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Housing the Oscar Wilde Archive: Postmodernism's Curation of Decadence

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Since his death, Oscar Wilde has only been accessible through documents: those he left behind, and the documents produced by friends, family, scholars, biographers, and artists. The figure we know is related to the historical original, but it is not Wilde himself. It is a Wilde born of the archive, created by the mingling of documentary evidence with archival decision-making, critical intervention, and creative imagination. Reading Wilde as an archive, then, has implications for both decadence and recent postmodern approaches to archive theory.

This article is based on ongoing research into the relationship between decadence and postmodernism.¹ The figure of Wilde is important, not because of anachronistic claims that Wilde is a proto-postmodernist, but because he offers an important example of the interests in history and the archive shared by decadence and postmodernism. While resisting the notion of any equivalence between postmodernism and decadence, we argue that these literary and artistic movements, separated by nearly a century, nonetheless share similar interests in disrupting notions of progress, linear history, and the objectivity of the archive. Exploring postmodern interest in decadent texts and theories makes it possible to reconsider the artist's relationship to history and the role that the documentary archive plays in creating new histories in the work of contemporary artists and authors. Born of postmodern historiography, archive theory argues for a non-linear, self-conscious narrative that is eclectic and contingent. The historical Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (1854-1900) is not the Wilde who concerns us. That Wilde, however, did contribute many of the documents that help to shape the Wilde discussed in this paper, a figure born of the archive. This article, then, is not about Oscar Wilde, whose history and cultural influence is well rehearsed. Instead, the documentary archive of Wilde's life and art becomes a means to help us

understand this interpretation of the archive as an active, biased, agent of change. Using Wilde's *De Profundis* (1912, 1962), Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), Neil Bartlett's *Who Was that Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (1988), and ArtAngel's installation *Inside* (2016), we will argue that postmodernism's return to the decadent archive brings new material to a never-ending collection of new impressions. Looking at decadence through a postmodernist lens allows us to discover a potential historiography which the decadents themselves did not precisely articulate despite their interest in the past.

In order to understand the importance of the decadent archive's role in defining the reader's historical relationship to Wilde, we have organized this essay into three parts. First, we will examine the archival relationship between decadence and postmodernism, with reference to our existing research and its relationship to the topic at hand. Second, we will explore the decadent idea of the 'House Beautiful' as an archival project in order to understand the specifically decadent approach to history and the relationship of the present to the past. Third, we will examine Wilde as a document of the archive — ever-changing according to who is curating his materials — including the central role played by Wilde's own writing in *De Profundis* in creating this approach to his history. Our goal is to demonstrate that what some incorrectly characterize in Wilde as an anticipation of the future, is actually an important theoretical characteristic of decadent literature that only postmodernism has, as of yet, recognized in its return to the decadent archive for frequent inspiration.

Decadence and Postmodernism

Decadence and postmodernism are by no means the same beast, but a number of postmodern works clearly find affiliation with the decadent archive. Gregory Betts suggests that 'as an act of rupture, historical decadence, like postmodernism in general, opens texts forward and backward in time rather than working toward closures or teleologies of any kind'.² Both reject a linear, progressive model of history, demonstrate a 'disillusionment with their contemporary milieu', and

a ‘falling away from established norms of language-use without falling toward anything — a systematic derangement of the senses [...] an embrace of the end of order, the end of stability’.³ David Weir summarizes the 1980s debate between Jürgen Habermas and Jean-François Lyotard about postmodernism as ‘a type of transition’: ‘although Habermas views the transition as a temporary modulation away from modernity [...] Lyotard imagines that the movement away from the “enlightened” narratives of modernity will go on indefinitely’.⁴ From this discussion, Weir concludes that decadence and postmodernism ‘coincide’ in several ways: in giving temporal transition a particular cultural inflection, in their interest in decline, and in both terms having both positive and negative connotations. Decadence is a non-linear reading practice, or to use Matthew Potolsky’s language, a ‘mode of reception’, where historical archives are accessed in order to critically rethink moments in the past ‘in relationship to their [present] culture’.⁵ In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon coins the term ‘historiographic metafiction’ to describe novels that are self-conscious about their own processes as fiction, while also foregrounding questions of how we come to know about historical events.⁶ Recognizing how the past is put to work is part of the reader’s critical stance; scepticism, therefore, is one of the legacies of postmodern fiction, which aims to revisit historical moments with a critical, ironic eye, while always focusing on the ways in which we come to know history from written traces. Beverley Southgate concurs that postmodernism’s questioning of ‘the most fundamental aspects of our lives’ is in accordance with ‘the original meaning of both “historia” and “scepticism”, both of which implied not any immanent attainment of the end, but rather the need for continuing, even endless, search and inquiry.’⁷ For Southgate, the function of postmodern history is to ‘*destabilise* — endlessly to question certainties, reveal alternatives, and provoke reassessments’.⁸ Both postmodernism and decadence, then, are interested in disrupting the established norms which seek to impose cultural consensus and hierarchies of power for the purpose of establishing an ideal.

Decadence is deeply concerned with artistic and creative expression. Its turn to the past is a turn to a history of philosophers, orators, painters, sculptors, poets, and pornographers in order

to reimagine the present and to create new possibilities for the future. Walter Pater, for example, argues that in Plato's philosophies, 'there is nothing absolutely new' and that 'the seemingly new is old also, a palimpsest, a tapestry of which the actual threads have served before' and 'has already lived and died many times over'.⁹ While 'new perspectives' and 'novel juxtapositions' are possible, the ideas have a pre-existing history and 'only the *form* is new'.¹⁰ Such an approach to the past questions the notion of progress endorsed by Victorian thinkers such as Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold. Striving toward a notion of cultural consensus, based on middle-class notions of Christianity and the Protestant work ethic, Carlyle saw human history as a 'thing ever struggling forward irrepressible, advancing inevitable: perfecting itself, all days, more and more' until the end of days.¹¹ Arnold saw history as a record of humanity's 'progress towards perfection', so that the individual achievements of authors and artists served human culture, or 'the study of perfection'.¹² Such visions of art and of history are dependent upon a linear chain of events that sees the continual improvement of human life and thinking. Pater challenges these notions, as do more decadent thinkers like Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire, for instance, argues that the notion of progress, an 'invention of present-day philosophizing', is illusory.¹³ 'Anyone', he says, 'who wants to see his way clear through history must first and foremost extinguish this treacherous aid. This grotesque idea [...] has discharged each man from his duty, has delivered each soul from its responsibility and has released the will from all the bonds imposed upon it by the love of the Beautiful.'¹⁴ Unique experiences of beauty in art and literature, then, are the novelties that emerge when new form is given to old ideas. Progress suggests that we have nothing to learn from the past other than how much better things are today. Decadence rejects this linear notion of history in favour of fragmentation.

We have elsewhere examined the influence of decadence on postmodern notions of the past in several texts.¹⁵ In John Lanchester's novel *A Debt to Pleasure* (1996), narrator Tarquin Winot hosts a 'black feast' in his rooms at Cambridge. 'Cribbed from Huysmans', the evening's menu includes 'truffles grated over squid-ink pasta, followed by *boudin noir* on a bed of fried black

radicchio'.¹⁶ While Des Esseintes' black feast in Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884) is a 'dinner to mark the temporary demise of the host's virility',¹⁷ Tarquin's emphasizes the 'artificiality of the event' as a 'celebration of art, whim, caprice, set over against the brutal facts of nature and death'.¹⁸ In his novel *Poor Things* (1999), Alasdair Gray makes literary and bibliographic reference to the decadence of Aubrey Beardsley, Robert de Montesquiou, and William Strang not only to query Margaret Thatcher's political revisionism when it came to 'Victorian Values', but also to align his own textual practice with the revival of printing and the creation of beautiful books. These historiographic metafiction are not the only examples of the discourses of history that postmodernism and decadence explore. The 2014-16 television series *Penny Dreadful* features Dorian Gray as a decadent character who 'mimics Wilde's concern with social performance and the art of fiction', without, however, rehearsing the plot of Wilde's novel.¹⁹ Instead, Dorian is a postmodern meme, referencing decadent literary history without requiring the viewer to have any prior experience of reading Wilde's work. Such a memetic historical affiliation is also found in Frederick Rzewski's 1992 composition, *De Profundis: For Speaking Pianist*. The piece uses 1,392 words from *De Profundis*, divided into eight sections of text each of which is preceded by a musical interlude in which the pianist also has to shout, whistle, hum, sing, breathe, howl, bark and sigh, as well as recite the text and occasionally spank themselves on the arse. All of these postmodern texts draw on artifacts from the historical archive of fin-de-siècle decadence, while also adding new documents that change decadence to suit the tastes of a postmodern discourse.

Postmodernism's conversation with decadence follows Potolsky's idea that the decadents were a 'community founded on admiration and the exchange of texts [...]. a dispersed phenomenon arising out of discrete moments of artistic production and receptions [...] forged across space and time' through a 'series of encounters and sensations'.²⁰ Postmodernism, by collecting these discrete moments from decadents' literary and artistic history, imagines novel approaches to historiography. Decadence, then, is both the collection and a mode for *reading* the collection.

Housing the Archive

In his study of Pater, Wolfgang Iser explains the Aestheticist's relationship to history as a search for new sensations. Pater diverges from Hegel's approach to history and time because aestheticism does not 'focus on the end of time'.²¹ Instead, Pater is interested in the *means* or the 'in-betweenness of the transition', meaning that 'the possibilities of life become an end in themselves' eliminating the need for an end or goal.²² Art exemplifies the ways in which the aesthete can resist linear notions of time. Art also destabilizes the authority of the archive, opening it to change and a creative assemblage of its contents. Jacques Derrida traces the etymology of the word 'archive' to the Greek word *arkheion*, 'initially, a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrate'.²³ It is not only a home, but a site that houses authority. Decadence and postmodernism both seek to destabilize that authority. By questioning the authority assumed by the housing of documents in an archive, postmodernism enters the 'House Beautiful', an aesthetically pleasing archival space where artists and authors may have non-linear encounters with the collections held in the decadent archive and generate new sensations. Robert Stilling uses Derrida's idea of an "*anarchival impulse*" to describe how an archive can destroy archival memory even as it induces the desire to conserve memory against such destructive impulses'.²⁴ Decadent archives, however, throw nothing away; instead, their contents can be rediscovered and reread.

For the decadents, the collection of beautiful objects in the home is an archival approach to history. In his famous lecture on the 'House Beautiful', Wilde promotes an eclectic approach to home decoration. Not only does he emphasize the importance of affordability to his middle-class American and Canadian audiences, but he asks them to look at diverse periods of design to assemble a beautiful modern home:

When I advise you to have Queen Anne furniture, I do not want you to send to Chippendale in England for it; it could be made here, and to that end a good school of design should be established. In your school of design let the pupils, instead of painting pictures, work at decoration and designs, and their work will soon be in all your houses.²⁵

Wilde's description is an intersection of cultures, history, and modern ingenuity. The house, for Wilde, is a depository of influences that define the owner's good taste. Wilde's taste is decadent, influenced by James McNeill Whistler's contemporary use of colour, as well as by diverse historical designs, which Wilde collects together in an idealized house. The home is reimagined as an eclectic archive where the old becomes new again, and decoration of the home becomes an act of curation.

Such a relationship to the archive, however, is not limited to those objects on display in one's own house. More important is how new sensations are evoked by historical objects in the everyday experience of life. In her essay 'In Praise of Old Houses', aesthete, author and critic Vernon Lee claims that 'our ancestors knew nothing of the emotion of the past, the rapture of old towns and houses'.²⁶ For Lee, history is a living thing found in the architectural structures created in the past. The past offers Lee a new sensation to explore because it coexists with her present life and gives her 'a sense of being companioned by the past, of being in a place warmed for our living by the lives of others'.²⁷ While those past lives are no more, they haunt the present, and continue to live in the artifacts and documents of the archive. Accessing those archives, however, does not mean unmediated access to the past, and recognizing the role of the reader is key to reading a decadent archive. Self-consciousness regarding the presence of the past, and the influence of the reader or curator of history is as much a legacy of postmodern fiction as it is of decadence. Postmodern fiction aims to revisit historical moments with a critical, ironic eye, focusing on the ways in which we come to know history from written traces. It does not just read archives but interacts with them to create new historiographies. This defining feature of postmodernism makes the moments when it explores the specific historical archive of decadent literature and culture particularly enriching because it draws attention to the history of understanding history.

Archive theory has for several decades recognized that archives are not depositories of empirical evidence. Marlene Manoff argues that the archive is 'contingent' because of 'the way it is shaped by social, political, and technological forces'.²⁸ Manoff's argument puts abstract notions of the archive into conversation with the everyday practice of record-keeping:

regardless of what historians may have once believed, there is currently a widespread sense that even government records that appear to be mere collections of numbers are, in fact, already reconstructions and interpretations. Someone decided what was worth counting and how to count it.²⁹

Terry Cook supports Manoff's rejection of positivist historicism, 'based on the integrity of a scientific resurrection of facts from the past and the record as an impartial, innocent by-product of action', arguing that 'some archivists are now starting to explore the implications of these postmodern ideas for the profession'.³⁰ For Cook, the 'record is no longer a passive object, a "record" of evidence, but an active agent playing an on-going role in lives of individuals, organizations, and society'.³¹ Those who write or produce histories, biographies, plays, novels, performance art or art installations based on Wilde's archive must reflect not simply an accurate portrayal of the historically inaccessible figure, but recognize that the work they produce is the result of a conversation between the documentary archive and their own interpretations.

Archive theory argues for a non-linear, self-conscious narrative that is eclectic and contingent. A non-linear means of reading the archive, then, can be seen as a form of curation. In his study of textual alterity in the curation of art, Joseph Grigley ironically 'use[s] history to interrogate history [...] in order to reveal on the one hand its importance, and on the other, its limitations'.³² For Grigley, curation is an important means of reading our relationship to the past because it 'cannot be studied apart from the language and the narratives that are used to construct it'.³³ Curations are neither linear nor progressive; they are collections of materials brought together to tell a story or narrative about the past in the present. In that sense, a curation is a conversation with the past. In order to understand the past, we must find a commonality with it, and form bonds of companionship the way Lee does with the historical architecture of the city.

Hayden White tells us that 'historians refamiliarize [past events], not only by providing more information about them, but also by showing how their developments conformed to one or another of the story-types that we conventionally invoke to make sense of our own life histories'.³⁴ White calls these elements 'mimetic' because they are the elements of historical narratives that

imitate and repeat familiar tropes from the present. Charles Darwin, for example, based his narration of evolution on the narrative practices of Charles Dickens. Realist storytelling gave Darwin a structure, what White calls an ‘icon’ or a ‘complex of symbols’ employed to give the reader a mimetic experience.³⁵ Non-linear narratives in postmodern fiction, however, interrupt that structure. Realist narrative is only one example of a ‘complex of symbols’ that can be employed. In the examples below, the figure of Oscar Wilde, now himself a meme of popular culture, serves this iconic role. Wilde allows the archive to consider the archive, not as an authority, but as a performance. As Rebecca Schneider argues, that performance is ‘both the act of remaining and a means of reappearance’ which means that the body ‘becomes a kind of archive and host to a collective memory’.³⁶ Wilde’s body holds not only his documentary history, but additional meanings imposed on his body by readers and interpreters of his history, as well as lost histories, acts ‘of securing memory’ that allow those in the present ‘to rethink the site of history in ritual repetition’.³⁷ Wilde the archival document asks the reader not simply to remember the past, but to revise their perceptions of the present based on the archive’s imposition of Wilde’s textual presence on the here and now.

Wilde as Archive

The narrative of Oscar Wilde in modern culture has been revisited and reinterpreted *ad nauseum*, co-opted for commercial appeal in plays, murder mysteries, erotic novels, films, and television comedies including *Monty Python* and *A Bit of Fry and Laurie*. Wilde is many things, but none of them is ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ in the realist sense. Wilde the historical figure makes way for Wilde the tragic artist, the queer martyr, the performer, the whatever-the-archivist-sees-fit-for-him-to-be. At the same time, there is an interest that surrounds Wilde as the mythic forefather of modern queer community in the Western world. This myth follows Alan Sinfield’s notion that identity based on hetero- and/or homosexual identity is ‘constructed within an array of prevailing social possibilities’ that emerged ‘at the Wilde trials: effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance,

decadence, and aestheticism'.³⁸ The characteristics assigned to Wilde during his trial became the characteristics of modern Western queer culture. This reappropriation of Wilde demonstrates an archival impulse that mirrors what Potolsky reads as the communal impulse of the decadents who 'incessantly drew lines of affiliation back in time and across national borders, declaring their (permanent or provisional) allegiance to the movement by asserting a family resemblance with admired contemporaries or figures from the past'.³⁹ An origin story is born, not from his trials and short degraded life in exile, but from the archives drawn on to curate new Wildes for future audiences.

Wilde's own approach to history in *De Profundis* exemplifies the idea of the decadent archive. First and foremost, Wilde is revising his public image after his trials for gross indecency. Prosecutor Edward Carson used literary production by decadent authors to narrate his own story of Wilde's sexual pathology. Carson asked a series of questions about the content of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* (1889) in order to demonstrate that Wilde's works were open to an 'immoral' or 'sodomitical interpretation'.⁴⁰ He puts these works, along with Wilde's letters to his young male associates, into a collection of material that is broader than Wilde alone. His selections include Lord Alfred Douglas' poems, John Francis Bloxam's short story 'The Priest and the Acolyte' published in *The Chameleon* (to which Wilde also contributed 'Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young') and Huysmans's decadent novel *À rebours*. These works have relationships with Wilde's texts: intertextual as with Huysmans, professional as with Bloxam, or personal as with Douglas. Carson calls on Wilde to defend not only his own works, but the works of those who influenced him and the works of those influenced by him. Wilde's critical denouncement in the popular press goes further to condemn Wilde's influence on art. In April 1895, the *Telegraph*, while sniffing that it had had 'enough and more than enough of Mr. Oscar Wilde', nevertheless focuses on condemning less his 'his spurious brilliancy, inflated egotism, diseased vanity, cultivated affectation, and shameless disavowal of all *morality*' than

the spurious *arts* by which he and his like have attempted to establish a cult in our midst, and even to set up new schools in literature, the drama, and social thought. The superfine 'Art' which admits no moral duty and laughs at the established phrases of right and wrong.⁴¹

In short, both Carson and the press contribute to an archive of Wilde based on a curation of third-party documents, producing an excess of evidence deemed perverse and indecent. Wilde's contributions to the archive of sexual inversion and dissidence that decadence embraced as one of its central characteristics, was transformed by the courts and the popular press into a weapon to destroy not just Wilde, but the discourse of decadence more broadly.

Wilde fought against that narrative and used *De Profundis* as a response to these criticisms and as a means by which to write his own narrative for future readers. Reading the letter again, one remembers Ian Small's warning that the 'idea of Wilde contriving his self-image for different publics should again caution us against reading the letter simply as sincerely expressive'.⁴² While *De Profundis* is unreliable as a factual record, reading it from a decadent perspective, we discover Wilde's attempt to re-affiliate, not just his own work, but the philosophies of aestheticism and decadence. Its bibliographic history is itself problematic. When scholars discuss *De Profundis*, they refer to the manuscript held in the British Library and published as a part of Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis' 1962 collection of Wilde's letters.⁴³ The letter's putative recipient, Lord Alfred Douglas, died in 1945 having claimed that he never received it.⁴⁴ The letter was only released in full after the Wolfenden report of 1957, several years before the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, which decriminalized sex between consenting adults of the same sex.⁴⁵ Schroeder argues that the 1962 edition is the first authentic version of the letter because other documents are corrupted. Holland and Hart-Davis note that these corruptions go back to the error-filled typescripts that Robbie Ross had prepared from Wilde's manuscript.⁴⁶ Such an argument, however, erases the influence that these documents had on Wilde as an archival figure: protecting, damaging, confusing, and changing Wilde's narrative. All these documents are part of Wilde's historical archive.

The first section of the letter, in which Wilde directly addresses Douglas and their intimate relationship, is a condemnation of Douglas' character as manipulative and of Wilde himself as a co-dependent victim of Douglas' irrational abuses. It is this portion of the letter that was hidden from the public by both Ross and Holland until the 1962 publication of the letter. The crime Wilde admits to is not gross indecency, but the choice that he made to support Douglas' 'desires and interests in Life' rather than his own 'work as an artist': 'When I compare my friendship with you to my friendship with such still younger men as John Gray and Pierre Louÿs I feel ashamed. My real life, my higher life was with them and such as they'.⁴⁷ Wilde does not express guilt for his sexual practices; he presents his intimate relationships with these other men as positive influences on his life. Wilde seeks to acknowledge Douglas' influence on the diminishment of his art and creative vision and vows to return to his 'higher life' once he leaves the confines of his filthy prison cell.

Wilde continues this narrative later in the letter when he offers a revised reading of the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus Christ as a model for the aestheticist theory of 'art for art's sake'. Recalling a conversation with André Gide, he writes that 'there was nothing that either Plato or Christ had said that could not be transferred immediately into the sphere of Art, and there find its complete fulfilment', meaning that 'the very basis of [Christ's] nature was the same as that of the nature of the artist, an intense and flame-like imagination'.⁴⁸ Drawing on his long-running interest in the classics, as well as Pater's theories of art criticism, Wilde adds the Bible to his archive of the art of the individual in an attempt to revise historical perceptions of his works and to keep his artistic achievements alive. By adding Christ to the decadent archive of eclectic historical influences on his work and his 'intense and flame-like imagination',⁴⁹ Wilde does with Jesus what others have done with Wilde: he allows historical documents of the archived past to influence his reading of aestheticism and decadence in his own time. By positioning Christ as a decadent who, 'through some divine instinct [...] seems to have always loved the sinner as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of man',⁵⁰ Wilde textually incriminates Christianity and offers

a model for a decadent reading of the Bible as an archival document. By positioning the Bible as a text that inspired his flame-like imagination, and Jesus Christ as a decadent who, ‘through some divine instinct [...] seems to have always loved the sinner as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of man’, Wilde re-affiliates his art, and decadent art more broadly, with the tenets of Christianity.⁵¹ In doing so, he also textually incriminates the Bible in any criticisms of his art and offers a model for a decadent reading of the Bible as an archival document.

Wilde’s self-conscious exploration of narrative persuasion in this letter speaks not just to the unreliability of the autobiographical voice, but to the role that interpretation plays in our reading of historical documents. Wilde’s tale is no more authentic than Carson’s. Wilde was aware that he was writing to an audience. He was writing to his lover, Lord Douglas, but he was also responding to the readers of the newspaper accounts of his trial. In addition, he was writing a document under the intense supervision of Reading Gaol’s governor, Major Nelson, who allowed Wilde ‘one quarto sheet of paper a day’,⁵² and likely realized the possibility, if not the likelihood, that the governor, or any prison guard who came in contact with the letter might read it.

Wilde’s creation of a new personal history to give him comfort in the isolation and degradation of his gaol cell is rewritten, once more, by Ackroyd in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*. *The Last Testament* is so detailed in its depiction of Wilde that it may be hard for a reader to remember that this ‘journal’, which he titles *The Modern Woman’s Guide to Oscar Wilde*, is a work of fiction. *The Last Testament* collects detailed information about Wilde’s history and ventriloquizes him so successfully that it masquerades as a work of realism. Ackroyd revisits the last few months of Wilde’s life through a fictional autobiography whose aim, according to the character, is ‘to try to break the habit of a lifetime’ of lying to himself and others, but whose success as a truthful document is queried by his lover Lord Douglas and friend Frank Harris who insist that it is not only ‘nonsense’ and ‘invented’ but composed of ‘stolen lines from other writers’.⁵³ Critics of this novel point unerringly to its postmodern elements. Kirby Joris calls Ackroyd’s Wilde a ‘postmodern character, fashioned out of different interpretations and representations’.⁵⁴ Martin

Middeke goes further in suggesting that Wilde himself is a proto-postmodernist, although the irony of this argument lies in the idea that, somehow, postmodernism was inevitable because decadence came before it, a notion that ignores postmodernism's disruption of the linear progress model.⁵⁵ Jeremy Gibson and Julian Wolfreys argue that 'Ackroyd plays implicitly with historical knowledge not for the purpose of pinning Wilde down, but, ultimately, in order to make us question what we think we can know about both Wilde and, by implication, any historical figure'.⁵⁶ These interpretations focus on the novel's postmodernism and forget the influence of decadence on both Wilde's creative practice and Ackroyd's historiography.

As a postmodern author, Ackroyd has taken full advantage of Wilde's textual remains; in fact, readers may well question the function of documentary evidence in the novel. Little information appears in the novel that could not be accessed through biographies or Wilde's own writing. Even the 'spin' Ackroyd puts on 'Wilde' could well be discerned from *De Profundis*. But when 'Wilde' is accused by Harris and Douglas of telling lies in this journal, and 'Wilde' admits that he 'never saw reality' and that he 'put on a mask as easily as [he] adopted a mood', even the historical traces of Wilde's life are called into question.⁵⁷ And yet, many of those traces are verifiable. 'The Truth of Masks' asserts 'For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true.'⁵⁸ Ackroyd's novel does precisely this: it is both 'resolutely fictive and yet undeniably historical'.⁵⁹ Towards the end of the novel, 'Wilde' laments 'that artifice crumbles — an artificial world will dissolve also'.⁶⁰ Postmodernism, however, concurs with Max Beerbohm that 'Artifice must queen it once more in the town',⁶¹ and *The Last Testament* rejects the referential nature of fiction while foregrounding its illusion-making process.

Ackroyd's novel immerses Wilde in his historical context, portraying friends, publishers, and family and giving detailed pictures of Wilde in both London and Paris. Critics who discuss the novel present Wilde as relevant particularly for issues of the present: homosexual oppression and postmodern thought. And yet, little attention is paid to those details. Ackroyd was writing this novel in Thatcher's England in the early years of HIV/AIDS when gay men were vilified as fears

mounted over 'gay cancer'. That Ackroyd is himself a gay man who wrote his second novel about the world's most famous gay man was both dangerous and admirable. Even more admirable was his attention to Wilde's community – a decadent community of gay men, poets, outspoken women, male prostitutes, and various bohemian figures. Wilde's life post-prison, renting a cheap hotel room in the poorest neighbourhood, unable to work, being spat at in the streets by strangers, is a stark reflection of the lives of LGBT Britons in the 1980s.

Ackroyd does the critic's work by contextualizing his own fiction. However, he is not writing history but historical fiction, which does not require such referential accuracy. Hutcheon tells us that 'what history refers to is the real world; what fiction refers to is a fictive universe'.⁶² Ackroyd's use of the documentary record is a means to a fictitious end. Oscar Wilde is simply another text, a referent. What critics have yet to consider is that perhaps it is not the historical Wilde that interests Ackroyd as much as the decadent texts that Wilde wrote. It is not Wilde the person that he is interested in reviving from the archive, but Wilde's theories of fiction, of anti-realism, and of decadence, in order to create his own postmodern re-reading of those practices.

In effect, Ackroyd creates a decadence out of time. By repeatedly playing with temporality he seems to show how fluidly the figure of Wilde inhabits multiple periods. In fact, Ackroyd's Wilde seems to be peculiarly out of time, and recognizes this toward the end of the novel when he visits the 1900 Paris Exhibition and is asked 'to say something into Edison's speaking machine'. The experience gives him a premonition of death: 'that place, and that machine, were not of my time'.⁶³ Wilde's archive, not Wilde, is transported by Ackroyd into the postmodern 1980s. Wilde here is a product of Ackroyd's research into the documentary archive, his imagination, as well as the social anxiety to which he and so many other gay men were subjected. Hutcheon argues that postmodernism conflates 'documentary materials' of the archive with 'metafictive reflexivity', and in doing so, makes clear that reference to the past, or to a historical figure such as Oscar Wilde, is not the 'actual object'.⁶⁴

Ackroyd's choice of Wilde to explore such a history brings us to the significance of decadence to our understanding of the archive. Decadence collects histories self-consciously to subvert the politics and cultures of the present: bourgeois hypocrisy, income inequality, and elitism. Wilde, and decadence more broadly, offer a model of self-conscious historiography. Wilde was not a proto-postmodernist, he was a decadent aesthete whose creative practice influenced the postmodernism of Ackroyd's novel. There is something in his work and in the historical literary and artistic culture of decadence with which postmodernism could converse. Postmodernism did not turn Wilde into this archival 'Oscar Wilde'; Wilde did, because decadence was itself a self-conscious archival approach to history.

Wilde has, of course, not just been revised for postmodern fiction; he is also a means by which to revise the notion of autobiography and history, particularly for gay men in the twentieth century. In *Who Was That Man?*, Bartlett returns to Wilde's archive in order to write his history of famous gay men during the Victorian era, and his own coming of age in early 1980s London. Bartlett explains this choice in his introduction by saying that he has '*come to understand that I am connected with other men's lives, men living in London with me. Or with other, dead Londoners*' (emphasis in original).⁶⁵ In an attempt to learn his 'own history', Bartlett 'began to see this other London as the beginning of [his] own story'.⁶⁶ His subsequent search for the complete and authentic Wilde reveals other stories outside of Wilde's history but relevant to Bartlett. He reads the homoerotic, pornographic novel *Teleny* (1893) to which Wilde may have contributed. He wants to find information on the rent boys with whom Wilde associated, who have disappeared from the archive. How did they 'wear their hair in Soho a hundred years ago? [Did] they have the same lines around their mouths and eyes as they have now?'.⁶⁷ Their presence, it seems, was not relevant after Wilde's trials and their own stories were not considered worth recording. Bartlett calls the narrative that comes from the documentary record and its various interpretations 'unconvincing', and 'focussed too neatly on one central event, apparently reflecting our own contemporary situation, in which everything can be described as being before or after "coming out"'.⁶⁸ Bartlett, importantly,

does not equate Wilde's story of same-sex desire and social ruin in 1895 with his own feeling of isolation as a young gay man in search of a history and a community. Instead, he draws lines of affiliation and creates a new narrative out of Wilde's story, one inspired by the documentary materials he has read, but focused on his own worldview as a gay man in the 1980s.

Bartlett reads Wilde in order to give historical relevance to his own sense of selfhood as a gay man. He assures the reader that he sees differences between the 'suggestions of effeminacy and aristocracy [...] so central to the homosexual imagery of 1889', and 'the image of a London leather bar in 1985'.⁶⁹ Wilde is not a model of universal homosexual identity, but his history helps Bartlett craft an idea of the gay man that suits his own experience. Bartlett argues that 'some of my most basic ideas about myself as a homosexual man were invented for me by other men, in another time, in another city'.⁷⁰ By reading the documentary materials of Wilde's story, he finds affiliation with the past, and a companion with whom to walk the city streets of London of his then present day. History is not a linear experience, but a living part of the present. It exists in reference, in reinterpretation, and in the buildings and streets of the city. Like Lee before him, Bartlett can experience the past interpreted through his own temporal experience of the 1980s.

Today, it is not just the queer community who can revise the Wilde archive. Performance art gives us a recent example of the role of the decadent archive in understanding the present through the interpretation of the past as a multitude of individual and subjective voices. In the 2016 installation *Inside* at Reading Gaol, Oscar Wilde performs and subverts the role of the unstable historical record for the audience. At the centre of the project (literally so in the catalogue) is *De Profundis*. Cells and other spaces, however, were given over to an international group of artists and writers who wrote letters and created paintings and sculptures on themes of confinement, isolation, homophobia, and same-sex desire.

The subjects of the letters are drawn from fiction and history, both contemporary and ancient. Anne Carson writes a piece from Socrates to Crito, and Jeanette Winterson creates a letter from Hermione to Perdita. Gillian Slovo writes to her murdered mother, anti-apartheid activist

Ruth First. Deborah Levy writes to Wilde himself on the subject of language: ‘Language lifted you off earth [...]. And it is language that crushed you. They asked: “Is this the kind of letter one man writes to another?”’.⁷¹ Along with these voices, performers sitting in front of repurposed cell door C.3.3 read aloud from *De Profundis*. Since the prison was only decommissioned in 2013, other prisoners had come and gone, leaving traces and fragments of their time there. Some history of them is provided in photographs taken between 1885 and 1910 of those prisoners considered likely to reoffend, as well as in more recent graffiti on cell walls. This installation is not, strictly speaking, an archive, but it mirrors Potolsky’s idea of decadence as ‘collecting disparate themes, tropes and stylistic manners from around the globe [...] foregrounding acts of selection, juxtaposition and critical discernment, [and piecing] together ostentatiously borrowed parts’.⁷² The installation both centres and decentres Wilde because the audience is encouraged to read Wilde through and alongside other detainees, letters, and histories. He attracts attention, not just to his own archival record but to the records of other artists around which this ArtAngel project curates its historical archive. Wilde facilitates non-linear affiliations based on contemporary perceptions of historical relations. This use of Wilde is decadent because *De Profundis* is not connected to the projects created by Carson, Winterson, and others until those affiliations are realized within this particular curation of history. As Cook and Joan M. Schwarz write: ‘postmodernism sees value in stories more than structures, the margins as much as the centres, the diverse and ambiguous as much as the certain and universal’.⁷³ In this sense, postmodern art finds affiliation with Wilde’s idea that the ‘highest kind’ of criticism ‘treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation’.⁷⁴ Perhaps this is also a good definition of the archive: recognizing that there are always other stories in a proximate call number or a proximate cell.

Conclusion

By revisiting decadence, postmodernism engages, either directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, with decadent notions of the past. Postmodernism, then, has moments of

reimagining its own theories and ideas of history through juxtapositions with fin-de-siècle decadence. That juxtaposition allows postmodern art to be self-reflexive about history as a conversation with the past in the present. Just as Lee finds companionship in old houses, and Pater makes conversation with Plato, Ackroyd, Bartlett, and the contributors to the ArtAngel project at Reading Gaol find affiliation with Wilde. In the process, each discovers something new about the past that was not possible to know in the past because it is born out of a conversation in the present. Current notions of the archive engage with this concept of the archive as a living discourse. Arlette Farge argues that the role of the archive is to ‘bring forward details that disabuse, derail and straightforwardly break any hope of linearity or positivism’.⁷⁵ Decadence offers this discourse a language of curation and eclecticism, collecting ideas that are historically diverse and not necessarily connected by any sort of linear logic, but the logic of the archivist’s subjective point of view alone.

¹ For previous research by the authors on the relationship between postmodernism and decadence, please see: ‘Bibliographic Metafiction: Dancing in the Margins with Alasdair Gray’, *Contemporary Literature*, 52.2 (2016), 216-44; ‘From Text, to Myth, to Meme: *Penny Dreadful* and Adaptation’, *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 82 (2015), 19 paras; and ‘Consuming Surfaces: Decadent Aesthetics in *The Debt to Pleasure*’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 42.3 (2019), 151-69.

² Gregory Betts, ‘Postmodern Decadence in Canadian Sound and Visual Poetry’, *RE: Reading the Postmodern: Canadian Literature and Criticism after Modernism*, ed. by Robert David Stacey (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010), pp. 151-79 (p. 155).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁴ David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 196.

⁵ Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 1.

⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 5.

⁷ Beverley Southgate, *Postmodernism in History: Fear or Freedom?* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁹ Walter Pater, *The Works of Walter Pater*, 8 vols (1900-1901) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), VI, *Plato and Platonism: A Series of Lectures*, p. 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, ed. by Richard D. Altick (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 25.

¹² Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. by Jane Garnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 144, 9.

¹³ Charles Baudelaire, ‘The Exposition Universelle, 1855’, in *Art in Paris 1845-1862: Review of Salons and Other Exhibitions*, ed. and trans. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1965), pp. 121-29 (p. 126).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ See note 1.

¹⁶ John Lanchester, *The Debt to Pleasure* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1996), pp. 106-07.

¹⁷ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature [À rebours]*, trans. by Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 12.

¹⁸ Lanchester, p. 107.

¹⁹ Lee and King, ‘From Text, to Myth, to Meme’, para. 14 of 19.

²⁰ Potolsky, p. 9.

- ²¹ Wolfgang Iser, *Walter Pater: The Aesthetic Moment*, trans. by David Henry Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 79.
- ²² *Ibid.*, pp. 79, 81.
- ²³ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 2.
- ²⁴ Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 232.
- ²⁵ Kevin H. F. O'Brien, 'The House Beautiful: A Reconstruction of Oscar Wilde's American Lecture', *Victorian Studies*, 17.4 (1974), 395-418 (p. 410).
- ²⁶ Vernon Lee, 'In Praise of Old Houses', in *Limbo and Other Essays to Which is Now Added Ariadne in Mantua* (London: The Bodley Head, 1908), pp. 19-42 (p. 21).
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- ²⁸ Marlene Manoff, 'Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines', *Libraries and the Academy*, 4.1 (2004), 9-25 (p. 12).
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ³⁰ Terry Cook, 'Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts', *Archival Science*, 1 (2001), 3-24 (p. 10).
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ³² Joseph Grigley, *Textuality: Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 3.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Hayden White, 'The Historical Text as Literary Artifact', in *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, ed. by Brian Gay, Philip Pomper, and Richard T. Vann (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 15-33 (p. 21).
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ³⁶ Rebecca Schneider, 'Performance Remains', *Performance Research*, 6.2 (2001), 100-08 (p. 103).
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- ³⁸ Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 11-12.
- ³⁹ Potolsky, p. 5.
- ⁴⁰ *The Real Trials of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland (New York: Perennial, 2003), pp. 80-81.
- ⁴¹ Quoted in 'Oscar Wilde at Bow Street', *Penny Illustrated Paper*, 20 April 1895, p. 3.
- ⁴² Ian Small, 'Love-Letter, Spiritual Autobiography, or Prison Writing? Identity and Value in *De Profundis*', in *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 86-100.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- ⁴⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), p. 683, n1.
- ⁴⁵ Horst Schroeder, *The 'Definitive' Edition of Oscar Wilde's De Profundis*.
<http://horst-schroeder.com/deprofundis.htm> [accessed 18 May 2020].
- ⁴⁶ Wilde, *Complete Letters*, p. 683, n1.
- ⁴⁷ Oscar Wilde, letter to Lord Alfred Douglas [January to March 1897], in *Complete Letters*, p. 686.
- ⁴⁸ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, in *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Nicholas Frankel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), pp. 53-291 (p. 197).
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 223.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵² Ruth Robbins, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 167.
- ⁵³ Peter Ackroyd, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (London: Abacus by Sphere Books, 1984), pp. 160, 161.
- ⁵⁴ Kirby Joris, 'Wilde Rewound: Time-Travelling with Oscar in Recent Author Fictions', *Authorship*, 1.2 (2012), 1-12 (p. 10).
- ⁵⁵ Martin Middeke, 'Oscar the Proto-Postmodern? Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Temptation of Oscar Wilde*', in *The Importance of Reinventing Oscar: Versions of Wilde During the Last 100 Years*, ed. by Uwe Böker, Richard Corballis, and Julie Hibbard (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 207-17 (p. 207).
- ⁵⁶ Jeremy Gibson and Julian Wolfreys, *Peter Ackroyd: The Ludic and the Labyrinthine Text* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 88.
- ⁵⁷ Ackroyd, p. 171.
- ⁵⁸ Oscar Wilde, 'The Truth of Masks', in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Richard Ellmann (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 408-32 (p. 432).
- ⁵⁹ Hutcheon, p. 142.
- ⁶⁰ Ackroyd, p. 179.
- ⁶¹ Max Beerbohm, 'A Defence of Cosmetics', *The Yellow Book: An Illustrated Quarterly*, 1 (1894), pp. 65-82 (p. 66).
- ⁶² Hutcheon, p. 142.
- ⁶³ Ackroyd, p. 179.

⁶⁴ Hutcheon, pp. 142, 144.

⁶⁵ Neil Bartlett, *Who Was that Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988), p. xx.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Deborah Levy, 'Deborah Levy, Letter to Oscar Wilde, 2016', *Inside: Artists and Writers in Reading Prison*, ed. by James Lingwood and Michael Morris (London: ArtAngel, 2017), p. 50.

⁷² Potolsky, p. 4.

⁷³ Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, 'Archives, Records, and Power: From (Postmodern) Theory to (Archival) Performance', *Archival Science*, 2 (2002), 171-85 (p. 182).

⁷⁴ Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Richard Ellmann, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 341-408 (p. 367).

⁷⁵ Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, trans. by Thomas Scott-Railton (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 42.