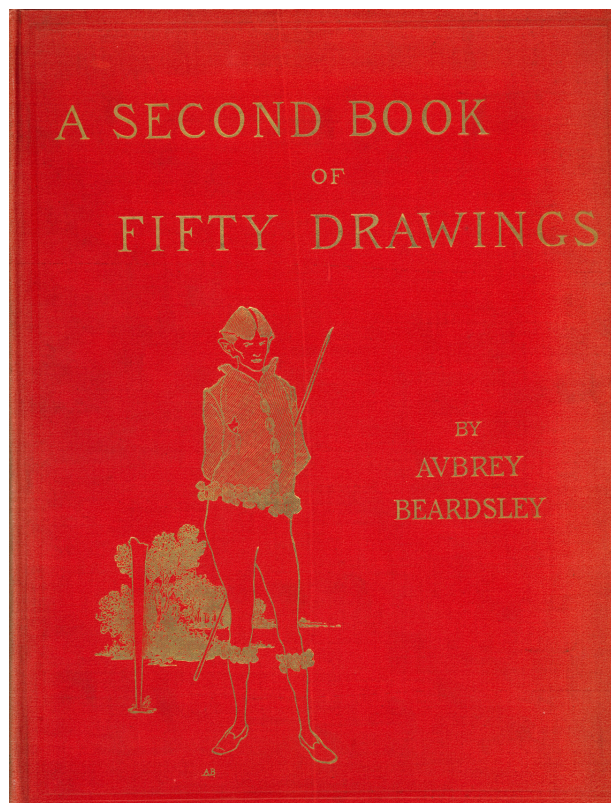


Fig. 7: *A Second Book of Fifty Drawings*, 1899.
Source: University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections.

By virtue of its title, *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley* promised to carry on a tradition of high-end art publications once supervised by Nichols's former partner: Beardsley's *A Book of Fifty Drawings* had appeared under Smithers's imprint in 1897, and *A Second Book of Fifty Drawings* followed in 1899, shortly after the artist's death [figs 6 & 7]. This second volume included 'twenty-nine hitherto unpublished drawings' which, according to the candid Smithers, 'would not have appeared had Mr. Beardsley been living'.²⁶ Indeed, Beardsley's reputation for erotica and graphic naughtiness 'tend[ed] to keep up the mystery and support the possibility of more authentic drawings being discovered', as even the prolific Beardsley scholar and collector R. A. Walker admitted during the Nichols forgery controversy, some twenty years later.²⁷ The artist's decadent reputation – so fully captured by the fake 'Dying' image – would also seem to have the effect of leaving his canon porous and open-ended. The problem for connoisseurs such as Walker with such additional 'discoveries' (or 'new originals'), of course, is that far from being genuine drawings suppressed out of a sense of shame or delicacy, they could instead be fakes.

In issuing 'hitherto unpublished' drawings that amplified (and traded on) existing Beardsleyan associations, Nichols emulated a format supplied by Smithers's 1890s Beardsley books. As Smithers had done, so too did Nichols: each image in *Fifty Drawings* is presented on the recto side of a full page devoid of text, and the appealing promotional phrase 'hitherto unpublished' is affixed to the title that prefaces each one. But unlike Smithers, Nichols attributes this new set of 'fifty drawings' directly to Beardsley in the book's title, and his cover design, emphasizing the words 'Aubrey Beardsley' in gold, announces the book's subject to be *the artist* as much as his drawings. If these were cues aiming to enhance the volume's credibility, such authenticating gestures nonetheless proved ineffective, for these 'hitherto unpublished' drawings, carefully 'selected from the collection owned by Mr. H. S. Nichols', as the subtitle attests, continued to attract censure and denunciation. In a 1921 review of *Fifty Drawings*, Walker (under the pseudonym Georges Derry) attacked 'the ignorance and effrontery of the publisher' for having issued what he called 'this abominable book'.²⁸ In a piece entitled 'Beardsley Non Redivivus',

Walker insisted that the artist had not been brought back to life by Nichols's tome – it did not accomplish the time-travel feat heralded by the drawings' first appearance in 1919 – but instead it had the effect of posthumously defaming him. Indeed, Walker continually returned to the notion of a 'stolen name', concluding that 'this book is merely an insult to Beardsley's name and reputation'.²⁹ Walker's critique was not entirely disinterested: he had an agenda of his own in promoting himself as *the* Beardsley expert, especially in the realm of unknown images. Two years later, he followed up his intervention into the Nichols furore with some hitherto unpublished Beardsley material of his own when he issued *Some Unknown Drawings of Aubrey Beardsley*, which was itself limited to 500 numbered and signed copies, with a front cover featuring the words 'Aubrey Beardsley' stamped in gold.³⁰ Walker's authoritative archiving of Beardsley's life and work nonetheless had the curious effect of recalling Nichols's 'abominable book'.



Fig. 8: 'Toilette of a Courtesan' from *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley*.
Source: author's collection.



Fig. 9: 'Salomé' from *Fifty Drawings* by Aubrey Beardsley.
Source: author's collection.

Despite the technical flaws that had attracted the condemnation of Beardsley experts and collectors, Nichols, as we have seen, was certainly well enough informed about Beardsley's cultural milieu to disseminate a sequence of images purporting to capture the distinctive flavour of the 1890s, or what art critic and biographer Osbert Burdett would, in 1925, come to designate as 'the Beardsley period' [figs 8 & 9].³¹ Nichols's forgeries, in other words, made a timely appearance regardless of the aesthetic shortcomings that had roused experts' suspicion. In resituating the decadent legacy within the cultural project of high modernism, Vincent Sherry also affirms that Beardsley's line drawings represent 'the signature image of his decade'.³² Beardsley was, as Wilde's literary executor Robert Ross put it with arch delicacy, 'popularly supposed to have given expression to the views and sentiments of a certain school, and his drawings were regarded as the outward artistic sign of inward literary corruption'.³³ The artist's reputation for depicting sinister

sexuality, moreover, was eagerly exploited by forgers, who, according to Linda Gertner Zatlín, were ‘intent on capitalizing on Beardsley’s supposedly wicked work’.³⁴ If Beardsley could be understood to represent 1890s decadence, then the threat his work may once have exemplified seems largely to have faded by 1920, although it could prove ripe for commercial exploitation in the rarefied world of limited-edition art books.

The identity of the forger (or forgers) who produced these images remains the subject of speculation. Making the task of forgery-detection more difficult is the fact that a great many Beardsley forgeries were already in circulation when *Fifty Drawings* appeared. According to *Vanity Fair*, as early as 1919 Beardsley had already become ‘one of the most “faked” of all masters. That, certainly, is true fame’.³⁵ Mark Samuels Lasner suggests that ‘the most likely culprits [are] three of [Leonard] Smithers’s associates – John Black, Alfred Cooper, and H. S. Nichols – as well as possibly Smithers himself’.³⁶ The case for identifying John A. Black as the forger is an intriguing one, since it recalls the old partnership between Nichols and Smithers – a business relationship that even Nichols cited, albeit in a roundabout way, to explain the drawings’ origins. According to bookseller Dan Rider, the roguish Smithers employed Black as a Beardsley copyist who ‘would even work under a magnifying glass to ensure absolute accuracy. And frequently he would produce an entirely new Beardsley drawing that Beardsley had never seen or thought of’.³⁷ Peter Mendes explicitly identifies the *Fifty Drawings* images as ‘John Black forgeries, given by Smithers to Nichols, sometime after [Smithers’s] bankruptcy [in 1900], to cover a debt’.³⁸ The logic of provenance invigorates this theory: if Black contrived the forgeries for Smithers, then Nichols obtained them from his onetime business partner, at which point they became his exclusive property. This conjecture, of course, requires the forgeries to have been executed in the late 1890s and so to have lain dormant for some twenty years under Nichols’s custodianship, and it amplifies the stories Nichols himself gave to the *New York Press* when announcing his exhibition in 1919. He told such a story of art-for-debt exchanges to the *New York Times*, for example, when recalling that he had

‘supplied Beardsley with funds during the latter’s periods of stress, and took what drawings the artist had to offer.’³⁹

The ‘who’ and the ‘why’ behind the creation of the *Fifty Drawings* forgeries perhaps matters less than the ‘when’ in the timing of their release to the public in 1919 and 1920 – once enough time had elapsed for Beardsley’s style to have assumed the place of a ‘signature image’ in the popular imagination of the ‘Beardsley period’. And if the drawings’ status as fakes confirms the lasting impact of Beardsley’s artistic legacy, Nichols’s recovery of such ‘hitherto unpublished’ artworks (however phony) suggests that decadence could already be apprehended as an archive – a layered collection of associated artifacts, such as the assembled elements in ‘Beardsley’s Portrait of Himself Dying’ that both emanate from and represent the past. *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley* is thus an archive of fakes, a collection of images whose familiarly suggestive style (or its approximation) promises viewers a trip to the 1890s between the covers of a paper time machine.

In this way, Nichols’s book again follows the established models provided not only by Smithers’s earlier publications of authentic drawings, but also by John Lane’s two volumes *The Early Work of Aubrey Beardsley* (1899) and *The Later Work of Aubrey Beardsley* (1901), the first of which was reprinted in 1920, and which similarly aggregated Beardsley’s graphic work from different periods and for different occasions. Although some of the forgeries in *Fifty Drawings* appear to be pitifully crude neo-Beardsley simulacra, others evince distinctly archival characteristics in their composition. If the entire collection constitutes an archive (albeit a misleading and deceptive one), then the organizing principle behind many of the individual drawings can also be apprehended as archival: such images are visual compilations of references derived from graphic and literary sources, which are then clustered and re-packaged into discrete units that purport to represent ‘Beardsley’ or ‘decadence’. In *Vanity Fair*, A. E. Gallatin (writing as ‘Oliver Brenning’) described the fake Beardsleys displayed by Nichols as ‘a new form of picture puzzle’.⁴⁰ By analysing the puzzle pieces that comprise the book’s forged portrait of Wilde, we get an even fuller sense of the

forger's (or forgers') representational strategy in arranging visual units of meaning to generate an image-as-archive.

A New Portrait of Oscar Wilde

In *How to Detect Beardsley Forgeries* (1950), R. A. Walker describes the stylistic technique employed in the *Fifty Drawings* forgeries as 'synthetic'. This description is particularly appealing because it captures the forgeries' artificiality and inauthenticity as much as their integration of disparate components. Although they range widely in subject and theme, the most persuasive of the forgeries share an important commonality: they tend to synthesize familiar graphic elements from Beardsley's repertoire with new material into images in which 'parts of drawings by Beardsley have been copied into the forgery while other parts are [newly] imagined.'⁴¹ The book's image number 13, entitled 'Full length portrait of Oscar Wilde in frock-coat' stands out as especially noteworthy in this connection [fig. 10].⁴² It depicts Wilde in a long, double-breasted black frock coat, gazing thoughtfully – we could even say knowingly – at the viewer from the foreground. When the drawings were on display at Nichols's bookstore, a critic for the *New York Times* described this image as 'Oscar Wilde, looking like a white pigeon boned for the kitchen in his soft plumpness'.⁴³ In the background on the right sit several rows of books arranged on shelves partially hidden by a curtain. On the left, mounted on the wall above Wilde's head, hangs a picture of a woman, both nude and draped, who is being leered at by a masked and goateed figure derived from Beardsley's *Salome* illustration work. The wallpaper in the background is filigreed with minutely executed, curling dotted lines, in careful approximation of Beardsley's delicate art-nouveau tracery. 'Full length portrait of Oscar Wilde in frock-coat' thus synthesizes, recombines, and arranges information about the Irish writer into a composite image comprised of visual quotations in a notably Beardsleyesque style. This 'hitherto unpublished' image exemplifying the well-known association between the author and the illustrator of *Salome* purports to embroider literary and art history by expanding decadence's pictorial archive.



Oscar Wilde.

Fig. 10: 'Full length portrait of Oscar Wilde in frock-coat' from *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley*.
Source: author's collection.

The frock-coated depiction trades on many aspects of Wilde's posthumous mythology, not least of which is his reputation as a metonym for decadence. Moreover, as Zatin has recently shown, the disreputable London publishers and booksellers who distributed forged Beardsley drawings often sold these items along with pirated editions of Wilde.⁴⁴ In New York, Nichols himself issued several lavishly produced – and entirely unauthorized – editions of various Wilde titles in the 1910s and 20s. The *Evening Post* article that accompanied the announcement of Nichols's 'treasure-trove' Beardsley exhibition also touted 'what is considered to be the most thorough and beautiful edition of Wilde's works in America, the lavender colored flexible leather Cosmopolitan Library.'⁴⁵ Nichols reprinted a great majority of Wilde's writings, and in each 'Cosmopolitan Library' edition, he personally endorses the contents (with a facsimile signature) and signals his own role as scholar, archivist, and keeper of the Wildean flame. In Nichols's 1915

volume *Novels and Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, for instance, a prefatory ‘Indorsement’ assures readers that:

This is a genuine copy of the integral edition of the *Novels and Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, as well as some of his other writings, all of which are complete in this one volume, as published by me in the Cosmopolitan Library; they have all been printed from very rare and almost unobtainable editions, the texts of which have been scrupulously followed word by word with absolute accuracy.⁴⁶

His 1924 edition of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, part of Nichols’s ‘Precious Tomes’ series, quite literally archives decadence in a package: Wilde’s leather-bound ballad is presented in a decorative box, and the poem itself is surrounded by a lengthy paratextual apparatus that legitimizes Nichols as a custodian of the Irish writer’s memory [figs 11 & 12].

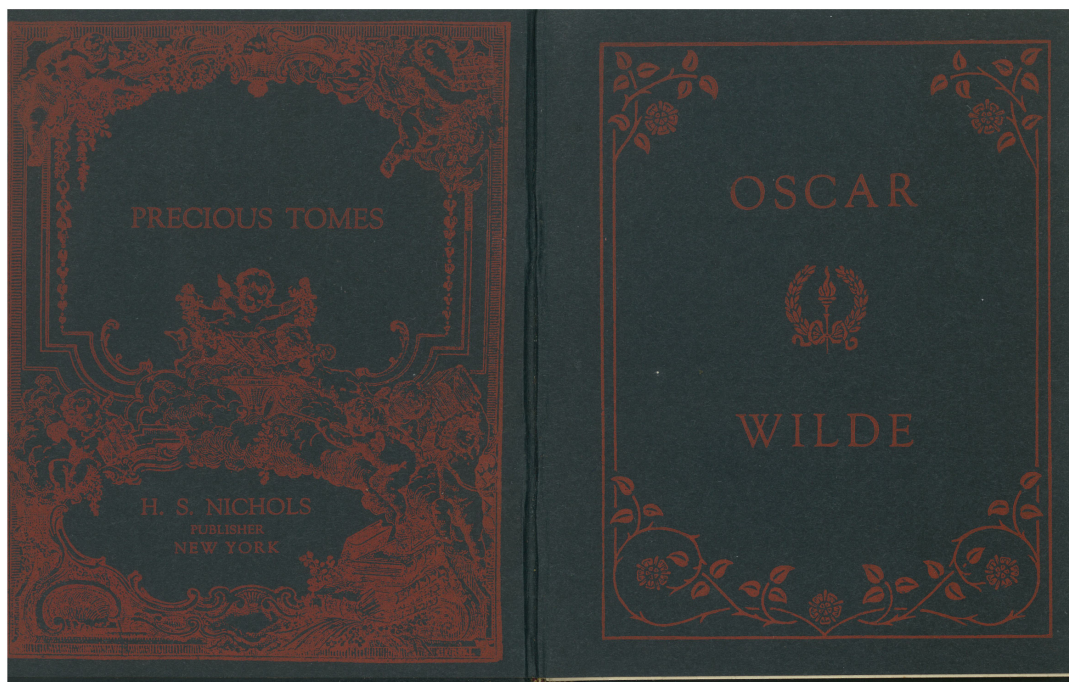


Fig. 11: *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1924) in H. S. Nichols’s ‘Precious Tomes’ series.
Source: author’s collection.

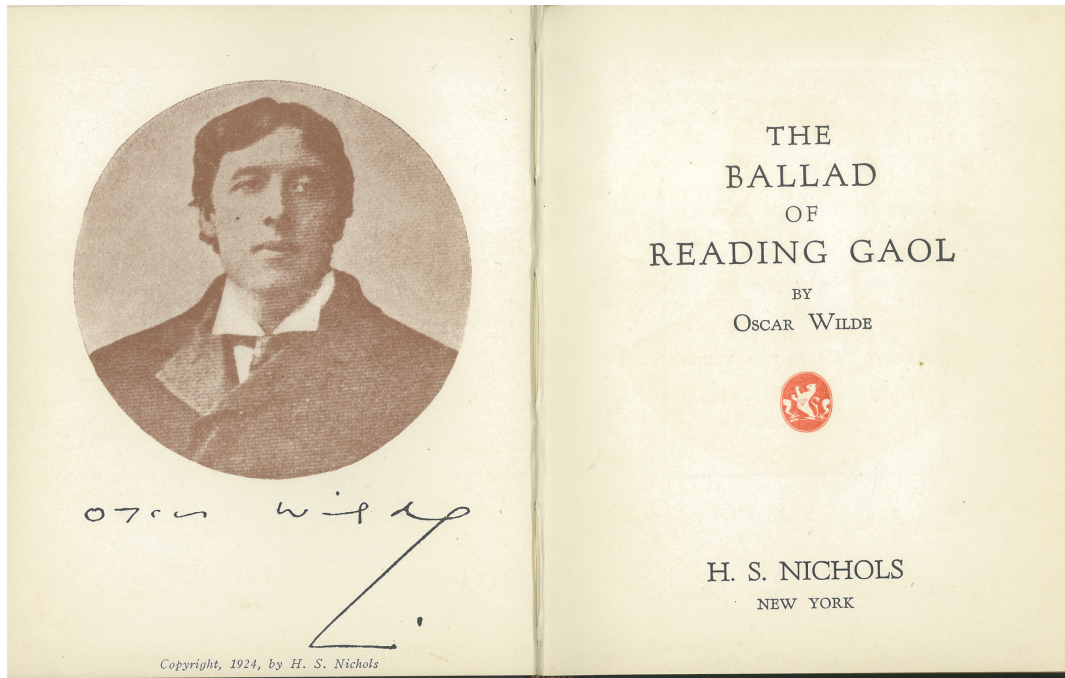


Fig. 12: *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1924) title page.
Source: author's collection.

As he had done in *Fifty Drawings*, Nichols personally inserts himself into the larger 1890s story with his ostentatious signature, only to follow that self-aggrandizing gesture with a frontispiece image of Wilde (complete with autograph) and a 'Foreword', credited to himself, twinned with Alfred Douglas' memorably grief-stricken poem 'The Dead Poet'. Perhaps the Beardsley debacle made Nichols more cautious in 1924, since this 'Foreword' carefully omits the false claim he made to the *New York Evening Post* in 1919 that the choice to credit the first printing of the poem to Wilde's prison identity, C.3.3., was jointly made by Smithers and himself.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Nichols remains eager to associate himself with that era in this edition of the *Ballad*, as he describes Wilde's literary executor Robert Ross as someone 'whom I knew in London in the eighteen-nineties'.⁴⁸ With his Wilde books, as with the Beardsley forgeries, the publisher and maker of 'precious tomes' asserts his claim to being the 1890s principal survivor; in republishing the period's writers and artists, he also becomes their exponent, archivist, and loyalist.



Fig. 13: Oscar Wilde by Ellis and Walery, 1892.
Source: Wikimedia Commons; public domain image.



Fig. 14: Detail from 'Full length portrait of Oscar Wilde in frock-coat' from *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley*.
Source: author's collection.

In ‘Full length portrait of Oscar Wilde in frock-coat’, Wilde serenely faces the viewer with one hand on his hip, the other at his temple, in a position that could only be described as posing. Wilde posed for many photographs throughout his life, including those shot in 1892 at London’s Ellis and Walery photography studio, which likely provided the template for this particular portrait [fig. 13]. The glossy sheen on the lapel, the collar, and the tie-pin are all there.⁴⁹ Deliberately foregrounded in the Nichols forgery, the very act of ‘posing’ may also work to remind viewers of the extra-literary narrative of Wilde’s downfall in a sex scandal that began with the misspelled accusation on a calling card that he had been ‘posing as a sodomite [*sic*]’.⁵⁰ More immediately, the forgery refers to – and amalgamates – imagery associated with Wilde’s notoriety and literary career with the Beardsleyesque designs in its background. On one side, a theatrical curtain half conceals and half reveals several tiers of (unidentified) books, at once suggesting dramatic authorship and a corpus of writings filled with veiled meanings. Wilde’s published writings emerge here as the site of an open secret of which the viewer is presumably aware. The picture on the other side of the background’s wall [fig. 14] reinforces the suturing of Wilde, Beardsley, and decadence that (much to Beardsley’s irritation) had defined the artist’s reputation since the publication of his illustrations for the English version of Wilde’s play *Salome* in 1894. Indeed, *Salome*-style images had been a focal point of critical ire in responses to the Nichols exhibition and *Fifty Drawings*. This picture-within-a-picture comes across as nothing less than a cropped imitation of Beardsley’s *Toilette of Salome (I)* [fig. 15], an image so sexually provocative that it was not included in the first edition of the play, although it did appear in later versions.⁵¹ Indeed, it was not published until 1907,⁵² which, assuming that the forgers did not have access to unpublished images, might explain the forgeries after the 1890s. According to Walker, ‘the Salome set [of drawings], whence so many forgeries are derived’ proved a popular template for forgers of Beardsley, probably because those Wilde illustrations were some of his best-known works.⁵³ The *Salome* illustrations are also, of course, replete with unflattering caricatures of Wilde [fig. 16]. Nichols’s ‘Portrait’ forgery, however, is not a caricature, but a fantasy. Its purpose is not to mock, but to encapsulate.

If I were to categorize it, I would label it a self-referential pastiche. It not only brings together Wilde and Beardsley, but also clusters 1890s literature, visual art, and photography into a ‘picture puzzle’ that invites the viewer to see (and purchase) decadence as a package deal. And so convincing is this suturing of the writer and the illustrator that as recently as 1998 the frock-coat portrait was still being attributed to Beardsley in a collection of his drawings published by Taschen.⁵⁴



Fig. 15: Aubrey Beardsley, *The Toilette of Salomé (I)*.
Source: University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections.



Fig. 16: Aubrey Beardsley, *Enter Herodias*.
Source: University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections.

Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley situates decadence firmly in the (recent) past, as an archive of texts, images, attributes, and lore to be exhumed as much as revived. But it also forges that past in both senses of that word by ‘making’ (or inventing) it and ‘faking’ (or misrepresenting) it. That said, the fact that forgeries traffic in illusions, and that they tell lies (Beardsley did not draw the Nichols portraits of himself and Wilde, for example) does not mean that they cannot exercise an interpretive function. ‘Beardsley’s Portrait of Himself Dying’ and ‘Full length portrait of Oscar Wilde in frock-coat’ may fail to persuade us of their genuineness, but the attempt that these forgeries represent merits scrutiny. By conjuring an elusive concept such as ‘decadence’ with an aggregation of personality, stylization, and lore, these forgeries do much the same thing as other (legitimate) 1920s compilations of Beardsley’s work in marketing a twentieth-century future for the 1890s ever-captivating past.

- ¹ Royal Cortissoz, 'Aubrey Beardsley and Some Others', *New York Herald Tribune*, 16 March 1919, p. 7.
- ² This description comes from Joseph Gollomb, 'New Beardsley Originals', *Evening Post* [Book Section], 12 April 1919, pp. 1, 6 (p. 6).
- ³ I borrow this phrase from James G. Nelson's *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde, Dowson* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).
- ⁴ As a New York publisher and bookseller, Nichols touted the more reputable aspects of his 1890s past, such as the West End addresses of his London bookstores, rather than his published output or inventory, which included, according to Peter Mendes, 'some of the most interesting erotic publications of the period' ('Smithers', p. 289). Relatively little is known about Nichols, and what information is obtainable in published sources tends to emphasize Nichols's partnership with Leonard Smithers in the clandestine business of publishing erotica. The two began to publish erotic works under the 'Erotika Biblion Society' imprint in Sheffield in 1888 before moving to London, where for a time each maintained a bookshop. Their partnership dissolved in 1894-95, with Smithers moving into more high-end publishing ventures. Nichols went bankrupt in 1898, and after a stint in Paris he moved to the United States in 1908, where he remained for the rest of his life. See Mendes, 'Smithers and the Erotic Book Trade', in James G. Nelson, *Publisher to the Decadents*, pp. 287-90; Mendes, *Clandestine Erotic Fiction in English: A Bibliographical Study* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993), pp. 15-19; Nelson, *Publisher to the Decadents*, pp. 27-47; and Colette Colligan, *The Traffic in Obscenity from Byron to Beardsley: Sexuality and Exoticism in Nineteenth-Century Print Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 71-72.
- ⁵ Gollomb, pp. 1, 6.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- ⁷ 'An Exhibition of a Portion of H. S. Nichols' Collection of Original Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley', [p. 4]. 'Scrapbook of clippings relating to the Nichols forgeries, containing also the announcement of the exhibition of the forgeries, New York, April 14-19, 1919', Princeton University Library Special Collections, 2005-2080N. On the Nichols exhibition, see A. E. Gallatin, *Aubrey Beardsley: Catalogue of Drawings and Bibliography* (New York: Grolier Club, 1945), p. 139.
- ⁸ Oliver Brenning [A. E. Gallatin], 'Aubrey Beardsley: Vintage of 1919', *Vanity Fair* (September 1919), 44.
- ⁹ H. S. Nichols, 'Beardsley Experts', *Evening Post*, 25 April 1919, p. 10.
- ¹⁰ C. Lewis Hind, 'Aubrey Beardsley', *Evening Post*, 31 May 1919, p. 13.
- ¹¹ H. S. Nichols, 'Critics Question New Beardsleys', *Evening Post*, 18 April 1919, p. 9.
- ¹² Joseph Pennell, 'A New Illustrator: Aubrey Beardsley', *The Studio* (April 1893), 14-19.
- ¹³ Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 156.
- ¹⁴ Gollomb, p. 1.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ¹⁶ For this information I thank Steven Halliwell of Rivendale Press, who granted me a Skype interview on 9 November 2019. Mr. Halliwell's bibliography of Nichols is in preparation.
- ¹⁷ Gollomb, p. 6.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- ¹⁹ Nichols, 'Critics Question', p. 9.
- ²⁰ A. E. Gallatin, 'Beardsley Art to be Passed Upon', *Evening Post*, 28 May 1919, p. 9.
- ²¹ H. S. Nichols, 'The Beardsley Drawings', *Evening Post*, 6 June 1919, p. 8.
- ²² Nichols admitted as much when he wrote that it 'was the recent sale at the Anderson Galleries of the Frederick H. Evans collection of Aubrey Beardsley's drawings that caused me to make the announcement that I possessed a collection also, and of later exhibiting them.' H. S. Nichols, 'The Beardsley Controversy', *Evening Post*, 24 May 1919, p. 8.
- ²³ Bernard Quaritch (1819-1899), prolific bookseller and collector.
- ²⁴ Charles F. Rideal, 'Beardsley Critics', *Evening Post*, 23 April 1919, p. 10.
- ²⁵ G. C. Williamson's copy of Aubrey Beardsley, *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley* (New York: H. S. Nichols, 1920), Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.
- ²⁶ Leonard Smithers, 'Prefatory Note', in Aubrey Beardsley, *A Second Book of Fifty Drawings* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1899), [p. 7].
- ²⁷ Georges Derry [R. A. Walker], 'An English Authority on Beardsley', *Evening Post*, 28 April 1919, p. 8.
R[ainforth] A[rmitage] Walker was a vigorous and longstanding defender of Beardsley's reputation, having published multiple books on the artist, thus establishing himself as a pre-eminent expert. His Beardsley books, many of which were self-published, include *Some Unknown Drawings of Aubrey Beardsley* (1923); an edition of *Letters from Aubrey Beardsley to Leonard Smithers* (1937); and *How to Detect Beardsley Forgeries* (1950).
- ²⁸ Georges Derry [R. A. Walker], 'Beardsley Non Redivivus', *Literary Review* [*New York Evening Post*], 5 March 1921, p. 5.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ R. A. Walker, *Some Unknown Drawings of Aubrey Beardsley* (London: R. A. Walker, 1923).

- ³¹ Osbert Burdett, *The Beardsley Period: An Essay in Perspective* (London: John Lane, 1925).
- ³² Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 103.
- ³³ Robert Ross, *Aubrey Beardsley* (London: John Lane, 1909), p. 25.
- ³⁴ Linda Gertner Zatin, *Aubrey Beardsley: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), II, p. 447.
- ³⁵ Brenning [Gallatin], p. 44.
- ³⁶ Mark Samuels Lasner, *A Selective Checklist of the Published Work of Aubrey Beardsley* (Boston: Thomas G. Boss, 1995), p. 108.
- ³⁷ Rider quoted in Mendes, *Clandestine Erotic Fiction*, p. 451.
- ³⁸ Mendes, p. 19.
- ³⁹ 'Owns Seventy Beardsleys: H. S. Nichols to Exhibit His Collection of Original Drawings', *New York Times*, 30 March 1919, p. 14.
- ⁴⁰ Brenning [Gallatin], p. 44.
- ⁴¹ R. A. Walker, *How to Detect Beardsley Forgeries* (Bedford: R. A. Walker, 1950), p. 15.
- ⁴² Beardsley, *Fifty Drawings*, [n.p.].
- ⁴³ 'Aubrey Beardsley in a Representative Exhibition', *New York Times*, 13 April 1919, p. 4.
- ⁴⁴ Zatin names Alfred Cooper, a onetime bookselling associate of Smithers's, as a source for both types of items. See Zatin, II, p. 447.
- ⁴⁵ Gollomb, p. 6.
- ⁴⁶ H. S. Nichols, 'Indorsement', *Novels and Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (New York: H. S. Nichols [Cosmopolitan Library Series], 1915), [n.p.].
- ⁴⁷ C.3.3. [Oscar Wilde], *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1898).
- ⁴⁸ H. S. Nichols, 'Foreword', in Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (New York: H. S. Nichols, 1924), p. 10.
- ⁴⁹ On the Wilde photographic archive, see Daniel A. Novak, 'Sexuality in the Age of Technological Reproducibility: Oscar Wilde, Photography and Identity', in *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008), pp. 63-95, and 'Picturing Wilde: Christopher Millard's "Iconography of Oscar Wilde"', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 32 (2010), 305-35.
- ⁵⁰ The insulting calling card, left at Wilde's club by the Marquess of Queensberry, prompted Wilde to sue Queensberry for libel. The failure of that lawsuit led in turn to Wilde's prosecution and eventual imprisonment for gross indecency. On the card and its interpretation, see Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 412.
- ⁵¹ On publisher John Lane's suppression of this image 'because of the sexual details', see Zatin, II, pp 33-35.
- ⁵² Aubrey Beardsley, *A Portfolio of Aubrey Beardsley's Drawings Illustrating Salome by Oscar Wilde* (London: The Bodley Head, 1907).
- ⁵³ Walker, *How to Detect Beardsley Forgeries*, p. 15.
- ⁵⁴ Gilles Néret, *Aubrey Beardsley* (Cologne: Taschen, 1998), p. 30.

The Journal as Archive:
Vesy and the Russian Reader's Encounter with Decadence

Jonathan Stone

Franklin and Marshall College

The journal *Vesy* [*Libra*], published in Moscow between 1904 and 1909, offered a markedly new venue for the waves of modernist authors and theorists emerging in turn-of-the-century Russia. It incorporated numerous nods to European literary trends and included regular contributions from Remy de Gourmont, frequent articles on Oscar Wilde, reproductions of artwork by Odilon Redon and Aubrey Beardsley, and a steady stream of reviews of recent books in French, English, German, and Italian. Yet it also published new works by the most prominent Russian Symbolists and decadents. *Vesy*'s aesthetic stance was abundantly clear to its readers, prompting a hostile critic to label it 'the Koran of the Moscow Decadents'.¹ This offhand dismissal contains a surprising degree of insight. The journal billed itself as a 'bibliographical monthly' that sought to combine Russian and Western, new and old, original and translation. True to the journal's bibliographical identity, the mixture of materials included in the seventy-two issues of *Vesy* did indeed read like another breviary of decadence that collected the foundational tenets of the new tradition, accumulated over several decades from all corners of Europe, into a single space of publication. For Russian readers and authors, decadence was a balancing act. On the one hand, they sought to imitate authors and texts of the past that were imported with a badge of decadence that had already been established by European critics and readers, and on the other, they were simultaneously generating distinctly Russian iterations of what, for them, was an emerging modernist art form.² Having created an instant, serialized, and widely accessible archive of decadent works, *Vesy* offers a curious indication of how decadence was read from a distance while also working as a template for transplanting it into new cultural spaces. This perspective helps flesh out a definition of decadence that highlights its open-endedness and malleability.

This article examines the structural principles that governed *Vesy*'s mixture of poetry, prose, criticism, and reviews. I show how *Vesy* was designed to educate a Russian audience about decadence and nurture a coterie of readers versed in its underpinning aesthetics. This didactic element emerges when aspects of reception theory are applied to our reading of the print culture of decadent publications. Matthew Potolsky shows how the definition of decadence hinges on the people and institutions that informed its reception.

Works are 'decadent' not because they realize a doctrine or make use of certain styles and themes but because they move within a recognizable network of canonical books, pervasive influences, recycled stories, erudite commentaries, and shared texts. Each decadent text borrows from and expands the network, locating itself by reference to the names or books it evokes and leaving its own contributions behind.³

Russian readers were particularly attuned to the contexts and networks of decadence. The highly mediated ways they accessed modernist works created a confluence of influences and models that emphasized their communal elements. The eclectic diversity of decadence, the hodgepodge of traits that contribute to Potolsky's dynamic and somewhat mercurial definition, are the crux of its Russian readers' conceptual understanding of the tradition. The journals and publications that helped to import decadence into Russian literary culture relied on promoting and participating in the networks of texts and authors that reveal the contours of its definition. Modernist journals in turn-of-the-century Russia were a major tipping point in shepherding Russian literature and culture from the era of the psychological and realist novel to a sensibility focused on individual experience and the subjective perception of the surrounding world. The journals, with *Vesy* ultimately taking the lead, could articulate a unifying viewpoint, 'the principal of individuality, of freedom of art, of the subjectivity of artistic creation [which] played the role of a consolidating idea' that bound Russia's nascent modernists.⁴ This called for a steady introduction of both European works and forms and original literary and artistic creation from Russia itself. The modernist journals' transitional position has been explored extensively in scholarship that situates it within the dramatic and rapid development of new art and aesthetics in late Imperial Russia.⁵ I expand the scope of those interactions by highlighting the significance of the Russian journal's complex

relationship with temporality in navigating the presentation of modernism. As part of a second, delayed, wave of theorizing and modelling modernism, *Vesy* actively cultivated an awareness of the multiplicity of decadence, the many components that fashioned it for a new cultural context, and strove to offer a vehicle for decadence's encounter with a Russian audience.

I focus on presenting and analyzing several elements of the inaugural issue of *Vesy* from 1904. Its opening article, Valerii Briusov's 'Keys to the Mysteries', was immediately followed by Konstantin Bal'mont's extended discussion of the life and poetry of Oscar Wilde. Bal'mont's posthumous and historical appraisal of Wilde complements the generative and novel quality of Briusov's aesthetic manifesto. By capitalizing on the belated introduction of decadence to Russia, the journal functioned as an archival repository of European decadence while also fostering the creation of new decadent works in Russian. Through this combination of its retrospective and future-oriented functions, *Vesy* illustrates how readers first experienced decadence and came to understand and even emulate it in the aftermath of that encounter. Within the scope of this article, I limit my analysis to the first issue of *Vesy*. It serves as a representation of the journal as a whole in terms of its structure, style, and aesthetic stance. But this particular issue is an especially informative site for an investigation of Russian modernism. It conveys the aspirations of an emerging group of writers, it is modelled as one long manifesto for their art, it was designed to be utilized as a sourcebook for a new aesthetics, and it overtly seeks to create bridges between distant times and disparate places, to connect a Western literary past to a Russian literary present.

Vesy's dualistic temporal focus is indicative of the liminal nature of Russian modernism. The journals and publications that disseminated Symbolist and decadent writing in Russia in the mid 1890s were explicitly creating something new. They imported an aesthetic language and literary style that deviated significantly from the realist prose works that had preoccupied Russian readers from the 1840s into the late 1890s. With little in the way of transition or organic development, modernism seemed to appear *ex nihilo* on the Russian literary landscape around 1894-95 with a spate of publications, both genuine and parodic, touting their novelty. In this early wave of what

was generically labelled ‘the new art’, it was quintessential for writers to prominently proclaim their aesthetic affiliation. Calling a booklet of poetry ‘Russian Symbolists’ and being associated with an article about the ‘Moscow Decadents’ was a clear indication of an artistic stance to their readers. My approach to the period hinges on understanding the dynamic relationship between author and reader. By importing decadence into Russia decades after it was introduced in Europe, Russian writers adopted a didactic role, educating their readers in a new aesthetic. This complicates the model of literary evolution that views modernism as a natural reaction to the nineteenth century and exposes the punctuated nature of its development. *Vesy* captured the uneven and temporally disparate quality of decadence by mixing its past, present, and future, adding a notable element of intentionality and self-awareness to the Russian writers’ relationship to decadence. They approached the concept as both a canon of established works and a potential new trajectory for Russian literature. *Vesy* was a tangible and relatively well delineated model while also simultaneously conveying the vague notion of future work in an as yet unseen corpus of Russian art.

Fast-forwarding a decade to 1904, the heyday of that early impulse to introduce this new art, *Vesy* reveals the complexity of the Russian reader’s encounter with modernism. Decadence was simultaneously understood as something connected to foreign books and non-Russian authors and as an increasingly visible presence in Russian literature. By the turn of the century, ‘decadence’ was a term that had been bandied about by Russian writers, readers, and critics as both insult and badge of honour. They had a sometimes inchoate, sometimes specific idea of its behavioural, cultural, and stylistic markers. It represented forms of newness and alternatives to the status quo that coincided with growing social and political discontent.⁶ After a decade of exposure to decadence, a complex network of sources and aesthetic stances had emerged, contributing to the Russian definition of decadence. The journal offers a window into the myriad forces driving this perception. The first issue of *Vesy* demonstrates the extent to which modernism was a part of Russian literature’s nascent twentieth-century identity while also representing a removed and

seemingly inaccessible cultural and temporal otherness. Its presentation of both the concept of decadence and a collection of decadent works captures the multifaceted nature of Russia's relationship to modernism's formative texts and traditions. With its deep roots in history and frequent engagement with classical motifs and aesthetics, decadence supplied Russian readers with a connection to both the distant and recent past. Yet the decadent works showcased in *Vesy*, and the decadent qualities it helped to define, bound it inextricably to Russian literature's present discourse. The journal collected and categorized an aesthetic that charted a path for practitioners yet to come. In this respect, it encompassed both the twilight and the dawn of European decadence.

Vesy was the organ of a number of writers who had struggled to find a suitable place in print. It was the logical extension of the publishing house Skorpion, founded in 1899 to wrest control from commercial publishers and divert their books away from hostile readers.⁷ Skorpion's significant early investment in translations of works by Henrik Ibsen, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Knut Hamsun, Edgar Allan Poe, and Arthur Schnitzler complemented its active efforts to establish a canon of original poetry and prose by such Russian figures (both notable and obscure) as Valerii Briusov, Aleksandr Dobroliubov, Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, Fedor Sologub, Zinaida Gippius, and Aleksandr Miropolskii. By founding a journal in 1904, those affiliated with the publishing house could create a complexly organized and interdisciplinary platform for disseminating 'Symbolism, Decadence, and the new art' (the movements they identified with in the journal's opening editorial statement) in Russia. The holistic and intentional convergence of the roles of publishing house and journal was reified in the fifteen-page publisher's catalogue appended to the first issue of *Vesy*. Both the content of the issue and the catalogue were meant to be mutually instructive and were directed at the same readers. The model of a catalogue is one of the operating paradigms for *Vesy* and a generally helpful approach to the process of importing and adapting decadence in Russia. This is the first structural concept that I will discuss as a key context in which Russian readers came to know this art and regard it as both native and foreign, contemporary and historical.

Beyond this, the range of articles and reviews in the issue itself establishes another structural paradigm that corresponds to *Vesy*'s self-designation as a 'bibliographical journal'. This is a particular manifestation of the archival impulse that reflects the processes by which decadence was presented to and collected for a Russian readership. I will also touch upon the relevance of translation and a self-awareness of the international and imported nature of a decadent aesthetic. With a keen eye on the European print context, the Russians levelled out linguistic and temporal distinctions in order to foster a unified and timeless conception of decadence. All three of these structural models help us understand the combination of reactive and productive elements of Russian decadence and give us particular insight into the broader presentation of its aesthetic tenets. Through a combination of collecting and creating, Russian decadents used the journal to establish a Janus-faced version of the art form that points both backwards and forwards.

The publisher's catalogue provides a telling snapshot of this intersection between literature of the past and literature of the future, between Russian and non-Russian decadence. The final fifteen pages of the first issue of *Vesy* comprised a catalogue of all books published by Skorpion from 1900 to 1904. Beyond its commercial purpose to sell more of the publisher's books, the catalogue creates a distinct sense of affinity and connection between all of the titles listed. It gathers and organizes decadence into a clearly delineated set of works linked by their stylistic and thematic qualities. This function complements the Russian modernist journal by consolidating the meandering branches of European decadence into a single time and space. The combination of modernist journal and book catalogue offers a clearer sense of both the purpose and the intended readership of Russian decadence. These are expressions of an understanding that an aesthetic concept is most comprehensible when presented as a cluster of works. By establishing a critical mass of disparate texts that nonetheless are branded with the same designation and association, the compilation of articles in the issue functions didactically while the list of books adds a complementary prescriptive element.

Readers of *Vesy* were amenable to its instructive qualities and drawn to the coterie represented in microcosm in its catalogue. And herein lies the crucial artistic tension and challenge for second-wave decadence. *Vesy* sought to represent an established canon of decadent works and tropes while also propelling it into the future. Kate Hext, Kristin Mahoney, Alex Murray, Vincent Sherry, and David Weir have drawn attention to the paradoxically productive role played by decadence in the development of twentieth-century modernism.⁸ *Vesy* was particularly invested in the creation of a new type of writer, one who embodied Hext and Murray's notion of 'Decadent Modernism'. *Vesy* exposed its audience to the interest in the aesthetic, the championing of alterity, and the perspectival shifts that fuelled late nineteenth-century decadence. This awareness informed the Russian readers' and writers' sense of modernity and, as exemplified in *Vesy*'s first issue, was built on an extensive foundation of texts and ideas already marked with the badge of decadence. By rehashing decadence's aesthetic stance and recontextualizing its major works and authors in the single, simultaneous space of a journal, *Vesy* reimagined the archive as a fundamental entry point into decadence. Its compactness and accessibility allowed Russian readers to incorporate it into their own visions of modernism and propel decadence into Russia's own literary and artistic avant-garde.

The list of books issued over the previous four years by the journal's publisher performs the type of levelling-out that is prominent in Russian decadence. They bring an assortment of authors and languages together and present them to the reader as an established and interconnected group. While the label 'decadent' may not be the most common for each individual book in the catalogue, in the aggregate these works form a corpus of decadence. The publisher's emphasis on variety showcases the range of sources that fed Russian decadence. The implicit community created by placing these books in a single catalogue overcomes the differences in time and place that separate Edgar Allan Poe from Zinaida Gippius and Henrik Ibsen from Andrei Bely. The titles listed here are both a static collection of books on the shelf of an archive and the

dynamic syllabus of items available in the bookstores that are necessary for new readers to acquaint themselves with a wide and capacious array of decadence.

The challenge of encompassing both the past and the future created the potential for a rift in the presentation of decadence to Russian readers. By circumscribing decadence as a set group of published works while also actively using it to cultivate a new, as yet unwritten, literary tradition Russian proponents of the new art had to nimbly navigate multiple temporal identities. The catalogue that served as the culmination of the journal established an archive of past and present examples of decadence. As a text, the catalogue operates similarly to an anthology or a miscellany. It is a ‘professionally mediated and systemized’ document that shapes its reader.⁹ Barbara Benedict explains that

[i]f in one sense the readers of late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century anthologies are passive, in another, depending on the extent and nature of the editorial mediation, they must expend enormous energy in converting decontextualized material into meaningful experience, in choosing for themselves what has been chosen for them. This enforced process of imaginative engagement simultaneously defines reader and literature as culturally elite.¹⁰

The process of inscribing additional meaning onto extant works and finding insight into a new art form through the aggregate of the catalogue is part of the imaginative engagement that marks the active reader. By assembling exemplars of decadence, the catalogue is an overt articulation of modernism as a complex network of people, works, and institutions. The consistent format of its entries – with most including a portrait of the author, annotation about the book, and excerpts from reviews – puts this list of titles into dialogue with one another. They become a coterie into which an aspiring writer or curious reader is initiated by collecting these books. The dissolving boundary between text and biography implied by the coterie, what Lytle Shaw qualifies as the ‘kinship’ of its members, is particularly suited to introducing decadence to Russian audiences.¹¹ The catalogue offers an entry point for those new to the tradition while using the model of an archive (a mediated, curated, and annotated collection of established texts) to express a definition of decadence that legitimizes their participation in it. With its apparent straightforwardness, the

catalogue intentionally smooths over the significant distance in time and place between the members of its coterie. In this respect, *Vesy* is part of a broader modernist trend for effacing national boundaries and conveying the internationally networked identity of the movement. As Eric Bulson has shown, the journal was a form well suited to reflecting modernist aesthetic and technological advancements.¹² While adopting the static concept of decadence inherited from this established collection of works, the catalogue opens up the potential for a more fluid and dynamic decadence by empowering the reader to reformulate its connections and form a new whole from these disparate elements.

The catalogue does not function in isolation, but as an integral element of the first issue of *Vesy*. It is part of the highly instructive and structured experience of reading the journal's Russian and non-Russian works. The articles in the journal also operate in the bifurcated temporality of Russian decadence. Ultimately, reading this inaugural issue of one of Russia's most consequential literary journals of the turn of the century is to inhabit multiple planes and be immersed in a plethora of temporal and geographical modes. As Joan Delaney Grossman has shown, in *Vesy* the Russian modernists

envisioned a journal devoted to the new literary and artistic culture with special attention to those Western currents on which Russian developments were still dependent for inspiration. This aim was in keeping with their conception of art's essential oneness and their hopes for a broad new artistic movement without national or linguistic boundaries.¹³

Vesy's emphasis on an instructive and didactic approach to decadence helps to explain its self-proclaimed classification as a bibliographical journal. This is a curious term for a publication at the forefront of importing modernist tendencies into Russian literature and culture. *Vesy* does indeed include an extensive section of book reviews that covers publications in Russian, German, Italian, French, and Swedish. But the impulse to collect and gather books, as I have discussed, was not limited to the reviews. Its bibliographical identity serves to emphasize the centrality of reading in the creation of Russian modernism. The work of constructing meaning out of the journal's various elements called for an engaged and committed readership. Through the confused temporality of

the archive it aligns decadence with the fragmentary and subjective facets of later modernism. The readers' interaction with decadent texts, as modelled by their encounter with *Vesy*, is mediated by the external figure of an editor. The editor acts as guide, explicating and curating the reader's experience. The archival assemblage of the catalogue enables this encounter and presents decadence to the reader in a structure that lends itself to such mediation. As with later twentieth-century modernist texts, decadence is a literary mode that seeks to train and acculturate its readers.¹⁴ When *Vesy* is considered as a whole, its blend of retrospection and guidance, the constituent factors in its bibliographical function, construct a reading experience that fosters a nuanced understanding of decadence.

Like the catalogue that concludes it, the first part of *Vesy*'s first issue, consisting of original articles, reinforces its bibliographical structure. Once again we see the constellation of coterie, collection, and archive that fuels this issue and sets up its complex relationship to time: it presents both a retrospective position on art of the past and a future-directed mandate for emerging authors. To this end, the issue is programmatic in several ways. While Briusov's 'Keys to the Mysteries' is the most frequent subject of critical attention in this issue, its pairing with the next article, Bal'mont's 'The Poetry of Oscar Wilde', conveys the particularities of Russia's appropriation of decadence and the relevance of the space of the journal. For the reader, the implied conversation between the two and the relationship established by this textual proximity links Wilde to contemporary Russian artistic theory. Through the bibliographical code of the journal, the side-by-side placement of these two articles creates an equivalence between the ideas and figures they discuss.¹⁵ The community of past and present authors generated in these articles anticipates the decadent network of the publisher's catalogue on the final pages. The interaction between parts and the whole reveals the journal's interstices in such a way that we can see how it constructs the concept of decadence. Briusov elucidates the general principles of decadence, but the context provided by Bal'mont's article adds colour and detail to Briusov's declarations about the nature of art.

Written three years after Wilde's death, Bal'mont's appraisal of his poetic career is distinctly styled as neither an obituary nor a memorial. He seeks to fix Wilde's place in both the European *fin de siècle* and in early twentieth-century Russian aesthetics. Near the end of the article, he asserts that Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche, who died just three months before Wilde in 1900, were paradigms of late nineteenth-century thought. Their lives and personalities serve as models for aspiring Russian decadents: 'How representative of our confused epoch, always searching and never finding, that these two geniuses from two great countries, with their passion and their desire, ended in insanity and exile.'¹⁶ Bal'mont's article is in part an overview of Wilde's career and an analysis of his writing, thus adding to the international record of critical responses to the writer. But it is also the first comprehensive study of Wilde in Russian and opens new horizons for the impact of his work on emerging artists.¹⁷ When paired with Briusov's manifesto, it becomes both descriptive and prescriptive. Bal'mont is engaged in an act of summation. He takes stock of Wilde's career and makes a sweeping justification for the 'Poetry' in his title, with the entirety of Wilde's work, not just his verse, being qualified as poetic: 'I am now speaking about the poetry of his personality, the poetry of his fate.'¹⁸ The goal of Bal'mont's article is to convey a single, appreciable version of Wilde for a Russian audience. He encapsulates Wilde's essence by listing his qualities: 'Oscar Wilde would everywhere scatter a glistening waterfall of paradoxes, ideas, comparisons, conjectures, biting sarcasm, delicate charm, a stream of sunshine, smiles, laughter, Hellenic joy, poetic surprises.'¹⁹ Here is a straightforward appraisal of Wilde's personality as well as a catalogue of the qualities that can help define a decadent. As Evgenii Bershtein argues, '[i]t was in the numerous responses to Bal'mont's article that Wilde's story became completely mythologized. Russian critics now considered his life as a failed superhuman effort to overcome morality; and in his attempt to create life artistically, they saw a revolt doomed to punishment.'²⁰

This broadly-focused instruction is part of Bal'mont's effort to place Wilde in the past and create an archive of his life and work for Russian readers. But elements of Bal'mont's article are in conversation with the more present-minded theoretical facets of *Vesy*. Bal'mont's discussion of

Wilde constantly hovers around the notion of beauty, particularly beauty as understood through Wilde's aestheticism. It is rooted in Bal'mont's appraisal of the interplay between society and art that is central to his presentation of Wilde. It is the beauty of tragedy and suffering that he identifies with Wilde: 'If in so loving himself, a brave man is rendered blind, he will be genuinely defeated, and in that there is more beauty, more poetry than if he conquered multitudes [...]. Such was the drama of Oscar Wilde.'²¹ Bal'mont's privileging of beauty as the key to Wilde's work and his soul, as the condensed essence of his decadence, is more than a repetition of well-worn notions of 1890s aestheticism. Bal'mont sets up the legend of Wilde as a trope for the future production of decadence. Wilde's life story moves from the biographical to the realm of the manifesto. In second-wave decadence, conveying old paradigms and inventing new ones occurred simultaneously. *Vesy* navigated this mixture of memory and invention by combining backward glances at European decadents with nods forward to the new Russian art. Beauty and art, the unsurprising keystone of Bal'mont's presentation of Wilde, are also central to Briusov's article 'Keys to the Mysteries', which the reader of *Vesy* had encountered in the preceding pages.

Briusov describes beauty in terms of mystification and the quest for eternity. This comes at the culmination of his discussion – after he has charted a path through various nineteenth-century aesthetic theories. While he tracks the development of utilitarian art, pure art, and empirical art, their relationship to beauty serves as a gauge that anticipates their function in contemporary literary practice. The polemics that he voices by spelling out the arguments of the supporters and detractors of each movement will resonate with Bal'mont's map of Wilde's life in art. Briusov fixates on the link between art and revelation through the contemplation of previous art forms. Bal'mont's discussion of Wilde plays readily into this approach. As the reader learns, the tenets of realism that Briusov rejects in the first pages of *Vesy* had been rejected by Wilde years before. Briusov and Bal'mont create a parallel between the past and the present fashioned through a well-curated examination of Wilde's life and work. The fulcrum for their interaction is in the concept

of beauty, a term both critics capitalize at key moments. They both focus on the struggle of the writer and the importance of the individual in contemporary art:

A person to whom everything in the world is simple, clear, attainable, cannot become an artist. Art is only where there is audacity beyond the edge, breaking through the boundaries of the cognizable with a craving to scoop up at least a drop of

‘An alien element, from the beyond’.

‘The gates of Beauty lead to cognition’, said the same Schiller. In all the centuries of their existence, unconsciously, but unchangingly, artists have carried out their mission: to explain the mysteries revealed to them, and at the same time they have sought other, more perfect means of attaining cognizance of the universe.²²

The definition of art and the artist promoted by Briusov as a manifesto for his contemporaries and literary allies is built on the foundation of previous decades of European art. Only when paired with a comprehensive understanding of Wilde (as mythologized for the Russian decadents) and a catalogue of works branded as decadent do Briusov’s declarations fit into the landscape he seeks to inhabit. Without an archive of past achievements, the present of Russian decadence seems unanchored and incomprehensible to the reader.

These Russian thinkers are constructing their own version of decadence through bricolage. They assemble various pieces, both native and foreign, established and nascent, and manage to sustain a version of decadence that is at once historical and novel. They acknowledge and embrace its imported character and deep roots in the past while still promoting its viability and vitality for new Russian writers. The ability to gather together so many exemplary models through the creation of an archive is essential to this project. By fixating on the act of reading decadence in all of its many spaces and times, its Russian proponents showcase the ‘otherness’ of decadence without alienating their audience. A highly contingent and networked understanding of the tradition emerges in the process. The overarching meaning that is derived from fusing these fragments for the Russian reader can be understood as a version of decadence that is telling for both its broader conceptual development and its particular place in Russian literary and artistic culture. The final structural model of *Veiy* I consider brings me to a question that is naturally, and belatedly, at the heart of this discussion: how did Russian authors and readers understand the concept (or concepts)

of decadence and what traits did it embody for them? This last approach to *Vesy* hinges upon the knowingly adaptive and borrowed nature of its content. Russian readers had access to European decadent publications such as *The Savoy*, *The Yellow Book*, the *Athenaum*, *La Plume*, the *Mercure de France*, *Cosmopolis*, and *La Revue Wagnérienne*, and knew of its major practitioners. As I have discussed elsewhere, by 1898 even seventy-year-old Lev Tolstoy had read two dozen or so *fin-de-siècle* writers including Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, and Maurice Maeterlinck.²³ The Russian understanding of decadence is strongly shaped by these imported sources. It draws from the types of otherness seen in Baudelaire, the musicality of Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud, the aestheticized morality of Wilde, and the immersion in Classical and Renaissance art of Walter Pater. For Russians, decadence is at once about recapturing the resonance of the lyrical ‘I’ and pushing back against the traditions of authorial social and civic responsibility that had dominated the later nineteenth century. The paradigmatic figures of Russian literature’s previous decades – Lev Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev, Fedor Dostoevsky, Ivan Goncharov – cemented the turn towards realist prose that immersed the reader in physical and psychological details. It was primarily outside of Russia that the emerging decadents of the 1890s could find aesthetic models. Many writers devoted significant effort in that early phase to discovering, obtaining, and collecting these works.²⁴ Translation and imitation were part of the Russian experience of the new art from the very beginning and by 1904 *Vesy* could quite naturally integrate numerous strains of European decadence into its pages and catalogue alongside the developing canon of Russian decadence.

Vesy consolidated these non-Russian perspectives and organized them in an accessible space. It forged a common perspective and established a set of terminology (in Russian) that put them into dialogue. Here we return to the idea of the ‘Koran of the Russian Decadents’, the pejorative label given to *Vesy* by Asheshov that was mentioned at the outset. While to an extent the Judeo-Christian Bible emphasizes narrative cohesion, the Koran is structured as a compilation of stories and episodes. For Russian writers, a pastiche of foreign works and a more amorphous constellation of figures and ideas became the entry point into decadence. The accumulated heft of

decadence, assembled into a whole, informed their understanding of the concept. The bibliographical and archival traits of the journal, as seen most readily in *Vesy*'s structure, facilitated this pursuit. For Russian readers, decadence was primarily a collection of various works by non-Russian writers bound by common spaces of publication, a common critical framework, and the associative links of the canon or archive. In this respect, decadence gains a uniformity and cohesiveness through proximity and context without endangering the open-endedness and diversity that are essential to its definition. The combination of gathering and commenting makes this into a curated assemblage of an aesthetic whose sum is more cohesive and instructive than its constituent elements. By experiencing decadence in the aggregate, readers overcame the geographical, temporal, and aesthetic divisions that made it such a capacious tradition. *Vesy* is a tangible example of the network that constitutes decadence. It is the reification of decadence's conflicted relationship with the new and modern that makes it a notoriously slippery concept.²⁵

Decadence's liminality and alterity come from its uneasy relationship with borders and boundaries.²⁶ Consequently, it could be adopted by writers and readers at a significant spatial and temporal distance from its origins. Russian decadents capitalized on this mobility and fluidity to join a tradition that was not native to their literary heritage. The process called for the rapid education of a Russian audience through the instant creation of an archive of decadence. It was essential to translating a decadent canon into Russian while also fostering the development of an indigenous decadent tradition among Russian writers. By consigning decadence to the archive, *Vesy* enabled both of these functions. It turned decadence into a relatively unified object of study, a contemplation of literature's past, while sparking its ongoing development with new works and new authors bound by its thematic, aesthetic, and stylistic markers. Archiving decadence was an effective strategy for performing the shifts in geography and temporality that made it part of the present and future for new literary traditions. Ultimately, the ways *Vesy* reflected and refracted decadence affirmed its timelessly dynamic and mercurial nature, a status conferred by the Russian journal's appropriation of the archive.

¹ Nik Asheshov, 'Review of K. D. Bal'mont (*Sobranie stikhotvorenii. Tom vtoroi*), Viacheslav Ivanov (*Prozrachnost'*), Andrei Belyi (*Zoloto v lazuri*)', *Obrazovanie*, 8 (1904), Part III, 146-51 (p. 149). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

² Scholarly considerations of modernism tend to pinpoint its beginnings in the shifts in thought that had been percolating since the appearance of Baudelaire, Swedenborg, and Darwin in the mid nineteenth century. Thus, decadence was born of the same paradigm shifts that enabled modernism's artistic and social upheavals and can be treated as an early phase of modernism, one that would help propel the movement into the twentieth century. See David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995); Vincent B. Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Kate Hext and Alex Murray, eds, *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019).

³ Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 5.

⁴ A. V. Lavrov, and D. E. Maksimov, 'Vesy', in *Literaturnyi protsess i russkaia zhurnalistika kontsa XIX-nachala XX veka. 1890-1904. Burzhuazno-liberal'nye i modernistskie izdaniia*, ed. by B. A. Bialik, V. A. Keldysh and V. R. Shcherbina (Moscow: Nauka, 1982), pp. 65-136 (p. 70).

⁵ The contours of this transition and the foreign influences on writers of the 1890s have been the subject of several major studies. See Georgette Donchin, *The Influence of French Symbolism on Russian Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1958) and Rachel Polonsky, *English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). General overviews of the evolution of the Russian modernist journal can be found in Joan Delaney Grossman, 'Rise and Decline of the "Literary" Journal: 1880-1917', in *Literary Journals in Imperial Russia*, ed. by Deborah Martensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 171-96; Stanley Rabinowitz, 'Northern Herald: from traditional thick journal to forerunner of the avant-garde', in *Literary Journals in Imperial Russia*, ed. by Deborah Martensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 207-27; and Hanna Chuchvaha, *Art Periodical Culture in Late Imperial Russia (1898-1917)* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

⁶ See Joan Delaney Grossman, *Valery Bryusov and the Riddle of Russian Decadence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Mark D. Steinberg, *Petersburg Fin de Siècle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Olga Matich, 'Russia', in *The Fin-de-Siècle World*, ed. by Michael Saler (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 150-66; and Jonathan Stone, *Decadence and Modernism in European and Russian Literature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁷ The most extensive treatments of the history and development of *Vesy* (whose name was derived from the zodiac sign but has been variously translated into English as *Libra*, *The Balance*, and *The Scales*) are Lavrov and Maksimov, 'Vesy', and K. M. Azadovskii and D. E. Maksimov, 'Briusov i "Vesy" (K istorii izdaniia)', in *Valerii Briusov. Literaturnoe nasledstvo 85* (Moscow: Nauka, 1976), pp. 257-324. A more focused approach to *Vesy* can be found in the articles contained in D. A. Zavel'skaia and I. S. Prikhod'ko, eds, *Iz istorii simbolistskoi zhurnalistiki. Vesy* (Moscow: Nauka, 2007). There is also a cursory overview of the journal in Oleg Minin, 'Modernism Upheld: Moscow Journals of Art and Literature', in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines. Vol. III, Europe 1880-1940*, ed. by Peter Brooker, Sascha Bru, Andrew Thacker, and Christian Weikop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 1276-798.

⁸ Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*; Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*; Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence*; and Hext and Murray, eds, *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*.

⁹ Barbara Benedict, *Making the Modern Reader: Cultural Mediation in Early Modern Literary Anthologies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹¹ Lytle Shaw, *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), pp. 17-47.

¹² Eric Bulson, *Little Magazine, World Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

¹³ Grossman, 'Rise and Decline of the "Literary" Journal', p. 182.

¹⁴ See Molly Abel Travis, *Reading Cultures: The Construction of Readers in the Twentieth Century* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), pp. 18-23.

¹⁵ On the concept of bibliographical codes, see Jerome J. McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

¹⁶ Konstantin Bal'mont, 'Poeziia Oskara Uail'da', *Vesy*, 1 (1904), 22-40 (p. 37).

¹⁷ On Wilde's place in Russian culture, see Evgenii Bershtein, 'The Russian Myth of Oscar Wilde', in *Self and Story in Russian History*, ed. by Laura Engelstein and Stephanie Sandler (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 168-88, and Polonsky, *English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance*, pp. 152-69.

¹⁸ Bal'mont, 'Poeziia Oskara Uail'da', p. 25.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁰ Bershtein, 'The Russian Myth of Oscar Wilde', p. 179.

²¹ Bal'mont, 'Poeziia Oskara Uail'da', pp. 24-5.

²² Valerii Iakovlevich Briusov, 'Keys to the Mysteries', in *The Russian Symbolists: An Anthology of Critical and Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. by Ronald E. Peterson (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1986), 52-64 (p. 63). The original is in Valerii Iakovlevich Briusov, 'Kliuchi tain [1904]', in *Sredi stikhov, 1894-1924: manifesty, stat'i, retsenzii*, ed. by N. A. Bogomolov and N. V. Kotrelev (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1990), p. 101.

²³ Jonathan Stone, 'Decadent Style with a Symbolist Worldview: Andrei Bely, Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, and the Perils of Surfaces', *Modernism/Modernity*, 21.1 (2014), 269-82.

²⁴ A crucial starting point for many was Zinaida Vengerova's 1892 essay, 'Symbolist Poets in France'. Zinaida Vengerova, 'Poety simvolisty vo Frantsii', *Vestnik Evropy*, 9 (1892), 115-43.

²⁵ See Weir and Sherry, who build on Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979).

²⁶ This is the crux of Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky's characterization of decadence as an aesthetic of 'perennial decay'. Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky, eds, *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

‘Struggling with the tempter’:
the Queer Archival Spaces of Vernon Lee, Mary Robinson, and Amy Levy

Sally Blackburn-Daniels

The Open University

Burdett Gardner was the first scholar to gain access to the personal correspondence of Vernon Lee (1856-1935) after its donation to Colby College, Maine, in 1951. Yet his resulting monograph, *The Lesbian Imagination (Victorian Style): A Psychological and Critical Study of Vernon Lee*, was not published until 1987. This may have been due to the embargo Lee herself had placed upon the bequest, though her close friend and executor Irene Cooper Willis had published a collection of Lee’s private correspondence in 1937 and provided permission for the scholar Peter Gunn to write and publish a biography of Lee in 1964.¹ Gunn addresses the embargo in his preface by suggesting that adherence to Lee’s testamentary wishes would impoverish her ‘extraordinarily precocious talents’. Therefore, he notes, Cooper Willis waived the prohibition in this instance.² Why then was Gunn’s biography published with permission of the testamentary estate, and Gardner’s monograph subject to Lee’s proviso? I would argue that this was due to the ways in which each writer engaged with a particular aspect of interest in Lee’s archival remains: her sexuality.

Alongside attention to Lee’s correspondence at Colby, notable additions to Gardner’s study were the interviews he conducted with Lee’s close friends, acquaintances and neighbours, including Cooper Willis, whom Gardner quotes as saying:

Vernon was homosexual, but she never faced up to sexual facts. She was perfectly pure. I think it would have been better off if she had acknowledged it to herself. She had a whole series of passions for women, but they were all perfectly correct. Physical contact she shunned. She was absolutely frustrated.³

Perhaps Cooper Willis’ own anecdotes were partly the reason she refused the book’s publication, but this statement — along with many others in Gardner’s work — cemented Gardner’s position that Lee was a spokesperson for the ‘cramped and cabined ego’.⁴ Gardner’s psychosexual analysis of Lee’s biography engaged with perceived Oedipal desires between Lee’s brother, Eugene Lee-

Hamilton, and mother, Matilda Paget (née Adams), and Lee's repressed same-sex sexual expression. Despite this, Gunn and Gardner's work paved the way for an influx of interest in Lee, particularly by second-wave feminist critics keen to reclaim marginalized homosexual women writers. Cooper Willis' admission that Lee *refused* to admit her own frustrated sexual appetites has suggested to certain scholars that Lee was unable to express her sexual identity either publicly or privately. It is this aspect of Lee's identity I wish to consider in this article: the ways in which Lee sustained a 'pure', 'perfectly correct', and asexual self-presentation (even around her closest friends), which was counterposed with the women in *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890), whom she frees from her own (self-imposed) moral constraints.

In doing this, I engage critically with Lee's personal and public life, using a methodology most significantly encountered in the study of ancient democracy and politics: prosopography. Prosopography is, as Dion Smythe notes, derived from the Greek *prosopon* — a mask, or person — and *grapho*, 'I write'.⁵ As a scholarly discipline, it is used to narrativize and analyse collated biographical data from a specific, often narrow, historical period.⁶ Yet prosopography is not merely collective biography. It highlights change, be it political, economic, social, cultural, or ideological. It is also heavily reliant upon archival sources and their interrelations.⁷ This article will utilize this methodology to provide a prosopographical study of late-nineteenth century decadent discourse between three queer women writers: Vernon Lee, Agnes Mary Frances Robinson (known as Mary Robinson, 1857-1944), and Amy Levy (1861-1889).

As Matthew Potolsky suggests in *The Decadent Republic of Letters*, decadence is in fact 'preoccupied with communities',⁸ with each text borrowing from and expanding its network, 'locating itself by reference to the names or books it evokes and leaving its own contributions behind.'⁹ It is these decadent communities that reframe or perhaps, conversely, make indistinct, the boundaries of the archive that I wish to engage with in this article. Literary texts by Lee, Robinson, and Levy are sites of storage for autobiographical and biographical material, each text a micro-archive. Drawing out these biographical details, especially those which are in dialogue with

the work of other writers, provides a unique and personal approach to the more traditional concept of the archive. Furthermore, the locus of this reframing or blurring of boundaries through intertextual presences and prosopographical analysis will expand the definition of the archive, taking it beyond a singular cohesive entity, and enabling a decryption of the community of coded references to queer decadence that exist within these works.

Whilst Lee's attraction to women is acknowledged within the public domain, there is a difficulty for some critics in placing her relationships: Sally Newman asks were they 'lesbianism or romantic friendships?'¹⁰ Newman's question is one that can only be answered, it seems, with evidence of the sex-act itself, which has yet to be evidenced by Lee's correspondence or manuscripts. Many Lee scholars, including Martha Vicinus and Vineta Colby, believe Lee engaged in same-sex partnerships, albeit none of them were consummated. Invoking phrasing from Lee's own *Euphorion*, Colby writes that '[h]er feelings for Mary Robinson were to remain "a kind of love which is mainly aesthetic"' and that 'their relationship was and remained nonsexual in the physical sense'.¹¹ Patricia Pulham, using D. W. Winnicott's transitional object theory, suggests Lee only finds freedom to express transgressive sexualities through the art object. Yet, in doing so, Pulham draws attention to the problems of labelling Lee's sexuality.¹² In this way, much scholarship avoids embodying Lee's desire. Vicinus instead argues that Lee's relationships 'advocated a feminine purity that arose from a disciplined desire, rather than from either a denial or ignorance of passion'.¹³ Sensuality and passion were felt, Vicinus suggests, but were dealt with rationally, and with self-control. It is this 'disciplined desire' I would like to focus on and adapt. I want to suggest that Lee's sexuality is neither stifled nor 'cramped', neither lesbian nor asexual but, rather, *sophrosyne* in nature. The *sophrosyne*, argues Helen North, is 'the harmonious product of intense passion under perfect *control*'.¹⁴ It is the effect of this wilful suppression of emotional extremes that I hope to highlight in Lee's relationships with Robinson and Levy.

Rather than fixing Lee with the term 'lesbian' and the sexual connotations of this descriptor as is done by Newman and many other Lee scholars, I instead utilize the term *queer*. In defining

queerness with respect to Lee, I follow José Esteban Muñoz and Judith [Jack] Halberstam. Muñoz points to the German origins of the word *quer* as a presentation of the transverse: ‘situated or extending across something’.¹⁵ This conception of the term corresponds to the particularities of both Lee’s life and works. Whilst Lee’s relationships were inherently same-sex, they appear to be simultaneously asexual. Her textual expressions of sexual desire are also inherently non-normative. In this way, Lee’s sexuality and gender identity extends across the spectrum of sexual and gender expression; similarly, her work transverses genres and literary periods. Halberstam’s notion of ‘queer’, meanwhile, is constructive for thinking about sexuality in structural, organizational, spatial, and temporal terms insofar as it ‘refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time.’¹⁶ Halberstam’s queer archive is a site of collected memory, a complex record of political and ideological activity that functions rhetorically. Therefore, a queer archive — the storage of materials that relate to gender or sexual identity and nonnormative expression — is a space in which queer individuals engage with one another, and, I would argue, this queer archival space can exist within a single text. For example, an archive can exist within the texts that are subject to archiving; the intertextual text is simultaneously text and archive. In this way, many of Lee’s works are complete entities, yet also contain a community of queer influence, expression and activity. It is from these queer archives — the intertextual sites of queer expression — that I build my prosopography of Lee.

Contemporary letters between poet and literary critic John Addington Symonds and sexologist Havelock Ellis suggest the same-sex attraction between Lee and Robinson was not only publicly recognized, but was also an ideal case study for Ellis’ studies of female same-sex relationships. Ellis wrote to Symonds that he was ‘given to understand — and can well believe — that Vernon Lee is very homosexual’, but believes it ‘doubtful’ she would be ‘willing to take any scientific interest in the matter’.¹⁷ He continues to taxonomize Lee and Robinson within a binarized framework of inversion, presenting their gender signifiers as a ‘heterosexual polarisation within the homosexual circle’.¹⁸ Robinson is the *femme fatale*: ‘ultra-feminine’, ‘little’, and ‘kittenish’

whilst ‘the straightforward “Vernon Lee” — addressing a meeting’ is androgyne.¹⁹ Ellis’ use of inverted commas to enclose Lee’s adopted nomenclature draws attention to Ellis’ recognition of this being a pseudonym, and a pseudo-performance of masculinity. He creates boundaries around the name, exposing its falsity, whilst juxtaposing it with the confirmed masculinity and straightforwardness of her true character. Despite her resistance to an analysis of her romantic relationship with Robinson, Lee was not opposed to, or uninterested in, the work of sexologists such as Ellis. Indeed, Lee’s personal collection of books, now held at the British Institute of Florence, contains the work of Patrick Geddes, whose *Sex* (1898) focuses on the biological evolution of the sexes, reproduction, sexual selection and degenerate sexual reproduction, and August Forel, whose *Die Sexuelle Frage* (1906) uses Krafft-Ebing’s classificatory terms to explore sexual pathology, the influence of environment on sexuality, as well as sexual hygiene and morality. More significantly, her collection includes Charles Féré’s *L’instinct sexuel: évolution et dissolution* (1899). Féré’s book begins with the statement that its aim is to demonstrate the necessity of control and responsibility in sexual acts, from both the hygienic and ethical point of view, something Lee evidently ascribed to, confirmed by Cooper Willis’ interview with Gardner.²⁰ There is much evidence of Lee’s reading in her copy of *L’instinct sexuel*, but what is particularly noticeable is that the chapter ‘Les Perversions sexuelles symptomatiques’ remains uncut. Perhaps the first page of the chapter’s discussion of a congenital predisposition to homosexuality went beyond the boundaries of Lee’s interest in this subject, and it remains, unlike the chapters following, virginal and unread. The uncut pages of this chapter stand as a metaphor for Lee’s own same-sex desire: the chapter has not been penetrated by her intellectually curious mind, the pages remain un-parted to this day. It is, to the Lee scholar, a marker, both textual and moral, of her self-imposed sexual continence; evidence of what Cooper Willis calls her perfect purity and correctness, an intellectual passion under perfect moral control. It is perhaps this form of silencing certain subjects and subjectivities within Lee’s archive that frustrates scholarship. I suggest that by being cognizant of the sprawling and intertextual boundaries of Lee’s queer archive, we open up its potential as a

repository for community biography: in this case, the relationship between Lee, Robinson, and Levy. Through the collaborative archival traces extant within the network of queer archives, we can decode textual sources, silences, and moments of self-restraint.

The Sophrosyne

‘Dionea’, a fantastic tale from the collection *Hauntings*, is framed by Lee as the letters of Doctor Alessandro De Rossi to the Lady Evelyn Savelli, Princess of Sabina. De Rossi, writing from his coastal exile, alludes to his younger years spent in political and social intrigue, but it is clear he is now seeking penance. The correspondence is one-way — a device that presents De Rossi as an unreliable narrator and focuses the reader’s attention on any narratorial omissions. The plot centres on De Rossi’s discovery of a shipwrecked four- or five-year-old child, Dionea, whom he finds eminently fascinating. He takes it upon himself, with Lady Evelyn’s financial support, to ensure the waif is cared for and educated. He notes she is ‘decidedly pretty, and brown as a berry, [...] she understood no kind of Italian, and jabbered some half-intelligible Eastern jabber, a few Greek words embedded in I know not what.’²¹ This linguistic hybridity and exoticism intoxicates De Rossi. Leaving Dionea with a convent of nuns, he is amused to hear of her continued ‘un-Christian’ behaviours. De Rossi writes to Lady Evelyn that Dionea’s ‘companions detest her, and the nuns, although they admit that she is not exactly naughty, seem to feel her as a dreadful thorn in the flesh.’²² His comment contains, of course, the suggestion of the puritanical Reformers’ ‘thorn in the flesh’ which represented a shift away from the Catholic interpretation of the thorn as a physical impediment towards a metaphysical loss of faith.²³ Dionea is tempting the coastal community, including the nuns, to unbelief.

By the age of seventeen, Dionea has thoroughly bewitched the inhabitants of the coastal village, with its people either falling indescribably and unsuitably in love with one another or fearing the young woman whom they claim is a witch. De Rossi is so enchanted by the beauty and Greekness of his ‘brown-berry’ Dionea that he returns to his scholarly interest in the Pagan gods

and goddesses. He reads Heinrich Heine's 'Die Götter im Exil' ['Gods in Exile'] (in *Vermischte Schriften* [Miscellany], 1854) in which the Pagan gods are assimilated into Christian society:

Yes dear Lady Evelyn, you have guessed aright. Your old friend has returned to his sins, and is scribbling once more. But no longer at verses or political pamphlets. I am enthralled by tragic history, the history of the fall of the Pagan Gods.... Have you ever read of their wanderings and disguises, in my friend Heine's little book?²⁴

Heine's essay confirms De Rossi's suspicions that the gods and goddesses still wander the earth, most notably in the case of Dionea. He writes to Lady Evelyn that 'the Pagan divinities lasted much longer than we suspect, sometimes into their own nakedness, sometimes in the stolen garb of the Madonna or the saints.' This comment is particularly resonant as, he notes, Dionea has recently been discovered trying on the garments of the Virgin Mary at the convent.²⁵ He also reveals that Dionea's skills echo those of her namesake, Dionysus: she has the ability to make people fall in love, but 'it is not with her they are in love [...] the young people must needs fall in love with each other, and usually where it is far from desirable.'²⁶ De Rossi's description of Dionea draws on Heine, who, in turn, recycles stories from the canon of classical works.

Lee's (and by extension De Rossi's) fixation upon Pagan divinities is not peculiar to them. Indeed, it is an interest shared by Robinson. Robinson was a scholar of the Greek language, receiving tuition from Symonds, and her poetry engages with themes and motifs from Greek mythology. Robinson's collection *The Crowned Hippolytus* (1881) was published a year after meeting Lee in Italy. Indeed, Robinson presented a copy of *The Crowned Hippolytus* to Lee, and penned a dedicatory poem in the inside cover of the text:

To Violet, with Mary's love.

Violets are for Sappho's wear
In her laurel-shadowed-hair;
But upon my head is set
No immortal bay, nor yet
Royal-hearted violet.
Flowers, that crowned her sacred head,
You shall crown my heart instead.

April 15th 81.²⁷

Lee is not the ‘straightforward’ Vernon to the ‘kittenish’ Robinson, but Violet to Mary. There is gender parity and affection, and more than a suggestion of Newman’s ‘romantic friendship’. But this friendliness is disrupted by the mention of Lesbian poet Sappho, who is crowned with violet flowers. Sappho is ‘sacred’ to Robinson, and as readers we question whether this is as a poet, as an icon of same-sex love, or both. The violet flowers that crown Sappho replace the bay, a suggestion that Sappho’s poetry has been replaced in public perception by her sexuality. But this is not the case for Robinson. Modestly, she notes her literary skills have not yet been recognized, and the violet, the symbol of homosexuality, is around her heart, not her head.

Robinson’s dedication expresses a familiarity with Sappho’s fragments, one that becomes part of a shared discourse between herself and Lee. The crowning with flowers is a motif often repeated in the poetic fragments of Sappho; in ‘Now Dika, weave the aniseed together, flower and stem’ the garland becomes a diadem and gift to the Graces.²⁸ The connection between Robinson’s dedication and Sappho’s poetry becomes more explicitly connected with same-sex love when we consider the use of violets. Sappho writes:

You culled violets and roses, bloom and stem,
Often in spring and I looked on as you
Wove a bouquet into a diadem.
Time and again we picked lush flowers, wed
Spray after spray in strands and fashioned them
Around your soft neck; you perfumed your head
Of glossy curls with myrrh — lavish infusions
In queenly quantities — then on a bed
Prepared in fleecy sheets and yielding cushions,
Sated your craving ...²⁹

The plucking of flowers and the creation of wreaths and diadems are pastimes that bind women together, and act as precursors to sensual and sexual fulfilment. The erotic tones of Sappho’s fragment are absent from Robinson’s dedication, yet the language of flowers uniting women is present. Aaron Poochigan notes that ‘thoughts of flowers bind females together once they have been separated’.³⁰ In the fragment ‘I have had not one word from her’ the violet tiara becomes a symbol of sated, but now separated, love:

I have had not one word from her
Frankly I wish I were dead.
When she left, she wept

a great deal; she said to
me, ‘This parting must be
endured, Sappho. I go unwillingly.’

I said, ‘Go, and be happy
but remember (you know
well) whom you leave shackled by love

‘If you forget me, think
of our gifts to Aphrodite
and all the loveliness that we shared

‘all the violet tiaras,
braided rosebuds, dill and
crocus twined around your young neck

‘myrrh poured on your head
and on soft mats girls with
all they most wished for beside them

‘while no voices chanted
choruses without ours,
no woodlot bloomed in spring without song ...³¹

That Robinson’s and Lee’s violets remain around the heart, rather than crowning the head suggests same-sex love, and a binding together, but also a wholesome purity.

This purity is referenced in the collection’s title, *The Crowned Hippolytus*. Hippolytus was the son of Theseus and the subject of a play produced by Euripides for the City of Dionysia of Athens in 428 BC. At the opening of the play Hippolytus has sworn chastity and refuses to revere Aphrodite, instead honouring the goddess of the hunt, chaste Artemis. Hippolytus was crowned with laurel because he was a worshipper of Artemis (the twin sister of Apollo), and cypress trees were sacred to her. All of Artemis’ companions remained virgins: indeed, it is Artemis’ virginity — or her asexuality — that provides her power and independence. She is her own master. This is exemplified by the Ancient Greek virtue of *sophrosyne*; an ideal excellence of character and soundness of mind, which when combined in one well-balanced individual leads to other qualities, such as temperance, moderation, prudence, purity, decorum, and self-control.

It is the virtue of the sophrosyne, and the parallels between the chaste morality of Lee and Hippolytus, that feed into both Robinson's collection and Lee's 'Dionea'. 'The Lover's Silence', a sonnet from Robinson's collection, explores the purity and self-control that she experiences in her relationship with Lee.

When she whose love is even my air of life
Enters, delay being past, to bless my home,
And ousts her phantom from its place, being come
Herself to fill it; when the importunate strife
Of absence with desire is stilled, and rife
With heaven is earth; why am I stricken dumb
Abashed, confounded, awed of heart and numb,
Waking no triumph of song, no welcoming of life?
Be thine own answer, soul, who long ago
Didst see the awful light of Beauty shine,
Silent; and silently rememberest yet
That glory which no spirit may forget,
Nor utter save in love a thought too fine
For souls to ignore, or mortal sense to know.³²

The poem concerns the 'she' who is the love of the poet's life, the gender of the lover is reiterated three times in four lines, with the fourth line stressing the opening 'Herself'. It is a queer opening, one that burns with desire for the she/Lee that haunts Robinson. The lover's space has been inhabited by a phantom which represents both a physical absence of one lover, and the desire for the absent body of that lover. Yet once the phantom lover is ousted by the embodied lover 'the importunate strife | Of absence with desire is stilled' and there is silence. The first section, the octet, is filled with desire for 'she' and her physical arrival. The volta and the sestet that follows is concerned with the present moment: the material, beauty, thought, and sense. The lovers' love is 'too fine | For souls to ignore', yet unknown by mortal sensuality. Hippolytus the sophrosyne, lover of aesthetic beauty but chaste, temperate, and self-controlled, triumphs over the Dionysiac desires that are an expectation, but never sated, of the poet Robinson.

In the early stages of their relationship, Robinson's phantom is synonymous with excitement and desire, but it is replaced by the reality of an embodied Lover who is ascetic and chaste. By 1884 the desire for a disembodied lover became the central focus for Lee's fantastic tale

A Phantom Lover (1886) which was later published as ‘Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover’ in *Hauntings*. The change of title for the short story is fascinating. The phantom becomes a definite article; the new title sets up a dichotomy between the embodied William Oke — the ‘Oke of Okehurst’ — and the spectral Lovelock. Alice Oke desires communion with Lovelock; it is the absence of the poet that make him all the more fascinating and attractive to Alice, whereas the apparently steadfast (and living) Oke is a nuisance. The passion Alice has for Lovelock is reckless and Dionysian, at odds with her author’s own sophrosyne morality. Lee’s dedication of ‘Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover’ to Count Peter Boutourline states:

Do you remember my telling you, one afternoon that you sat upon the hearthstool [...] the story of Mrs Oke of Okehurst? You thought it a fantastic tale [...] and urged me to write it out at once, although I protested that, in such matters, to write is to exorcise, to dispel the charm.

In fixing or making a physical representation of the phantom, it loses its charm. The physical is a poor substitute for the ethereal, and in her protests to Boutourline Lee attempts to show authorial self-control and allow ‘Oke of Okehurst’ to maintain its charm. This opposition between physical and absent (spectral or ethereal) desire permeates Lee’s and Robinson’s letters and writings.

On 8 February 1886, Lee writes to Robinson: ‘You are a strange creature, Mary; & I feel that were I to clutch you [ever] so close, I should clutch but a phantom, or rather the real thing would elude me, volatile, distant.’³³³ The phantom figure that haunted the lover in Robinson’s sonnet, that became the lover in Lee’s *A Phantom Lover*, has become transposed by Lee, who subsumes Robinson’s metaphor. The fear for Lee is the reality of contact, and the idea that should this occur she would in fact, feel nothing. It is a reversal of Robinson’s phantom who excites desire only for the embodied Lee to silence and calm this desire. Lee enters, fills, and blesses Robinson’s home. The home is a sacred space, a heaven upon earth, when they are both within it. In an undated letter to ‘Vernie’, although certainly after their separation in 1887, ‘Molly’ (Robinson) writes again about the notion of shared space:

Vernie dear, I have vanished like a ghost from your life — and soon you will feel less rancour towards that poor little phantom because she will begin to grow indistinct —

blurred forgotten, therefore forgiven for all real or imaginary faults & failures. Perhaps best it is so. [...] Ah if you could have only come to be the queen and pearl of the house how much more it would have seemed like home! Molly.³⁴

Robinson's regret that Lee did not become 'queen and pearl' of the house means that the house is unable to become a home. Furthermore, the use of 'queen' evokes the crowning of Hippolytus once more, as well as the sensual poems of Sappho. It also emphasizes Lee's femininity, rather than the masculine 'king'. The pearl, once a piece of grit, has now been polished and irritates the flesh no more, and there are obvious connotations between female genitalia and the mantle of the oyster. The letter again picks up on the trope of haunting. Robinson's phantom now further dissipates, she becomes almost fluid, and hopes to be forgotten by Lee. Like Alice Oke, Robinson refuses what Pulham insightfully calls 'the restraint of the Apollonian form'.³⁵ Brandon Chao-Chi Yen utilizes Pulham's original approach, noting that the essential fluidity of the Dionysiac in Dionea is the woman 'born' of a storm, who returned to the waves. This appears to be the case with Robinson, a woman of desire, who becomes indistinct. Chao-Chi Yen recognizes that the intermingling of these Apollonian and Dionysian elements of human nature 'undermine[s] the concrete fabric of art' and casts 'an ambiguous light on morality'.³⁶ The Dionysiac allows the self to succumb, to reach pleasurable satisfaction, whereas the sophrosyne Apollo turns away from the sensual towards a moral assuredness.

The Flesh is Weak

Dionea is the embodiment of potential chaos and pleasure, yet any desire for Dionea remains unfulfilled. Whilst the villagers fear the primal emotions she arouses, the sophrosyne De Rossi, and the Apollonian sculptor Waldemar are, at least initially, rational, and morally upright. Lee the sophrosyne (and by extension De Rossi) is able to immediately 'understand the place of the irrational in the human soul and somehow come to terms with it', and is at once able to 'honour Dionysus without shaming Apollo', something which the sculptor Waldemar is unable to achieve.³⁷ Waldemar's aesthetic ideal is an echo of Winckelmann and Pater: he favours sculpting the male

physique — until he meets Dionea. Yet, as Pulham argues, Waldemar’s underlying homosexuality is not negated by his fascination with Dionea. Rather, the sacrificial scene at the end of the narrative encodes *poikilos*, the Greek phenomenon of homoerotic love.³⁸ Waldemar’s Apollonian nature is kept in check by his wife, Gertrude, and when it is given free expression, Waldemar and Gertrude are killed in the Dionysian ritual. This presentation of the destructive Dionysian expression of homosexuality is not the only one evident in ‘Dionea’. De Rossi’s relationship with the young Father Domenico is fundamentally important in understanding Lee’s sexual dissonance: how desire is presented and recognized, and the choice to fulfil it, or negate it. De Rossi’s letters note that Domenico is:

A young man, tall, emaciated with fasts and vigils, but handsome [...]. One has heard of men struggling with the tempter. Well, well, Father Domenico had struggled as hard as any of the Anchorites recorded by St. Jerome, and he had conquered. I never knew anything comparable to the angelic serenity of gentleness of this victorious soul. I don’t like monks, but I loved Father Domenico.³⁹

De Rossi admits to admiring the monk, certainly, but what is significant is the way in which these two men mirror one another. Both have chosen a form of exile: De Rossi in the court of Lady Evelyn’s father, Domenico cloistered in the monastery. While De Rossi studies the Pagan gods and rituals, Domenico is devoted to his Roman Catholic faith. Their friendship involves the sharing of struggles and victories:

Of late, Father Domenico had seemed to me less calm than usual: his eyes had grown strangely bright, and red spots had formed on his salient cheekbones. One day last week, taking his hand, I felt his pulse flutter, and all his strength as it were, liquefy under my touch. ‘You are ill,’ I said. ‘You have fever, Father Domenico. You have been overdoing yourself — some new privation, some new penance. Take care and do not tempt Heaven; remember the flesh is weak.’ Father Domenico withdrew his hand quickly. ‘Do not say that,’ he cried; ‘the flesh is strong!’ and turned away his face.⁴⁰

When De Rossi is called back to the monastery one evening, he is overcome by a feeling of dread. He writes ‘Something told me my monk was dead.’⁴¹ De Rossi’s instincts, rather than his rationality, take over. At the behest of the Superior, he writes the death certificate out as ‘a case of apoplexy’,⁴² noting, ‘It was weak of me. But after all, why make a scandal? He certainly had no wish to injure the poor monks.’⁴³ The Doctor recognizes the truth of Domenico’s demise, and believes Dionea

to have been the cause, particularly when she states, ‘so, he has killed himself with charcoal, poor Padre Domenico!’⁴⁴ This small scene is hugely significant. I would argue that this is perhaps the first *embodied* same-sex/queer desire scene in Lee’s work, albeit a coded one, rather than a supernatural or aesthetic representation. That the young Domenico is attracted to De Rossi, an educated, single, older man, who lives in self-imposed exile, and a confidant of the Princess of Sabina, is not extraordinary. The signs De Rossi reads as sickness are also signifiers of attraction and desire: the red spots are perhaps blushes not fever, the pulse a flutter of excitement. He takes the young man’s hand (in what way we are not told), but the way in which Domenico liquefies under De Rossi’s touch is reminiscent of Bernini’s *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. Bernini’s sculpture is composed of nun Teresa and an angel. The former’s face is contorted with religious ecstasy as the angel prepares to pierce the body of the nun with his phallic golden spear. Yet Domenico’s Catholicism will not allow him to succumb to the temptations of queer desire, and his final attempt to show the strength of the flesh is to end his life by inhaling the fumes of charcoal.⁴⁵ Camille Paglia suggests that ‘Both the Apollonian [and by extension sophrosyne] and Judeo-Christian traditions are transcendental. That is, they seek to surmount or transcend nature’.⁴⁶ Domenico could not transcend his own nature — he was not able to maintain sophrosyne virtue — and chose to take his own life, despite this being an ecclesiastical crime. Domenico’s death is included in a letter to Lady Evelyn dated 20 October 1885.

I have focused on this section not only because it engages with a coded representation of queer desire in Lee’s archive, but because it exhibits parallels with her relationship with the poet and novelist Amy Levy. Levy met Lee in 1886 in Italy, where she was spending time recovering from a deep depression. Levy immediately fell for Lee, but Lee was still in a relationship with Robinson, and appears not to have noticed Levy’s attraction to her. On 26 November 1886, Levy sent Lee five poems, one being ‘To Vernon Lee’.

On Bellosguardo, when the year was young,
We wandered, seeking for the daffodil
And dark anemone, whose purples fill

The peasant's plot, between the corn-shoots sprung.

Over the grey, low wall the olive flung
Her deeper greyness; far off, hill on hill
Sloped to the sky, which, pearly-pale and still,
Above the large and luminous landscape hung.

A snowy blackthorn flowered beyond my reach;
You broke a branch and gave it to me there;
I found for you a scarlet blossom rare
Thereby ran on of Art and Life our speech;
And of the gifts the gods had given to each
Hope unto you, and unto me Despair.⁴⁷

Levy's sonnet, like Robinson's, narrates a memory of Lee. Levy recalls a walk along Bellosguardo, Florence, in early spring. The year is young, and so too is the relationship between Lee and Levy. The poem is abundant in its use of opulent colours; the decadent yellow, gold, purple, and scarlet appear to draw Levy's eye but these are offset by Lee's austere greys, pearls, and whites. Lee and Levy search for early blooming flowers, daffodils, and anemones, and see the bountiful fields of the peasants sprouting not only crops but blooms. There is utility and beauty. The list of flowers, and the luminous landscape, the undulating hill on hill, is reminiscent of Romantic poetry, particularly the line that reverberates with a Wordsworthian subjectivity '[w]e wandered, seeking for the daffodil'. Levy finds for Lee 'a scarlet blossom rare': the blossom is unnamed, unspoken, but scarlet is a symbol of the desire and passion she has for the older writer. Lee reciprocates, in an act heavy with sophrosyne virtue: she breaks a branch (there is a sense of violence) from 'a snowy blackthorn'. Purity is symbolized by the whiteness of the blackthorn's flowers, and this, as well as the blossom, is beyond Levy's reach, but not Lee's. The blackthorn is flowering, but the fruits — the part of the tree most prized — have not yet formed. Lee's gift to Levy, though beautiful and desired, is torturous and not what it appears to be, nor is it equal to that of Levy's gift to Lee. The blackthorn, whilst beautiful in bloom, is also savagely protected by its thorns, an image Lee utilizes when describing Dionea as a 'thorn in the flesh'. Is Levy a thorn in Lee's flesh, and is her desire testing Lee's strident moral standards?

Whilst the poem is strewn with flowers and the hope of springtime, there is also a poignancy, a disappointed desire. Levy's scarlet blossom is found, but is not taken by Lee, and nature is presented as being beyond Levy's reach. It is 'far-off', and she remains in a state of frustrated desire, 'seeking'. Levy notes that the conversation ran on 'Art and Life', with art paired with 'hope', life paired with 'despair', an implicit return to the gods that illustrate these Apollonian and Dionysian ideals and the virtue that binds control and passion, the *sophrosyne*. The Lee that exists within Levy's 'To Vernon Lee' appears to quash the desire that she excites in the poet. Not only is Lee's purity (the blackthorn) beyond Levy's reach, but it is harsh.⁴⁸

Despite this unrequited passion, Lee and Levy remained in correspondence until Levy's death on 10 September 1889. Shortly before her death, Lee had asked Levy to come to Florence once more, but Levy's reply which arrived on 8 September (and was quoted in Lee's own letter to Paget) stated she was '*too ill in body & soul*'.⁴⁹ On 18 September 1889, Lee writes to her mother from Ilkley near Leeds in the North West of England:

Dearest Mamma

You will be sorry to hear that poor little Miss Levy died last week. Poor little girl, she was only 27, and had her novel cremated with her — a sad little life. I should be very grateful if you w^d have a few laurel sprigs cut & put in a *campione senza valore* box (if there are none in the drawing room *cassapanca* they can be got at the Post Office) 25 cent. stamp and address to Mrs Levy 7 Endsleigh Gardens Easton Square N. W. and will you put our name merely & 'For Amy'? It is very sad.⁵⁰

Lee's gift of laurel sprigs from Florence, a place that meant so much to their friendship, is a recognition of Levy's life as a writer and poet, a crowning from the Hippolytus. Unlike Robinson's and Lee's diadems and wreaths, it is not a same-sex bond, but a recognition of Levy's art. Despite Lee's matter-of-factness, and the business-like way in which she conducts her mother to send the laurel in a *campione senza valore* — a box sample without value — there is also a deep sadness. Significantly, the *campione* was often used to send manuscripts between correspondents, or items without commercial value, yet to both sender and receiver the object's literary resonances would have been understood.⁵¹ By 14 October 1889, society had discovered that the death of Levy was by her own hand.

Poor Miss Levy! The truth has little by little dribbled out. She killed herself with charcoal, probably while the family was away. I suppose she could not obtain poison, else she would scarcely have inflicted on her family the horror & disgrace of undoubted suicide. But she had every right: she learned in the last 6 weeks that she was on the verge of a terrible & loathsome form of madness apparently running in the family, & of which she had seen a brother of hers die. I did not know this till today. What a life for a poor little sensitive girl!⁵²

The seriousness of Levy's decision and the infliction of this decision upon her family can scarcely be believed by Lee, especially the notion of societal disgrace Levy's act would have brought upon them. Yet Lee feels that despite Levy's method, she was right, due to a hereditary illness that ran in the family. Scholars now know that Levy's brother did not in fact die from an inherited madness, but from contracting syphilis.

Lee's inclusion of suicide by the inhalation of charcoal fumes in a published work so soon after the death of Levy, especially as both women moved within the same literary circles, is perhaps of questionable taste. The suicide of Father Domenico, a death that I have argued is due to unreciprocated love or the shame of same-sex desire, is dated by De Rossi specifically as 20 October 1885, almost six months before Lee met Levy for the first time in Florence, and almost a year before she received Levy's sonnets and poems. In separating these events historically and by gender, Lee is distancing herself from Levy's tragic ending, or suggesting that these events are in no way connected. But perhaps by instilling De Rossi with the *sophrosyne* virtue that she herself exhibits, she is suggesting that, like De Rossi, she too was unaware of Levy's admiration, or wilfully suppressed any feelings for her.

In conclusion, by broadening Lee's archive of influence beyond its material and topographical boundaries, and by allowing it to become enmeshed with the archival sources — to write a queer prosopography of Lee's friends and lovers — we are able to synthesize a three-dimensional picture of Lee's life. The literary co-presence of Lee within Robinson's and Levy's work, and of her within theirs, suggests that the edges of personal archives are not so clearly defined. By imbuing the unreliable narrator De Rossi with her own virtues, Lee invites the reader

to go beyond the framed narrative of the text, unravel the intertext, and extend the boundaries of the archive.

¹ Elizabeth F. Libbey, 'The Vernon Lee Papers', *Colby Quarterly*, 3.8 (November 1952), 1-3 (p. 1). Elizabeth Libbey discusses this embargo: 'the original packets of Letters Home [...] shall not be read except privately until 1980, and that all examination of them shall be under this restriction.' Vernon Lee, *Vernon Lee's Letters with a Preface by her Executor I. C. Willis*, ed. by Irene Cooper Willis (London: Privately Printed, 1937); Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964).

² Gunn, pp. ix-x.

³ Sally Newman, 'The Archival Traces of Desire: Vernon Lee's Failed Sexuality and the Interpretation of Letters in Lesbian History', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 14.1/2 (2005), 51-75 (pp. 55-56).

⁴ Burdett Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination (Victorian Style): A Psychological and Critical Study of Vernon Lee* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1987), p. 69.

⁵ Werner Eck, 'Prosopography', in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies*, ed. by Alessandro Barchiesi and Walter Scheidel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 1.

⁶ Dion Smythe, 'Prosopography', in *The Oxford Book of Byzantine Studies*, ed. by Robin Cormack, John F. Haldon and Elizabeth Jeffreys (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 1.

⁷ Lawrence Stone, 'Prosopography', *Daedalus*, 100.1 (Winter 1971), 46-79 (p. 46).

⁸ Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5

¹⁰ Newman, p. 52.

¹¹ Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville, MA, and London: University of Virginia Press, 2003), pp. 59, 58.

¹² Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. xiv.

¹³ Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 144.

¹⁴ Helen North, *Sophrosyne: Self Knowledge and Restraint in Greek Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. x.

¹⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 31.

¹⁶ Judith [Jack] Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), p. 2.

¹⁷ Sean Brady, *John Addington Symonds (1840-1893) and Homosexuality: A Critical Edition of Sources* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 239.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 245-46.

²⁰ 'Ce livre a pour but de mettre en lumière la nécessité sexuelle tant au point de vue de l'hygiène qu'au point de vue de la morale. Il ne compte pas sur toutes les sympathies.' [This book aims to highlight the sexual need, both from the point of view of hygiene, and from the point of view of morality. The author does not count on sympathy.] Charles Féré, *L'instinct sexuel: évolution et dissolution* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1899), p. 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²³ Matthew George Easton, 'Thorn in the Flesh', in *Easton's Bible Dictionary* (London, Edinburgh, and New York: T. Nelson and Sons, 1897), p. 958.

²⁴ Vernon Lee, 'Dionea', in *Haunting and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Mississauga: Broadview Editions, 2006), pp. 77-104 (p. 83).

²⁵ Dionea was discovered 'handling in a suspicious manner the Madonna's gala frock and her best veil of *πίρρο δι Canti*'. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁷ A. Mary F. Robinson, 'Dedicatory Poem', in *The Crowned Hippolytus Translated from Euripides with New Poems* (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1881), inside cover. Vancouver, BC, Norman Colbeck Collection, UBC Library: Rare Books and Special Collections.

²⁸ Sappho, 'Now Dika, weave the aniseed together, flower and stem', in *Stung with Love: Poems and Fragments*, trans. by Aaron Poochigan (London: Penguin, 2015), p. 13.

²⁹ Sappho, 'In all honesty, I want to die', in *Stung with Love*, p. 25.

³⁰ Poochigan, 'Notes', in *Stung with Love*, p. 24.

- ³¹ Sappho, 'I have not had one word from her', in *Sappho*, trans. by Mary Bernard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 42.
- ³² Mary Robinson, *The Crowned Hippolytus* (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1881), p. 194.
- ³³ Vernon Lee, letter to Mary Robinson, 8 February 1886, in *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, 1856-1935: Volume II, 1885-1889*, ed. by Sophie Geoffroy and Amanda Gagel (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), p. 144.
- ³⁴ Mary Robinson, letter to Vernon Lee, 4 August 1888, in *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, Vol. II*, p. 370.
- ³⁵ Pulham, p. 135.
- ³⁶ Brandon Chao Chi Yen, 'Art, Psychology and Morality: The Dionysiac and the Apollonian in Vernon Lee's Hauntings', *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 62 (Spring 2014), 1-11 (p. 8).
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- ³⁸ Pulham, p. 142.
- ³⁹ 'Dionaea', pp. 87-88.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 8.
- ⁴⁷ Amy Levy, *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1889), p. 74.
- ⁴⁸ 'Reason and logic are the anxiety-inspired domain of Apollo, premiere god of sky-cult. The Apollonian is harsh and phobic, coldly cutting itself off from nature by its superhuman purity [...]. Apollo's great opponent Dionysus is ruler of the chthonian whose law is procreative femaleness. As we shall see, the Dionysian is liquid nature, a miasmatic swamp whose prototype is the still pond of the womb'. Paglia, p. 12.
- ⁴⁹ Vernon Lee, letter to Matilda Paget, 8 September 1889, in *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, Vol. II*, p. 436. [Italics in original.]
- ⁵⁰ Vernon Lee, letter Matilda Paget, 18 September 1889, in *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, Vol. II*, p. 440.
- ⁵¹ Anon. 'Tariffe e servizio postale dei campioni senza valore', *Posta e società*, http://www.postaesocieta.it/magazzino_totale/pagine_htm/campioni_senza_valore.htm [accessed 28 April 2019]
- ⁵² Vernon Lee, letter to Matilda Paget, 14 October 1889, in *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, Vol. II*, p. 447.

Rachilde's *La Tour d'amour* (1899): A Translated Extract

Jennifer Higgins

Independent Translator

Rachilde's *La Tour d'amour* tells a story of loneliness, guilt, and sexual obsession set in the perilous world of a lighthouse off the Brittany coast, creating a gripping psychological drama. Although this novel stands among Rachilde's finest work, it remains relatively little-known and has never been translated into English. Rachilde, who was born Marguerite Vallette-Eymery (1860-1953), published the story in 1899. At this time, she was already well-known in Parisian literary circles as the author of several novels exploring non-conformist, fetishist, or obsessive sexuality, usually from the starting-point of a female protagonist. These early novels include those for which Rachilde is now best remembered, such as *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), in which a French noblewoman rejects her aristocratic male suitor in favour of a poor man whom she transforms into a 'wife', a culturally feminine figure, and *La Marquise de Sade* (1887), whose sadist female protagonist takes revenge on men for injustices she suffered as a child. These women, and those in many of Rachilde's novels of the 1880s and 1890s, seek escape through unusual or cruel sexual behaviour from the identity and sexuality that society imposes on them. In this sense, *La Tour d'amour* is different: its protagonist is a young man, and he is drawn into a world of depravity rather than creating his own depravity in order to escape from the bonds of conventional society. This difference sets it apart and could perhaps explain why the novel is frequently omitted from accounts of Rachilde's oeuvre, despite its quality.

In *La Tour d'amour*, Rachilde creates a world completely cut off from society, the lighthouse, where the narrator makes a series of disturbing discoveries. Rachilde roots the story in reality: the novel's lighthouse, the Ar-Men, is a real one, built during the 1870s and still standing today. Rachilde was greatly interested in the lighthouse's construction and in the practicalities and perils (both physical and psychological) of working there, including the immensely dangerous process of getting on and off it.¹ She uses this in the novel to emphasise the Ar-Men's otherworldly-nature and its separation from 'normal' life.

The novel is narrated by Jean Maleux, a young, naïve sailor who is appointed assistant keeper of the Ar-Men lighthouse. He is sent there to help old Mathurin Barnabas, the current keeper. Jean makes the crossing to the Ar-Men in stormy weather, and soon begins to find life there strange and troubling: Barnabas barely speaks, has forgotten how to read, never washes, and moves around the lighthouse in a crab-like crawl. Before long, a ship is wrecked nearby, and the bodies of the drowned begin to float by. Jean is horrified by Barnabas' indifference, and amazed

when the old man sets off in a rowing boat despite the continuing storm. The next morning, Jean glimpses something unusual in the water. The pale form turns out to be the body of a naked woman: Barnabas was not searching for survivors in his boat, but beautiful corpses, and he has fastened one there so that the sea can never take her away.

Time slips by, and Jean no longer thinks of visiting the mainland or of anything except his daily round of duties. One morning, after a storm, he climbs up the outside of the lighthouse to carry out repairs. Finding himself close to the window of Barnabas' secret room, he peers inside. A face looks out at him, a sad young woman with long, faded blonde hair. Jean loses his grip and falls into the sea, only just managing to pull himself back up onto the rocks.

When Jean recovers he goes on leave to Brest, where, drunk, he wanders down a dark alley, grasping his knife for protection. He hears footsteps and a woman comes up and whispers in his ear. This woman, who may or may not be Marie, a girl who has previously spurned him, kisses him with an 'abominable' kiss and embraces him 'like an octopus'. Jean drives his knife into her stomach, killing her. 'What of it?' he asks himself, 'I've killed the sea.'

Back at the lighthouse, tormented by guilt, Jean immerses himself in the numbing routine. Meanwhile, Barnabas falls ill. As he lies dying he makes one last request: that Jean should fetch 'her' for him, and he gives him the key to the secret room. Jean expects to see the woman he glimpsed previously, but instead finds but a jar with a woman's head inside it, preserved in alcohol, her long hair flowing out down the sides. Barnabas caresses the head and makes Jean throw it into the sea rather than allow another man to possess it.

Barnabas dies, and Jean must await the supply ship. The old man's body begins to decompose in the heat, but Jean does not throw it into the sea. When the ship finally comes, he is named chief lighthouse keeper and he vows 'before God, if he is listening' never to set foot on land again. The world of the Ar-Men closes around Jean: in it his distorted perception finds the home that he never previously had, and a refuge from the mainland, which is for him threatening, confusing and impossible to navigate.

Like most of Rachilde's novels, *La Tour d'amour* has never been translated into English: her work is not easily obtainable in French, and still less so in English translation. Recent translations by Melanie Hawthorne of *Monsieur Vénus* and *La Jongleuse* are still in print, but Liz Heron's translations of *La Marquise de Sade* and *Monsieur Vénus*, published by Dedalus in the 1990s, are unavailable now, although *La Marquise de Sade* is due to be re-issued in 2020.²

The extract translated here begins part-way through Chapter Six and goes on to the end of the chapter. It is the moment when Jean first discovers that the strange behaviour of Barnabas is much more sinister than he had previously thought. An English ship, the 'Dermond-Nestle', has

been wrecked not far from the lighthouse, and both men have been watching corpses float by, some narrowly missing a rocky reef known as the *Baleine*. As the extract opens, Jean is resting after having been on watch.

The accompanying woodcut image [fig. 1] was designed by Louis Jou (1881-1968) for a 1916 edition of the text, issued by the publisher Georges Crès et Cie. as part of the ‘Maîtres du livres’ series.



Fig. 1: Woodcut, designed by Louis Jou for Rachilde's *La Tour d'amour* (Paris: Georges Crès et Cie, 1916).

Extract from Chapter 6, *La Tour d'amour*³

Rachilde

Why the devil hadn't we seen a single woman float by?

At first this idea comforted me a little. I was reading *Paul and Virginie*, a lovely story where the woman is also drowned, towards the end. And I remembered the lady's long blonde hair (or was it brown? I can't really remember) stretched on the sand of the seashore when Paul ... Yes, that was why there were no women. Because we save women first, according to true French manners, and they travel less than men. They stay at home in the warm with their children close by, hiding in their skirts.

The book dropped from my hands.

And all of them waiting for their men on the jetties, over there!

I wouldn't have minded comforting one of them.

Oh, to have a sweet woman, a loving one, waiting for you, her pink mouth ready for a kiss on your return ...

'Like cats!'

And the old memory of the Moorish girl came back to me.

I'd seen her again on my second voyage to Malta, but she wasn't free, and she only gave me her photograph. The photograph that I kept so devotedly, even though it had been ruined by the Marseilles flies.

Oh, women!

I fell asleep, seeing things and sighing, and I had a strange dream.

I dreamed that a drowned woman ... who had the old man's hair, the way he wore it in the evening ...

Habit woke me just in time for my shift. I got up with difficulty.

'A foul dream', I said to myself, ashamed of the whole thing.

... But it had come in spite of me ... and really, in the *Ar-Men* lighthouse it couldn't happen any other way ...

'It's the tower of Love!' I sniggered to myself, wanting to make fun of my own weakness.

Lost in my thoughts about living in the *Tower of Love*, I suddenly realised that I hadn't heard the boss's usual refrain. Was he going to spend the whole night there on the edge of his staircase with his harpoon?

I did my round of the lamps and cleaned the glass, filthy with slimy water from the endless rain. From deep within the cave of rocks there rose a low roar: the water was letting out its hollow

moan, thrashing about in violent rage at its own powerlessness to demolish us ... The sea is delightful! Suddenly a new song began to rise, not spiralling up through the interior but coming from *outside*, from the waves. The old man was singing his song, off towards the *Baleine*, abeam the lighthouse, and he was *moving away* ...

I stood there for a moment, stunned, wondering if I wasn't losing my mind! Why, seeing all those carcasses going past all in one evening was enough to drive anyone a bit mad. The old man was going away, leaving the lighthouse, peacefully singing his accursed song.

'How's he getting away? In the rowing boat, by Jove!'

Then, in a flash, everything became clear. Perhaps he had seen a living soul, and was trying to save it.

A living soul around here, when the *Dermond-Nestle* was wrecked nine days ago?

'Hm! I must be deranged. You need to keep an eye on your boiler, my son. It's bubbling over, and all this solitude doesn't do you any good at all.'

Indeed, it was hard to imagine the predicament of someone who survived a shipwreck and landed on the back of the *Baleine*; he wouldn't last three hours there, standing up or sitting down. The only way you'd end up there would be if you were like a lump of soft cheese, a bundle of clothes that could no longer fight its destiny.

I leaned out, but the rain blurred the view in all directions, the lamps' rays were turning to yellow steam, and the reef emerged over two hundred metres away from us.

The witch's voice was still moving further away.

The old man's a good rower! I thought, resigned to accepting all his eccentricities.

At heart, I resented him for not having got the boat out on the evening of the catastrophe. That would have been the natural thing to do.

I kept watch for the rest of that dismal night, presuming I would never see Mathurin Barnabas again.

The next day, at breakfast, my boss sat down in front of a bowl of hot soup that I'd had the audacity to prepare without consulting him.

He had returned from his nocturnal roam, not without difficulty, by all appearances! Ah, the poor old man, such a sad face! He really was sulking! His head was sunk between his shoulders, his eyes were bleary, his cheeks were the colour of wax, his hands trembled, and his whole demeanour was dirtier and shiftier than usual, a clear sign that his rescue hadn't been successful.

He ate his soup greedily, drank a glass of his tafia,⁴ then went to bed, mute as a fish.

For two days he kept his mouth shut, doing his rounds like a clock that chimes because it's been wound up.

Now that the dead weren't paying us any more visits, I arranged to take leave the next time the provisions boat came. My replacement was at the ready on the *Saint Christophe's* poop deck. He would disembark, swinging from the hoist, and I'd be off.

I'd be carrying my notes about the loss of the English ship, a long list of tins of food, a record of plank numbers and details of lots of drowned people.

I was bursting with pride at having such a solemn mission. Misfortune dictated that I should spoil this little moment by playing about with a little telescope up there on the gallery.

It was the day before I was set to depart. I was examining the area around the *Baleine* curiously. The day was quite clear, the swell was calmer, and a warm breeze, a spring breeze, had paused to let the waves warm up.

It would start up again, of course, for bad weather is also a habit that the sky never gives up, but just at that moment there was a breathing space.

I focused my telescope.

There was a white smudge on the reef's dark back.

It was a long back, several metres, rather like the keel of a boat upturned by a hurricane, a shiny sealskin.

Not a tuft of algae, not a blade of grass, not even a grain of sand stuck in a crevice. Just smooth rock, polished by the water since the beginning of time.

Across it, a livid body.

... Yes, a corpse spread-eagled there, legs to one side, arms to the other, and the swell swishing a sort of brown drapery around its head.

The body was completely naked.

I don't know why I felt suddenly feverish, seeing it naked.

It was so white, so pure, its bobbin shape so pretty.

'It's a woman!' I cried.

The brown drapery? ... hair ... very long, loose hair. A woman with no lifebelt, she was. A young woman decomposing in the warm June sun.

I wanted to cry and ...

I wanted to laugh, the nasty laugh of a boy mocking the shame of naked girls.

I ran down the spiral staircase to find the old man.

He was on his way to prepare the docking crane, the supply boat being expected at any moment. He pulled his hat down over his ears and made his way towards the esplanade, bent double, a bird of prey dragging its tattered wings along the rocks. His harpoon trailed behind him like a long, bald tail.

I brought him up short:

‘Captain!’

‘What now?’ he growled, with a start.

‘There’s another body on the back of the *Baleine*. *It’s the other sex this time!*’

I don’t know what the old man must have heard in my voice, but it stopped him in his tracks.

He straightened up suddenly, and he seemed very tall, not his usual, hunched self, and his eyes flashed, lighting up his pale face as he gesticulated madly, pointing his harpoon at my chest:

‘Oh yes, there’s a woman out there all right. And she needs to be left there, my boy.’

‘The ebb tide will catch her and bring her round to us this evening, Monsieur Barnabas; in any case, we’ll find no clues on this one, she’s naked from her head to her toes, the poor lady.’

‘The tide’ll bring us nothing at all.’

‘Why not? It’s funny it hasn’t done it already. It’s been three days ...’

‘What of it?’

I waited. I had my reasons. He was still threatening me with his harpoon, and as I gazed at him he seemed to change colour.

Finally the terrible weapon fell from his hands.

‘You saw me that evening in the boat, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, I saw you, Monsieur Barnabas. So brave ... when it was too late to save anybody!’

‘She was dead’, he whispered, in a wrecked voice, ‘so no harm looking.’

‘She was naked, too ... It’s hard to believe she hasn’t been washed off the reef ...’

As I asked my questions, I seemed to be explaining things to myself. All sorts of dark things.

‘What of it?’ he sniggered, caught in my trap and stunned by the scream of the siren announcing the supply boat. ‘You’re not thinking of denouncing me? I’d have saved her if she’d been alive, poor little minx. But she’s nearly rotten ... so ... *what did it matter? ... I fixed her there with two hooks.*’

‘You filthy pig!’

We stood there facing one another, paler than all the drowned corpses in the sea.

We’d understood each other at last ...

The *Saint-Christophe*, belching out steam, turned its left side round to us and called out with the loud hailer, as it always did.

Without a word, our arms moving as one, like labourers who always worked together, we threw out the buoy. The pass rope was caught and attached to the hoist, and the crane was lowered, as the little steam boat let off white jets and whistled loud enough to burst our eardrums.

‘Ho! Hoist! Hoist! Hoist up!’

With one co-ordinated movement, we heaved on the cable.

‘Hoist up! Hoist! Hoist! Ho!’

The parcel of provisions came over, then the man replacing me, another parcel wrapped in tar cloth that we had to dry out and cheer up with a glass of rum that *I gave* him myself.

And then it was my turn. I dangled from the hoist and flew over to the *Saint-Christophe*, where I was met by a friendly bunch.

I could tell them, in all truthfulness, that I hadn’t seen a human being for six months.

I cried with joy.

That made the officer smile.

¹ Édith Silve, Préface, *La Tour d’amour* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994).

² Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus: Roman matérialiste*, trans. by Melanie C. Hawthorne and Liz Constable (New York: Modern Language Association, 2004); *The Juggler*, trans. by Melanie C. Hawthorne (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990); *La Marquise de Sade*, trans. by Liz Heron (Sawtry, Cambs: Dedalus, 1994); and *Monsieur Vénus*, trans. by Liz Heron (Sawtry, Cambs: Dedalus, 1992).

³ Rachilde’s original italics have been retained throughout.

⁴ Tafia is a West Indian rum made from sugarcane juice.

Feeling Like an Outsider:
Harold Acton, Anna May Wong, and Decadent Cosmopolitanism in China

Kristin Mahoney

Michigan State University



Fig. 1: Harold Acton in Beijing with Anna May Wong in the carved moon-gate of the drawing room of his residence at 2 Kung Hsien Hutung, or Gong Xian Hutong, c. 1936.
© New York University, Acton Collection, Villa La Pietra, Florence.

In his *Memoirs of an Aesthete* (1948), the decadent modernist Harold Acton (1904-1994) chose to include a photograph of himself in his home in Beijing with the Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong (1905-1961) [fig. 1]. Wong, known for her roles in *The Toll of the Sea* (1922), *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), and *Shanghai Express* (1932), was at the time on a year-long tour of China, during which she hoped to study Chinese theatre and acquire a deeper understanding of her heritage. She went with the hope of locating roots and a cultural home, but she also carried with her a deep ambivalence about these aspirations. ‘Perhaps upon my arrival’, she said, ‘I shall feel like an outsider. Perhaps instead, I shall find my past life assuming a dreamlike quality of unreality.’¹ Acton resided in Beijing from 1932 to 1939, and in his life-writing and fiction related to this period, he represents himself as perpetually working to come into communion with the culture of China and

perpetually frustrated in these attempts. In the image Acton chose to include in his memoirs, the two sit beside one another in the moon gate of Acton's home. In the words of Kun Xi, Acton has 'modelled himself after a Manchurian nobleman'.² Wong wears a patterned gown and holds a fan. These cosmopolites, raised in Florence and Los Angeles, who lived hybrid and peripatetic existences, longed similarly for connection with China, and they appear here staged in a manner that allows them to perform a sense of embeddedness within a culture from which they often felt disconnected.



Fig. 2: Anna May Wong in Harold Acton's residence in Beijing at 2 Kung Hsien Hutong, or Gong Xian Hutong.
© New York University, Acton Collection, Villa La Pietra, Florence.

Acton does not discuss the nature of his relationship with the famous Hollywood star in the memoirs, but the archive of visual materials related to Acton's time in China at his home, Villa La Pietra, includes numerous images of Wong [fig. 2] in his garden in front of the lotus pond, outside his study, posing in a larger group and alone wearing a fur coat. While Wong's visit to China was brief, she seems to have deeply interested and appealed to Acton. As I write a chapter on Acton's time in China for my larger project on transnational decadence and queer kinship, I am drawn to these photographs about which I want to know so much more. Because of an ongoing legal dispute concerning Acton's estate, I am unable to consult the paper archive at Villa La Pietra,

so I am uncertain whether Acton's correspondence might reveal more about how well Acton and Wong knew one another, what drew them together, or what they may have discussed during her visit to Acton's home in Beijing. However, as I work to understand Acton's relationship to China, which he represents in his writing as at once crucial and vexed, marked by a fundamental ambivalence that mirrors Wong's sense of both intimacy with and alienation from the country, I continue to return to these photographs with questions about what these two might have said to and learned from one another during this encounter.

In his memoirs, Acton foregrounds his practice of a Paterian openness to the beauty that surrounded him in China. His decadence, he seems to argue, endows him with the capacity to perceive the culture of Beijing keenly, lucidly, and with the greatest acuity. However, he also indicates that his deep veneration of Chinese culture rendered him suspicious to the expatriate community in the city, and he reflects at length in his novel *Peonies and Ponies* (1941) on the loneliness that resulted from his passion for China. Philip Flower, a character in the novel modelled on Acton, notes that his Britishness 'separates [him] from the Chinese', yet he is 'too Chinese for the foreign community'.³ Philip longs for connection and intimacy: 'He wanted to meet the Chinese on their own ground and be accepted as one of them. He would have liked nothing better than to be adopted by a Chinese family.'⁴ Philip seeks to solve the problem of his isolation by adopting a younger Chinese actor, a project that does not yield the integration with Chinese culture for which he so yearns. The young man, who longs only for New York, favours Western clothes, decorates his room with photographs of the Empire State Building, and does not provide Philip access to the union with China he seeks. Acton's novel foregrounds the sense of dislocation that accompanies the practice of decadent cosmopolitanism. The curiosity and desire for intimacy with other cultures that underwrite transnational aestheticist encounters can, in Acton's formulation, produce a sense of cultural exile, as one relinquishes a sense of rootedness in one's native culture to find that communion with the newly-desired home is impossible.

While, as the child of second-generation Chinese-American parents, Wong certainly possessed greater access to a sense of connection with Chinese culture, she places similar emphasis on a sense of rootlessness and dislocation in her comments on her visit to the country. Before her departure, she stated, 'I am going to a strange country, yet, in a way, I am going home.'⁵ However, as recent accounts of her Chinese travels by Anthony B. Chan and Graham Russell Gao Hodges indicate, this sense of homecoming was complicated by the reception she received during her visit. Prior to her visit, 'numerous [Chinese] magazines openly questioned whether she would be welcomed at all' and charged her with '[disgracing] China' in her portrayal of Chinese women.⁶ At a party in Shanghai, she met 'one of the ladies [who] spoke my dialect and so I began to chatter

away merrily in Cantonese. After a few minutes, she said, “Miss Wong, do you mind going back to English? You speak Chinese charmingly, but you have such a marked American accent.”⁷ Oral histories of her visit to her ancestral village of Chang On ‘state that villagers threw rocks at her as she approached’.⁸ She had hoped to learn more of Chinese theatre during her trip. Yet on her return she concluded, ‘I am convinced that I could never play in the Chinese theater. I have no feeling for it. It’s a pretty sad situation to be rejected by the Chinese because I am too American.’⁹ However, as Shirley Lim has recently argued, Wong was haunted throughout her career by ‘Western fantasies of the oriental, and racial segregation’ that ‘[denied] her an opportunity to become an A-list Hollywood actress in major studio productions.’¹⁰ Her Asian identity separated her from Hollywood, but she was perceived as too American by the Chinese community once she made her way ‘home’.

Working with this incomplete and alluring archive at Villa La Pietra, I am left to wonder whether Acton and Wong discussed their sense of cultural exile with one another when these photographs were taken in Acton’s garden and in his home. With the decadent tendency to Orientalism in mind, it is easy to think that these photographs reflect Acton’s treatment of Wong as an exoticized object of fascination. But Acton and Wong’s careful reflection on their attempts at communion with China lead me to hope that something else happened when they came into contact with one another. Philip Flower’s lament concerning the alienation resulting from his cultural hybridity resonates with Wong’s expression of regret about her own transnational dislocation. Perhaps this shared feeling was the foundation of their engagement with one another. These photographs, then, become artifacts with a very different political inflection, that speak to thoughtful and painful consideration of cultural displacement and the stubbornness of national boundaries rather than simply appropriation and appetitive consumption of otherness. This is, for me, an archive of images that allows for a meditation on decadent cosmopolitanism and Orientalism, that pushes us to ask a slightly different set of questions about the manner in which the decadents engaged with difference and reflected on the politics of Paterian curiosity and desire. But it is at the same time an archive that speaks to the tremendous frustrations that beset our attempts to answer these questions about the cultural politics of decadence and to reconstruct history while relying on partial or incomplete archives. This is an archive that allows us to wonder rather than to know, but I have focused here on these photographs because I treasure the uncertainty they introduce both for my own project and for our larger conversation about the politics of decadent cosmopolitanism.

-
- ¹ Carolyn Anspacher, 'Star Goes "Home"', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 24 January 1936, p. 17.
- ² Kun Xi, 'Picturing an Aesthetic and Homoerotic Space: Harold Acton's Travel Writing of China in the 1930s', *Interactions*, 28.1/2 (2019), n.p.
- ³ Harold Acton, *Peonies and Ponies* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1941), p. 78.
- ⁴ Acton, p. 79.
- ⁵ Anna May Wong, 'Anna May Wong Tells of Voyage on 1st Trip to China', *New York Herald Tribune*, 17 May 1936, p. 1.
- ⁶ Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 159.
- ⁷ Anna May Wong, 'Anna May Wong Recalls Shanghai's Enthusiastic Reception', *New York Herald Tribune*, 31 May 1936, p. 6.
- ⁸ Hodges, p. 168.
- ⁹ Quoted in Anthony B. Chan, *Perpetually Cool: The Many Lives of Anna May Wong (1905-1961)* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003), p. 119.
- ¹⁰ Shirley Jennifer Lim, *Anna May Wong: Performing the Modern* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019), p. 3.

‘A strange breath of salty air’:
Revealing Walter Edwin Ledger’s Decadent Collection

Elizabeth Adams

University College Oxford

In his autobiography, Arthur Ransome provides a compelling glimpse of Walter Edwin Ledger:

He used to come to town dressed as an old-fashioned Jack Tar, with open neck and a blue-and-white sailor collar and bell-bottom trousers. He was an extremely efficient seaman, [...] and in general brought a strange breath of salty air into the somewhat greenhouse atmosphere of the literary Nineties.¹

Although Ledger would probably have been flattered that Ransome placed him within the sphere of the literary 1890s, he was not a novelist, playwright, poet, or artist. It was as a devoted collector and bibliographer of Oscar Wilde’s works that Ledger became known to many of the individuals connected to the decadent tradition. Though less well known than figures such as Robert Ross and Christopher Millard, who famously engaged in efforts to ensure Wilde’s literary legacy and posthumous reputation, Ledger played an important role in this work and was a friend to both these men. Ledger, in fact, chose to name his magnum opus, ‘The Robert Ross Memorial Collection’, after his close friend. According to the memorandum left with Ledger’s will, the collection was a ‘tribute of admiration and affectionate esteem to [his] friend the late Robert Ross in appreciation of his chivalrous and selfless devotion to and friendship in adversity for Oscar Wilde’. Ledger’s desire to memorialize his friend resulted in a remarkable decadent archive, now housed at University College Oxford. In this brief account, I shall look at what we know about Walter Ledger and the origins of the collection and suggest why it is important.

Beyond glimpses in memoirs such as Ransome’s, much of the personal detail known about Walter Ledger comes from Donald Cree, his friend and executor. Cree tells us that Ledger was a gifted pianist, an accomplished sailor, and the world expert on ceropoegias, a type of ornamental plant.² Cree also confirms Ransome’s account by asserting that Ledger, for the last thirty-odd years of his life, dressed as a Blue Jacket, with the name of his boat, The Blue Bird, embroidered on his cap [fig. 1]. Walter Ledger was born in Lille, France, on 13 April 1862. By the time he was ten, the family had moved to England where Ledger attended University College School in Hampstead from 1872 to 1876.³ Ledger had a sister, Anne Marie (1847-1928) and a brother, Percy George (1860-1947). By the time of the 1881 Census of England and Wales, he was living with his widowed mother, Clara Eugenia, in Chertsey, Surrey. In 1882, he became an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects, articulated to the architect William Henry Crossland. By the time of the 1891

Census Ledger had moved to Wimbledon, Surrey, where he lived with his unmarried sister and one servant. He remained in the Wimbledon bungalow until his death in 1931. Ledger identified himself as an architect in the 1891 Census but by 1901 both he and his sister declared that they lived through ‘private means’.



Fig. 1: Walter Ledger: ‘In the garden that I love.’
Source: Ross d.209: Walter Edwin Ledger, *The "Blue Bird" in the South* (London: [Privately printed], 1913), frontispiece.

Although he did not officially resign from his post until Crossland’s death in 1908, at some point in the late 1890s Ledger abandoned his architectural practice and devoted himself to the creation of his decadent archive. His collection contains almost every edition (and every variant therein) of Wilde’s works published either in journal- or book-form. Ledger also sought out all of the many translations and foreign publications of Wilde’s works, as well as anything written about Wilde by other authors. Following Ledger’s death, Donald Cree believed that his collection was unique and that its only possible rival was that belonging to an American collector.⁴ This American was, of course, William Andrews Clark Jr., whose collection is now considered the most comprehensive of its kind in the world.⁵ It is worth quoting in full a piece written by Donald Cree in the course of his duty as Ledger’s executor:

Mr. W. E. Ledger's service to literature in forming the Robert Ross Memorial Collection: No better cenotaph could have been constructed in memory of a famous writer and his friends than the collection of books and manuscripts made by Mr. W. E. Ledger and entitled by him the Robert Ross Memorial Collection. He brought together books and documents indispensable to the study of a significant period in English art and letters. But for his vigilance and patient purpose, much that is now preserved would have been scattered and irrevocably lost. In completeness, catholicity and scholarship, it is in its own sphere unsurpassed, if not unrivalled.

In future, the student of certain phases of the literary and social life of England will find indispensable the Collection which Mr. Ledger made and dedicated in memory of Oscar Wilde's faithful friend, Robert Ross.⁶

Cree gives no indication, in this piece from 1932, of the difficulties Ledger faced in finding a home for his collection. In 1930, when corresponding with the manager of Faber & Faber, C. W. Stewart, Ledger suggested that current feeling against Wilde might prevent his collection being accepted by Magdalen College Oxford.⁷ As it happened, Ledger was right and Wilde's own college, Magdalen, turned down his offer. It was not until after Ledger's death in December 1931, that his executor, Donald Cree, offered the collection to University College.⁸ The Master at the time, Sir Michael Sadler, was able to persuade the Fellows of the College to accept the donation but a lack of secure storage meant that it was placed on long-term deposit at the Bodleian Library, Oxford.⁹ These difficulties in securing a place for an important Wilde collection may strike us today as surprising, but they demonstrate the high degree of contingency involved in collecting and archival enterprises. They are a reminder, too, of how much Wilde's non-normative sexuality served as a hindrance to an open appreciation of his works and to efforts to establish his importance as a major literary figure in this period.

Wilde's printed works form only part of the Robert Ross Memorial Collection. A large and largely unexplored proportion consists of the 'miscellanea'. Along with Ross and Christopher Sclater Millard, Ledger spent more than thirty years trying to establish and preserve Wilde's literary canon and,¹⁰ in doing so, he accumulated a vast archive of correspondence, booksellers' catalogues, prospectuses, and other ephemera. It is this material, as well as the meticulous notes that Ledger left in his books, that is unique to the collection and that is proving so interesting to researchers. In addition to well-known figures like Ross, Ledger corresponded with publishers, translators, collectors and enthusiasts as far afield as Calcutta, Vienna, Moscow, and Mexico. He also corresponded with a number of notable figures of the 1890s who were still living, including Lord Alfred Douglas; Theodore Wratislaw, one of the minor 'minor poets' of the 1890s; Ada Levenson, affectionately known as 'The Sphinx' by Wilde; and Marc-André Raffalovich, French poet, novelist, and one of the early writers on homosexuality, who had a lifelong relationship with John Gray, a reputed inspiration for Dorian Gray. Though Raffalovich, who had converted to Roman

Catholicism, wanted his works on homosexuality that were in Ledger's possession to be destroyed, it is certainly telling that he signed his correspondence with an adopted middle name – Sebastian – the name of the saint that homosexual aesthetes of the 1890s identified as an icon of homosexual desire.¹¹

A cataloguing project is underway to make this material more available, but to date there are twenty folders which do not appear to have been examined.¹² Only one reference to the folders has been found, dating from the late 1970s. In his book, *Oxford Libraries Outside the Bodleian*, Paul Morgan writes that Ledger's collection includes 'the manuscript of Stuart Mason's Bibliography' of Oscar Wilde.¹³ Although Morgan was one of the few researchers given access to this material, he incorrectly identifies the nature of the contents of these folders. The 'manuscript' consists of twenty spring-back folders containing Ledger's, rather than Millard's, bibliographic findings, accumulated over a period of more than thirty-five years. Although Ledger and Millard intended to collaborate on the Bibliography,¹⁴ Millard's imprisonment for gross indecency in 1906 led Ledger to take a step back. On publication, Millard acknowledged Ledger's assistance, but Ledger continued with the project, adding translations, foreign publications, works about Wilde by other authors, and the numerous forgeries. Dipping into the folders proves fruitful. They have so far revealed the identities of two women with Wilde connections: Marie Franzos, a previously unrecognized correspondent, and Anna Marie von Boehn, the first German translator of Wilde's works.¹⁵ With the archival turn in humanities scholarship, the richness of this collection comes to the fore in new ways. Scholars can find interest not only in what the collection contains but also in what its provenance and creation might say about Wilde and his legacy. Gregory Mackie's recent monograph, *Beautiful Untrue Things: Forging Oscar Wilde's Extraordinary Afterlife* (2019), for example, makes use of this collection and other archival material of this kind to investigate the 'restorative bibliograph[ic]' work undertaken by this queer community of bibliophilic men.¹⁶ Collections such as Ledger's can tell scholars important things not only about the lives but also about the afterlives of their subjects and about the figures invested in constructing these afterlives.

Perhaps the most poignant symbol of Ledger's success in embedding himself within Oscar Wilde's circle has recently been uncovered in the Robert Ross Memorial Collection: a wedding invitation postmarked from Paddington on 29 December 1913, addressed to Walter Ledger, Esquire. The invitation [fig. 2] is for the wedding of Oscar Wilde's younger son, Vyvyan Holland and Violet Craigie, which took place in January 1914. There is no indication as to whether Ledger accepted the invitation, but it is certain that he would have been chuffed to receive it. We found it safely tucked into a slip of paper within his remarkable collection.

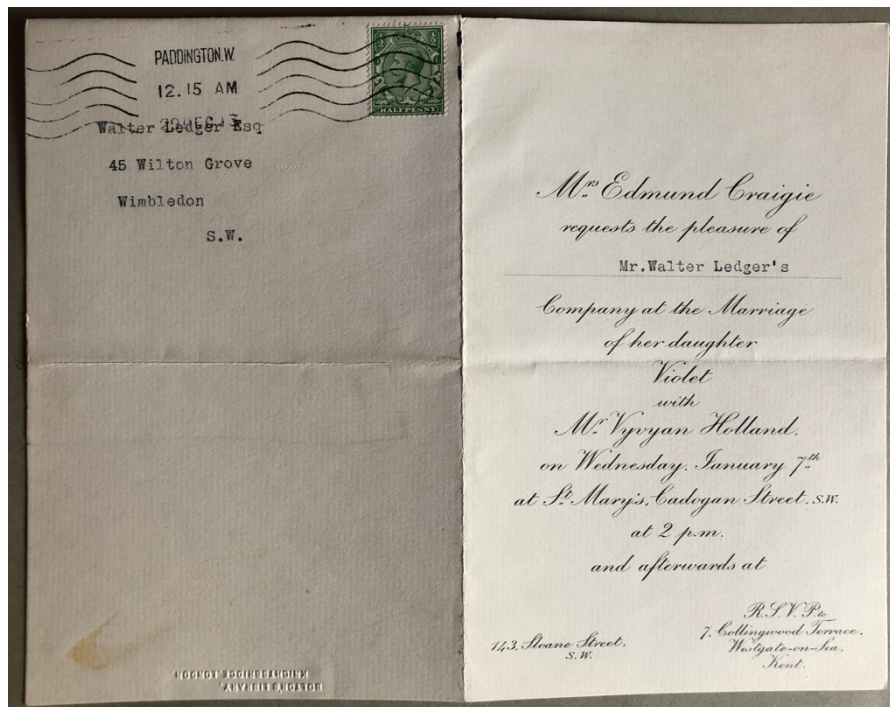


Fig. 2: Ledger's invitation to the wedding of Vyvyan Holland and Violet Craigie.
 Source: Ross Miscellaneous items, Box 6 (not yet numbered) in the Robert Ross Memorial Collection, University College Oxford.

¹ Arthur Ransome, *The Autobiography of Arthur Ransome* (London: J. Cape, 1976), p. 142.

² See letter from Donald Cree to Sir Michael Sadler, dated 15 January 1932, in the Archives of University College Oxford: UC:MA44/7/C1/1.

³ *Alphabetical and Chronological Register of University College School, London, for 1831-1891*, ed. by T. E. Orme (London: University College School, 1892), p. 177.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ William Andrews Clark Memorial Library website, 'Oscar Wilde and the fin de siècle':

<https://clarklibrary.ucla.edu/collections/oscar-wilde/> [accessed 18 September 2019] (para. 1 of 2).

⁶ Papers relating to the bequest of the Robert Ross Memorial Collection (hereafter cited as RRM) in the Archives of University College Oxford: UC:MA44/7/C1/1.

⁷ See Ross Box 1.23.iii in RRM, University College Oxford.

⁸ Robin H. Darwall-Smith, 'An Oscar for Master Sadler: The Acquisition of the Robert Ross Memorial Collection', *University College Record*, 12 (1997), 46-54.

⁹ The RRM returned to University College from the Bodleian Library, by mutual consent, in 2013.

¹⁰ Gregory Mackie, *Beautiful Untrue Things: Forging Oscar Wilde's Extraordinary Afterlife* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), p. 35.

¹¹ For a thorough discussion of the significance of St. Sebastian to decadence, see Richard A. Kaye, "'Determined Raptures": St. Sebastian and the Victorian Discourse of Decadence', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27 (1999), 269-303.

¹² The 'miscellanea' in the RRM is being catalogued, with current progress found on the website: <https://www.univ.ox.ac.uk/learn-at-univ/library-collections/> [accessed 15 June 2020].

¹³ Paul Morgan, *Oxford Libraries Outside the Bodleian: A Guide* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 1980), p. 146.

¹⁴ Stuart Mason [Christopher Sclater Millard], *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1914), p. viii.

¹⁵ See Ross f.101: Oscar Wilde, *Der Geist Canterville*, trans. by A. M. von Boehn (München: [C. Brügel & Son], 1897).

¹⁶ Mackie, pp. 34-37.

Maxime Foerster, *The Politics of Love: Queer Heterosexuality in
Nineteenth-Century French Literature*
Becoming Modern: New Nineteenth-Century Studies
(Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2018), pp. xi + 243.
ISBN 9781512601701

Mathew Rickard

Queen's University Belfast

Published in a series that aims to explore the historical developments that inform our concepts of modernity on both sides of the Atlantic, Maxime Foerster's exploration of *The Politics of Love: Queer Heterosexuality in Nineteenth-Century French Literature* arrives at a perfect time in the post-#MeToo society in which we find ourselves. Queer theory increasingly allows us to interrogate even the most monolithic of sexual realities, many of which find their basis in the French nineteenth century. Indeed, despite recent French misgivings surrounding the rise of *la théorie du genre*, it is important to remember that both our conceptions of gender and sexuality and the deconstructions of them are equally (and ironically) informed by French thought.

While the nineteenth century, and especially the French experience therein, has been held up by many as the century of patriarchal bravado in which transgressive female protagonists are didactically castigated, the issue of sexuality and gender has of late been reopened, re-examined and reconstituted. Foerster's opening epigraph, dedicating the book to 'all those who continue to resist normalization today' (p. vii), firmly situates the study in the countercultural tradition of the decadent novels that the author examines. Perhaps more surprising to some, however, is the inclusion of Romantic literature. While decadence is well known and well studied for its provocative treatments of perverse erotic inclinations, there is perhaps a tendency to assume that in comparison to its decadent offspring, Romanticism is conventional, even tame, in its representations of the so-called politics of love. However, Foerster at once links the two, suggesting that the familiar decadent perversion of love picks up from the less-acknowledged Romantic reinvention of love.

The Introduction opens with a Rachildean reimagining of the Don Juan legend in which a woman usurps the masculine role yet continues the patriarchal heteronormative paradigm, encapsulating what Foerster refers to as 'heterosexual trouble', a framework the name of which evokes Butlerian readings of gendered relations. Don Juan features as the supreme heterosexual lover throughout French literature of the nineteenth century, yet recent scholarship has demonstrated their queer potential, making them a good starting-point for discussion. Firmly

ensconcing his argument in the now axiomatic queer interrogations of heterosexuality of the late twentieth century, Foerster's overarching thesis is that the so-called norm of heterosexuality seemed not to work in the French century of revolutions. A key aspect of his argument is the gendered facet of the French language that so many feminist critics have suggested enforces gendered expectations, but which Foerster demonstrates can be just as resistant to essentialism. This linguistic nuance is extended to Foerster's conceptualization of heterosexuality, ultimately distancing *heterosexuality* from *heteronormativity*, allowing for the queerness of 'straight' people that has been refused by other queer theorists (although increasingly common in anglophone French studies).

Foerster's study spans the length of the long nineteenth century in French literature, encompassing both male and female canonical writers in the Romantic period as well as those from the decadent tradition. Finally, he comments on the legacy of nineteenth-century queer heterosexuality moving into the twentieth century. This breadth of material and gender balance demonstrates that while challenges to heteronormativity may often be perceived as a uniquely feminine concern, men also suffer under patriarchy and have just as often critiqued its reach. *The Politics of Love* tackles the often-thorny issue of masculinity in the French nineteenth century, a time when virility was championed in official discourse, yet simultaneously openly challenged and even ridiculed in both Romantic and decadent fiction. Similarly, any conceptions of the Eternal Feminine were thrown out of kilter by the nascent feminist movement across the long nineteenth century, equally represented in the fiction of the time. However, whereas many have had recourse to the blatantly different forms of masculinity and femininity that overtly challenged patriarchal norms, Foerster's return to the original aims of queer theory through his focus on the 'default' sexual order and the subsequent unsettling of any putative claims to normalcy it holds is a welcome addition to the burgeoning queering of the nineteenth century.

The discussion of heterosexual love in the Romantic period begins with the age-old question of whether or not the concept of heterosexual love is a 'trap of masculine domination' (p. 11), and indeed, the Romantic ideals of individualism and exploration of the self would seem to be at odds with traditional formulations of 'romantic' heterosexual love. Foerster argues eloquently that this individualism paved the way for the decadent subject who turned erotic normalcy on its head. While Thomas Laqueur argued that the end of the Enlightenment brought us from a one-sex to a two-sex model of gender relations, it is suggested here that the literature which followed seemingly continued to be at odds with this conceptualization.

Foerster demonstrates that the supposed contemporaneous divide between idealism (feminine) and realism (masculine) in Romanticism was in reality indicative of the incompatibility

of heteronormative ideal sexualities. His discussion of Germaine de Staël's *Delphine* (1802) and *Corinne; ou, L'Italie* (1807) develops the concept that Romantic idealism allowed women far more agency than before, allowing for a radical reinvention of the heterosexual institution of love. Both women refuse to bow down to what Lee Edelman would later come to refer to as [hetero]sexual futurism – the institutions of marriage with children – while the men suffer from an 'odd reversal' of masculinity. Similarly, the discussion of the notoriously nonconformist George Sand and her novels *Lélia* (1833) and *Isidora* (1845) reveals how the author not only questioned gender roles through her fiction and real-life interactions, but also queried how these gender deviations demonstrated the impossibility of heteronormative love. However, while it could be assumed that Staël's and Sand's critiques of heteronormativity are part-and-parcel of their position as gynocritics, Foerster adroitly demonstrates that this heterosexual trouble was felt on both sides of the gender divide.

The Romantic task of reinventing heterosexual love was intimately connected with dismantling masculine domination, and so Foerster balances his approach to the movement by referring to male Romantic writers. Of particular note is the inclusion of Benjamin Constant and Alfred de Musset, both known for their trysts with Staël and Sand respectively, adding a distinctly extratextual layer to Foerster's framework of heterosexual trouble, evidenced in real life as well as in the fiction of these lovers. Both Constant's *Adolphe* (1816) and Musset's *La Confession d'un enfant du siècle* (1836) demonstrate the Romantic urge to separate heterosexual ('romantic') love from the libertine legacy of the eighteenth century. The reinvention of love and the turbulence of revolution, warfare, and empire, however, remade masculinity and made it more difficult to define. Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) demonstrates this gendered ambiguity, with its androgynous protagonist embodying the very concept of heterosexual trouble. The ambiguity of gender is compounded by the ambiguity of genre and language, with Foerster revealing queerness at every level of the novel. Foerster notes that by refusing to conform to 'natural' heterosexual functions, these Romantic characters are often derided as unnatural or monstrous, paving the way for decadence and its lauding of artifice.

Foerster pinpoints the transition between Romanticism and decadence as beginning in 1857 with the emergence of Baudelaire's degenerate poetics, and states that while Romanticism was a pan-European movement, decadence 'was first recognized as a distinctly French cultural phenomenon' (p. 22). Of course, as most readers of *Volupté* will agree, decadence studies has been expanded to include the most disparate of cultural milieux, yet its distinctly French origins remain a key characteristic of the tradition, and vital to Foerster's argument for the inimitability of heterosexual trouble in French decadent texts. However, the degenerate opposition that decadence

offered did not fully hold sway until the fin de siècle, with which it is most often associated these days. The French humiliation during the Franco-Prussian war (amongst other national crises) gave decadence the foothold needed to assert itself and its poisonous poetics on a national stage. Thus, as Foerster argues, while Romanticism wrote against the Enlightenment ideals of heterosexual compatibility, decadence revelled in the degeneration of the nation, a macrocosmic rejection of heterosexual idealism.

Both Charles Baudelaire and Jules-Amédée Barbey d'Aurevilly lauded the male dandy while denigrating the female, yet by framing dandyism as the refinement of perversion, Foerster reveals an often confrontational yet symbiotic relationship between the male and female dandy in their work, at once underscoring and undermining heterosexual trouble. In writing in *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (1863) that women can rise above nature through engaging with artifice, Baudelaire would seem to contradict what he wrote in *Mon cœur mis à nu* (1887) – that women were inherently natural and thus excluded from dandyism. Similarly, Barbey d'Aurevilly's decadent misogyny ironically opens up a space for female dandyism, at once refusing to identify historic female dandies of the past in *Du dandysme et de George Brummell* (1845) yet wishing to celebrate the androgyny of Lady Emma Hamilton and giving agency to monstrous women in his *Les diaboliques* (1874). Ultimately, both are shown by Foerster to blur the line between gendered individualism and patriarchal complicity, despite professing the opposite.

The discussion of dandyism dovetails with an exploration of the late nineteenth-century obsession with degeneration and normalization, with the last case study focusing on the decadent couple as embodied by the female patient and the male doctor. Decadence, despite its remit of amorality, was borne out of a reactionary impulse to reclaim all that French positivism sought to eradicate. As Foerster argues, with the rise of sexology as the new facet of masculine dominance, the male doctor and the hysteric woman were the troubled heterosexual couple *par excellence*, inevitably parodied by decadence in comparison to naturalism's upholding of the sexological agenda. Indeed, Baudelaire blurs the lines between feminine and masculine by juxtaposing them together in the name of the protagonist of 'Mademoiselle Bistouri' ('bistouri' meaning lancet, the phallic metonym for the doctors his protagonist lusts after) while giving agency to the mad female rather than to the rational doctor. Similarly, Jean Lorrain's *La dame aux lèvres rouges* (1888) deals with two men's inability to understand the morbid sexuality of the eponymous *dame*, taking the place of the male doctor in pathologizing and demonizing her, while ironically unable to stem the carnage she continues to wreak. Finally, in providing us with a commentary on Rachilde's *La Jongleuse* (1900), Foerster demonstrates not only a parody of the doctor-patient construct, but also an additional example of heterosexual trouble so dysfunctional that even the most basic of

heterosexual acts – that of sex itself – is out of the question, with autoeroticism and voyeurism replacing literal carnality.

Foerster ends his study with a welcome invitation of suggested routes of investigation readers of *The Politics of Love* may take, including those of drama and poetry, often overlooked in favour of novels. Readers of *Volupté* will also be pleased to note his acknowledgment of manifestations of queer heterosexuality in other national canons of decadence, as well as those of Romanticism and naturalism/realism, providing fertile ground for future research. Another welcome (though perhaps not original) addition is what Foerster refers to as the ‘Proustian Step’, suggesting that nineteenth-century heterosexual trouble paved the way for new and more innovative iterations of the construct in the writings of both male (notably Marcel Proust) and female authors in the twentieth century, ultimately demonstrating the importance of both Romanticism and decadence to our modern conceptions of gender and sexuality. While it may seem that Foerster treads familiar ground by interrogating gender deviance and dysfunctional sexuality in nineteenth-century French literature, his focus on the ‘norm’ of heterosexuality and both canonical and reactionary literature reframes the argument in an innovative and informative manner. The breadth and depth of material covered in a deceptively slim tome ensures that this volume will be of interest to a wide cross-section of researchers of nineteenth-century literature of all shades and beyond.

Robert Azzarello, *Three Hundred Years of Decadence: New Orleans Literature and the Transatlantic World*
(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019), 224 pp.
ISBN 9780807170885 (e-pub)¹

Tanfer Emin Tunç

Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey

As Robert Azzarello expresses in *Three Hundred Years of Decadence*, when embodied in human form, decadence evokes a tableau of pleasure, indulgence, and excess – a decadent is someone ‘who has had too much – too much nicotine or caffeine, too much liquor or morphine, too much literature or philosophy or art – and is thus reduced to a state of being that seems to oscillate between comatose and enlightened.’ The decadent individual is almost always a late nineteenth-century western European, a Parisian or Londoner who has read ‘too much’ Baudelaire or Wilde and consumed ‘too much’ absinthe. However, as Azzarello argues in this groundbreaking work, the decadent tradition also has a long, if yet unexcavated, tradition in the United States. To date, most of what has been studied focuses on a coterie of fin-de-siècle, transatlantic American poets, novelists and critics including James Huneker, Vance Thompson, Robert William Chambers, Vincent O’Sullivan, David Park Barnitz, and brothers Edgar and Francis Saltus, all of whom spent time in Paris and London at the turn of the twentieth century and were heavily influenced by Joris-Karl Huysmans, Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, and Henry James. After returning to the United States, they attempted to popularize the decadent tradition through their own works, but were generally unsuccessful. Today, these American decadents remain unknown and understudied, with the exception of a few contributions to the secondary literature such as David Weir’s books, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (1995) and *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature against the American Grain, 1890–1926* (2008).

Three Hundred Years of Decadence expands the geographical and chronological scope of Weir’s work beyond fin-de-siècle New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco to the South, specifically to New Orleans, arguably the most decadent city in the American literary and cultural imagination. After all, as Alecia P. Long contends in *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865–1920* (2004), ‘[p]eople believe two things about New Orleans. The first is that it is different from the rest of the United States.’ The second is ‘that the city is decadent, and that its cultural distinctiveness is related to its reputation for tolerating, even encouraging, indulgence of all varieties’, thereby rendering the city fertile ground for decadence in all of its forms. Azzarello excavates the three-hundred-year-long history of decadence in the

literature of New Orleans across all genres – from poetry, to short stories, novels, and plays – from the colonial era to the present. In the process, he ventures beyond the expected English-language, post-Civil War, regionalist and local colour fiction of New Orleans, into works in other languages and from other genres, including non-fiction essays and expository prose. Moreover, by emphasizing the role of four continents – Europe, Africa, and the two Americas – in shaping the decadence of New Orleans literature, Azzarello’s study also represents a major intervention in the fields of Transatlantic, Hemispheric, Gulf, Environmental and Urban Studies, as well as in critical examinations of the Global South.

Over the course of the eight chapters that comprise this work, Azzarello chronologically explores the concept of decadence through four different sites: bodies, languages, literatures, and environments. In his introductory chapter, ‘New Orleans Decadence in Theory’, he claims that as a theoretical framework, decadence ‘provides a distinct avenue into the story of New Orleans and the transatlantic world, and one that takes us from the city’s very founding in 1718 to contemporary speculations about the city’s future.’ Within this framework, bodies are particularly complicated since they exemplify the fecundity of New Orleans’s cross-pollination of races, nations, and cultures, as well as the futility of the artificial colour line drawn by the US Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). As Azzarello contends, *Plessy* both underscored and obscured the troubled racial history of the city, adding to the atmosphere of decay, decline, and degeneration. Anxieties concerning the body, and all of its decadent manifestations are, according to Azzarello, further amplified by ‘the litany of vices’ associated with the city:

prostitution and miscegenation, homosexuality and gender deviance, and more than one of the seven deadly sins. Add to this list the city’s stubborn Francophilia, its Afro-Caribbean connection, its Catholicism, its air of mystery and detection, its preoccupations with the dead and the undead, its seemingly perpetual state of human violence, and a strange pattern starts to emerge.

Part of this ‘strange pattern’ is language which, for European decadents and their American counterparts, went hand-in-hand with bodies, especially those marked by race, class, religion, and ethnicity. In the context of New Orleans, this tension emerges in the conflict between mono- (English) and multi- (indigenous, French, Spanish, creole) lingualism. New Orleans literature, Azzarello asserts, has been shaped by moments of corporeal and lingual crisis, such as ‘the French takeover of the natives, the Spanish takeover of the French, the American takeover of the Europeans, the breakdown of state relations that reached a crisis in the Civil War, [and] the segregation and desegregation of the public sphere.’ Moreover, the physical environment of New Orleans, with its hurricanes, fires, and epidemics, further connects its bodies, languages, and literatures.

The second chapter of *Three Hundred Years of Decadence* traces New Orleans decadence from its colonial beginnings to the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, when the city became a US territory. It begins with Antoine-François Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* (1733), a French novel set in Paris and New Orleans that deals with an aristocrat's fall into the decadent underworld of illicit sex, gambling, theft, and murder. Azzarello reads the work 'as part of the prehistory of decadence that emerged more fully articulated and practiced in the nineteenth century.' As such, it lays the foundation for decadence by paving 'the way for a further descent into the world of vice', and the intoxication that comes with passion and pleasure. However, *Manon Lescaut* is also significant because it interweaves various literary traditions – 'Parisian, French, European, transatlantic, American, Southern, Louisianian, and New Orleanian' – on a scale that transcends time, place, language and culture. As Azzarello argues, the European writing from the colonial period to 1803 – from the travel narratives of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish and French colonizers, to Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* and François-René de Chateaubriand's *Atala* (1801) and *René* (1802) – all 'constitute a prehistory of decadence, an intellectual fertilizer that helped to spawn a more developed, consolidated, self-conscious, and recognized movement that exploded in Paris during the final quarter of the nineteenth century.' Rarely considered part of American literary history because they are written in French and are from the colonial period, these transatlantic works also prompt us to rethink the definition of American literature.

Chapter three, 'American New Orleans, 1803 to 1865', opens with Pierre Clément de Laussat's *Memoirs of My Life* (1831), which recounts his role in the transfer of the Louisiana Territory from France to the United States in 1803, and the traumatic loss of his extensive library as he quickly made his way to Martinique after the handover. Azzarello reads this dispersal of French classics by Montaigne, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Corneille, and Racine throughout New Orleans as fertilizing what would become New Orleans literature. In this chapter, Azzarello also discusses the impact that new settlers, printing presses, and print culture had on the creative output of the city. While anglophone travellers and settlers 'recoiled when they encountered the prevailing French language of the city, its dominant Catholicism, its bawdy sensual delights, or its proud free black population – in short, its deeply rooted creole traditions', New Orleanians took pride in their difference, which included their unpredictable weather and unstable environment, and their connection to France. Moreover, the city's francophone, romantic poets (e.g., Charles-Oscar Dugué, Louis Allard, and Alfred Mercier), and writers of African, Caribbean, Spanish, and German origin (e.g., Ludwig von Reizenstein) – reinforced the preexisting 'transatlantic routes of intellectual exchange' that would feed the decadence of the post-Civil War era.

Structured around George Dessommes' French language poem, 'Un Soir au Jackson Square' ['An Evening in Jackson Square'] (1880), chapter four captures a period of transition and change in New Orleans between the end of the Civil War (1865) and the fin de siècle. The poem is an apt framework for the chapter as its 'vision of old and childless men walking around in circles, dreaming in foreign languages about other times and places fading now into memory, plays into a larger myth' of French decadence in New Orleans. In the rest of the chapter, Azzarello traces Dessommes' decadent formulations in the works of George Washington Cable and Lafcadio Hearn. Set in the years immediately following the Louisiana Purchase, Cable's *The Grandissimes* (1880) focuses on 'two half-brothers, one white and one black, who share a name and a father but whose different mothers set their racial fate.' While in Paris, they are truly brothers; however, as in Prévost's *Manon Lescaut*, once they make the transatlantic voyage to New Orleans, they experience 'moral degeneration' and 'ethical decay'. Their lives become dominated by the racial hierarchy and white supremacy of the city, rendering them tragically unequal adversaries. In 'The Creole Patois' (1885), Lafcadio Hearn laments the disappearance of bodies and languages – specifically of octoroons (people with one-eighth African ancestry) and their creole patois – from the multicultural tapestry of New Orleans. Moreover, in the environmental novella *Chita* (1889), he depicts how the hurricane of 1856 devastated human, animal, and plant life and how, much like Hurricane Katrina would do a century and a half later, it traumatized New Orleans and its fragile ecosystem.

Azzarello concludes chapter four with a brief analysis of fin-de-siècle writer Kate Chopin, whose oeuvre is comprised of works dealing with New Orleans, French creole culture, and the transatlantic world. He concentrates on *The Awakening* (1899), whose overt sensuality, sexuality, and transgression of traditional gender roles was so scandalous when it was published that it ended Chopin's career. However, an analysis of Chopin's 'Désirée's Baby' as a transatlantic (Paris-New Orleans) text would have been a much more relevant selection for this chapter as it iterates many of the concerns of *The Grandissimes* while emphasizing how racism and sexism impacted women's lives in the nineteenth century. The short story would have also strengthened the transition into Alice Dunbar-Nelson's 'The Stones of the Village' (1905) and Charles Chesnutt's *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* (1921), which are the focus of chapter five.

In this chapter, which spans the fin de siècle to the end of World War II (1945), Azzarello charts the trajectory of New Orleans's bodies and languages through the changing legal status of French in the ten state constitutions that were passed between 1812 and 1974. During this period, English monolingualism dominated, with French gaining and losing power as a second (un)official language. As Azzarello argues, the shifting status of French and the creole

dialect – and those who spoke them as native languages – was reflected in the literature of the period, especially works dealing with racial passing, colourism, and the colour line within the African American community, such as ‘The Stones of the Village’ and *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* Azzarello also positions these texts as examples of early twentieth-century New Orleans transatlantic decadence since, much like Prévost’s *Manon Lescaut* and Cable’s *The Grandissimes*, they involve the ‘double bind’ of individual and social illness, and the notion that ‘human beings are haunted not by some supernatural spirit or demon but by their very selves. [...] one’s own mind and body and the surrounding social structures.’ However, while the works of African American writers such as Dunbar-Nelson and Chesnutt are certainly part of the decadent tradition, for these authors ‘there was very little that was redeeming in the concept of decadence.’ Here, Azzarello poses one of the most interesting questions in his work: ‘To what extent is decadence itself a white European and Euro–American phenomenon?’

Emphasizing the period between World War II to Hurricane Katrina (1945-2005), chapter six extends Azzarello’s analysis to the contemporary world, starting with Tennessee Williams’s autobiographical play *Vieux Carré* (1977) and the decadent New Orleans characters – ‘drunks and drug addicts, hardened bouncers, gay-for-pay male prostitutes, bat-crazy women, orgy enthusiasts, and transvestite artists’ – who inhabit a boardinghouse in the French Quarter. Set in the late 1930s during the Great Depression when New Orleans was just becoming a tourist city, *Vieux Carré* complements Eudora Welty’s short story ‘No Place for You, My Love’ (1952), which depicts the experiences of two tourists visiting the city. The chapter then takes an unusual turn towards Tom Dent’s play *Ritual Murder* (1978), straying from *Three Hundred Years of Decadence*’s transatlantic theme and rendering this the most disjointed chapter in the entire work. Here, Azzarello could have examined the contributions that the Modernist, Southern Renaissance, and Southern Gothic literary movements made to New Orleans decadence. After all, Azzarello begins the chapter with two of their most prominent writers – Williams and Welty – and at various points in *Three Hundred Years of Decadence* mentions other New Orleans authors associated with these movements, such as Truman Capote and John Kennedy Toole, but unfortunately only in passing. A presentation of their texts, especially Toole’s *Confederacy of Dunces* (1980), which is set in New Orleans and is replete with decadent characters (beats and phony intellectuals) and themes (excessive food and sex, and parodies of European snobbishness), would have been an interesting addition to this work. Moreover, an examination of Southern Gothic literature, and its obsession with decay, decline, and degeneration, the haunting ghosts of the past in the present, and nonnormative (or ‘grotesque’) bodies and environments, is also a missing element in this work. Williams’s play *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1958), for example, would

have been a better choice for this study than *Ritual Murder*, as it is set in both New Orleans and Europe and explores the physical, sexual, racial, and murderous violence associated with decadent excess.

The last two chapters of *Three Hundred Years of Decadence* consider New Orleans literature after Katrina, from 2005 to the present. While chapter seven emphasizes the environmental literature of Katrina, such as John Biguenet's *Rising Water* (2006), Martha Serpas' *The Dirty Side of the Storm* (2007), Katie Ford's *Colosseum* (2008), Yusef Komunyakaa's 'Requiem' (2008), and Rebecca Solnit's *A Paradise Built in Hell* (2009), much like chapter six it, at best, provides an uneven treatment of the transatlantic. Chapter eight continues the ecological themes of the previous chapter with works like Moira Crone's *The Not Yet* (2012), providing additional insight into the connections between environments and bodies, yet, once again, this is at the expense of *Three Hundred Years of Decadence's* overarching transatlantic theme. Despite these shortcomings, however, Azzarello ends his ambitious and overall successfully-executed project by conveying an intriguing message: that even though most of the works examined in *Three Hundred Years of Decadence* were written and/or set in the past, they continue to pose and answer questions about the present and the future.

¹ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic an unpaginated e-pub version of the text was consulted; this review is therefore lacking page references after quotations.

Stéphane Guégan and André Guyaux, eds, *Joris-Karl Huysmans: De Degas à Grünewald*
(Paris: Gallimard, 2019), 226 pp.
ISBN 9782022865602

Matthew Creasy

University of Glasgow

Joris-Karl Huysmans was unimpressed by the Salon of 1879:

Of the 3,040 paintings listed in the catalogue, there's not a hundred that are worth looking at. The rest are certainly inferior to the advertising posters on the walls of our streets and on the pissoirs of our boulevards, those tableaux that represent little slices of Parisian life: ballet gymnastics, clown acts, English mimes, racetracks and circus arenas.¹

Although he is best known now as a novelist, Huysmans was active as an art critic throughout his life. As well as writing for periodicals, he published three major essay collections and incorporated commentary on art and artists into his fiction. The recent exhibition, *De Degas à Grünewald* at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and the accompanying catalogue and critical collection edited by Stéphane Guégan and André Guyaux testify to increasing interest in these activities and their relationship. His broad dismissal of the Salon is suggestive here, since he rejects the canvases on display in favour of street art. The implication is that this represents a more authentic mode of expression than the scenes from classical myth and Roman history that dominated work by the likes of Alexandre Cabanel and William-Adolphe Bougereau. As André Guyaux observes:

Il cherche dans la peinture ce qu'il cherche dans la littérature: le vivant, le vrai, un art qui ne ment pas, qui s'éloigne des clichés académiques, un art où il retrouve la vie, sa vie – la vie libre et même quelque peu débauchée qu'il mène à Paris. (p. 93)

[He seeks in painting what he seeks in literature: the living, the true, an art that does not lie, that moves away from academic clichés, an art where he finds life, his life – the free and even somewhat debauched life he leads in Paris.]

Just as Huysmans's earliest novels, *Marthe: Histoire d'une fille* (1876) and *Les Sœurs Vatard* (1879) dwell on the lives of prostitutes and working girls, so his artistic tastes tended towards the realities of the street too.

Huysmans's scathing assault upon the arts establishment proved too much for the Republican editors of *La Voltaire*, who dropped him after serializing his review of the 1879 Salon. But Francesca Guegliemi traces his involvement with a variety of other publications including *La Musée des deux mondes* and *La Chronique illustrée* during the early part of his career. This account locates his journalism within Pierre Bourdieu's 'field of cultural production', identifying the internal politics and the frissons of aesthetic and ideological affiliation amongst the coteries and networks

within the French periodical scene. In this context, Huysmans's espousal of Edgar Degas' scenes of working-class women and drinkers in his art criticism became a means of establishing his own credentials amongst the Naturalist writers surrounding Émile Zola.

This fiercely partisan quality of Huysmans's writings on art reverberates at a linguistic level too. He disdained work on display at the Salon as 'the mediocrity of those raised in the State-run farms of the Academy of Fine Arts' (p. 29). Translation here (and throughout) is taken from Brendan King's recent edition of *L'Art moderne* (1883), a collection that Huysmans revised and edited from his journalistic writings. One excellence of King's version is his willingness to depart from literal rendering to capture the nuances of Huysmans's prose. In French, Huysmans wrote about 'la médiocrité des gens élevés dans la métairie des Beaux Arts'.² The word 'métairie' here derives from sharecropping and farming practices that hark back to feudal arrangements, but King's 'state-run farms' brilliantly captures the tone and target of Huysmans's disdain. As Aude Jeannerod points out, Huysmans was deeply and implacably opposed to 'official art'. His dismissal of the École des Beaux Arts is a rejection of a whole system, from the training offered to art students to the annual Salons themselves as the epitome of conservative artistic values.

In her excellent essay on Huysmans's style, Estelle Pietrzyk cites Jean Richepin's description from *Gil Blas* in April 1880:

substantifs rares, épithètes curieuses, alliances de mots imprévues, archaïsmes, néologismes, syntax démantibulée à dessein, bariolages, pailletages, assonances, musique tintinnabulante de syllabes, toutes les herbes de la Saint-Jean quoi! (p. 175)

[rare nouns, curious epithets, unexpected word combinations, archaisms, neologisms, syntax deliberately dismantled, jumbled-up words, glittering on the page, assonance, the tinkling music of syllables, all that you need!]

For Pietrzyk, such linguistic innovations demand 'une lecture assidue de bout en bout' [careful reading from beginning to end], forcing readers out of complacency. But she also argues that this style is cognate with his searching gaze ('la motricité du regard' (p. 171)) as a critic, and the 'unexpected word combinations' described by Richepin are central to this. When, for example, Huysmans exclaims, 'into the bin with all this lick polished rubbish by the likes of Cabanel and Gérôme' (p. 33), 'lick polished' is King's best approximation of the word 'léchotteries' in the original.³ As he points out in a footnote, this neologism combines criticism that their work is fussy and over-polished with a sexual slur and a double-entendre about the proliferation of nude figures in their work (p 271). In comparison, on a panel at the d'Orsay exhibition, the curators render this as 'overly licked and polished', which glosses the word accurately, but loses the energy of compression in the original. Huysmans's liberties with language condense his art criticism into sentences and words that bristle with thought.

In fact, Huysmans's prose as a critic is less dense and more transparent than his fiction. His most famous novel, *À rebours* (1884) employs an even more eclectic lexis, ransacking different pockets of the French language to capture the shifting aesthetic fads and obsessions of his protagonist, Des Esseintes. Outlining the influences that shape Huysmans as a critic and novelist, André Guyaux supplies two highly informative essays in the collection. The first explores Huysmans's links with contemporary artists, such as Edgar Degas and Odilon Redon; the second examines Huysmans's interest in 'primitive' renaissance religious painting, focusing on a later collection, *Trois Primitifs* (1904). Moving deftly between fiction, art criticism, and biography, Guyaux is concerned to trace links and continuities. Huysmans's *Là-bas* (1891), for example, opens with an account of a crucifixion by the fifteenth-century German artist, Matthias Grünewald. Its harrowing realism is offered as an analogue to nineteenth-century Naturalism, but also plays a role in the religious sensibilities of the protagonist, Durtal. Guyaux suggests that Huysmans 'charge Durtal, le héros du roman, de développer son idée' [puts Durtal, the hero of the novel, in charge of developing his idea]. And Grünewald certainly seems to have held a strong personal significance for Huysmans, since he returned to his paintings in *Trois Primitifs* and mirrored his own turn to the Catholic church in Durtal's fictional experiences in the subsequent novels *En route* (1891) and *La Cathédrale* (1898).

The ceaselessly moving surface of Huysmans's style, however, creates difficulties here: his vocabulary is so mobile that it produces a sense of linguistic relativity calling attention to language and undermining confidence in its purchase on the world.⁴ So, whilst there are undoubtedly connections between Huysmans and the fictional protagonists of his novels, Mireille Dottin-Orsini and Daniel Grojnowski sound a cautious note in their account of the figure of Salomé in *À rebours*, 'Il ne s'agit plus ici de critique d'art, mais d'une fiction, véhiculée par un personnage particulier, des Esseintes' [It is no longer a question of art criticism, but of fiction, conveyed by a particular character, Des Esseintes] (p. 119). Accommodating the range of Huysmans's writings is not such a problem for a collection of critical essays by diverse hands, but the exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay was less assured.

One difficulty here is that the greatest strengths of the exhibition also prove to be a weakness. As the catalogue testifies, the exhibition brought together a great wealth of artistic materials, including, for example, versions of the images of Salomé before the floating head of John the Baptist by Gustave Moreau that inspired *À rebours*. It also incorporated archival material, from images created as a frontispiece for *Marthe* to a draft of *À rebours* clearly copied into a ledger book repurposed from Huysmans's day job as a civil servant. But the presentation of all that material was hideously over-conceptualized and poorly explained.

The culprit here seems to be Francesco Vezzoli, a contemporary Italian artist brought in to jazz up all the supposedly dull nineteenth-century stuff. Vezzoli compares himself without irony to a DJ who makes ‘des remix’ (p. 22). But the organization of the exhibition was more Vengaboys than, say, anything by the late Andrew Weatherall. The first room was presented in stark white with a panel explaining that this was intended to ‘project the lucidity of Huysmans the art critic into our own times’. Walls in the second room were deep red with large-scale photographic images from the *Vittoriale degli Italiani* – the residence of Gabriele d’Annunzio – on the walls. In an interview, Vezzoli explains that this was intended to demonstrate the unconscious influence of Huysmans’s *Des Esseintes* upon the Italian decadent writer, but visitors to the Musée d’Orsay learned little about Huysmans from this presentation and even less about d’Annunzio.

It is a shame that presentational issues distracted from the wealth of the material on display, but this may have always been likely to create problems. It is illuminating to set passages of Huysmans’s art criticism next to the paintings he described, but also risky, because the fireworks of his prose threaten to overshadow some of the works on display, especially those he disliked. Reviewing Franz Fernand’s ‘Death of Commodus’, for example, he noted:

I initially misunderstood the subject of this painting. I thought the gentleman in the green bathing trunks leaning over the other gentleman in white bathing trunks was a masseur, and the woman lifting the curtain was simply saying: ‘The bath is ready.’ It appears that the bathroom attendant is a thug, an expert strangler who is in no way kneading the neck of Commodus in order to help his blood circulation. (p. 37)

No one looking at the original with these words in front of them could take it seriously again. Huysmans’s reference to contemporary ‘bathing costumes’ jokingly draws out the anachronism driving the fixation with the classical past that motivates such works. This is reinforced by little touches, such as his use in the original French of the verb ‘malaxer’ [to knead], which is more frequently associated with baking or mixing.⁵ Deft and agile, Huysmans’s style punctures any pretension towards propriety in this classical scene and it is hard to compete with this. Indeed, the failings of the exhibition show that it is folly to try.

Jeannerod argues that Huysmans’s resistance to the artistic establishment was persistent and characteristic, stemming ‘de conviction libertaire’ [from libertarian conviction] (p. 77). So there is some irony that he should receive official sanction today from such a major gallery as the Musée d’Orsay. The benefit of this exhibition and the beautifully illustrated catalogue is that they bring passages from his writings into proximity with the artworks he loved and hated so vigorously. *De Degas à Grünewald* contains much that is worthy and interesting, but its most worthwhile achievement is to help bring Huysmans’s words before the public they deserve.

¹ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Modern Art*, trans. by Brendan King (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2018), p. 33. All quotations from Huysmans in translation are taken from this volume. Subsequent page references are supplied in parentheses.

² Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Écrits sur l'art: L'Art modern; Certains; Trois Primitifs*, ed. by Jérôme Picon (Paris: GF Flammarion, 2019), p. 47.

³ Huysmans, *Écrits sur l'art*, p. 52.

⁴ Linda Dowling describes a similar effect in Huysmans's English near-contemporary, Walter Pater. See *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁵ Huysmans, *Écrits sur l'art*, p. 54.

Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Romans et nouvelles* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade)
(Paris: Gallimard, 2019), 1791 pp.
ISBN 9782072699825

Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I: 1867-79
(Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2017), 1381 pp.
ISBN 9782812451409

Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. IV: 1888-91
(Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019), 1127 pp.
ISBN 9782406085355

Brendan King

Independent Scholar

For many general readers of French literature the work of Joris-Karl Huysmans, who began his writing career by allying himself to Émile Zola's naturalist movement and ended it as a mystical Catholic, remains a minority interest, intriguing in parts, certainly, but subsidiary both to the traditional literary canon, and to the contemporary currents of academic discourse. Nevertheless, there has been something of a revival in Huysmans's literary fortunes over the last few years: in 2017 Classiques Garnier published the first volume of an ambitious nine-volume *Œuvres complètes*, which will incorporate practically all of Huysmans's published and unpublished works; a major exhibition devoted to Huysmans as an art critic ran from 3 April to 19 July at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris; and now the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, whose editions have long been seen as marking a writer's entry into the French literary pantheon, has finally inaugurated Huysmans into their iconic leather-bound series. It would be an over-simplification to say that all this is the result of Michel Houellebecq's 2015 novel *Soumission* [*Submission*], the narrator of which is a Huysmans specialist at the Sorbonne who is offered the editorship of a proposed Pléiade edition, but the lively debate aroused by the novel certainly had the effect of introducing Huysmans to a new readership. When asked about the Pléiade's long-overdue decision to include Huysmans, André Guyaux, who, together with the critic Pierre Jourde, directed the editorial team responsible for the edition, admitted: 'L'idée était dans l'air, mais Houellebecq y a incontestablement contribué.' [The idea was in the air, but Houellebecq undoubtedly contributed to it.]¹

Initially, when the Pléiade and Classiques Garnier first announced their respective Huysmans's projects many assumed that they would be rival editions, each fighting for the same limited readership. The idea of a new *Œuvres complètes* was certainly welcome (the first *Œuvres complètes*, directed by Huysmans's testamentary executor, Lucien Descaves, dates back to 1928-

1934 and contains little in the way of explanatory notes or critical apparatus), but two competing editions seemed a bit like overkill. In reality, the Pléiade and Classiques Garnier editions actually embody two different approaches to the presentation of Huysmans's work, and both are clearly targeted at different readers. The first obvious difference is that the Pléiade is not, as one might have assumed given its long history of producing complete (or practically complete) editions of classic writers, in any way an *œuvres complètes*. Although it contains all of Huysmans's major pre-conversion fictional works – *Marthe*, *Les Sœurs Vatard*, *Sac au dos*, *En ménage*, *À vau-l'eau*, *À rebours*, *Un Dilemme*, *En rade*, and *Là-bas*, together with the first of the conversion novels, *En route* – it leaves out Huysmans's art criticism, his journalism, his first book of prose poems and stories, posthumous works such as his novella *La Retraite de Monsieur Bougran*, and, most controversially, his last two 'Catholic' novels. Completeness is not the goal here; the edition is aimed – like most of the Pléiade series – at the informed reader, rather than the academic specialist or the student of literature.

By contrast, *classiques Garnier*, directed by Pierre Glaude and Jean-Marie Seillan, takes the term *œuvres complètes* literally. Its massive volumes – the two that have appeared so far weigh in at 1381 and 1127 pages respectively – aspire to include everything that Huysmans committed to print, with the result that even long-time devotees will come across material that was previously unfamiliar to them, and its thorough critical apparatus is obviously directed at the academic market.

Both new editions draw heavily on the knowledge and skills of members of the Société J.-K. Huysmans. Guyaux is the current president of the Société, while Francesca Guglielmi, a Huysmans and Léon Bloy specialist who provided the Pléiade's critical apparatus for *Marthe* and *Là-bas* (with the assistance of Guy Ducrey) is the Société's vice president. Added to which, the names of a number of the Pléiade editors – Pierre Jourde, Per Buvik, Gaël Prigent, and Andrea Schellino – will be familiar to readers of the Société's annual *Bulletin*. As for the *Classiques Garnier* edition, Seillan is another Société luminary whose writings on Huysmans have been appearing in its *Bulletin* and elsewhere for the last thirty years. His book tracing the development of Huysmans's political views, *Huysmans: politique et religion* (2009), is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the ideological roots of Huysmans's fascination with the Middle Ages and his return to Catholicism.

The Pléiade's critical apparatus is, as might be expected, more straightforward and easier to use than that of the *Classiques Garnier* edition. Not only is all the critical material kept separate at the back (apart from a nominal amount of footnotes that clarify obscure words in the text), the Pléiade edition helpfully includes two ribbon bookmarkers, so it is possible to bookmark both the text and the relevant notes, making switching between the two very simple. The critical apparatus

itself follows the format typically adopted by the publisher in the past: each work has a separate critical section comprising a preface that situates the work within its contemporary context and describes its genesis and composition, a short note on the text explaining which version has been used and whatever variants or publication anomalies there might be, a short bibliography of relevant critical texts, followed by the notes themselves. For the most part, these are succinct and informative, rather than extensive or overly academic in tone. Such is the general density and obscurity of Huysmans's references, however, that even the experienced editors of the Pléiade are not immune to the odd error. In *À van-l'eau*, for example, Huysmans makes reference to a 'cabinet à cinq centimes' situated on the Place Saint-Sulpice. Curiously the notes describe this as a 'cabinet de lecture', a reading room where subscribers could borrow or read books and journals. However, contemporary photos of the Place Saint-Sulpice in the 1880s show that this 'cabinet' was actually a public urinal. Later, in the same novella, Huysmans makes what is surely an incomprehensible allusion to 'le vieux sanglier que possédait autrefois la maison Bailly' [the old wild boar that used to be owned by the Maison Bailly]. The notes to the Pléiade tell us, correctly enough, that the Maison Bailly was a firm of furniture removers, but not what the significance of the old boar was. Again, Huysmans's recondite allusions often give way to persistent research – in fact the boar was a gift from a grateful customer in the 1860s who intended it to be enjoyed as a Sunday roast, but the Maison Bailly's proprietor, unable to kill it, decided to keep it in the firm's courtyard instead, where it became something of a local celebrity, attracting the attention of passers-by and schoolchildren, including the adolescent Huysmans.

The decision by the editors of the Pléiade edition not to include Huysmans's final two post-conversion novels, *La Cathédrale* and *L'Oblat*, is certainly a controversial one. These have traditionally been seen as forming, along with *En route*, either an autobiographical trilogy, or a tetralogy if you also include *Là-bas* (in which Huysmans's alter ego Durtal is introduced for the first time). It could be argued that both *La Cathédrale* and *L'Oblat*, though nominally published as novels, are devoid of plot and action, and constitute a thinly-disguised transcription of Huysmans's own spiritual journey into the turbulent waters of turn-of-the-century Catholicism rather than being works of fiction as such. There were probably also practical and logistical reasons for the exclusion: *La Cathédrale* was by far Huysmans's longest novel and to have included it alone would have pushed the page count beyond acceptable limits. Either way, the decision has prompted an aggrieved response from those who see Huysmans's spiritual journey as a key component in understanding him as a writer. The weekly Catholic magazine *Famille chrétienne* complained bitterly about the exclusion in its pages: 'Est-ce un choix idéologique? Ses responsables éditoriaux auraient-ils expurgé volontairement l'œuvre de Huysmans de sa partie catholique?' [Was this an ideological

decision? Did those leading the editorial team want to purge Huysmans's work of its Catholic part?].

Leaving out *La Cathédrale* would have been easier to comprehend if some rationale had been given by the Pléiade editors. As it is, neither the general introduction – which otherwise gives an interesting and insightful account of Huysmans's life and work – nor the 'Note sur l'édition' even mention the book by name. This is surely a curious omission given that the novel was for many years Huysmans's most well known and emblematic book – before the twentieth-century fascination with the decadent tradition and its adoption of *À rebours* as a kind of cult classic, that is.

Inevitably, given the dichotomous nature of Huysmans's readership, the Pléiade edition looks certain to divide its readers. Those who see Huysmans primarily as a naturalist whose work becomes progressively less interesting in proportion to his attraction to Catholicism, will find almost all they need: a well-edited, compact edition of the works that define Huysmans as a fin-de-siècle writer. Indeed, taken together, the Pléiade's introductory prefaces, which make good use of Huysmans's voluminous correspondence (much of it still unpublished) in their account of the genesis of the novels, provide a fascinating and succinct biography of the writer's life, albeit one that stops in 1895. On the other hand, those who see Huysmans's work through the teleological lens of his conversion to Catholicism will be sorely disappointed. Guyaux has expressed his desire for a second volume, which would go some way to salving the wounds caused by the omission, but realistically, even if a second volume does appear, it would be something of a ragbag, with Huysmans's late Catholic works being shoehorned in alongside his art criticism and journalism. In this regard, the Classiques Garnier edition will probably be the more satisfying in the long run – assuming Seillan has the energy to see the remaining seven volumes through to completion – in that it will present in chronological order the most comprehensive and critically rigorous collection of Huysmans material ever published.

¹ All translations are my own.

Notes on Contributors

Elizabeth Adams is Librarian at University College Oxford, a role that sees her buying the latest medical textbooks for undergraduates, curating exhibitions of medieval manuscripts, and assisting researchers who visit to consult special collections. One of her major projects has been the repatriation and exploration of the Robert Ross Memorial Collection. Outside the Library she spends time teaching, promoting and practising the inky craft of letterpress printing.

Sally Blackburn-Daniels is Impact Consultant for English at The Open University. She completed her PhD on Vernon Lee (Violet Paget, 1856-1935) at the University of Liverpool in January 2019. Sally is Communications Officer for the International Vernon Lee Society (IVLS) and Transcription Editor for the Holograph Lee Project (HoL). Sally's essay 'Vernon Lee: Excavating *The Spirit of Rome*' is included in *Excavating Modernity: Physical, Temporal and Psychological Strata in Literature, 1900-1930* (Routledge, 2018).

Joseph Bristow is Distinguished Professor of English at the University of California, Los Angeles. His books include (with Rebecca N. Mitchell) *Oscar Wilde's Chatterton: Romanticism, Literary History, and the Art of Forgery* (Yale University Press, 2015) and an edited collection, *Oscar Wilde and the Cultures of Childhood* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). He is completing *Oscar Wilde on Trial: The Criminal Proceedings, from Arrest to Imprisonment* for Yale University Press. His recent essays include a study of Margaret Sackville's career in *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, ed. by Kate Hext and Alex Murray (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), a discussion of Sapphic boyhood and turn-of-the-century English and French lyric in *Victorian Poetry* (2019), and an analysis of Michael Field's *Attila, My Attila!* in *Michael Field: Decadent Moderns*, ed. by Ana Parejo Vadillo and Sarah Parker (Ohio University Press, 2019). He is (with Rebecca N. Mitchell and Charlotte Ribeyrol) joint editor of *Studies in Walter Pater and Aestheticism*.

Matthew Creasy is Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Glasgow. His critical edition of Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* was published by Fyfield-Carcenet in 2014 and he is currently working on an edition of George Moore's *Confessions of a Young Man* for the MHRA's Jewelled Tortoise series. He is Vice-Chair of the British Association of Decadence Studies and a member of the Advisory Board for the Decadence Research Centre at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Jennifer Higgins is a literary translator from French and Italian. Recent translations include *A Short Philosophy of Birds* by Philippe Dubois and Elise Rousseau (WH Allen, 2019), and *Faces on the Tip of my Tongue* by Emmanuelle Pagano (Peirene Press, 2019, a co-translation with Sophie Lewis), which was longlisted for the Man Booker International Prize 2020. She is also assistant director of the Queen's College Translation Exchange, an organization promoting literary translation in schools and the wider community. Jennifer is also a member of the AHRC-funded Decadence and Translation Network.

Brendan King is a freelance writer, reviewer and translator with a special interest in late nineteenth-century French fiction. He also runs a research website devoted to the work of J.-K. Huysmans (www.huysmans.org). His most recent translation is Huysmans's collection of art criticism, *Modern Art* (Dedalus Books, 2019) – the first time the book has appeared in English – and he is currently working on Huysmans's follow-up volume, *Certains*. For over twenty years he worked for the novelist Beryl Bainbridge and his biography of her, *Love by All Sorts of Means*, was published by Bloomsbury Continuum in 2016.

Frederick D. King is Assistant Professor of business communication with the Rowe School of Business at Dalhousie University. Frederick's research into British aestheticism and decadence includes work on queer theory and textual studies and has been published in *Victorian Periodicals Review* and *Victorian Review*.

Alison Lee is Associate Professor in the Department of English and Writing Studies and the Department of Women's Studies and Feminist Research at the University of Western Ontario. Alison's co-authored work with Frederick D. King (Dalhousie University) is a comparative study of nineteenth-century decadence and twentieth-century postmodernism as critical methodologies for reading contemporary neoliberal discourses. Their articles have also appeared in *Cahiers victoriens et édonardiens*, *Contemporary Literature*, and the *Journal of Modern Literature*.

Gregory Mackie is Associate Professor in the Department of English and Norman Colbeck Curator in Rare Books and Special Collections at the University of British Columbia. He specializes in Victorian and Modernist Literature, drama, and book history. He is most recently the author of *Beautiful Untrue Things: Forging Oscar Wilde's Extraordinary Afterlife* (University of Toronto Press, 2019).

Kristin Mahoney is Associate Professor in the Department of English and a Faculty Fellow in the Center for Gender in a Global Context at Michigan State University. She has published articles on aestheticism and decadence in *Victorian Studies*, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, *Criticism*, *English Literature in Transition*, *Literature Compass*, *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, *Victorian Review*, and *Victorian Periodicals Review*. Her first book, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2015. She is currently completing a project entitled *Queer Kinship after Wilde: Transnational Decadence and the Family*.

Mathew Rickard recently defended his PhD thesis at Queen's University Belfast. His thesis was entitled 'Against the Grain: The Poetics of Non-Normative Masculinity in Decadent French Literature'. His research has appeared in *Volupté* and *Dix-Neuf*, and his chapter on dandyism and Don Juan appeared in *Le dandysme, de l'histoire au mythe*, ed. by Edyta Kociubińska (Peter Lang, 2019). His broader research interests include book culture, intertextuality, transgression and gender studies, with a particular focus on masculinities and queer theory. Mathew is currently working on turning his thesis into a monograph with Peter Lang and will take up a position as a *maître de langue* at the Université de Picardie Jules Verne in Beauvais this coming September.

Jonathan Stone is Associate Professor of Russian at Franklin & Marshall College (USA). He studies early Russian modernism, European decadence, and the print and material culture of the fin de siècle. He is the author of *The Historical Dictionary of Russian Literature* (Scarecrow Press, 2013), *The Institutions of Russian Modernism: Conceptualizing, Publishing, and Reading Symbolism* (Northwestern University Press, 2017), and *Decadence and Modernism in European and Russian Literature and Culture: Aesthetics and Anxiety in the 1890s* (Palgrave, 2019). He has published articles on Russian Symbolism, decadence, the history of the book, and Mikhail Bakhtin in *PMLA*, *The Russian Review*, *Modernism/Modernity*, and the *Slavic and East European Journal (SEEJ)*.

Tanfer Emin Tunç is Professor of American Studies at Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey. She holds a BA, MA, and PhD in US History from the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and specializes in American social and cultural history, women's and gender studies, and transnational American studies. She has published extensively on southern writers, and on topics ranging from reproduction in the antebellum South to southern foodways. She is currently the Vice President of the American Studies Association of Turkey and a Board Member of the

European Association for American Studies. A complete list of her publications can be found here: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Tanfer_Tunc

GUEST EDITOR

Kirsten MacLeod is Reader in Modernist Print Culture at Newcastle University. She has published widely on the literature and print culture of the long fin de siècle (1880-1930) in Britain and America. She is the author of two books, *Fictions of British Decadence: High Art, Popular Writing and the Fin de Siècle* (Palgrave, 2006) and *American Little Magazines of the Fin de Siècle: Art, Protest and Cultural Transformation* (University of Toronto Press, 2018). She has published essays on Marie Corelli, M. P. Shiel, Henry James, and Carl Van Vechten and, more recently, has edited Van Vechten's decadent 1920s novel, *The Blind Bow-Boy*, for MHRA. She has an essay forthcoming on F. Scott Fitzgerald and decadence for a new *Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald* (2021) and is currently working on a larger project on Van Vechten and archiving modernism.

EDITORIAL

Jane Desmarais (Editor-in-Chief) is Professor of English and Director of the Decadence Research Centre 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) and *Decadent Plays, 1890-1930* with Adam Alston (forthcoming with Bloomsbury in 2023). Her monograph, *Monsters Under Glass: A Cultural History of Hothouse Flowers, 1850 to the Present*, was published by Reaktion in 2018. She 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' has been published in Jane Desmarais and David Weir's volume *Decadence and Literature* 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* (2021) and is co-editor with Alice Condé 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* (Legenda, 2017). 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. Jessica and Alice 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. Together with 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, 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, Peter Lang, 2019).