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Variations of Decadence:
Reflections on Julian Barnes' *The Man in the Red Coat*

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Why are we drawn to decadence? No single answer on the complex variations of decadence's allure will suffice. The task is no easier in the context of a special issue on neo-Victorian decadence. Nevertheless, some form of response must be tried, if only because of the reflections it can prompt through the (mis)readings it repeats and the (re)readings it invites. And so, inadequately, we take a stab at an answer. We are drawn to decadence because of the validation it offers to personal or collective enervation, exquisiteness, and excess. It countenances the luxuriant, the dissipative, and the aesthetic. These categories are too loosely run together, admittedly, and the words deployed seem to bear, implicitly and incongruously, tones of reproof. Yet what's not to like in looseness (*volupté*: one need hardly say more) if not for a peculiar unease which, even and as it is repressed, makes decadence more tantalizing in its prospect and chancier in its actuality? The cares and uncertainties of the world are kept at bay by a cocooning of one's self – *soi*, in French – in the *soie*, the silk, of Apollonian attitudinizing. This is only one mode of decadence and seems to constitute some play of delusion, but all forms of decadence must act like there's no tomorrow. The decadent attitude must be flaunted, vaunting its contempt for measure. But this mostly holds if we are, in fact, committed to decadence and lost *to* or lost *in* it: for instance, and in another of its modes, by making ourselves at one with the languor, the affectation, the fastidious disdain of its costumed, flâneuring drift (all words used here, as befits the context, without negativity). If, on the other hand, the decadent existence proves too consuming – so that we swerve away from affirming and totalizing it as our *life/style* – then we are drawn to it differently. We still regard it in fascination, but we indulge it at a distance, only vicariously intent on the disposition for the flamboyantly unconstrained and on the fall that can be visited upon it by the world and by fate. Decadence, in

this sense, has some affinities with tragedy. As with observation of the tragic, there is something of the cathartic in witnessing decadent trajectories. And, as it happens, could anything be stagier than decadence – or its undoings?

That is by way of initial answer. But there are significant problems with this description. For one thing and for all the disclaiming gestures, it is too general, as well as less than precise about the discontinuities between Aestheticism and decadence, the distinctions between and across which generate ample scholarship within Victorian and Edwardian studies. The hint of some level of judgemental suspicion is not easily dispelled either. For reasons that will hopefully become more justifiable over the course of this article's argument, there is, however, strategic purpose to these liberties over definition and category, and to the overtones that intrude. A consideration related to this is best mentioned at the outset. It involves the vernacular understanding of decadence that is associable with jeremiads decrying sociocidal decay in a culture's vigour, verve, and values. That understanding is one that this article would also like to keep in view, as there is some value in an unsophisticated construction of decadence which can both expose and throw light on the label's finer extensions, which will come more centrally into frame in the second section of this article on Julian Barnes' *The Man in the Red Coat* (2019). This other less specialist perspective on decadence presumes that what is being contemplated is a vitiating of ideas and mores, a tension between robust tradition and shiftless modernity. In other words, and to return to a literary equivalent, in the frame would be decadence as seen by someone like Alexander Pope, who in the remarkable conclusion to Book IV of the *Dunciad* (1743), and against the vexed backdrop of the eighteenth-century debate on the contending merits of the Ancients and the Moderns, perceives the whole of culture and civilization imploding upon itself as a consequence of an all-pervasive 'Dul'ness' and decay. In that 'dread Empire' of 'CHAOS!', ruled by the 'great Anarch' of Dullness in which 'Nor *human* spark is left, nor Glimpse *divine!*', the outcome is that 'Universal Darkness buries All.'¹ This is the extreme hyperbole of the mock-heroic, positioning itself at the most extreme variation of decadence. It is the bleakest vision of decadent reduction.

Or, indeed, as we are talking Victorians, in the frame would be the stance of Matthew Arnold in ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’ (1864) or of *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). What could be more high-Victorian, more *non*-decadent, than Arnold’s resonant injunction upon criticism to act on (indeed the equation of criticism with) ‘*a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that has been known and thought in the world?*’² As is well-known, Arnold felt that the consequence of rejecting this course is, in fact, decline. Dramatically, he describes it as ‘mere anarchy and confusion’, thereby echoing the *Dunciad*’s fear of the ‘great Anarch’, quoted above, and anticipating W. B. Yeats’s ‘mere anarchy [...] loosed upon the world’ in ‘The Second Coming’ (decadence, it appears, always comes again, with variations).³ It is rather wonderful, in fact, that the words *decline* and *decadent/decadence* are not actually used by Arnold in those texts, and *decay* only twice and in a different context, but the sense of what is at stake is clear in various sequences. In none of these sequences is Arnold shy about how anarchy takes hold. He equates it, conventionally, with ‘social disintegration’, with ‘rowdyism’, with how

this and that man, and this and that body of men, all over the country, are beginning to assert and put in practice an Englishman’s right to do what he likes; his right to march where he likes, meet where he likes, enter where he likes, hoot as he likes, threaten as he likes, smash as he likes.⁴

Against this, ‘culture is the most resolute enemy of anarchy, because of the great hopes and designs for the State which culture teaches us to nourish’: the opposing impulse to that which drives those expressions of decadence seeking to upset the prevailing order, in a politics which, as Alex Murray and Matthew Potolsky, among others, have shown, is itself more complex and varied than might be assumed.⁵

And yet, by a curious paradox, Arnold’s injunctions are not so far removed as one might think from the discriminating commitment to that which within decadence (a tradition gradually installing itself across this article with accruing modulations and variations) is held to be most worthy of a life’s devotion. In the words of Walter Pater, a very different kind of Victorian, that loyalty is most rewardingly due to ‘art’, which famously ‘comes to you professing frankly to give

nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake', thereby enabling you to 'burn with a hard gemlike flame'.⁶ There is, of course, the risk that the call of the high-minded will find itself betrayed or trivialized by a rarefied posture. And the vulnerabilities in the idea of *l'art pour l'art* were rehearsed early and often in criticism: not least and predictably, as Irving Singer wrote long ago, in relation to the morality of the idea and a certain 'pervasive irresponsibility' associated with it, as well as to whether the decadent gesture and the compulsions of 'a predominance of sensuous intuition and creative imagination' is in and of itself radical and subversive.⁷ G. H. Bell-Villada later observed that "The vulgar-Marxist belief that Art for Art's Sake is a phenomenon of the decadent bourgeoisie simply ignores the historical record', adding that "The most superficial knowledge of literature and the other arts since 1820 tells us that *l'art pour l'art* has always been present as a component sect somewhere in bourgeois Culture."⁸

The character of Cecil Vyse in E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908) embodies aspects of this attitude, which is designed to provoke more complex reactions than the mockery that, for example, prefigures the simpler affectations of the fops of Restoration comedy. Asked by another character – Mr Beebe, a clergyman – what he does for a profession, Cecil responds,

I have no profession, [...] It is another example of my decadence. My attitude – quite an indefensible one – is that so long as I am no trouble to any one I have a right to do as I like. I know I ought to be getting money out of people, or devoting myself to things I don't care a straw about, but somehow, I've not been able to begin.⁹

'Doing as one likes': it is striking how often scenarios and debates involving decadence come back to this idea, against which the whole of the second chapter of Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* is situated (and titled). Significantly, one other characteristic is remarked of Vyse and his decadence (the word is directly used only that one time in the novel, though the affinities are clear enough). Lucy Honeychurch, the heroine of the novel, is warned by another character, Mr Emerson: 'You cannot live with Vyse. He's only for an acquaintance. He is for society and cultivated talk.'¹⁰ Pointedly, in a novel that is singularly replete with references to characters being 'tired' and finding

situations ‘tiresome’, he adds: ‘Have you ever talked to Vyse without feeling tired?’. As Lucy attempts to interrupt, Mr Emerson presses home the point:

No, but have you ever? He is the sort who are all right so long as they keep to things – books, pictures – but kill when they come to people. [...] Next, I meet you together, and find him protecting and teaching you and your mother to be shocked, when it was for *you* to settle whether you were shocked or no. Cecil all over again.¹¹

Decadence all over again, were it not for the fact, or even because of it, that there are variations to decadence that transcend this kind of attitudinizing. But decadence, it is true, can be exhausting. Charles Baudelaire’s ideas in ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ (1863) on the ‘aristocratic superiority’ of the mind of the ‘perfect dandy’, and ‘the *burning* desire to create a personal form of originality’ are the more acceptable and celebrated, if potentially equally consuming, variation and attestation of this.¹² Burning, again: there’s a strange propensity for it, it seems, in decadence. Decadence, in Aestheticist mode or otherwise: it burns you out, it burns you up.

Meanwhile, the other ascription of decadence – involving sociocultural vulnerabilities, readable within Habermasian sentiment on the unfinished project of modernity, or Lyotardian diagnoses of ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’, or Jamesonian reflections on ‘waning of affect’, or ‘postmodernity and its discontents’ as discussed by Zygmunt Bauman (all perspectives on the postmodern condition) – evolves into speculation on what might be thought of, in a more current paradigm, as posthumanist decadence.¹³ Although not as comprehensively covered in scholarship as one might expect, this is potentially an expansive subject, rendered more intractable by the manner in which transhumanist visioning and contemporary technoscience apotheosize that very belief in ‘machinery’, in its hyper-evolved instantiations, that Arnold suspected, and which in different ways are critiqued in, for instance, Roberto Calasso’s *L’innominabile attuale* [The Current Unnameable] (2017) or Bernard Stiegler’s *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism* (2016).¹⁴ It is of course far from clear that posthumanism must be thought of as in and of itself decadent. The counter-argument is eminently viable and certainly, in a different setting, worth pursuing. But it is not difficult to see why the correspondence with

decadence suggests itself, possibly a little facilely, in the context of discussions around the ‘post-humanities’ and the end of the human and, indeed, of everything else, or of those representations of the (post)apocalyptic that are coextensive with dystopian imminence and which allegorize, to repurpose a title of Anthony Trollope, the way we decadently live now.¹⁵ It is only another confirmation that whatever the variation of decadence in play, the sense will be that things tend pleurably but ominously. This seems to ring with a sense of lapsarian inevitability, and of postlapsarian wallowing *or* bewilderment *or* resentment *or* defiance *or* insouciance *or* regret *or* ... but there will be many variations of reaction to many variations of decadence and their many upshots and downcastings. To paraphrase Bruno Latour: we may never have been modern, but we have always already been decadent. The decadent condition is always already, in successive *and* simultaneous variation, the human state.

Consequently, the question of why we *are* drawn to decadence, in whichever of its forms we find ourselves compelled by, returns more sharply. One response could well go: how could we not be, if that is where we are all already at? But to answer the question requires possibly less generality and more exemplifying focus. What, for instance and in narrowed variation, is the beguilement of a supercilious, overweening attachment to the fineries of beauty and art, unless it has also something to do with the Wildean drama of the inevitability of its undoing that we witness (creeps that we are) with possibly sympathetic, but also savvy, fascination – and distance?

Julian Barnes’ *The Man in the Red Coat* looks, precisely, at aspects of that beguilement. Before considering it, one last preparatory move is useful, taking in the definition of *decadence* not in the *Oxford English Dictionary* but in Samuel Johnson’s 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*. Johnson – can we imagine anybody more robustly, pre-Victorianly non-decadent than him? – gives decadence short shrift. His definition is one of his tersest and most unappealing. ‘*Decadency*’, he writes, is ‘decline, decay’. And that’s that. The thought does occur that Johnson himself provides a curious instance of how the exemplars of the non-decadent can be revealed to have a side perceivable as not undecadent. How else are we to regard Johnson’s predilection for holding court, or his

indulgence of discipleship and of awed circles of conversation in the (self-)theatricalizing of his own literary eminence? Then again, and for all the relevance of pre-Victorian self-regard in relation to neo-Victorian decadence, this opens up too much distracting scope. It is why the rest of this article grounds the question, ‘Why are we drawn to the decadent?’, in a close look at *one* text: *The Man in the Red Coat* – after all, the act(ing) of discriminating selectiveness is always opportune in and around decadence, or a certain conception of it. Not before observing, however, that the moves just rehearsed prime an important, and converse, question. ‘What antitheses does decadence draw?’ We must ask, squarely, ‘What *is* the opposite of decadence?’ Squareness itself, possibly, could be one answer, especially as we are not going to follow Arnold and insist upon ‘Culture!’ Squareness, bearing the staid securities of the proper, the correct, the steady, the reliable. Is that it, though? No: the contention will be that *The Man in the Red Coat* offers a more prismatic and revealing response to why we are drawn to, *and away from*, decadence.

***The Man in the Red Coat*: Scientific rationalism and decadent association**

There is something rather delectable in approaching decadence in the context of work by Julian Barnes. The impression, after all, would be that he is another of the exemplars of the non-decadent. His writing is justifiably famed for its *control*. It is unaffected and self-aware to an almost painfully recursive degree. *Nothing to be Frightened Of* (2008), a memoiristic book-length essay on death that starts with the sentence ‘I don’t believe in God but I miss him’ and instantly goes on to critique it, as it does with its repeated recourse to the use of the past conditional (‘It’s what she would have wanted’), is a good example of this, seamlessly weaving anecdote and self-questioning reflection into a tapestry of intertextual reference to death and bereavement, doing so across literature, philosophy, biography and more.¹⁶ It is a different kind of elegance to that conveyed in the wit of decadence, and in fact, as we shall see, Barnes will question aspects of the latter. This other stance is marked, rather, by suave restraint, though it is also true that it is possible to discern there a narrative rhetoric of quite performed poise. There can in fact be something very urbane, very

dapper in the fine performance of the *undecadent*. It is perhaps telling that *silken* is a term that comes to mind to describe Barnes' style. Silk, like velvet, is a material of choice for decadence (recall, also, the opening of this article) and Barnes, as he himself records, was in his time not above a velvet 'bottle-green' suit, 'the uniform of young litterateurs' in a bygone London (a different shade could have made it very Wild(e)).¹⁷

However, it does not take an impressionistic or invasive point about Barnes' style or persona for the surprising affinity with decadence in his work to come through. It is arguable that a crypto-fascination (and indeed, it is hardly cryptic) with decadence in all its forms runs through his writing. An article could be written on variegations of decadence in *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989), or Barnes' translation of Alphonse Daudet's *In the Land of Pain* (1829) – he who was the son of a silk merchant – or indeed on the awareness of many of his protagonists that they are decliningly short of their potential. But since Barnes, in *The Man in the Red Coat*, did write a wide-ranging portrayal of French decadence in the Belle Époque and of its prefigurations in and involvements with Victorian and Edwardian England, it is to that book, almost too apt for the theme of this special issue, that the immediate decadence-minded critical gaze turns.

The book is structured in the form of essayistic vignettes. Each depicts characters, encounters or episodes involving decadent elects in the late Victorian period in England and the Belle Époque in Paris. *The Man in the Red Coat* is not, therefore, a novel. It is probably best thought of as a form of essayistic documentarism, which makes much of its not being a novel. Barnes notes of the past, 'We may speculate as long as we also admit that our speculations are novelistic, and that the novel has almost as many forms as there are forms of love and sex.'¹⁸ Quite like decadence and its variations then, some of which are imprinted with the influence of certain proper names:

Some names and works recur pressingly in the fin-de-siècle litany, both as precursors and exemplars: Baudelaire, Flaubert, Antinous (Hadrian's lover), Salomé, Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon, Parsifal, Burne-Jones, plus a supporting cast of androgynes, sadists, cruel mythological women and cruel English milords.¹⁹

Elsewhere, as he considers gaps and puzzles in the historical record, Barnes adds: ‘All these matters could, of course, be solved in a novel.’²⁰ But *The Man in the Red Coat* is not a novel, heightening the reader’s sense of how its neo-Victorian inter-generic nature sharpens the poignancies of its distinctive mode of life writing and chronicle. A longer analysis of the volume would need to address that characteristic, reading it also in the light of the poetics, or at least the attributes, of essayism discussed by Brian Dillon.²¹ And indeed, the suitability of the documentarism and essayism to the decadent context emerges from Barnes’ own remarks and quotations: he cites Mallarmé referring to *À rebours* [*Against Nature*] as ‘an absolute vision of the paradise of pure sensation’ but one which remains ‘strictly documentary’, while himself noting how Huysmans’s novel ‘diverts into essayistic mode’.²² For reasons of space, and as it is (neo-)Victorian decadence that is in view, it is best to steer the discussion to Barnes’ contrasting depictions of Oscar Wilde and the man in the red coat himself, Samuel Jean Pozzi. Into that contrast can be read, as if in parable, why it is that we are drawn to decadence.

Some contextualizing is needed for Pozzi that is not required for Wilde. An eminent gynaecologist but also a socialite acquainted with a bewildering number of canonical decadent figures, Pozzi remains largely overlooked, despite the consistency of his own observing presence in the scene. *The Man in the Red Coat* begins thus: ‘In June 1885, three Frenchmen arrived in London. One was a Prince, one was a Count, and the third was a commoner with an Italian surname. The Count subsequently described their purpose as “intellectual and decorative shopping”.’²³ During ‘the previous summer’, notes Barnes in the next vignette, Oscar and Constance Wilde are on their honeymoon in Paris, with ‘Oscar reading a recently published French novel’.²⁴ We later learn that the book is Huysmans’s *À rebours*, that classic of decadence which Barnes describes as a ‘dreamily meditative bible of decadence’.²⁵ Meanwhile, the Count is Robert de Montesquiou-Fézensac, ‘a society figure, dandy, aesthete, connoisseur, quick wit and arbiter of fashion’,²⁶ who models himself on Huysmans’s Des Esseintes; the Prince is Edmond de Polignac. They come to London, Barnes notes, ‘bearing a letter of introduction to Henry James’, who

‘devoted two days, 2 and 3 July 1885, to entertaining these three Frenchmen who’, James subsequently wrote in a remark quoted by Barnes, ‘had been “yearning to see London aestheticism”’.²⁷ The letter was written by John Singer Sargent, who in 1881 had painted a portrait of Pozzi in a red coat, ‘Unless it is better described as a dressing gown’, though it remains resplendent ‘Red – or more exactly, scarlet – full length, from neck to ankle, allowing the sight of some ruched white linen at the wrists and throat’.²⁸ Well might the painter have told his subject, ‘It’s not about *you*, it’s about the coat’, and indeed ‘the coat is now remembered more than its young inhabitant’.²⁹ Dress and effect prevail over the man who Sargent described to James as ‘a very brilliant creature’: this too is decadence.³⁰

Here, then, in Barnes’ book, with its non-novelistic rendering of neo-Victorian decadence, the beginnings of the Belle Époque meet Victorian decadence. And of the Belle Époque, Barnes writes:

Merrie England, the Golden Age, la Belle Époque: such shiny brand names are always coined retrospectively. No one in Paris ever said to one another, in 1895 or 1900, ‘We’re living in the Belle Époque, better make the most of it’. [...] The Belle Époque: locus classicus of peace and pleasure, glamour with more than a brush of decadence, a last flowering of the arts, and last flowering of a settled society before, belatedly, this soft fantasy was blown away by the metallic, unfoolable twentieth century [...]. Well, it might have been like that for some. [...] But then, as Douglas Johnson, wise historian of France, once wrote, ‘Paris is only the outskirts of France.’³¹

The wistfulness discernible here will become important for comparative reasons in the third section below, but for the moment this passage may remain in suspension here. And so, with this first contextualizing done, we can return to Pozzi, who is described by Leon Edel, James’ biographer, as ‘a society doctor, a book-collector, and a generally cultivated conversationalist’.³² Barnes describes him later as having ‘what might be called “the bourgeois pleasure of pleasing”’, in canny contradistinction to “the aristocratic pleasure of displeasing” (the phrase is from Baudelaire)’. He ‘was from the start an adroit social tactician’.³³ Barnes notes how, as a result and in what becomes something of a refrain in the book, ‘Pozzi was everywhere, so Pozzi was here too, at the centre of the action’,³⁴ such that the book is a tracing of just how ubiquitous the now

almost unremembered Pozzi is in the Paris society of his time.³⁵ Pozzi moves in society without insidiousness but, rather, with approved grace. The book becomes an account of that society.

Everyone is here, from Sarah Bernhardt to Maupassant, Mallarmé to Proust, Montesquiou to the Goncourt brothers and all the *Célébrités Contemporaines* featured on the cards enclosed in the confection boxes of the chocolatier Félix Potin, reproductions of which punctuate Barnes' account and line the inside and back covers of the hardback. Pozzi, it seems, knew them all. In other words, and this is central to the argument of this article, what *The Man in the Red Coat* offers is a displaced immersion, focalized through the overlooked and overlooking ubiquity of Pozzi, of sundry variations of decadence. Through it all, Barnes notes,

Pozzi was always well-dressed, and his 'English frock coats' were commented upon; he was described as 'almost a dandy'. He was one in the loose, vernacular sense: but he could never be one in the fullest meaning of the term. The dandy was an Anglo-French phenomenon, criss-crossing the Channel throughout the nineteenth century. [...] The French dandy was more of a writer than the English version: Baudelaire was the poet-dandy's poet-dandy. [...] The dandy is an aesthete, one for whom 'thought is of less value than vision'.³⁶

And there, in that 'almost', is the crux. Pozzi, not quite a dandy but pleasingly acquainted with and inserted within all the decadent and Aestheticist strains of his time, is just the person to look to in responding to the question, 'What draws us to decadence?' Pozzi is drawn to it but unclaimed by it. He is decadent only in 'the loose, vernacular sense'. He remains what Barnes describes as a 'highly intelligent, swiftly decisive, scientific rationalist'.³⁷ He sails, 'a sane man in a demented age',³⁸ consorting with decadence but not overcome by it. This can be contrasted with Wilde, who has the vision that Barnes speaks of in the quotation above. Reading *The Man in the Red Coat* it becomes clear that Barnes does not have much regard for this kind of vision.

Barnes' references to Wilde are at best ambivalent. He refers to Wilde's 'glitterdust'.³⁹ He speaks scathingly of Wilde's inability to read the room, the *courtroom*, no less, when Wilde famously responds during his cross-examination, 'No work of art ever puts forward views of any kind',⁴⁰ which becomes a gift to the prosecuting Edward Carson, QC, MP. Elsewhere, there is an account of Wilde being rude to Proust about the interiors of his home. 'How ugly your house is!', he tells

him.⁴¹ The thought occurs that a necessary attribute to being an aesthete is a lack of graciousness (Pozzi, in contrast, comes across in Barnes' portrayal as a man of some grace). Barnes reports Wilde describing Sargent's art as meretricious,⁴² but it is hard not to feel that he sees the word rebounding on Wilde. He cites Jean Lorrain's description of Wilde as a faker.⁴³ He refers also to Arthur Conan Doyle's declining regard for Wilde and ebbing 'gentlemanly instincts'.⁴⁴ And then there is this prime example of a Barnesian dig: 'Arriving in America, Wilde explained to the natives, "I am here to diffuse beauty". The Artist as Aerosol, perhaps.'⁴⁵

Yet the depiction is at its most devastating when it centres on one of the easiest of draws to decadence: the epigram. 'The epigram', writes Barnes, is like

a verbal dandy. And like the dandy, most epigrams, except the greatest, come with a 'best before' label. Time is equally the enemy of the butterfly, the dandy and the epigram. [...] [Wilde] was, socially and intellectually, a juggler, a tightrope walker, a trapeze artist, quick on his feet and quick in his head, a whirl of rhinestones caught in a spotlight while the rising clatter of the snare drum urges him and us towards that final cymbal clash. And then the applause – oh yes, the applause is vital.⁴⁶

The snare drum indeed. Decadence, ever performative, traps even those who are wary of it. And what form might an undrawing from decadence take? Here, in the most salient quotation for the argument developed in this article, is Barnes on that point:

When I was a young man I first heard Wilde's epigrams on the lips of actors who knew exactly what effect they would have. I was startled by their elegance and confidence and therefore assumed their truth. Later, I began to realise how many of them relied on a slick reversal of a normal assumption or *idée reçue*. Then, in middle age, I began to doubt their essential truth, or even their moderate truth, or even their vestigial truth, and a fierce literary moralism set in. Finally, I realised that the Wildean epigram (whether in dramatic or prose form) is actually a piece of theatrical display rather than any serious distillation of truth. And then, post-finally, I discovered that Wilde was aware of this all along. As he once wrote to Conan Doyle: 'Between me and life there is a mist of words always. [...] the chance of an epigram makes me desert truth'.⁴⁷

This is Barnes as, in effect, literary critic (the passage is somewhat reminiscent of Joseph Addison's essay of 11 May 1711 in *The Spectator* on distinctions between 'True Wit' and 'False Wit'),⁴⁸ engaged in a close examination of how we are drawn to decadence, or at least to one variation or performance of it, but with a potential for disaffection too. Charmed and beguiled, we might yet seek, and find, distance from it. Distance: this, in the end, is the key to Pozzi, who is 'almost a

dandy' but stands in for Barnes' own regard for the decadent. Drawn to it, yes, intimately and narratingly interested, such that the relation is affinitive and elective, not merely vicarious – but, in the end, unclaimed and capable of detachment, possibly wary of being undone by it. So it is ironic that Pozzi does not waste away as a result of any decadent indulgence but still comes to abrupt end. He dies murdered, shot 'three times: in the arm, the chest and the gut' on 13 June 1918 by a disturbed patient that he had treated, while he was engaged in the very undecadent activity of visiting and performing duties in a military hospital.⁴⁹ The scientific rationalist is (over)taken by the irrational.

Varying away from decadence, manageably

So, in conclusion, what is there to say about this figuration, in the contrast between Wilde and Pozzi, about how Barnes – and we – view decadence? The decadent burn is not for everyone. It is hard not to think that some burn so that others, fascinated by the (self-)consuming act but wary of it, might not. Barnes, notably, likes Pozzi. He watches him navigate the decadent waters. Barnes drops Wilde but takes up Pozzi's watchfulness (in its double sense) in relation to decadence. Above all, he approves of Pozzi's dictum, 'Chauvinism is one of the forms of ignorance.'⁵⁰ Pozzi is remarkably unignorant in that sense. Contrasting this in his Author's Note with his own dismay at Brexit, Barnes' closing comment reads thus:

Still, I decline to be pessimistic. Time spent in the distant, decadent, hectic, violent, narcissistic and neurotic Belle Époque has left me cheerful. Mainly because of the figure of Samuel Jean Pozzi. [...] He was, thankfully, not without faults. But I would, nonetheless, put him forward as a kind of hero.⁵¹

The nature of that heroism lies in the tactical rational distance in the face of the allure of decadence in all its senses. Yet this is a puzzling note for the book to end on. What is the connection between this anti-Brexit stance and what Pozzi – this 'hero' of the Belle Époque, who is 'almost a dandy', who is *in* and *of* and *with* decadence, yet rather *without* – embodies? Possibly it must be read in the context of the quotation that was left in suspension in the second section: with that sense in view

of an age that we never knew as delicious and teeming, or as precarious and vulnerable to history, when we were in it. Possibly it has to do with nostalgia for smooth and easy flow across contexts, for which decadence arguably has a genius.

Even so, the impression one is left with by the characters encountered in *The Man in the Red Coat* is that the decadent alternative can be overbearing in the end, its own stagey act becoming a little predictable to itself and others, a little tiresome and tiring, perhaps. ‘Cecil all over again.’ And the propensity for self-destruction is strong, which is why one might wish to move away. What *The Man in the Red Coat* allegorizes, then, is the broader instance of how variations across temper and temperance – for this has always been, in the end, about those attributes – modulate the regard of, and for, decadence.

Of course, this can seem feeble, tepid, square, bourgeois: everything that an aesthete *or* a decadent must disdain. It must also be reemphasized that *The Man in the Red Coat* revisits, in good neo-Victorian and neo-Edwardian fashion, a wider cast of decadent dispositions than is represented by Wilde, though few of the other characters emerge with calibrated balance in character or conduct. More interestingly still, the suggestion above that *The Man in the Red Coat* is in the end a study of temper and temperance (or lack thereof) across the Belle Époque cues a comparative point from which some insight could be drawn. It can seem like in registering the book’s restaging of subtle and guarded veerings away from decadence what is being witnessed is, in fact, a neo-Victorian *and* neo-Elizabethan variation – admittedly, at a distant remove on the continuum, though the overriding point ought perhaps to be that there is in fact a discernible continuum of (non-)decadent proclivities – of a determining episode in the twelfth Canto of Book II of Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*. That episode famously depicts the sacking of that *locus classicus* of decadence, the Bower of Bliss, by the righteous Sir Guyon, the Knight who is a model of temperance but is wildly intemperate in the destruction. We could do worse than to revisit Spenser for reflections on how we cannot resist the richly varied allure of decadence, and why any disengagement from it can range from the gently dissociative participation of Pozzi to Guyon’s

violent break, though that work of interpretation, at least in regard to the latter consideration, has already been done to fine effect in an article by Angela D. Bullard on the Bower of Bliss episode in *The Faerie Queene*. Bullard concludes, ‘there is a degree of manageability that early moderns believed they could exert over an outside environment with the potential to shape their affectivity’.⁵² Whether such manageability of decadence and its effects and variations over time, which can only be a matter of ‘degree’ anyway, is configurable or illusory is kept in ambiguous, tantalizing suspension. It could hardly be otherwise, for like the protagonist of *The Man in the Red Coat*, this neo-Victorian parable on how and why we are forever drawn to and away from decadence, it is ultimately we ourselves who are most variable in what we think and desire.

¹ Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. by John Butt (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 800. Emphasis in the original.

² Matthew Arnold, *Selected Prose*, ed. by P. J. Keating (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 156. Emphasis in the original.

³ See Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. by J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 97; W. B. Yeats, *Poems of W. B. Yeats: A New Selection*, ed. by A. Norman Jeffares (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), p. 246.

⁴ Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, pp. 82, 76-77.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 204; Alex Murray, *Decadent Conservatism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Matthew Potolsky, ‘Decadence and Politics’, in *Decadence: A Literary History*, ed. by Alex Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 152-66.

⁶ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, introduced by Arthur Symons (New York: The Modern Library, 1900), pp. 197, 199.

⁷ See Walter Lippman, *A Preface to Morals* (New York: Macmillan, 1929) and Irving Singer, ‘The Aesthetics of Art for Art’s Sake’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 12.3 (1954), p. 344.

⁸ Gene H. Bell-Villada, ‘The Idea of Art for Art’s Sake: Intellectual Origins, Social Conditions, and Poetic Doctrine’, *Science & Society*, 50.4 (1986), p. 419.

⁹ E. M. Forster, *A Room with a View* (London: Edward Arnold, 1908), p. 139.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 254-55.

¹² Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (New York: Phaidon Press, 1964), p. 27, emphasis added.

¹³ See Jurgen Habermas, ‘Modernity: An Unfinished Project’, trans. by Nicholas Walker, in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, ed. by Maurizio Passerin d’Entreves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997 [1981]), pp. 38-55; Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1975]); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991); Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (London: Polity, 1997).

¹⁴ For a different conceptualization of correspondences between decadence and posthumanism see also Dennis Denisoff, ‘A Disembodied Voice: The Posthuman Formlessness of Decadence’, in *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin-de-Siècle*, ed. by David Hall and Alex Murray (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 181-200.

¹⁵ See the opening to Ali Smith, *Winter* (London: Faber and Faber, 2017), for a memorably comprehensive yet terse portrayal of the contemporary obsession with things ending.

¹⁶ Julian Barnes, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), p. 1.

¹⁷ Julian Barnes, ‘One famous writer brought him a piece and was told it might serve as cat litter’, *The Guardian*, 17 April 1999. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/1999/apr/17/julianbarnes> [accessed 7 December 2023].

¹⁸ Julian Barnes, *The Man in the Red Coat* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2019), p. 113.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-1.

- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 251.
- ²¹ See Brian Dillon, *Essayism* (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2017).
- ²² Barnes, *The Man in the Red Coat*, p. 37.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 1.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 9.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 6.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 2.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Ibid., p. 6.
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 26.
- ³² Ibid., p. 4.
- ³³ Ibid., p. 21.
- ³⁴ Ibid., p. 51.
- ³⁵ There is one biography of Pozzi: Claude Vanderpooten, *Samuel Pozzi: Chirurgien et ami des femmes* (Ozoir-La-Ferrière: In Fine; Neuilly: V & O, 1992).
- ³⁶ Barnes, *The Man in the Red Coat*, pp. 56-57.
- ³⁷ Ibid., p. 54.
- ³⁸ Ibid., p. 168.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p. 97.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 16.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 150.
- ⁴² Ibid., p. 115.
- ⁴³ Ibid., p. 74.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 116.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 65.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 209-10.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 210.
- ⁴⁸ *The Spectator* 62, 11 May 1711.
- ⁴⁹ Barnes, *The Man in the Red Coat*, p. 257
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 265.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., p. 266.
- ⁵² Angela D. Bullard, 'Tempering the Intemperate in Spenser's Bower of Bliss', *Spenser Studies: A Renaissance Poetry Annual*, 31-32.1 (2018), 167-87 (p. 183).