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Volume 6, Issue 2, Autumn/Winter 2023

Decadence and Fashion

Preface by the Editor-in-Chief Jane Desmarais	i
Decadence and Aestheticism through Fashion and Textiles: Guest Editors' Introduction Robyne Calvert and Veronica Isaac	ii
CRITICAL	
Some Americans in the 'House Beautiful': Edith Wharton, Oscar Wilde, and Aestheticism Ailsa Boyd	1
Fibres, Folds, and Trimmings: The Decadent Materials of Sarah Grand's <i>Emotional Moments</i> Stefanie John	28
Layers of Clothing in Hjalmar Söderberg's Writing: Translations of 'The Fur Coat' (1898) and 'A Grey Waistcoat or Justice in Munich' (1913) with an Introduction Laura Alice Chapot	46
Rag Time: Decadent Textiles in the Louisiana Gothic of the Fin de Siècle Ryan Atticus Doherty	75
Finishing Touches: Clothing and Accessories as Tokens of Evil in Rachilde and Barbey d'Aurevilly Elise Bouley	102
(Un)Dressing Decadence: Masquerade and Murder in <i>Mascara</i> David Melville Wingrove	120
CREATIVE	
Arrangements in White and Red Catherine Spooner	141
The Yellow Art Piece Azadeh Monzavi	152
Extracts from 'A thread through portraits of Marchesa Casati' Andrew Nightingale	158

Otherscapes
Jade Starmore, Rebecca Wyman, and Deniz Uster 162

BADS ESSAY PRIZE 2023

‘Oh, London dear!’: Belated Decadence and the Queer City in Ronald Firbank’s *Vainglory*
and *Caprice*
Lucinda Janson 177

BADS TRANSLATION PRIZE 2023

Park Young-hee, ‘A Ward Woven with Moonlight’ (1923): A Translation with an Overview
of Korean Decadence
Di Cotofan Wu 190

REVIEWS

Decadence, Now, Malta Society of Arts, Palazzo De La Salle, Valletta, 11-31 May 2023
Lara Camilleri 206

Kristin Mahoney, *Queer Kinship after Wilde: Transnational Decadence and the Family* (Cambridge
and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022)
Stefano Evangelista 209

Alphonse Mucha, *Le Pater. Le Grand Œuvre d’Alphonse Mucha*, ed. by Tomoko Sato (Paris:
Éditions RMN, 2023)
Sam Kunkel 213

Notes on Contributors 223

Preface

Almost ten years ago, in 2014, Goldsmiths organized a conference entitled ‘Decadence and the Senses’, which aimed to explore the decadent sensorium and its representation in literature and visual culture from classical to modern times. Decadent studies was an emerging field then, defining itself principally around literary studies, but a number of the conference papers were richly interdisciplinary. One such paper was Liz Renes’ on John Singer Sargent’s 1884 painting *Madame X* and the ‘aesthetics of sculptural corporeality’. She tantalized us with a discussion of how the decadent aesthetics of clothes and cosmetics disrupted Victorian conventions. Since then, however, despite the provocations of the 2014 conference and with the exception of a few interventions (including most recently Catherine Spooner’s essay on ‘Fashion: Decadent Stylings’ in the *Oxford Handbook of Decadence*), the worlds of decadence studies and fashion have seldom collided. It is with enormous and long-awaited pleasure therefore that *Volupté* is the platform for a selection of new critical and creative explorations on decadence, aestheticism, fashion, textiles, accessories, and cosmetics.

This issue weaves together a wide range of contributions that explore the connections between aestheticism and decadence and fashion and textiles. Contributions look at the influence of the House Beautiful aesthetics of Pater and Wilde on Edith Wharton’s writing (Boyd), Sarah Grand’s use of textiles in her narrative fiction, where they appear ‘not only as elements of dress but also in descriptions of interiors, artworks, and atmospheres’ (John, p. 28), and the symbolism and signifying function of clothing from grey waistcoats to green satin dresses to white wedding gowns and feathered headdresses (Chapot, Doherty, Bouley, Wingrove). Decadent clothing is performative and transformative, bringing contrasting realms of experience into play. As Wingrove comments about Eurydice’s gown in the film *Mascara* (1987): ‘the upper world of the opera and the underworld of drag impersonation – fuse and blend into one’ (p. 128).

This issue is full of textural/textual analysis and chromaticism, but although the colours of red, black, green, grey, gold, blue, yellow are threaded throughout, it is the shade of white that dominates, reminding us perhaps of Whistler’s ‘white girls’ and signifying and synthesizing purity, cruelty, and celestial transcendence. We include four creative pieces in this issue: four extracts from a sequence of poems about Marchesa Casati by Andrew Nightingale, Azadeh Monzavi’s ‘Yellow Art Piece’, crafted from upcycled materials, a series of fashion photographs inspired by Pre-Raphaelite artworks by Jade Starmore, Rebecca Wyman, and Deniz Uster, and a short story by Catherine Spooner which takes us back to the corporeal whiteness that Renes highlighted almost a decade ago. Recalling perhaps Angela Carter’s ‘Black Venus’ (1985), Spooner’s ‘Arrangements in White and Red’ is written from the point of view of Whistler’s muse, Joanna Hiffernan, ‘us[ing] fiction as an alternative means of thinking through cultural constructions of whiteness’ (p. 143).

We are proud to announce two BADS Prizewinners. Lucinda Janson wins the Essay Prize for an essay on Ronald Firbank, judged to be ‘a fascinating look at the topography and geographies of his London cityscapes. [...] argu[ing] for the importance of this work, [and] [...] weav[ing] together context and text, providing parallels between Firbank and the more canonical decadents and Modernists’. And Di Cotofan Wu wins the BADS Translation Prize for a translation of Park Young-hee’s ‘월광 (月光) 으로 짠 병실 (病室)’ [‘A Ward Woven with Moonlight’] (1923) and an historical and critical overview of Korean decadence, applauded for its ‘triangulation between European decadence, Japan, and Korea’ and deemed ‘particularly fruitful and well thought-through’.

With our grateful thanks to Guest Editors, Robyne Calvert and Veronica Isaac, and to all of our contributors. Wishing our readers a peaceful 2024 from all of us on the *Volupté* team.

Jane Desmarais
Editor-in-Chief
11 December 2023

Decadence and Aestheticism through Fashion and Textiles: Guest Editors' Introduction

Robyne Calvert and Veronica Isaac

University of Glasgow and University of Brighton

[...] and now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect [...]

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Chapter 1), 1891

The description of Basil Hallward's studio – provided in the opening lines of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) – is a feast for the senses from the start, with the 'rich odour of roses' inviting the reader through the door, away from the 'dim roar of London' to the orientalist fantasy within.¹ As in so many fin de siècle visual and literary texts, decadence is conveyed – or implied – through vivid descriptions of the material culture surrounding, or, as in this instance, carefully assembled by the central characters. At the heart of his description are 'long tussore-silk curtains' on which the 'fantastic shadows of birds of flight' produce 'a kind of momentary Japanese effect', an exotic invocation of the Asian-inspired Aestheticism to which Wilde subscribed in his own life.² He was perhaps the most well-known male proponent of Aesthetic Dress – most obviously performed through velvet suits with knickerbocker trousers he famously wore during his 1882 lecture tour of North America, where he was photographed by Napoléon Sarony (fig. 1). While Wilde's views and practices on dress met with mixed reviews, his escapades were widely reported and avidly followed in the British press, cultivating his celebrity even while abroad. Although he was mocked for his attire in Boston, his ensemble as reported by the Canadian press was more subdued:

The apostle had no lily, nor yet a sunflower. He wore a velvet jacket which seemed to be a good jacket. He has an ordinary neck tie and wore a linen collar about number eighteen on a neck half a dozen sizes smaller. His legs were in trousers, and his boots were apparently the product of New York art, judging by their pointed toes. His hair is the color of straw, slightly leonine, and when not looked after, goes climbing all over his features.³

Wilde was the high-profile, often lampooned example of what in artistic circles was a serious approach to art and life, from the furnishing of one's home, to one's sartorial choices. 'The Aesthetic Movement', as it is still often called, did not have a cohesive thesis or manifesto. For this reason, many scholars now prefer the term 'Aestheticism', which acknowledges the breadth of fields influenced by Aesthetic values, and its intersections with other contemporary movements and ideals – including decadence. While Aestheticism is often thought to be confined to the visual arts, unlike decadence which is primarily a literary tradition, both reflect a more eccentric and rebellious side of Victorian culture that crosses over multiple disciplines. They develop from similar cultural contexts and find inspiration in ideas of excess and pleasure, but equally they have more philosophical underpinnings that suggest more serious questions around the nature of beauty.



Fig. 1: Oscar Wilde photographed by Napoléon Sarony (1882). Photographic print on card mount, 33 x 19 cm.
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The present issue of *Volupté* explores the connections between Aestheticism and decadence through the lens of fashion and textiles. The theme was inspired by a online series of talks (*Jendis*), ‘Decadence & Aestheticism: Truth, Beauty, Exoticism, and the Sublime in Nineteenth Century Fashion’, which we were invited to organize by the British Association of Decadence Studies (BADS) in Autumn 2021. Our own eagerness to explore these connections stemmed from a shared interest in Aestheticism in dress and textile histories, particularly in relation to the performative aspects of Artistic Dress, and its relationship to costume/fashion practice in life and on the stage. The papers shared at the four *Jendi* events highlighted the ways in which fashion and textiles – including objects such as clothing, costumes, and interior soft furnishings – can become narrative agents in literature, and within both historical and contemporary creative practice, including ‘neo’ and revivalist responses to these periods. We therefore wish to note (and thank again) the contributors who initiated these important conversations, some of whom are also represented in this issue:

Truth

Emily Taylor, ‘Material Constructions: Making, Outré and Taste in late-19th Century Dress’
Stefanie John, ‘Unveiling Truth and Beauty: Textiles in Sarah Grand’s Short Fiction’
Hilary Davidson, ‘Looking Back Through Fashion: Regency Romanticisms’

Beauty

Ailsa Boyd, ‘Some Americans in the “House Beautiful”: Edith Wharton and Wildean Aesthetics’
Max Donnelly, ‘Daniel Cottier and the House Beautiful’
Kimberly Wahl, ‘Decadent Beauty: Haptic Modes in Aesthetic Dress and Design’

Exoticism

Samuel Love, ‘Send in the Clowns: The Pierrot Costume as Decadent Cipher’
Louise Wenman-James, ‘“Oh, I didn’t know you were a Selfridgette!”: Power Play, Self-Construction, and Fashion in Ada Leverson’s *Bird of Paradise*’
Veronica Isaac, ‘Shopping in Byzantium: Costumes fit for a “Temple of Art”’

Sublime

Robyne Calvert, ‘Dark Decadence: The Gothic in Aestheticism and Neo-Aestheticism’
Rachael Grew, ‘Rags to Sequins: Dressing the Witch’
Catherine Spooner, ‘Unwrapping the Mummy’s Bandages: Whiteness, Fabric and Horror in Imperial Gothic Fictions’

These four *Jendi* evenings left us keen to initiate further discussions surrounding the centrality of dress and textiles within both decadence and Aestheticism, and the interrelationship between individuals and their values. We were therefore delighted to accept an invitation to edit this special issue of *Volupté*, which engages with debates and ideas connected to the opulence and splendour of Aestheticism, and also its darker decadent side.

What we have compiled is an exploratory issue, applying approaches from material culture to a literary field and thereby offering interdisciplinary considerations which include not just astute textual analyses, but creative pieces of fiction, poetry, and art practice as well. This collection encompasses a range of sources, disciplines and time periods representing texts, textiles, film, images, interiors, dress, and accessories – real and imagined. The creative responses in particular demonstrate that both Aestheticism and decadence – or neo-decadence and neo-Aestheticism – are living fields that provide inspiration for creativity, questioning, and analysis. The exploration of fashion in relation to decadence is nascent in terms of scholarship: amongst the most recent publications we recommend the excellent contribution by Catherine Spooner entitled ‘Fashion: Decadent Stylings’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence* edited by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (2021).

The first two critical essays in this edition directly discuss how Aestheticism and decadence manifest through dress and textiles in late Victorian fiction, focusing on the artistic side of the ‘Gilded Age’ in the work of two important women authors. In ‘Some Americans in the “House Beautiful”: Edith Wharton, Oscar Wilde, and Aestheticism’, Ailsa Boyd presents a consideration of aesthetic theories in the work of Edith Wharton (1862-1937), whose first published book was an interior design manual, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897). Following a concise overview of the transatlantic exchange of Aestheticism in the 1880s, Boyd discusses the influence of Pater and Wilde in Wharton’s fiction (Wharton may have seen Wilde lecture). She observes that while Wharton’s taste in her own home did not exhibit the decadence that Wilde indulged in, ‘Aestheticism gave Wharton a language with which to discuss beauty in her own writings’ (p. 1).

She offers rich examples of how this was employed, together with fascinating insights into how Aestheticist principles translated into the author's homes: 'Wharton decorated several homes according to the principles of her book, and built The Mount at Lenox, Massachusetts in 1902, probably exerting influence in the architectural design as well as the interior' (p. 18), thus providing an important and underappreciated example of a successful woman artist embodying the Aesthetic principle of blending art and life.

In 'Fibres, Folds, and Trimmings: The Decadent Materials of Sarah Grand's Emotional Moments', Stefanie John explores Aestheticism, decadence, and the New Woman in the short stories of Sarah Grand (1854-1943), particularly those published in the collection *Emotional Moments* (1908). John observes that within these stories, 'narrative appropriations of material culture accentuate Grand's subversion of gender norms and furthermore reveal her appropriation of Aesthetic and decadent culture.' (p. 30) In her shrewd analysis, John points to the ways in which Grand – like Wilde – uses textiles as a metaphor for atmosphere, and, by extension, aesthetic sensibilities. However, John also elucidates the ways in which Grand's work has the added complexity of using dress and textiles to comment on gender and power in what would now be deemed a feminist critique; showing how Grand's stories both partake in and parody aestheticism and decadence.

Laura Alice Chapot's contribution, 'Layers of Clothing Layers of Clothing in Hjalmar Söderberg's Writing: Translations of "The Fur Coat" (1898) and "A Grey Waistcoat or Justice in Munich" (1913)', directs the attention of decadence studies to late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Sweden. Both decadence and fashion are, as Chapot shows, taken seriously in author, translator, and journalist Hjalmar Söderberg's (1869-1941) work. The two short stories on which Chapot's analysis centres are distinguished by a meticulous attention to detail in the description of the clothing, with an incisive focus on specific elements of dress – the colour of a coat, the number of buttons – and the socially and culturally specific information they communicated about their wearer. Building on this point, Chapot argues that 'In this rapidly changing social landscape,

fashionable dress became a way of situating oneself socially. It became a code through which individuals could make themselves readable and interpretable.’ (p. 53) Like Söderberg’s writing, Chapot’s article is a testament to the power and significance of clothing - specifically its enduring ability - ‘like decadence itself’ to ‘mean many different things simultaneously.’ (p. 57)

In his article ‘Rag Time: Decadent Textiles in the Louisiana Gothic of the Fin de Siècle’, Ryan Atticus Doherty takes us on a journey to late nineteenth-century Louisiana which, he argues, has been underexplored in terms of decadence. Doherty analyses the use of textiles to reflect the sense of decay in the deep South after the Civil War, providing metaphorical fabric for Louisianian authors such as Adolphe du Quesnay (1839-1901), Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), George Washington Cable (1844-1925), and Alfred Mercier (1816-1894) to ‘grappl[e] with the concept of decadence in the American South’s postbellum years’. (p. 76) Doherty proposes Southern decadence should be reconsidered within a broader framework of the historic and cultural confluence of European colonialism, the Caribbean, and the American South, to allow for a re-evaluation of this unique literary genre. Like Chapot, Doherty presents an intriguing analysis that shows the malleability of cloth and clothing to signify multiple connotations around class, race, power, and place, especially in the case of fashionable New Orleans.

The final two essays expose and engage with the darker side of decadence through clothing and textiles as cyphers for excess, extravagance, conceit, artifact, deception, corruption, and even violence. In ‘Finishing Touches: Clothing and Accessories as Tokens of Evil in Rachilde and Barbey d’Aurevilly’, Elise Bouley argues that ‘the sartorial realm [is] the perfect location from which to read the decadent woman as an idol of beauty and perversity.’ (p. 103) Her exploration of the ‘cross-fertilization between appearance and cruelty’ (p. 102) centres on three short stories from Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly’s 1874 collection *Les Diaboliques* (‘Le Rideau Cramoisi’ [‘The Crimson Curtain’], ‘Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan’ [‘The Most Beautiful Love of Don Juan’], and ‘Le Bonheur dans le crime’ [‘Happiness in Crime’]), which she reads alongside, and in conversation with, Rachilde’s novel *La Marquise de Sade* (1887). In a piece which is unflinching and

troubling, Bouley engages with the darker elements of decadence. In her article, however, it is the women who are, quite literally, dressed to kill: their male victims both enraptured and emasculated by ensembles which herald, and in some instances directly initiate, doom and destruction.

Like Bouley, David Wingrove explores the darker side of decadence in '(Un)Dressing Decadence: Masquerade and Murder in *Mascara*'. Centring on a close reading of the 1987 film *Mascara*, directed by Patrick Conrad, Wingrove ventures into a world in which supreme beauty co-exists with, is tainted, and ultimately corrupted by, passion, violence, and murder. His article exposes the unease and potential anger provoked by the fear surrounding identities and garments which remain in flux and refuse to conform to stable social and cultural norms. Wingrove's piece makes a compelling case for the continued, and heightened relevance of the film given the current and growing unease and division provoked by 'culture wars' over gender identity and transgender rights, arguing that *Mascara* feels like 'a film whose time has come' (p. 138).

Adjacent to these critical pieces (and in addition to the *Jendi* talks noted above), Spooner has contributed to this issue a sublime short story, 'Arrangements in White and Red', which picks up on these themes in a wonderful Whistlerian way. Equally, Aubrey Beardsley has been literally and figuratively woven into both Azadeh Monzavi's textile work entitled *The Yellow Art Piece*, and Andrew Nightingale's poems, extracts from a sequence based on portraits of Marchesa Luisa Casati. Pre-Raphaelite art and the fiction of Lewis Carroll inspired *Otherscapes*, contemporary fashion photographs through the fantastical lens of Jade Starmore. Collaborating with designer Deniz Uster of Otherscapes Studio, and featuring model Rebecca Wyman, the images craft a contemporary faerie tale exploring the body's relationship with the natural world, decay, comfort, and ruination.

There are still many questions which this issue of *Volupté* does not address as fully as we would like. For example, we recognize the importance of the debates initiated by the previous issue on Decolonizing Decadence, and there is a great deal more work to be done in this area to deconstruct issues of gender, race, and class. We therefore offer this issue as more of a provocation,

rather than a reflection on the current ‘state of the field’. Our aim is to inspire and invite others to undertake further discussion and research on fashion and textiles in decadence studies, particularly as narrative agents that may reveal deeper complexities and new readings of material and literary culture of the fin de siècle, and their legacies.

¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 7.

² Ibid.

³ Walter Hamilton, *The Aesthetic Movement in England* (London: Reeves & Turner, 1882), pp. 120-21.

Some Americans in the ‘House Beautiful’: Edith Wharton, Oscar Wilde, and Aestheticism¹

Ailsa Boyd

Independent Scholar

The ‘House Beautiful’ of the Aesthetic movement was an ideal of beauty, sensuality, and taste. A reaction against industrialization, Aestheticism embraced internationalism and was frequently condemned as immoral. During his 1882 lecture tour of America, Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) became the Aesthetic movement’s most recognizable spokesman. The writer Edith Wharton (1863-1937) may have heard him speak, which is significant because her first published book was an interior design manual, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897). This is just one point within a vibrant transatlantic exchange of ideas on truth and beauty in art and design in the 1870s-80s. Familiar with life on both sides of the Atlantic from travels in her childhood, Edith Jones had been enchanted by the art and architecture of the ‘Old World’, and her literary career began with a serious engagement with art, interior design, and their importance in society. Both Wilde and Wharton put their theories of decoration into practice in their own, very different, homes. Although Wharton’s controlled taste seems diametrically opposed to Wilde’s espoused decadence, it is possible that Aestheticism gave Wharton a language with which to discuss beauty in her own writing. At several points in her career, she utilized the ideas of Walter Pater (1839-1894) in her work: a youthful poem ‘Intense Love’s Utterance’ (1881), the short story ‘The Fulness of Life’ (1893), and her last, unfinished novel, *The Buccaneers* (1938). Each would have been unthinkable without the transatlantic exchange of ideas on Aestheticism, of which Wilde was the self-acknowledged prophet.

In the late nineteenth century, what you wore and how you decorated your home were the most personal and physical fronts of a greater culture war that was being fought across society. Increased industrialization and population growth in towns and cities led to discussions about the style of public buildings, the subject matter (or lack) of great art, and the morality of literary

characters, from which could be gauged the health of society. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Pre-Raphaelites revived an interest in Britain's medieval history. Through modern art and poetry, artists like D. G. Rossetti (1828-1882) glorified a lost Arthurian Elysium while commenting on contemporary social issues. John Ruskin (1819-1900) and the design reformers of the 1860s irrevocably linked beauty to utility, and truth to materials, and a sense of the past. Designers like William Morris (1834-1896) looked to ancient techniques for dyeing textiles and the natural world for design inspiration. By the 1870s many intellectuals took the worship of beauty to new levels with the Aesthetic credo of 'Art for Art's Sake', which led them to be criticized for immorality, sensuousness, and ridiculousness. On his 1882 American lecture tour Wilde took these ideas across the Atlantic, in the process becoming perhaps the most famous British Aesthete, with statements such as: 'Today more than ever the artist and a love of the beautiful are needed to temper and counteract the sordid materialism of the age.'²

But these ideas were not limited to British artists and designers and their vernacular tradition, for the transatlantic dialogue that came from personal and professional networks in art and literature was hugely important to the development of Aestheticism. As Jonathan Freedman states, 'the American literary experience with the British Aesthetic movement may be seen as a cross-cultural dialogue of dizzying complexity'.³ Wharton and many other Americans travelled to Europe and beyond from their youth, consuming the culture of the Old World and socializing with communities of other expats. Artists and writers found new ways of looking at the world as they negotiated between two continents and cultures. The development of the artistic 'House Beautiful' in interior design can be tracked through many points of transatlantic influence. In 1860s London, Massachusetts-born artist James McNeill Whistler (1834-1901) made collecting East Asian textiles, prints, and blue and white china fashionable and essential to any home that aspired to be artistic. He entitled landscape paintings 'Nocturnes' and figure paintings 'Arrangements', disposing with the traditional narrative subject. When he decorated Frederick Leyland's London dining room, Whistler gave it a musical title: *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room* (1876-77).

The lavish interior, with gold decoration of stylised feathers over almost every surface, combined with the pre-existing incised shelves and sunflower andirons by designer Thomas Jeckyll (1827-1881) to house Leyland's collection of blue and white china and Whistler's oil painting of a girl in a kimono, *La Princesse du pays de la porcelaine* (1864-65) in its decorative frame. The room's title prioritizes the harmonious combination of arts and crafts on display, raising them in the aesthetic hierarchy to equal painting and architecture. Wilde described the Peacock Room as 'the finest thing in colour and art decoration that the world has known since Correggio'.⁴ After Whistler's death, the whole room was purchased by American industrialist and art patron Charles Freer, and moved to the United States to be put on public display in Detroit in 1906.

By the 1880s, the painter John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) was comfortable in studios and salons across Europe due to his fluency in French, German, and Italian. Born in Florence to American parents, Sargent's studio was where the British and American elite came to be painted, and he was at the forefront of taste. His Paris studio house showed off his perfect selection of artistic items: Japanese fabrics, ceramics, *Hina* dolls, oriental rugs, and a 'Sussex' rush-seated chair by the decorative arts firm Morris & Co. The similarly expatriate author Vernon Lee (pseudonym of Violet Paget, 1856-1935) was one of Sargent's oldest friends. She described his house as 'so extremely pretty, quite aesthetic and English, with a splendid big studio and a pretty garden with roses and all done up with Morris papers & rugs and matting'.⁵ Founded in London in 1861, Morris & Co. designed furniture, jewellery, wallpaper, carpets, and tapestry, becoming popular in Europe and North America by the mid 1870s. Later, Sargent developed his career in America through his friendships with others who facilitated the transatlantic movement of art and ideas, such as Boston collector of European art and antiques Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924), and architects Stanford White (1853-1906) and Charles McKim (1847-1909), who returned from Beaux-Arts training in Paris to lead the American Renaissance in classical architecture which proved enormously popular with the enormously wealthy. Sargent worked with them on decorative projects like the Boston Public Library (1895-1919).

Although born in Boston, Henry James (1843-1916) was educated in Europe and visited the salons and drawing rooms of Europe as a young journalist. By 1876 he had settled in London, famous as *the* novelist of the American subjective experience in the ‘Old World’ of Europe. He socialized with and wrote about many of the most avant-garde artists and writers, like Whistler and Sargent, and from 1900 was very good friends with Wharton. His writing on Aestheticism is frustratingly equivocal; he responded negatively to decadence, condemning the sensual poetry of Algernon Swinburne (1837-1909). He never liked Wilde, calling him ‘repulsive and fatuous’ on meeting him in Washington in 1882.⁶ Yet he was fascinated with the connoisseur and the character of the Aesthete occurs frequently in his novels. Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) is the consummate Aesthete, commenting that one ‘ought to make one’s life a work of art.’⁷ The cover of the first American edition is an Aesthetic design which demonstrates elements of the House Beautiful. It is arranged like a tripartite wall treatment, with dado, fill and frieze, a lily-pad *kamon* [Japanese family crest], and frieze of stylized peacock feathers [fig. 1]. The antique is another important element of the Aesthetic interior, so Osmond’s home has ‘faded hangings of damask and tapestry’ and ‘time-polished oak’, but also ‘articles of modern furniture, in which liberal concession had been made to cultivated sensibilities.’⁸ Taste and aestheticism are integral to his villainy, for he treats everyone like an object, particularly his wife Isabel. She is tricked by his perfect taste into thinking that his beautiful rooms indicate a perfect character, but she is very wrong. Aestheticism also inspires the ‘flame-like spirit’ that makes Isabel a vibrant heroine, and her Paterian visions that propel the novel’s plot. For James, and Wharton, modern life is inescapably made up of Paterian Aesthetic experiences.

Pater’s reputation as one of the most influential thinkers of the Aesthetic movement rests on *Studies in the History of The Renaissance* (1873), which Wilde described as ‘my golden book; I never travel without it.’⁹ The famous ‘Conclusion’ was attacked at the time as unscholarly and morbid, for unlike many of his contemporaries, Pater was not interested in connoisseurship or didactic morality, but the subjective impression of the work of art. The ‘stirring of the senses’ by ‘strange

flowers and curious odours, or work of the artists' hands' would 'set the spirit free for a moment'.¹⁰

In a phrase marked by Wharton in her own copy and evoked by Isabel Archer, he famously states: 'To burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.'¹¹ Every individual lives through fleeting moments in isolation, and the purpose of philosophy and culture is to 'startle' the human spirit into 'sharp and eager observation'. As Colin Cruise describes, 'the reader is thrown into [...] hectic modernity' and challenged 'to find passion in every moment'.¹²

Pater defines and elevates the amoral credo of the Aesthete:

Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake, has most, for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.¹³

Pater's decidedly amoral and luxurious emphasis on sensation and passion is the exotic wave on which Wilde crossed the Atlantic, to explain and popularize 'The English Renaissance' in art and design, echoing Pater's title with 'eloquent vagueness', as Richard Ellmann put it.¹⁴

Aestheticism for the home was first introduced to Americans en masse at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, which had over ten million visitors and was the 'primary vehicle for the communication of British ideas' of reformed and artistic taste as Roger B. Stein writes.¹⁵ America was already familiar with the neo-Gothic of 'Eastlake style', but on display was the more modern taste of Aestheticism. There were trade stands with tiles from Minton, Hollins & Co. Doulton china, and Barnard & Bishop Ironworks brought a whole Japanese-style pavilion with railings made of Jeckyll's wrought iron sunflowers (the andirons in the Peacock Room). Furniture was represented by James Schoolbred & Co., Howard and Son, but also the more avant-garde Collinson & Lock [fig. 2], who made Anglo-Japanese furniture designed by E. W. Godwin (1833-1886). The superiority of British decorative arts and furniture was generally agreed, and the exhibition influenced a generation of American designers and craftspeople and all those who wished to decorate in the most fashionable style.

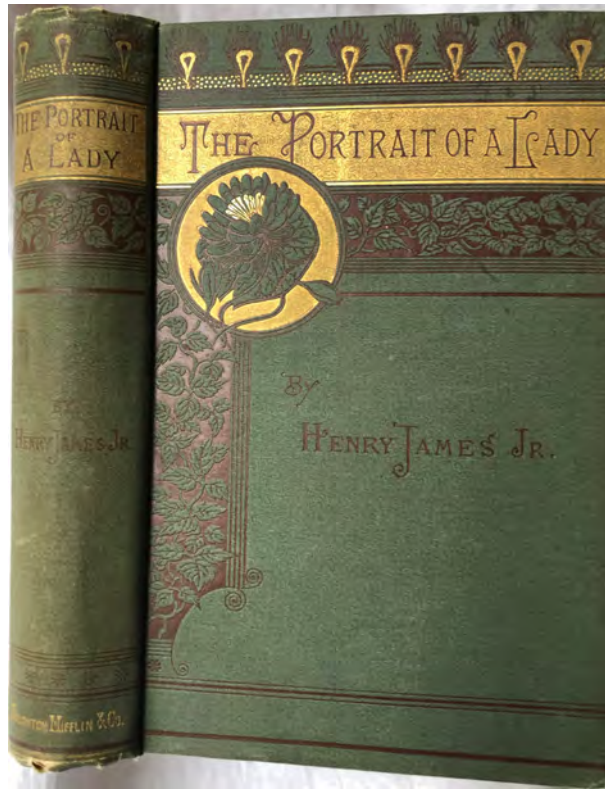


Fig. 1: Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1883). Green cloth cover decorated in gilt and maroon, 520 pp, second printing, 14 x 19.5 x 3 cm. Collection of Ailsa Boyd.



Fig. 2: Philadelphia Centennial Photographic Co., *Collinson & Lock's Furniture Exhibit - Main Building*, 1876. Photograph (silver albumen print), 26 x 21 cm. Free Library of Philadelphia, Print and Picture Collection.

Unlike the Gothic Revival, Aestheticism was not the revival of a single historical style, but a visually playful combination of items from all over the world, from antique Chippendale and Japanese ceramics, to spindly Godwin furniture and modern Morris wallpapers and stained glass. The aim was a *gesamtkunstwerk* of every aspect of life, involving all the senses, and extended to clothing, tableware, furniture, even musical instruments. In the interior, rich hangings could alter sound, and stained glass or fretwork change the colour of light. With every surface richly decorated, Aestheticism's visual complexity makes it difficult for us to comprehend. To modern eyes it can look over the top or fussy, particularly when combined with the extensive economic resources of the homeowner. Although it could also be indicated by a Japanese fan or a peacock feather, this was a privileged way of living, difficult to pin down but easy to lampoon. Manuals of household taste used the catch-all word 'artistic' to describe the 'look'.¹⁶ *Nuttall's Standard Dictionary* in the late 1880s was unsure as to the authenticity of the term, defining Aestheticism as 'devotion, real *or* *affected*, to the study of the beautiful'.¹⁷ This tendency to affectation was famously lampooned in the series of *Punch* cartoons by George du Maurier (1834-1896). In 'The Six-Mark Tea-Pot', the Aesthetic bridegroom, who looks a bit like Wilde and shares his first name with Swinburne, is exhorted by his 'Intense Bride' in a sprigged tea gown, 'Let us live up to it!' [fig. 3]. The aspiration is to live, in *all things*, at the intense high level of beautiful porcelain.

The boundaries of taste and appropriateness around Aestheticism were in contention, but also dependent on wealth, as young Edith Jones (later Wharton) highlights in a comic poem of 1881. The narrator of 'Intense Love's Utterance', fears he cannot provide a home with 'High art, the highest, completest | To welcome my utterest Bride'.¹⁸ He lists the 'treasures intense and intenser' that she is used to:

How far would a poor fellow's income
Extend in your dados and friezes,
Your Chippendale table, your ceiling
From a study of Paul Veronese's,
Your old Venice glass opalescent,
Your golden stamped leather from Spain,
Your majolica ware iridescent –

Yet to live without these would be pain.

Decorative arts from around the world are described, along with a lot of repurposed ecclesiastical items like portieres made of chasubles, and ‘gold panels | With wailing wan women in rows, | And sunflowers worked on green flannels’. As Laura Rattray states, Wharton was a ‘prolific and dedicated poet’, publishing her first *Verses* aged sixteen, and exploring poetic forms throughout her literary career.¹⁹ This satirical verse, written at the age of nineteen, demonstrates command of rhyme, metre, and word choice to hilarious effect. It zips along in a rhythm worthy of Gilbert and Sullivan, whose opera on the Aesthetic movement, *Patience*, had opened in London in April of that year (while Wharton’s family were in Europe). It ends with the bridegroom deciding that love pales in comparison with the beautiful objects which inspire Paterian intensity:

No, no – what is life? A succession
Of fleeting pulsations (as Pater
Has told us in Renaissance Studies)
Which must cease for us sooner or later,
And Art can alone make them precious,
And lovely and dear as old plate –
Go back to your dados and friezes,
For love is a thing out of date!

Hermione Lee notes how this ‘wry dig’ at Pater recognizes the materialism and snobbery of Wharton’s own status in society, as a debutante from a wealthy, well-connected family.²⁰ She knows fashionable tastes and ideas well enough to satirize them, and is also cynically aware of her own place in the marriage market. She would later develop this theme of valuing beauty and things over people and relationships in her fiction. The difficulty of defining Aestheticism, with its wide base of styles and influences, along with the suspicion of radical lifestyle choices, made the movement ripe for further explanation, hence the popularity of Wilde’s lecture series, initially planned for 50 dates, then extended to 141. Booking agents were told that ‘the general public would be interested in hearing from [Wilde] a true and correct definition and explanation of this latest form of fashionable madness’.²¹



Fig. 3: George Du Maurier, 'The Six-Mark Tea-Pot', *Punch*, 30 October 1880. Glasgow University Library.



Fig. 4: Napoleon Sarony, *Oscar Wilde*, 1882. Carte de visite, no. 16, oscarwildeinamerica.org.

For eleven months in 1882 Wilde toured the United States and Canada, lecturing on the ‘English Renaissance in Art’ and ‘House Decoration’ [fig. 4]. At twenty-eight, he was internationally famous without having actually done very much – he was yet to write *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) or his successful plays. Susan Owens states that in his journalism Wilde held ‘a vital role [...] in shaping perceptions of Aestheticism’, and as figures like Pater, Rossetti and Swinburne retreated from public view, he was ‘marking out territory as spokesman’, able to entertain and engage a wide audience.²² He developed his lectures as the tour went on, and a definitive version of ‘The House Beautiful’ was only published in 1974, when Kevin H. F. O’Brien reconstructed it from contemporary newspaper reports. In it, Wilde borrows freely from the writings of designer and socialist William Morris, and, to a lesser extent, from W. J. Loftie’s *A Plea for Art in the House* (1876) and Mrs Haweis’ *The Art of Decoration* (1881). The ideas of John Ruskin are an unavoidable context when discussing art, morals, and beauty, and he was also paraphrased by Wilde. The reiteration of predecessors is fairly standard in manuals of household taste, popular guides which led the middle-class homeowner through the crowded shopping arcade of decorative styles. Even Wilde’s title was borrowed from Clarence Cook’s popular American book, *The House Beautiful: Essays on Beds and Tables, Stools and Candlesticks* (1878). This rather sentimental volume was also a transatlantic production: the text was originally published in American magazine *Scribner’s Monthly* illustrated with furniture by Scottish designer Daniel Cottier (1838-1891). As Petra Chu and Max Donnelly have described, Cottier played a ‘crucial role’ in Aestheticism as a skilled designer but also a ‘brilliant art impresario industrialist’, setting up a furnishings company in New York in 1873 selling ‘artistic’ interiors to the very rich.²³ Wilde’s recommendations to have beautiful things in one’s house and express one’s individuality over the upholsterer, are fairly standard. He pithily paraphrases Morris’ ‘The Lesser Arts’ (1877): ‘Have nothing in your houses that is not useful or beautiful; if such a rule were followed out, you would be astonished at the amount of rubbish you would get rid of’.²⁴ He describes the materials for building houses and the importance

of harmony and colour, evoking Whistler: ‘Colours resemble musical notes’. He defends his ‘Aesthetic movement’ against charges of immorality, emphasizing practicality over fashion; for example, his velvet knee breeches are warm and reduce muddy splashes from puddles. In Ruskinian vein, he exhorts this speedily industrializing nation to ‘honor the handicraftsman’ and set up schools of design.²⁵ Newspapers reported Wilde’s words everywhere he went, and the tour made his name internationally, even if by the end, as Ellmann states, he ‘had made people heartily sick of the words “beauty” and “beautiful”’.²⁶



Fig. 5: Jose Maria Mora, *Edith Wharton*, c. 1884. Carte de visite.
The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

In March 1882, twenty-year-old Edith Wharton [fig. 5] had just returned from living in Europe, after her father’s death. She vividly records the ‘bitter disappointment’ on her first return to New York as a child – ‘How ugly it is!’ – stating ‘I have never since thought or felt otherwise than an exile in America.’²⁷ Newport, Rhode Island, was where the upper classes spent the summer

riding, playing tennis, picnicking and calling on each other, some of which activities she enjoyed, but she also had an inner 'life of dreams & visions, set to the rhythm of the poets, & peopled with thronging images of beauty'.²⁸ Wilde described Newport as 'this little island where idleness ranks among the virtues', and his lecture would certainly have been a diversion from the usual leisure pursuits of the rich.²⁹ The research of Donna M. Campbell and Emily J. Orlando puts Wilde and Wharton both in Newport in July 1882, a small town where she 'could not have been unaware of Wilde's appearance'.³⁰ So although there is no evidence in letters, it seems possible Wharton could have attended his lecture, a welcome change for the restrictive and fashionable 'little society'.³¹

On 15 July 1882, Wilde spoke on 'The Decorative Arts' at 'The Casino in Newport, a lecture with many of the same elements as 'The House Beautiful'.³² The *Sun* newspaper reported that he held 'the entire sympathy of his audience', discussing the ugliness of ladies' bonnets and artificial flowers, and also 'made a special appeal for the inculcation of art among the children'. It seems he might have taken advantage of local antiques as visual aids, for he 'made repeated gestures toward the various articles of antiquated furniture with which the stage was arranged', and spoke on 'the backwardness of Americans in the matter of art, notwithstanding the fact that we had all the wealth with which to train the mind and purchase the material' – the 'cottagers' of Newport were damned with the faint praise that they painted in colours, instead of the white 'which was so general throughout the country'.³³ With the gender assumptions of his time, Wilde praised women for their 'natural art instincts', saying 'it may be the mission of the women of this country to revive decorative art into honest, healthy life'.³⁴ With its proliferation of books and articles written by women, the Aesthetic movement allowed women to become tastemakers. As Orlando has noted, it was American women who embraced Wilde's tour in 1882, both by attending the lectures and hosting him in their homes.³⁵ That summer, Wharton became engaged to Harry Stevens, whose mother Mrs Paran Stevens was a relentless society hostess. While Wilde was staying in New York, Mrs Stevens entertained him at dinner on at least two occasions, and also attended a party for Wilde at the Newport home of Julia Ward Howe the night before his lecture.³⁶ Shortly after,

however, Wharton's engagement was very publicly 'postponed' in *Town Topics* and at the end of an emotional summer, soon after her father's death, she returned to Paris.³⁷ Although we do not know what Wharton may have thought of Wilde's lecture, the event was perhaps a cultural signpost. Orlando writes that Wilde's support of women may have acted as a 'surprising catalyst and enabler for the likes of Wharton', opening up the possibility that a woman from the leisure class could write, undertake interior decoration, or even have a literary career.³⁸

Responses to art, architecture, and design were integral to Wharton's development as a serious writer. Her first novel, *The Valley of Decision* (1902), vividly evokes the art and architecture of eighteenth-century Italy, but her first full-length book was a household taste manual, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897). This was written with her architect friend Ogden Codman Jr. (1863-1951) who, Orlando has discovered, was a gay man who spent a lot of time in Europe and was on the edge of Wilde's circle.³⁹ Orlando has usefully compared the two design treatises, *The Decoration of Houses* and *The House Beautiful*, for despite their differences 'Wilde's lecture served as a meaningful but unacknowledged influence' on the later book.⁴⁰ Both are within the literary tradition of manuals of household taste, with a shared genealogy of influence, which only Wharton and Codman made explicit. They were keen to emphasize their scholarly credentials with a list of 'Books Consulted' in which only the most architectural of contemporary household taste manuals are listed: Robert Kerr and J. J. Stevenson.⁴¹ They use historical research to describe and taxonomize room types, uses, and style, emphasizing symmetry, proportion, and privacy. As Lyn Bennett has described, their concern with emphasizing their own scholarly research would be justified by contemporary reviews, which repeatedly state they fall short of professional status due to lack of originality or 'manliness'.⁴²

The illustrations in *The Decoration of Houses* demonstrate the most obvious difference to Wilde: decorative style [fig. 6]. There are many reasons for Wharton's love of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English, French, and Italian furniture, including her youthful appreciation of European culture and the move away from clutter of the 1890s. Although she took photographs

in European palaces, her aim was to rationalize the excesses of the American Renaissance and advocate simplicity. However, it was the eclecticism of Aestheticism, and its professed position outside of changing fashions, that allowed Wharton to ‘choose’ her favourite style. Wilde’s lectures took place after the 1876 Centennial Exposition, so the Aesthetic style of black Japonese furniture, sunflowers, and peacock feathers was familiar to his audience, but along with his newly acquired velvet suit he brought a new style of furniture to the House Beautiful. It should not be Gothic, ‘so heavy and massive it is out of place when surrounded with the pretty things’, or even Eastlake, which is ‘a little bare and cold, has no delicate lines’, but ‘Queen Anne’ or Chippendale furniture, which is ‘most suitable’ for modern life, for its ‘comfort and beauty’. So, historically and stylistically, this eighteenth-century furniture aligns with Wharton, but Wilde protests that ‘the furniture of the Italian renaissance is too costly and French furniture, gilt and gaudy, is very vulgar, monstrous and unserviceable’.⁴³ As Orlando has noted, Wharton and Codman seem to respond directly to this ‘dismissal of French furniture’ when they address the ‘general impression that eighteenth-century furniture [...] was not comfortable in the modern sense’;⁴⁴ for those who have ‘not studied the subject’ did not notice the ‘easy-chairs and work tables’ of ‘simplicity and convenience’.⁴⁵



Fig. 6: ‘Room in the Grand Trianon, Versailles’, Plate V, in Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman Jr., *The Decoration of Houses* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1897). Photographed by Nick Smith-Koblitz © The Mount, Edith Wharton’s Home.

When we look at the way the two treatises approach morality, that unavoidable nineteenth-century term of reference, there is no easy opposition of amoral Aestheticism and morally rigid Classicism. They share a belief in the importance of beauty for society as a whole, with that beauty judged by taste and the informed eye, hence the need for their instruction. Wharton and Codman prioritize formal qualities: ‘Architecture addresses itself not to the moral sense, but to the eye.’ With a backhanded swipe at Ruskin, they state, ‘The existing confusion on this point is partly due to the strange analogy drawn by modern critics between artistic sincerity and moral law’.⁴⁶ But their style does have an ethical basis, and the book is full of didactic statements on order, appropriateness, and the avoidance of vulgarity: ‘Proportion is the good breeding of architecture’; ‘symmetry [...] as the sanity of decoration’.⁴⁷ Although they praise Ruskin’s ‘words magical enough to win acceptance for any doctrine’, they take him to task, specifically over his criticism of symmetry in door and window placement being ‘abysses of moral as well as of artistic degradation’.⁴⁸ Thus they dismiss Ruskin’s central stylistic thesis of *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53), that the decline of society was reflected in the change from Gothic (asymmetrical) to Classical (symmetrical) architecture. Sociology and philosophy have taught Wharton and Codman that ‘a regard for symmetry, besides satisfying a legitimate artistic requirement, tends to make the average room not only easier to furnish but more comfortable to live in’.⁴⁹ They recognize the importance of design for the health of society, an Associationist philosophy applied to the domestic interior since the 1850s: ‘If art really is a factor in civilization, it seems obvious that the feeling for beauty needs as careful cultivation as other civic virtues’.⁵⁰ Similarly, Wilde advocates ‘a democratic art, entering into the houses of the people, making beautiful the simplest vessels they contain for there is nothing in common life too mean [...] that art cannot raise and sanctify’.⁵¹ Although Wilde would later epitomize the position of Art for Art’s sake, here: ‘It is sometimes said that our art is opposed to good morals; but on the contrary, it fosters morality’ through a ‘common intellectual atmosphere between all countries’, which might even prevent wars.⁵²

Historicism was a widespread artistic strategy in the nineteenth century, but Aestheticism made it eclectic. Decorative items could be taken from any religion, country, or time period, with beauty the only criteria. This was strengthened by the transatlantic cultural dialogue, which ranged from artists inspired by encounters with the Old World, to Pre-Raphaelite stained-glass fitted into cathedrals in Boston, or millionaires furnishing their New York mansions with whole antique panelled rooms shipped from France. Chu and Donnelly have highlighted how Aestheticism uniquely came to emphasize the ‘best materials and craftsmanship’, departing from stricter styles like neo-Gothic by not favouring the medieval, and allowing the use of mechanical tools.⁵³ Thus, despite Wilde’s supposedly democratic lectures, by the 1890s Aestheticism became popular with the new industrial millionaires. The original principles of simple taste and beauty had been replaced with displays of ‘conspicuous consumption’, in Thorstein Veblen’s term.⁵⁴ Wharton and Codman state that ‘the vulgarity of current decoration has its source in the indifference of the wealthy to architectural fitness’.⁵⁵ Their book, with a chapter on ‘Gala Rooms and Ball Rooms’, is addressed to these vulgar millionaires, and laments how American Renaissance architects using European Classicism and Baroque as models could ‘sometimes lose sight of their relative unfitness for modern use’, creating ‘confused and extravagant’ rooms.⁵⁶ Wharton similarly condemned conspicuous consumption throughout her novels. In the chapter ‘Bric-à-Brac’, Wharton and Codman advocate ‘the Oriental habit of displaying only one or two objects of art at a time [which] shows a more delicate sense of these limitations than the Western passion for multiplying effects’. In an almost Ruskinian phrase, selection of anything beyond essentials (lamps, furniture) should be limited to the ‘labors of the master-artist’s hand’.⁵⁷

In the 1880s and 1890s, American high-end Aestheticism inspired by historically and geographically diverse models was mostly created by European craftsmen, using both hand and machine techniques, and expensive and often rare materials. For the very rich, the useful could be made very beautiful indeed. One of the largest ‘cottages’ in Newport was The Breakers, built for Cornelius Vanderbilt II in 1895. Its grand public rooms were decorated by French firm J. Allard

et fils, with panelling in rare woods, Baccarat crystal chandeliers, rose alabaster columns, and plasterwork gilded with platinum leaf and twenty-two carat gold. Codman was pleased to obtain the valuable commission to design the bedroom floors in a lighter, more restrained Louis XV and Louis XVI style. However, a couple of years later, Wharton complained to Codman, 'I wish the Vanderbilts didn't retard culture so very thoroughly. They are entrenched in a sort of Thermopylae of bad taste, from which apparently no force on earth can dislodge them.'⁵⁸ Wharton and Codman also condemn the way Aesthetic taste has trickled down, for by the 1890s 'artistic' furniture is cheaply made 'showy stuff' and 'hints for "artistic interiors"' in the newspapers use 'such poetic adjectives as jonquil-yellow, willow-green [...] or ashes of roses' and are 'usually cheap devices based upon the mistaken idea that defects in structure or design may be remedied by an overlaying of color or ornament'.⁵⁹ Adding more rich patterns cannot fix a badly proportioned room. In her own homes, Wharton utilized the visual playfulness she had learned from Aestheticism, but she was not swayed by fashion, preferring the historical integrity of antiques.

Both Wharton and Wilde were able to create their own House Beautiful, however briefly. Wilde lived in Tite Street, London, from 1884 until the debacle of his trial, imprisonment, and bankruptcy in 1895. Wilde's home certainly did not always follow his own rules and was perhaps a consciously theatrical interior commensurate with his celebrity status. His previous bachelor rooms were decorated with 'exquisite objects' more along the lines of an artist's studio.⁶⁰ The interior of the red brick terrace of 16 Tite Street, Chelsea, was designed by E. W. Godwin, with assistance from Whistler. The dining room, including the Chippendale chairs, was painted glossy white, like lacquer. A narrow shelf fixed on the wall around the room acted as a sideboard, with a built-in corner seat and chest for storage. There was Japanese matting on the floors rather than rugs, and doors were replaced by curtains, a lack of privacy which Wharton would have hated. He wrote to Godwin: 'Each chair is a sonnet in ivory, and the table is a masterpiece in pearl.' The practicalities of such décor in a home with two young boys is questionable: 'We find that a rose leaf can be laid on the ivory table without scratching it – at least a white one can. That is something.'

The drawing room was also white, with yellow and pink. On the walls were Whistler etchings, Japanese fans, and Regency convex mirrors, as depicted in this sketch, probably by Whistler's wife, the artist Beatrix Whistler (1857-1896) [fig. 7]. The smoking room and library had a 'distinctly Turkish note' with low divan seating and the window covered in a pierced wood screen, painted in dark blue and pale gold. Wilde probably enjoyed the dramatic impression it made on visitors, and Constance's cousin was taken aback by the bareness: 'no fire and a look as if the furniture had been cleared out for a dance'.⁶¹

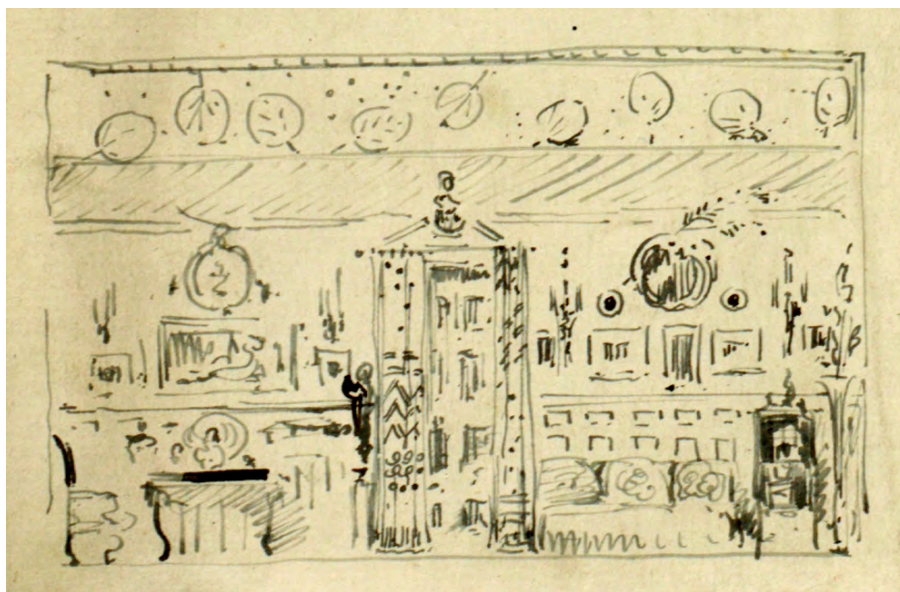


Fig. 7: Attributed to Beatrix Whistler, *Sketch of an interior, possibly Oscar Wilde's drawing room at 16 Tite Street, Chelsea, London, c. 1884*. Pen drawing (ink on paper), 17.9 x 22.8 cm. GLAHA 46408 (verso detail). Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow, Birnie Philip Bequest.

Wharton decorated several homes according to the principles of her book, and built The Mount at Lenox, Massachusetts in 1902, probably exerting influence in the architectural as well as the interior design. Wharton designed a comfortable English country house with New England shutters on the outside, and a decidedly French character within. She worked with Codman on the interior, who designed wood and plaster panelling painted in light, bright colours, apart from the library where natural wood provides a beautiful background for books. There are terrazzo floors, gilded electric light sconces and floral paintings set into the walls [fig. 8]. Throughout, the furniture is French and comfortable, not spindly or impractical. Her boudoir upstairs is furnished in pink

toile de jony, and as the most private room in the house is where she wrote. Wharton entertained here a great deal, but not at the scale of ‘gala rooms’, and on the ground floor the comfortable rooms lead out to a terrace overlooking her beloved gardens. It was reluctantly sold in 1911, by which time she was living in France, able to create authentically French interiors.



Fig. 8: *Dining Room, The Mount*, during Wharton’s occupancy 1902-11. Edith Wharton Collection. Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Wharton lived up to the ideal of beauty and civilization espoused by *The Decoration of Houses*, in the restrained, tasteful way that so many American millionaires did not. As her friend Vernon Lee wrote in 1912, ‘beauty has come to be associated with all our notations of order, of goodness, of health, and of more complete life’.⁶² Both Wilde and Wharton lived within their own *gesamtkunstwerk* where décor and lifestyle were combined with their own ideals of beauty – though at Tite Street with rather less practicality. Each House Beautiful was only possible through the tenets of Aestheticism, beyond conventional expectations or morality, breaking down the divisions between the ‘lesser arts’ and fine art to build homes that were beautiful and inspiring. Wilde’s later work would fully express the surge of imaginative freedom and creativity this enabled. In ‘The Critic as Artist’ (1890), he distilled the ideas of Swinburne and Pater into the role of creative critic:

“The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticizes as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought.”⁶³ What we can call ‘Paterian vision’ is the emotive and physical process by which we achieve a subjective understanding of a work of art. According to Pater, ‘the movement, the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off, that continual vanishing away, that strange perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves’.⁶⁴

Fiction from both ends of Wharton’s career demonstrates different ways in which she uses the philosophy of Aestheticism. A Paterian vision propels a short story, and in her final novel, the transatlantic exchange of money for status makes the reader examine the relationship of beauty and integrity. A quote from the short story ‘The Fulness of Life’ (1893) is frequently used to comment on Wharton’s unfulfilling marriage: ‘a woman’s nature is like a great house full of rooms’ and in the innermost, ‘the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes’.⁶⁵ However, the climax of the tale is a Paterian vision of Aesthetic beauty through meditation on an art object. A woman on the threshold of death converses with a Spirit, revealing that the fullness of her life came not from her marriage but a ‘moment’ of ‘exquisite sensations’ and happiness.⁶⁶ In the church of Orsanmichele in Florence, she contemplates the highly wrought tabernacle in which is displayed a mid-fourteenth-century painting of the Madonna and Child.⁶⁷ ‘The marble, worn and mellowed by the subtle hand of time, took on an unspeakable rosy hue, suggestive in some remote way of the honey-colored columns of the Parthenon, but more mystic.’ All her senses are aroused: the air is ‘incense-laden’, she hears the ‘wail of the priest’, seeing ‘magical light’, and the ‘flame of candles upon martyrs’ tombs, and gleams of sunset through symbolic panes of chrysoprase and ruby [...] the light of the middle ages’. The work of art inspires a vision of the whole history of humankind, where she is ‘borne onward along a mighty current, whose source seemed to be in the very beginning of things’ and ‘the mingled streams of human passion and endeavour’.⁶⁸ This transforms into a cavalcade of the symbols and styles of design history, worthy of the pages of the *Grammar of Ornament*.⁶⁹ ‘As I gazed the mediaeval bosses of the tabernacle of Orcagna seemed to melt and

flow into their primal forms so that the folded lotus of the Nile and the Greek acanthus were braided with the runic knots and fish-tailed monsters of the North'. The work of the medieval handicraftsman is then revealed: 'And so the river bore me on, past the alien face of antique civilizations and the familiar wonders of Greece, till I swam upon the fiercely rushing tide of the Middle Ages [...]; I heard the rhythmic blow of the craftsmen's hammers in the goldsmiths' workshops and on the walls of churches.' She has a physical and emotional response: 'the tears burned my lids, the joy and mystery of it seemed too intolerable to be borne'.⁷⁰ The achievement of her vision is thoroughly Paterian: the contemplation of a work of art, involving all the senses ('a group of impressions – colour, odour, texture – in the mind of the observer'), even a sense of time travel, connecting the past and present in an object, and the subjective, transformational response.⁷¹

Pater states that 'each mind [is] keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world', and this solitude is the woman's misfortune, for beside her, her husband is prosaically 'gazing into the bottom of his hat'.⁷² This is the tragic version of 'Intense Love's Utterance', for in life, she has never met one who 'could have heard it with me'.⁷³ This moment also accords with Lee's theories of 'aesthetic emotion', where looking at art, architecture, and design has an actual physical effect on emotions.⁷⁴ Friends with Wharton from 1894, Lee was her mentor during the writing of *The Valley of Decision* (1902). Wharton would have known about the theories of aesthetic empathy Lee had been developing since the 1880s, and the 'illusion of mental lucidity', inspired in particular by the architecture, structure, and decoration of Gothic churches: 'With this feeling of clearheadedness goes a keen excitement; we seem to be living at twice our normal rate, and life, for no definable reason, seems twice as much worth living.'⁷⁵ 'The Fulness of Life' demonstrates this 'hypothesis of the aesthetic perception of visible form'; the ideal Aesthetic experience.⁷⁶

Wharton also utilizes Paterian vision in her final novel, *The Buccaneers*, to demonstrate the ardent nature of Nan St George. In this unfinished historical novel, Wharton looks back at the mid-1870s of her childhood, in particular the many international marriages of rich American

women into the British aristocracy, desperate for economic assistance during an agricultural depression. This transatlantic exchange of money, status, and sex brokered by mothers like Mrs Paran Stevens, resulted in infamously disastrous marriages, like that of Consuelo Vanderbilt and the ninth duke of Marlborough.⁷⁷ Hermione Lee has described it as ‘a high-spirited, socially acute, lavish historical comedy’ with a ‘bitter theme’.⁷⁸ In this often-harsh satire, the only consolation is the misty, romantic background made up of Wharton’s love of British art, landscape, and history. Honourslove is a ‘honey-coloured’ Jacobean manor house on ‘the edge of the Cotswolds’ and the home of Sir Helmsley and Guy Thwarte, who are united in their ‘joint love of their house and the land it stood on’.⁷⁹ Unlike the other American heiresses, Nan with her ‘fresh eyes’ and ‘receptive mind’ has ‘an emotional sense [...] of its beauties’.⁸⁰ The theme of history is strengthened by references to Rossetti’s art and poetry, for the Pre-Raphaelites were inspired by English myths like Arthurian legend – one of the characters even owns King Arthur’s Tintagel Castle in Cornwall. But it is at Honourslove that Nan comes across Sir Helmsley’s treasure: ‘Well, she came to a dead point before the Rossetti in the study, and at once began to quote “The Blessed Damozel”.’ This is her moment of Paterian vision, which has accumulated from going around the ‘exquisitely intimate’ house and gardens with Guy, ‘at ease with the soft mellow place as though some secret thread of destiny attached her to it’. That she will fall in love with Guy is indicated in their shared understanding ‘about the *beyondness* of things’.⁸¹ Because she understands ‘something of her environment, which is a sealed book to the others’, the layers of history and beauty in the house make her Paterian vision inevitable.⁸²

When governess Miss Testvalley first reads the Rossetti poem ‘The Blessed Damozel’, sixteen-year-old Nan is captivated. The ‘harmonious syllables flowed on’ as though ‘it symbolized something grave and mysterious’:

The blessèd damozel leaned out
 From the gold bar of Heaven:
 Her eyes were deeper than the depth
 Of waters stilled at even.⁸³

Rossetti worked on the poem for most of his life, revising it between 1847-70. He began painting the subject in 1871, around the time the novel is set. It is one of his ‘double works’, depicting what Jerome McGann calls the ‘foundational Rossettian subject’ of the woman in paradise, looking down on her earthly lover.⁸⁴ He famously created several versions and by the time the novel was published, one had made its way to America in the collection of Grenville Winthrop, an acquaintance of Wharton’s.⁸⁵ The combination of visual image and poem enhances the vision, and Nan is captivated by this ancient dream of medieval, symbolic beauty. It is ‘one of Nan’s magic casements’ – a window onto another world like Tennyson’s similarly medieval *Idylls of the King*.⁸⁶ In 1893, Wharton wrote to her former governess Anna Bahlmann (inspiration for Miss Testvalley): ‘I think Rossetti’s sonnets unsurpassed in English’, and marked a stanza from this poem in her copy.⁸⁷ Like young Edith Jones confronted with Aestheticism and poetry in the intellectual desert of Newport, it opens Nan’s mind to other possibilities and cultures.

Miss Testvalley is rather worried that Nan should reveal that she knows the poem, as some people would be ‘shocked’; just one of the ways the American Buccaneers manage to discomfort the British. Sir Helmsley sardonically comments on Nan’s recitation – ‘So the Fleshly School has penetrated to the backwoods!’⁸⁸ This refers to Robert Buchanan’s vicious attack on ‘The Fleshly School of Poetry’ of 1871 which accused Rossetti, Swinburne, and Morris of obscenity. Buchanan compared Rossetti’s *Poems* of 1870 with his paintings, finding ‘the same morbid deviation from healthy forms of life, the same sense of wary, wasting, yet exquisite sensuality; nothing virile, nothing tender, nothing completely sane’.⁸⁹ The decadent side of Aestheticism relates to worries over its dissolution of boundaries of all sorts – social, sexual, and hierarchical. We discover Helmsley is ‘one of [Rossetti’s] best patrons’, with his own misspent youth in Paris. His ‘odd intimacies with a group of painters and decorators of socialistic tendencies, reckless dalliance with ladies’ sounds very like the Pre-Raphaelites or even Morris, known for his Socialism.⁹⁰ Like the other literary Aesthete Gilbert Osmond, Helmsley’s own creativity is limited to copying, and by this process he reinscribes the importance and mysterious nature of his Madonna by Rossetti. The

‘small jewel-like picture in a heavy frame’ that inspires Nan’s recitation is not an identifiable actual work.⁹¹ The other Rossetti painting mentioned, *Bocca Baciata* (1859), does exist, and marked a new (and more successful) phase in Rossetti’s work. His half-lengths of beautiful women, adorned in gorgeous clothes, jewellery, and surrounded by beautiful things, prioritize formal characteristics over narrative. He designed intricate frames to augment the decorative object-ness, and often used fruit and flower symbols to indicate hidden, personal meanings. But when considered in conjunction with Wharton’s theme of women being sold on the marriage market, the objectifying of women as merely aesthetic items without their own agency or voice, is particularly pointed. Helmsley’s Madonna is a mysterious talisman, with its own hidden meaning, for only Miss Testvalley ‘knows all about the circumstances in which my D. G. Rossetti was painted and knows also the mysterious replica with variants which is still in D. G.’s possession, and which he has never been willing to show me’.⁹² The hermetic, icon-like aspect of the painting is key for Nan’s Paterian moment of poetic glossolalia, which also inspires Helmsley’s meditation through copying. It is an Aesthetic talisman linking the true love stories in the novel, which are ultimately destroyed by patriarchal society that prioritizes money, status, and convention over beauty, freedom, and love.

Wharton began writing *The Buccaneers* in 1934, at the same time as her memoir *A Backward Glance*, and by the time of her death in 1937 it was three-quarters complete. In both books, she uses memory and nostalgia to reflect on current attitudes. Drawn back to the time of her youth, the 1870s, Wharton examined society at the height of Aestheticism, when the transatlantic exchange of ideas and culture were just beginning to create new possibilities for women and her own artistic ambitions. For the Buccaneers of the 1870s, the exchange was frustratingly economic, with little space for ‘the *beyondness* of things’ and often disastrous. But it was the Aesthetes, and the ‘painters and decorators of socialistic tendencies’ who developed ideas about beauty, morality, and society that showed a way in which modern life could be elevated. ‘The House Beautiful’ was found not just in the showrooms of Morris & Co, but in the literature, poetry, and art of the world.

As Wilde said: ‘Today more than ever the artist and a love of the beautiful are needed to temper and counteract the sordid materialism of the age. In an age when [...] commerce is ruining beautiful rivers and magnificent woodlands [...] the artist comes forward as a priest and prophet of nature to protest’.⁹³

¹ This article would not have been possible without support from the University of Glasgow Transatlantic Literary Women group (#TeaWithTLW), whose regular meetings throughout the pandemic kept me connected to current research on and around Edith Wharton. With thanks to the organizers Chiara Bullen, Dr Lindsay Middleton, and Dr Laura Rattray.

² Kevin H. F. O’Brien, ‘“The House Beautiful”: A Reconstruction of Oscar Wilde’s American Lecture’, *Victorian Studies*, 17 (1974), 395-418, para. 49.

³ Jonathan Freedman, ‘An Aestheticism of Our Own: American Writers and the Aesthetic Movement’, in Doreen Bolger Burke et al., *In Pursuit of Beauty: Americans and the Aesthetic Movement* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), pp. 385-99 (p. 385).

⁴ Wilde, quoted in O’Brien, para. 14.

⁵ Vernon Lee to her mother, 23 June 1883, quoted in Richard Ormond, ‘John Singer Sargent: A Biographical Sketch’, in *John Singer Sargent*, ed. by Elaine Kilmurray and Richard Ormond (London: Tate Gallery, 1998), pp. 11-23 (p. 15).

⁶ Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 167.

⁷ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1883), p. 269.

⁸ James, p. 198.

⁹ W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 130.

¹⁰ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1873), p. 232.

¹¹ Marked on p. 250 of Wharton’s edition (London: Macmillan, 1894). ‘Pater, Walter The Renaissance Studies in Art and Poetry’, *EWL* <<http://edithwhartonslibrary.org/ewl/items/show/1477>> [accessed 16 March 2023].

¹² Colin Cruise, ‘Walter Pater (1839-1894)’, in *The Cult of Beauty*, ed. by Stephen Calloway and Lynn Federle Orr assisted by Esmé Whittaker (London: V&A Publishing, 2011), pp. 60-61 (p. 61).

¹³ Pater, p. 213.

¹⁴ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 150.

¹⁵ Roger B. Stein, ‘Artifact as Ideology’, in Burke, et al., pp. 23-51 (p. 28).

¹⁶ Penny Sparke, ‘Furnishing the Aesthetic Interior: Manuals and Theories’, in Calloway et al., pp. 124-33.

¹⁷ *Nuttall’s Standard Dictionary* (London: Warne & Co., [1887]), emphasis added.

¹⁸ Edith Wharton, ‘Intense Love’s Utterance’, *Novellas and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1990), p. 1093.

¹⁹ Laura Rattray, *Edith Wharton and Genre* (London: Palgrave Writings WRITINGS??? Macmillan, 2020), p. 20.

²⁰ Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2007), pp. 61-62.

²¹ Ellmann, p. 145.

²² Susan Owens, ‘Oscar Wilde’, in Calloway et al., pp. 216-19 (p. 216).

²³ Petra Chu and Max Donnelly, *Daniel Cottier: Designer, Decorator, Dealer* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021), p. 2.

²⁴ Wilde, quoted in O’Brien, para. 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, para. 3-4.

²⁶ Ellmann, p. 200.

²⁷ Edith Wharton, ‘Life and I’, in *Unpublished Writings of Edith Wharton*, ed. by Laura Rattray, 2 vols (London: Taylor & Francis, 2009), II, p. 192.

²⁸ Wharton, ‘Life and I’, p. 194.

²⁹ Oscar Wilde to Charles Eliot Norton [c. 15 July 1882], in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 177.

³⁰ Donna M. Campbell, ‘Did Edith Wharton meet Oscar Wilde during his 1882 American Tour? A continuing literary mystery’ <<https://donnamcampbell.wordpress.com/2015/02/27/>> [accessed 10 September 2021]; Emily J. Orlando ‘“Perilous Coquetry”: Oscar Wilde’s Influence on Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, Jr.’, *American Literary Realism*, 50 (2017), 25-48 (p. 45).

³¹ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1934), p. 48.

- ³² John Cooper, 'Newport' <<https://www.oscarwildeinamerica.org/lectures-1882/july/0715-newport.html>> [accessed 10 October 2021].
- ³³ Anon., 'Oscar Wilde in Newport', *The Sun* (New York, NY), 16 July 1882, p. 5, quoted in Cooper, 'Newport'.
- ³⁴ O'Brien, p. 402, para 1, n. 14.
- ³⁵ Orlando, p. 27.
- ³⁶ Orlando, p. 27, n. 18; p. 45.
- ³⁷ H. Lee, pp. 60-61.
- ³⁸ Orlando, p. 35.
- ³⁹ Codman had also recently returned from Europe to Massachusetts, and could also have attended one of Wilde's lectures. Orlando, pp. 44-45.
- ⁴⁰ Orlando, p. 28.
- ⁴¹ Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman Jr., *The Decoration of Houses* (1897; New York: Norton, 1997), p. 242.
- ⁴² Lyn Bennett, 'The Critical Reception of Edith Wharton', in Gary Totten, ed., *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors: Edith Wharton and Material Culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), pp. 19-43 and 22-26.
- ⁴³ Wilde, quoted in O'Brien, para. 22-24.
- ⁴⁴ Orlando, p. 34.
- ⁴⁵ Wharton and Codman, pp. 130-32.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- ⁵¹ Wilde, quoted in O'Brien, para. 50.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, para. 48.
- ⁵³ Chu and Donnelly, pp. 2-3.
- ⁵⁴ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899; London: George Allen & Unwin, 1922), p. 68.
- ⁵⁵ Wharton and Codman, p. 3.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 5 and 192.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 190.
- ⁵⁸ Edith Wharton to Ogden Codman, 1 May 1897, Folder 1676. Codman family papers (MS001). Historic New England, Library & Archives.
- ⁵⁹ Wharton and Codman, pp. 28 and 32.
- ⁶⁰ Anne Anderson, 'At Home with Oscar: Constructing "The House Beautiful"', *The Wildean*, 24 (2004), 25-45 (p. 27).
- ⁶¹ Charlotte Gere and Lesley Hoskins, *The House Beautiful: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Interior* (London: Lund Humphries in association with the Geffrye Museum, 2000), pp. 100 and 102.
- ⁶² Vernon Lee and C. Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1912), p. 29.
- ⁶³ 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. 372).
- ⁶⁴ Pater, p. 210.
- ⁶⁵ Edith Wharton, 'The Fulness of Life', *Scribner's Magazine*, 14.6 (1893), 699-704 (p. 700).
- ⁶⁶ Wharton, 'Fulness', p. 701.
- ⁶⁷ Andrea Orcagna (c. 1308-c. 1368), Tabernacle, c. 1359, marble, surrounding Barnardo Daddi (c. 1280-1348), *Madonna with Child and Angels*, c. 1346, tempera and gold on panel, in Orsanmichele church, Florence, completed 1404.
- ⁶⁸ Wharton, 'Fulness', p. 701.
- ⁶⁹ Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament* (London: Day & Son, 1856).
- ⁷⁰ Wharton, 'Fulness', pp. 701-02
- ⁷¹ Pater, p. 209.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*
- ⁷³ Wharton, 'Fulness', p. 702.
- ⁷⁴ Vernon Lee and C. Anstruther-Thomson, 'Beauty and Ugliness', *The Contemporary Review*, 1 July 1897, pp. 544-69, pp. 669-88 (p. 562).
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 568.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 688.
- ⁷⁷ Adeline R. Tintner, 'Consuelo Vanderbilt and *The Buccaneers*', *Edith Wharton Review*, 10 (1993), 15-19. Mrs Stevens married off her daughter to Lord Arthur Paget. See H. Lee, pp. 59 and 724.
- ⁷⁸ H. Lee, pp. 720-21.
- ⁷⁹ Edith Wharton, *The Buccaneers* (New York and London: D. Appleton-Century, 1938), pp. 106 and 108.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 345 and 235.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-37.
- ⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 88-89.

⁸⁴ The long publishing and production history of the poem and paintings is detailed in 'Doubleworks Exhibit: The Blessed Damozel', in *The Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/1-1847.s244.raw.html>> [accessed 16 March 2023].

⁸⁵ Although not friends, Wharton and Winthrop both lived in Lenox, MA. See R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis, *The Letters of Edith Wharton* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 72-73 and 485.

⁸⁶ Wharton, *The Buccaneers*, p. 166.

⁸⁷ Irene Goldman-Price, *My Dear Governess: The Letters of Edith Wharton to Anna Bablmann* (Yale: New Haven and London, 2012), p. 105. Wharton owned two copies of his complete works, presents from Christmas 1895. 'Rossetti, Dante Gabriel The Collected Works of Rossetti', *EWL* <<http://sheilaliming.com/ewl/items/show/1596>> [accessed 16 March 2023].

⁸⁸ Wharton, *The Buccaneers*, p. 139.

⁸⁹ Robert Buchanan as 'Thomas Maitland', 'The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr. D. G. Rossetti', *Contemporary Review*, 18 (October 1871), 334-50, quoted in Calloway et al., p. 55.

⁹⁰ Wharton, *The Buccaneers*, pp. 164 and 112.

⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 117 and 235.

⁹² Ibid., p. 235.

⁹³ Wilde, quoted in O'Brien, paras 48-49.

Fibres, Folds, and Trimmings:
The Decadent Materials of Sarah Grand's *Emotional Moments*

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The emergence of the late Victorian 'New Woman' – a term popularized in a series of articles by Sarah Grand and Ouida, published in the *North American Review* in 1894 – has often been linked to fin-de-siècle sartorial discourses such as the rational dress movement and Aesthetic dress. 'Rational' ensembles inspired by menswear 'allowed women physical and social mobility' and were therefore an important means of expressing dissent towards Victorian gender ideologies.¹ By contrast, the connotations of Aesthetic or artistic dress, associated with 'looseness and lack of structure, natural waist' and 'disavowal of the corset', were less explicitly political.² As Kimberly Wahl writes, Aesthetic dress 'was rarely viewed as a direct challenge to hegemonic norms of gender in Victorian fashion culture', but it was based on artistic conceptions of naturalness instead.³ Yet Aesthetic dress, too, appealed to New Women, in both fiction and fact.

Sarah Grand (born Frances Elizabeth Bellenden Clarke, 1854-1943), one of the most successful New Women writers, exemplifies this confluence of artistic and political meanings in the domain of fashion and textiles. A series of photographs of Grand by H. S. Mendelssohn, published alongside an interview of 1895, depicts the 'Aesthetically dressed' author with a curly hairstyle that 'mimics and mocks Pre-Raphaelite iconography',⁴ alongside pictures of her tastefully furnished Kensington flat.⁵ Grand was often portrayed by contemporaries as an authority on fashion: 'not only has she a very pretty taste of her own in dress', writes Helen C. Black in her 1906 account of the author, 'but not infrequently is requisitioned to supply a judicious hint or original idea when consulted by her friends as to the becomingness of this or that gown, hat, fold, or trimming'.⁶

Folds, trimmings, and fibres of fabric also inform Grand's narrative fiction, where textiles appear not only as elements of dress but also in descriptions of interiors, artworks, and

atmospheres. In Grand's short fiction, as this article sets out to demonstrate, references to the material qualities of textiles bring to the fore complex perspectives on art and beauty, artificiality, and excess – concepts more typically associated with Aestheticism and decadence than with New Women's writing. By shifting attention to the functions of material culture and by focusing on Grand's short stories, I wish to contribute to a recent 'effort to uncover and understand Victorian women writers' often complex relationship with literary decadence'.⁷ This involves undermining simplistic distinctions between 'the more self-consciously Aestheticist work of such writers as Vernon Lee and Alice Meynell' and the arguably 'more explicitly feminist work of so-called New Woman writers such as Grand, Egerton [...], or Syrett'.⁸ I argue that textile materiality acts as a constitutive element in the narrative design of Grand's short stories, specifically in her collection *Emotional Moments*. This volume was first published in 1908 but was inspired by Grand's life in London in the 1890s, where she moved after having split from her husband. Centring on Grand's achievement in short fiction – rather than her realist novels such as *Ideala* (1888), *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), or *The Beth Book* (1897) – shifts the emphasis towards a genre which stands out for its 'compressed' material form and which serves as a vehicle of (proto-) Modernist experimentation.

Compression, density, and formal flexibility are characteristics of the short story, but also of textiles. In nineteenth-century narrative fiction by women, descriptions of textile objects and textile crafts often highlight Victorian middle-class women's expertise in fashion, needlework, and interior decoration, and serve to indicate changing understandings of femininity.⁹ Textiles are integral to the 'craft paradigm' at work in mid-Victorian novels, as described by Talia Schaffer,¹⁰ and they give rise to what Christine Bayles Kortsch, focusing on late Victorian fiction, calls women writers' 'dual literacy': a combination of 'literacy in fabric (sewing and interpreting dress) and literacy in print'.¹¹ Such interwoven codes of text and textile inform representations of female characters as makers of fabrics – at home or in industrial settings – and as consumers of textiles, in depictions of outfits, shopping practices, and interiors. But the materiality of cloth also structures texts themselves. As Roland Barthes notes in *The Fashion System*, '[w]ritten clothing is

carried by language, but also resists it, and is created by this interplay'.¹² Even though language and fabric remain entirely different media, words can imagine and mimic the materiality of cloth through description; at the same time, fabric can 'shape' the material of the text itself, when densely woven prose descriptions approximate the interlaced textures of cloth, or when textile imagery serves to evoke atmosphere and scenery.

In its choice of theme and method, this article builds on the 'material turn' in studies of Victorian literature, which has directed critical attention to the physical, formal, and symbolic significance of objects in nineteenth-century written texts.¹³ I approach material culture in Grand's *Emotional Moments* on the level of story and discourse. Textiles occur as narratively represented things – as properties of the story world – but references to fabrics and items of clothing also fulfil metaphorical purposes. They shape the style of Grand's prose as well as encoding ideas of gender, material affluence, and art. I start by introducing the different conceptions of materiality that surround the short story genre and Grand's vision of fin-de-siècle culture, drawing on two of her authorial prefaces. Then follows my analysis of textile materialities in *Emotional Moments*, in particular in the story 'The Undefinable', where I argue that narrative appropriations of material culture accentuate Grand's subversion of gender norms and furthermore reveal her appropriation of Aesthetic and decadent culture, in which her fiction both partakes and which it parodies.

Material Environments in the New Woman Short Story

Short stories were at the heart of the fin-de-siècle literary scene, where a quickly expanding market for periodicals sharpened the genre's contours and ensured its success.¹⁴ The short story craze also contributed to the rise of the New Woman in fiction and fact. Alongside novels such as Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883), Grand's *The Heavenly Twins*, George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893), or Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did* (1895), short narrative texts, too, were populated by the unconventional, witty, educated, and free-spirited female characters that came to define the New Woman in the 1880s and 1890s. Short stories were also an important medium of

expression for women writers.¹⁵ Published in widely-read and fast-selling magazines, the genre ‘afforded women an unprecedented opportunity to launch their careers’.¹⁶ The short story’s brevity and open format created new possibilities of exploring and subverting gender norms and subjectivities. As Angelique Richardson puts it, ‘[i]nconclusive, open-ended, evasive short stories were a perfect fit for the modern woman, as she released herself from repressive social codes, and tried out new identities’.¹⁷ What is more, the short story’s ‘compressed narrative’¹⁸ gave rise to a material text notably different from the novel, given its economical use of space in the printed work. ‘Rather like interlining fabric’, writes Winnie Chan, in reference to an 1896 advertisement for Fibre Chamois interlining, ‘the short story presented a way to have fiction cut into and sold by lengths’.¹⁹

Sarah Grand took advantage of the creative opportunities offered by short fiction.²⁰ Throughout her career, three collections of stories appeared: *Our Manifold Nature* (1894), *Emotional Moments* (1908), and *Variety* (1922). Like most of her contemporaries working in the genre, Grand published individual stories in magazines before reissuing them in book form. For instance, the story ‘The Undefinable: A Fantasia’ from *Emotional Moments* – which is included in Elaine Showalter’s seminal anthology *Daughters of Decadence: Stories by Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle* (1993) – first appeared in two consecutive issues of *The New Review* in 1894.²¹ The fact that the story originally appeared in two instalments demonstrates that brevity was subject to editing decisions and publishers’ compartmentalizing of fictional material. Grand critically comments on such processes in the preface to *Our Manifold Nature* (1894), noting that her stories, when first published, were ‘mutilated for convenience of space or in order to remove from them any idea of unusual import’.²²

Editing processes, even censorship, determined the material form of the short story at the fin de siècle. As she reflects on such treatments of her work, Grand admonishes her critics for their confusion of ‘art’ with ‘artificiality’ and evokes the analogy of fashion. Readers who doubted the truthfulness of Grand’s ‘studies from life’ (p. iii), as she terms her short fiction, exemplify a

literary scene obsessed with artificiality, a trend she compares to the normalization of the silhouette of the corseted Victorian woman: ‘We are accustomed to the false and conventional in this branch of art as we are to the distorted figure of a fashionable woman’ (p. v). This scepticism towards artificiality is crucial to Grand’s narrative approach in *Our Manifold Nature* and *Emotional Moments* and governs her stories’ treatment of material culture.

In the preface to *Emotional Moments*, Grand describes her life in London during the 1890s, which shaped her authorial identity. Different conceptions of materiality and materialism inform the argument and its sketch of fin-de-siècle urbanity. Grand conceives of the literary work as a product of its circumstances: ‘There is always the question of environment’,²³ wherefore ‘[t]he influences to which we are subject create the matter we would mould into shape’ (p. xi). In other words, when the raw material of real-life experience is transformed into the fictional text, it is subject to individual impressions and perspectives. Grand then details how the fabric of London’s ‘social atmosphere’ (p. x) changed with the amount of time she had spent in the city. To the occasional visitor, London appeared as ‘a pleasant dream-region, delicately tinted in healthy colours, with every beauty accentuated, and all the ugliness successfully concealed; the goodness was made apparent; the underlying misery, the cruelty, the evil, little suspected’ (p. xii). Yet once she experienced daily life in the city, it turned into

a world in which there was too much of everything: too many people, too many events, too much to hear and to see and to eat and to drink – too much of everything that pertains to the flesh, that is to say, but never a crumb for the spirit, and never a perfect moment to enjoy. (p. xiv)

Initially, London produces a flood of sensual stimulations which engender the city as a realm of beauty. Grand’s account recalls the kind of art experience described by Walter Pater in *The Renaissance* (1873), where ‘each object is loosed into a group of impressions – colour, odour, texture – in the mind of the observer’.²⁴ Grand’s vision of a dreamlike city, its ‘beauty accentuated’ through colours, evokes the Aesthetic cult of beauty and, in the ekphrastic manner, suggests the hazy styles of impressionistic art of the period, such as James McNeill Whistler’s *Nocturnes*.

Grand's sense that these impressions 'concealed' an underlying layer of misery, however, hints at a more complex material reality. The more she was exposed to the flood of beautiful impressions, the more the city turned into 'a world in which there was too much of everything' (p. xiv). London emerges as a spectacle of decadent excess. The cult of art for art's sake mutates into a search for the perpetual gratification of physical, material desires, 'too much of everything that pertains to the flesh' (p. xiv). In his essay 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' (1893), Arthur Symons uses similar imagery of abundant sense experiences, defining decadence as 'an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity'.²⁵ Grand's preface sets the tone for *Emotional Moments* as a portrayal and critique of not just decadent but also affluent lifestyles, where '[e]verything is provided on the most lavish scale' and 'the most admired of all attainments is the attainment of wealth' (p. xvi). This is enhanced by Grand's retrospective perspective and her asserting control over the editing of her stories. Just as the volume assumes material form, it also enables Grand to voice a sharp anti-materialist critique of '[t]he modern ideal of achievement', which 'is not in the quality of the work done, but in the price to be paid for it' (p. xv).

Textile Materialities in *Emotional Moments*

Grand's portrayal of decadent Aestheticism and her critique of excessive materialism in *Emotional Moments* converge in the representation of material objects and textures. In particular, her deployment of various strands of textile materiality – meaning diegetic as well as metaphorical references to the properties of fabrics, dresses, and other textile objects – showcase these tensions. Already in the preface, Grand conjures a dense 'mass' of unspecified, fabric-like material as a fitting image of decadent excess: 'I saw Society, at that time, all about me, piled up into a dense mass – a mass in which the more attractive attributes of human nature were obliterated, the more repulsive features forced into prominence' (p. xv). The image suggests a heap of discarded clothes or pieces of fabric, a 'dense mass' which at once covers up truths and procures new, distorted forms.

The twelve short stories collected in *Emotional Moments* exemplify Grand's concern with art and artificiality and her interest in representing subjective consciousness. As they narrate 'moments' in the lives of mostly upper-class Victorians, the stories portray variations on the search for sensual and emotional fulfilment. From romantic love to the perfect artwork, Grand's characters – often young women – strive for an 'undefinable' or elusive thing, feeling or quality that will enrich their lives. The plots are connected by the stylistic textures of Grand's prose, combining, for example, interior monologues with accounts of external environments. Textiles form part of these physical settings, while also enhancing Grand's rendering of psychological and sensory spheres. In 'A New Sensation', the protagonist, Lady Flora, is tired of her life as a spoiled rich socialite, whose main ambition in life 'had been to perk about in new clothes and trifle with men' (p. 56). She contemplates the furnishings of her home:

When her guests had gone, she strolled through the empty rooms. They were decorated to excess, and reeked of luxury of the stifling kind, reflected from France. Everywhere were hangings, everywhere was silk or satin, even on the ceilings. The house was lined like a bonbon box, and it suddenly seemed to her ridiculous. She felt the artificiality, the stuffiness of it, and her impulse was to tear down the hangings and fling the windows wide open. (p. 60)

The 'bonbon box' effect of silk and satin wall hangings denotes a conspicuous display of wealth and luxury as much as conveying a decorative style centred around 'excess' and 'artificiality', here associated with French interiors. This sensory overload is, initially, made to contrast with the naturalness and simplicity of the rural setting to which Lady Flora escapes in the main section of the story. In the country, she befriends a gardener and is struck by his 'well-cut clothes' (p. 67) and elegant manner. He further confounds the lady's assumptions of rustic simplicity when he recites a stanza from Swinburne's poem 'By the North Sea' (1880), which, significantly, constructs a landscape scenery by way of textile imagery: 'Far flickers the flight of the swallows, | Far flutters the weft of the grass | Spun dense over desolate hollows | More pale than the clouds as they pass' (p. 80). Suggesting spidery weaving and manufacture, Swinburne's lines depict nature as a crafted

site. In the context of Grand's narrative, these images link the rural setting with Lady Flora's fabric-lined urban home.

In 'The Man in the Scented Coat', Grand draws on textile materiality to establish another kind of urban setting. A description of a thick fog at the onset of the story, focalized through the main character Josepha, evokes the texture of fabric:

She could see nothing through it, not the twinkle of the nearest lamps, nor could she hear a sound. For a moment the mist seemed solid as a wall, but the heat of the house meeting it melted its density, frayed it at the edges, and released it, so that it came streaming into the hall, fast filling it with vapour, which rapidly spread itself over everything, gauzily, like a veil, bedimming the brilliant lamps, shrouding the luxurious furnishings, and adding to all that touch of mystery which dignifies commonplace ordinary elegance with interest. (pp. 275-76)

Grand's imagery conveys the mutability of London's infamous 'pea soup fog', produced by a mix of air pollution and wet climate.²⁶ This 'yellow mist' (p. 279), as the narrator later terms it, was a popular emblem of Victorian literature. Oscar Wilde's poem 'Symphony in Yellow' (1889), for example, compares London's 'thick fog' to 'a yellow silken scarf' which 'hangs along the quay'.²⁷ Both Wilde and Grand draw on the material properties of fabric in their depictions of fog. Whereas Wilde's image evokes the opacity and smoothness of silk, Grand suggests the multi-functionality of different kinds of fabric: textiles can block vision and noise, they can occlude, mystify, and decorate people and things, and change the atmosphere of a place. While the fog is dense and almost solid at first, muting sound and sight like a thickly woven piece of cloth, it gradually turns more translucent and fragmented. Heat and light slowly permeate the damp air, making the mist seem like fabric that is 'frayed [...] at the edges'. In its most 'gauzy' state, the fog adopts the suggestive qualities of a veil. As it enters the house, the mist transforms the aesthetics of the interior, 'adding to all that touch of mystery which dignifies commonplace ordinary elegance with interest'. The intruding fog creates the appropriate atmosphere for adventurousness and change, enwrapping the main character in excitement and directing her to the outside world: 'She found herself being rapidly wound up into the mood for adventures. Her quick imagination began to present possibilities to her' (p. 278). As with Lady Flora in 'A New Sensation', Josepha's

abandoning of the home sphere and the material surrounding of the interior initiates her emancipation from restrictive gender roles.

‘When the Door Opened – ?’, a story which anticipates ‘twentieth-century fragmentation and fluidity²⁸ by way of its ambiguous title, expands on the urban and materialist imagery of Grand’s preface. London is portrayed as a densely textured mass, saturated with experiences and impressions. In the story’s opening paragraph, the urban crowd appears as a ‘tangled mass of movement’, where ‘the commonplace doings of people in the commonplace moods and phases [...] weave themselves into the weft of wholesome lives’ (pp. 171-72). Like an unstructured jumble of threads which is arranged to form the orderly pattern of woven fabric, significant moments or periods in life take shape, once contemplated from a distance: ‘they stand out to view, these intervals of intensity, the beginnings of episodes – tragic, heroic, amorous, abject’ (p. 172).

Layers of fact and fiction shape the form and plot of ‘When the Door Opened – ?’ The frame narrator relays a conversation with a stranger on a bus, who shares anecdotes about his married life. The embedded narrative revolves around a fancy-dress ball, where the stranger suspected his wife of committing adultery, only to find that he mistook another party guest, dressed in a similar costume, for his wife. The wife’s costume is described as ‘a silver-grey domino, lined with pale pink, and trimmed with white lace’, accompanied by a mask ‘fringed with lace’ (p. 178). As artfully crafted as the story itself, the outfit’s flamboyant yet tasteful combination of materials and colours signifies feminine agency and a self-conscious play with identities. As part of a nineteenth-century wedding dress – such as Queen Victoria’s costly silk and lace gown²⁹ – white lace would connote purity and submissiveness. By comparison, the incorporation of lace in the costume of Grand’s character seems to suggest playfulness and mystery. Contemplating the flirtatious behaviour of the woman he assumes is his wife, the husband wonders: ‘Was this the true woman [...], and was that other to whom I was accustomed only an actress earning her living?’ (p. 184).

Dressing up, and the performative, mystifying, and revelatory functions of textile objects, also feature in ‘The Undefinable: A Fantasia’, the final piece in *Emotional Moments*. The story offers the most explicit commentary on fin-de-siècle art, fashion, and decadent excess in Grand’s oeuvre of short fiction.

Unveiling Beauty and Truth in ‘The Undefinable: A Fantasia’

The narrator is a male painter based in Kensington, London. As some critics have observed, he is meant to be the same character who narrates the story of the costume ball in ‘When the Door Opened –?’.³⁰ During a period of creative deadlock, an unknown woman visits his studio, seeking employment as a model. A typical New Woman character, she is confident, intelligent, and altogether unconventional. The debates and shifting power dynamics between the two characters structure the short story. The woman criticizes the artist’s work for its lack of ‘human interest’ (p. 325). The artist, though initially appalled by the woman’s demeanour, finds himself increasingly intrigued by her presence and fresh ideas, gradually realizing that she embodies a new force of creative inspiration. The story ends with the model’s departure, having teased the painter into accepting her identity as a ‘free woman, a new creature’ (p. 357). In addressing the search for the ‘undefinable’ aspect that determines artistic genius, the story resembles Honoré de Balzac’s short story ‘The Unknown Masterpiece’ of 1832, which also features a master-student relationship and revolves around the mysterious ‘soul’ of great art.³¹ But as Grand’s choice of epigraph, ‘that certain Something’ (p. 303), attributed to Ruskin, indicates, ‘The Undefinable’ also constitutes a response to Grand’s more immediate cultural environment of the Aesthetic and decadent 1880s and 90s. This connection is supported by the preface to *Emotional Moments* and it is apparent in the story’s deployment of material culture.

Textile imagery first enters the story when the artist contemplates his most recent painting, which fails to move him. Even though he considers the ‘scene’ fit for ‘the proper appreciation of a noble work of art’ and ‘although I had reclined in a deep easy-chair long enough to finish a

cigarette, not a single fibre of feeling had responded to the call of canvas upon it' (pp. 305-06). The image of a 'fibre of feeling' links the artist's emotional life with the texture of the canvas. Complementing the descriptions of the studio's interior décor and atmosphere, it clothes the story's core theme of the quest for artistic genius in material terms. This connection is reinforced by the appearance of the female model. At first dismissing her as rude and unattractive, the artist's impression of his visitor gradually changes when he contemplates her dressed figure:

She had placed herself full in the light for my inspection, with her back to my picture, and I looked at her attentively, gauging the possibility of making anything out of such a face, and the rather tall bundle of loose, light wraps which was the figure she presented. (p. 314)

Focusing on her external appearance, the artist's gaze initially reduces the model to a potential art object. But the 'loose, light wraps' and flowing fabrics of her clothes resist the objectification of her body to a certain extent. Her outfit evokes the unconstrained 'looseness and lack of structure'³² of late Victorian Aesthetic and rational dress styles and thus signifies the visitor's status as a modern woman.

Material culture in 'The Undefinable' not only encodes feminist subversions of the male gaze but also shapes the story's ironic critique of 'art for art's sake'. Dismissing the artist's work-in-progress, the model tells him: 'You have fed your senses to such a monstrous girth that they have crowded the soul out of you. What you put into your pictures now is knowledge, not inspiration' (p. 324). Her objection is that the painter has gone too far in his pursuit of sensory spectacle. In seeking to translate the life of sensations into art, he has produced a technically skilled, yet soulless formalism. Embarrassed at her critique, the artist acts out his self-doubt in material terms: 'The next morning I was in the studio before ten o'clock, and the first thing I did was to cover my new work with a curtain, and then I set my palette' (p. 316). This seemingly minor plot detail indicates some of the story's most important fin-de-siècle contexts and intertexts. The charge that a painter has put the wrong thing into his artwork and a painting concealed by a piece of fabric also form part of the iconic decadent narrative of the 1890s, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Grand was familiar with Wilde's novella but did not approve of it. She recorded her reading experience in a letter of 1891:

I am just reading *Dorian Gray*, and find it only exasperating so far – the outcome of an unlovely mind [...] – poor, forced stuff, conceited, untrue to all that is elevating in nature & in art, and not improved by being polished up in passages to a laboured smartness, which one's head acknowledges but one's heart abhors.³³

Despite Grand's forthright critique of Wilde's novel, there are obvious similarities between the two writers' work and the shaping of their authorial identities, as Catherine Maxwell has shown: 'Like Wilde, Grand was accomplished at inventing herself as a public figure and celebrity, skilfully controlling her image and stage-managing her interviews, appearances, and artfully posed photographs'.³⁴ This connection 'extends to their literary work',³⁵ as Grand's writing critically engaged with, and anticipated, decadent debates surrounding beauty and artificiality. Grand's dismissal of *Dorian Gray* as 'untrue' and 'conceited' has parallels with the model's condemnation of a lack of 'human interest' in the painter's work, described in the short story. Her depiction of the dandy-esque artist reads like an ironic take on Wilde's male characters in *Dorian Gray*, who regard themselves as disciples of a decadent 'new Hedonism'.³⁶ In search of relentless sensual and Aesthetic stimulation, they contemplate how they might 'cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul' (p. 155). Like Grand's artist, Basil Hallward strives after the 'undefinable' quality that defines great art. But the central conceit of Wilde's novel is, of course, that Basil's painting of his muse, *Dorian Gray*, contains too much of the truth, and develops an uncanny life of its own. The portrait not only exposes the artist's feelings, but it also reveals the real nature of its sitter and owner.

During the course of the narrative the picture changes to display the gradual degeneration of *Dorian's* soul due to a life of selfish excess, while his actual physical appearance remains youthful and beautiful. Horrified by the transformation, *Dorian* hides the painting in his house and shrouds it in cloth.

As the door closed, *Dorian* put the key in his pocket and looked round the room. His eye fell on a large, purple satin coverlet heavily embroidered with gold, a splendid piece of late

seventeenth-century Venetian work that his grandfather had found in a convent near Bologna. Yes, that would serve to wrap the dreadful thing in. It had perhaps served often as a pall for the dead. Now it was to hide something that had a corruption of its own, worse than the corruption of death itself – something that would breed horrors and yet would never die. (p. 101)

The embroidered Venetian coverlet epitomizes Aesthetic taste and prefigures Dorian's obsessive and orientalist accumulation of historic textiles and other luxurious objects later in the novel. But having once been used as a 'pall for the dead' and now veiling Dorian's sinful soul, the decorated cover also intimates the darkness and the 'horrors' that lurk beneath Aesthetic refinement, gesturing towards decadence's fascination with the transgression of boundaries and the Victorian anxieties surrounding social and cultural degeneration at the end of the century.

Grand weaves these connotations into her short story. Like Dorian, her artist-narrator dreads being faced with the painting again when a group of guests ask to see his work, as it contains an aspect of himself he prefers to conceal: 'I had not looked at it myself since I had covered it up, and now that I was forced to draw the curtain from before it, I felt it to be a distasteful duty' (*Emotional Moments*, p. 321). By introducing the New Woman figure, however, Grand adds a feminist twist to Wilde's character constellation. During her second visit to the studio, the model unveils the unsuccessful painting: '[T]hen she rose in her deliberate, languid way, and went, with her long wrap depending from her left arm and gracefully trailing after her, up to the picture, and drew aside the curtain that concealed it' (p. 325). The description of the gracefully trailing fabric of her gown, focalized through the eyes of the painter, stages the New Woman as a subject of artistic interest but also connects her with the piece of cloth that conceals the truth. As she removes the curtain from the painting, her role changes from art object to that of art critic:

'Now, look at that!' she exclaimed. 'Your flesh is flesh, and your form is form; likewise your colour is colour, and your draperies are drapery – although too luxuriant, as a rule; you riot in fulness and folds with an effect that is wormy – but there isn't a scrap of human interest in the whole composition, and the consequence is a notable flatness and insipidity, as of soup without salt.' She looked close into the picture, then drew back and contemplated it from a little distance, with her head on one side, and then she carefully covered it up with the curtain, remarking as she did so contemptuously, 'There is not a scrap of "that certain something" in it, you know; it is merely a clever contrivance of paint upon canvas.' (pp. 325-26)

The paragraph constructs a complex intermedial mesh of visual and material codes. Even though the story never provides a full description of the actual subject of the painting, Grand pays attention to the shape and arrangement of fabrics and forms, echoing the earlier references to the curtain and the model's outfit. Textiles here both enact and criticize the prioritization of surface over substance. In the model's view, the painter's rendition of drapery is accurate in form yet lacks depth and relevance beyond its Aesthetic effect. A 'luxuriant', 'wormy' spectacle of 'fulness and folds', the painted textiles contrast with the simpler, more natural flow of fabric represented by the woman's own 'gracefully trailing' and 'loose, light' garments. These semanticizations of textiles as materials are reinforced in a series of illustrations for 'The Undefinable', created by the American artist William Thomas Smedley and published alongside the story in *Cosmopolitan* in 1894. The first image depicts the painter in front of his framed work, with a piece of cloth covering the top of the frame. Another illustration shows the model posing for the painter in her loosely flowing dress. She stands amongst what is described in the story as 'two heavy curtains which screened off one side of the studio from an outer apartment' (p. 334) – a material indication of the boundary between art and life.

In Grand's story, the forms and materials of textiles facilitate a complex layering of Aesthetic and feminist meanings. Further descriptions of the model's dress underline her unconventionality; yet her outfit is also presented as a luxury object, which elicits Aesthetic pleasure:

I noticed that her own dress, which had struck me at first as purely classical, was not really of any form with which I was acquainted, ancient or modern; but was of a design which I believe to be perfectly new, or, at all events, a most original variation upon already-known designs. It was made of several exquisitely harmonized tints of soft silk. (p. 339)

Transcending Victorian fashion trends, the dress symbolizes the story's search for a kind of art that is both beautiful and meaningful. While the formlessness of the cut gestures towards feminist design choices, the 'exquisitely harmonized' colours and the 'soft silk' material present the dress as visual and tactile spectacle. Noting that 'New Woman writers often drew on the vogue for

Aesthetic fashion to make a point about rational dress’, Ann Heilmann argues that ‘it is this emphasis on the social rather than the sensual function of dress which differentiated feminists from Aesthetic dress reformers’.³⁷ Yet this distinction is dissolved in the short story. As Grand’s writing slips into ‘sensual’ descriptions of textile materials and designs, it complicates any assumption that New Women’s writing draws on fashion solely for didactic purposes.

Grand’s narrative both laughs at and partakes in the fabrication of Aesthetic and decadent culture. The model, finally, becomes the artist, when she invites the painter to dress up and pose in classical attire. Textile materiality directs her gaze, as she fits him in ‘a short-sleeved tunic, reaching to the knees, with a handsome Greek border embroidered upon it’ (p. 340). The model creates a tableau vivant: ‘she went to the chest and obligingly looked me out some yards of stuff, which she said, when properly draped, would do for a toga; and having arranged it upon my shoulders to please herself, she conducted me to one of the couches’, where she then asks him to ‘assume a classical attitude’ (p. 343). Initially reacting with laughter at her own creation, the model mocks the late Victorian idealization of classical culture as well as undermining the narrator’s authority. With his ‘ambrosial locks’ and ‘manly arms embraceleted’ (p. 342), the artist’s styling also playfully challenges gender roles. Greek dress was a source of inspiration for women’s fashion, as Wilde illustrates. In a magazine piece on ‘Woman’s Dress’, published in 1884, Wilde advises that

the laws of Greek dress may be perfectly realized, even in a moderately tight gown with sleeves: I mean the principle of suspending all apparel from the shoulders, and of relying for beauty of effect not on the stiff ready-made ornaments of the modern milliner – [...] but on the exquisite play of light and line that one gets from rich and rippling folds.³⁸

Wilde’s description of fabric ‘suspended from the shoulder’ prefigures the ‘loose’ attire worn by Grand’s female model as well as the tunic and toga in which she dresses the artist. In ‘The Undefinable’, the draped fabrics of classically inspired dress undermine rigid boundaries between feminine and masculine beauty standards. Grand’s textually mediated textiles, moreover, reveal the entangled concerns of decadence, Aestheticism, and the New Women movement.

For Grand, the folds and forms of decorative fabric mimic and mock the decadent preference of surface over substance and, moreover, serve as a symbol of liberation from the constraints of Victorian gender roles. ‘I am here to be painted’, professes the mysterious visitor towards the end of the story: ‘Just set your palette while I see to my attire. You seem to have forgotten lately that a woman is a creature of clothes in these days’ (pp. 350-51). However, she refuses to be reduced to a mere silhouette: ‘The mere outer husk of me is nothing [...] – you must reveal the beyond of that’ (p. 353). The materials of visual art and of fashion are both aligned and opposed in the narrative. Dress determines the woman’s status as an art object, but its fabric is also presented as something which the modern woman can actively shape: a material embodiment of the malleability of gender identities. The model finally abandons the artist right after he has regained a state of creative flow, which reaffirms the New Woman’s agency. By leaving, she deprives the painter of his source of inspiration but also initiates his acceptance of a realigned gender hierarchy.

Grand’s still under-researched short stories pay considerable attention to physical environments and a late Victorian culture of things. Worked into condensed and open narrative designs, references to interiors, objects, and clothes clearly exceed the function of mere backdrops to the characters’ actions. In these environments, textiles assume special prominence, encoding fin-de-siècle debates about art, gender, and the privileged lifestyles of the upper classes. But the textile – etymologically related to ‘text’ – also performs structural and intertextual functions, revealing connections such as Grand’s response to Swinburne’s and Wilde’s decadence and Aestheticism, and offering scope for intermedial experiments, for example, when the language of painting merges with the language of cloth in her prose narrative. If Grand enjoyed fashioning herself as an author with a sense of style, who was considered an expert on ‘the becomingness of [...] gown, hat, fold, or trimming’,³⁹ this literacy extends to her fiction, where the materials of fin-de-siècle society helped her to craft an art form that claimed to be both useful and beautiful.

- ¹ Madeleine C. Seys, 'Rational Dress', in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Victorian Women's Writing*, ed. by Lesa Scholl and Emily Morris (Cham: Palgrave, 2022), pp. 1317-20 (p. 1318).
- ² Kimberly Wahl, *Dressed as in a Painting: Women and British Aestheticism in an Age of Reform* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2013), p. xi.
- ³ Kimberly Wahl, 'Bifurcated Garments and Divided Skirts: Redrawing the Boundaries of the Sartorial Feminine in Late Victorian Culture', in *Crossing Gender Boundaries: Fashion to Create, Disrupt and Transcend*, ed. by Andrew Reilly and Ben Barry (Bristol: Intellect, 2020), pp. 22-34 (p. 22).
- ⁴ Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies: Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 22.
- ⁵ For the photographs, see Jane T. Stoddart, 'Illustrated Interview: Sarah Grand', *Woman at Home*, 3 (1895), 249-50, in *HathiTrust* <<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.a0011275609>> [accessed 14 October 2023]. On Grand's self-fashioning as an author, see also Catherine Maxwell, 'Sarah Grand and Oscar Wilde: Decadence, Desire, and the Double Life', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 49.4 (2021), 731-51 (pp. 732-33).
- ⁶ Helen C. Black, *Notable Woman Authors of the Day* (London: Maclaren and Company, 1906), p. 327.
- ⁷ Maxwell, p. 732.
- ⁸ Elke D'Hoker and Stephanie Eggermont, 'Fin-de-Siècle Women Writers and the Modern Short Story', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 58.3 (2015), 291-312 (p. 298). See also Linda Dowling, 'The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890s', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33.4 (1979), 434-43. A foundational source on women's contribution to the British Aesthetic movement is Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000).
- ⁹ See, for example, Lynn M. Alexander, *Women, Work, and Representation: Needlewomen in Victorian Art and Literature* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003); Talia Schaffer, *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Christine Bayles Kortsch, *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction: Literacy, Textiles, and Activism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); and Madeleine C. Seys, *Fashion and Narrative in Victorian Popular Literature: Double Threads* (New York: Routledge, 2017).
- ¹⁰ Schaffer, *Novel Craft*, p. 4.
- ¹¹ Kortsch, p. 5.
- ¹² Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. by Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 4.
- ¹³ Lyn Pykett, 'The Material Turn in Victorian Studies', *Literature Compass*, 1 (2003), 1-5.
- ¹⁴ On this phenomenon, see Winnie Chan's *The Economy of the Short Story in British Periodicals of the 1890s* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
- ¹⁵ Critical editions of fin-de-siècle short stories with an emphasis on women's writing include *Daughters of Decadence: Stories by Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 2016), and *Women Who Did: Stories by Men and Women, 1890-1914*, ed. by Angelique Richardson (London: Penguin, 2002).
- ¹⁶ Kate Krueger, *British Women Writers and the Short Story, 1850-1930: Reclaiming Social Space* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 1. Women writers' success in the literary marketplace was also weaponized against them by critics who accused female authors of commercial greed. See Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, and New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p. 50.
- ¹⁷ Richardson, p. lxvi.
- ¹⁸ Krueger, p. 2.
- ¹⁹ Chan, p. xvi. The advertisement is reprinted on p. ix.
- ²⁰ Neither monographs on Grand's fictional oeuvre nor studies of the nineteenth-century short story have paid much attention to her contributions to this genre, with some exceptions. The third and fourth volumes of *Sex, Social Purity and Sarah Grand*, ed. by Ann Heilmann and Stephanie Forward, 4 vols (London: Routledge, 2000), still the most comprehensive anthology of Grand's work, introduce her shorter writings. See also D'Hoker and Eggermont, 'Modern Short Story' and Stephanie Eggermont, 'The Scientific Design of Sarah Grand's Short Story Collection *Our Manifold Nature* (1894)', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 7.2 (2011) <<http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue72/eggermont.html>> [accessed 21 June 2023]. Detailed commentary on collections and publication histories can be found in Kathryn Anne Atkins, 'Towards A Critical Edition of the Short Fiction of Sarah Grand' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of the West of England, 2015) <<https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/806097/towards-a-critical-edition-of-the-short-fiction-of-sarah-grand>> [accessed 21 June 2023].
- ²¹ Sarah Grand, 'The Undefinable', *The New Review* 11 (September, 1894), 320-30 and *The New Review* 11 (October, 1894), 433-42. In America, the story was published in *The Cosmopolitan*, 17 (October, 1894), 745-57, featuring illustrations by W. T. Smedley.
- ²² Sarah Grand, *Our Manifold Nature* (New York: Appleton, 1894), p. iii. Subsequent references to this edition are cited in the text.

- ²³ Sarah Grand, *Emotional Moments* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1908), p. vii. Subsequent references to this edition are cited in the text.
- ²⁴ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. by Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 151.
- ²⁵ Arthur Symons, 'From "The Decadent Movement in Literature"', in *Arthur Symons: Selected Writings*, ed. by Roger Holdsworth (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989), pp. 72-78 (p. 72).
- ²⁶ On this phenomenon and its significance in Victorian culture, see for example Christine L. Corton's *London Fog: The Biography* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015).
- ²⁷ Oscar Wilde, 'Symphony in Yellow', in *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890s: An Anthology of British Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Karl Beckson, rev. ed. (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1981), p. 240.
- ²⁸ Heilmann and Forward, 4, p. 1.
- ²⁹ A commentator on the Queen's wedding noted 'the trimming of the gown, which is of Honiton lace' and which would 'alone cost 1000*l.*'. 'The Queen's Marriage', *Dublin Mercantile Advertiser* (17 January 1840), p. 2; in Rebecca N. Mitchell, ed., *Fashioning the Victorians* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 155-56 (p. 156).
- ³⁰ See Atkins, p. 45.
- ³¹ This link to Balzac is discussed by Sigrid Anderson Cordell in *Fictions of Dissent: Reclaiming Authority in Transatlantic Women's Writing of the Late Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 13-16.
- ³² Wahl, *Dressed as in a Painting*, p. xi.
- ³³ From Grand's unpublished letter to Mr. Goodman, 7 August 1891, in the private collection of Mark Samuels Lasner. Quoted in Elaine Showalter, *Inventing Herself: Claiming a Feminist Intellectual Heritage* (New York: Scribner, 2001), p. 90.
- ³⁴ Maxwell, p. 372.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.* Her subsequent discussion of this intertextual dialogue centres on Grand's *The Heavenly Twins*.
- ³⁶ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 22. Subsequent references to this edition are cited in the text.
- ³⁷ Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction*, p. 124.
- ³⁸ 'Mr Oscar Wilde on Woman's Dress', in *Clothing, Society and Culture in Nineteenth-Century England: Vol. 2: Abuses and Reforms*, ed. by Clare Rose and Vivienne Richmond (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 267-69 (first publ. in *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1884).
- ³⁹ Black, p. 327.

Layers of Clothing in Hjalmar Söderberg's Writing: Translations of 'The Fur Coat' (1898) and 'A Grey Waistcoat or Justice in Munich' (1913) with an Introduction

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How can a fur coat lead to heartbreak? And how can requesting five rather than six buttonholes for a waistcoat lead to litigation? These are questions the Swedish author, translator, and journalist Hjalmar Söderberg (1869-1941) explores in his short stories 'Pälsen' [The Fur Coat] (1898) and 'En grå väst, eller Rättvisan i München' [A Grey Waistcoat or Justice in Munich] (1913).¹

Söderberg is widely recognized as a significant cultural figure of the Swedish fin de siècle and remains a popular writer to this day for his incisive cultural commentary on pressing issues of modern life and for his characteristic writing style – vivid yet economical, light-hearted yet serious. This signature style evolved in part through the interactions between the different genres that Söderberg was writing in, ranging from poetry, novels, short (and very short) stories, reviews of contemporary art and literary critiques, translations, as well as cultural commentary pieces and 'kåserier' (short essay pieces published in newspapers that address hot topics of the day in an earnest yet humorous, conversational, and entertaining tone). Söderberg was also particularly aware of the different cultural and artistic movements coursing through continental Europe at the time. In Scandinavia, this complex of different movements and literary traditions (such as social realism, Naturalism, decadence, and Symbolism) was arguably not as strongly institutionalized into distinctive schools of practice as in other contexts, which allowed writers a certain freedom to put them into conversation.² This meant that, while decadence was highly stigmatized in the Scandinavian context, many authors still 'experimented with decadence and developed new varieties of it'.³

My translation of two of Söderberg's short stories aims to illuminate how focusing on the role of clothing as literary device in Söderberg's writing can provide a window into the distinctive kind of decadent style Söderberg developed. Although Söderberg incorporates meticulous

descriptions of clothing throughout his writing, in these two stories clothing becomes a dramatic agent that precipitates events. This suggests the particular signifying functions that clothing takes on: how it can play a role in the negotiation of broader social issues, and how seemingly ordinary events and everyday objects can expose the hidden depths and the more troubling aspects of modern love and life. The two stories were also selected to display different facets of Söderberg's decadent style – 'A Grey Waistcoat' is more comedic whilst 'The Fur Coat' is more tragic. While 'The Fur Coat' has been previously translated into English (by M. Ekenberg in 1934 and by Carl Lofmark in 1987), there are no previous English translations of 'A Grey Waistcoat'.

The Question of Swedish Decadence

The extent to which Swedish literature of the *fin de siècle* could be considered decadent is up for debate. Many literary historians argue that a decadent strain in Swedish *fin-de-siècle* literature was minor at best and not, in any case, the most prevalent or the most celebrated mode of writing at the time.⁴ Decadence, as understood in terms of the French model, does not seem germane to the Scandinavian cultural contexts that were by and large relatively younger nations in-the-making,⁵ predominantly rural rather than urbanized, where traditional institutions continued to hold strong sway in cultural and social life, and modernization was still an exciting aspiration.⁶ Instead, a more favoured label for Swedish *fin-de-siècle* literature is Neo-Romanticism: emotional, sensational, and nostalgic, drawing on folk traditions and natural landscapes as means of expression, and often engaging with nationalistic themes.⁷

Yet Neo-Romanticism was only one facet of the rich creative and artistic ferment in Sweden at the time. Swedish literary culture at the turn of the century was dynamic and far from monolithic. It was particularly open to and aware of literary developments taking place in neighbouring Scandinavian countries and other parts of Europe.⁸ The influential Danish literary and cultural critic Georg Brandes had urged writers and artists in Scandinavia to break out of insular and inward-looking cultural production and draw inspiration from what was happening

throughout Europe. Brandes himself advocated for a literature that addresses social and political issues. He is famous for declaring in his *Hovedstrømninger i det 19de Aarhundredes Litteratur* [*Main Currents of Nineteenth-Century Literature*] (1872) – originally a lecture series turned into a multi-volume publication that established his name as a literary critic – that:

The only literature that is alive today is one that provokes debate. Thus, for example, Sand opened up a debate on marriage; Voltaire, Byron, and Ludwig Feuerbach on religion; Pierre-Joseph Proudhon on property; Alexandre Dumas the younger on the relationship between the sexes; and Émile Augier on social conditions. A literature that fails to debate problems is one that is in the process of losing all significance.⁹

Söderberg was certainly influenced by Brandes (and exchanged letters with him), and he was also a translator, forging his own voice and literary style in part through his practice as translator. In the early years of his translating career, Söderberg translated novels and short stories by the French writer Anatole France who was known for being a socially engaged as well as deeply compassionate writer.¹⁰

At the same time, Söderberg's initial forays as a literary writer unfolded under the banner of decadence and specifically *flâneur* literature. He wrote decadent poems that were published in magazines such as *Hemvänner* and *Idun*, and his first novel, *Förvillelser* (1895) (a title notoriously difficult to translate, sometimes translated as *Delusions* or *Diversions*, but also meaning 'aberrations'), displays some of the most canonical characteristics of decadent literature. It follows the disaffected and fashionable medical student Tomas Weber as he listlessly wanders around Stockholm consorting in cafés, having sexual (mis)adventures (one of which is ignited by his decision to buy a pair of red gloves), and generally pondering the meaning and purpose of life until a catalytic event forces him out of his stupor.

Söderberg later abandoned his initial self-presentation as decadent *flâneur*, perhaps in part because he believed it had damaged his budding literary career when antagonists seized on this aspect of his self-presentation and his writing to disparage his work.¹¹ Decadent literature was highly stigmatized in Sweden as well as the Scandinavian context more broadly. It was seen as subversive, immoral, and corrupting artistic as well as social standards. Writers seen to engage with

decadence were often taken to court for their writing or driven into exile.¹² Although the degree of stigma in the Scandinavian context may be particularly acute, these were not unusual critiques of decadence. Decadence is routinely dismissed as a fad, a ready-made formula that is widespread yet lacks substance. It encourages questionable attitudes, particularly in *flâneur* literature where the main characters are often passive, escapist, and self-absorbed observers, detached from healthy social relationships and socio-economic realities.¹³ Despite this alleged vacuousness, decadence is nevertheless considered a threat that can spread and have influence. With its emphasis on the artificial and unnatural as rivalling and even surpassing nature, it is seen as corrupt and excessive, degrading sound values, tastes, and standards.¹⁴ These critiques of decadence often crystallize around the term ‘fashion’. Decadence has indeed repeatedly been referred to as a ‘fashion’ – a passing stance you adopt for a time and then divest yourself of¹⁵ – and both decadence and fashion have had similar critiques levied against them as a consumerist, frivolous, and wasteful indulgence without any real depth or significance, corrupting standards of taste, and displacing authenticity with superficiality.¹⁶

The connections between decadence and fashion appear in a new light, however, when considering the function of fashionable dress in decadent texts and as worn by decadent figures. From this perspective, decadence and fashion share a subversive potential as ways of breaking with convention and celebrating self-expression.¹⁷ Fashionable dress connects in complex ways to identity, belonging, and power.¹⁸ It can be a form of social pressure demanding conformity from individuals to reproduce social norms.¹⁹ Yet fashion can also be seen as a means of protesting conformity, providing individuals with a form of agency to cultivate and make visible different dimensions of their identity. It can also act as form of solidarity, marking a sense of belonging between individuals.²⁰ Similarly, the emphasis on artifice in decadent art acts as a means of breaking with classical codes and experimenting with new modes of expression,²¹ while fashionable dress in decadent literature and culture becomes a privileged medium for resisting the pressure of normative conventions through creative self-fashioning.²² Focusing on the role of fashion in

decadence therefore illuminates the contradictory signifying power of the world of things that can trouble broader social conventions and express a range of contradictory emotions and identities.

Despite the critics, Söderberg takes decadence and fashion seriously, and he incorporates both into his distinctive style. Söderberg's writing certainly retains a decadent dimension beyond his early years, but it shifts as he evolves his own literary voice and style. Söderberg's decadent writing becomes 'an art of contradictions'²³ seeking to give aesthetic expression to the ambivalences of modern living.²⁴ He takes from social realism and Naturalism a deep engagement with key social issues of his time. He strives to relate individual inner experiences to the broader social world, not shying away from the baser aspects of the mind and human relationships, while remaining anchored in realist descriptions of everyday life. In addition, we see the influences of Symbolist and Romantic trends in the epic and animist tendencies drawn from traditional folklore that enable the vivid and sensual rendition of emotional forces through depictions of the natural and human-made environment. Focusing on the role of clothing, especially fashionable clothing, in these two stories therefore gives us insight into the unique ways in which Söderberg brings together social commentary with the deeply human and emotional dimensions of these social issues such that the inner worlds of his characters are deeply entangled with the broader social and material realities of which they are a part.

The Signifying Functions of Clothing

Social engagement and the expression of emotional inner life are often compartmentalized and put into tension with one another. Söderberg's writing exemplifies how these distinctions do not always hold. Söderberg is a decadent *flâneur* as well as a cultural critic who writes in the wake of Brandes' call for a literature attuned to social problems. Characterizations of Söderberg's writing tend to emphasize either one or the other, but I would argue that the interplay between these two tendencies is the bedrock of his particular style and is what makes him truly decadent.

Söderberg was a committed and engaged writer who did not shy away from taking positions on topical issues of his time. Tom Geddes characterizes him as ‘a critical observer of society, intent on exposing its failings’.²⁵ He was particularly preoccupied by injustice and the hypocrisy and absurdity of social conventions especially when these failed those who did not conform to or who questioned established social norms. As early as 1892, for example, he wrote a piece for *Nyaste Kristianstadsbladet* (26 January 1892) entitled ‘Sociala Grubblerierna’ [‘Social Broodings’] in which he denounces the injustice, inequality, and hypocrisy of contemporary Swedish society that favours the powerful and educated classes over others. He rails in particular against traditional religious, political, and legal institutions which perpetuate these dynamics of inequality and have outsized power over people’s lives.²⁶

‘A Grey Waistcoat or Justice in Munich’ is a story about inequality and the power (and legitimacy) of social institutions, and exemplifies how Söderberg uses clothing as a medium for addressing broader social issues. Already in the title itself, a simultaneous juxtaposition and equivalence is set up between ‘A Grey Waistcoat’ and ‘Justice’. When the narrator asks a tailor to make a waistcoat with five instead of the conventional six buttonholes, the waistcoat becomes an object of contention illuminating the absurd rigidity of conventions that span from dress codes to the judicial code. On the face of it, the story is primarily a dispute around the fact that the narrator asked for a waistcoat with five buttonholes, and refused to pay the tailor when he makes one with six. But anchoring what becomes a serious issue around such a seemingly insignificant request, exposes the absurdity and inscrutability of certain established conventions and legal practices as well as how deep their roots grow in our social imagination. The tailor is unable to produce or even imagine a waistcoat that would deviate from the usual six buttons. The impersonal formulations (the Swedish ‘man’ which would translate to ‘one’ in English) and the passive voice (which was not rendered in the translation) that the tailor uses – ‘Till en hög väst begagnar man sex knapphål’ [For a tall waistcoat, one uses six buttonholes] and ‘Det brukas alltid sex knapphål’ [One always uses six buttonholes] – emphasizes the sense that conventions are simply taken for

granted and not open to question. The narrator is asked why he wants five buttonholes, but it is never asked why there should be six in the first place.

The juxtaposition of waistcoat and justice is also an example of Söderberg's ability to write about serious things lightly and light things seriously. This tension announced in the title between something light-hearted and serious, something whimsical and grand, is continually developed throughout the story: a beautiful river is also a gutter, a musing on Ibsen's life in Munich ends up being a complaint about not being able to sit in pubs in peace, and a disagreement over how many buttonholes a waistcoat should have snowballs into a reflection on the concept of justice and the ability of social institutions to deliver it. In 'A Grey Waistcoat' we are never really sure when we are in jest and when we are in earnest such that we are always somewhat simultaneously in both. This humorous seriousness of the story is primarily elaborated through the voice of the narrator and allows for a certain ambivalence to emerge. Even though we are told the story from the narrator's point of view, and might become endeared to his cause, he is also an unreliable narrator as his own prejudices constantly emerge throughout the story (for example, with his persistent reminders of how things are done in his own country). He initially appears to embody the prototypical outsider who is able to see through absurd and oppressive conventions. Yet the narrator himself may not be wholly righteous and innocent. The pursuit of his principles (his desire to be right about the freedom to ask for a waistcoat with five buttons) comes to predominate over principles of solidarity with fellow human beings. The narrator chooses to answer the summons and go to court purely out of intellectual curiosity rather than real necessity (indeed, his opera glasses and bathrobe that have been repossessed seem to mean little to him). In contrast, the tailor's only defence and primary concern is that he should be compensated for his labour. In the narrator's pursuit of vindication and justice, he fails to see how he is cheating the tailor out of just compensation. As the waistcoat slowly recedes from the story, justice takes centre stage and in doing so makes visible the human bodies that labour: the tailor, the starved clerks, and the equally starved waitress who devours the narrator's leftovers that he deigns to give her.

Söderberg therefore constantly toys with our allegiances in this story. The use of witty seriousness to continually destabilize perspectives and assumptions is a common trait in decadent writing. As an epitaph to *Der Fall Wagner* [*The Case of Wagner*] Nietzsche chose: ‘ridendo dicere severum’, translated as ‘[t]hrough what is laughable, say what is sombre’ – apparently a variation on Horace from *Satires* I.24: ‘*ridentem dicere verum, quid vetat?*’ [What forbids us to tell the truth, laughing?].²⁷ In the case of ‘A Grey Waistcoat’, something could always be interpreted as something else from a different perspective – a waistcoat could be a waistcoat or could also be a symbol either of the absurdity of social codes or the inequalities of the class system. In the guise of a light-hearted anecdote – and a beautiful waistcoat – Söderberg raises instead a host of conflicting questions without clear resolution.

Textures of Meaning

In ‘A Grey Waistcoat’, the waistcoat becomes the catalyst for negotiating broader social questions. The social realism of clothing in Söderberg’s writing can therefore be seen in the way in which items of clothing become vehicles for social commentary. In this semiotic reading, clothing acts as a sign that stands in for broader social issues, and the signifying function of clothing can be read as signalling aspects of social relations and status. In ‘The Fur Coat’, fur coats similarly index broader social transformations taking place at the time. In the second half of the nineteenth century in Sweden, industrialization along with an emerging capitalist economy were reshaping society. The social body became differentiated into new social groups and social classes, and the distinctions between these groups were bolstered through modern consumer culture and the growing mediatization of society.²⁸ In Sweden, ‘textiles, followed by clothes, were the second most important products behind food in the 1870s’.²⁹ This suggests how clothing, and especially fashionable clothing (such as waistcoats made of high-quality fabric as in ‘A Grey Waistcoat’ and fur coats as in ‘The Fur Coat’) became newly significant in modern living. In this rapidly changing

social landscape, fashionable dress became a way of situating oneself socially. It became a code through which individuals could make themselves readable and interpretable.³⁰

Modern interpretations of fashionable clothing therefore emphasized its semiotic role as transmitter of broader social signals especially those related to social standing and status.³¹ Coats in particular emerged as increasingly important items in men's fashion in Sweden with fur coats often the most valuable and expensive item of clothing in men's wardrobes (coats and fur coats could make up by themselves half of the total value of a man's wardrobe with fur coats being the most expensive item). As a luxury item, fur coats were therefore read as items of conspicuous consumption signalling economic and social success.³² In 'The Fur Coat', chief district judge Richardt tells us how his coat is 'almost a professional requirement' for someone of his social standing. And the story opens with the idea that fur coats are markers of distinction when a divide is set up between those who have coats and those who do not. This divide is also what distinguishes between the two main characters in the story: the doctor (Henck) and his friend, the entrepreneur/judge (Richardt), the latter standing in for social and financial success in contrast to the doctor who does not have financial success but has more intangible successes such as family and integrity as a person who is dedicated to curing and helping people without much in return. The doctor, however, is the worse for wear. At the beginning of the story, we are told how those without fur coats are physically diminished from the cold, and Doctor Henck has also become physically diminished especially after his marriage. As soon as he dons his friend's fur coat however, the doctor feels changed, 'in a better mood than he had been for a long time', and he muses over how different his work, financial situation, marital relationship, and sense of self would have been if he had invested in a fur coat. This hints at the very real consequences of the clothing we wear and how it can determine and delimit the kinds of work we can do, the kinds of spaces we can occupy, the ways others see us, and the power and authority we can have in the world.³³

Yet how we choose to dress our bodies can express many more dimensions of our ambivalent and shifting identities beyond social class and status.³⁴ Items of clothing themselves are

unstable signifiers that can take on different connotations in different contexts and can mean different things to different people.³⁵ The fur coat repeats as a leitmotif throughout the story. It anchors the story around a realistic and concrete detail, that, in its repetition and its interweaving with other details, lets layered meanings spin out around it. Rather than simply standing in for something else, the coat itself interweaves different threads of meaning. The significance of the coat becomes increasingly muddled and confused as different symbolic dimensions are intertwined around the concrete marker of the fur coat. For example, a fur coat is not just a symbol of financial and social success, as is set up at the start of the story, it is also a symbol of love and lust, perhaps excessive or illicit love and lust, as appears later in the story with the association of the coat with darkness, light, and fire. The fur coat becomes inflected with a variety of meanings and takes on different emotional valences as it moves us through the story.

The materiality of the coat therefore provides an anchor for the elusive, shifting, and intangible flow of emotions coursing through the narrative. The fur coat, in 'The Fur Coat', is more than a uniform index of social status or an element of characterization. Compared to the indefinite 'a' in 'A Grey Waistcoat', 'the' fur coat in 'The Fur Coat' is a specific coat which becomes a protagonist in itself as it plays a particular role in the personal and emotional drama that unfolds between the characters. This story could not have happened with any fur coat, it had to be precisely this coat, otherwise it would have been a different story. The things we make and wear are not 'indifferent things'; they have 'a name, a personality, a past'.³⁶ The fur coat in 'The Fur Coat' therefore suggests another kind of signifying function as it becomes a dramatic agent that discloses and precipitates the social and emotional drama taking place. It shows how 'objects have a capacity to "act" on people's feelings'.³⁷ This fur coat is not only reflective of social codes, it is also an active constituent in those human relations. The waistcoat in 'A Grey Waistcoat' disappears from the story as an item of clothing as it is 'emptied out of particularity and thingliness'.³⁸ It becomes considered 'not as a thing but as an exchange value' and is displaced as an object by the debate on

what value it has and who should pay for it. However, the fur coat, in 'The Fur Coat', is primarily a material object that is worn, envied, and touched.

'The Fur Coat' therefore puts bodily and lived realities back into the fur coat. It enables a material mode of expression where objects can act 'as material manifestations of emotion'.³⁹ Emotions have a degree of materiality to them as we feel emotions not only through sensory, embodied experiences but also through (and with) the objects that we make and that surround us.⁴⁰ Objects can 'offer access to an emotional vocabulary, but unlike texts, in that they need not suggest specific words'.⁴¹ In this reading, the fur coat makes things manifest without making them wholly explicit. Similarly, it allows characters to realize and to say things without necessarily stating them explicitly. The coat materializes unspoken emotions and allows ambiguous feelings to unfold in a suggestive, allusive kind of language.⁴² In the final scenes, a language of gesture and of the senses interweaves with the language of textuality. We find ourselves in the limits of language, in the realm of undercoding

when, in the absence of reliable interpretive rules, persons presume or infer, often unwittingly, on the basis of such hard-to-specify cues as gesture, inflection, pace, facial expression, context, and setting certain moral meanings in a text, score, performance, or other communication.⁴³

Towards the end of the story, language becomes scarce and cryptic. Instead, the emotional force of the story develops through an emphasis on sensory and bodily dimensions. The poignancy of the doctor's final words does not only come from those words alone; it also comes from the blazing fire, from his crushed posture, and from all the other words that came before. The fur coat therefore gives concrete shape and form to the emotional and social drama taking place, not only as a personification, not only as a symbol, but primarily as a coat that sews this story together and breaks it apart.

Conclusion

Söderberg's writing emerges here therefore as not only or purely realist. Rather, there is an interplay between symbolist modes of writing and realist descriptions of precise details and observations of social relationships. In his writing, the social issues he addresses are also existential and affective issues. The social and emotional dimensions of experience are inextricably entangled. In 'The Fur Coat', love, friendship, loyalty and betrayal, and dignity, are enmeshed and entangled with social class, status, money, and power. Through the motif of the fur coat, Söderberg is able to show, and not tell, about these complex entanglements, he is able to make things manifest in ways that remain only partly intelligible and articulable. Paying attention to clothing in Söderberg's stories therefore illuminates the role of fashionable clothing in literary decadence whilst also shedding light on the varieties of decadences at the fin de siècle. The role of clothing, especially fashionable clothing, in these two stories exemplifies Söderberg's decadent style – how Söderberg gives everyday moments and people the emotional depth and complexity of romantic heroines and heroes in vivid yet economical style and light-hearted seriousness. He does not romanticize the people and objects he writes about, rather these paper beings and things allow him to develop a prosaic kind of existentialism in which he gives due depth and vividness to the social and emotional tribulations of everyday life. In Söderberg's decadent style, the repository for mediating human experiences and emotions is expanded from the natural world to include our world of things. There can be as much emotion and poignancy in a living room fire as in a thunderstorm. Letting clothes speak also allows Söderberg to express a range of conflicting and ambiguous emotions that make up modern love and life. Much like decadence itself, clothing in Söderberg's stories draws its signifying force from the ability to mean many different things simultaneously since '[i]t is not the referential content of [decadence] that conveys its meaning so much as the dynamics of paradox and ambivalence that it sets in motion'.⁴⁴ As with many other of Söderberg's stories, there is no definitive response to 'The Fur Coat', which is perhaps why we want to keep reading them again and again.

¹ In this article I will refer to these short stories by their translated titles. All English quotations from these works are from my new translations, provided in full at the end of the article.

² Pirjo Lyytikäinen et al., 'Decadence in Nordic Literature: An Overview', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen et al. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), pp. 3-37 (pp. 4-5).

³ Pirjo Lyytikäinen, 'Nordic Literary Decadence: From Metropolis to Wilderness', in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 209-26 (p. 209).

⁴ Tom Geddes, 'Hj. Söderberg: Doktor Glas', *Studies in Swedish Literature*, 3, 2nd ed (Hull: University of Hull, 1980), p. 32.

⁵ Compared to some of the other Scandinavian nations, Sweden could be considered an old kingdom that had since the seventeenth century played an important role on the European political stage and had cultural connections with other European centres but had been losing some footing in its standing with its neighbours and in Europe more broadly. However, Sweden was also somewhat engaged in a process of nationalistic questioning and reinvention and did not necessarily experience itself as an old nation in decline in the same way that France, for example, might have done. See Lyytikäinen et al., p. 7.

⁶ Lyytikäinen et al., p. 3, p. 4, pp. 7-8; Lyytikäinen, p. 2.

⁷ Lyytikäinen, p. 2.

⁸ Lyytikäinen, p. 1; Lyytikäinen et al., pp. 3-4, pp. 9-10.

⁹ Georg Brandes, 'The 1872 Introduction to *Hovedstrømninger i Det 19de Aarhundredes Litteratur (Main Currents of Nineteenth-Century Literature)*', trans. by Lynn Wilkinson, *PMLA*, 132.2 (2017), 696-705 (pp. 700-01).

¹⁰ The translation that cemented Söderberg's fame as translator was the translation of France's novel *Le Lys Rouge* [*Den röda liljan; The Red Lily*] in 1902, but he had also previously translated a selection of France's short stories in 1897 as well as the novels *La Rôtisserie de la reine Pédauque* [*Drottning Gåsfof; The Queen Pedauque*] in 1899 and *Histoire comique* [*En komedianthistoria; A Mummer's Tale*] in 1905.

¹¹ The first review of *Förvillelser* was written by Harald Molander in the newspaper *Aftonbladet* (in the issue of 9 November 1895). Molander dismissed the book as decadent – depraved and obscene – and applied the same criticisms of immorality to Söderberg. This scathing review set the tone for the reception of the novel and brought it into public view.

¹² One particularly well-known example is the writer Ola Hansson who took refuge in Germany after the publication of his *Sensitiva Amorosa* (1887) – a collection of erotic sketches – caused a scandalous uproar. See Lyytikäinen, p. 3, p. 5; Lyytikäinen et al., pp. 9-10.

¹³ Claes Ahlund, 'Decadence in Contemporary Culture as a Theme in Swedish Literature, c. 1885-1920', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, pp. 192-202 (p. 192).

¹⁴ Catherine Spooner, 'Fashion: Decadent Stylings', in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, pp. 417-41 (p. 417, p. 419).

¹⁵ Florian Krobb characterizes decadence as 'a fashionable term' ("Die Kunst Der Vater Todtet Das Leben Der Enkel": Decadence and Crisis in Fin-de-Siècle German and Austrian Discourse', *New Literary History*, 35.4 (2004), 547-62 (pp. 547-48)). Similarly, Roger Bauer notes the "'vogue" du mot *décadence*' ['popularity' of the word *décadence*] at the fin de siècle ("Fin de siècle" et "*décadence*" comme catégories littéraires: Positions et propositions', *Neohelicon*, 3.3-4 (1975), 69-86 (p. 69)). Dieter Kafitz also identifies *décadence* as a 'Schlagwort' [catchword] and 'Modebegriff' [fashionable concept] (*Dekadenz in Deutschland: Beiträge zur Erforschung der Romanliteratur um die Jahrhundertwende* (Frankfurt am Main; New York: Peter Lang, 1987), p. 20). George C. Schoolfield refers to *décadence* as a literary fashion (*A Baedeker of Decadence: Charting a Literary Fashion, 1884-1927* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003)). Finally, Marion Schmid refers to *décadence* in relation to Marcel Proust as an aesthetic, a style, a pose that Proust adopted and later abandoned (*Proust dans la *décadence**, (Paris: Champion, 2008), p. 29).

¹⁶ Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson, 'Introduction: Body Dressing', in *Body Dressing*, ed. by Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2011), pp. 1-11 (p. 2); Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 195. For definitions of fashions, see Davis, pp. 14-15; Entwistle and Wilson, p. 2; Spooner, p. 2.

¹⁷ Spooner, p. 20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁹ Spooner, p. 2; Kate Soper, 'Dress Needs: Reflections on the Clothed Body, Selfhood and Consumptions', in *Body Dressing*, pp. 13-32 (pp. 26-27).

²⁰ Spooner, p. 2; Susan Brantly, 'The Fashionable Decadence of Verner von Heidenstam's *Hans Alienus*', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, pp. 56-69 (pp. 56-57).

²¹ David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 8.

²² Spooner, pp. 1-4, p. 9, p. 20.

²³ Lyytikäinen et al., p. 14.

²⁴ A reformulation of Weir's definition of *décadence* as 'the aesthetic expression of a conflicted attitude toward modernity', in *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 3.

- ²⁵ Geddes, p. 32.
- ²⁶ Hjalmar Söderberg, 'Sociala Grubblariet', in *Preludier: Ungdoms noveller, Kåserier samt en tidskommentar 1887-1896*, ed. by Björn Sahlin and Nils Sjöstrand (Stockholm: Lind & Co, 2021), pp. 257-65.
- ²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Case of Wagner', in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: Vintage Books, Random House, 1966), p. 153.
- ²⁸ Marie Ulväng, 'Clothing Economy and Clothing Culture: The Farm Wardrobe from a Gendered Perspective in Nineteenth-Century Sweden', *Gender & History*, 33.2 (2021), 365-89 (p. 381).
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 380.
- ³⁰ Davis, pp. 4-5; Entwistle and Wilson, p. 4; Joanne Entwistle, 'The Dressed Body', in *Body Dressing*, pp. 33-58 (p. 33, p. 47).
- ³¹ James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 27; Davis, p. 4; Spooner, p. 2; Ulväng, p. 381.
- ³² Ulväng, pp. 378-79 For contemporary readings of fashionable dress as social signals and conspicuous consumption, see Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899) <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/veblen-the-theory-of-the-leisure-class-an-economic-study-of-institutions> [accessed 19 October 2023]; Georg Simmel, 'Fashion', *American Journal of Sociology*, 62 (1904, repr. 1957), 541-58.
- ³³ Peter Stallybrass, 'Marx's Coat', in *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, ed. by Patricia Spyer (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998), pp. 183-207 (pp. 187-88, p. 202).
- ³⁴ For critiques of approaches to fashionable clothing that emphasize clothing as mediator of social class and status (e.g., in the work of Thorstein Veblen and Georg Simmel), see for example, Davis, p. 9, pp. 16-17, pp. 57-60, p. 77, p. 202; Entwistle and Wilson.
- ³⁵ Davis, pp. 5-9.
- ³⁶ Mauss in Stallybrass, p. 185.
- ³⁷ Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway, and Sarah Randles, 'A Feeling for Things, Past and Present', in *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History*, ed. by Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway, and Sarah Randles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 8-25 (p. 12).
- ³⁸ Stallybrass, pp. 183-84.
- ³⁹ Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway, and Sarah Randles, 'Introduction', in *Feeling Things*, pp. 1-7 (p. 1).
- ⁴⁰ Downes, Holloway, and Randles, 'A Feeling for Things, Past and Present', p. 37, pp. 43-44, p. 46.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ⁴² See Davis, p. 3 for clothing as an allusive and suggestive mode of communication. See Entwistle and Wilson, pp. 4-5 for fashion and dress as embodied practices.
- ⁴³ Davis, p. 11.
- ⁴⁴ Charles Bernheimer, T. Jefferson Kline, and Naomi Schor, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 5.

Pelsen [Pälsen] (1898)¹

Hjalmar Söderberg

Det var en kall vinter det året. Människorna krympte ihop i kölden och blefvo mindre, utom de som hade pelsverk.

Häradshöfding Richardt hade en stor pels. Det hörde för öfrigt nästan till hans ämbetsåligganden, ty han var verkställande direktör i ett alldeles nytt bolag. Hans gamle vän doktor Henck hade däremot icke någon pels: i stället hade han en vacker hustru och tre barn. Doktor Henck var mager och blek. Somliga människor bli feta af att gifta sig, andra bli magra. Doktor Henck hade blifvit mager; och så blef det julafton.

‘Jag har haft ett dåligt år i år’, sade doktor Henck till sig själf, när han vid tretiden på julaftonen, just i middagsskymningen, var på väg upp till sin gamle vän John Richardt för att låna pengar. ‘Jag har haft ett mycket dåligt år. Min hälsa är vacklande, för att icke säga förstörd. Mina patienter däremot ha krytat upp sig nästan hela sällskapet; jag ser så sällan till dem nu för tiden. Jag kommer förmodligen snart att dö. Det tror min hustru också, det har jag sett på henne. Det vore i så fall önskvärdt, att det inträffade före utgången af januari månad, då den förbannade lifförsäkringspremien skall betalas.’

Då han hade hunnit till denna punkt i sin tankegång, befann han sig i hörnet af Regeringsgatan och Hamngatan. Då han skulle passera gatukorset för att sedan fortsätta nedåt Regeringsgatan, halkade han på ett glatt slädspår och föll omkull, och i detsamma kom en droksläde körande i full fart. Kusken svor och hästen vek instinktmässigt åt sidan, men doktor Henck fick likväl en knuff i axeln af den ena meden, och dessutom fattade en skruf eller spik eller något liknande tag i hans öfverrock och ref en stor lucka i den. Folket samlade sig omkring honom. En poliskonstapel hjälpte honom på benen, en ung flicka borstade af honom snön, en gammal fru gestikulerade kring hans trasiga rock på ett sätt som antydde att hon skulle ha velat laga den på stället om hon kunnat, en prins af det kungliga huset, som händelsevis gick förbi, tog upp hans mössa och satte den på hufvudet på honom, och så var allting bra igen, utom rocken.

‘Fy fan så du ser ut, Gustaf’, sade häradshöfding Richardt, då Henck kom upp till honom på hans kontor.

‘Ja, jag har blifvit öfverkörd’, sade Henck.

‘Det är just likt dig’, sade Richardt och skrattade godmodigt. ‘Men inte kan du gå hem på det där sättet. Du kan gärna låna min pels, så skickar jag en pojke hem till mig efter min öfverrock.’

‘Tack’, sade doktor Henck.

Och efter att ha lånat de hundra kronor han behöfde, tillade han:

‘Välkommen till middagen alltså.’

Richardt var ungarl och brukade tillbringa julaftonen hos Hencks.

*

På hemvägen var Henck i ett bättre lynne än han hade varit på länge.

‘Det är för pelsens skull’, sade han till sig själf. ‘Om jag hade varit klok, skulle jag för längesen ha skaffat mig en pels på kredit. Den skulle ha stärkt mitt själförtroende och höjt mig i människornas aktning. Man kan inte betala så små honorar åt en doktor i pels som åt en doktor i

vanlig öfverrock med uppslitna knapphål. Det är tråkigt, att jag inte har kommit att tänka på det förut. Nu är det för sent.'

Han gick ett slag genom Kungsträdgården. Det var redan mörkt, det hade börjat snö på nytt, och de bekanta han mötte kände icke igen honom.

'Hvem vet för öfrigt, om det är för sent?' fortsatte Henck för sig själf. 'Jag är inte gammal ännu, och jag kan ha misstagit mig i fråga om min hälsa. Jag är fattig som en liten räf i skogen; men det var också John Richardt för inte länge sedan. Min hustru har varit kall och ovänlig mot mig på senare tider. Hon skulle säkert börja älska mig på nytt, om jag kunde förtjäna mera pengar och om jag vore klädd i pels. Det har förefallit mig, som om hon tyckte mera om John, sedan han skaffade sig pels, än hon gjorde förut. Hon var visst en smula förtjust i honom som ung flicka också; men han friade aldrig till henne, han sade tvärtom till henne och till alla människor, att han aldrig skulle våga gifta sig på mindre än tio tusen om året. Men jag vågade; och Ellen var en fattig flicka och ville gärna bli gift. Jag tror inte att hon var kär i mig på det sättet, att jag skulle ha kunnat förföra henne om jag hade velat. Men det ville jag ju inte heller; hur skulle jag ha kunnat drömma om en sådan kärlek? Det har jag inte gjort sedan jag var sexton år och för första gången såg 'Faust' på operan, med Arnoldson. Men jag är likväl säker på att hon tyckte om mig den första tiden vi voro gifta; man misstar sig inte på sådant. Hvarför skulle hon inte kunna göra det än en gång? Under den första tiden efter vårt giftermål sade hon alltid elakheter åt John, så ofta de träffade hvarandra. Men så bildade han ett bolag och bjöd oss på teatern ibland och skaffade sig en pels. Och så tröttnade min hustru naturligtvis med tiden på att säga elakheter åt honom.'

*

Henck hade ännu några ärenden att uträtta före middagen. Klockan var redan half sex, då han kom hem fulllastad med paket. Han kände sig mycket öm i vänstra skuldran; eljes var det ingenting som erinrade honom om hans missöde på förmiddagen, utom pelsen.

'Det skall bli roligt att se hvilken min min hustru kommer att göra, när hon får se mig klädd i pels', sade doktor Henck till sig själf.

Tamburen var alldeles mörk; lampan var aldrig tänd annat än under mottagningstiden.

'Nu hör jag henne i salongen', tänkte doktor Henck. 'Hon går så lätt som en liten fågel. Det är eget, att jag ännu blir varm om hjärtat hvar gång jag hör hennes steg i ett angränsande rum.'

Doktor Henck fick rätt i sin förmodan, att hans hustru skulle ge honom ett älskvärdare mottagande, då han var klädd i pels, än hon eljes brukade göra. Hon smög sig tätt intill honom i tamburens mörkaste vrå, lindade armarna om hans hals och kysste honom varmt och innerligt. Därefter borrade hon hufvudet i hans pelskrage och hviskade:

'Gustaf är inte hemma ännu.'

'Jo', svarade doktor Henck med en något sväfvande röst, medan han med båda händerna smekte hennes hår, 'jo, han är hemma.'

*

I doktor Hencks arbetsrum flammade en stor brasa. På bordet stod whisky och vatten.

Häradshöfding Richardt låg utsträckt i en stor skinnklädd länstol och rökte en cigarr. Doktor Henck satt hopsjunken i ett soffhörn. Dörren stod öppen till salen, där fru Henck och barnen höll på att tända julgranen.

Middagen hade varit mycket tyst. Endast barnen hade kvittrat och pratat i munnen på hvarandra och varit glada.

‘Du säger ingenting, gamle gosse’, sade Richardt. ‘Sitter du kanske och grubblar öfver din trasiga öfverrock?’

‘Nej’, svarade Henck. ‘Snarare öfver pelsen.’

Det var tyst några minuter, innan han fortsatte:

‘Jag tänker också på någonting annat. Jag sitter och tänker på att detta är den sista jul vi fira tillsamman. Jag är läkare och vet att jag icke har många dagar kvar. Jag vet det nu med fullkomlig visshet. Jag vill därför tacka dig för all vänlighet du på sista tiden visat mig och min hustru.’

‘Å, du misstar dig’, mumlade Richardt och såg bort.

‘Nej’, svarade Henck, ‘jag misstar mig icke. Och jag vill också tacka dig för att du lånade mig din pels. Den har förskaffat mig de sista sekunder af lycka jag har känt i lifvet.’

¹ Hjalmar Söderberg, ‘Pelsen’ in *Historietter* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers, 1898), pp. 37-46. The version of ‘Pelsen/Pälsen’ provided here is drawn from the 1898 edition of the collection *Historietter*. This version follows older spelling forms of Swedish which precede the early twentieth century spelling reform (hence ‘Pelsen’ is spelt in the older form and would be spelt as ‘Pälsen’ in modern spelling).

The Fur Coat (1898)

Hjalmar Söderberg

It was a cold winter that year. People crumpled up in the chill and became smaller – except those who had furs.

Chief district judge Richardt had a large fur coat. It was, besides, almost a professional requirement, for he was chief executive of a brand new company. His old friend Doctor Henck, however, did not have a fur coat: instead, he had a beautiful wife and three children. Doctor Henck was thin and pale. Some people become fat from marriage, others become thin. Doctor Henck had become thin, and then it was Christmas Eve.

‘I’ve had a bad year this year’, Doctor Henck said to himself as he was on his way up to his old friend John Richardt, at three o’clock on Christmas Eve, just as the midday dusk was setting in, to borrow money. ‘I’ve had a very bad year. My health is faltering, not to say ruined. My patients, on the other hand, are on the up, nearly the whole lot of them. I hardly ever see them these days. I’m probably going to die soon. My wife believes so too; I can tell from looking at her. If that is the case, it’d be preferable if it happened before the end of the month of January when the damned life insurance premium is due to be paid.’

As he reached this point in his train of thought, he found himself at the corner of Regeringsgatan and Hamngatan. As he was about to cross the intersection to continue down Regeringsgatan, he slipped on an icy-smooth sledge track and fell over and in that same instant a sleigh-cab came hurtling towards him at full speed. The driver swore and the horse veered instinctively to the side, but Doctor Henck still got hit in the shoulder by one of the runner blades and on top of this, a screw or nail or something similar caught onto his coat and ripped a big hole into it. Folks gathered around him. A police officer helped him to his feet; a young girl brushed the snow off him; an elderly woman fussed over his tattered coat as if to say that she would have wanted to mend it there and then if she could have; a prince of the royal family, who happened to be walking by, picked up his hat and put it back on his head for him; and with that, everything was well again – except for the coat.

‘Oh my, you look awful, Gustav!’ said chief district judge Richardt when Henck came up to him at his office.

‘Yes, I got run over’, said Henck.

‘That’s just like you’, said Richardt, and he laughed jovially. ‘But we can’t have you going home looking like that. Why don’t you borrow my fur coat, and I’ll send an errand boy home to my place to fetch my overcoat.’

‘Thank you’, said Doctor Henck.

And after he had borrowed the one hundred *kronor*¹ he needed, he added:

‘I’ll see you at dinner then.’

Richardt was a bachelor and usually spent Christmas Eve at Henck’s.

*

On the way home, Henck was in a better mood than he had been for a long time.

‘It’s because of the fur coat’, he said to himself. ‘If I’d have known better, I would’ve bought myself a fur coat on credit a long time ago. It would’ve strengthened my self-confidence and people would’ve held me in higher esteem. You can’t pay the same small fees to a doctor in a fur coat as you can to a doctor in an ordinary overcoat with torn buttonholes. It’s sad that I didn’t realize this sooner. Now it’s too late.’

He walked for a little bit through Kungsträdgården.² It was already dark; it had started snowing again, and the acquaintances he came across did not recognize him.

‘Who knows, maybe it’s not too late after all?’ continued Henck to himself. ‘I’m not old yet, and I could’ve been mistaken about my health. I’m as poor as a little church mouse, but so was John Richardt not too long ago. My wife has become cold and unfriendly towards me recently. She would surely start falling in love with me again if I could earn more money and if I wore a fur coat. It seems to me as if she likes John more since he bought himself a fur coat, more than she did before. She was apparently a little bit fond of him as a young girl too, but he never proposed to her. On the contrary, he said to her and to everyone else that he would never dare to get married on less than ten thousand a year. But I dared, and Ellen was a poor girl and was glad to get married. I don’t believe that she loved me in a way that would’ve allowed me to seduce her if I had wanted to. But that wasn’t something I wanted either; how could I have dreamed of a love like that? I haven’t dreamt of it since I was sixteen years old and saw Faust at the opera for the first time, with Arnoldson.³ And yet, I’m sure that she liked me in some way in the early days of our marriage; you don’t mistake things like that. Why couldn’t she like me once again? During the early days after we were married, she was always saying hurtful things to John, every time they saw each other. But then he started a company, and invited us to the theatre sometimes, and bought himself a fur coat. And so, of course, with time, my wife tired of saying hurtful things to him.’

*

Henck still had some errands to run before dinner. It was already half past five when he arrived home laden with parcels. He felt very sore in his left shoulder; other than that, there was nothing else to remind him of his earlier mishap – except for the fur coat.

‘It’ll be interesting to see my wife’s expression when she sees me wearing a fur coat’, said Doctor Henck to himself.

The hallway was completely dark; the lamp was never lit outside of appointment hours.

‘I hear her in the lounge now’, thought Doctor Henck. ‘She walks as light as a little bird. It’s strange how I still feel warm around my heart every time I hear her footsteps in the next room.’

Doctor Henck was right when he guessed that his wife would give him a warmer welcome than she usually did because he was wearing a fur coat. She snuck up close next to him in the hallway’s darkest corner, wrapped her arms around his neck, and kissed him affectionately and passionately. After that, she burrowed her head into the collar of his fur coat and whispered:

‘Gustav isn’t home yet.’

‘Yes, he is’, answered Doctor Henck in a somewhat dazed voice as he stroked her hair with both his hands. ‘Yes, he’s home now.’

*

In Doctor Henck’s study blazed a roaring fire. There was whisky and water on the table.

Chief district judge Richardt lay stretched out in a big leather armchair and was smoking a cigar. Doctor Henck sat slumped into a corner of the sofa. The door stood open onto the dining room where Mrs Henck and the children were busy lighting the Christmas tree.

Dinner had been very quiet. Only the children had chattered and chattered and talked over one another and had been happy.

‘You’re not saying anything, old boy’, said Richardt. ‘Are you brooding over your torn overcoat?’

‘No’, replied Henck. ‘I’m thinking about the fur coat, actually.’

It went quiet for a few minutes before he continued:

‘I’m also thinking about something else. I’m thinking about how this is the last Christmas we will be celebrating together. I’m a doctor, and I know that I don’t have many days left. I know it now with complete certainty. That’s why I want to thank you for all the friendship you’ve shown me and my wife lately.’

‘Oh, you’re mistaken’, mumbled Richardt, looking away.

‘No’, replied Henck, ‘I’m not mistaken. And I also want to thank you for lending me your fur coat. It has given me the last seconds of happiness I’ve felt in life.’

¹ A *krona* (plural *kronor*), the Swedish crown, is the official Swedish currency, since 1873. 100 *kronor* is roughly the amount an average male worker in 1898 would get paid for 361 hours of labour. 100 *kronor* in 1898 would be roughly equivalent to 8,077 *kronor* today (in 2023) which is around £644 or \$773.

² *Kungsträdgården* is a big park in the centre of Stockholm. It is a popular place to go walking and meet friends, in summer as in winter.

³ (Carl) Oscar Arnoldson (1830-1881) was a Swedish actor and opera singer who played Faust in the opera adaptation of the Faust story when it was performed at the Royal Opera House in Stockholm in 1862. The opera adaptation of the play (by French composer Charles Gounod) focuses on Faust’s fateful love relationship with Marguerite (adapted from the Gretchen character in Goethe’s *Faust*).

En grå väst
eller
Rättvisan i München
(1913)¹

Hjalmar Söderberg

En vacker septemberdag gick jag och dref på gatorna i München och tänkte på ingenting. Det vill säga jag tänkte på hur i all världen det var möjligt att Ibsen kunde stå ut med att lefva i München så länge som han gjorde – i denna stad, där det är omöjligt att få sitta i fred på krogarna. Om jag sätter mig vid ett ledigt bord och det står tjugu andra lediga bord rundt omkring, så sätter sig nästa gäst, som kommer in, ofelbart vid mitt bord. Hur i all världen kunde Ibsen tåla det?

Medan jag grubblade öfver detta, stannade jag framför en herrekiperingsaffär. En väst af ljusgrått kläde tilldrog sig min uppmärksamhet. Jag kunde just behöfva en ny väst. Dessutom erinrade jag mig att jag var i besittning af ett garnityr västknappar, bestående af fem kalcedoner infattade i förgylldt silfver. De hade ursprungligen varit sex, men jag hade tappat en. Jag gick in i butiken och beställde en väst af samma ljusgråa kläde som den i fönstret utlagda; men alltså utan knappar; den skulle vara med knapphål till lösknappar; med fem knapphål.

‘Till en hög väst begagnar man sex knapphål’, svarade skräddaren.

‘Jag vet det’, svarade jag. Men jag vill alltså ha fem. Fem knapphål: fünf. Verstanden?’

Med en min, som om han för en tokig utlännings skull nödgades göra ett afsteg från sina moraliska grundsatser, lofvade skräddaren att göra mig en väst med fem knapphål.

Efter en vecka kom västen hem till mig. Den hade sex knapphål.

Budet fick naturligtvis ta den med sig tillbaka; och samma dag gick jag af öfverdrifven höflighet in till skräddaren för att förklara för honom hvarför jag inte kunde använda västen. Han föreslog att ändra den.

‘Nej’, svarade jag, ‘det går inte. Om ni tar bort det öfversta knapphålet, blir västen för mycket uringad efter min smak; och om ni tar bort det nedersta blir den för kort. Adjö!’

Det var vackert väder den dagen, och jag gick en lång promenad längs med den absintgröna floden Isar, som ibland verkligen ser ut som en flod men ibland som en rännsten. Denna gång såg den ut som en rännsten. Jag åt litet mat på en restaurant i hörnet af Zweibrücken och Isar. Jag åt kall gås. Man gaf mig en kolossal portion; jag åt knappast fjärde-delen. Flickan, som serverade mig, frågade mig om det var något fel med gåsen. ‘Nej, inte alls’, svarade jag, ‘men jag orkar inte äta mer!’ Jag fick kaffe och betalade och skulle gå. Då kom flickan med ett litet paket till mig. Det var gåsen! Inlagd i ett nummer af *Das bayerische Vaterland!* Jag höll på att falla baklänges af häpnad öfver detta nästan hysteriska utbrott af ärlighet i en stad, där utlänningen annars blir skinnad och klådd på alla upptänkliga vis. – Flickan fick behålla gåsen. Hon satte sig genast ner i en vrå och började gnaga på den.

Då jag kom hem för att kläda om mig – jag skulle till en teater för att se ett stycke af en landsman och gammal skolkamrat – mottogs jag af min värdinna, fru Schuster, med alla tecken på djup bestörtning och bottenlös förtviflan.

‘Herr Zederperch’, sade hon, ‘det har varit utmätning!’

‘Har det varit utmätning hos er, fru Schuster?’ frågade jag. ‘Det var ju tråkigt. Men jag inser inte hvad jag kan göra åt det!’

‘Nej, herr Zederperch, det har inte varit utmätning hos mig – hos er, herr Zederperch, har det varit utmätning!’

‘Det var som fan! Har det varit utmätning hos mig?’

‘Ja, herr Zederperch! En Gerichtsvollzieher och en skräddare har varit här! De ville ta er frackkostym! Men den fick de inte: jag hänvisade till att herr Zederperch var Schriftsteller och att frackkostymen var nödvändig för honom i hans yrke! Då kunde de inte ta den! Men de ha tagit er teaterkikare och er badkappa! Jag är förtviflad, herr Zederperch, men det kunde jag inte hindra!’

‘Tack, kära fru Schuster’, svarade jag, ‘jag brukar visserligen inte skriva i frack, men det var ju mycket vänligt att ni räddade den. Saken rör sig tydligen om en väst, som jag hade beställt, men som inte blef sådan jag hade beställt den. Men här i Tyskland begagnar man alltså utmätning i förskott – utmätning på grund af en rent subjektiv, ännu obestyrt fordran? För mig som svensk är det ett alldeles nytt rättsinstitut. Men det är ju alltid intressant att lära känna vilda folkslags seder...’

Och så gick jag på teatern.

Dagarna gingo, veckorna också.

Då och då fick jag med posten en skrifvelse från Rättvisan i München på blandadt tryckt och handskrifvet språk. Det handskrifna var naturligtvis oläslig tysk stil. Jag gaf hela saken fanken.

Veckorna blefvo till månader. Efter cirka två månader fick jag med posten – inte som det brukas hos oss (man har ju någon erfarenhet!) af två stämmingsmän – en stämning, eller rättare sagt två: en från skräddaren och en från rätten – den senare hade som rubrik ordet ‘Ladung’, hvilket betyder inbjudning – treflig bjudning! Jag ‘inbjöds’ däri till ‘första muntliga förhandlingen i målet Lewerandroffski contra Zederperch’ i justitiepalatset i München nästkommande onsdag kl. 9 f.m.

Nu började en svår inre strid mellan min lättja och min nyfikenhet. Den första bjöd mig att fortfarande ge hela saken fanken och låta skräddaren behålla den misslyckade västen jämte teaterkikaren och badkappan. Men nyfikenheten segrade. Det är intressant att lära känna vilda folkslags seder och bruk.

Kvällen innan rättsförhandlingen skulle äga rum satt jag på Café Luitpold, som vanligt. Där tänkte jag öfver hvad jag skulle säga och antecknade det med blyerts på några papperslappar. Ty det är mig omöjligt att utan förberedelse säga något förståndigt på ett främmande språk.

Nästa morgon lyckades jag genom ett litet underverk krafla mig upp ur sängen i så god tid, att jag verkligen befann mig på slagfältet precis kl. 9. Den föregående nattens meditationer på Café Luitpold hade fyllt mig med segerstämning. Jag var viss om att vinna processen. Det fanns väl ingen möjlighet att skräddaren kunde få rätt i denna sak!

Justitiepalatset i München är ett stort hus i modern barock. När man kommit in genom porten, befinner man sig i en stor ljusgård eller hall, som påminner om en operasalong i rokoko. ‘Die Ladung’ – stämningen – hänvisade mig till rummet n:o 66. Jag lyckades efter en stunds kringirrande finna rummet. Det påminde om en skolsal i gamla ladugårdslandsskolan i Stockholm, men tarfligare. På några nakna träbänkar sutto några ruskiga individer, bland hvilka jag upptäckte skräddaren. Vi utbytte en något stel hälsning. Bakom domarskranket syntes till en början inte en katt, men efter några minuter uppenbarade sig en ung domare med guldbågad pincenez, mörkt helskägg och klädd i den oemotståndligt skrattretande svarta kalott, som jag dittills hade antagit vara ett påhitt af *Simplificissimus*. Vid åsynen af denna kalott intogs jag af dystra aningar.

Målet 'Lewerandroffski contra Zederperch' uppropades omedelbart af en rättstjänare. Skräddaren och jag klefvo fram till domarskranket.

Domaren frågade mig, om jag hade något att invända mot stämningen.

'Ja, litet!' svarade jag. 'Den börjar riktigt nog: nämligen med det faktum, att jag har beställt en väst af käranden. Men...'

Domaren afbröt mig här och dikterade för protokollföranden:

'Skrif: svaranden erkänner sig ha beställt den ifrågavarande västen af käranden.'

'Nej ursäkta', svarade jag, 'jag har erkänt mig ha beställt en väst af käranden, men inte "den ifrågavarande västen". Jag har af käranden beställt en väst med fem knapphål, men han har sytt en med sex.'

Här inföll skräddaren:

'Det brukas alltid sex knapphål.'

Domaren tog sig en liten funderare. Han strök kokett sitt svarta skägg. Och så sade han, vänd till mig:

'Hvarför måste er väst nödvändigt ha fem knapphål?'

'Därför', svarade jag, 'att jag har ett västknappgarnityr, bestående af fem kalcedoner. De ha från början varit sex; men jag har tappat en. Därför har jag beställt en väst med fem knapphål.'

Den unge domaren frågade:

'Hvad är egentligen "kalcedoner"?''

'Kalcedon', svarade jag, 'är en naturlig sten af gråblå färgskiftning, som räknas till de så kallade halfädelstenarna. Den är mycket tarflig i jämförelse med diamant och smaragd. Men till västknappar kan den begagnas.'

'Hm', sade domaren. 'Hvad har käranden att säga?'

Käranden yrkade i korthet och utan närmare motivering, att jag skulle åläggas betala västen jämte omkostnaderna.

Den unge domaren betraktade mig strängt och sade:

'Vill svaranden betala västen jämte omkostnaderna?'

Vid denna fråga skulle jag alldeles ha förlorat fattningen, om jag inte kvällen förut hade berett mig på den på Café Luitpold och skrivit upp svaret. Jag gräfdde bland mina papperslappar och svarade, det vill säga läste innantill:

'Herr domare. Jag trodde inte, att det här, på detta rum, längre var fråga om hvad jag vill eller inte vill. Jag har föreställt mig, att det är er uppgift som domare att helt enkelt afgöra saken efter att ha hört parterna. Och jag kommer naturligtvis att foga mig i ert afgörande, antingen jag vill eller inte. Illusionen att det finns en Rättvisa är en nödvändig illusion. På den hvilar hela samhället.'

De sista orden, sammanställningen af 'illusion' och 'rättvisa', tycktes göra den unge domaren en smula perplex. Ett ögonblick såg han ut, som om han tänkte döma mig till fängelse på vanlig fängkost för opassande uppträdande inför rätten. Men i nästa ögonblick røjde hans ansikte mildhet och öfverseende: det var tydligen en halftokig utlänning han hade för sig... Och han sade:

'Ni vill alltså nödvändigt ha en dom?'

'Jag trodde', svarade jag, 'att det var därför jag var kallad hit på denna för mina vanor något tidiga morgontimma.'

'Mja', svarade domaren, 'en dom kan jag inte afkunna nu. Saken är för litet utredd. Vi måste inkalla en kommission af sakkunniga.'

En kommission af sakkunniga! Naturligtvis skräddare! Jag kände jorden gunga under mig...

Plötsligt frågade domaren:

‘Har ni fast bostad här i München?’

‘Jag bor för ögonblicket på “Hotell Vier Jahreszeiten”’, svarade jag.

‘Och ni är beredd på att stanna här i München vintern öfver?’

‘Nej, fy tusan!’ – hade jag så när sagt, men jag sade bara: nej, jag har tänkt resa om ett par dar.’

Vid detta oskuldsfulla svar förklarades den unge domarens stränga ansikte plötsligt af ett ljus och soligt leende.

‘Det förändrar saken betydligt’, sade han. ‘När det förhåller sig på det viset, måste jag på det allvarligaste tillråda er att ingå på förlikning.’

‘Mycket gärna’, svarade jag. ‘Jag är inte omedgörlig. Men hvad menas egentligen med förlikning?’

‘Därmed menas’, svarade domaren, ‘att ni betalar västen jämte omkostnaderna.’

Nu var jag fast! Jag hade ju redan gått in på förlikning! Det var bara att betala. Det hela blef 17 mark och 55 pfennige. Jag betalade skräddaren 17:60, och då han inte kunde ge tillbaka, fick han alltså 5 pf. i drickspengar. För dessa 5 pf. gjorde mig skräddaren för öfrigt den tjänsten att visa mig vägen till det ställe, där jag skulle utfå mina konfiskerade ägodelar: kikaren och badkappan. De förvarades i ett stort, brokigt hus med ett färgskimrande klocktorn, huset bredvid justitiepalatset. Skräddaren rände i förväg, fyra trappor upp om jag minns rätt, in i ett stort kontor fullt af bleka och utsvultna tjänstemän. Skräddaren lyckades beveka en af dem att utlämna ett dokument, som berättigade mig att utfå mina tillhörigheter. Men jag kunde inte få dem strax; jag skulle afhämta dem mellan 4 och 5 samma dag.

Och strax efter klockan fyra samma dag vandrade jag åter ned till det brokiga huset och befriade kikaren och badkappan ur deras två månaders fångenskap i ett hemskt och rusligt källarhvalf. Och jag tänkte i mitt hjärta, medan jag vandrade hemåt i skumrasket: Det här var något helt annat än Gustaf Adolfs resa i Tyskland...

Nästa morgon fick jag till min fasa ännu ett bref med den välbekanta stämpeln: Gerichtsvollzieherei, München. Hvad i helvete nu då? Jag trodde att saken var slut! Med darrande händer öppnade jag brevet.

Men det befanns vara ett fridens budskap, en dufva med ett oljeblad! Det var ett dokument – sista aktstycket i målet ‘Lewerandroffski contra Zederperch’ – som uttryckligen förklarade mig befogad att aflägsna rättens sigill från såväl kikaren som badkappan...

¹ Hjalmar Söderberg, ‘En grå väst eller Rättvisan i München’ in *Den talangfulla draken* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers, 1913), pp. 37-51. The version of ‘En grå väst eller Rättvisan i München’ provided here is drawn from the 1913 edition of the collection *Den talangfulla draken*. This version follows older spelling forms of Swedish which precede the early twentieth century spelling reform.

A Grey Waistcoat or Justice in Munich (1913)

Hjalmar Söderberg

One beautiful day in September, I was idly drifting around the streets of Munich, not thinking about anything. That is to say, I was thinking about how on earth it was possible that Ibsen could stand to live in Munich as long as he did – in this city where it's impossible to get to sit in pubs in peace. If I settle down at a free table and there are twenty other free tables all around, then the next patron who comes in will, without fail, sit at my table. How on earth could Ibsen put up with it?

As I was brooding over this, I came to a stop in front of a shop selling men's clothing. A waistcoat made out of light-grey fabric caught my attention. It just so happened I could do with a new waistcoat. Besides, I remembered that I was in possession of a set of waistcoat buttons which consisted of five chalcedony gemstones set in gilded silver. There had originally been six, but I had lost one.

I went into the shop and placed an order for a waistcoat of the same light-grey fabric as the one displayed in the window, but without buttons, please; it should be made with buttonholes for my own buttons; with five buttonholes.

'For a tall waistcoat, one uses six buttonholes', replied the tailor.

'I know that', I replied. 'But, I want to have five, you see. Five buttonholes: fünf. Verstanden?'

With an expression as if he were being forced to forgo his moral principles for the sake of a foolish foreigner, the tailor promised to make me a waistcoat with five buttonholes.

After one week, the waistcoat arrived. It had six buttonholes.

The courier had to take it back, of course; and that same day, out of extreme courtesy, I went to the tailor to explain to him why I couldn't wear the waistcoat. He offered to alter it.

'No', I replied, 'that won't work. If you remove the top buttonhole the waistcoat will be too low-cut for my taste, and if you remove the bottom one, it will be too short. Good day!'

It was beautiful weather that day, and I went for a long stroll along the absinthe-green Isar river, which sometimes really does look like a river but sometimes like a gutter. This time it looked like a gutter. I ate a little food at a restaurant on the corner of Zweibrücken and Isar. I ate cold goose. They gave me a colossal portion; I barely ate a quarter of it. The girl who was serving me asked if there was something wrong with the goose. 'No, not at all', I answered, 'But I can't manage to eat any more!' I had coffee and paid and was about to leave when the girl brought a little package over to me. It was the goose! Wrapped up in a copy of *Das bayerische Vaterland!*¹ I nearly fell over backwards from astonishment at this almost hysterical outbreak of honesty in a city where foreigners are otherwise fleeced and cheated in every way imaginable. The girl got to keep the goose. She instantly sat down in a corner and started gnawing on it.

When I arrived home to get changed – I was going to the theatre to see a play by a compatriot and old school friend – I was met by my landlady, Mrs Schuster, who was bearing all the signs of deep consternation and bottomless despair.

'Herr Zederperch', she said, 'there has been a repossession!'

'Has there been a repossession at your place, Mrs Schuster?' I asked. 'That was rather unfortunate. But I don't see what I can do about it!'

‘No, Herr Zederperch, there hasn’t been a repossession at my place – at your place, Herr Zederperch, there has been a repossession!’

‘Well I’ll be damned. There’s been a repossession at my place?’

‘Yes, Herr Zederperch! A Gerichtsvollzieher² and a tailor have been here! They wanted to take your tailcoat suit! But they didn’t get it: I pointed out that Herr Zederperch was Schriftsteller³ and that the tailcoat suit was essential for him in his profession! Thus, they could not take it! But they have taken your opera glasses and your bathrobe! I’m devastated, Herr Zederperch, but I couldn’t stop it!’

‘Thank you, dear Mrs Schuster’, I replied. ‘Admittedly, I don’t usually write in my tailcoat, but it was certainly very kind of you to save it. The matter is evidently about a waistcoat that I had ordered but that didn’t turn out as I had ordered it. But here in Germany they resort to repossession in advance then – repossession on the basis of a purely subjective, as yet unsubstantiated claim? For me, as a Swede, this is a completely new legal practice. But still, it’s always interesting to learn about the customs of wild peoples...’

And so I went to the theatre.

Days went by, weeks did too.

From time to time, I’d get a missive in the post from Justice in Munich written in a mix of printed and handwritten language. The handwritten parts were, of course, in unreadable German writing style.⁴ I didn’t give a fig about the whole thing.

Weeks turned into months. After approximately two months I got in the post – not hand-delivered by two judicial officers, as is usually done in our country (trust me, I’d know!) – a summons, or more accurately, two summons: one from the tailor and one from the court. The latter had as a heading the word: ‘Ladung’, which means invitation – to a nice get-together? In it I was ‘invited’ to ‘the first hearing in the case *Lewerandroffski v Zederperch*’ at the courthouse in Munich next Wednesday at 9 a.m.

A serious inner struggle now began between my laziness and my curiosity. The former urged me to continue to not give a fig about the whole thing and let the tailor keep the failed waistcoat along with the opera glasses and the bathrobe. But curiosity prevailed. It’s interesting to learn about the customs and traditions of wild peoples.

The evening before the court proceedings were going to take place, I was sitting, as usual, at Café Luitpold. There I thought over what I was going to say and noted it down in pencil on some pieces of paper, since I find it impossible to say anything sensible in a foreign language without preparation.

The next morning, by some small miracle, I managed to drag myself out of bed in such good time that I actually was on the battlefield at exactly 9 o’clock. The previous night’s meditations at Café Luitpold had filled me with a sense of victory. I was sure to win the case. There really was no way that the tailor could be right in this matter!

The Munich Courthouse is a big building in modern baroque style. When you come in through the main entrance, you find yourself in an enclosed courtyard flooded with light, or a hallway, reminiscent of a rococo opera hall. ‘Die Ladung’ – the summons – referred me to room no. 66. After meandering around for some time, I succeeded in finding the room. It was reminiscent of classrooms in the old Ladugårdsland⁵ school in Stockholm, but shabbier. On some bare wooden benches sat some creepy-looking individuals. Amongst them I spotted the tailor. We exchanged a somewhat steely greeting. On the judge’s bench it seemed at first as though there

wasn't a soul in sight, but after a few minutes a young judge materialized with gold-rimmed pince-nez, a full dark beard, and wearing the irresistibly laughable black judge's hat that I had assumed, until then, to be one of *Simplicissimus*' jokes.⁶ At the sight of this hat, a gloomy sense of foreboding took hold of me.

The case 'Lewerandroffski v Zederperch' was immediately called by a court clerk. The tailor and I stepped up towards the judge's bench.

The judge asked me if I had any objection against the summons.

'Yes, somewhat!', I answered. 'It starts off accurately enough namely, with the fact that I ordered a waistcoat from the plaintiff. But...'

The judge interrupted me here and dictated to the court reporter:

'Write: the defendant admits having ordered the waistcoat in question from the plaintiff.'

'No, excuse me', I replied, 'I admit having ordered a waistcoat from the plaintiff, but not "the waistcoat in question". I ordered from the plaintiff a waistcoat with five buttonholes, but he made one with six.'

Here the tailor interjected:

'One always uses six buttonholes.'

The judge took a little moment to reflect. He stroked his black beard coquettishly. And then he said, turning towards me:

'Why must your waistcoat necessarily have five buttonholes?'

'Because', I answered, 'I have a set of waistcoat buttons which consists of five chalcedony. There had originally been six, but I lost one. That's why I ordered a waistcoat with five buttonholes.'

The young judge asked:

'What are "chalcedony" exactly?'

'Chalcedony', I answered, 'is a natural gemstone that has a grey-blue hue. It's considered a so called semi-precious gemstone. It's very unrefined compared to diamonds and emeralds, but it can be used for waistcoat buttons.'

'Hm', said the judge. 'What does the plaintiff have to say?'

The plaintiff demanded briefly and without further justification that I should be required to pay for the waistcoat as well as the overhead expenses.

The young judge looked at me sternly and said:

'Does the defendant want to pay for the waistcoat as well as the overhead expenses?'

I would've completely lost my composure at this question if I hadn't prepared myself for it and written down the answer the night before at Café Luitpold. I sifted through my pieces of paper and answered, that is to say, read out:

'Your Honour. I don't believe that what's taking place here, in this room, is any longer a question of what I want or don't want. I'd imagined that it is your duty as a judge to quite simply decide the case after having heard from both parties. And I will, of course, abide by your ruling, whether I want to or not. The illusion that there is Justice is a necessary illusion. The whole of society rests upon it.'

The last words, the combination of 'illusion' and 'justice', seemed to perplex the young judge slightly. For a moment, he looked like he was thinking about sentencing me to prison on regular prisoner rations for disorderly conduct in court. But in the next moment, his face showed kindness and indulgence: this was clearly a kooky foreigner he had in front of him... And he said:

'So you definitely want to have a verdict?'

‘I thought that was why I was called here at this, for my habits, rather early hour of the morning’, I answered.

‘Well’, replied the judge, ‘I cannot deliver a verdict now. The case has not been sufficiently investigated. We have to summon a commission of experts.’

A commission of experts! Tailors, of course! I felt the earth give way under me...

Suddenly the judge asked:

‘Do you have a fixed residence here in Munich?’

‘For the moment I live at the “Hotel Vier Jahreszeiten”’, I answered.

‘And you are prepared to stay here in Munich throughout the winter?’

‘By God, no!’ – I came so close to saying, but I just said: ‘no, I was planning to leave in a couple days.’

At this innocent answer, the young judge’s stern face was suddenly brightened by a brilliant and sunny smile.

‘This changes the matter significantly’, he said. ‘When this is the case, I have to counsel you most earnestly to enter into a settlement.’

‘Very gladly’, I replied. ‘I’m not unreasonable. But what is meant exactly by settlement?’

‘This means’, answered the judge, ‘that you pay for the waistcoat as well as the overhead expenses.’

Now I was trapped! You see, I had already agreed to the settlement! All there was left was to pay. It came to 17 marks and 55 pfennigs in total. I paid the tailor 17.60, and, because he couldn’t give the change, he also got 5 pf. in tips.

For these 5 pf., the tailor did me the additional favour of showing me the way to the place where I could retrieve my confiscated possessions: the glasses and the bathrobe. They were being stored in a large, motley house with an iridescent bell tower; the house next to the courthouse. The tailor scurried ahead, up four flights of stairs, if I remember correctly, and into a big office filled with pale and starved clerks. The tailor succeeded in persuading one of them to hand over a document that entitled me to retrieve my belongings. But I couldn’t get them right away; I was to collect them between 4 and 5 that same day.

And right after 4 o’clock that same day, I walked once again down to the motley house and released the glasses and the bathrobe from their two months imprisonment in a horrifying and grisly underground vault. And I thought in my heart as I walked back home in the evening gloom: compared to Gustav Adolf’s famous journey in Germany, this has been something else entirely...⁷

The next morning, to my horror, I got yet another letter with the familiar stamp: Gerichtsvollzieherei, München.⁸ What the blazes now then? I thought the case was closed! With trembling hands, I opened the letter.

But it turned out to be a message of peace, a dove with an olive leaf! It was a document – the last record in the case ‘Lewerandroffski v Zederperch’ – that expressly pronounced me authorized to remove the court’s seal from both the glasses and the bathrobe...

¹ *The Bavarian Fatherland* was a Catholic daily newspaper popular in Bavaria (state of southern Germany in which Munich is located) known for taking satirical stances against Prussia (another German historical kingdom and state, now dissolved) and its imperial ambitions.

² German word for bailiff.

³ German word for writer.

⁴ The predominant writing style in German-language handwriting in the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century was known as *Kurrent* or *Kurrentschrift* [cursive script] or *deutsche Schrift* [German script]. It was developed from medieval gothic cursive handwriting. *Kurrent* is rather hard to write and read, particularly to the untrained eye, and letters could have different variations depending on the context in which they were written. *Kurrent* was simplified into the *Sütterlin* form of *Kurrent* around 1915 and steadily declined in popularity becoming replaced with Latin scripts by the 1950s.

⁵ Ladugårdslandet was a suburb in the northeastern part of Stockholm. In 1885 it was renamed and gradually expanded into Östermalm. It had previously been home to the barns of the royal family, but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a mix of workers, artisans, and military personnel built homes there – wooden and stone houses that were mostly yellow in colour and often with big gardens. In the 1890s, many of these older buildings were demolished to make way for the new modern buildings of the new Östermalm district. This was one of the most extensive urbanizing demolition projects of the time.

⁶ *Simplicissimus* was a German weekly satirical magazine based in Munich. It was known for its modern illustrations and merciless caricatures. An example of an illustration with judges and their caps can be found on the cover of issue 11, vol. 30 from 15 June 1925.

⁷ The narrator might be referring here to Gustavus Adolphus also known as Gustav II Adolf who was King of Sweden from 1611 to 1632 when he died in the Battle of Lützen in Germany. In 1629 Gustav II Adolf intervened on the side of the Protestants in the Thirty Year's War in Germany between Protestant forces and the Holy Roman Empire and its Catholic allies. His intervention in the war had significant consequences for the history and development of Germany as a country. To this day, there are memorials and traces of Gustav II Adolf scattered across Germany – one of these being the 'Schwedenquell' [Swedish wellspring] beer which was named in memory of the Swedish king and is still sold today with a picture of Gustav Adolf on the label.

⁸ German for 'Bailiff's Office, Munich'.

Rag Time: Decadent Textiles in the Louisiana Gothic of the Fin de Siècle

Ryan Atticus Doherty

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When I saw it first – sunrise over Louisiana – the tears sprang to my eyes. It was like young death – a dead bride crowned with orange flowers – a dead face that asked for a kiss. I cannot say how fair and rich and beautiful this dead South is. It has fascinated me. I am resolved to live in it; I could not leave it for that chill and damp Northern life again.

Lafcadio Hearn, 1877¹

Plaidoyer pour une décadence sudiste

Lafcadio Hearn's fascination with the 'dead bride' of the American South, beginning upon his arrival in Louisiana in 1877, was predicated upon a notion of Louisiana as a locus of cultural and literary production that had been among the richest in America for decades. If we continue Hearn's metaphor of the dead bride, her wedding gown is undoubtedly a rich one, embroidered and bedight with baroque finery. By the time of Hearn's arrival in the late 1870s, Louisiana was adorned with numerous literary journals and a wealth of works written in multiple languages. As Catherine Savage Brosman suggests:

Thus, crisscrossed for three centuries by competing ethnic, civic, and cultural lines of force, and unique, as the only former French colony in what is now the United States, Louisiana gave rise, unsurprisingly, to a unique cultural patrimony, or what has been termed the state's 'perverse complexity'.²

Although the invocation of perversity brings with it a host of complex associations, one that has been underexplored, both in American literature and in literature of the South more specifically, is that of decadence. In *Fears and Fascinations* (2005), Thomas F. Haddox makes a case for viewing works in the tradition of the Southern Gothic, and their antecedent works, through the lens of decadence – far from being a uniquely European phenomenon, he suggests, decadence is to be found in the American South, in 'the spectacle of a South haunted by defeat, by the ghosts of racial atrocities, and by a fantasy of past cultural glory [...]. If failure is indeed beautiful to a decadent, then the ruined, faux-aristocratic South becomes a splendid backdrop'.³ Rather than seeing

Louisiana literature as a regional curiosity, I propose we cease to enshroud ourselves in a parochial view of what constitutes major and minor literatures. As literary scholars, we may ask ourselves: ‘In what sort of raiment is Hearn’s dead bride clothed?’ This article thus proposes to address this question, not through a study of historical dress practices *per se*, but through the ways in which the texts of nineteenth-century Louisiana serve as textiles, revealing in their wear and tear how Louisiana’s authors grappled with the concept of decadence in the American South’s postbellum years. In other words, this article proposes to observe the wedding gown of Hearn’s dead bride and to show the inherent vice of the textile, the decay of the social and literary fabric.

Haddox is not the first to draw such a parallel between the South and decadence; Désirée Martin, in *Veillées d’une sœur* (1877), recounts her impressions of Louisiana’s decadence, comparing it to that of Rome. She prays for the burden of postbellum stagnation and poverty to end:

Ô Seigneur miséricordieux [...] Depuis que ta justice a pris les rênes de notre punissable contrée, ta bonté semble nous avoir oubliés. Ah! Pardon, mon Dieu, pardon!... N’es-tu pas un *Dieu bon!*... La Louisiane, autrefois bénie de toi, est devenue un nid d’oppression; les oiseaux de proie la dévorent et l’étranger la délaisse en disant: Pauvre terre!... Sombre pays!

[Oh merciful Lord [...] Since Your justice has taken the reins of our punishable country, Your bounty seems to have forgotten us. Oh forgive us, my God, forgive us!... Are You not a good God!... Louisiana, once blessed by You, has become a nest of oppression; the birds of prey devour it, and the foreigner neglects it, saying: Poor land!... Dark country!]⁴

She ends her lament with a sentiment that encapsulates the simultaneous feeling of hatred for the institution of slavery and nostalgia for the economic and cultural power that Louisiana had before the Civil War: ‘Nous ne te demandons pas pour elle le retour des années 1816 à 1861; ne lui rends jamais de prospérité basée sur l’esclavage; mais, mon Dieu, redonne-lui la liberté et la paix.’ [We do not ask You on her behalf for the return of the years 1816-1861; do not ever give her prosperity based on slavery; but, my God, give her back liberty and peace.]⁵ Vladimir Jankélévitch, in his 1950 study on decadence that has become a seminal work in defining the concept both literarily and philosophically, emphasizes that, ‘La décadence pourtant ne se confond ni avec la déchéance théologique, ni avec la dégénérescence biologique, ni avec le déclin individuel.’ [Decadence,

however, is neither to be confused with theological decay, nor with biological degeneration, nor with individual decline.]⁶ He continues, saying that decadence is inherently a relative concept, one in which value is shifted temporally to an irrevocable past:

En d'autres termes, l'acmé est au milieu, entre pente et contre-pente, tandis que l'excellence, dans la chute, est toute concentrée à l'origine; la valeur n'est plus métémpirique, comme dans les mythes de l'Age d'or ou du Paradis supralapsaire, mais elle est 'devenue'.

[In other terms, the peak is in the middle, between incline and decline, while excellence in freefall is entirely concentrated at the beginning; value is not so much metempiric, as in the myths of the Golden Age or of Paradise Lost, but it has 'become'.]⁷

Instead of functioning as a stable category, decadence is always a statement of loss, a reminder that the present has 'fallen away from' the past.⁸ Elsewhere, I have argued for a periodization of Louisiana's literature, but as yet no one has theorized a literary periodization of Louisiana that includes a decadent school.⁹ However, spanning the decades from the 1870s to the 1900s, the decadent school in Louisianian letters corresponds neatly with the flourishing of decadent prose in Europe.¹⁰ Thus, this article proposes to bridge this gap by suggesting not only that Louisiana literature has a long heritage of decadence, but also that this literature, when viewed through the lens of representation of textiles and their decay, provides unique insight into the unravelling of the social fabric of the Old South.

As the 1850s drew to a close, the political and economic divisions driving the United States towards its Civil War were omnipresent. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, the Supreme Court decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* in 1857, and John Brown's execution in 1859 all bore witness to an increasing tension across the Mason-Dixon line, one which, if we are to borrow Jankélévitch's notion that decadence derives from a deliberate and self-conscious delectation in one's own decay, abounds in many writings from the South in the latter half of the nineteenth century:

En fait, la conscience qui dégénère prend goût à sa propre dégénérescence et trouve à s'éplucher elle-même une sorte d'amère et morose délectation. La réflexion narcissienne sur le Soi et les sous-produits de la pensée caractérisera donc les époques decadents.

[In fact, consciousness that degenerates develops a taste for its own decay and finds a sort of bitter and morose delectation in teasing itself apart. The narcissistic reflection on the self and the resulting products of thought thus characterize periods of decadence.]¹¹

Although comparatively few histories of Louisiana's literature exist, especially ones which periodize it into movements, there exists nevertheless a suggestion that it has its decadent period. Auguste Viatte in his *Histoire littéraire de l'Amérique française* considers the years 1840-1860 the 'Apogée' of Louisiana literature, and Bill Marshall suggests similarly that Louisiana's francophone literary scene peaked between 1840 and 1850.¹² And although neither of these critics suggest a period of decadence, such an era is implied in all periodizations of a Golden Age.

Drowned Bodies in Ballgowns: The Spoils of the End of the World

Born in Jamaica to a French family that had fled the revolution in Saint-Domingue, Adolphe du Quesnay moved to Louisiana in 1869 and began a short-lived writing career in his later years, depicting the darker, menacing side of the Gulf of Mexico.¹³ His novella *Un été à la Grand'Île* [*A Summer on Grand Isle*] (1892) tells of family tragedy on the eponymous resort island in the Gulf and has been criticized for its moralizing tone and unidimensional characterization.¹⁴ However, the atmosphere of the novella, brooding and disturbing, permeated with nostalgia and lush description, betrays many of the hallmarks of decadent fiction. In her analysis, Brosman has concluded, '[l]ocal color is exploited, as well as the pathetic fallacy, focusing on the ocean and its moods'.¹⁵ The family tragedy at the heart of the story – the loss of a young couple's infant daughter while vacationing on the island – is set against the historical backdrop of a more sweeping natural disaster, the hurricane of 1856, which destroyed the analogous *Dernière Isle*, a vacation spot for the wealthy who wished to escape the stifling heat of New Orleans.

The sudden outbreak of a storm on Grand Isle, described as a rend in a veil, causes a temporal shift, in which the narration flashes back to the famous disaster of 1856 as a meteorological metonymy mediated through a textile metaphor:

Nous avançons parfaitement tranquillement, quand soudain, déchirée comme un voile, la nue s'illumina d'une blanche averse, ondée subite qui, suspendue un moment en une écharpe aérienne, creva, une seconde après, sur la mer et l'île, baignant celle-ci en un clin d'œil.

[We were walking along perfectly tranquilly when, suddenly, torn like a veil, the clouds were lit up by a white shower, an abrupt shower that, suspended for a moment like an aerial scarf, broke a second later upon the sea and the island, bathing it in the blink of an eye.]¹⁶

The opening up of the cloud like torn fabric, while functioning as pathetic fallacy for the action that is to come, also serves as the nodal point in the narrative, precipitating the decline of the narrator's family and creating a *mise-en-abyme* with the events of 1856. In a bizarre attempt to cheer up his wife after the loss of their daughter, the narrator takes her on a sightseeing tour of the ruins of Dernière Isle, allowing the narration of the novella to slip into a protracted sequence describing the last hours of the resort:

Si l'on en croit les souvenirs des autochtones, on donnait ce soir-là un grand bal dans l'île. Le temps, depuis la veille, avait été orageux. C'était un samedi soir, le 13 août 1856 je crois; le vent d'ouest soufflait du large et il pleuvait très fort.

[If one is to believe the memories of the natives, there was a great ball given that night on the island. The weather had been stormy since the previous day. It was a Saturday night, the 13 August 1856, I believe; the western wind blew in from the sea and it rained very heavily.]¹⁷

The last ball on Dernière Isle, drawing on a literary tradition of gayety in the face of disaster, could not be more decadent; Louisiana's elite dance as the waters soak the hems of their gowns.

The luxury of the seasonal inhabitants of the island becomes, in the description of this disaster, a metonymy of the wealth of the state before the Civil War, a lost Golden Age that was to be wiped away as cleanly as the structures on Dernière Isle:

Cependant le luxe proverbial des dames louisianaises était si somptueux à cette époque, en pleine floraison d'esclavage, l'or abondait tellement sur les plantations, qu'on dépensait beaucoup sans y regarder de bien près, et que l'on courait follement après le plaisir en déployant un faste extrême.

[However, the proverbial luxury of the Louisianian ladies was so sumptuous at that time, at the very height of slavery, and money was so abundant on the plantations that people spent much without looking very closely, and they madly chased pleasure by displaying an extreme splendour.]¹⁸

As the women bedeck themselves in their finery, the threatening storm seems only to add to their feverish search for pleasure.¹⁹ Once the storm breaks, however, this finery only serves to emphasize the helplessness of wealth and fashion before nature's power. In a shift from first person to free indirect discourse, the novella imagines the last hours of the wealthy planters at the ball, casting them as figures variously tragic and symbolic. As Stephanie Boeninger has suggested about death at sea: 'Drowning thus serves an ambivalent function in literature, uniting the human desire for a peaceful death with the equally powerful terror of being forgotten', and the drowning of the society of the last antebellum generation takes this dichotomy from the personal to the sociological.²⁰ Thus, du Quesnay's narrator imagines trapped women and children who are summarily beaten and stripped by the storm before being drowned: 'Au bout de quelques heures, leurs vêtements, fouettés par les vagues étaient en pièces; ils étaient complètement nus.' [After a few hours, their clothes, whipped by the waves, were in tatters; they were completely naked.]²¹ Nature, in a symbolic triumph over sartorial decadence and excess, reduces these people to an Edenic nudity that is imposed just before the moment of death, an apotheosis of decadence directly preceding the inevitable fall.²²

Un été à la Grand'Île not only recapitulates the decadent themes of horrific imagery and societal excess and decline, it manipulates its *mise-en-abyme* structure in order to analyse the consequences of collapse. Thus, after the storm passes, the ruins of Dernière Isle provide, ironically, more fertile soil for an exploration of decadence than did the antebellum resort: 'le sol était jonché de plusieurs centaines de cadavres déjà décomposés sous les rayons ardents d'un soleil splendide' [the ground was littered with several hundred bodies already decomposing under the intense rays of a splendid sun].²³ The carpeting of rotting corpses over what had once been a playground for the rich serves, for the reader of 1892, as an all-too-familiar reminder of the fields of corpses that were to litter the countryside during the upcoming war. The bright sun, which had made of Dernière Isle a resort location in the first place, now hastens the decomposition of its former inhabitants. However, biological decay is not at the heart of this aftermath:

Encore parées de leurs robes de fête, la plupart des femmes avaient les doigts coupés. Leurs bijoux, bagues de diamants et de rubis, colliers de pierres fines, leurs riches costumes revêtus pour le bal avaient été arrachés, emportés. Cette profanation de la mort fut accomplie, croit-on, par les pêcheurs riverains, sortes de ravageurs et gens barbares qui, habitant les terres hautes d'alentour, purent arriver les premiers à ce banquet de vautours.

[Still dressed in their ballgowns, most of the women had their fingers cut off. Their jewels, diamond and ruby rings, necklaces of fine gems, and their rich ensembles put on for the ball had been stripped and carried off. This profanation of death was accomplished, so it is said, by the coastal fishermen, a type of barbarous scavenger, who were able to arrive at this vulture's banquet first because they lived upon the surrounding highlands.]²⁴

The very clothes that women had donned for the last ball both weighed down their bodies in the sea and attracted wreckers, who pillaged their jewels and fabrics. The very garb of decadent society leads directly to the profanation of its death: while the same ardent sun shines, the fabric of society is cut up and sold for scrap. Boeninger has suggested that death at sea presents a fundamental problem for the human desire for memory since there is no fixed locus to mourn the dead, but du Quesnay's wreckers add an additional layer of complexity to this analysis.²⁵ In his novella, the worse alternative appears to be washing ashore, since, when lost at sea, the memory of the living can create a respectful grave for the dead, while the found body, especially when fallen into unscrupulous hands, is subject to the further degradation of mutilation for the sake of profit.

The young wife in the frame story, Diane, in a strange access of gayety at the end of their stay on Grand Isle, insists upon a last swim – anticipating a more famous work of Louisiana literature, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899).²⁶ This image of the wife and mother, returning to the sea in an act of grief and/or freedom, also constitutes a fundamentally decadent act; in a gesture of self-resignation, the individual relinquishes all struggle and allows herself to be carried by the inevitable water. When Diane's body is recovered, the direct connection with the victims of a quarter century before is palpable in the state of her body and, more particularly, her clothing:

À moitié enterrée dans les sables où la mer l'avait jetée, ses traits purs et fins conservaient toute la première sérénité de la mort; ses beaux yeux noirs étaient grands ouverts et fixes, et elle souriait doucement. Mais ses vêtements étaient déchirés, et ses membres délicats tout raidis, mutilés horriblement.

[Half-buried in the sand where the sea had thrown her, her pure and fine features retained all the first serenity of death; her beautiful black eyes were opened wide and fixed, and she

smiled softly. But her clothes were torn, and her delicate limbs were stiff and horribly mutilated.]²⁷

The horror of this scene stands in direct contrast with the placidity of her face. However, her body and her clothing bear witness to the violence of her death; the tearing of the fabric of her dress and of her skin blending the once-living and the inert textile into one mutilated whole. As a locus for a decadent exploration, *Dernière Isle* also serves as a reminder of Louisiana's imbrication with the Caribbean, creating what I shall call the idea of a 'tropical decadence', a decadence that is predicated on local colour and *créolité*, displaced from urban centres and allowed to fester, like the bodies after the hurricane, under harsher climes.

Mary Gallagher has suggested that Hearn, perhaps more than any other author of the *fin de siècle*, embodies the complexity of *créolité* in his writings and accentuates the cultural continuum between the Deep South and the Caribbean, managing, 'to outline the basis of the Creole cultural continuum and to suggest the manner in which that continuum might cancel the boundaries between different geographical spaces, states, nations, cultures, genres and languages'.²⁸ Shared origins in plantation slavery and its violent collapse, she argues, are explored by Hearn in an 'aesthetics of *métissage*', a focus on local colour punctuated with stylistic references to recent French writing. Indeed, Bernadette Lemoine has focused on Hearn's indebtedness to France, labelling him as an 'ambassador' to French literature in America and Japan.²⁹ However, these analyses leave out a larger consideration of how Hearn's writing in Louisiana and the Antilles reworks the mechanisms and imagery of decadence into a tropical setting. Thus, when Hearn chooses as the subject of his first novella, *Chita* (1887), the 1856 hurricane and its devastation of *Dernière Isle*, this choice does not exist in a literary vacuum. Rather, Hearn's characterization of the menacing power of the Gulf and the collapse of Southern society symbolized by this hurricane draws upon a long literary tradition in Louisiana, and similarities to du Quesnay's novella of a few years later are not to be taken lightly.

As in *Un été à la Grand'Île*, the first glimpse the reader is allowed of Dernière Isle is a retrospective one which dwells on its ruinous state in order to situate the story of the hurricane within the context of the island's eventual destruction:

Last Island (L'Isle Dernière), – well worth a long visit in other years, in spite of its remoteness, is now a ghastly desolation twenty-five miles long. Lying nearly forty miles west of Grande Isle, it was nevertheless far more populated a generation ago: it was not only the most celebrated island of the group, but also the most fashionable watering-place of the aristocratic South.³⁰

Hearn is, in many respects, more explicit than du Quesnay about the parallel between the 1856 hurricane and the impending destruction of the old, aristocratic South. When the Civil War is referenced in *Chita*, it is 'that huge shock, which left all the imposing and splendid fabric of Southern feudalism wrecked forever'.³¹ The rending of the 'splendid fabric' of the old South becomes metonymized in the menacing and mysterious tropicity of the locus of Hearn's story. In an apostrophe to the reader, the novel opens with this suggestion: 'you will find yourself more than once floating through sombre mazes of swamp-forest, – past assemblages of cypresses all hoary with the parasitic tillandsia, and grotesque as gatherings of fetich-gods'.³² And like du Quesnay, Hearn uses the metaphor of fabric to express environmental destruction: 'it will seem to you that the low land must have once been rent asunder by the sea, and strewn about the Gulf in fantastic tatters'.³³ The rending of cloth, and the resulting 'tatters' of land, expresses violence inherent to the physical space of the Gulf of Mexico in a way that cannot be otherwise expressed; from the ancient Jewish tradition of rending garments in mourning to the violence of the Crucifixion being marked by the tearing of the veil in the temple, it brings together a physical and metaphysical rupture in space and systems of thought that can never be 'stitched' back together.

Also like du Quesnay's imagining of the last hours of the island resort, Hearn creates an extended conceit of the final ball given on the island as a way to symbolize the broader destruction that would obliterate the South and its planter class. With an exclamation of 'Il n'y a rien de mieux à faire que de s'amuser!' [There's nothing better to do than have fun!], the denizens of Dernière Isle gather in the hotel ballroom to ignore the impending storm and its destruction.³⁴ This

hedonistic approach, lacking in both spatial awareness and foresight, echoes the prioritization of the aesthetic over the material with which Hearn diagnoses antebellum society, alleging it believed it

wiser to admire the grace of Parisian toilets, the eddy of trailing robes with its fairy-foam of lace, the ivory loveliness of glossy shoulders and jewelled throats, the glimmering of satin-slipped feet, – than to watch the raging of the flood without, or the flying of the wrack...³⁵

The fabrics of the women's dresses are given ambiguous adjectives that both describe their ephemeral nature and invite a direct comparison to the troubled waters outside; the 'eddy' of gowns with a 'fairy-foam' of decoration both echo and soften the harsh natural reality that threatens them. And indeed, it is in the course of 'la valse-tourbillon', again echoing the hurricane, that the first sign of impending disaster is the wetness of dancing slippers.³⁶

In *Chita*, the aftermath actually forms the bulk of the novella; the textile metaphors of the storm itself – in which 'tearing' of land and 'rending islands in twain' creating a physical and epistemological rupture between the antebellum and postbellum societies – and giving way to the harvesting of fabrics from the bodies of the dead.³⁷ 'There are silks, satins, laces, and fine linen to be stripped from the bodies of the drowned' – a formulation that, because of its impersonal construction, allows Hearn to make the reader implicitly complicit in the despoiling of the dead.³⁸ Among the detritus of the disaster is the titular young girl, who is found by a coastal Spanish fisherman named Feliu. To emphasize the conceit of textiles representing the destruction of the social fabric, the eponymous Chita is found as a 'frail creature bound to the mother's corpse with a silken scarf', tethering her quite literally to her old society by the bonds of a costly fabric.³⁹ Thus, in many respects Chita is first presented as herself a type of wrecker's spoil, a costly bit of fabric fished from the sea because of its value. As Feliu and his wife adopt the orphan girl, who speaks only Creole and is unable to communicate with the couple, the clothes in which she was found serve almost as transitional objects, ushering her into her role as adopted daughter:

She wore the same dress in which Feliu had found her – a soft white fabric of muslin, with trimmings of ribbon that had once been blue; and the now discolored silken scarf, which had twice done her such brave service, was thrown over her shoulders.⁴⁰

The transformation of Chita from wealthy, creolophone scion of New Orleans society to a coastal Spanish fisherman's daughter is made more poignant by her eventual 'rediscovery' by her father a decade later, although he is delirious with yellow fever and unable to recognize her. And this transition, marked sartorially by Hearn, encapsulates the social upheaval represented by the hurricane and, by extension, the coming Civil War: 'She wore a loose-falling dress of some light stuff, steel-gray in color; – boys' shoes were on her feet.'⁴¹ Hearn's poetizing of social destruction through natural disaster, like du Quesnay's, is inherently a commentary on the social collapse wrought by the Civil War, and like his characters, his writings are haunted, '[h]e who teareth off the Mask of the Flesh had looked into her face one unutterable moment: – she had seen the brutal Truth, naked to the bone!'⁴² *Chita*, and *Un été à la Grand'Île*, narratologically tear off the mask of artifice to reveal the social order laid bare – when the fabric of society decays, the nudity underneath is made visible and legible.

In Which the Quadroon Rolls up Her Sleeves

What du Quesnay and Hearn address in terms of Louisiana's decaying social order, George Washington Cable addresses with race. Race is a recurring theme throughout his works, but *Madame Delphine* (1881), being the story of a quadroon woman and dealing primarily with mixed-race relationships, is one of his most explicit. As historian Emily Clark has noted, the 'myth of the quadroon' became a popular trope starting in the eighteenth century and afforded a way to both expose the ills of slavery and indulge in an orientalist-style fantasy of it.⁴³ The appeal of this figure, further argues Kenneth Aslakson, lies in her simultaneous familiarity and exoticism, being both white enough to make her familiar to a largely white readership while being black enough to maintain her position as an exotic other.⁴⁴ Cable's *Madame Delphine*, tells the story of a quadroon and her daughter, and elaborates the lengths to which the eponymous heroine will go for her

daughter to marry the white man with whom she has fallen in love. As Violet Harrington Bryan posits, the question of race is central to depictions of New Orleans as a decadent locus in the novel:

[I]n *Madame Delphine* Cable emphasizes more dramatically the changes that have occurred in the twenty years since the golden period of Creole life; he paints boldly the atmosphere of decay in the Quarter and suggests that the newly Americanized Esplanade area on the outskirts of the Quarter would also suffer as a result of its complicity in the racial sins of the area.⁴⁵

The area of the French Quarter where Madame Delphine lives is described thus by Cable as a ‘region of architectural decrepitude’ where stagnation and a hopeless nostalgia reign, a feeling he poetically paints as a ‘long Sabbath of decay’.⁴⁶ What marks this setting as particularly decadent, I argue, is not just this emphasis on decay but the ways in which Cable paints this decay as beautiful:

Yet beauty lingers here. To say nothing of the picturesque, sometimes you get sight of comfort, sometimes of opulence, through the unlatched wicket in some porte-cochère-red-painted brick pavement, foliage of dark palm or pale banana, marble or granite masonry and blooming parterres; or through a chink between some pair of heavy batten window-shutters, opened with an almost reptile wariness, your eye gets a glimpse of lace and brocade upholstery, silver and bronze, and much similar rich antiquity.⁴⁷

This bringing together of material luxury, particularly in the appointments of interior décor, and the notion of an irrevocably lost past in New Orleans, is preserved artificially. This sense of fading grandeur that is condemned to be cloistered behind crumbling façades in the French Quarter evokes the ‘long Sabbath of decay’, a quasi-religious resignation to, and even celebration of, corruption.

More than physical corruption, the reputation for moral corruption in New Orleans dates at least to the eighteenth century, and the mixed-race women of the city fuelled this fascination during the nineteenth century. Numerous figures, both literary and historical, describe the balls where white men and women of colour paired off, often emphasizing the lasciviousness of the ‘quadroons’ – even political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville, on his tour of America, recounts visiting a quadroon ball in 1832, calling it a ‘[u]nique lien produit par l’immoralité en[t]re les deux races. Une sorte de bazar’ [unique place produced by the immorality between the two races. A sort

of bazaar].⁴⁸ However, when Cable portrays Madame Delphine as a veteran of the quadron balls, the ‘widow’ of a white man, he chooses to emphasize her decorum and dignity, describing the women at the balls: ‘They were clad in silken extenuations from the throat to the feet, and wore, withal, a pathos in their charm that gave them a family likeness to innocence.’⁴⁹ Whereas other authors, including both Alexis de Tocqueville and Sidonie de La Houssaye, emphasize their salacious side – Mme de La Houssaye often employs the word ‘dévergondage’ in reference to the practice – Cable opts instead to portray the quadroons almost as hetærae or women prey to a social convention rather than opportunistic exploiters of men, and this shows most visibly in his sartorial description of them as covered and, almost, innocent.⁵⁰

In an echo of the *costume* worn by her mother decades before, Madame Delphine’s daughter, Olive, is hidden both intra- and extra-dietetically when first presented in the narrative. Glimpsed during a mass held by the energetic Père Jerome, Madame Delphine and her daughter are enigmatic figures: ‘The younger one bowed silently; she was a beautiful figure, but the slight effort of Père Jerome’s kind eyes to see through the veil was vain.’⁵¹ Even the kindly gaze of the priest is unable to penetrate the veil, nor is the reader permitted a glance at the girl beneath. She is sartorially and narratologically marked off, protected. Veils will come to play an essential role in this analysis of Louisiana decadence. As Marni Reva Kessler argues in her book *Sheer Presence: The Veil in Manet’s Paris* (2006), ‘[l]ike a lens that alternately burs and sharpens, the veil is a tool that helps us to explore nineteenth-century conceptions of femininity, public health, aging, vision, imperialism, urbanism, and modernity art practices’.⁵² Holding a privileged, if often overlooked, place in public textiles in the nineteenth century, the veil serves as an instrument of power for women; the veil allows them to maintain anonymity while observing the world and moving freely in it. It acts as a kind of armour, shuttering the woman from the prying eyes of society while allowing her to display the information about herself that she chooses. Thus, when Olive later comes to seek Père Jerome’s assistance in her complicated love affair, she again appears veiled: ‘turning, he beheld a closely veiled female figure standing at the other end, and knew instantly that

it was Olive'.⁵³ This time, Père Jerome is able to discern under the veil – he, and the reader, have been granted access to Olive by Cable, but the veil remains as a reminder that she is separate within the text, held off from the corruption, both moral and physical, which surrounds her.⁵⁴

The other function of the veil within this narrative is to obscure the race of the woman wearing it; although Olive appears white, the veil reinforces the ambiguity inherent within a complicated racial hierarchy. In a similar way, sleeves function as an indicator of both race and morals, both hiding the skin from the sun's darkening rays and countering the prurient gaze. Thus, the scene where Olive's love interest, Vigneveille, first glimpses her is indicative of the symbolic role her clothing plays. In her garden, Vigneveille, like Père Jerome before him, sees first the figure as defined by its garments, then perceives the girl: 'a pale glimpse of robes came through the tangle, and then, plainly to view, appeared an outline – a presence – a form – a spirit – a girl!'⁵⁵ As Olive materializes through material, 'her arms, half hid in a snowy mist of sleeve, let down to guide her spotless skirts free from the dewy touch of the grass'.⁵⁶ What ensues is an unintentional, for Olive, strip-tease, in which the movement particularly of her sleeves simultaneously reveals her body and her purity. The 'snowy mist' of sleeve and 'spotless skirts', metonymically, remind the reader both her of innocence and her perceived race, and, as Roland Barthes has suggested, the dress makes the woman:

la plume, la fourrure et le gant continuent d'imprégner la femme de leur vertu magique une fois même qu'ils sont ôtés, lui font comme le souvenir enveloppant d'une carapace luxueuse, car c'est une loi évidente que tout le strip-tease est donné dans la nature même du vêtement de départ.

[the feather, the fur, and the glove continue to imbue the woman with their magical virtue even once they have been taken off, acting for her like the encompassing memory of a luxurious shell, because it is an obvious law that all strip-tease lies in the nature itself of the clothing being removed].⁵⁷

The revealing of the arms beneath the sleeves carries with it the ghost of the sleeve, a subtle game of *cache-cache* which operates in counterpoint to Oscar Wilde's aphorism: 'Nothing should reveal the body but the body.'⁵⁸

Vigneveille watches Olive, substituting for the reader in the fascination of the game: ‘She approaches the jasmine; she raises her arms, the sleeves falling like a vapor down to the shoulders.’⁵⁹ This tactic of using the sleeve as a particular part of the garment that accentuates the quadron is widespread in fin-de-siècle Louisiana literature. Sidonie de La Houssaye uses it in her series *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans* (1894-1898) to show the whiteness of the arms of Octavia, the ‘queen of the quadrons’, a signifier of her *métissage*:

Elle était habillée tout de blanc; la mousseline de son corsage couvrait sans les cacher ses admirables épaules; et ses manches longues, mais très larges, montraient en se relevant ses beaux bras d’un blanc de neige. Une rose rouge était le seul ornement de sa magnifique chevelure, qui retombait en boucles soyeuses au-dessus du peigne destiné à les relever.

[She was dressed entirely in white; the muslin of her bodice covered her admirable shoulders without hiding them, and her long, very wide sleeves showed her beautiful, snow-white arms when they fell back. A red rose was the only ornament in her magnificent hair, which fell in silken curls over the comb that was supposed to hold it up.]⁶⁰

Like Octavia, Olive is revealed to both the reader and Vigneveille through her garments, and because the sleeve has a double function of preserving both pallor and modesty, and because of its ability to, almost of its own accord, coquettishly reveal the skin, especially the wide, loose sleeves of the quadron, it functions as a literal floating signifier, falling through involuntary movement of the arm to signifier its wearer, her sexuality, and her race.

Thus, Olive, although described even more chastely than her mother had been decades before, is still, as part of the quadron mythology of the Crescent City, an object of sexual fascination, precisely because of her modesty. In a sartorial echo of her mother, who, after all, had Olive because of her semi-clandestine relationship as mistress to a white man, Cable casts Olive as a classical figure, ostensibly to be observed with cold detachment:

Her chaste drapery was of that revived classic order which the world of fashion was again laying aside to re-assume the mediæval bondage of the staylace; for New Orleans was behind the fashionable world, and Madame Delphine and her daughter were behind New Orleans. A delicate scarf, pale blue, of lightly netted worsted, fell from either shoulder down beside her hands.⁶¹

Like the scarf that bound Chita to the body of her mother, Olive’s scarf binds her to her mother; the final sentence of this quote is ambiguous about the antecedent of the pronoun ‘her.’ This

attachment, however, serves as the narrative crux of the novel when Madame Delphine finds herself obliged to lie about Olive's parentage so that she can marry. She tells Olive and Vignevelle that she is not Olive's mother so that Olive can claim to be white – the wedding occurs, but Madame Delphine, deprived of her role as mother of the bride, is consigned to the aisles. Among the guests, she stands aside, 'and last – yet first – one small, shrinking female figure, here at one side, in faded robes and dingy bonnet'.⁶² The fading clothes of Madame Delphine relegate her narratologically to the past. In publicly renouncing her parentage, she renounces her claims upon the future and recedes into the background, eventually dying as she confesses her lie to Père Jerome. Cable, once again, turns to the metaphor of textiles to add pathos to the drama: 'Madame Delphine might have tried a thousand times again without ever succeeding half so well in lifting the curtain upon the whole, sweet, tender, old, old-fashioned truth.'⁶³

The Veil is Rent

Unlike in *Madame Delphine*, the veil in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* in many respects metonymizes a generic shift away from the more wistful Romanticism of Cable, albeit a Romanticism tinged with political concerns.⁶⁴ The veil in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* grows ragged and threadbare, marking how the sweeping family epic of the novel displays the unravelling of the fabric of Southern society itself in the years immediately surrounding the Civil War. In the decay of this fabric, Guri Barstad sees both decline and evolution:

Dans le microcosme louisianais de la plantation Saint-Ybars, ce sont trois générations d'une même famille qui semblent représenter et illustrer les différents stades de l'évolution d'une société qui, sous maints égards, est aveuglée par l'habitude, ou qui, par commodité, choisit de demeurer immobile, d'éviter tout changement, tout ce qui ressemblerait à une évolution et pourrait demander un effort d'adaptation. C'est ainsi qu'après s'être rendue économiquement dépendante de l'esclavage, la société elle-même se retrouve esclave de ses mensonges.

[In the microcosm of Louisiana that is the Saint-Ybars plantation, three generations of the same family seem to represent and illustrate the different stages in the evolution of a society which, in many respects, is blinded by habit or which, out of convenience, chooses to remain immobile and to avoid all change and anything that would smack of evolution or could demand some effort to adapt. It is thus that, after having made itself economically dependent upon slavery, it is society itself that finds itself a slave to its lies.]⁶⁵

However, while she is correct in pointing out that society is blinded by habit and immobilized, and thus enslaved by its own structure, it is difficult to see in the story of this family, regardless of how Mercier creates openings for a positivist view of human progress, anything other than decadence.⁶⁶

Like the other works of the corpus of this article, *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* opens with a panoramic sweep of the local topography, allowing both the introduction of local colour and permitting the 'weaving' of the local society, setting up the social structures and mores that are going to fall into decline throughout the course of the plot, creating a saga of familial decline and fall, a *Buddenbrooks* of the South. A young Frenchman, Pélasge, who is fleeing his political involvement in the insurrection of 1848, arrives in Louisiana. Engaged to be the tutor on the Saint-Ybars plantation to the youngest scion of the house, Démon, he undergoes a cultural and philosophical journey through 'le rideau lointain et sombre de la cyprière' [the dark and distant curtain of the cypress grove] to arrive at the plantation, where his observations of its inhabitants and mores shake his beliefs and challenge his Eurocentric worldview.⁶⁷ In his encounters with the denizens of the plantation, Pélasge's understanding of life in the American South, be it linguistic, social, or political, is upended, creating a question around where shared culture – and even shared language – end.⁶⁸

In the middle of the Saint-Ybars plantation stands an ancient tree, the Sachem; once the meeting point for local Indian tribes, it now shelters their scant descendants while also serving as the resting place for the Saint-Ybars family. The Spanish moss hanging from its branches establishes the funerary stagnation of the Sachem as a locus: 'Des touffes de barbe espagnole pendaient ça et là comme de longs voiles funéraires; leur immobilité morne augmentait la mélancolie de cette solitude, et donnait plus d'intensité au silence' [Tufts of Spanish moss were hanging here and there, like long funeral veils; their mournful immobility increased the melancholy of this solitude and gave a greater intensity to the silence].⁶⁹ Like the quadroom's veil in *Madame Delphine*, the veils hanging on the Sachem lend it the gravitas of its ostensibly unshakeable

connection with the past. Although Saint-Ybars superstitiously fears the Sachem, claiming that ‘cette immobilité et ce silence ressemblent trop au néant’ [this immobility and silence are too similar to nothingness], Démon finds the continuity the Sachem provides with the past comforting.⁷⁰ Saint-Ybars’s dislike of the locus, however, does not prevent him from seeking it out as a means to attempt to seduce his daughter’s music teacher, Nogolka.

In a scene of attempted rape that, like with du Quesnay, is augmented by the pathetic fallacy of an impending hurricane, Nogolka appears by the tomb under the Sachem: ‘Elle était vêtue d’une robe blanche; un voile blanc à travers lequel se dessinait vaguement sa figure, tombait sur ses épaules et descendait jusqu’au dessous de la taille’ [She was dressed in a white dress; a white veil, through which her face could vaguely be seen, fell onto her shoulders and hung to just above her waist].⁷¹ Dressed in this funereal shroud, Nogolka is both narratologically marked as ‘outside’ the living world of the plantation and demonstrates, through the metonymy of the tomb, the depravity to which Saint-Ybars is willing to sink. After Pélasge takes the torn veil away as evidence of the attempted rape, the second part of the novel reaches its climax when, frustrated and ashamed, Saint-Ybars lashes out at Démon on the night of the hurricane, beating him mercilessly. When his nurse Mamrie, his ‘deuxième mère’, saves him by hurling an axe at Saint-Ybars’s head, Mercier’s analysis of the violent potential of a slave society, however bucolic it may appear on the surface, reaches its most prescient point. As Mamrie is brought into the courtyard to be publicly whipped, Pélasge meditates on how his comfortable life on the Louisiana plantation is at odds with the democratic ideals for which he had been exiled from France:

Pélasge était dans sa chambre. Debout devant sa table de travail, il avait les yeux fixés sur le voile de Nogolka; mais ce n’était pas à elle qu’il pensait; il regardait machinalement ce voile et pensait à Mamrie: il se demandait encore, au dernier moment, s’il n’y aurait pas un moyen de la sauver.

[Pélasge was in his room. Standing in front of his worktable, his eyes were fixed on Nogolka’s veil, but it was not about her that he was thinking. He was looking mechanically at this veil and thinking about Mamrie; he still wondered if there were not some way to save her at the last minute.]⁷²

Although the scene ends with Saint-Ybars remitting Mamrie's punishment through the intervention of Nogolka, for Pélasge, there is an almost Edenic Fall in this moment, a recognition that even in spite of the normally peaceful life of the plantation, there is a fundamental violence that undergirds it, and the veil by which he links the events of Saint-Ybars's outbursts, serves as a narratological *fil rouge*.

The veil, metonymized from the parasitic moss of the trees to the young woman Nogolka to the slave Mamrie, becomes, through Saint-Ybars's act of mercy, a signifier of changing times and coming collapse. Man Sémiramis, the major-domo of the plantation, expresses her regret over the liberality of white masters:

Monsieur, dit-elle, les blancs ne savent plus régner, ils faiblissent; dans dix ans il n'y aura plus d'esclaves.

– Tant mieux, répondit Pélasge.

Sémiramis le regarda d'un air de pitié, et s'éloigna sans ajouter un mot.

[Sir, she said, the whites no longer know how to rule; they are growing weak. In ten years, there will not be any more slaves.

– All the better, responded Pélasge.

Sémiramis looked at him with an air of pity and walked away without adding a word.]⁷³

Man Sémiramis' presentiment of the end of the antebellum slave society proves to be part of the *zeitgeist*, as even Saint-Ybars's father, Vieumaite (vieux maître), predicts the violent end of the South by apostrophizing her:

Ô Sud, quel triste sort t'attend! Vainqueur ou vaincu, ton malheur est certain. Vainqueur, tu traînes un boulet attaché à ton pied, l'esclavage. Ton ennemi, défait sur le champ de bataille, te poursuit sans trêve ni merci sur le terrain de la discussion. Vaincu, tes ateliers sont désorganisés; la confiscation te saisit de ses serres impitoyables. Déchiré, dévoré comme Prométhée, que de temps il te faudra pour reprendre ta santé et tes forces! Peut-être un demi-siècle.

[Oh South, what sad destiny awaits you! Win or lose, your misery is certain. As a victor, you will drag the chain attached to your ankle: slavery. Your enemy, beaten on the battlefield, will hound you mercilessly on the field of discussion. If defeated, your industry will be in disorder; confiscation will latch onto you with its pitiless claws. Torn apart and devoured like Prometheus, how much time it will take for you to regain your health and force! Maybe half a century.]⁷⁴

Helpless before political and social forces, as well as damned regardless of the outcome of the coming war, the characters on the plantation find themselves prey to a feverish sense of decadence;

like the merrymakers on Dernière Isle, they conduct a last valse-tourbillon before the inevitable collapse of their civilization. As Emma Harlet and Nathan Rabalais have suggested in their introduction to the newest edition of *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*:

L'œuvre de Mercier est colorée d'une ambiguïté face à l'esclavage. Dans le contexte de la fin de siècle, il faut mettre en avant la complexité de la société louisianaise, avec la disparition de la société créole francophone telle que l'a connue Mercier jeune au profit de l'anglo-américanisation de la région.

[Mercier's work is coloured with ambiguity on the subject of slavery. In the context of the end of the century, one must bear in mind the complexity of Louisiana society, in particular the disappearance of francophone Creole society as Mercier knew it in his youth in favour of the Anglo-Americanization of the region.]⁷⁵

Thus there is a parallel decadence being explored both dietetically and metatextually; the decadence of the antebellum plantation society stands in, for Mercier, for what he sees as the decadence of francophone Louisiana at the end of the century. *Fin de siècle, fin de la créolité*.

And as with the other works of this corpus, Mercier's novel offers his readers a detailed analysis of the consequences of the collapse of a decadent society. In a gesture that recalls Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher', the collapse of the house of Saint-Ybars is mirrored by the physical collapse of the family's mansion:

Le soleil, le vent, la poussière et la pluie commencèrent à y pénétrer librement, à mesure que les portes et les fenêtres étaient enlevées [...]. Les planchers s'évanouirent, suivis des poteaux, des solives, des panneaux, des escaliers. Bientôt il ne resta plus que la carcasse en brique, semblable à une forteresse abandonnée après un siège. Les briques elles-mêmes furent emportées; de la magnifique résidence des Saint-Ybars, on ne vit plus que quelques pans de mur du rez-de-chaussée, à l'ombre desquels vinrent se reposer de vieilles vaches errantes.

[The sun, the wind, the dust, and the rain began to enter into it liberally as the doors and windows were taken away [...]. The flooring vanished, followed by the columns, the soffits, the panelling, and the stairs. Soon nothing was left but the brick carcass, like a fortress abandoned after a siege. The bricks themselves were taken away. Of the magnificent Saint-Ybars residence, all that remained to be seen were a few pieces of wall of the ground floor, in the shadow of which old wandering cows came to rest.]⁷⁶

The destruction of the Saint-Ybars mansion allows Mercier by extension to indulge in a veritable orgy of death for the family; in quick succession, Saint-Ybars, his wife, and their sons succumb to the ravages of postbellum poverty. When Chant-d'Oisel, Démon's twin sister, marries Pélasge, it

is on her deathbed. In a prolonged scene where Mamrie dresses her in a chemise de batiste, a ‘dernier reste de l’ancienne splendeur’ [last remnant of the old splendour], fabric once again serves as an indicator of decadence.⁷⁷ As she tells Mamrie, ‘Vous allez [...] faire ma toilette de mariée qui sera aussi ma toilette de morte’ [You will [...] dress me in my wedding gown, which will also be my burial shroud], recalling Hearn’s imagery in the epigraph to this article of the South as a dead bride, dying at the moment of lost innocence and entry into the world.⁷⁸

As the house of Saint-Ybars collapses around him, Pélasge’s monologues turn more nihilistic; upon perceiving that the Sachem, the symbol of connection with the past, is dying, he embarks on an apocalyptic meditation:

tout meurt, tout disparaît, c’est la loi. La terre elle-même, berceau et tombeau de tant d’êtres, aura sa fin. Une nuit viendra, nuit lugubre et glacée, où l’humanité, réduite à un petit nombre de familles, attendra vainement le retour du soleil, et sera ensevelie sous une pluie de neige. Mais qu’importe?

[everything dies, everything disappears – that is the law. The earth itself, the cradle and tomb of so many beings, will reach its end. One night will come, a cold and gloomy night, when humanity, reduced to a small number of families, will await the return of the sun in vain and will be buried under an onslaught of snow. But what does it matter?]⁷⁹

This eschatological preoccupation, however, is an extension of the social and economic collapse of Louisiana, as represented by the reversal of fortune of the Saint-Ybars family. As disillusioned as Pélasge had been with plantation slavery, the aftermath of the war proves to provide no more hope, leading him to believe that: ‘la Louisiane va s’engloutir dans un abîme de sang et de ruines’ [Louisiana will be swallowed up in an abyss of blood and ruins].⁸⁰ Violence has begotten violence, and the sea of blood and ruination that is engulfing Louisiana echoes, affectively, the sea of the Gulf itself that, for du Quesnay and Hearn, laps menacingly at the shore.

The official end of the Saint-Ybars family, in a dramatic scene involving a murder-triple-suicide, including the suicides of Démon and Mamrie, in which clothing plays a central role – a bullet pierces through a ‘gabrielle et chemise’ [gabrielle and shirt], and a man is murdered as he is held by the tie – plunges Pélasge, the last man left on the wreckage of the former plantation, into

despair.⁸¹ 'Il considérait sa vie comme finie, il se survivait', the narrative informs us, casting him as a superannuated relic of a world that will never return:

Je n'ai plus rien à faire sur cette terre. [...] je ressemble à un acteur, qui, après une représentation, quand tout le monde a quitté le théâtre, continue de se promener gravement sur la scène, dans le costume de son rôle.

[He considered his life over; he had outlived himself. [...] 'I no longer have anything to do on this earth. [...] I am like an actor who, after a performance when everyone has left the theatre, continues to walk about gravely on the stage in the costume of his role.]⁸²

The 'costume' that Pélasge wears no longer matches the character; with the disappearance of the eponymous Saint-Ybars, he is dressed in the rags of nostalgia, creating a tension on the part of Mercier's narration that both celebrates the end of slavery and mourns the loss of Creole society. As Harlet and Rabalais suggest in their introduction to the new edition of the novel: '[I]a technique narrative qu'emploie Mercier démontre une lutte mentale et morale contre le legs de l'esclavage, l'inégalité raciale dans la société du Sud et la disparition imminente de la culture créole qui lui est chère' [the narrative technique used by Mercier demonstrates a mental and moral battle against the legacy of slavery, racial inequality in the society of the South, and the imminent disappearance of the Creole culture so dear to him].⁸³ Although the novel explicitly speaks to the inherent link between nostalgia and decadence, it ultimately seeks to allow a measure of hope in even the most complete of tragedies, a view supported by Barstad when she characterizes Démon's suicide as a 'martyre'.⁸⁴ This characterization of Démon's suicide is somewhat apt, although the concept of martyrdom is ideologically misapplied, as it makes of the murder-triple-suicide which concludes the novel an appropriate metaphor, all strata of Louisiana society falling upon its sword, killing itself out of the same stubbornness that had made it the richest of the 'states gone to sleep'.⁸⁵ Mercier, however, ends the novel with an appeal to progress, by having Nogolka return to request his presence in Europe to lead a fight against social inequality. And while the hope which returns to Pélasge at the end of the novel is undoubtedly a gesture towards a belief in human progress, it functions almost as a *deus ex machina* and transplants the locus of this progress to an unspecified elsewhere.

In spite of his personal efforts to maintain French thought in Louisiana, Mercier's pessimism shows through in the completeness of the ravages he describes in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*. A later novel, and his final one, *Jobnelle*, becomes even more pessimistic about the future of Creole society.⁸⁶ And ultimately, this preoccupation with decadence was justified to a certain extent: in 1916, the state of Louisiana banned the teaching of French in schools, and in 1923 the last French-language press, *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, closed its doors. Although decadent Louisianian literature is not limited to its francophone production, as this paper has shown, the sense of collapse of the old Creole order permeates the *fin de siècle*. And as the literature of the South more broadly began to be reconsidered in the early twentieth century, especially as William Faulkner burst onto the American literary scene in the 1920s with his early writings in New Orleans, the emergence of a Southern Gothic came to both eclipse and recapitulate the earlier Louisiana Gothic. By tracing this continual threat through the literature that directly links France and the American South, the decadence of Louisiana can take its place in both American and francophone letters, bringing to bear the epistemological, moral, and political implications of decadence on issues central to the South: poverty, race, religion, and the legacy of slavery feudalism. To conclude, I offer the ending of Faulkner's 1936 reflection on the influence of aristocratic decay, miscegenation, and regional stereotyping, *Absalom, Absalom!* As the novel concludes, one man, Shreve, observes to another, Quentin: 'The South. Jesus. No wonder you folks all outlive yourselves by years and years and years', recalling, unintendedly, the notion of Pélasge outliving himself after the collapse of the Saint-Ybars plantation.⁸⁷ In response, Quentin ends the novel on a suspect insistence of negation: 'I dont hate it', thinking, '*I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*'⁸⁸ In theorizing a Southern decadence, I propose that by reconsidering preconceived notions of Southern literature as monolithically white, Protestant, and of only regional concern, we can disencumber it from political and cultural stereotypes and perceive it within a global framework. And, perhaps, we can stop hating it.

¹ Lafcadio Hearn, *Fantastics and Other Fancies*, ed. by Charles Woodward Hutson (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), p. 6.

² Catherine Savage Brosman, *Louisiana Creole Literature: A Historical Study* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), p. 12.

³ Thomas F. Haddox, *Fears and Fascinations: Representing Catholicism in the American South* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 86.

⁴ Désirée Martin, *Les Vieilles d'une sœur; ou, Le Destin d'un brin de mousse* (Shreveport: Tintamarre, 2008), pp. 61-62.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

⁶ Vladimir Jankélévitch, 'La Décadence', *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 55.4 (1950), 337-69 (p. 337).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ According to the OED, the word 'decadence' derives from the Medieval Latin neologism of *de* and *cadere*, meaning to fall away from. It arrived into English in the sixteenth century via French.

⁹ Following on the periodizing work in the *Anthologie de poésie louisianaise du XIX^e siècle*, I have suggested a periodization of Louisiana literature that includes both a Romantic school and, to borrow a term from Mario Praz, a 'black Romanticism', heavily influenced by both American Gothic authors such as Poe and Hawthorne and French authors such as Gautier and Barbey d'Aureville. See my introduction to Charles Lemaitre, *Rodolphe de Branchelière* (Shreveport: Tintamarre, 2023), pp. 7-24, as well as *Anthologie de poésie louisianaise du XIX^e siècle*, ed. by D. A. Kress, Margaret E. Mahoney, and Rebecca Skelton (Shreveport: Tintamarre, 2010).

¹⁰ In many respects, the origins of the decadent school, at least in a francophone context, can be traced to the watershed year of 1884, in which was published J.-K. Huysmans's *À rebours*, Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus*, Élémer Bourges' *Le Crépuscule des dieux*, Joséphin Péladan's *Le Vice suprême*, and Maurice Barrès' journal *Tâches d'encre*.

¹¹ Jankélévitch, pp. 340-41.

¹² Auguste Viatte, *Histoire littéraire de l'Amérique française des origines à 1950* (Paris & Québec, P.U.F./P.U.L., 1954), pp. 242-75; and Bill Marshall, 'Francophone Gothic Melodramas', in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic*, ed. by Susan Castillo Street & Charles L. Crow (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 215-28 (p. 216).

¹³ Brosman, p. 97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

¹⁶ Adolphe Lemercier du Quesnay, 'Un été à la Grand'Île', in *Contes et récits de la Louisiane créole, tome I* (Shreveport: Tintamarre, 2006), pp. 157-97 (p. 184).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ In his article 'Fashion, France, and the Politics of Form', David Faflik analyses a nineteenth-century American play in which French fashions are lampooned, and his formalistic argument applies particularly well to this story of francophone Louisiana. He suggests, for example, that, 'The players are so beholden to 'French' fashion sense that they always already prioritize the narrow conventions of haute couture over individual deliberation and choice – whether formal, fashionable, or otherwise. Whatever forms they subscribe to become an ordering force', and to a certain extent, du Quesnay's depiction of wealthy members of antebellum Louisiana's planter class seeking fashion over safety adds a vital element to this analysis. They are depicted as being such slaves to fashion, particularly the French fashions that dominated in Louisiana's material dress culture at the time, that they are helpless to save themselves from destruction. The general lampooning of French fashion at this time that is highlighted by Faflik also serves to encode this story within the aristocracy of antebellum New Orleans, who considered themselves more aligned with France politically than even with the rest of the American South, just as it serves to situate this story within the broader context of the francophone Caribbean. David Faflik, 'Fashion, France, and the Politics of Form', *Arizona Quarterly*, 73.3 (2017), 49-71 (p. 53).

²⁰ Stephanie Pocock Boeninger, *Literary Drowning: Postcolonial Memory in Irish and Caribbean Writing* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2020), p. 24.

²¹ du Quesnay, p. 187.

²² Sophie White has suggested that conspicuous material consumption, particularly in fashion, has been a defining characteristic of francophone New Orleans since its inception: 'New Orleans had been conceived as a city, and in key respects colonists strove to fulfill that vision of an ordered colonial city. One way they did so was through consumption. In response to a colonial environment marked by demographic dominance of enslaved Africans, elites and middling groups sought to reinforce and extend social cohesion through consumer and leisure activities such as shopping, and by echoing the material culture of their exact peers and kin in France.' Thus, this scene can be read as nature stripping off the defining pretense of Louisiana as a French colony and reducing her to her natural state. Sophie White, *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians: Material Culture and Race in Colonial Louisiana* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 226.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Boeninger, p. 3.

²⁶ At the end of Chopin's novel, the protagonist Edna Pontellier swims out to sea beyond her capacities, arguably committing suicide in an attempt at regaining freedom. Ironically, this scene also takes place at Grand Isle.

²⁷ du Quesnay, p. 195.

²⁸ Mary Gallagher, 'Lafcadio Hearn's American Writings and the Creole Continuum', in *American Creoles: The Francophone Caribbean and the American South*, ed. by Martin Munro and Celia Britton (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), pp. 19-39 (p. 21).

²⁹ Bernadette Lemoine, 'Lafcadio Hearn as an Ambassador of French Literature in the United States and in Japan', *Revue de littérature comparée*, 3.319 (2006), 299-317. However, it is via New Orleans that Hearn came to know the French proto-decadents, including Baudelaire's translations of Poe, as well as his fascination for stories and customs of the Far-East. For a biography of Hearn's time in New Orleans and the French Antilles, see Edward Larocque Tinker, *Lafcadio Hearn's American Days* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Co., 1924), pp. 109-13.

³⁰ Lafcadio Hearn, *Chita: A Memory of Last Island* (New York & London: Harper & Brothers, 1889), p. 12.

³¹ Ibid., p. 170.

³² Ibid., p. 4.

³³ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 45.

³⁵ Ibid..

³⁶ Ibid., p. 48.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 53.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 56-57.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 87.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 98.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 186.

⁴² Ibid., p. 142.

⁴³ Clark makes a direct link between tales about the quadroon as a young, sexualized woman and fictive depictions of the seraglio in the same time period. Emily Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), p. 133.

⁴⁴ Kenneth Aslakson, 'The 'Quadroon-Plaçage' Myth of Antebellum New Orleans: Anglo-American (Mis)interpretations of a French-Caribbean Phenomenon', *Journal of Social History*, 45.3 (2012), 709-34 (pp. 724-25).

⁴⁵ Violet Harrington Bryan, *The Myth of New Orleans in Literature: Dialogues of Race and Gender* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), p. 17. This echoes, in many respects, Tinker's analysis of Hearn's response to the French Quarter:

He had become supersaturated with the life of this quarter – its sights, sounds, psychology and traditions – its lack of comfort, its dank feeling of decadence and even its smells. He had exhausted the quarter's local colour and there followed a revulsion of feeling, – a positive dislike for that part of New Orleans which had once so aroused his enthusiasm. (Tinker, p. 190.)

⁴⁶ George W. Cable, *Madame Delphine* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1881), p. 2. Also of note is the fact that in the French version of the novella published in Louisiana, *La Fille de la quarteronne: scènes de mœurs louisianaises*, the frame story, including the panoramic sweep over the decay of the French Quarter, is entirely omitted. It is not known if Cable himself translated the book or if it were the work of an unnamed translator. George Washington Cable, 'La Fille de la quarteronne: scènes de mœurs louisianaises', *La Sentinelle de Thibodaux*, 21 June to 16 August 1884.

⁴⁷ Cable, *Madame Delphine*, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, 'Voyage en Amérique', *Œuvres complètes, tome I* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2013), p. 180.

⁴⁹ Cable, p. 9.

⁵⁰ Whitney Nell Stewart suggests that fashion was one of the primary means by which free people of colour in the antebellum period were able to assert and maintain their social status, particularly in the multi-racial society of Louisiana that reigned in the early decades of the century. She posits, for example, that 'By overlooking or underplaying the importance of French material culture, scholars have necessarily overlooked the place of *gens de couleur libres* in the construction and exhibition of Frenchness [...]. When we take seriously the material culture of New Orleans, *gens de couleur libres* appear at the center of Frenchness, thereby complicating the narrative about how and why cultural retention was so important to antebellum Franco-New Orleanians' Whitney Nell Stewart 'Fashioning Frenchness: *Gens de Couleur Libres* and the Cultural Struggle for Power in Antebellum New Orleans', *Oxford University Press Journal of Social History*, 51.3 (2018), 526-56 (p. 528).

Likewise, Léona Queyrouze, a Creole writer of the 1880s and 1890s, suggests in her unpublished manuscript *Silhouettes créoles* that the early part of the nineteenth century was a period in which modes of dress particular to Louisiana – most famously, the *tignon* headwrap – was in the process of becoming a universal aspect of fashion, not just limited to one racial group:

À l'époque dont nous venons de parler, le *tignon* constituait, pour ainsi dire, la coiffure nationale, car il était non-seulement porté par toutes les femmes de couleur, mais adopté, à l'âge du déclin, par beaucoup de femmes de l'aristocratie qui se coiffaient, avec une savante coquetterie, de superbes madras à nuances éclatantes sous lesquels passaient les bandeaux encore noirs de leurs beaux cheveux. Les madras atteignaient souvent un prix exorbitant, et devenaient une parure d'un luxe aussi coûteux qu'élégant.

[In the era about which we have just been speaking, the *tignon* constituted the national hairstyle, so to speak, because it was worn not only by all women of color but adopted, in older age, by many women of the aristocracy who crowned themselves with a knowledgeable coquetry with superb madras in startling colors, under which were the bands of their still-black hair. Madras often commanded an exorbitant price and became a luxury good that was as costly as it was elegant].

Léona Queyrouze (under the name Constant Beauvais), *Silhouettes créoles*, unpublished manuscript in the Léona Queyrouze Barel Papers collection, MSS. 1204, 1222, 1278, 1314, 1323, 1335 in the Special Collections of Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.

⁵¹ Cable, p. 37.

⁵² Marni Reva Kessler, *Sheer Presence: The Veil in Manet's Paris* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. xix.

⁵³ Cable, p. 101.

⁵⁴ Within the context of more canonical decadent texts, the politics of the veil are played out wittily by Oscar Wilde in his short story 'The Sphinx Without a Secret' (1887). In it, a woman surrounds herself with an air of mystery and is witnessed ducking hurriedly, and veiled, into a building. After her death, it is revealed that her eponymous 'secret' was simply a love of creating an air of mystery. Oscar Wilde, 'The Sphinx Without a Secret', in *The Complete Oscar Wilde* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1996), pp. 209-12.

⁵⁵ Cable, p. 66.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

⁵⁷ Roland Barthes, 'Strip-tease', in *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du seuil, 1957), pp. 165-68 (p. 166).

⁵⁸ Oscar Wilde, *Epigrams: Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young* (Boston and New York: C. T. Brainard, 1909), p. 143.

⁵⁹ Cable, p. 67.

⁶⁰ Sidonie de La Houssaye, *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans, tome I: Octavia la quarteronne, suivi de Violetta la quarteronne* (Shreveport: Tintamarre, 2006), p. 79.

⁶¹ Cable, p. 70.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁶⁴ Bryan, pp. 12-14.

⁶⁵ Guri Ellen Barstad, "'Vivre dans la vérité': la lutte pour la vérité subjective dans deux romans d'Alfred Mercier", *Excavatio*, XXIV (2014), 1-9 (p. 4).

⁶⁶ This idea, not original to Mercier, echoes the analysis of Alexis de Tocqueville in *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835), in which he stands on the banks of the Ohio River and compares the slave society of the South to Northern industrialism. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique, tome II* (Paris: Pagnerre, 1848), pp. 298-99.

⁶⁷ Alfred Mercier, *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars; ou, Maîtres et esclaves en Louisiane: récit social* (Shreveport: Tintamarre, 2022), p. 45.

⁶⁸ Jennifer Gipson makes the comparison between Mercier's *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935), based in part on her fieldwork in Louisiana. Both mark the fact that 'the boundaries between folklore and literature can be porous, so too can the analytical', suggesting that part of the difficulty, or rather, the potential, in analyzing this novel lies in the fact that it does not easily fit into genres or aesthetics schools. (See Jennifer Gipson, 'Fiction as a Forum for Critical Reflections on Folklore: The Case of Alfred Mercier's *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* (1881)', *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany* (2016), 5-20). As Lawrence Rosenwald has suggested: '[W]hat distinguishes it as a novel is chiefly the meticulous, almost sociolinguistic care Mercier takes to have all of his characters, both Black and White, speak the languages they most likely would have spoken in the situations in which he presents them.' (See Lawrence Rosenwald, 'Alfred Mercier's Polyglot Plantation Novel of Louisiana' in *American Babel: Literatures of the United States from Abnaki to Zuni*, ed. by Marc Shell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 219-37 (p. 230)).

⁶⁹ Mercier, p. 92.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 196-97. Mercier's final novel *Johnelle*, of a decade later, would prove even more apocalyptic in tone, as in it he metaphorizes the loss of francophone Creole Louisiana to abortion. See, for example, Ryan Atticus Doherty, 'Johnelle apparut: le fantôme du non-né dans *Johnelle* d'Alfred Mercier', in *Godot(s)*, ed. by Olga Gancevici and Alexandru Diaconescu (Suceava: Editura Universității Ștefan cel Mare Suceava, 2023, forthcoming).

⁸⁰ Mercier, p. 214.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 258-60.

⁸² Ibid., p. 274.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 11. Increasing racial hatred even becomes one of the sources of Pélasge's despair in the novel: 'l'esprit de caste est plus prononcé qu'il ne l'était du temps de l'esclavage' [the sense of caste was more pronounced than it had been in the time of slavery]. Ibid., p. 214.

⁸⁴ Barstad, p. 9.

⁸⁵ See the de Tocqueville quote in note 66 in which he refers to the South by saying, 'la société est endormie'.

⁸⁶ See my forthcoming article on *Johnelle* referenced in note 79.

⁸⁷ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Modern Library, 1936), p. 377.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 378. Punctuation and emphasis as in the original.

Finishing Touches:
Clothing and Accessories as Tokens of Cruelty and Evil in Rachilde and
Barbey d'Aurevilly

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In decadent fiction, evil is manifested through perversion, a taste for torment, and the creation of sexual, gender, and moral transgressions. In Rachilde's and Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly's works, manifestations of evil and demonstrations of femininity are co-constructed. Each short story in Barbey's *Les Diaboliques* (1874) foregrounds a different *femme fatale* whose beauty is perhaps only rivalled by her talent for cruelty. In each story, these women deceive, kill, and seduce with their good looks, or use their sensuality to captivate their male prey. The three stories that I focus on in this article, 'Le Rideau cramoisi' [The Crimson Curtain], 'Le Plus bel amour de Don Juan' [The Most Beautiful Love of Don Juan], and 'Le Bonheur dans le crime' [The happiness in crime], stage a cross-fertilization between appearance and cruelty that is comparable to another major piece of French decadent fiction, Rachilde's well-known novel *La Marquise de Sade* (1887) in which the protagonist, Mary Barbe, is a young and fashionable misanthrope whose distaste for men and mankind is often sartorially determined. Her peculiar beauty and extravagant garments operate as a repository of tools and weapons that she uses to harm, torture, and humiliate the men around her.

Many of the cruelties performed by the fictional women in these works are linked to their clothing and physical presentation. Through these clothes and accessories, I suggest, we can observe a cruelty leading to a fashion-related understanding of evil. In both Rachilde's and Barbey's works, actions and clothes – what is 'done' and what is 'worn' – mirror each other in their capacity to harm and deceive. The *femmes fatales* in the works of Rachilde and Barbey exploit and subvert the association of beauty with goodness via their appearance and clothing. Through fashion imagery, the equation of female beauty with evil is invoked – on the one hand, fashion reveals

contemporary anxieties related to women and morality and, on the other hand, fashion glamorizes evil. Since the nineteenth-century femininity portrayed in French decadence is associated with glamour, style, and elegance, as much as it is with temptation, sin, and vice, it makes sense that the harmful and the seductive are placed side by side. Female characters' clothes and accessories allow for the merging of beauty with vice, making the sartorial realm the perfect location from which to read the decadent woman as an idol of beauty and perversity.

What Evil?: Hidden evil and cruelty in Rachilde and Barbey

Rachilde's heroine, Mary Barbe, Alberte in Barbey's 'Le Rideau cramoisi', the Countess in 'Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan', and Hauteclair de Savigny in 'Le Bonheur dans le crime', are all tall and thin, and this sets the tone for the appearance of the ideal, fashionable female figure. In Rachilde's and Barbey's works, women stand majestically tall, steeling themselves against the fascinated and envious looks of others. Mary's blossoming into adulthood is a growth process that resembles that of a plant rather than of a person, as we see her waist sprout out of her hips like a stem from its soil: 'sa taille sortait un peu des hanches, [...] les jambes imitait les nattes, elles s'allongeaient, élégantes' [her waist sprouted slightly from the hips, [...] the legs, mimicking the braids, extended out, elegantly] (p. 102).¹ Her long limbs shape her body yet also seem to spring from it, marking her femininity as a set of innate and cultivated lean lines. Similarly, in *Les Diaboliques*, beauty is equated with tall stature: the young girl in 'Le Rideau cramoisi' is described as a 'grande personne' [tall person] and a 'grande fille' [tall girl], for example.² While, in 'Le Plus bel amour de Don Juan', the countess's statuesque and distinguished beauty rivals only that of Hauteclair who possesses a physical advantage that reads as social superiority. She is as tall as her husband and 'royale d'attitude' [royal in attitude] (p. 143). Physical height serves to equate proportion with femininity and beauty – parallels that these characters' apparel and fashion accessories are designed to bolster. In the very first scene of 'Le Bonheur dans le crime', we see the erratic Hauteclair gloved from the tip of her fingers to the bottom of her elbow; a detail that serves to reinforce the idea that flesh

is enhanced by fabric and fashion, an idea that scholars like Justine de Young, Aileen Ribeiro, and Valerie Steele have tied to representations of the feminine in fin-de-siècle art and literature.³ The agility and flexibility of Hauteclairé's athletic body shines through her silhouette-hugging clothes: 'lacée dans ce gilet d'armes de peau de chamois qui lui faisait comme une cuirasse, et les jambes moulées par ces chausses de soie qui en prenaient si juste le contour musclé' [laced in this chamois officer vest that hugged her like a breastplate, and her legs shaped by silk tights that so perfectly adopted their curvature] (p. 173). The straightness of her arms springing out in forward motions during physical activity creates a linear movement, further enhanced by the blade of the sword itself, which produces a seamless connection between the object and the body that wields it. Hauteclairé is an uninterrupted line of physical perfection, where clothing and persona are in complete alignment.

At the end of the nineteenth century, slenderness was a synonym for fashionableness since long, svelte lines hinted at overall equilibrium, balance, and proportion, aspects perceived as alluring in fin-de-siècle fashion. The long and lean feminine silhouette sent both socio-economic and moral messages. The ideal woman, who critic and writer Eugène Chapus described in his *Manuel de l'homme et la femme comme il faut* [Manual for the Correct Man and Woman] (1862), had 'le cou long, les épaules fines, les mains petites, blanches, effilées' [a long neck, thin shoulders, and small, pale, slim hands]. Supposedly, such a woman did not have to work and her spine had not been arched by the hardship of manual labour or the struggles of day-to-day life: 'ce sont là des caractères auxquels s'associent des idées de noblesse d'origine, d'inoccupation, de grandeur et de fortune' [these are characteristics with which are associated ideas of nobility, idleness, grandeur and fortune].⁴ Thinness, as George Vigarello has posited, was to remain physically ideal throughout the second half of the century.⁵ Where it had previously hinted at the physical idleness symptomatic of social privilege, in the last few decades of the nineteenth century slenderness became evocative of youth and athleticism. As Eugen Weber notes,

it also reflected the growing interest in hygiene; the reaction against overeating (now denounced as gastrolatry) and toward greater sobriety in diet; and with this a changing ideal of femininity, from the opulence and pallor of the midcentury to a slimmer, healthier type of beauty, less plump, more sportive.⁶

If thinness was the hallmark of a select few of a certain kind of social standing and financial situation, it was also an embodied quality achieved through self-regulation, not purchased at a store.

Framed by the long vertical shapes of their bodies and tight-fitting clothes, these majestic women of decadent fiction not only tower above their male counterparts, but they glow and shine too. In 'Le Rideau cramoisi', the young woman's cuirasse [breastplate] is 'luisante' [shining] (p. 78). In *La Marquise de Sade*, Mary's celestial corset shines just as bright, 'constellé d'un paillon mordoré à multiples reflets' [studded with a golden motif of multiple reflections] (pp. 212-13), and the countess in 'Le Plus bel amour de Don Juan' is compared to a fairy, clad in a dress with 'un reflet d'argent' [a silver reflection] (p. 120). Several of these women appear to represent notions of celestial majesty and moral purity. The female protagonist's name in 'Le Bonheur dans le crime', for instance, is a combination of the French adjectives 'haute' [high] and 'claire' [light]. The first dress Rachilde's heroine wears is a little Sunday dress whose symbolic whiteness echoes the purity of her namesake, the Virgin Mary, and prefigures her gentle handling of the Christ-like lambs she nurtures with care at a garden party in her childhood years.

The portrayal of women as luminous, pure, and angelic takes on new meaning against the backdrop of the technological advances in the fin de siècle. In his fashion atelier, the celebrity designer Charles Frederick Worth (regarded as the father of haute-couture) conceptualized a showroom called the 'Salon de lumière': the gas lamps he later upgraded to electric ones allowed women to see his garments in an environment that simulated those in which they would be worn if purchased.⁷ While this novelty stemmed from practical concerns it allowed for the symbolism of women as angelic and ethereal beings to remain undimmed: we are to imagine the well-dressed

woman entering a *soirée* like an angel out of a cloud, draped in coloured garments that shimmered in the light.

In the work of Rachilde and Barbey their protagonists are not clearly gendered. In *La Marquise de Sade*, the combination of Mary's first and last name (Barbe, the French word for beard) is an amalgamation of virginity and virility that merges feminine and masculine attributes. This also comes to mind when we think of the 'cuirasse' worn over Mary's dress at the beginning of Chapter Eight and the 'gilet d'armes de peau de chamois' worn by Hauteclair in 'Le Bonheur dans le crime'. Hauteclair also continues to manage the family business after the passing of her father by keeping his fencing school running and teaching the lessons he once gave. Despite entertaining an all-male audience and teaching an almost exclusively male-dominated sport, Hauteclair stands out as the most skilled and talented fencer of them all. Similarly, Mary's interest in anatomy and biology is initially mocked by the men around her but their initial contempt quickly fades when they come to realize her obvious scientific knowledge. In both cases, it is their clothing that both invites and undoes male disdain.

In Barbey's and Rachilde's works appearance is a façade; a front that prevents us from seeing that both authors have already begun preparing for the arrival of evil. If the moral value of righteousness is symbolically couched in physical slenderness and sartorial luxuriance, then their characters appear to be angelic beings. The value given to bodies and clothing reinforces this parallel, so that the lines of the silhouette, as well as the shape, colour, and lustre of the garments, appear to provide a complete picture of the character's personality, interiority, and social status. The reader soon realizes, however, that they have been fooled by such positive connections and harmonious echoes.

Dressed to Kill

From the beginning of the novel, Rachilde foregrounds the cruelty of men. Mary is consistently ignored and denigrated as a child, including by her abusive military father, but it is the slaughtering

of an ox in the opening chapter of the novel that leaves a profoundly traumatic mark on her. Mary realizes from that point onwards that there are two categories of being in the world: those who kill and those who are killed. This binarism, opposing hunter and prey, allows her to create a system of classification that places weak individuals at one end of the spectrum and their strong and cruel counterparts at the other. When she comes to the realization that women are not often in command, she vows to reverse the traditional power dynamic by turning her clothing and accessories into weapons. Garments, then, become what Emily Apter has described as ‘arsenal of beauty secrets’ – a repository of sartorial arms she uses tactically to attack men and their power.⁸ At the beginning of Chapter Eight, Mary asks her seamstress to design her a green dress for a party thrown by her uncle, a literary avatar of the notorious Jean-Martin Charcot.⁹ Her specific indications are not that the dress be ‘de couleur verte’ [green in colour] but rather the ‘couleur de souffrance’ [colour of suffering] (p. 212). While it is not uncommon for an object to lend its name to a colour, both terms are often paired to make the comparison more explicit: ‘bleu ciel’ [sky blue], ‘rouge sang’ [blood red], ‘noir corbeau’ [raven black], and so forth. Here, ‘souffrance’ is employed as a proper chromatic denomination, requiring no further explanation. As an emotion and not a tangible object, suffering is felt rather than seen – suffering has no colour in the material sense, and yet, somehow, we can understand what such a colour would be. This implies that colour-emotion associations may be as much about sensation as they are about sight.

In his chapter on colour and emotions in *New Directions in Color Studies*, David R. Simmons suggests that a strong luminous flux has the potential to evoke a response that may be more than strictly visual – a colour may invoke an associated memory or thought, giving rise to feelings or emotions and, in turn, bodily responses.¹⁰ The visual stimulus represented by Mary’s suffering-coloured gown does indeed provoke reactions and bodily responses, but it is the men who suffer, not her. What is seen – the woman’s green dress – is associated with what the men feel – frustration and suffering. The sensual torment that Mary inflicts on the men with her unapproachable looks and green gown makes the male guests increasingly aware of their own physical frustrations. The

only time the enamoured attendee Paul Richard comes into contact with Mary is through an embarrassing encounter with her dress: ‘en traversant le salon, Paul Richard mit le pied sur la traîne de la robe de soie verte’ [while walking across the living room, Paul Richard stepped on the train of her green silk dress]. Mortified by his blunder, Paul states he would rather ‘recevoir une gifle que d’être présenté à cette femme dont la robe lui faisait peur’ [be slapped across the face than to be introduced to this woman whose dress frightened him] (p. 222). Paul steps on the dress and his fear is due to the perception of the blunder he has made. This emasculates him, and he would rather be slapped than forced to continue witnessing this arresting spectacle of green.

The bottom edge of Mary’s dress is adorned with ‘des feuillages de rosier sans fleurs, criblées de leurs épines’ [flowerless roses, riddled with thorns] that ‘cour[ent]’ [run] along the folds of the skirt (p. 212). Mary comes bearing roses without petals, stripped of all softness and reduced to nothing but green leaves and thorns. Rachilde’s use of the words ‘courir’ [run] and ‘criblées’ [riddled], both belonging to a vocabulary of war, is not incidental here. The dress becomes a metaphorical battleground and Mary’s body, something of a war zone.¹¹ While a battlefield is usually more grey, black, brown, or red than it is green, it is a place where fear and anger often converge, where one is often, as the French saying goes, “vert de rage” [green with rage] or “vert de peur” [green with fear]. Twenty-five years prior to the publication of *La Marquise de Sade*, the British magazine *Punch* published an amusing but intriguing article stating that if ladies continued to wear green dresses at balls, these gatherings would soon become ‘as deadly and destructive as cannonballs’.¹² The journalist’s remark is a reference to the fashionable green dresses of the time, made with a pigment that soon became known as ‘Paris Green’ due to its popularity in the French capital.¹³ Although it produced a fabulously vibrant green, the copper acetate and arsenic trioxide compound was considered a relatively dangerous and toxic pigment, harmful to both the wearer and those who came into contact with them. As Rachilde had worked as a fashion columnist before turning to fiction, writing for provincial journals such as *L’Opinion*, *Le Henri IV*, and *L’Écho de la Dordogne*, there is evidence to suggest that she was aware of the various trends that permeated the

world of fashion. It should come as no surprise, then, that she would dress her dangerous and seductive heroine in a green ensemble to reactivate the familiar cliché of the *femme fatale*, dressed to kill in one of the century's deadliest colours and who is not a fashion victim, but an attractive aggressor, a beautiful bully.

Beauty and the Beast

Like *La Marquise de Sade*, Barbey's 'Le Bonheur dans le crime' begins with a confrontation between humanity and nature. Hauteclair, standing in front of a panther's cage in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, decides to tease the beast whose beauty is said to rival her own. She takes off her glove, slides it through the bars of the cage, and gratuitously 'fouette' [slaps] (p. 143) the muzzle of the animal. This action foreshadows the audacity and nerve with which she teases and eventually vanquishes her husband's ex-wife by disguising herself as a maid, entering her service and fatally poisoning her. Hauteclair slips her glove through the cage and challenges the animal much like she will slip through the cracks to kill her enemy.¹⁴ If the slapping glove makes the sound of a cracking whip, echoing that of the torturer, it is also reminiscent of the one used by wild animal trainers who often wore gloves themselves and cracked a whip to tame and intimidate. The glove, whose particularity is that it leaves no fingerprint, strikes a blow and leaves a mark on all who witness this confrontation. Worn for both practical and aesthetic reasons her glove conceals and reveals the shape of her arm, both covering and exhibiting it. The glove helps to shape our initial perception of her as a beautiful and elegantly dressed woman, but also acts as the principal symbol and accessory of her lack of morals and her cruelty – her glove is both a whip and a sword.¹⁵

As Peter Corrigan has more broadly suggested of clothing, the accessory 'is an object to which things happen but that also provokes things to happen'.¹⁶ In this scene, fabric functions in a similar way, as the rivalry between the 'she-panther' and the real panther is in the texture itself. After jokingly calling the interaction a fight of panther versus panther, which might suggest an equalization of woman and beast, the narrator nonetheless turns to textiles to contrast and oppose

the two: ‘panthère contre panthère! [...] mais le satin est plus fort que le velours’ [panther versus panther! [...] but satin is stronger than velvet] (p. 143). At the time, notes Valerie Steele,

there was [...] a mania for using zoological terms. A dandy (*le lion*) would call his mistress *ma tigresse*, if she were a well-born woman, and *mon rat*, if she was a dancer. His groom was *mon tigre*. One of the novels of the July Monarchy opened with the words: ‘Le lion avait envoyé son tigre chez son rat’.¹⁷

The quip ‘panther versus panther’ could very well be a playful reference to this linguistic trend, especially as it applied to the fashionable circles that Barbey had come into contact with.¹⁸ The most interesting aspect of this scene, however, is that the textiles, traditionally associated with softness, become totemic symbols of a power struggle that disrupts the order and hierarchy of the species. The textile is the catalyst for putting the animal on a par with the human, and it gives Hauteclaira an animal-like status (putting the woman on a par with a beast): ‘la femme, qui avait une robe de cette étoffe miroitante – une robe à longue traîne [...] noire, souple, d’articulation aussi puissante, [...] était comme une panthère humaine, dressée devant la panthère animale qu’elle éclipsait’ [the woman, who sported the dress of such shimmering fabric – a dress with a long train [...] black, supple, with an articulation so powerful, [...] was like a human panther, rising before the animal panther she outshined] (p. 143). The panther is no longer a panther but a piece of velvet, a transformation foreshadowed by the description of the animal as like a piece of fabric:

la panthère est un magnifique échantillon des redoutables productions de son pays. Nulle tache fauve n’étoilait sa fourrure de velours noir, d’un noir si profond et si mat que la lumière, en y glissant, ne la lustrait même pas, mais s’y absorbait, comme l’eau s’absorbe dans l’éponge qui la boit’

[the panther is a magnificent sample of the fearsome products of its country. No tawny stain spangled its black velvet fur, a black so deep and matte that the light, gliding over it, could not make it shine, but rather absorbed it, like water is absorbed in the sponge that soaks it up] (p. 141).

While the panther does not manage to sink its claws into Hauteclaira, Mary Barbe does everything in her power to ‘griffer l’homme’ [scratch mankind]. Her identification with cats begins early, as we see her alternately loved and harmed by her cat, Minoute, her only childhood friend. The terms used by Rachilde to qualify the little girl and her pet are often used interchangeably,

revealing that, much like the scene in 'Le Bonheur dans le crime', there is both a power struggle between species and a 'concomitant hierarchy yielding to a sameness' between female and feline.¹⁹ Mary plays dress-up with Minoute, forcing the animal into human clothes and adorning her with accessories: 'elle finissait par lui mettre un bonnet à elle, garni de broderies, un corsage de sa poupée' [she would end up by putting a bonnet on her, trimmed with embroidery, or one of her doll's bodices] (p. 41). She also tells herself that Minoute will be her constant companion, accompanying her through the reality of an existence where women have tails and cats wear lace: 'Oui, Minoute, nous irons sur la grande montagne, nous aussi, tu auras un bonnet de dentelles et moi j'aurai ta queue de soie jaune!' [Yes, Minoute, we too will climb up the big mountain, you will have a lace bonnet and I will have your yellow silk tail!] (p. 44). Mary's garments and accessories are not part of an attempt to dominate nature, as in the case of Hauteclaire, but are worn in such a way as to apply the dynamics of the animal world to society. Because Mary believes that the men of her time are the weak, living proof of what happens to society when the strongest fail, she uses her clothing and accessories to maintain a traditionally appealing feminine exterior while asserting a predatory superiority aimed at punishing the emasculated men around her.

The Devil in the Detail

Barbey uses the adjective 'cramoisi' [crimson] to describe the colour of a curtain the narrator sees hanging from the window of a house while he is on a trip. He catches a glimpse of the curtain from the inside of his car and begins to reminisce about his first sexual experience with a young girl named Alberte, an event that happened in the very same house, many years ago. 'Cramoisi' refers to the deep red shade of coagulated blood and shares a phonetic closeness with the French word 'moisi', meaning mouldy or decomposing. The narrator recalls that during a passionate night of love-making with Alberte, she had fallen dead in his arms. Terrified by this sudden reaction and scared that the girl's clueless parents sleeping in the other room might come to find out, he cuts her open with his blade, draining her blood in the desperate hope of bringing her back to life.²⁰ As

he remembers his past, the silhouette of a woman, that we can only assume to be that of his former lover's ghost, appears behind the curtain. In the same way that the crimson colour encompasses all of the story's symbols (love, passion, blood), the recounting of the story is prompted by the coloured fabric and by the outline of the female silhouette appearing against it. She looks as if she is part of the fabric and the coloured fabric *is* the story. In fact, that the mysterious, inexplicable nature of the events are staged on both sides of the crimson curtain, much like a play would be, reveals that the audience (us mortals, sitting in the car with the narrator) and the performer (the she-devil, a living-dead person inside the house) belong to fundamentally different spheres that will forever remain estranged and separated. Although this may not strike us as evil initially, several historical texts on evil, witchcraft, and demonology attest to this separation of realms as being the very prerogative of the devil. In Stuart Clark's *Thinking with Demons*, he writes that 'the devil was enormously skilled as a deceiver, [...] persuading his victims to hear, sense, see, and touch things that, in truth, were only appearances presented to their deluded senses'. Because the devil creates a realm within a realm, where he can 'make men and women believe that which is not, and imagine that which is to be something else', the coloured fabric, which creates a similar confusion in 'Le Rideau cramoisi', becomes a prominent symbol of the manifestation and presence of evil in the story.²¹

Interestingly, the notions of deception and trickery that are manifest in evil find a correlation in late nineteenth-century art critics' discussions about the instability of colour. As Bettina Bock von Wülffingen has remarked of Lichtenstein's investigations on the matter, 'colour [...] was qualified as a secondary, physical and ornamental phenomenon of lesser value' in art, its sensitivity to light and tendency to darken or fade contributing to its characterization as an overall deceitful and inferior component to art.²² Charles Blanc's infamous suggestion that 'le dessin est le sexe masculin de l'art; la couleur en est le sexe féminin' [drawing is the masculine in art; colour is the feminine] comes to mind here.²³ That which could be both real and a diabolical illusion (the silhouette of young Alberte) appears through the medium of both textiles (the curtain) and colour

(red), ensuring that femininity, colour, and fabric create a triad of deceit. In fact, this triad brings us back to fabric and clothing, for just as certain artists were concerned with the ‘serious work’ of line and drawing rather than colour, so too, says Richard Thompson Ford, were ‘tailors of the time concerned with “serious work” of fit and construction rather than fashionable decoration’. Men, he continues, were ‘not “fashion conscious” but “well dressed” – a description that suggested not vanity but civility’.²⁴

There is a striking difference between the clothes of Alberte’s father and her own structured, elongated attire as additional signifiers of evil in the text. The evidence of the father’s bad taste in clothes (he wears a green frock coat under a white waistcoat) perplexes the narrator, who wonders how such an ugly man could be related to the beautiful creature that is Alberte. Although the man telling the story, the Vicomte de Brassard, is now old, his vitality and elegance have remained relatively unfaded since his years as a captain under the Restoration – a role he is said to have taken up a few years after meeting Alberte and her father. One might suppose, then, that the young Brassard’s encounter took place at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the frock coat was still very much in vogue. The coat worn by Alberte’s father is therefore not so much a sign that the man is out of style as it is a plausible indicator that he simply fails to be stylish, preferring instead one of the most basic pieces of bourgeois clothing of the time. The father’s unattractive, unsophisticated, and practical attire accurately mirrors his boring, unimpressive, yet harmless and virtuous, nature.

Alberte’s dress on the other hand is an exquisitely tailored Spencer ‘de soie verte à franges’ [of green fringed silk] (p. 78) and a flattering white skirt. It makes her stand out. Although they look entirely different, father and daughter are actually wearing the same colours. Where the kind, helpful, and affectionately dull father wears white on his chest, as a testament to his immediately recognizable virtuousness, innocence, and purity, the young woman’s white garment runs the risk of being trampled or stepped on as it covers the bottom of her silhouette. Alberte’s colour scheme, in a sense, turns her into her father’s mirror image, casting back an upside-down reflection in the

spirit of what Barbey said of the fictional women of his book: ‘Comme le Diable, qui était un ange aussi, mais qui a culbuté, – si elles sont des anges, c’est comme lui, – la tête en bas, le reste en haut!’ [Like the Devil, who too was an angel but has tumbled, – if they are angels, they are like him, – head upside down, the rest facing upward!] (p. 51).

The ambiguity of the colour green, worn by father and daughter alike, is a notable detail. It has been best examined by the art historian Michel Pastoureau whose book, *Vert, Histoire d’une couleur* [Green, History of a colour], analyses the mutually incompatible tropes and conflicting symbolical elements associated with green through the ages. He states that: ‘symbole de vie, de chance et d’espérance d’un côté, attribut du désordre, du poison, du diable et de toutes ses créatures de l’autre’ [on the one hand it is a symbol of life, luck and hope, and on the other an attribute of disorder, poison, the devil and all his creatures].²⁵ For a long time, green was made by mixing blue and yellow dyes and, because yellow dyes were neither lightfast nor durable, they were particularly prone to discolouration. This made green a chemically unstable colour. Superstition still has it that it is bad luck for performers to wear or be gifted green-coloured items of clothing.²⁶ As a volatile colour, green came to be associated with the unsteady and the frivolous, with what could dissipate and change without warning: youth, luck, hope, fortune, and even love.²⁷ Due to its chemical properties and accumulated symbolic associations (not to mention the contemporary stigmas surrounding absinthe consumption), green became tinged with danger, anxiety, and even suspicion.²⁸

Skin Deep

The symbolic relevance of colour is also a key element in understanding the manifestations of evil in Barbey’s ‘Le Plus bel amour de Don Juan’. In contrast to the vibrant descriptions of the Countess’s brightly-coloured wardrobe, her daughter’s skin tone catches our attention. The little girl is the colour of burnt topaz, her ‘bistré’ (p. 129) skin suggesting the yellowish-brown shade of a flesh marked perhaps by a type of sickness.²⁹ The narrator, an archetype of Don Juan, is disliked

by the little girl, and her reluctance to engage with him is to be understood by the reader as a form of jealousy: the man, as an undesired father figure, might steal her mother away from her. The little girl, we are told, is devoutly committed, almost to an extreme. Under her clothes, she wears scapulars – small rectangles of cloth connected by cords – that have the purpose of protecting her from sin: ‘Elle tordait autour de son maigre corps toutes sortes de scapulaires et se plaquait sur la poitrine, [...] autour de son cou bistré, des tas de croix, de bonnes vierges et de Saints-Esprits’ [She twisted all sorts of scapulars around her skinny body and placed piled of crosses, good virgins and Holy Spirits [...] around her yellowish neck] (p. 129). Though soft and made of fabric, her scapulars are arranged in a peculiar way, wrapped and twisted around her body like self-administered lashes of purifying mortification. Like Christ on the cross, the little girl is restrained and immobilised, her inner thoughts and spiritual devotion seemingly trapped onto her flesh. That the narrator uses ‘tordre’ [twist] to describe not the body of the little girl but the religious objects meant to ward off evil suggests that their purpose might have in fact already failed. The protective armour of religious objects seems faulty because it has already been contorted, deformed and bent out of shape by the forces of evil: worn so tightly against the flesh in hopes of keeping evil at bay, these accessories bear the symbolic shape of the devil himself, in whom everything (body, tail, actions, words) is also twisted. The sartorial markers of her pious devotion are thus not so much preventive as they are curative. And even so, they might already come a little too late.

While we expect Don Juan’s ‘plus bel amour’ to be the Countess, we learn that it is, in fact, this religious little girl. The story reaches a disturbing climax when she confesses to her priest that, despite her immense reticence and hatred of Don Juan, he has impregnated her. The horror is threefold. Carrying the baby of an older man is a harrowing experience for the young girl, but the self-loathing that comes from feeling responsible is even worse. The most troubling aspect of all, however, is the possibility that this pregnancy is a self-fulfilling prophecy, the result of her forbidden desire for this man. Other than pressing his hand lightly on the child’s forehead, as a father would, Don Juan never seems to touch the little girl. And yet, if we turn our attention back

to the scapulars for a moment, we might be led to believe otherwise. If Don Juan is indeed innocent, how could he know about the little girl's jewellery and point it out in such specific terms? Even if he was aware of the way scapulars are worn in the Christian tradition (which does not correspond to the way the little girl styles them anyway), his acknowledgement of their specific placement on the child's prepubescent body suggests he probably saw her unclothed. Our attention is drawn to the surface in order to invite us to uncover what lies beneath: evil lives in the religious regalia, pointing to the impossibility of goodness even having its own symbol, since evil is already there.

The jewellery worn by the little girl is meant to protect her from evil, even though she is described by her priest and her mother as a model of incorruptibility, and so the protective jewellery is necessary so that she retains this innocence. As Barbey notes in his 'Préface', 'Le Diable est comme Dieu. [...] Malebranche disait que Dieu se reconnaissait à l'emploi des moyens les plus simples. Le Diable aussi' [The Devil is like God. [...] Malebranche said that God was recognizable through the use of the simplest of means. So too is the Devil] (p. 50). In 'Le Plus bel amour de Don Juan', the presence of evil is indicated through the child's necessity to repent for 'something'. This operates as a secret confession of sin which is, in turn, materializes in sartorial objects of devotion. Although they do not initially appear to be so, the scapulars could be read as a kind of disguise – a superficial layer of protection hinting at a darkness growing from within, evoking the familiar misogynistic analogy between garb as trickery and women as the treacherous daughters of Eve.³⁰ In this story, Eve could well be the little girl's mother; her clothes and accessories, though beautiful and luminous, are potential evidence of the wearer's own diabolical potential. Other than the train of her dress that 'figurait assez bien la queue de serpent' [resembled a snake's tail quite well] (p. 120), the large ruby hanging from a chain across her forehead in a *ferronnière* style is compared to her 'yeux incendiaires dont la flamme empêchait de voir la couleur' [fiery eyes whose flame prevented the colour from being seen] (p. 125). The two fiery eyes connected to the red ruby on her forehead by way of the head-piece evokes, if not a cabalistic third eye, at least a potentially

derisive inversion of the Holy Trinity.³¹ In the same way that prevention, penance, and punishment are confusingly intermingled on the body of the little girl, the mother's sartorial choices create the illusion of her body as a place where goodness as sartorial value and evil as adornment coexist. Evil appears to run in the family – a hereditary trait passed down from the mother to offspring.

Conclusion

My study of Rachilde and Barbey has aimed to reveal two things: first, that the authors' crafting of evil involves an intentional focus on topics associated with fashion and clothing (the symbolism of thin and lofty feminine silhouettes, the allegorical charge contained in the shapes and cuts of garments, and the symbolic relevance of colour); and second, that selected sartorial elements in the stories discussed emerge as instruments of evil (the glove as sword and weapon, the green gown as a weapon of mass [masculine] destruction, and the scapular as the locus of goodness contaminated by evil). Overall, my analysis of *La Marquise de Sade* and *Les Diaboliques* has argued for the inseparability of the sartorial and the cruel in both texts, shedding additional light on the inherent symbolic duality at work in decadent fiction that other scholars have explored against the backdrop of gender (Jean de Palacio in *Figures et formes de la décadence*), semiology (Naomi Schor in *Reading in Detail*), politics (Vladimir Jankélévitch in 'La Décadence'), or aesthetics (Bram Dijkstra in *Idols of Perversity*). As I hope to have shown, the cruel deeds and desire of the characters to inflict harm on others are symbolised through clothing and accessories. In Barbey's stories, there are as many types of she-devils as there are manifestations of evil and, as a result, the reader is presented with a range of methods, strategies, and schemes of cruelty that can be understood through sartorial parallels. Deceit and revenge are manifested through sartorial disguise, through Hauteclair's satin gloves and the poisonous allure of Mary's green dress. Alberte, a likely reincarnation of the devil on earth, is revealed by the suggestive power of the red curtains and the inverted colour schemes of the dress of Alberte and her father. In 'Le Plus bel amour de Don Juan', the cloth scapulars, wrapped tightly around the little girl's flesh become part of her skin,

tying her righteous intention for piety to the shapes that striate her body. The fabric accessory designed to ward off evil becomes a paradoxical sign of its irrefutable presence, and the innocent flesh of the pious child becomes a surface to which evil has attached itself. As this article has aimed to illustrate, the presence of cruelty and the intention of evil in relation to women, and to the femme fatale in particular, are manifested in a number of subtle ways in decadent texts; they are symbolised through women's fashion and accessories not only through the clothes they wear but through their colour, texture, and shape.

¹ Rachilde, *La Marquise de Sade* (1887; Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 102. All translations are mine. Subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the body text.

² Jules Barbey D'Aureville, *Les Diaboliques* (1874; Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1999), pp. 78-80. All translations are mine. Subsequent page references are given parenthetically in the text.

³ See Justine de Young's *Fashion in European Art: Dress and Identity, Politics and the Body, 1775-1925* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) and her contribution on fashion and nineteenth-century portraiture to *Impressionism, Fashion & Modernity*, ed. by Gloria Groom (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); Aileen Ribeiro's *Dress and Morality* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1986) and *Clothing Art: the Visual Culture of Fashion, 1600-1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); and Valerie Steele's *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Berg, 1998).

⁴ Eugène Chapus, *Manuel de l'homme et de la femme comme il faut* (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1862), p. 65.

⁵ See Georges Vigarello, *Les métamorphoses du gras* (Paris: Seuil, 2010).

⁶ Eugen Weber, *France, Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 99.

⁷ For more on Charles Frederick Worth, see Valerie Steele's 'Édouard Manet – Nana', in *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity*, ed. by Gloria Groom (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

⁸ Emily Apter, 'Weaponizing the "Femme Fatale": Rachilde's Lethal Amazon *La Marquise De Sade*', *Fashion Theory*, 8.3 (2004), 251-65 (p. 255).

⁹ Otherwise known as the 'Napoleon of Neuroses' by his peers, Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893) is remembered today as the most prominent figure in nineteenth-century neurology. Charcot's research was predominantly conducted on the topic of hysteria, treating and working with patients at the Hôpital de la Pitié-Salpêtrière in Paris. Charcot conducted weekly 'Leçons du mardi', in which a large group of male attendees would discuss hysterical female behaviour or conduct practical research on female patients. Rachilde's staging of a single woman amidst a male group of scientists is not incidental and recalls Pierre Aristide André Brouillet's painting *Une leçon clinique à la Salpêtrière*, dating from the same year of *La Marquise de Sade*'s publication. For more on Charcot, hysteria, and women, see Janet Beizer. *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994); Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie. Charcot et l'Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (Paris: Macula, 2003); Martha N. Evans, *Fits and Starts: A Genealogy of Hysteria in Modern France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999); and Asti Hustvedt. *Medical Muses: Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

¹⁰ David R. Simmons, 'Color and Emotion', in *New Directions in Color Studies*, ed. by Carole P. Biggam, et al., (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2011).

¹¹ Previously in the novel, a mock tournament designed to rally patriotic sentiment and celebrate the French military is organized in Mary's town. She wears a purple dress for the occasion and, as Apter notes, 'preside[s] over the entertainment [...], cast as the "spirit of war" in a costume ordered from a Paris couturier' (p. 251).

¹² *Punch*, 8 November 1862, quoted in Alison Matthews David, *Fashion Victims: The Dangers of Dress Past and Present* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) – 'Now if [these ladies] persist in wearing arsenic dresses, a ball will be as deadly and destructive as a cannonball, and nearly everyone who dances will be food for [arsenic] powder' (p. 91).

¹³ For more on arsenic green and its popularity in nineteenth-century Paris, see David's *Fashion Victims*, John Emsley's *Elements of Murder: A History of Poison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), and Alison Matthews David's 'Tainted Love: Oscar Wilde's Toxic Green Carnation, Queerness, and Chromophobia', in *Colors in Fashion*, ed. by Jonathan Faiers and Mary Westerman Bulgarella (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 127-42.

¹⁴ To get into her role as chambermaid, she wears the ‘costume des grisettes de la ville de V’ [costume of the grisettes of the city of V] and styles her hair with the ‘long tire-bouchons de cheveux tombant le long des joues [...] que les prédicateurs appelaient, dans ces temps-là, des serpents’ [long corkscrew-shaped locks of hair falling alongside the cheeks [...] that the preachers, back in those days, used to call snakes] (p. 161). Because the image of the Luciferian snake converges with that of the Medusa, Barbey seems to suggest that through her disguise, the woman does not simply conform to one representation of feminine evil but rather combines an entire set of them, much like a panoply of costume accessories and trinkets.

¹⁵ Even a small detail – the twelve buttons adorning her glove – reads as a mocking recuperation of the number of Christ’s apostles; ‘hidden’ in Hauteclair’s clothes, the buttons come to symbolize a sacrilegious counterfeit of divine work, especially as it manifests itself slyly, almost invisibly on the fabric. There is wealth of literature on the glove – as weapon, as love object, as metonym for the female body, particularly the kid glove in Renaissance visual and material culture. For this article, however, it is important to note the use of gloves and glovedness in Gabriele D’Annunzio’s *Il piacere* [*Pleasure*] (1889). See, for example, Lidia Hwa Soon Anchisi, ‘Bodies in Bits and Pieces: Towards a Feminist Re-Reading of Gabriele D’Annunzio’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, New York University, 2001).

¹⁶ Peter Corrigan, ‘Interpreted, Circulating, Interpreting: The Three Dimensions of the Clothing Object’, in *The Socialness of Things: Essays on the Socio-Semiotics of Objects*, ed. by Stephen Harold Riggins (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1994), pp. 435-50 (p. 435).

¹⁷ Steele, p. 65.

¹⁸ Barbey is most commonly known for his views on masculine style which he discusses in his 1843 essay ‘Du Dandysme et de George Brummell’, but he also wrote for *Le Moniteur de la mode*, a relatively popular ladies’ magazine.

¹⁹ I borrow this expression from Robert Ziegler’s *Asymptote – An Approach to Decadent Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p. 148.

²⁰ Passion-red meets blood-red throughout the story and it is a detail that presents itself as significant from the very beginning for it is after he sees the colour of the crimson curtain that the narrator begins to recount the past.

²¹ Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), p. 166.

²² Bettina Bock von Wülffingen, *Science in Color: Visualizing Achromatic Knowledge* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), p. 36.

²³ Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des Arts du Dessin. Architecture, Sculpture, Peinture* (Paris: Renouard, 1867), p. 23.

²⁴ Richard Thompson Ford, *Dress Codes: How the Laws of Fashion Made History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2021) p. 118.

²⁵ Michel Pastoureau, *Vert, Histoire d’une couleur* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2013), p. 9.

²⁶ In nineteenth-century French theatre culture, it is said that Molière was wearing green when he died. As John Hutchings notes, it was also commonly believed that ‘during the era of green-tinged limelight, invented in 1826 and used until the beginning of the twentieth century, an actor wearing green would not stand out well’ from his peers. ‘Folklore and Symbolism of Green’, *Folklore*, 108 (1997), 55-63 (p. 60).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Due to the widespread consumption of absinthe – the green, anise-flavoured aperitif – happy hour came to be known in Paris as ‘l’heure verte’ [the green hour] and entire districts of the city were said to smell of the drink. For more on absinthe, see Marie-Claude Delahaye, *L’Absinthe: vert et histoire* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1983); Pierre Kolaire, *Absinthe. Précis de la troublante* (Paris: L’Ampoule, 2004); and Jad Adams, *Hideous Absinthe: A History of the Devil in a Bottle* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004).

²⁹ The French word “bistre” refers to the yellowy-brown skin, like the circles beneath tired, worn, ill eyes. See ‘Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan’, pp. 127-29.

³⁰ Bram Dijkstra has best explored the manifestations of this relationship in the context of nineteenth-century visual culture and literature in *Idols of Perversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). For more, see also Patrick Bade’s *Femme fatale: Images of Evil and Fascinating Women* (New York: Mayflower Books, 1979) and Jean de Palacio’s *Figures et formes de la décadence* (Paris: Éditions Séguiet, 1994).

³¹ When we initially see her, she is sitting at a table, ‘comme un juste à la droite de Dieu, à la droite du comte de Ravila, le dieu de cette fête’ [as a righteous man at the right hand of God, at the right hand of the Count of Ravila, the god of this festival] (p. 120). This supper, counting twelve female guests, becomes what Pierre Glaudes has described as ‘un détournement parodique de la Cène’ [a parodic twist on the Last Supper]. See *Esthétique de Barbey d’Aurevilly* (Paris: Éditions Classiques Garnier, 2009).

(Un)Dressing Decadence: Masquerade and Murder in *Mascara*¹

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Mirrors: no man has ever described
What you hide in your deepest heart.
Gaping like holes in a sieve,
You fill in the blank voids of time.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*²

It opens on a blue vista of sea. A white villa looks out over the waves and glows in the evening light. A woman comes out, encased in a tight-fitting white trouser suit. She climbs into a car and drives off. The sea remains, its waves stretching out to the horizon as in a painting by René Magritte. Night falls. We see the woman driving in close-up, her face lit pale yellow by passing cars. We may recognize her as Charlotte Rampling, the cinema's perverse glamour icon *par excellence*. Yet her image here is altered, her hair cropped short so she resembles an androgynous boy. Her throat rises from the up-curving collar of her white suit, which encases her like the sculpted calyx of a lily. One earring dangles from one ear. Its white geometrical swirls suggest a sculpture by Constantin Brâncuși.

'Nobody dresses like that', says director Patrick Conrad. 'Not even to go to the opera.'³ Yet at the start of his 1987 film *Mascara*, that is precisely where Rampling is headed. The chic androgyny of her outfit and overall style are crucial to the film that follows. Her clothes were created specially by the French designer Claude Montana. The fashion journalist Marielle Cro describes his style:

Montana was particularly fond of the androgynous look – maybe thanks to the memory of (his) rather aristocratic-looking aunt, who wore trouser-suits and had her clothes made to measure by a gentleman's tailor. Montana reinvented men's clothes for women and cultivated a female dandy look.⁴

In addition to its visible androgyny, it is of vital importance to the overall scheme of *Mascara* that the colour of this outfit is white. An audience has no way of knowing this so early on in the film.

Yet already, we get a sense of entering a world that is strangely ‘other’. One in which the expected tropes of dress, fashion, and behaviour no longer apply.

A flamboyantly Orphic tale of incest, fetishism, cross-dressing, grand opera, and murder, *Mascara* revolves around two opposing but interlinking spaces. One is the rather grand opera house of an unnamed European city; the other is an underground S&M drag club called Mister Butterfly. Each is a place that Bill Thompson, in his study of sadomasochistic aesthetics, would refer to as a ‘super-setting’ – a rarefied or privileged space that ‘provides the boundary between the action and everyday reality’.⁵ The action of *Mascara* is *outré* enough in its own terms and rendered doubly improbable by the highly theatricalized realms in which it transpires. The drag club, furthermore, is a deliberate and conscious evocation of the Underworld of Ancient Greek myth, with dollops of kinky sex and transvestite opera performance thrown in for good measure.



Fig. 1 (00:56:58): Charlotte Rampling as Gaby and Michael Sarrazin as Bert.

Might all of this explain why *Mascara* – a high-profile Belgian-Dutch-French co-production that featured in the Quinzaine des Réalisateurs at the 1987 Cannes Film Festival – was greeted with such blank incomprehension by critics and audiences? Its executive producer, Menahem Golan of Cannon, refused to release it theatrically in the United States. Critics at that year’s Chicago Film Festival denounced it as homophobic, even though not one of its main characters is readily identifiable as a gay man. Citing its use of *Salome* (1905) by Richard Strauss, a critic for the London magazine *Time Out* opined, ‘Even ardent searchers after nefarious enjoyment should draw seven veils over this one.’⁶ Its director Patrick Conrad – a Belgian painter, poet, filmmaker, and author of best-selling psychological crime fiction – describes it to this day as ‘a doomed cult movie’ that ranks among the most obscure and sulphurous of *films maudits*.

‘Anything that is not normal is in my work’, Conrad says. ‘I don’t think there’s anything I didn’t write about’. Above all, *Mascara* is a film about the curious fetishism of clothes and the ways in which fancy dress – whether an operatic or drag costume, or an *haute couture* outfit for some high-toned evening event – can serve not only to reflect a person’s identity, but also to construct it. Historically, as Benjamin Linley Wild explains in *From Carnival to Catwalk*:

Fancy dress provided an immediate means to contemplate the issue of role-plays because of the parallels that exist between anonymizing layers of costume and the different identities that people construct within themselves.⁷

The characters in *Mascara* definitively – at times, fatally – become the disguises they adopt. Not one of their multiple faces will survive its collision with the all-conquering power of the mask.

Yet the film starts with a near-collision of another sort. As she speeds into the city *en route* to the opera, the woman played by Charlotte Rampling narrowly misses running over a man (Derek de Lint). He is crossing the road with what looks like a theatrical costume slung over one arm. It is, we learn later, a costume for the opera she is about to attend. ‘I could have killed you’, she purrs with a smile that makes Death seem an inviting prospect.⁸ Soon she is off again to her rendezvous with another man (Michael Sarrazin) who sits in evening dress before a large full-length mirror. She enters and crouches down beside him. Their two faces hover side by side in the glass, uncannily

alike, like twin halves of one androgynous being. We learn their names are Bert Sanders and Gaby Hart. He is the city's Chief of Police; she works as a translator. Are they lovers? Are they siblings? Their relationship is not defined at this point. What each loves in the other is visibly a reflection of his or her own self.

The role of mirrors in *Mascara* reflects the centrality of mirrors in the Orphic universe. That centrality is expressed eloquently by Rilke in his *Sonnets to Orpheus* (see above) and by Jean Cocteau in his classic film *Orphée* (1950) where 'mirrors are the doors through which Death enters'.⁹ The bond between Gaby and Bert – or, at least, his obsessive devotion to her – seems built around the innate narcissism of mirror reflections. As Suzanne R. Stewart writes:

On the man's side, his slavish admiration of woman, his fascination with her narcissistic self-sufficiency, has its origins in the man's own narcissism, which he now sees reflected in the woman he loves: what man loves in woman is not woman but man.¹⁰

Yet the spectacle they witness at the opera will change forever their perceptions of themselves, of one another and of whatever relationship it is that unites them. The agent of that change is nothing more nor less than a stage costume.

The opera that night is *Orpheus and Eurydice* (1762) by Christoph Willibald Gluck. The role of the poet Orpheus, who journeys to the Underworld in search of his dead bride Eurydice, was written for a castrato but is now played either by a counter-tenor or (as it is here) by a contralto in male drag. Any performance of this opera necessarily involves questions of androgyny and gender identity. Yet here it is the soprano role of Eurydice that takes centre stage. As her husband leads her up out of the Underworld, she pleads with him to turn around and look at her – the one thing the Lord of Hades has forbidden him to do. She wears a diaphanous white gown, speckled with sequins to catch the light, and a towering headdress of white plumes. Inside the gown is a luminous red heart that pulsates softly on and off.

This gown was the creation of the noted Dutch designer Yan Tax. Its near-blinding whiteness is an essential part of its allure, connoting as it does both purity and innocence, ghostliness and death. It also places *Mascara* squarely within a centuries-old tradition of artistic and

literary decadence. The cultural historian Mark Booth quotes the sixteenth-century author Francesco Sansovino and his evocation of dandies in Venice:

During fine summer weather they were in the habit of wearing the most costly white silk dresses, their vests were of white velvet, their ruffs of the whitest cambric, their pantaloons and stockings of white silk, and their hats of white velvet with white feathers in them.¹¹

This obsession with whiteness would become a key element in the 'look' of lethal *femmes fatales* in decadent literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The vampiric opera diva in *The Glass of Blood* (1892) by Jean Lorrain is surrounded by 'white irises, white tulips, white narcissi' and clothed in 'a long dress of white velvet trimmed with fine-spun lace'.¹² The deadly but seductive snake woman in *The Lair of the White Worm* (1911) by Bram Stoker is 'clad in some kind of soft white stuff' and wears 'a close-fitting cap of some fine fur of dazzling white'.¹³ The opera gown in *Mascara* thus becomes a visual nexus of sex and danger, seduction and death.

For Bert and Gaby, this gown becomes the object of an intense and fetishizing obsession, one as overpowering as the homicidal desire of the Wicked Witch for the ruby slippers in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) or the self-destructive longing of the young ballerina for *The Red Shoes* (1948). At a party after the performance, Gaby meets the designer Chris Brine and recognizes him as the man she almost ran over. 'Eurydice's dress is one of the most beautiful things I've seen!' she says. Already, there is an undercurrent of eroticism between them; it will lead inevitably to romance. Bert, in contrast, is seized with a compulsion to possess the gown itself. The next day, he begs Chris to let him borrow it 'for just one night' as a gift to a special friend who is celebrating her birthday. Chris agrees because he assumes the wearer will be Gaby. He insists he must come along to help the wearer change in and out of it.

Moments later, Chris is driving his white Citroën across the flat expanse of beach outside Gaby's house, to an orchestral interlude from *Norma* (1831) by Vincenzo Bellini. He brings her, as a birthday present, his original sketch for Eurydice's gown. 'I think it will look great on you', he says. Gaby is mystified and says her birthday is not for many months. Her outfit here is a direct photographic negative of the one she wore in the opening scenes: a long-sleeved black top and

black Turkish-style harem pants. The pale minimalist chic of her apartment is disrupted only by a vast Art Deco painting that hangs above the fireplace. It depicts a beautiful naked woman, crouching with her wrists bound by chains. It is the 1929 image of *Andromeda* by Tamara de Lempicka. Is Gaby also chained and imprisoned in ways she might not feel free to discuss? Chris meets her daughter Laura, who seems to suffer a congenital brain defect. Gaby tells him she has been a widow for some years.



Fig. 2 (00:10:48): Michael Sarrazin, Charlotte Rampling, and Derek de Lint as Chris.

Meanwhile, Bert goes to the Central Station to meet a strange woman off a train. Her name is Pepper (Eva Robins) and her gold torrent of hair, moody dark eyes, and impeccably sculpted cheekbones make her a platonic ideal of cosmetically constructed beauty – evoking such Eurotrash film goddesses of the 60s as Ursula Andress, Virna Lisi, or Marisa Mell. Yet her voice is a pitch too low, her jawline a shade too strong and manly. ‘I look a wreck!’ she says as she shakes her hair loose about her shoulders. Might this be the mysterious, unnamed being who is destined to wear Eurydice’s gown?

The path and the turning. An impulse received.
 New horizons. The two become one – but do they?
 Are both of them not, perhaps,
 The road they make together?

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*¹⁴

Fans of European genre cinema may recognize Eva Robins as Roberto Coatti, an Italian actor and model and one of the first openly transgender stars. ‘Eva is not a drag queen’, Conrad insists. ‘She’s a woman with a dick.’ Her androgynous persona fits seamlessly into the sexually ambivalent world of *Mascara*. She is a living embodiment of the archetypal myth of the hermaphrodite, a being at once female and male. As Rebecca Arnold writes:

While unisex seeks to mask the body in supposedly genderless clothes, androgyny seeks to unite male and female, masculine and feminine in one body. The resulting hermaphrodite vision represents a return to a ‘sense of primordial cosmic unity’, a point of union which would assuage gender confusion and anxiety, by evoking a mythical pure state of being before the Fall.¹⁵

As in the lines of Rilke quoted above, two opposing poles seem to fuse yet also to co-exist as discrete entities. Each one exists, simultaneously, as itself and as the other. Most of the actors in *Mascara* inhabit this sliding scale in-between two genders. As Conrad points out, Charlotte Rampling is the one member of the cast who is actually ‘a full-time woman’.

Yet even here, the dividing line is neither clear nor absolute. The role that has defined Rampling’s screen persona is that of a sex slave in a Nazi concentration camp in the Liliana Cavani film *The Night Porter* (1974). As she sings and dances topless to a song that was a hit for Marlene Dietrich, she is costumed androgynously (by Piero Tosi) in black trousers and braces, a peaked SS cap and black silk evening gloves. Her hair is cropped short (as it is in *Mascara*) and she looks at once like a girl in male drag and like a perversely beautiful boy. This image has shaped her enduring queer fan base and made her a muse to fashion photographers such as Helmut Newton. *Mascara* plays adroitly with the gender fluidity of Rampling’s screen image and makes her androgyny a

keynote of its plot and *mise en scène*. It makes symbolic, if not literal, sense that Chris Brine confuses the androgynous Gaby with the transgender Pepper.

It is on a quest for Gaby (so he thinks) that Chris joins Bert on his descent into the bizarre sexual Underworld of Mister Butterfly. He bears with him the white feathered headdress, the white gown with its pulsating red heart. With these, he hopes to invest the woman he desires with the mythical persona of Eurydice. Bert leads him to a deserted pier along the seafront. A red light flashes at the top of a deep flight of stairs. Standing in the light and bathed in a sulphurous glow is Bert's gaunt, imposing sidekick (Harry Clevon) who plays the role of Charon, the ferryman who ushers the damned into Hades. He leads them through a labyrinth of concrete tunnels, to a service elevator that plunges down deeper still. A neon sign spells out MISTER BUTTERFLY.



Fig. 3 (00:29:45): Mister Butterfly.

The club's name is a transsexual alias for the heroine of Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* (1904). It has echoes of the predatory chauffeur (Pierre Clémenti) in *The Conformist* (1970) by Bernardo Bertolucci – who lures boys to his lair by offering to display 'my scarlet kimono, just like the one in *Madame Butterfly*'.¹⁶ The club was conceived by Conrad as a sexualized recreation of

the Classical Greek Underworld. A man in a chainmail mask sucks a raw oyster from its shell, passes it mouth-to-mouth to a blond youth. A boy in silver eyeshadow performs fellatio on a bunch of red lilies that burst from the black leather crotch of another man. A man in evening dress (minus his trousers) crawls across the floor towards a naked muscleman crouched atop a pillar and prostrates himself in an act of worship. A chanteuse named Lana (played by the transgender cabaret star Romy Haag) sings the Kris Kristofferson ballad 'Help Me Make It Through The Night' in a plaintive, husky wail.

It is here that Pepper is to don the white gown and, with it, the identity of Eurydice. She stands in her dressing room before a vast mirror, naked apart from her white silk panties. Bert orders the befuddled Chris to robe her in preparation for that night's performance. Before her act even begins, Conrad imbues it with the air of a sacred ritual. As Camille Paglia writes in *Sexual Personae*:

Ritual transvestism, then and now, is a drama of female dominance. There are religious meanings to all female impersonation, in nightclub or bedroom. A woman putting on men's clothes merely steals social power. But a man putting on women's clothes is searching for God.¹⁷

There is no denying Pepper wears the gown divinely. In a way that was unusual in the neo-conservative 80s, Conrad treats his transgender actors not as freaks but as icons for adoration and worship. Through the body of Pepper and the magic of Eurydice's gown, the two levels of performance in *Mascara* – the upper world of the opera and the underworld of drag impersonation – fuse and blend into one. In so doing, they fulfil a dream of androgynous perfection that eludes most of us. 'We are so limited as men and women', Conrad says. 'Transvestites are everything. They are angels.'

As she takes the stage, Pepper/Eurydice hovers above a *trompe l'oeil* pool, an expanse of plastic aglow with neon tubes. Her reflection floats within it like a lily adrift on water or Narcissus enraptured by his own face. She lip-syncs Eurydice's big scene in line with the time-hallowed traditions of transvestite performance. As Philip Core writes in his examination of drag:

Singing and dancing to music (often mimed to a well-known recording by a great star) allows the 'drag artist' to become – seriously but with a little irony – the woman of his dreams... This is ancient totem magic, the perverse lure of Tiresias of the two sexes, an insult to nature and an invocation of both her active forces.¹⁸

These 'forces' – although Core never enumerates them – are presumably Eros and Thanatos, Sex and Death. They will come into terrifying conflict in the next scene. After the performance, Bert and Pepper toast their triumph in a dressing room lined with mirrors. It has brought back to Bert memories of his childhood, which he evokes in the fetishized language of clothes. He describes his sister on the day of her confirmation: 'She wore a white dress, dainty white gloves and her first pair of high heels. It was a very special event!' As always, the clothes that obsess him are coloured white. He recalls how they sneaked away to indulge in forbidden sexual games. His idyll shatters when Pepper – erotically aroused by wearing the garb of Eurydice – makes an unwelcome sexual pass.



Fig. 4 (00:39:31): Michael Sarrazin and Eva Robins as Pepper.

This scene is intercut with the action back in the clubroom where a trans performer slinks down a staircase, draped in glistening gold chains and lucent ropes of pearls, lip-syncing the final scene of *Salome* by Strauss. She resembles a Gustav Klimt painting sprung to life. In this scene, the Princess Salome sings her twisted song of love to the severed head of Iokanaan, the prophet whose execution she has ordered. A musical setting of the 1891 play by Oscar Wilde – which was inspired

in turn by Gustave Flaubert's story 'Hérodiade' (1877) – this opera bears an eerie resemblance to *Mascara* as a work where 'insanity and perversion are presented for viewing pleasure'.¹⁹ What it shares with *Orpheus and Eurydice* is a built-in queer and androgynous subtext. According to Marjorie Garber and other critics, Flaubert modelled his character on a homosexual Egyptian dancing boy, Hasan el-Belbeissi. Garber writes:

It is no accident that the Salome story conflates the myths of Medusa and Narcissus, the decapitated head and the mirror image. This conflation was known to [...] Aubrey Beardsley, whose illustrations for Wilde's text clearly show Salome in the act of kissing Iokanaan's dead lips, holding aloft the head with its snaky locks, transfixed by self-love on the bank of a reflecting pool. Self-love, and self-hatred.²⁰

The forces of self-love and self-hatred collide in the dressing room as Pepper disrobes very slowly with her back towards Bert and the audience, in a manner not unlike Salome in her Dance of the Seven Veils. Her nude body in the dim light seems no more than a tantalizing mirage. Turning with the slow and choreographed precision of a dancer, she stands fully exposed, displaying breasts but also a penis.

The gender ambiguity of Salome has long played a part in the myth. A photograph from the 1890s was thought to show Oscar Wilde himself in drag as Salome.²¹ The Ken Russell film *Salome's Last Dance* (1988) climaxes with an androgynous young woman (Imogen Millais-Scott) performing the Dance of the Seven Veils (bizarrely, to 'In the Hall of the Mountain King' by Edvard Grieg) and ending the dance with a fleeting, almost subliminal flash of male genitals. As Garber points out:

(O)n the level of the Imaginary, the dancer is neither male nor female, but rather transvestic [...] the essence of the dance itself, its taboo border-crossing, is not only sensuality, but gender undecidability, and not only gender undecidability, but the paradox of gender identification, the disruptive element that intervenes, transvestism as a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture. *That* is the taboo against which Occidental eyes are veiled.²²

In Conrad's own 1994 novel *Limousine*, a fashionista named Suzanna Rizzoni reveals herself to be a transgender woman with a functioning set of male genitals. She shouts defiantly: 'Suzy doesn't exist! Everybody is looking for Suzanna Rizzoni, but she is just a name, a label, puppet, a costumed

phantom, an illusion, a vision... And that's why she's immortal!²³ The dynamic in *Mascara* is less aggressive but vastly more complex. Here a transgender actor (Eva Robins) plays a transgender performer (Pepper) who takes on the mythical personae of Eurydice and Salome. Both actor and performer are biologically male, but female in every other respect. The questions they ask Bert are entirely reasonable and pertinent: 'What's stopping you from living out your dreams? Why shouldn't you be yourself at least once?'

Yet such questions are too much for the rigid sex and gender categories that exist in Bert's mind. His inability to reconcile his erotic appetites with these preconceived categories is what pushes him to psychosis and murder. In the clubroom, a drag queen garbed as King Herod (ironically, a drag in drag) points at the transgender Salome and mouths the closing line of the opera: 'Kill that woman!' In the dressing room, Bert grabs Pepper round the neck and chokes her to death. At first glance, the murder seems like an onslaught of homosexual panic akin to the one in *Sarrasine* (1830) by Honoré de Balzac, in which the eponymous hero learns to his horror that Zambinella, the opera diva he desires, is actually a *castrato* who plays women's parts. "I ought to have you killed!" shouted Sarrasine, drawing his sword with a violent movement.²⁴ The crucial difference is that *Mascara* never defines Bert as being either hetero- or homosexual. His sexuality at this stage seems entirely and innately sadomasochistic.

A clue to his sexual nature may lie in his obsessive love of opera. Suzanne R. Stewart writes: 'Operatic pleasure is always marked by suffering – tears, shivers, sighs – and is closer to an experience of *jouissance* than to one of pleasure.'²⁵ Another facet of sadomasochistic sexuality – according to Stewart – is 'the disavowal and suspense of genital sexual desire in favour of a sexualization of guilt and punishment'.²⁶ This, in an extreme form, is what Bert does in refusing to make love to Pepper and killing her instead. Eurydice's gown functions as sexual catalyst for all the characters in *Mascara*. In admiring it, Gaby voices her initial attraction to Chris. In making Gaby a present of the sketch, Chris expresses his reciprocal attraction to her. In wearing and removing it, Pepper acts upon her long-suppressed desire for Bert. In seeing it removed, Bert discovers his own

sadomasochistic libido, killing anyone who challenges his fragile self-image or his rigidly defined boundaries of gender identity.



Fig. 5 (00:37:28): Salome.

Although he is present in the club, Chris Brine is a witness neither to the murder of Pepper nor to the impersonation of Eurydice that precedes it. He is confined strictly to the dressing room in which he costumed Pepper for her act. He asks no questions when Bert brings him back the gown and tells him the diva is resting. Yet later that night, he sleeps with Gaby and wakes in the throes of a nightmare. He says he was dreaming of Bert Sanders. ‘What was my brother doing in your dreams?’ Gaby asks. It is the first direct indication that Bert and Gaby are brother and sister. Furthermore, that they have been and possibly still are incestuous lovers. Also, that Bert may be the father of Gaby’s daughter Laura. Incest has been a common theme in Charlotte Rampling’s filmography – notably in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1971) by Giuseppe Patroni Griffi and *He Died with His Eyes Open* (1985) by Jacques Deray – yet *Mascara* is unique in making her both an object of incestuous desire and the androgynous dream goddess of an Orphic underground realm.

Just in case we have not picked up on the latter aspect, Conrad includes a scene in which Gaby steals into Chris's *atelier* and stands behind a mannequin that is draped in Eurydice's white gown. The mannequin is missing a head, so her face fills the empty space and becomes that of Eurydice. She orders Chris *not* to turn around and *not* to look at her, in a direct and conscious subversion of the Orpheus myth. Now is her turn to assume the mythic persona of Eurydice, one that transcends all notions of identity, sexuality, and gender. As in the West African masquerade rituals examined by Wild, 'The men – sometimes women – who wear these costumes temporarily lose their human identity and become conduits for specific deities to manifest themselves.'²⁷ The gown invests its wearers with a symbolic resonance that humans ordinarily lack. Yet its history is far from over. Its flowing, diaphanous folds hold a wealth of secrets still to be revealed.

iii

The words he speaks transcend his very being;
Already, he has come to a place where none may follow.
The strings of his lyre no longer control his hands;
He obeys and he transgresses in one moment.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*²⁸

This issue of revelation is central to any discussion of drag in particular or masquerade in general – or, indeed, to any discussion of gender or sexuality that transcends the strict biological norm. Garber writes of the motivations implicit in any transvestite performance, which are at once 'to reveal' and 'to conceal':

Conceal what? Reveal what? When the wig is doffed, ceremonially, at the end of a transvestic stage performance, what is the 'answer' that is disclosed? Only another question: is *this* the real one? In what sense real? What is the 'truth' of gender and sexuality that we try, in vain, to see, to see through, when what we are gazing at is a hall of mirrors?²⁹

After his killing of Pepper, Bert will employ Eurydice's gown for just such an act of revelation and concealment. The habitués of Mister Butterfly are understandably anxious to know what has become of their star. None of them know she is dead, as Bert was able to remove her body. Yet now Bert decides to 'explain' her disappearance by constructing a fictitious serial killer. The

problem is that any such killer requires another victim – and that victim must, of necessity, be dressed in Eurydice’s gown.

Planting a stash of cocaine in Chris’s apartment, Bert blackmails him into bringing him the gown again and helping the star to change into it. The only question is who is to play the victim. His choice falls on Lana, the resident chanteuse played by Romy Haag. A transgender cabaret artiste who ran her own nightclub in Berlin in the 70s and 80s, Haag resembles Eva Robins in retaining a full set of male genitalia along with a full female identity. Yet her persona lacks the seamless androgyny of Robins. ‘She is more a drag queen’, says Conrad, ‘more burlesque’. Her impersonation of Eurydice has overtones of camp and grotesquery that Robins’s never had. She performs the big scene with her image mirrored – as Pepper’s was – in the *trompe l’oeil* plastic pool. As it did for Pepper, the wearing of Eurydice’s gown prompts Lana to voice her long-suppressed desire for Bert. (The appeal of Bert for these two transgender women is something an audience must take on faith.) He strangles her, as before, in her dressing room. We see her death reflected in a multiplicity of mirrors.

The staging of this scene is a direct and deliberate visual quote from *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947) by Orson Welles, where the climactic shoot-out takes place in a Hall of Mirrors. That film has its own dimensions of androgyny and sexual ambivalence – not least in the way its floridly female star Rita Hayworth has her trademark flowing auburn hair cropped short and bleached a harsh peroxide blond, like a beautiful boy in a film by Jean Cocteau. Just in case we miss the connection, we see Lana in an earlier scene with a sailor’s cap perched atop her head at a jaunty angle – exactly like Hayworth in an iconic shot from the Welles film. Yet all of this, to Bert, is simply a means to an end. The horrified denizens of Mister Butterfly discover Lana’s corpse and Bert points out the blindingly obvious. The outsider Chris Brine was present at the club on the night of both killings.

Bert's obsessional staging of his own sadomasochistic fantasies seems typical of a type that Bram Dijkstra identifies as 'the executioner's assistant', a man who seeks power in a fantasy world to compensate for a lack of power in his actual life:

He has no personal being, feeding on defeat to turn his personal, parasitic existence into a secret mirror world of the executioner's values. In this realm of moonlight and looking-glass magic, of fantastic dreams and majestic feats of submission, he tries to make the executioner see him as the threat he very well knows he isn't.³⁰

Like Orpheus in the sonnet by Rilke, he has lost all sense of whether he is in control of his fantasies or his fantasies are in control of him. The fact that both his victims are transgender women adds a final and deeply ironical twist to Bert's lack of control. Both Pepper and Lana (like the actors Eva Robins and Romy Haag) have taken on a female identity – which Bert persists in viewing as fake – and lived it as an actual real-life truth. They are punished not for being 'fake' women but for being 'real' women who live beyond the parameters of biological sex.

Hence it makes perfect sense when *Mascara* returns to the opera house and the opera on show – again, in a production designed by Chris Brine – is *Norma* by Bellini. This is an opera where the notion of womanhood is challenged and thrown into crisis. Norma, like Medea, is a pagan priestess who betrays her beliefs for an outsider. When the man betrays her in turn, she is pushed to the brink of killing her own children. Catherine Clément describes Norma as one of 'these furies, these goddesses, these women with fearsome arms and inspired eyes [...]. [T]hese recalcitrant women, bent on their own destruction, determined to leave their lives behind.'³¹ On opening night, the woman who leaves her life behind is Gaby. Seated beside her brother, she gets up abruptly and storms out in the middle of an act. When he follows her and begs her to come back, she says Chris has told her all about his secret life. She urges Chris not to lend Eurydice's gown to Bert when he asks for it the next day. She warns him darkly: 'He wants you with the dress!'

The sense in which Bert 'wants' him is necessarily open to question. At no point does *Mascara* hint that Bert is homosexual (in general) or feels any desire for Chris (in particular). Yet the next stage of his plan is to entrap Chris by himself putting on Eurydice's gown. As Bert takes

the stage at Mister Butterfly to lip-sync the big scene, the camera travels slowly up his body, lingering on the diaphanous white folds, the pulsating red neon heart. His face is plunged in shadow but an aureole of light glows around it, like a halo, on the headdress of white plumes. Now the light shifts to reveal his face, caked a pale white and lined with mascara. Up until this point, Eurydice's gown has clothed only women. Some of these are women through biological origin (Gaby and the diva who sings at the opera) while others (Pepper and Lana) are women through a conscious choice of gender identity. Yet now we see the gown draped grotesquely on a man in drag. In a perverse way, Bert has embraced his own mythic and androgynous ideal. As Peter Ackroyd writes:

If, as the Creation myths assert, Chaos – or the unity of undifferentiated sexuality – is the progenitor of all life, then the separate sexes represent a falling off from that original fecundity. Androgyny, in which the two sexes co-exist in one form, and which the transvestite priest imitates in his own person, is an original state of power.³²

'He becomes what he loves, what he hates, what he kills', says Conrad. 'He becomes his own obsession?.'



Fig. 6 (01:17:42): Charlotte Rampling and Derek de Lint.

His act ends and the applause is underwhelming. A man remarks snidely, 'It takes balls to do that!' It is a pointed reminder of Bert's maleness at the moment he purports to cast it to one side. Garber sees this as a paradox innate in drag performance:

[T]he male transvestite represents the extreme limit case of 'male subjectivity', 'proving' that he is male against the most extraordinary odds. Dressed in fishnet stockings, garter belt, and high heels, or in a housedress, the male transvestite is the paradoxical embodiment of male subjectivity. For it is his anxiety *about* his gendered subjectivity that engenders the masquerade.³³

In truth, Bert has seldom looked more 'manly' than he does in this flamboyantly female garb. Yet something inside him seems to have been liberated by this masquerade. Back in the dressing room, he makes a flagrant pass at Chris. 'I look like Gaby, don't I?' he says. He sidles up to Chris, sticks his tongue in his ear and sighs, 'I love you!' How much of this is merely an act, put on to provoke a violent response? How much is an authentically homosexual side of Bert that is set free, for the first time, by the power of Eurydice's gown? As Wild asserts, 'the liminal nature of fancy dress costume emboldens people, enabling them to express aspects of their characters, and to articulate ideas about themselves that would be otherwise difficult.'³⁴ These are questions that *Mascara* does not set out to answer. All we know is that Chris lashes out and punches Bert in the gut.

In the clubroom, another performance is in full swing. A drag Tina Turner is dressed up as Aunt Entity in *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985): a chainmail dress, a blonde bouffant wig, and gold earrings that look like Slinky toys crawling up both sides of her head. A shaven-headed chorus wear PVC body suits in black or red, with a matching patch over one eye, like drag clones of Bette Davis in *The Anniversary* (1967). They hear shouts from the dressing room and run to join in the fun. Bert tells them he has caught the killer. Like the Furies of the Orpheus myth, they descend on the intruder, kicking and blinding and castrating Chris with their spiked heels. 'The Furies', writes Camille Paglia, 'are daemonic spirits of earth-cult, black as their mother night', who 'come from the realm of Dionysian *sparagmos* or ritual dismemberment'. Their force 'annihilates form and obliterates the eye'.³⁵ Having mauled Chris to the consistency of steak tartare, they haul him above ground and hurl him into the sea to drown.



Fig. 7 (01:09:46): Eurydice's gown.

Perhaps a shade improbably, Gaby has found her way to the pier in time for this final act. She is a helpless and horrified witness to the killing, like Elizabeth Taylor at the ritual murder of her Cousin Sebastian by a mob of cannibal rent boys in *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959). Yet somehow, Gaby finds it in herself to become the avenging angel. She sees Bert standing in the tatters of Eurydice's gown, its rags aglow in the moonlight. She follows him coldly but implacably to the end of the pier. She tells him they must leave this dreadful place and go away together. Then she stretches out her arms as if to touch him – but does not. The sheer hypnotic force of Charlotte Rampling's eyes seems to propel Bert backwards off the pier and into the dark water below. We hear an echo of Lana as she sings 'Help Me Make It Through the Night'. Gaby, at least, appears to make it through. The police call the next morning and drive her down to the beach to identify two dead bodies.

As Gaby cradles Chris in a visual echo of a *Pietà*, the song fades out and merges with a soft lapping of waves. 'There are no happy endings', Conrad says. 'There are simply endings'. In 1987, there seemed to be no happy ending of any sort in view for *Mascarara*, which was dismissed by critics – and shunned by audiences – as an overheated stew of sex and sadomasochism, high camp and *haute couture*. Yet now that societies are riven by 'culture wars' over gender identity and transgender rights, *Mascarara* feels like a film whose time has come. Elizabeth Wilson writes in *Fashion and Modernity*:

It's as if gender, on the surface so outraged, is for that very reason divorced from a sexuality that remains opaque [...]. The rigid sexual identities we cultivate [...] are really fictions elaborated by the nineteenth-century sexologists; they merely imprison the waywardness of lust, constraining us in sexual and social roles.³⁶

Colleen McQuillen goes a step further in *The Modernist Masquerade*: “The implicit link between mask and menace, disguise and demonism, provides a counterpoint to the emergent understanding of identity as a temporary social construct.”³⁷ We emerge from *Mascara* with a sense that all identities are temporary, that we ourselves might one day put on Eurydice’s gown. Its diaphanous white folds, its glistening white plumes, its luridly pulsating red heart may whisper to us secrets we have yet to tell ourselves.

¹ With heartfelt thanks to Patrick Conrad and Jane Gershenson for their warmth, generosity, and support. Thanks also to David Cairns and Katja Robinson – and not forgetting Carlito and Choco Chanel.

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³ All quotations from Patrick Conrad are from interviews conducted in Antwerp on 24 and 25 March 2023.

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¹⁷ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae – Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 90.

¹⁸ Philip Core, *Camp: The Lie That Tells the Truth* (London: Plexus, 1984), p. 77.

¹⁹ Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera: The Last 400 Years* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), p. 439.

²⁰ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 340.

²¹ The image of ‘Wilde as Salome’ published in Richard Ellmann’s 1988 biography *Oscar Wilde* is not really Wilde. In 1994 Wilde’s grandson Merlin Holland revealed that it was in fact a photograph of Hungarian opera singer Alice Guszalewicz.

²² Garber, p. 342.

²³ Patrick Conrad, *Limousine*, trans. by Stephen Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), p. 292.

²⁴ Honoré de Balzac, *Sarrasine*, trans. by David Carter (London: Hesperus Classics, 2007), p. 42.

²⁵ Stewart, p. 97.

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²⁷ Wild, p. 50.

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- ³⁰ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 352.
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Arrangements in White and Red

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‘Arrangements in White and Red’ reflects on the relationship between Joanna Hiffernan (1839-1886) and James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) in the 1860s, a relationship that produced two of the most significant paintings of the era: *Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl* (1861-63) and *Symphony in White No. 2: The Little White Girl* (1864). Hiffernan’s contribution to Whistler’s work has undergone a major reassessment in recent years as feminist art scholarship has reappraised the role of the model in the creation of the artwork, bringing to wider attention the physical and aesthetic labour of women (and sometimes men) previously given the romanticized epithet of ‘muse’. In 2022, the Royal Academy of Arts London and National Gallery of Art Washington staged an exhibition that, for the first time, put a spotlight on Hiffernan’s role. *Whistler’s Woman in White: Joanna Hiffernan* brought together the overwhelming majority of surviving art associated with the model and showed clearly for the first time the full extent of her contribution to nineteenth-century visual culture. In particular, Margaret F. MacDonald’s research, published in the book that accompanied the exhibition, uncovered new facts about her life and dispelled a number of myths.

Hiffernan was, by all accounts, intelligent and knowledgeable about art, and may even have had artistic aspirations herself. If this was the case, however, none of her artwork has survived, and few of her letters or other written documents. Accounts of her by her contemporaries are evocative but brief. Her background as an impoverished Irish immigrant, her lack of formal education and, most significantly, her sexually ambiguous status as an artist’s model, meant that despite Whistler’s evident reliance on her – she managed his affairs during his trip to Chile in 1865 and at the time he made her the sole beneficiary of his will – she could never fully transcend the demi-monde. When Whistler’s mother came to live with him in December 1863, Hiffernan was

exiled to a cottage in Fulham and this no doubt contributed to her semi-visibility among Whistler's peers.

I am indebted to the work of MacDonald and her co-curators, Ann Dumas and Charles Brock, for sparking the idea for the following short story and providing such rich resources to draw on. At the same time, I have been inspired by the gaps and missing information in Hiffernan's narrative, which have enabled me to craft a fiction that attempts, in its own way, to restore Hiffernan's presence in nineteenth-century aesthetic culture. Among these gaps are the tantalizing information that Whistler and Hiffernan attended séances at their neighbour Dante Gabriel Rossetti's house in Chelsea, and that according to a contemporary, Whistler believed Hiffernan to be 'a bit of a medium'.¹ Alex Owen has shown how young women from the working and lower-middle classes with a talent for performance could reap considerable, if precarious, rewards through a career as a spirit medium in the Victorian period.² It is not, perhaps, surprising that both Rossetti's model Fanny Cornforth and Hiffernan experimented with mediumship. The role of the medium and that of the artist's model shared many similarities in their ambiguous social position and the way they embodied others while putting their own body on display. Although the content of the séances Whistler and Hiffernan attended is not documented, J. B. Bullen, Rosalind White, and Lenore Beaky have recently thrown light on the Rossettis' involvement in spiritualism with their publication of William Michael Rossetti's séance diaries, dating from slightly later in the 1860s.³ Whistler's original biographers, the Pennells, also provide a tantalising glimpse of the séances Whistler and Hiffernan attempted to recreate at home.⁴ Together, these provide a flavour of the couple's experiences with spiritualism while they were working on *Symphony in White No. 2*.

Whistler's work was puzzling and often controversial to his contemporaries, but is now widely recognized as instrumental in the movement from narrative painting towards abstraction that was beginning to take place in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. *The White Girl* was shown at a private gallery in London and at the Salon des Refusés in Paris after being rejected by both the Royal Academy and the Salon, and was described as 'bizarre' and 'incomplete' by the *Athenaeum*

and ‘a piece of bad white-washing’ by one Parisian critic.⁵ The *Symphony in White* paintings, however, marked a creative breakthrough for Whistler; as biographer Daniel E. Sutherland suggests, *The White Girl* was his ‘first tentative step *away* from narrative painting’, towards the Aestheticism that would distinguish his later work.⁶ One of the challenges of writing ekphrastically about Whistler’s art is the way it seems to both invite and resist narrative explanation, to evoke a scene or mood and then allow it to dissolve into an arrangement of colours. In the writing of this story, I have attempted to capture that tension by allowing the narrative to unfold through a series of moments organized through colour, specifically the contrast of red and white.

Recent forensic research into Whistler’s technique has shown, however, that colour is never quite what it seems in his work. While he used lead white in both paintings, the source of the ‘painter’s colic’ both he and Hiffernan suffered from (one of the likely effects of which was miscarriage), one of his achievements in the *Symphony in White* paintings is the complexity of his rendition of white through a range of unexpected oil pigments. This technique, according to MacDonald, Dunn, and Townsend, ‘anticipated the colour harmonies he used in portraits from the 1870s, where every white contains black and every apparently pure touch of color contains traces of yellow, green, and blue pigment, carefully chosen for that composition’.⁷ The white dress depicted in *Symphony in White No. 2* specifically contains additions of red ochre and red lake.⁸ As Joanna acknowledges in my story: ‘That is the painting’s secret: white is not one colour; at its heart, is red.’

‘Arrangements in White and Red’ has been written concurrently with research for an academic monograph on the white dress in Gothic literature and culture. It uses fiction as an alternative means of thinking through cultural constructions of whiteness, by embedding them in specific points of view and moments of emotional affect, not readily accounted for in academic writing. It also explores Hiffernan’s artistry with dress; Aileen Ribeiro considers that she was ‘advanced in her ideas’ in her adoption of the aesthetic dress she encountered through Whistler’s ‘cosmopolitan’ circles and her unconventional style informs both paintings.⁹ The story positions

dress and the acts of designing, making, laundering, choosing, and wearing clothes as central to nineteenth-century women's embodiment, labour, creative expression and desire. In doing so it aims to restore Hiffernan's imagined perspective to the account of the painting's creation, drawing connections between modelling, and the séance, as kinds of performance.

¹ Margaret F. MacDonald, ed., *Whistler and the Woman in White: Joanna Hiffernan* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2020), p. 23.

² Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), *passim*.

³ See J. B. Bullen, Rosalind White, and Lenore A. Beaky (eds), *Pre-Raphaelites in the Spirit World: The Séance Diary of William Michael Rossetti* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022).

⁴ Elizabeth Robins Pennell and Joseph Pennell, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler*, revised sixth edition (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott Company; London: William Heinemann, 1919), p. 84.

⁵ Cited in Daniel E. Sutherland, *Whistler: A Life for Art's Sake* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 71, p. 79.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 69. Italics in original.

⁷ Margaret F. MacDonald, Joanna Dunn, and Joyce H. Townsend, 'Painting Joanna Hiffernan', in *Whistler and the Woman in White*, pp. 33-45 (p. 41).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Aileen Ribeiro, 'White Muslin: Joanna Hiffernan and the 1860s', in Margaret F. MacDonald, Susan Grace Galassi, Aileen Ribeiro and Patricia De Montfort, *Whistler, Women and Fashion* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 76-91, p. 85.

Arrangements in White and Red

Art thou the ghost, my sister,
White sister there,
Am I the ghost, who knows?

A. C. Swinburne, 'Before the Mirror' (1864)

It's a bright June morning, too bright. Joanna turns her head away from the sun trickling in through the cracks between the curtains. The sounds of Fulham jostle outside: clerks closing doors as they leave for work, servants banging out grates, sparrows squabbling in the areas. She has a feeling something's wrong but can't place it. Her head aches and the joints in her legs and shoulders. She gradually registers the wetness between her legs, the ball of pain like a wadded-up dish cloth in the pit of her stomach. She pulls herself up and on the white bed linen there is a bright, shiny circle of red the size of a bronze penny.

She swings her legs out of the bed, feet hesitating on the rug. She pulls the chamber pot from beneath and squats, holding on to the iron bedstead to steady herself. A glob of red slides into the pot. She doesn't look at it too closely. She's seen something like this before: a thing that could be her monthly courses come late and heavy or could be something else. Either way, it doesn't bear looking at. She lets herself focus on the leaden ache in her lower belly and not on what it means. Sweating, she stands and pours cold water from the ewer into a bowl. She takes a cloth from the washstand and mops at herself, then squeezes out the cloth. A skein of red runs through the water, unravelling into a faint tint of copper, then with each mop and squeeze a deeper, denser red. The water forms a perfect red circle in the china basin. Where it catches the fragments of sunlight it glows like polished carnelian. Even as she thinks this, she knows she is thinking what he would think. There are two Joannas: one whose stomach is cramping and who is swabbing her thighs with a dirty towel and one who observes the light reflecting on a basin of blood and thinks of how he would paint it.

Joanna dresses for the sitting when she reaches Lindsey Row, so that her skirts will not be soiled in the streets. Jimmy is particular about such things. The white gown is where she left it, in the dressing room that used to be hers, laid carefully over a chair to prevent it from creasing. As she enters the room, it looks as if someone is sitting there, a headless version of herself. For a moment, she thinks it is her sister Catherine, waiting for her. She has a fleeting sensation of dizziness, as if she is about to fall from a great height. It passes as quickly as it comes and she feels foolish. Catherine was much smaller, and now is gone.

She takes the dress in her hands, smoothing the fabric. They had talked about it and Jimmy had sketched it: her ideas, his pen moving fast over the paper, the lines somehow capturing her posture although the sketch was only intended to show the depth of the neckline and where the sleeves should sit so that the dressmaker could copy it. It's just how she wanted it. The structure is in the fabric, with no need for stays or cage. It's how all the women in Jimmy's set are wearing their dresses. She thinks it was Lizzie's idea first, Gabriel's dead wife. That was long before Joanna knew Jimmy or Gabriel, when she was still prinking up cast-offs from Monmouth Street, fancying herself fine enough because she knew the trick of dressing a third-hand hat to make it look fresh from the milliner's. She has adapted Lizzie's artistic style to make it more fashionable, more French, without losing the long lines that flatter the body and create the painterly effect. And the advantage of not wearing a cage, of course, is that the skirt doesn't swing up over her calves every time she sits down, and she can manoeuvre swiftly in and out of doorways and cabs. The skirt is

soft and full and the sleeves translucent: thick creamy ruches springing out from her shoulders and narrowing to her wrists. There are faint traces of starch still clinging to the muslin and the layers rustle satisfyingly over her skin as she pulls them on.

It's chilly, despite the fire; her arms are freckled with gooseflesh. She pins the artificial pearls in her ears, smooths her rioting hair with a padded brush and gathers it loosely at the back of her head. A single hair is caught on her bodice like an erratic red thread. It is almost blue at the roots, like the blue at the base of a candle flame. She picks the hair up and runs it between her fingers, enjoying the way they snag on the kinks and bumps of the curl. There are some hairs that never brush straight. She drops it into the fire and savours the brief acrid smell.

Jimmy stands Joanna in front of the mirror, leaning on the mantelpiece, where he has placed two of his treasures: a blue and white china vase, and a Chinese lacquered box, a marvellous trinket that has another box just like it, but smaller, nested inside. She is twinned with her reflection, another self just like her but smaller, shrunk in the mirror's perspective. It is tiring, looking at oneself for hours on end. If you look too long into your own eyes in the mirror, they become strange, as if they belong to someone else. She is uneasy and keeps shifting her focus. 'Look at the box, Jo!' Jimmy says. The box is scarlet, chosen to harmonize with the blush tones on her skin and the red accents of the fan. It is easier now she has found a focus point and can come back to it, but uncomfortable to gaze at the same object for so long. Its reds melt and shift and when she looks away, its shape is burned green into her retinas.

He keeps changing the position of her head, painting it and then painting it out. It's difficult to stand at exactly the same angle each time. Today her stomach is still cramping and heavy, and she's worried that her rags are sodden and need changing, so she can't get it right and he is irritable. He has a way of pulling at his moustache when his bad mood is coming on, so she is always prepared for it. 'Goddamn thing!' he says under his breath, or occasionally 'Damn you, Jo!', throwing down his brushes and stamping over to the window to rest his eyes on the grey waters of the river. She knows it will blow over once he gets the composition right and she waits it out, using each squall of temper as an opportunity to stretch or, if the intervals are longer, to run to the dressing room and check her rags are still in place and the gown is still pristine and unmarked. When it's going well, he stands back from the canvas, darting forward to add a single brush stroke and then back again in a way that reminds her of a dragonfly, not looking at her but at the play of light on fabric, absorbed in the shifting colours of her dress. She knows the oil colours off by heart: Mars yellow, ultramarine, bone black, red ochre, red lake. That is the painting's secret: white is not one colour; at its heart, is red.

When the light is altogether wrong, they spend the afternoons tumbled on Jimmy's bed, not bothering to change the sheets. She's not above doing laundry, but there is a luxury in leaving them, a small means of marking her territory while his mother is gone. She lies on the rucked linen in her chemise, eating soft, sticky Chelsea buns thick with lemon peel and cinnamon and reading the newspapers he gets delivered for his mother and has forgotten to cancel. But nights are best, when they stay up late drinking the Irish whisky she likes and playing cards, gambling for ha'pennies or cigarettes. She's a better gambler than he is and often cleans him out of coppers, which he never ceases to be surprised by no matter how many times it happens. She teases him about it, putting on the voices of his drinking partners and pretending to be calling in his debts, and he always laughs and says she's wasted as a model, she could go on the stage.

Today, when he's finished for the day, she crosses to the window, and opens it to let the paint fumes dissipate. The light has gone; the outlines of the factories over the water are dim and hazy. Shouts of men steering empty coal barges down the river filter into the room. A hansom cab pulls up two doors down and she watches a woman she doesn't recognize step out, holding several large parcels of shopping tied up in brown paper. New tenants must have moved in since she

moved to Fulham. Jimmy comes back from the scullery where he's been cleaning his brushes and closes the door behind him, but she doesn't turn round. She already knows the way the flesh pools in soft pouches around his eyes, the quizzical lift in his left brow, how the light falls on his cheekbones. He lifts the auburn masses of her hair away from her neck and kisses her nape. In the creases of his hands, she smells linseed and turpentine.

In the first painting, the famous one, it wasn't clear if the rug she was standing on was a wolf or a bear, and they laughed about that, afterwards. Animals never really interested him. He was interested only in the texture of the fur and the way the creature's white teeth fringed the carmine strawberry of its mouth. She knew it was a bear, though, because she had gone out to buy it, and bearskin was more expensive. They couldn't really afford it, so she had to haggle, in her bad French, at the flea market. *Je voudrais un tapis en peau d'ours. Non, c'est trop cher. Non, ça doit être blanc.* Jimmy was fluent and she wished he had just done it himself, although he was right that she was much better at beating down the price than he was. The rug had to be a bear, because it was supposed to be white, although the mangy, badly cured thing she had brought back to the studio was more *beige* than *blanc*. He was cross with it, at first, but then as he discovered the blue of the carpet brought out its peachy tones, he relaxed and became absorbed in his brush-strokes, scratching ochre back and forth on his palette, while she warmed her stiffening limbs and sipped dark, bitter chocolate from their tiny, chipped, blue-and-white china cups.

It snowed in Paris, that winter, and the studio was cold. In the mornings while the stove warmed up, Jimmy made pancakes for them the American way, thick buttery pillows spread lavishly with treacle. He insisted treacle was inferior to the molasses he had at home, but licked the spoon from the pot nonetheless. She wore a loose wrap so the white dress didn't get sticky, and changed when he was ready. It was her first gown made by a French dressmaker and it started a craving in her no pancakes could fill. They went to a small shop one of Jimmy's former models had recommended, in a featureless back street a few blocks from the main bustle of le Sentier. The paint on the shutters was flaking and they had to step over a wall-eyed pug sprawled in the doorway that snapped at them peevishly. The woman in the shop tutted over the design, which she dubbed *à l'anglaise*, although Joanna was not English and it would have been just as outlandish back in London. She worried it would not come out right, but Jimmy shrugged off her anxieties, telling her to wait and see. And when it was delivered, wrapped in pale rose tissue paper, she saw it had been made with exquisite precision, like nothing she had ever owned before. It was just as she had envisaged it, only refined and made more elegant: simple and high-waisted with the vertical pin-tucks on the bodice that made her look taller, and the puffs of muslin like small clouds that lengthened the shoulders. Her only hesitation was that the dressmaker had not been able to resist adding a tiny bow to the waist, but Jimmy just laughed and said it was *chic*.

After that, she begged Jimmy for other dresses, to rival the Parisiennes dressed electrically in mauves and magentas, crowding the Grands Boulevards and the cafés of Place Pigalle. She went back to the same dressmaker, who continued to comment disapprovingly on her taste in the French way but who was cheap and efficient. None of the other dresses had the same magic as that first gown, though, and the feeling she had when she put it on, that for the first time, someone had listened to what she really wanted.

Still, the cambric was thin, for the time of year, and she missed the layer of warmth that stays would have added. The lead fumes from the paint seemed to infuse the light in the studio, somehow. The muslin curtain strained the light like cheesecloth strains curds, so it fell whey-coloured on her skin. She had a headache through most of the sittings. It started under her eyes, a tightness beneath the bridge of her nose, and spread like a tight metal band entrapping her skull. As she stood by the window in the white gown with the light falling through the curtain behind her, and the snow falling behind that, she felt as if she was wrapped in a series of veils and might

suffocate beneath them. Then the painter's colic, like an iron ball in the gut. After long days of standing in front of the curtain, she would lie flat on the bed, her fingers kneading her lower belly, as if they could dislodge the heaviness settled there.

That was the first time she had seen the clot of red in the chamber pot, and she had cried, but after a day or two it hadn't seemed important, and Jimmy had bought her a new nightdress trimmed with *broderie anglaise* and red ribbons.

Joanna dresses in plain blue crape for the evening, in the loose artistic style she favours. She leaves the artificial pearls in her ears. Gabriel's house is just a little further down the street and she and Jimmy walk there by the side of the river, the moored boats creaking slightly on the shifting tide. The house is larger and grander than Jimmy's and crammed with pictures from the floor to the ceiling like in a gallery. There are new ones since last time she was here. Gabriel notices her looking and says kindly, 'Come back and pay Fanny a visit some time; she'll show you my new acquisitions.'

Gabriel invites them into his downstairs sitting room. The room is painted dark green and hung with dozens of mirrors, which catch the setting sun and make the room look like a forest with glimpses of daylight flashing through the branches. Fanny, Gabriel's housekeeper, has her thick, honey-coloured hair piled up in masses on the back of her head, showing off her luxuriant white neck. There's Gabriel's brother, William, with his balding crown making him look oddly monkish; and his friend Algy, who talks frenetically over everybody else. The round mahogany table has been unfolded and brought into the centre of the room, with chairs for them all placed around it. Gabriel offers brandy in Italian glasses with curious twisted stems while Fanny draws the shutters and sets candles on the table. Everyone sits down and looks at one another, the candlelight picked up and repeated in the mirrors like glow-worms winking in the dusk.

They chatter for a while, circling around the reason they are there, and then William takes charge. 'We must all hold hands,' he says. Joanna takes Jimmy's hand in her right, its familiar grasp settling comfortably into hers. Algy is sitting to her left and she takes his hand reluctantly. His hands are small and slender with long, manicured nails and they tremble slightly; she briefly imagines the nails scraping her thigh and suppresses a shiver.

There is some talk, which she only half-listens to, and then Fanny snuffs the candles. In the darkened room, sensation is magnified: Jimmy's skin is dry and a little rough from scrubbing brushes, but Algy's is damp and sticky like a child's. There is a smell of hot wax and a dense, sweet aroma from a vase of white lilies on the mantelpiece; the smoke from the snuffed candles makes shadowy shapes in the mirrors. Tired from the long day standing, she feels her mind drifting almost immediately.

After a few minutes, Fanny's head droops as if she is in a slumber. 'Is there someone with us?' asks William.

There is a pause, and Joanna can hear the clock ticking in the hallway. William clears his throat and asks the question again.

'Yes', says Fanny, in a voice that has somehow lost her Cockney inflections.

'Are you a man or a woman?'

'A woman', says Fanny. Joanna thinks that Fanny is not really asleep and that she has the playful note in her voice that she uses when she teases Gabriel and his friends behind their back, but her heart beats faster nonetheless. The warmth of the room and the overpowering stench of the lilies are making her light-headed. In the darkness, the red coral beads Fanny is wearing stand out like ellipses from the whiteness of her neck. Out of the corner of Joanna's eye, a shape starts to emerge in one of the mirrors.

'Oh! It is a woman! A woman in a white dress, with red hair!' she exclaims, before she can stop herself. Jimmy's hand jumps in hers and Algy's fingers quiver. As if in response, the table jolts and shudders.

‘Lizzie! It is Lizzie!’ exclaims Gabriel.

Joanna turns to look at Gabriel and the shape vanishes. She knows it is not Lizzie, but Catherine. However, she cannot say anything. His face is too nakedly hopeful. She lets her eyes drop.

Fanny takes up the theme. ‘Yes dearest, it is Lizzie who speaks.’

Joanna feels nauseous. She knows it is not Lizzie, although she is grateful to Fanny for deflecting the group’s attention. Jimmy’s hand presses hers and she returns the pressure. A vivid memory of Catherine’s face returns to her, tiny and gaunt, her eyes glassy with fever, her skin stretched almost translucent over the bones. Her red hair hangs loose over her pale nightgown, like a fire unleashed and consuming her, burning away the little energy she has left.

In the garden behind Gabriel’s house, Fanny is throwing grain to the peacocks. She offers some to Joanna as she comes through the garden door but she declines, so Fanny throws the last handfuls, wipes her hands on her apron and invites her to sit beside her on the ironwork garden chairs. The birds have been moulting, or perhaps fighting, and their tails are shabby and full of holes. ‘Gabriel calls ’em Umberto and Oderisi’, she says. ‘I’ve no idea how he knows which is which. I call ’em both Algy. They think of themselves as fine fellows, but they don’t ’alf get into scraps.’

Joanna laughs. ‘You could call one Jimmy’, she says. ‘He’s been known to lose a few feathers now and then.’

‘He do like a scrap, don’t he?’ Fanny grins at her and shouts for the maid to bring tea. The two women sit chatting companionably, enjoying the light breeze which stirs the blossoms on the plum and wild cherry, sending fitful drifts of white petals across the lawn and teasing loose threads of their hair, Joanna’s deep red and Fanny’s rich coppery gold.

‘Do you mind about Lizzie?’ Joanna asks.

Fanny shrugs. ‘She couldn’t keep up with him. Which of the two of us is with him now?’

‘Does she really speak through you?’ says Joanna.

Fanny laughs. ‘She do and she don’t. Not in the way that Gabriel thinks, perhaps. But we ’ave an alliance, she and I. We know what he needs to hear.’

‘It was not Lizzie I saw,’ Joanna says. ‘It was my sister.’

Fanny looks at her appraisingly. ‘Did you now.’ She seems on the verge of saying something else, but stalls. ‘Did you lose her long ago?’ she asks.

‘Just before I met Jimmy. She was always sickly. We were all living hand to mouth then.’

Fanny puts her big, soft hand over hers. ‘Oh sweetheart, we’ve all been there. There’s only so much you can do.’

The faint Irish inflection in Joanna’s accent thickens. ‘You couldn’t give ’em cash because Da would always drink it off, you know? And I was scratching a living meself.’

‘I know, ducks,’ Fanny says. ‘And you need a certain outlay to attract the next meal ticket. You did well for yourself, sweetheart. Look what you ’ave now. There ain’t nothing you could’ve done for her.’

Joanna takes out a white cambric handkerchief and wipes her eyes. She is disarmed by Fanny’s kindness. Fanny, only three or four years older than herself, already an overblown rose, who Gabriel will never marry. She thinks of the gold ring Jimmy put on her own finger for the painting, so casually she couldn’t tell if it was merely a prop, like the fan, or whether he meant something by it. Mrs Abbott, she calls herself, but it’s a fiction, of course, another mirror self peeling off, a drift of white petals and peacock feathers on a lawn, on a street she doesn’t live on any more.

As if reading her thoughts, Fanny asks, ‘How are things with Jimmy’s mother?’

‘It’s easy enough while she’s away’, Joanna says. ‘Almost like old times. But when she’s here, I’m in exile. I’m *the model*. I need to be *guided back to the path of virtue*.’ She makes a face that is so uncannily like Jimmy’s godly and respectable mother that Fanny bursts out laughing. ‘She’s always trying to give me tracts. I keep them and use them for Jimmy’s cigarette papers.’

‘Use ’em to wipe your bum, more like!’ says Fanny. Joanna claps her hand to her mouth but can’t prevent a snort of laughter. Fanny catches her eye with an expression of feigned outrage and that sets them both off, giggling like children and trying to compose themselves, then looking up at one another and starting again.

Fanny takes a deep breath and straightens up. ‘Look, Jo, love. You ain’t never going to win that battle. She was there first and she ain’t going to let him go. You need to find yourself a few more tricks if you want to ’ang on to him. You could be a medium. You got natural talent. Why not try it yourself next time?’

Joanna thinks of Catherine’s face swimming out of the dark. She doesn’t know if she wants to turn that stone. But the painting is nearly finished and Jimmy’s mother is due home soon. She needs to think of something.

‘Can we try it again, Jo?’ Jimmy says, holding her hand gently. ‘Just the two of us?’

She looks away, out of the window where the Thames runs thick and yellow just like in the painting. There’s a young couple walking past the moorings, heads bent towards one another as if no one else in the world exists for them. The woman has on a pale green pelisse that doesn’t suit her, but she is smiling.

Joanna looks back at Jimmy, quickly. ‘Why?’ she says.

‘Because you can do it’, he says. ‘Because I want to know if it can be done.’

‘What if I don’t want to know?’ she says.

‘Don’t you?’ he says.

She looks at her hands, the finger without a ring on it. She thinks of the white dress, on the chair in the dressing room, and of Catherine’s pale face floating in the smoky mirrors.

‘Come with me,’ she says. She leads him into the sitting room that used to be hers, before she was removed to Fulham. She had thought of the things in it as belonging to her, as she had chosen them or Jimmy had bought them to please her, but of course they are not hers, they belong to Jimmy. She lets her hand trail against the mantelpiece, enjoys the coolness of the marble against her fingers. She picks up the red box that is in the painting; it seems to vibrate in her fingers, and she fancies for a second that it is hot to the touch.

‘Here,’ she says. ‘Let’s sit.’ She seats herself on the divan, meaning to place the box on the table between them, but he pushes the table aside and kneels before her, with his hands resting on her skirt. They hold the box gently together, so it rests on their upturned fingers. Its lacquered sides shine as if it is wet.

‘Let your mind go clear’, she says. She rests her eyes on the surface of the box, the shadows reflected in its polished curves. ‘Is there anyone there?’ she says. ‘Would anyone like to speak?’

She is quiet for a few minutes, concentrating on the colours that hover on the edge of her awareness. *Mars yellow, ultramarine, bone black, red ochre, red lake*. She waits until the colours start to form into patterns and then into faces. Some of them are unfamiliar, people she has never seen; others are faces she has longed for and half forgotten. Her mother, her poor sister. She sees the face of a baby and cannot help giving a small mewling cry, like a cat.

‘What is it?’ he asks.

‘It is one who cannot speak,’ she whispers. She hesitates. She doesn’t know whether this might take them to a place to which they have not yet been and from which there is no return. ‘He has no words because he was never born.’

She can feel him shift his weight towards her, uneasy but unwilling to break the circle. The baby's face shivers and dissolves into a mess of pigments. She tries to follow it, but it has gone. A fellow with long mustachios appears in his place. 'A man', she says. 'I don't know him. He has dark hair and a long moustache. He is wearing a smoking jacket and carrying a cigar.'

'Oh, it is my cousin Eric!' Jimmy says with evident relief. 'From Georgia!'

She grasps at this snippet. She has heard him parody his southern cousins before. 'Yes, he has an American accent', she says. 'A southern accent', she adds carefully. She remembers details, gleaned from conversations when she poured the tea and no one paid attention to her. 'He still has an eye for the ladies', she says. 'He still enjoys a cigar.'

Jimmy's eyes light up, and she knows she has him, for this moment at least.

Jimmy puts the flowers in afterwards. They come into season when the painting is almost done, and Joanna gets up early and fetches an armful from Covent Garden Market; she is the only one he trusts to buy the exact kind he needs. A huge spray of pink azaleas, awkward to carry in the cab; every time it jolts, she clutches nervously at the long stems. His brushstrokes are fast, fluid, blooming directly on the canvas. Rose madder for the petals; ultramarine, viridian, cadmium, and zinc yellow for the leaves. The flowers don't reflect in the mirror, although everything else does. It's not noticeable to anyone who didn't know they weren't really there at the time. There's something about the lack of reflection that appeals to her; it counteracts the flowers' ephemerality. The flowers are resolutely material, they refuse to be translated into the mirror world.

In the mirror world, there's one of Jimmy's paintings of the river behind her head, the yellowish waters enriched by the gilded frame. It's a window within a window, bisected by the fold of the mirror. The version of her outside the mirror looks towards it, and the one in the reflection looks away. These two selves look like different women to her, and she's not sure which one she recognizes. The mirror self looks younger, but also sadder, the light catching on her brow and cheekbones like a Renaissance Madonna, carrying the sorrows of the world. She imagines her being the one who lived here, before Jimmy's mother's arrival. The other one, the one leaning on the mantelpiece and holding the fan, is the one who now lives at the house in Fulham. One of the women is outside looking in, but she is not sure which. She wonders if he can tell the difference, and which is the one he wants.

Jimmy's mother is coming home soon, and he has re-engaged a second housemaid and is cleaning out the house on Lindsey Row, ridding it of her smell on the sheets and the loose hairs fallen from her brush onto the dressing table. 'We'll go back to Paris for a while', he promises. 'We'll go back to the French coast. We'll find some time for ourselves.' He is already planning another White Girl picture, even as he is varnishing the painting to display at the Royal Academy.

The more she sits with the painting, the more her eyes are drawn to the lacquered box, a detail you might miss on a cursory glance, distracted by the drama of the woman confronting her mirror self. But if you follow both women's eyes across the canvas, you will see they are connected by the taut thread of their gaze. It might appear they are both looking at the gold band on their wedding finger, but she knows they are both looking at the box, glowing lucky Mandarin red and gold against pale marble and muslin. The more she looks, the angrier and more insistent that redness is, like a cold sore blooming on the corner of a mouth. Even now, she feels it burning, a live coal against her wrist.

The Yellow Art Piece (2023)

Azadeh Monzavi

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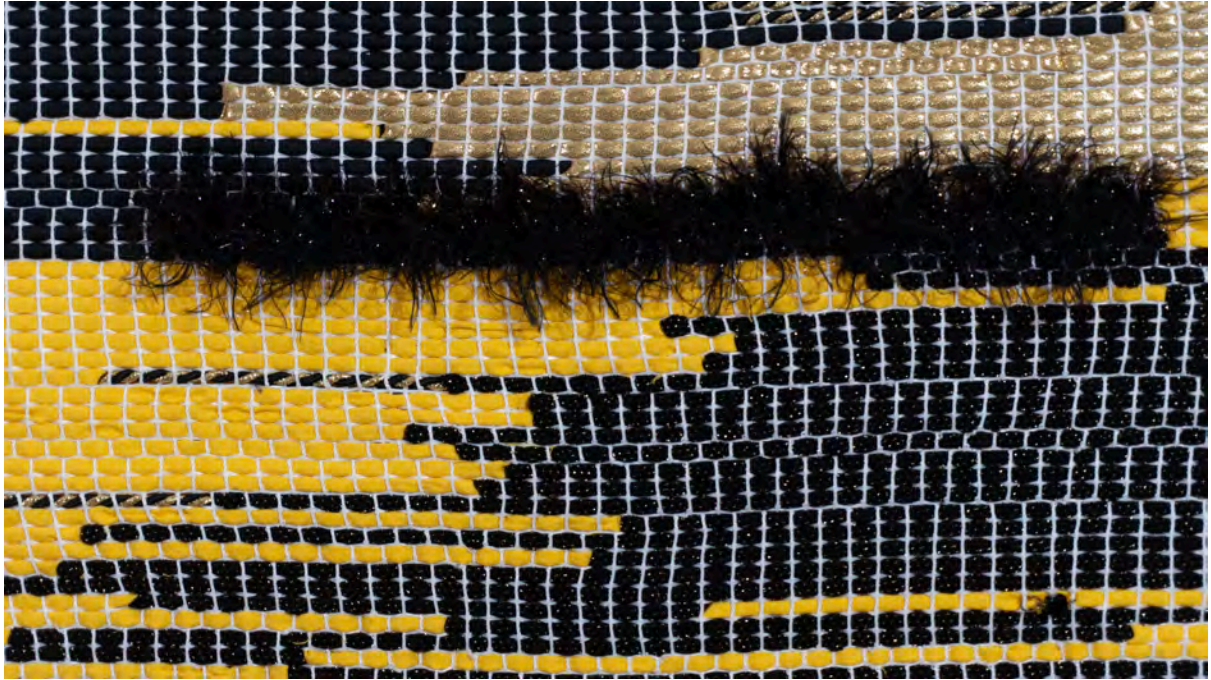
What you are looking at here is *The Yellow Art Piece*, created for this issue of *Volupté*. The title is the only true statement I feel the piece needs from me as the artist, as it will surely resonate with the readers of this journal and others familiar with the 1890s. To the rest of its viewers, otherwise unfamiliar with the milieu it turns to, it is merely a work of art in yellow, black, and gold. Works of art only take on meaning if seen. It is, thus, the familiarity and knowledge of the viewer that lends meaning to the work.

In theory, as an artist whose practice is centred around contemporary issues of identity, feminism, social justice, and memory, I approached this work with one inspiration: art for art's sake! It was meant to be aesthetically pleasing, luxurious for its use of materials, and decadently self-indulgent. In practice, however, it was an embodied experience of the decadent pain one feels in the pleasure of creating something beautiful yet of no use.

The materials that I had initially been drawn to, such as rich velvets, heavy brocades, and delicate lace, proved useless as they fell apart. The only suitable yellow fabric to use also proved impossible to find on the shelves and in the baskets of charity shops. After a few failed options, finding the right shade of yellow fabric that could be cut into ribbons without falling apart became an occupation of mine. On the surface, the seemingly abundant use of materials without the added value of morals turned out to be a valuable lesson in materiality. Most importantly, given that the materials are upcycled, they are inherently embedded with narratives – purposes and intentions. Whether leftover from a dress made by a mum, a quilt by a grandma, or simply a sewing project abandoned halfway, these materials add their history to the piece. The resulting artwork is the most decadent work I have created to date, a work whose every inch has received equal attention and effort.

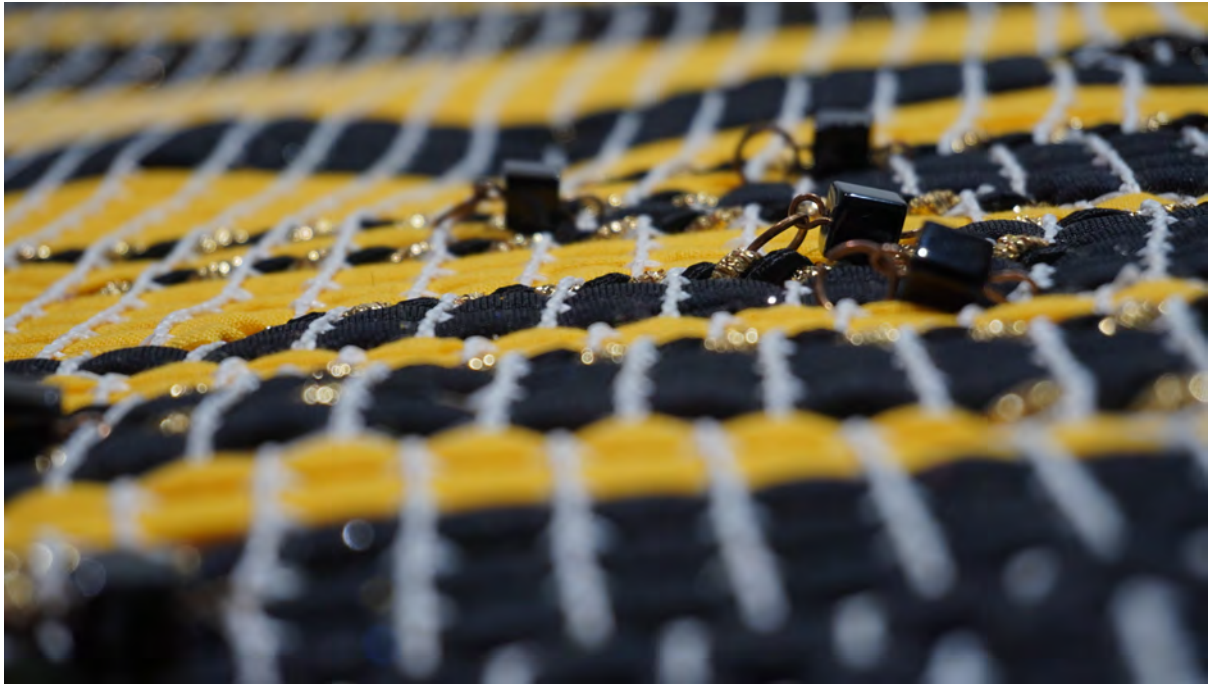


Fig. 1: *The Yellow Art Piece* (2023).
Canvas rug and upcycled materials: various fabrics, knitting yarn, vintage necklace beads.
86 cm x 132 cm.









Figs 2-6: Details from *The Yellow Art Piece* (2023).

Extracts from 'A thread through portraits of Marchesa Casati',
an unpublished sequence of 15 poems

Andrew Nightingale

Baron Adolph de Meyer, 1912

She's looking back at de Meyer,
throwing her gaze,
black veil,
over his face: cold wit, no mercy.

But to look over the back of a chair
is to turn, which is to figure
or to cut a new figure,
looking back to an idol for cover:

she picks a princess to dress herself in.
She cuts her cloth, she wears
the Belgiojoso, aping the embalmed lover
with a mannequin

at her table in Venice
when dining with the photographer.
She also raids that princess for
tall emaciation, the eyes of a sphinx,

the early PJ Harvey makeup,
charcoal smudging arum white,
a morbid aura of séance and scrying:
generally, eau de fin de siècle.

She's young, why fault her
for dressing in an iconic forbear
to wield a feudal power
from eyebrow, fringe and philtrum?

This first recorded stillness
is the first running stitch
along a straight seam that gathers in
tailored tropes, a sequence

of subterfuges that keep her alive
and (or is this how?) keep her never
quite herself as in a garment
without flesh inside.

Roberto Montenegro, 1914

Knockoff Beardsley
by the young illustrator from Guadalajara
makes an androgynous opening bracket of her
on the steps of Palazzo dei Leoni.

She wears Persian costume,
metallic silver with pearls,
a Paul Poiret,
and she holds aloft a gourd of perfume

like it was nouveau fruit. At heel
a masked footman
ushers with a lantern
and proffers a bowl of peach hearts:

fruit dressed as unholy desire.
The décor is orbs, button holes, eyelets
as beads in webbing or threshed kernels
or pawnbroker weft on a warp of nacre layers.

Her shawl recalls two black dolphin
handles mounted off the shoulders
of her vase – the vessel for which she offers
Montenegro anything in the shop.

The asymmetry of the bracket is corrected
later in Paris
with a life-size mirror image,
a waxwork in a matching outfit.

Joseph Rous Paget-Fredericks, 1940s

All over the place:
retro Deco
on a gold ink ground evoking
medieval icons, some tortured saint

but done up as Taoist wanderer
with, is that the traditional tasselled spear?
And two, no, three of her trademark cheetahs
back on loan from Kunlun Mountain.

She seems ascended, white blush enraptured
in a vaping trail of cloud mysteries,
her marchioness arts a prescient mastery
of shamanic catwalk patterns and

look! She's looking straight at me
and she's Golden Lady
of the Shining Lake...
Wake up! She slaps my cheek

and is gone
where the penniless
find grace in the privacy
of loss.

Time gradually pulls the spindle
bare, iron girders settle
their grid of anti-telepathy
and South Ken rain sews on sequins.

Cecil Beaton, 1954

Beaton pretends to take the Pekinese,
but Luisa still swerves, she turns away
and manages to shield her face
so a refusal is perceived.

These last images, a final first,
turn against the spectator,
the reflection in belladonna depths,
the cloak of bold defiance,

the back of the chair.
Beaten,
everything is taken and cheapened,
the bottles of meths,

broken clocks,
an old electric fire,
wilting artificial flowers,
keys to villas she's now sold off.

She wants Beaton sued for defamation
but she still takes tea with him.
He has her shots stuffed in a glass coffin,
high camp fit for a morality play:

the trauma
no cut can fix,
no costumier re-imagine.
Horror's the body's

irreducible trauma. A symbolic
ensemble can't deflect
the imaginary fabric's slough,
the stopping of the run of stitches.

A drunken placket
detached from the body hangs loose
to leave cloth words rot.

Otherscapes

Jade Starmore, Rebecca Wyman, and Deniz Uster

This series of photographs explores the idea of the beautiful young woman dropped like a Monopoly house into a location at odds with her perfect appearance. It takes inspiration from Pre-Raphaelite artworks, where the sitters recline gracefully amid artfully gathered gowns, passively awaiting a tragedy only hinted at by a slight pout of the lips. Even when fully submerged in rivers on their way to an untimely demise, every limb and lock of hair is perfectly positioned to give the viewer the best window onto their beauty. No allowance is given for the discomfort of the pose, the impossible neckline which would cause the dress to fall to the floor if the sitter stood, the cold water seeping through the rich fabric. All consideration is for the viewer.

In this story we begin by taking our heroine and depositing her into a decaying, many-roomed castle. She begins lost, like Alice in Wonderland, vulnerable, drifting in her finery and looking for rescue from some approaching threat. As the series progresses, she starts to welcome her environment, becoming a true explorer and inviting the encroaching plant and insect life to curl around her. By the final frames she is entirely comfortable in her surroundings and is no longer positioned for the satisfaction of the viewer. Her fabric drapes in line with her own requirements and intruders are no longer welcome.

Styling and photography by Jade Starmore
Headpieces and shoes by Deniz Uster/Otherscapes Studio
Modelling by Rebecca Wyman.





























‘Oh, London dear!’:
Belated Decadence and the Queer City in Ronald Firbank’s *Vainglory* and *Caprice*

Lucinda Janson

In his introduction to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935* (1936), W. B. Yeats famously declared that, after the so-called Yellow Nineties, ‘in 1900 everybody got down off his stilts; henceforth nobody drank absinthe with his black coffee; nobody went mad; nobody committed suicide; nobody joined the Catholic church; or if they did I have forgotten’.¹ Yeats’s remark is, of course, tongue-in-cheek. Still, Yeats had forgotten at least one writer, and very few people have remembered him since. Ronald Firbank, who wrote his best-known novels during, and immediately after, the First World War, stayed up on his stilts, half drank himself to death, converted to the Catholic Church, and was widely considered to be mad – or, at least, very eccentric. One person who did remember Firbank was E. M. Forster, whose 1929 article on Firbank was reprinted in the same year as Yeats’s *Modern Verse*. ‘[T]here is nothing up to date’ about him, Forster states: rather, Firbank is ‘*fin de siècle*, as it used to be called; he belongs to the nineties and the *Yellow Book*; his mind inherits the furniture and his prose the cadences of Aubrey Beardsley’s *Under the Hill*’.² Definitionally, decadence is always belated. But Firbank’s was doubly so, because he had missed out on the 1890s. He was too late to be belated when the men and women of the ‘Yellow Nineties’ had been feeling belated in exactly the same way that he would a few decades later.

It is significant that Firbank was remembered by the queer Forster, who no doubt saw something of a kindred spirit in the flagrantly queer writings of Firbank, and Forster who, in his own fiction, famously sought ways of imagining how queer lives might be lived in relative freedom. How, or, more precisely, *where*. Forster, in *Maurice* (written 1913-14) and in various posthumously published short stories, leads his queer protagonists to ‘the greenwood’: a pastoral refuge with a touch of the Hellenistic. Firbank’s queer utopia – as Forster’s invocation of Beardsley and *The Yellow Book* implies – was, conversely, an *urban* space. It was, in large part, the London of the

decadent Nineties, as well as all the previous Londons that existed, palimpsestically, beneath it. Beardsley, and publications such as *The Yellow Book* and the *Savoy*, were inextricably associated with the metropolis, where artists, authors, publishers, and readers congregated, many of them queer or otherwise marginalized in late-Victorian Britain. *The Yellow Book* itself was a glaring feature of London's shopfronts from its first publication in 1894. The poets Michael Field wrote in their diary that they were 'almost blinded by the glare of hell', and that their eyes seemed to be 'filled with incurable jaundice' upon seeing copies of the first edition on display at The Bodley Head in Vigo Street.³ Although Firbank would have been only eight years old at *The Yellow Book*'s initial publication, his abiding interest in the culture of the 1890s is evidenced when two characters in *Vainglory* (1915) have an assignation in Vigo Street.⁴

The critical literature on Firbank is regrettably sparse, and scholarship has yet to consider Firbank as an urban novelist. Don Adams has characterized Firbank as a 'pastoral' novelist whose works are concerned with idealized, rural havens of tolerance.⁵ Alex Murray and Martin Lockerd have discussed the Firbankian impulses of Evelyn Waugh's fiction (Waugh was both an admirer and sceptic of Firbank), and have begun to trace a genealogy of the decadent Arcadian from Beardsley to Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*.⁶ As has been documented by Brigid Brophy, who writes extensively about Firbank's cult of Wilde, and Ellis Hanson, who concludes his monograph on decadent Catholicism with a discussion of Firbank's religiosity, Firbank idolized and continually looked back to the 1890s, the decade of the queer city *par excellence*, peopled by Wilde's youthful aesthete Dorian Gray, Conan Doyle's homosocial pair Holmes and Watson, and, in his poem 'Plato in London', Lionel Johnson's time-travelling, street-walking Ancient Greek.⁷

That Firbank worshipped Wilde, in particular, is striking, given just how crucial London was to Wilde's own works and image. The libretto to Gilbert and Sullivan's opera *Patience* (1881), a satire on the Aesthetic movement, includes an oft-quoted line strongly associated with Wilde: 'If you walk down Piccadilly with a poppy or a lily in your mediæval hand'.⁸ The mention of Piccadilly cements the centrality of London to the Wildean mythos. At the same time, the reference to the

‘mediæval’ reveals, and does much to create, a popular association between Aestheticism and the Middle Ages. It suggests that aesthetes looked longingly back to a medieval past – as did Firbank’s characters. Like any good medieval saint, *Vainglory*’s society hostess Mrs Shamefoot dedicates her life to becoming vitrified in a ‘commemorative window to herself’ (p. 17). This is, in fact, reminiscent of another line from the same song in *Patience*, regarding the ‘stained glass attitudes’ adopted by decadent types.⁹ As she awaits her translation into stained glass, Mrs Shamefoot keeps a florist’s shop as a hobby, ‘just at the beginning of Sloane Street’ (p. 30). From the shop window, Mrs Shamefoot observes passers-by, many of whom are her friends, on their way to Holy Trinity, an Arts-and-Crafts church built in 1888-90, which features a large Morris and Co. window: an aestheticist retreat in the heart of London.¹⁰ This web of queer urban aestheticism is strengthened when one remarks that Mrs Shamefoot admits to having ‘tidied [her]self before the Virgin of the Rocks’ in the National Gallery on her way to the Savoy (p. 118), and that Sarah Siquier’s costumes for a London theatre in *Caprice* (1917) are praised for being ‘Renaissance, and ergo *à la mode*!’ (p. 361). These are both references to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), the most famous work of the arch-aesthete Walter Pater, who taught Oscar Wilde, and was a prominent figure in London aesthetic circles of the 1880s and early 1890s.¹¹ Yet Joseph Bristow is certainly correct to remark that while Firbank was heavily influenced by Wilde (and, by extension, Pater), his project was one of ‘modernizing Wilde’, rather than of simply imitating him.¹²

Winsome Brookes, a young musician who lives with his male partner, an artist known in *Vainglory* only as Andrew, is a paradigmatic example of the Firbankian queer character for whom the London *both* of 1915 *and* of the past – specifically the 1890s – is a place of safety and community. Brookes and Andrew reside at the euphonious address of 13 Silvery Place. While Silvery Place does not seem to have existed outside *Vainglory*’s London, the similarly selenic Half Moon Street was not only the location of Algernon Moncrieff’s house in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), but was also a real London street which remained a queer enclave into the 1920s.¹³ Much like Algernon’s rebaptism as Ernest for matters of convenience, Brookes flirts with the idea

of ‘changing his usual name’ to the ‘more promising’ Rose de Tivoli (p. 39). Like Wilde’s characters, moreover, the lives of Brookes and his circle are marked by movement between the city and country, and back again. Brookes follows his patron, Mrs Henedge, to the cathedral town of Ashringford, where he is soon stricken with a very decadent *ennui*, and a similarly Wildean distaste for the country. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Gwendolen peevishly remarks that ‘Personally I cannot understand how anybody manages to exist in the country, if anybody who is anybody does. The country always bores me to death.’¹⁴

Brookes would certainly concur with Gwendolen, as demonstrated by the following dialogue, in which he is discovered sleeping in the Bishop’s palace, having entered uninvited in search of some books for his patron. He says:

‘In the country one is always grateful to find anything to do.’

‘Have you been here long?’

‘Since yesterday. Already, I could howl for staleness.’

Mrs Shamefoot glanced at the Bishop.

‘Very likely,’ she said; ‘but to run away the moment you arrive, just because it’s the most appealing place on earth ... I should call it decadent!’

And indeed, after a few hours nearer Nature, perpetually it was the same with him. A *nostalgie du pavé* began to set in. He would miss the confidential ‘Things is very bad, sir,’ of the newspaper boy at the corner; the lights, the twinkling advertisements of the Artistic Theatre ... the crack of the revolver so audible those nights that the heroine killed herself, the suspense, the subsequent sickening silence; while the interest, on lighter evenings, would be varied by the ‘Call me my biplane,’ of Indignation as it flew hurriedly away. (p. 86)

Mrs Shamefoot is right in calling Brookes’ attitude ‘decadent’. His bombastic French phrase, *nostalgie du pavé*, recalls Charles Baudelaire’s phrase *Le spleen de Paris*, used as a title for his posthumous collection of prose poems, as well as Walter Pater’s description of the ‘fatigue du Nord’ felt by the queer German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann.¹⁵ Brookes’ ‘nostalgia for the pavement’ – as a literal translation of the French gives us – demonstrates not only a generalized decadent malaise, but also that he envisages a return to London as a return *home*. After all, a literal translation of ‘nostalgia’, taking into account the Greek origins of the word, would be ‘return home pain’.

It is notable that what Brookes misses about the city is, in large part, its modernity: the ‘twinkling advertisements’ and the ‘biplane’ are both conspicuous signs of new technologies of communication, transportation, and capitalism. Indeed, Firbank makes Brookes’ longing for the London of 1915 so up-to-date that some of his allusions are now impossible to decipher: ‘Call me my biplane’ could conceivably refer to a popular phrase – from some play or music hall act – now lost to oblivion. The reference to the biplane also anticipates, by some ten years, the famous ‘strong high singing of some aeroplane overhead’, whose flight over London – ‘the sound boring into the ears of all people in the Mall, in the Green Park, in Piccadilly, in Regent Street, in Regent’s Park’ – connects all the characters in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). It also invokes cutting-edge technology, the war that had been and the war that everyone suspected was soon to come, and advertising. “‘It’s toffee,’” murmured Mr Bowley’, who had just been reflecting, ‘sentimentally’, on ‘orphans, widows, the War – tut-tut’.¹⁶

‘Nostalgia’ also implies a longing not only for the London of 1915, but also for the London, or Londons, of the past. The London theatrical world, whose ‘light’ and ‘twinkling advertisements’ Brookes misses, is also that of Wilde’s heyday in the first half of the 1890s, before his trials and imprisonment. ‘[T]he crack of the revolver so audible those nights that the heroine killed herself surely alludes to the suicide of the young actress Sybil Vane in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-91). In fact, in *Caprice*, Firbank rewrites the Wildean trope of the tragic young London actress in a tragicomic vein. The novel follows the fortunes of Sarah Siquier, the daughter of a Westmorland canon who runs away to London to pursue her dream of becoming an actress, only to be killed by a mousetrap after her successful opening night as Juliet. Upon first arriving in London, Sarah stumbles, fortuitously, upon the Café Royal, in search of ‘some nice teashop’ or ‘cool creamery’ (p. 315). The Café Royal was famously frequented by fin-de-siècle decadents including Wilde and Beardsley, and continued to be a gathering space for artists and queer people into the twentieth century. Indeed, Sarah soon finds London to be just as much of a queer utopia as does Winsome

Brookes. She begins a relationship with another aspiring actress, Miss May Mant, bonding over their shared love of the stage:

‘Oh, isn’t it wonderful?’
‘What?’
‘Being here.’
‘It’s rather pleasant.’
‘Can you feel the boards?’
‘A little.’
‘They go *right* through me. Through my shoes, up my legs, and at my heart they sting.’
‘Kiss me.’
‘I love you.’
‘Pet.’
‘Do I look interesting?’
‘Ever so.’
‘Would you take me for a Cardinal’s comfort?’ (p. 351)

In ‘Foreign-Colony Street, Soho’, Sarah is introduced to another unambiguously gay male couple, reminiscent of Brookes and Andrew: the ‘versatile young men Harold Weathercock and Noel Nice’ (p. 338), a pair of actors who live together and who run a laundry business on the side to fund their theatrical endeavours. Their ‘fifth-floor laundry garden’ has brought ‘all Chelsea (and part of Paris)’ along with Sarah, ‘to study illusive atmospherical effects from the[ir] dizzying drying-ground’ (p. 338). London is here figured for Sarah, Harold, and Noel – as it was for Brookes and Andrew – as a utopia which can provide a haven for queer people. Their security is, however, precarious, as evidenced by Sarah’s swift demise, and Harold and Noel’s desperate turn from artistic pursuits to the laundry business. The ambience of the 1890s is heightened by the mention of Paris, whose absinthe and *fleurs du mal* made it the other quintessential city of decadence.

These attempts to find sanctuary in the city suggest that it is useful to situate *Vainglory* and *Caprice* within the genre of the ‘urban pastoral’. As Terry Gifford has demonstrated, traditional pastoral is written for and by city-dwellers, and is concerned with movements of *retreat* and *return*: retreat into the atemporal, paradisaical world of the countryside, and return to the busy, harried world of the city.¹⁷ In the classical Latin formulation, this is the distinction between *otium*, or leisure, and *negotium*, or business.¹⁸ Firbank’s novels collapse this dichotomy. Anticipating Joyce and Woolf, Firbank crafts almost plotless novels, in which *otium* takes precedence over *negotium*, whether in the

country or the city. In this, his work resembles the amphibious urban pastoral works of the eighteenth century, first produced by Jonathan Swift and John Gay.

The *Town Eclogues* (1715) of Swift's and Gay's associate, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, are explicitly mentioned in Firbank's *Vainglory*, alongside her 'Epistle from Arthur Grey the Footman', which is quoted. The allusion comes early in the novel, at the London *soirée* hosted by Mrs Henedge at her dwelling 'just off Chesham Place' (p. 9). Here we learn that Brookes is writing an opera based on Montagu's works:

Through the wide windows of the drawing-room someone could be heard to say:
'Town Eclogues! ... Epistle from Arthur Grey the Footman. Words by Lady Mary Wortley. Music by Chab-bon-nière.'
'Delightful'
'So suitable!'
'Ingenious!'
'Ingeniousness *is* so rare!'
'And so enchanting!' (p. 161)

The choice of Montagu's urban pastoral is significant for the queerness of Firbank's project: Montagu was known in Firbank's day as a queer figure, at least to a certain cognoscenti. In the 'Sexual Inversion' volume of his pioneering *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (third edition, 1915), Havelock Ellis quotes Montagu's writings about Turkish women, in which she describes admiringly the 'majestic grace' with which they move at the Turkish baths, 'stark naked, without any beauty or defect concealed'.¹⁹ Montagu was rumoured to have had lesbian relationships, admired Sappho's works, and alluded to the Greek poet's 'Fragment 31' in her letters. John Hervey and Alexander Pope famously nicknamed her 'Sappho'.²⁰

Firbank is plainly keen for his readers to make the connection between Montagu and her Sapphic appellation, since the *soirée* is being held in honour of an 'original fragment of Sappho' which has been discovered by Mrs Henedge's acquaintance Professor Inglepin (p. 7). Although the fragment itself turns out to be bathetically anti-climactic in content – we are only given the English translation, 'Could not, for the fury of her feet!' (p. 22) – Firbank makes it clear that the *soirée* is to be viewed as Sapphic in the adjective's fullest range of meanings. While Professor

Inglepin requests that, stylistically, ‘severity might be the key’ at the *soirée*, Mrs Henedge disobeys him ‘in everything’, particularly his injunction against flowers (p. 9). She fills her drawing-room with ‘white and dark mauve stocks’, and during dinner she ‘scatter[s] violets indiscriminately into the glasses and over the plates’ (pp. 10 and 15). The recurrence of shades of purple is important to note here. Mauve was well known as a homosexual colour in the period, while violets, thanks to the Sappho poem, were associated with lesbians.²¹ Firbank and his circle were well-versed in such colour symbolism: in a memoir of his friend, the American author Carl Van Vechten writes that Firbank’s colour was ‘magenta’, while Wilde’s was green.²² Mrs Henedge’s guests are patently aware of such subcultural meanings: they ‘remember Sappho’ (p. 15) as they spread the violets, and the talk around the dinner table turns before long to Mitylene, the capital of the Greek isle of Lesbos where Sappho famously ‘loved and s[a]ng’.²³

Yet Firbank does not allow his audience to forget that as much as Mrs Henedge attempts to cultivate a ‘Greek’ atmosphere; her salon is, in fact, held in London in or about 1915. Thus, we learn, parenthetically, that the Lesbian wine which the guests consume is ‘from Samos. Procured, perhaps, in Pall Mall’ (p. 15). This is just one of many examples of Firbank letting his characters almost reach the pastoral Greek, before undercutting the moment by a return to the contemporary, and, particularly, to the contemporary city.

For the city is still not the perfect utopia for queer people, just as it was not at the turn of the century. It was, of course, in the London of 1895 that Wilde was arrested on charges of gross indecency; it was in the Green Dragon on Fleet Street in 1902 that thirty-five-year-old Lionel Johnson, partly plagued by the ramifications of his homosexuality, drank himself to death; it was in a London workhouse in 1905, after multiple convictions over the previous decades for soliciting sex in public toilets, that Simeon Solomon died. The decadents of the nineteenth century had looked back to other historical moments: to Ancient Greece, to the Renaissance, to the eighteenth century. But in the absence of those, for Firbank as for Wilde and his circle, the best alternative was still the modern metropolis.

Given such tarnished histories, it is perhaps not surprising that Firbank's engagement with the world of 1915 has its limits. While his contemporaries from Cambridge such as Rupert Brooke (incidentally, the model for Winsome Brookes) were writing poetry about their experiences in the trenches of France, Firbank, who was excused from military service on the grounds of ill health, spent the war in Oxford, living in Oscar Wilde's old rooms on High Street.²⁴ As Firbank sought to escape wartime London, so do his novels of the period rarely mention the Great War. The only reference to it in *Vainglory* occurs in an offhand, highly satiric conversation between Lady Anne, wife of the Bishop of Ashringford, and her secretary, the aptly named Miss Madge Hospice:

'I was wondering what had become of you,' Lady Anne had said to her as she came in. Where on earth have you been?'

'...Wading through fields of violet vetch. It's so delicious out.'

'Had you forgotten today?'

'I don't think so: I've told Gripper again to sponge the stretchers, but he's so lazy, you know he never will.'

The bi-weekly Ambulance classes at the Palace, (so popular socially), were, it must be owned, on a parallel with the butter-making at Trianon. (p. 62)

Trianon, of course, was the rustic retreat built for Marie Antoinette in the grounds of the Palais de Versailles. Marie Antoinette's requested specifications included meadowland and a farmhouse, accoutrements which were designed to create a rural ambience around the palace.²⁵ Its appearance in the same sentence as the Ambulance classes is striking when we consider that Marie Antoinette was, by the twentieth century, a sapphic icon, and the World War One ambulance corps were notoriously full of lesbians: both feature, the latter heavily, in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1929), which draws on Ellis, and which many hold to have defined the twentieth-century lesbian.²⁶

Both Trianon and the Ambulance classes, then, are queer havens, and both are allied to the urban: while the Ambulance classes take place in the country, the motorized vehicles herald both the obliteration of rural Western Europe in the War, and the incipient overrunning of cities by cars; meanwhile, Trianon is a pastoral paradise for city dwellers, built entirely artificially, like the gardens painted on screens in Beardsley's illustrations for Pope's *Rape of the Lock*. Both, moreover, are fractured utopias. The ambulance corps were a by-product of the unprecedented

horror that was the Great War, and also one that had to disband with, coincidentally, the Treaty of Versailles, as Hall movingly chronicles. Trianon too is blemished, since it was supposedly there that Antoinette was first alerted to the beginning of the French Revolution, which would ultimately, of course, land her on the guillotine.

In his refusal to draw attention to the War, Firbank prefigures Virginia Woolf's well-known comment in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) about the relative importance ascribed to the battlefield and the salon:

This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop – everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists.²⁷

Like Woolf, Firbank privileges the salon, the drawing-room, and the shop, over the battlefield: indeed, over the field of any variety. Whereas classical warfare was city-based, such as in the Siege of Troy, the First World War was rural, fought in poppy-strewn Flanders fields. The rural was thus no longer the site of otiose luxury: the days of Roman generals retiring from command to the *otium* of the countryside were long gone. Whatever escape might be possible, it was to be found for Woolf, as for Firbank, in the city.

It should come as no surprise that Woolf, celebrated London author, wrote to a friend in May 1929 about reading Firbank's works 'with some unstinted pleasure', while she was working on *A Room of One's Own*.²⁸ In that book, London appears as the site of creative freedom – the room of one's own – for women of her own time, in opposition to the stultifying and restrictive atmosphere of 'Oxbridge'. In the fifth chapter, Woolf discusses at length a new type of female novelist, one who writes about women and their relationships with other women, past and present. Woolf imagines the potential subjects of this new kind of novel as denizens of London, and writes of feeling, in the streets of London, 'the pressure of dumbness, the accumulation of unrecorded life' of its women.²⁹ This attention to past Londons is already Firbankian, but Woolf goes further, positing that her new female novelist would write about queer relationships between women. In a

famous passage, Woolf adopts a playful Firbankian tone as she declares that, in this new kind of novel, “Chloe liked Olivia...” Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things do sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women.³⁰ Some fourteen years earlier, Firbank’s female novelist, Mrs Asp, describes her novel in the following way:

‘There’s no plot,’ Mrs Asp, who seemed utterly unable for continuity, was confiding to a charmed few, ‘no plot exactly. It’s about two women who live all alone.’
‘You mean that they live just by themselves?’
Mrs Thumbler was unable to imagine a novel without a plot, and two women who lived so quietly! ... She was afraid that poor, dear Rose was becoming dull.
‘I wonder you don’t collaborate!’ she said.
‘Oh no ... Unless I were in love with a man, and *just as a pretext*, I should never dream of collaborating with anybody.’
‘You would need a sort of male Beatrice, I suppose?’ (p. 19)

This is, of course, exactly the kind of novel that Firbank himself was writing: a novel ‘without a plot’, populated by women and queer people, about whose private lives and urban havens few books had then been written. That Firbank anticipated some of Woolf’s most famous formulations is fitting for an author who, as we have seen, is perpetually out-of-time, both looking back, in an Arcadian manner, to past Londons, and reaching forward, to the utopian promise of future, freer metropolises. Indeed, Firbank planned to set the novel he was working on at his death, *The New Rythum*, in New York, a city whose queer culture fascinated him, although he would never visit it.³¹ The optimism inherent in this creative decision is a testament to the power Firbank saw in the queer metropolis as a liberating space.

In 2019, Ellis Hanson wrote of his hope that ‘the centenary of Firbank’s novels brings a long overdue reappraisal of his significance’.³² As we are, in fact, fast approaching the centenary of Firbank’s untimely death in 1926, this project seems more urgent than ever. I have sought to contribute to this reappraisal, by placing Firbank within the context of queer, decadent Londons of the past, especially of the 1890s and the eighteenth-century, and also by seeking to locate him within his twentieth-century context. Firbank is radical in many ways, not only for his anticipation of Modernism, but also for his situating of queer lives, and queer joy, in the metropolis. Firbank’s

belatedness – his decadent turning back to past queer urban spaces and cultures – is in many ways an enabling force, allowing him to imagine utopian queer futures. Firbank’s urban pastoral constructs the city as a queer haven, albeit an occasionally precarious one, looking forward to later accounts of more liberated queer cities, by authors such as Edmund White, writing about New York; Armistead Maupin, writing about San Francisco; and Alan Hollinghurst, whose novels about gay London are inflected by his doctoral work on Firbank. There may have been, according to E. M. Forster, nothing ‘up to date’ about Firbank in 1936, but that is surely not the case in 2023.

¹ W. B. Yeats, ‘Introduction’, in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892–1935*, ed. by W. B. Yeats (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. xi.

² E. M. Forster, ‘Ronald Firbank’, in *Abinger Harvest* (London: Edward Arnold, 1936), pp. 135-41 (p. 137).

³ Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo, eds, *Michael Field, the Poet: Published and Manuscript Materials* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2009), p. 261.

⁴ Ronald Firbank, *Vainglory with Inclinations and Caprice*, ed. by Richard Canning (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 86. All future references to *Vainglory* and *Caprice* are taken from this edition, with page numbers given in text.

⁵ Don Adams, ‘Ronald Firbank’s Radical Pastorals’, *Genre*, 35.1 (2002), 121-42; Don Adams, *Alternative Paradigms of Literary Realism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 75-94.

⁶ Martin B. Lockerd, ‘Decadent Arcadias, Wild(e) Conversions, and Queer Celibacies in *Brideshead Revisited*’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 64.2 (2018), 239-63 (p. 253); Alex Murray, ‘Decadence Revisited: Evelyn Waugh and the Afterlife of the 1890s’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 22.3 (2015), 593-607 (pp. 597-600).

⁷ Brigid Brophy, *Prancing Novelist: A Defence of Fiction in the Form of a Critical Biography in Praise of Ronald Firbank* (London: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 243-338; Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 354-64.

⁸ W. S. Gilbert, *Patience* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1994), Act I, No. 6: Recit. & Song (Bunthorne) ‘Am I alone...?’

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Matthew Bradley, ‘Sinful Cities and Ecclesiastical Excuses: The “Churches for Art’s Sake” Movement from the Century Guild to Eliot’, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 37.1 (2007), 193-208 (p. 201).

¹¹ Lene Østermark-Johansen, ‘Character and Caricature’, in *Walter Pater’s European Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 158-205 (pp. 191-94).

¹² Joseph Bristow, *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing after 1885* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995), p. 105.

¹³ Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 114.

¹⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *The Complete Plays*, ed. by H. Montgomery Hyde (London: Methuen, 1988), pp. 213-90 (Act II, Scene 1, p. 265).

¹⁵ Walter Pater, ‘Winckelmann’, in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1873), pp. 146-206 (p. 148).

¹⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 4 and 21-23.

¹⁷ Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 2-5.

¹⁸ Peter V. Marinelli, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 59.

¹⁹ Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, 3rd edn, 3 vols (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, 1915), II, p. 142.

²⁰ Alison Winch, ‘“Drinking a Dish of Tea with SapP?ho”’: The Sexual Fantasies of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Lord Byron’, *Women’s Writing*, 20.1 (2013), 82-99 (p. 84).

²¹ On the significance of mauve see, for example, Charlotte Ribeyrol, ‘John Singer Sargent and the *Fin de Siècle* Culture of Mauve’, *Visual Culture in Britain*, 19.1 (2018), 6-26.

²² Carl Van Vechten, ‘Ronald Firbank’, in *Ronald Firbank: Memoirs and Critiques*, ed. by Mervyn Horder (London: Duckworth, 1977), pp. 161-65 (p. 162).

- ²³ Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome McGann, v: *Don Juan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), III. 87. 2 (p. 188).
- ²⁴ Miriam J. Benkovitz, *Ronald Firbank: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), pp. 143-45.
- ²⁵ Meredith Martin, 'Marie-Antoinette and the Hameau Effect', in *Dairy Queens: The Politics of Pastoral Architecture from Catherine de' Medici to Marie-Antoinette* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 158-213 (pp. 160-64).
- ²⁶ Terry Castle, *Noël Coward and Radclyffe Hall: Kindred Spirits* (New York: Columbia Press, 1996), pp. 46 and 67.
- ²⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. by Michèle Barrett (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 67.
- ²⁸ Nigel Nicolson, ed., *Leave the Letters till We're Dead: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 6 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1980), VI: 1936-1941, p. 526.
- ²⁹ Woolf, *Room of One's Own*, p. 81.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- ³¹ Kate Hext, 'Rethinking the Origins of Camp: The Queer Correspondence of Carl Van Vechten and Ronald Firbank', *Modernism/Modernity*, 27 (2020), 165-83 (p. 177).
- ³² Ellis Hanson, 'The Queer Drift of Firbank', in *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, ed. by Kate Hext and Alex Murray (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 118-34 (p. 120).

Park Young-hee, 'A Ward Woven with Moonlight' (1923):
A Translation with an Overview of Korean Decadence

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월광(月光)으로 짠 병실(病室) – 박영희

밤은 깊이도 모르는 어둠 속으로
끊임없이 구르고 또 빠져서 갈 때
어둠 속에 낮을 가린 미풍(微風)의 한숨은
갈 바를 몰라서 애꿎은 사람의 마음만
부질없이도 미치게 흔들어 놓도다.

가장 아름답던 달님의 마음이
이 때이면 남몰래 앓고 서 있다.

근심스럽게도 한발 한발 걸어 오르는 달님의
정맥혈(靜脈血)로 짠 면사(面絲) 속으로 나오는
병(病)든 얼굴에 말 못하는 근심의 빛이 흐를 때,
갈 바를 모르는 나의 헤매는 마음은
부질없이도 그를 사모(思慕)하도다.

가장 아름답던 나의 쓸쓸한 마음은
이 때로부터 병들기 비롯한 때이다.

달빛이 가장 거리낌 없이 흐르는
넓은 바닷가 모래 위에다
나는 내 아픈 마음을 쉬게 하려고
조그만 병실(病室)을 만들려 하여
달빛으로 쉬지 않고 쌓고 있도다.

가장 어린애같이 빈 나의 마음은
이 때에 처음으로 무서움을 알았다.

한숨과 눈물과 후회와 분노로
얕는 내 마음의 임종(臨終)이 끝나려 할 때
내 병시로는 어여쁜 세 처녀가 들어오면서
당신의 얕는 가슴 위에 우리의 손을 대라고 달님이
우리를 보냈나이다.
이 때로부터 나의 마음에 감추어 두었던
회고 흰 사랑에 피가 묻음을 알았도다.

나는 고마워서 그 처녀들의 이름을 물을 때
나는 '슬픔'이라 하나이다.
나는 '두려움'이라 하나이다.

나는 ‘안일(安逸)’이라고 부르나이다 -.
그들의 손은 아픈 내 가슴 위에 고요히 닿도다.

이 때로부터 내 마음이 미치게 된 것이
끝없이 고치지 못하는 병이 되었도다.

-[백조] 3 호(1923년 9월호)-

A Ward Woven with Moonlight

Deep within the abyss of night, darkness takes its hold,
Ceaselessly rolling, falling, ever so bold.
The sigh of the veiled Zephyr shrouded in the dark,
Knowing not where to go, lost is my aimless heart,
Madly it shakes, sways, swings, without any cause.

The heart in the once-beautiful moon's splendour,
Now suffers silently in the night's tender.

With weariness, step by step, the moon ascends,
Through threads of venous blood, anguish descends,
Upon its sickly visage, silent worries are found,
My wandering heart, uncertain where it's bound,
Yearns without reason, in silent throes profound.

From this moment, my once radiant heart,
Begins its affliction, its joy starts to depart.

Upon the vast sandy shore,
Where moonlight most freely flows,
Resting my aching heart, a solace grows.
To craft a small ward, working without rest,
With the strands of moon, a shelter I sew.

My heart, empty, like that of a child unaware,
Realizes, for the first time, the depth of its despair.

With sighs, tears, regret, and anger,
As the death throes of my heart hover,
Into my sickroom, three maidens wander,
Sent by the moon, with a purpose so clear,
‘Upon your sickened heart let us lay our hands, dear.’

From this moment, my heart understood,
Pure love hidden within was stained in blood.

Gratefully, I asked for their names in the quiet,
One speaks, ‘I am Sadness’, another, ‘I am Fear’,

The last whispers, 'Call me Comfort, my dear',
Their hands gently rest on my aching chest,

From this moment, my heart fell into unrest,
Becoming an incurable illness, an eternal quest.

White Tide, No. 3, September 1923

Overview of Korean Decadence

Although decadence was predominantly focused on Western Europe, particularly France and Britain, its influence reached as far as the Korean peninsula, during the early twentieth century when the nation was under Japanese rule. Regrettably, this facet of global decadence has been somewhat neglected within the realm of academia until now.

During the mid-Victorian period and onwards, the exchange of cultures facilitated a significant influence of Japanese art on European artists, who developed a strong affinity for the opulence of 'Oriental' aesthetics, commonly known as Japonisme. Simultaneously, Japan actively pursued westernization throughout the Meiji (1868-1912) and Taisho (1912-1926) eras, embracing and emulating various aspects of Western culture. Unsurprisingly, academic discussion in the English language on decadence in East Asia, or 'Oriental' motifs in decadence, has predominantly examined Japan's literature and art, resulting in a substantial body of academic work in this field since the 1960s.¹

Contrastingly, research in English exploring the influence and reception of the decadent tradition in Korea has been notably scarce. Limited studies have been conducted on Korean writers who advocated for *sunsu munhak* (순수문학) [pure literature] that championed Western decadence and Aestheticism through their studies in Japan.² Even within Korean domestic academia, little attention has been given to Park Young-hee 박영희 (朴英熙) (1901-1950?), the poet in question.³ Despite his famous decadent poem, '월광 (月光) 으로 짠 병실 (病室)' ['A Ward Woven with Moonlight'], being a Korean classic included in middle school literary textbooks, it remains

relatively unknown outside of the Korean-speaking community. My translation aims to introduce this renowned poem to a broader international audience, as well to better our understanding of decadence outside of its immediate cultural and geo-political sphere.

To fully understand and analyse the poem, it is crucial to consider its historical and ideological context. It was composed in the 1920s, a period when the Korean peninsula was subjected to Japanese occupation. Against this backdrop, decadent literature emerged as a distinct voice for Korean intellectuals, offering them a channel to explore themes of sexuality, melancholy, and rebellious individualism and cosmopolitanism. This artistic tradition became particularly significant as it challenged and rejected the traditional Confucian literature and the Enlightenment literature developed in the 1910s, led by figures like Yi Gwang-su 李光洙 (1892-1950) and Choe Nam-seon 崔南善 (1890-1957). These writers' literary form was proven ineffective in the face of the oppressive actions carried out by the Japanese colonial government.⁴

It is intriguing to note that the exploration and admiration of British decadence and Aestheticism, particularly the literary works of Oscar Wilde, did not start in Korea until the country was annexed by Japan in 1910. Wilde's works, especially *Salomé* (1894) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), were initially introduced to a Korean audience by the colonial government. This introduction served as a stratagem for assimilating Koreans into Japan's imperial vision of modernity, which was heavily influenced by Western culture.⁵ For example, the premier performance of *Salomé* in Korea was carried out by a renowned Japanese magic theatrical troupe, Tenkatsu Ichiza, inside the deteriorating Gyeongbokgung Palace of the Joseon dynasty in 1915 as part of the Joseon Industrial Exposition in Commemoration of the Fifth Anniversary of Japanese Colonial Rule.⁶ The exposition featured various sectors, including agriculture, forestry, mining, fisheries, industry, education, art, and archaeological material with the aim to showcase Japan's colonial achievements and the development of Korea under Japanese rule. The *Salomé* magic show, then, is not only a blatant propaganda of 'Japan's dominance over Korea',⁷ but, more importantly, it sought to establish cultural uniformity through an alluring display of Western magic tricks,

seductive dances, and modern stage techniques. These elements were perceived as effective in convincing Koreans of the cultural superiority of Western civilization, with Japan positioning itself as the self-proclaimed spokesperson for Asia in this regard. In its pursuit of modernization, Japan internalized this colonial narrative to justify its own imperial expansion.⁸ While they painstakingly promoted Western art and lifestyle on the one hand, on the other, the government-general issued an ordinance in 1911, restricting Korean folk-art performances to specific holidays with the prerequisite approval of the local authorities.⁹

Clearly, it can be observed that the Japanese regime strategically utilized Western art and literature in Korea as a tool for cultural assimilation. It attempted to devalue Korean indigenous culture, casting it as primitive and obsolete. This is evident in the Enlightenment literature of the early colonial era (1910-1919), which completely dismissed traditional Korean literary works. This strategy deeply affected Korean intellectuals, primarily educated in Japan, causing them to oscillate between a desire for Western modernity and national sovereignty. Facing discrimination both in Japan and their annexed homeland, their anguish is evident in colonial literature, marked by themes of tormented artists resorting to suicide and violence.¹⁰

In 1919, the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I failed to address Korea's sovereignty issue.¹¹ This prompted thousands of Koreans from various walks of life, including students, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens, to take to the streets to demand Korea's independence on 1 March 1919. This movement lasted for a few months and Japanese authorities responded with brutal suppression with about 7500 killed, 16000 wounded, and approximately 46000 arrested.¹² The movement marked a significant turning point in Korea's struggle for independence, as it drew international attention to their cause and defined a new era of colonial literature. However, Korea did not regain its sovereignty until 1945.

The failure of the March 1st Movement left many young scholars disillusioned and bewildered. Literary critic Paek Chöl 백철(白鐵) states in 'The Impact of the March 1st Movement' (1948):

The March 1st Independence Movement is the last stronghold of hope for our nation. Therefore, the failure of this movement resulted in the loss of prospects for our entire nation, and a despairing precipice loomed before us.¹³

Following the movement, Korea faced challenges on multiple fronts. Politically, its sovereignty was already compromised. Economically, Japanese industrial dominance led to the decline of local industries, pushing the nation towards bankruptcy. However, the movement's impact led the Japanese colonial government to ease censorship, permitting limited private publications. This fostered an environment for the emerging literati to share their modern experiences through coterie journals.

One of the most notable among these, the *Baekjo* 白潮 [*White Tide*] literary magazine (1922-1923), led by Park Young-hee, stands out as a significant proponent of decadence in Korea. It marked a departure from the didactic literature of the early colonial era. Apart from *Baekjo*, there were other significant journals like *Changjo* 创造 [*Creation*] (1919-1921), co-initiated by Kim Dong-in 金东仁 (1900-1951) and his Tokyo-based peers, and *Pyebo* 废墟 [*Ruins*] (1920-1921), directed by Kim Eok 金億 (1896-?). These three influential coterie journals championed Aestheticism and decadence, offering a platform for writers to delve into avant-garde themes and styles, thereby enriching Korean literature of the time.

According to literary critic Han Hyo 韓曉, the literati of that time found the prevailing bleak situation unbearable, prompting them to 'transcend the boundaries of reality' with a decadent attitude. They pursued 'conceptual liberation', and achieved 'the sublimation of the subjective world, forming a kind of Romantic literature' just like the construction of the 'beautiful third world'.¹⁴ They translated, introduced, and emulated the works of influential figures of the Aesthetic and decadent traditions, including Wilde, Charles Baudelaire, Aubrey Beardsley, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and even lesser-known Russian decadent writers like Boris Konstantinovich Zaytsev.¹⁵ This literary movement offered them a sense of catharsis and empowerment, serving as a tool to confront their psychological trauma.

Moreover, while they identified with the fin de siècle melancholy and frustration with the world found in decadence, they also sought to appropriate its rebellious and provocative aspects. They held the hope that the infusion of Western decadence, with its vitality and fresh perspectives, could invigorate their own literary scene, which had grown weary of didactic and politically oriented works. As Park stated in the inaugural issue of *White Tide*,

to rejuvenate the outdated literary world and bring about a 'White Tide' literary trend, I, as a comrade writer, bear a significant responsibility. Additionally, I aim to introduce foreign literature and arts as a pioneer. I have translated the works of the famous writer of British aestheticism (英國의唯美主義),¹⁶ Mr. Oscar Wilde.¹⁷

The aspiration to diversify Korean literature prompted them to zealously write manifestos to defend literature's autonomy. They also used these manifestos as a means to articulate their perplexity and confusion regarding the modernity enforced by Japanese colonial rule.

Park Young-hee, better known by his pen name Hoe-wol 회월(懷月), was a prominent figure in the Korean decadent movement. Born and educated in Seoul, South Korea, Park attended Gonggok Elementary School and Baejae High School. Notably, unlike many of his peers, Park did not undergo the traditional Chinese Confucian education.¹⁸ Dong-ha Lee suggests that Park's early education fostered a strong affinity for modernity, leading him to be more receptive to Western literature.¹⁹ On 5 March 1919, Park was actively involved in the March 1st movement and was arrested but subsequently released with a warning. After completing his education at Baejae High School, he pursued further studies in Japan at the Tokyo Seisoku English School. By 1921, he had returned to Korea and began contributing to various coterie publications.

Park lived during a period characterized by cultural suppression and political turmoil. This context deeply influenced his writings, which often reflected themes of despair, disillusionment, and a longing for freedom. Infused with the aesthetics of decadence, his works served as more than artistic expressions; they also represented a subtle form of resistance against the oppressive regime. The artistic expression of fin de siècle decadence, with its obsession with the declining Roman Empire, also resonated deeply with Korean students like Park who were witnessing the

decline and demise of the Joseon Kingdom (1392-1897) and the short-lived Korean Empire (1897-1910) during their own lifetime.²⁰ Park's literary orientation was significantly influenced by his exposure to decadent literature with the works of Wilde exerting a particularly profound impact. In the inaugural issue of *White Tide* (1923), Park published his unfinished translation of *Salomé*, marking its first appearance in Korean literary scene.

While Wilde penned *Salomé* in French, Park's fluency in the language is uncertain. It is also unclear whether Park translated from English or used Japanese or Russian versions.²¹ By the 1920s, Mori Ogai's Japanese translation, based on the German adaptation for Richard Strauss's 1907 opera, was widely available.²² Given this context, it is probable that Park engaged primarily with a Japanese adaptation. His stint at an elite English school in Tokyo implies a degree of English proficiency; however, the brevity of his time there suggests he predominantly used a Japanese version, occasionally cross-referencing with English texts.

The exploration of beauty, indulgence, perversity, and individualism in Wilde's writing strongly resonated with Park, inspiring him to incorporate these elements into his own literary works. One notable example is the poem, 'A Ward Woven with Moonlight', published in the third issue of *White Tide* (1923). The poem is significant in Korean literary history as it trailblazes the new literary trend of decadence, which was known as 'morbid romanticism' in the 1920s.²³ Through this piece, Park captures the bleak reality of his motherland in a sentimental manner, reflecting not only his own profound melancholy and the yearning to escape from the harshness of reality, but also the deep-seated collective despair and sorrow of the Korean people, in the aftermath of the failed March 1st movement.

The opening lines of the poem immediately plunge the reader in an emotional landscape where the narrator is depicted as tormented even by the gentlest breezes. This vivid imagery emphasizes the heightened sensitivity and fragile mental state of the narrator, likely symbolizing the psychological distress faced by the Korean literati amidst the political unrest of that time.

The speaker then describes gathering moonlight on a sandy seashore, creating a ‘ward’ or sanctuary for his ailing heart. However, despite this attempt to find solace, the speaker’s heart, portrayed as empty as a child, is now filled with fear for the first time upon facing reality. As previously discussed, before the March 1st movement, the intellectuals still held hope for Korean independence and progress. However, the failure of the movement shattered their illusions and made them realize their disempowerment and the brutal strength of the imperial force. These idealists were confronted with genuine terror for the first time.

The translation of Park’s poem, a quintessential example of *byeondae-si* (현대시) or modern Korean poetry, is a delicate balance between linguistic fidelity and poetic resonance. Written predominantly in Hangeul,²⁴ the poem’s themes of deep emotion, and existential introspection break away from the Korean poetic tradition. Yet, its occasional use of Hanja (Chinese characters), as seen in words like ‘정맥혈(靜脈血)’ and ‘면사(面絲),’ introduces a classical depth, a nod to a bygone era in a predominantly modern linguistic landscape. This classical resonance was mirrored in my English translation. For instance, the term ‘Zephyr’ was chosen over the more commonplace ‘breeze’ to translate ‘미풍(微風)’. This choice seeks to parallel the profound Greco-Roman influence on English literature, akin to the Chinese cultural influences on pre-modern Korean literature.

Another salient feature of the original poem is its strategic use of repetition and parallel structures. The recurring motif, ‘이 때로부터’ (‘From this moment’), acts as a rhythmic anchor, accentuating pivotal emotional junctures for the speaker. This repetition, mirrored in the English rendition with lines like ‘From this moment, my once radiant heart,’ serves not only to emphasize these emotional crescendos but also to maintain the original’s tempo.

In the endeavour to achieve poetic resonance in English, certain creative liberties were necessitated. For instance, the phrase ‘Sent by the moon, with a purpose so clear | Upon your sickened heart let us lay our hands, dear.’ The addition of ‘with a purpose so clear’ is not present

in the original line ‘우리를 보냈나이다’, which, when translated verbatim, reads ‘we have been sent (by the [달님이 moon])’. Yet, for the sake of maintaining rhyme with both the preceding and succeeding lines, I added this phrase. Moreover, the original sentence reads, ‘당신의 앓는 가슴 위에 우리의 손을대라고 달님이 | 우리를 보냈나이다’, which when translated literally, means ‘Upon your ailing heart, our hands we lay, the moon has sent us.’ Such a direct translation, however, risks sounding jarring to English ears, compromising both rhythm and rhyme. Notably, the phrase ‘우리를 보냈나이다’ (ulileul bonaessnaida) consists of many more syllables than the English counterpart ‘us sent (by the moon)’. A literal translation would disrupt the poem’s balance and render it somewhat ungainly in English expression. Consequently, I decided to restructure the sentences, first clarifying the speaker’s identity, thus moving the ‘sent by the moon’ first, and subsequently elucidating their intent to soothe the poet’s tormented heart. To enhance the poem’s fluidity and ensure it resonates authentically within the English poetic tradition, I also added phrases like ‘a purpose so clear’ and ‘dear’. While these adaptations might diverge from a rigidly literal translation, they are instrumental in retaining the poem’s intrinsic musicality.

The introduction of the symbolic maidens – ‘Sorrow’, ‘Fear’, and ‘Comfort’ – offers a poignant exploration of human emotions. The translation of ‘나는 ‘안일(安逸)’이라고 부르나이다’ as ‘The last whispers, “Call me Comfort, my dear”’ not only adds a layer of personification but also retains the original’s emotional essence. These personified emotions, when contrasted with the traditionally positive attributes of the Greek goddesses, the Charites, known for their association with beauty, creativity, and fertility, create a striking dichotomy to highlight the poet’s sense of despair and impotence. This contrast also likely reflects Park’s familiarity with Hellenic myth and culture, influenced by Wilde.

Furthermore, the moon, beyond its celestial connotation, emerges as a symbol of beauty, sorrow, and enigma. The line ‘가장 아름답던 달님의 마음이’ is rendered as ‘The heart in the once-beautiful moon’s splendour,’ encapsulating the moon’s personification and emotional depth.

This moon motif, especially considering Park Young-hee's penname 'Hoe-wol' (literally 'yearning for the moon'), resonates with his 1922 translation of *Salomé*, highlighting the profound influence of Wilde on his literary oeuvre. Beardsley's 1894 illustration for Wilde's play 'The Woman in the Moon' further accentuates the moon's imagery as emblematic of both insanity and tragic beauty, a sentiment echoed in Park's poem.

Wilde's *Salomé* is replete with Orientalist characteristics, from its dreamlike atmosphere and abundance of exotic objects to its portrayal of characters steeped in sensuality, despotism, and irrationality. The Jewish royal family, particularly Salomé herself, embodies this Orientalised sensuality, 'with Herod's kingdom depicted as a treasure trove of perfumes, jewels, and other exotica.'²⁵ However, it is crucial to note that Wilde's Orientalist depiction of this Jewish tale operates on what Edward Said describes as 'latent Orientalism', namely shared, often unconscious, ideas about the Orient as Europe's Other.²⁶

Surprisingly, this latent Orientalism did not deter East Asian audiences. Both Japanese and Korean interpretations mirrored European aesthetics. In fact, during its colonial period, many Koreans, influenced by Western cultural dominance, identified with white protagonists in Victorian literature,²⁷ momentarily sidelining their racial identities. This mirrors bell hooks' insights in *Black Looks* (2015), where racial identity is momentarily set aside to connect with characters.²⁸ Especially in Japanese renditions, *Salomé* consistently present the protagonist as an exotic symbol of desire. Actresses always don Arabian belly dancer costumes,²⁹ a stark contrast to the Hellenic costumed Chinese adaptation influenced by the New Cultural Movement's ethos against objectification of women.³⁰ The Japanese portrayal aligns more with European views of Salomé as an exotic Jewish princess due to the problematic internalization outlined by hooks.

While *Salomé* cannot avoid its Orientalist limitations, Wilde's unique position as a queer Irish playwright in late-Victorian British society complicated the matter. Scholars have extensively highlighted how his personal marginality subverts the prevailing discourse.³¹ The play's rebellious undertones, evident in Salomé's fervent passion, her unconventional courting behaviour, and her

necrophiliac tendencies, serve as allegorical reflections of Wilde's 'misidentification' with the Orientalist protagonist.³² Korean audiences, while not fully cognizant of the play's Orientalist tendency at that time, resonated strongly with its spirit of defiance.

Indeed, Park's adaptation of Wilde's moon imagery in his poetry is an example of 'cultural hybridity' as theorized by Homi K. Bhabha.³³ While colonized societies often meld elements of the colonizer's culture with their own, it is crucial to recognize that Korea's exposure to Western influences primarily came via Japan, rather than direct Western colonization. By the time Japan began its colonization of Korea, it had already assimilated elements of Western cultural hegemony. The colonial government astutely utilized Western decadent literature, exemplified by the Japanese magic show version of *Salomé*, as a means to both attract and regulate Koreans. This strategy showcased the allure of Western modernity through performances featuring magic tricks, sensual dances, and sexualized foreign women's bodies. Coupled with the introduction of modern infrastructure like railways, trams, and electric lighting, the intent was clear: to present an enticing vision of progress and modernization, thereby encouraging Koreans to actively contribute to the vision of a Greater Japanese colonial empire.

Bhabha's concept of 'Mimicry' provides a nuanced framework through which we can further explore the cultural dynamics of Korean decadence. According to Bhabha, the mimicry of the colonized is never a perfect replication; it is always 'almost the same but not quite'.³⁴ In the case of Korean intellectuals during the colonial period, they did not simply passively absorb these Western influences. Instead, they engaged in a process of imitation that served as a form of resistance against the narrative of Japanese colonial rule. Park's works identify with the subversive spirit in Wilde's play while appropriating its Orientalist form to mock the imperialist intention behind it. He recontextualizes the moon imagery from *Salomé*, infusing it with a uniquely Korean sentiment of despair tied to the loss of political sovereignty. This weary and melancholic symbol contrasts sharply with the eroticized Salomé prevalent in Japanese imperial narratives. Through this deliberate but subtle counter-narrative, Park emphasizes his unique resistance by challenging

the industrious spirit promoted by the colonial regime, crafting a symbol that resonates deeply with the experiences of Koreans under Japanese rule.

Therefore, the decadent tradition in Korean literature, as exemplified by Park and his contemporaries, is best described as 'Lyo-colonial Decadence'. The term 'lyo-colonial' was introduced by Xiaoli Liu in her studies of writers from Manchukuo, another region under Japanese colonial rule.³⁵ Unlike traditional anti-colonial or de-colonial literature that directly opposes colonial forces or counter colonial propaganda retrospectively, lyo-colonial writings subtly challenge and undermine the colonial narrative at present. Through their introspective and melancholic poems, Park and his peers drew inspiration from the wandering Western flaneurs and the deliberate, languid lifestyles of dandies. This was a subtle act of defiance against the colonial government's promotion of hard work and societal productivity. By blending Western decadent influences with their own cultural nuances, these intellectuals forged a unique path of cultural resistance. They not only expressed their individuality but also redefined and reshaped the broader Korean identity within the confines of colonial rule.

Despite the resistance evident in their decadent works, these writers had a complicated relationship with the colonial government. Their stance towards the authorities was ambivalent, marked by periods of criticism and cooperation. This duality reflects the intricate responses shaped by colonial pressures, internalization, and survival tactics. Park's early decadent writings, initially resistant, evolved over time. Facing criticism from progressive peers for perceived escapism, Park transitioned from decadence, co-founding the left-leaning Korean Artists Proletarian Federation (KAPF). Yet, the oppressive colonial environment and mounting critiques influenced further changes in his position. Eventually, Park joined the imperial army's writers' corps, even adopting a Japanese name, Yoshimura Kodo 芳村乡道, and supporting pro-Japanese initiatives. Park's fluctuating stance mirrored that of another decadent figure, Kim Dong-in, who also transitioned from opposing to endorsing the Japanese colonial regime. Park Young-hee, Kim Dong-in, Yi Gwang-su, Choe Nam-seon, and intellectuals who shared such transition were denounced as

Chinilpa 친일파 (親日派) [pro-Japanese faction], a derogatory term for pro-Japanese collaborators,³⁶ and faced intense criticism later in their lives. Such shifts, emblematic of the challenges under colonial rule, have been points of contention in discussions on Korean decadence.

The Korean decadent movement, despite its controversies, indelibly influenced the trajectory of modernist literature in Korea. This movement was birthed amidst the complex interplay of dual colonialism: Japan's direct military domination and the West's indirect cultural hegemony. This triangular relationship presented a captivating power dynamic. Japan appropriated the imperialistic and Orientalist undertones of Western decadence to subjugate Korea. In contrast, Korean writers, resonating with decadence's rebellious spirit, repurposed decadent writings into lyo-colonial writings, subtly challenging imperial propaganda. The movement's engagement with themes such as melancholic beauty, tragic and grotesque love, artists seeking vengeance through their art, and unconventional artistic expressions significantly augmented the richness of Korean modern literature. This added a unique dimension to the Korean literary landscape, which would later be dominated by proletariat writings that emerged in the 1920s.

The Korean decadent movement also added a distinct dimension to the global understanding of decadence. It is intriguing how this fin de siècle literary and artistic tradition could manifest in such varied, even diametrically opposed interpretations. Much like Wilde, the quintessential 'prince of paradox', the movement embodies a paradox in its very essence, oscillating between progressiveness and conservatism. This duality offers a nuanced lens through which we can appreciate the multifaceted nature of decadence across different cultural contexts.

¹ Such as Imura Kimie, '日本におけるオスカー・ワイルド--移入期-1-' ['Nippon Ni Okeru Oscar Wilde: Pnyuki (Dai Ichibu)'], *Tsurumi Joshidaigaku Kijyo* 鶴見女子大学紀要, 7 (1969), 39-60). Qi Chen, 'The Circulation of Oscar Wilde's Prose and Poems in Japan (1868-1926)', *Literature Compass*, 10.3 (2013), 288-99. Yoko Hirata, 'Oscar Wilde and Honma Hisao, the First Translator of "De Profundis" into Japanese', *Japan Review*, 21 (2009), 241-66. Joseph Lavery, 'Remote Proximities: Aesthetics, Orientalism, and the Intimate Life of Japanese Objects', *ELH*, 83.4 (2016), 1159-83.

² See Jin-kyung Lee, 'Art as Freedom and Power: Kim Tongin and the Political Legacy of Pure Literature in Modern Korea', in *Routledge Handbook of Modern Korean Literature*, ed. by Yoon Sun Yang (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 15-26. For articles written in Korean about Korean Decadence see Jae-bok Lee, 'Korean Modern Poetry and

Decadence', *Cross-Cultural Studies*, 12.2 (2008), 163-88. Soo-Young Im, 'The Decadence Of 1930's 1930s' ?Korean Poetry', *Daedong Munhwa Yeon'gu*, 83 (2013), 309-46.

³ See Paek Chol's *Korean Decadence* cited in Cho Yoon-je, *The Literary History of Korea* [韩国文学史] (Beijing: Social Sciences Literature Press (社会科学文献出版社), 1998), pp. 520-37. Nomdal2018 낫달 2018, 'Park Young-hee, A Writer whose Literature and Ideology have been both Forgotten [박영희, 문학도 이데올로기도 모두 잊힌 문인]', *In this Turbulent World* [이 풍진 세상에], *Story of Pro-Japanese Literature*, 2021 <<https://qq9447.tistory.com/1851>> [accessed 16 July 2023].

⁴ The Enlightenment era (1894-1910) of Korean literary history was initiated by Yi Gwangsu. Known as the 'Father of Modern Korean literature', he advocated that personal emotional writing in Western literature had the power to reshape the Korean mentality. His works showcased an awakening of individual consciousness, although they later received criticism for being excessively didactic.

⁵ Yasumi Higuchi, '見世物興行年表:松旭齋天勝興行年表 大正 4 年 (1915 年) 10 月~12 月 [Chronology of Shokyokusai Tenkatsu's performances, October to December 1915 (Taisho 4)]', in *Blog.Livedoor.jp* <<http://blog.livedoor.jp/misemono/archives/52303075.html>> [accessed 22 April 2023].

⁶ Seon-yeong Hong, '제국의 文化領有와 外地巡行 -天勝一座의 <살로메> 景福宮 공연을 중심으로 -' [The cultural domination and oversea land tour performance of Japanese empire - Salome performance in Kyngbokkung of Tenkachuichiza], *일본근대학연구* [*Japanese Modern Studies*], 33 (2011), 333-46. Lois Cucullu, 'Wilde and Wilder Salomés: Modernizing the Nubile Princess from Sarah Bernhardt to Norma Desmond', *Modernism/Modernity*, 18.3 (2011), 495-524.

⁷ Seon-yeong Hong, pp. 345-46.

⁸ See comments on Japan's internalized colonialism in Ayu Majima, 肌色」の憂鬱 : 近代日本の人種体験 [The Melancholy of 'Skin Colour': The Racial Experience of Modern Japan] (Tokyo: Chuokoron-Shinsha, 2014).

⁹ Kyung-wook Jeon, 한국가면극: 그역사와원 [*Korean Mask Drama: History and Structural Principles*] (Korea: Yŏrhwadang 열화당, 1998), pp. 1-48.

¹⁰ Theodore Jun Yoo, *It's Madness: The Politics of Mental Health in Colonial Korea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

¹¹ Seung-young Kim, *American Diplomacy and Strategy toward Korea and Northeast Asia, 1882-1950 and After* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 64-65.

¹² 'March First Movement | Samil Independence Movement, Korea, 1919 Demonstrations | Britannica', 2023 <<https://www.britannica.com/event/March-First-Movement>> [accessed 26 September 2023].

¹³ Cited in Cho, pp. 522-23.

¹⁴ Hyo Han, '朝鮮的浪漫主義論' ['Romanticism in Korea'], *New Literature* 『신세대』, 8 (1946), cited in Cho, pp. 524-25. The original text is not available.

¹⁵ Boris Konstantinovich Zaytsev, "Silent Dawn" by Zaytsev, Translated by Pumdal [고요한새벽빛 사이쓰에 푸 작, 품달譯], *New Youth* [밝혀진/新青年], 6, trans. by Young-hee Park (Gyeongseong (Seoul): Adanmungo, 1921), p. 29. <<http://archive.adanmungo.org/ebook/1463453467.1935/1590963216.0708/mobile/index.html#p=33>> [accessed 25 September 2023].

¹⁶ The term 'aestheticism' (唯美主義) here, while written in Hanja (한자)-Chinese characters used in the Korean script-actually originates from Japan, not China. These characters, 唯美主義, sometimes also written as 耽美主義 (pronounced as 'tanbism' in Japanese), are Kanji (Chinese characters used in the Japanese script), meaning 'addicted-to-beauty'-ism. This Japanese term is expressed using Chinese characters, reflecting the significant influence of Chinese culture on both Korea and Japan during East Asia's pre-modern era. However, in the 1890s, Japan, having embraced aestheticism and the works of Oscar Wilde, emerged as a cultural epicentre, attracting Chinese and Korean students, including members of the Bakjo group, to study in Tokyo. This facilitated the spread of 'aestheticism' and its cultural movement to China and Korea.

¹⁷ White Tide Coterie, '六號雜記' ['Miscellany No. 6'], *Baekjo* 白潮_第壹號, 1, 5 February 1922, p.142, in *Hyundam Mungo Collection* <<http://www.adanmungo.org>> [accessed 5 December 2022].

¹⁸ Dong-ha Lee, '동인지 <백조>의 문학사적 성격' ['The Literary Historical Character of the Coterie Magazine "Baekcho"'], *한국문화*[*Korean Culture*], 4 (1983), 107-18 (p. 116).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Despite Joseon Korea renaming itself as the Korean Empire in 1897 to assert independence from the Qing Empire's tributary system, its sovereignty remained deeply compromised. Emperor Gojong sought asylum in the Russian embassy (1896-1897) and later faced intense Japanese surveillance and had to abdicate. This external pressure eventually forced his abdication, underscoring the complex interplay of regional power dynamics and national sovereignty in early 20th-century East Asia.

²¹ There have been speculations on whether Park also has a command of the Russian language. He is credited with the translation and publication of an obscure decadent short story, 'Тихие зори' ['Quiet Dawn'], by Russian author Boris Konstantinovich Zaytsev (1881-1972). This work appeared in the literary magazine 밝혀진/新青年 [*New Youth*] in its July 1921 issue (vol. 6, pp. 29-41). However, upon examining the original Korean text, I noted an

intriguing detail: the English word ‘curtain’ was used in brackets to explain the Korean term ‘커튼’, instead of the Russian word, ‘портрер’. This suggests that Park’s translation might not have been sourced directly from the Russian original but rather from an English version or a Japanese version. (Zaytsev, p. 29.) Further comparative translation study made by Yonghui Ahn claims that it is highly likely that Park translated this work from the Japanese version by Shomu Nobori. See Yonghui Ahn, ‘Park, Young-Hee and Nobori, Shomu’, *The Society for Korean Language & Literary Research*, 46.4 (2018), 257-83 (pp. 273-75).

²² Kimie Imura Lawlor, ‘Salome in East and West’, *Oscar Wilde Study*, 4 (2001), 60. Paper presented at *Iconographic: Changes of Images in East and West*, 2001 Japan-Britain Cultural Festival.

²³ Cho, p. 524.

²⁴ The Korean writing system historically combined Hangeul and Hanja. Hangeul (한글) is the native Korean alphabet, introduced in 1443 by King Sejong the Great. It is a unique phonetic system where each letter represents a sound. Hanja, on the other hand, are Chinese characters that were incorporated into Korean writing roughly between the 1st and 7th centuries AD. Hanja were used in Korea for centuries, especially in formal, scholarly, and official documents. Following the Korean War (1950-1953), the South Korean government began actively promoting Hangeul for education and official documentation in the latter half of the 20th century. This initiative, especially pronounced starting in the 1960s, significantly reduced the use of Hanja.

²⁵ Yeeyon Im, ‘Oscar Wilde’s Salomé: Disorienting Orientalism’, *Comparative Drama*, 45.4 (2011), 361-80 (p. 361).

²⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 206. Italics in original.

²⁷ Ji Eun Lee, ‘Victorian Humanity in Colonial Korea, Where Asians Did Not See Themselves as the Other’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 51.1 (2023), 101-13.

²⁸ bell hooks, ‘Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance’, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992; New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 37-61.

²⁹ Lawlor, p. 60.

³⁰ Jing Jiang, ‘Chinese Salomés on the Modern Stage’, *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 23.2 (2011), 175-209.

Xiuyun Hong, ‘邪恶之花——试论莎乐美与潘金莲’ [‘Flower of Evil: On Salome and Pan Jinlian’, *江西教育学院学报(社会科学)* [Journal of Jiangxi Institute of Education (Social Science)], 2 (2006) 103-05.

³¹ See Xiaoyi Zhou, ‘Oscar Wilde’s Orientalism and Late Nineteenth-Century European Consumer Culture’, *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 28.4 (1997), 49-71. Yeeyon Im, pp. 361-80; Kristin Mahoney, ‘Taking Wilde to Sri Lanka and Beardsley to Harlem: Decadent Practice, Race, and Orientalism’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 49.4 (2021), 583-606. Qi Chen, ‘Mirror of Self-Consciousness: The “Chinaman” in Oscar Wilde’s Identity Politics’, *Irish Studies Review*, 19.2 (2011), 171-84. Colin Cavendish-Jones, ‘Oscar Wilde’s Radically Revised View of China’, *SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 54.4 (2014), 923-41. Eleonora Sasso, *Late Victorian Orientalism: Representations of the East in Nineteenth-Century Literature, Art and Culture from the Pre-Raphaelites to John La Farge* (London: Anthem Press, 2020).

³² Yeeyon Im, p. 362.

³³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

³⁵ Xiaoli Liu, ‘解殖性内在于殖民地文学’ [‘Lyo-colonization is Inherent in Colonial Literature’], *探索与争鸣* [Exploration and Free Views], 1.1 (2017), 111-16 (p. 111).

³⁶ The term ‘chinilpa’ can be literally translated as ‘pro-Japanese faction’ from Korean. Although the word itself is neutral, it carries a deeply derogatory connotation, referencing those who collaborated with Japan during its colonial rule over Korea. Similarly, in Chinese, the term ‘Japanese’ is also used pejoratively. In both cases, these terms are charged with negative meanings tied to the painful history of Japanese aggression in these countries.

Decadence, Now, Malta Society of Arts,
Palazzo De La Salle, Valletta, 11-31 May 2023

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Moving through and beyond the *fin de siècle*, *Decadence, Now* was comprised of a multidimensional display of artistic works, paraphernalia, artefacts from museums, galleries and private collections, and contemporary art. This was accompanied by musical performances in the fashion of salon gatherings, featuring songs and operatic extracts from Italy, Germany, and France, as well as the premiere of a song cycle by Karl Fiorini, composed in response to the music of the *Belle Époque*. Curated by Andrew Borg Wirth and featuring art by Luke Azzopardi, Andrew Borg Wirth, Maria Theuma, Michael Zerafa, and Rebecca Bonaci, the exhibition considered ‘decadence’ as a unifier of numerous artefacts across a breadth of styles, epochs, and subject matter, while foregrounding the curatorial process as an artistic manoeuvre in its own right.

The array of exhibits and performances juxtaposed the historic with the contemporary, the local with the foreign, and the visual with the performative, and invited viewers to reconsider the legacy of *fin de siècle* decadence for a twenty-first century audience. The central concern of this exhibition was always in focus – in an age of virtual reality and media-saturated culture, what reaction does decadence provoke now?

Occupying the earlier spaces in the exhibition were artefacts dating mostly from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, of European origin, and centred on representations of mysticism, decay, and degeneration, with a particular interest in the *femme fatale* motif and the trope of human life as a balancing act between life and death. These concepts were well delineated in a series of artworks, including Félicien Rops’s *La Buveuse d’Absinthe* (1865) and *Le Vice Suprême* (1884), Man Ray’s portraits of Luisa Casati (1922 and 1935), and Giuseppe Cali’s *Woman Carried by the Sea* (1900), and which functioned as a prologue to the ensuing exhibits. An array of historical artefacts including a first edition copy of Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* (1891), pamphlets from the former

Malta Royal Opera House, a late nineteenth-century day jacket, a fan belonging to the Empress Zita of the Hapsburg empire, and issues from the Catalan literary publication *Pèl & Ploma*, highlighted characteristically decadent concepts. Serving as a connective thread between these exhibits and displayed sequentially between the artefacts were illustrator and tattooist Rebecca Bonaci's reactions to these items. She also illustrated the poster for the exhibition.

The experimental artworks in the following spaces offered new perspectives on the lasting influence of decadence on modern culture, drawing on the concepts of decline and decay as a driving force for self-expression, and exploring the extent to which decadence moves freely across media and centuries. Mike Zerafa's *Head on a Plate* (2023), a mirrored installation suspended in a curtained-off enclosure, is a contemporary take on the symbol of Salomé from Richard Strauss's 1905 opera of the same name, infamous for the dissonant chord heard a few moments before Salomé is killed and echoing the monstrous degradation to which she has descended. The installation, which the viewer can step inside, quite literally invites audiences to immerse themselves in the moment of decapitation. In another room, Maria Theuma's *For its Sake* (2023), braided hair woven to spell the word *Pèl*, was hung adjacent to green velvet partitions on which bird feathers, bones, and tufts of human hair are presented as remnants on display. This installation paid homage to the hair and feathers of the *Pèl & Ploma* journal on display in the preceding room, envisioning the transformation of the literary into the visual.

The last two reactionary artworks are meditations on personhood and the self – Luke Azzopardi's *Heat You Can't Beat I and II* (2023) and Andrew Borg Wirth's *Thirty* (2023). Drawing inspiration from Empress Zita's fan as an object that morphs according to the identity of whoever holds it, Azzopardi's two portraits personify the dichotomous and changing attitudes of character. Similarly, Borg Wirth's installation, motivated by Man Ray's hazy 1935 portrait of Luisa Casati as she appears in motion, reckons with perception and the modes in which something may be seen or understood. The assortment of iPhone covers form a refracting kaleidoscopic three-dimensional self-portrait and serve as a fitting culmination to a project that searches for the

timelessness and the persistence of decadence in the twenty-first century, tracing the endurance of fin-de-siècle arts and attitudes within a time that might seem decadent, now.

Kristin Mahoney, *Queer Kinship after Wilde: Transnational Decadence and the Family*
(Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022),
288 pp. ISBN 9781009019682

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Among Richard Bruce Nugent's papers in the Beinecke Library, there are multiple manuscripts of a story about a half-Japanese, half-American gender-fluid individual who works as a geisha, has a sexual relationship with their father (first accidentally and then by conscious choice), and travels around Europe and North America in pursuit of physical pleasure and beautiful objects to collect. 'Geisha Man' never saw the light of day during Nugent's lifetime. But the author's daring plan for this decadent story was to bring it out as an impossibly elaborate art book, in which each page should have been printed on paper of a different colour, with different-coloured ink. The intriguing 'Geisha Man' is emblematic of the decadent corpus that Kristin Mahoney brings to light in her fascinating new book, *Queer Kinship after Wilde: Transnational Decadence and the Family*. It is a corpus that is, like Nugent's story, made of cosmopolitan connections and projections, attempts to fashion and unmake complex racial and gender identities, baffling hybrids of aestheticism and taboo.

Mahoney focuses on the intersection between queer identities and forms of familial kinship. In a series of deft readings, she shows how writers from the first half of the twentieth century looked back to the artistic and sexual radicalism of the 1890s, spectacularly encapsulated by Oscar Wilde, to create artistic and interpersonal networks where they could operate in the margins of society and, crucially, of the type of experimental Modernism that has become the canonical face of that period. The Wilde-Beardsley era was attractive to these writers because it seemed to embody a type of artistic iconoclasm and a simultaneously bold and fluid approach to sexual identity that they were hard-pressed to find in the more structured world of the new century. Looking back to the literature of the fin de siècle enabled them to pursue unconventional modes

of desire in their work (so, for instance, Mahoney interprets Nugent's handling of incest in 'Geisha Man' with reference to Wilde's *Salomé* (1891)). In some cases, this led them to attain pleasure and personal happiness. But they also had to contend with the burden of nostalgia and with the challenge of how to repurpose and, in a sense, curate decadence at a time in which the artistic reputation of the *fin de siècle* was at its lowest.

The book takes what Mahoney has earlier called 'post-Victorian Decadence' into new directions, shifting the focus on the construction of networks and communities.¹ The six archive-rich chapters are packed with stories and arresting findings. Fittingly, she starts with Wilde's son Vyvyan Holland, tracing his effort to reconnect with his father's circle, particularly Robert Ross and Christopher Sclater Millard – the man who compiled the first bibliography of Wilde's works. Mahoney argues that Holland's collaborations with these figures who were either personally close to his father or worked hard to rehabilitate his reputation should be seen as an attempt to create new familiar bonds, and that they should be understood in conjunction with Holland's work as a translator of decadent literature – something that again connected him emotionally and artistically with his father's generation and its legacy. From here, Mahoney goes on to analyse the life-long partnership between siblings Laurence and Clemence Housman, the unconventional marriage of Compton and Faith Mackenzie, Harold Acton's intimacies with students during his time in China, and finally Nugent and Eric Gill's use of incest – a real-life, abusive practice in the case of Gill.

All of these forms of attachment, Mahoney argues, are queer in that they enabled authors to extricate themselves from traditional family ties based on heteronormative expectations. They allowed them to forge unconventional life trajectories and fuelled their artistic imagination in ways that could be liberating and productive but also highly troubling at times. Indeed, one of the most impressive aspects of *Queer Kinship after Wilde* is just the amount of intelligent pressure that Mahoney puts on queerness as a category of resistance. She sensitively exploits the flexibility of queerness as an affective and social bond: the work of Holland and Gill – figures that are generally understood within a heterosexual prism – acquires new potentialities when we read it in relation

to queer networks; Acton's queer-inflected Aestheticism opens up to new meanings when we consider that the queer *woman* Vernon Lee, rather than Pater and Wilde, might have been its shaping influence. At the same time, however, Mahoney is quite clear that queerness should not be too easily associated with progressive politics. Transgressive and traditionalist structures of feeling are entangled more often than we think, as manifested for instance in a distinctive queer desire for domesticity that emerges in several of Mahoney's case studies and in a residual discourse of biologism that overshadows utopian ideas of queer family. And of course, homosexual attachments could also be exploitative and unethical. By emulating decadent radicalism, Mahoney's writers also often inherited Orientalist and 'Mediterraneanist' practices and the habit of fetishizing national and racial differences. The case of Gill is the most extreme instance of how queer decadence could even be refashioned into an abusive form of patriarchy.

Mahoney brings out the extraordinary complexity of queer forms of kinship in a series of nuanced readings grounded in extensive archival work. What her archive also shows is how often queer kinship was compounded with transnational links. The affective and social connections analysed here were frequently facilitated by travel, exile, migration, and other forms of physical uprooting. Such cosmopolitan connections resulted in important acts of transcultural mediation, such as Holland and Acton's literary translations. When dealing with cosmopolitanism, too, Mahoney fleshes out the complex legacy of decadence in aesthetic and ethical terms, highlighting the positive effects of cultural curiosity and her authors' critiques of nationalism. But she never overlooks the fact that cosmopolitan openness went hand in hand with her authors' privileged positions as citizens of wealthy nations such as Britain and the United States. A particularly powerful instance is her analysis of Compton and Faith Mackenzie's state as 'Decadent exiles' (p. 96) on the Italian island of Capri. Set apart from Italy by its tradition of high-end tourism that stretches all the way back to the Roman Emperor Tiberius, Capri provided a tolerant haven for sexual outcasts from Northern Europe, such as Norman Douglas and the controversial Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen. Here, the Mackenzies encountered a temporally deracinated version of the

queer decadence of the 1890s that had been preserved in the utopian island setting, and which informed the couple's affective relations and their autobiographical writings. But they (and their writings) also participated in forms of cultural exploitation and sex tourism.

Mahoney's reading of the Mackenzies relies partly on private photograph albums that record queer life on Capri. One of the fascinating suggestions of the book is that acts of queer intimacy very often took place through encounters between texts and visual material. The Housman siblings developed their shared political activism via a dialogue between writing and illustration. Nugent's obsession with drawing and redrawing Salomé enables Mahoney to uncover the complex racial politics that underlie 'Geisha Man'. And she traces the circulation of Gill's religious sculptures among figures linked to Aestheticism and decadence, including the Michael Fields, John Gray, and André Raffalovich, to uncover the persistence of fin-de-siècle queer Catholicism in Gill's modernist visual aesthetics. In all these instances visual culture provides a crucial medium to bring to light performances of intimacy and identity construction that are only half-articulated in printed texts.

Going back to 'Geisha Man', Mahoney labels Nugent's aborted experiment a work that 'seems to at once demand and exceed analysis' (p. 161). This is the interpretative line that she navigates so expertly in *Queer Kinship after Wilde*, an important book for students of the fin de siècle and of Modernism. Mahoney shows the rewards that come from unpacking marginalized and difficult material and from reactivating connections across national and period boundaries that are all too often lost in compartmentalized approaches.

¹ See Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Alphonse Mucha, *Le Pater: Le Grand Œuvre d'Alphonse Mucha*, ed. by Tomoko Sato
(Paris: Éditions RMN, 2023),
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Sam Kunkel

Independent Scholar

First published in a limited edition of 510 copies in December 1899, the Symbolist masterpiece of Czech artist Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939), *Le Pater* [*The Our Father*] has just seen a re-edition from Les Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux and the Mucha Foundation in collaboration with an interactive exhibition of his work currently taking place at the Grand Palais Immersif in Paris.

This is not the first time that Mucha's illuminative manuscript has been reprinted in recent years: a hardcover edition was released by Somogy Éditions d'Art in 2001, and in 2019, for the 120th anniversary of *Le Pater*, the Century Guild published the work in two deluxe hardcover editions which reproduce the artwork in its original format, as well a third paperback edition featuring an introduction by science-fiction author Michael Moorcock. The most recent edition, *Le Pater: Le Grand Œuvre d'Alphonse Mucha*, is distinguished from the others by virtue of its supplemental material – both textual and visual – which shines new light upon the text and its creator. Beyond the fact that this edition features beautiful reproductions on thick, high-quality paper of the integrality of *Le Pater* at two-thirds of its original scale, it also features three illuminating essays about Mucha's life, work, and spirituality which enable the reader to better position the work both culturally and biographically.

Born in 1860 in Ivančice in the Czech Republic and rejected by the School of the Fine Arts in Prague in 1875, Mucha went on to study at the School of the Fine Arts in Munich (1885-1887), as well as the Julian Academy (1887-1888) and the Colarossi Academy (1888-1889) in Paris. His career as an artist began earlier than that however, in around 1880, when he found work as a professional artist in Vienna, creating stage décor for a theatre company. His rise to fame did not

start until later, near the end of 1894, when he was commissioned for two distinct projects for the play *Gismonda*, written by Victorien Sardou. The first of the commissions was a request to create illustrations of ‘the most remarkable scenes’ to feature in a special Christmas supplement of the newspaper, *Le Gaulois*.¹ The second commission concerned the creation of a poster featuring the play’s star, Sarah Bernhardt. The poster was hailed as an immediate success. Following its design, Mucha signed a six-year contract with Bernhardt to create not only posters for six other plays, but also the set decoration for her plays, the jewellery she would wear, and her costumes. The popularity of these posters made the name Alphonse Mucha synonymous with the term ‘Art Nouveau’ in the final years of the twentieth century and gave him the renown necessary to be hired for numerous other advertisements and creative projects.

Mucha’s first foray into literary illustration took place around 1885 when he provided drawings and illustrations for the Czech satirical magazine, *Krokodil*, which was edited by his brother-in-law. However, a few years later in 1890, following his arrival in Paris where independent literary revues were experiencing a period of unprecedented success and popularity, Mucha’s illustrations graced the cover of Catulle Mendès’ illustrated revue, *La Vie populaire*. Later in the decade, he would also provide illustrations for revues such as *L’Illustration*, *La Plume*, *Au Quartier latin*, *Le Chic*, as well as others. It was in 1897 that Mucha was, for the first time, able to contribute images to a work destined to stand on its own as an artistic object: *Ilseé princesse de Tripoli*, *Légende du Moyen Âge*, written by Robert de Flers and published by the editor Armand Colin & Cie.² With *Ilseé*, Mucha was able to explore freely the relationship between the idea, the image, the word, and the page, setting the stage for a creative process which would come to full bloom with the publication of *Le Pater* in 1899.

In 1898, Mucha began conceiving of an illustrated version of *Le Pater* during a period of great personal despair. Although his idiosyncratic style had become the driving force behind the Art Nouveau aesthetic and made him a tastemaker in the decorative arts of the early twentieth century, he found himself unfulfilled and increasingly frustrated by the growing distance between

the artistic ideals of his youth and the commercial success that he was experiencing. Seeking a project that could bring both artistic satisfaction and spiritual fulfilment, he developed the idea of creating an illustrated version of the Lord's Prayer, which might not only give a visual form to the words themselves, but illustrate his vision of the promise that they held and offer a source of guidance to the society of his day. Writing about the decision, he observed:

Bientôt je suis devenu la victime de mes propres procédés. D'ailleurs, je n'avais pas trouvé de véritable satisfaction dans ce genre de travail. Je voyais mon chemin ailleurs, un peu plus haut et un peu plus loin. Je cherchais des moyens de répandre une lumière qui illuminerait même les coins les plus reculés [du monde]. Je n'ai pas eu à chercher longtemps ! Le Notre Père ! Pourquoi ne pas donner aux mots une expression picturale ?

Soon, I became the victim of my own practices. I had not, by the way, found any true satisfaction in that sort of work. I saw my path elsewhere, a bit higher and a bit further. I sought means to spread a light that would illuminate even the most distant corners [of the world]. I did not have to seek for long! The Our Father! Why not give a pictorial expression to the words? (p. 30)³

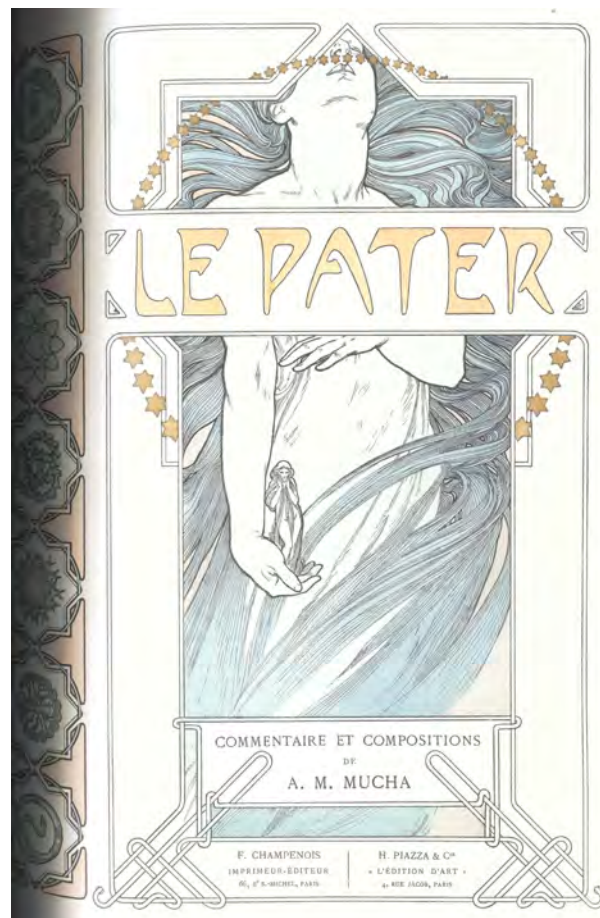


Fig. 1: Cover for the 1899 edition of *Le Pater*. Printed by Les Éditions F. Champenois et H. Piazza & Cie, in Paris.

Le Pater: Commentaire et compositions de A. M. Mucha, to give its full title, first appeared in print on 20 December 1899 (fig. 1). Far more than just a simple book of verses, *Le Pater* is structured around a series of seven triptychs, each of which corresponds to a verse from the prayer and also transmits a message from the artist concerning the life of modern man and his place in the universe. On the first page of each group of illustrations is a chapter heading featuring a verse from the Lord's Prayer, as well as an elaboration of one of the different ornamental symbols shown on the cover of the book (fig. 2).

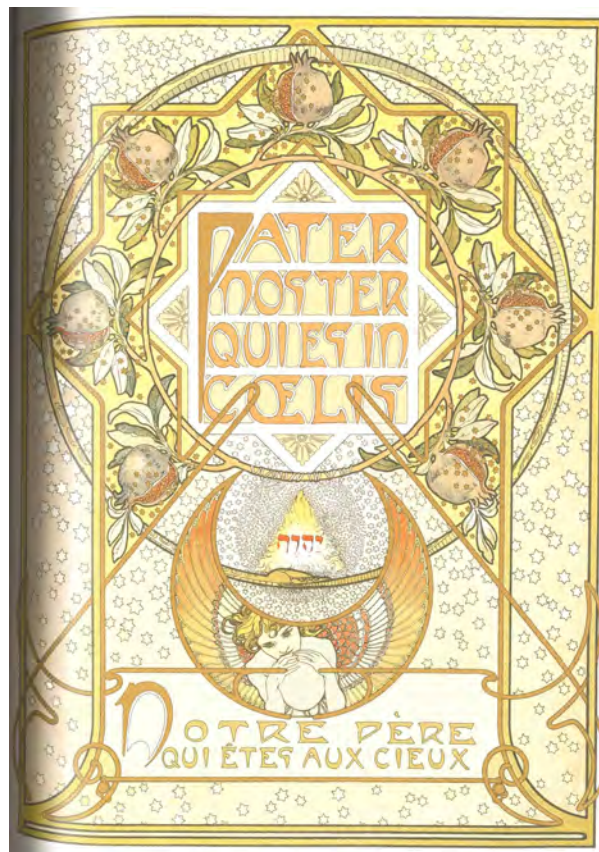


Fig. 2: Title page of *Le Pater: Commentaire et compositions de A. M. Mucha*. 'Our father, who art in heaven'.

Following this page of verse is a short text written by Mucha which resembles an illuminated manuscript from the Middle Ages in form, and which acts both as an address to the reader and as an explanation of the illustration that is to follow (fig. 3). For example, the text that accompanies the first verse begins:

Au sein de la matière dormante l'homme s'éveille peu à peu, et, péniblement, parvient à se reconnaître. Pour atteindre là haut, vers l'Idéal, il faut que son âme s'oriente, se dégage, quitte la région des ténèbres où le retient son corps.

Within dormant matter, Man slowly awakens, and, painfully, struggles to recognize himself. To attain that higher level, that of the Ideal, his soul must orient itself, disengage itself, leave the realm of shadows where it is held back by the body. (p. 118)

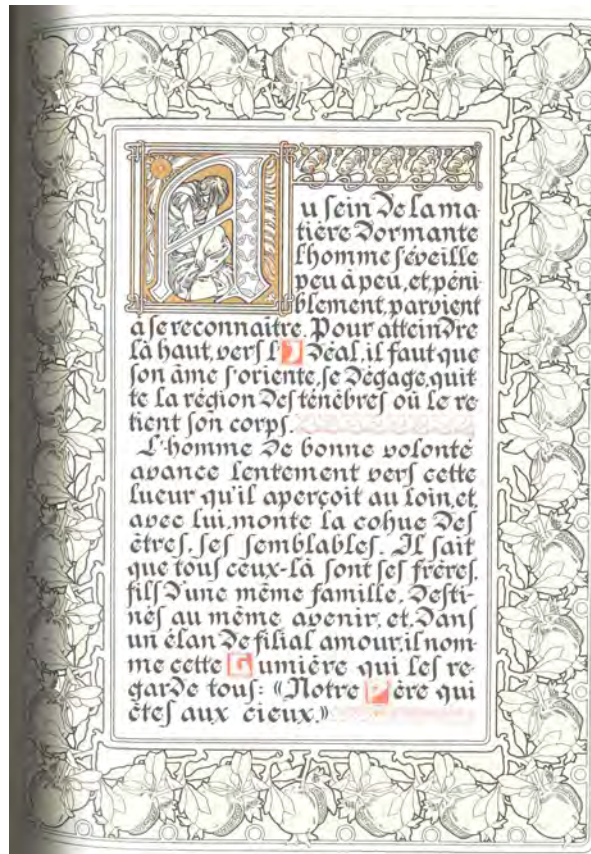


Fig. 3: Page two of *Le Pater*. Translation in body text above.

This page is followed by a full-page black-and-white illustration which visually expresses the preceding text and reinforces Mucha's written message. In the case of the first verse, the illustration depicts a man rising from a tangled heap of naked bodies and stretching his arms outwards towards the sun (fig. 4). Each section of *Le Pater* is an address to humanity from both God and Artist, displaying the redemptive and salvatory promises of a life lived in faith. With the illustrations accompanying the verses, Mucha, through classical religious symbols as well as images born of his own artistic vision, shows the abundant richness and promises of faith and the decrepit state of modern spirituality.



Fig. 4: Page three of *Le Pater*. Illustration to accompany the text.

Le Pater, therefore, is an attempt to offer a sort of antidote to the vacuous commercialism of France's Third Republic – for both reader and artist. In it, Mucha was not only able to offer a visual, symbolic interpretation of the prayer which could transcend the familiar words themselves, but also provide a deeper, more compelling form for them, one which might pique the interest of the average individual. In this sense, with *Le Pater*, Mucha's work can be compared to that of a number of other spiritual fin-de-siècle artists, such as Jean Delville or Gustave Moreau, who believed that their own artistic vision could offer the keys to salvation to a public grown weary of materialistic endeavours and diluted, exoteric dogma. With *Le Pater*, however, Mucha manages to distinguish himself from a painter such as Moreau who, beyond disparate and cursory elucidations, never wrote any sort of spiritual missive explicitly for his public.⁴ This choice, which is surprising

at a time when many artists favoured mystery over clarity, underscores Mucha's desire to not enshroud the path to salvation in enigma, but to render it clear and accessible for all who might happen upon his book – an indication of his fundamentally benevolent intentions. Mucha is significant within his time for his attempts to reach the public with his message of spiritual reform not only through his images, but also by means of literary language – the two primary means at his disposal.

Mucha's illustrations go beyond a literal interpretation of the Lord's Prayer, and indicate a singular and important moment within his œuvre. Inspired more by the religious art that he contemplated in the church where his devoutly Catholic mother worshipped than by the dogma of the church itself, Mucha remained intuitively spiritual throughout his life. Upon moving to Paris, he developed a deep friendship with the Swedish writer and artist August Strindberg, whose writing of 'mysterious forces' that guide the life of the individual had a great influence on Mucha's spiritual thought. Mucha frequently depicted 'invisible powers' at play in his work in the form of towering figures standing behind the main subjects and tacitly guiding them (p. 34). This idea of invisible forces acting upon the individual and conducting them in secret and hidden ways was very important to Mucha, who, although both spiritual and Christian, was not partisan to the notion of exotericism.

Those interested in his spirituality and the impact that it had on his artistic work will not be disappointed by the critical texts included in this new edition of *Le Pater*. Thanks to their depth and insight, these essays contribute to the recent scholarship connecting key works by individual artists to the esoteric faith behind them (such as the volume *Les deux Prométhée de Jean Delville* (2021), which features essays on Delville's masterpiece, *Prométhée*, by scholars such as Sebastien Clerbois, who also wrote *L'Ésotérisme et le symbolisme belge* (2013)). Through this supplementary scholarship, this edition manages to offer a new and illuminating perspective on *Le Pater* by explaining how it is the product of Mucha's identity not only as a mystical Christian, but as a Czech nationalist as well.

As this book illustrates marvellously, Mucha was a very active member of the Freemasons – first in Paris, and later in Prague – and believed ardently that certain knowledge is conveyed to the uninitiated by means of an intermediary. As the text explains, the completion of *Le Pater* marked a turning point in Mucha’s career, after which he decided to devote himself to more fulfilling projects, namely works which would serve the goal of supporting the growing movement for Czech independence against the Austrian Empire. Because of the amount of writing dedicated to this subject in the volume, it also deserves a place among a growing list of titles focused on the connection between symbolist art and the national independence movements in Eastern and Central Europe at the start of the twentieth century.⁵

As Jacob Sadilek’s essay ‘Alphonse Mucha, franc-maçon’ explains, Mucha’s desire for more serious artistic projects also coincided with an increasing involvement in the Freemasons, whose emphasis on universal fraternity resonated deeply with him at the time (pp. 50-85). Initiated first in Paris, Mucha was later active in the founding of two different Czech lodges, and later appointed as a national representative for the Czech Republic on the international stage. Beyond his intellectual involvement, however, he was also able to put his artistic talents to use for the Masons, designing pins, badges, chalices, and mallets, as well as executing murals to decorate the walls of their lodges. Indeed, one of the great benefits of this edition is that beautiful photographic reproductions of these objects are provided (see fig. 5), as well as photos of other masonic ephemera pertaining to Mucha and his lodges.

The essays centring around Mucha’s spirituality, as well as his involvement in both the Freemasons and the Czech independent movement, give this edition a distinct purpose and make it a valuable contribution to the growing interest in both Mucha and his non-commercial artwork. The three essays that comprise the text of this edition are accompanied by a truly impressive number of images – there are 80 illustrations and images over the book’s 176 pages – both of *Le Pater* itself, as well as other texts, illustrations, and objects pertaining to Mucha’s life and work. These additions help to flesh out an area of his career which was clearly quite important to him,

but which has been largely neglected. While less known and more difficult to explain than his commercial projects, works such as *Le Pater* were no doubt more significant to Mucha as an artist and an individual.



Fig. 5: Alphonse Mucha, enamel badges for the Freemasons lodges, Parvda vítězí, Prague.
Top: Badge for the founders of the Parvda vítězí loge, 1928. Coloured enamel on bronze, 8.5 x 6 cm.
Bottom: Badge for the regular masons of the Parvda vítězí loge, 1928. Coloured enamel on bronze, 12 x 8.5 cm.

¹ *Le Gaulois*, 25 December 1894.

² More on the fin-de-siècle phenomenon of elaborate and artistically designed literary texts is given in the recent collection of essays *Éloge du parergon. L'art décoratif du livre fin-de-siècle*, ed. by Sophie Lesiewicz and Hélène Védrine (La Fresnaie-Fayel: Otrante, 2021).

³ All translations are my own.

⁴ The majority of Moreau's writings on his paintings were small explanations intended for friends or gallery owners. See Gustave Moreau, *L'Assembleur de rêves. Écrits complets de Gustave Moreau* (Fontfroide: Fata Morgana, 1998).

⁵ See, for example the exhibition catalogues *Âmes sauvages. Le symbolisme dans les pays baltes* (RMN/Musée d'Orsay, 2018) and *Decadence: Aspects of Austrian Symbolism* (Museum Belvedere, 2013), *Silent Rebels. Symbolism in Poland around 1900*, ed. by Roger Diederer (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2022), or even Amalia Wojciechowski's doctoral dissertation 'Visions of their Land: Młoda Polska & The Making of Landscape' (Bryn Mawr, 2020).

Notes on Contributors

Elise Bouley is a fourth year PhD candidate in the Department of French and Francophone Studies at Brown University. She holds degrees in French literature from the University of Burgundy and North Carolina State University. She is interested in the intersections between pain and beauty, madness and hysteria in the nineteenth century, and the symbolic role of colour and clothing in end-of-century French art and literature.

Ailsa Boyd is an independent writer, lecturer, and curator of nineteenth century art, design and literature. She is currently researching a prolific but relatively unknown Glasgow architect Robert Duncan. She is researching George Eliot, Henry James and Edith Wharton, exploring the intersection of the real homes of the authors with those they created in their fictions for their female characters, against the vibrant background of the design reform movement in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Academic publications include *Beatrix Whistler*, manuals of household taste, the afterlives of Henry James's home in Rye and Edith Wharton's approach to interior design. She also regularly lectures on Scottish art and artists, Glasgow history and architecture.

Lara Camilleri is a secondary school English teacher. She is a PhD student at the University of Malta, carrying out research on the biographical and creative representations, constructed personae, and self-representation of nineteenth-century poet-artist Elizabeth Siddal in Victorian and post-Victorian texts and art, and in Siddal's corpus. She holds an MLitt in Romantic and Victorian literature from the University of St Andrews and has recently presented her research at the British Association for Victorian Studies annual conference.

Laura Alice Chapot is currently a Neukom Fellow in Comparative Literature and Digital Humanities at Dartmouth College. In her research, she combines comparative literary studies with computational text analysis and cultural history to investigate notions of decadence and the co-development of literary and computational cultures in late nineteenth century Germany and Sweden. She is working on her first monograph and on translations of a selection of short stories, poems, and journalistic writings by the Swedish author Hjalmar Söderberg. She teaches courses on computational comparative literature. She holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Edinburgh.

Ryan Atticus Doherty is an assistant professor of French at Centenary College of Louisiana, where he specializes in nineteenth century decadence, medical history, Catholic theology and philosophy, architecture and horticulture, and Francophone Louisiana. He has most recently published 'Where is the Decadent Suicide?' in the journal *XIX*, as well as on Jean Lorrain's fairy tales in the volume *L'Artiste de la vie moderne: le dandy entre littérature et histoire*. As part of his research on Francophone Louisiana, he is on the comité de rédaction of Éditions Tintamarre, the only French-language publishing house in America. He has recently edited and written the introduction for Charles Lemaître's 1851 gothic novel *Rodolphe de Branchelièvre*, published through Éditions Tintamarre, and he is currently working on *Contes et récits de la Louisiane créole*, tome IV.

Stefano Evangelista is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Oxford University and Fellow of Trinity College. He works on nineteenth-century literature and is especially interested in Aestheticism and decadence, the reception of the classics, and the relationship between literary and visual cultures. His most recent monograph is *Literary Cosmopolitanism in the English Fin de Siècle: Citizens of Nowhere* (2021). From 2023 till 2026 he will be Einstein Visiting Fellow at the Centre of British Studies of the Humboldt University, Berlin, working on a project entitled 'The Boundaries of Cosmopolis'.

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Sam Kunkel is an independent scholar and translator specialized in decadent and Symbolist literature and novel theory. He has most recently translated *The Solar Circus* by Gustave Kahn, and his book *L'Orphisme et le roman post-romantique: Édouard Schuré, Joséphin Péladan, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood* is available from Éditions Otrante.

Azadeh Monzavi is an artist/researcher and PhD Candidate in the Communication and Culture program at Toronto Metropolitan University. With an MA in Fashion (TMU) and a BA in Art and Art History (University of Toronto/Sheridan College), her material approaches include upcycling used fabrics and exploring 'found' objects through social encounters with users and designers of textiles and clothing. Interweaving narratives implied or hidden within discarded textile remnants, her work explores personal and political consciousness through reflective research practices. Her piece *Namesake* (2022) is in the Canada Council Art Bank collection, and she has recently been awarded a residency with the Textile Museum of Canada.

Andrew Nightingale grew up in West Cornwall, has a microelectronics degree from Manchester University, and a creative writing PhD from Anglia Ruskin University. He lives in St Leonards-on-Sea and works for an animal protection charity. His most recent poetry pamphlet is *Denizen Disease* (Red Ceilings, 2022). Some of the other poems from this sequence can be read at thedecadentreview.com.

Catherine Spooner is Professor of Literature and Culture at Lancaster University. She is primarily known for her academic writing on Gothic in literature, film, fashion, and popular culture, but has recently begun to develop a creative practice. Her seven academic books include *Fashioning Gothic Bodies*, *Contemporary Gothic* and *Post-millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic*, which was awarded the 2019 Allan Lloyd Smith Memorial Prize by the International Gothic Association. As a writer of prose fiction, she was awarded the 2022 Northern Writers' Arvon Award and longlisted for the 2023 Women's Prize Trust Discoveries Award; her poetry has appeared in *Lune* and the *Fish Anthology* 2023.

Jade Starmore is a photographer, designer and stylist based in Scotland, with a particular knowledge of the Outer Hebrides. She studied photography at City of Glasgow College and then at Glasgow School of Art, where she graduated with a first class BA (hons) in Communication Design. After winning a scholarship from Creative Scotland she gained an MDes in Fashion & Textiles, also from GSA. Starmore specializes in commercial fashion, product, landscape, and lifestyle photography, as well as fine art projects, fashion styling, digital print on fabric, costume design, illustration, and website building. She is also fully trained in photographic digitization of artworks and historical documents. Her website is: <https://www.towzietyke.com>.

Deniz Uster is a Scotland-based multidisciplinary artist/researcher, who has previously presented her work at ICA (London), If Istanbul Independent Film Festival, and Sabanci Museum (Istanbul), amongst others. Uster's collaborative practice is rooted in anthropological, ethnographic and scientific research, interwoven with speculative fiction. An imaginary shift in nature within her

narratives forms the foundation for alternative social structures, cultures, economic systems, futures and histories. Uster is currently investigating alternative, mobile modes of presentation of her work in the form of narrative and sculptural headpieces and footwear under the title ‘O T H E R S C A P E S.’

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GUEST EDITORS

Robyne Calvert is a Cultural Historian with research interests focused on the history of art, architecture, and design in Britain. She is also presently a visiting lecturer in Dress & Textiles Histories at the University of Glasgow; and researched and lectured in heritage, architecture and design history and theory at the Glasgow School of Art for over a decade. She has published widely on Victorian design and visual culture and is currently completing a new history of the Mackintosh Building at the Glasgow School of Art, to be published by Yale University Press in 2023.

Veronica Isaac is a material culture historian who specializes in the history of nineteenth century dress and theatre costume. She is a curatorial consultant and university lecturer and spent a decade working in the Department of Theatre and Performance of the Victoria & Albert Museum. Her doctoral research focused on the personal and theatrical dress of the actress Ellen Terry (1847-1928) and formed the basis for her recent chapter, ‘Costume Centre Stage: Re-Membering Ellen Terry (1847-1928)’ in *Performance Costume: New Perspectives and Methods* (2020). She is currently expanding her investigations into nineteenth century stage costume and performance, and is particularly interested in the insights costumes offer into the performers – and audiences – for which they were originally created.

ESSAY PRIZE

Lucinda Janson holds an Honours degree in English Literature from the Australian National University and a Diploma of Languages (Latin). She received the University Medal, and the Leslie Holdsworth Allen Memorial Prize for the best performance in English Honours. In July 2023, she graduated with Distinction from an MSt in English (1830-1914) at the University of Oxford, where she was funded by a Clarendon Scholarship. She wrote her MSt dissertation on queer childhood and aesthetic education in Vernon Lee’s *œuvre*.

TRANSLATION PRIZE

Di Cotofan Wu is an Assistant Professor of English Literature at the University of Kurdistan Hewlêr, Iraq. Prior to this, she held lecturer positions in English Studies at institutions including

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EDITORIAL

Jane Desmarais (Editor-in-Chief) is Professor of English and Director of the Decadence Research Centre in the Department of English and Creative Writing 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 Symonds: 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 the *Oxford Handbook of Decadence* (2021) and *Decadent Plays, 1890-1930* with Adam Alston (Bloomsbury, 2023). Her monograph, *Monsters Under Glass: A Cultural History of Hothouse Flowers, 1850 to the Present*, was published by Reaktion in 2018.

Alice Condé (Deputy Editor) is Lecturer in the Department of English and Creative Writing 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' appears in Jane Desmarais and David Weir's *Decadence and Literature* (2019), and 'Contemporary Contexts: Decadence Today and Tomorrow' appears in Desmarais and Weir's *Oxford Handbook of Decadence* (2021).

Jessica Gossling (Deputy Editor) is Lecturer in the Department of English and Creative Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London, and Deputy Managing Editor of *The Literary Encyclopedia*. She 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) and her chapter 'Interior Decoration: Designing Decadence' is published in the *Oxford Handbook of Decadence* (2021). Her essay, 'Decadent Magic: Arthur Machen's *The Hill of Dreams*' was published in *Magic: A Companion*, edited by Katharina Rein (Peter Lang, 2022). Jessica and Alice are the webmistresses of *volupte.gold.ac.uk*.

Robert Pruett-Vergara (Reviews Editor) is currently preparing a monograph of his thesis, *Remy de Gourmont and the Crisis of Erotic Idealism*, and his work investigates the interplay of erotic and philosophical discourses at the transition from Symbolism to Modernism. Alongside 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).