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'The clouds are grand pianos': Derek Mahon's *The Yellow Book* and Neo-Victorian Decadence

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By (almost) unanimous consent 'in literary history', *The Yellow Book* 'is always *the* magazine of the 1890s', or, 'more than usually assumed, *is* the nineties'.[1] Its literary authority was such that, according to Stanley Weintraub,

> in *The Yellow Book*, literature stands on the threshold of the twentieth century. Concealed beneath such familiar tags as 'The Aesthetic Decade', 'The Beardsley Period', 'The Yellow Nineties' and others, is the transitional nature of the 1890's; and the prevalence of yellow in many of the descriptions suggests the symbolic importance of that famed but ephemeral yellow-hued quarterly.[2]

Published in London from 1894 to 1897, it sold 'only 5,000 copies an issue'[3] and counted among its literary contributors hard and pure decadents like George Gissing (1857-1903), Ernest Dowson (1867-1900), Max Beerbohm (1872-1956), Richard Le Gallienne (1866-1947), plus Arthur Symons (1865-1945) and William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) in their youth. The 'almost' between parentheses, which appears above, is justified by remarks like Cyrena N. Pondrom's, which point to the fact that although *The Yellow Book* 'justly deserves its assigned place as the leading journal of the English decadence, its prominence has generally obscured the fact that it was neither the first nor the most exclusively 'decadent' of the English journals of the 'nineties'.[4]

However, *The Yellow Book* was not just *literature*. Like Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), whose 'polymorphism' extended 'even to an eclecticism among the arts',[5] its nature, identity, and mission were polymorphically oriented in a perspective that was intersemiotic, intermedial, and interdisciplinary by vocation and that permeated all its issues. This notwithstanding, the study of such perspective has almost always been restricted to the mere acknowledgement of its juxtaposition of verbal and figurative codes and products: no investigation has been carried out on the semiotic features and consequences of their micro- and macro-textual interaction in every number of *The Yellow Book* and in the megatext of the twelve numbers of the whole series.

Even less (honestly, no) attention has been paid to the contribution of music to their intersemiotic orientation and multilayered textuality. The musical components, implications, and epiphenomena of *The Yellow Book* have been constantly downplayed and overlooked, in perfect coherence – for instance – with the neglect on the part of decadent scholars of both Beardsley's 'perhaps […] deeper feeling for music than for'[6] books and pictures, and his experience as an infant 'musical prodigy, not only performing in semi-public but performing his own compositions, even before he was a precocius draughtsman or writer'.[7] Very few exceptions to this critical omission are available and two of them deserve special mention here: the two enthusiastic (though 'non peer-reviewed') commentaries by undergraduate students at Ryerson University to their 'exhibits' of music-related images from *The Yellow Book* in the context of a classroom of a course on Advanced English Research Method.[8] Such scholarly indifference to the traces of music in an intersemiotic enterprise that was received as one of the 'outrage[s] by one of that desperate and dangerous band of madmen',[9] is all the more short-sighted given, for instance, Max Beerbohm's idea that 'the art of music' is 'rather akin' to 'the painting of the face' because the latter lasts, 'like music's echo, not for very long' – an idea which makes music, by analogy with cosmetics, 'one of the chief planks in the decadent platform'.[10]

Among the multifarious and strategically unconventional musico(-)literary [11] signs disseminated in *The Yellow Book*, those in *The Gospel of Content*, a short story written by the English journalist Frederick Greenwood (1830-1909) and published in its second issue,[12] are paradigmatic of the decadent approach to the homology between language/literature and sound/music, and deserve special mention here. Its protagonist is a Monsieur Vernet, a former Russian revolutionist and political exile in London – 'whose real name ended in 'ieff'' (p. 15) – who was 'a splendid radiant creature of a man' (p. 15) and 'was loud in praise of English liberty' (p. 17). In the long second section of Greenwood's narrative, Vernet, who has undergone profound physical and spiritual mutations, shares his views on 'the greater mutations that affect all mankind' (p. 19) with a homodiegetic narrator thirty years after their first meeting (i.e., in the specified year 1887). He

preaches his 'Gospel of Content' ('with a very very little of this world's goods, or even contentment in poverty', p. 31) against the 'Gospel of Rancour' (p. 30), sermonized by 'the coolest Encyclopedist' (p. 23), 'the Darwinian process', the 'strict materialists' (p. 24) *et al.*

While preaching, Vernet predicts a transition towards 'heart-growth' (p. 24), 'spiritual perfectioning' and 'spiritual advance' (p. 28), and, just as predictably, vents a seemingly Romantic conception of music as 'a *language* that speaks to the deeper thought and finer spirits in us as words do not' (p. 29; italics mine). However, despite its music-oriented appearance, the very literarization of his prediction starts from a word-oriented expectation of 'the time' when 'an entirely new literature will have a new *language*' (p. 28) and consistently ends up confirming the ancillarity of music to verbal language and revealing the paradoxical nature of a transitional functionality that annihilates its Romantic extralinguistic autonomy and unearths the oxymoronic tangle of its decadent musico-literary elaboration:[13]

> It is music; music, which is felt to be the most subtle, most appealing, most various of tongues even while we know that we are never more than half awake to its pregnant meanings, and have not learnt to think of it *as becoming the last perfection of speech*. But that may be its appointed destiny. […] There is more, however, in what music is – a voice always understood to have powerful innumerable meanings appealing to we know not what in us, we hardly know how; and more, again, in its being an exquisite voice which can make no use of reason, nor reason of it; nor calculation, nor barter, nor anything but emotion and thought. […] What do you think? What do you say against *music being wrought into another language for mankind*, as it nears the height of its spiritual growth? (pp. 29-30; italics mine)

In his passionate peroration on *The Gospel of Content*, Monsieur Vernet oxymoronically props physically and literally, spiritually and metaphorically, rhetorically and semiotically, against a piano – in all likelihood, a small upright piano, given the chronotopic smallness of the dining room which contains it. More specifically, in Greenwood's short story, Monsieur Vernet:

a) goes 'lightly over the keys' of 'a piano in the little room we dined in' (p. 28);

b) sustains his discourse strategy by pointing 'to the piano with the finger of interrogation' (p. 29);

c) climaxes his verbal elucubrations 'with a delicate sweep of the keyboard' (p. 29).

By so doing, Vernet pushes the (a) immaterial, (b) extralinguistic, and (c) organicistic features of music in Romantic culture 'to the point of apparent dissolution'[14] by oxymoronically hybridizing or decadently contaminating them with some of their 'cultural antonyms',[15] which may be synthetically labelled as

a) materiality, which concretizes and historicizes his reference to music and is 'a projection of culture entangled with the social';[16]
b) indexicality, which 'identifies the semiotic process that makes it possible for participants […] to link particular forms of speech or conduct to types of social situation and participant in these';[17]
c) a blend of decorativism, whose 'economic function […] *proffers* the truth',[18] and ornamentation, whose late nineteenth-century linguistic interpretation was rooted in *The Grammar of Ornamentation* published by Owen Jones (1809-1874) in 1856.

Unsurprisingly, the piano was the same technological marvel that, in those very same years, Shaw aptly defined as 'the most important of all musical instruments' whose 'invention was to music what the invention of printing was to poetry',[19] and which, programmatically enough, appeared on the title page of the first volume of *The Yellow Book*, where, 'in the middle of an open field', a typically elongated Beardsleyan lady is touching a pianoforte. Very relevantly to the coeval socio-literary controversy on the piano as 'the very symbol of Victorian "respectability"' and 'the focus around which every middle-class household revolved',[20] Matthew Sturgis recalls that

> on the letters page of the *Pall Mall Budget* Beardsley defended his 'unpardonably affected' al fresco pianist by quoting an account (very probably [*sic!*] invented) of how Gluck, 'in order to warm his imagination […], was accustomed to place himself in the middle of a field; and how […] with the piano [*sic!*] before him […], he wrote in the open air […] his 'Orpheus' […]. […] *And yet we do not call Gluck a decadent.*[21]

The Yellow Book and Neo-Victorian Decadence

Faith Bickes has remarked that 'nowhere are [the complex lines of connection and difference running between the final decades of the nineteenth century and the opening decades of the twentieth] more apparent than in the world of little magazines'.[22] Perhaps surprisingly for ideologized supporters of their incurable conflict, *The Yellow Book* was an appreciated and effective interpreter of their dialogical connection (in its strictly verbal and figurative constituents), as witnessed for example by Ford Madox Ford (1873-1939), who 'presented [the] ambition […] of creating "an *aube de siècle* Yellow Book"' in his *English Review* (1908-1937); Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) and John Middleton Murry (1889-1957), who 'recalled [the] desire to make *Rhythm* [1911-1913] "the *Yellow Book* for the modern movement"'; and Margaret Anderson (1886-1973), who 'emphasized the *Yellow Book*'s literary significance and lasting value' for her *Little Review* (1914-1929).[23]

At the turn of the new millennium, predictably in the coeval unrestrainable wave of multiplication and commodification of (literary) anniversaries, the abovementioned connection has found room and evidence in some exhibitions designed and/or hosted by cultural and academic institutions in the Anglosphere. To mention just a few examples, in 1983, two English arts experts – the arts administrator Gavin Henderson (1948-) and the art gallerist and curator Michael Parkin (1931-2014) – and the Belfast-born barrister, politician, and Wilde biographer Harford Montgomery Hyde (1907-1989), issued the catalogue of the art-focused exhibition *The Artists of The Yellow Book & the Circle of Oscar Wilde* that was held in London from 5 October to 4 November 1983.[24] In 1994, another catalogue was edited by American Victorianists Margaret D. Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner: it accompanied *The Yellow Book: A Centenary Exhibition* that had been hosted by The Houghton Library at Harvard University to commemorate 'the most important and notorious British magazine of the 1890s, the first to market High Culture to mass audiences in England and America through modern advertising strategies'.[25] More recently, after the abovementioned 'exhibits […] created by undergraduate students at Toronto's Ryerson University' in 2015 (tutored by the digital Victorianist Lorraine Janzen Kooistra and the British

magazines specialist Alison Hedley), 'a complete set of *The Yellow Book* periodical' was included in *Colour Revolution: Victorian Art, Fashion & Design*, an exhibition at Oxford's Ashmolean Museum that opened on 21 September 2023, and which focused 'on the changes that took place in attitudes to colour in the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly in Victorian England, then in the vanguard of the industrial revolution'.[26]

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century poets writing in English seem to have dedicated very scant attention to the literary theory, poetical practice, and textual politics of *The Yellow Book*. Relevant exceptions are very hard to find in this case, let alone any reference to its strategic and/or tactical musico-literariness. John Betjeman (1906-1984) passingly mentioned it in his 1930s poem 'The Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the Cadogan Hotel',[27] while in the 1950s D. J. Enright (1920-2002) hyenically versified a student's answer ('Dr. Jonson [*sic*] edited the Yellow Book') as the eleventh line of a poem titled 'University examinations in Egypt'.[28] Apparently, one has to wait until 2019 to find a direct group response of 'contemporary UK-based poets […] to [that] short-lived but influential quarterly magazine' in the form of the exploration of 'the possibilities of visual and object poetry': such a response was offered 'in an exciting and cosy exhibition curated by poet Astra Papachristodoulou at [London's] Westminster Reference Library from the 1-27 November 2019' and featuring, besides the curator, Steven J. Fowler, Sarah Cave, Simon Tyrrell, Imogen Reid, Michał Kamil Piotrowski, Nic Stringer, Karen Sandhu, Vilde Valerie Bjerke Torset, Luke Thompson, and Lisa Kiew.[29]

However, these superficial appearances can be deceiving, says the ancient adage, and, in fact, between the 1960s and 2020, there has been an important Irish poet who has constantly nourished and literarized a strong and competent interest in the so-called 'Decadent Dilemma'.[30] His name was Derek Mahon (1941-2020) and his poetical re-readings of the 'Decadent Dilemma' materialized, above all, in two noteworthy and, in a way, diachronically and semiotically complementary poetical works:

1. the early poem 'Dowson and Company', no. 3 in the poetry collection *Night-crossing* (1968)[31] and no. 2 in his *Poems 1962-1978* (1979)[32] with no textual changes, and the more inclusive and encyclopaedic microtitle *The Poets of the Nineties*;
2. the later organic and panoramic poetry sequence *The Yellow Book*, published autonomously in 1997[33] and significantly revised in 2021[34] to be included in his posthumous and testamentary *Poems 1961-2020* with the unmistakeable macrotitle *Decadence*.

Mahon shared such interest with many other predecessors and successors in the evolutionary line of Irish poetry: suffice it to mention Louis MacNeice's 'Elegy for Minor Poets' in his poetry collection *Holes in the Sky* (1948), Austin Clarke's definition of 'Naughty Nineties' in his book on *The Celtic Twilight and the Nineties* (1969), and, *primus inter pares*, Yeats, who, in an emblematic passage of *Book IV. The Tragic Generation* (of the nineties) in his *Autobiographies* (section 'The Trembling of the Veil', written between 1920 and 1922 and published in 1922), asked himself and his fellows in the Rhymers' Club (e.g., Dowson, Johnson, Davidson, Wilde, and Beardsley): 'Was it that we lived in what is called "an age of transition" and so lacked coherence, or did we but pursue *antithesis*?'[35]

In those poems, Mahon poetically re-semiotized in a Neo-Victorian decadent perspective what J. B. Mayor (1828-1916), Professor of Classical Literature (1870-1879) and Moral Philosophy (1879-1882) at King's College, London, had etymologically identified in 1871 as the 'barbarous Gallicism'[36] *decadence*, both unveiling a characteristically politico-cultural chauvinistic bias, and stigmatizing what he saw as a genetic link between decadence's xenophilic proneness to new and superfluous linguistic fashions, and the elitist awareness of the '*décadent* school', which, according to a coeval anonymous piece of scorching criticism in the *Athenæum*, 'under the pretext of symbolism, of metaphysics, of "ultra-fineness", of "rare impressions", applies its resources to writing unintelligibly'.[37] As is well known, such a genetic link was oppositionally interpreted also

by Max Nordau, who applied to it a disparaging subsense of the adjective 'ichsüchtig',[38] which was paroxysmally rendered as 'ego-maniacs' in the 1895 English translation of Nordau's *Entartung*.[39] However, Stanley Rosen, Professor of Philosophy at Boston University, has proposed a more unbiased and holistic view of the decadents' dynamic and centrifugal 'search for/of the I' (a different translation of 'Ichsucht' from the usually static and centripetal ones of 'egoism', 'egotism', 'egocentricity', and 'egocentrism') in a brilliant paragraph of his 1987 *Hermeneutics as Politics*, which deserves full quotation:

> Decadence may be understood as an exacerbation of the nervous sensibility. Experience does not merely transpire; it accumulates. The result, as Nietzsche showed in such brilliant detail, is both intensification of perception and a concomitant deadening of the critical faculty. As the artist becomes more refined and penetrates to a deeper level of psychological analysis this increase in self-reflection leads also to a dissatisfaction with the traditional languages and forms of art. The ensuing creation of new forms becomes indistinguishable, not merely from a rejection of the old but from the dissolution of what is at first called 'the traditional concept of form' and, eventually, of form itself.[40]

In their 'search for/of the I', the decadents' dissatisfaction with language and form made them 'survive by packaging theories on decadence' like Umberto Eco's 'apocalyptics',[41] privilege conjunctive logic[42] and apply the textual resources of a conjunctive approach to literarization that Michel Riffaterre identified as follows: 'le romantisme avait substitué l'antithèse à l'harmonie et à l'unité dans le canon esthétique: les Decadents remplacent l'antithèse par l'oxymore'.[43] Their literarized version of the 'struggle against disharmony', which was 'the unifying theme' and, I would add, world model, 'of Victorian culture',[44] extensively semiotized the conjunctive potentialities of the oxymoron, in which – unlike opposition, which 'is a minimal paradigm, one term being *in praesentia* the other *in absentia* [–] both terms are *in praesentia*' and 'mutual exclusion (the condition of paradigmaticity) is subordinated to mutual inclusion (the condition of syntagmaticity)'.[45] Thus, with its 'smart saying[s] that at first may seem foolish',[46] the oxymoron-prone decadent community sought 'solace in elaborate methodologies and abstruse terminologies'[47] against the disjunctive strictures of the Victorian 'hegemonic syntagmatic model, contrasted and eroded from within by semantic and symbolic categories'.[48]

Derek Mahon and Neo-Victorian Decadence

Derek Mahon, 'poet of the perimeter meditating on the centre, with a mixture of amusement and pain',[49] is aware of the semiotic import of oxymoronity on the decadents' cultural experience and process of literarization to the point that he makes it the textual backbone of his early poem 'Dowson and Company' and the cypher of his first organic contribution to Neo-Victorian decadence. He inflects it in the (predominantly) [50] verbal intersemioticity of the dramatic monologue, i.e., 'the primary Victorian genre',[51] which, like all dramatic poetry, is itself 'at best an intrinsically contestable critical category and at worst *a violent oxymoron*, sparking the theoretical and historical friction between performance and poetry, theater and writing, action and language'.[52] In 'Dowson and Company', the poetic 'I' experiences the apparition of each and every of his silent decadent interlocutors, who manifest themselves on its two-dimensional literarized stage with three oxymoronic features, at the same time, general and idiosyncratic: 'important carelessness',[53] a 'spirit-sculptured face' (p. 2), and 'eyes bleak from discoveries' (pp. 3-4). He addresses them both individually *and*, collectively, as a 'kind' (p. 2), since this was the oxymoronic way in which they experienced decadence – i.e., the semiotically separative 'process of falling away or declining from a prior state of excellence, vitality, prosperity, etc.'[54] or, better, from the 'state[s]' that the coeval mainstream considered as such (whatever their meaning, function, and worth): in point of fact, theirs was a 'process of declining' that also aimed to defuse the very antithesis *individuality vs collectivity*, and that was at the core of their exacting and exhausting 'Ichsucht' for a semiotic niche from which they could both *individually and collectively* reconceive and reformulate their world model through the conjunctive logic of oxymoron.[55]

Mahon's actualization of the Victorian decadent world-model in 'Dowson and Company', apparently incompatible in both historical and cultural terms with late-sixties Belfast (while the Troubles were flaring up in Northern Ireland), clearly indicated that his world-model had been 'extended' to include them, since his 'attitude towards *Dowson and Company* is neither celebratory,

nor drastically "malicious": it activates the same scourging irony that this Belfast poet applies to the oxymoronic totality of the world and of his own human experience'.[56] Such verbal-oriented 'extension' may be rightly adjectivized as Neo-Victorian decadence and interpreted as a result of 'the postmodern assault upon the Enlightenment' which, according to Stanley Rosen, 'is in general an example of decadence'[57] and arises not from 'revolutionary fervour' – i.e., the intense zeal that aims to forcibly trigger a radical communitarian change – but from 'political despair' – i.e., the hopeless awareness that what regulates the relations of any kind within any given community at any given time cannot be mended or reformed, since, as Michelle Goldberg has recently written of American political life, 'dystopia no longer has an expiration date'.[58]

Thirty years or so after 'Dowson and Company', in 1997 (one year before the Irish landmark event of the so-called Good Friday Agreement), Mahon published the first version of his second and major poetical contribution to Neo-Victorian decadence, paradigmatically entitled *The Yellow Book*, which intensively and extensively re-semioticizes and re-poeticizes Decadence – past, present, and future – both as an 'ineluctable stage in history'[59] – populated by persons, actants, and personas in chronotopes Irish, British, European, global, cosmic – and as an anthropological matrix embedded in 'a forest of intertextuality' (*MYB97*:8, 29:56), explored by creative artists and critics lost among texts of any kind and transcodifications from any textual format to any other textual format. Mahon's *The Yellow Book* includes a Baudelairean prefatory 'Landscape' in verse plus twenty poems that, in the following years, he will submit to his habitual and inexhaustible revision process, and to editorial adjustments that are assembled in the following chart:[60]

The Yellow Book	*The Yellow Book*	*Decadence*	*Decadence*	*Decadence*
	Collected Poems of Derek Mahon	*New Collected Poems*	*New Selected Poems*	*The Poems (1961-2020)*
Loughcrew, The Gallery Press, 1997, pp. 57	Loughcrew, The Gallery Press, 1999, pp. 223-65	Loughcrew, The Gallery Press, 2011, pp. 195-229	London, Faber & Faber; Loughcrew,	Edited by Peter Fallon, Loughcrew, The

	[cf. *Literature Online*]		The Gallery Press, 2016, pp. 75-78	Gallery Press, 2021, pp. 201-33
Abbr. *MYB97*	Abbr. *MYB99*	Abbr. *MD11*	Abbr. *MD16*	Abbr. *MD21*
To the memory of Eugene Lambe (1939-1994) [9]				
[Epigraph:] 'Palinurus', *The Unquiet Grave* [10]				
0 Landscape (after Baudelaire) [11] (26)	0 Context: Baudelaire [223] (26)			
1 Night Thoughts [12-13] (52)	1 Night Thoughts [224-5] (47)	1 Night Thoughts [195-6]		1 Night Thoughts [202-2] (47)
2 Axel's Castle [14-15] (54)	2 Axel's Castle [226-7] (57)	2 Axel's Castle [197-8]	1 Axel's Castle [75-76]	2 Axel's Castle [203-4] (57)
3 At the Shelbourne [16-17] (54)	3 At the Shelbourne [228-9] (54)	3 At the Shelbourne [199-200]		3 At the Shelbourne [205-6] (50)
4 'shiver in your tenement' [18-19] (52)	4 'shiver in your tenement' [230-1] (52)	4 'shiver in your tenement' [201-2]		4 'shiver in your tenement' [207-8] (51)
5 Schopenhauer's Day [20-22] (68)	5 Schopenhauer's Day [231-3] (87)	5 Schopenhauer's Day [203-4]		
6 To Eugene Lambe in Heaven [23-25] (82)	6 To Eugene Lambe in Heaven [234-6] (81)	6 To Eugene Lambe in Heaven [205-7]		5 To Eugene Lambe in Heaven [209-11] (74)
7 An Bonnán Buí [26-27] (57)	7 An Bonnán Buí [237-8] (38)	7 An Bonnán Buí [208-9]		6 An Bonnán Buí [212-3] (39)
8 Remembering the '90s [28-29] (64)	8 Hangover Square [239-40] (60)	8 Hangover Square [210-11]		7 Hangover Square [204-5] (60)
9 At the Gate Theatre [30-32] (64)	9 At the Gate Theatre [241-2] (51)	9 At the Gate Theatre [212-3]		8 At the Gate Theatre [216-7] (43)
10 The Idiocy of Human Aspiration [33-34] (48)	10 The Idiocy of Human Aspiration [243-4] (58)			

11 At the Chelsea Arts Club [35-36] (59)	11 At the Chelsea Arts Club [245-6] (63)	10 At the Chelsea Arts Club [214-5]		9 At the Chelsea Arts Club [218-9] (54)
12 Aphrodite's Pool [37-38] (40)	12 Aphrodite's Pool [247-8] (41)	11 Aphrodite's Pool [216-7]		10 Aphrodite's Pool [220-1] (37)
13 Dusk (after Baudelaire) [39-40] (39)	13 Dusk (after Baudelaire) [249-50] (39)			
14 Rue des Beaux-Arts [41-43] (67)	14 Rue des Beaux-Arts [251-2] (67)	12 Rue des Beaux-Arts [218-9]		11 Rue des Beaux-Arts [222-3] (65)
15 Smoke [44-45] (63)	15 Smoke [253-4] (60)	13 Smoke [220-1]		12 Smoke [224-5] (48)
16 America Deserta [46-48] (70)	16 America Deserta [255-6] (75)	14 America Deserta [222-3]		13 America Deserta [226-7] (43)
17 The World of J. G. Farrell [49-50] (53)	17 The World of J. G. Farrell [258-9] (54)	15 The World of J. G. Farrell [224-5]		14 The World of J. G. Farrell [228-9] (34)
18 Death in Bangor [51-53] (80)	18 A Bangor Requiem [260-1] (70)	16 A Bangor Requiem [226-7]	2 A Bangor Requiem [77-78]	15 A Bangor Requiem [230-1] (64)
19 On the Automation of the Irish Lights [54-55] (50)	19 On the Automation of the Irish Lights [262-3] (44)			
20 Christmas in Kinsale [56-57] (62)	20 Christmas in Kinsale [264-5] (61)	17 Christmas in Kinsale [228-9]		16 Christmas in Kinsale [232-3] (41)

The critical reception of *The Yellow Book* has often blatantly understimated Mahon's theoretical and practical competence in nineteenth-century decadent poetic theory and practice (the one relevant to this article), as shown, for example, by the intuitive definition, unsupported by adequate textual evidence, of Mahon as 'the most remorseful aesthete'[61] or by the shallow remark that '*The Yellow Book* seems not to have paid much attention to some of the *fin-de-siècle* writing it addresses'.[62] As a corollary to this, it has also frequently overlooked the semiotic

relevance of oxymoronity in Mahon's late-twentieth-century poeticization of Neo-Victorian decadence, for instance when critical suggestions have taken the forms of

1) a (simplistically escapist) reference to his speculation 'about the new millennium and the possibilities of *alternative* ways of living';[63]
2) a reductive mention of his knowledge of the (unspecified) 'ambivalence' of 'the best [*which?*] decadent writers';[64]
3) an insightful (though hermeneutically naive) perception that the two terms 'literature' and 'litter' are not 'mutually exclusive, but […] overlap so frequently'.[65]

Such views do not take into sufficient account some strategically oxymoronic features of the poetic 'I' ('Our Protagonist', *MYB97*:8, 28:26) of Mahon's *The Yellow Book*, who keeps 'alight the cold candle of decadence' (*MYB97*:8, 29:41) in the name of late nineteenth-century anglophone decadents (*lato sensu*) like 'Wilde and Yeats' (*MYB97*:1, 12:21), George Moore (*MYB97*:2, 14:epigraph), Austin Clarke (*MYB97*:4, 18:epigraph), 'Dowson, Johnson, Symons and Le Gallienne' (*MYB97*:8, 28:25). From the view of the poetic 'I', all these 'desperate characters of the previous '90s' (*MYB97*:8, 28:23) are 'heroes' – i.e., etymologically, demi-gods in service to mankind – who, like some kindred personas in Mahon's first poetry collection, *Night-Crossing*, bring 'dangerous tokens to the new era' of a logocentric and ratiocentric world by combining intersemiotic 'wonders'[66] of a distinctly musico-literary kind. As counter-Odysseus 'slaves of the Siren', they are paradoxically forced to re-establish 'the archaic supremacy of the song'; as 'consorts of the Sphinx' (*MYB97*:8, 28:26), they are destined to the same fate as the lovers in Wilde's *The Sphinx*: their rational capacity is nullified by her anti-rationalist 'loathsome mystery', and their verbal (and literary) potentialities are silenced by her anti-verbal 'poisonous melodies'[67] despite the 'enlightenment's stereotyped message' of 'Oedipus' answer'.[68] In their sphinxian experience of 'their world of siren-song' (*MYB97*:19, 55:30), those 'desperate characters of the previous '90s' are radically different from Wilde's ideal critic, who

> will certainly be an interpreter, but he will not treat Art as a riddling Sphinx, whose shallow secret may be guessed and revealed by one whose feet are wounded and who knows not his name. Rather, he will look upon Art as a goddess whose mystery it is his province to intensify, and whose majesty his privilege to make more marvellous in the eyes of men.[69]

Two strategically paratextual interlocutors of the 'protagonist' of Mahon's *The Yellow Book* anticipate and support his self-identification as

> a decadent who lived to tell the story,
> surviving even beyond the age of irony
> to the point where the old stuff comes round again. (*MYB97*:8, 28:27-29)

These are the 'eccentric Irishman'[70] Eugene Lambe (1939-1994), 'colloquial yet ornate, | one of those perfect writers who never write' (*MYB97*:6, 23:19-20), who is the dedicatee of this macrotext of Neo-Victorian decatent dramatic monologues; and the English literary critic Cyril Connolly (1903-1974), from whose 'war book' *The Unquiet Grave*, written under the pseudonym 'Palinurus' 'to proclaim his faith in the unity and continuity of Western culture in its moment of crisis', Mahon took his epigraph to *The Yellow Book*: 'to live in a decadence need not make us despair; it is but one technical problem the more which a writer has to solve' (*MYB97*:epigraph, 10).[71] With such (Greimasianly) prestigious adjuvants in the conception and institutionalization of twentieth-century Neo-Victorian decadence, its 'protagonist' deliberately and coherently articulates the oxymoronic inheritance of those 'old boys of Yeats's 'tragic' (pathetic) generation' (*MYB97*:8, 28:18) in 'the pastiche paradise of the post-modern' (*MYB97*:4, 19:52). Their 'old stuff', which keeps seamlessly coming round again from cultural epoch to cultural epoch in Western experience, resurfaces in its oxymoronic conception of 'the pleasures of the text, periphrasis and paradox' (*MYB97*:2, 14:16).

However, Mahon's competent articulation of Neo-Victorian decadence in *The Yellow Book* is definitively personalized and authenticated by how he poeticizes some textualizations of intersemiosis, which, in the palimpsestic 1890s *Yellow Book*, was oxymoronically literarized as both the unrestrainable potentiality and the pathological symptom of a late nineteenth-century (imperfectly anaesthetized) dilemma that was impacting both ordinary *and* poetic language with

their symbiotic semiospheres. Mahon's intersemiotic investments include both those between (predominantly) verbal-oriented systems that feature also in 'Dowson and Company', and the ekphrastic ones between verbal and pictorial systems that abound in the whole of his creative output[72] and are authoritatively epitomized by Gustav Klimt's *Mermaids* (painted in the landmark year 1899) on the yellow cover of Mahon's 1997 *The Yellow Book*. However, its overall compositional approach to Neo-Victorian decadence cannot be judged only by its bookcover. What is unusually coherent, organic, and programmatic in the contextural counterpoint of its macrotext and microtexts is the creatively intensive adoption of musico-literary intersemioticity, i.e., that between literary systems and musical systems. The (abovementioned) oxymoronic complementarity of Siren and Sphinx is only one example of the still uninvestigated inheritance from the musico-literary intersemioticity of the originary 1890s *Yellow Book* (sketchily delineated in the first section of this article).

In elaborating the homology between language/literature and sound/music, which is the culture medium of musico-literary intersemioticity, the 'protagonist' of Mahon's *The Yellow Book* poeticizes the transposition of the otherwise irrecoverable soundsphere of the very long nineteenth century (with its logocentrically and ratiocentrically 'hegemonic syntagmatic model')[73] to the oxymoronic sonic world model of Neo-Victorian decadence. Anticipated in the paratextual areas of the epigraph from Connolly's *Unquiet Grave*[74] and the prefatory poem 'Landscape (after Baudelaire)',[75] this macrotextual process sustains the most organically musico-literary of its dramatic monologues and is carried out by simultaneously:

1. exploding the canonical Victorian soundsphere through a systematically oxymoronic sonic design, derived from an oxymoronic sonic imagination;
2. conceiving a new type of sonic disharmony (or post-harmony), whose (metaphorical) dissonances are not temporary instabilities to be resolved within the solar system of *one* tonal culture, but are themselves the permanent stabilizers of an oxymoronic network of *many* post-tonal cultures;

3. (re)composing the soundscape of Neo-Victorian decadence as a new sonic chronotope governed by an oximoronic sonic episteme, whose cross-fertilized and interactive DNA is regulated by both idiosyncratic individuality and homological coherence.

A first and highly emblematic case in point is the elaboration of a complex musico-literary isotopy in the fifth dramatic monologue, 'Schopenhauer's Day'. As its microtitle announces, it evokes the 'old bastard' (*MYB97*:5, 20:1) Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), who was one of the most competent in music and conversant in musico-literariness among the philosophers of his time, and strategically poeticizes a very relevant quote from his *World as Will and Idea*: 'music, the panacea for all our woes' (*MYB97*:5, 21:53).[76] Its Neo-Victorian decadent actualization of a daily soundscape in Schopenhauer's later life, it composes Frankfurt's dissonant sonic chronotope in an oxymoronic way which intertwines:

a) the presence in the imperial *Kaiser*saal of 'a thicket of fiddle-bows' (*MYB97*:5, 20:14) (with their unexpectedly folk terminology for violin-bows) and a polysonic/polysemic chiming from the Catholic Cathedral of St. Bartholomew (which is the *Kaiser*dom of Frankfurt) that Schopenhauer experiences in the poem 'as the Buddhists do' (*MYB97*:5, 21:43);

b) Schopenhauer's cultured 'flute practice' (which he had 'started […] as early as 1799')[77] of the flute part of the *Konzert C-Dur KV 299 für Flöte*, *Harfe und Orchester* by Mozart (*MYB97*:5, 20:8), and its metaphorization as the primaeval 'Pan-pipes in honour of a previous life' (*MYB97*:5, 20:9);

c) such non-rational metaphorization and the rational definition of the compositional process in Mozart, Schopenhauer's favourite composer after Rossini,[78] as the (in itself inherently oxymoronic) 'heartfelt calculus of Mozart'[79] (*MYB97*:5, 21:54).

'At the Chelsea Arts Club', the eleventh dramatic monologue of Mahon's 1997 *The Yellow Book*, takes his Neo-Victorian decadent actualization of Victorian decadence to one of the latter's most symbolic chronotopes. The (still existing) Chelsea Arts Club, founded in March 1891 by a cenacle of 55 members among artists and intellectuals living and working in that area of London, was a programmatically intersemiotic enterprise with aims both intellectual and practical, i.e., oriented both to the 'empyrean of aesthetic ideal' and 'to solve as far as possible the domestic problems of the Artist'.[80] The Neo-Victorian decadent fabrics of Mahon's actualization are woven with unmistakeably musico-literary threads[81] through a combination of oxymoron, paradox, and synaesthesia that 'tests the limits of language and perception',[82] and 'challenge[s] the limits imposed by dualistic thinking and binary logic'.[83] Thus, in the 1990s, in a way not unlike that in the 1890s, while an omnivorous and indistinct 'everywhere' popularizes and commodifies the Paterian aspiration of 'all art' to music into 'rock music'[84] (*MYB97*:11, 35:1), the poetic 'I"s culturally selective and exclusive 'we' takes 'refuge' against metaphonologically and semiotically 'raucous trivia' (a refined syntagmatic loan from George Steiner)[85] in the 'citadel' of the Chelsea Arts Club (*MYB97*:11, 35:3 and 9) beside a Thames intersemiotically poeticized through a double Whistlerian loan from both his 'Ten O'Clock Lecture'[86] and his pictorial and music-modelled[87] 'nocturnes consecrating wharf and bridge' (*MYB97*:11, 35:10-13 and 19).

Last but not least, 'Death in Bangor', the eighteenth and antepenultimate dramatic monologue in *The Yellow Book*, opens on the poetic 'I"s maternal burial in 'a new cemetery | on a cold hillside in the north of Co. Down' on the southern side of Belfast Lough 'half hidden by great drifts of rain' (*MYB97*:18, 51:1-2, 4). It maps the domestic chronotope of a mother who was 'a kind of artist, […] | setting against a man's aesthetic of cars and golf | your ornaments and other breakable stuff' (*MYB97*:18, 52:33-35) in 'a cold epitaph from your only son, | the wish genuine if the tone ambiguous' (*MYB97*:18, 53:69-70). Such tonal ambiguity finds an authoritative intertextual source in a quotation from the novel *December Bride* (1951) by the Scottish-born Northern Irish novelist Sam Hanna Bell (1909-1990), whose 'Nature, with her continual and

invariably indiscreet fertility, was a bad example to simple folk' is abridged to 'Nature's a bad example to simple folk' in a line within parentheses (*MYB97*:18, 51:30), surrounded by many examples of the mother's oxymoronic 'mingling of the orderly with the arbitrary',[88] hardly acceptable in a member of a strict Presbyterian community dominated by Orangists.

Like the artists in 'At the Chelsea Arts Club', Nature too 'indefinitely' and 'innocently' (*MYB97*:18, 52:49 and 66) ignores 'the limits' of both 'language and perception' and 'dualistic thinking and binary logic', and her ignorant unawareness brings about the culturally paradoxical coexistence of her home's 'intimate spaces' and 'provincial time' (*MYB97*:18, 51:6 and 20) with her 'frantic kitsch decor' (*MYB97*:18, 51:28) and 'incurable ache | of art' (*MYB97*:18, 53:75-76). On the 'score' (*MYB97*:7, 26:14) of Mahon's macrotextual elaboration of his Neo-Victorian decadent musico-literary intersemioticity, such coexistence corresponds to a dense maternal soundscape composed by the following oxymoronic oppositions of irremediably dissonant soundspheres:

a) the inevitable clash of the mother's paradoxical 'idea of the beautiful, not unrelated to Tolstoy | but formed in a tough city of ships and linen' (*MYB97*:18, 52: 41-42) with the urban 'dance-hall' euphoria (*MYB97*:18, 52:46) and 'daft musicals at the Curzon and the Savoy [cinemas]' (*MYB97*:18, 52:50), which, as Tolstoy wrote in *What is Art?*, like 'all the filthy operas, operettas, songs, romances, which are thriving in our world', show 'that contemporary art has one definite aim – spreading corruption as widely as possible';[89]

b) two apparently conflicting references to the mother's originary Protestant soundsphere in the blazing line in italics '*Remember 1690; prepare to meet thy God*' (*MYB97*:18, 52:59). This line conflates the sectarian sonicscape of 'the slogan 'Remember 1690', sometimes abbreviated to 'REM 1690', which is 'the reminder of present threats to the Ulsterman's security and independence',[90] and a quote from the Book of Amos (*King James Bible*, 4:12), which is the title of a famous Wesleyan hymn

and appears, now like then, in religious signs erected in rural Protestant areas of Northern Ireland;

c) the seemingly conflictual sonic design poeticized in the lines 'a hum of drums above the summer glens | echoing like *Götterdämmerung* over lough water' (*MYB97*:18, 52:63-64), whose superficial 'folk music *vs* art music' features hide a caricatural (and, thus, oxymoronic and paradoxical) equivalence between the 'drums' of 'the Orangemen practis[ing] for the July walk'[91] and Wagner's twilight of the gods. These two lines may have been influenced by the soundtrack written by the German composer Jürgen Knieper (1941-) for the movie *December Bride* (1991), based on Bell's novel, although their Wagnerian reference is diffused to a mere 'twilight' in the revised 1999 version of Mahon's *The Yellow Book* (*MYB99*:18, 261:54);

d) the oxymoronic counterpoint between the sonic design mentioned in c), which resounds 'in a violent post-industrial sunset blaze' (*MYB97*:18, 52:65), and the mother's 'innocently' humming of three pop music hits of her youth with their agile melodies, culturally adequate harmonies, swinging rhythms, and the centrifugal (from Bangor) perspectives of their lyrics (*MYB97*:18, 52:66-67): the 'Mexico way' of *South of the Border* (1939) by James Kennedy and Michael Carr, the 'slow boat to China' of the homonymous song (1948) by Frank Loesser, and the 'new horizon' of *Beyond the Blue Horizon* (1930) by Leo Robin, Richard Armstrong Whiting, and William Franke Harling.

These illustrative pieces of soundscape evidence in Mahon's *The Yellow Book* should not be neglected or downplayed. Just as those in the originary 1890s *Yellow Book* were paradigmatic of how the homology between language/literature and sound/music could be functional to the oxymoronic decadent approach to cultural semiotics and textual politics,[92] these re-write and re-read the 'old stuff' in the perspective of Mahon's approach to Neo-Victorian decadence. Although

the 'protagonist' in 'At the Chelsea Arts Club' prefers 'the traditional kinds of art' (*MYB97*:11, 35:31) whose 'song' he would have sung 'had I known the score' (*MYB97*:7, 26:14), the 'significant form'[93] (*MYB97*:11, 35:24) of Mahon's *The Yellow Book* shows that he knows it very well. In fact, he oxymoronically intensifies its vocal fragmentations, harmonic dissonances, rhythmic clashes, and timbre clusters in the ironic attempt to organize the compositional centre of his Neo-Victorian decadent semiosphere and personalize 'the postmodern assault upon the Enlightenment', arisen 'from political despair, not from revolutionary fervour',[94] by appropriating the 'elaborate methodologies and abstruse terminologies' of 'a kind of epistemological (or postepistemological) aestheticism'.[95]

In the first decade of the new millennium, Mahon applied the same intersemiotic treatment to one of his most prestigious (quasi-)decadent interlocutors in a magnificent poem on the poet's trade, first published as 'The Seagull (Trigorin, Act 4)' in an interim collection,[96] then included as 'Trigorin' in the book of poems *Life on Earth*,[97] and finally posthumously selected as 'Trigorin – Chekhov, The Seagull, Act 4' for his definitive *The Poems (1961-2020)*.[98] Its dialogical interaction with Anton Checkov's *The Seagull* (wr. 1895, perf. 1896), which 'confirmed him as the life and soul | of the new drama'[99] with strong decadent predilections,[100] gives preminence to musico-literary intersemioticity and, above all, to the semiotic value of the piano(forte), which has also been emphasized above as one of the (neglected) foundational musico-literary resources of the 1890s *Yellow Book*. While seemingly observing the culturally numb Trigorin from a Tryeplyev-like viewpoint, in fact, Mahon's poetic 'I' overshoots both Paulina Andreyevna's indexical association of Tryeplyev's 'playing a melancholy waltz' with depression, and Trigorin's reduction of the intersemiotically restraining simile of 'a cloud […] shaped like a piano' to a verbal 'note in his notebook'.[101] His oxymoronically intersemiotic metaphor 'the clouds are *grand* pianos' surpasses the world models of both, and the insurmountable semi-colon that separates its hemistich from the logocentric 'he makes a note'[102] in the following one, is a semiotic choice that definitively seals

Mahon's mastery of the transcodification of Victorian decadence into Neo-Victorian decadence also in the new millennium.

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[1] Ian Fletcher, 'Decadence and the Little Magazines', in *Decadence and the 1890s*, ed. by Ian Fletcher (London: Arnold, 1979), p. 192.
[2] Stanley Weintraub, '*The Yellow Book*: A Reappraisal', *The Journal of General Education*, 16 (1964), p. 136.
[3] Nicholas Freeman, *1895: Drama, Disaster and Disgrace in Late Victorian Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 4.
[4] Cyrena N. Pondrom, 'A Note on the Little Magazines of the English Decadence', *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter*, 1 (1968), p. 30.
[5] Brigid Brophy, *Black and White: A Portrait of Aubrey Beardsley* (London: Cape, 1968), p. 46.
[6] Arthur Symons, *The Art of Aubrey Beardsley* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918), p. 23.
[7] Brophy, p. 46.
[8] Cf. Edward-Ian Manapul, 'Music Halls and Operas: The Class Divide in *The Yellow Book*', and Roxanne Frazer, 'Musical Performance, Audience, and Class Relations: *The Yellow Book* Blurs the Lines', in *Situating the Yellow Book: Image, Text, Context*, https://nines.org/groups/62 [accessed 27 September 2023].
[9] Max Beerbohm, 'A Letter to the Editor', in *The Yellow Book*, 1, April 1894 (New York: AMS & Arno Press, 1967), pp. 77-78.
[10] Max Beerbohm, 'A Defence of Cosmetics', in *The Yellow Book*, 2, June 1894 (New York: AMS & Arno Press, 1967), p. 281.
[11] On the hermeneutic use of the hyphen in the adjective 'musico(-)literary' see Enrico Reggiani, *Introduzione* a *Il do maggiore di questa vita. Cinque saggi sulla cultura musico-letteraria di lingua inglese* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2016), p. 19.
[12] Frederick Greenwood, 'The Gospel of Content', *The Yellow Book*, 2, pp. 11-33. Henceforth cited in line.
[13] See, for example, Arthur Symons's version of such an oximoronic tangle in Jane Desmarais' paper 'The Musical Aesthetics ('such as it is') of Arthur Symons (1865-1945)', delivered at the conference *Arthur Symons: Writing across Arts and Cultures* organized by Elisa Bizzotto and Stefano Evangelista at the IUAV University of Venice, Italy, in 2015, https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/17584/ [accessed 31 October 2023].
[14] John Robert Reed, *Decadent Style* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985), pp. 10-11; cf. also Fraser Riddell's remarks on pianism and pianistic semiotics in 'Hearing: Bodies Resounding in Decadent Literature', in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 507-24.
[15] Juri Lotman, *Culture and Explosion* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), p. 123.
[16] Kim de Wolff, 'Materiality', in *Society for Cultural Anthropology*, https://culanth.org/fieldsights/materiality [accessed 5 October 2023].
[17] Robert Moore, 'Registers, Styles, Indexicality', in *The Cambridge Handbook of Discourse Studies*, ed. by Anna De Fina and Alexandra Georgakopoulou (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 10.
[18] Roland Barthes, *Image – Music – Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 56 (italics mine).
[19] George Bernard Shaw, 'The Religion of the Pianoforte', in George Bernard Shaw, *Shaw's Music. The Complete Musical Criticism in Three Volumes. Volume III: 1893-1950*, ed. by Dan H. Laurence (London: Max Reinhardt / The Bodley Head, 1981), p. 105.
[20] Cf. Philip Gilbert Hamerton, 'The Yellow Book, criticised', in *The Yellow Book*, 2, p. 187; cf. also the semiotic role of the pianoforte in *Natalie*, a short story by Aline Herminie Merriam (1860-1939) in *The Yellow Book*, 12, January 1897 (New York: AMS & Arno Press, 1967), pp. 245-47.
[21] Matthew Sturgis, *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 165.
[22] Sturgis, p. 166.
[23] Faith Binckes, *Modernism, Magazines and the British Avant-garde: Reading Rhythm, 1910-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 46-47.
[24] *The Artists of The Yellow Book & the Circle of Oscar Wilde* (London: Clarendon & Parkin Galleries, 1983).
[25] Stinehour Press, Lunenburg, Vermont, 1994, p. 64; cf. also Margaret D. Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner, '*The Yellow Book:* A Centenary Exhibition', *The Victorian Web*, https://victorianweb.org/decadence/yellowbook2.html [accessed 17 December 2023].
[26] Charlotte Ribeyrol, in 'Colourful Rare Books from Trinity's Library Collection on Display at Ashmolean Exhibition', 19 September 2023, https://www.trinity.ox.ac.uk/news/colourful-rare-books-trinitys-library-collection-display-ashmolean-exhibition [accessed 17 December 2023].
[27] John Betjeman, *Continual Dew: A Little Book of Bourgois Verse* (London: John Murray, 1937), pp. 1, l. 13.
[28] D. J. Enright, *The Laughing Hyena and Other Poems* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), pp. 38, l. 11.

[29] Cf. 'The Yellow Book Exhibition, 1-27 November 2019', *Poem Atlas*, https://www.poematlas.com/yellow-book [accessed 19 December 2023].
[30] R. K. R. Thornton, '"Decadence" in Later Nineteenth-century England', in Fletcher (ed.), *Decadence and the 1890s*, p. 26: the decadent dilemma is when 'a man [is] caught between *two opposite and apparently incompatible pulls*: on the one hand he is drawn by the world, its necessities, and the attractive impressions he receives from it, while on the other hand he yearns toward the eternal, the ideal, and the unwordly' (italics mine).
[31] Derek Mahon, 'Dowson and Company', in *Night-Crossing* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 4. For a detailed (cumulative/contextural) analysis of 'Dowson and Company', see Enrico Reggiani, *In attesa della vita: introduzione alla poetica di Derek Mahon* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1996), pp 135-44. On contextural analysis, cf. Neil Fraistat, *Introduction: The Place of the Book and the Book as Place*, in Neil Fraistat, ed., *Poems in Their Place: the Intertextuality and order of poetic collections* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 3-17.
[32] Derek Mahon, *Poems 1962-1978* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 2.
[33] Derek Mahon, *The Yellow Book* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1997).
[34] Derek Mahon, 'Decadence', in *The Poems (1961-2020)* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2021), pp. 201-33.
[35] William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Works of William Butler Yeats. Volume III. Autobiographies*, ed. by W. H. O'Donnell and D. N. Archibald (Scribner: New York 1999), p. 236 (italics mine). Mahon makes a direct textual reference to this chapter of Yeats's *Autobiographies* in section VIII. 'Remembering the '90s', in *The Yellow Book* (*MYB97*:8, 28:18; henceforth quoted as follows: edition [cf. the chart on pp. 38-40 of this article]: poem number, page number: line number).
[36] Joseph B. Mayor, 'Decadence', *The Journal of Philology*, 3 (1871), p. 347; cf. also p. 348: '"decadence" seems to have made little way in England until the last quarter of a century, when, possibly owing to the influence of Comte, it came into fashion, apparently to *denote* decline, and *connote* a scientific and enlightened view of that decline on the part of the user'.
[37] 'Continental literature in 1886: […], France, […]', *The Athenæum*, 1 January 1887, p. 10.
[38] Max Nordau, *Entartung* (Berlin: Carl Duncker, 1893), p. 106.
[39] Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: Heinemann, 1895), p. 302, where the German noun 'Ichsucht' is coherently translated as 'ego-mania'.
[40] Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 143.
[41] Umberto Eco, 'Apocalyptic and Integrated Intellectuals: Mass Communications and Theories of Mass Culture', in *Apocalyptics Postponed*, ed. by Robert Lumley (London: Flamingo, 1995), p. 28.
[42] See Giovanni Bottiroli, 'An Introduction to (Conjunctive) Scissional Logic', in *Paradoxes*, ed. by Stefano Arduini (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2011), p. 54: 'the most fascinating rhetorical figures (metaphor, oxymoron, etc.) are actually conjunctive'. On conjunctive logic see also Giovanni Bottiroli, *Che cos'è la teoria della letteratura* (Torino: Einaudi, 2006), esp. pp. 160-65 and 388-93.
[43] Michel Riffaterre, 'Traits décadents dans la poésie de Maeterlinck', in *La production du texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1979), p. 203.
[44] Francesco Marroni, *Victorian Disharmonies. A Reconsideration of Nineteenth-century Fiction* (Roma: John Cabot University Press, 2010), p. 11.
[45] James Jakob Liszka, 'A Critique of Lévi-Strauss's Theory of Myth and the Elements of a Semiotic Alternative', in *Semiotics 1981*, ed. by John N. Deely and Margot D. Lenhart (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1983), p. 464.
[46] Charles L. Bartow based this intriguing definition of oxymoron on its etymology in his *God's Human Speech. A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 12.
[47] Rosen, p. 142.
[48] Franco Marucci, *Introduzione*, in *Il vittorianesimo*, ed. by Franco Marucci (Napoli: Liguori, 2009, p. 5); the English translation of Marucci's definition of the Victorian code, based on Lotmanian cultural semiotics, is mine.
[49] Brendan Kennelly, 'Derek Mahon's Humane Perspective', in *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry*, ed. by Terence Brown and Nicholas Grene (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 150.
[50] On the ekphrastic features of Mahon's allusion to Gustave Moreau's *L'apparition* in 'Dowson and Company', see Reggiani, *In attesa della vita*, p. 138, n. 49.
[51] Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 12.
[52] William B. Worthen, 'Dramatic Poetry', in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Roland Green, fourth edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 376 (italics mine).
[53] Mahon, 'Dowson and Company', p. 1. Hereafter cited in line.
[54] *OED Online*, s.v. 'decadence (*n.*)', https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5361262747 [accessed 19 December 2023].
[55] Cf. Matthew Potolsky, 'The Decadent Counterpublic', *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 48 (2007), p. 6, https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/017444ar [accessed 5 October 2023]: 'The cosmopolitan impulses of decadent writers were specifically cultural, and for that reason, perhaps, limited in their broader political impact – but not in their political intent. […] Judgement of taste are, for decadent writers, politics by other means'.
[56] Reggiani, *In attesa della vita*, p. 144 (English version mine).
[57] Rosen, p. 141.
[58] Michelle Goldberg, 'The Problem of Political Despair', *New York Times*, 22 November 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/22/opinion/american-democracy.html [accessed 18 October 2023].

[59] Richard Drake, 'Decadence, Decadentism and Decadent Romanticism in Italy: Toward a Theory of Decadence', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 17 (1982), p. 69.
[60] Page numbers are in square brackets; the numbers of lines per poem are in round brackets.
[61] Kevin Barry, 'Review: Cigarette Papers. Reviewed Work(s): *The Yellow Book* by Derek Mahon; *Journalism: Selected Prose, 1970-1995* by Terence Brown', *The Irish Review*, 23 (1998), p. 151.
[62] Peter McDonald, 'Review: Incurable Ache. Reviewed Work(s): "The Yellow Book" by Derek Mahon', *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 56 (1998), p. 117.
[63] David G. Williams, '"A Decadent Who Lived to Tell the Story": Derek Mahon's "The Yellow Book"', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 23.1 (1999), p. 118 (italics mine).
[64] Jefferson Holdridge, 'Night-Rule: Decadence and Sublimity in Derek Mahon from *The Yellow Book* to the "Italian Poems"', *Journal of Irish Studies*, 17 (2002), p. 62.
[65] James Fitzpatrick Smith, 'Review. Reviewed Work(s): *The Yellow Book* by Derek Mahon', *Chicago Review*, 44.3/4 (1998), p. 212.
[66] 'Glengormley', l. 15, in Mahon, *Night-Crossing*, p. 5. For a detailed (cumulative/contextural) analysis of this poem see Reggiani, *In attesa della vita*, pp. 145-52.
[67] Oscar Wilde, *The Poems and Fairy Tales* (New York: The Modern Library, 1930), respectively p. 278 (l. 155) and p. 279 (l. 167).
[68] The mythological references in line 24 of 'Remembering the '90s' in Mahon's *The Yellow Book* (*MYB97*:28, 8:24: 'slaves of the Siren, consorts of the Sphinx') seem indebted to Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 46 ('the archaic supremacy of the song'), p. 4 (the 'enlightenment's stereotyped message' of 'Oedipus' answer'). It is also relevant in this perspective that a quotation from Adorno's *Minima Moralia* figures as the epigraph of *MYB99*:232, 5.
[69] 'The Critic as Artist', in Oscar Wilde, *The Complete* Works, vol. IV, *Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man*, ed. by Josephine M. Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 164.
[70] James Cahill, *David Hockney* (London: Hachette UK, 2022), p. 98.
[71] Cyril Connolly, *The Unquiet Grave: A Word Cycle by Palinurus* (London: Hamilton, 1951), pp. xi, xii, 54.
[72] In the last decades, contemporary Irish poetry specialists have frequently anointed Mahon as one of the most distinguished champions of *ekphrasis*, which John Heffernan has labelled as 'the verbal representation of visual representation' ('Ekphrasis: Theory', in *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature – Image – Sound – Music*, ed. by Gabriele Rippl (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), p. 35.
[73] Cf. Franco Marucci's definition of the Victorian code, based on Lotmanian cultural semiotics, which reads as follows: 'hegemonic syntagmatic model, contrasted and eroded from within by semantic and symbolic categories'. Marucci, p. 5 (translation mine).
[74] By borrowing its epigraph from Connolly's *Unquiet Grave*, Mahon's 'protagonist' articulates the Neo-Victorian decadent project of a musico-literary intersemioticity that intertwines the semiotically oxymoronic elegiac echoes of both the death of Virgil's Palinurus and 'and old border ballad in which a lover haunts the grave of his mistress and troubles her sleep' (Connolly, p. xiii). On the homonymous 'old border ballad' *The Unquiet Grave, or, Cold Blows the Wind*, see e.g., *English Folk Songs Collected and Arranged with Pianoforte Accompaniment,* selected edition, vol. II, *Songs and Ballads*, ed. by Cecil J. Sharp (London: Novello and Company, 1916), pp. xii, 18-19.
[75] For the 'protagonist' of Mahon's 1997 *Yellow Book*, the compositional (though still sight-dominated) process of writing 'chastely' his (urban) 'eclogues' requires, nonetheless, an oxymoronically Baudelairean soundscape that intersemiotically combines both hearing the (averbal) 'grave hymns wind-blown' from the 'church spires' ('masts of the ocean-going city') to 'my ivory tower' and seeing (imperceptibly verbal) 'workshops full of noise and talk' (*MYB97*:11, 0:1,4, 6-7).
[76] Cf. Schopenhauer's 'Musik […] als Panakeion aller unserer Leiden', in *Die Welt als Wille un Vorstellung*, Erster Band, Erster Teilband (Köln: Könemann, 1997), p. 386.
[77] David E. Cartwright, *Schopenhauer: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 30.
[78] Cf. Yael Braunschweig, 'Schopenhauer and Rossinian Universality: On the Italianate in Schopenhauer's Metaphysics of Music', in *The Invention of Beethoven and Rossini: Historiography, Analysis, Criticism*, ed. by Nicholas Mathew and Benjamin Walton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 28.
[79] This Mozartian reference is extended to 'the heartfelt calculus of Bach and Mozart' in *MYB99*:5, 233:54; instead, the whole poem is omitted in *MD21*. Cf. Louis Zukofsky, *'A'* (New York: New Directions, 1959), p. 258: 'Why write an essay | Saying Bach took from the folk | Their church for a calculus | And Mozart from the folk | Their stage for his calculus, | And some of us | Folk as we are from | Two wars what calculus'.
[80] Tom Cross, *Artists and Bohemians: 100 Years with the Chelsea Arts Club* (London: Quiller Press, 1992), pp. 42, 90.
[81] The 'symphonies in white', which the poetic 'I"s 'we' 'treasure' (*MYB97*:11, 35:18) against the 'exhausted chrome | grumbling at funeral pace' (*MYB97*:11, 35:14-15), may be a complex Neo-Victorian decadent derivative from the synaesthetic decadent matrix exemplified in both the '*Symphonie en blanc majeur*', in Gabriele d'Annunzio's *Il Piacere* (Milano: Fratelli Treves, 1889), p. 383, and Oscar Wilde's poem 'Symphony in Yellow' (1881). On the musical meaning of 'chrome' see e.g., William Wilson, *A New Dictionary of Music* (London: William Hughes, 1835), pp. 57, 73, 100.

[82] Fabien Desset, 'Synesthesia in Percy Bysshe Shelley's Ekphrasis: From Audible Paintings to Tangible Ideas', *Interfaces*, 36 (2015), p. 189.
[83] Rostam J. Neuwirth, 'Equality in View of Political Correctness, Cancel Culture and Other Oxymora', *International Journal of Legal Discourse*, 8 (2023), p. 2.
[84] Cf. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1904), p. 140. In *MYB99*:11 (245-246), the semiotic gap between 'everywhere' and 'we' is strengthened through both the substitution of 'rock music' with 'pop music' (*MYB99*:11, 245:1, italics mine), and the conflict between the former's '*white noise* of late-century consumerism' and the latter's '*symphonies in white*' (*MYB99*:11, 245: 2 and 20, italics mine).
[85] George Steiner, *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1995* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 15.
[86] James A. McNeill Whistler, *Ten O'Clock. A Lecture* (Portland, ME: Thomas Bird Mosher, 1916), p. 13.
[87] On Whistler's synaesthetic, oxymoronic, and paradoxical creative process in *Nocturnes* (*et al.*), cf. Arabella Teniswood-Harvey, 'Whistler's Nocturnes: A Case Study in Musical Modelling', *Music in Art*, 35 (2010), pp. 71-83.
[88] Sam Hanna Bell, *December Bride* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1974), p. 143.
[89] Alexandra Tolstoy, 'Tolstoy and Music', *The Russian Review*, 17 (1958), pp. 258-59. Derek Mahon also explicitly and extendedly refers to Tolstoy's conception of art in his poem 'New Space', included in the collection *An Autumn Wind* (Loughcrew, The Gallery Press, 2010), p. 20, ll. 23-30.
[90] Peter Burke, 'Co-memorations: Performing the past', in *Performing the past: memory, history, and identity in modern Europe*, ed. by Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree, and Kay Winter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), p. 113.
[91] Bell, p. 127.
[92] On textual politics, see Jay L. Lemke, *Textual Politics: Discourse and Social Dynamics* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1995).
[93] Steiner, p. 142.
[94] Rosen, p. 143.
[95] Ibid., p. 141.
[96] Derek Mahon, *Somewhere the Wave*, Drawings and Watercolours by Bernadette Kiely (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2007), no page numbers.
[97] Derek Mahon, *Life on Earth* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2008), pp. 15-16.
[98] Mahon, *The Poems (1961-2020)*, pp. 294-95.
[99] Derek Mahon, 'Chekhov at the Grove', in *The Poems (1961-2020)*, p. 495, ll. 28-29.
[100] Anton Chekhov, 'Letter to A. S. Savorin, Nov. 2, 1895', in *Letters on the Short Story, the Drama and Other Literary Topics*, ed. by Louis S. Friedland (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964), p. 197.
[101] Anton Chekhov, *The Plays of Anton Chekhov*, trans. by Paul Schmidt (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999), pp. 148, 133.
[102] Mahon, *The Poems (1961-2020)*, p. 294, l. 9 (italics mine).