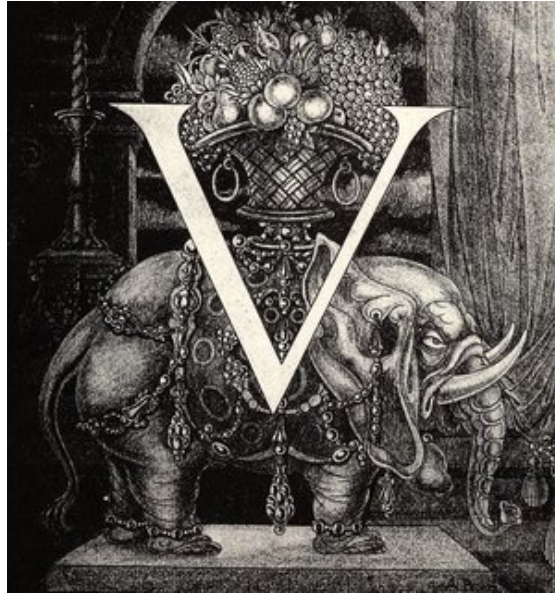


volupté

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES



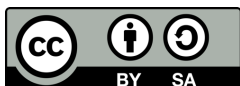
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Preface

As this merciless and traumatizing year draws to a close, I am pleased to welcome *Volupté* readers, new and old, to this bi-lingual issue on translation. I leave it to our Guest Editors, Matthew Creasy and Stefano Evangelista, to introduce the contributions and affirm the importance of decadence for translation studies, but I would like to acknowledge the work of their Decadence and Translation Network and the series of events in Oxford, London, Strasbourg, Glasgow, and Paris from 2018 to 2020 that brought translators, publishers, poets, curators, and academics together in convivial surroundings to share ideas about the way in which the concept and the practice of translation sit at the heart of British and French decadent literature. The Network events had so many highlights it is difficult to choose one that stands out, but the gathering of scholars in Strasbourg in June 2019 under the hospitable wing of Guy Ducrey is surely one of them. The Network has had considerable impact, inspiring new projects, partnerships, collaborations, and friendships, and it has provided a fruitful space for new thinking about the translational, transnational, and transcultural nature of decadence. It is my fervent hope that despite the petty-minded and destructive Brexit impulse international collaboration at individual and institutional levels continues to flourish and grow.

We travel back and forth across the Channel in this issue, but our BADS Essay Prizewinners take us to new places, including the watery byways of Bruges and Venice at the fin de siècle and to the glittery disco dancefloors of New York in the 1970s. We received a good number of high-calibre essay submissions this year and we loved them all, but our published winners are Joanna Cresswell for her essay on ‘The Ecology of Suffering: Thinking with the Elements in Decadent Literature’ and William Rees for “‘Le Freak, c’est Chic’: Decadence and Disco’. Joanna’s essay was praised for the way its ecocritical methodology applied to Rodenbach’s and Mann’s novellas ‘offers fresh ways of considering how decadence operates within them, while at the same time demonstrating their relevance to our contemporary moment’, and William’s comparative cultural study was described as ‘assured’ and ‘impressive’, ‘put[ting] into conversation decadence studies and popular musicology’. Our warm congratulations to them both, and our thanks to our wonderful judge who provided such full and thoughtful feedback on all the submissions.

We are proud and delighted to include the work of creative practitioners in our journal and this issue is particularly rich for its new translations and artwork by Matthew Creasy, but it is with tremendous personal sadness that we acknowledge the passing of the great poet, Derek Mahon, who died on 20 October 2020 and whose last work, seven translations of Verlaine’s poems from *Romances sans paroles*, we publish here. He was characteristically tentative about the task of translating Verlaine, and in a jotted note he raised the issue of untranslatability. ‘I’ve always thought much of Verlaine untranslatable, like trying to rewrite music as language; but by (re-)writing language as “music”, perhaps it can be done. The results can have a fey quality in English, but that’s not inappropriate. I’m unsure if these versions work, but I hope they’re on the right track.’ They are, and we treasure them.

Thank you to our Guest Editors, and to Caroline Crépiat for her editorial assistance. Undecadent it may be, but best wishes from the *Volupté* team for a peaceful and healthful 2021.

Jane Desmarais
Editor-in-Chief
21 December 2020

The View from Strasbourg Translational Readings of Decadence by the Guest Editors

Matthew Creasy and Stefano Evangelista

Glasgow University and Trinity College, Oxford University

This special issue of *Volupté* turns to France at the end of the nineteenth century to consider the ways that artists, writers, and critics associated with decadence probed and strained at the limits imposed by received linguistic and artistic forms through translation. The articles gathered here derive from a broader project to explore decadence and translation, funded by the AHRC during 2018 and 2019. Specifically, contributions relate to an event held at the Collège doctoral européen de Strasbourg within the University of Strasbourg during June 2019.¹ The aim of this event was to bring together scholars from the United Kingdom and across Europe in an attempt to establish a comparative understanding of how decadence and translation are approached in different institutions within different countries and in different languages. Translation activity from the nineteenth century was an object of study at this event; it was also a mode of communication for scholars, who came from Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Norway, and Russia.

From the establishment of the Council of Europe and its role as seat for the European Parliament to the intimate philosophical gatherings and discussions around Jacques Derrida that took place there in 2004, Strasbourg has been a place of conversation and debate on questions of language, international relations, and identity.² Simultaneously, it also has a long history as a place of tensions and disputes along the borderlines between languages and countries. Indeed, the loss of Strasbourg during the Franco-Prussian war was central to that sense of historical and political crisis within France which drove the emergence of modern decadence in the final decades of the nineteenth century. For these reasons, Strasbourg seems an apt point of origin for a collection of readings that draws out the ‘translational’ nature of decadence. Drawing on influential work in translation studies by Lawrence Venuti, Emily Apter, Barbara Cassin, Rebecca L. Walkowitz, and others, this approach posits that the crossings between languages are never simple or invisible.

Wail S. Hassan has defined ‘translational literature’ as consisting of ‘texts that straddle two languages, at once foregrounding, performing, and problematizing the act of translation’.³

Contributions to this issue interrogate the translational nature of decadent literature by exploring the consequences of attending to the frictions, overlaps, borrowings, and interconnections between languages, literary texts, and artistic forms in France at the fin de siècle. In so doing, they present French decadence as a transnational space, with several of the essays concentrating specifically on Anglo-French literary relations. This introduction will set out some of the tensions inherent in decadence itself that emerge through such a ‘translational’ understanding, in order to frame the readings and case studies in the articles that follow.⁴

Consider Anatole Baju’s opening proclamation in the first issue of *Le Décadent* in April 1886:

Se dissimuler l’état de décadence ou nous sommes arrivés serait le comble de l’insenséisme. Religion, mœurs, justice, tout décade, ou plutôt tout subit une transformation inéluctable. La société se désagrège sous l’action corrosive d’une civilisation déliquescence. [...] C’est dans la langue surtout que s’en manifestent les premiers symptômes.

[To fool ourselves about the state of decadence at which we have arrived would be the height of stupidism. Religion, morals, justice – everything is decaying, or rather undergoing an ineluctable transformation. Society is breaking down under the corrosive influence of a deliquescent civilisation. [...] It is in language above all that the first symptoms manifest themselves.]⁵

Baju places language at the heart of a widespread social and historical crisis: it is where society is most vulnerable to decadence and where decadence is ‘manifest’ as ‘symptoms’. Simultaneously, language is also the medium through which decadent aesthetics spread in response to that broader malaise. Baju’s remarks, however, also epitomize the conditions they seek to describe. Translating the unusual coinages ‘l’insenséisme’ and ‘décade’ as ‘stupidism’ and ‘decaying’, our English version here draws on Patrick McGuinness’s subtle account of Baju’s politics, which makes an important distinction between the idea of ‘the new’ (as ‘natural, fresh, vigorous’), and ‘the neologism’, which is ‘hybrid, ambiguous, a perversion produced by injecting dead material with an atavistic spasm of creation’.⁶

The unsettlingly ‘hybrid’ quality of Bajou’s writing does not stop, however, at his confection of new words. This version of decadence is born from a deep indebtedness to recent and not-so-recent precursors. Bajou’s linguistic perversions recall the style and preoccupations of *Des Esseintes* in Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *À rebours* (1884), particularly his fondness for the late Latin writings of Petronius and Apuleius, rich in linguistic borrowings and neologisms. Huysmans famously established a correspondence between ancient and modern decadent styles that hinged on the image of linguistic ‘decomposition’:

Au demeurant, la décomposition de la langue française s’était faite d’un coup. Dans la langue latine, une longue transition, un écart de quatre cents ans existait entre le verbe tacheté et superbe de Claudien et de Rutilius, et le verbe faisandé du VIII^e siècle. Dans la langue française aucun laps de temps, aucune succession d’âges n’avait eu lieu; le style tacheté et superbe des de Goncourt et le style faisandé de Verlaine et de Mallarmé se coudoyaient à Paris, vivant en même temps, à la même époque, au même siècle.

[Incidentally, the decomposition of the French language had been effected suddenly. In the Latin language, a long transition, a distance of four hundred years existed between the blotchy and magnificent epithet of Claudian and Rutilius and the gamy epithet of the eighth century. In the French language, no lapse of time, no succession of ages had taken place; the blotchy and magnificent style of the de Goncourts and the gamy style of Verlaine and Mallarmé rubbed elbows in Paris, living in the same period, the same epoch and the same century.]⁷

Although Huysmans invokes Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé here, the ‘gamy style’ and fascination with late Latin literature is directly indebted to Théophile Gautier’s description of Charles Baudelaire, which ascribes the discovery of ‘la langue marbrée déjà des verdeurs de la décomposition et comme faisandée’ [a language already veined with the greenness of decomposition, as if gamy] to his friend’s readings in decadent Classical writers.⁸ In form, style, and content, then, Huysmans and Bajou enrol themselves in an implicit ‘imagined community’ of writers, characterized by Matthew Potolsky as the Decadent Republic of Letters.⁹

As part of that imagined community Bajou’s broad pronouncements about social collapse (‘decading’) are suffused with an interlinguistic and transhistorical way of thinking, inherited from the work of Désiré Nisard, via Baudelaire, Gautier, and Huysmans. This framed a present sense of historical crisis through foundational comparisons between modern France and the culture of

the late Roman Empire.¹⁰ In the aftermath of the military defeat against Prussia of 1871, French history seemed to many to be a living translation of Roman decline. Decadence offered a clue to understanding that feeling of loss as well as a means of creative response. This may explain why so many works associated with decadence seem to be translations from some lost original. Across the Channel, literary decadence in Britain has been identified by Linda Dowling as the expression of a similar crisis within nineteenth-century understandings of language, brought about by the rise of comparative philology.¹¹ Dowling traces the shock waves of this crisis within the prose of Walter Pater, which enacted a self-conscious, highly elaborate style that aspired towards the condition of Latin. In common with Huysmans, Bajou, and Baudelaire, Pater thus transfigured his national literary idiom by endowing it with a ‘hybrid’ or translational quality. Criticising translators who focus exclusively on ‘idiom and sentence construction’, in his essay ‘Style’ (1888), Pater urged them to pay closer attention to the individual word, or the ‘elementary particles’ of a text: ‘Plato, for instance, being often reproducible by an exact following, with no variation in structure, of word after word, as the pencil follows a drawing under tracing-paper’.¹² Pater advocates here an extreme method of translation that stretches and moulds English, which is imagined as following the contours of classical Greek, acquiring a new power from the very loss of idiomatic individuality. By doing so, Pater creates new potentialities for the translational, which can also be understood as a mode of attention – a form of critical discipline and deep reading that moulds the decadent writer’s relationship with language, reminding readers of Paul Bourget’s well-known theories about the pre-eminent importance assigned to the word in decadent style.

The ‘tracing-paper’ analogy deployed by Pater also opens up vital questions about the relationship and hierarchy between source and target language that have come to the fore within the modern discipline of translation studies. Debate has shifted in this field from a concern with how to assess the fidelity of a translation (what remains of the original outline), towards an attempt to understand translation as a distinctive mode of cultural production, for instance by mapping publication practices and histories of circulation and reception. Following Pater’s analogy, we

might say that whilst it aids transfer of the original, the ‘tracing-paper’ also obscures it. Lawrence Venuti’s theories regarding the translator’s invisibility have been highly influential here, as have his paradigms of domestication and foreignization.¹³ The impact of translation studies is now making itself felt within literary criticism more broadly. In tandem with a renewed close scrutiny of ideas of cosmopolitanism and world literature, literary scholars have started to draw on translation studies in order to create multivalent, decentred approaches that seek to overcome the ingrained national bias of literary studies as practised in universities, but also to question traditional methods of literary comparison. Emily Apter, for instance, has argued that the very notions of ‘non-translation, mistranslation, incomparability and untranslatability’ can be used to re-energize the field of comparative literature, which she sees as too invested in a myth of easy cultural equivalence and/or fluffy celebrations of cultural diversity.¹⁴ Apter wants critics to be suspicious of translation. Her advocacy of ‘untranslatability’, however, is by no means an invitation to stop translating: it is, rather, a call to pay increased attention to the act of translation as an aesthetically open-ended and politically charged act. Her work partly builds on Barbara Cassin’s *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (2004), known in English as *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. This large collaborative project collected philosophical terms that resist translation – terms such as the Greek *polis*, the German *Dasein*, and the English *feeling*, which, in the editor’s words, become ‘sign[s] of the way in which, from one language to another, neither the words nor the conceptual networks can simply be superimposed.’¹⁵ For Apter as for Cassin, instances of translation failure reveal the most profound truths about intercultural transmission: they are the fault lines of the system, where ideologies and material conditions show through most clearly, where critics can intervene most effectively.

Both the cultural politics of literary transmission and the aesthetics of resistance of the untranslatable come into play in a ‘translational’ understanding of decadence. Viewing translation as folding together linguistic, cultural, and often intermedial acts of international dialogue, the essays collected in this issue interrogate the affinities, tensions, and complexities underpinning

relationships between France the rest of the world. Bertrand Marquer's essay on Max Nordau and Cesare Lombroso, for example, revisits some of the foundational critical narratives that have shaped our understanding of decadence in relation to notions of genius, criminality, and psychopathology. His contribution identifies the rise of a 'medico-literary' translation at the heart of scientific and pseudo-scientific discourse about degeneration theory. Examining French and English translations of Nordau and Lombroso, Marquer uncovers a complex pattern that mixes translation and non-translation, shaping and re-shaping their theories as they spread across Europe. The scientific text is thus revealed as an ambivalent space of deployment and regulation of decadent translation.

Guy Ducrey's essay brings to bear a similar sensitivity on the role of translation in his account of the multiple 'lives' of one particular translator. Whilst Gabriele D'Annunzio is widely recognized as the foremost decadent writer in Italian, his French translator, Georges Hérold, is a more ambiguous figure. Ducrey examines the overlap of different identities within Hérold's career: these span his public work as a historian and as a translator, but they also include his less well-known researches into the history of homosexuality. Hérold's esoteric work into the homosexual archive was, Ducrey shows, co-extensive with his public activities as a translator, just as there were intimate links between his acquisition of the Italian language and his relationships with young men. These interests might be thought to align Hérold with the transgressive qualities associated with decadence more generally but, as a translator, he believed that his practice should be informed by achieving intelligibility rather than rendering the contours of literary experiment and formal innovation in his source material. This is why D'Annunzio objected to the 'banalization' of his writings in translation, of which he believed Hérold of being guilty. The issue is further complicated by evidence that, despite these disagreements, D'Annunzio also collaborated with Hérold in toning down his own writings for a French audience.

In comparison, Emily Eells identifies a 'decadent resonance' that can be found in Marcel Proust's translations of John Ruskin in spite of Proust's declared resistance to decadence ('Je ne

suis pas *décadent*). For Eells, this arises through a paradoxical tension between the generative power of Proust's translation as a creative activity and the degenerative effect of translation upon Ruskin's original text. Ruskin's *The Bible of Amiens*, the work that Proust selected for translation, is deeply concerned with art and notions of decay. The mixture of profit and loss that occurs in shifting Ruskin's art criticism into finely tuned tonalities of Proust's French, Eells suggests, amplifies the English writer's Aestheticism into a form of decadence that had future repercussions for his own masterpiece, *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

Eells's account of Proust's versions of Ruskin highlights the fact that a translational understanding of decadent literature must take into account this writing's pervasive engagement with visual culture, across disciplinary divides. Two further contributions underscore the important role played by the arts in the international dialogue around decadence. In a series of subtle readings, Sophie Basch explores the resonance, for French writers and readers at the fin de siècle, of the English term 'modern style', used to describe contemporary architecture and design. As a shorthand for a distinctive brand of turn-of-the-century Anglophilia, 'le modern style' became a vehicle to articulate concerns about various forms of foreign influence upon French culture. Cyril Barde uncovers a related set of anxieties about linguistic degeneration and neologism in French turn-of-the-century reactions to art nouveau. The attacks on art nouveau and modern style carry with them a criticism of modern practices of cosmopolitanism, international collaboration, and de-nationalization prevalent in literature as well as the visual arts. Translation emerges here, not simply as a means of acknowledging the cross-over between formal disciplines, but also as a rhetorical weapon in the hands of fin-de-siècle critics keen to police national borderlines. There is an important irony here: Barde draws on Cassin's work to show that such expressions of anxiety about untranslatability are precisely where translational activity proliferates.

As well as acknowledging the frictions between languages and cultures and the interests that jostle between texts and translators, our understanding of decadence as 'translational' is also informed by a strong sense that such debates are not closed. Translation is never a final or

finalizing act. The essay by Richard Hibbitt demonstrates how the critical study of literary translation and the creative practice of translation inform one another in productive ways. Hibbitt explores the difficulties of translating the prose of Paul Verlaine for a modern audience. The essay begins by considering the formal and thematic resources offered to Verlaine by prose over verse. In style and subject matter, the short stories in *Histoires comme ça* (1888-90) may look similar to the naturalism of Émile Zola, but Hibbitt suggests that their presentation of sexual mores and identity is closer in spirit to the poems that earned Verlaine a reputation as a decadent writer. In order to make this point, Hibbitt takes on the challenge of translating some extracts from one of Verlaine's short fictions. Responding to Venuti's arguments about the invisibility of the translator, he provides a series of practical examples to show that any contemporary translation needs to take account of Verlaine's shifting lexis, as he deploys informal and demotic registers in his depiction of the seedy underside of Parisian life.

The final cluster of contributions closes the gap between translation theory and practice by presenting a series of original English translations of French decadent works. Here translation figures not only as a living phenomenon but as crucial to the ongoing effort to create new readerships, and therefore new opportunities of engagement, for decadent literature. We are delighted to be able to include Derek Mahon's new English versions of seven poems by Verlaine. In a brief note Mahon, who sadly passed away only a few weeks before we went to press, sets up the productive relationship between poetry, music, and untranslatability that inspired his work on Verlaine. Peter Manson turns to another towering figure of the French fin de siècle with his translation of Mallarmé's 'Monologue d'un faun', which is part of a fragmentary first version of what was to become the poet's impressionist masterpiece, *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (1876). Finally, Matthew Creasy and Jennifer Higgins present a fascinating hybrid text: Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's highly crafted decadent prose poem 'Vox Populi' (1880). These translations remind us of how much of French decadent literature, even by major authors, remains untranslated into English. The need for translation is arguably even more acute when it comes to 'minor' languages, which

have traditionally been marginalized both in the international publishing market and within academia. Today more than ever, there is a renewed political as well as cultural urgency to the imperative to keep translating decadence: as public discourse is once again saturated by divisive nationalisms, engaging with the translational is a modest gesture of dissent against the closing borders of the early twenty-first century, especially in Britain, where the study of foreign languages is under threat as never before.

¹ We would like to record our gratitude to the AHRC and the Collège doctoral européen de Strasbourg. Particular thanks should be extended to Guy Ducrey, whose role in facilitating debate and exchange amongst scholars and across languages was exemplary.

² See Jacques Derrida, *For Strasbourg: Conversations of Friendship and Philosophy*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

³ Wail S. Hassan, 'Agency and Translational Literature: Ahdaf Soueif's "The Map of Love"', *PMLA*, 121.3 (2006), 753–68 (p. 754).

⁴ The 'translational' understanding of decadence we outline here is discussed in greater detail within Stefano Evangelista's 'Translational Decadence: Versions of Flaubert, Pater, and Lafcadio Hearn', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 49.1 (2021), forthcoming.

⁵ 'La rédaction', 'Aux Lecteurs!', *Le Décadent littéraire & artistique*, 10 April 1886, p. 1. Our translation.

⁶ Patrick McGuinness, *Poetry and Radical Politics in fin de siècle France: From Anarchism to Action française* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 49, 50.

⁷ J.-K. Huysmans, *À rebours*, in *Romans et Nouvelles*, ed. by André Guyaux, Pierre Jourde, et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 2019), p. 696; translation quoted, with modifications, from *Against the Grain*, trans. by John Howard; intro. by Havelock Ellis (New York: Lieber & Lewis, 1922), p. 301.

⁸ Théophile Gautier, 'Charles Baudelaire', in Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris: Michel Levy, 1868), pp. 16–17. Translation quoted, with some modifications, from Théophile Gautier, *Charles Baudelaire: His Life*, trans. by Guy Thorne (London: Greening & Co., 1915), pp. 19–20.

⁹ Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Regarding Nisard and the evolution of attitudes towards decadence in France during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1979), and Ben Hutchinson, *Lateness and Modern European Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹¹ Dowling defines decadence as 'an attempt to save something from the wreck by turning to literary advantage what had otherwise appeared only as one of the incidentally bleak implications of the new linguistic science: the idea that written language [...] was simply another dead language in relation to living speech.' Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. xv.

¹² Walter Pater, 'Style', in *The Library Edition of the Works of Walter Pater*, 10 vols (London: Macmillan, 1910), vol. 5: *Appreciations*, pp. 5–38 (pp. 14–15).

¹³ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995); and, for an overview of the field, Lawrence Venuti, ed., *The Translation Studies Reader*, 3rd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁴ Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), p. 4. Another theory of translation that lends itself very readily to literary applications is the 'prismatic' model articulated by Matthew Reynolds in *Prismatic Translation*, ed. by Matthew Reynolds (Cambridge: Legenda, 2019).

¹⁵ Barbara Cassin, 'Introduction', in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. by Barbara Cassin, trans. by Emily Apter et al. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. xvii–xx (p. xvii).

The Spirit and the Letter Medico-Literary Uses of Translation (Lombroso and Nordau)

Bertrand Marquer

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Taking as a corpus two famous works of the late nineteenth century, Cesare Lombroso's *L'Uomo di genio* (1882)¹ and Max Nordau's *Entartung* (1892), I would like to focus on a particular type of translation which could be qualified as 'medico-literary'. This translation is based on a double phenomenon of adaptation and transposition which exemplifies what philosopher Isabelle Stengers calls a 'capture': an 'operation by which representatives of the so-called hard sciences' annex 'a notion or a problem culturally charged with meaning'.² The medico-literary translation indeed serves a clinical reading of literature, which supposes the passage of poetic or figurative language to be a symptomatic and often literal one.

This translation has, in itself, already been the subject of analyses, but they were essentially centred on the 'scientific ideologies' that the 'nomad concept' of degeneration has helped to constitute.³ Translation was then only considered as an (unfaithful and biased) interpretation of the cited literature, regardless of any linguistic problem. My approach will be slightly different, as it will focus on a comparative study of the French and English translations of *L'Uomo di genio* and *Entartung*. I will not try to measure a degree of fidelity and its consequences on the reception of a theory, as it has been the case for *On the Origin of Species*, translated into French by Clémence Royer.⁴ My ambition is more modest, but perhaps more revealing in the case of Nordau's and Lombroso's translations: by focusing on the status of literary quotations in these medical works, I would like to question the role played by translation in the rhetoric of these two texts written by theoreticians of degeneration.

Scientific spirit, letter of the text

A few reminders, to begin with, about the spirit that animated these two books on mental medicine. Since the work of the alienist Bénédict-Auguste Morel in 1857, degeneration had taken on the narrow meaning of ‘sickly deviation from a primitive type’ and quickly became part of the debates on the psychopathology of genius.⁵ In *L’Uomo di genio*, the Turin forensic medicine professor Lombroso used the notion to support his theory of a direct correspondence between madness and genius, whereas his French predecessor, Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours, postulated a simple analogy in his *Psychologie morbide* (1859). Translated into French in 1889, then into English in 1891, *L’Uomo di genio* was responsible for a lasting controversy, making Lombroso the master of thought for those who conceived of literary creation as a source of inevitable physiological disorder. Despite the fact that Nordau dedicated *Entartung* to Lombroso, his own conception of genius was in fact opposed to that of the Italian scholar, since, for the Austro-Hungarian doctor, degeneration was not the stigma of genius, but the symptom of a more general deviance – a deviance expressed by the lifestyle and literature of his time, which commanded an unquestionable condemnation.⁶ More in tune with the spirit of the times, Nordau’s violent indictment against the fin de siècle spirit emanating from France (and in French in the original text), was translated very quickly: in 1894, in the supposed motherland of degeneration, and the following year in England.⁷

In *Entartung*, Nordau develops the technique of pathological portraiture (or ‘pathography’)⁸ already used by Lombroso, but he inscribes it explicitly in a pamphleteering logic, to the point that his work can appear as a series of violently satirical ‘characters’, in the sense that La Bruyère uses this term. Quotations play a central role in these ‘pathographies’, insofar as they are treated as symptoms of the authors’ mental state. In accordance with the ‘principle’ that ‘writing is the living image of the mind’,⁹ the style, which fin-de-siècle medicine sees as a quasi-physiological expression, in fact tends to become the tangible document of a possible deviance. The medical portraits drawn by Lombroso and Nordau thus submit the metaphorical language of literature to the clinical reading they are supposed to validate. They constantly superimpose ‘objective’ symptoms (those

noted by doctors) and ‘subjective’ ones (those noted by writers, or which they constitute as such). For Nordau, for example, ‘Zola’s novels do not prove that things are badly managed in this world, but merely that Zola’s nervous system is out of order’.¹⁰ Even more significant is the portrait of the ‘degenerate’ Paul Verlaine, a portrait that stands out for its broad range: after disqualifying the poet by attacking his physical appearance in accordance with physiognomic theories, Nordau quotes Verlaine’s work extensively to illustrate ‘the loathsome condition of his mind’.¹¹ The poems ‘Écrit en 1875’ and ‘Un conte’ thus confirm, according to the doctor, that Verlaine’s ‘madly inordinate eroticism’ is ‘the special characteristic of his degeneration’,¹² while the early poems of *Sagesse* demonstrate that ‘religious fervour [...] usually accompanies morbidly intensified eroticism’.¹³

This literal and biographical reading is also present in Lombroso’s work, particularly in the portrait of Charles Baudelaire as ‘the type of the lunatic possessed by the *Délire des grandeurs*’.¹⁴ To support a semiology of degeneration, Lombroso converted poems such as ‘Le Mauvais vitrier’, from *Le Spleen de Paris* (1864), ‘La Géante’ and ‘Une nuit que j’étais près d’une affreuse Juive...’, from *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), into clinical documents. For the Italian anthropologist, their plot constitutes a collection of symptoms that allows him to turn the lyrical subject into a pathological one, thus participating in what the philosopher Frédéric Gros calls a ‘clinic of expressive writing’:¹⁵

In childhood he was subject to hallucinations; and from that period, as he himself confessed, he experienced opposing sentiments; the horror and the ecstasy of life; he was hyperaesthetic and at the same time apathetic; he felt the necessity of freeing himself from ‘an oasis of horror in a desert of *ennui*.’ Before falling into dementia he committed impulsive acts; for instance, he threw pots from his house against shop windows for the pleasure of hearing them break. [...] He loved ugly and horrible women, negresses, dwarfs, giantesses; to a very beautiful woman he expressed a desire that he might see her suspended by the hands to the ceiling that he might kiss her feet; and kissing the naked foot appears in one of his poems as the equivalent of the sexual act.¹⁶

The quotation of a line from Baudelaire’s ‘Le Voyage’ was, in the Italian text, reproduced in the French,¹⁷ whereas Lombroso’s choices are most often towards a translation that narrativizes, as it were, Baudelaire’s poetic work to make it the document of his life. In the rest of the portrait, for example, Lombroso translates ‘À une heure du matin’ to present Baudelaire as ‘[p]roud,

misanthropic, and apathetic'.¹⁸ The English translation follows this model, and even extends it to the quotation from 'Le Voyage', which retains only one term in French: *ennui*. The English translator here is in fact faithful to Lombroso's medical-psychological approach, which favours a literal approach to the texts cited, and makes the translation necessary for an argument that in the end leaves little room for form or style.

Clinical virtues of the source text

The case of *Entartung* is much more complex. The German text generally follows the logic of systematic translation of its Italian model but uses quotations from the source texts several times. In the long portrait of Verlaine, Nordau translates the excerpts from 'La Nuit du Walpurgis classique' and 'Ariettes oubliées VIII' into prose, but he quotes in French the first stanza from 'Chevaux de bois':

Tournez, tournez, bons chevaux de bois,
Tournez cent tours, tournez mille tours,
Tournez souvent et tournez toujours,
Tournez, tournez au son des hautbois.¹⁹

The excerpts mentioned, however, all have the same function: to illustrate the 'rabâchage' [rehashings] (in French in the text) of a degenerate poet.²⁰ This is just as evident in 'Chevaux de bois' as it is in the verses of 'La Nuit du Walpurgis Classique', which Nordau chose to translate:

Ein rhythmischer Sabbat, rhythmisch, äußerst rhythmisch.²¹

Un rythmique sabbat, rythmique, extrêmement
Rythmique...²²

Another passage from *Entartung*, however, helps to understand what Nordau's logic might have been. When he tackles René Ghil, he also reproduces a long excerpt from the poem 'Le Meilleur devenir':

Oùis! oùis aux nues haut et nues où
Tirent-ils d'aile immense qui vire...

et quand vide
et vers les grands pétales dans l'air plus aride —

(et en le lourd venir grandi lent stridule et
Titille qui n'alentisse d'air qui dure, et!
grandie erratile et multiple d'éveils, stride
mixte, plainte et splendeur! la plénitude aride)

et vers les grands pétales d'agitations
lors évanouissait un vol ardent qui stride...

(des saltigrades doux n'iront plus vers les mers...)²³

Nordau then precedes this quotation with a *nota bene* justifying his choice:

Und René Ghil [...] entlodt seiner Leier diese Töne, die ich französisch anführen muß, erstens weil ihr Klang in der Übersetzung verloren ginge, und dann weil ich nicht hoffen kann, daß der Leser bei einer ehrlichen Übertragung ins Deutsche noch an meinen Ernst glauben würde.²⁴

Translating into German the 'sounds' that Ghil 'draws from his lyre' would mean that they would lose their characteristics but would also risk making the translator lose his 'seriousness' ('Ernst') and credibility. Beyond the difficulty linked to the neologisms (which Nordau sometimes bypasses), it is therefore the inanity of the remarks that leads him to maintain this quotation in its original form, as if he refused to *touch* it.

Such a refusal is indeed as much a matter of ethical stance as of linguistic renunciation. The medical literature on deviants is accustomed to these effects of distancing, as Jean-Paul Aron and Roger Kempf have shown with regard to the '*invertis*' or homosexual men: the use of Latin, 'a dead language that defuses and sublimates desire', made it possible to introduce the filter of a 'translation' perceived as 'a happy medium between account and occultation'.²⁵ Samuel Tissot, the author of a famous work on onanism first published in Latin, thus confided in the preface to the first edition in French that 'this work' had been 'much more painful' because of the absence of a linguistic filter, and he confessed his 'embarrassment to express images whose terms and expressions are declared indecent by usage'.²⁶ This linguistic censorship in the name of morality was still practiced by doctors at the end of the century, including Dr Laupt (pseudonym of George Saint-Paul) and Dr Tardieu, both specialists in sexual deviance. To use a foreign language and, in the case of Latin, a scholarly language, is therefore to maintain a distance between the clinical fact

and its narrative in order to preserve the reader, but also the writer whose ‘pen’, to use a formula from the *Dictionnaire médical*, has thus ‘remained chaste’.²⁷

René Ghil’s quotation in French has, in *Entartung*, more or less the same ethical function, although it reverses the role played by translation. By presenting the source text as untouchable, Nordau the doctor makes it an irrefutable clinical proof, and Nordau the polemicist an unspeakable document that he rejects without compromise: the quotation, which has here the value of a condemnation, allows Nordau to pose as a censor of the delirious elucubrations that the man of science must reproduce, but that the man himself can only reprove.

The presence of this untranslated quotation also indicates the evolution of the indexical character of the literary ‘document’ from Lombroso to Nordau. The model of the Italian scholar was indeed essentially visual and governed by a rhetoric of the obvious. This is evidenced by the primary role played by the reproduction of Baudelaire’s physical portrait, which extends the demonstrative logic already used in *L’Uomo delinquente* (first published in 1876, and constantly revised and enlarged).²⁸ For Lombroso, the text confirms what the image reveals; and the literary document merely illustrates, on another level, what body language can make meaningful.

Although Nordau also mentions the irregularity of Verlaine’s skull (quoting his ‘master’ Lombroso in the same breath),²⁹ he is nevertheless much more sensitive to the effects of language and integrates recent work on language pathologies into his semiology of degeneration. In an article published in 1885, Georges Gilles de la Tourette had indeed distinguished the ‘disease of convulsive tics’ from chorea, and placed verbal tics, which had until then been considered an epiphenomenon, at the centre of his nosography.³⁰ These works are cited in *Entartung*, notably in the portrait of a Zola suffering from coprolalia ‘to a very high degree’,³¹ and Nordau repeatedly uses the symptoms of echolalia and glossolalia to disqualify fin de siècle literary productions. So, for Nordau, ‘[t]wo points are noticeable in Verlaine’s mode of expression’: ‘the frequent recurrence of the same word, of the same turn of phrase’ (what Nordau calls ‘rabâchage’³²); and ‘the combination of completely disconnected nouns and adjectives, which suggest each other’.³³ Jean

Moréas, who practices in *Le Pèlerin passionné* (1891) ‘the insertion of words which have no connection with the subject’, shares the same pathology, as does Gustave Kahn, whose poem ‘Nuit sur la lande’ is for Nordau ‘pure echolalia’.³⁴ In *Entartung*, therefore, textual symptoms are no longer simply redundant, as in Lombroso: they can also be discriminating. The untranslated quotation takes on a hyperbolic clinical value in these conditions by illustrating, to the letter, the incomprehension of which the doctor wants to make a symptom.

Quoting is betrayal: paradoxes of fidelity

Auguste Dietrich, *Entartung*’s French translator, perhaps understood only too well the central role that Nordau gives to the literary text. Dietrich, a professor of German language and literature and scientific editor of *Le Page disgracié*, chose systematically to insert excerpts from the poems commented on by Nordau, even if this meant considerably lengthening the book and somewhat distorting the doctor’s rhetoric.

The presence of exact quotations is thus trivialized, and the weight of literary discourse paradoxically reinforced by the addition of long autonomous excerpts. Where Nordau was translating to incorporate the literary document into his argument, the poetic extract detaches itself from the medical discourse that frames it and imposes its own rhythm. Where the quotation in the original language provoked a phenomenon of strangeness in the service of a superlative condemnation, the French edition smooths out the difference. Auguste Dietrich thus eliminates the *nota bene* that introduced, in the German edition, the reproduction of René Ghil’s poem and gave it its full meaning: the refusal to translate is replaced by a banal introductory comment: ‘René Ghil [...] tire de sa lyre les propos que voici’.³⁵

The translator’s choices, which do not detract from the pamphleteering tone of the whole, can certainly be easily explained by the fact that most of the works commented on by Nordau were in French, and that it was therefore easier for Auguste Dietrich to quote the source text. The English version of *Entartung* nevertheless allows us to measure the consequences of such a choice.

Although *Degeneration* presents itself as ‘Translated from the Second Edition of the German Work’, it is presumably an adaptation of the French version of *Entartung*, whose long quotations in French are reproduced in the English edition. The passage on René Ghil nevertheless reintroduces the precision formulated in the German edition, but finally renders it incomprehensible, since it does not actually break with what is practiced in the rest of the work:

René Ghil [...] draws from his lyre these tones, which I also quote in French; in the first place because they would lose their ring in a translation, and, secondly, because if I were to translate them literally, it is hopeless to suppose that the reader would think I was serious.³⁶

The multiplication of foreign-language quotations in *Degeneration* is thus a further step in the transformation of the original clinical rhetoric, which clearly distinguished between two cases. This massive presence of untranslated literary excerpts also raises the question of the readership of the English edition. Although the book acquired the status of a ‘popular edition’ in 1898, it is legitimate to ask which public is targeted by a text that was now doubly hybrid, by virtue of its subject (medical-literary) but also its linguistic choices. Given Nordau’s rapidly acquired notoriety, a first hypothesis would be that the English translator considered that the potential linguistic opacity of the reproduced document was not a real obstacle to the clinical relevance of the whole, among a public that had been persuaded in advance by the medical authority. If, however, one considers this choice as an extension of the dynamic initiated by Auguste Dietrich, the interpretation can be singularly different. The French edition had indeed given literary texts their full place as texts, and not as mere documents. By choosing systematically to maintain quotations that had become allophone, the English edition would reinforce this particular status of the literary text, which a clinical translation does not seem able fully to absorb. The quotation appears, in this case, as what resists clinical discourse, detaches itself from it, and participates in an obscure seduction of the deviance it formally embodies. By quoting literally, and respecting the letter of the text, the French and English editions of *Entartung* make it possible to reintroduce a (guilty?) pleasure of the text,

absent in Nordau's work, even if it means making this clinical pamphlet the possible support of a morose pleasure.

This comparative study of the original and translated editions of *L'Uomo di genio* and *Entartung* therefore brings to light the strategic role of quotation in the rhetoric of these two doctors and in the development of their scientific ideology. Quoting, in this perspective, is not only an act of commenting: it is also an act of translation into another language that transforms the literary text into a pathological document. The problems raised by the strictly linguistic translation nevertheless make it possible to nuance, at least in Nordau's case, the effectiveness of this initial conversion by revealing a form of resistance in the source text. The French and English translators of *Entartung* seem to be men of language who cannot help but respect the literary text, reproducing it as it is, without mediation. In their case, betrayal does not consist in committing 'belles infidèles',³⁷ but on the contrary in erasing themselves, even though the clinical work they are responsible for translating assumes a total hold on the literary notes.

¹ Lombroso published *Genio e follia* in 1864. It was not until the fourth edition, in 1882, that the work took on the title that made it famous, and which served as a reference for translations.

² Isabelle Stengers, *D'une science à l'autre. Des concepts nomades* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), p. 23. All translations in this article are my own unless otherwise indicated.

³ See, respectively, Georges Canguilhem, *Idéologie et rationalité dans les sciences de la vie* (Paris: Vrin, 1977), p. 44, and Stengers, *D'une science à l'autre*.

⁴ See, for example, Michel Prum, 'Traductrice et traducteurs français de Charles Darwin au XIX^e siècle: un chemin difficile, de la Suisse à la France', and Pascal Duris, 'Flourens lecteur de Darwin (ou de Clémence Royer?): à propos de son *Examen du livre de M. Darwin sur l'origine des espèces* (1864)', in *Littérature française et savoirs biologiques au XIX^e siècle. Traduction, transmission, transposition*, ed. by Thomas Klinkert and Gisèle Séginger (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 51–60 and 61–77, respectively.

⁵ Bénédict-Auguste Morel, *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine* (Paris: Baillière, 1857), p. 5.

In French, the term *dégénérescence* first appears at the end of the eighteenth century and is synonymous with *dégénération*. It then it replaces the term *dégénération*. in the mid-nineteenth century. It is the work of Bénédict-Auguste Morel that gives it its negative meaning: *dégénérescence* designated the change that an organized body undergoes under the influence of the environment, without this change being connoted.

⁶ See, for example, Max Nordau, *Psycho-physiologie du génie et du talent* (1897). The genius artist is, for Nordau, the one who is understood by his contemporaries.

⁷ The symptomatic portraits that aim to support his point of view are certainly not all devoted to French writers (Oscar Wilde, Henrik Ibsen, and Friedrich Nietzsche are not spared), but the latter nonetheless takes the lion's share.

⁸ At the turn of the nineteenth century, 'pathography' became a veritable 'sub-genre' of the medical thesis, particularly in Lyon, under the impetus of Alexandre Lacassagne (1843–1924), a professor at the Faculty of Medicine and one of the founders of the French school of criminal anthropology. Many medical students devoted their thesis to the 'medico-psychological studies' of men of letters. This is the case of Raoul Odinet on Alfred de Musset, while others chose Fyodor Dostoyevsky (Pierre-Gaston Loygue, 1903), Edgar Allan Poe (Georges Petit,

1906), Gérard de Nerval (Gaston Barbier, 1907), Thomas de Quincey (Paul Guerrier, 1907), and E. T. A. Hoffmann (Marcel Demerliac, 1908).

⁹ Louis-Victor Marcé, 'De la valeur des écrits des aliénés au point de vue de la sémiologie et de la médecine légale', *Annales d'hygiène publique* (1864), pp. 379–408, (p. 379).

¹⁰ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* [1895], translated from the Second Edition of the German Work (London: Heinemann, 1898), p. 499.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁴ Cesare Lombroso, *The Man of Genius* (London: Scott, 1891), p. 70.

¹⁵ Frédéric Gros, *Création et folie. Une histoire du jugement psychiatrique* (Paris: PUF, 1997), p. 43.

¹⁶ Lombroso, *The Man of Genius*, pp. 70–71.

¹⁷ '[E]ra soggetto ad allucinazioni fin da bimbo, e provava, come confessò fin d'allora, due sentimenti opposti: l'orrore e l'estasi della vita; era iperestetico, e apatico: sentiva il bisogno per iscotersi di *Une oasis d'horreur dans un désert d'ennui*: e già prima della demenza commetteva atti impulsivi, come di gettare dalla sua casa dei vasi contro le invetriate delle botteghe, solo per sentirle rompersi.' Cesare Lombroso, *L'Uomo di genio in rapporto alla psichiatria, alla storia ed all'estetica*, 6th edn (Torino: Fratelli Bocca, 1894), pp. 99–100.

¹⁸ Lombroso, *The Man of Genius*, p. 71.

¹⁹ Max Nordau, *Entartung* (Berlin: Duncker, 1896), p. 225.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

²² See Max Nordau, *Dégénérescence* (Paris: Alcan, 1894), p. 222.

²³ René Ghil, *Ceuvre* (Paris: Figuière, 1889), p. 42; in Nordau, *Entartung*, p. 242.

²⁴ Nordau, *Entartung*, pp. 241–42.

²⁵ Jean-Paul Aron and Roger Kempf, *La Bourgeoisie, le sexe et l'honneur* (Brussels: Éditions complexe, 1984), p. 57. First published as *Le Pénis et la démoralisation de l'Occident* (Paris: Grasset, 1978).

²⁶ Samuel Tissot, *L'Onanisme. Dissertation sur les maladies produites par la masturbation* (Lausanne: Marc Chapuis, 1769), pp. iv–v.

²⁷ Dr Fournier-Pescay, 'Sodomie', in *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales* (Paris: Panckoucke, 1819), p. 447; cited in Aron and Kempf, p. 82.

²⁸ Lombroso adds an 'atlas' to the French version of his *L'Uomo delinquente*. This 'atlas' is composed of a series of illustrations that he presents as the 'most important' part of his work, since it allows 'the reader [...] to grasp and control, by himself, the truth of [his] assertions'. Cesare Lombroso, *L'Homme criminel: atlas* (Paris: Alcan, 1887), p. 5 (my translation). On this rhetoric of the obvious, see Bertrand Marquer, 'Lombroso et l'École de la Salpêtrière: du bon usage du cliché', in *Cesare Lombroso et la vérité des Corps*, ed. by Ida Merello and Bertrand Marquer, *Publif@rum*, 1 (2005), <http://www.farum.it/publifarumv/n/01/pdf/Marquer.pdf>. In *The Man of Genius*, Lombroso also begins his analysis of Baudelaire from 'the portrait placed at the beginning of his posthumous works', in order to evidence the 'type' he identifies in the poet. Lombroso, *The Man of Genius*, p. 70.

²⁹ 'If we look at the portrait of the poet, by Eugène Carrière, of which a photograph serves as frontispiece in the *Select Poems* of Verlaine, and still more at that by M. Aman-Jean, exhibited in the Champs de Mars Salon in 1892, we instantly remark the great asymmetry of the head, which Lombroso has pointed out among degenerates'. Nordau, *Degeneration*, pp. 119–20.

³⁰ Doctor Gilles de la Tourette defined the disease in 1885, in an article that appeared in the *Archives de Neurologie*, a journal founded by Jean-Martin Charcot, known to the general public for his work on hysteria carried out at the Salpêtrière, where Gilles de la Tourette had been head of the clinic since 1884. See Georges Gilles de la Tourette, 'Étude sur une affection nerveuse caractérisée par de l'incoordination motrice accompagnée d'écholalie et de coprolalie', *Archives de Neurologie*, 9 (1885), 19–42 and 158–200.

³¹ 'M. Zola is affected by coprolalia to a very high degree. It is a necessity for him to employ foul expressions, and his consciousness is continually pursued by representations referring to ordure, abdominal functions, and everything connected with them.' Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 499.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 124.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 133, 134.

³⁵ Nordau, *Dégénérescence*, p. 239.

³⁶ Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 135.

³⁷ 'Belles infidèles' are translations which are revised and corrected versions by translators who think they can improve the original text, or want to please and conform to the taste and decency of the time.

Is there such thing as a ‘Decadent Translator’?
The case of Georges Héroelle (1848–1935)

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One never reads the biography of a translator. Translators do not seem to have a biography, their lives are of no interest to the general public and no-one seems to really care for them. Except, of course, if they are creators themselves, poets in their own right, who have endeavoured, here and there, and always for a great writer, to become translators. This is why Georges Héroelle’s personality seems so unique: he is a translator *with a biography* – and, moreover, his biography has largely determined his first steps in translation. Not that it is necessary to linger too much on his actual life, which has already been written about at length by Professor Clive Thomson.¹ I shall touch only briefly on Héroelle’s biography, but the links between his life and his work as a translator and essayist (for he has also written a short essay on his own work as a translator), are still worth examining. Our intuition – or rather our initial intuition – is that his case offers a wonderful opportunity to explore what exactly translating decadence is, particularly in French, and what the possible definition of a decadent translator could be. *Initial* intuition, for this hypothesis of a decadent translator has become progressively questionable as Héroelle’s familiarity to us has increased. He has certainly translated decadent writers with commitment and passion: but was he a decadent himself? Our newborn doubts will be addressed here in five short sections.

The Five Lives of Georges Héroelle.

Born in 1848, Georges Héroelle actually lived five lives in the course of his eighty-seven years; some simultaneously, some consecutively. The first and most public of them all, after his studies in Dijon, was his life as a professor of philosophy in several *lycées* around France: first in Vitry-le-François (Champagne), then in Cherbourg, and finally for his last twenty years in Bayonne. It was his first way of earning a living. Soon after, however, as early as his first position in Vitry-le-

François, Hérelle's passion for ancient archives led him to his second public life: that of a specialist in local history. He was commissioned to explore matters as varied as Protestantism in the Champagne region, and the province's judicial system during the Medieval and Renaissance periods.²

Hérelle's narrative talent led directly to his research being published, with those books still considered as references today. What he achieved as a local historian and archivist of the Champagne region at the beginning of his life, he similarly pursued in his final years, but with a different focus. This third life, in the Pays Basque, proved his passion for popular theatre and festivals, the modern Mysteries of the Pyrénées valleys.³ He patiently attended each festival, collected the plots of each play, transcribed them, and finally dedicated books to the subject – books that remain precious references for theatre in the Basque language to this day.⁴

But, of course, those three lives, certainly public, are not the ones which gained Hérelle his principal followers. It is his fourth life, the life of an incredibly active and prolific translator, that predominantly brought him to the public's attention in the 1890s and beyond: thirty volumes of translations, first from Italian and then from Spanish into French, and of the renowned writers of the time; writers with whom he was personally acquainted and with whom he shared an intense and sometimes volcanic correspondence – with Gabriele D'Annunzio in particular. This part of his work is certainly enough to ensure his renown and a major position as a bridge between Italy and France for at least thirty or forty years. And it is as a translator that Hérelle became known to the French public and the academics of today, as well as the readers of D'Annunzio and Blasco Ibáñez.

Finally, there is Hérelle's fifth life – probably the most interesting and one that remained secret for nearly a century, until a paper by Philippe Lejeune in 1987, Thomson's biographical study, and an exhibition organized by the Mairie de Paris, made it known: it is the life of an archaeologist or an anthropologist of homosexuality at the Belle Époque – its peculiarities, its rituals, its favourite places, and its relationships to the medical theories of the time regarding

homoeroticism.⁵ This life led Hérelle to translate a German essay on homosexuality in Ancient Greece; to write a comprehensive book on the same subject which he pursued until his death but was not able to complete, and even more interestingly to conceive of a very original questionnaire on homosexuality – half psychology, half sociology – which he asked his friends to complete for the purpose of general knowledge and science.⁶ He accumulated an extensive archive of homosexuality throughout the ages, which he organized with remarkable energy and determination and bequeathed to the Bibliothèque de Troyes, where it remains under the name *Fonds Georges Hérelle*. This archive, which includes family photographs, art photographs, but also photos of young lovers and of masculine nudes, was obviously considered by him as part of his work and perhaps even his secret masterpiece – secret, for even when he decided to publish something from this extensive material, it was only in extremely limited editions, and sometimes under a pseudonym. The donation of this archive to a public library cannot, therefore, be considered a coming out. For nothing remains perhaps more secret and less known than the archive of a French provincial town of secondary importance. ‘Only for the happy few’ – the recognizable motto of a decadent mind. But let us linger a little on the fourth of these five lives – the life of the translator, which we will address in the second of our little sections.

Why Translate?: Translation and Desire

Hérelle’s first steps into translation are themselves extremely interesting and significant, for this major translator of D’Annunzio, Grazia Deledda, and Antonio Fogazzaro, an excellent Latinist and Hellenist, did not know a word of Italian until he reached his forty-second year. Prior to this, he had no notable familiarity with Italian in his childhood and no Italian family. He made no trips to Italy before the summer of 1890 where (as he explains) he headed directly to Naples, drawn there, it seems, by an irresistible attraction:

Puisque je disposais de deux mois entiers, j’aurais pu, j’aurais dû, ce me semble, m’arrêter à Turin, à Livourne, à Pise, à Sienne, à Florence, à Rome, etc. Mais, contrairement à ce

qu'auraient fait la plupart des voyageurs, je ne mis que cinq ou six jours pour arriver à Naples et j'y demeurai un mois et demi.

[As I had two full months, I could have and perhaps should have, stopped in Turin, Livorno, Pisa, Sienna, Rome, etc. But, contrary to most travellers, I rushed to Naples in 5 or 6 days, and stayed there a month and a half.]⁷

And on his first day there, he met in his hotel an eighteen-year-old young man, Alfredo Rosati, who for two months would initiate the French traveller into the pleasures of the Italian language, and probably other pleasures of companionship. For Rosati's photograph features in the file where Hérèlle kept some of the images of young men he met on his travels and which he entitled *Amici amati (minores)*. To any French reader familiar with nineteenth-century literature, this story, of course, sounds pleasantly familiar: it is the masculine version of a story told by the great poet and novelist Alphonse de Lamartine in 1849, in his most famous novel *Graziella*. In this story, a young Frenchman (the twenty-five-year-old author himself) falls in love with a charming girl from Naples, a fisherman's daughter, who he teaches to read and to whom he introduces Romantic literature. Seen in this light, Hérèlle's lessons in Italian with Rosati under the stars in the gulf of Naples offer a homoerotic mirror version of *Graziella*, albeit with several inversions. The most striking one is that, on this occasion, it is the Frenchman who is taught by the young inhabitant of Naples, and not the reverse.

The further consequences of the trip are better known and detailed by Hérèlle himself in his short essay on translation, *Petit mémoire d'un traducteur*, published in Belgium in 2006. This describes how the traveller, now back in Normandy and endeavouring to improve his new knowledge of Italian, took a subscription to the *Corriere di Napoli*, where he discovered the novel of a writer called D'Annunzio (it was *L'Innocente*), translated thirty pages or so for fun and read them aloud to his friends. Encouraged by them, and soon by the writer himself (he wrote to D'Annunzio through the *Corriere di Napoli* and asked him permission to pursue his task), Hérèlle offered those pages for publication first in the newspaper *Le Temps* where the book was published with great success, and subsequently in a volume edited by Calmann-Lévy. 'J'étais devenu

traducteur' [I had become a translator]:⁸ so he summarizes soberly in his memoir, pointing out the easy innocence with which this sequence of circumstances had occurred. For, in spite of D'Annunzio's established fame in his country (by 1891, he was the author of several volumes of verses – the first one published aged sixteen – and most of all, of the acclaimed novel *Il Piacere*, published 1889), the writer was utterly unknown to Hérèlle, the *professeur de lycée*, recently returned from a summer in Italy.⁹ *L'Innocente* was to be the first of a long series. It led to a close friendship with D'Annunzio and a very important exchange of letters between the two men throughout the years, which reveal details of the translator at work, and his struggles with the author.

To conclude this second section on the initial circumstances around Hérèlle's activities as a translator, it is important to stress just how far from the academy they are. For Hérèlle, translation was related to love and liberty. Learned and employed in this way, Italian becomes the language of desire (as it is for many, for Stendhal, and for all opera-lovers), but a prohibited desire, experienced in free conditions. Hérèlle's mastery of Italian had not been forged in the reading of Dante, or Petrarch or Boccaccio, but in the lively, embodied experiences of wanderings with lovers in Italy. As such, it was probably the language of liberty, a release from the constrictions and conventions of *lycée* life. And perhaps it is inevitable that these experiences endowed him with the particular, typically decadent interest in bizarre languages, barbarisms of expression or neologisms. If they did, however, this is not reflected in his work as translator or essayist where he remains remarkably classic and academic in style. But if decadence for Hérèlle is perhaps not emulated in style, it is to be found elsewhere: all his writings exude a very characteristic dilettantism and make him as profoundly endearing as Max Beerbohm or Richard Le Gallienne.

Dilettantism and Decadence

Briefly sketched, Hérèlle's intellectual biography shows a particularly rare flexibility of mind – a quality vital to a famous translator. From the Protestant Reformation in Vitry-le-François to the pastoral Theatre of the Pays Basque, and from his translations of D'Annunzio to research on

homosexuality both antique and modern, Hérèlle appears to travel with ease and always modestly: he regularly insists on the purely fortuitous nature of his researches and discoveries. He poses as a dilettante, an amateur figure following his tastes, nothing at all like a professional researcher (although his investigations are always scientifically founded).

He thus epitomizes an attitude to life which his intimate friend Paul Bourget, with whom he was closely connected between 1867 and 1874, had famously theorized in an essay on Ernest Renan, linking dilettantism with the states of extreme civilizations or decadence. Taste and pleasure are always promoted in the dilettante's choices, as stated in the first pages of Hérèlle's memoir as a translator: '[J]'ai toujours traduit pour mon plaisir et si mes traductions ont été fructueuses, il n'en est pas moins vrai que je ne me suis jamais proposé pour objet le profit.' [I have always translated for my own pleasure, and if my translations have been successful, it is no less true that I never set out to profit.]¹⁰ He also stresses that the choice of the work to be translated is a pure question of taste: 'choisir est affaire de goût, et le goût est personnel' [choosing is a matter of taste, and taste is personal].¹¹ This contempt for money, this importance of taste, and finally this flexibility in the choices one makes, are the very definition of the dilettante according to Paul Bourget in his essay of 1883, in which he gives this famous description of the concept:

Il est plus aisé d'entendre le sens du mot *dilettantisme* que de le définir avec précision. C'est beaucoup moins une doctrine qu'une disposition de l'esprit, très intelligente à la fois et très voluptueuse, qui nous incline tour à tour vers les formes diverses de la vie et nous conduit à nous prêter à toutes ces formes sans nous donner à aucune. [...]

Sur le tard seulement de la vie des races et quand l'extrême civilisation a peu à peu aboli la faculté de créer, pour y substituer celle de comprendre, le dilettantisme révèle sa poésie dont le plus moderne des anciens, Virgile, aurait eu comme un pressentiment, s'il a vraiment laissé tomber cette parole que le scoliate nous a transmise: 'On se lasse de tout, excepté de comprendre.'

[It is easier to understand the meaning of the word 'dilettantism' than to define it. It is far less a doctrine than a mental disposition both very intelligent and very sensual, which inclines us toward diverse forms of life and leads us to lend ourselves to these forms without giving ourselves to any. [...]

Late in the life of races, and when civilisation has progressively abolished the faculty of creation to replace it by the faculty of understanding, dilettantism reveals its poetry as Virgil has perhaps sensed, when he said (if one is to believe his commentator): 'Everything ends up boring one, except understanding.'¹²

Hérelle had been very close to Bourget ten years before those lines were written and it is hard to believe they don't offer a marvellous key to understand his flickering intellectual interests and tastes, as they relate to decadence. For Bourget states clearly: dilettantism is a product of extreme civilization and affects people who are much less creators (Hérelle constantly reminds his readers he is not one) than critics. The motto of dilettantism – 'trying to understand' – is at the very core of Hérelle's activity as a translator, and of course as an amateur anthropologist of homosexuality.

The best proof of his nature as a dilettante lies perhaps in the particular use he makes of the adjective 'petit', when he speaks about his own work: thus, in addition to *Petits mémoires de la vie littéraire* and *Petit mémoire d'un traducteur*, we find his *Petit traité descriptif des courses de taureaux d'après 'Arènes sanglantes', le fameux roman de V. Blasco Ibáñez*, published by Calman-Levy in 1925.¹³ These titles indicate an attitude towards the world, and moreover about one's own work, considered as a modest, amateurish, and unspecialized activity. Defining the decadent mind in his 1950 groundbreaking essay, Vladimir Jankélévitch thus writes significantly: 'Petits maîtres, petits sujets, petites occupations' [Small masters, small subjects, small occupations].¹⁴ And Hérelle confirms it marvellously in a description of his early life as translator: 'Voici comment je suis devenu traducteur. Ainsi qu'il arrive souvent, c'est un concours de petits hasards qui a déterminé ce grand événement, le plus important peut-être de ma vie.' [This is how I became a translator. As so often happens, a combination of small fortunes has determined this great event, perhaps the most important of my life.]¹⁵ It would be difficult to find anyone less boastful in the French fin-de-siècle literary scene, where so many egos are so vastly overblown.

Focussing for an instant on the dilettante figure, it is worth recalling that Bourget, in his chapter on the same, relates the figure to that of a collector – collector of objects, of carpets, wallpapers, of moods. Modern times, that is times of decadence for Bourget, are an epoch of collectors, and Des Esseintes, like so many of his counterparts in literature (Jean Lorrain, Marcel Schwob, the brothers Goncourt, Remy de Gourmont) is first and foremost a collector. And so is

Hérelle: not so much a collector of objects, but of archives, whether they are about ancient baroque theatre or stories and images about homosexuality.

But ultimately, of course, it is Hérelle's taste for D'Annunzio's writings, entirely self-instilled, for he knew nothing about the author at first, that defines his place within decadent literature. For what exactly did he find in the first D'Annunzio he encountered? What did he find in *L'Innocente*, which he translated in 1892, *Il Piacere* in 1895 or *Il Fuoco* in 1900, but also *La Città Morta* in 1898? He found a world of wealthy individuals in refined surroundings, but where archaic, ultra-violent passions surge (Arthur Symons famously referred to 'that marvellous, malarious *Piacere*').¹⁶ It was certainly a challenge in itself – to confront this universe, all the more so as Hérelle does not seem to have held (if one gives credit to his *Mémoires de la vie littéraire*) a particular interest in the French decadent novels of his time – from Catulle Mendès to Joris-Karl Huysmans or from Jean Lorrain to Paul Adam, or even his friend Bourget. In many ways, it seems that his work on D'Annunzio is also for him an introduction to the decadent mind, to novels of interior turmoil and sinuous and complex souls. But he rose to the challenge and, to both the satisfaction of the author and the public, became an acclaimed and almost branded part of D'Annunzio's world as it crossed the borders of Italy.

Thus considered, the case of Hérelle as a decadent figure seems clear: his taste for ancient periods of history as opposed to modern times; his passion for old, forgotten papers and his compulsive, obstinate trend of collecting; his singular way of trespassing the moral conventions of his time and questioning them thoroughly; the variety of his interests and his vindicated, modest amateurship; finally the shock of his discovering D'Annunzio's prose, to the point of translating it out of pure interest; his contempt of material matters and his exaltation of personal taste – all these qualities undoubtedly gain him inclusion in an anthology of figures of decadence.

And QED, *quod erat demonstrandum*, it might seem as though we could stop our quest here. Except that one critically important matter has not been addressed: the language. For decadence is foremost a matter of language, a singular use of language, which rejects everyday talking and

common prose, replacing it with a prodigious inventiveness (neologisms, ancient tongues, specialized vocabulary, silences even, and ellipses). It creates a new prose, or poetry, very often akin to music. Music, music of the language: this is what D'Annunzio aims at, as he explains many times in his correspondence and prefaces. But it is also precisely here that Hérèle becomes fascinatingly interesting and problematic in his efforts to translate the great Italian.

Decadent Author, Classical Translator?

There is a distinct pleasure in reading Hérèle as an essayist, because his qualities, discernible in innumerable letters, memoirs of all sorts and thoughts about homosexuality, are blatant. His prose is, at all times and with no exception, crystal clear, remarkably scholarly, and in a tone of familiar, almost friendly, confidence that makes him, as already mentioned, deeply likeable. It is the prose of a master in French rhetoric and of a life-long professor of philosophy. But do not look for any elaborate style, any invention of words, or puns. There is never any play with language in his personal writing and his style is, as we say in French, 'plat comme un trottoir de rue' [flat as a sidewalk]. In his *Petits mémoires de la vie littéraire*, Hérèle admits this readily:

J'étais doublement inhabile. Je ne savais pas imaginer une fable, combiner une intrigue, donner aux faits racontés la vraisemblance émouvante d'une fable réelle; et j'éprouvais une difficulté extraordinaire à exprimer verbalement ce que je voulais dire. [...] Il en est de même pour ce qui concerne les moyens d'expression, le vocabulaire et la forme des phrases; [...]. J'écris donc avec beaucoup de peine et, pour composer un roman, j'aurais besoin de recourir au procédé des fiches, comme un chartiste ou un linguiste. N'est-il pas évident qu'une pareille méthode, exclusive de toute inspiration, ne pourrait produire qu'une œuvre morte? [...] Je renonçai à l'impossible prétention de produire des œuvres originales, d'être, comme on dit, un écrivain créateur, et j'essayai de devenir un historien et un critique.

[I was doubly unskilful. I didn't know how to imagine a tale, how to combine a plot, and to endow the narrated facts with the emotional verisimilitude of a real tale. [...]; and I felt an extraordinary difficulty in expressing verbally what I wanted to say [...]. And the same occurs with all means of expression, vocabulary and shape of the sentences; [...] I hence take great pains in writing and, in order to compose a novel, I would need to make recourse to files, like an historian or a linguist. Would not such a method, so incompatible with inspiration, only lead to a dead work? I therefore renounced the impossible pretension to write original works and to be what is called a creative writer, and I tried to become an historian and a critic.]¹⁷

It is, in fact, difficult to quote one single original phrasing or one single remarkable formulation of Hérèlle's. Not that he writes badly – on the contrary – and not that he is not interested in bizarre languages (he duly notes graffiti written in slang on the walls of men's toilets and is very aware of Neapolitan dialect), but his own prose remains extremely restrained at all times. By his own admission, Hérèlle modelled his writing on the classical Latin phrase, which he claims as a solid canon for understanding Italian and Spanish: 'En fait, un homme instruit, qui sait le latin et le français, arrive presque sans étude à lire aisément les textes italiens et espagnols.' [In fact, a well-read man, who knows Latin and French, succeeds almost without study in easily reading Italian and Spanish texts.]¹⁸ This lack of an individual style has probably been an asset for his translations: as intelligent as he was, he was easily able to adapt to the style of the author he was translating.

But D'Annunzio did not always see it that way. The writer became more and more critical as he progressively grasped the lack of his translator's stylistic aptitudes. The relationship between the two men reached a point of acute crisis in 1900, as Hérèlle was translating *Il Fuoco* – a novel set in Venice and whose style is notably elaborate and flamboyant, in order to evoke the flickering lights of the city, particularly at night. It is, of course, impossible for us to explore in depth D'Annunzio and Hérèlle's year-long debate on style. Guy Tosi has analysed it remarkably, with its contradictions, in his edition of the letters in French.¹⁹ But a few examples of this debate between a writer obstinately aware of language, style, and rhythm, and his translator whose explicit aim is to make the writer intelligible to the French public, will perhaps help sketch the difficulties of the relation.

Two examples, chosen from dozens of others, can situate the debate. In the first, dated 4 May 1894, D'Annunzio states his foremost identity as a stylist in the direct line of Flaubert:

Io sono (e voglio essere), sopra tutto [*sic*], uno *stilista*. Io ho l'orrore delle frasi comuni, della *frase fatta*. Pur nella rappresentazione delle cose meno significanti, io proseguo [*sic*] una ricerca acutissima della parola.

[I am (and want to be) first and foremost a *stylist*. I cannot bear the common sentences, the *ready-made sentence*. Even when representing the most insignificant of things, I search carefully for the right word.]²⁰

To which we can oppose Hérèlle's radical claim – to be intelligible in French: 'Règle qui, selon moi, est fondamentale: une traduction française doit être écrite en français' [One rule for me is fundamental: a French translation must be written in French].²¹ Both positions seem obvious and both perfectly defensible and one would think they are reconcilable. But they appear not to have been for the two artists and are indicative of a major antagonism. It peaks in a fascinating letter of 4 January 1905, concerning his play *La Figlia di Iorio*, where all D'Annunzio's grievances rise to a climax – even if he had been immensely complimentary at times in the past:

Tutta l'opera è *banalisée* appunto perché *francisée*. Il vostro concetto del tradurre è – per me – errato. Voi tendete a trasformare in un'opera francese un'opera italiana, rifuggendo da tutte le singolarità e da tutte le asperità dell'originale, per il timore di violare il genio della vostra lingua e il senso comune dei lettori mediocri.

Dalla vostra persistenza nell'errore, vedo che è difficilissimo intenderci.

Non bisogna cercare il ritmo esatto, [...] ma cercare di riprodurre il ritmo esotico [...]. Per fortuna, i traduttori odierni [Mallarmé, Mourey] hanno compreso che un'opera tradotta *non deve* entrare a far parte della letteratura nazionale ma deve conservare la sua impronta d'origine, magari *contro* il genio della nazione che l'ospita. [...]

Voi, in vece [*sic*], vi sforzate di togliere ogni colore, ogni rilievo, ogni forza al mio stile, per mancanza di coraggio.

[The whole work is *banalisée*, precisely because it is *francisée*. Your notion of translation is, in my opinion, completely wrong. You tend to transform an Italian work into a French one, by removing the peculiarities and asperities of the original, fearful the genius of your language is violated and thus the common sense of your mediocre reader.

Seeing how you persist in your error, I think it is difficult for us to understand one another.

You should not search for the exact rhythm, [...] but rather seek to reproduce the exotic rhythm [...]. Thankfully, today's translators [Mallarmé, Mourey] understand that a translated work does not need to become part of national literature, but must retain the stamp of the original, despite the *genius* of the nation embracing it.

You, on the contrary, endeavour to remove all colour, all depth, all of my stylistic strength, for lack of courage.]²²

D'Annunzio's scathing attack on Hérèlle reveals his contempt for the translator's preference to render the text understandable for his readers, but at the expense of originality; making it clear at all costs and conforming to French expectations of the literary genius, rather than capturing D'Annunzio's original language. In another, earlier letter, addressed in French to the publisher Louis Ganderax, D'Annunzio bemoans this 'fâcheuse manie de clarté inutile' [unfortunate mania for unnecessary clarity] and complains about his translator's 'besoin de tout éclaircir' – this need

to clear everything up: ‘(pour qui? pour les idiots évidemment, qui ne lisent pas mes livres)’ [(for whom? for the idiots, of course, who don’t read my books)].²³ He even goes to the point of vindicating the importance of being unintelligible at times, or mysterious – *even in French*. In March 1896, in a letter to Hérelle, D’Annunzio writes:

Spesso tra una frase francese (ben francese) ma un po’ rara e una frase francese comune (del linguaggio corrente), voi scegliete quest’ultima. Così facendo, voi mi *tradite*, cioè è voi contrariate la mia indole di scrittore, senza che la necessità vi giustifichi!

[Between a French sentence (good French but a bit rarefied) and a common French sentence, of everyday language, you choose the latter. In doing so, you *betray* me, that is you go against my nature as a writer, without being justified by necessity!]²⁴

To Hérelle’s observation that, in French, a sentence retained ‘something gauche and almost unintelligible’, D’Annunzio replies sharply: ‘Voi mi scrivete: ‘La phrase française a quelque chose de gauche et d’à peu près inintelligible’. Benissimo! – Gauche et inintelligible – *dev’essere così*.’ [You write to me: “La phrase française a quelque chose de gauche et d’à peu près inintelligible”. Very well! – Gauche and unintelligible – *so it must be*.]²⁵ He adds later: ‘Una traduzione è un modo più o meno ingegnoso di mettere il lettore *in stato di divinazione*’ [A translation is a more or less ingenious way to put the reader *in a state of divination*].²⁶

This is absolutely crucial for our topic because, as is well known, the reproach of being unintelligible was first and foremost addressed to decadent prose and poetry (Paul Adam, Jean Moréas, Francis Poictevin, but most of all to Stéphane Mallarmé). By calling on his translator to embrace his own unintelligibility – and not to untangle it – D’Annunzio appears acutely more aware of the modern tendencies of literature promoted by decadent and symbolist prose, than his academic translator.

And Hérelle’s scrupulous respect – perhaps too scrupulous – for the boundaries of French classical style leads him, in his *Petit mémoire d’un traducteur*, to address the case of another translator, Laurent Tailhade, in a very significant way that we need to understand and explain:

La dernière sorte d’infidélité dont je parlerai [...] est celle d’un traducteur qui veut faire du style pour son propre compte. [...] Beaucoup de stylistes sont enclins à ce défaut, et je n’aurais pas grande confiance, par exemple, dans une traduction faite par Laurent Tailhade:

ce bizarre et grincheux homme de lettres, qui s'entiche de certains vocables et a un goût décidé pour ce qui est insolite et baroque, me paraît incapable de subordonner son style à celui de l'auteur qu'il traduit, et doit chercher toujours l'expression qui va au-delà du texte.

[The last infidelity I will mention is the translator's desire to create his own style. Many stylists fall into this trap and it is the reason why I would not trust a translation by Laurent Tailhade, for example: this strange and grumpy man of letters who is obsessed with certain words and has a particular taste for the bizarre and the baroque, seems unable to suppress his own style in favour of the author he is translating. He always seeks an expression that goes above and beyond the text.]²⁷

So who exactly was Tailhade, this grumpy translator, whom Hérelle does not like and whose *bizarre* style he despises? He was precisely a decadent poet: the author of a volume of anti-bourgeois verses called *Poèmes aristophanesques* (1904), but he was foremost the ground-breaking author of a new translation of Petronius' *Satyricon* in 1902. Hérelle admits he has not read this, but is certain, nevertheless, that it has distorted the Latin original: 'Je ne connais pas sa traduction de Pétrone, mais je parierais bien, sous prétexte de faire une traduction très vivante, qu'il a complètement défiguré l'original' [I do not know his translation of Petronius, but I bet that on the pretext of creating a lively translation, he has completely disfigured the original].²⁸

All these little clues tend to show that Hérelle's role in D'Annunzio's reception is to make the novelist more academic or classic than he actually was. And, his inclination was also to somewhat erase a part of the Italian writer's stylistic audacities or oddities. Tosi speaks of the edulcoration of the original, which is a form of toning down of the original text.²⁹ And a remarkable paper in ethnology, published in 2006 in the journal *Ethnologie française*, with the title 'D'Annunzio à l'usage des Français' [D'Annunzio for the French] goes even further and proves that the translator exercised, in the case of Hérelle, a very subtle and secret censorship of the writer's moral audacities, in the name of what was and was not acceptable in French novels (and particularly French magazines of the 1900). This is all the more ironic as we have seen Hérelle's own biographical and intellectual issues with conventions and morality.³⁰ In their paper, the authors reveal the type of cuts Hérelle encourages D'Annunzio to make for the French versions of all his books (he never made cuts on his own initiative), under the pretext of making the text

more accessible for the French public. This even reached the point where D'Annunzio anticipated and was the first to ask for some expurgations for the French version.

Translating: Sexing Down?

Hérelle himself points out an example to illustrate the difference between the Italian and the French version of *Il Fuoco*. It is a moment where the hero speaks of the actress La Foscarina, a transposition of Eleonora Duse, the famous Italian tragic muse who had actually been D'Annunzio's mistress. The Italian version reads:

Il suo desiderio fu insano e smisurato, contenne il fremito delle moltitudini vinte et *l'ebbrezza degli amanti ignoti e la visione delle promiscuità orgiache*; fu fatto di crudeltà, di rancore, di gelosia, di poesia e di orgoglio. Lo punse il rammarico di non aver mai posseduta l'attrice dopo un trionfo scenico, ancora calda dell'alito popolare, coperta di sudore, ansante e smorta [...]. Egli la vide in un lampo riversa, piena della potenza che aveva strappato l'urlo al mostro, palpitante come la Menade dopo la danza, *assetata e stanca ma bisognosa d'essere presa, d'essere scossa, di contrarsi in un ultimo spasimo, di ricevere il seme violento, per placarsi infine in un sopore senza sogni*.³¹ [Emphasis added]

In 1900 Cassandra Vivaria translated this into English as:

His desire lost all proportion and became mad, full of the quiver of conquered multitudes and *the intoxication of her unknown lovers and the vision of orgiastic promiscuities*; cruelty, rancour, jealousy, poetry, and pride were in his desire. Regret stung him for never having possessed the actress after some theatrical triumph, still warm with the breath of the crowd, covered with sweat, pale and panting [...]. For the space of a lightning-flash he saw her outstretched, full of the power that had drawn a howl from the monster, throbbing like a Maenad after the dance, *parched and tired, yet needing to be taken, to be shaken, to feel herself contracting in a last spasm, to receive some violent germ, in order to quiet down at last to a lethargy without dreams*.³² [Emphasis added]

Note the very explicit language ('orgiastic promiscuities'; 'the last spasm'; the 'violent germ' followed by a 'lethargy without dreams'). And contrast it now to Hérelle's French translation:

Son désir fut insensé et sans mesure, fait de cruauté, de rancune, de jalousie, de poésie et d'orgueil. Il regretta de n'avoir pas possédé l'actrice après un triomphe scénique, chaude encore du souffle populaire, couverte de sueur [...]. Dans un éclair, il la vit abattue, pleine de la puissance qui avait arraché le hurlement au monstre, palpitante comme la Ménade après la danse, *assoiffée et lasse*. [Emphasis added]

[His desire was mad and without limit, made of cruelty, rancour, jealousy, poetry and pride. He regretted never having possessed the actress after some theatrical triumph, still warm with the breath of the crowd, covered in sweat [...]. In a flash, he saw her knocked down,

full of the power which had drawn howling from the monster, throbbing like a Maenad after the dance, *thirsty and tired*.]³³

It is clear how the French version is a distinctively sexed down, sanitized version of the Italian. But Héréelle vehemently denied he was the one who asked for these expurgations, insisting they were requested by D'Annunzio, to avoid offending La Duse by the brutality of the description: 'Aucune des différences qu'un lecteur attentif pourrait trouver entre la rédaction italienne et la rédaction française ne m'est imputable' [None of the differences an attentive reader could find between the Italian and the French version is attributable to me].³⁴ And he adds: 'Pour le fond c'est lui qui a fait les remaniements, les coupures, grandes ou légères, par lesquels la traduction se distingue de l'original' [As to the content, [D'Annunzio] has made the changes, the cuts – important or light – which account for the discrepancies between the translation and the original].³⁵ It might very well be that Héréelle was not responsible for this particular bowdlerizing of the Italian text, but it is known that in many instances, he frequently used the French language and public as arguments to reduce D'Annunzio's audacities and indeed morals, rather than defend them – in spite of his motto being that fidelity was paramount.

Let us be absolutely clear, however, that neither Héréelle's probity as a translator, nor his ability is questioned here. But certainly what can be questioned is his comprehension of what was, and of what is, decadence at the end of the nineteenth century, in its wonderful reinvention of form and its taste for the crisis in language (the 'Crise de vers' as Mallarmé puts it).³⁶ If D'Annunzio had (as has been proven many times) a deep understanding of symbolist prose and decadent language, so Héréelle had not.

We might ask one final question: why did he not? But the answer will be somewhat disappointing – for it is mainly sociological. Decadence was essentially an urban phenomenon, and a collective one, located in Paris, London, Munich, Vienna, and Brussels, where groups of poets gathered, who read each other, were published by the same reviews and ultimately the same publishers. In a vast system of echoes and travels across the borders, they built up a type of

informal community of imagination and conception of languages – a taste for the bizarre which is so foreign to the Professor of a *lycée*. Vitry-le-François, Cherbourg, Bayonne are so far from this buoyant, frenetic, urban scene, that a translator, however scrupulous, excellent, and passionate as Hérèlle was, was too distant to completely grasp the poetic audacities of this world. Gathering from his comments on Laurent Tailhade’s translations of Petronius and, most of all, from the silence he kept regarding the French literary scene, one can reasonably claim he was not aware of the decadent movement of his time. His exchanges about style with D’Annunzio tend also to prove his ignorance of that larger, European literary context. And it is not the least paradoxical to pledge that the very translator of *Il Piacere* into French had probably not grasped he was dealing with one of the first major Italian contributors to decadence – as Benedetto Croce later famously described D’Annunzio: ‘With him, a note which had hitherto been absent was sounded in Italian literature, sensual, decadent, brutal, clearly audible even in his earliest verses’.³⁷

And so it seems that the excellent Georges Hérèlle, to whom we owe much of D’Annunzio’s French reception and many ground-breaking thoughts on homosexuality at an age when it was not studied (as he studied it), was not much of a decadent translator, even when he was translating an author who was certainly decadent in many ways.

¹ Clive Thomson, *Georges Hérèlle. Archéologue de l'inversion sexuelle 'fin de siècle'* (Paris: Éditions du Félin, 2014). Hereafter abbreviated as *Archéologue*.

² See Georges Hérèlle, *La Réforme et la Ligue en Champagne*, 2 vols (Paris: Champion, 1887–1892), and *Notice sur la création de l'échevinage de Vitry-le-François, d'après des documents inédits* (Vitry-le-François: Bitsch, 1882).

³ This includes (among several other titles): Georges Hérèlle, *La Musique et la danse au théâtre basque* (Bayonne: Feltzer, 1912), and *Études sur le théâtre basque. La représentation des pastorales à sujets tragiques* (Paris: Champion, 1923).

⁴ See Georges Hérèlle, *Le répertoire du théâtre tragique, cycles de l'Ancien Testament, du Nouveau Testament, de l'hagiographie, de l'Antiquité profane, des chansons de geste, des romans d'aventures et de l'histoire légendaire* (Paris: Champion, 1928). See also Florence Galli-Dupis’ excellent paper, ‘Un ethnographe, érudit historien et traducteur littéraire: Georges Hérèlle (1848–1935) et la pastorale basque’, *Garae-Ethnopôle* (2007), <<http://www.garae.fr/spip.php?article220>> [accessed 7 June 2020].

⁵In addition to Thomson’s *Archéologue*, see Philippe Lejeune, ‘Autobiographie et homosexualité en France au XIX^e siècle’, *Romantisme*, 56 (1987), 79–100, and Philippe Artières and Clive Thomson, eds, *Fières archives: Documents et images autobiographiques d'homosexuels fin-de-siècle* (Neuilly: Atlande, 2017).

⁶ See M. H. E. Meier, *Histoire de l'amour grec dans l'antiquité*, trans. by G. Hérèlle, under the pseudonym of L. R. de Pogey-Castries, under ‘Päderastie’, in *Allgemeine Encyclopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste*, ed. by J. S. Ersch and J. G. Gruber, 9th section (1837), pp. 147–89; and Manuscript, Bibliothèque de l’Agglomération troyenne.

- ⁷ Georges Héréle, *Petit mémoire d'un traducteur*, ed. by Jean-Marie Van der Meerschen (Brussels: Éditions du Hasard, 2006), p. 20. Hereafter abbreviated as *Traducteur*. All translations my own unless otherwise indicated.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- ⁹ Remembering his discovery of *L'Innocente* in the *Corriere di Napoli*, Héréle shows his ignorance of everything related to D'Annunzio's career, as he writes: 'Le nom de l'auteur m'était inconnu et je m'en étonnais. Comment était-il possible qu'un écrivain de ce talent n'eût point acquis déjà la célébrité? Était-il donc très jeune, si jeune que cette œuvre fût à la fois un coup d'essai et un coup de maître?' [The name of the author was unknown to me and it astonished me. Was it possible that a writer of that talent had not yet reached fame? Was he so very young, so young that this book was at the same time a first attempt and a stroke of genius?] (*Traducteur*, p. 22).
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- ¹² Quoted in Richard Hibbitt, *Dilettantism and Its Values: From Weimar Classicism to the Fin de Siècle* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 87–88. Translation modified by Guy Ducrey.
- ¹³ The *Petits mémoires de la vie littéraire* (Fonds Héréle MS 3170) has been reproduced in its entirety within *Archéologue*, pp. 259–85.
- ¹⁴ Vladimir Jankélévitch, 'La Décadence', *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 4 (October-December 1950), 346.
- ¹⁵ *Traducteur*, p. 20.
- ¹⁶ Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 87.522 (1893), 858–68 (p. 866).
- ¹⁷ *Archéologue*, p. 271.
- ¹⁸ *Traducteur*, p. 19.
- ¹⁹ See Gabriele D'Annunzio to Georges Héréle, *Correspondance accompagnée de douze Sonnets cisalpins*, ed. by Guy Tosi (Paris: Denoël, 1946), p. 436. Hereafter abbreviated as Tosi.
- ²⁰ *Lettere a Georges Héréle*, ed. by Maria Giovanna Sanjust (Bari: Palomar, 1993), p. 131. Hereafter abbreviated as Sanjust.
- ²¹ *Traducteur*, p. 21.
- ²² Sanjust, p. 275.
- ²³ Tosi, p. 78.
- ²⁴ Sanjust, p. 193.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 277.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 278.
- ²⁷ *Traducteur*, p. 75.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ Tosi, p. 104.
- ³⁰ Loué Thomas, Wilfert-Portal Blaise, 'D'Annunzio à l'usage des Français. La traduction comme censure informelle (fin du XIX^e siècle)', *Ethnologie française* (2006), 101–10.
- ³¹ Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Il Fuoco* [1900] (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1907), p. 189.
- ³² Gabriele D'Annunzio, *The Flame of Life* [*Il Fuoco*], trans. by Cassandra Vivaria (Boston: L. C. Page, 1900), p. 133.
- ³³ Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Le Feu*, trans. by Georges Héréle (Paris: Calmann-Lévy n. d. [1900]), pp. 141–42.
- ³⁴ *Traducteur*, p. 42.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- ³⁶ Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Crise de vers' ['Crisis of Verse'], in *Divagations* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1897).
- ³⁷ Benedetto Croce, *The History of Italy. 1871–1915* [1928], trans. by Cecilia M. Ady (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), p. 104.

Proust's Translations of Ruskin Generative Degeneration

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What have John Ruskin and Marcel Proust to do with decadence and translation? The latter protested ‘je ne suis pas *décadent*’ [I am not *decadent*],¹ the former that he was ‘entirely opposed to translations.’² Proust associated the decadent sensibility with ‘insincérité [...], la religion des belles formes de langage, une perversion des sens, une sensibilité malade qui trouve des jouissances très rares dans de lointaines accordances, dans des musiques plutôt suggérées que réellement existantes’ [insincerity [...], worshipping beautiful forms of language, a perversion of the senses, a sickly sensitivity which relishes in esoteric pleasures of distant harmonies or in music which suggests rather than actually exists].³ Although he equated the decadent sensibility with an excessive aestheticism, Proust’s translations of Ruskin can be associated with another aspect of decadence, namely degeneration. As he had not studied English, he relied on his mother and his English-speaking friend Marie Nordlinger for a first draft of the translation, which he then improved stylistically. This collaborative work resulted in error and attrition as his translation was not just second, but third hand.⁴ Proust also deformed the Ruskin original with his overpowering peritext⁵ comprising numerous notes and a long introduction in which he relocates Ruskin’s work in a contemporary French context. At the same time, Proust’s critical apparatus enriches Ruskin’s text and illustrates George Steiner’s point that ‘[t]he work translated is enhanced’.⁶ Proust’s translations of Ruskin comply with Steiner’s definition of translation as ‘a mirror [that] not only reflects but generates light’, even if the light projected casts shadows of decadence.⁷ The aim of this essay is to examine in what ways Proust’s translation produced a degenerated version of Ruskin, while at the same time having a generative impact on his own writing.

Ruskin's Two Paths, Proust's Two Ways

Extracts from *The Two Paths* (1859) were amongst the first of Ruskin's works to be translated into French; they were published in the *Bulletin de l'Union pour l'action morale* where Proust read them.⁸ In his introduction to *The Two Paths*, Ruskin addresses the 'general student', whom he pictures at a crossroads faced with the option of taking the path towards aestheticism and dilettantism, or that leading to the higher spheres of cultured, ethical living. Ruskin presents the choice in figurative terms as:

decisive and conclusive, between two modes of study, which involve ultimately the development, or deadening, of every power he possesses. [...] [T]he way divides itself, one way leading to the Olive mountains – one to the vale of the Salt Sea. There are few crossroads, that I know of, from one to the other. Let him pause at the parting of THE TWO PATHS.⁹

As Jérôme Bastianelli has suggested, Ruskin's two paths, the one leading to the sterility of the Dead Sea and the other to the organic fertility of the trees on the Mount of Olives, might have inspired the two ways mapped in Proust's novel, deceptively paired in the titles *Du côté de chez Swann* and *Le Côté de Guermantes*.¹⁰ In fact, 'Swann's Way', that of the decadent aesthete, converges with the Guermantes' way, that of high society living, leading – in Ruskin's terms – to the Dead Sea. The other, an unidentified way, is that of 'la vraie vie'. This is the path of literature, the way taken by the narrator at the end of the novel – Proust's way: 'La vraie vie, la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie, la seule vie par conséquent réellement vécue, c'est la littérature' [Real life, life which has finally been discovered and enlightened, consequently the only life which has really been lived, is literature].¹¹

Proust's first publication, entitled *Les Plaisirs et les Jours* (1896) – which predates his translations of Ruskin – is the work of a young man hesitating at a crossroads where two paths part. This collection of short pieces pandered to contemporary taste for decadent aesthetics in its precious style and focus on such themes as morbidity, the oneiric, and music. In his preface to the volume, Anatole France evokes its decadent redolence: 'Il nous attire, il nous retient dans une atmosphère de serre chaude, parmi des orchidées savantes qui ne nourrissent pas en terre leur étrange et malade

beauté' [He attracts us and detains us in a hot-house atmosphere, amid wild orchids which do not feed on the earth for their strange, sickly beauty].¹²

Given his youthful claim that he was not decadent, Proust was keen to distance himself from the association suggested by France and consequently engaged in projects of a different nature. In a letter dated 5 December 1899, he tells Marie Nordlinger that he had turned to Ruskin after working on a lengthy project, the one which would be published posthumously as *Jean Santeuil*:

Je travaille depuis très longtemps à un ouvrage de très longue haleine mais sans rien achever. Et il y a des moments où je me demande si je ne ressemble pas au mari de Dorothea Brook [sic] dans *Middlemarch* et si je n'amasse pas des ruines. Depuis une quinzaine de jours je m'occupe à un petit travail absolument différent de ce que je fais généralement, à propos de Ruskin et de certaines cathédrales.

[I have been working for a long time on a long, drawn-out work but without finishing anything. There are moments when I wonder if I'm not like Dorothea Brooke's husband in *Middlemarch* and if I am not piling up ruins. For a fortnight I've been busy with a short piece which is completely different from what I do generally, about Ruskin and some cathedrals.]¹³

Proust draws a parallel here between his own work and Edward Casaubon's painstaking, sterile attempts to compile a 'Key to All Mythologies' in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871). He pinpoints the moment in the narrative when Casaubon's wife, Dorothea, fears she will have to devote her widowhood to 'sorting what might be called shattered mummies, and fragments of a tradition which was itself a mosaic wrought from crushed ruins'.¹⁴ Reading Ruskin rescued Proust from pursuing a project that was, to use Eliot's phrase, 'already withered in birth', as it inspired him to embark on a new, dynamic literary pilgrimage 'in search of lost time'.¹⁵

Proust describes his literary project using terms synonymous with decadence and its etymological origin referring to something falling to pieces, decaying, or degenerating. Decadence is also associated with the morbid and the unhealthy, both of which characterize Casaubon's work as a withered stillborn. In the *Petit Robert* dictionary, the first example given for decadence is 'l'acheminement vers la ruine' [the way to ruin], ruin being a key term used by Proust in his letter to Nordlinger. Proust attempts to break from decadence through the discipline of translation, before translating his 'self' into his novel. Indeed, Proust conceives of writing as a form of self-

translation: 'le seul livre vrai, un grand écrivain n'a pas, dans le sens courant, à l'inventer puisqu'il existe déjà en chacun de nous, mais à le traduire. Le devoir et la tâche d'un écrivain sont ceux d'un traducteur' [the only real book, a great writer does not have to invent in the usual sense of the word, but to translated. The duty and the task of a writer are those of a translator].¹⁶ Proust's use of the terms 'duty' and 'task' here echo the vocabulary of Ruskin's Protestant work ethic and illustrate how his writing continues to resonate with Ruskinian overtones despite his efforts to release himself from its influence.

Proust's Two Ruskins

Proust translated two volumes by Ruskin: his *Bible d'Amiens* was published in 1904, followed by *Sésame et les lys* two years later. Both of Ruskin's works – *The Bible of Amiens* (1880–85) and *Sesame and Lilies* (1865) – predate the decadent movement though they clearly show how Ruskin adamantly opposed the decadent sensibility, which he equated with corruption. Indeed, we might readily rewrite Huysmans's title, *À rebours* and assemble Ruskin's works under the heading 'Against Decadence'.

The Bible of Amiens was the first – and only – volume of Ruskin's series 'Our Fathers have told us', which he conceived as a multi-volume series on the history of Christendom addressed to young Christian readers. The last chapter of *The Bible of Amiens* is a guide to the western façade of the cathedral, where Ruskin identifies each image with the corresponding passage in the Bible. The version of *Sesame and Lilies* which Proust translated contains two lectures on the importance of literature: the first, 'Of Kings' Treasuries', which will retain our interest here, was delivered on the occasion of the opening of a library in Manchester, and concentrates on the lesson of how to read and respect language, whereas the second, 'Of Queens' Gardens', is devoted to the education of women.

Both volumes translated by Proust contain questions related to translation: *The Bible of Amiens* explicitly so, as it is concerned with the translation of the Word with a capital 'W' into

sculpted image and includes a chapter on St Jerome, patron saint of translation. As Proust writes, Ruskin sees the cathedral as ‘une sorte de livre ouvert, écrit dans un langage solennel’ [a kind of open book, written in a solemn language].¹⁷ The first lecture of *Sesame and Lilies* focuses on reading and on the single word. At one point, Ruskin digresses and discusses translation in an unexpected way, linking it to his social preoccupations. He uses the word ‘translator’ in its archaic sense, meaning mender of boots. Then, using red typeface to highlight the tragedy he is about to recount, he tells the story of a family whose main breadwinner was a translator, a poor cobbler, who died of cold and starvation.

Proust: Translator Extraordinary

It is initially surprising that Proust undertook the task of translating Ruskin, given that he did not study English and could not speak the language. His most significant contribution is the addition of what Genette defined as the peritext, in which he overwrote Ruskin’s original and made it his own. He did not intend his system of annotation to constitute a scholarly, exhaustive, critical apparatus, such as the one researched and compiled by the editors of the Library Edition. On the contrary, the connections he makes in his footnotes are essentially subjective.¹⁸ They can be likened to the mechanism of involuntary memory that Proust would turn into the central theme of his multi-volume novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*, as Proust suggests in his choice of terms describing these associations as sudden flashes of memory: ‘Ils ne sont rien qu’un éclair de la mémoire, une lueur de la sensibilité qui éclairent brusquement ensemble deux passages différents’ [They are nothing more than a flash of memory, a glimmer of sensitivity which suddenly illuminates and brings together two different passages].¹⁹ Proust used the critical apparatus of his translation as a means of self-expression. So, when asked whether he could annotate a translation of *Praeterita*, he laid down his condition for doing so saying that he would need a great deal of space and an entire independence of views.²⁰

For Proust, translation involved not simply moving from one language to another, but also transposition of the tonality of the text from one cultural framework to another. Translation for him was an exercise in chromatic transposition which required recasting what he called ‘the faded colours’ of Ruskin’s prose into another colour scale.²¹ He associated Ruskin’s ‘faded’ writing with the effete palette of the French decadent artist Gustave Moreau. In his first article on Ruskin in *La Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (1 April 1900), republished as part of the preface to his translation of *The Bible of Amiens*, he likens Ruskin to Moreau’s figure of Apollo in a surprising comparison of the dour sage of Coniston with a languorous, homoerotic figure. No less surprising is the comparison of his weighty volumes to the diaphanous female muses attendant on Apollo: ‘Comme les “Muses quittant Apollon leur père pour aller éclairer le monde”, une à une les idées de Ruskin avaient quitté la tête divine qui les avait portées et, incarnées en livres vivants, étaient allées enseigner les peuples’ [Like the ‘Muses leaving their father Apollo to go and enlighten the world’, one by one Ruskin’s ideas had left the divine head which had borne them, and, embodied in living books, set out to teach the people].²² Proust calls on Moreau in another passage of the same preface, in reference to Ruskin’s senility. He compares it to the bird taking flight in Moreau’s painting of *Le Jeune homme et la mort* (1865): ‘à l’extrême vieillesse, la pensée désert a la tête de Ruskin, comme cet oiseau mystérieux qui dans une toile célèbre de Gustave Moreau n’attend pas l’arrivée de la mort pour fuir la maison’ [in very old age, thought deserted Ruskin’s head, like the mysterious bird in a famous canvas by Gustave Moreau which does not wait for the arrival of death to flee from the house].²³ Proust’s evocation of the ephobic young man at the door of the kingdom of death, with his crown of laurel leaves, colours with decadence the image of the elderly Ruskin beset with incipient insanity.

Proust himself questioned the pertinence of the parallel he drew between Ruskin’s earnest ethics and Moreau’s mystical aesthetics but justified it by arguing that both relied on symbolism, Moreau in his practice of art for art’s sake, Ruskin as a devotee of the religion of beauty:

Il n'y a certes pas lieu de comparer Ruskin à Gustave Moreau, mais on peut dire qu'une tendance naturelle, développée par la fréquentation des Primitifs, les avait conduits tous deux à proscrire en art l'expression des sentiments violents, et, en tant qu'elle s'était appliquée à l'étude des symboles, à quelque fétichisme dans l'adoration des symboles eux-mêmes, fétichisme peu dangereux d'ailleurs pour ces esprits si attachés au fond au sentiment symbolisé qu'ils pouvaient passer d'un symbole à l'autre, sans d'être arrêtés par les diversités de pure surface.

[There are no grounds for comparing Ruskin to Gustave Moreau, but one may say that a natural tendency, developed through familiarity with the Primitives, had led both to proscribe the expression of violent feelings in art, and, in as much as this was applied to the study of symbols, to proscribe a certain fetishism in the worship of symbols themselves, not a very dangerous fetishism for minds basically so attached to the feeling symbolized that they could pass from one symbol to another without being hindered by superficial diversity.]²⁴

As Robert Hewison points out, in '[c]omparing [Ruskin] with the Symbolist painter Gustave Moreau, a surprising but perceptive comparison, Proust detected an "adoration of the symbol for the symbol's sake";²⁵ in that sense, both practised a form of the 'Religion of Beauty' professed by Ruskin.²⁶

Associating Ruskin with Moreau is an eloquent example of how Proust coloured his translation with French references; others include Claude Monet's series of the façade of Rouen cathedral and Paul Helleu's impressionistic views of cathedral interiors, artists – like Moreau – whose work Ruskin did not know. A further step towards his independence from Ruskin was his appropriation of key elements from the texts he translated, which he incorporated into his own work inflecting them with his own associations. As we shall see, this is the case for the Madonna in Amiens and for the title of *Sesame and Lilies*.

The Madonna in Decadence

Ruskin's study of the statue of the Madonna in Amiens in *The Two Paths* was one of the first of his texts that Proust read.²⁷ Some thirty years before writing *The Bible of Amiens*, Ruskin had compared the Queen Madonna in Chartres with the 'Vierge dorée' in Amiens. The relevant passage in *The Two Paths*, which Proust quotes at length in a footnote to his *Bible d'Amiens*, is an extract from 'The

Deteriorative Power of Conventional Art over Nations’, a chapter whose title makes significant use of the verb ‘to deteriorate’ meaning to make worse, degenerate, or lose value.²⁸ According to Ruskin, the Madonna and the figures surrounding her in Chartres, dating from the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, ‘possess a dignity and delicate charm’ which is lacking in later works. The earlier Madonna has ‘real nobleness of feature’ and the fall of her drapery is represented with ‘grace, mingled with severity’ producing ‘a most studied finish in composition, every part of the ornamentation tenderly harmonizing with the rest’.²⁹ In contrast, the Madonna in the south transept door of Amiens was sculpted at a later date, after sculpture had gained in dynamism:

the statue is now completely animated; it is no longer fixed as an upright pillar, but bends aside out of its niche, and the floral ornament, instead of being a conventional wreath, is of exquisitely arranged hawthorn. The work, however, as a whole, though perfectly characteristic of the advance of the age in style and purpose, is in some subtler qualities inferior to that of Chartres.³⁰

For Ruskin, the Amiens Madonna – despite her vitality – is less commendable because the sculptors had become more interested in the decorative frame surrounding her than in her figure and face. He even brands the development as ‘fatal’: ‘at this point a fatal change came over their aim. From the statue they now began to turn the attention chiefly to the niche of the statue, and from the floral ornament to the mouldings that enclosed the floral ornament.’³¹ Ruskin considered the attention paid to ornament to be a ‘catastrophe’ and this new priority to be ‘instant and irrevocable’. His terminology condemning how Gothic architecture perverted the foregoing ideals of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries anticipates characteristics of decadent art: ‘Architecture became in France a mere web of waving lines, – in England a mere grating of perpendicular ones. Redundance was substituted for invention, and geometry for passion; the Gothic art became a mere expression of wanton expenditure, and vulgar mathematics’.³²

Ruskin deplores how the frame no longer served its function of highlighting its contents but distracted the viewer from them by overlaying them with ornamentation: the ‘beautiful niche’ framing a ‘barren figure’, its ‘beautiful tracery’ comprising ‘withered flowers’.³³ In *The Bible of Amiens*, Ruskin pursues his study of the sculpted Madonnas as the embodiment of Ruskin’s two ways. He

distinguishes the Queen Madonna of the western façade of Amiens cathedral, akin to the upright, noble statue of Chartres, from the Nurse Madonna, or ‘Vierge dorée’, in the southern portal of the cathedral, who is more down-to-earth. Ruskin likens her to the mistress of the house and conflates the sacred with the secular in his portrait of her with her ‘nimbus switched a little aside too, like a becoming bonnet’.³⁴ In Ruskin’s eyes, this ‘pretty French Madonna’ is decadent on several counts. First of all, her niche is decorated to excess, although Ruskin concedes that the ‘hawthorn-blossom lintel [is] worth [...] looking at’;³⁵ secondly, she has usurped her place, supplanting St Honoré who originally occupied the niche; thirdly, she represents a degraded form of Catholicism which Ruskin believed played its part in the French Revolution. In the following portrait, he calls her a ‘soubrette’, a French term derived from eighteenth-century comedy and referring to the character of the pert, flirtatious maid. He also has her perform the etymological sense of the word ‘decadence’, in her metaphoric fall from her sacred pedestal:

A Madonna in decadence she is, though, for all, or rather by reason of all, her prettiness, and her gay soubrette’s smile; and she has no business there, neither, for this is St. Honoré’s porch, not hers; and grim and grey St. Honoré used to stand there to receive you, – he is banished now to the north porch, where nobody ever goes in. This was done long ago, in the fourteenth-century days, when the people first began to find Christianity too serious, and devised a merrier faith for France, and would have bright-glancing, soubrette Madonnas everywhere – letting their own dark-eyed Joan of Arc be burnt for a witch. And thenceforward, things went their merry way, straight on, ‘ça allait, ça ira,’ to the merriest days of the guillotine.³⁶

At this point in the translation, Proust adds a footnote referring the reader to the passage in *Modern Painters* in which Ruskin evokes how the dignified Queen Madonna fell – or to use his term ‘sank’³⁷ – and became a more human Nurse Madonna, a dethronement which he would have chastised as decadent had he known that artistic movement: ‘In early times *art was employed for the display of religious facts*; now, *religious facts were employed for the display of art*’.³⁸ As a result, according to Ruskin: ‘the crowned Queen-Virgin of Perugino sank into a simple Italian mother in Raphael’s Madonna of the Chair’.³⁹ In the passage cross-referenced by Proust, Ruskin adds that this is emphatically not a ‘healthy change’.

Proust clearly had his translation of Ruskin in mind when writing *À la recherche du temps perdu*. He translated Ruskin's 'Madonna in decadence' into his novel in the sense that a saint's relics are literally translated – meaning carried – from one place to another. He positions her in the porch of the church in Balbec, which his narrator visits, inspired by his reading of Ruskin.⁴⁰ The Ruskinian intertext is more explicit in some manuscript versions of this passage, where Balbec was identified as 'Amiens'.⁴¹ Proust constructs a setting for the Madonna made up of all the degraded aspects of modern life deplored by Ruskin. The church is integrated into a hub of urban activity, next to a savings bank and an election campaign billboard, opposite a Café advertising 'Billards' on its façade, on the square where two tramway lines intersect. It is further desacralized by the smells coming from the nearby pastry-chef's kitchens.⁴² Proust's church in Balbec shares all the aspects of the European cities whose degradation Ruskin railed against in *Mornings in Florence* (1875), beginning with the space in front of the Campanile there:

Which spot of ground the modern Florentine has made his principal hackney-coach stand and omnibus station. The hackney coaches, with their more or less farmyard-like litter of occasional hay, and smell of variously mixed horse-manure, are yet in more permissible harmony with the place than the ordinary populace of a fashionable promenade would be, with its cigars, spitting, and harlot planned fineries [...].

The front of Notre Dame of Paris was similarly turned into a coach-office when I last saw it – 1874. Within fifty yards of me as I write, the Oratory of the Holy Ghost [in Venice] is used for a tobacco-store, and in fine, over all Europe, mere Caliban bestiality and Satyric ravage – staggering, drunk and desperate, into every once enchanted cell where the prosperity of kingdoms ruled, and the miraculousness of beauty was shrined in peace. Deluge of profanity, drowning dome and tower in Stygian pool of vilest thought, – nothing now left sacred, in the places where once – nothing was profane.⁴³

Proust's fictional description of the church in Balbec, implanted in its banal, vulgar surroundings, reads like a literary transposition of Ruskin's fiery criticism. As does the account of the narrator's disappointment when he sees the statue of the Madonna he knew from reproductions. It is degraded, corrupted or, as Proust wrote, 'métamorphosée' [metamorphosed].⁴⁴ The statue is covered in soot, and appears to be a little old lady, brought down to earth and so close that her wrinkles can be counted. The narrator imagines scrawling his name in the soot, an act anticipating

contemporary graffiti which – if realized – would have made him into one of those tourists Ruskin holds in contempt, who deface sacred buildings by leaving a mark of their presence.

The narrator's disappointment is countered later on by the painter Elstir's lesson on the aesthetics of the sculpted façade of the church. His words resonate with Ruskin's precepts and preoccupation with the translation of Word into Image on ecclesiastical buildings, though Proust marks his distance from Ruskin here with his incongruous reference to the symbolist art of his contemporary, Odilon Redon: 'Il y a certaines paroles de l'office de l'Assomption qui ont été traduites avec une subtilité qu'un Redon n'a pas égalée' [Some words from the liturgy for the Assumption have been translated with a subtlety that a Redon cannot match].⁴⁵

The Word in Decadence

Ruskin's study of ecclesiastical art in *The Bible of Amiens* shows how his notion of decadence was related to the degeneration of late-Gothic sculpture. Paul Bourget's theory of decadence in his famous essay on Charles Baudelaire helps specify in what ways the text of Proust's second translation, *Sesame and Lilies*, can also be related to decadence. Ruskin would have agreed with Bourget's account of how society can lapse into decadence because individuals do not work together for the collective good: their independence leads to anarchy and the decadence of society as a whole. Bourget draws a parallel with language which slips into decadence when it is no longer viewed as an organic whole but each component – a page of text, a single sentence, an individual word – thrives independently.⁴⁶ Ruskin was concerned to counter the social degeneration Bourget describes here: he stressed the importance of a tightly woven social fabric, resistant to class distinction and inequality. His social preoccupations laid out in *Unto this Last* (1860) transpire at the end of *Sesame and Lilies*, most explicitly in a first version of the text where the 'treasuries of the kings' are not the books held in libraries, but 'the streets of their cities' which socially minded leaders transform into 'crystalline pavements' for everyone's benefit.⁴⁷ Proust's own interest in Ruskin's work was less in his social thought than in his reflections on language, reading, and art.

Ruskin adopts a condescending tone when instructing his listeners or readers how to read and write, concentrating on the meaning of single words: 'I tell you earnestly and authoritatively (I *know* I am right in this), you must get into the habit of looking intensely at words, and assuring yourself of their meaning, syllable by syllable – nay, letter by letter'.⁴⁸ Ruskin considers his readers to be Philistines quite unlike the 'well-educated gentleman' who is schooled in:

learning in the *peerage* of words; knows the words of true descent and ancient blood, at a glance, from words of modern canaille; remembers all their ancestry, their intermarriages, distant relationships, and the extent to when they were admitted, and offices they held, amount the national noblesse of words at any time, and in any country.⁴⁹

A close study of how Proust translated two passages in *Sesame and Lilies* will reveal how he adopted Ruskin's thought while transforming the text through copious annotation.

The first example occurs in the passage on masked words which Ruskin claims can even 'do deadly work sometimes'.⁵⁰ Here Proust makes a cross-reference to the first Ruskin volume he had translated, sending the reader back to the passage describing the tomb of Évrard de Fouilloy.⁵¹ Ruskin had transcribed the thirteenth-century Latin inscription on the frame surrounding the recumbent statue and considered how it could be translated into English. He focused on these lines describing how Evrard behaves towards others:

Vbis,
Mitib agnus erat, tumidis leo, lima supbis.

To words of men,
If gentle, a lamb; if violent, a lion; if proud, biting steel.⁵²

Ruskin explains that English cannot translate 'lima' by the word 'file' because the latter has been corrupted by its use in slang to mean a swindler, or cheat (probably derived from the verb 'to defile'). The contamination is close to blasphemy and exemplifies how language has been degraded:

I could not end my translation of this epitaph, as the old Latinist could, with the exactly accurate image: 'to the proud, a file' – because of the abuse of the word in lower English, retaining however, quite shrewdly, the thirteenth-century idea. But the *exact* force of the symbol here is in its allusion to jewellers' work, filing down facets. A proud man is often also a precious one: and may be made brighter in surface, and the purity of his inner self shown, by good *filing*.⁵³

Ruskin's note on translating 'lima' and Proust's cross-referencing foreground an example of the degenerative use of language and an implicit plea to counter it.

The second example occurs in Ruskin's discussion of social rank, when he suggests that to be a king one does not have to be sovereign of a realm but well-read and in possession of a good library. He embeds a reference to Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I*, in his statement: 'It matters very little whether Trent cuts you a cantel out here, or Rhine rounds you a castle less there'.⁵⁴ The quotation comes from Act III, Scene One, when Hotspur – his finger on the map – complains that the division of the kingdom is unfair as the course of the river Trent reduces his portion. Proust's footnote quotes seventeen lines from the play in translation whereas the editors of the complete works of Ruskin cite only these three:

See how this river comes me cranking in,
And cuts me from the best of all my land
A huge half-moon, a monstrous cantel out.⁵⁵

Proust gave more context to Ruskin's quotation and included a note of humour not cited by Cook and Wedderburn when he added Glendower's rejoinder from several lines further down to the effect that they will have the course of the river changed to suit Hotspur: 'come, you shall have Trent turn'd'.⁵⁶ His footnote confirms that his task as translator included compiling notes apprising his readers of cultural references they might not know.

Proust's translation was alert to Ruskin's choice of the word 'canel', which derives from the word 'scant' meaning meagre or small in quantity. He explained in a letter to the first editor of this text that he had made a studied choice of terms which should not be corrected on the proofs:

Je n'ai aucune recommandation spéciale à faire sauf pour 'château' et 'château' (au commencement du § 44). Ce n'est pas une erreur, j'ai bien mis une fois 'château' et l'autre fois 'château'. Il y a dans le texte 'canel' et 'castel' et j'ai ainsi conservé, voire renforcé, l'allitération. Je sais bien que 'château' n'est pas très usité mais 'canel' ne l'est pas davantage. C'est d'ailleurs le même mot, et d'une dérivation identique.

[I have no particular recommendation to make except concerning 'château' and 'château' at the beginning of § 44. It's not a mistake: in one instance I put 'château' and in the other 'château'. 'Canel' and 'Castel' are in the original text and I have kept – and even improved – the alliteration. I know very well that 'château' is not often used but 'canel' isn't either. Besides it's the same word with an identical etymology.]⁵⁷

Proust's translation of these paired words shows how he had taken on board Ruskin's lesson that their original meanings should not be degraded.

Proust's translation of Ruskin's passage on masked words again illustrates how attentive he was to Ruskin's choice of vocabulary and how he punctuates the translation with his own thoughts and references. According to Ruskin, masked words are polysemous and can thus lead to ambiguity or imprecise usage; loose in meaning, they are, in a word, degenerate. In his definition of them, he adopts an imperious tone and strengthens his message through alliteration and the repeated use of the verbal participle. Ruskin is prescient when he speaks of 'infectious "information"', or rather deformation, which sounds like he is railing against what is today called fake news:

words, if they are not watched, will do deadly work sometimes. There are masked words droning and skulking about us in Europe just now, – (there never were so many, owing to the spread of a shallow, blotching, blundering, infectious 'information,' or rather deformation, everywhere, and to the teaching of catechisms and phrases at school instead of human meanings) – there are masked words abroad, I say, which nobody understands, but which everybody uses, and most people will also fight for, live for, or even die for, fancying they mean this or that, or the other, of things dear to them: for such words wear chameleon cloaks – 'ground-lion' cloaks, of the colour of the ground of any man's fancy: on that ground they lie in wait, and rend them with a spring from it.⁵⁸

In a note on the cover of one of the notebooks he used for his translation, Proust queries the meaning of 'ground-lion cloaks' in that sentence.⁵⁹ He learned that the word 'chameleon' came from the Greek meaning 'ground-lion' and thus added a footnote to that effect.⁶⁰ This close attention to the etymology of words proves how scrupulous Proust was as a translator, even though he took the liberty of transforming the original text with his invasive annotation.

Proust's idiosyncratic translation process reverses the movement of Bourget's definition of decadence as the disintegration of a whole into separate entities: he reconstructs Ruskin's text in French by reassembling the individual pieces after he has made sense of them. Although he did not speak English, Proust learnt Ruskin's language as he explains: 'à force d'approfondir le sens de chaque mot, la portée de chaque expression, le lien de toutes les idées, je suis arrivé à une

connaissance [...] précise de ce texte' [By delving into the meaning of each word, the thrust of each expression, the link between all the ideas, I have arrived at a precise knowledge of his text].⁶¹

As Proust had turned to translation to rid himself of the decadent taint with which Anatole France had branded him, he would have been heartened by Albert Sorel's review of his first translation of Ruskin:

Cet esthète pénétré ne traduit pas ses pensées en prose décadente. Il écrit, quand il médite ou rêve, un français flexible, flottant, enveloppant, en échappements infinis de couleurs et de nuances, mais toujours translucide, et qui fait songer aux verreries où Gallé enferme ses lianes.

[This committed aesthete does not translate his thoughts into decadent prose. He writes, when he meditates or dreams, flexible French which is floating, enveloping, fugitive in myriad colours and nuances, but always translucent, resembling Gallé's glass works festooned with creepers.]⁶²

Although Sorel asserts that Proust's writing is not decadent, he nevertheless associates him with decadence, speaking of him not as a disciplined translator but as one who indulges in meditation and dreams. Sorel might praise the limpidity of Proust's prose, but he also finds it ethereal, hinting that the translator is subjective as he 'meditates and dreams'. The adjectives he uses to describe his prose – floating, fugitive, enveloping – and the association with Émile Gallé's art nouveau glass work – are all redolent of decadence.

Proust's translations of Ruskin have a decadent resonance, but it is thanks to them that Ruskin's critical fortune was assured in France. Proust tried in vain to break free of Ruskin's influence but his language bears its mark. He even borrows Ruskin's terminology to thank Gabriel Mourey, the editor of the periodical *Les Arts de la vie*, for agreeing to publish extracts of *Sésame et les lys* before the complete volume was issued by the *Mercure de France*. He echoes the titles of the two lectures when he refers to Ruskin as a king and to his books as 'treasures' or 'lilies'. For Proust, translation is a form of transplanting from the soil of one land to another.

Je suis bien heureux de penser que dans cette atmosphère fraternelle les beaux lys ruskiniens que j'avais l'audace sacrilège de vouloir transplanter, ne se sentiront pas dépaysés, pourront retrouver sur cette terre hospitalière et amie une vie nouvelle et prolongée.

Un roi comme Ruskin se décidant à passer le détroit, avec ses trésors, vous étiez le seul personnage assez qualifié chez qu'il pût descendre.

[I am delighted to think that the beautiful Ruskinian lilies which I had the sacrilegious audacity to transplant will not feel disoriented in that congenial atmosphere, that they will find a friendly, hospitable soil to embed in and enjoy a new and prolonged life.

When a king like Ruskin decides to cross the channel, with his treasures, you are the only one in a position to offer him hospitality.]⁶³

Proust's objective to bring new and prolonged life to Ruskin's work was fulfilled in that he ensured its afterlife in France. Proust was not overstating the case when he qualified himself as boldly sacrilegious. Given his invasive presence as a translator, and the way he imposed his cultural references onto Ruskin, it could be said that he desacralized Ruskin's work and contaminated it with decadent references. His translation is degenerative in the sense that it derives and deviates from the original. In turn, it has given way to another, bizarre distortion which moves even further away from Ruskin: Goodlake Lowen's retranslations of *La Bible d'Amiens* and *Sésame et le lys* into English, for example, use Proust's version as the source text.⁶⁴ The French references Proust added to Ruskin's text and the decadent resonance he lent it are thus transferred back into the English language.

Proust's translation not only ensured Ruskin's reception in France, it also stimulated the germination of his own novel. Any reader of *À la recherche du temps perdu* would have difficulty finding explicit references to Ruskin in it. Indeed, Proust only names him on four occasions though he constructs his work on an extensive Ruskinian intertext. Ruskin is embedded in Proust's novel as firmly as involuntary memory is its central theme. Reading and translating Ruskin, Proust paused at the crossroads and chose his path, following the way of literature which he had identified in Ruskin. However, he parted from him by practising a form of the religion of beauty which put aesthetics before ethics. Twice in his novel he contradicts Ruskin's work ethic by associating his name with a sybaritic lifestyle: the first pictures the narrator in Venice indulging in a sherbet at Florian's while reading *The Stones of Venice*, and the second borrows Ruskin's masked word 'sesame' and adopts it as the password to a homosexual brothel. In this way Ruskin's texts have become both tainted with degeneracy and indissociable from Proust. In turn, Proust's text bears the

watermark of Ruskin's presence just as his language has an English ring to it. As Daniel Karlin has demonstrated in *Proust's English*,⁶⁵ Proust wrote a kind of 'langue intermédiaire' [intermediary language],⁶⁶ mediating between English and French. His activity as a translator helped him forge his own style, creating a new 'langue étrangère' [foreign language]⁶⁷ which he defined as the hallmark of a work of literature.

¹ Marcel Proust, *Correspondance*, ed. by Philip Kolb, 21 vols (Paris: Plon, 1970–1993), XXI, p. 552. Letter written in May 1888. Emphasis in original. All translations are my own.

² John Ruskin, *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903–1912), XXXIV, p. 616.

³ Proust, *Correspondance*, XXI, p. 552.

⁴ See Jérôme Bastianelli, *Dictionnaire Proust-Ruskin* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2017), pp. 239–48.

⁵ In *Seuils*, Gérard Genette defines this term as the text which frames the body of the text (the title, subtitle, preface, footnotes, etc.). See Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), p. 10.

⁶ George Steiner, *After Babel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975. Repr. 1998), p. 316.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

⁸ The *Bulletin de l'Union pour l'action morale* published two lines from *St Mark's Rest* in November 1893 followed by longer extracts from his other works starting in 1895.

⁹ Ruskin, *The Complete Works*, XVI, pp. 253–54.

¹⁰ See Bastianelli, *Dictionnaire Proust-Ruskin*, pp. 714–15.

¹¹ Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié, 4 vols (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1987–1989), IV, p. 474.

¹² Marcel Proust, *Jean Santeuil*, précédé de *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, ed. by Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1971), p. 4.

¹³ Proust, *Correspondance*, II, p. 377.

¹⁴ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. by David Carroll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 449–50.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

¹⁶ Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, IV, p. 469.

¹⁷ John Ruskin, *La Bible d'Amiens*, trans. by Marcel Proust (Paris: Mercure de France, 1904), p. 45.

¹⁸ See John Ruskin, *Sésame et les lys*, trans. by Marcel Proust [1906], ed. by Antoine Compagnon (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 1987), p. 38: 'Ces rapprochements tels que je les conçois sont essentiellement individuels'.

¹⁹ Ruskin, trans. Proust, *Sésame*, p. 38.

²⁰ See Proust, *Correspondance*, VIII, p. 102.

²¹ See Proust, *Correspondance*, where he wrote 'Praeterita c'est écrit avec des couleurs "passées"' (VIII, p. 102).

²² Ruskin, trans. Proust, *Amiens*, p. 48.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²⁵ Robert Hewison, *John Ruskin: The Argument of the Eye* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 193.

²⁶ This is the title of the first significant book on Ruskin to be published in France: Robert de la Sizeranne's *Ruskin et la religion de la beauté* (Paris: Hachette 1897).

²⁷ It was published in French translation in *Le Bulletin de l'union pour l'action morale* on 1 December 1896, pp. 37–44.

²⁸ Ruskin, trans. Proust, *Amiens*, pp. 260–62.

²⁹ Ruskin, *The Complete Works*, XVI, p. 279.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 281–82.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 283.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 282, n. 1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, XXXIII, p. 128.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 128–29.

³⁷ Ruskin, trans. Proust, *Amiens*, pp. 323–24.

- ³⁸ Ruskin, *The Complete Works*, V, p. 77. Emphasis in original.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- ⁴⁰ See Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, II, p. 9. The narrator's mother motivates him by evoking the 'voyageur ravi dont parle Ruskin' [the exalted traveller of whom Ruskin speaks].
- ⁴¹ See Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, II, p. 889, for a transcription of his working version.
- ⁴² Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, II, p. 19.
- ⁴³ Ruskin, *The Complete Works*, XXIII, pp. 413–14.
- ⁴⁴ Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, II, p. 21.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 197.
- ⁴⁶ Paul Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine*, 3 vols (Paris: Plon, 1924), I, pp. 19–26.
- ⁴⁷ Ruskin, *The Complete Works*, XVIII, p. 105, n. 1.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64. Emphasis in original.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65. Emphasis in original.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- ⁵¹ He refers the reader to *The Bible of Amiens* IV, §25. See Ruskin, trans. Proust, *Sésame*, p. 142.
- ⁵² Ruskin, *The Complete Works*, XVIII, p. 139.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 141. Emphasis in original.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 4.
- ⁵⁶ See Ruskin, trans. Proust, *Sésame*, p. 229.
- ⁵⁷ Unpublished letter from Proust to Gabriel Mourey, transcribed in the *Bulletin d'informations proustiennes*, 45 (2015), p. 225. Emphasis in original.
- ⁵⁸ Ruskin, *The Complete Works*, XVIII, p. 66.
- ⁵⁹ The notebook belongs to the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*. Classmark: N.A.fr. 16628.
- ⁶⁰ He made the correction of the proofs, see N.A.Fr. 16621 95 r^o, and Ruskin, trans. Proust, *Sésame*, p. 143, n. 32.
- ⁶¹ Proust, *Correspondance*, III, p. 220.
- ⁶² Albert Sorel, 'Variétés: Pèlerinage de beauté; *La Bible d'Amiens*, de John Ruskin, traduite et annotée, avec une préface, par Marcel Proust', *Le Temps*, 11 July 1904, p. 3.
- ⁶³ Proust, *Correspondance*, IV, p. 124.
- ⁶⁴ See R. A. Goodlake Lowen, trans., *Proust by Way of Ruskin*, 2 vols (New York: Bell & Clews, 2014).
- ⁶⁵ See Daniel Karlin, *Proust's English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- ⁶⁶ Proust, *Correspondance*, X, p. 321.
- ⁶⁷ The full quotation reads: 'Les beaux livres sont écrits dans une sorte de langue étrangère' [Beautiful books are written in a kind of foreign language]. See Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, ed. by Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1971), p. 305.

Le ‘modern style’: un *intraduisible* dans les arts décoratifs

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L’Art nouveau, réaction contre l’imitation qui paralysait les arts décoratifs, se passe de traduction. Les Anglais, qui se gardent de confondre le mouvement avec les *Arts and Crafts* dont la relation au passé n’implique pas les mêmes ruptures, l’évoquent en français, à l’exemple de Forster dans *Howards End*: ‘Stunned, Margaret did not move from the best parlour, over which a touch of *art nouveau* had fallen’ [Accablée, Margaret attendit dans le ‘grand salon’ qu’avait déjà effleuré l’art nouveau].¹ De même, le concept de ‘modern style’ n’a de sens qu’en français: la platitude sémantique de cet ‘intraduisible’ ne se prête pas aux féconds transferts dont Barbara Cassin a exploré les distorsions dans différents réseaux terminologiques.² Son invention, en pleine anglomanie, se range entre l’inauguration de Maxim’s en 1893 et du Fouquet’s en 1899. La formule ne se dégage que par contraste. Le témoignage d’Aragon citant son oncle Edmond Toucas-Massillon parlant de ‘Modern Staile’ est le seul indice attestant sa prononciation à l’anglaise.³ Mais rapidement le journaliste Albert Flament, ami de Proust, s’est moqué du ‘moderne [s*iz*] style’, indiquant que la prononciation française devait l’emporter.⁴ L’antéposition de l’épithète dans cette traduction parodique indique en effet que le ‘modern style’ n’est pas ‘the modern style’, le ‘style moderne’ que Robert de La Sizeranne définissait comme ‘une forme à la fois nouvelle et durable pour embellir, depuis la maison jusqu’au joyau, ce qui est utile à la vie’, et auquel il consacra un long article lors de l’exposition de 1900: ‘Avons-nous un style moderne?’⁵ Deux conditions sont nécessaires à sa réalisation: ‘Si l’on ne réalise pas quelque chose de neuf, il n’y a pas de style “moderne”. Mais si l’on ne réalise pas quelque chose de fort, on ne fait pas de “style” du tout.’⁶ Peu d’objets répondent à ce double impératif en raison de la suprématie de l’ornement, ‘postiche et surrogatoire’ au lieu d’être lié à l’objet. Huit ans avant Adolf Loos, La Sizeranne voit dans l’ornement un crime:

Dans le *modern style*, l'ornement, c'est ce qui gêne.

Il marque donc un arrêt brusque et parfois même une régression dans l'évolution du meuble vers le confort et la mobilité. Tandis que le fauteuil Louis XV n'est pas moins confortable qu'un fauteuil Louis XIV, qui l'était déjà plus qu'un fauteuil Henri II, où l'on était mieux cependant que dans les chaises à haut dossier, les 'faldistaires' du moyen âge, voici que les fauteuils modern style ne marquent aucun progrès de confort sur le Louis XVI ou sur l'Empire, mais au contraire une régression.⁷

Dans cette perspective, le *modern style*, incommode et compliqué, est l'antithèse de l'Art nouveau, un art social, pratique, fonctionnel, dont le principal bienfait 'est de perpétuer, dans notre vie, ce qui, dans la nature, n'a duré qu'une heure⁸ comme y réussissent si bien Lalique, Cross, Voysey, Gallé, Grasset, ces 'combattants du style moderne'⁹ directement opposé au *modern style*. La Sizeranne instruit méthodiquement le procès d'un faux progrès basé sur le mensonge, l'artifice, l'emprunt, la confusion. Sans surprise, il rapproche cette confusion des genres de la traduction:

Il restait aux novateurs un moyen désespéré de trancher sur le passé, c'était de demander à chaque art non pas ce qu'il produit lui-même, mais ce que produit son voisin. Tandis que les pointillistes imitaient, dans leurs tableaux, la tapisserie, celle-ci imitait, dans ses trames, la peinture. Cependant la maroquinerie cherche à se faire prendre pour de la mosaïque, la céramique pour du métal. Le verre est désolé d'être transparent. Il devient de la pierre. Mais la porcelaine, en revanche, se couvre de cristaux. C'est une caractéristique de notre temps que cette inter-pénétration ou l'inter-échange que font les arts de leurs différents procédés. Il n'y a point, dans ce chassé-croisé, la moindre création, pas plus qu'il n'y a création quand on traduit dans une langue un auteur qui a écrit dans une autre. Mais il y a un jeu d'adresse et de trompe-l'œil qui, pour quelque temps, peut simuler l'originalité.¹⁰

La charge est d'autant plus plaisante si l'on se souvient de l'importance de certains passages des *Praeterita* traduits par Robert de La Sizeranne dans *Ruskin ou la religion de la beauté* (1897). À la suite de ce procès pour trahison par traduction, La Sizeranne, comme Albert Flament, acheva de ridiculiser le 'modern style', démodé par vocation, en francisant l'anglicisme orthographié 'moderne style'. Dès 1900, il prédisait sa disparition: 'Les meubles modern style dont on avait embarrassé quelques salons, en ces dernières années, on déjà commencé, vers les étages supérieurs des maisons, l'ascension fatale des choses démodées.'¹¹ En 1925, l'Exposition des Arts décoratifs allait donner l'occasion à Robert de La Sizeranne de constater que 'rien n'est resté du *modern style*'.¹² Saluant la discipline des lignes droites que Bevis Hillier popularisera en 1968 sous le nom d'Art

Déco, il se réjouit de la faillite de ‘cette sorte de rococo pauvre et tout effiloché’.¹³ Mais la principale raison de cette débâcle réside moins dans les réalisations que dans la sottise de l’auto-proclamation:

Que prouve cet échec du *modern style*? Seulement ceci qu’il ne suffit pas à toute une génération de crier: ‘Nous avons trouvé un style! Honte à qui ne le voit pas!’ pour que ce style soit créé en effet et qu’il mérite de vivre.¹⁴

En 1901, dans une étrange symétrie négative comme s’il avait voulu répondre à La Sizeranne, un journaliste de vingt et un ans, le Franco-russe Serge de Chessin (alias Sergej Šerševskij) rédigea l’éloge paradoxal et provocateur d’un Art nouveau qui, contrairement à son principe, détournait les objets de leur vocation, consacrait l’inutilité et le métissage, la supercherie et la déviation:

Le Style Moderne épuisera la fantaisie décorative à noyer l’utilité sous un luxe inédit d’ornementation. [...] Un autre moyen, plus spirituel, plus conforme à ces tendances hybrides, consistera dans la déviation de l’utilité de son sens naturel. Une chaise devient une table, un canapé une étagère. On ignore où il est permis de s’asseoir dans un salon ‘Modern-Style’. C’est grave: l’Art Nouveau n’a pas encore créé de siège, c’est-à-dire, il n’a pas encore le principal. Mais, à son grand honneur, il faut insister sur les conséquences qui découlent, chez lui, du conflit tout particulier entre ‘l’agréable’ et ‘l’utile’. Les objets les plus pratiques deviennent esthétiques. Il n’y a pas d’ustensile de cuisine qui ne se prête à revêtir l’ornementation du Style Moderne. C’est le maximum du raffinement. D’autre part, les objets esthétiques dépourvus de toute utilité se multiplient. De là l’abondance de bibelots, ces véritables ‘finalités sans fin’.¹⁵

Dans ce système et non par hasard, l’architecture officielle se garde du modern style, domaine de l’intime: ‘On n’imagine guère un hôtel de ville, un palais de justice, un parlement Modern-Style. On n’étale pas ses névroses en pleine rue.’¹⁶ Tel sera bien le tableau parodique représenté l’année suivante par Albert Robida dans sa ‘rue Modern-Style’ où pas un bâtiment public ou privé, de l’Opéra au kiosque, et pas un véhicule particulier ou collectif n’échappent à l’emballage stylistique [fig. 1].¹⁷

Au diapason de son propos, Chessin mêle indifféremment Art nouveau, style moderne et *modern style*, à moins qu’il ne les confonde à dessein. Ce n’est certainement pas un hasard si, des trois appellations, c’est l’anglaise qu’il privilégie dans le titre *Philosophie du ‘Modern-Style’*. Son plaidoyer frondeur demeura isolé.



Fig. 1: Albert Robida, 'la rue Modern-Style', 1902.

Pour mesurer la nuance entre style moderne et *modern style*, il suffit de confronter Marcel Proust à ses traducteurs anglais. Les 'expositions "modern style"' de *Du côté chez Swann* deviennent ainsi des 'exhibitions of modern housing' sous la plume de Scott Moncrieff qui traduit par ailleurs par 'furniture in the modern style' les 'meubles modern style' de Saint-Loup dans *Le Côté de Guermantes*, et par 'the Munich or modern style of furniture' le 'style munichois ou le modern style' coordonnés dans *La Prisonnière*. Lorsque Proust écrit dans *Le Temps retrouvé* que les Verdurin 'disaient ne pas pouvoir supporter le modern style', le même choix s'impose à Stephen Hudson: 'they could not stand the modern style'. Imaginons que le texte original de la *Recherche* ait disparu, comme la conférence de Mallarmé sur les impressionnistes et Édouard Manet retraduite par Bertrand Marchal à partir de sa publication dans *The Art Monthly Review*, et qu'il faille le restituer à partir de sa version anglaise: 'furniture in the modern style', 'modern style of furniture', et 'the

modern style' deviendraient respectivement 'meubles en style moderne', 'meubles modernes', 'style moderne'. La singularité du 'modern style' passerait à la trappe. Le 'modern style', qui n'a de sens qu'en français, est intraduisible. C'est du franglais, et comme tel une appellation d'origine contrôlée.

Revenons précisément sur ce sens. Dans un article paru dans le *Mercur de France* en mars 1902 à propos du livre de Roger Marx sur *La Décoration et les industries d'art à l'exposition de 1900*, Remy de Gourmont, pour qui l'art est ce qui donne une sensation de beau et de nouveau à la fois, de beau inédit', se servait du *modern style* pour dresser un réquisitoire contre la copie et faire l'éloge de la 'non-imitation':

La gaucherie, est-ce cela qui a détourné plus d'un amateur de suivre les essais de rénovation de l'art familial? Non, mais plutôt la prétention de quelques marchands et le poncif immédiat de quelques faux artistes. Le *modern style* – l'anglais des imbéciles n'est pas toujours aussi transparent – manqua de se discréditer par cette formule, d'une anglomanie naïve. On vit des gantiers et des mastroquets se commander des boutiques *modern style*. La vulgarisation avait été trop rapide, les architectes contaminés trop vite.¹⁸

Deux ans plus tôt, dans le *Mercur de France* de mai 1900, Gourmont avait consacré une chronique sarcastique à la porte monumentale de l'exposition, œuvre de l'architecte René Binet [fig. 2]. En forme de radiolaire, ornée de cabochons multicolores, elle trônait place de la Concorde:

Elle est déjà célèbre et elle le mérite. Sa durée sera trop éphémère pour qu'elle puisse prendre place dans le catalogue des merveilles du monde [...]; mais, gloire tout aussi durable, elle fournira peut-être à la langue française une expression, qui lui manque, pour désigner le style particulier aux manifestations architecturales de la troisième république. De Porte Binet à Style Binet, il n'y a qu'un pas, et deux syllabes harmonieuses tiendront lieu de longues périphrases. Le style Binet n'est pas le style moderne, celui que les marchands de meubles appellent *modern style*, mais c'est peut-être le style de l'avenir. Cela vaut la peine qu'on s'y arrête et qu'on tente une explication, sinon une définition. Entièrement original (et quelle originalité!) dans son ensemble, le style Binet semble créé d'éléments empruntés à deux genres assez hétéroclites: les tirs aux macarons et les pavillons quasi-mauresques d'Asnières.¹⁹

La restriction du *modern style* au mobilier n'est pas anodine: pour les contemporains, l'association relevaient d'une évidence qui échappe à ceux qui confondent le *modern style* avec l'Art nouveau, mouvement réformateur aux vastes ambitions dont il n'est que l'émanation dégradée. Henri

Cazalis, le médecin, poète et ami de Mallarmé, traita le *modern style* avec la même inquiétude que La Sizeranne et Gourmont dans son essai sur l'Art nouveau:

Art nouveau, enfin, tout ce mobilier de *modern style*, mais ici art qui hésite et qui cherche plus qu'il n'a trouvé, a promis plus qu'il n'a tenu, étonne, choque trop souvent le goût et les yeux, comme les fameux gilets rouges de certains romantiques, compromet ainsi aux regards de beaucoup ce passionnant mouvement d'art contemporain, fait douter, mais à tort, de lui et de son avenir.

Le mobilier n'a pas jusqu'ici rencontré l'homme de génie, qui, en le renouvelant, définitivement l'impose; il n'a pas eu, comme la bijouterie, son Lalique, comme la verrerie, son Gallé ou son Tiffany.

Devant beaucoup de ces meubles, je vois une mode plutôt qu'un style en ce prétendu *modern style*. La juste proportion, l'élégance vraie des lignes, la simplicité, le goût, le confort aussi leur font trop souvent défaut.²⁰

Mais quand au juste cet anglicisme s'est-il imposé?

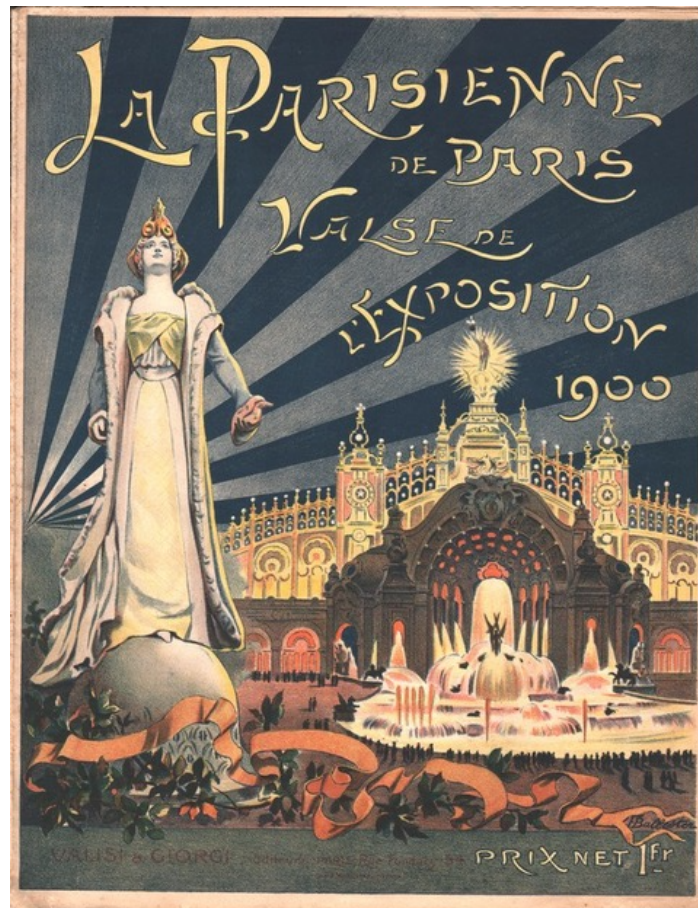


Fig. 2: La Porte Binet et la Parisienne, 1900.

Comme s'en souvenait Gourmont, le *modern style* est une invention de 'tapissier-décorateur', en l'espèce de la Maison Jansen fondée à Paris en 1880 par un Hollandais, Jean-Henri Jansen,

ensemblier de génie qui donna dans l'orientalisme avant de promouvoir le retour au dix-huitième siècle tout en mêlant les antiquités aux créations contemporaines. C'est dans cette optique que Jansen installa en 1896, au 6 rue Royale (l'ancienne adresse de Mme de Staël), face à son adresse principale du 9 de la même rue, une nouvelle enseigne, *Modern Styles*. *Le Figaro* lui manifesta une indulgence tempérée, en insistant sur le caractère étranger de ces nouveautés réservées aux espaces intimes: 'Ah! par exemple on ne saurait encore donner asile à ces nouveaux venus dans le grand salon qui doit rigoureusement garder son style français.'²¹ Un an plus tard, *La Vie parisienne* en rendait compte en ces termes [fig. 3]:

C'est là, dans cet immeuble historique, que *Jansen* a, tout récemment, installé un second magasin auquel il a donné le nom de *Modern Styles*. On a maintes fois reproché à nos architectes de n'avoir tenté aucun effort en vue de créer un style moderne et de suivre obstinément les vieux errements.

L'art du tapissier semble avoir été plus heureux.

Au *Modern Styles*, comme son nom l'indique suffisamment, vous chercherez en vain un meuble, un bibelot, une étoffe qui rappelle, tant par sa forme que par son caractère, les objets ou mobiliers d'un usage courant et dont l'aspect nous soit familier. Rien de tout cela; mais, sous l'apparence de la capricieuse fantaisie, vous y verrez les choses les plus charmantes, les plus coquettes, les plus séduisantes, arrangées avec un goût, mais un goût!... C'est une des plus originales attractions de la rue Royale.²²

Le théâtre sert aussitôt de vitrine à Jansen, qui s'attire la clientèle des décorateurs à la page et des comédiens célèbres, comme il ressort de ce compte rendu de *La Meute* d'Abel Hermant, satire des parasites qui grouillent autour des millionnaires, créée au Théâtre de la Renaissance le 9 avril 1896, avec Lucien Guitry dans le rôle d'un aristocrate désargenté. La critique s'émerveille du souci d'exactitude de la mise en scène:

On peut dire que tout y est d'une scrupuleuse vérité. C'est le rez-de-chaussée d'un petit pavillon séparé de corps de logis principal et situé dans le parc. Un cabinet de travail comme j'en voudrais un, qu'Abel Hermant et Guitry ont tenu à faire meubler par Jansen, le seul dépositaire des secrets du *modern style*.²³

Le succès ne se dément pas. L'année suivante, pour le décor de *La Loi de l'homme* de Paul Hervieu, créée le 15 avril 1897, 'voulant faire tout à fait beau M. Jules Claretie a demandé l'ameublement du premier et du troisième acte à M. Jansen, le grand tapissier de la rue Royale: voilà le "Modern Style" à la Comédie-Française'.²⁴



Fig. 3: Jansen, vitrine Modern Styles, 1896.



Fig. 4: Jansen, ameublement Modern Styles, 1906.

L'establishment s'entiche de Jansen. Un reportage vante ainsi l'inauguration, place de l'Opéra, du tout nouvel Automobile-Club, 'un vrai club, c'est-à-dire un cercle de forme aussi anglaise que son nom', et son aménagement:

Le mobilier, cuir grenat et acajou, réalise le dernier mot du confortable, divans immenses, fauteuils énormes où, les fortes chaleurs de l'été venues, les membres du cercle pourront prendre quelque repos, pupitres spéciaux permettant de lire les journaux sans les plier ni les soutenir, tout cela merveilleusement compris et établi par le maître tapissier Jansen, créateur du *modern style*.²⁵

Alphonse Allais ne manque pas si belle occasion de parodie, lorsqu'il imagine installer le siège de l'Aéro-Club dans une baleine échouée: 'L'estomac de la baleine bien désinfecté, vous vous y installez après l'avoir fait confortablement meubler (*modern style*) par Jansen.'²⁶

Une publicité pour la succursale *Modern Styles* de Jansen confirme l'impression qui ressort de ces lectures: l'intérieur présenté, éclectique et cosu, justifie le pluriel de l'enseigne dont la principale nouveauté réside dans le confort, produit d'importation dans la mesure où cette qualité était étrangère au mobilier français [fig. 4].²⁷ Rien à voir donc avec l'inconfort dénoncé par La Sizeranne. Il n'est initialement pas question de présenter un style mais des modes de vie. D'esprit bourgeois, l'entreprise est, parce que moins ambitieuse, moins novatrice que *L'Art nouveau* de Siegfried Bing, inauguré en 1895 ou que *La Maison moderne* ouverte par Julius Meier-Graefe en 1899, abris de créations rares réservées aux Happy Few: l'Art nouveau, à la différence de son dérivé commercial, le *modern style*, n'est pas vendeur.

Mais Jansen n'est pas seul. Au Faubourg Saint-Antoine, Mecque de l'ébénisterie parisienne, les Galeries d'ameublements Mercier Frères revendiquent également la révolution mobilière et insèrent deux pages illustrées dans *Le Temps* pour démocratiser le *modern style*, 'un art nouveau qui, aussi bien pour les meubles que pour les étoffes, s'inspire directement de la nature':

Beaucoup de personnes, même ayant de la fortune, s'imaginent que le *modern style* coûte les yeux de la tête. C'est une erreur qui s'est propagée un peu partout, sans doute par suite de certaines importations d'outre-Manche; il convient de détruire cette inquiétante légende, alors qu'il en est temps encore. [...] Disons tout de suite que les frères Mercier, véritables artistes jusqu'au bout des ongles, ne sont pas, comme on pourrait le croire, exclusifs dans leurs idées. Tout en reconnaissant la supériorité de l'art nouveau à bien des points de vue, ils sont loin de dédaigner les styles anciens auxquels on peut certes faire quelques reproches, mais qui n'en ont pas moins un grand cachet d'élégance et de correction dans la forme.²⁸

Marquant une résistance à l'anglicisme par le titre de 'Moderne Style', le journal *Gil Blas* salue dans la maison Mercier frères, avec un certain fatalisme, l'initiatrice d'un mouvement qui semble imposé

plutôt qu'adopté: 'Style moderne, telle est la devise que nos décorateurs ont dû suivre sous peine de voir le public se détourner d'eux'.²⁹

Le *modern style* apparaît donc dès sa naissance comme la branche mobilière, importatrice du confort anglais, de l'art nouveau. La version de Mercier, l'art nouveau du pauvre, abâtardi par la multiplication, l'emporte rapidement sur celle de Jansen, ensemblier des riches. Ce décor global engendre moqueries et quolibets des connaisseurs, livré clé en main à ses commanditaires, bourgeois ignorants du génie de la composition, comme le résume Meier-Graefe en personne dans *L'Art décoratif*, à propos du pavillon de la maison Bing à l'Exposition de 1900:

La production de celle-ci, émanant de différents artistes, n'a jamais eu un caractère uniforme, mais elle a constamment été dominée par les vues qui viennent d'être exposées. Aujourd'hui l'évolution des idées s'y précise, et les intérieurs composés par MM. Colonna, de Feure et Gaillard [...] donnent des définitions nettes non d'un style – ce mot a fini sa carrière et l'ère de la liberté est définitivement ouverte dans l'art aussi! – mais d'un mobilier nouveau régi par le style et par l'esprit français.³⁰

Le critique raille par ailleurs le '*majorellisme*', une 'industrie [...] où tout est pris à M. Majorelle... excepté son talent', et englobe dans le même mépris l'historicisme, 'la salade d'emprunts à tous les anciens styles [...] dont les ingrédients sont achetés à bon compte par la bonne chez l'épicier du coin' et 'le "*modern style*", invention à laquelle feu le Salon des Incohérents eût ouvert ses portes avec joie; autels du culte du crochet-Dieu, ses produits font apparaître ça et là leurs tentacules menaçants, prêts à saisir l'imprudent qui s'approche'.³¹ C'est assez dire la distance sociale qui sépare l'art nouveau du *modern style*, style de domestique pour Meier-Graefe, de gantières et de mastroquets pour Gourmont... À l'Exposition de 1900 toujours, le restaurant le Pavillon bleu, résultant de la collaboration du décorateur belge Gustave Serrurier-Bovy et de l'architecte français René Dulong, éclatante démonstration de l'art nouveau franco-belge, n'échappe pas au dénigrement du 'modern style' [fig. 5].³² Le 'modern style' s'étendant à tout, le directeur de *L'Art décoratif* releva par ailleurs avec amusement la méprise de l'ancien ministre des affaires étrangères, Gabriel Hanotaux, aveuglé par son hostilité à l'Angleterre, qui prenait le plus célèbre magasin de meubles du quartier de l'Opéra, 'l'honnête M. Maple', 'pour le coryphée de l'ébénisterie révolutionnaire, et ses variations

bourgeoises sur les thèmes centenaires de Chippendale, d'Heppelwhite et de Sheraton pour tout ce qu'il y a de plus "modern style".³³ Emporté par sa méfiance, Hanotaux avait en effet accusé les artistes français d'avoir emprunté 'le symbolisme lamentable, agressif et superficiel du "modern style",³⁴ dans une parfaite ignorance de la visée des *Arts and Crafts*. Sa confusion était largement partagée, notamment par le journaliste Adolphe Brisson, qui confondait les productions des grands magasins d'outre-Manche avec leurs maladroitement acclimatations françaises:

Le goût du rococo, du bizarre, du 'modern-style', a imprimé son empreinte sur l'Exposition. Oh! ce modern-style! je l'ai beaucoup aimé! Lorsque je passais, naguère, devant les vitrines de Maple et de Liberty, je sentais s'allumer en moi d'étranges concupiscences. Et maintenant j'en suis las! On a trop abusé de l'acajou verni, des frises de papier peint, des fleurs d'hortensias, des soies et des velours aux teintes mourantes, de la plante 'envisagée comme type ornemental'.³⁵

Le poète Jean Rameau, membre des Hydropathes, inventa quant à lui une identité politique bien française au modern style: le 'style Félix-Faure'. S'émerveillant, quelques mois avant le décès spectaculaire du président de la République, de la faculté des meubles contemporains à tomber en pièces et de ces guéridons où, comme dans la classe politique, les pieds tiennent plus de place que la tête, il prédisait un avenir commun à la littérature et à l'ébénisterie, dans une trahison mutuelle:

Quelques uns s'étonnent que, depuis dix ans, tant de formes nouvelles de sièges, de crédences, de tables, de coffres aient été lancés dans la consommation. Ceux-là ne savent pas une chose, c'est que les ébénistes ne sont plus seuls à fabriquer des meubles. Les écrivains s'en mêlent à présent. On m'a montré, l'an dernier, une banquette, fort jolie ma foi! qui avait été rabotée par un jeune homme dont le nom est l'un des plus grands de la littérature française. D'autres esthètes menuisent pareillement et signent, qui une console, qui un porte-parapluie. Le grand chic, dans le jeune Parnasse, est de faire un sonnet et une armoire à glace par an. [...]

C'est Tolstoï qui est cause de cela. Depuis qu'il a recommandé le travail manuel aux jeunes cérébraux, la plupart des esthètes qui ont cent mille francs de rente manœuvrent un rabot ou une queue-de-rat. Ce sont eux qui envoient les meubles les plus suggestifs à l'Exposition du Champ-de-Mars. C'est un nom d'écrivain ou d'artiste qu'on trouve le plus souvent sur un bahut sensationnel ou une chaise longue lyrique. [...]

Cela explique notamment pourquoi tant de livres et de tableaux sont si ennuyeux ou si incohérents depuis quelques années. Ils doivent être faits par des charpentiers ou des rempailleurs. Échange de bons procédés entre corporations amies.³⁶

Les regards se tournent, bien qu'il ne fût plus tout à fait un jeune homme à la fin du XIX^e siècle, vers Robert de Montesquiou, fasciné par l'ébénisterie et dont plusieurs projets furent menuisés par Émile Gallé: sa 'Commode aux hortensias', sa 'Pendule aux pensées' et sa 'Psyché aux glycines'

firent grande impression sur les visiteurs du Salon du Champ-de-Mars 1892, 1893, et 1894, et notamment sur Octave Mirbeau qui ne parvenait pas à dissocier le meuble du recueil de poèmes, ‘cette commode orfévrée comme un intime coffret, plus frissonnante qu’un éventail, gaie ainsi qu’un kakémono, [...] faite pour renfermer, en ses tiroirs silencieux, le manuscrit des *Chauves-Souris*’.³⁷



Fig. 5: Vue stéréoscopique du Pavillon bleu, 1900.



Fig. 6: Caran d’Ache, *L’Illustration*, 1896.

Partageant avec Montesquiou la passion de l'unique, animé de la même conception élitiste de l'art, Mirbeau déplora quelques années plus tard 'la mort du goût' après une flânerie des grands boulevards à Picpus: 'si le goût survit encore chez quelques individus devenus de plus en plus rares, il est répudié violemment par les collectivités, comme s'il était pour elles un danger ou une saleté'. Lorsqu'il fustigeait 'l'Art nouveau', 'cet art abominable et caricatural, qui n'est même pas de l'art et qui n'est pas nouveau',³⁸ il ne s'en prenait pas aux œuvres singulières exposées chez Bing ou chez Meier-Graefe: se trompant de procès, c'est la prolifération du *modern style* qu'il visait.

Dès janvier 1896, Robert de Montesquiou qui, comme l'a bien vu Claude Coste, 'défend l'Art nouveau au nom d'une tradition du nouveau',³⁹ et qui plaidait en conséquence pour une 'union assortie du nouvel et de l'ancien', avait compris que la querelle des styles était aussi une querelle de mots. Il s'en prenait aux critiques 'cherchant noise à M. Bing au sujet de l'appellation d'*art nouveau* qui désigne le caravansérail d'art, le bazar, dirai-je la bagarre d'esthétique, dont il a dérangé tant d'impériales chimères':

Il y a toujours à chicaner les titres et chipoter sur ce qu'ils intitulent. Quant à nous, celui d'Art nouveau, non seulement ne nous semble ni choquant ni mal venu, mais au contraire bien et cursivement approprié à la tentative dont il est la synthèse nominale.⁴⁰

Quelques mois avant l'apparition du *modern style*, autour d'avril 1896, Montesquiou, par parallèle avec le Théâtre-Libre d'André Antoine, évoquait, à propos des expérimentations observées chez Bing, 'un Théâtre-Libre du décor' ou 'mobilier libre':

Peuvent passer pour non avendus, en tant que réussites définitives, bien des objets exposés à l'Art nouveau, que justifie pourtant leur qualité de précurseurs, d'annonciateurs de ceux qui viendront, dégagés de gongorisme ou de pauvretés, quand tant d'éléments hybrides et hétérogènes et d'influences étrangères se seront répartis en un objet ou fondus dans un style.⁴¹

Évinçant ce mobilier aristocratique de conception éminemment littéraire, avec 'quelque chose de symbolique et de pensif, de par le décor variant et commentant un texte, une idée',⁴² le *modern style* allait s'imposer et se disqualifier en même temps par la sottise de la formule, épinglée par Gourmont. Dès décembre 1896, Caran d'Ache opposait en deux planches 'le peintre féministe, style ancien', artiste raté, succédané réaliste de la Nouvelle Athènes, qui voit une grosse dame

comme une grosse dame, au ‘peintre féministe “modern style”’, ami du prince de Galles, lecteur de Montesquiou, tirant son succès de sa flatterie: il représente la grosse dame en sylphide préraphaélite [fig. 6].⁴³ D’emblée, le *modern style* exprimait le faux et le mensonge.

En 1903, le journal de Marie Nordlinger, orfèvre chez Bing, cousine de Reynaldo Hahn et amie de Marcel Proust indiquait que la bataille de mots faisait toujours rage et que le style nouveau cherchait encore sa traduction:

Je termine actuellement une boîte à cigarettes ornée de feuilles d’automne en émail champlévé, plus japonisant que ‘Art nouveau’, nomenclature qui provoque d’interminables débats: ‘Pourquoi diable “nouveau”?’ Il n’y a rien de *nouveau* sur terre, preuve qu’on nous accuse de chiper des motifs Louis XV. Quant au “Modern Style” – le moderne c’est le classique de demain – Dieu nous en préserve!’⁴⁴

Dans un tout autre milieu, Émile de Lacombe, colonel d’artillerie en retraite, disciple d’Auguste Comte et membre actif de la Société positiviste, pestait contre son époque:

Que dire des *Décadents* et du *Décadentisme*? On comprend que les Gueux et les Sans-culottes se soient parés par bravade d’un titre qu’on leur avait jeté par dérision, mais se vanter d’être en décadence!⁴⁵

Après avoir dit leur compte aux symbolistes, aux primitifs, aux impressionnistes et aux tachistes, pesté contre les sculptures à moitié achevées qui semblent ‘sorties du déluge de Deucalion et Pyrrha’, le militaire sonnait la charge contre le *modern style*, apparenté à une épidémie d’origine (nécessairement) étrangère, comme le prélude décoratif de la grippe espagnole:

Et l’art décoratif? Il commence à être infecté par une sorte d’influenza venue aussi de l’Asie ou tout au moins des pays Danubiens, qui s’intitule *art nouveau*, ou mieux *modern style*, sans doute pour bien marquer qu’elle n’est pas française.⁴⁶

En 1906, ce combat esthétique était cependant, déjà, d’arrière-garde. L’Exposition de 1900 n’avait pas fermé ses portes que les avis de décès du *modern style* se multipliaient, sous la houlette de Léon Daudet:

Tout cela ira rejoindre prochainement, dans le Barathrê aux vieilles lunes, le mobilier modern style, avec ses fauteuils où l’on ne peut s’asseoir, ses tables en forme de guitares, ses armoires à glace en forme de cigogne; la bijouterie modern style, avec ses triangles à devises, ses rébus d’or et d’acier, son symbolisme de pacotille.⁴⁷

Le requiem le plus implacable fut orchestré par le grand critique d'art Arsène Alexandre, ami de Lautrec et de Rodin, auteur d'un ouvrage sur les arts décoratifs préfacé par Roger Marx. Sous le titre à ses yeux dégradant de 'Modern Style', comme pour démontrer que l'Art nouveau avait trahi ses ambitions premières en se laissant aspirer par ses déclinaisons populaires, Alexandre décrivait 'un musée d'ostéologie comparée' en déplorant qu'aucun intermédiaire n'ait su s'imposer 'entre le style qui rabâche et celui qui délire':

Ceux qui avaient eu l'horreur légitime de ces répétitions défigurées et l'excellente ambition de créer du nouveau sont tombés dans l'erreur de ne pas regarder la nature davantage. Il semble qu'ils aient pris pour modèles les circonvolutions mêmes de leur cerveau, au lieu des images que ces replis reçoivent, conservent et transmettent.

Et ce qu'il y a de plus curieux, c'est qu'en réalité ils n'ont pas créé de lignes nouvelles. Les lasagnes et les apophyses qui sont la principale ornementation du genre moderne suivent de grandes lignes contournées qui rappellent celles du siècle dernier, et l'on est surpris de constater que cet art nouveau n'est autre que le style Louis XV devenu sa propre larve.⁴⁸

Il est particulièrement intéressant de constater qu'Alexandre traite l'Art nouveau comme une traduction ratée, en se réjouissant que les occupants de ces horribles intérieurs ne leur ressemblent pas, bien que l'on dise 'en parlant des écrivains que le style n'était autre chose que l'homme lui-même'. Heureusement, échappant à la pandémie, '[d]e très saines créatures, de très honorables et placides familles évoluent parmi ces ameublements anatomiques et ces décorations giratoires.'⁴⁹ Tel est le cas, par exemple, de Marthe et de Ludovic dans une saynète de Jacques Crépet, fils de l'ami de Baudelaire qu'on connaît comme l'historien de la littérature qu'il n'était pas encore en 1900. Intitulé *Modern-Style*, ce dialogue entre cette femme entretenue et le jeune homme qui la courtise, d'un libertinage contenu, a lieu dans un intérieur à la mode qui condense tous les poncifs de l'art nouveau:

Le salon élégant, confortable, d'une femme déceimment entretenue. (C'est gentil.) Mobilier art-nouveau. Des bibelots – des jolis et des laids. – Aux tentures défailent des pavots lourds sur un fond vert. La cheminée-étagère; le guéridon carrelé de faïence; des poteries de tous les golfes, etc. – Enfin les meubles horrifians de l'an de grâce 1900. Canapé. Chaise longue.⁵⁰

S'il fut un échec dans le domaine décoratif, le *modern style* connut une gloire posthume comme expression figurée. La formule désigne désormais une manière d'être, appliquée à des mœurs

nouvelles ou légèrement décalées et à des situations plus ou moins dérangeantes, insolites ou cocasses. Franc-Nohain intitula ‘Modern Style’ un poème destiné aux oies blanches, soulignant la niaiserie des intérieurs Liberty ripolinés;⁵¹ dans *L’Humanité* le *modern style* est synonyme de ficelle électorale;⁵² un enlèvement en automobile est qualifié de *modern style*,⁵³ et l’on assiste ‘au spectacle *modern style* d’un roi légitime déjeunant familièrement, en compagnie de son chauffeur, dans un bar du quartier de l’Étoile’.⁵⁴ Est *modern style* aussi tout ce qui touche à l’inversion, comme, sur des cartes postales, la danse de deux femmes qui évoque la valse contre seins d’Albertine et d’Andrée. À partir du Salon d’automne de 1910 qui mit à l’honneur les décorateurs bavarois, le *modern style*, sans surprise, devient le ‘style munichois’. Dès le début de la Grande Guerre, les salves contre le ‘style boche’ se précipitèrent. La palme revient à Joséphin Péladan, enragé que ‘l’austro-boche l’emporte sur l’élément français’, auquel il reconnaissait une part de responsabilité:

Comment des architectes français en sont-ils venus à l’imitation de nos contrefacteurs? Ce problème n’est pas simple. Le modern-style élucubréd en France, comme l’impressionnisme, nous appartient, hélas, puisqu’il ne présente (*horresco referens*) qu’une répercussion de la peinture sur l’art des trois dimensions. Cette tentative consiste à éviter tout rappel de thème antérieur. Chaque fois qu’un profil se raccorde à quelque modèle, on le contourne, on le torture, on le dénature sans autre souci que de ne ressembler à rien. La ligne architectonique n’a pas la souplesse du mouvement et la nature ne la fournit pas: elle sort d’une conception abstraite. Et quand les bons prêcheurs s’écrient: ‘Étudiez la vie’, ils oublient que l’art monumental n’a pas de modèle vivant. Il procède de l’idéologie pure. Le modern-style opère par dissonances, il a tronqué la forme, il a brisé le rythme et, ayant évité la cadence il a soufflé de ce grand effort, sans illusion sur le résultat.⁵⁵

Adversaire exalté des influences et des translations, ne distinguant que trahisons dans les traductions, Péladan concluait: ‘Que chaque race se suffise à elle-même, que le crapaud se contente de sa crapaud!’⁵⁶

Cette déclinaison sur tous les modes connaîtrait son apothéose ironique après une autre guerre, grâce à Raymond Queneau, qui en 1947 dans les *Exercices de style* choisit précisément le ‘Modern Style’ pour qualifier sa variation sur quatre-vingt-dix-neuf modes de ‘petite tragi-comédie’.

¹ E. M. Forster, *Howards End* [1910] (Londres: Penguin Classics, 2000), p. 229. Traduction citée dans *Howards End*, trad. Charles Mauron (Paris: UGE, 1982), p. 297.

² Barbara Cassin, éd., *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies. Dictionnaires des intraduisibles* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil-Le Robert, 2004).

³ Louis Aragon, ‘Le “Modern Style” d’où je suis’, préface à Roger-Henri Guerrand, *L’Art nouveau en Europe* (1965) (Paris: Perrin, 2009), p. ix.

- ⁴ Albert Flament, 'La vie qui passe. Le Carnet des heures', *La Presse*, 2769 (27 décembre 1899), 3, 873.
- ⁵ Robert de La Sizeranne, 'L'art à l'Exposition universelle de 1900 IV. Avons-nous un style moderne?', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 161 (15 octobre 1900), 866-97 (p. 867).
- ⁶ Ibid., p. 869.
- ⁷ Ibid., p. 875.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 887.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 888.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 876.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 877.
- ¹² Robert de La Sizeranne, 'À l'Exposition des Arts décoratifs. I : Où en est le style moderne ?', *Revue des deux mondes*, 28 (15 juillet 1925), 433-45 (p. 433).
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 434.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 444.
- ¹⁵ Serge de Chessin, 'Philosophie du "modern-style"', *L'Ermitage*, 3 (mars 1905), 171-78 (p. 171).
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 176.
- ¹⁷ Albert Robida, *L'Album* (Paris: Tallandier, 1902).
- ¹⁸ Remy de Gourmont, 'Sur l'Art nouveau', in *Le Problème du style. Questions d'Art, de Littérature et de Grammaire* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1902), pp. 205-06.
- ¹⁹ Remy de Gourmont, 'La Porte Binet', in *Épilogues. Réflexions sur la vie. Deuxième série. 1899-1901* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1923), pp. 138-39.
- ²⁰ Jean Lahor [Henri Cazalis], *L'Art nouveau* (Paris: Lemerre, 1901), p. 72.
- ²¹ Henry de Trèves, 'Au jour le jour. Modern Styles', *Le Figaro*, 17 avril 1896, p. 1.
- ²² Charles Franck Valéry, 'Le Vieux Paris et les grands quartiers de la capitale. Origines, mœurs et physionomie des grands quartiers de Paris. La rue Royale', *La Vie parisienne*, 18 (1 mai 1897), 262-63 (pp. 262-63).
- ²³ Adrien Vély, 'Soirée parisienne. La Meute', *Le Gaulois*, 10 avril 1896, p. 3.
- ²⁴ *Le Figaro*, 30 mars 1897, p. 1.
- ²⁵ Tout-Paris, 'Bloc-notes parisien. La première de l'Automobile-Club', *Le Gaulois*, 16 avril 1896, p. 1.
- ²⁶ 'La Vie drôle. La baleine volante', *Le Journal*, 5 février 1899, p. 1.
- ²⁷ Voir *La Vie parisienne*, 52 (24 décembre 1898), 746 (p. 746).
- ²⁸ 'L'art de se meubler', supplément au journal *Le Temps*, 1 juin 1896, pp. 8-9.
- ²⁹ 'Moderne Style', *Gil Blas*, 6022 (13 mai 1896), 3 (p. 3).
- ³⁰ G.-M. Jacques [Julius Meier-Graefe], 'L'intérieur rénové', *L'Art décoratif*, 24 (septembre 1900), 217-28 (pp. 220-23).
- ³¹ G.-M. Jacques [Julius Meier-Graefe], 'Le meuble français à l'Exposition', *L'Art décoratif*, 22 (juillet 1900), 142-49 (pp. 142-43).
- ³² Voir Marie-Amélie Tharaud, 'Un joyau éphémère de l'Art nouveau: le pavillon bleu à l'Exposition universelle de 1900', *Livraisons de l'histoire de l'architecture* [En ligne], 19 | 2010, mis en ligne le 10 juin 2012.
- ³³ G.-M. Jacques [Julius Meier-Graefe], 'Réponse à deux articles', *L'Art décoratif*, 27 (novembre 1900), 85.
- ³⁴ Gabriel Hanotaux, 'L'Exposition de 1900. Le goût', *Le Journal*, 15 octobre 1900, p. 1.
- ³⁵ Adolphe Brisson, 'Revue des livres. Les livres d'étrennes', *Les Annales politiques et littéraires*, 912 (16 décembre 1900), 394-96 (p. 395). Le 22 décembre 1901, dans le même journal, Brisson réaffirme que: 'L'Exposition de 1900 m'a fait haïr le "modern style".' ('Revue des livres. Les livres d'étrennes', *Les Annales politiques et littéraires*, 965, 396-97 (p. 396)).
- ³⁶ Jean Rameau, 'Le Style Félix Faure', *Le Gaulois*, 2 janvier 1899, p. 1.
- ³⁷ Octave Mirbeau, 'Les Chauves-Souris', *Le Figaro*, 16 octobre 1892, p. 1.
- ³⁸ Octave Mirbeau, 'Art nouveau', *Le Journal*, 22 décembre 1901, p. 1.
- ³⁹ Claude Coste, 'Robert de Montesquiou, poète critique: la cristallisation du décoratif', *Romantisme*, 42 (1983), 103-17 (p. 108).
- ⁴⁰ Robert de Montesquiou, 'Le mobilier libre', *Le Gaulois*, 31 janvier 1896, p. 1.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Caran d'Ache [Emmanuel Poiré, dit], *L'Illustration*, 2806 (5 décembre 1896), 450-51.
- ⁴⁴ Marie Riefstahl-Nordlinger, 'Fragments de journal', *Bulletin de la société des amis de Marcel Proust*, 8 (1958), 521-27 (pp. 524-25).
- ⁴⁵ Émile de Lacombe, *La Maladie contemporaine. Examen des principaux problèmes sociaux: au point de vue positiviste* (Paris: Alcan, 1906), p. 177.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 179.
- ⁴⁷ Léon Daudet, 'Le Théâtre aéré', *Le Gaulois*, 10 août 1900, p. 1.
- ⁴⁸ Arsène Alexandre, 'Modern Style', *Le Figaro*, 1 septembre 1900, p. 1.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Jacques Crépet, 'Modern-Style. Saynète à trois personnages', *La Vie parisienne*, 22 (2 juin 1900), 303-07 (p. 303). Le dialogue fut porté à la scène aux Escholiers l'année suivante (Pitt, 'Paris-partout', *La Vie parisienne*, 8 (23 février 1901), 112 (p. 112)).

- ⁵¹ Franc-Nohain [Maurice Étienne Legrand], 'Les petites oies blanches. Modern Style', *Le Journal*, 4 septembre 1902, p. 1.
- ⁵² 'Modern Style', *L'Humanité*, 30 septembre 1907, p. 1.
- ⁵³ Dessin de Fadiano, *Le Rire*, 250 (16 novembre 1907), 13 (p. 13).
- ⁵⁴ Francis Chevassu, 'Le vertige de la vitesse', *Le Journal*, 17 juillet 1901, p. 1.
- ⁵⁵ Joséphin Péladan, 'La place allemande dans l'histoire de l'art', *La Revue hebdomadaire*, 44 (30 octobre 1915), 638-58 (pp. 641-42).
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 655.

L'Art Nouveau: Babel du bibelot ou espéranto décoratif?

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Les théoriciens de l'ornement et de l'art décoratif ne cessent, dans la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle, de penser les formes artistiques comme un langage dont il faudrait inventorier le vocabulaire et organiser la syntaxe. On ne compte plus en effet les grammaires de l'ornement et les grammaires de l'ameublement qui s'inscrivent dans ce paradigme linguistique.¹ Comme l'écrit Rémi Labrusse, 'parler de grammaire ornementale plutôt que de recueil, c'est imaginer le théoricien de l'ornement non pas comme un philologue mais comme un linguiste, moins préoccupé par le sens global d'un *répertoire* (assimilable à une littérature) que par les règles de fonctionnement d'une *combinatoire* (assimilable à une langue)'.² Si le parallèle avec l'entreprise normative et taxinomique de la grammaire manifeste un souci de clarification et d'organisation rationnelle du langage des formes après des décennies dominées par la confusion de l'éclectisme, la référence à la langue implique aussi une réflexion sur l'identité nationale dans un pays – la France – où langue et identité nationale sont indissociables, et dans un moment – le tournant du siècle – marqué par les prolongements de la querelle du cosmopolitisme et l'exacerbation des rivalités entre États-nations.³ L'émergence de l'Art nouveau et sa diffusion rapide dans l'Europe de 1900 suscitent de nombreuses métaphores linguistiques qui dénoncent le péril d'une dégénérescence du langage décoratif français. La nouvelle langue architecturale, qui puise aussi bien dans le japonisme, les *Arts and Crafts* anglais que dans les innovations belges ou allemandes, apparaît à bien des égards comme un terme étranger et corrupteur, un emprunt inassimilable, tout aussi intraduisible que le nom que les Français lui inventent – 'modern style' – faux anglicisme qui incarne à lui seul l'irréductible différence des langues et des cultures. Le nouveau langage décoratif, en raison même de son caractère cosmopolite, apparaît dès lors comme une formation cacophonique de langues étrangères qui échouent à s'entendre et à former une langue commune cohérente.

Nous proposons d'explorer dans cet article la manière dont la réception française de l'Art nouveau convoque cet imaginaire linguistique. L'intention polémique évidente de ces discours invite alors à considérer leurs conceptions de la traduction comme autant d'armes rhétoriques, mobilisées au service d'enjeux politiques. Fustiger le 'modern style' comme un langage formel intraduisible, mettre en scène l'échec de cette traduction de la grammaire Art nouveau dans le style national devient, comme l'écrit Emily Apter dans sa réflexion plus large sur la littérature comparée, 'un prétexte facile pour rester confiné dans son univers monolingue'.⁴ Symétriquement, la représentation d'un style décoratif déraciné qui prétend tout traduire permet aux tenants d'un art décoratif français de développer un discours obsidional, revendiquant la défense d'une identité esthétique et linguistique menacée par un modernisme niveleur. Les références à Babel et au volapük, que nous examinerons successivement, sont ainsi l'avertissement et le revers d'une même angoisse et d'une même offensive qui assimile la traduction à la trahison et à la décadence.

L'Art nouveau ou la défiguration de la langue française

L'Art nouveau s'affirme comme la volonté de rompre avec le ressassement des styles historiques qui a prévalu pendant tout le XIX^e siècle. Il s'agit de renouveler en profondeur le répertoire des formes ornementales pour fonder un style moderne, retrempé aux sources d'une nature qui lui inspire ses motifs et ses structures. L'Art nouveau apparaît alors à beaucoup de critiques circonspects comme un néologisme au sein même du langage français du décor. Robert de La Sizeranne, dans un article sévère écrit à l'occasion de l'Exposition universelle de 1900, utilise la métaphore linguistique pour exprimer ses craintes:

Et de même que ce n'est pas blâmer une langue que de dire qu'elle est composite, puisqu'elle se compose de mots formés en différents temps et différentes sources, pour répondre à différents besoins: de même un salon, une maison peuvent contenir des meubles imaginés à différentes époques pour répondre à différents besoins sans cesser d'appartenir au même ensemble. Comme il y a dans une langue des mots éternels pour exprimer certains besoins qui ne changent pas, il y a des formes éternelles. Une fois qu'elles sont trouvées, elles demeurent dans la maison de même que le mot dans la langue. À côté, se trouvent des mots, qui ne sont venus que plus tard, répondant à des nuances de pensées plus modernes et des meubles qui ne sont que plus tard apparus, répondant à des besoins

que les aïeux ne connaissaient pas. Les uns et les autres s'ajoutent au patrimoine déjà acquis. Et c'est toujours la même langue et c'est toujours la même maison. Il y a des mots, enfin, qui ne répondent qu'aux besoins d'un instant, à la fantaisie d'une heure, à une nuance que peut seule imaginer et saisir un petit groupe d'initiés, mots d'argot ou mots de précieuses. Il y a des meubles que créa aussi le besoin d'une seule génération ou même d'une seule société dans un seul moment [...]. Telles sont les formes passagères du mobilier dans un salon comme des mots qui, dans une langue, durent deux ou trois saisons. Parce qu'ils existent et parce qu'ils sont nouveaux et parce qu'ils paraissent un instant nécessaires, faut-il tout sacrifier à leur existence et remanier tout le langage des formes pour les accommoder à ces tard-venus et pour obtenir l'homogénéité du style?⁵

La Sizeranne envisage le développement d'une langue comme une stratification d'usages et d'influences ou plutôt comme l'ameublement progressif d'une maison. Il distingue clairement deux types de néologismes au sein de ce processus. Il évoque d'abord les néologismes que leur utilité va peu à peu intégrer au mobilier déjà présent, si bien qu'ils ne seront plus perçus comme néologismes après cette accommodation à l'ensemble du décor. En revanche, les néologismes qui ne relèvent que d'une mode fugace ne peuvent en aucun cas s'accommoder durablement au mobilier au sein duquel ils figurent toujours comme des emprunts temporaires et transitoires. L'Art nouveau est bien conçu comme l'un de ces néologismes précaires, adaptés aux besoins du temps mais de ce fait accessoires et passagers, l'un de ces sociolectes excentriques ('mots d'argot ou mots de précieuses') qui ne sauraient s'assimiler et encore moins se substituer aux mots de l'ancienne langue. Octave Mirbeau, quant à lui, envisage franchement l'Art nouveau comme une dénaturation des styles anciens et n'hésite pas à comparer le style nouveau à la modernisation de certaines œuvres littéraires. La traduction en français moderne des *Cent Contes drolatiques* de Balzac par André Hélie suscite sa colère:

Je vois très bien un Racine, un Molière, un Diderot, et, plus tard, un Renan ou un Anatole France, traduits en argot de Belleville, ou en patois bas-normand: en argot par M. Bruant, par exemple, en patois, par M. Quesnay de Beurepaire, n'est-ce pas ? ... pour la plus grande instruction des souteneurs suburbains et des braves paysans de France [...]. Ingéniez-vous donc à écrire un délicieux pastiche de la langue de Rabelais pour être ensuite traduit en français de brasserie moderne, par un écrivain qui ne voit, évidemment, dans ces contes transformés, que lucrative pornographie [...]. Que penseriez-vous de ce sinistre bonhomme qui gratterait les murs et mutilerait les ornements d'une charmante habitation du seizième siècle, pour en faire une maison modern-style du vingtième?⁶

Comme dans l'article de La Sizeranne, l'Art nouveau ou 'modern-style' est désigné comme un équivalent visuel de l'argot, renvoyé aux territoires de la marginalité sociale, de la vulgarité esthétique et morale. La traduction est ici ramenée à une opération d'avilissement et de dégradation. L'image du 'sinistre bonhomme' qui gratte les murs de la maison du XVI^e siècle pour mutiler ses ornements rappelle le processus du palimpseste, comme l'écrira Henri Meschonnic: 'En grattant la traduction, ce n'est pas tant le texte, l'original, qu'on découvre, que ce qui échappe communément au traducteur [...], ce n'est plus la traduction qu'on voit, et le texte d'origine encore moins. C'est le traduire'.⁷ Or, Mirbeau reprend ici l'image du palimpseste pour mettre au jour ce qui, pour lui, constitue le geste de traduction à l'œuvre dans cette opération de modernisation: le traduire (en) 'modern style' relève de l'ablation, de la profanation et du vandalisme.

Le parallèle entre langue et ornement intervient également au détour de chroniques consacrées à une passion bien française: la réforme de l'orthographe. En 1905, l'homme de lettres Henry Asselin réagit au projet de réforme de l'orthographe proposé par le célèbre grammairien Ferdinand Brunot.⁸ Asselin y voit un 'symptôme de [...] décadence', un péril mortel pour la tradition des lettres françaises qui n'a d'équivalent que la grande défiguration du 'modern style'. Si la comparaison n'est pas explicite, le lecteur attentif établira un rapport entre le danger de cette réforme linguistique et l'évocation finale d'un paysage méditerranéen: l'auteur décrit les 'vieilles maison du Cannet' et leurs 'belles et vénérables pierres aux couleurs du pays' cernées par 'une éruption soudaine de petites villas "modern-style", tachées d'iris ou de nénuphars mal peints, et déjà déteints'. L'"envahissement universel du modernisme"⁹ menace décidément tout ce qui fait la beauté du langage et des paysages français: modernisation de l'orthographe et 'modern-style' architectural sont les deux noms d'un même outrage aux traditions nationales. Le poète Robert de Souza, très impliqué dans les recherches linguistiques de l'époque et théoricien du vers libre, file une métaphore similaire dans les pages de *La Phalange*. Les réformateurs de l'orthographe risquent, à cause de leurs remèdes maladroits, de défigurer la langue comme Viollet-le-Duc et ses émules de l'Art nouveau dénaturent l'architecture française:

L'école de Viollet-le-Duc est condamnée; on sait tous les monuments historiques qu'elle nous coûte au profit d'une unité conjecturale qui supprime les âges qu'ils ont vécus jusqu'à nous, et qui les défigure, quand elle ne les détruit pas sous les pierres neuves entièrement. Il ne faudrait pas que les archéologues de la langue renouvellent de si beaux exploits.

Ces exploits n'aboutiraient pas seulement à des reconstructions par où la tradition serait travestie plus que 'restaurée', mais à l'oubli même, au renversement complet de cette tradition. On sait que les champions en architecture de l'art nouveau se prétendent disciples fidèles de Viollet-le-Duc, qui leur enseigna par l'exemple de notre passé ogival l'économie de la matière, le retour à la simplicité des moyens. On sait aussi qu'à force de simplicité et d'économie la nature ne fut plus respectée du tout et que les formes gauchirent. Les mêmes accidents se produiraient dans l'état de la langue, si du jour au lendemain l'on devait apporter des formes archaïques plus simples dans la transcription des mots.¹⁰

On notera que dans tous les exemples cités, la dégénérescence du langage – verbal ou architectural – relève de la régression, de la simplification abusive qui ramène la langue à des formes primitives et archaïques. Ainsi Abel Hermant, dans l'un de ses 'Propos cosmopolites' consacré à l'Art nouveau, fait dire à ses personnages:

Cottbus. – Il y a réellement toute une classe d'artistes qui se croient malins de renoncer au bénéfice de la civilisation. Ils recommencent à balbutier l'art, non comme des primitifs, mais comme des sauvages.

Siegfried. – C'est à peu près comme si nous nous ingériorions de renoncer au langage, comme trop banal, pour en revenir aux onomatopées.¹¹

Modernisation outrée et barbarie primitive se confondent à la faveur d'un paradoxe qui n'est qu'apparent: la décadence est ce ruban de Möbius où le plus moderne et le plus ancien se rejoignent parce que le temps de l'histoire, de la tradition, de la lente maturation des langues et des styles s'est aboli.

L'Art nouveau ou la babélisation de l'art

Si cette nouvelle langue architecturale fait violence aux traditions françaises, ce n'est pas seulement en raison d'un désir forcené d'originalité et de modernité, c'est aussi parce qu'elle est étrangère, ou plus précisément, cosmopolite. Les créations de l'Art nouveau, innervées par les expériences anglaises et belges, se heurtent à des réactions inquiètes, voire franchement hostiles, lorsqu'elles font leur apparition en France au milieu des années 1890. La réaction horrifiée de Jules de

Goncourt à la sortie de *La Maison de l'Art nouveau*, inaugurée à Paris par Siegfried Bing en décembre 1895, est emblématique du rejet que suscite l'initiative chez de nombreux hommes de lettres:

Vraiment, est-ce que nous serions *dénationalisés*, conquis moralement par une conquête pire que la conquête de la guerre, en ce temps où il n'y a plus de place en France que pour la littérature moscovite, scandinave, italienne et peut-être bientôt portugaise? En ce temps où il semble n'y avoir plus de place en France que pour le mobilier anglo-saxon ou hollandais?¹²

Le parallèle avec l'invasion des littératures étrangères, véritable lieu commun de la querelle du cosmopolitisme, est significatif: Edmond de Goncourt oppose deux langages formels – la légèreté de la volute française et la dureté anguleuse du mobilier anglais – selon lui incompatibles en ce qu'ils appartiennent à deux traditions nationales inconciliables. Dominique Jarrassé a en effet montré que la convocation du modèle philologique et linguistique contribue à l'ethnisation de l'histoire de l'art dans la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle et rappelle la formule de Viollet-le-Duc: 'Dans un pays deux choses doivent être éminemment nationales, la langue et l'architecture; c'est ce qui exprime le plus nettement le caractère d'un peuple'.¹³ Il s'agit donc de prendre au sérieux les métaphores qui envisagent les formes et les lignes du décor comme une écriture, une langue qui aurait ses lois et ses règles, entretiendrait un rapport intime avec l'esprit d'une nation, le génie d'un peuple et ne saurait souffrir un certain nombre de néologismes qui viendraient la corrompre et la travestir.

Nombreux sont ceux qui mobilisent alors l'imaginaire de la tour de Babel pour décrire les tentatives de collaborations internationales. Cela commence dès l'ouverture de la galerie de Bing en décembre 1895, qui réunit des artistes et décorateurs français mais aussi anglais, allemands, belges ou américains. Edmond Cousturier dénonce le disparate de l'installation, résultat de la collaboration d'artistes de tempéraments et d'horizons trop différents: 'Nous savions assez que l'Art s'érige aujourd'hui en une Babel où tous les artistes s'évertuent à parler un idiome différent'.¹⁴ S'il s'agit plutôt de viser l'éclectisme ou l'absence d'unité d'ensemble, la métaphore renvoie aussi au cosmopolitisme de l'entreprise de Bing, presque unanimement dénoncé dans la presse française. À l'occasion de l'Exposition universelle de 1900, J.-H. Morel-Lacordaire donne une série de

chroniques sur l'Art nouveau. S'il fait preuve de bienveillance à l'égard des tentatives de rénovation du style, il déplore à son tour les influences étrangères importées par Bing en 1895:

Réellement, nous autres Français, nous sommes de bons enfants; il plaît à un négociant qui jusqu'alors importait des bibelots de la Chine et du Japon, de changer son fusil d'épaule, de faire fabriquer par des ouvriers de toutes les nations (excepté des ouvriers français), un 'art nouveau' [...]; cet habile *marchand de Venise* a opéré ainsi: se rappelant qu'il avait prêté de l'argent à un nommé Antonio qui tenait boutique sur le Rialto, il lui dit: '[...] tu vas me faire un style dont on parlera dans le monde entier, ce sera le *Style Nouveau*. Tu auras comme collaborateurs des Japonais, des Chinois, des Allemands, des Belges, en un mot je te donnerai un ouvrier de chaque nation.

Exemple: Tu leur feras un modèle de siège, chacun aura la liberté absolue de l'interpréter comme il l'entendra; de là sortiront des mouvements, des contorsions épileptiques, car tes collaborateurs ne parlant pas ta langue (et eux ne connaissant que la leur propre) tu ne pourras les influencer...'

Antonio, interrompant le marchand de Venise, lui dit:

'Je vois ce que vous voulez faire; c'est *l'art de la tour de Babel*.'¹⁵

Le chaos des langues voue l'entreprise à l'échec et sape la cohérence du nouveau style voué à la déraison et au délire des 'contorsions épileptiques': l'hystérie mobilière n'est que le reflet de l'affolement cosmopolite. Ce style, conçu par le monde entier pour le monde entier, n'a d'autre langue, échoue à trouver quelque identité stable. La référence au *Marchand de Venise*, qui assimile Bing à l'usurier Shylock, reconduit le stéréotype antisémite d'un Art nouveau promu à des fins mercantiles par des marchands sans patrie ni drapeau, chefs d'orchestre d'une cacophonie des langues et des styles.¹⁶ La babélisation du bibelot Art nouveau est également soulignée dans un conte satirique d'Abel Hermant, paru dans *Le Journal* en 1909. Madame Albert Deschamps et son jeune fils voyagent en Allemagne. Lorsqu'ils arrivent chez leur hôte, le professeur Gross, les deux touristes français découvrent avec stupeur la décoration des lieux:

Le mobilier était du 'style sécession', qui est au 'moderne style' ce que la folie furieuse est à la folie. Mais M^{me} Albert Deschamps, maîtresse de maison accomplie, et qui avait une âme de commissaire-priseur, savait faire abstraction de la laideur des choses pour en estimer la valeur marchande. Elle observa d'ailleurs que, de tous ces objets affreux, émanait ce je ne sais quoi d'indéfinissable qui a un nom dans toutes les langues, mais que chaque peuple se targue de posséder en propre et exclusivement. La maison Gross aurait paru 'désirable' à un Anglais; un Italien l'aurait jugée 'sympathique'; elle avait, aux yeux d'un Français, un certain air bon enfant, et il est clair que les Allemands y devaient trouver la *Gemütlichkeit* dans tous les coins.¹⁷

La réflexion linguistique est d'autant plus intéressante qu'elle renvoie le 'modern style' à un intraduisible, un 'je ne sais quoi' que chaque nation considère comme ce qui la distingue radicalement des autres. Ironiquement, le seul accord que l'Art nouveau permette de réaliser entre les langues, c'est la conviction de leur irréductibilité et de leur incommunicable singularité.

L'Art nouveau: un espéranto architectural?

Un imaginaire linguistique symétrique à celui de la confusion babélique se développe autour de 1900. La propagation des formes ornementales et architecturales de l'Art nouveau dans toute l'Europe a en effet pu être considérée comme l'uniformisation artificielle et inquiétante des langages décoratifs. Cet espéranto visuel, loin de susciter l'espoir d'une esthétique commune et transnationale, suscite de nouveau l'ire des gardiens jaloux de la spécificité nationale. C'est le cas de Jean Lahor qui fait partie des tenants d'un Art nouveau fidèle à ce qu'il estime être la tradition française. En 1901, il met en garde ses lecteurs contre un Art nouveau international

encouragé par le cosmopolitisme d'aujourd'hui, un art indépendant de toute nationalité, de toute tradition, aspirant à une sorte de règne universel, comme l'art classique d'autrefois, [...] ou comme le latin, dont nous ne voulons pas davantage et qui tendait lui aussi à être et à rester la langue universelle.¹⁸

Lahor évoque le latin, mais il y a bien à la fin du XIX^e siècle plusieurs tentatives de créations de langues auxiliaires internationales, rêvant de substituer à la langue universelle perdue, pré-babélique, une langue universelle moderne, construite d'après les lois rationnelles de la linguistique. Parmi ces langues, on trouve en particulier le volapük, langue internationale construite par le prêtre catholique allemand Johann Martin Schleyer en 1880, et qui connut un certain succès jusqu'au début des années 1890 avant de décliner au profit de l'espéranto. Autour de 1900, c'est donc à une langue en perte de vitesse et partiellement discréditée que le peintre Louis Morin fait référence dans la revue *L'Œuvre et l'image*:

Parmi les petites chapelles qui officient en ce moment, il n'en est pas de plus intransigeante que celle du modern style, et nous ne sommes pas suspects de tendresse pour ce volapük artistique dont les Roumains ou l'Équateur se sont montrés d'emblée aussi capables que nous-mêmes.¹⁹

La crainte est toujours celle d'un nivellement, d'une dilution des identités particulières et des spécificités nationales. Est-ce un hasard si cette langue inventée par un Allemand est davantage associée au 'modern style' dans la seconde décennie du siècle alors que le Salon d'automne de 1910 a confirmé la prééminence des artistes-décorateurs munichois? À l'occasion de l'exposition internationale de Bruxelles, également organisée en 1910, on peut lire sous la plume d'un chroniqueur anonyme, dans la revue *L'Éventail*:

Le modern-style en architecture correspondra à l'esperanto ou au volapük. Ce seront – ce sont – des inventions arbitraires sous des prétextes impérieusement logiques, mais nous ne voyons pas bien pourquoi des races d'éducation française ne conserveraient pas un style architectural qui s'est imposé sous ses divers avatars au monde, renonceraient [à] une langue qui est la langue universelle des lettrés, tout en faisant évoluer, bien entendu, cette architecture et cette langue selon les conditions vitales éternellement variables.²⁰

Non seulement l'auteur réaffirme cette alliance intime entre la langue et l'architecture, mais il dévoile au passage que le refus de cet esperanto architectural est en réalité motivé par le souci de préserver l'hégémonie culturelle de la France sur l'Europe et le monde. Par ailleurs, le critique insiste aussi sur le caractère arbitraire et donc artificiel de la langue construite. Deux ans plus tard, Louis Dimier, historien de l'art monarchiste, écrit dans *L'Action française*:

Il en est de l'art comme des langues, ou comme des lents ouvrages de la nature physique, fruits de la terre, obscure formation des marbres, du charbon, des pierres précieuses. Celui qu'on créera ainsi sera à l'art classique ce qu'un produit chimique est aux mets naturels, ce que le volapük est aux langues véritables.

En veut-on la preuve? Elle est faite. Elle est fournie par l'incapacité où nous avons vu (et bien vu) que le *modern style* a été de se développer.²¹

Le volapük et le 'modern style' sont deux langages artificiels qui relèvent d'une poétique de la décadence, hors-nature et déterritorialisée, coupée de la croissance organique des langues naturelles. Marc Angenot note qu'on accuse dès 1889 le volapük d'être une 'chimère' linguistique, une langue sans mémoire ni avenir 'idéale pour traduire la poésie des décadents'.²² En 1900, Léon Duvauchel reconduit le thème cosmopolite en décrivant une langue apatride qui vole de bouche en bouche, sans ancrage et sans permanence: 'Et le suave volapük voltigera sur les lèvres des femmes! Et les sans-pays se réjouiront de ce modern style, cosmopolitement baragouiné!'²³ La

boucle est bouclée: le 'modern style' était considéré comme un volapük architectural, le volapük devient à son tour une langue 'modern style', qui déparle plus qu'elle ne parle.

Il est intéressant de constater qu'au même moment, en 1911, quoique dans une perspective différente, l'architecte et théoricien Adolf Loos s'en prend à l'ornementalisme de l'Art nouveau et de la Sécession viennoise en mobilisant des métaphores similaires. Dans un article consacré au travail d'Otto Wagner, il fustige le moment où l'architecte autrichien s'est détourné de la tradition viennoise pour s'inspirer de l'ornement végétal de l'Art nouveau belge et s'en prend à 'tous ces horribles tournesols, spirales, lignes dentelées, vrilles et lombrics, lâchés du fond de l'atelier Wagner sur cette pauvre ville'²⁴ de Vienne, langage formel échevelé et aberrant emprunté qui ne correspond pas à la véritable identité de l'architecte. Loos poursuit:

Il s'éloigna délibérément du langage formel de l'Antiquité pour tenter de parler un langage formel à lui. Ce fut et c'est encore une erreur. L'écrivain moderne, tout aussi bien, peut exprimer dans son langage tout ce qu'il a à dire. Il n'a pas besoin pour cela d'un volapük. Otto Wagner commit la faute de se joindre avec véhémence aux recherches belges en vue d'inventer un nouvel ornement.²⁵

À l'universalité de la tradition classique s'oppose une nouvelle fois l'artificialité d'un langage formel moderniste voué, comme le volapük, à s'éteindre parce qu'il est coupé de la vitalité de la tradition. Dans un entretien donné à un journal tchèque en 1924, Loos reconduit le parallèle entre les tentatives extravagantes de l'ornement Art nouveau et les langues construites de la fin du XIX^e siècle: 'Notre éducation repose sur les études classiques. Un architecte est un maçon qui a appris le latin. Mais les architectes modernes semblent plus attachés à l'espéranto. L'enseignement du dessin doit partir de l'ornement classique.'²⁶ L'architecture-espéranto est une architecture à rebours, une langue à rebours qui commence par là où elle devrait finir.

Si l'Art nouveau est un volapük architectural, l'arabesque en serait assurément le mot essentiel, le trope le plus fréquent. Des papiers peints de Walter Crane aux réalisations d'Antonio Gaudí en passant par la Belgique et la France, l'arabesque est bien le motif privilégié de ce langage international, le trait commun qui permet de l'identifier. Or, si les grammaires de l'ornement tentent de répondre à l'angoisse du brouillage des signes et du chaos ornemental au nom d'un

double principe de lisibilité et d'intelligibilité, l'arabesque Art nouveau, si l'on en croit ses détracteurs ou ses soutiens les plus circonspects, propose une langue qui, loin de permettre une quelconque clarté, favorise la cacophonie et l'illisibilité. André Hallays développe cette métaphore de l'écriture folle dans son texte sur l'Exposition universelle de 1900:

Le modern style à l'Exposition: 'Est-ce le paraphe d'un maître d'écriture? Est-ce le zigzag de la foudre? Est-ce la forme d'un infusoire démesurément grossi par le microscope? Paraphe, éclair ou infusoire? Nul ne le saura jamais. Et pourtant cette arabesque saugrenue, cette ligne tordue au hasard, voilà – forme et décor, – ce qu'on appelle 'le style moderne', le modern style, comme disent les tapissiers et constructeurs polyglottes.²⁷

L'allusion aux tapissiers polyglottes suffit à désigner le cosmopolitisme comme la source de ce délire ornemental qui confond l'infiniment grand (la foudre) et l'infiniment petit (l'infusoire est un protozoaire), l'artefact humain et le phénomène naturel. L'abstraction de la forme, symptomatique d'une langue ornementale standardisée et décontextualisée, rend le dessin incompréhensible, l'instaure en pur signifiant détaché de tout signifié identifiable. Pour Hallays, ces embrouillaminis linéaires sont précisément le produit d'une uniformisation dangereuse du style architectural:

Tout se contourne, s'amincit et se déséquilibre selon la mode nouvelle. Du nord et du sud de l'Europe, ce sont les mêmes formes grêles et vacillantes, le même décor vague et puéril. Notre ineffable castel Béranger est un logis cosmopolite. Les Allemands sillonnent de dessins hétéroclites les tentures de leurs intérieurs les plus gothiques et font un mélange extraordinaire de gothique et d'art nouveau. Les Viennois ont adopté le zigzag décoratif avec un enthousiasme consternant. On fabrique du modern style à Barcelone.²⁸

Le métissage des traditions nationales et la constitution d'un langage ornemental européen, après avoir dissout les spécificités et le caractère de chaque pays, risquent d'accoucher d'un style international absurde, d'un monstrueux espéranto architectural. La décadence 'modern style' nous ramène une fois encore aux balbutiements primitifs d'une langue à rebours, au 'gribouillage'²⁹ d'un 'décor vague et puéril' sans forme et sans force. L'Europe retombée en enfance abandonne le langage articulé pour le zézaiement des 'bouzilleurs'³⁰ et des maniaques du 'zigzag'. Voici venu le triomphe du 'z', dernière lettre de l'alphabet et initiale de l'interjection 'zut' qui résume, dans sa brièveté impuissante et ironique, toute une poétique de la Décadence, comme l'a montré Guy Ducrey dans un bel article.³¹ Le volapük architectural se voit réduit à une lettre que Roland Barthes

considère comme ‘la lettre de la mutilation’, dont la prononciation claque comme un ‘fouet châtieur’.³² La ligne coup de fouet de l’Art nouveau est donc le signe et la signature, pour ses détracteurs, d’une langue ornementale décadente qui rature les identités et voue toute tentative de traduction à l’insignifiance.

Ces discours défensifs soulignent néanmoins, du fait même de leur existence et de leur insistance, le succès et les tâtonnements d’un Art nouveau qui, quel que soit le nom qui lui fut donné, a constamment cherché à concilier sa dimension internationale avec les traditions des pays ou des régions qui l’accueillaient. L’acharnement à faire de l’Art nouveau (ou du ‘modern style’) un intraduisible peut alors se comprendre comme la recherche inquiète et fébrile d’une formule esthétique articulant subtilement singularité et altérité. L’intraduisible, comme le dit joliment Barbara Cassin, ne serait donc pas ‘ce qu’on ne traduit pas, mais [...] ce qu’on ne cesse pas de (ne pas) traduire’.³³

¹ Voir notamment Owen Jones, *Grammaire de l’ornement* (Londres: Day & Son, 1856); Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des arts décoratifs. Décoration intérieure de la maison* (Paris: Renouard, 1882); et Henry Havard, *L’Art dans la maison. Grammaire de l’ameublement* (Paris: E. Rouveyre, 1883).

² Rémi Labrusse, ‘Face au chaos: grammaires de l’ornement’, *Perspective*, 1 (2010), 97-121 (p. 101).

³ Sur ce point, voir Blaise Wilfert-Portal, ‘La “querelle du cosmopolitisme” des années 1890. Une perspective socio-historique’, in *Romans et récits français, entre nationalisme et cosmopolitisme*, éd. Anne Cadin, Perrine Coudurier, Jessica Desclaux, Marie Gaboriaud, et Delphine Pierre (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2017), pp. 67-90. Pour ce qui concerne l’Art nouveau, voir par exemple Jessica M. Dondona, *Nature and Nation in Fin-de-Siècle France: The Art of Émile Gallé and the École of Nancy* (New York et Londres: Routledge, 2017).

⁴ Emily Apter, *Zones de traduction. Pour une nouvelle littérature comparée* (Paris: Fayard, 2015), p. 135.

⁵ Robert de La Sizeranne, ‘L’Art à l’Exposition de 1900. IV: Avons-nous un style moderne?’, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 161 (15 octobre 1900), 866-97 (pp. 891-92).

⁶ Octave Mirbeau, ‘L’Avenir des chefs-d’œuvre’, *Le Journal*, 9 mars 1902, p. 1.

⁷ Henri Meschonnic, ‘Traduction, adaptation – palimpseste’, *Palimpsestes*, 3 (1990), <<http://journals.openedition.org/palimpsestes/421>> [consulté le 8 mai 2020].

⁸ Sur ce point, voir Henri Besse, ‘Ferdinand Brunot, méthodologue de l’enseignement de la langue française’, *Histoire, Épistémologie, Langage*, 17 (1995), 41-74.

⁹ Henry Asselin, ‘La Réforme de l’orthographe’, *La Presse*, 22 mars 1905, n. p.

¹⁰ Robert de Souza, ‘La Réforme de l’ortho graphe: sa vanité’, *La Phalange*, 38 (20 août 1909), 289-315 (p. 300).

¹¹ Abel Hermant, ‘Propos cosmopolites. Art nouveau’, *Le Figaro*, 7 septembre 1900, p. 1.

¹² Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, *Journal des Goncourt. Mémoires de la vie littéraire* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1956), p. 1213.

¹³ Cité dans Dominique Jarrassé, ‘Ethnicisation de l’histoire de l’art en France 1840-1870: le modèle philologique’, in *Histoire de l’histoire de l’art en France au XIX^e siècle*, éd. Roland Recht, Philippe Sénéchal, Claire Barbillon, et François-René Martin (Paris: La documentation française, 2008), pp. 337-59 (p. 342).

¹⁴ Edmond Cousturier, ‘Galeries S. Bing. Le Mobilier’, *La Revue blanche*, 10 (15 janvier 1896), 92-95 (p. 92).

¹⁵ J.-H. Morel-Lacordaire, ‘Chronique de l’Exposition. L’Art libre dit “Art nouveau”’, *Le National*, 17 septembre 1900, p. 1.

- ¹⁶ Sur l'Art nouveau considéré comme 'esthétique dreyfusarde' et style juif, voir Sophie Basch, *Rastaquarium. Marcel Proust et le 'modern style'. Arts décoratifs et politique dans À la recherche du temps perdu* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), pp. 152-55.
- ¹⁷ Abel Hermant, 'Contes du *Journal*. La demoiselle de la maison', *Le Journal*, 12 août 1909, p. 1.
- ¹⁸ Jean Lahor, *L'Art nouveau* (Paris: Lemerre, 1901), p. 88.
- ¹⁹ Louis Morin, 'Bibliographie. Le livre d'art de demain', *L'Œuvre et l'image*, 1 (novembre 1900), 1-12 (p. 9).
- ²⁰ Anonyme, 'Promenades à l'Exposition II', *L'Éventail*, 19 juin 1910, p. 3.
- ²¹ Louis Dimier, 'Chronique artistique', *L'Action française*, 26 mai 1912, n. p.
- ²² Marc Angenot, 'Chapitre 20. Les à vau-l'eau culturels', *Médias 19* [en ligne], Publications, 1889. *Un état du discours social*, E. Déterritorialisation, mis à jour le: 30/07/2013, <<http://www.medias19.org/index.php?id=12298>> [consulté le 8 mai 2020].
- ²³ Léon Duvauchel, 'Noël traditionniste', *La Jeune Picardie*, 6 décembre 1900, p. 130.
- ²⁴ Adolf Loos, *Ornement et crime* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2003), p. 179.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 178.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 248.
- ²⁷ André Hallays, *À travers l'Exposition de 1900* (Paris: Perrin, 1901), pp. 253-54.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 256.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 254.
- ³⁰ Ibid., p. 266.
- ³¹ Guy Ducrey, 'Zut, premier ou dernier mot de la Décadence?', in *States of Decadence. On the Aesthetics of Beauty, Decline and Transgression across Time and Space*, éd. Guri Barstad et Karen P. Knutsen, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), I, pp. 144-52 (p. 151).
- ³² Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), p. 113.
- ³³ Barbara Cassin, 'Les intraduisibles. Entretien avec François Thomas', *Revue Sciences/Lettres*, 1 (2013), <<http://journals.openedition.org/rsl/252>> [consulté le 30 septembre 2020].

On Translating Verlaine's Prose

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It is probably safe to say that the French poet Paul Verlaine (1844–1896) is not known as a writer of prose. In fact, it may come as a surprise to learn that there is enough material extant for a Pléiade volume entitled *Œuvres en prose complètes*, edited by Jacques Borel and published in 1972. These writings span from 1867 to 1895 and are divided into the following sections: *Œuvres d'imagination*; *Œuvres autobiographiques*; *Œuvres critiques*; *Œuvres polémiques*; *Voyages*; an appendix containing a translation from Byron; the contents of Verlaine's notebook; and some pieces written in English, including the enjoyable 'My Visit to London' (published in *The Savoy*, April 1896). Many of these pieces can be classified as travel writing or autobiographical sketches; there is also a fair number of critical articles, prefaces, and reviews, although Verlaine was not as prolific a reviewer as many of his contemporaries. The best-known pieces are *Les Poètes maudits*, Verlaine's six short articles on different nineteenth-century poets, including himself.¹ As for what we would today call creative writing, or short fiction, many pieces are brief character sketches of one or two pages; others can be categorized as short *contes* or longer *nouvelles*. Although some of these appeared during his lifetime, most were published for the first time in *Œuvres posthumes* (1903).² What is striking is how conventional these texts often seem – usually narrated in either the first or third person and in the past tense, with setting, character, dialogue, and plot all present and correct. One might think perhaps of Guy de Maupassant as a touchstone. It would also be easy to believe that these works were by one of many writers who wrote for the myriad newspapers and journals at a time when print was the hegemonic mass medium.

Like Charles Baudelaire's prose writings, Verlaine's prose pieces are characterized by their relative brevity; unlike Baudelaire, there is no preface to a collection of prose poems that offers insights into how he viewed the medium. Jacques Borel suggests that Verlaine's prose pieces can

often be seen as ‘l’anecdotique envers’ of his poetic work, which can be understood as the ‘anecdotal flipside’ or ‘discursive counterpart’.³ In other words, the medium of prose allowed Verlaine to explore some of the themes in his lyric poetry through discursive narrative exposition. This would also explain why he gravitated more towards the conventional form of the short story than to the experimental prose poems of Arthur Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*, published with Verlaine’s help in 1886. The naturalist short story as practised by Maupassant, Alphonse Daudet, and others frequently enables a form of succinct and trenchant social commentary that also appealed to Verlaine, who prefers this type of *conte* to the *conte fantastique*; there are few ghosts, hallucinations or doppelgänger to be found in Verlaine’s prose, which tends to be canny rather than uncanny.⁴ Thematically, there is an interest in character types which recalls the ‘physiologies’ described by Walter Benjamin in ‘Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire’ (1938). Writing about how the ‘physiologies’ transformed crowds of people into recognizable types, Benjamin suggests that ‘everyone could – unencumbered by any factual knowledge – make out the profession, character, background, and lifestyle of passers-by’.⁵ But Verlaine, like Maupassant and many of their contemporaries, is more interested in probing the psychology of human behaviour than simply repeating well-known tropes about nineteenth-century Parisian life, which is why his prose works go beyond stereotypical descriptions to more interesting areas such as motivation, desire, agency, sexual politics, double standards, and the tension between the individual and society.

Verlaine’s poetry has been translated into English many times on both sides of the Atlantic, both as collections and as single poems, although the sheer amount of material precludes a complete collection. Most English versions opt for a selection of poems taken from the different collections, which often veer inevitably towards a ‘greatest hits’ approach favouring the earlier work, with some interesting variations in recent translations. The first known collected translation of Verlaine poems, Gertrude Hall Brownell’s *Poems of Paul Verlaine*, was published in 1895, a year before his death.⁶ Two new volumes appeared in 1948: *Selected Poems*, translated by C. F. MacIntyre, and *Forty Poems*, translated by Roland Gant and Claude Apcher.⁷ These were followed by Jacques

Leclercq's *Poems* in 1961, Doris-Jeanne Gourévitch's *Selected Verse* in 1970, and Joanna Richardson's *Selected Poems* in 1974.⁸ Two new translations were published in 1999: Martin Sorrell's *Selected Poems*, featuring 170 poems from different periods of Verlaine's life, and Norman H. Shapiro's *One Hundred and One Poems*.⁹ The most recent translation, Samuel N. Rosenberg's *Paul Verlaine: A Bilingual Selection of His Verse* (2019), divides Verlaine's career into four chronological sections: 'The Parnassian Years'; 'Under the Spell of Rimbaud'; 'From Prison to Conversion'; and 'The Last Years'.¹⁰ Each new translation brings new poems to the attention of anglophone readers and provides readers of all ages and linguistic backgrounds with new insights into Verlaine's work.

Despite this plethora of translations, there are no collected English translations of Verlaine's prose.¹¹ The task of translating Verlaine's prose is therefore accompanied by a sense of liberty; unlike in the case of his poetry, the translator has no qualms about accidental imitation or the challenge of emulating popular and critically acclaimed versions. This article considers some of the questions that Verlaine's prose poses to translators, considering in particular dialogue and register. It ends with my own attempt at translating a passage from his short story 'Deux mots d'une fille', part of a group of seven short texts written between c. 1886 and 1890 but first published posthumously in 1903, under the title 'Histoires comme ça'.¹² I consider here how Verlaine uses the short story form to offer an ambivalent critique of contemporary French society that can be interpreted as both a celebration and an indictment of perceived fin-de-siècle decadence: his contempt for deceit and hypocrisy is tempered by a fascination with the nuances of language and behaviour and a keen desire to chronicle the mores of his time.

Verlaine's Translators

In his preface to Samuel Rosenberg's recent English translations of Verlaine's selected poems, Nicolas Valazza notes that 'a substantial portion of Verlaine's poetic corpus contains erotic or even *pornographic* texts (in the etymological sense of writings on prostitution)'.¹³ He goes on to argue that 'the sexuality and gender roles that the poet displays in his licentious verse strongly challenge

the heteronormativity that characterizes traditional lyric poetry'.¹⁴ Valazza's insights are also relevant to Verlaine's prose works, where an interest in prostitution is combined with an indictment of hypocrisy. 'Deux mots d'une fille' relates a man's enduring attraction for a female prostitute despite her fickle behaviour towards him. The first-person narrator's tone suggests an equal sympathy towards both parties in this unconventional yet mutually beneficial relationship. The narrator's tone is also telling in 'Charles Husson', the tale of an eponymous pimp who is unexpectedly propositioned by another man; when the two men go upstairs to a hotel bedroom, the excluded female prostitute, swearing to exact her revenge, informs an off-duty policeman who agrees to arrest the couple. The story ends with an unfinished paragraph of one sentence: 'Et c'est ainsi qu'encore une fois la morale fut sauvé, que force restait à la Loi, que...'.¹⁵ The ellipsis here invites the reader to finish the sentence off. The narrator's ironic declarations expose the double standards at play: a policeman might turn a blind eye to clandestine unlicensed female street prostitution, but could be persuaded to expose a gay liaison in the knowledge of the ensuing scandal.¹⁶ One might add now that morality, the law and heteronormativity *avant la lettre* were all maintained. In this regard Verlaine's prose work 'Charles Husson' constitutes a counterpart to the homoerotic poems collected in *Hombres*, mostly written around the same time (1887–1891) and only published clandestinely after his death in 1903. It can also be read as a counterpart to the more implicit treatment of homosexual love in a poem such as 'Il faut, voyez-vous, nous pardonner les choses', from *Romances sans paroles* (1874). Writing in prose enabled Verlaine to make a point about inequality in a more direct and, ironically, acceptable manner to the censor. Instead of encoding contentious erotic references or discounting any hope of officially publishing explicit material, prose allowed Verlaine to consider matters of sexual politics in both a literally and figuratively prosaic style, drawing on the quasi-documentary approach of Naturalist fiction that had dominated the previous two decades. Writing in prose was therefore not simply an opportunity to try out a different form; it also enabled Verlaine to criticize the hypocritical heteronormative systems of

control and punishment that would later lead to the downfall of Oscar Wilde on the other side of the Channel.

Verlaine's relationship with decadence has already been discussed by a number of critics, most notably by Philip Stephan.¹⁷ As Stephan shows, one consensus in the 1880s was that Verlaine's main contribution to decadence was in his refinement of sensation, which Maurice Barrès saw as 'le dernier degré d'énervement dans une race épuisée' [the utmost degree of enervation of an exhausted race].¹⁸ But at the same time Verlaine's interest in imprecision, evocation, and suggestion was a precursor of the contemporaneous interest in Symbolism, which shows the limitations of associating writers with specific schools or manifestos (and with schools or manifestos *tout court*). As far as Verlaine's prose is concerned, it is striking that his conventional use of narrative technique is matched by an overwhelming interest in contemporary settings. In *Zoom sur les décadents*, Julia Przyboś argues that French decadent works set in the present often share a disgust with contemporary democratic society, while those set in the past – often ancient Rome or a vague Middle Ages – testify to a shared practice of 'revisionist creativity'.¹⁹ We can certainly see this in Verlaine's prose works, although Verlaine's satirical contempt for certain contemporary attitudes hardly seems to evince exhaustion or disgust. On the contrary, his prose writings seem to exude a surprisingly healthy vitality, both in their resilient syntax and their interest in the workings of desire.

At this juncture it is useful to consider Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* on two counts. First, the description of Verlaine's nuanced, ambiguous, delicate, vague, and musical poetry that appeals to Des Esseintes accentuates the contrast with his more robust, explicit, and unequivocal prose, which is not mentioned in the novel (most of Verlaine's prose writings date from after its publication in 1884). Second, Huysmans's own stylistic choices in *À rebours* also establish a contrast with Verlaine's prose style: Huysmans turns towards description of the interior and reduction of dialogue, anticipating Marcel Proust; Verlaine uses concise exterior description and dialogue to express character in the same way as many nineteenth-century prose writers before him. Their

interest lies in the treatment of similar themes, such as same-sex love and the corruption caused by cynical profiteering, although Verlaine's prose writings do not evince any particular contempt for the notions of progress or democracy. In fact, the most noticeable influence on Verlaine's prose is the Naturalist school of writing associated with Émile Zola's Médan group, including both Huysmans and Maupassant. If *À rebours* famously marks a rupture with Naturalism, Verlaine's prose pieces can be seen to continue their influence, similar to Paul Bourget's technique in novels such as *Le Disciple* (1889), which combines an accentuated interest in psychology with inherited Naturalist interest in the effect of environment and heredity on human behaviour. In the same way that we might see Verlaine's well-known 1883 poem 'Langueur' as a poem about decadence rather than an attempt to write a poem in a decadent style, many of his prose pieces can be seen as attempts to write about themes appertaining to contemporary society, without any attempt to essay *l'écriture artiste* or narrative experimentation with temporality or interior monologue.²⁰

In the introduction to *French Decadent Tales*, his 2013 collection of translated short stories for the Oxford World's Classics series, Stephen Romer suggests that the one quality which the wide range of texts in the book share is 'self-consciousness so developed that it comes to resemble a set of symptoms'.²¹ This collection does not feature any of Verlaine's tales, which did not come across the translator's radar when working on the project.²² In contrast to familiar decadent pathologies, most of the protagonists in Verlaine's prose writings display relative health; he is interested in their appearance, their idiosyncrasies, their behaviour and their speech. But although Verlaine's prose writings may not be obvious contenders for an anthology of decadent tales, the example discussed at the end of this article will show how they shed a different kind of light on fin-de-siècle mores.

The potential translator of Verlaine's prose can learn a great deal from the translators of his poetry, especially with regard to his use of register. Verlaine's fascination with slang, dialect, and idiolect is apparent throughout his correspondence, for example in his letters written from London, when he listens carefully to the use of street slang and reports back on it to his friends.

In a perceptive review of the two collections that came out in 1999, by Norman R. Shapiro and Martin Sorrell respectively, Adam Piette gives the following appraisal of Verlaine's use of register and lexis:

He wanted French poetry to have the freedom, fluidity, energy, and sprightliness of demotic street French, particularly the French he heard on the backroads and in the bars after his tramping marathon with Rimbaud. This desire to cross high poetic diction with slang rhymed gracefully with his Baudelairean dream of a poetry that could speak the whole self.²³

Here we see another affinity with Huysmans's *À rebours*, namely Des Esseintes' admiration for the rich linguistic range in Petronius' *Satyricon*. Verlaine's use of dialogue in his prose writings similarly reveals a good ear for colloquial speech, as well as an occasional humour and sense of *joie de vivre* that is familiar from some of his poems, particularly the exchanges between the *commedia dell'arte* characters in *Fêtes galantes* (1869). As with the poems, the dialogue also gives his prose pieces a theatrical element that places them in the present tense; we listen to the exchanges between characters being played out before us, as if imagining a radio or stage play. It is this theatricality which presents an intriguing challenge to prospective translators of the prose: do they update the dialogue, as one might do in the theatre with a new translation of Molière, for example, or do they aim for a target-text lexis that seems appropriate to the late nineteenth century?²⁴ Romer opts for the latter in his approach to translating late nineteenth century French prose:

While trying to keep a sprightly pace, I have retained as far as possible vocabulary and usage that would seem appropriate in stories from the same period in English. Nothing dates faster than inappropriate modernisation in this kind of prose fiction.²⁵

This caveat about inappropriate modernization notwithstanding, translating Verlaine's prose comes with a sense of freedom; moreover, the translator of prose does not have to decide on a strategy for negotiating the familiar relationship between rhyme and lexis in source and target text.²⁶ In some respects the challenge is the same, however, for example with regard to updating lexis. Rosenberg gives a specific example in his 'Translator's Note', with reference to the late poem 'L'Arrivée du catalogue' (1895), which he translates as 'The Catalogue Arrives'. Considering the late nineteenth century Parisian form of postal communication known as 'le bleu' or 'le petit bleu',

a closed telegram sent by pneumatic tube to post offices across the city and delivered by messengers, Rosenberg argues that this archaic term ‘is now best replaced by a contextually appropriate word meaning “message”’; in the event he renders ‘Un petit bleu’ as ‘answer’.²⁷ Translation choices are of course always moot; one could counter here that ‘Un petit bleu’ might be successfully retained as ‘A *petit bleu*’, familiar to those readers who associate it with Proust’s Odette, and within easy reach online for anyone coming across it for the first time. But the general point is a good one: the translator always has to keep the reader’s expected knowledge in mind. Joseph Acquisto’s praise for Rosenberg’s translations on the book’s back cover highlights his ability to convey Verlaine’s voice: ‘The translations capture and reproduce Verlaine’s variety of registers and style in lively renderings that are faithful to the spirit of the buoyant original verse.’²⁸ What interests me about this well-deserved encomium is the place of temporality; such a statement could have been written at any time over the last one hundred and fifty years, which might indeed be Acquisto’s point. But how do we reconcile this ability to reproduce the variety of registers with the aforementioned question of whether to update the lexis?

At this point I would like to bring in another Verlaine translator, John R. G. Turner, winner of the British Comparative Literature Association/British Centre for Literary Translation’s John Dryden Translation Competition in 2009.²⁹ Turner’s version of Verlaine’s ‘A Poor Young Shepherd’ from *Romances sans paroles* provides an example of how Verlaine’s lexis can be successfully updated. The source text draws whimsically both on popular song (in the reference to Valentine’s Day) and on Classical antecedents (the possible allusion to Corydon, which invites a queer reading of the text):

J’ai peur d’un baiser
Comme d’une abeille.
Je souffre et je veille
Sans me reposer:
J’ai peur d’un baiser!

Pourtant j’aime Kate
Et ses yeux jolis.
Elle est délicate,

Aux longs traits pâlis.
Oh! que j'aime Kate!

C'est Saint-Valentin!
Je dois et je n'ose
Lui dire au matin...
La terrible chose
Que Saint-Valentin!

Elle m'est promise,
Fort heureusement!
Mais quelle entreprise
Que d'être un amant
Près d'une promise!

J'ai peur d'un baiser
Comme d'une abeille.
Je souffre et je veille
Sans me reposer:
J'ai peur d'un baiser!³⁰

Rather than keeping the English title for the translation, Turner opts for a pun in 'DeliKate', thus setting the tone for his playful rendering of the source text, which mirrors its rhyme scheme and conveys Verlaine's hexasyllabic metre through two amphibrachs:

DeliKate

I'm frightened of kisses
That hurt like a bee sting.
The blighter of this is
My slumber's a beasting:
I'm frightened of kisses.

I do fancy Kate though:
Eyes couldn't be kinder,
She's so delicate, though
Her looks are a blinder.
Do I fancy Kate, though!

St Valentine's Day! It's
The day I must fess up.
What gets in the way: it's
A great day to mess up,
St Valentine's Day. It's...

She gave me her promise.
Declared she'd be glad to.
Where I'm coming from is

It's hard on a lad too
This close to a promise:

I'm frightened of kisses
That hurt like a bee sting.
The blighter of this is
My slumber's a beating:
I'm frightened of kisses!³¹

Turner's translation succeeds in maintaining the giddy sense of trepidation and promise while updating the lexis to twentieth-century British English ('beasting', 'blighter', 'fancy', 'lad') with a more recent locution ('fess up') that brings it closer to contemporary usage. The poor young shepherd from the source text is now a young man from many possible backgrounds, rural or urban. The simultaneous foregrounding of rhythm and rhyme also gives the translation a spontaneous feel, as if it had been improvised in a rap battle. This specific musical quality harks back to the source text's possible origins in the popular songs that Verlaine and Rimbaud heard in London in the early 1870s. The register may now be closer to a pop song than to a pastoral folk song, but the translation still retains the vibrancy of the lyric voice.³²

Deux mots d'une fille

The remainder of this article considers the extent to which it might be possible to draw on Turner's approach to translating Verlaine's poetry when translating his prose. Although the aforementioned theatricality of the dialogue in his short stories may lend itself to an updated translation, the narration itself is anchored more firmly in a recognizable fin-de-siècle Parisian milieu. In practical terms this means that a modernizing approach may have uneven results, as Romer warns. There is also the question of why we might want to translate Verlaine's prose, beyond the primary aim of making it available to interested anglophone readers; do we want to recreate a period piece, or do we want to activate the source text's potential for a contemporary audience? Both approaches are valid; it can also be argued that they are not mutually exclusive – who defines what this potential is, and how it should be activated? In a recent piece on his translation of *Gertrudis*, a 1927 collection

of prose poems and narrative pieces by the Catalan poet J. V. Foix (1893–1987), Lawrence Venuti proposes a method of reading a translation which he terms ‘intercultural historicism’.³³ This approach entails reading the translation in juxtaposition with a contemporary text, which allows the reader to see areas of thematic and stylistic convergence and divergence. As Venuti explains:

A translation of a past text from the source culture is analyzed from the vantage point of a pertinent contemporary text in the translating culture which is in turn analyzed from the vantage point of the translation. The differences that come to light in the critical dialectic are ultimately historicizing, indicating the different historical moments in which each text was produced.³⁴

This intercultural historicist approach may also shed light on many translations that have set out to achieve a similar hybrid affect without this explicit theoretical underpinning; it also implies a specific analogy with the process of adaptation and with the discipline of comparative literature, *per se*. The extent to which intercultural historicism may be better suited to poetry or drama than to prose is a matter for further debate. My own view is that updating lexis and register is a suitable approach to translating Verlaine’s prose, but that the translation should resist the desire to foreground a particular contemporary register; here I agree with Romer’s view on how easily slang dates. Similarly, to my mind translations of prose should also resist the temptation to embellish the semantic material in the source text, which sometimes happens in new translations of classical theatre repertoire; I have in mind here Patrick Marber’s *Exit the King*, a wonderfully inventive adaptation of Eugène Ionesco’s *Le Roi se meurt* (1962) that was staged at the National Theatre in London in 2018 and described as a ‘new version’.³⁵ Based on the translation by Donald Watson – which was the only script available to buy in the National Theatre bookshop – it could not resist the occasional innuendo that took it into *Carry On* territory, for example in an exchange between the two queens about the kingdom being full of holes.³⁶ My approach to translating Verlaine’s prose aims to update the text without attempting to place it in a specific period or to add any cadenzas.

What follows below is a translation of an extract of dialogue from the short story ‘Deux mots d’une fille’, mentioned previously, in which a nameless first-person narrator recounts the

story of his friend, X, who lives in a *bôtel garni* [boarding house] for workers that doubles as an informal *maison de passe* [a seedy hotel frequently used by sex workers and their clients]. At the start of the text X recounts his preference for prostitutes and petty thieves over those who gain money through fraud and corrupt business practices. The narrator then takes over the narrative to recount X's story himself: 'je vais vous donner à la troisième personne, et tout bonnement, son récit qui vous eût été, sans nul doute, lyrique à l'excès' [I will tell you, in the third person and quite simply, his story, which no doubt you would have found excessively lyrical].³⁷ X's story begins with his initial relationship with one of the sex workers, Marie, which ends in a quarrel and her departure from the hotel. Six months later she returns and rents out another room, to X's great delight, although he soon realizes that she is intending to carry on seeing clients and that she also has another lover, Célestin. Having stayed with X for several more months and nursed him through illness, she eventually leaves him again for Célestin, who, it gradually transpires, is also her pimp. Her second departure is announced in this exchange:

Le lendemain, elle vint prendre le café et passa le reste de la journée, dîner payé par elle compris, jusqu'à minuit, heure à laquelle elle se rhabillait, quand X.:

'Et où vas-tu comme ça?'

Elle:

'Chez nous, parbleu, chez...'

'Chez Célestin?'

'Eh bien! oui, chez Célestin. C'était de lui tout ce que je te disais hier.'

'Et il accepte que tu sortes comme ça?'

'Tu t'en plains?'

'Non, mais...'

'Tu trouves ça maquereau, dis la vérité.'

'Ma foi!...'

'Que veux-tu? Aussi son ouvrage ne va pas toujours. Il me gronde parfois tout de même de sortir. Ah! je l'aime bien, je te l'avoue. C'est l'homme qu'il me faut. Je te dis, toi, tu es trop chic, tu es un monsieur, trop savant pour moi. Seulement, tu as été bien gentil, pas jaloux...'

Pas Jaloux! quel éloge dans quelle bouche!

'...Pas embêtant, pas sciant. Et j'ai eu pour toi un béguin qui dure encore et durera, je te promets... Oui. Célestin est mon grand, de béguin. Mais c'est égal, va, j'ai été bien contente de toi cet hiver... et tiens, je n'osais pas te le dire, je...'

'Tu...?'

'Eh bien, là, si j'ai couché tous ces mois-ci avec toi, C'ÉTAIT POUR ME CONSOLER!'³⁸

I have rendered this:

The next day she came over for coffee and stayed the whole day, including for dinner, which she paid for herself. At midnight she started getting ready again. X said:
 ‘Where are you going at this time?’
 To which she replied:
 ‘Back home, for God’s sake, back to...’
 ‘Back to Célestin’s?’
 ‘Yes, of course, back to Célestin’s. It was him I was talking about yesterday.’
 ‘And does he let you go out at this time of night?’
 ‘Are you complaining?’
 ‘No, but...’
 ‘You think he’s a pimp, don’t you?’
 ‘Well, yes!...’
 ‘What can I say? His other work dries up sometimes. And besides sometimes he tells me off for going out to work. But I like him a lot, I can tell you that much. He’s the man I need. I told you, you’re too posh for me, you’re a gentleman, too intelligent. Although you have been very nice and you haven’t been jealous...’
 Not jealous! such praise coming from such a mouth!
 ‘...you haven’t been annoying, or a pain. And I had a crush on you which I still have and I’ll keep on having, I promise... Yes, Célestin is my main crush. But it doesn’t matter, I’ve been really happy with you this winter, and, you know, I didn’t dare tell you, but I...’
 ‘What?’
 ‘Well, um, the reason I’ve kept on sleeping with you for all these months was TO CHEER MYSELF UP!’³⁹

My translation aims to reproduce the colloquial register of the source text through lexical choices that situate it neither in the late nineteenth century nor in any other specific period or cultural space, contemporary or otherwise. Of course, this desired neutrality of register and lexis is relative and subjective. But the aim is to produce a text which might also be adapted to other media – film, radio, theatre, television – and to different periods and settings. With regard to Venuti’s method of intercultural historicism, I do not have a specific third text in mind; if anything, the third text here is based loosely on an amalgam of mid twentieth century postwar British English sources, encompassing new wave cinema, kitchen sink dramas, or the early plays of Harold Pinter or Shelagh Delaney. At the same time this approach also aims to look back to the serialized novels of the nineteenth century and forward to the TV soap operas of the twenty-first.

This attempt to provide a geographically and socially non-specific translation of a fin-de-siècle French short story also aims to demonstrate the ongoing relevance of certain themes of decadence. The most pertinent is the intriguing dynamic of the relationship between the two protagonists, Marie and X (whom Marie refers to as Ernest, suggesting that both the narrator and

the author can't control her). This relationship transcends the stereotypical love of a rich man for a female prostitute who stays with him for his money, or the *Pretty Woman* version of Cinderella where the rich knight in armour rescues the damsel in distress. There are elements of both free will and tenderness in Marie's final shouted declaration that she has carried on sleeping with X as form of consolation, a choice that we might interpret as a third space between Célestin and an autonomous life as a sex worker (at one point Marie arrives at the hotel with a black eye; although we are not told who was responsible, the implication is that Célestin may have hit her). There is an interesting mutual respect between the two protagonists that prefigures some of Michel Houellebecq's musings on economic and erotic capital, but with less cynicism.⁴⁰ In retrospect the narrator's initial thoughts about his friend's interest in the behaviour of sex workers make sense. But Verlaine is careful to avoid excessive sentimentality: some time after the scene translated above, X happens to see Marie in a café; they go to a hotel room, whereupon she promptly runs off with his wallet. The next time that he sees her, she tells him not to be angry and says that they should remain friends, despite her behaviour:

'[...] MAIS J'AI BIEN FAIT, tu sais.'
Il faut croire qu'il le savait. Car il la voit toujours. Du moins, j'en suis sûr, puisque il ne me l'a pas dit, et là pour moi finit son récit.

['BUT I DID THE RIGHT THING, you know.'
We have to believe that he did know. Because he still sees her. At least, I'm sure of it, since he hasn't told me, and that for me is the end of his story.']⁴¹

The short story ends with this final intervention from the narrator, who assumes that X's relationship with Marie continues, based undoubtedly on mutual understanding, and, arguably, on mutual exploitation.

Writing recently about Georges Simenon in the *London Review of Books*, John Lanchester makes an interesting distinction between English and French novels that bears quotation in full:

The reader whose idea of the novel is formed by the English canon may at some stage start to read books in the French tradition. At that point, it may suddenly seem that everything one has previously read has essentially been children's literature. Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, even Austen and Eliot, are all wonderful writers, but their work is founded in wish fulfilment, happy endings and love conquering all. The side notes and off notes and

internal dissent are all there, of course, but they are subtextual, subtle, inexplicit. The main current of the English novel is in the direction of Happy Ever After, along the lines of Miss Prism's deathless observation: 'The good ended happily and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means.' When you turn from that tradition to the work of Laclos, Flaubert, Balzac, Stendhal, Maupassant and Proust, it's like getting a glass of ice water in the face. Everybody lies all the time; codes of honour are mainly a delusion and will get you into serious trouble; the same goes for love; if you think the world is how it is described in consoling fictions, you have many catastrophic surprises in store. Above all, the central lesson of the French tradition is that people's motives are sex and money, and you can write about those things as sex and money, directly, no euphemisms required.⁴²

Like many distinctions between national traditions, this one adumbrates an astute insight based on years of reading. Where might we locate Verlaine's prose works in this model? X is motivated by sex but has no concerns about money, as far as we know; Marie is motivated by both sex and money, even if her relationship with X enables her to separate them for a while. But what might be a largely accurate appraisal of Zola's *Nana*, or Maupassant's *Bel-ami*, seems to underplay the unspoken possibility of affection, tenderness, and love in Verlaine's 'Deux mots d'une fille'. In this respect Verlaine's prose echoes the moments of optimism to be found in many of his poems.

One objective of Naturalism was to equate the origins of human behaviour with basic animal motivations of survival and reproduction, played out in different forms of desire, greed and selfishness. In some respects, decadence locates these same concerns in a fin-de-siècle context that draws on analogous historical periods and similar interests in decline and renewal. But at the same time decadence allows for the possibility of alternative forms of community where relationships are not simply transactions based on the value of economic capital. It is with regard to this possibility that translating Verlaine's prose becomes more than simply a project of introducing the minor work of a great poet to a wider audience; it is also part of the aim to introduce a further example of decadence both to the same audience and to critics from all linguistic backgrounds.

¹ Paul Verlaine, 'Les Poètes maudits [1884 et 1888]', in *Œuvres en prose complètes*, ed. by Jacques Borel (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1972), pp. 633–91.

² Paul Verlaine, *Œuvres posthumes*, 2 vols (Paris: Messein, 1903).

³ Jacques Borel, 'Avant-propos', in Verlaine, *Œuvres en prose complètes*, pp. xi–xviii (p. xvi).

⁴ The exception is 'La Main de Major Müller', the story of an army officer who loses a hand in a duel. According to one of the characters in the story, the preserved hand becomes animate and eventually helps the dying officer to kill

himself out of mercy. This text may owe a debt to both Gautier's 1840 short story 'Le Pied de momie' and Balzac's 1831 novel *La Peau de chagrin*.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, trans. by Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 70.

⁶ *Poems of Paul Verlaine*, trans. by Gertrude Hall Brownell (Chicago: Stone & Kimbell, 1895). Arthur Symons published 'Tears in my Heart' (a translation of 'Il pleut dans mon coeur') in *The Academy* (12 July 1890), p. 31, and other individual translations were published in reviews and periodicals and within verse collections by Ernest Dowson and John Gray around this time too.

⁷ *Selected Poems*, trans. by C. F. MacIntyre (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948); *Forty Poems*, trans. by Roland Gant and Claude Apcher (London: Falcon Press, 1948).

⁸ *Poems*, trans. by Jacques Leclercq (Mount Vernon, NY: Peter Pauper Press, 1961); *Selected Verse*, trans. by Doris-Jeanne Gourévitch (Waltham, MA: Blaisdell Publishing, 1970); and *Selected Poems*, trans. by Joanna Richardson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

⁹ *Selected Poems*, trans. by Martin Sorrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and *One Hundred and One Poems*, trans. by Norman H. Shapiro (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ *Paul Verlaine: A Bilingual Selection of His Verse*, trans. by Samuel N. Rosenberg (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019). Hereafter abbreviated as *A Bilingual Selection*.

¹¹ To my knowledge there are no published English translations of Verlaine's prose at all, not even in the selections of poetry.

¹² For 'Deux mots d'une fille', see Verlaine, *Œuvres en prose complètes*, pp. 168–82. It has recently been republished within *Histoires comme ça, avec 'Gosses'* (Angoulême: Editions Marguerite Waknine, 2013).

¹³ Nicolas Valazza, 'Preface', in *A Bilingual Selection*, pp. viii–xvi (p. x). Italics in original.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Verlaine, 'Charles Husson', in *Œuvres en prose complètes*, pp. 150–54. This short story was published in *La Revue indépendante* in December 1888. In the posthumous publication of Verlaine's collected works it was given the alternative title of 'Rampo', which was one of the names given to the many informal gambling games that took place in bars with dice or counters. All translations suggested here are my own, unless otherwise stated.

¹⁶ For a study of the relationship between law, morality, and free will during the period, see Ruth Harris, *Murders and Madness: Medicine, Law and Society in the Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

¹⁷ See Philip Stephan, *Paul Verlaine and the Decadence: 1882–1890* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974); A. E. Carter, *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature, 1830–1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978); and Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹⁸ Maurice Barrès, 'La sensation en littérature: La folie de Charles Baudelaire', *Les Taches d'encre*, 1 (5 November 1884), 3–26, and 2 (5 December 1884), 21–43 (p. 27). Quoted in Stephan, *Paul Verlaine and the Decadence*, p. 163.

¹⁹ Julia Przyboś, *Zoom sur les décadents* (Paris: Corti, 2002). For a brief précis of this idea in English, see also Julia Przyboś, 'Polish Decadence: Leopold Staff's *Igrzysko* in the European Context', *Nordlit*, 28 (2011), 79–87 (p. 79).

²⁰ This initial appraisal of Verlaine's prose works should not overlook some of the more experimental pieces that he wrote, particularly the fragments collected in 'Gosses'. A critical study of his prose work remains a desideratum of the research. To date the most comprehensive one is Benoît Abert, 'La prose de Verlaine: Vers une esthétique de la contrariété', unpublished MA dissertation, University of Lille, 2015. I would like to thank Professor Jessica Wilker of the University of Lille for drawing my attention to this work.

²¹ Stephen Romer, 'Introduction', in *French Decadent Tales*, trans. by Stephen Romer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. xi.

²² Email exchange with Stephen Romer, 29 June 2020.

²³ Adam Piette, 'Review of *One Hundred and One Poems by Paul Verlaine: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. by Norman R. Shapiro, and *Paul Verlaine: Selected Poems*, trans. by Martin Sorrell', *Translation and Literature*, 9.2 (2000), 258–66 (p. 260).

²⁴ I am thinking, for example, of Ranjit Bolt's version of Molière's *Le Misanthrope*, translated as *The Grouch* and first performed at the West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds in 2008. See Claire Brennan, 'All Rhyme, but no Reason in Glossy Grouch', *The Observer* (24 February 2008) <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2008/feb/24/theatre1>> [accessed 28 June 2020].

²⁵ Romer, *French Decadent Tales*, p. xxxvii.

²⁶ See Samuel Rosenberg's interesting account of his approach in 'Remarks on Translating the Poetry of Paul Verlaine in English', *Nouvelle-Fribourg* (Summer 2017) <<http://www.nouvellefribourg.com/universite/remarks-on-translating-the-poetry-of-paul-verlaine-into-english/>> [accessed 28 June 2020].

²⁷ Samuel Rosenberg, 'Translator's Note', in *A Bilingual Selection*, p. xx. See pp. 318–21 for his translation of 'L'Arrivée du catalogue'.

²⁸ Joseph Acquisto, quoted on the back cover of Paul Verlaine, *A Bilingual Selection*.

²⁹ See 'Seven Tricky Verlaines, translated by John R. G. Turner', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 7.1 (2010), 124–30. See also four further translations published in *PN Review*, 37.3 (2011). Turner's translations have been commended three times for *The Times* Stephen Spender Prize, in 2011 and 2012.

³⁰ Paul Verlaine, 'A Poor Young Shepherd', in *Oeuvres poétiques complètes*, ed. by Yves-Alain Favre (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1992), p. 93.

³¹ © John R. G. Turner (2020). I gratefully acknowledge the author's permission to reprint this translation here. A collected volume of Turner's Verlaine translations is currently under consideration by Carcanet Press. An earlier version of this translation was sent speculatively first to *The Guardian* and then to the *Independent* to mark the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton in April 2011. Sadly, both newspapers declined to publish it. I would like to thank Turner for his instructive comments on the first version of this article and for many conversations about Verlaine over the last ten years, including an annual session on translation with students at the University of Leeds taking the module 'The Pleasures of French Poetry'.

³² Turner wonders now whether the rhythm for 'DeliKate' may have been inspired by the parodic music-hall song 'Burlington Bertie from Bow', credited to William Hargreaves: 'I'm Burlington Bertie, I rise at ten-thirty | And saunter along like a toff' (email exchange, 2 July 2020).

³³ Lawrence Venuti, 'Translation, Publishing and World Literature: J. V. Foix's *Daybook 1918* and the Strangeness of Minority', in *Sociologies of Poetry Translation: Emerging Perspectives*, ed. by Jacob Blakesley (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 45-65 (p. 55).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ See 'Exit the King', *National Theatre* <<https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/shows/exit-the-king>> [accessed 30 June 2020].

³⁶ Marber's version was developed from Eugène Ionesco, *Exit the King*, trans. by Donald Watson (London: Samuel French, 1973).

³⁷ Verlaine, *Œuvres en prose complètes*, p. 169. Jacques Borel notes that the text is a thinly disguised version of Verlaine's personal experience of a similar relationship (see *Œuvres en prose complètes*, p. 1203).

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 180-81.

³⁹ I would like to thank Catherine Kaiserman for her very helpful comments on my translation of this passage.

⁴⁰ The significance of both economic and erotic capital is introduced in Houellebecq's first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* from 1994 (translated into English under the title *Whatever* in 1998, although a more literal rendering would be 'Extension of the domain of the struggle'). At the end of *Soumission* (2015, translated as *Submission* in the same year), the narrator, a specialist on Huysmans, pays for sex workers to visit his flat; since he also orders food to be delivered, he no longer needs to leave home. Houellebecq's fiction continues the lineage of the nineteenth-century Naturalist novel into the twenty-first century in several ways, from the use of conventional narrative techniques (narration, plot, characterization, dialogue) to the interest in sociology and the controversial reflections on identity.

⁴¹ Verlaine, *Œuvres en prose complètes*, p. 182.

⁴² John Lanchester, 'Maigret's Room', *London Review of Books*, 42.11 (4 June 2020), 9-12 (p. 11).



Mathew Creasy, 'Mahon and Verlaine' (2020)

From Verlaine

Derek Mahon

Mandolin

From under echoing trees
The serenading suitors
Offer old gallantries
To their fair auditors.

There's Aminte and Tircis,
Clitandre as ever was,
Damis who voices his
Love songs to deaf ears.

Then their silken tunics
And long trailing gowns,
Their verve and fancy tricks,
Their shadowy blue outlines

Swirl in romantic washes
Of moonlight grey and rose
While a mandolin crashes
In a light, shivering breeze.

In Muted Tones

At peace in the half-light
Of these great boughs above,
Why should we not admit
This silence to our love,

Dissolve heart, soul and senses
With their ecstatic fervour
In the vague indolence
Of oak-tree and conifer?

Half-close your eyelids, place
Your hands upon your heart
And from your quiet breast
Let worldly thoughts depart.

Let's yield, this afternoon,
To the soft lullaby
That comes to murmur in
The long grass where we lie.

Soon when the evening air
Falls from darkened trees
The voice of our despair,
A nightingale's, will rise.

Green

These are for you, these branches, fruits and flowers,
Also my heart that beats for you alone.
Don't break it, please, with those white hands of yours;
And may this plain gift be an acceptable one.

Just look at me, dripping with morning dew,
Dew the cold wind has frozen to my brows.
Let me, exhausted, rest up here with you
And think consoling thoughts of our best days.

Here on your youthful breast let my head lie
Still echoing with your kisses; let it know
Relief from the emotional storm, and may I
Doze for a little as you're dozing now.

To Clymène

Strange songs of the gondolier,
Songs without words ... My dear
Girl, because your eyes
 The colour of skies;

Because your voice, a melodious
Spectacle that clouds
And clears the horizon
 Of my reason;

Since your unique bouquet
Of swan-like clarity,
And since the white glow
 Of your breath too;

Since everything you are
(A sweet angelic choir,
Glory of seraphim,
 Your scent and rhythm)

Has, with its soft phrases
And synaesthetic graces,
Tempted my sly heart – oh,
 Let it be so!

The Old Refrain

It's languorous ecstasies,
It's amorous reveries,
The rustle of beech trees
In a rushing breeze,
Those tiny voices
Among the wood noises.

O frail, fresh respiration! –
Its whistle and whisper
Like the unspoken cry
Blown grasses sigh,
Or the rumbling mutter
Of pebbles underwater.

This soul now complaining
In drowsy melancholy,
It's our own, surely?
It's yours, yes, and mine
Breathing its old refrain
To the warm night again.

Art poétique

The music is the important thing.
Opt for the singular, the rare,
the faint, the soluble in air,
no rhetoric and no posturing.

Take note, it's absolutely fine
to sound a bit ambiguous;
best is a grey, indefinite verse
where the exact and vague combine –

behind the veil a twinkling eye,
vibration of the noontday light,
a violet star concourse, bright
in an exhausted autumn sky.

Not primary colour but nuance,
nuance alone that can unite
dream to dream and horn to flute,
informs all such experience.

Resist the lure of mocking 'wit',
the glib reductionism, the cheap
sarcasm at which the angels weep.
Avoid the nasty taste of it.

Take eloquence and wring its neck
and, while we're at it, it's high time
to be more circumspect with rhyme.
If not, it soon dictates the work.

The damage it has done already!
What daft idiot, deaf to tone,
forged from tin this specious coin
that rings so false to everybody?

Music and yet more music, please!
May your own song be something light
we hear soaring, a soul in flight
to other loves and other skies.

May it presage the greater future
borne on a brisk morning wind
bestowing scents of thyme and mint.
The rest is only literature.

Down in the Woods

Some, like the innocent and the neurasthenic,
find in the woods only a languorous charm,
fresh breezes, warm scents. Good luck them.
Others, dreamers, are seized with vague panic.

Good luck to them! I, nervous and aghast,
racked by a strange, insistent guilt complex,
tremble here like a faintheart who expects
a trap, perhaps an encounter with a ghost.

These great boughs, like sea waves never still,
with their dark silences and even darker
shadows – a sad and sinister décor –
inspire fears both profound and risible.

Worst is summer dusk when a fiery sky
merges in the grey-blue of mists its range
of blood hues while a distant angelus
rings out like the echo of a plaintive cry.

Wind rises hot, strong; wild convulsions race
crazily through the increasingly opaque
density of the oaks until, grown weak,
they escape like exhalations into space.

Night hovers, an owl flies, and you think back
to grim rumours warning of awful things.
Below a thicket there, *there*, hidden springs
chuckle like killers lying in wait to strike.

Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Monologue of a Faun'
A New Translation

Peter Manson

The poem which eventually became *L'Après-midi d'un faune* was first conceived as a short play or intermezzo. 'Le Faune, intermède héroïque', written in the summer of 1865, was to have comprised three scenes: the 'Monologue d'un faune' (translated here), followed by a scene of dialogue between the two nymphs, Iané and Ianthé, and a final monologue, 'Le Réveil du faune', spoken by the Faun after his siesta. In a letter of June 1865, Stéphane Mallarmé mentions that the work is still in progress and nearing 400 lines long. Only around 200 lines of this material survives. The dialogue scene, and the Faun's reawakening, exist only as heavily corrected and incomplete rough drafts. The Monologue is preserved in a much later fair copy, dating from 1873 or 1874, with the dedication '(copié pour le tyrannique Burty, par) – Stéphane Mallarmé'.¹ Philippe Burty (1830–1890) was a French art critic, a supporter of the Impressionists and an advocate of Japanese art. The text of this fair copy cannot be identical with that of the lost original of 1865. The surviving fragments show that the three scenes would have been linked metrically. The Monologue was to have ended with the incomplete line 'Adieu, femmes' – the line being completed, and the rhyme fulfilled, by the opening words of Iané in the dialogue scene which followed.

Mallarmé offered his Heroic Intermezzo to the Comédie-Française in late 1865, but was rejected on the grounds that the piece lacked narrative strength and would be of interest only to poets. Mallarmé's grandmother, Fanny Desmolins, had already chided him by letter for aspiring to the Comédie without considering any less prestigious venues. In the circumstance it seems impressive that the work got a hearing at all: Mallarmé was twenty-three years old and had published only a handful of short poems.

In completing its last line, Mallarmé severed the Monologue from its larger dramatic context and allowed the Faun's doubts about his encounter with the nymphs to remain unresolved. Within a year, the work would be shorn of stage-directions and rewritten as a poem for the page. The new version, 'Improvisation d'un faune', was submitted to the editors of the 1876 *Parnasse contemporain*, but was, again, rejected for obscurity.² By this time Mallarmé had already collaborated with Édouard Manet on the deluxe edition of Edgar Allan Poe's 'Le Corbeau/The Raven', and it was in a similarly opulent separate edition that the definitive text of *L'Après-midi d'un faune* would appear in April 1876, with Japanese-influenced woodcuts by Manet.

¹ It is possible to consult this manuscript online in a digital scan from the [Collection Henri Mondor at the Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Drouet](#).

² A previous translation of that work can be found on [my website](#).

Monologue of a Faun

from Mallarmé

*(A seated faun allows, first from one, then from his other arm,
two nymphs to escape.*

He stands up)

I was having Nymphs!

Is it a dream? No: the bright
ruby of lifted breasts still sets the immobile air
on fire,

(Inhaling)

and I drink the sighs.

(Stamping his foot)

Where are they?

(Pointing to the scenery)

O greenery, if you protect these mortals,
give them back to me, by April who swelled your nubile
branches (I languish still from such ills!)
and by the nudity of roses, o greenery!

Nothing.

(Striding about)

I want them!

(Stopping)

But if this fair plundered couple
were only an illusion of my fabling senses?

The illusion, sylvan, does she have the blue
green eyes, like water flowers, of the one more chaste?
and this one... lovestruck by the sweetness of the contrast,
was the wind of Sicily driving through your fleece?
No, no: the sea wind pouring a swoon
to the lips going pale with thirst towards the calices,
has, to refresh them, neither these contours so smooth
to touch, nor these hollow mysteries where you drink
of that coolness which the woods never had for you!...

And yet!

(To the scenery)

O dried-up gladioli of a marsh
ransacked by my passion, equal to the sun,
bulrushes trembling with sparks, tell
how I was coming to break the tall reeds, tamed
by my lip: when on the glaucous gold of distant
verdures flooding the marble of the fountains
a scattered whiteness undulates of a flock:

and that, at the sound of my flute to which I adjust a reed-pipe,
this flight... of swans? no, of naiads, saves itself.

I am...

But you burn in the tawny light,
with no murmur and without saying how the troupe
took flight, scared away by my flute...

(With head in hands)

Hold!

All of this denies me: and am I thus the prey
of my torrid desire, and as aroused as it might think
by the intoxications of its sap?

Would I be pure?

I, I don't know! Everything, on Earth, is obscure:
and this still more than all: for the evidences
of a woman, where must they be, my breast, that you might find them?
If the kisses had their wound: at least,
one would know!

But I know!

O Pan, behold the witnesses
of the frolic! On these fingers admire a feminine
bite-mark, that says teeth and measures
the happiness of the mouth where the teeth flourish.

(To the scenery)

And so, my woods of shaken laurel, confidants
of flights, and you, lilies, in modest silence,
are you conspiring? Thank you. My hand, ravishing, hurls
into the eternal sleep of the yellow water lilies
the stone that will drown their great scattered tatters:
for I can also gobble the green shoots
of the languid vine and tomorrow the useless
moss!

But let us scorn the vile traitors!

Serene,

on this fallen pedestal I want to talk uncut
of the perfidious ones, and by idolatrous paintings
remove again more girdles from their shadow:
just as, when I have sucked the brightness out of grapes
that my regret might be banished by the dream,
laughing, I lift the empty bunch to the summer sky,
and, breathing into its luminous skins, eager
to be drunk, I gaze through them till evening!

(He sits down)

Naiads, let us reinflate some divers memories!

My eyes, piercing the reeds, were following an immortal
neck, that drowns its burning in the wave
with a cry of rage to the forest sky:
and the troupe, from the streaming bath, disappears
into the swans and the shiverings, o gemstones!
I went forth, when at my feet are intertwined, garlanded
by the modesty of loving in this haphazard bed,

two women asleep in the ecstasy of being two.
I seize, without disentangling, them, and I steal away
to gardens, hated by frivolous shadow,
of roses poking shamelessly in the sun,
where our love might be the equal of the burnt-up air!

(Rising)

I adore you, fury of women, o fierce
delight of this white naked burden that slips
beneath my lip, drinking from fire, in a lightning-flash
of hatreds! the secret fright of the flesh,
from the feet of the malevolent one to the back of the timid,
on a cruel and perfumed skin, dampened
perhaps by the marsh with splendid vapours.
My crime was to have, without exhausting these malignant
fears, divided the tousled tuft
of kisses which the gods had mixed so well:
for, barely had I gone to hide an ardent laugh
under the happy folds of just one woman, detaining
with a frail finger, that her featherlike whiteness
be dyed in the brilliance of a sister catching fire,
the little one, naive and unblushing,
than, from my arms undone by lascivious deaths,
this prey, forever ingrate, frees itself,
without pity for the sobbing from which I was still drunk!

(Standing)

Let us forget them! Plenty others will avenge me
by their hair tangled up in the horns of my brow!
I am happy! Here everything offers itself: from the open
pomegranate, to the water that goes naked in its promenade.
My body, lit up in infancy by Eros,
gives off a red fire, almost as of old Etna!
Through these woods, which, at evening, have the colour of ashes,
flesh passes and lights up in the extinct foliage:
it is even said, in a whisper, that great Venus
going with naked feet, dries up the torrents,
in the evenings bloodied by her mouth, of roses!

(Hands joined in the air)

Sol...

(As if fending off with his parted hands an imaginary lightning-bolt)

But am I not struck by lightning?

No: these closed

(Letting himself fall)

eyelids, and my body weighed down by pleasure
succumb to the antique siesta of midday.

Let us sleep...

(Stretched out)

Let us sleep: I can dream of my blasphemy
without crime, in the arid moss, and as I love
open my mouth to the great sun, father of wines.

(With a final gesture)

Farewell, women: duo of virgins when I came.

Auguste de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, 'Vox Populi' (1880)
A New, Annotated Translation

Matthew Creasy and Jennifer Higgins

Jean-Marie-Mathias-Philippe-Auguste, Comte de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (1838–1889) first published 'Vox Populi', the short text translated here, in the magazine *L'Étoile française* during December 1880. He republished it in *La Comédie humaine* a year later, before gathering it into the collection *Contes cruels*, published by Calmann Lévy in February 1883.

It appears there as the third story in the collection and the editors of the Pléiade edition suggest this positioning was intended to signal the variety of forms deployed across the collection as a whole.¹ For this work is more frequently referred to as a poem in prose, rather than a 'conte' or story. As well as its brevity, 'Vox Populi' is characterised by a set of repeating motifs and phrases. At the heart of its narrative lies the beggar's cry: 'Please, take pity on a poor blind man!', which is repeated six times in the course of the text. (One biographer suggests that the story was inspired by an actual encounter with one such beggar in Paris.) But Villiers also repeats (with variations) references to the setting and Parisian crowds, as 'Vox Populi' surveys key political developments between 1868 and 1880. The interplay of difference and repetition at these points measures the cowardice and fickleness of the general population in Paris as they respond with fear or enthusiasm to each successive change of regime.

As such, 'Vox Populi' has much in common with the 'point-scoring against the bourgeois' that Gerri Kimber has identified as characteristic of *Contes cruels* as a whole.² But this dense pattern of repeating motifs prompts Des Esseintes, the protagonist of Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884) to have 'Vox Populi' reprinted in his own anthology of poems in prose. This fictional character praises Villiers's text as 'une pièce superbement frappée dans un style d'or, à l'effigie de Leconte de Lisle et de Flaubert' [a piece superbly struck out in a golden style, in the effigy of Leconte de Lisle and Flaubert].³ Huysmans's treatment of 'Vox Populi' positions it within literary lineage that includes the prose poems in Charles Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869), as well as

the lapidary concision of Gustave Flaubert. (Indeed, Villiers alludes to Baudelaire's poem, 'Les Aveugles' and draws on its sentiments.) The enthusiasm of Des Esseintes, then, suggests that 'Vox Populi' might be considered a finely wrought work of decadence or aestheticism, seemingly above the vacillations of the crowds it describes.

As Helen Abbott points out, however, there need be no contradiction between poetry and satire here. Rather, she observes, repetition is intrinsic both to the politics and the music of this text – its status as prose poetry is not at odds with its satirical bite.⁴ This sense of concision and compression is hard to capture in translation, but it also accounts for the continuing appeal of this work across the ages.

¹ Auguste de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex and Jean-Marie Bellefroid (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1986).

² Gerri Kimber, 'Hidden Assassin: Subverting the Bourgeois in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Contes cruels*', *French Studies E-Journal*, 1 (2005), 1–9.

³ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À rebours*, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Lucien Descaves, 23 vols (Paris: Crès, 1928–1934), VII, p. 259. Our own translation.

⁴ Helen Abbott, 'Politics or Poetics? The Battle Cry of the Refrain in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's "Vox Populi"', *Romance Studies*, 26.2 (2008), 126–35.

Vox Populi¹

To M. Leconte de Lisle²

The Prussian soldier makes his coffee in a dark lantern.
– Sergeant Hoff³

That day saw a great parade on the Champs-Élysées!

It is now twelve insufferable years since that spectacle.⁴ Summer sunlight splintered its long golden arrows upon the roofs and domes of the ancient capital. Dazzling reflections flashed from myriad windows: bathed in a powdery light, the people thronged the streets to see the army.

Before the railings of the parvis at Notre-Dame,⁵ on a high wooden stool, sat the ancient Beggar, the doyen of Parisian Poverty, whose mournful, ashen face was riven by a network of wrinkles the colour of dirt. Sitting cross-legged under black rags, his hands joined beneath the official notice attesting to his blindness, he lent a ghostly air to the *Te Deum* of the celebrations taking place around him.

Wasn't everyone in this crowd his neighbour? Weren't the joyous passers-by his brothers? A member of the Human Race for sure! Besides, living in the shadow of this sovereign portal he hadn't lost everything: the State recognized his right to be blind.

As the owner of this title and beneficiary of the respectability conferred by his official occupation of this place and the alms it promised, and, as a registered voter, he was practically our equal, even if he lacked a little Light.

And this man, a kind of lingering presence among the living, uttered from time to time a monotonous complaint – the outward articulation of the deep sigh that was his whole life.

'Please, take pity on a poor blind man!'

Around him, beneath the powerful vibrations dropping from the belfry – *outside*, out there, beyond the wall of his eyes – from the stamping of the cavalry, from the bursts of bugle calls, from the cheers mixed with salvos from the Invalides and fierce cries of command, from the clash of steel, from the thunder of drums marking time for interminable processions of infantry, a distant rumble of glory reached him. His acute hearing even picked out flotillas of heavily fringed banners brushing against breastplates. A thousand flashes of sensation, all vague and indistinct, were born within the understanding of the old prisoner of darkness. A second sight told him what was setting the hearts and minds of the City on fire.

And, hypnotized, as always, by the glamour which they find in strokes of good luck and audacity, the people offered up this fashionable prayer with a shout:

'Long live the Emperor!'

But, amidst the lulls within this tempest of triumph, a faint voice rose from near the mystical railings. The old man sat, his head thrown back against the pillory of his bars, rolling his vacant orbs towards the sky, forgotten by the people whose true prayer he alone seemed to express – the prayer that lay hidden beneath their cheers, a secret, private prayer, – and he, the intercessionary prophet, chanted like a psalm his now mysterious phrase:

'Please, take pity on a poor blind man!'

*

That day saw a great parade on the Champs-Élysées!

It is now *ten* fleeting years since those sunny celebrations! Same sounds, same voices, same smoke! And yet the tumult of public joy was somewhat muted. A shadow haunted everyone's eyes. The usual salvos fired from the grounds of the Prytaneum⁶ reverberated this time with the distant

roar of the batteries at our forts. And the people were already straining their ears, trying to make out answering fire from the approaching enemy guns in the echoes.

The governor passed by, directing his smiles at all and sundry, guided by the ambling trot of his fine horse.⁷ Reassured by the confidence that a well-turned-out uniform always inspires, the people alternated between patriotic songs and the military applause with which they honoured this soldier's presence.

But the syllables of their previous impassioned cheer had changed; the frenzied people offered up this fashionable prayer:

'Long live the Republic!'

And over there, near the sublime portal, you could still make out the solitary voice of Lazarus. This Mouthpiece for the unspoken thoughts of the people did not change; he didn't veer from his old, rigid lamentation.

The true soul of these festivities, lifting his extinguished eyes to the heavens, he cried out, during the silences, in the tone of one making an observation:

'Please, take pity on a poor blind man!'

*

That day saw a great parade on the Champs-Élysées!

It is now *nine* insupportable years since that clouded sunshine!

Oh! Same rumblings! Same clash of arms! Same whinnying! Even more muted than the previous year but shrill, nevertheless.

'Long live the Commune!' the people proclaimed to the passing wind.

And the voice of that secular Chosen One, the representative of the Unfortunate, was still to be heard, over there at the holy portal, repeating its corrective refrain to the one idea of these people. Tilting his head up towards the sky, he groaned in the shadows:

'Please, take pity on a poor blind man!'

*

And two moons later, accompanied by the dying vibrations of the tocsin whilst the Generalissimo in charge of the regular forces of the State reviewed his two hundred thousand rifles, still smoking, alas, from the sad civil war, the terrified people, with one eye on the buildings burning in the distance, cried:

'Long live the Marshal!'⁸

Down there, by the salubrious enclosure, the immutable Voice, the voice of that veteran of human Poverty, repeated his machine-like, dolorous and pitiless obscuration:

'Please, take pity on a poor blind man!'

*

And, since then, from year to year, from parade to parade, from clamour to clamour, whatever name the people have hurled up into space with their cheers, anyone listening attentively to the sounds of the earth can always make out, amidst the loudest of the revolutionary shouts and bellicose celebrations that follow, the distant Voice, the *true* Voice, the intimate Voice of the terrible, symbolic Beggar! – the Night Watchman who keeps the exact hour of the People – the incorruptible custodian of the citizens' conscience, the one who pieces together the Crowd's occult prayer and encapsulates its sighs.

The Inflexible Pontiff of Fraternity, this Official bearer of physical blindness, has never ceased, in his role as unconscious intercessor, to invoke divine charity for his brothers in thought.

And when the People, drunk on fanfares, bells and fusillades, troubled by this din of flattery, endeavour vainly to disguise from themselves their own true prayer, under whatever mendacious syllables of enthusiasm, this man, the Beggar, face turned to the Heavens, arms uplifted, groping in the depths of his Shadows, stretches up in the eternal threshold of the Church – and, in a voice that is ever more piteous, but that seems to travel beyond the stars, still calls out his prophetic corrective:

‘Please, take pity on a poor blind man!’

¹ From the maxim, *Vox populi, vox Dei*: ‘The voice of the People is the voice of God’. Gustave Flaubert used the full phrase as an epigraph to his *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* (written c. 1879).

² Villiers was a friend and admirer of the French poet, Charles Marie René Leconte de Lisle (1818–1894), who was a leading figure in the Parnassian movement in Paris.

³ This epigraph probably derives from the siege of Paris during 1870. A dark lantern includes a slide or other arrangement by which the light emitted can be concealed. The Editors of the Pléiade edition of Villiers’s works suggest that this joke about rendering a dark lantern useless by employing it as a cafetière may have a symbolic value.

⁴ Given the first publication of ‘Vox Populi’ in 1880, this probably refers to celebrations for the birthday of Emperor Napoleon III during August 1868.

⁵ A ‘parvis’ is an enclosed area in front of a church or cathedral. During the 1850s and 60s Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann cleared the area around the Cathedral of Notre Dame, widening the square in front of it. Villiers’s beggar is probably imagined as sitting by the railings installed before the great front portals of the cathedral.

⁶ The military college in Paris.

⁷ The crowd cheer General Louis-Jules Trochu (1815–1896), appointed Governor of Paris in 1870 to conduct its defence in the face of the collapse of the Second Empire and imminent invasion by the Prussians.

⁸ Marshal Patrice de Mac Mahon (1808–1893). In May 1871, he bloodily suppressed the revolutionary government known as the Commune, set up by Parisian radicals in response to the surrender of the French government to Prussia. Mac Mahon became President of the Third French Republic between 1873 and 1879.

The Ecology of Suffering

Thinking with the Elements in Decadent Literature

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How should one seek out a suitable place to suffer in the world? What would a city built for sorrow look like? And what sort of elemental conditions or precise ecosystem would it need for the right amount of melancholy to thrive? In 2019, the American poet and essayist Anne Boyer published a literary meditation on her cancer diagnosis in *The New Yorker*. In it, she detailed the blueprints of a space for communal grief that she had dreamed up long ago:

Before I got sick, I'd been making plans for a place for public weeping, hoping to install in major cities a temple where anyone who needed it could get together to cry in good company and with the proper equipment. It would be a precisely imagined architecture of sadness: gargoyles made of night sweat, moldings made of longest minutes, support beams made of *I-can't-go-on-I-must-go-on*.¹

Boyer writes how she took pleasure in envisioning how this gathering of distraught bodies might enrage societies at large because it would expose the exquisite, rotten truth – that suffering is what is shared – and something in this idea, with its prodding of ugly societal ethics and its excessive indulgence in the luxuries of sadness, feels potently decadent. If fin-de-siècle European writers and artists had contributed to a decadent handbook of suffering, what advice might it have included? What maps would they have drawn up, and where would they have told us to go?

Throughout the course of this essay, I intend to work towards finding answers to some of these questions primarily through the close reading of two decadent texts – Georges Rodenbach's 1892 novella *Bruges-la-Morte* and Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* [*Death in Venice*], first published in 1912 – alongside a small constellation of other secondary texts that will act as further critical coordinates towards my final argument. Each of these novellas, set in different European cities and written almost two decades apart, intertwine, I will argue, through the language of the elements. The protagonists of both stories opt to travel to aqueous cities with suffocating atmospheres in order to buttress their respective experiences of grief and desire, and it is for this

reason that of the four elements – water, fire, earth, and air – I have chosen to hone in specifically on the shaping presences of water and air.

Ultimately, I aim to propose the beginnings of a framework for a decadent ecology of suffering. In order to do this, I have structured my argument into several parts. The first, ‘Mapping Out a Place to Mourn’, sets out the parameters of my thesis and offers some critical explorations into both the nature of living in cities at the times in which these novels were set, and the uses of elemental language to extract stories of human sorrow from within their very infrastructures. In part two, ‘Where the Sea Meets the Sky’, I attempt to unpick the importance of thresholds in maintaining the precarious elemental dreamworlds each of the protagonists have conjured for themselves. Finally, in ‘Towards A Process of Mattering’, I present some concluding observations on what happens to the narratives of these stories when their elemental equilibrium is disrupted, and how this may alter our reading of them in years to come.

Mapping Out a Place to Mourn

Was the place to be loved for its life or for its beautiful death?²

When attempting to conjure an image of Boyer’s temple of tears, Rodenbach’s description of Bruges in ‘The Death Throes of Towns’ – the essay he wrote to accompany *Bruges-la-Morte* – is especially apt for inspiration:

And in the prison of those quais of stone [...] there is the eternal weeping, the streaming and dripping of the gutters, the drains and sporadic springs, the overflow from the roofs [...] like a great euphony of sobbing and inexhaustible tears.³

Rodenbach paints the picture of a tormented, porous place made up of the elements of suffering, and the town appears as a body, breathing and leaking, ‘shivering in the bareness of its stones’ while its very bones are ‘the tears of things in which one truly senses an almost human sorrow’.⁴

Just as Boyer’s temple would likely cause uproar, so too did Rodenbach’s depiction of Bruges. As Alan Hollinghurst notes, at the time that *Bruges-la-Morte* was published there was talk of ‘reopening the city to the modern world after centuries of decline brought about by the silting-

up of its old sea-canal' and thus the people of Bruges did not take kindly to Rodenbach's representation of it as cold and dead.⁵ Rodenbach writes of the North Sea retreating in 1475, leaving Bruges to dry up, its remaining waters becoming stagnant. The sombre medieval architecture of the city is empathetic to the sorrow of the people that pass through it, and it suffers with them, providing architectural, atmospheric company for human misery. In the novel, Rodenbach goes on to directly highlight the elemental importance of Bruges to the story's mood, writing, 'in Bruges a miracle of the climate has produced some mysterious chemistry of the atmosphere'.⁶

In both novellas studied here, the protagonist grieves for a dead wife while finding a new obsession to stalk. *Death in Venice* follows the story of Gustav von Aschenbach, an ageing writer who travels to Venice for a break. While there, he finds himself so taken by the beauty of a young boy, Tadzio, that he fails to notice the ominous disease that is beginning to pervade Venice's streets. In *Bruges-la-Morte*, the widower Hugues Viane arrives in Bruges, having selected his destination because 'he needed a dead town to correspond to his dead wife. His deep mourning demanded such a setting' (p. 30). He then becomes obsessed with a mysterious woman, later identified as a dancer called Jane, who is the very image of his dead wife.

On the subject of still, cold waters, in *Monsters Under Glass* (2018) Jane Desmarais quotes Donald Flanell Friedman:

The watery depths and blindly meandering passageways of the canal city provide a structural paradigm for both the unconscious mind and a stygian zone, site of narcotized underworld voyage, by turns paradisaical and infernal, lenitive and tormented.⁷

These words feel pertinent to the reading of *Death in Venice* too, because although Italy's waters are not cold and northern, they were, at the time, wrapped up in notions of sickness due to the nineteenth-century cholera outbreak that forms the backdrop of infectious threat in Mann's novel.

Desmarais writes that Belgian writing at the time *Bruges-la-Morte* was published was 'rooted in [...] the spirit of geographic place. Poets used concrete imagery to suggest abstract states of mind and the exterior became an index for the interior'.⁸ We find this everywhere in Rodenbach's

text, and we learn that Hugues ‘liked to walk, looking for analogies to his grief in deserted canals’ (p. 26). This is true also of Mann. Both writers chose places upon which they could map the vicissitudes of grief and desire, and in each of these cities two adventures unfold simultaneously: one physically, with the protagonists guided by the waterways, and one mentally, into the very heart of human suffering. In *Death in Venice*, we learn of Aschenbach’s love of a motto by Frederic the Great – ‘durchhalten!’, meaning ‘to last’ or ‘to soldier on’ – because to him it ‘epitomised a manly ethos of suffering action’.⁹ Hugues too, it would seem, is a disciple of this cult of male suffering action.

There is an elemental gaze present in the decadent texts I am studying here; one in which the forms of cities and bodies fold into one another and merge through the language of the elements. Both towns and people are sick in these stories; both towns and people are dying. ‘He was already starting to resemble the town’, writes Rodenbach of Hugues as he spins further into his own madness (p. 90). Will Stone points out that in *Bruges-la-Morte* the different elementally charged parts of the town (the windmills, for instance) conspire as ‘agents of melancholia’, seeming to Rodenbach to be ‘grinding down [...] the sky’.¹⁰ This is as if the elements are mouldable, like pigments tinted to our moods. Emphasising this notion, Rodenbach writes: ‘It is as if the frequent mists, the veiled light [...] the granite [...] the incessant rain [...] had combined to influence the colour of the air’ (p. 61). The cultural and literary episodes which are combined under the umbrella term ‘fin de siècle’ include both decadence and symbolism, each of them thematically intertwining in myriad ways, each of them drawing on the era’s greatest anxieties. As a result, the literary and artistic production of the time is full of phantoms and split selves, grotesque doublings, uneasy slippages between sleeping and drowning, and the morbid threat of infection. Perhaps most importantly, emerging scientific theories of the time were of great allure, in ways both exciting and unbelievably terrifying.

‘Water makes death elemental’, wrote Gaston Bachelard in his seminal text *Water and Dreams* (1942), ‘for certain souls, *water is the matter of despair*’.¹¹ Two such souls are found in

Aschenbach and Hugues, and we are truly able to understand the importance of water to their stories. In *Bruges-la-Morte*, for instance, Hugues is found resting his head against the cool window-pane in order to feel ‘the freshness of water in which to soak away all his anguish’ (p. 122). But while water is crucial to the fabric of each narrative, it is perhaps air that really drives the elemental progression forward, as both an aesthetically and atmospherically shaping presence, as this line in *Bruges-la-Morte* demonstrates: ‘Every town is a state of mind, a mood which, after only a short stay, communicates itself, spreads to us in an effluvia which impregnates us, which we absorb with the very air’ (p. 93). Wherever there are types of water explored in these texts – seas, lagoons, canals, tears – so too are there types of air. Airiness is often used to describe the natures of Jane and Tadzio early on in these novels (as I will demonstrate later in this essay), but air can be a darkening force too. It can become thick, affecting breathing and vision in ways that water cannot, as in this scene in *Death in Venice*:

An unpleasant sultriness pervaded the narrow streets; the air was so thick that the exhalations from houses and shops, and hot food stalls, the reek of oil, the smell of perfume and many other odours hung about in clouds instead of dispersing. Cigarette smoke lingered and was slow to dissipate.

Odours and clouds, smoke and heat. An ecosystem of the senses invoked through types of air emerges here. It continues:

The further he went, the more overwhelmingly he was afflicted [...] caused by a combination of the sea air with the sirocco, a condition of simultaneous excitement and exhaustion [...] the sickening stench from the canals made it difficult to breathe.
(p. 228)

The elements are mingling and the result is both an emotional and a physical human response. In *Bruges-la-Morte*, we see ‘drifts of mist gathering’ in the town and Hugues subsequently feeling ‘the pervasive fog flooding his soul’ (p. 89). Likewise, as the sirocco picks up in *Death in Venice*, the mood changes and the city becomes gloomy and threatening. ‘Every wind that blows makes a difference [...] each change in air matters in the fabric of existence’, write Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino in ‘Coda: Wandering Elements and Natures to Come’, which I will draw from more closely in the final section.¹² Just before the zenith of *Death in Venice*’s action, Aschenbach

finds himself wishing ‘if only [...] he had taken a chance on acclimatising himself to Venice or waiting for the wind to change’, highlighting the true importance of climate and man needing to find a way to work together (p. 229).

In *Bruges-la-Morte*, we are told that ‘in the muted atmosphere of the waterways [...] Hugues was less sensitive to the sufferings of his heart’ (p. 33). This is an example of the ‘spiritual stagnation’ that Desmarais tells us Charles Baudelaire incited in later symbolists.¹³ To look for a place without weather is impossible, though this passage suggests it may have been Hugues’ ultimate desire, and so instead he seeks out a place to dull his senses, and this is satisfactory, at least for a while. Lamentably, however, the elements have the power to enliven even the deadest of places, as each of these protagonists come to find out.

Where the Sea Meets the Sky

I am living in a real phantasmagoria [...] all around me dreams and mirages.¹⁴

When the Belgian symbolist painter Léon Spilliaert wrote the letter from which the above evocative words are taken, it was 1920 and he was informing a friend of his return to his home in Ostend after an extended period of travelling. For Spilliaert, this coastal city was a profoundly elemental place, where the sea meets the sky, lived in and loved by other painters he admired, including James Ensor. Spilliaert had wanted to connect with Ensor, but the older painter was reportedly irritated by the young man. The story goes that Ensor once caught Spilliaert following him through the streets.¹⁵ It is poetic to imagine this strange, spectral figure stalking the object of his interests through dusky streets, footsteps quick and light on the stone, just as Hugues did when following Jane in *Bruges-la-Morte*, and Aschenbach did while trailing Tadzio in *Death in Venice*.

There is a particular work by Spilliaert entitled *The Shipwrecked Man*, painted in 1926, in which an apparitional figure floats above a long, low boat. The water it travels upon is visualized as undulating washes of Prussian blue and grey dulled to almost-black by crepuscular light, and it slices right across the painting. Many of Spilliaert’s paintings probe this elemental threshold, with

rivers and seas and prismatic shafts of light carving through the centres of landscapes, separating painter from scene, or scene from audience. In Spilliaert's paintings, writes Desmarais, 'we encounter images of a subjective world that evoke anxiety and depression'.¹⁶ Spilliaert's vision emerges from a particularly Belgian strain of symbolism, often equating dreams and mental states with the weather, and this same preoccupation is powerfully present in Rodenbach's work.¹⁷

Rodenbach constantly refers to thresholds and gaps in his writings, and his letters especially, as highlighted by Hollinghurst, show the idea of separation as being important to his thinking:

Truly to love one's little homeland, it is best to go away, to exile oneself for ever [...] and for the homeland to grow so distant it seems to die [...]. The essence of art that is at all noble is the DREAM, and this dream dwells only upon what is distant, absent, vanished, unattainable.¹⁸

Both Hugues and Aschenbach are at their calmest when in states of half-reverie, and able to walk the canal's edges or sit on the shore in such a state, to dream, recall or imagine. The person-objects of their affections – Jane and Tazio respectively – and their shapeless recollections – each of their dead wives – are only truly alluring as long as they feel unreachable, as if behind glass, underwater, or made of vapour. However, what happens in the lacunae is often what intensifies or upends the narratives. Consider this moment from *Death in Venice*:

Under a pallid overcast sky the sea lay sluggishly still and shrunken-looking, with the horizon in prosaic proximity [...]. When Aschenbach opened his window he thought he could smell the stagnant air of the lagoon. Vexation overcame him. (p. 221)

The turning of the elements is unpleasant to Aschenbach, and it inspires rage within him. The elements are kept at bay in a number of pointed ways in the early pages of these novels, but when they do rush in, they alter and overwhelm the moods of Hugues and Aschenbach.

In *Death in Venice*, Mann is preoccupied with the exact meeting-places of the elements. He writes of Aschenbach finding 'the sensuous ease at the brink of the element' (p. 223) when on the beach, and shortly after, he watches Tazio emerging from the water:

And to behold this living figure, lovely and austere in its early masculinity, with dripping locks and beautiful as a young god, approaching out of the depths of the sky and the sea, rising and escaping from the elements [...]. (p. 227)

The idea that Tadzio should be escaping, as if in danger, gives an important indicator to the power Mann attributes to the elements. That same sense of foreboding is present in Hugues' experience, as we find him perpetually seeking to remain at the very edge of that elemental threshold; just enough to keep the dream alive, but not so far as to burst the bubble: 'Above all he felt a horror at the idea of being left alone, face to face with this town, without anyone between him and it anymore'.¹⁹ The thing between him and the town, that is somehow holding together the atmosphere he is cultivating, is Jane. What Spilliaert's paintings can teach us visually about vibrating at the precipice of changing matter are, I argue, the same things Mann and Rodenbach attempted to show us in language about the substance of sorrow, or grief, or suffering as it changes.

Where the elements combine, Opperman and Iovino write, a 'unique ecology' emerges, and in that process is disclosed 'surprising worlds, challenging narratives, the tangling of nature's chain'.²⁰ For the unique ecologies of both *Death in Venice* and *Bruges-la-Morte* to be maintained, and for their cycles of suffering to be able to renew, each of the protagonists would need to remain oscillating indefinitely at the edge of elements, but of course this is not possible. Both narratives culminate in death, but only one protagonist dies. Why is this? In the final part of this essay, I will endeavour to investigate what happens when the elemental equilibrium of these stories is tipped too far in one direction or another.

Towards A Process of Mattering

what is there to talk about, if not what is in the atmosphere everywhere?²¹

In *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water and Fire* (2015) the cosmic philosophy of the Greek pre-Socratic Empedocles is reassessed. Empedocles thought of all 'world-process as the product of the combination and separation of the four elements [...] under the influence of Love

and Strife'.²² That is to suggest that all of Earth's matter, and all of our experiences within it, are composed of the four elements in varying combinations; some woven together by love, and others torn apart by strife. As summed up by Opperman and Iovino in their coda to this essay collection, the largely outgrown science of the elements needs to be revisited, and a renewed intimacy with literary uses of the elements in centuries past holds the potential to help us re-frame contemporary environmental ethics:

Elemental ecocriticism wants to show that the elements *matter* and follow the forms qua stories that their mattering assumes. The narratives emerging from this process of mattering are stories of returns and encounters [...] humans may be just an elemental episode, but [...] the way we narrate stories, and the stories themselves, can shape the earth(s) to come.²³

Later, they write of reanimating stories that make use of the lexicon of the elements, 'to make them glow with renewed meaning'.²⁴ Decadent texts are particularly powerful to relate to in this process of mattering. Each of the works studied here is a thinking, feeling text that probes the texture and terms of raw human emotion. Their words breathe and sweat, and for all their grotesquerie, they are deeply empathetic to the substances of suffering and ennui, and all of this is achieved through richly elemental language.

Concluding her essay on hothouses and aquariums in decadent literature, Desmarais writes:

Filtered through the splenetic and surreal tendencies of Decadence and Symbolism, they become modern metaphors for human isolation and serve as continuous reminders of human destructiveness. They leave unsettling impressions of man's relationship to the natural world, and dramatise his retreat from or defeat by forces beyond his control and his failure to look after the environment; they are metaphors of individual despair, political inadequacy and social delinquency.²⁵

Illuminated behind glass, elemental processes are placed under a microscope, maintained in precise ecosystems, and slowed enough for us to see in decadent literature. Both *Bruges-la-Morte* and *Death in Venice* are stories of individual despair, but so too are they set against backdrops of social unrest, the rapid modernization of cities and the political choices that were having a grave effect on human lives at the time. It could be suggested, then, that each of these novels function as aquariums or dioramas, focusing on single lives that act as microcosms for far larger climates of anxiety.

‘Retreat from or defeat by’ are words to draw from too. The two protagonists of the novels I have studied here would, I suggest, each exemplify one of these routes. Both Hugues and Aschenbach are solitary men on similar paths, but the elemental make-up of their solitudes lead them to very different fates. Where Hugues allows the elements to swell his anger into usable force, Aschenbach succumbs to them completely. Hugues ends up committing a murder, whereas Aschenbach does not make it to the end of his novel alive. Each of these stories teaches us about the ecosystems of suffering, but also about how humans weather emotional sorrow. ‘Weathering’ has a double meaning that is crucial to reading these novels differently, because weathering is both erosion by the elements, and resilience against them. Aschenbach became eroded; Hugues chose resilience.

Rodenbach and Mann often describe the energies of their protagonists. In *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach is portrayed as a man preoccupied with the ‘constant harnessing of his energies’ (p. 203), and with a fondness for ‘ordering energy’ (p. 202). In *Bruges-la-Morte* Rodenbach writes that Hugues wants to ‘feel his last energies silt up, slowly but surely grind to a halt beneath this fine dust of eternity’ (p. 62). In both novels, the material states of these energies transform as the narratives wear on. In *Death in Venice*, Mann writes the following on the subject of solitude: ‘The observations and encounters of a devotee of solitude and silence are at once less distinct and more penetrating than those of the sociable man; his thoughts are weightier, stranger, and never without a tinge of sadness’ (p. 218). This idea of weight, or heaviness, and its relationship to suffering, is woven throughout both novels in an elemental way. Mann writes of Aschenbach’s ‘solitude which has been full of hard [...] sufferings and struggles’ (p. 207). This use of ‘hard’ can arguably be read as difficult, but also as dense and with the capacity to weigh on the soul. In *Bruges-la-Morte*, images of Jane begin as airy and watery. Early in the novel she is described as ‘an apparition [...] a dream [...] with a slow, fluid gait’ (p. 35), whom Hugues wants to ‘drink in’ (p. 41). To further accentuate her fluid impermanence, the other women of the town could not seem more solid. Those

performing next to Jane are clunky to Hugues, 'like wooden dolls' (p. 46), and later, he indicates a group of 'women with their faces of old ivory' (p. 71).

Mann employs this same technique in *Death in Venice*. The townspeople who approach Aschenbach are described at length with hard and ugly adjectives. Often they appear as animalistic figures, with skin leathered by the elements, and their descriptions are tinged with heaviness. Aschenbach's gondolier is 'displeasing, indeed brutal' (p. 215) in appearance, Tazio's governess is of 'corpulent' (p. 220) build and his sisters are solemn-faced, dressed in 'stiff' blue linen (p. 222). Meanwhile, Tazio enters the scene with grace, phantom-like, as if floating, murmuring words in his 'soft liquescent language' (p. 222).

Slowly, in *Bruges-la-Morte*, Jane's behaviour begins to disrupt the elemental balance of the narrative. As she mocks Hugues' dead wife's dresses, the atmosphere between them begins to become 'polluted' (p. 69). This is where we can pinpoint the catalyst of elemental change in Hugues' vision of Jane. From here, Jane is often referred to as hard, in lines such as 'Hugues was suffering [...] Jane's face had acquired a certain hardness' (p. 102) and later, as 'expressionless, hard' (p. 122). Slowly and violently she loses her lightness. Where once Hugues had decided that 'as long as they were kept at a distance, with the mists of death between them, the illusion remained possible', eventually Jane's fluidity hardens entirely (p. 86). We find her finally portrayed as 'glacial', and her very presence is said to have 'placed more barriers of ice between them' than could be overcome in the end (p. 124). Hugues blames Jane entirely, believing that 'the weight of sorrow [had] accumulated in his soul because of her' (p. 107).

As Hugues' rage bloats beyond all reason, the atmosphere in the town intensifies as if in chorus: 'The poplars beside the water moaned' and 'the swans [...] were alarmed, emotional, fevered, tearing the watered silk of the canal [...] like a sick man thrashing about' (p. 109). On the last morning Hugues wakes up in the novel – the last morning Jane will spend alive – the air suddenly has a 'fineness' again, and the 'sky carries a hint of joy' (p. 115). This is perhaps best read as the calm before the storm. The very same thing happens to Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* when

he decides to leave the city: ‘When he opened his windows in the morning [...] the air seemed fresher, and – he began even now to regret his decision’ (p. 229). His journey away from Venice is described with creaking arduousness as ‘a voyage of sorrow’ (p. 230) while the boat’s journey back towards it is fast and full of light, ‘with spray tossing before its boughs’ and Aschenbach is barely able to contain his bubbling excitement (p. 232). Back on the beach, ‘the sea had turned pale green, the air seemed clearer and purer’ (p. 233). Suddenly the elements have conspired, shifted the weather into more pleasurable circumstances and enticed Aschenbach to stay – which, of course, he does, and this decision leads to his eventual demise.

It is also worth highlighting that the cholera spreading through the city and shaping the backdrop to *Death in Venice* is described in its most acute form as ‘the “dry” type, which is the most dangerous of all’ (p. 257). Mann is at pains to explain the science of the illness to the reader, describing how heat warms the water and creates the perfect breeding ground for the virus to spread, and how bodies that succumb to the disease go through a gradual process of massive fluid loss that eventually kills them. This is surely not just empty indulgence in the lexicon of disease, but another way to reinforce that elemental drying up leads to death. In *Bruges-la-Morte*, as Jane dies, she assumes her final elemental composition and evaporates, emitting a ‘sigh, like the breath from a bubble expiring on the surface of the water’ (p. 128).

Elements are energy, and the cyclical nature of elemental processes is what keeps the world moving, but they can also drain us, and this is what happens to the men of *Bruges-la-Morte* and *Death in Venice*. In the introduction to his translation of *Death in Venice*, David Luke suggests that ‘it is structurally necessary that “Aschenbach’s” experience should be brought full cycle [...] it was needed to restore the balance after “sensuality” had triumphed’.²⁶ If this same theory of cyclical process were to be applied to *Bruges-la-Morte*, one might imagine that it was crucial for Hugues to destroy the person he believed was causing his suffering in order to break his own cycle.

How do we get from water to steam, or solid to liquid in each of these stories? Is it the protagonist’s emotions that shape the elements, or the opposite? In each case, a precarious

decadent ecology of suffering needs to be maintained in order to perpetuate the cyclical nature of suffering. The final lines of ‘The Death Throes of Towns’ read as follows:

And in the vast mystic enclosure [...] one gradually submits to the creeping counsel of the stones, and I imagine that a soul, bleeding from some recent, cruel sorrow, that had walked amidst this silence, would leave that place accepting the order of things – not to live any longer – and, beside the neighbouring lake, sense what those gravediggers of Shakespeare said of Ophelia: it is not she who goes to the waters, but the water which comes to meet her grief.²⁷

The small constellation of decadent texts studied in this essay undoubtedly demonstrates to us, in the most decadent of ways, what nature can do to the human mind at the most elemental level, and how humanity can infect the world in return. Our reading of these texts will shift across the centuries, but their relevance will endure precisely because that relationship will always exist. The two literary labyrinths conjured out of the stones of real cities and brought forth by Rodenbach and Mann each offer aquatic, breathing spaces in which the elements come to meet the pain of the protagonists, and by proxy, to meet us too.

¹ Anne Boyer, ‘What Cancer Takes Away’, *The New Yorker*, 8 April 2019

<<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/04/15/what-cancer-takes-away>> [accessed 6 May 2020].

² Alan Hollinghurst, ‘Introduction’ to Georges Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, trans. by Mike Mitchell (London: Dedalus, 2005), p. 11.

³ Georges Rodenbach, ‘The Death Throes of Towns’, in *Bruges-la-Morte*, pp. 141–61 (p. 149).

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 141, 149–50.

⁵ Hollinghurst, p. 11.

⁶ Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, p. 61. All subsequent references to this novella are cited parenthetically in the text.

⁷ Donald Flannell Friedman, ‘Belgian Symbolist Poetry: Regionalism and Cosmopolitanism’, in *Comparative Literature Now: Theories and Practice*, ed. by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Milan V. Dimić with Irene Sywenky (Paris: Champion, 1999), pp. 365–74 (p. 369), quoted in Jane Desmarais, *Monsters Under Glass: A Cultural History of Hothouse Flowers from 1850 to the Present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), pp. 191–92.

⁸ Desmarais, p. 185.

⁹ Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice and Other Stories*, trans. by David Luke (London: Vintage, 1988), p. 204. All subsequent references to *Death in Venice* are cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁰ Will Stone, *Poems – Georges Rodenbach* (Cornwall: Arc Publications, 2017), p. 14.

¹¹ Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. by Edith R. Farrell (Texas: The Pegasus Foundation, 1983), p. 92. Emphasis in original.

¹² Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino, ‘Coda: Wandering Elements and Natures to Come’, in *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water and Fire*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), pp. 310–17 (p. 311).

¹³ Desmarais, p. 183.

¹⁴ Léon Spilliaert, as quoted in Laura Cumming, ‘Discovering the art of Léon Spilliaert, Belgium’s unsung genius’, *The Guardian*, 9 February 2020 <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/feb/09/leon-spilliaert-belgian-artist-ostend-royal-academy>> [accessed 2 May 2020].

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Desmarais, p. 185.

¹⁷ This year, the first monographic exhibition of Spilliaert's work in the UK was organized by the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in collaboration with the Musée d'Orsay, Paris (23 February–25 May 2020, extended to 20 September 2020 due to Covid-19). The paintings in this exhibition ranged from his self-portraits to the more dreamlike depictions of the North Sea coast.

¹⁸ Rodenbach, quoted by Hollinghurst, p. 14.

¹⁹ Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, p. 108.

²⁰ Opperman and Iovino, pp. 312–13.

²¹ Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, p. 100.

²² Edwin L Minar Jr., 'Cosmic Periods in the Philosophy of Empedocles', *Phronesis*, 8.2 (1963), 127-45 (p. 127).

²³ Opperman and Iovino, p. 316.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Desmarais, p. 206.

²⁶ David Luke, 'Introduction' to *Death in Venice and Other Stories*, pp. vii-xliv (p. xlii).

²⁷ Rodenbach, 'The Death Throes of Towns', in *Bruges-la-Morte*, p. 161.

'Le Freak, c'est Chic': Decadence and Disco

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The optimistic beats of 1970s and 1980s disco might seem a strange comparison to the decadent tradition's obsession with rot. Decadent legacies are, however, to be found in disco, with the acknowledgment that decadence after the fin de siècle is difficult to explicitly label. This article investigates the influences of decadence on disco. It does so by exploring similarities between the two cultures: how they were conceived alongside ideas of decline, how they were both criticized as 'other', the relationship between nineteenth-century dandyism and late twentieth-century popular culture, and how both movements put emphasis upon refinement. This analysis builds upon existing studies that link decadence to twentieth-century popular culture, and sets itself apart by specifically examining decadence's relationship to disco, a topic that remains largely undiscussed. Overall, this article suggests that, although it was a distinct culture with utopian elements, disco incorporated aspects of decadence and disseminated these into mainstream American society.

Decadence comes to America

The Victorians widely believed the historical theory that ancient Rome's fall was due to its success; a lack of obstacles enabled the Roman elite to complacently degenerate towards effeminacy, weakness, hedonism, and corruption. With an emphasis upon classical learning at European educational institutions, such as schools, museums, and universities, the Roman empire was considered a past parallel to contemporary European empires. Rome served as both an inspiration (in administration, architecture, sculpture, etc.) and a warning to European elites about becoming lax with imperial successes. Mainstream beliefs about art were related to such notions; it was widely believed that art should maintain societal discipline and function to morally educate people.

Decadent art, and the transgressive lifestyles of decadents, were a refusal of this. The decadents viewed contemporary European powers as already old and exhausted civilizations that were in terminal decline; there were even some artistic sentiments that the world itself would soon end. In highlighting decline, they sought to embrace it. Decadent artists rejected bourgeois Victorian values of industriousness and moral conviction, instead emphasizing apathy, overindulgence, aristocratic refinement, and Victorian notions of perversity including unconventional sexuality.

Decadent attitudes were not confined to Europe. While traces of American decadence were found in Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds* (1942), recent studies have highlighted the impact of decadent artists such as Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, and Joris-Karl Huysmans on literature in America.¹ In *Decadent Culture in the United States* (2008), David Weir argues that European decadent ideas were transported into American society and circulated through a commercialized popular culture.² Weir has suggested that decadence had a particular influence on the cultures of America's large cities, such as New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco. He has noted: 'whatever coloration decadence takes, it is typically the expression – the projection – of urban experience'.³ Similar to its European manifestations, this included emphasis on hedonism, flamboyance, sexuality, and moral transgression.

It is difficult to definitively label American expressions of decadence. Kate Hext and Alex Murray have noted that 'decadence' is a broad and slippery term: 'decadence after the fin de siècle is even more difficult to detect and ultimately define than it was at the fin de siècle. [...] Decadence was not a movement as such after the imprisonment of Wilde'.⁴ Whether or not manifestations of decadence in American popular culture were decadence per se, influences could be observed in the urban cultures of 1920s America, such as in opulent jazz parties.⁵ Murray has argued that the writings of F. Scott Fitzgerald were indebted to decadent influences and that he 'saw in the model of European decadence a presentiment of the decline of the American culture that had for so long considered itself the antithesis of old Europe'.⁶ Likewise, Alice Condé has argued that:

every decadent moment of Western cultural anxiety is accompanied by a subculture of almost nihilistic hedonism encompassing sexual licence, self-obsession, and fascination with degeneration. [...] The pleasure-seeking excess of the Roaring Twenties was a reaction to the economic prosperity and modernity after The Great War.⁷

New York, 1970s Declinism, and Disco

Similar anxieties could be seen in the 1970s. Despite being the undisputed western superpower of the later twentieth century, to many Americans the 1970s seemed a period of decline of the nation's power, stability and morals.⁸ The Vietnam War which ended in 1975 seemed a decisive defeat for the military, and many people felt that atrocities committed in the conflict had undermined America's international reputation as a moral nation. At the tail-end of the post-war economic boom there were energy crises and strained labour relations as well as high rates of inflation and slow economic growth. Politically, discontent was expressed through popular protest such as the anti-Vietnam War movement. Violent groups such as the Black Panthers existed, and the Watergate scandal undermined the integrity of the presidency.

America's urban centres were depicted as the failure of America's post-war optimism and the epitome of a perceived moral decline. Numerous films of the decade portray New York as a dangerous hellscape where traditional values of respect and stability have been replaced by crime, corruption, and substance abuse. These include *Shaft* (1971), *Serpico* (1973), *Mean Streets* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), and *The Warriors* (1979). The 1981 sci-fi classic *Escape from New York* would even imagine New York as a city so infested with crime that in the future it would be abandoned by law enforcement with a giant wall being built around it, turning it into one giant prison roamed by violent and lawless gangs.

These depictions had real-world parallels. Since the 1960s there had been talk of New York as being an 'ungovernable mess'.⁹ Years of 'white flight' of affluent citizens towards the suburbs had resulted in a lack of tax revenue for the centre. The city had lost manufacturing jobs, making more citizens dependent on welfare.¹⁰ It had colossal debts and could not afford to pay police officers, the fire brigade or for trash collections.¹¹ In 1975, when the city was near bankruptcy, the

police and firefighter unions produced a nightmarish pamphlet for their members to distribute to tourists. The cover featured an illustration of the Grim Reaper and was titled 'WELCOME TO FEAR CITY', with the subtitle, 'a survival guide for visitors to the city of New York'.¹² Advice included not leaving the Manhattan area, never using public transport ('you should never ride the subway for any reason whatsoever'), and staying off the streets after 6pm.¹³ This was politicized and exaggerated propaganda, but it played into existing anxieties about the city's condition.

Although New York was often portrayed as an urban nightmare, the city was culturally energetic, producing punk and hip-hop in the same decade. It was also from this environment that the dance scene which would later be labelled 'disco' emerged. New York's dance scene was influenced by David Mancuso's parties in The Loft, beginning in the 1960s.¹⁴ Mancuso was inspired by the writings of Timothy Leary, who advocated psychedelic drugs as a form of emancipatory experimentation, capable of helping people discover a higher state of consciousness. Mancuso tailored The Loft in appearance, sound, and audience (it was invite-only) so as to create an environment of inclusivity. Tim Lawrence has described Mancuso's parties as being a type of experimental socialism: 'it was social, and contained the possibility of collective politics'.¹⁵ This utopianism can be contrasted with decadence's pessimistic obsession with decline. There were, however, similarities in the creative confidence that fin-de-siècle decadence and 1970s disco encouraged. The collective security of The Loft, as would be seen in discotheques across New York that replicated its success, created space for self-expression. While drugs would often assist the experiences of dancers, the music and shared experiences of the crowd in themselves would enable the sort of emancipatory self-realization that Leary attributed to psychedelics. Against the backdrop of hardship in inner city New York, togetherness was especially important for self-expression.¹⁶ The city was a cultural melting pot in which discotheques were inclusive spaces where people from different backgrounds could come together and dance without persecution. While this included male heterosexual dancers, it was particularly emancipating for women. One sociologist's opinion on the appeal of disco later in the decade was that: 'it talks to women. It tells

them you'll be okay; that you'll survive; that you can be a "Bad Girl" if you want to'.¹⁷ It was also especially liberating for those who would have been considered to be outside the white and heterosexual 'norms' of mainstream America, such as African Americans, Latin Americans, and homosexuals. Although disco is sometimes associated with elitist clubs such as Studio 54, these were more the exception than the rule.¹⁸

While disco exhibited self-expressive aspects of decadence, it was in many ways different from it. While both decadence and disco were conceived alongside ideas of urban, and more generally, western decline, they had distinct responses to it. Decadence focused upon self-expression alongside decay, and with it, a more individualistic cure for the sickness of civilization.¹⁹ Disco was more focused upon utopian self-realization, and by extension, renewal on the dance floor. It was fundamentally optimistic, and rather than passively accepting the world as exhausted, it encouraged dancers towards energetic dancing. In nineteenth-century decadence, time seemed to be coming towards an end. In disco's beats of extended twelve-inch records, and in the reality-distorting lights and sounds of discotheques, the party never stopped; time itself was disrupted. While Wilde's *Dorian Gray* believed that 'life is a great disappointment', for which hedonism and aristocratic refinement are of some comforting distraction, disco's reaction to the struggles of life were collectively and personally invigorating.²⁰ A clear rejection of *Dorian Gray*'s opinion, Patrick Hernandez's 'Born to Be Alive' (1979) insists by repetition: 'It's good to be alive!'.²¹

Criticisms of Disco

While there were differences in overall outlook, as with decadence, criticisms of disco often stemmed from the 'otherness' of its participants and it was similarly lambasted as having no artistic value. In 1979, Robert Vare wrote in *The New York Times*:

The Disco Decade is one of glitter and gloss, without substance, subtlety or more than surface sexuality [...]. In the 1960's, of course, Americans would have given anything for something as mindless and impersonal as disco, an escape hatch from the social responsibilities [...]. Now we have found the answer. All we have to do is blow dry our

protein-enriched hair, anoint ourselves with musk oil, snort another line of cocaine and turn up the volume.²²

There were also feelings among some in the rock community that disco was an existential threat to the values and commercial dominance of rock. In a 1979 issue of *Voice*, Frank Rose interpreted the backlash against disco as a rebellion of heterosexual white rocker kids against disco's mainstream acceptance:

What rock fans really hate about disco [...] is that it's so 'plastic'. The office workers, business people, singles, Perrier drinkers, and jogging enthusiasts who have embraced disco's sexy package of hedonism, narcissism, materialism, and escapism are the same people who, in a simpler age, would have settled for Pat Boone and Connie Francis and a nice home in the suburbs. Now they wear coke spoons.²³

Disco was, for many of its critics, evidence of what Tom Wolfe labelled the "'Me' Decade' in which individualistic self-obsession had replaced meaningful collective values.²⁴ Vare labelled the 1970s 'the disco decade', which he contrasted with the 1960s, believing musicians in the 60s had been more sincere in their pursuit to change the world: 'after the lofty expectations, passions and disappointments of the 1960's, we have the passive resignation and glitzy paroxysms of the Disco 1970's. After the poetry of the Beatles comes the monotonous bass-pedal bombardment of Donna Summer'.²⁵ The first issue of *Punk Magazine* declared that disco was 'the epitome of all that's wrong with Western civilization'.²⁶ In these narratives, disco became a symptom of cultural decline, exhibiting artificiality and moral decay; it was decadence in the pejorative sense.

Historians of disco, such as Tim Lawrence, Peter Shapiro, and Alice Echols, have redressed many of these criticisms. While much of the mainstream disco that followed the release of the blockbuster film *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) was heavily commercialized, they have investigated core principles in the culture, such as inclusivity and self-expression. Historians of disco have also found that criticisms of disco were often directed towards the 'otherness' of the culture. In the post-war period, New York had become a metropolis for America's gay community, and the disco scene was largely incubated in homosexual discotheques.²⁷ Frank Gillian has written that in anti-disco discourses, the culture was presented as 'queer, gender transgressive, elitist, and socially

threatening'.²⁸ Leader of the 'disco sucks' movement, radio jockey Steve Dahl, often lisped the word 'disco' in his broadcasts to stress its associations with male homosexual culture.²⁹ His recorded single 'Do You Think I'm Disco?' (a parody of Rod Stewart's 1978 'Do Ya Think I'm Sexy?'), which ridiculed disco as being artistically meaningless, featured the lyrics: 'do you think I'm disco? Am I superficial? Looking hip's my only goal'.³⁰ Gillian has argued that

the violent backlash against disco in 1979 transformed disco from a socially acceptable form of music and culture to one that was highly stigmatized. However, the backlash was directed not simply at a musical genre but at the identities linked to disco culture.³¹

Besides homosexuality, this included associations with commerciality (and by extension, inauthenticity), non-white ethnicities, and women; essentially, disco seemed 'other' to the musical authority of rock music, which was generally thought of as being more white, heterosexual and male.

These criticisms, many of which were homophobic, would have been familiar to fin-de-siècle decadent artists who were ridiculed for being superficial, vainglorious, and effeminate; for their 'otherness' to mainstream Victorian society.³² One illustration in *Punch* mocked the Aesthetic man as removed, pompous, and unintelligent, depicting him effeminately posed beside a fireplace with dustpan in hand and the inscription: 'the dilettante De Tomkyns complacently boasts that he never reads a newspaper, and that the events of the outer world possess no interest for him whatever'.³³ As a celebrity, Wilde was particularly subjected to satire for his eccentricity and suspected homosexuality (he was tried for 'gross indecency' in 1895). Thomas Nast labelled Wilde an 'aesthetic sham' in a caricature depicting him as the self-obsessed Narcissus [fig. 1].³⁴

Similarities between the criticisms of decadent artists and criticisms of disco are no coincidence. Decadence has a longstanding influence on the performances of LGBTQ+ cultures. Weir has noted: 'decadence has enjoyed a considerable afterlife in that over-the-top culture known as camp'.³⁵ While it is true that disco was often denounced for being over-commercialized, much of the criticism had a more political dimension. Disco was considered threatening because it subverted societal expectations of what was 'normal'.³⁶

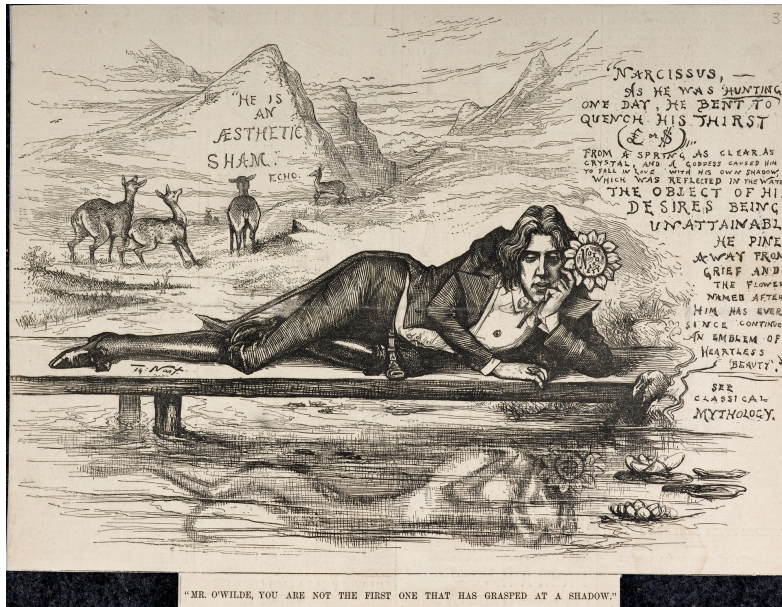


Fig. 1: Thomas Nast, 'Oscar Wilde as Narcissus' (c. 1894).

Dandyism and Late Twentieth-Century Popular Culture

One notable aspect of nineteenth-century decadence was its rejection of nature in favour of artificiality. The motto of Aestheticism (of which decadence might be considered a branch), 'art for art's sake', philosophized that art should not have a moral purpose. This thinking was explored in Huysmans's *À rebours* [*Against Nature*] (1884), in which the main character rejects society by choosing to explore a world of his own artistic creation. Celebrating moral inversions of what Victorians believed to be 'natural' could mean embracing supposedly deviant sexualities such as homosexuality. If searching for artistic beauty and creativity is paramount, societal condemnation of sexuality can be disregarded. Peter Jeffreys has noted:

not only was decadent aestheticism linked to homosexuality because of the sexual tastes of so many of its key advocates, but the arguments regarding amorality in art and literature were frequently thinly veiled attempts by fin de siècle homosexuals at justifying same-sex relations.³⁷

Many decadents would experiment with clothing that was unfashionable. There were men who would dress in effeminate clothing and women who would dress in masculine clothing. Dandyism placed emphasis on the refinement of physical appearance, language and activities. Holbrook Jackson once described the dandy as 'an artist whose media are himself and his own personal

appearance’, adding that ‘the art of the Dandy is the art of putting forward the best personal appearance, of expressing oneself in one’s clothes, in one’s manners, in one’s talk’.³⁸ Jackson observed that clothing was ‘only the outer envelope of dandyism’, and that it was part of a wider artistic outlook of self-expressive elegance through lifestyle.³⁹ Scholars such as Condé and Rhonda K. Garelick have suggested that dandyism had a legacy in late-twentieth-century cross-dressing. This could be seen in drag act communities and in glam rock acts such as KISS and Marc Bolan. Garelick has noted that in the 1980s Prince often appeared in sexualized purple outfits, including a frilled shirt, which mimicked the clothing of the nineteenth-century dandy. Garelick writes, ‘Prince appears keenly aware of his debt to nineteenth-century dandyism’.⁴⁰ In 1993, Prince even dandyishly replaced his stage name (i.e., his musical identity) with a ‘love symbol’ that was a combination of the gender symbols for man and woman.

Condé has examined decadent influences in artistic culture in 1960s and 1970s New York, observing that an ‘outsider art rock scene began to take shape in New York City, formed of the various creative figures who congregated around the Hotel Chelsea and The Factory, the studio of pop artist Andy Warhol’.⁴¹ Condé suggests that we might observe decadent legacies here: ‘these two locales represented the depth and superficiality of post-war American decadence. The emptiness of it all’.⁴² Warhol and the artists he collaborated with, such as The Velvet Underground, explored the links between culture, media and celebrity, with a decadent emphasis on experimenting with identity.⁴³

New York also had a longstanding drag ball community and by the 1970s it also had a newly-empowered LGBTQ+ community willing to protest and even riot for its right to exist. Historian and sociologist Tina Fetner has written that activist movements such as women’s rights, Civil Rights, and the anti-Vietnam War movement created ‘a culture of political upheaval and a sense of imminent change’.⁴⁴ Although same-sex sexual relations would remain technically illegal until 1981, New York’s prohibition of same-sex dancing ended in 1971 following protests such as the 1969 Stonewall riots.⁴⁵ These successes emboldened the community; while homosexual bars

had previously been illegal and secretive, discotheques became areas of assertive self-expression where LGBTQ+ participants could explore and experiment with their identities without harassment.⁴⁶ Many discotheques did maintain aspects of secrecy, such as being ‘members only’ clubs or prohibiting photography, but besides mystique, this was intended to add a sense of community and security to these discotheques so that dancers could express themselves without photographic evidence.⁴⁷

As a scene grounded in the LGBTQ+ community, disco artists often played with identity in decadent ways. Through its discourse of ‘realness’, disco echoed the Aestheticist emphasis on artificiality. This could – perhaps paradoxically – be heard in Cheryl Lynn’s ‘Got to Be Real’ (1978) and Sylvester’s ‘You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)’ (1978).⁴⁸ As disco historian Alice Echols put it, disco liked to ‘revel in the pleasures of the artificial’.⁴⁹ ‘To be real’ was to express oneself more authentically on the dancefloor.⁵⁰ The seeming artificiality of celebrating ‘otherness’ was in fact, considered more ‘real’ than the mainstream and every day; theatrical performances including drag and energetic dancing were expressions of a true self unfixed by societal expectations. Chic’s Nile Rodgers has reflected: ‘back in my hippy days, we talked about freedom and individuality, and it was all bullshit [...] we conformed to our non-conformity. As the celebratory phase of the struggle, disco really *was* about individuality. And the freakier, the better.’⁵¹

An example of ‘realness’ and dandyish experimentation can be found in the artist Grace Jones, who was androgynous in her appearance and performance.⁵² Experiences in New York’s underground clubs inspired her creativity with identity, and she in turn contributed to the culture.⁵³ In the Paradise Garage, ‘a disco space shaped by a primarily black and Latino gay aesthetic’ in the late 1970s and 1980s, her singles ‘Pull Up to the Bumper’ and ‘Slave to the Rhythm’ were on the Top 100 DJ list.⁵⁴ The former of which, repeating the confident (and plosive heavy) imperative: ‘pull up to my bumper baby!’, was a rallying call to homosexual participants for unrestrained sexual exploration.⁵⁵

Her gender bending and blending was displayed in a poster for the James Bond film *A View to A Kill* (1985) in which she starred. In this advertisement, Jones was presented both as a typically sexualized 'Bond girl' in a swimsuit, and as a muscular and masculine serious-looking enemy, sizing up Bond with the question: 'HAS BOND FINALLY MET HIS MATCH?'.⁵⁶ The poster suggested Jones was both a woman and just as much a man as Bond, being equally formidable to him. Bennett Brazelton has observed how Jones intersects many identities considered 'other' to white heterosexual America: 'her performances are a complex blend of robotic, alien, futuristic, diasporic, Afro Caribbean, sexual, queer, Black, feminine, masculine, dominating, intimidating, androgynous, humorous, depressed, dystopian, dispossessed'.⁵⁷ Brazelton believes that this multifaceted identity challenges the status quo: 'these multiple streams of identity, resistance, and reaction coalesce into provocative performances which disturb dominant modes of being/thinking'.⁵⁸ Miriam Kershaw notes that discotheques were spaces in which 'participants could construct an identity in opposition to external heterosexual norms'.⁵⁹ Jones, like many decadents of the past, embraced this eroticism and camp theatricality: '[the] erotic, fashionable outfits with the gender ambiguity of her intentionally androgynous look met with admiration in this willingly experimental and sexually explicit context'.⁶⁰

Disco and Refinement

Dandyism, and decadent art in general, was often associated with aristocratic refinement. In the late twentieth century, cultural movements like rock and disco, although significantly less aristocratic and more inclusive of the masses, had artists who explored decadent styles of refinement. David Bowie, for instance (who was more associated with rock), did this while experimenting with identity as something malleable; his refinement of multiple performative identities suggested that his life was itself a work of art. This was similar to the dandyism of Wilde, who argued in *De Profundis* (1897) that 'every work of art is the conversion of an idea into an

image'.⁶¹ For Bowie, this included gender bending. He appeared lying effeminately in a dress with long curly hair on the British cover of his album *The Man Who Sold the World* (1971).⁶²

Bowie rejected societal conformity, and switched between personas he wanted to artistically pursue, telling fans in 1974 that 'one isn't totally what one has been conditioned to think one is'.⁶³ While the cosmic Ziggy Stardust is his best remembered guise, his European aristocrat persona The Thin White Duke arguably best encapsulated many aspects of nineteenth-century dandyism and decadence. Like Bryan Ferry and Japan's David Sylvian, he emphasized refinement; his hair was slicked, and his suits were expensive and debonair. Bowie's Thin White Duke lifestyle was hedonistic; he consumed excessive amounts of cocaine and was extremely thin, exemplifying the decadent idea of self-destructive decay. The character, as with many decadent artists, portrayed himself as intrinsically empty and at times nihilistic, with songs about romance seeming a failed attempt to express emotion or meaning; as one paper put it, his 'passion' was 'studied' and 'his fire as cold as ice'.⁶⁴ Furthermore, Bowie played the role as if artistically independent of society's moral restraints when making numerous statements that were sympathetic to fascism. In a 1975 interview for *NME* he said: 'the best thing that can happen is for an extreme right government to come. It'll do something positive at least to cause commotion in people and they'll either accept the dictatorship or get rid of it'.⁶⁵ In the same interview, Bowie displayed awareness of the decadent influences on his role whilst condemning mainstream morality: 'I think the morals should be straightened up for a start. They're disgusting. This whole particular period of civilisation [...] it's not even decadent. We've never had true decadence yet. It borders on Philistine, really'.⁶⁶ After receiving criticism, Bowie, in decadent fashion, insisted that these were the views of an artistic expression of the character and not himself.

While The Thin White Duke made Nietzschean 'beyond good and evil' statements about morality, many disco acts embraced refined quasi-aristocratic styles without the outspokenness. In its glamour, partying, and the often-extravagant outfits of its participants, disco was reminiscent of the urban jazz culture of early twentieth-century America, which itself had had decadent

influences.⁶⁷ Chic, for instance, deliberately marketed themselves as cultured, their band name suggesting genteel trendiness. Their guitarist, Rodgers, has written of being artistically inspired by the alter egos of glam rock bands: ‘we created believable alter egos: two men in impressively labeled but subtle designer business suits which effectively gave us the anonymity of KISS. We put sexy girls on our cover, which was suave like Roxy Music.’⁶⁸ Additionally, the bold text of ‘Chic’ on their cover sleeves was rendered in Art Deco style (disco often fetishized fashions from the early twentieth century).⁶⁹

Other disco artists also gravitated towards themes of refinement in their music. Norma Jean sang her aspirational rags-to-riches song ‘High Society’ (1979), while Gladys Knight & the Pips sang the deprecating ‘Bourgie, Bourgie’ (1980), about people who ‘hold the pose, turn the nose’.⁷⁰ In this, the goal of becoming middle class is to pompously achieve an almost aristocratic level of sophistication and leisure: ‘you keep us cool | with attitude. | Never have to work too hard | face is your credit card’.⁷¹ Furthermore, whether it was the sexual ‘voulez-vous coucher avec moi, ce soir?’ [do you want to sleep with me tonight?] in LaBelle’s ‘Lady Marmalade’ (1974), or Chic’s disco-summarizing, ‘le freak, c’est chic’ [the freak is chic], the occasional usage of French words and phrases in disco songs added to the idea of aristocratic and splendid sophistication, as well as sexiness associated with the French language.⁷²

In having refined aspects, disco was largely self-conscious in its impersonation of high culture, making it catchier to the masses. An epitome of this is Walter Murphy and the Big Apple Band’s ‘A Fifth of Beethoven’ (1976), which adapted Beethoven’s ‘Symphony No. 5’, transforming it into a danceable 4/4 disco beat.⁷³ It removed much of the original work, reducing it to its most memorable parts and repeating these. This made it in many ways less musically complex, but also more accessible. The title of the song itself turned Beethoven’s symphony into a pun about a liquor measurement. Many disco songs feature orchestral instruments, giving them luscious and fantastical soundscapes with cultivated associations, but as with ‘A Fifth of Beethoven’, these songs, due to the danceable nature of disco, are more inclusive than classical music.⁷⁴ While disco

may have incorporated aspects of high culture into its style, it was primarily a music and culture for ordinary people. High culture simply added to the fantasy and glamour.

Decadence to a Catchy Beat?

Echols has argued that disco covertly remade America by exposing the public to marginalized peoples who were typically denied a voice. Despite the backlash of the ‘disco sucks’ movement of the late 1970s, the enduring catchiness of its beats were part of a slow process of making America more tolerant:

The hotness of seventies’ disco doesn’t just refer to its raunchiness or its rhythmic drive; it also signifies its politically incendiary quality [...]. Disco was the opportunity for people – African Americans, women, and gays in particular – to reimagine themselves and in the process to remake America.⁷⁵

This article has identified decadent tendencies in disco through its presence alongside ideas of societal decline, similarities in how both movements were criticized, and in performances of dandyism and refinement. It has also identified differences between the cultures in decadence’s preoccupation with decay and disco’s more utopian optimism. This is not an exhaustive comparative analysis, and there is scope for further study. Hedonism in both cultures for instance, has not been investigated in depth.

Although decadence after the *fin de siècle* is difficult to define, similarities indicate decadent legacies in disco. If this argument is accepted alongside Echols’s, it would suggest that disco was a means by which decadent ideas, typically associated with the margins of society, were proliferated into mainstream American culture. This is not to say that it spread decadence in its *fin-de-siècle* form. Hext has reflected that decadent legacies in popular culture are not necessarily decadence as such:

As decadent culture metamorphosed in the twentieth century, the semblance of a core movement became lost, even whilst elements of its principles and styles came to influence the broader culture. Decadence in the new century became not so much a tradition as a spirit that helped to define camp style and operated to signify a defection from bourgeois values and sexual propriety.⁷⁶

With that considered, a line from an early autograph manuscript of Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* (1895), 'one's true character is what one wishes to be, more than what one is', would not have felt amiss in disco.⁷⁷ As the cross-dressing Sylvester put it in 'Dance (Disco Heat)' (1978): 'dancing's total freedom, be yourself and choose your feeling.'⁷⁸

¹ Alex Murray, 'The Dance of Death: Fitzgerald and Decadence', *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, 63.3 (2016), 387–411 (p. 389).

² David Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature Against the American Grain, 1890-1926* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008), p. 1.

³ David Weir, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 8.

⁴ Kate Hext and Alex Murray, 'Introduction', *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, ed. by Kate Hext and Alex Murray (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 1–26 (p. 11).

⁵ Peter Jeffreys, *Reframing Decadence: C. P. Cavafy's Imaginary Portraits* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 2.

⁶ Murray, 'The Dance of Death', p. 389.

⁷ Alice Condé, 'Decadence and Popular Culture', in *Decadence and Literature*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 379–99 (p. 380).

⁸ Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 1.

⁹ Barry Gottelher, 'Urban conditions: New York City', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 371.1 (1967), 141–58 (p. 143).

¹⁰ Jon Shelton, *Teacher Strike!: Public Education and the Making of a New American Political Order* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), p. 115.

¹¹ Ira Millstein, *The Activist Director: Lessons from the Boardroom and the Future of the Corporation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 133.

¹² 'WELCOME TO FEAR CITY' pamphlet produced by the NYC Police and Fire Unions (1975) <<https://researchdestroy.com/welcome-to-fear-city.pdf>> [accessed 1 October 2020].

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Tim Lawrence, *Love Save the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 10.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 26–27.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁷ Doug Hall, 'Sociologist Sounds Off: Blames Labels for Disco Music Sag', *Billboard*, 27 October 1979, p. 6.

¹⁸ Tony Fletcher, *All Hopped Up and Ready to Go: Music from the Streets of New York 1927–77* (New York: Omnibus Press, 2009), p. 392.

¹⁹ John Calvert-Finn, 'The Institution of Modernism and the Discourse of Culture: Hellenism, Decadence, and Authority from Walter Pater to T. S. Eliot', unpublished doctoral thesis, The Ohio State University, 2004, p. 171.

²⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Lit2Go edition <<https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/113/the-picture-of-dorian-gray/1951/chapter-15/>> [accessed 11 October 2020].

²¹ Patrick Hernandez, 'Born to be Alive' (Columbia, 1979).

²² Robert Vare, 'Discophobia', *New York Times*, 10 July 1979, p. 15.

²³ Frank Rose, 'Rock & Roll Fights Back: Discophobia', *Voice*, 12 November 1979, p. 37.

²⁴ Tom Wolfe, 'The "Me" Decade and the Third Great Awakening', *New York Magazine*, 23 August 1976, pp. 26–40.

²⁵ Robert Vare, 'Discophobia', *New York Times*, 10 July 1979, p. 15.

²⁶ John Holmstrom, 'Editorial', *Punk Magazine*, 1 (1976), p. 1.

²⁷ Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis: The Landmark History of Gay Life in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1997), p. xii.

²⁸ Frank Gillian, 'Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 1.2 (2007), 276–306 (p. 279).

²⁹ Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), p. 206.

³⁰ Steve Dahl & Teenage Radiation, 'Do You Think I'm Disco' (Ovation Records, 1979), and Rod Stewart, 'Do Ya Think I'm Sexy?' (Warner Bros Records, 1978).

³¹ Gillian, 'Discophobia', p. 278.

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- ³⁵ Weir, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 8.
- ³⁶ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, p. 209.
- ³⁷ Peter Jeffreys, *Reframing Decadence: C. P. Cavafy's Imaginary Portraits* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 160.
- ³⁸ Holbrook Jackson, 'Dandies', in *Southward Ho! and Other Essays* (London: Dent, 1914), pp. 135–24 (p. 135).
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- ⁴⁶ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷ Fletcher, *All Hopped Up and Ready to Go*, p. 394.
- ⁴⁸ Cheryl Lynn, 'Got to be Real' (Columbia, 1978), and Sylvester, 'You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)' (Fantasy, 1978).
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- ⁵² Alan Jones and Jussi Kantonen, *Saturday Night Fever: The Story of Disco* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Company, 2005), p. 155.
- ⁵³ Ricardo Montez, *Keith Haring's Line: Race and the Performance of Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), p. 86.
- ⁵⁴ Francesca T. Royster, *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), p. 145; Grace Jones, 'Pull Up to The Bumper' (Island Records, 1985); and Grace Jones, 'Slave to the Rhythm' (ZTT/Island Records, 1985).
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- ⁵⁶ *A View to a Kill* poster (c. 1985) <<https://www.007collector.com/>> [accessed 20 October 2020].
- ⁵⁷ Bennett Brazelton, 'The Futures of Grace Jones: Queer, Black, Dystopian, Eternal', *Fire!!!*, 5.2 (2020), 53–82, (p. 54).
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- ⁶¹ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (1897), in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003), pp. 980–1059 (p. 1032).
- ⁶² David Bowie, *Man Who Sold the World* British album cover (Mercury, 1971) <<https://livemap.davidbowie.com/>> [accessed 20 October 2020].
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- ⁶⁴ 'Slowdown in World of Rock', *The Bulletin*, 24 December 1976, p. 7.
- ⁶⁵ Anthony O'Grady, 'David Bowie: Watch Out Mate! Hitler's On His Way Back', *NME*, August 1975, n. p.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid.
- ⁶⁷ Condé, 'Decadence and Popular Culture', p. 379.
- ⁶⁸ Nile Rodgers, *Le Freak: An Upside Down Story of Family, Disco and Destiny* (London: Sphere, 2011), p. 131.
- ⁶⁹ Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p. 182.
- ⁷⁰ Norma Jean, 'High Society' (Bearsville, 1979); Gladys Knight & The Pips, 'Bourgie, Bourgie' (Columbia, 1980).
- ⁷¹ Gladys Knight & The Pips, 'Bourgie, Bourgie'.
- ⁷² LaBelle, 'Lady Marmalade' (Epic, 1974), and Chic, 'Le Freak (C'est Chic)' (Atlantic, 1978).
- ⁷³ Walter Murphy Band, 'A Fifth of Beethoven' (Private Stock, 1976).
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- ⁷⁵ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, p. 239.

⁷⁶ Kate Hext, 'Decadence on the Silent Screen: Stannard, Coward, Hitchcock, and Wilde', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 2.2 (2019), 21–45, (pp. 21–22).

⁷⁷ Kerry Powell, 'Acting Wilde: Victorian Sexuality, Theatre, and Oscar Wilde' excerpt, <http://assets.cambridge.org/97805215/16921/excerpt/9780521516921_excerpt.htm> [accessed 15 October 2020].

⁷⁸ Sylvester, 'Dance (Disco Heat)' (Fantasy, 1978).

Michèle Mendelsohn, *Making Oscar Wilde*
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Matthew Sturgis, *Oscar: A Life*
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In 'The Critic as Artist' (1890; 1891), Oscar Wilde's spokesperson Gilbert declares 'Every great man nowadays has his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography.'¹ One book that bears out Gilbert's claim is Lord Alfred Douglas' *Oscar Wilde and Myself* (1914), but many later biographers have served Wilde more charitably, and none more so than Richard Ellmann, whose influential 1987 account concludes that Wilde was 'so generous, so amusing, and so right'.²

Of course, as Horst Schroeder and others have argued, Ellmann's book (although itself 'generous' and 'amusing') was not always 'right' about the details of Wilde's life, and Matthew Sturgis mentions this deficiency as one justification for producing another biography. Sturgis' other justifications include the discovery of significant documents and the introduction of novel research perspectives and techniques over the past three decades. In particular, Sturgis and fellow Wilde biographer Michèle Mendelsohn emphasize the importance of recently digitalized archives for the recovery of fresh information about Wilde's life. Drawing upon these resources, they have filled their deeply-researched biographies with absorbing new insights on Wilde's life and art. At the same time, their differing emphases furnish insights into the hermeneutics of biography.

Mendelsohn focuses principally on Wilde's visit to the USA from January to December 1882. (She does not examine his lecture-tour visits to Canada in May and October 1882, nor his second visit to the USA, from August to September 1883, when he attended the New York premiere of his play *Vera; or, The Nihilists*.) Part One (comprising a fifth of the book) briskly scans Wilde's development from 1854 to 1881; Part Two (around three fifths of the book) investigates

in depth his USA lecture tour from January to July 1882; and Part Three rapidly surveys his careering career from 1883 to 1900. This choice of temporal structure arises from Mendelssohn's framing of the biography as a 'quest to solve the mystery of Wilde's identity', a project catalyzed by her archival encounter with some of the racist caricatures that assailed Wilde during his American tour.³ For the book's epigraph, she chooses W. B. Yeats's claim that '[t]here is for every man some one scene, some one adventure, some one picture that is the image of his secret life, for wisdom first speaks in images' (p. 1). This seems to imply that Wilde's 1882 American tour was the key 'adventure' of his 'secret life,' the solution to 'the mystery'.

Mendelssohn's hypothesis may strike some readers as surprising, given Wilde's declaration in *De Profundis* (1897) that one of 'the two great turning-points of my life' was 'when my father sent me to Oxford'. He hoped someday to 'be able to say' that the second major 'turning-point' was 'when society sent me to prison'.⁴ However, Mendelssohn explicitly labels her approach 'a revisionist history of Wilde's early life and rise to fame', and even if one ultimately remains unconvinced that the 1882 tour constitutes the Casaubonic key to all Wildean mythologies, her biography encourages readers to view the circumstances and significance of those crucial months with new eyes. The book's other major goal – and major success – is to offer 'an intimate history' of the 'powerful globalizing mechanisms' of 'America's ethnic melting pot and Britain's imperial enterprise' in the late nineteenth century (p. 6). According to Mendelssohn, 'Wilde's place in this system fluctuated dramatically from high to low', since 'America's ethnic hierarchies put Irishmen and blacks together at the bottom, a precarious social position' that Wilde struggled to overcome during his visit (pp. 6–7).

In Part One, she foreshadows the racially charged features of Wilde's American tour by highlighting three elements: the experiences of Christian Cole (an African student who attended the University of Oxford at the same time as Wilde); the presence of an American slaveholder in Wilde's family (his mother's brother); and *Punch's* use of blackface Christy minstrel allusions to attack Wilde's *Poems* (1881). In Part Two, Mendelssohn examines caricatures, songs, advertising,

Christy minstrel sketches, and student protests, in tracking the racist satirizing of Wilde during the first seven months of his American tour. She also shows how Wilde's observations about African Americans and the Confederacy sometimes reveal him to be not only a target of racism but also a perpetrator. Finally, in Part Three, she searches for evidence of how Wilde's tour experiences might have informed his later writings, especially the society plays.

I read Mendelssohn's biography in June 2020, a month after the killing of George Floyd in the USA led to worldwide anti-racist protests, calls to defund the police, the toppling of Confederacy statues, and apologies by several white comedians for using blackface. Against that backdrop, her skilful examination of nineteenth-century racist stereotyping (especially the exploration of Christy minstrelsy's popularity in the USA and UK) achieves a painful and powerful contemporary relevance. However, the book is less persuasive in demonstrating precisely how Wilde's experience of racist satire affected his sense of self and art. Mendelssohn acknowledges that 'Wilde didn't mention these satirists in his correspondence', so she has to speculate that they must have 'had an effect' on the later creation of what she calls 'his own kind of whiteface theatre' (p. 239). It is true that Charles Brookfield's *The Poet and the Puppets* (1892), a 'Travestie' on Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), employs Christy minstrelsy allusions (briefly) in its mockery. It is also true that *Punch and Judy* and the *Guardian* newspaper compared the dialogue in *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) to Christy minstrelsy exchanges. But these (astutely researched) discoveries do not constitute definitive proof that Wilde deliberately drew upon minstrelsy devices. As Mendelssohn admits, 'Nowhere did he mention that [his dramatic techniques] were also hallmarks of Christy minstrelsy' (p. 231), and so her argument that his 'approach' was 'minstrel-inspired' relies more on inference than explicit evidence (p. 239). Nevertheless, by highlighting the reviewers' Christy minstrelsy comparisons, she provides fresh and fruitful scholarly contexts for Wilde's society plays, and the biography as a whole motivates readers to rethink the significance and influence of his first American visit.

Towards the close of her book, Mendelssohn notes that Wilde's autobiographical efforts in *De Profundis* to convert 'chaos' into 'order' inadvertently draw attention to 'the thickets of experience that had been cut down to size or cleared altogether to create a well-ordered panorama' (p. 251). Of course, the '[b]lessed rage for order' (as Wallace Stevens called it) can curse biographers too.⁵ In the preface to his mammoth 900-page study of Wilde, Matthew Sturgis maintains that Richard Ellmann's 'approach was that of a literary critic rather than an historian': '[t]he Life is seen largely through the prism of the Work', and this led Ellmann 'not to pay as much attention as he might have done to the facts and the chronology of Wilde's life, or to the testing and assessing [of] his sources'. Sturgis also disagrees with Ellmann's decision to structure Wilde's life as 'Greek tragedy, foreshadowing the narrative arc from the outset, and suggesting an awful inevitability to its course'. Instead, he seeks 'to return Wilde to his times, and to the facts', '[t]o view him with an historian's eye, to give a sense of contingency, to chart his own experience of his life as he experienced it'.⁶

Overall, Sturgis succeeds in this goal, positioning the reader on the ground and in the moment, not with the gods, gazing down coolly from above. In addition, he devotes more space than did Ellmann to Wilde's experiences at Portora Royal School and Trinity College Dublin. (Sturgis claims that Ellmann devotes 'scarcely more than a couple of pages' [p. xiv] to Portora, but the actual number is seven, spread out over Chapter One.) Yet, in expanding these youthful episodes, he frequently relies upon Frank Harris, whose 1916 biography *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions* includes (as Sturgis himself admits) 'its moments of invention' (p. 719). The same goes for Robert Sherard's Wilde biographies, from which Sturgis also draws regularly. Nevertheless, Sturgis draws upon plenty of other sources and unearths little-known events from Wilde's earlier life. Scholars of the Irish Wilde will be intrigued to learn that, in August 1878, shortly after graduating from Oxford with a Double First and winning the Newdigate prize for his poem *Ravenna* (1878), Wilde delivered a short talk in Ireland to visiting members of the British Association: standing in front of the cromlech at Howth, he stated that the location also contained

the tomb of the legendary Irish hero Oscar and declared that ‘the ancient Irish believed a bard could, by poetic invective, bring down temporal misfortune on the object of his satire’ (p. 130).

Wilde’s brother Willie chronicled this event, and Sturgis’ biography reveals how frequently Willie boosted Oscar’s growing celebrity in the late 1870s and early 1880s, using his journalistic contacts to plant stories in Irish and British journals, a process Willie termed ‘the trick of advertisement’ (p. 173). Sturgis also deftly traces the intricate interactions and appropriations between Wilde and the caricatures of aestheticism featured in *Punch* magazine (especially through the drawings of George du Maurier) and between Wilde and the characters of Gilbert and Sullivan’s comic opera *Patience* (1881). Although Mendelssohn provides many examples of Wilde’s education in self-promotion during his American tour, Sturgis reveals just how hard the Wilde brothers worked before 1882 in order to make Oscar the kind of celebrity deemed worthy of such a tour.

Since *Volupté* is a journal of decadence studies, readers may wish to know whether and how these biographies address that multivalent concept. Mendelssohn’s main focus is on Wilde in 1882, so decadence features infrequently, but her book’s design would be appreciated by the decadent (and bibliophilic) protagonist of Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890; 1891): the dustcover’s hot pink font repeats on the book’s spine and resplendently saturates the end-sheets and flyleaves. (The volume also includes 48 plates, 11 of them in colour.) Unsurprisingly, Sturgis, the author of *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s* (1995) and a biography of Aubrey Beardsley (1999), highlights decadence in his Wilde biography. He traces the impact on Wilde of English sources such as A. C. Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads* (1866) and Walter Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) (which Wilde called ‘the very flower of decadence’), as well as the crucial significance of Wilde’s stay in Paris from late January to mid May 1883 (supported by money from the American tour).⁷ As Sturgis shows, by re-reading dead writers like Charles Baudelaire and Théophile Gautier and encountering living writers like Paul Bourget, Maurice Rollinat, and Paul

Verlaine, Wilde educated himself about *‘Les Décadents’* and began to write and revise poems in that style.

Another significant visit to Paris occurred a year later, during Wilde’s honeymoon, when he read Joris-Karl Huysmans’s novel *À rebours* (1884), which Sturgis (reworking Wilde on Pater) terms ‘the very breviary of decadence’ (p. 310). As Sturgis notes, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, reviewing *Dorian Gray*, claimed that Wilde’s key ‘inspiration’ was ‘the aesthetic paganism of the French “Decadents”’ (p. 399), especially *À rebours*; and *The Daily Chronicle* called *Dorian Gray* ‘a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French *Décadents*’ (p. 401). Upon Wilde’s conviction in 1895, the *National Observer* jeeringly labelled him ‘the High Priest of the Decadents’, of whose ‘hideous conceptions of the meaning of Art’ and ‘worse than Eleusinian mysteries, there must be an absolute end’ (p. 564). In addition, Sturgis notes that when staying in Naples with Douglas, two years later, Wilde was dismissively called ‘the English *Decadent*’ by a few local newspapers (p. 655).

Sturgis’ attention to decadence allows readers to view Wilde’s post-prison years in a new light. After publishing *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), Wilde achieved the final stage of his often-expressed wish to turn his life into a work of art. Meeting Laurence Housman in Paris in late September 1899, he stated:

I told you that I was going to write something: I tell everybody that. It is a thing one can repeat each day, meaning to do it the next. But in my heart – that chamber of leaden echoes – I know that I never shall. It is enough that the stories have been invented, that they actually exist: that I have been able, in my own mind, to give them the form which they demand. (p. 699)

Both Ellmann and Sturgis cite this passage, but Sturgis adds another key confession by Wilde from Housman’s account:

The artist’s mission is to live the complete life: success, as an episode (which is all it can be); failure, as the real, the final end. Death, analysed to its resultant atoms – what is it but the vindication of failure: the getting rid for ever of powers, desires, appetites, which have been a lifelong embarrassment? The poet’s noblest verse, the dramatist’s greatest scene deal always with death; because the higher function of the artist is to make perceived the beauty of failure. (pp. 699–700)

This inadvertent foreshadowing of Samuel Beckett might also be read as an effort by Wilde to turn his life's physical, social, and creative decay into a decadent work of art.

As noted at the start of this review, Wilde's Gilbert views biographers suspiciously. He claims that they are 'the mere body-snatchers of literature', and 'the soul is out of their reach'.⁸ Whether any biographer can truly evoke a subject's 'soul' is debatable, but Mendelssohn and Sturgis are no 'body-snatchers'. This does not mean that they ignore Wilde's failings: both condemn episodes during which he treated his wife Constance poorly, and Mendelssohn critiques the white supremacist nostalgia Wilde displayed during his visit to the southern states. In summing up, Mendelssohn states that Wilde is simultaneously 'daring, fresh, timeless' and 'real, broken, flawed, and human' (p. 264). Sturgis, striking a more Ellmann-like note, quotes Roger Fry's claim in 1927 that Wilde 'has a way of being right, which is astonishing at that time, or any for that matter' (p. 719). Through their insightful biographies, Mendelssohn and Sturgis help us to understand much better the writer and person who once called himself 'a problem for which there was no solution'.⁹

¹ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol, and Other Writings*, ed. by Anne Varty (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2002), p. 177.

² Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage, 1988), p. 589.

³ Michèle Mendelssohn, *Making Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 5. All subsequent page references are cited parenthetically in the text.

⁴ Wilde, p. 60.

⁵ Wallace Stevens, 'The Idea of Order at Key West', in Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, ed. by John N. Serio and Chris Beyers (New York: Vintage, 2015), p. 138.

⁶ Matthew Sturgis, *Oscar: A Life* (London: Head of Zeus Ltd, 2018), p. xiv. All subsequent page references are cited parenthetically in the text.

⁷ Cited in Ellmann, p. 301.

⁸ Wilde, p. 177.

⁹ Cited in Ellmann, p. 549.

Jeremy Coleman, *Richard Wagner in Paris: Translation, Identity, Modernity*
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In his remarkable 1851 polemic, *Opera and Drama*, Richard Wagner characterized Paris as ever-hungry, impatient for the new, and as a city where an ambitious young artist might thrive; indeed, as the ‘great devourer of all artistic tendencies’.¹ But such an image also suggests that the city might just as easily chew up and spit out a young composer. It is not surprising that Wagner, at this point living in Zurich, had such contradictory feelings about the French capital. *Opera and Drama* was written in the aftermath of what Jeremy Coleman, in his fine, detailed study of the composer’s fraught relationship with the city, characterizes as his ‘second assault’ on Paris. Having fled the aftermath of the Dresden Uprising of May 1849, in which he had been implicated, Wagner was now a political exile. Like Odysseus searching for Ithaca or perhaps condemned, like the tragic hero of his own 1843 opera, *The Flying Dutchman*, to journey the earth for eternity until the spirit of music finally redeems and releases him, Wagner needed a new home, and so it was that he heard the Sirens of Paris calling. While lodging with the composer Franz Liszt in Weimar, the pair plotted the city’s conquest, and, as Coleman describes, drew up plans for ‘nothing less than the future of art in the wake of political failure’.²

Wagner planned to stage *Tannhäuser* (1845) in the French capital. This opera, with its central character of Venus in her palace of the Venusberg, was a fitting subject for a city he would spend his life both fascinated with and repulsed by. The production, however, did not take place and he would have to wait until he next resided in Paris between 1859–1862 for it finally to happen. The 1861 *Tannhäuser* has gained an almost mythic status, and still, as Coleman points out, dominates the study of Wagner’s relationship with Paris. It has also become central to research into subsequent *Wagnérisme* and to its influence on decadence and modernism. Coleman’s book,

however, seeks to decentralize this event, and in so doing, provides a much-needed nuanced and comprehensive study of Wagner's fraught relationship with Paris over the composer's career. This, in turn, necessarily gives greater context to the 1861 *Tannhäuser*. As Coleman points out, Friedrich Nietzsche – Wagner's one-time close friend – continually remarked that the composer's true home was in Paris, and indeed, even provocatively wondered whether Wagner was German at all, regarding him as intricately bound up with French decadence. Coleman tackles this view through an original and refreshing study of Wagner's own translations. Rather than revisiting established narratives about Wagner's failures in the city, Coleman continually returns to the composer's writings and, persuasively, to the intricacies of his music, with numerous musical examples. This method provides a thought-provoking analysis of what translation might mean as it charts the conflicts in Wagner's work between his claims for music's vital and universal essence and his contradictory desires to meet the demands of Parisian cosmopolitan tastes. Inspired by Franco-German political thought, Wagner perhaps sought a trans-national form of translation that fitted in with his fundamentally exiled outlook, a state of communication apt for his status as a homeless European wanderer, as an exile in search of his Bayreuth, and as a composer of music that, to paraphrase the man himself, was constantly in a process of transition. In charting Wagner's battles with translation between German and French, Coleman interrogates the composer in terms of 'the dialectical interconnections between the global and the local, between the national and the international, between the universal and the particular' (p. 11).

The first chapter studies Wagner's initial residence in Paris from 1839, when he arrived with considerable ambition, keen to make his mark upon the European centre of music, but also as a young German radical émigré. Coleman takes issue with Wagner's later autobiographical writings, which suggest his move to Paris was a result of financial need. (Wagner tends to mythologize such events, often seeking to present himself in a heroic light.) Rather, Coleman argues, Wagner arrived in Paris with the express aim of conquering the capital by staging his still relatively unknown comic opera, *Das Liebesverbot* (1836) or 'The Ban on Love', a loose two-act

adaptation of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. Yet despite the composer's ambition, Coleman ultimately detects a certain resistance to Paris' possibilities and attractions, with Wagner perhaps identifying more with his opera's central character, the puritanical German governor Friedrich (Frédéric in the French translation), rather than with the pleasure-seeking citizens of Sicily, where the opera is set. Despite his need to succeed in Paris, translating his work and interpolating new material that would directly appeal to French tastes, Coleman sees Wagner attempting – in contradiction – to retain the vestiges of German distance and authority amongst the deleterious effects of Parisian consumerism.

Chapter Two deals with Wagner's articles about the first performance in a French translation of Weber's opera *Der Freischütz* in 1841 and discusses how he became embroiled in ideas about translation at a time when his own sense of identity was shifting as he developed as an artist. Attacking the replacement of the opera's spoken words with recitatives by Hector Berlioz, written to suit French tastes, Wagner claimed that the opera had become disfigured, was misunderstood, and that its innate Romantic, sentimental German character needed salvaging from French demands. Wagner's own articles also became victims of these same needs, with their references to 'German individuality' deleted so as not to upset the French readership. Thus Wagner began to question whether the heart of German opera could ever be truly translated, while also – contradictorily – believing in an idea of true musical performance as a translation that could somehow reach beyond particularities towards a composer's true intentions, and so capture truth itself by reaching into 'the mine in which the glimmering jewel lies buried' (p. 52).

Chapter Three discusses Wagner's success with *The Flying Dutchman* in Dresden in 1843, which, despite its original conception as an opera to appeal to French tastes (it had been conceived in Paris and partly written in French), he marketed in German nationalist terms. Anxious about the influence of foreign models on the opera, Wagner stated that he had abandoned the 'modern template of operatic numbers and turned instead to legend', claiming that the opera's poetic sense was innately German (p. 75). Coleman details the changes that Wagner made to the orchestration

to reflect the demands of German orchestras. He interestingly positions this discussion alongside the composer's issues with a version of the Dutchman legend in a two-act opera performed in Paris in 1841, which had actually originated in a French-language draft he had sold in Paris when he realized that *The Flying Dutchman* was unlikely to premiere in the capital. Wagner feared comparisons, not least negative ones, with his own final version, should the Paris *Dutchman* be presented first, and Coleman neatly presents the wanderings of the anti-hero of Wagner's completed opera as an image of the travails of the work itself.

It is the third part of Coleman's book, which details Wagner's final attempt to besiege Paris with his 1860 concerts and the 1861 *Tannhäuser* production, that will provide the greatest interest for decadence studies. The narrative of 'failure' that surrounds the latter is one of fascination for decadence, given its interest in irresolution, incompleteness, and collapse, although the word 'failure' needs to be qualified in the light of the production's success in finding a central place in fin-de-siècle cultural history. There is, as Coleman points out, a 'formidable' amount of scholarship on the Paris *Tannhäuser*, but he suggests that the usual narrative – that the opera failed and that Wagner was wronged by the 'frivolous' Paris establishment – needs to be reassessed with considerable caution, not least because Wagner himself contributed to the 'dense web of mythology' both around himself and around the production (p. 6). Secondly, he argues that Charles Baudelaire's *Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris* (1861) has been routinely misread. The pamphlet's text is not concerned with the production but with the series of three concerts that Wagner produced in Paris the previous year. Although he had been writing his pamphlet on-and-off since these concerts, Baudelaire finally completed it on the same day as the opera's second performance (18 March 1861), which, as Coleman suggests, was surely in order to capitalize (in the financial as well as the cultural sense) on the production's notoriety. Coleman claims that Baudelaire was 'largely indifferent to the [1861] production' as there is 'no indication' that he 'attended either of the first two performances [of the opera]' (p. 149), and from this position he then weaves an interesting and perceptive interpretation. The concert series of 1860 included the overture from

Höllander, the *Tristan* Prelude, and selections from *Tannhäuser* and *Lobengrin*. Through a discussion of Baudelaire's layered treatment of *Lobengrin*, Coleman analyses how the poet draws parallels between what he considers to be different 'translations' of this opera's music into language; these include his own comments, but also those of Liszt (whom Baudelaire quotes at length), and Wagner's programme notes. Coleman suggests here that Baudelaire is concerned less with the music as part of an opera and more with the metatextual 'lacuna' between music and attempts to describe it in language, and, thus, finding a common, *a priori* source for his own comments and the corresponding descriptions of Liszt and Wagner. Indeed, Baudelaire then asks us to dispense with the "aid of a stage production, of decor, of the embodiment of the imagined characters in living actors, and even of the sung word" (pp. 150–51), to turn away from the trappings of theatrical production and focus on the musical space. Coleman argues that Wagner's music had a profound effect on Baudelaire not in spite of the absence of theatre, but because of it.

Such a view asks us to reassess Baudelaire's reaction to Wagner's music, not least – as Coleman points out – because of the curious points of correspondence between *Les Fleurs du mal* and the composer's music that the poet misses. Baudelaire barely mentions, for example, the Prelude of *Tristan und Isolde*, despite the obvious relationship of this music's themes to his own poetic sensibility. In these latter stages, Coleman essentially wishes to disentangle Wagner from the literary responses to his music, the significance of which may have become 'disproportionate to the actual discursive influence or representativeness that these figures [i.e., Baudelaire, etc.] wielded at the time' (p. 143). Although this view might be arguable, the book nevertheless provides a welcome and perceptive revision of Baudelaire's response. Additionally, by decentralizing the Paris *Tannhäuser* and charting Wagner's changing relations with Paris, Coleman enables us to see the Paris *Tannhäuser* not only as a signal of radical change, but also in terms of ongoing processes of cultural exchange and translation. In this, Coleman's study provides a significant contribution to Wagner Studies. Setting aside established forms of reception history, some of which have sought to present the composer's relationship with Paris in the potentially reductionist terms of rivalry

and ambition, Coleman instead foregrounds Wagner's intentions as seen through his music. What emerges instead, despite and indeed because of the contradictions and ambiguities, is a focused, precise and geographically inspired portrait of the composer in the city.

¹ Richard Wagner, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. by William Ashton Ellis, 8 vols (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd, 1892–1899), II, p. 75.

² Jeremy Coleman, *Richard Wagner in Paris: Translation, Identity, Modernity* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2019), p. 105. All subsequent page references are cited parenthetically in the text.

Arthur Symons, *Spiritual Adventures*, ed. by Nicholas Freeman
(Cambridge: MHRA, 2017), 262 pp.
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It is probably safe to say that, with the exception of a few anthologized lyrical poems, Arthur Symons is best known for his critical rather than his creative work. And no wonder, for his criticism was instrumental in the theorization of that curious formation known as decadence: his 1893 essay ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’, later expanded and retitled *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), was among the first attempts to unify what he called those ‘little separate cliques [of] brainsick young people’ – mystical poets, naturalist fiction writers, painters in the style of *Japonisme* – into a coherent tradition.¹ To the extent that he staked a claim for decadence as a serious movement worthy of critical study, Symons remains the unofficial patron saint for our research endeavours in *Volupté* and elsewhere.

Yet, there is a kind of irony in this image of Symons. While his modern reputation rests mostly on what he wrote about other writers (and, in his wider body of criticism, artists, dancers, and composers), much of his work is characterized by what Nicholas Freeman diplomatically calls ‘self-absorption’ (p. 13). As Freeman reminds us in his excellent introduction to Symons’s short fiction collection *Spiritual Adventures* (1905) – recently reissued as part of the Modern Humanities Research Association’s ‘Jewelled Tortoise’ series – Symons ‘saw almost everything from the same viewpoint’, often basing his critical analysis on subjective impressions and an idiosyncratic catalogue of recurring touchstones and allusions (p. 11). In a 1903 notice in the *Athenæum*, a less generous reviewer discerned in Symons’s writing a ‘voracious egoism of soul’ – an egoism that was symptomatic, in their view, of the broader ‘disease of civilization’ (p. 15). But with the benefit of retrospect, Freeman’s thoughtful edition of *Spiritual Adventures* both contextualizes the self-

reflexivity of Symons's broader oeuvre and makes a strong case for restoring the critic's fiction to a place of prominence in the decadent canon.

Like Oscar Wilde and Richard Le Gallienne – those other luminaries of the 1890s – Symons straddled the boundary between avant-garde coterie culture and the popular periodical press. He contributed to the infamous *Yellow Book* and went on to edit the influential, if short-lived, highbrow magazine *The Savoy*. Along with W. B. Yeats and Le Gallienne, Symons also belonged to the Rhymers' Club, an exclusive group of young bohemian poets active in the 1890s; his membership is in some ways reflected in his verse collections *Silhouettes* (1892) and *London Nights* (1895), both of which 'broke new ground' in their 'experiments with impressionism' and their 'willingness to tackle subject matter many deemed unsavoury' (p. 4). At the same time, and despite his public pronouncements on the vulgarity of Grub Street, Symons was very active in the less rarefied world of newspaper journalism. He regularly published reviews and features in the *Star*, the *Saturday Review*, and other general-interest papers, sometimes at a rate of one article per week. His financial reliance on the daily grind of print left him little time for longer projects, partly ensuring that *Spiritual Adventures* would remain his only short-story collection.

Indeed, we can think of *Spiritual Adventures* – the last major work that Symons published prior to his psychological breakdown in 1908 – as something of a swan song. As Freeman explains in his reception history of the volume, the cultural environment on its release in 1905 was not especially hospitable to Symons, associated as he was with a generation of writers that had seemingly flamed out since their heyday in 'Yellow Nineties' (his fellow Rhymers Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson had died around the turn of the century, as had Wilde). Sales were lacklustre, and the critical response tepid. Even appreciative readers felt that the stories of *Spiritual Adventures* were, in Freeman's summation, 'marred by excessive exposition, a lack of emotional variety (chiefly humour), and failures in characterization' (p. 21). Freeman reports that reviewers were also perplexed by the limited subject matter of the stories, which draw their personalities and scenarios primarily from Symons's own life.

Freeman's MHRA edition of *Spiritual Adventures* – the sole scholarly edition of the text available – largely foregrounds these autobiographical elements. Its title aside, only about half of the MHRA volume consists of stories from the first edition of *Spiritual Adventures*. Freeman dedicates the first half of the edition to selections from Symons's earlier prose, which shed light on his approach to fiction and its continuity with his criticism. Several of these pieces centre around artistic or otherwise sensitive personalities, sometimes from the perspective of more prosaic characters who briefly become the objects of the artist's ennobling, but pitiless, attention. The titular women of 'An Episode in the Life of Jenny Lane' (unpublished until 1986) and 'The Extra Lady' (1895), for instance, feel their humdrum existences expand in the presence of more cultured acquaintances, only to find themselves impoverished when alone once again. Freeman also includes two stories from Symons's Lucy Newcome cycle: a trio of fictional sketches that he later attempted, without success, to work up into a novel. Three non-fiction pieces – 'At the Alhambra' (1896), on Symons's experiences at the legendary London theatre, the travel essay 'Arles' (1898), and his ode to Frédéric Chopin, 'Pachmann and the Piano' (1902) – round out this first half of the volume.

This brings us to *Spiritual Adventures* proper. Like the early writings that open the edition, the eight stories collected in *Spiritual Adventures* are loosely plotted, episodic sketches of their protagonists, many of them composites of Symons and his associates. The most autobiographical of the tales, 'A Prelude to Life', recounts the childhood of a cosmopolitan aesthete who, like Symons, grows up in subtle revolt against his hard-working, pious parents. Though less transparent than 'Prelude', 'An Autumn City' echoes Symons's own affection for the French city of Arles, where the 'dripping trees and soaked paths' (p. 209) serve as the dreary backdrop to a failing marriage (which is itself a fictionalized representation of the author's turbulent affair with a ballet dancer). The eponymous protagonists of 'Christian Trevalga', 'Seaward Lackland', and 'Extracts from the Journal of Henry Luxulyan' similarly reflect and refract Symons's peculiarities: his affinity for the Cornish seascapes of his childhood, his passion for Chopin, his intellectual engagement

with his father's strict Methodism, and his thorny relationships with women. Several stories, including most notably the aforementioned 'Christian Trevalga', 'Esther Kahn', and 'The Death of Peter Waydelin', pick up on Symons's ongoing critical fascination with the maligned and misunderstood artist. Of the collection, 'The Childhood of Lucy Newcome' – the first in his Lucy series – strays the furthest from Symons's own experiences. Helpfully, Freeman prefaces each story with a headnote that summarizes its publication history and locates it within both Symons's career and the work of other authors. Freeman's extensive footnotes explain obscure references and offer further biographical context as required.

While *Spiritual Adventures* has many attractions for scholars of decadence, its most obvious value, given Freeman's framing, lies in its intimate portrayal of the critic's life and times. Characters such as Philip Haygarth, the Svengaliesque theatre critic of 'Esther Kahn', and the painter Mr Winter, who courts a music-hall dancer in 'The Extra Lady', speak not only to Symons's theories of acting, but also his exploits as a 'stage-door Don Juan' (p. 5). There are snatches of Symons's friendship with the socialite and painter Mathilde Ruinard de Brimond in the tortured affection that Henry Luxulyan – whom Freeman identifies as a 'problematic authorial double' – bears for his patroness, the brilliant but disfigured Baroness von Eckenstein (p. 231). In the pianist Christian Trevalga's descent into madness, fuelled in part by his determination to 'turn up music as it is before it is tamed to the scale', we can detect Symons's own difficulties in finding a critical language in which to articulate the aesthetics of music (p. 172). Along these lines, the stories of *Spiritual Adventures* also enrich our understanding of Symons's avant-garde milieu. The character of Lucy Newcome, for instance, was inspired by his close friend and occasional lover Muriel Broadbent, whose popularity as a sex worker made her a fixture of London's West End entertainment scene in the 1890s; the Newcome stories, especially 'The Life and Adventures', thus grant us candid glimpses into the theatres, music-halls, clubs, and game-rooms that constituted the epicentre of British decadence. Likewise, 'The Death of Peter Waydelin', which chronicles the final days of a

provocative young painter as he wastes away, unappreciated, in an East-End tenement, is a thinly veiled depiction of decadent *enfant terrible* and frequent Symons collaborator Aubrey Beardsley.

Beyond its usefulness as a record of Symons's decadent circle, *Spiritual Adventures* is remarkable for how it continues to perpetuate the unorthodox methods of Walter Pater, over a decade after the aesthetic philosopher's death. Freeman begins his introduction by quoting Symons's glowing review of Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* (1887), which the then twenty-two-year-old saw as a welcome rebuttal to the basic conventions of realist storytelling. Young Symons breathlessly enthused over the older writer's refusal to 'endow [his subjects] with flesh and blood, with the breath of life'; Pater's characters serve instead to 'give a concrete form to abstract ideas', or to vocalize particular states of consciousness that Pater himself had undergone (p. 1). The stories of *Spiritual Adventures*, reflecting Symons's early admiration of Pater, plainly owe their impressionism to *Imaginary Portraits*. Like Pater, Symons devotes most of his narration to tracking the subjectivity of his protagonists as they grapple with the artistic or religious questions that vex them the most: the actress Esther Kahn's quest for the perfect 'power of expression', for instance, or Seaward Lackland's perplexity over the justice of divine mercy (p. 152). The amorality of Symons's narratives, even in those stories that are preoccupied with religion, is no doubt indebted to Pater's own rejection of didacticism.

But *Spiritual Adventures* is not merely a belated imitation of *Imaginary Portraits*. Most apparently, Symons's prose lacks the finely wrought ornateness and beautiful abstruseness so characteristic of Pater's writing; the simpler, more staccato syntax of *Spiritual Adventures* is a testament to both its author's journalistic background and the shifting stylistic expectations of the early twentieth century. Additionally, Freeman draws our attention to the proto-Modernist formal play of Symons's stories, which 'navigate between observation, invention, reminiscence, and reflection' with an unapologetic aplomb (p. 18). We can thus situate *Spiritual Adventures* with respect to the genre-bending autobiographical experiments of writers such as Virginia Woolf and Dorothy

Richardson, whose stories eschew plot and dialogue in favour of the moment-to-moment experience of an exquisitely responsive consciousness.

That Symons draws his subject matter from his own life also marks an important departure from Pater. Pater was, after all, a Renaissance historian at heart, and his protagonists often hail from centuries past (with the notable exception of Florian, the central character of Pater's 1878 self-portrait "The Child in the House"). Where Pater's fictions take their cue from his historiography, Symons's 'adventures' are deeply rooted in the contemporary moment. His disaffected characters are patently creatures of the *fin de siècle*, writhing under the 'suffocating nausea' (p. 213) and 'absurd sensitiveness' (p. 239) of modern, and especially urban, life. This goes some way to explaining the tonal bleakness of *Spiritual Adventures*: the way it relinquishes Pater's classically inflected (and, to some extent, typically Victorian) humanism in the face of what Symons represents as an insurmountable ennui. Each of Symons's heroes and heroines find themselves estranged from friends and lovers, alienated from traditional sources of spiritual comfort, or frustrated by the discordance between artistic vision and material reality; they cut ties with their fellows, they give up their art, they go mad, they die. And it is this innovation on the Paterian formula, I would suggest, that makes the collection worth reading. Just as 'The Decadent Movement' had put its finger on the 'most representative literature of the day', in *Spiritual Adventures* Symons marries the contemplative interiority of the Paterian portrait to an emergent twentieth-century sensibility, and in doing so seems to presage the spirit of Modernism itself.²

¹ Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 87.522 (1893), 858–68 (p. 858).

² *Ibid.*

Walter Pater, *The Collected Works of Walter Pater*
Vol. IV: *Gaston de Latour*, ed. by Gerald Monsman
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 399 pp.
ISBN 9780198816164

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Gerald Monsman's edition (2019) of Pater's final and unfinished novel *Gaston de Latour* is one of the initial two volumes (the other being Lene Østermark-Johansen's edition of *Imaginary Portraits*) to be published in the new Oxford University Press *Collected Works of Walter Pater*, with Lesley Higgins and David Latham as General Editors. Along with *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), Pater's earlier novel of first-century Rome, *Gaston de Latour* was apparently intended to be part of a projected trilogy with each novel located in a different historical era. *Gaston* is set in sixteenth-century France in the years after the Reformation, and its eponymous hero is an observer whose meditative consciousness soaks up the religious, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic atmosphere of his age. He comes into contact with many of the period's significant figures: Pierre de Ronsard, leader of the Pléiade school of poetry, the philosopher and essayist Michel de Montaigne, the Italian Dominican friar and thinker Giordano Bruno, Queen Marguerite, wife of Henry of Navarre III (later Henry IV of France), and Henry himself.

The novel is, very typically for Pater, a series of scenes and portraits, with Gaston the mediating figure, highly sensitive to his surroundings and the magnetic personalities he encounters. Appropriately he is described by the narrator as 'thoughtfully looking on with us, all the while, as essentially, a creature of the eye, even more likely than others to be shaped by what he sees' (p. 166). Gaston moves through a number of scene-changes starting with his pensive childhood and early youth in his family's ancestral manor-house in La Beauce, 'the great corn-land of central France', and progressing through his contemplative adolescence as a 'young clerk' attached to the Cathedral at Chartres (pp. 37, 58). As a young man, he meets his literary heroes – Ronsard in the

priory at Croixval in Vendômois and Montaigne in his chateau in the Dordogne – and finally ends up in Paris. There he lives through the infamous murder of the Huguenots (the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre) and its aftermath, hears Giordano Bruno expound his pantheistic ideas, and comes into contact with the major players of the French court in a milieu at once rarefied, elegant, sinister, and malign. Although we learn, almost in an aside, that he marries Colombe, a Huguenot woman from whom he is separated during the Massacre, we see next to nothing of her and their relationship is telescoped into a few lines. Rather Gaston dwells on his feelings of guilt after her death, having learnt that she fled into the country in labour with their child and believed herself deserted by him. Subsequently, as he lives on in ‘a kind of priestly celibacy’, the sounds of young children’s reproachful voices hauntingly recurring at moments of distress, turning later into ‘the voices of grown boys’, and then ‘young men [...] in due order to what the age of the lost or dead child would have grown to be’ (pp. 129, 130).

Gaston de Latour presents the editor with a specific set of challenges. The novel was incomplete at the time of Pater’s death in 1894. He had started it soon after or perhaps even before finishing *Marius*, and published the first five chapters between June and October 1888 in *Macmillan’s Magazine*, before he gave up on serial publication. One other chapter on Giordano Bruno was originally published as a discursive essay in the *Fortnightly Review* in August 1889 and was subsequently revised by Pater to appear in the novel as Chapter 7: ‘The Lower Pantheism’. He continued to work on *Gaston* up to his death, and, afterwards, in 1896, his friend and colleague Charles L. Shadwell, having gathered the serially published chapters together with the Bruno chapter and another chapter in manuscript (Chapter 6), edited these and had them brought out in book form by Macmillan as *Gaston de Latour: An Unfinished Romance*. In his short preface, Shadwell recorded his decision not to print the remaining ‘portions of other chapters’ as they were ‘for the most part unfinished: and they certainly have not received that revision which he [Pater] would have been careful to give them before he allowed them to appear among his published writings’ (qtd. p. 2). In fact, Shadwell withheld six chapters in various states of completion. These previously

unpublished chapters have been subsequently edited and included by Monsman, who points out in his Critical Introduction that several of them ‘appear very polished indeed’ (p. 4).

The holographs of those unpublished chapters ended up in the possession of the late John Sparrow, former Warden of All Souls College, Oxford, and are now at King’s Hall and Brasenose College, Oxford with some stray pages acquired by the Houghton Library, Harvard. But after the periodical publication of Chapters 1–5 and 7, Pater recopied these chapters from their periodical form into a new manuscript making numerous small emendations, a revision that suggests that he would have used this text as the basis for his own later text of the novel. This manuscript, acquired for the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library, is thus selected by Monsman as the base text for Chapters 1–5 and 7 in the Oxford edition, with Shadwell’s printing of Chapter 6 the copy-text for that segment, this being the only known version at the present date. However, these chapters are also collated with the published periodical texts and Shadwell’s text. The Brasenose and Houghton holographs serve as copy-texts for Chapters 8–13.

Monsman’s OUP edition is not strictly new, being heavily reliant on the text he produced for the ELT Press in 1995 (*Gaston de Latour: The Revised Text*), still available new and second-hand for about a third of the price of the OUP volume which retails at £120.00/\$155.00. As regards the editing process, the chief difference between the two is that in the OUP edition, Monsman, guided by the General Editors, has adopted an alternative way of dealing with Pater’s interlineations in the Berg MS, treating all such interlineations, with or without a caret, as edition text ‘to illustrate the maximum reach of Pater’s experimentation with the poetics of prose’ (p. 25). While scholars will feel obliged to reference the OUP edition, it is questionable whether what many will regard as minor textual differences will make it seem worth the extra outlay. To my mind at least, the ELT edition is a clearer, more attractive volume to read and handle; it is more generously spaced in a larger font, and it is far quicker and easier to locate key words and phrases in the appended ‘Annotation’ sections where they are helpfully picked out in bold type, which is not the case in the

OUP 'Explanatory Notes'. Chapter divisions in the ELT 'Annotation' are also much more clearly indicated.

Readers remain, of course, deeply indebted to Monsman for his original substantial achievement in giving us a much-extended, reliably edited *Gaston*. Pater's novel is emphatically not an easy read and has its *longeurs*, but readers who persevere get to savour its many pleasures. In Monsman's edition we revisit the memorable telling passages such that (in Chapter 3: 'Modernity') brilliantly detailing the poetry of the Pléiade, represented as at once sensuous and ideal. Here Pater not only cannily encrypts references to Charles Baudelaire but makes his mesmerizing description also do duty for Pre-Raphaelite verse, or what he elsewhere called 'Aesthetic Poetry'. The added chapters build substantially on what preceded them with some extraordinary, beautifully intricate, and atmospheric writing – such as the exquisite fragment that forms Chapter 12: 'A Wedding' in which the aesthete dandy Jasmin, late for his sister's wedding and unaware of his impending doom, steps out in his dazzling white satin attire into the snow – 'the untouched, crisp particles in the delicious, frosty, virgin air' (p. 173).

However, Monsman has not gone out of his way to update or add much value to this OUP edition. Much of the prefatory material, although slightly tweaked and reordered, remains substantially the same, as do the 'Notes'. The invaluable Pater 'Chronology', vastly superior to anything I've seen before, is new, but this seems to be a standard feature in the OUP *Works*, so is presumably not Monsman's own work. He includes an expanded 'Bibliography', but this deals principally with contemporary nineteenth-century references and source material detailed in the 'Notes'. It would have been helpful to have a separate Bibliography dealing specifically with critical responses to *Gaston de Latour*. Although the 'Explanatory Notes' are suitably scholarly and well-informed, most readers will be unfamiliar with the complexities of sixteenth-century French history and will find it difficult to get an overview of the events by trying to piece together the substance of separate references. Many will undoubtedly find themselves resorting to internet searches. I found myself longing for a helpful contextual summary which might have been

provided in the form of an extended chapter headnote in the ‘Notes’, or as a short essay in the Appendices.

It should also be acknowledged that our critical perspective on decadence has evolved and broadened since 1995. Both editions usefully point out that there are interesting echoes of Oscar Wilde’s ideas and Pater’s response to these in Chapter 8: ‘An Empty House’. Yet, to give just one example, in the OUP edition Monsman could have pointed out that, in Chapter 10: ‘Anteros’, the treatment of Queen Marguerite – a type of the *femme fatale* – and the accompanying discussion of cruel love which he calls ‘a significant contribution to gender studies of the Victorian period’ (p. 3), surely owe something to the short story ‘Amour Dure’ (1887) by Vernon Lee, one of the writers Pater most respected. Not to indicate how our greater knowledge of the period might enhance our current perception of this fascinating text seems yet another disappointing missed opportunity.

Letter to the Editors
Salomé Doesn't Dance

David Weir

The Cooper Union

In my essay on Alla Nazimova's *Salomé* published in *Volupté* 2.2 (Winter 2019), I comment on the lack of camera movement in the film and make this observation: '*Salomé* was shot in January and February 1922, and it would not be until 1924 that Hollywood directors, most likely after coming under the influence of F. W. Murnau and other German directors, began to experiment with camera movement'. The source for the information about Murnau's influence is Patrick Keating, *The Dynamic Frame: Camera Movement in Classical Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), pp. 6, 292 n.3. The claim that Hollywood directors did not employ the moving camera or, more precisely, the mobile frame until 1924 is accurate as far as it goes but additional context is required. Recently, I finally made it all the way through D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) – not an easy film to watch – and saw that Griffith had his cinematographer mount a camera on some kind of motorized vehicle, probably the back of a truck, to film the 'heroic' members of the Ku Klux Klan riding at full gallop to rescue the fainting damsel Elsie Stoneman (Lilian Gish) from the clutches of the villainous mulatto Silas Lynch (George Siegmann), then saving a group of white southerners trapped in a cabin being attacked by a ruthless band of black soldiers. The camera is driven ahead of the charging Klansmen who are kept in frame because the speed of the vehicle matches the speed of the horses. This example could be multiplied many times to show that, indeed, filmmakers employed the mobile frame well before 1924.

But these pre-1924 instances of the practice need to be qualified in several ways. First, the moving camera seems to have been used primarily in location shots, a practice that goes back to the earliest days of filmmaking. As Keating mentions, a camera might be placed on an Eiffel Tower elevator going up and down or on a boat cruising in New York harbour to film the city's skyline. These types of films, common in the first decade of the twentieth century, are usually termed 'the

cinema of attractions', whereby, using the examples cited, a New York audience would get to see a view of Paris from the Eiffel Tower and a Parisian audience would get to see the skyscrapers of New York. This brings us to the second qualification, namely, that the moving camera was not initially a feature of narrative filmmaking. When it was used to help tell a story, in the early days, often the story was thin, just an excuse for slapstick antics and trick shots. All of this changed with Griffith, of course; in *The Birth of a Nation* the mobile frame is used to create a sense of suspense and adventure, but then around 1920, as Keating puts it, 'cinematographers began to think of themselves as artists' (p. 19), taking their inspiration from pictorial photography. This change certainly applies to *Salomé*, as there can be no doubt about Nazimova's high artistic ambitions. The camera is stationary in *Salomé* not only because the film antedates Murnau's influential *Der letzte Mann* [*The Last Man*] (1924; known in English as *The Last Laugh*) but also because it was shot in a studio, not on location; and, more importantly, because the mobile frame, partly as a result of its use in slapstick two-reelers, had temporarily lost prestige and come to be regarded as less artistic than stationary framing.

We are only just beginning to contemplate how the decadent tradition might be manifested through the art of film. Cinematic adaptation of a work in the decadent canon is an obvious area of investigation, but so is the idea that an aesthetic of decadence might be transferred from literature to film. At the same time, there is something a little perverse about rendering the decadent text – often static, sometimes hieratic, always allusive – into filmic form at all because cinema is dynamic by definition. Can you imagine a film version of *À rebours* by, say, Dziga Vertov, in which Des Esseintes' armchair adventures are represented by means of the kinds of rapid cuts and dizzying camera movements we see in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929)? You cannot. Putting decadence on film is a bit of a challenge, then, but one that Nazimova came close to meeting. Granted, there are a lot of things about her *Salomé* that do not quite harmonize with the decadent tradition, but the immobile frame is not one of them.

Notes on Contributors

Cyril Barde est ancien élève de l'ENS de Lyon et agrégé de lettres modernes. Il a soutenu une thèse intitulée 'Matières à poésie. Littérature et Art Nouveau, de Mallarmé à Proust' (Université Paris 8, 2020). Il enseigne actuellement en classes préparatoires.

Sophie Basch is Professor of French Literature at Sorbonne University and Senior Member of the Institut universitaire de France. She has written and edited several books on orientalism and fin-de-siècle literature and culture, including *Rastaquarium. Marcel Proust et le 'modern style': Arts décoratifs et politique dans À la recherche du temps perdu* (Brepols, 2014). Her current research focuses on Japonisme.

Michael Craske has recently completed his PhD at Queen Mary, University of London, entitled 'Swinburne and Wagner: Poetry and Music'. His ongoing work on musical settings of Swinburne's poetry (1866–1920), which has appeared in the *Journal of Victorian Culture*, can be found at www.verseandmusic.com and www.soundingvictorian.org. Partly inspired by his previous career in the Middle East, he is looking to start work on a new project concerning Victorian orientalism and decadence, with particular emphasis on the translations and travel writing of the explorer Richard Burton.

Guy Ducrey is Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Strasbourg. His work has predominantly focused on the dialogue between literary texts and the scenic arts (theatre, dance, opera, pantomime) in Europe from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Following his PhD, *Corps et Graphies, Poétique de la danse et de la danseuse autour de 1900* (Champion, 1996), he edited a collection of fin-de-siècle novels (*Romans fin-de-siècle*, 2000) and completed a monograph on the arts of the stage circa 1900 (*Tout pour les yeux*, 2010). With Francesca Guglielmi, he is the scientific editor of Joris-Karl Huysmans's *Là-bas (Romans et nouvelles)*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2019).

Emily Eells is Professor of British Literature and Translation Studies at the University of Paris at Nanterre. She is a specialist of nineteenth-century British art and literature and author of *Proust's Cup of Tea: Homoeroticism and Victorian Culture* (Ashgate, 2002). Her research focuses on cross-Channel cultural exchange and her publications include several articles and book chapters on Wilde and France, a monograph entitled *Two Tombeaux to Oscar Wilde: Jean Cocteau's Le Portrait surnaturel de Dorian Gray and Raymond Laurent's Essay on Wildean Aesthetics* (Rivendale Press, 2010) and a volume she co-edited with Naomi Toth on translating sound in Proust, *Son et traduction dans l'œuvre de Proust* (Champion, 2018). She is a member of the international research group [Writing 1900](#) and recently authored an article on 'Proust's Ruskin: From Illustration to Illumination' which appeared in the on-line journal *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, vol. 91 (2020).

Richard Haslam is Associate Professor of English at Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia. His essays on Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* have appeared in *English Literature in Transition* (January 2014 & April 2020), *Victorian Literature and Culture* (June 2014), and the Norton Third Critical Edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (2020).

Richard Hibbitt is Senior Lecturer in French and Comparative Literature at the University of Leeds, where he co-directs the Centre for World Literatures. His research interests are in aesthetics, poetics, and cultural exchange, with a particular interest in the long nineteenth century. Current projects include *Two Sides of the Straits: An Anthology of Gallipoli Poems in English and Turkish*, co-edited with Berkan Ulu (forthcoming with White Rose University Press), and *Literary Capitals in the Long Nineteenth Century: Spaces Beyond the Centres*, co-edited with Arunima Bhattacharya and Laura

Scuriatti (forthcoming with Palgrave). He is a member of the [Writing 1900](#) research group and sits on the executive committees of the BCLA and the [European Society of Comparative Literature](#).

Jennifer Higgins is a literary translator of French and Italian. Recent translations include Emmanuelle Pagano's *Faces on the Tip of my Tongue* (Peirene Press, 2019), a co-translation with Sophie Lewis which was longlisted for the Man Booker International Prize 2020, and *A Short Philosophy of Birds* by Philippe Dubois and Elise Rousseau (W. H. Allen, 2019). She is currently working on translations of works by Jean Lorrain (for Bloomsbury Press) and Rachilde (for Wakefield Press). Jennifer is also Programme Manager for the Queen's College Translation Exchange, an organization promoting literary translation in schools and the wider community.

Derek Mahon was born in Belfast in 1941. He received numerous awards including the Irish Academy of Letters Award, the Scott Moncrieff Translation Prize, and Lannan and Guggenheim Fellowships. In recognition of his 'lifetime's achievement' he received the David Cohen Prize for Literature in 2007. Recent publications from [The Gallery Press](#) include *Echo's Grove* (translations, 2013), *Red Sails*, (2014, prose), *New Selected Poems* (2016), *Olympia and the Internet* (2017, prose), *The Rain Bridge* (2017, children's story), *Against the Clock* (2018, winner of the *The Irish Times* Poetry Now Award), and *Washing Up* (2020). He died in Kinsale, County Cork, in October 2020.

Peter Manson lives in Glasgow. His book of translations, *Stéphane Mallarmé: The Poems in Verse* is published by Miami University Press, Ohio. Other books include *Adjunct: an Undigest* (2004), *For the Good of Liars* (2006), *Between Cup and Lip* (2008), and *Poems of Frank Rupture* (2014). Further information can be found at: petermanson.wordpress.com.

Bertrand Marquer is Professor of French Literature at the University of Strasbourg, and Junior Member of the Institut Universitaire de France. His research focuses on the relationship between literary and medical discourse in the nineteenth century, and on the impact of this crossover in the history of representations. He has published *Les Romans de la Salpêtrière* (Droz, 2008), *Naissance du fantastique clinique* (Hermann, 2014), and directed, within the HC19 ANR project, the collective anthology *Savants et écrivains: portraits croisés dans la France du XIX^e siècle* (APU, 2014). This latest research focuses on the imagination of nutrition, in line with nineteenth-century scientific theories. In this context, he has published an essay, 'L'Autre siècle de Messer Gaster? Physiologies de l'estomac dans la littérature du XIX^e siècle' (Hermann, 2017), co-ordinated the issue of *Romantisme* devoted to 'La Gourmandise', and published two collective works at the Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg – *Allégories de l'estomac au XIX^e siècle: Littérature, art, philosophie* and *Dis-moi ce tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es: Fictions identitaires, fictions alimentaires* (2020).

Catherine Maxwell is Professor of Victorian Literature at Queen Mary, University of London, and author of *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (2001), *Swinburne* (2006), *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (2008), and *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture* (2017), awarded the 2018 European Society for the Study of English prize for Literatures in English.

Lindsay Wilhelm is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Oklahoma State University. Her research and teaching interests include late nineteenth-century literature and science, aestheticism, global Victorianism, women's writing, and popular literature. She has published articles on these and related topics in *Victorian Studies*, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, and *Studies in the Novel*. Her most recent essay, on evocations of decadence in British travel writing about Hawai'i, is forthcoming in *Nineteenth-Century Literature*. Currently, she is working on a book project – tentatively titled 'The Height of Taste: Evolution, Aestheticism, and Cultural Progress,

1850-1924' – that examines how British aestheticism and certain strains of post-Darwinian science converge on optimistic notions of taste as the means for widespread sociocultural development.

BADS ESSAY PRIZE WINNERS

Joanna Cresswell recently completed an MA in Comparative Literature and Criticism at Goldsmiths, University of London. In 2019 she won first place in the British Comparative Literature Association's Arthur Terry Postgraduate Essay Prize for her essay, 'Wit as a Weapon: Male Anxiety and Female Laughter in Feminist Responses to Epic and Ancient Myth'. This research went on to form the basis of her dissertation, 'Masochism, Metamorphosis, Madness', an examination of psycho-medical mirth and the figure of the laughing woman in late-nineteenth century French literature.

William Rees is a freelance history writer who is interested in the histories of popular music, particularly disco and rock, and how these tie into philosophical themes of individualism and societal change. He recently completed a Masters by Research History course at the University of Exeter and is aspiring towards doctoral research. William also writes his own blog, [Will Does History](#).

GUEST EDITORS

Matthew Creasy is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Glasgow. His critical edition of Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* was published by Fyfield-Carcanet in 2014. He has published essays and articles on modernism, decadence, and periodical studies and he is currently working on an edition of George Moore's *Confessions of a Young Man* for the MHRA's '[Jewelled Tortoise](#)' series dedicated to Aesthetic and Decadent literature.

Stefano Evangelista is Associate Professor of English at Oxford University and Fellow of Trinity College, and Fellow of the Centre for British Studies of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. He is the author of *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (2009) and the editor of *The Reception of Oscar Wilde in Europe* (2010), *A. C. Swinburne: Unofficial Laureate* (2013, with Catherine Maxwell), *Pater the Classicist: Classical Scholarship, Reception, and Aestheticism* (with Charles Martindale and Elizabeth Prettejohn, 2017), and *Arthur Symons: Poet, Critic, Vagabond* (with Elisa Bizzotto, 2018). His monograph *Citizens of Nowhere: Literary Cosmopolitanism in the English Fin de Siècle* is due to be published by OUP in 2021.

EDITORIAL

Jane Desmarais (Editor-in-Chief) is Professor of English and Director of the Decadence Research Centre in the Department of English and Creative Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London. She has written numerous essays on the theme of decadence and has co-edited several works, including *Decadence: An Annotated Anthology* (with Chris Baldick, Manchester University Press, 2012), *Arthur Symons: Selected Early Poems* (with Chris Baldick, MHRA, 2017), and *Decadence and the Senses* (with Alice Condé, Legenda, 2017). She is co-editor with David Weir of *Decadence and Literature* (2019), a volume in the Cambridge Critical Concepts series, and is currently co-editing with David Weir the *Oxford Handbook of Decadence* (forthcoming in 2021) and *Decadent Plays, 1890-1930* with Adam Alston (forthcoming with Bloomsbury in 2023). Her monograph, *Monsters Under Glass: A Cultural History of Hothouse Flowers, 1850 to the Present*, was published by Reaktion in 2018.

Alice Condé (Deputy Editor) is Lecturer in the Department of English and Creative Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London. She is co-editor of *Decadence and the Senses* (with Jane Desmarais, Legenda, 2017) and *In Cynara's Shadow: Collected Essays on Ernest Dowson* (with Jessica Gossling, Peter Lang, 2019). Her essay on 'Decadence and Popular Culture' appears in Jane Desmarais and David Weir's *Decadence and Literature* (2019), and she is currently working on decadence and its contemporary contexts.

Jessica Gossling (Deputy Editor) is Lecturer in the Department of English and Creative Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London, and Assistant Editor of *The Literary Encyclopedia*. She has a forthcoming chapter on decadence and interior design in the *Oxford Handbook of Decadence* (2021) and is co-editor with Alice Condé of *In Cynara's Shadow: Collected Essays on Ernest Dowson (1867–1900)*. Her essay on 'À rebours and the House at Fontenay' is published in *Decadence and the Senses* (Legenda, 2017) and her chapter 'Decadent Magic: Arthur Machen's 'The Hill of Dreams'' is due to be published in *Magic: A Companion*, edited by Katharina Rein (Peter Lang, 2021). Jessica is currently working on her first monograph on the decadent threshold poetics of Charles Baudelaire, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Arthur Symons, and Ernest Dowson. Jessica and Alice are the webmistresses of *volupte.gold.ac.uk*.

Robert Pruett (Reviews Editor) is a DPhil student in French at St Cross College, Oxford, where he is preparing a thesis on eros and idealism in the work of Remy de Gourmont. Alongside the Cercle des Amateurs de Remy de Gourmont (CARGO), he co-organized the *Fin de Siècle Symposium* (Balliol College, Oxford, 2016). In 2018, he co-organized *Decadence, Magic(k), and the Occult* at Goldsmiths, University of London. His chapter on 'Dowson, France, and the Catholic Image' appears in *In Cynara's Shadow: Collected Essays on Ernest Dowson* (ed. by Alice Condé and Jessica Gossling, Peter Lang, 2019).