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Kate Hext and Alex Murray (eds), *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 304 pp.
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The broad premise of *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* – that the relationship between decadence and modernism is not so much contiguous as continuous – is one that has been steadily gaining traction in recent years. This collection of essays offers a series of fascinating examples that illuminate the nuances of this relationship and, crucially, collectively draw attention to the plurality of both traditions in a period too often dominated by the high modernist canon.

The opening chapter, by Kristin Mahoney, goes straight to the heart of the decadence-modernism conundrum. Ada Leverson is shown as occupying two middle grounds: one as an 1890s decadent inhabiting the new century; and another between decadence and feminism. As a means to counter a masculine conception of modernism, the decadent aesthetic becomes the basis for an indirect type of feminism but Mahoney is rightly sensitive to the complexities of a feminist writer's engagement with a tradition that was, itself, not without misogyny. She illustrates Leverson's use of parody to disrupt patriarchal structures, adapting fin-de-siècle methods to modern, feminist purposes in a problematic but ultimately fruitfully progressive relationship.

Ellen Crowell takes a different approach, examining the legacy of an 1890s text, Wilde's *Salomé*, in early twentieth-century productions. Crowell proposes that using the severed head of John the Baptist as a prop sets in motion a generic tension by juxtaposing a Naturalist object with an otherwise Symbolist mise en scène. By refusing to reconcile these two aesthetic modes, *Salomé* makes irreconcilability itself a meta-aesthetic critique: the play's subversion lies in its exploitation of the irritation the audience feels when genres collide, using aesthetic failure as a trigger for new generic forms. Crowell's is a unique and convincing reading of the play's performance history, although francophone readers will find the misgendered nouns jarring.

The volume's third chapter takes a broader stance. Nick Freeman argues that the early twentieth-century conservative press sought to confine infectious decadence to the 1890s but that its flexibility allowed decadence to resist being 'cured'. Identifying a 'semantic slippage' around the term 'decadence', whereby it became associated more with a lifestyle than an aesthetic, Freeman examines several ways in which decadence persisted into the twentieth century: Edmund John's Pre-Raphaelite imitations enact a new decadence; Max Beerbohm, a product of the 1890s, satirizes his own past but risks obscuring the radical experimentation encouraged by decadence; and Hector Hugh Munro (writing as Saki) uses humour to evade any moral outcry his homoerotic writing might provoke. In a wide-ranging essay, Freeman demonstrates how, divorced from explicit immorality and designating a mode of behaviour rather than an aesthetic purism, twentieth-century decadence slipped into the mainstream in disguise.

In the fourth chapter, Joseph Bristow shines a light on Margaret Sackville, who was among the most visible female poets of the era but was regarded as limited by her gender. An activist for women's rights and poetry's cultural influence, Sackville railed against the narcissism and male-domination amplified by decadence and called for women to develop their own art forms, no longer as muses but as voices in their own right. War disrupted her endeavours and she struggled to translate her pacifist and socialist activism into the disciplined, decorous poetic form she sought. Ultimately, Bristow shows that Sackville considered it a crisis of war that women failed to intervene against modernistic militarism and stayed silent to please men. This chapter weaves together a biographical emphasis with snatches of text-based criticism to illuminate an important female figure who explicitly grappled with gender politics within a decadent-modernist framework.

Ellis Hanson's essay on Ronald Firbank, which takes drifting as its central concept, is an unexpected highlight, giving space to a writer who has often been neglected within modernist studies. Hanson explains that Firbank exemplifies the way decadence bled into modernism, but this alienated him from the brand of modernism that eschewed decadence. Seen as too decadent and too queer, too Wildean in an era that disavowed Wilde, Firbank has not been canonized.

Nevertheless, his various ways of drifting – his nomadic, disorientating plots and syntax, his comic approach, his use of Creole as an aesthetic flourish – allow him to transgress ethnic and sexual boundaries. Elaborating on Derridean 'destinnerance' and Barthesian 'dérive', Hanson argues that Firbank's stylistic drift is productively disruptive and enables queering in his novels. As a study in drifting attention, this chapter ironically succeeds in holding its reader captivated.

Sarah Parker's chapter on Edna St Vincent Millay chimes nicely with the earlier chapters on Leverson and Sackville, again showing the potential for twentieth-century decadence to foreground female writers. In Parker's reading, Millay has been excluded from the modernist canon for resisting modernism's cult of impersonality and formal experimentation. However, Parker shows that Millay reworks decadent forms and themes to offer an alternative to modernism. The most interesting aspect of this essay is the argument that Millay 'ventriloquizes' Charles Baudelaire, a figure to whom both decadence and modernism have laid claim. Millay's translations adapt Baudelaire's work to her own purpose, out-fetishizing the male poetic tradition embodied in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, and injecting a light, modern irony that scrutinizes Baudelaire's sexual violence and misogynistic legacy. This important essay demonstrates that female modernism embraces intertextuality for the purpose of redressing the gender balance.

A latent irony underpins the relationship between decadence and modernism, which few chapters in this book address explicitly. Decadence is initially the product of a sense of decline from which stems the paradoxical drive for renewal that is its lifeblood – a fact which must necessarily influence its relationship to modernism. It is therefore a relief when Vincent Sherry's essay foregrounds this point, emphasizing the temporality of the terms 'decadence' and 'modernism'. In a two-part essay, Sherry first discusses Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, two heavyweight modernists who draw on decadence by exploring imperial decline: for Woolf, the decline of empire enables interrogation the historical erasure of women; while, for Joyce, linguistic decay is linked to the declining British Empire in the context of Irish nationalism. The second, more substantial part of the essay, examines decadence in the work of Djuna Barnes and Samuel

Beckett. In an illuminating turn, Sherry argues that Barnes and Beckett produced self-consciously decadent prose but used the genre of mechanical comedy to update decadence and apply the notion of decay to language itself. This is an essay brimming with material – it could easily have constituted two separate chapters – which offers a refreshing take on the central premise of *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*.

Howard J. Booth traces a direct modernist inheritance from decadence, showing that D. H. Lawrence took a decadent model – in this case, Swinburne's writing – and opened up its existing forms to reach a new understanding of modernity. Booth charts the way Swinburne's anti-Cartesianism and mythopoeia evolve in Lawrence's writing, focusing on the depiction of Pan to explore the relationship between the self and the natural world, and between the mind and body. Booth concludes that while Swinburne broaches these themes within the controlled context of tight versification and established tropes, Lawrence opens up form in order to seek answers to the damage wrought by modernity. Although the essay would have benefitted from more textual examples, particularly from Lawrence's novels, it is a concise argument that examines how a parallel between the two writers allowed Lawrence to propose decadence as an answer to modernism in a reversal of the usual narrative.

Douglas Mao's chapter on Donald Evans, Gertrude Stein, and 'naughtiness', is as charming as the phenomenon it describes. Mao notes that the publications of Evans's Claire Marie press were largely an early twentieth-century incarnation of 1890s decadence, and that Stein's futuristic *Tender Buttons* was anomalous. However, Mao acknowledges similarities between Evans and Stein, notably that both writers were accused of posing, a result of their willingness to shock in order to further the artistic cause. Mao introduces the notion of 'naughtiness': these writers deliberately provoke in a charming manner, confident that readers will be won over by the amusement their rule breaking generates. Naughtiness is employed by both decadence and modernism to reform artistic standards because, while it initially repels the reader, it is ultimately inviting and tameable.

In other words, it aims to be assimilated so as to effect disruption. Mao's case for naughtiness is delightfully provocative and convincing – which is precisely the point.

Kirsten MacLeod's essay on Carl Van Vechten's queerness aligns well with Hanson's contribution on Firbank. MacLeod puts Van Vechten at the centre of new decadence as a resistance to the cultural authority of modernism. This resistance allowed him to explore queerness as a form of anti-essentialism and an interrogation of the paradigms of sexuality and gender. MacLeod argues that Van Vechten coloured the features of old decadence with new camp aesthetics of artifice, extravagance, transgression, and irreverence. By playing with the distinction between surface and depth, and between foreground and background, Van Vechten uses new decadence to facilitate the expression of queer identity. This essay intelligently and deftly exposes the way twentieth-century decadence became a platform for marginalized voices and employed camp as a mode of resistance.

The book closes with another spotlight on a marginalized figure: Michèle Mendelssohn explores Richard Bruce Nugent's place in the history of queer black modernity. Situating Nugent within the Harlem Renaissance tradition, Mendelssohn shows that he refused to compromise his identity, becoming an important voice for both African American and gay communities in the first half of the twentieth century. Mendelssohn compares J.-K. Huysmans's *À rebours* with Nugent's story 'Smoke, Lilies and Jade' and draws on the notion of autobiografiction to argue that Nugent repurposed decadence to make visible his queer black identity. Unlike his friend, Wallace Thurman, Nugent transforms the decadent anxiety around homosexuality into modern queer-positivity. This essay demonstrates that Nugent's avant-garde dream of homosexual, interracial desire owes a debt to the 1890s but has cast off the shame of that era and is out and proud. Mendelssohn ensures that the volume ends on a high note, showcasing a writer who takes the best of decadence and fashions it into a bold new modernity for a more liberated era.

This is a wide-ranging and compelling volume which offers new insights into both decadence and modernism as mutually influential movements. As the editors Kate Hext and Alex

Murray acknowledge in their detailed and insightful introduction, this is not the first study to question the notion of an established dichotomy between the two movements. But the strength of this collection is that it allows for, and celebrates, the diversity of decadence and modernism without attempting to reduce either movement to a single definition. As a result, the essays work best when viewed collectively, offering a platform for communities who were marginalized on the basis of gender, race, or sexuality.

Relevant to each of the essays is the concern that modernism and decadence studies, as discrete disciplines, have been complicit in the amplification of the 'make it new' doctrine and the erasure or dismissal of less severely demarcated histories of the turn of the twentieth century. The fact that the term 'decadence' necessarily implies a heterogeneity of style and politics that characterizes the essence of the tradition, allows the writers of these essays to demonstrate in diverse ways that decadence was a vehicle for an alternative form of modernism to that which was practised and preached by the high modernists who have dominated the canon. The result is a refreshing exploration of writing on the periphery, which ultimately acknowledges that both decadence and modernism sought to challenge tradition and, in this respect, the reciprocally revealing relationship between them comes as no surprise at all.