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A Note on Voluptuousness: A Personal Essay on Decadence and Pleasure

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What is the relationship between decadence and pleasure? Surely there must be some such relationship, but it has to be (as we used to say) problematic. Part of the problem involves cultural context, or rather, contexts. Decadence begins as a sensibility – a composite of pessimism, refinement, immorality, aestheticism – and ends up as a culture, in both senses: as something learned but also lived. Learned decadence was once housed in such institutions as the University of Oxford and the Bodley Head, but such institutions have also had a major role in the development of decadence as a lived culture. It is one thing to read about a character in a novel who has a set of blue china; it is another thing altogether to actually have a set of blue china and to enjoy using it. If that pleasure seems too mild and aesthetic for decadence, feel free to fill the cup of blue china with absinthe and have the character light up one of those opium-tainted cigarettes we read about – then stop reading and light one up for yourself. I'm pretty sure you will recognize the difference in the two activities. Also, you will probably take pleasure in both. But are these decadent pleasures, and is one more pleasurable – or more decadent – than the other? Moreover, despite the difference in readerly delights and some actual pursuit in life of those pleasures first encountered in art, isn't there an obvious continuity between the two? For my part, coming from one of the most backward backwaters of the United States, and being the first person in my family (by which I mean extended family, including third cousins and pets) to attend university, decadence was for me a form of that most mundane of American enthusiasms: self-improvement. If only I could become decadent, I thought, I could better myself to the point that I would cease to be American. The effort did not succeed, hélas, but at least the attempt offered an opportunity to contemplate the question of whether decadence and pleasure might somehow coincide.

That a relationship between decadence and pleasure exists is not in doubt, at least so far as popular conceptions of decadence go. Decadent pleasure in this popular sense involves excess – too much of a good thing. This meaning appears to cut across several Indo-European languages. In Spanish, ‘a decadent lifestyle’ is ‘un estilo de vida de excesos’; German synonyms for *dekadent* include *verschwenderisch* [extravagant] and *maßlos* [immoderate]; a Dutch synonym is *genotzuchtig* [self-indulgent], a compound of ‘pleasure’ *genot* and ‘sigh’ *zucht*. The French and Italian cognates *décadent* and *decadente* more or less combine these notions of excess, extravagance, and self-indulgence with the more familiar senses of ‘decay’, ‘decline’, and ‘degeneration’. Such meanings derive largely from Roman history, especially as represented in those mostly unreliable accounts (by Suetonius, Tacitus, the author of the *Historia Augustae*, and others) of particular Roman emperors whose appetites for food, drink, and sex were both boundless and exotic. They were voluptuaries as well as connoisseurs, larger-than-life types whose power allowed them to combine excess with refinement. A moment’s reflection, however, suggests a certain contradiction at the heart of this model of decadent pleasure. Excess and refinement are in some measure at odds with one another, since excess implies no principle of selection – ‘Let’s eat it all!’ – whereas refinement connotes discrimination – ‘Let’s have the Nebbiolo Alto with the white truffles.’ In fact, refinement might actually involve the *elimination* of certain pleasures as too common or crass for decadent delectation, a practice that is hard to square with the idea of excess.

That the Romans had a more multiform conception of pleasure than our modern notion of excess suggests is manifest in their varied vocabulary. The noun *voluptās* involves pleasure in the general sense of ‘enjoyment’, as something ‘agreeable’ to the mind or the senses, although some authors (Ovid, Petronius, Apuleius) use the word in a more specific way to refer to sexual intercourse. Usually, however, *libidō* is sexual pleasure, but even that meaning is specialized, the more general sense of *libidō* being simply ‘desire’, an urge to satisfy a ‘bodily craving’, not all of which are necessarily sexual. *Dēlicia*, more often in plural form as *dēliciae*, refers to pleasurable activities, ‘allurements’, and the like, sometimes even ‘luxuries’, although there is a specific word,

luxus, from which English ‘luxury’ is derived, that conveys ‘excess’ and ‘extravagance’. *Dēlectātiō* is the nominal basis for ‘delight’, while the verb form *dēlectare* means ‘to lure’, ‘to entice’, or ‘to charm’. Other verbs relating to pleasure include *placēre*, ‘to please or satisfy’, and *oblectare*, ‘to delight, amuse, divert, entertain’; and so on.¹ Yet none of these words – with the possible, partial exception of *luxus* – connotes anything inherently decadent, and I think I know why: namely, because decadence is less a form or type of pleasure in itself – a category of pleasure – as it is a judgement *about* pleasure. That scenario would certainly cover the case of excess, which necessarily involves the judgement that pleasure has – or should have – limits. But how much is too much? And is too much pleasure decadent? The basic ambiguity that attaches to the word *decadent* in multiple contexts applies here, since the judgement about pleasure may be both moral and aesthetic. Perhaps it is truer to say that while the basis for judging pleasure as decadent may once have been *both* moral and aesthetic, more recently the basis is *either* moral or aesthetic.

We probably have Walter Pater to thank for conflating morality and aesthetics and for making the prospect of decadent pleasure possible. Not that it was his intention to do so: the conflation was the result of the outraged reaction to the first edition of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) that insisted, after the fashion of Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin, that art and life both have moral purpose; and of Pater’s response to that reaction in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). Although Pater was more neo-Hegelian than neo-Kantian, his awareness of Kant’s categorical separation of pure (theoretical) reason, practical (moral) reason, and aesthetic judgement (taste) seems evident from the first page of the *Renaissance*, since he rejects the relevance of empirical observation to aesthetic experience when he denies the validity of Arnold’s advice to the critic ‘To see the object as it really is’.² But no sooner does Pater reinforce one Kantian boundary than he crosses another one, when he deliberately fuses practical experience with aesthetic experience: ‘What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? Does it give me pleasure?’ (p. 4). The antecedent of the pronoun *it* is a bit slippery here, some composite of ‘song’, ‘picture’, and ‘engaging personality’, the latter

ambiguously situated ‘in life or in a book’ – but, one suspects, between the covers in either event. The ‘Conclusion’ clarifies all that lies behind that shimmering *it* on the first page: ‘Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end’ (p. 119). Moreover, the ‘engaging personality’ that flashes its coy smile at us on the first page reappears in the ‘Conclusion’ as well, when Pater names the need to ‘catch at any exquisite passion’ to allay the elusiveness of perception, whether ‘work of the artist’s hand, or the face of one’s friend’ (p. 120). Here is a real and deliberate refusal to discriminate between art and life as the basis for aesthetic experience, which is tantamount to making taste do the work of morality.

And there it is – the basis for decadent pleasure: the decadent deploys taste, not morality, as the means of determining whether sensuous experiences are good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable. Pleasure is subjected to aesthetic judgement, not practical reason. Having let this particular genie out of the lamp, Pater went to some pains to put it back, or try to. His oft-quoted complaint to Edmund Gosse from 1876 – ‘I wish they wouldn’t call me a hedonist; it produces such a bad effect on the minds of people who don’t know Greek’ – shows how irritating all those ‘journalistic mosquito-bites’³ were: the inability of the press to understand the necessity of pleasure in anything other than moral terms led to the self-censorship of the second edition of the *Renaissance* in 1877 and in 1885 to *Marius the Epicurean*, where Pater ‘dealt more fully’ with ‘the thoughts suggested’ by the original ‘Conclusion’ of 1873.⁴ The key chapter in *Marius* where Pater deals more fully with those thoughts and where he ‘clarifies’ the meaning of ‘hedonism’ is titled ‘The New Cyrenaicism’. There, Pater allows himself a moment of self-referential playfulness when he mentions some acquaintances of Marius ‘who jumped to the conclusion’ that ‘he was making pleasure – pleasure, as they so poorly conceived it – the sole motive of life’.⁵ In this passage, Pater surely has in mind all those young, rapt Oxonians who ‘jumped to the conclusion’ of the first edition of the *Renaissance*.

As for ‘hedonism’, Pater somehow manages to equate ‘that reproachful Greek term for the philosophy of pleasure’ (p. 119) with – wait for it – stoicism. Paraphrase cannot do justice to the

astonishing, almost heroic display of rhetorical sophistry Pater mounts in his defence of pleasure, however attenuated and qualified. Along the way Marius is associated with ‘the “new Cyrenaicism”’ (p. 120), a philosophy of pleasure that has its origins with Aristippus of Cyrene, an ancient city located in northern Africa (modern Libya). Practitioners of the original or ‘old’ Cyrenaicism actively sought pleasure and so are philosophically different from the Epicureans, who mainly wanted to avoid pain, rather than endure it like the Stoics.⁶ Evidently, Marius is a ‘new’ Cyrenaic because his pleasures are not exactly pleasurable:

Not pleasure, but fullness of life, and ‘insight’ as conducting to that fullness – energy, variety, and choice of experience, including noble pain and sorrow even [...] – whatever form of human life, in short, might be heroic, impassioned, ideal: from these the ‘new Cyrenaicism’ of Marius took its criterion of values. (p. 120)

It would be a ‘new’ Cyrenaic indeed who would *choose* pain, however noble, yet this is Marius’ ‘theory’ – ‘which might properly be regarded as in great degree coincident with the main principles of the Stoics themselves’ (p. 120). What this stoical hedonist means to do with his theory is mainly what Pater announces in his preface to the *Renaissance*: pay the closest possible attention to his own sensuous impressions, regardless of whether those impressions are prompted by ‘works of art’ or ‘the fairer forms of nature and human life’, and then explain and analyze their influence on him (p. 4). So Marius will take care ‘[t]o understand the various forms of ancient art and thought, the various forms of actual human feeling’ in order ‘to satisfy [...] the claims of these concrete and actual objects on his sympathy, his intelligence, his senses’ and ‘become the interpreter of them to others’ (p. 120). Pater does not use the word ‘decadent’ in his characterization of Marius’ pleasure, but the importance of interpretation here is consistent with the notion that pleasure is decadent mainly on the basis of aesthetic judgement.

But regardless of whether we are talking about some bygone, *fin-de-siècle* era or the present day, a lot depends on who is doing the judging. During the days of Oscar Wilde and the early André Gide, for example, there is no doubt that the homosexual pleasures they each enjoyed were judged to be decadent in the moral sense. Indeed, for a time *decadent* served as a euphemism

for *homosexual*, and those who practised homosexuality were immoral, as the title of Gide's 1902 *récit* proudly proclaims: *L'Immoraliste*. By contrast, in the United States and other Western democracies today, the moral basis for judging homosexuality as a form of decadence no longer obtains. Yes, of course, religious fanatics on the far-right fringe still equate homosexuality with bestiality, but in America, at least, debates about 'same-sex marriage' and 'gays in the military' are mostly settled.⁷ The larger point here is that the moral judgement that once deemed homosexual pleasure decadent is now moot, although the aesthetic judgement perhaps continues to resonate: as Carl Van Vechten's epigram quoting Allen Norton so memorably puts it, 'A thing of beauty is a boy forever'.⁸

One species of the moral argument that judges certain pleasures decadent concerns the notion that it is possible for human beings to violate nature, to do things that are unnatural. The extremist religious position holding that homosexuality is no different from bestiality is an example of such judgement. But how is bestiality unnatural? One of the more unusual items in my vocabulary is the lexeme 'stump-trained heifer', a term for a female bovine sufficiently disciplined to stand with her rear end positioned near a tree-stump so that an ardent farm-boy can be at the appropriate height to satisfy his natural desires. Certainly, some people will judge this particular pleasure decadent on moral grounds, whereas others will say that such bovine pleasures fail the aesthetic test, not the moral one, and so do not qualify as decadent. Lest I appear to endorse bestiality, I will concede that arguments against the practice most certainly exist that have nothing to do with the religious prohibitions detailed in Leviticus 18:23 ('It is confusion') and 20:15-16 ('Their blood shall be upon them'). All kinds of objections can be mounted against congress with quadrupeds, from the ethical (see: societies, humane) to the medical (see: Fracastoro, Girolamo).⁹ But however unethical or unsafe, it cannot be decadent because bestiality is not unnatural so much as all too natural. It is, after all, a form of sexuality, which is a problem for decadence generally, by which I mean that sexual pleasure is so natural

(indeed, there would be no nature without it) that it poses a problem for anyone who wants the experience of it to be decadent.

There is a scene in Ettore Scola's *La Nuit de Varennes* (1982) where the great enlightenment pornographer Nicolas-Edme Restif de la Bretonne (Jean-Louis Barrault) is momentarily distracted from his quest to track Louis XVI's flight from Paris to Varennes on the night of 20-21 June 1791. Madame Faustine (Caterina Boratto), one of Restif's old flames who now runs an elegant brothel, tempts him with a new girl (Annie Belle), very young, whose tiny feet immediately appeal to the fetishistic desires of the author of *Le Pied de Franchette* (1769). When Restif goes into elaborate verbal ecstasies over the 'petits pieds' of the young girl, Faustine tells her that he is a great writer, whereupon the object of the great writer's podophilic ardor asks, with some alarm, whether she will have to do anything special. Faustine comforts her with this assurance: 'Un intellectuel ou un forgeron, dans un lit, c'est la même chose' [An intellectual or a blacksmith: in bed, they're the same thing]. That's the problem: how does the (male) decadent differentiate himself from the (male) blacksmith in bed? By going to bed with the blacksmith? That by-gone solution to the problem of making sexual pleasure decadent depends not only on the now-defunct moral prohibition against homosexual relations but also on class distinctions that have less erotic frisson now than they did in the days when aristocrats walked the earth (see: Montesquiou-Fézensac, Marie Joseph Robert Anatole, Comte de).

So what is the poor decadent to do? Hard to say. If we take literature as a guide to life (and who doesn't?), we can find some instruction in *À rebours*, chapter 9. There Joris-Karl Huysmans offers three examples of Des Esseintes' sexual adventures, which the decadent recalls after letting a bonbon 'consist[ing] of a drop of schoenanthus scent' [une goutte de parfum de sarcanthus] and sugar dissolve in his mouth.¹⁰ Schoenanthus, better known as camel grass, is common to Saudi Arabia and northern Africa. While chewing or brewing the root of it is said to have certain medicinal benefits, modern sources do not indicate any aphrodisiac value.¹¹ Huysmans evidently thought otherwise, which explains why he calls it 'female essence' (p. 96) [d'essence feminine (p.

145)]. In any event, the bonbon's *madeleine*-like effect first produces memories of Des Esseintes' affair with the muscular American acrobat known as 'Miss Urania', whose manly strength, the decadent hopes, will allow him to experience 'that extravagant delight in self-abasement which a common prostitute shows in paying dearly for the loutish caresses of a pimp' (p. 97) [l'exorbitant attrait de la boue, de la basse prostitution heureuse de payer cher les tendresses malotrues d'un souteneur (p. 146)]. Unfortunately, the manly woman turns out to be 'positively puritanical in bed' (p. 98) [elle avait une retenue puritaine, au lit (p. 146)] so Des Esseintes ends the affair without achieving the decadent pleasure he desires. The second recollected affair is more successful. This is the one with the ventriloquist whom Des Esseintes uses, first, to recreate the dialogue between the Chimera and the Sphinx from Gustave Flaubert's *La Tentation de Saint-Antoine* (1874) and, second, to create the illusion 'of being caught *flagrante delicto*' (p. 101) [d'être pris en flagrant délit (p. 149)] by simulating the sounds of an outraged lover at the bedroom door. The charade gives Des Esseintes 'extraordinary pleasure' (p. 101) [des allégresses inouïes (p. 149)] by making him feel like 'a man running a risk, interrupted and hustled in his fornication' (p. 101) [cette panique de l'homme courant un danger, interrompu, pressé dans son ordure (p. 149)]. This time, it is the woman who quite understandably cuts short the affair, leaving the decadent for 'a fellow with less complicated whims and more reliable loins' (p. 101) [un gaillard dont les exigences étaient moins compliquées et les reins plus sûr (p. 149)]. The last affair is with a 'poorly clad' [pauvrement vêtu (p. 150)] young man who asks Des Esseintes 'the quickest way to get to the Rue de Babylone' (p. 102) (what's in a name?) [la plus courte pour se rendre à la rue de Babylone (p. 149)]. The 'mistrustful friendship' [une défiante amitié (p. 150)] that ensues gives Des Esseintes a peculiar kind of pleasure: 'never had he submitted to more delightful or more stringent exploitation, never had he run such risks, yet never had he known such satisfaction mingled with distress' (p. 102) [jamais il n'avait supporté un plus attirant et un impérieux fermage; jamais il n'avait connu des périls pareils, jamais aussi il ne s'était senti plus douloureusement satisfait (p. 150)].

What do these three experiences have in common? First, all three evidently illustrate the pleasures of sex *à rebours*; that is, in each instance Des Esseintes, more or less, imagines himself in some kind of feminine position. In the case of Miss Urania, the role-reversal is quite explicit: ‘he got to the point of imagining that he for his part was turning female’ (p. 97) [à se regarder [...], de son côté, l’impression que lui-même se féminisait (p. 146)]. This dimension is less obvious in his relationship with the ventriloquist, but Des Esseintes does ‘cling [...] to her like a child wanting to be comforted’ (p. 101) [se réfugeant, ainsi qu’un enfant inconsolé (p. 149)], implying a less-than-manly attitude toward the woman, who, after all, parts her hair ‘like a boy’s’ (p. 99) [une raie de garçon (p. 147)]. Hence, an element of implicit ‘inversion’ (one nineteenth-century term for homosexuality) is involved in the first two recollected affairs, an element that becomes explicit with the last. Two of the three have in common an element of risk, absurdly contrived in the case of the ventriloquist, socially real in the case of the shabbily dressed young man who accosts Des Esseintes on the street. The element of risk in the last affair is evidently the product of the class difference between the aristocrat and the street hustler that further compounds the social taboo against same-sex relations. While homosexuality was not illegal in the Paris of Huysmans’s day, sodomy having been decriminalized in 1791, it was hardly accepted by the broader society – or by the police, who maintained special departments to surveil and control homosexuals until 1981.¹² But there is a third component to these recollected pleasures that might make them decadent, and that is the fact of recollection itself, which ensures that they all undergo the process of aesthetic judgement.

The memories are prompted by the synaesthetic trigger of the schoenanthus scent, of course, so the ‘morose delectation’ (p. 103) [délectation morose (p. 150)] of these past pleasures occurs in an aesthetic context from the start. Huysmans’s use of the ecclesiastical term ‘morose delectation’ is a clever touch because it brings the pleasures into the orbit of sin, suggesting, almost, that the pleasurable acts themselves are not sinful so much as the pleasurable recollection of them is. Morose delectation involves moral judgement, but such judgement is like aesthetic

judgement in so far as it is reflective or retrospective. Des Esseintes' pleasures occur in a literary text, so naturally there is an element of narrative retrospection to them. This literary fact aside, however, I contend that there is necessarily something retrospective about the idea of decadent pleasure itself, so when I say we can look to literature as a guide to life, what I mean is not that we should comb the pages of the decadent canon looking for specific pleasures that we might then emulate in life; rather, we should recognize that there is a post-facto quality to decadent pleasure. This is not quite the same as Ernest Hemingway's celebrated insight into the nature of morality: 'what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after'.¹³ We are not in the realm of practical reason just now, and Hemingway's capsule restatement of the categorical imperative is not that helpful. What I have in mind is better captured by that old joke that has me asking, 'Do you smoke after sex?' and you say, 'I don't know. I never looked'. Well, look; and tell me what you see when you cast your glance downward, or, better, backward. Decadence somehow lies on the other side of pleasure; pleasure, in short, is something you have to go through to get to decadence. This much is suggested early on in *À rebours* through the black feast celebrating Des Esseintes' hard-earned impotence. Indeed, the pleasures of the black feast are doubly decadent because the feast itself memorializes the decadent hero's past profligacy while the recollection of the memorial banquet is an occasion for even more morose delectation.

Huysmans is supposed to have based Des Esseintes' fictional black feast on the account of a funerary dinner staged by Grimod de la Renière (1758-1838), the classical prototype being the black banquet served up by the emperor Domitian, described by the Greek historian Cassius Dio. The pleasures of food seem to have been beside the point in the case of both Domitian, who wanted to terrify his guests, and Grimod, who wanted to embarrass them. Few details have survived about the legendary Grimod dinner (a room draped in black, choirboys wafting funeral incense),¹⁴ but the food does not seem to have been black in fact, whereas Cassius Dio says that Domitian did serve black food, 'in dishes of the same colour'.¹⁵ Hence the better model for the

mordant meal in *À rebours* seems to be Domitian's rather than Grimod's, with the difference that Des Esseintes clearly means to entertain his guests. Whatever decadent pleasure might inhere in the black feast, however, lies not in the appeal to the sense of taste but to sight, in the carefully realized aesthetic vision that subordinates both food and drink to the colourless colour scheme.

One of the things that interests me about the black feast is Des Esseintes' choice of wines. Usually, such choices are intended to complement the food on the basis of taste: a great Nebbiolo Alto, such as one of Luigi Ferrando's black-label Caremas, matches the flavour of shaved white truffles extraordinarily well. But Des Esseintes goes against the grain of such thinking by choosing wines on the basis of colour, not taste: 'From dark-tinted glasses they had drunk the wines of Limagne and Roussillon, of Tenedos, Valdepeñas, and Oporto' (p. 13) [bu, dans des verres sombres, les vins de la Limagne et du Roussillon, des Tenedos, des Val de Peñas et des Porto (p. 71)]. Obviously, the wines named are supposed to be especially dark, the most familiar and least problematic on the list being the wine from Oporto, or Port, made from such black-skinned grapes as Touriga Nacional, Tinta Baroca, Touriga Francesa, Tinta Roriz (the Portuguese name for Spanish Tempranillo), and Tinto Cão, among others. Carignan, another dark grape, was heavily planted in Roussillon, and the black-skinned Tempranillo finds its way into the red wine of Valdepeñas, the poor man's Rioja.¹⁶ One nineteenth-century account of the wines of Tenedos, a Turkish island in the Aegean, describes them as 'deep red' with a 'flavour not unlike strong Burgundy',¹⁷ while a still earlier description claims, 'A Tenedos wine has much the taste and colour of Red Port'.¹⁸ The outlier on Des Esseintes' list is Limagne, a part of the Auvergne region that produces indifferent wines today. Possibly, the grape in the glass is Auvernat, the local version of Pinot Noir; 'its skin is as black as jet', an old source says.¹⁹ All of this business is exceedingly odd, but the strangest part of it may be that Des Esseintes and his guests are drinking wines at all. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, one vintage after another fell prey to phylloxera, the root-eating aphid that began the destruction of the French wine industry in 1863 and was not brought under control until well after the publication of *À*

rebours. The phylloxera epidemic might well explain why wine does not figure prominently in the decadent pleasures of Des Esseintes – aside from that one sentence in the episode of the black feast – or of other decadent heroes. Sure, Dorian Gray is ‘sipping some pale-yellow wine from a delicate gold-beaded bubble of Venetian glass’ – at breakfast – when Basil Hallward arrives in a panic after he learns of the death of Sybil Vane,²⁰ but the wine is at best secondary as a signifier of decadence compared to Dorian’s utter insouciance in the face of human tragedy. Moreover, the other references to wine in that novel seem about as generic as the one Ernest Dowson summons when Cynara’s shadow falls ‘between the kisses and the wine’.²¹

We also have phylloxera to thank for the popular association of decadence with another alcoholic pleasure: absinthe. At first, absinthe was the drink of French soldiers who had acquired a taste for the stuff in Algeria (as an alcoholic antidote to malaria)²² and, evidently, of the poor – as the history of artistic representations suggest. None of the figures in Édouard Manet’s *Le Buveur d’absinthe* [*Absinthe Drinker*] (1859), Honoré Daumier’s *L’Absinthe* (1863), or Jean-François Raffaëlli’s *Les Buveurs d’absinthe* [*The Absinthe Drinkers*] (1881), for example, would ever be mistaken for the dandified decadents we know in literature. Wine was still available, of course, but the relative scarcity of grapes inflated the price even as that same scarcity drove the cost of absinthe down, as distillers began to use industrial alcohol made from beets instead of grapes.²³ Hence, absinthe-drinking might have been a bohemian pleasure, but it was not an especially decadent one – except in the usual moral sense, for which we have Marie Corelli and any number of other absinthe abolitionists to blame. But then there is Paul Verlaine, shit-faced from absinthe at the Café François 1er (or possibly Café Procope) in those famous photographs by Dornac (aka Pol Massan, aka Paul Cardon)²⁴ from 1892, the year before Edgar Degas’ *L’Absinthe* (1876) was exhibited in London at the Grafton Gallery. Degas’ painting of the actress-model Ellen Andrée and the artist Marcellin Desboutin (who trained in the studio of Thomas Couture) at La Nouvelle Athènes likely did little to encourage the notion of absinthe-drinking as a decadent pleasure,²⁵ but

Verlaine – or his reputation – did. We know this because 1893 was also the year that Edmund Gosse (him again), with Henry Harland as his guide, finally succeeded in tracking down Verlaine:

I learned that there were certain haunts where these later Decadents might be observed in large numbers, drawn together by the gregarious attraction of verse. I determined to haunt that neighbourhood with a butterfly-net, and see what delicate creatures with powdery wings I could catch. And, above all, was it not understood that that vaster lepidopter, that giant hawk-moth, Paul Verlaine, uncoiled his proboscis in the same absinthe-corollas?²⁶

The cultural lepidopterist Gosse published the account of his 1893 expedition as one of his *French Profiles* in 1905, the same year that Belgium banned the sale of absinthe and Jean Lanfray, a farm-worker in Vaud, Switzerland, shot and killed his pregnant wife and his two daughters. Lanfray was an absinthe drinker, meaning he drank a couple of glasses of absinthe after he had polished off as many as five litres of wine a day, plus a few glasses of brandy. Nonetheless, absinthe took the rap, and the sensational ‘absinthe murder’ of 1905 had a lot to do with the Swiss ban that took effect in 1910, with France and other European countries, as well as the United States, following suit soon thereafter.²⁷ I mention these familiar facts because the prohibition undoubtedly has something to do with the mistaken (in my view) elevation of this rather ordinary liqueur into the ranks of decadent pleasures.

But at the end of the day legal prohibition is no better than moral stricture as a basis for decadent pleasure. It’s not that the decadent is beyond good and evil so much as he or she is beyond caring about good and evil. Is this perverse? I doubt it, but perversity is another one of those moral categories that has found a place in popular conceptions of decadence, especially as regards sexuality, though the best example of perversity in the decadent canon concerns not sex but alimentation. When Des Esseintes develops a ‘taste’ for his peptone enemas and takes his nourishment *à rebours*, he is being ‘perverse’ in a sense so literal as to be comic, having ‘turned around’ the normal, natural method of ingestion by taking food in through the ‘wrong’ orifice. The problem of applying this canonical model of perversity to sexuality is immediately apparent, not only because there is no such thing as the wrong orifice when it comes to sex, but also because of the incalculable relativity of morals and manners (see: heifer, stump-trained).

The psychoanalytic theorist Robert J. Stoller succinctly defined ‘perversion’ as ‘the erotic form of hatred’, a fantasy that may or may not be actually enacted, but when it is, the hostility that lies at the heart of the fantasy takes the form ‘of revenge hidden in the actions that make up the perversion and serves to convert childhood trauma to adult triumph. To create the greatest excitement, the perversion must also portray itself as an act of risk-taking’.²⁸ We are now a long way from peptone enemas, but the sense of risk does resonate with the decadent pleasures Des Esseintes recalls in Chapter 9 of *À rebours*. And the general notion of perversion as an erotic form of hatred seems especially relevant to the activities of any number of sadists, from the Divine Marquis himself to the fictional dominatrix Clara who makes that hapless male masochist accompany her through the terrors of the Orient in Octave Mirbeau’s *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899). But even in that *grand guignol* narrative the horrors must pass through some kind of aesthetic filter to satisfy the tastes of the decadent heroine: ‘I’ve seen every horror, all human tortures ... It was very beautiful! But I’ve seen nothing as beautiful – do you know what I mean? – as these Chinese convicts ... it’s most beautiful of all!’ [‘Toutes les terreurs, toutes les tortures humaines, je les ai vues ... C’était très beau! ... Mais je n’ai rien vu de si beau ... comprends-tu? ... que ces forçats chinois ... , c’est plus beau que tout!].²⁹ These would be the convicts to whom Clara feeds rotten meat and experiences near-orgasmic delight in doing so. Perverse? Yes. Decadent? I guess, but I am reluctant to call such pleasures decadent because the aesthetic dimension seems rough and arbitrary, with very little evidence of the artifice that would make the judgement ‘beautiful’ credible. Clara’s perverse pleasures, in short, are not sufficiently refined.

To refine is to remove, and the thing that must be most removed from pleasure to make it decadent is time. Anyone who has ever had a good hangover understands, at a basic level, what this means. The way you feel the morning after gives you a sense of just how decadent your pleasure was the night before. Not that every hangover is of equal quality: one whose origins lie in *Vitis vinifera* L. (‘Nebbiolo’) is preferable, by far, to one whose proximate cause is *Artemisia absinthium*. This is a judgement of taste, and one that necessarily requires a certain amount of time

to make. It's hard to make a judgement about pleasure *in medias res* because one needs time to assess the experience in order to place it on the scale of decadence, since decadence is what you feel good about after being bad. More important, you need a certain amount of time to make the badness better: reflection is the friend of refinement. So perhaps Pater's Marius is right after all to equate hedonism with stoicism: to so discriminate and refine his pleasures that they cease to be a source of pleasure. That would do as a definition of decadent pleasure in a way, since it combines the popular conception of excess with an extraordinarily rarefied sense of taste – too much refinement. Again, to refine is to eliminate, so the only way to make aesthetics fully do the work of morality is to bring the aesthetic sensibility to bear on pleasure wholly and completely – excessively so. That would be perverse. That would be decadent.

¹ For these and other definitions of Latin words related to pleasure, see *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. by P. G. W. Glare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), and *Cassell's New Latin Dictionary*, ed. by D. P. Simpson (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1959).

² Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 4.

³ Edmund Gosse, 'Walter Pater', *Critical Kit-Kats* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1903), p. 258; originally published as 'Walter Pater: A Portrait', *Contemporary Review*, 67 (December 1894), 795-810.

⁴ Pater, *Studies*, p. 177, n.118.

⁵ Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, ed. by Michael Levy (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), p. 119.

⁶ For a recent discussion of these distinctions, see Kurt Lampe, *The Birth of Hedonism: The Cyrenaic Philosophers and Pleasure as a Way of Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). In his chapter on Pater, Lampe notes that, despite the novel's title, 'Marius does not engage seriously with Epicureanism' (p. 173).

⁷ For the U.S. Supreme Court decision establishing the right to same-sex marriage, see *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. ___ (2015); for legislation mandating more liberal policies toward homosexuality in the armed forces, see *Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act of 2010*, HR 2965, 111th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record*, 156 (December 22, 2010): Public Law 111-321.

⁸ Carl Van Vechten, *Interpreters and Interpretations* (New York: Knopf, 1917), p. 148. The epigram prefaces an essay on Vaslav Nijinsky.

⁹ Actually, the common notion that syphilis was contracted from sheep appears to have no sound scientific basis, but the idea persists because the name of the disease derives from that of the shepherd Syphilus in *Syphilis sive Morbus Gallicus* [Syphilis, or the French Disease], a pastoral epic in Latin published in 1530 by the Renaissance physician Girolamo Fracastoro (c. 1478-1553). In the poem, Syphilus loses his sheep to drought and, as a result, impiously offers homage to the king Alcithous instead of the sun-god Sirius, whereupon Sirius punishes Syphilus with the eponymous disease. See *Syphilis sive Morbus Gallicus* (Verona, 1530), n.p., or the anonymous prose translation published as *Syphilis* (St. Louis: Philmar, 1911), pp. 53-55.

¹⁰ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. by Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 2003). p. 96; Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À rebours* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1978), p. 145.

¹¹ Umberto Quattrocchi, *CRC World Dictionary of Grasses: Common Names, Scientific Names, Eponyms, Synonyms, and Etymology*, vol. 1 (Boca Raton, FL: Taylor & Francis, 2006), pp. 550-51.

¹² Louis Compton, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 528.

- ¹³ Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner, 1999), p. 13.
- ¹⁴ For an account of Grimod's 1783 banquet, see Nichola Fletcher, *Charlemagne's Tablecloth: A Piquant History of Feasting* (New York: St. Martin's, 2004), pp. 85-87.
- ¹⁵ Cassius Dio Cocceianus, *Dio's Roman History*, trans. by Earnest Cary, 9 vols (London: Heinemann, 1925), VIII, p. 337.
- ¹⁶ Jancis Robinson, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Wine*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 540, 600.
- ¹⁷ J. C. Hobhouse, *A Journey through Albania, and Other Provinces of Turkey in Europe and Asia, to Constantinople, During the Years 1809 and 1810* (London, 1813), p. 674.
- ¹⁸ Jeremy Bentham, *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, vol. 3, ed. by Ian R. Christie (London: UCL Press, 2017), p. 278.
- ¹⁹ Philip Miller, *The Gardeners Dictionary*, 8th edn (London, 1768), n.p.
- ²⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 92.
- ²¹ Ernest Dowson, 'Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae sub Regno Cynarae', in *Decadent Poetry from Wilde to Naidu*, ed. by Lisa Rodensky (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 86.
- ²² Phil Baker, *The Book of Absinthe: A Cultural History* (New York: Grove Press, 2001), p. 106.
- ²³ Baker, *The Book of Absinthe*, p. 125.
- ²⁴ For the identity of Dornac, see Elizabeth Emery, *Photojournalism and the Origins of the French Writer House Museum (1881-1914): Privacy, Publicity, and Personality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 67. Baker, *The Book of Absinthe* (p. 60), identifies the site of the photographs as the Café Procope, whereas Emery (p. 99), says it was the Café François 1er.
- ²⁵ Baker, *The Book of Absinthe*, p. 121.
- ²⁶ Edmund Gosse, *French Profiles* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1905), p. 182.
- ²⁷ Barnaby Conrad III, *Absinthe: History in a Bottle* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1988), pp. 2-3, 4-5.
- ²⁸ Robert J. Stoller, *Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred* (London: Pantheon, 1986), p. 4.
- ²⁹ Octave Mirbeau, *Le Jardin des supplices* (Paris: Charpentier, 1899) p. 137; *Torture Garden*, trans. by Michael Richardson (Sawtry: Dedalus, 1995), p. 106.