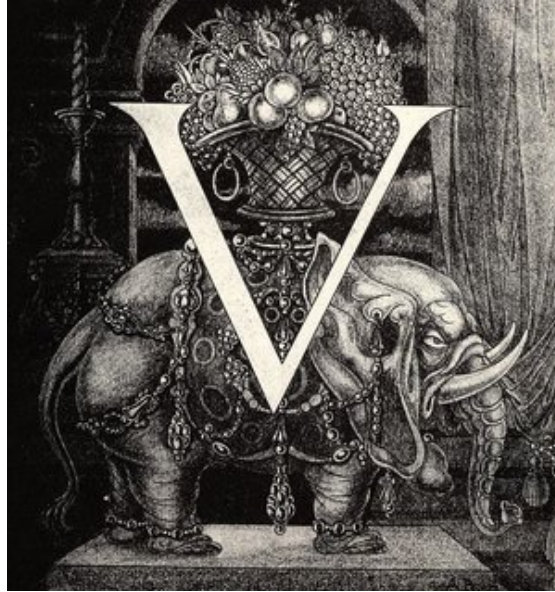


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Decolonizing Decadence

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**Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON



Volume 6, Issue 1, Spring/Summer 2023

Decolonizing Decadence

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## Preface

This issue appears later than planned, so apologies to our readers. One of the reasons for the delayed publication is that important material and ideas emerged from the online, interdisciplinary conference *Global Decadence, Race, and the Futures of Decadence Studies* (31 March-1 April 2023), and we chose to take stock and incorporate some of them in this issue.

One of *Global Decadence's* aims was to demonstrate the anti-imperial legacy of decadence and provide a platform for scholars, artists, and writers of colour working on the circulation, reception, and translation of nineteenth-century decadent texts, or postcolonial reinventions of decadence. Chaired by Cherrie Kwok, Joe McLaughlin, and Amy Sailer, the virtual event 'was a short but profound glimpse into the current state of the field of decadence studies' (p. 135).

The field appears to be in rude health, although it is perhaps too soon to evaluate whether decadence studies is able to be fully undisciplined and decolonized, or whether the pressure of interrogating 'decadence's uneasy relationship with racial and cultural power hierarchies' (p. 139) will force the field to become something slightly else (depending on your view of what it is now).<sup>1</sup> There are definite challenges in approaching decadence as a global phenomenon, not least the issues of translation, the transmission of texts between different languages, and the fact that fewer and fewer students are studying ancient and modern languages (issues that bedevil the field of Comparative Literature also). But scholars have been arguing for some years for a more inclusive, more 'diffusionist' model of decadence studies. This model, as I described in the preface of *Volupté* 4.1 (2021), is one that de-centres the European origin story, stimulating multiple origin stories that explore decadence in terms of networks, patterns, delineations, vectors, and influences that resonate across different geographical and temporal zones.

The increasing ease of participating in online events has enabled an international community of scholars and enthusiasts to gather to explore the generative possibilities of the notion of global decadence. A principal aim of this community is, as Stefano Evangelista has put it, to explore 'marginal spaces which still remain largely outside the map of scholars of English literature'<sup>2</sup> and to see how international authors repurpose decadence, 'remap[ping] global literary history as a response to global conditions'.<sup>3</sup> Contributors to this issue of *Volupté* invite us to see decadence in precisely those shifted and heterogeneous terms, from Western representations of tropical islands as colonial spaces (Bailey, Wilhelm), to the ways in which Indigenous authors respond to their treatment in colonial fantasies (Wilhelm, Clarke), to the role and place of Western aesthetic ideals at moments of transition to modern statehood (Chakraborty, Staudt), to the transmission of Asian literature into fin-de-siècle Europe (Bubb).

We are grateful to our guest editor, Robert Stilling, for bringing this issue together with such thoughtfulness, and to all of our contributors.

Jane Desmarais  
Editor-in-Chief  
1 July 2023

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<sup>1</sup> The Decadence Research Centre at Goldsmiths will launch its Global Decadence wing in autumn 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Stefano Evangelista, *Literary Cosmopolitanism in the English Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 91.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Stilling, 'Mapping Global Decadence: Jeet Thayil's *The Book of Chocolate Saints*', *CUSP*, 1.1 (Winter 2023), 145-56 (p. 148).

## Decadence, Decolonization, and the Critique of Modernity: An Introduction by the Guest Editor

Robert Stilling

Florida State University

What would it mean to decolonize decadence? To ask the question is to consider the relationship between disparate but intertwined critiques of modernity. For writers in late nineteenth-century France such as Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, and Joris-Karl Huysmans, for example, ‘decadence’ captures a particular critique of urban modernity. These were writers who exhibited a ‘profound scepticism about modernity and progress’, and were ‘disgusted by overcrowding, poverty, and rampant commercialism, what Huysmans described as ‘the caliphate of the counter’.<sup>1</sup> Decolonizing critiques, however, developed out of the anti-colonial movements that lead to political decolonization in the second half of the twentieth century, the emergence of newly independent postcolonial national cultures, as well as continuing efforts at cultural decolonization, including the development of postcolonial theory, and theorizations of coloniality and decoloniality. These are all critiques of modernity differentiated by their origins and ends, but which nevertheless cast doubt, each in their own ways, on the project of Western civilization, its myths of progress, imperial expansionism, imposed temporalities, and enthrallment to commodity capital. But to consider what it would mean to decolonize decadence is also to imagine modernity from starkly different viewpoints, from a stance of alienation within the West, from standpoints that experience Western hegemony as alien, and from innumerable perspectives that otherwise navigate colonial rule, imperialism and its aftermath, settler colonial myths, or the development of national cultures outside, but in relation to the West. It is to consider the scope and scale of modernity (or modernities), to provincialize the Eurocentric view of modern experience as primarily urban, to challenge diffusionist models of development and cultural transmission (as in, ‘first in the West, and then elsewhere’), and to question a Western conception of history as chronologically linear and singular, culminating in the heights of European civilization, however

much that civilization seems nearing its endpoint.<sup>2</sup> It is to deploy greater precision when it comes to the representation of non-Western cultures and the translation of non-Western texts. It is also to consider how ‘Europe was made by its imperial projects, as much as colonial encounters were shaped by conflicts within Europe itself’, and thus how the discourses of decadence that arose in Europe and its colonies were mutually constitutive and developed differently in specific local contexts and in dynamic relation with other non-Western understandings of civilization, history, temporality, race, and art.<sup>3</sup>

As an evaluative stance toward history, decadence often finds its foil in the Western myth of progress. Those artists and writers who embraced decadence in *fin-de-siècle* Europe as an oppositional stance toward the present state of the world, and who understood progress as decadence, and vice versa, frequently saw the domain of art and imagination as the primary alternative to a sordid reality. By contrast, while the project of decolonization has aesthetic implications, it seeks concrete ends in the liberation or repatriation of colonized territory, the dismantling of persistent racist colonial hierarchies, the rejection of Eurocentrism, and a delinking from colonial epistemologies.<sup>4</sup> Decolonizing critiques often reject both the sense of belatedness that can define a decadent sensibility in the West and the sense of the colonized world as being late-comers to history.<sup>5</sup> They likewise reject the hierarchies and binaries that emerge because of the West’s own understanding of itself as a civilization at the forefront of history. As Aníbal Quijano writes, because Europeans imagined

themselves to be the culmination of a civilizing trajectory from a state of nature [...] relations between Western Europe and the rest of the world were codified in a strong play of new categories: East-West, primitive-civilized, magic/mythic-scientific, irrational-rational, traditional-modern—Europe and not Europe.<sup>6</sup>

Insofar as the project of decolonization seeks material ends incommensurable with a status quo defined by the persistent injustices of settler colonialism, which may persist in postcolonial societies, ‘decolonization is not a metaphor’.<sup>7</sup>

Decadence, as an idea in Western thought, however, is an engine of metaphorization. Its articulation often involves the application of figures of decline, degeneration, sickness, morbidity, and decay borrowed from the organic, medical, and biological domains to the domains of history, politics, culture, society, race, religion, economics, technology, and art.<sup>8</sup> Because anxieties about social decadence drive anti-decadent polemics, within the context of colonialism, the concept is always (at least) double-edged. For the imperialist, colonial expansion was often seen as both a potential antidote to the ‘pressing threat’ of decadence at home, and as a potential accelerant of degeneration through colonial contact.<sup>9</sup> Insofar as a decadent ethos stands in opposition to endless growth and development and jingoistic imperialism and nationalism, or asserts the independence of the individual part over the whole, or partakes of a cosmopolitan pluralism at odds with or the consolidation of mono-lingual, ethnically homogenous national cultures, an embrace of decadence might be seen to undo the sorts of systems that efforts at decolonization also seek to dismantle.<sup>10</sup>

However, in nineteenth-century European thought, the ‘diagnosis of social and cultural decadence arises within the context of a view of civilizations as having lifecycles. This underlying metaphor links cultures to the different developmental stages in an individual human life’.<sup>11</sup> Non-European cultures are thus often portrayed as ‘embodiments of Decadent ancient civilizations that Europe is destined to follow; present-day examples of Decadence (usually Asian); or primitive states in the stagnant side-waters of history (often African)’. Just as Europe is portrayed as embodying ‘technological progress and moral degeneration’ simultaneously, decadence, as a comparative concept for evaluating civilizations, often entails contradictory representations of non-Europeans, colonized peoples, and Indigenous peoples as both primitive and decadent, as both closer to the nature and thus more authentic, but also on the verge of extinction or assimilation, or nearly refined out of existence.<sup>12</sup> To the degree that a decadent sensibility is sustained by the consumption of plundered artifacts, the exoticization of the Other, and fantasies of vanishing natives, or plays into fears of racial contamination and degeneration, or weds itself to a developmentalist model of civilizational comparison, the idea of decadence, no less than the idea

of progress, can serve to naturalize the hierarchies, binaries, and racial classifications that the West imposed worldwide through colonization, however unstable these classifications turn out to be in practice.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, decadent literature often relies on, even as it destabilizes, many of the categories that decolonizing initiatives seek to decentre, reframe, and dismantle. Nevertheless, those upon whom colonial hierarchies were imposed can turn the metaphorical possibilities of decadence, and anti-decadence, back against the West, playing against their audience's cultural assumptions. They can do so even as they seek to decentre and provincialize a Western conception of modernity that yields such narratives of progress, decadence, and civilizational difference in the first place. Decadence can also offer points of engagement and dialogue across Western and non-Western cultures as artists and intellectuals position themselves within a shared or polycentric understanding of modernity in which the West is just one player.

Yet, as Tuck and Yang insist: 'Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks.'<sup>14</sup> The contributors to this special issue therefore take nuanced approaches to decadence, anti-decadence, colonialism, settler-colonial myths, Indigenous performance, imperial decline, cultural nationalism, Orientalism, and translation across an array of geographic contexts, including the West Indies, the Pacific, North America, South Asia, the late Ottoman Empire, Persia, and Britain. Indeed, to address some of the many issues raised by anti-colonial, postcolonial, and decolonial critiques of modernity, scholars of decadence will need to recast the field within a wider geographic and historical frame of reference. The essays in this issue reflect the more global approaches that scholarship on decadence has taken in recent years in ways that give precise attention to local contexts and differences without imposing a single model or metaphor for how decadence operates globally.<sup>15</sup>

Peter Bailey, for example, in his examination of Lafcadio Hearn's revisions to his travel writing on Martinique, demonstrates how Hearn's depictions of Martinique's once carefully cultivated gardens as sites of decay and ruin reflects the resentments of white creoles, who felt



dispossessed and politically marginalized after emancipation by newly enfranchised Black and mixed-race majorities. Bailey shows how Hearn employs decadent rhetorical strategies to pin the blame for the loss of Martinique's prelapsarian beauty on the alleged barbarousness of 'negro-radical rule'.

In her article on late nineteenth-century writing about Hawai'i, Lindsay Wilhelm observes that 'decadence emerged from globe-spanning conversations about the shape of things to come – conversations in which colonial writers had a major stake' (p. 35). Wilhelm demonstrates how Tylorian thinking about stages of civilizational development, and the presumed collapse or assimilation of 'primitive' societies, created a vexed sense of time in in depictions of Hawai'i as, on one hand, a place of stasis, indolence, and changelessness, a veritable 'Island of the Lotus Eaters', and on the other hand, as a site of a rapid development and advancement toward decadence and decline. Wilhelm notes, however, that 'ranged against this body of *haole* [foreign] literature was a wealth of 'ōlelo Hawai'i historiography [...] in which Kanaka Maoli historians articulated alternative national narratives in their own native language' (pp. 21, 33). Nevertheless, Wilhelm offers a note of caution: 'in the midst of our discipline's turn to the global, we should be conscientious about enlisting non-Western writers into Western canons, lest we erase the claims to distinctiveness that were key to those anti-colonial nation-building efforts' (p. 35).

In his essay on the poetry and performance of Mohawk and Canadian writer E. Pauline Johnson (or Tekahionwake), Tim Clarke illustrates how Indigenous writers can resist the discursive violence of native extinction narratives by turning decadent literary and performance strategies toward ends that subvert Western myths about the vanishing Indian. Clarke demonstrates how Johnson navigates the 'settler conceptions of Indigenous peoples' by employing a 'decadent aesthetic of artifice' to 'undermine her audience's essentializations of cultural and racial otherness' (p. 40). By playing to her audience's anti-decadent desire to relieve the ennui of modernity through the vicarious enjoyment of Indigenous peoples' supposed vitality, simplicity, and authenticity, Johnson 'baits and makes a spectacle of settlers' desires to find correctives for the alleged

decadence of modernity in their own fantasies of alterity'. Likewise, Johnson's poetry 'pierces the myth of the vanishing Indian' with a 'proclamation of Indigenous survival and persistence' (p. 49). In Johnson's hands, a decadent aesthetic offers something of a survival strategy. As Clarke writes, decadent artifice offers 'a tactic for living amid discourses that alternately presume or anticipate her demise' (p. 55).

In examining the divergent reception of poet Sarojini Naidu in India and the West, Sriya Chakraborty registers her initial surprise at encountering Naidu's poetry in the US classroom for a course on decadence after two decades of education in India where Naidu was taught primarily as a national poet. While Naidu is perhaps best known to readers of decadent literature in the West as a protégé of Arthur Symons and Edmund Gosse, Chakraborty examines how Naidu's reception in India was shaped by 'the demand for a national literature that would capture the heart of India and celebrate a distinctively Indian sensibility' (p. 64). While Indian scholars have noted 'Naidu's indebtedness to Arthur Symons and Gosse [...] these records only serve to reinforce the story of her transformation from an imitator of British orientalism to a true poet of the Deccan' (pp. 61-62). Chakraborty finds that among Naidu's critics, the evidence of Naidu's European decadent influences was often dismissed, disavowed, or misattributed 'in ways that have enhanced her eligibility as a nationalist poet' (p. 76), and which Naidu, who went on to become Governor of the United Provinces, played into herself. Nevertheless, as Chakraborty argues in her reading of Naidu's poetry, Naidu's decadence and departure from realism were integral to her idealizing mode of poetic nationalism.

Kaitlin Staudt likewise notes how decadent aesthetics figured in debates over modernization and national culture across the divide between the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of the Turkish Republic. In examining the work of Poet Ahmet Haşım, Staudt notes how 'the aesthetic practices of Ottoman poetry' had been linked to narratives of Ottoman imperial decline (p. 79). The embrace of Ottoman aesthetics therefore stood at odds with the 'trends of realism, vernacularization, and utility' that came to define Turkish nationalist literature.

Nevertheless, Staudt argues, Ottoman authors deployed decadent aesthetics ‘to preserve a distinctly Ottoman literary power at home’ even as they disseminated their work through decadent networks in Europe (p. 85). Staudt shows how Haşim took debates over decadence as an opportunity to place Ottoman poetics in dialogue with the West. Haşim, Staudt argues, turns to European literary criticism to highlight ‘the temporal coequality of the Ottoman and European literary debates’ and to position ‘Ottoman poetry as both contemporary to and equal with, its literary counterparts’. In doing so, Staudt argues, Haşim ‘critiques the idea of European poetic primacy, dispelling the idea that symbolism originated in France and dispersed elsewhere across the globe’ (p. 87).

Finally, Alexander Bubb brings our attention again to decadence as a dialogue between Eastern and Western poetics by calling for greater scholarly precision in matters of translation. Bubb re-examines the story behind illustrator Patten Wilson’s drawings of episodes from the Persian epic the *Shahnameh* of Firdausi, several of which appeared in the 1890s journal *The Yellow Book*. While scholars and art dealers have most often assumed that the drawings were inspired by Matthew Arnold’s ‘Sohrab and Rustum’, which casts Firdausi’s poem along the lines of Greek epic tradition, Bubb demonstrates that the drawings were in fact inspired by *The Epic of Kings*, a popular 1882 abridgement of the *Shahnameh* by Helen Zimmern. The question of which translation inspired Wilson matters, Bubb writes, ‘because it allows us to undo the biases that have shaped the field’ (p. 101). Indeed, Bubb argues that Western translations of literary texts from Asia rarely receive the same level of scholarly scrutiny as texts, for example, from ancient Greece. As Bubb argues, scholars must afford ‘the same philological respect to Chinese, Persian, or Sanskrit as, to give a recent example, Yopie Prins does to Greek in her study of Victorian women’s engagement with tragic drama’ (p. 100). As Bubb further details, the bias among nineteenth-century Orientalists in favour of epic over the later Persian lyric traditions enabled a narrative of Persian decline partly inspired by the *Shahnameh* itself. Bubb details how Zimmern’s having been a woman and an

‘unapologetic amateur’ led scholars to overlook her as the likely source for Wilson’s drawings, leading to a distorted understanding of ‘Persian literary influence in Britain’ (p. 108).

While these essays cover a broad geographical range, from travel writing about Hawai‘i to translations of Persian epic, several common themes emerge. Bailey’s and Wilhelm’s essays both illustrate how decadent temporalities shaped Western travellers’ representations of supposedly timeless tropical islands as colonial spaces no less subject to the upheavals of modernity than the European metropolis. Indeed, both show how decadent narratives of development and ruination can be deployed to cast doubt on the ability of colonized peoples to successfully manage the transition to modernity (as the colonizers understood it) without suffering the ills of a decadent modernity, or to proleptically mourn the loss of some allegedly Edenic past. Both Wilhelm’s and Clarke’s essays illustrate how Indigenous writers navigate the pervasive narrative of native extinction, either by holding on to their own sense of historical disruption ‘not calibrated against the timeline of European exploration’ (p. 35), as Wilhelm puts it, or by artfully playing with and against white settler colonial fantasies. Both Chakraborty and Staudt call our attention to how decadent aesthetics were routinely put under pressure in debates over the formation of national culture and the proper place of Western aesthetic ideals during periods of transition to modern statehood. They illustrate how poetry, in particular, could become associated with old imperial formations (Ottoman, Mughal) considered ineligible for the representation of the modern nation. While Haşim and Naidu were critical figures who saw decadent literary modes as means of forging closer connections between European literary debates and Ottoman or Indian literary traditions respectively, Bubb asks scholars of translation to pay more careful attention to the means of transmission by which Asian literature entered into fin-de-siècle European contexts. Taken together, these essays illustrate just a few of the ways that thinking of decadence and decolonization together can shift the frame of decadence studies, decentre decadence as a primarily Eurocentric critique of modernity, and broaden our understanding of the range of responses to modernity with which the idea of decadence is intertwined.

I would like to thank Jane Desmarais for the invitation to guest edit this special issue, which emerged out of the conversations that followed the 2021 ‘Decolonizing Decadence’ roundtable sponsored by the NAVSA Aestheticism and Decadence caucus and moderated by Kristin Mahoney, which featured papers by Peter Bailey, Lindsay Wilhelm, Alexander Bubb, and Katharina Herold-Zanker. My thanks to Bob Volpicelli, who was the driving force behind the 2022 MSA Seminar ‘New Directions in Decadence: Contexts, Geographies, Histories’, in which I first encountered Kaitlin Staudt’s work on late Ottoman decadence. Thanks also to Cherrie Kwok for organizing the ‘Global Decadence, Race, and the Futures of Decadence Studies’, co-sponsored by BADS, which featured Tim Clarke’s paper on E. Pauline Johnson in an important panel on ‘Indigeneity, Race, and Reception in the late nineteenth century Decadences’. Events like these continue to be crucial to the field. Thanks especially to all the anonymous peer reviewers who so quickly and collegially turned around reader’s reports for this issue, and whose suggestions did so much to shape the final product. This work cannot be done without such dedicated colleagues.

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Desmarais, ‘Decadence and the Critique of Modernity’, in *Decadence and Literature*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 98-114 (p. 98). Desmarais quotes Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. by Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 179.

<sup>2</sup> For a critique of the ‘first in the West, and then elsewhere’ model in relation to European historicism and anti-colonial resistance movements, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 6-11. For an overview of how ideas of modernity have been put to scrutiny by an expanding array of voices, not least by those marginalized by or within the West, or cast as peripheral to it see Rita Felski, ‘New Cultural Theories of Modernity’, in *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 55-76; and Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 83-180.

<sup>3</sup> Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, ‘Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda’, in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> See Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 7; and Aníbal Quijano, ‘Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality’, *Cultural Studies*, 21.2-3 (2007), p. 177.

<sup>5</sup> Chakrabarty, p. 7

<sup>6</sup> Aníbal Quijano, trans. by Michael Ennis, ‘Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America’, *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1.3 (2000), p. 542.

<sup>7</sup> Tuck and Yang, ‘Decolonization is Not a Metaphor’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1.1 (2012), 1-40.

<sup>8</sup> See Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), pp. 155-56.

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Yee, ‘Introduction’, in *French Decadence in a Global Context: Colonialism and Exoticism*, ed. by Julia Hartley, Wanrug Suwanwattana, and Jennifer Yee (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022), pp. 10-12.

<sup>10</sup> See David Weir and Jane Desmarais, ‘Introduction: Decadence, Culture, and Society’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 1; Calinescu, pp. 157-71; Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859-1920* (New

York: Palgrave, 2010); Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 5-10.

<sup>11</sup> Yee, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Yee, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> See Curtis Marez, 'The Other Addict: Reflections on Colonialism and Oscar Wilde's Opium Smoke Screen', *ELH*, 64.1 (1997), 257-87; Hema Chari, 'Imperial Dependency, Addiction, and the Decadent Body', in *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, ed. by Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 213-32; and Urmila Seshagiri, 'Race and the Emergence of Metropolitan Modernism', in *Race and the Modernist Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010) pp. 16-53.

<sup>14</sup> Tuck and Yang, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> For examples of just some of the more globally oriented scholarship on decadence, see: Stefano Evangelista, *Literary Cosmopolitanism in the English Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Regenia Gagnier, 'Global Literatures of Decadence', in *Literatures of Liberalization* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 131-66; and Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

## Deforestation and Decolonization: Lafcadio Hearn's French Antillean Writing

Peter A. A. Bailey

University of the Bahamas

Looking outside at my breadfruit tree reminds me how European colonialism shaped Caribbean landscape through the genocide of indigenous peoples and colonization of their lands, followed by the theft, commodification and dispersal of indigenous plants and botanic knowledge. Furthermore, these processes were accompanied by the production and hierarchization of race and the enslavement and exploitation of African and Asian populations. As Elizabeth Deloughrey, Renee Gosson, and George Handley note, 'there is probably no other region in the world that has been more radically altered in terms of human and botanic migration, transplantation and settlement than the Caribbean'.<sup>1</sup> Yet, our ability to detect ecoimperialist activities by reading Caribbean landscapes is hampered by 'the ever-expanding and ambitious imaginative symbolism' through which the colonizers constituted the islands as tropical paradises'.<sup>2</sup> As Deloughrey explains, 'at the height of the process of altering and damaging island landscapes, tropical islands were interpellated in Edenic terms, removed in space and time' and segregated from human agency.<sup>3</sup> This interpellation, still active in today's tourism advertisements, naturalizes the altered landscapes, thereby effacing the violent ecological history of the Caribbean plantation economy.

Describing the French Caribbean, Édouard Glissant proclaims 'landscape is its own monument: its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history'.<sup>4</sup> How, then, do we expose this history beneath not only the rhetorical layers that overwrite landscape but also landscape's transfixing aesthetic appeal? Decadent environmental writing about Caribbean settings might help us with this recovery. What might we notice when we pay more attention to the ruined garden or paradise lost in accounts of landscape written when colonial withdrawal is underway? Robert Stilling describes the development of one type of these scenes: 'landscape once depicted by nineteenth-century naturalists as a new, tropical Eden became littered with the ruins of

abandoned plantation houses, sugar mills, and colonial forts [...] tropical paradise began to look more like the Roman Forum'.<sup>5</sup> Admittedly, decadent no less than romantic mythology is a colonizing projection onto the natural world: if there is no true Eden, there is also no true Waste Land. But as Alex Murray reminds us, decadence's 'reactionary, conservative accusations of a cultural fall' no matter how baseless, make 'temporality a pre-condition of Decadence'.<sup>6</sup> Decadence might restore temporality to natural history, allowing us to perceive more clearly how nature has been acculturated over time, or how certain histories rely on invocations of nature in order to be told. Furthermore, if as Murray argues, decadent landscape writing foregrounds the 'stylistic and the formal', allowing place to become 'secondary to the means and modes of representing it', the ostentatious self-reflexivity of decadent landscape writing might signpost for us where, why and how colonialist rhetoric invokes Caribbean paradise then its fall.<sup>7</sup> Thus informed, we might move to a decolonized assessment of what Caribbean landscape might afford us if it is no longer burdened with being paradise *or* the fallen garden.

The travel writing of Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904) exemplifies how decadent writing can expose the conflict and social inequalities materialized through people's environmental interactions. In 1887, Hearn sailed to several Caribbean ports, eventually settling in Saint-Pierre, Martinique. He would remain on the island until 1889, exploring its environments, recording the orature of its people, and observing their lifeways. His impressions of 'divine, paradisaical Martinique' informed several sketches he published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1888.<sup>8</sup> In 1890, he supplemented, revised, and published those dispatches as the travelogue *Two Years in the French West Indies*.

As scholars such as Stefano Evangelista and Catherine Maxwell have demonstrated, Hearn is a cosmopolitan conduit of decadent culture.<sup>9</sup> His translations of Théophile Gautier and Gustave Flaubert brought those authors wider circulation among American and British audiences while his journalism about New Orleans's Creole culture helped define that city as a centre of decadence in America. Despite Hearn's intermediary role, critics of decadence have published little about his



Caribbean sojourn, leaving unexamined how colonial conditions affected his sense of decadence as a literary style or a fin-de-siècle attitude towards contemporary life. Furthermore, although Hearn revises almost every paragraph of his *Harper's* sketches for *Two Years*, scholars have overlooked how these variations reveal developments in Hearn's thinking about decadence. Adjectives and nouns are changed; catalogues and site descriptions extended or truncated. Illustrations are reordered and recaptioned, suggesting new ethnographic and environmental foci for readers. Most changes follow no theme, but Hearn most significantly alters his text's tenor when he adds and deletes anecdotes that consider regime change in France and colonial race relations. These landscape-based reflections are prompted by Fort-de-France's Parc La Savane and Saint-Pierre's Jardin des Plantes. By examining Hearn's treatment of the latter, this article helps address the critical lacuna mentioned above.

Hearn's Caribbean writings in *Harper's* and *Two Years* can be seen as an extended effort to define how politics, culture and geography shape the causes and signs of Caribbean decadence. Although he employs Edenic terms to characterize the Caribbean, they often are voiced as if in hindsight, in memory of 'the paradise-life of the old days'.<sup>10</sup> As Stilling notes, 'from roughly 1830 to 1880, the West Indies were diminished in the popular imagination to the remnants of a once-great civilization'.<sup>11</sup> The emancipation of the enslaved, competition from Continental beet sugar, the loss of protected markets and slow adoption of modern technologies made Caribbean sugarcane plantations unprofitable. Disinvestment and white creole emigration accelerated. To travel through the Caribbean in the aftermath of emancipation was to witness the demise of white creole civilization:

Many of the British islands have been almost deserted by their former cultivators [...] Tobago is a ruin [...] St. Christopher is crumbling; Grenada has lost more than half her whites; St. Thomas, once the most prosperous [...] of West Indian ports, is in full decadence.<sup>12</sup>

Hearn notes that 'economical, climatic, ethnical [and] political' reasons have all been suggested for the decadence he observes, but that none of these reasons alone can explain it.<sup>13</sup>

Noting that Hearn's Caribbean travel writing was meant to 'satisfy the hunger for exoticism among middle-class Americans', Jacqueline Cousti downplays its political investment, claiming it 'concentrates on the picturesque and cultural aspects of Martinique'.<sup>14</sup> Yet Hearn's citation of white creole authors from the colony alerts us to his awareness of Martinican political conflicts. Cousti contextualizes these tensions, which arose from the attrition of privilege that white creoles experienced during the last third of the nineteenth century. As she goes on to detail, the 1880s were marked by the white creoles' reactionary and racist resistance to political reforms that empowered black and mixed-race people. They 'opposed the governor [...] a Frenchman who defended the inclusive vision of republicanism and supported the bourgeoisie of color'.<sup>15</sup> They protested the actions of Republican politicians of colour, using journalism to decry white victimization and to ascribe motives of white genocide to people of African descent.<sup>16</sup> If, as Cousti suggests, Hearn focuses on 'the marvels of Martinique' because political 'life in Martinique was anything but a source of exotic escapism', we should not suppose that his travel writings are devoid of political implications.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Hearn's sketch of the Jardin des Plantes, described as 'one of the wonders of the world', exemplifies how he uses the marvellous to examine the political aspects of decadence.<sup>18</sup>

As his periodical sketches evolve into their final forms in *Two Years*, Hearn complicates his rhetorical treatment of natural landscapes. Initially, he presents tropical nature as a vector of decadence itself; the fecund Caribbean flora decomposes the man-made forms that signify civilizational order. Moreover, nature enables decadent transmutations, 'melting and reshaping living substance [...] within the same awful crucible'.<sup>19</sup> These figurations of nature reject anthropomorphism by fostering what Dennis Denisoff calls 'open ecology [...] disruptive interfusions among the natural, cultural, spiritual [...] individual and collective'.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, in Martinique's forests, there exist 'plants that have fangs' while 'man feels here like an insect; fears like an insect'.<sup>21</sup> Animist sensibilities drive the colonial population to 'talk to imaginary beings, and to the trees, the clouds, and the eternal hills, like the women of the Kalevala'.<sup>22</sup> Thus juxtaposing

Martinican and Finnish paganism as ways of respecting the environment, Hearn's *Harper's* sketches suggest the relevance of colonial ecologies for comparative studies of how decadent writers engage with their environments. Indeed, analysis of Hearn could provide a supplementary chapter for Denisoff's *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860-1910* (2021). Unfortunately, this article lacks space to further examine Hearn's meditations on nature's influences on humanity. Instead, it examines how the final version of Hearn's travelogue develops and foregrounds concerns about man's influence on nature, concerns that only occur as an afterthought in his *Harper's* work.

As *Two Years* resorts to descriptions of forest clearance to suggest Martinique's anthropogenic ecological degradation, the colony's native flora becomes legible not as a figure for decadent agency, but as an object subject to decline, a text through which symptoms of decadence can be detected and an etiology for decadence derived. The textuality of this decadent treescape makes it an index to post-emancipation power struggles between Martinique's white creoles and its black and mixed-race population. White creoles resented black and mixed-race people as they surmounted racial barriers to new social and political opportunities such as elective office and quality state-sponsored education. Hearn channels the dispossession felt by white creoles, converting their political grievances into concerns over the management of the arboreal landscape. Thus, under the guise of mourning 'the destruction of trees older than the colony itself', Hearn can decry the 'negro-radical régime', the political alliance between Republicans and black Martinicans that he deems responsible for that deforestation.<sup>23</sup> Representing the decadent landscape as the result of barbaric motives and processes, he can rhetorically abject Martinicans of colour from their reinstated place as citizens, blame Republicans for fostering a utilitarian view of nature, and reflect nostalgically on France's First and Second Empires.

The Jardin des Plantes was an acclimatization garden, one of the nodes in the botanical network through which plants were transferred across the French colonial empire. As an example of the 'garden as constructed natural landscape' it obscured the boundaries that demarcated it as a man-made space from the old-growth forests.<sup>24</sup> Hearn suggests it is representative of the entire

natural landscape of the island, stressing to his readers that ‘the grand mountain forest itself’ was used to form the garden, and assuring readers that its ‘greater part [...] is a natural formation’ where ‘nature has accomplished [...] infinitely more than man (though man has done much)’.<sup>25</sup> Located less than a mile from Saint-Pierre, it was ‘for promenading and recreation as much as for science’.<sup>26</sup> Winding stone staircases and bridges guided visitors through different levels of the garden where they could enjoy high vistas and experience varied microclimates suitable for particular species of plants. Between the time of the garden’s establishment in 1803 and its destruction by the eruption of Mount Pelée in 1902, travel accounts routinely mention it as a highlight that distinguished Saint-Pierre as the Paris of the Antilles. Both as a signifier of civilization and order and as a microcosm of the entire island’s arboreal landscape, the garden is an apt site to consider the rhetoric of colonial decadence.

Let us begin examining Hearn’s sketch of the Jardin des Plantes as it appears in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*. He strives to make his reader experience its features with immediacy. Therefore, the sketch withholds his botanic impressions, instead adopting a second-person address that interpellates readers as sightseers. It concludes:

You are alone, you hear no human voice, you see no human face, but you observe all around you the labours of man in stone being gnawed and devoured by Nature – broken bridges, sliding steps, fallen arches; and your nostrils are filled with a pungent odor of decay. This odor, omnipresent and sinister, this stench of the vast chemistry of dissolution everywhere in operation, unpleasantly affects the aesthetic sense. It never ceases to remind you that when Nature is most puissant to charm, there also is she mightiest to destroy, to transmute, to obliterate forever.<sup>27</sup>

The sketch’s closing sentences focus on the depths to which human accomplishments may sink: ‘the broken bridges, sliding steps and fallen arches’ all reveal the downward trajectory of the garden’s architecture. Hearn describes this decline with the metaphors and syntax of decadent style. Nature, consuming those architectural structures that connect, is personified as a *femme fatale*, full of seductive power that she may also use ‘to destroy, to transmute, to obliterate forever’.<sup>28</sup> As the final sentence of the sketch comes to its conclusion, it strives to enact that omnipresent dissolution being described. Asyndeton banishes conjunctions, leaving the infinitives atomized and

seemingly functioning as synonyms for one another. The etymology of the triad's final verb hints at the disintegration of words themselves, as their individual letters are struck out.

Hearn's portrait of decadence in the botanical garden recalls another site he visits: St George, Grenada, the 'senescent city' that symbolizes full West Indian decadence.<sup>29</sup> In its silent mouldering streets, 'melancholy [...] abandoned dwellings' and greening, slimed buildings there is the 'suggestion of what any West Indian port might become when the resources of the island had been exhausted, and all its commerce failed'.<sup>30</sup> In St George, under the assault of 'luxuriant, evergreen, ever-splendid Nature', all

surfaces and angles are yielding to the attacks of time, weather, and microscopic organisms; paint peels, stucco falls, tiles tumble, stones slip out of place, and in every chink tiny green things nestle, propagating themselves through the jointures and dislocating the masonry.<sup>31</sup>

Nature is a decadent agent that decomposes and tumbles forms.

Hearn's idea that nature itself was hostile to colonial efforts to maintain civilization in the Caribbean conforms to prevailing thought at the time. As Christopher Church notes, the French Antilles seemed particularly vulnerable to tropical diseases, dangerous flora and fauna and natural disasters: 'The geography of the Caribbean presents a unique confluence of dangers. It is atop an active plate boundary, riddled with volcanoes, perpetually menaced by hurricanes and tempests'.<sup>32</sup> It would be fitting, therefore, for the sketch to conclude by reflecting on nature's destructive powers. However, the expected closure of Hearn's sketch is ruptured by an odd footnote. In it, he ceases his second-person address, for the first time presenting readers with his *own* reportage of the Jardin des Plantes:

The beautiful garden had been sadly neglected before I saw it. Storms and torrential rains had greatly damaged it and no attempt had been made to repair the bridges washed away, or the grottoes that had tumbled in. Still neglect alone would not have totally ruined the loveliness of the place; barbarism was necessary for such a devastation. And since the above lines were written, I was shocked to learn that under the negro radical rule orders had been given for the destruction of trees a hundred generations old; marvels that can never be replaced were cut down and converted into charcoal for the use of the *lycées*.<sup>33</sup>

The change in focalization foregrounds a gap between the pleasing vision Hearn wishes his readers to experience immediately and his own more conflicted perception. The body of the sketch makes

readers visualize the old-fashioned but undiminished allure of the botanical garden. Despite the decaying architectural structures described near its end, as a whole the garden is ‘very quaint; it suggests an art spirit older than Versailles, older than Louis XIV, but it is unutterably beautiful’.<sup>34</sup> By contrast, although Hearn’s footnote begins discussing ‘the beautiful garden,’ he soon undercuts this description. Decrying not only an indifference but also a barbarism that have ‘totally ruined the loveliness of the place’, he etymologically conveys the total evacuation of aesthetic charm: ‘devastation’ stems from the Latin roots *de-* ‘completely’ + *vastare* ‘to lay waste’, ultimately tracing to *vastus* ‘empty, desolate’. What do these representational oppositions reveal?

Hearn’s periodical sketch hierarchizes two portrayals of the relationship between decadence and nature. In the main text, nature is personified as the devouring *femme fatale* whose ravages are shown in the ruins of humanity’s work. However, beneath the text, readers are also presented with the ruin of *nature’s* work by man. In the footnote, the depiction of decadence ceases to be just one of timeless cycles of dissolution wrought by meteorological and organic attacks; it acquires a specific historical cause tied to human agency: the barbarism of negro-radical rule. Although this spatial ordering encourages us to overlook Hearn’s note as superfluous to the text, the footnote is actually supplemental in the deconstructive sense, foundational to understanding that Martinique’s decadence is caused by the racial dynamics of its contemporary political scene. But what exactly is ‘negro-radical’ rule? It is no neutral term.

The import of Hearn’s political reference is only apparent from the sociological viewpoint that he adopts in his Antillean writing. As Couti notes, although Hearn’s texts are shaped by local informants from a range of Martinique’s ethno-classes, his interpretation of local events is formed predominantly by the authorities he cites: ‘white Creole writers from Martinique’ and ‘white travellers or missionaries’ from France.<sup>35</sup> This ‘*bibliothèque coloniale*’ establishes the French Antilles as a tropical Eden from which the descendants of the original French settlers are being expelled by black Martinicans.<sup>36</sup> Thus informed, Hearn laments, ‘[i]n the island paradise of Martinique in 1848 there were 25,000 whites; now, against 160,000 blacks and half-breeds, there are less than

8,000 creoles left to maintain the ethnic struggle, and the number of these latter is annually growing less'.<sup>37</sup> By the time he wrote these words, Martinique's white creoles had lived through forty years of change in a fallen paradise. As Hearn notes in *Two Years*, "The universal creole belief is summed up in the daily-repeated cry: "C'est un pays perdu!"<sup>38</sup> What caused these feelings of dispossession? In 1848, slavery was abolished in the French colonial empire, an act perceived by white creoles as a betrayal by metropolitan Republicans. Dreading lethal retribution from the emancipated, many white creoles fled Martinique. Those that remained found their socioeconomic power shaken by the loss of enslaved labour, their political power threatened by universal manhood suffrage. Nevertheless, with the rise of the Second Empire in 1852, white creoles were able to figure abolition 'as a tropical storm – intense, destructive, but also of limited duration'.<sup>39</sup> Under Napoleon III's regime, the newly emancipated had their voting rights curtailed. Additionally, their freedom of movement was restricted by vagrancy laws and a system of work passes. These factors limited the employment prospects of the freed to the very plantations they had abandoned, largely maintaining the unjust social relations experienced during enslavement.

Unfortunately for white creoles, the reactionary period ended in 1870 when the Third Republic succeeded the Empire and restored full citizenship rights to Martinique's non-white citizens. Beginning in the 1880s, as the newly enfranchised majority of black and mixed-race men sought political representation, white politicians were gradually marginalized within local government and as Antillean representatives to the national French legislature. It is this new political situation that Hearn disparages as negro-radical rule, an unholy alliance of metropolitan Republicans and the majority formed by non-white Martinican voters.

Why does Hearn insist that under 'negro-radical rule' irreplaceable trees were 'cut down and converted into charcoal for the use of the *lycées*'? The primary purpose of this odd footnote is not to introduce facts about the state of the Jardin des Plantes. Indeed, no locatable historical source even confirms the tree-harvesting Hearn describes – it may entirely be a rhetorical device.<sup>40</sup> Rather, the work performed by the footnote is ideological, race-defining. Confronted with the legal

equality and social ascendancy of black Martinicans, Hearn seems to want to find an evaluative system through which he can still distinguish them from their white creole compatriots as equal citizens of the French Republic. Presenting his readers with a wondrous landscape that has been degraded, Hearn inextricably links the ruin of the environment to a black-Republican regime that finds no aesthetic, symbolic or historic value in natural beauty. Under this ‘negro-radical’ order, marvels like ancient trees can serve only the most basic material ends for institutions intent on incorporating black people into the nation. Hearn works to make his readers share his anger and shock towards this gross abuse of nature, an abuse that renders its perpetrators barbaric, the antithesis of cultivation and lawful order. In order to understand the claims advanced here, we must examine the state of public education in the fin-de-siècle French Antilles.

As people of colour challenged racial segregation in Martinique, white creoles sought enclaves such as private schools where they could maintain separatism. Hearn knew the agitation the issue of education raised in the colony:

No white creole would dream of sending his children to a lay school or a *lycée* – notwithstanding the unquestionable superiority of the educational system in the latter institutions; – and, although obliged, as the chief tax-paying class, to bear the burden of maintaining these establishments, the whites hold them in such horror that the Government professors are socially ostracized.<sup>41</sup>

This withdrawal was inimical to Republican ideals of racial unity and assimilation. As Matthew Potolsky notes, by the late nineteenth century, all industrialized Western European nations were instituting systems of universal public education. By ‘bringing together children from all social levels, the school sought to create a sense of national purpose that transcended social, economic, ethnic, religious and racial differences’.<sup>42</sup> This nationalist project also extended to the Antillean colonies, where in the early 1880s, the Third Republic mandated free, compulsory and secular primary schools. Before emancipation, education for people of colour, especially the enslaved, had been restricted in ways that would uphold the order of the plantocracy. Government-sponsored education, available equally to children of all races, enabled people of colour to better realize their human potential, enjoy their civil rights and fulfil their civic responsibilities and duties.



While public primary education was meant to ameliorate the lives of the greatest numbers, Republican officials introduced the secondary school or *lycée* to train an elite bourgeois professional class. *Lycées* were expected to ‘alleviate the impact of a potential confrontation between former slaves and former slave owners’ and disseminate Republican ideals.<sup>43</sup> Even though only a small percentage of the colony’s children would actually graduate from the *lycée*, in principle, its ostensibly merit-based admissions policies and mixed-race and black alumni demonstrated that Martinique’s people of colour had been assimilated by the state as full citizens. They were worthy to serve not merely their island but the entire Republic as administrators, educators, and bureaucrats.

Public education disrupted the hierarchical order of the plantocracy by promoting an egalitarian ethos and equipping Martinicans of colour to work outside the plantation system. For these reasons alone, the state school was a harbinger of decadence for white creoles. The anti-educational antipathy discussed above is doubtless a factor that affects Hearn’s rhetoric concerning schools.<sup>44</sup> When he complains that ‘marvels that can never be replaced were cut down and converted into charcoal for the use of the *lycées*’, he indicates the quotidian material processes required to sustain a student body; the charcoal mentioned is most likely cooking fuel to prepare school lunches. However, by yoking the image of the state-school with that of a botanical garden deforested to make charcoal, by ascribing that ecological mismanagement to barbarism and ‘negro-radical’ rule, Hearn encourages his readers to calculate the worth of the Republican educational project and to find the judgement of the black municipal authorities wanting. What is worth the loss of those irreplaceable trees? Is their sacrifice forgivable? As Marcus Winkler reminds us:

The lexeme *barbar-* is [...] used as a self-evident concept that fits incomprehensible heinous acts whose perpetrators, to whom it is applied as well, are to be considered as excluded from the civil society and even from the human species.<sup>45</sup>

There is irony here – the trees are cut to support the education which ostensibly confirms the colony’s mixed race and black citizens as citizens, but the very felling and burning of the trees marks those citizens as unassimilable Others.<sup>46</sup>

I have been explaining the way Hearn's footnote registers colonial decline as a process that can be understood ecologically; discussing the decadence of the botanical garden allows Hearn to question the value of the inclusive processes that make black Martinicans full citizens, equal to their white counterparts. However, while in its periodical form this way of reading the landscape is an afterthought rather than a fully developed idea, in Hearn's book, the increased importance of his new interpretive approach is evident in the way it rises from its prior peritextual position to be augmented and incorporated into his sketch's body as a conclusion. In addition to this, Hearn threads images from the original footnote through new sections he writes for the expanded travelogue. By comparing the periodical and book versions of his text we can fully appreciate Hearn as a manipulator of decadent rhetoric; he is not unconsciously reproducing the attitudes of his creole interlocutors but *developing* aspects of their worldview in a narrative of Martinican decline that deepens in complexity across his sketches' variants.

In *Two Years*, indiscriminate deforestation for the purpose of making charcoal returns repeatedly as a signifier of colonial decline, creating a network of references that connect blackness, barbarism and environmental destruction. Take for instance Hearn's apostrophe to Jean-Baptiste Labat, the French missionary who played an early key role in settling the French Antilles:

Eh, *Père Labat!* – what changes there have been since thy day! [...] the grand woods thou sawest in their primitive and inviolate beauty, as if fresh from the Creator's touch in the morning of the world, are passing away; the secular trees are being converted into charcoal.<sup>47</sup>

The postlapsarian rhetoric here is obvious. In another sketch about mountain ecosystems, Hearn complains:

There are rare and remarkable trees here, – acomats, courbarils, balatas, ceibas or fromagers, acajous, gommiers; – hundreds have been cut down by charcoal-makers; but the forest is still grand. It is to be regretted that the Government has placed no restriction upon the barbarous destruction of trees by the *charbonniers*, which is going on throughout the island. [...] to-day the island exports no more hard woods: it has even been found necessary to import much from neighboring islands; – and yet the destruction of forests still goes on.<sup>48</sup>

Here Hearn employs what Laura Brown calls the ‘rhetoric of acquisition’ where ‘the mere act of proliferative listing [...] and the sense of an incalculable quantity’ present the prospect of untold riches to be obtained through imperialist enterprise.<sup>49</sup> He enhances the sense of his catalogue’s special value by presenting the trees only through their defamiliarizing Creole names. The exotic diction emphasizes the wondrousness of the trees by foregrounding them not as living organisms but as a set of word-ornaments, a decadent collection of rare vocabulary that can only be fully appreciated by the discerning traveller or connoisseur of language. Yet evoking the value of the trees serves primarily to underscore the outrageous wastefulness described. These precious woods will not be exploited for their singular virtues, rather they are destined for the charcoal-maker’s kiln.

Charcoal makers were understood culturally as outlaw figures in a condemnatory pan-Caribbean discourse that colonial authorities wielded against charcoal producers and sellers.<sup>50</sup> Although they were essential because they made the primary domestic fuel in the colonies, they were regarded ambivalently.<sup>51</sup> Firstly, as Hearn indicates, their indiscriminate woodcutting caused environmental devastation, altering the landscape and destroying species that were valuable exports. Secondly, they routinely evaded paying licenses and taxes for the right to make and sell charcoal.<sup>52</sup> Though the *charbonniers* are not explicitly racialized above, their wasteful abuse of the arboreal landscape and the failure of government to restrict them elicits once more the charges of barbarous behaviour that Hearn originally linked with ‘negro-radical rule’. The *charbonniers* too are abjected beyond the bounds of civilized behaviour.

Hearn continues to link the politics that leads to decline with an inability to appreciate Martinique’s natural beauty. While Hearn’s original footnote in *Harper’s* registered decline by focusing on local politics in Martinique, his revision of the note expands its purview to the metropole, for the first time directly linking the decadent landscape to the collapse of the Second Empire and the rise of the Third Republic:

The beautiful garden is now little more than a wreck of what it once was; since the fall of the Empire it has been shamefully abused and neglected. Some *agronome* sent out to take charge of it by the Republic, began its destruction by cutting down acres of enormous and magnificent trees, – including a superb alley of palms, – for the purpose of experimenting with roses. But the rose-trees would not be cultivated there; and the serpents avenged the demolition by making the experimental garden unsafe to enter; – they always swarm into underbrush and shrubbery after forest-trees have been cleared away.... Subsequently the garden was greatly damaged by storms and torrential rains; the mountain river overflowed, carrying bridges away and demolishing stonework. No attempt was made to repair these destructions; but neglect alone would not have ruined the loveliness of the place; – barbarism was necessary! Under the present negro-radical régime orders have been given for the wanton destruction of trees older than the colony itself; – and marvels that could not be replaced in a hundred generations were cut down and converted into charcoal for the use of public institutions.<sup>53</sup>

Hearn ties care and respect for the natural world to aristocratic order. In both white Creole and metropolitan French texts, Martinique was often presented as a ‘tropical version of ancien régime France’.<sup>54</sup> The persistence of pre-Revolutionary culture on the island was demonstrated in white creoles’ status as ‘the land-owning class whose plantations predated the First French Republic and recalled the Old Regime’.<sup>55</sup> Appropriately then, in all variations of Hearn’s sketch, the Jardin des Plantes joins the plantations in generating these anachronistic royalist associations, even though it was constructed after the French Revolution. Notably, in *Harper’s*, Hearn tells readers the garden’s ‘art spirit [is] older than Versailles, older than Louis XIV’.<sup>56</sup> This claim is emphasized in *Two Years*: ‘It is of another century, this garden [...] it is very quaint; it suggests an art spirit as old as Versailles, or older.’<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, the site is linked to other retrograde monarchical signifiers. When Hearn invites his first readers to identify with explorers who have toured the space, he directs them not to their contemporaries but backwards to a famed figure of nostalgia, the Martinique-born first Empress of the French. ‘Did Josephine ever rest upon that shadowed bench nearby? She knew all these paths by heart: surely they must have haunted her dreams in the aftertime’.<sup>58</sup>

Hearn’s evocation of Josephine Bonaparte is fanciful; the Jardin des Plantes was established after she finally left the Caribbean for France. However, Hearn’s romanticized revision of history makes sense when we recall that in Martinique, beginning in the period of the Second Empire, commemoration of Josephine became a ‘powerful symbol for white claims to political,

social and moral authority'.<sup>59</sup> She was well known for her love of botany and horticulture, famed for her gardens. Yearning for the Jardin des Plantes in exile, she serves as an exemplary figure of care for Martinique's arboreal heritage that sharply contrasts with Hearn's charcoal makers and black politicians. Furthermore, as wife and grandmother respectively to emperors Napoleon I and Napoleon III, Josephine embodies the centrality of white Antillean *créolité* to French imperial glory, reminding white creoles of the time that they were not marginalized by the metropole. Perhaps most importantly, as Laurence Brown has argued, for white creoles, the recollection of Josephine served as an implicit justification of slavery and benevolent paternalism. Remembered as sympathetic and generous, she embodied 'the moral virtues of the white plantocracy without direct reference to slavery' even though she was a slave-owner.<sup>60</sup>

Given the temporal, racial and political associations Hearn reinforces with his account, it is unsurprising that he correlates the garden's deterioration with the transformation of relations between metropole and colony when the Second Empire fell. The shift between imperial and republican regimes is presented as a divestment of care from the motherland, a rejection of creole aristocratic culture and again a turn to a new deficient system of valuing the natural world. From its inception, the Jardin des Plantes was designed to be equally a place for recreation and a site for agronomical experimentation and advances in the plant sciences. Yet although these two purposes might be understood as interdependent, Hearn's text underplays the garden's scientific aspects. Rather, the aesthetic appeal that renders the site exceptional for leisure is foregrounded and insistently explained as anachronistic – 'quaint'. By contrast, through the 'experimenting with roses' Hearn criticizes here, the scientific and economic mandates of the Jardin des Plantes irrupt back to prominence, reminding us of its role as a station in the worldwide network through which newly discovered plants were taxonomized, transplanted, bred and commodified. Hearn's *agronome* links the Third Republic to an outrageously progressive science whose focus on innovation destroys the beauty of a long-established conservative order. Furthermore, the impersonal description of the palm-demolishing *agronome* establishes him as some interchangeable cog in the

machinery of imperial bureaucracy, a government functionary who cannot or will not understand the cultural specificity of the colony he has been dispatched to administer. As Mimi Sheller reminds us, because ‘palm trees in particular deeply informed initial European impressions’ of Caribbean flora’, the palm becomes ‘a key symbolic icon representing the entire Caribbean region’.<sup>61</sup> The tree also had strong associations with plantocratic order; in marking approaches to plantations and boundaries between estates, allées of palms were signs of property’.<sup>62</sup> Thus, in Hearn’s passage, palms serve as emblems of white creole particularism, disrespected by metropolitan bureaucratic indifference.

Hearn’s regret that acres of old and beautiful trees are sacrificed for an uncertain horticultural experiment is clear from the rhetorical strategies he employs to push his allegedly factual account towards what seems like an ironic revision of Edenic myth. Animated by pathetic fallacy, Hearn’s vengeful serpents and wilfully quiescent roses invest Nature itself with the power to resist and protest the garden’s redevelopment, a power that Hearn and his readers, too late to the scene of the outrage, cannot have. The experimental garden parodies the primeval Biblical one; as in Genesis, we are left with the image of a snake-infested garden that cannot be entered safely. Ultimately, however, the destruction the agronomist initiates cannot be checked; the passage *still* concludes with its incendiary end. In this revised account, the word *lycées* gives way to the term ‘public institutions’. While the rewording may be intended to make the description more readily comprehensible to anglophone readers, it also suggests a greater menace posed by the negro-radical regime. Although the new terminology preserves its reference to a more inclusive educational system, it suggests any number of institutions which may now be open to Martinique’s barbarous citizens of colour.

Praising Martinique’s ‘Eden-summer’ and ‘Hesperian magnificence’, Hearn might seem just another purveyor of the myths that constitute the Caribbean as timeless, free from the histories of violence, exploitation and inequality that have affected the region’s insular ecosystems.<sup>63</sup> Yet Hearn’s histrionic and evolving representation of decadent landscape disrupts the ahistoricity of

paradise and makes discerning those histories possible by foregrounding two notions of temporality. The first is the passage of time that makes the environmental decline discernible as a state of decadence. The second is the passage of time linked to revision. The variations between the periodical and book versions of Hearn's sketches highlight the ways in which all access to the natural world is through rhetoric, mediated by aesthetic, ideological and cultural values. Although this rhetoric is most visible through the representation of the wrecked landscape in the Jardin des Plantes, it applies equally in Hearn's paradisaical representations of Martinique, revealing their construction from the 'ambitious imaginative symbolism' that aided settlers to colonize the island first through discourse, then physically.<sup>64</sup>

Restoring temporality to our consideration of the landscape, Hearn channels decadence's capacity to detect and evaluate change. The full story of decadence as an ecologically informed artistic response to Caribbean history is untold, but Hearn's texts suggest that the environmental losses borne in order to modernize the Caribbean, that is to settle, govern and extract resources from it during the colonial period, may well be the major subject in any decadent literature that arises within the region. In his negrophobic condemnation of the *lycée*, after all, what he is protesting is the ecological cost of assimilating blackness into the nation. The deficiency of Hearn's sketches is that their critique is not wide-ranging enough – their increasingly overt embrace of racism and reactionism obscures the true origin, effect, and scope of the ecological disaster they lament. Witnessing ongoing environmental degradation in the Caribbean today, much of it caused by colonial and neocolonial factors, we might identify with Hearn's sadness over arboreal loss. However, it is not Martinique's black Republicans, *charbonniers*, or students who should disproportionately bear blame for the island's deforestation. Where is the history that links mismanagement of the island's natural resources to the plantocracy, sugar plantations and colonial underdevelopment? Informed by the siege mentality and white supremacist nostalgia of his creole interlocutors, Hearn will not provide us with a comprehensive contextualization of the ecological mismanagement he sees unfolding – we must supply it ourselves.

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- <sup>1</sup> Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, Renee K. Gosson, and George B. Handley, 'Introduction', in *Caribbean Literature and the Environment*, ed. by Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, Renee K. Gosson, and George B. Handley (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2005), pp. 1-30 (p. 1).
- <sup>2</sup> Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 5.
- <sup>3</sup> Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, 'Island Ecologies and Caribbean Literatures', *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie*, 95 (2004), 298-310 (p. 305).
- <sup>4</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse. Selected Essays* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1989), p. 11.
- <sup>5</sup> Robert Stilling, 'Warramou's Curse: Epic, Decadence, and the Colonial West Indies', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 43.3 (2015), 445-63 (p. 451).
- <sup>6</sup> Alex Murray, *Landscapes of Decadence: Literature and Place at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 7.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- <sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Bisland, *The Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn*, 2 vols (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), I, p. 414.
- <sup>9</sup> See Stefano Evangelista, *Literary Cosmopolitanism in the English Fin de Siècle: Citizens of Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) and Catherine Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- <sup>10</sup> Lafcadio Hearn, *Two Years in the French West Indies* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1890), p. 292.
- <sup>11</sup> Stilling, p. 451.
- <sup>12</sup> Lafcadio Hearn, 'A Midsummer Trip to the West Indies: Third Paper', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, September 1888, p. 631.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 630.
- <sup>14</sup> Jacqueline Couti, *Dangerous Creole Liaisons: Sexuality and Nationalism in French Caribbean Discourses from 1806-1897* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), p. 128.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> Lafcadio Hearn, 'A Midsummer Trip to the West Indies: Second Paper', in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, August 1888, p. 338.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 336.
- <sup>20</sup> Dennis Denisoff, *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860-1910: Decay, Desire, and the Pagan Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 32.
- <sup>21</sup> Hearn, 'Midsummer Second', p. 336.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344.
- <sup>23</sup> Hearn, *Two Years*, p. 63.
- <sup>24</sup> Clarissa Kimber, 'Le Jardin Colonial des Plantes of Martinique', in *Islands, Forests and Gardens in the Caribbean: Conservation and Conflict in Environmental History*, ed. by Robert S. Anderson, Richard H. Grove, and Karis Heibert (Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean, 2006), p. 89.
- <sup>25</sup> Hearn, 'Midsummer Second', p. 338.
- <sup>26</sup> Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Architecture and Urbanism in the French Atlantic Empire: State, Church and Society, 1604-1830* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018), p. 321.
- <sup>27</sup> Hearn, 'Midsummer Second', pp. 340-43.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 343.
- <sup>29</sup> Hearn, 'Midsummer Third', p. 627.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> Christopher M. Church, *Paradise Destroyed: Catastrophe and Citizenship in the French Caribbean* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), p. 65.
- <sup>33</sup> Hearn, 'Midsummer Second', p. 343.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.
- <sup>35</sup> Couti, p. 131.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>37</sup> Hearn, 'Midsummer Third', p. 631
- <sup>38</sup> Hearn, *Two Years*, p. 335.
- <sup>39</sup> Laurence Brown, 'Créole Bonapartism and Post-Emancipation Society: Martinique's Monument to the Empress Joséphine', *Outre-mers*, 93 (2006), 39-49 (p. 40).



- <sup>40</sup> Even if he were informed of any culling, it may be that he misunderstood, or more probably embellished, some routine aspect of forestry. For instance, in her history of the Jardin des Plantes, Clarissa Kimber mentions the ‘cutting down of introduced species grown large’ in the late nineteenth century (p. 107).
- <sup>41</sup> Hearn, *Two Years*, p. 179.
- <sup>42</sup> Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 104.
- <sup>43</sup> Véronique Hélénon, *French Caribbeans in Africa: Diasporic Connections and Colonial Administration, 1880-1939* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 27.
- <sup>44</sup> Hearn also is also hostile to the homogenizing effects of French language instruction that public education will bring, fearing that it will doom Martinican Creole to extinction. See Lafcadio Hearn, ‘West Indian Society of Many Colorings’, *Cosmopolitan*, July 1890, p. 339.
- <sup>45</sup> Marcus Winkler, ‘Theoretical and Methodological Introduction’, in *Barbarian: Explorations of a Western Concept in Theory, Literature and the Arts, Vol. I: From the Enlightenment to the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Stuttgart: B. Metzler, 2018), p. 1.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- <sup>47</sup> Hearn, *Two Years*, p. 182.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.
- <sup>49</sup> Laura Brown, *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 43.
- <sup>50</sup> Bonham C. Richardson. *Igniting the Caribbean’s Past: Fire in British West Indian History* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p. 88.
- <sup>51</sup> Clarissa Kimber, *Martinique Revisited: The Changing Plant Geographies of a West Indian Island* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1988), p. 123.
- <sup>52</sup> Richardson, p. 89.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.
- <sup>54</sup> Church, p. 80.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- <sup>56</sup> Hearn, ‘Midsummer Second’, p. 340.
- <sup>57</sup> Hearn, *Two Years*, p. 61.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>59</sup> Brown, ‘Créole Bonapartism’, p. 49.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- <sup>61</sup> Mimi Sheller, *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 194.
- <sup>62</sup> Jill Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 37.
- <sup>63</sup> Hearn, *Two Years*, p. 183.
- <sup>64</sup> Grove, p. 5.

## Development and Decadent Time in Nineteenth-Century Hawai'i

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The Hawai'i of literary renown seems to exist outside the normal flow of time. Charles Warren Stoddard, in his memoir *Hawaiian Life: Lazy Letters from Low Latitudes* (1894), recalls the beautiful 'boat-boy of Lahaina' in just such temporally ambiguous terms: although the travel writer had not seen the native youth in years, Stoddard muses that 'the finger of Time doubles up the moment it points toward him', so that 'he must be still lying in wait for me, [...] not a day older, not a particle changed'.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Hawai'i, this pervasive trope of stasis exists in tension with alternative and often contradictory models of time as cyclical, regressive, and even hyper-accelerated, such that Hawaiian history appears to unfold in fits and starts, jumping forward and looping backward in ways that resist linear understandings of progress. Later in *Hawaiian Life*, for instance, Stoddard reflects on the fate of Kane-Pihi, a local fisherman who in the span of a few months transforms from a 'gentle savage' into a streetwise petty thief and eventual convict.<sup>2</sup> For Stoddard, Kane-Pihi's rapid evolution – which ends with his ignominious death in prison – recreates in miniature the story of a race doomed to collapse under the weight of modernity and its steady drumbeat of 'development'.<sup>3</sup>

As Robert Stilling, Matthew Potolsky, Regenia Gagnier, and other scholars of global decadence have shown us, these evocations of a decadent or otherwise non-normative historical trajectory are not unique to the Pacific, but rather characteristic of colonial cultures in the age of imperial decline. This article seeks to complicate our understanding of this global decadence by situating historiography about and from Hawai'i vis-à-vis what Stilling, in his study of postcolonial anti-decadence, describes as the 'temporality of empire'.<sup>4</sup> To do so, I draw on work by the aforementioned scholars as well as Kristin Mahoney, Dennis Denisoff, and others who have recently expanded our definition of the movement to include a wider range of milieus, authors,

and forms. I am particularly indebted to Potolsky and Gagnier, who conceive of decadence not as a shared set of artistic values – that is, decadence as practised among the coteries of fin-de-siècle London and Paris – but rather as a ‘stance’ (to quote Potolsky) bred out of the friction of economic, political, and technological modernization.<sup>5</sup> More precisely, Gagnier defines decadence as a dialectical response to transnational contact, in which cultures ‘looked at, reified, and fetishized each other’.<sup>6</sup> This more expansive view of decadence, as I’ll suggest, allows us to recognize the diffuse decadent discourses surrounding Hawai‘i in the later nineteenth century, when the islands were not only popularly associated with the quintessentially decadent affects of languor and ennui, but also seen to both embody and resist the forces of geopolitical modernity.<sup>7</sup>

In what follows, I highlight one expression of that decadence: a vexed sense of time, evident in Stoddard’s travel narrative, which runs counter to bedrock Victorian principles of progress and improvement. To Anglo-American travel writers, ethnographers, and armchair historians, Hawai‘i promised perpetual afternoon, even as its people sped through the theorized natural lifecycle of a society, proceeding from ‘savagery’ through civilization to an over-ripened decadence in mere decades. The islands’ complicated temporal status – with rapid development and supposed degeneration counterpoised against its seeming changelessness – in turn both confirmed and contested already strained nineteenth-century theories about societal evolution. Thus, Hawai‘i’s nonconformity to the expected ambit of history found Western literary expression not only in decadent images, motifs, and idioms, but also in a more generalized decadent sensibility – one characterized by an anxious, sometimes seriocomic scepticism of liberal progressive teleology. As I make this argument, however, I want to be conscientious of overstretching decadence in ways that might occlude or flatten *Kanaka Maoli* [Native Hawaiian] literatures, which include a significant corpus of late nineteenth-century historiography written in ‘*ōlelo Hawai‘i* [the Hawaiian language]. By way of conclusion, I’ll turn to a small subset of this historiography to consider how it might be animated by overlapping, but nonetheless separate, conceptions of

decadent time. The paradigms of decadence which we find in that historiography, though comparable in some ways to Euro-American decadence, reveal commitments and concerns unique to a still-independent nation under the duress of colonialism. Hawai‘i thus presents a kind of test case for the global turn in Victorian studies, demonstrating the limits as well as the possibilities of our discipline’s expanding ken.

### **On Decadent Time**

Writing particularly about the French tradition, Leonard R. Koos remarks that ‘decadence, if not historiographical in the most literal sense of the word, always maintains an implicit reference to the process, however catastrophic, of history’.<sup>8</sup> Koos traces this ‘historiographical model of decadence’ to the Enlightenment, and more precisely to two seminal accounts of Rome’s collapse: Montesquieu’s *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734) and Edward Gibbon’s six-volume *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1788). In their own time, Koos argues, Montesquieu’s and Gibbon’s respective histories cemented an enduring association between decadence and the trajectory of empire, and in so doing also ‘presented a serious challenge to the Enlightenment project of progress and civilization’.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Charlotte Roberts identifies a different, but related, tension inherent in the reception of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* specifically: in the popular imagination, his opus stands as a ‘solid and imposing [...] articulation of history as synchronic, comprehensive, monumental, and singular’, even as the process of its composition suggests a view of the past as instead ‘diachronic, iterative, exploratory, and plural’.<sup>10</sup> In its earliest iterations, then, decadence bears within itself this vexing contradiction. On the one hand, decadence lends structure to history by helping to codify a messy confluence of events into linear, causal sequence. On the other hand, decadence as a material historical phenomenon ‘looms menacingly’ (to quote Koos) behind the Enlightenment doctrine of human perfectibility, threatening the inevitable collapse of every civilization, no matter how rationally constructed.

The nineteenth-century advent of evolutionary anthropology complicated this tension in ways that had profound implications for Victorian retellings of Indigenous history. For my own relatively modest purposes here, I would call attention to two influential concepts that were foundational to this anthropology: namely, the theory of the social organism, which held that societies arose, developed, and decayed in a manner akin to the single organism, and the notion of psychic unity, which held that innate mental capacity was the same across all human races.<sup>11</sup> The organic analogy allowed anthropologists to locate the cultures they studied on a sliding scale of development keyed also to the individual lifecycle, ranging from primitive childhood to civilized adulthood to decadent old age; psychic unity further entailed that all human societies passed through roughly the same stages along the scale.<sup>12</sup> In conjunction, these ideas gave rise to the pervasive assumption – implied, if not expressly cited, in much nineteenth-century writing about Hawai‘i – that contemporary non-white peoples were ‘stuck’ at the same level of development as children and ancient Europeans. This assumption formed the methodological basis for Edward Burnett Tylor’s landmark two-volume study *Primitive Culture* (1871): ‘It may be taken as a maxim of ethnology’, Tylor writes, ‘that what is done among civilized men in jest, or among civilized children in the nursery, is apt to find its analogue in the serious mental effort of savage, and therefore of primaeval tribes’.<sup>13</sup> Broadly speaking, the racial hierarchy implied by Tylor’s maxim lent validity to the particularly paternalistic form of imperialism that Rudyard Kipling would later enshrine as the ‘White Man’s Burden’, and Patrick Wolfe points out that evolutionary anthropology as a whole developed in tandem with shifts in colonial policy from outright genocide and resource exploitation toward a purportedly more humane cultural and political assimilation.<sup>14</sup> In the strain of Western historiography I address in this essay, this Tylorian evolutionary logic motivates standard narratives of Hawai‘i’s progression from pre-contact ‘savagery’ to post-contact civilization.<sup>15</sup>

Take, for example, Hawai‘i-born non-native folklorist Nathaniel Bright Emerson’s *Unwritten Literature of Hawaii: The Sacred Songs of the Hula* (1909), a lay history of Hawaiian music and dance published under the imprimatur of the Smithsonian Institution’s Bureau of American Ethnology. In the preface to his book, Emerson states that one of his chief goals is to prove that ‘savages are only children of a younger growth than ourselves’, and ‘that what we find them to have been we ourselves – in our ancestors – once were’.<sup>16</sup> He reiterates this again some pages later when he compares the pre-contact Hawaiian mindset to the ‘unconscious naiveté of a child’, which ‘hark[ens] back to a period that was close to the world’s infancy’.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, Emerson’s repeated framing of ancient Hawaiians as noble savages reflects a broader American fascination with Indigenous cultures that surged at the very moment of their supposed extermination. In this context, and as historian Kathryn Gin Lum has argued, Emerson’s career as the self-appointed ‘rescuer from oblivion of Hawaiian folkways’ was not at odds with his staunchly pro-annexation stance.<sup>18</sup> But Emerson’s nostalgia is also strategic, a means of situating contemporary Indigeneity – peoples, practices, and beliefs that remained alive and well despite efforts to stamp them out – in a precursory position within a progressive historical trajectory ending in US imperial hegemony. In his study, Emerson sets out to resurrect what he describes, in Arnoldian terms, as the lost ‘sweetness and light’ of pre-modern Hawaiian life, without having either to concede the illusion of American superiority or to compromise his overarching goal of assimilation (‘it is not so much what the primitive man can give us’, he reasons at one point, ‘as what we can find in him that is worth our while’).<sup>19</sup> The US takeover of Hawai‘i appears, in light of his racial hierarchy, not the result of years of concerted political and economic scheming, but rather the happy culmination of evolutionary destiny, in which the backward native is integrated into the linear time of an enlightened empire on the rise.

This might have appeared a sound presumption to Emerson in 1909, writing over a decade after the US had annexed the islands in 1898. But for most of the nineteenth century, the question

of whether Hawai'i would maintain its independence or be taken over by one of the colonial powers – the subject of much speculation among Anglo-American observers – was far from settled. Its fate was made more uncertain by its unique socio-political circumstances: Hawai'i was and is distinct from other Pacific Island groups for a number of reasons that have bearing on its perceived place within a racial hierarchy. Hawaiian studies scholar Noenoe K. Silva reminds us that Hawai'i is 'not a postcolonial but a (neo?) colonial state'.<sup>20</sup> Until the forced abdication of Queen Lydia Lili'uokalani in 1893, Hawai'i was an independent constitutional monarchy with a sophisticated governmental infrastructure, an extensive education system, a robust multilingual periodical press, and a richly cosmopolitan national culture. Despite its size, the Kingdom also commanded considerable respect on the global stage, in part because of a sustained campaign – intensified by Lili'uokalani's brother and predecessor David Kalākaua – to build a sprawling network of consulates and embassies. As Lorenz Gonschor explains, the Kingdom was the sole non-Western nation in this period to have secured full diplomatic recognition from the Western powers, and its status as the most conventionally developed country in Oceania made it a beacon for other nascent Indigenous nations in Polynesia.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the cultural and political assimilation that Emerson represented as evolutionarily predetermined was, for those writing in the nineteenth century, still tenuous and prospective.

To be sure, the Hawaiian Kingdom's myriad strengths did not prevent late Victorian observers from prognosticating its impending decline. Pronouncements on the inevitable extinction of Indigenous Hawaiians (and, presumably, the collapse of their Kingdom) are commonplace in travel writing and ethnography from this period: such predictions speak to the particularly potent branch of imperialist ideology that Patrick Brantlinger terms 'extinction discourse', which gained strength after Charles Darwin applied his arguments about natural selection to available data on population collapse among Indigenous peoples.<sup>22</sup> I have written elsewhere about the relationship between decadence and extinction discourse in travel writing

about Hawai‘i, but here I would highlight the ways in which the possibility of extinction was mapped onto evolutionary notions of individual and collective development.<sup>23</sup> Brantlinger observes that the ‘demise of “savagery” throughout the world’ was ‘understood [...] as necessary for social progress’, a view reinforced by Darwinian anthropologists and espoused even by writers, such as Stoddard, who otherwise supported Indigenous self-determination.<sup>24</sup> As we have already seen in Stoddard’s panegyric to the late Kane-Pihi – a moment to which I’ll return shortly – extinction discourse was also characterized by what Brantlinger describes as a sense of ‘proleptic elegy, sentimentally or mournfully expressing [...] the confidence of self-fulfilling prophecy’.<sup>25</sup> Manley Hopkins’s *Hawaii: The Past, Present, and Future of its Island Kingdom* (1862), a popular history he wrote while serving as the Kingdom’s consul-general in London, gives voice to this peculiar blend of reformist optimism and morbid sympathy. In the preface, Hopkins writes of his hope ‘that something useful may be learned’ from the ‘biography’ of this nation, ‘in which we have before us the life of a community, its efforts, its errors, its failures, its escapes, its repentances; its vivacious childhood, its noon-day struggles, and – must we add? – its instructed but premature decay’.<sup>26</sup> For Hopkins, the imminent extinction of the Hawaiian people is not so lamentable a fact that it cannot be redeemed, in some measure, by its utility as an example for other nations navigating the same turbulent waters.

### **Hawai‘i and the Anti-Telos of Decadent Time**

In writing about Hawai‘i, however, this prophetic confidence in the inevitability of progress continually runs up against a multitude of contradictory temporal models. As many outsiders noted, the Kingdom was a patently self-sufficient nation with a state apparatus on par with the modern constitutional monarchies of Europe. The travel writer Isabella Bird acknowledges as much in her popular travelogue *The Hawaiian Archipelago* (1874), in which she credits Hawai‘i with ‘one of the best administered governments in the world’, complete with a ‘liberal sovereign’ and ‘equable and enlightened laws [...] impartially administered’.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, almost every



Anglo-American memoirist and historian remarks on the islands' seeming *resistance* to progress, often articulating its allure through allusions to Alfred Tennyson's dramatic monologue 'The Lotus-Eaters' (1832). Like the island of Tennyson's poem, 'a land where all things always seem'd the same', Hawai'i's stable climate lulls both visitors and natives into a self-satisfied indolence – in Hopkins's words, an 'enervation in the human system' that breeds a "lotus-eating" condition of mind'.<sup>28</sup> Bird, writing in the 1870s, paints a charming portrait of a 'sunset world of endless afternoon', where residents 'dream away their lives' in the halcyon sunshine; forty years later, in his travel memoir *The Cruise of the Snark* (1911), Jack London would use the same myth to evoke the dreamy luxuriance of a meal partaken on his host's 'lotus-eating verandah' in Honolulu, an oasis after weeks of hard sailing from San Francisco.<sup>29</sup> The political upheaval of the intervening years – two coups, a monarchist counter-rebellion, annexation – could not dispel the pervasive fantasy of stasis that constituted a large part of Hawai'i's cultural appeal.

The disruptive potential of these cross-cutting paradigms – Hawaiians as simultaneously 'children of a younger growth', citizens of a modern liberal state, and perpetual lotus-eating decadents – is perhaps most apparent in travelogues and histories that seek to account for Hawai'i's geopolitical situation. To the extent that this temporal confusion exists in dialectical relation (to once again borrow Regenia Gagnier's formulation) with modern globalization, I contend that we can consider these disruptive temporalities in themselves decadent, even when we find them in work that lies far outside the strict bounds of the movement. Looking specifically at Walter Pater's late essays, Matthew Potolsky defines a characteristically 'decadent historiography' in terms of its resistance, in the vein of Walter Benjamin, to a conception of 'history as a grand and fateful [...] march toward the present'.<sup>30</sup> As Dennis Denisoff further argues in his recent study of decadent ecology, many decadents reworked and subverted 'discourses of alliance, colonization, and refinement that were used to naturalize the rise and fall of civilizations'; 'contrary to the common tendency to incorporate decay within a model of development or an idealistic holism', he observes

later, this strain of decadence ‘refuses an implicit teleology toward a collective harmony’.<sup>31</sup> In the travel writing and ethnography I highlight here, the teleology of empire de-coheres in the solvent of both political reality and settler fantasy. I suggest that this anti-telos constitutes a kind of immanent decadence, one that is only recognizable if we are willing to extend our scrutiny beyond the usual decadent networks.

Bird’s attestations to the islands’ ‘thoroughly civilized polity’,<sup>32</sup> for example, clash with claims she makes elsewhere about the spectre of extinction, as well as her own desire to succumb to Hawai‘i’s ‘indolent and aimless [way of] life, in which time is of no account’.<sup>33</sup> These contradictions persist into the final lines of her memoir, in which she expresses an earnest wish that

this people, which has advanced from heathenism and barbarism to Christianity and civilization in the short space of a single generation, may enjoy peace and prosperity under King Kalakaua, that the extinction which threatens the nation may be averted, and that under a gracious Divine Providence, Hawaii may still remain the inheritance of the Hawaiians.<sup>34</sup>

In charting Hawai‘i’s progress through successive cultural stages, Bird ascribes to a model of development in which its people have progressed – through a combination of initiative, divine favour, and missionary guidance – into its hard-won, independent maturity. But Hawai‘i’s ‘wonderful leap’<sup>35</sup> forward is shadowed by the twin threats of atavism (the Kingdom has already had to ‘fall back’, she observes, ‘on the old world resource of a standing army’)<sup>36</sup> and premature obsolescence (on the subject of Kalākaua’s election to the throne, she remarks that Hawai‘i is already ‘king-making by paper ballots’, which is an ‘approximation to president-making’; she posits US annexation as the natural, if regrettable, next step in this trajectory).<sup>37</sup> In Bird’s telling, the sheer rapidity of Hawai‘i’s development, contrasted with its lotus-eating languor, would seem to demonstrate the precarity of Westernization itself. It is in this context that she couches her well-wishes for the nation in an ambivalent subjunctive.

For Mark Twain, who spent four months in the islands in 1866 and continued writing about his experiences for decades afterward, Hawai‘i furnished the occasion for more comedic, but similarly unresolved, interrogations of progress. Brian Collins, in his analysis of Twain’s letters from the islands, explains how Twain played on his readers’ anxieties about ‘not savagery precisely’, but a kind of ‘semi-civilization’ exemplified in Hawai‘i’s ‘highly syncretic culture’.<sup>38</sup> In his memoir *Roughing It* (1872), Twain capitalizes on the incongruities of this semi-civilization in an extended anecdote about Kekūanaō‘a, father of then-reigning monarch Kamehameha V and presiding officer of the legislature. Although now a ‘white haired, tawny old gentlemen’, Twain reflects that

this man, naked as the day he was born, and war-club and spear in hand, has charged at the head of a horde of savages against other hordes of savages more than a generation and a half ago, and reveled in slaughter and carnage [...] [A]nd now look at him: an educated Christian, neatly and handsomely dressed; a high-minded, elegant gentleman, [...] a man practiced in holding the reins of an enlightened government, and well versed in the politics of his country and in general, practical information. Look at him [...] as seemingly natural and fitted to the place as if he had been born in it and had never been out of it in his lifetime.<sup>39</sup>

Regarding this passage, Collins argues that Twain’s depiction of Kekūanaō‘a allows him to explore the ‘savagery [that] persists beneath a thin surface of civilized “affectations”’ while keeping his American readers insulated from self-reflection.<sup>40</sup> Situated within an evolutionary context, we can also see how Twain literalizes the organic analogy: the social development of an entire people is writ small in the lifetime of one of its members, whose very existence testifies to both the irresistible might of progress and the tenuousness of its results. Twain continues to wring humour out of that paradox in his eviscerating account of Hawaiian governmental officials, from ‘his royal Majesty the King, with a New York detective’s income of thirty or thirty-five thousand dollars a year’, to ‘his Excellency the Minister of the Navy [...] who rules the “royal fleet” (a steam-tug and a sixty-ton schooner)’.<sup>41</sup> Princes, stewards, governors, envoys, and ministers – each dressed in the ‘gorgeous vari-colored, gold-laced uniform peculiar to his office’ – march in a grotesque parade that emblemizes the florid and impotent artifice not only of this ‘play-house “kingdom”’, but also of monarchy in general.<sup>42</sup> In Twain’s memoir, the historical pressures that transformed a

primitive warrior into an elegant gentleman have catapulted the nation into an enervated, hedonistic decadence.

But Twain, like many others, also memorializes Hawai‘i as a space exempt from that kind of change. In 1889, the humourist concluded a speech with an impromptu tribute to the islands, which the New York *Sun* later published as a ‘prose poem’:

No other land could so longingly and beseechingly haunt me, sleeping and waking, through half a lifetime, as that one has done. Other things leave me, but it abides; other things change, but it remains the same. For me its balmy airs are always blowing, its summer seas flashing in the sun; the pulsing of its surfbeat is in my ear [...] in my nostrils still lives the breath of flowers that perished twenty years ago.<sup>43</sup>

While its tonal earnestness marks a departure from his archly ironic travel literature, Twain’s prose poem underscores the temporal instability that typifies his writing on Hawai‘i. Where *Roughing It* presents an aspiring archipelagic empire that has accelerated too quickly through the stages of civilization, the prose poem amplifies a stock comparison between Hawai‘i and the unchanging island of Tennyson’s lotus eaters. Seen in isolation, the shift is in part attributable to Twain’s own experience of time: for the Twain of 1889, now well into middle age, Hawai‘i is a spatial mnemonic for his bygone youth. In conjunction with fin-de-siècle travel literature and ethnography more broadly, however, these inconsistencies form a pattern of racialized anxieties about degeneration, modernization, and globalization, which are projected and staged against a Hawaiian backdrop.

These anxieties are especially palpable in Charles Warren Stoddard’s aforementioned 1894 memoir *Hawaiian Life*, one of several books he wrote about his time there in the 1870s and 1880s. A fervent admirer of Walt Whitman and sometime protégé of Twain’s, Stoddard belonged to a circle of aesthetic- and decadent-adjacent bohemians based mostly in San Francisco; he was particularly close with the Japanese writer Yone Noguchi, with whom he developed a passionate and ambiguously romantic friendship.<sup>44</sup> His lifelong love for Polynesia was driven in part by what Noguchi’s biographer, Amy Sueyoshi, fairly describes as the American writer’s lifelong ‘fetish for young men from the Pacific Rim’ – a fetish that drew him to a series of beautiful Hawaiian youths,

including the ageless ‘boat-boy of Lahaina’ and the fisherman Kane-Pihi.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, Stoddard’s view of Hawai‘i as a queer sexual utopia – a view consistent with long-standing Western constructions of Polynesia – resonated with his polemical anti-capitalism.<sup>46</sup> He addresses the spiritual and aesthetic vacuity of ‘mercantile pursuits’ most clearly in his depictions of plantation life in the company town of Spreckelsville on Maui.<sup>47</sup> There ‘the steam-plow is rampant’, and a ‘forest of smoke-stacks’ rises over the town instead of trees: ‘Progress’, he writes, ‘the ogre of the nineteenth century – Progress, with a precipitous *P*, – is the war-cry of Spreckelsville’.<sup>48</sup> In Hawai‘i, Stoddard saw a land resistant, albeit gradually succumbing, to the demoralizing grind of ‘this modern civilization’ and its ‘new diseases’.<sup>49</sup>

As a victim to both proverbial and literal contagion, Kane-Pihi becomes a focal point for Stoddard’s reflections on modernity’s diseases. Like Twain in his sketch of Kekūanaō‘a, Stoddard projects onto Kane-Pihi’s biography the story of his entire people, and in doing so naturalizes a collective ‘doom’ that he fears is already ‘accomplished’.<sup>50</sup> More conscientiously than Twain, however, Stoddard contests an ideology of progress that would lionize that doom as a noble and necessary sacrifice for the sake of development. *Hawaiian Life* introduces Kane-Pihi via a frame narrative that establishes the stakes of his story: Stoddard, unable to focus on a book entitled ‘Evidences of Christianity’, abandons the volume for a stroll on the beach, where he stumbles upon ‘a youth just out of his teens, a slim, sleek creature, unconscious, unclad, sprawled inartistically, absorbing sunshine and apparently steeped to the toes in it’.<sup>51</sup> On his first appearance, Kane-Pihi is not only primitive but primordial, an ‘amphibious’ ‘man-fish’ who amazes a smitten Stoddard with his prowess as a swimmer and diver.<sup>52</sup> Stoddard’s descriptions of Kane-Pihi, although couched in the writer’s habitual mythological register, are in substance Darwinian: Kane-Pihi is ‘a perfect human animal’,<sup>53</sup> adapted to his semi-aquatic niche and constitutionally unsuited to the ‘method and industry’ of the town, or ‘anything so confining as a pavement or a trim garden spot’.<sup>54</sup> Stoddard also cheekily inverts religious and anthropological reformist logic when he asserts

that Kane-Pihi, with his ‘complete and unqualified success’ as an organism, ‘was doing what he could [...] towards destroying the last vestiges of the “Evidences of Christianity”’.<sup>55</sup> Kane-Pihi’s sheer fitness elevates him in an alternative developmental scale wherein Christianity, and Western civilization more generally, are relegated to the temporally subordinate position of ‘vestige’. In this anti-Tylorian hierarchy, it is the joyless regime of modern industry, not Kane-Pihi’s ‘savage’ vitality, which belongs properly to the past.

Things are quite different when Stoddard meets Kane-Pihi again, a decade later in real time but a mere five pages further into *Hawaiian Life*. During a chance visit to a local prison, Stoddard notices a particular inmate and inquires with the warden into the details of his life. Although the man’s rural upbringing left him with ‘no hope of development’, Stoddard explains, he might have lived in ‘perpetual happiness [...] if nature were to take her course’;<sup>56</sup> instead, the man was ‘seduced into the town’, and subsequently into a life of crime, by a charismatic missionary.<sup>57</sup> At this point, Stoddard reveals that the prisoner is ‘none other than my friend of yore completely transformed by civilization [...] Kane-Pihi, the man-fish, out of his element’.<sup>58</sup> Importantly, Stoddard’s explanation utilizes the elegiac rhetoric typical of extinction discourse while also rejecting its progressive telos. The root cause of Kane-Pihi’s downfall is not his incapacity to adjust to an uncongenial modernity – indeed, before his capture, the ‘man-fish’ had remade himself into ‘one of the cleverest boys in town’.<sup>59</sup> Rather, Stoddard mourns the fact that this once-perfect animal has adapted so well to modes of life structured around capitalist exploitation and greed. Kane-Pihi’s progression from exquisite waterman to consummate swindler, which Stoddard describes as a form of ‘backslid[ing]’, makes a mockery of mainstream Eurocentric conceptions of development;<sup>60</sup> as Stoddard puts it later, he ‘passed too rapidly from the simplicity of the savage to the duplicity of civilized man’.<sup>61</sup> By muddling the temporal and moral dimensions of progress, Stoddard vacates Kane-Pihi’s domestication, and eventual death from smallpox, of any redemptive sociological purpose. He thus stakes his protest against US imperialism in the unruly decadent

temporalities that had long troubled literary attempts to wrangle the islands into the progressive mainstream of history.

### **Decadence, Hawaiian Historiography, and the Global Turn**

‘Consensual national narratives’, as Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz points out in the introduction to *An Indigenous People’s History of the United States* (2014), are an essential tool of the colonizer.<sup>62</sup> In nineteenth-century Anglo-American writing, I’ve argued, Hawai‘i’s resistance to those narratives is registered in the decadent literary motif of temporal instability and breakdown. This motif both draws on and works against imperialist understandings of cultural development grounded in contemporary anthropology.

But ranged against this body of *haole* [foreign] literature was a wealth of *‘ōlelo Hawai‘i* historiography, much of it published serially in newspapers, in which Kanaka Maoli historians articulated alternative national narratives in their own native language. With the notable exceptions of David Malo and Samuel Kamakau, few of these historians have had significant portions of their work translated into English, and the vast majority of this archive remains inaccessible to scholars not fluent in Hawaiian. This is not necessarily a problem that requires addressing here: literary scholar ku‘ualoha ho‘omanawanui reminds us that, in contrast to Western academic epistemologies premised on singular authority and expertise, ‘traditional Kanaka Maoli ethics dictate a strong protocol of *kapu* (sacred, restricted, private) and *noa* (open, public)’, as well as a sensitivity to *makawalu* [multiple perspectives] and *kuleana* [responsibility].<sup>63</sup> It is not my *kuleana*, as a non-fluent Kanaka Maoli researcher, to call upon Hawaiian studies scholars to do the work of translating more of this material. Neither is it appropriate to make claims about nineteenth-century Hawaiian historiography based on the small segment of writing already available in translation.<sup>64</sup> It would be remiss of me, however, not to at least touch upon what little of this work has been translated – not to make a definitive argument about Hawaiian historiography (much less label it

decadent), but to gesture toward the ways in which socio-political upheaval found expression there in similarly non-linear representations of historical sequence.

In Kamakau's case, this non-linearity was so marked that it cast a long shadow on his posthumous reception. A judge and legislator as well as a prolific journalist, Kamakau contributed columns on Hawaiian history, religion, and folklore to various *'olelo Hawai'i* newspapers until his death in 1876; selections from his work were eventually translated and collected in four volumes published from the 1960s through the 1990s. As Puakea Nogelmeier observes, Kamakau's twentieth-century editors freely redacted, condensed, and reorganized his articles in order to lend "continuity" to a text that seemed to "jump about" in a Western sense'.<sup>65</sup> Translators also routinely simplified Kamakau's use of tenses, usually shifting instances of the Hawaiian present tense into English past tense. This had the effect of displacing contemporary, evolving Hawaiian cultural practices onto what Nogelmeier describes as the 'timelessness of the distant past'.<sup>66</sup>

But translation has not entirely occluded the temporal nuance of Kamakau's work. In the snippets of his writing collected in *Ka Po'e Kahiko: The People of Old* (1964), the notoriously polemical Kamakau utilizes historical comparison as grounds for timely cultural critique.<sup>67</sup> At some junctures, the trajectory he draws is palpably degenerative: speaking of the dissolution of Hawai'i's native caste system, Kamakau asserts that 'the blood of lords has become mixed with the blood of *kaunua* [outcasts], and there is nothing that can cleanse it'.<sup>68</sup> 'Most of the spirits of this age are lying spirits', he remarks later, and the *'aumakua*, once helpful ancestral deities, 'have become bitter enemies who punish severely the faults of their descendants when they break a vow'.<sup>69</sup> He attributes this decadence, in part, to the moral complexities of life in a Westernized modernity: 'many, many more are the troubles of the [...] Hawaiian race in these times as compared to times past', meaning that it is correspondingly more difficult to expiate their 'entangled wrongs and faults' through traditional rituals.<sup>70</sup> This narrative of irreparable rupture with an Edenic past resonates, to a degree, with Stoddard's decadent anti-modernism, and indeed with the interpretation of colonial history that would come to be known as the 'fatal impact' thesis.<sup>71</sup> At other moments, however, Kamakau



complicates this interpretation by calling into question the visitor's fantasy of a pre-contact Golden Age. A zealous Christian convert, Kamakau never depicts Western cultural influence as uniformly detrimental, and he analyses Hawai'i's ancient system of governance with measured ambivalence. His records abound with examples of 'vile' traditions – the 'useless' but 'profitable' practice of praying for vengeance,<sup>72</sup> the 'evils' of abortion and infanticide<sup>73</sup> – that predate Cook's arrival. On the subject of ancient *kanawai* or chiefly decrees, he observes: 'some *kanawai* were wicked edicts that put men to death and shed blood to please the bloodletting gods [...] Others were laws that benefited the people and the kingdom, and were laws superior to those of any other kingdom on earth'.<sup>74</sup> Kamakau's judgements rely on transhistorical and transnational comparisons rather than a historicized scale of development, disclosing a view of Hawaiian history that is by turns cyclical, cataclysmic, and degenerative, but rarely, if ever, teleological. Crucially, too, that history is not calibrated against the timeline of European exploration; the moment of Western contact is merely one pivotal event among many.

Again, Kamakau's disruptive representations of time do not make his historiography necessarily decadent. As ho'omanawanui, Silva, David A. Chang, and others have argued, Kanaka Maoli writers such as Kamakau belong to an independent intellectual tradition that sought to forge a distinct national identity by moulding Western forms to Indigenous worldviews: in the midst of our discipline's turn to the global, we should be conscientious about enlisting non-Western writers into Western canons, lest we erase the claims to distinctiveness that were key to those anti-colonial nation-building efforts.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, and as scholars of the tradition have demonstrated, decadence emerged from globe-spanning conversations about the shape of things to come – conversations in which colonial writers had a major stake. The challenge in tracing these conversations lies in teasing out their common terms without eliding the specificities of their interlocutors. Kamakau's eschewal of developmental hierarchy is instructive in this regard. Placed alongside his English-language contemporaries, he speaks to the pervasive entanglement of literary

and anthropological discourses of decadence in this period, while also resisting the colonial logic that those discourses often empowered.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Warren Stoddard, *Hawaiian Life: Lazy Letters from Low Latitudes* (Chicago and New York: F. Tennyson Neely, 1894), p. 200.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Regenia Gagnier, 'From barbarism to decadence without the intervening civilization; or, living in the aftermath of anticipated futures', *Feminist Modernist Studies*, 4.2 (2021), 166-81 (p. 167).

<sup>7</sup> In this sense, Native Hawaiians were consigned to a similarly anomalous temporal status as other native peoples, a phenomenon that Mark Rifkin describes as a 'double bind within dominant settler reckonings of time'. 'Either [native peoples] are consigned to the past', he writes in the preface to his recent book on settler time, 'or they are inserted into a present defined on non-native terms'. I would suggest that decadence, understood as a stance toward the modern, is particularly attuned to these contradictory temporal models. Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. vii.

<sup>8</sup> Leonard R. Koos, 'Fictitious History: From Decadence to Modernism', in *The Turn of the Century: Modernism and Modernity in Literature and the Arts*, ed. by Christian Berg, Frank Durieux, and Geert Lernout (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), p. 120.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Charlotte Roberts, *Edward Gibbon and the Shape of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> As George Stocking explains, the theory of the social organism was expounded in the mid-1800s by evolutionary philosopher Herbert Spencer and later refined by sociologist Émile Durkheim. George Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), pp. 298-99.

<sup>12</sup> Psychic unity was central to much post-Darwinian anthropological thought; Stocking observes that the 'logic of sociocultural evolutionary argument required psychic unity as a premise upon which evolutionary sequences could be reconstructed'. Stocking, pp. 141-42.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1871), I, p. 163.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London and New York: Cassell, 1999), pp. 130-31.

<sup>15</sup> In this sense, what I describe in the Hawai'i context is similar to the historical anxieties that Wolfe identifies in ethnographic discourses surrounding Aboriginal peoples in Australia. At the nation's founding, he argues, the 'recalcitrant presence of Aborigines in the pores of the body politic' visibly refuted attempts to rewrite the new nation's history so as to efface its violent carceral origins. Wolfe, pp. 33-34.

<sup>16</sup> Nathaniel Bright Emerson, *Unwritten Literature of Hawaii: The Sacred Songs of the Hula* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1909), p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Kathryn Gin Lum, *Heathens: Religion and Race in American History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), p. 198.

<sup>19</sup> Emerson, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Noenoe K. Silva, *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Lorenz Gonschor, *A Power in the World: The Hawaiian Kingdom in Oceania* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), pp. 5, 15.

<sup>22</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1830-1930* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Lindsay Wilhelm, 'Bright Sunshine, Dark Shadows: Decadent Beauty and Victorian Views of Hawai'i', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 75 (2021), 495-526.

<sup>24</sup> Brantlinger, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Hopkins's younger brother Charles, a naturalized citizen of Hawai'i who rose to a cabinet position under Kamehameha III, had secured Manley's consulship back in London. Manley Hopkins was also the poet Gerard

- Manley Hopkins's father. Manley Hopkins, *Hawaii: The Past, Present, and Future of its Island Kingdom* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1862), p. xvi; Paul Mariani, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life* (New York: Viking, 2008), p. 24.
- <sup>27</sup> Isabella Bird, *The Hawaiian Archipelago: Six Months Among the Palm Groves, Coral Reefs, and Volcanoes of the Sandwich Islands*, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1876), p. 67.
- <sup>28</sup> Alfred Tennyson, 'The Lotos-Eaters', *Poems*, 2 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1842), I, pp. 175-84 (p. 176); Hopkins, *Hawaii*, p. 31.
- <sup>29</sup> Bird, p. 152; Jack London, *The Cruise of the Snark* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), p. 72.
- <sup>30</sup> Matthew Potolsky, 'Pale Imitations: Walter Pater's Decadent Historiography', in *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, ed. by Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 235-53 (p. 251).
- <sup>31</sup> Dennis Denisoff, *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860-1910: Decay, Desire, and the Pagan Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 32, p. 179.
- <sup>32</sup> Bird, p. 3.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 318.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 318.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- <sup>38</sup> Brian Collins, 'Presidential Reconstructions: Mark Twain's Letters from Hawai'i and the Integration of Civil Society', *American Studies*, 37 (1996), 51-62 (p. 56).
- <sup>39</sup> Mark Twain, *Roughing It*, ed. by Harriet Elinor Smith, et al. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 457-58.
- <sup>40</sup> Collins, p. 57.
- <sup>41</sup> Twain, *Roughing It*, p. 464.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 465.
- <sup>43</sup> Twain, 'Prose Poem', quoted in A. Grove Day, 'Introduction' to Mark Twain, *Mark Twain's Letters from Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1975), p. xiv.
- <sup>44</sup> Roy Kotynek and John Cohassey, *American Cultural Rebels: Avant-Garde and Bohemian Artists, Writers and Musicians from the 1850s through the 1960s* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008), p. 22; Amy Sueyoshi, *Queer Compulsions: Race, Nation, and Sexuality in the Affairs of Yone Noguchi* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012), p. 4.
- <sup>45</sup> Sueyoshi, p. 16.
- <sup>46</sup> As Lee Wallace argues, 'imperial expansion in the Pacific has been imagined as a sexual event' from the moment of contact; he further contends that the most 'sexually resonant figure inscribed within the representational archive of the Pacific is that of the male body'. For discussions of Stoddard's place within a tradition of homoerotic South Seas travel literature and film, see also Justin Edwards and Jeffrey Geiger. Lee Wallace, *Sexual Encounters: Pacific Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 1; Justin Edwards, *Exotic Journeys: Exploring the Erotics of U. S. Travel Literature, 1840-1930* (Hanover and London: University of New Hampshire Press, 2001), pp. 33-47; Jeffrey Geiger, *Facing the Pacific: Polynesia and the U. S. Imperial Imagination* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), pp. 192-226.
- <sup>47</sup> Stoddard, p. 97.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 177-78.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 212-13.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.
- <sup>62</sup> Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), p. 2.
- <sup>63</sup> ku'ualoha ho'omanawanui, *Voices of Fire: Reweaving the Literary Lei of Pele and Hi'iaka* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. xxxi.
- <sup>64</sup> An over-reliance on translated sources has resulted in what Puakea Nogelmeier calls a 'discourse of sufficiency', in which these limited sources are taken as 'sufficient to embody nearly a hundred years of extensive Hawaiian auto-representation'. M. Puakea Nogelmeier, *Mai Pa'a I Ka Leo: Historical Voice in Hawaiian Primary Materials, Looking Forward and Listening Back* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 2010), pp. 1-2.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>67</sup> Nogelmeier explains that Kamakau was more ‘adamant about his qualifications to authority than many other writers of his time’, and he often engaged in heated debates with his readers about the accuracy of his accounts. Nogelmeier, pp. 109-18.

<sup>68</sup> Samuel Kamakau, *Ka Po'e Kabiko: The People of Old*, trans. by Mary Kawena Pukui, ed. by Dorothy B. Barrère (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1991), p. 9.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>71</sup> This thesis, which proposes that Indigenous societies were destroyed by Western contact, derives its name from Alan Moorehead's 1966 book *The Fatal Impact: An Account of the Invasion of the South Pacific, 1767-1840*.

<sup>72</sup> Kamakau, *The People of Old*, p. 36.

<sup>73</sup> Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs of Hawaii*, rev. ed. (Honolulu: Kamehameha Schools Press, 1992), p. 234.

<sup>74</sup> Kamakau, *The People of Old*, p. 14.

<sup>75</sup> See David A. Chang, *The World and All the Things Upon It: Native Hawaiian Geographies of Exploration* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Noenoe K. Silva, *The Power of the Steel-Tipped Pen: Reconstructing Native Hawaiian Intellectual History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

## After a Decadent Fashion: E. Pauline Johnson and the Staging of Indigeneity

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At the peak of her popularity in the 1890s, the Mohawk and Canadian writer Emily Pauline Johnson (or Tekahionwake) was one of the most recognizable literary figures in North America – a reputation earned largely through dramatic recitals of her poetry and prose rather than on the printed page. The daughter of George Henry Martin Johnson, a hereditary chief of the Mohawks of the Six Nations reserve, and Emily Howells, an Englishwoman and relation of American novelist William Dean Howells, she garnered such public acclaim that in 1895 the critic Hector Charlesworth could proclaim without controversy that '[f]or the past five years, Miss Pauline Johnson has been the most popular figure in Canadian literature'.<sup>1</sup> This popularity had much to do with Johnson's performance of her own Indigeneity. A typical recital would begin with Johnson taking the stage in an elaborate buckskin dress; after the intermission, she would return in a Victorian gown. As a woman of mixed Mohawk and English descent with an overwhelmingly white settler audience, Johnson's access to the literary marketplace was predicated on her ability to navigate a system of stereotypes, myths, and stock images that structured settler conceptions of Indigenous peoples.<sup>2</sup> Thus, on page and stage alike, she felt compelled to enact an autoexoticizing performance of her own Indigeneity – a performance that was self-consciously stereotypical but that also ironized the audiences who consumed and propagated such stereotypes.<sup>3</sup> Critics' efforts to articulate more fully the agential or recuperative dimensions of these complicated acts of autoexoticism have been among the most fruitful strains in recent Johnson scholarship.<sup>4</sup>

What interests me here, though, is the way that settler fantasies of Indigeneity often did double duty at the *fin de siècle* as part of a public discourse of anti-decadence. The full import of Johnson's literary and theatrical performances will remain obscure unless we understand them against the backdrop of her readers' pervasive concern with the threat of cultural decadence and

civilizational decline. I make two central claims in this article that connect Johnson to these discourses, which I trace from her early poem ‘The Re-Interment of Red Jacket’ to her later stage performances of the 1890s and early 1900s. The first is that Johnson’s audiences looked to her work as a tonic for the symptoms of *la maladie fin de siècle*: a gnawing sense of *ennui* at the artificiality of modern life, an anxiety that modern life was becoming ever more alienated from its sources of meaning and vitality, whether in the natural world or the traditions of the past, and a fear of the growing atomization of social life. Settler audiences thus saw Johnson’s work as a way of salving their own decadence.

My second claim is that Johnson herself stood in a starkly different relationship to these discourses, which she participated in through a paradigmatically decadent aesthetic of artifice that allowed her to undermine her audience’s essentializations of cultural and racial otherness. Scholars such as Carole Gerson have argued, albeit in passing, for considering Johnson among the women whom Elaine Showalter has described as ‘daughters of decadence’ on the basis of her allegiances to the New Woman movement and the defiant eroticism of some of her poetry; I argue that her decadence extends further still, to her subversive performance of settler fantasies about Indigeneity.<sup>5</sup> By catering outwardly to settler stereotypes about Indigenous people, Johnson in fact baits and makes a spectacle of settlers’ desires to find correctives for the alleged decadence of modernity in their own fantasies of alterity. Coded as an anti-decadent by her audiences, Johnson in fact took up a decadent aesthetic posture to undermine the racist assumptions that often subtended judgments about who was – or was not – decadent at the *fin de siècle*.

### **Indigeneity and Decadence: The Myth of the ‘Vanishing Indian’**

Johnson’s success on the performance circuit depended in no small measure on her audience’s ability to join their fantasies about her Indigeneity to *fin-de-siècle* discourses of anti-decadence. She seemed to promise fleeting access to a pre- or even anti-modern vision of life structured by precisely those features that seemed most on the verge of vanishing in modernity: authenticity, an

immediate or direct relation to nature, and a sense of rooted belonging to past traditions. Of course, there is a deep irony in the fact that this popular appetite for representations of Indigeneity was ultimately sated by illusions of authenticity rather than by representations of the complex lives that Indigenous people like Johnson led. Contemporaries of Johnson often resorted to the language of health and simplicity in their estimations of her qualities. One notable example occurs in Charlesworth's review of her 1895 poem collection *The White Wampum*, where he contends that Johnson's 'Indian ballads are fresh and stimulating to healthy people with dramatic intelligences, and there is a fine Mohawk barbarity about them.'<sup>6</sup> Gilbert Parker, writing in the introduction to Johnson's 1913 volume *The Moccasin Maker*, likewise emphasizes the alleged simplicity of her work, which he portrays as a natural extension of her Indigeneity: Johnson, 'singing and happy, bright- visioned, high-hearted, and with the Indian's passionate love of nature', brings to Canadian literature 'a breath of the wild' that promises to be a remedy for 'an age grown sordid'.<sup>7</sup> In short, if modernity appeared to Johnson's fin-de-siècle contemporaries as a decadent state of overrefinement, her Indigeneity could appear, on the contrary, as a counter-ideal of wholesome and harmonious simplicity.

There is also a pronounced tendency among Johnson's reviewers and critics to articulate her Indigeneity as a font of new aesthetic resources that could be incorporated into settler literary traditions. The British critic Theodore Watts-Dunton, a crucial advocate for Johnson's writing in Europe, argues that her work demonstrates that '[i]t is not in the old countries, it is in the new, that the poet can adequately reflect the life of Nature. It is in them alone that he can confront Nature's face as it is, uncoloured by associations of history and tradition.'<sup>8</sup> By this account, the animating feature of Johnson's work is something like an aesthetic correlate of the doctrine of *terra nullius*;<sup>9</sup> Watts-Dunton treats her Indigeneity as something both appropriable and practically contentless, being somehow unmediated by 'history and tradition'. What it offers to settler writers is precisely this emptiness, a precedent for beginning anew without the weight (supposedly) of prior literary traditions. Charles Mair takes a different view, though one that is no less

mythologizing. A fellow poet and an ardent Canadian nationalist, Mair argues that Indigenous peoples' 'closeness to nature, their picturesque life in the past, their mythical religion, social system and fateful history' gave rise to the tradition of Canadian literary Romanticism, 'which, as a counterpoise to Realism, our literature needs, and probably never shall outgrow'.<sup>10</sup> Implicit in Mair's judgment is a sense that literary Realism depicts the world as it is, that is to say, in the decadence of its modernity, and that a healthy literature requires a Romantic tendency such as Johnson's to provide access to an alternative sense of the world as it could be. Not only does Johnson depict a healthier, less decayed world, by Mair's account, but Canadian literature itself is healthier for having writers like her as a counterbalance against the claims of realism.<sup>11</sup>

A complicating factor in these discourses of anti-decadence, especially insofar as they relied on certain presumptions about Indigenous people, or on the reduction of Indigeneity to certain values, is their intersection with various narratives about decadence. The posture of anti-decadence necessarily relies on a story, even if only a suggestive or implicit one, about who has fallen – or is in danger of falling – into decline. These narratives were often contradictory; for instance, the fact that Johnson's audiences saw her as an icon of anti-decadent possibilities for their own consumption did not preclude them from also seeing her as the representative of a people who had already endured their own decadence and who now spoke as a kind of haunting voice from the past. The anti-decadent discourses that emerged around Johnson depended almost invariably on a host of dehumanizing stereotypes and myths, such as the 'Indian princess' and the 'noble savage'. The most crucial of these myths, though, was that of the 'vanishing Indian', which became the prevalent lens through which Canadian and American settlers, to say nothing of Europeans, viewed Indigenous people in the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> This myth, enshrined in the settler imagination in literary texts like James Fennimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, portrayed Indigenous people as living relics of nations and ways of life that were incompatible with modernity and that now verged on extinction. There is a natural affinity between the myth of the vanishing Indian and the temporalities of decadence. For scholars like Vincent Sherry and Richard Gilman,



the ‘imaginative time zone’ of decadence is that of ‘perennial *afterwardness*’, a sense of living in the arrested aftermath of a fall that somehow keeps falling.<sup>13</sup> This is precisely the temporality that an Indigenous writer like Johnson necessarily evoked on the stage for her settler audiences: she could not help but be read, however fallaciously, as the ambassador of a nation all but destroyed by the violences of colonialism. Part of the fascination for Johnson’s audiences, then, was this sense of bearing witness to a historical anomaly, to the presence of something otherwise absent.

How was it possible that Johnson could be an icon of decadence and anti-decadence at the same time? Simply put, her audiences viewed her as the remnant of a fallen nation whose simple and natural modes of living, though they could no longer be of any use to themselves, could nevertheless provide revivifying moral lessons for settlers. Johnson’s readers thus imagined her to be the vehicle of an anti-decadence that she could not herself enjoy. This image appears with dogged persistence in early critical estimations of her work. Mair, for instance, in his reflections on Johnson and the Canadian Romantic tradition, makes a point of narrating the fate of Indigenous nations in terms of simultaneous decline and persistence: “They failed, however, for manifest reasons, to maintain their own. They had to yield; but, before quitting the stage, they left behind them an abiding memory, and an undying tradition.”<sup>14</sup> Notably, Mair claims that it is not as peoples but as a tradition, one made meaningful through its subsequent appropriation by settler writers, that these nations endure. They persist neither in nor for themselves but as a resource for settler consumption – a medicine for settler decadence. The rhetoric of inevitable decadence recurs in Ernest Thompson Seton’s estimation of Johnson. Perhaps no one better represents the entanglement of *fin-de-siècle* discourses of anti-decadence and settler mythologies of Indigeneity than Seton, the Canadian-American author who co-founded the Boy Scouts of America. Seton was largely responsible for the Scouts’ spurious Indigenous trappings and explicitly viewed the Scouting movement as a remedy for the evils of Western industrial civilization, which he regarded as a ‘blight’ under which there could be ‘no complete happiness’.<sup>15</sup> He was also an admirer of Johnson and provided the introduction to her 1913 volume *The Shaganappi*, where he invokes both

civilizational decadence and the vanishing Indian myth to suggest that Johnson's work calls on settler audiences to

remember that no people ever ride the wave's crest unceasingly. The time must come for us to go down, and when it comes may we have the strength to meet our fate with such fortitude and silent dignity as did the Red Man his.<sup>16</sup>

Johnson thus appears as a moral exemplar who shows North American settlers struggling with their own impending or ongoing decadence how it is done – how to endure this fate with stoic poise and aplomb.

I have so far emphasized the way that Johnson was received by those who read her work or saw her performances; however, I do not ultimately take her to be an uncomplicated representative of these anti-decadent discourses. It is crucial also to account for the ways that she exploited her audience's stereotypes about her to underscore the fictitiousness or artificiality of settler conceptions of Indigeneity. One can think of Johnson's literary-theatrical project as operating under a kind of creative constraint, seeking out what unexpected subversions of the discursive violence of colonialism (including the appropriation of her Indigeneity into anti-decadent discourses) were possible under conditions where Indigenous peoples' real lives were perennially reduced in the minds of settlers to the imaginative role of the fallen predecessor. To perform these subversions, Johnson engaged in a career-long project of self-fashioning that depended on a knowing cultivation of artifice. By the time Johnson embarked on her literary career in the mid 1880s, an aesthetics of artifice had emerged as one of the defining elements of literary decadence, and much of her work, from her early poem 'The Re-Interment of Red Jacket' to her stage performances, can be understood as an effort to adapt decadent artifice to her own ends.<sup>17</sup>

Johnson was hardly the only writer on the Canadian scene who looked to decadence; in fact, the movement was more readily associated in the public mind with figures like Bliss Carman and Charles G. D. Roberts, who came to be canonized alongside Duncan Campbell Scott and Archibald Lampman as Canada's 'Confederation Poets'. Carman and Roberts immersed themselves deeply in the writing of the decadents and Symbolists; both were especially drawn to

the ornate poetry of Algernon Charles Swinburne and the esotericism of Maurice Maeterlinck.<sup>18</sup> Carman, who moved from Canada to the United States, had helped to edit *The Chap-Book*, one of the most significant of the American ‘little magazines’ of the fin de siècle, which placed French writers like Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé alongside English-language contributors, including Carman himself, Roberts, Henry James, and Max Beerbohm.<sup>19</sup> With the publication of his 1895 volume *Behind the Arras*, Carman became closely linked in the public imagination with decadence and Symbolism, though by this point he had privately begun to repudiate both tendencies.<sup>20</sup> Johnson was of the same generation as both figures and deeply admired Roberts, whom she took as a literary mentor and who championed her work in the 1890s.<sup>21</sup> We must understand Johnson, in other words, as emerging against the backdrop of a wider decadent tendency in Canadian letters; at the same time, she stands out within that tendency as an exceptional figure whose experiences as a Mohawk artist compelled to navigate the fantasies and misconceptions of a settler audience granted her a heightened sensitivity to the sly power of decadence as a means of both catering to and criticizing her audience’s prejudices.

When Johnson toured Great Britain in 1894, it was an opportunity not just to expose her work to a wider audience but to make connections with a network of decadent luminaries and sympathizers that extended beyond those she knew in Canada. She was introduced to a coterie of writers associated with *The Yellow Book*, including Wilde, who was then at the pinnacle of his fame, and William Watson.<sup>22</sup> While in London, she approached John Lane at the Bodley Head, the publishing house responsible for *The Yellow Book*, as a prospective publisher for what would appear in the next year as the poetry collection *The White Wampum*; one of the manuscript’s editorial reviewers was yet another *Yellow Book* alumnus, the poet Richard Le Gallienne.<sup>23</sup> Lane was also known as a publisher of ‘New Woman’ texts, which likely appealed to Johnson, who viewed herself as a fellow traveller of the New Woman movement.<sup>24</sup> On a later London trip, she met Watts-Dunton in person for the first time and through him met Swinburne and declared him a profound influence on her own development as a poet; though they did not know each other long, Johnson

and Swinburne left powerful impressions on each other.<sup>25</sup> Ironically, Charlesworth had in 1895 praised Johnson's poetry for imparting 'a quality of absolute naivete in dealing with natural things' that contrasts sharply with 'those gyrating rocket flights of passion of which Swinburne has the key', even while he conceded to finding in her work the occasional 'record of a mood that seems at first blush fin-de-siècle'.<sup>26</sup> But if the literary affinities between Johnson and Swinburne, or indeed Johnson and the decadent milieu broadly writ, were not obviously stylistic or even thematic, what were they? Above all else, they owed to a common investment in the possibilities of artifice. What this commitment looked like for Swinburne, as Jerome McGann has argued, was a conception of life as coextensive with poetry, that is, as being thoroughly mediated and shaped by language in an ongoing process of unfolding in which 'enlightenment and understanding [...] turn upon themselves, being part of an emergent poetic process'.<sup>27</sup> What it looked like for Johnson, on the other hand, was a literary world in which all possible meanings were processed, as soon as they were expressed, through a matrix of settler notions, preconceptions, and myths. This was a world, in short, that Johnson, as a Mohawk woman writing and performing for settler audiences, could not inhabit on her own terms but only, in a sense, between them, in ambiguous middle grounds. To that end, her poetry and performances do not strive to invent new terms but to take hold of existing ones and bend them to new meanings. For Johnson, artifice is a way of inventing the means of living under fundamentally hostile discursive conditions.

### **Indigeneity on the Page: 'The Re-Interment of Red Jacket'**

Although the obvious place to locate this subversive play of artifice is in Johnson's performing career of the 1890s and early 1900s, it would be a mistake to assume that her cultivation of artifice only began on the stage. It appears already in an early lyric that Johnson wrote commemorating the reburial of the Seneca chief Sagoyewatha (or Red Jacket) in the Forest Lawn Cemetery in Buffalo, New York, an event that Johnson attended. A gifted orator, Red Jacket became famous for his impassioned defense of Seneca religious practices in a speech before the New England

missionary Jacob Cram.<sup>28</sup> The reburial exemplified a growing public fascination in fin-de-siècle North America with Indigenous cultures and histories, albeit one with a broadly assimilationist thrust that tended to incorporate them imaginatively into the national histories of the settler colonial states. Thus, the Buffalo Historical Society's reburial of Red Jacket, which it undertook with the blessing of some of his descendants, in a certain sense recontextualizes him as an American rather than a Seneca or Haudenosaunee figure.<sup>29</sup> This gesture was deeply freighted with presumptions about the respective historical destiny of settler and Indigenous societies, and presented absorption into American history as an appropriate fate for a people otherwise imagined to be on the verge of disappearance.

Johnson's poem 'The Re-Interment of Red Jacket' appeared in the *Transactions of the Buffalo Historic Society* alongside a poem of Walt Whitman's, 'Red Jacket (From Aloft)', and is noteworthy as her 'first identifiably Indian poem'.<sup>30</sup> A deceptively simple elegy, 'The Re-Interment' is a complex rendition of settler myths of the vanishing Indian that ultimately upends them by revealing its speaker to be a living Indigenous subject who does not merely look back upon the past but also insists upon their own persistence into the future. The poem connects the season of the re-interment, which took place in autumn, with the allegedly declining historical fortunes of Indigenous peoples across the continent. At the same time, it partially ironizes this context of decline and this season of death by imaginatively resurrecting Red Jacket's memory – though the poem in the end must consign his memory to a new death. Overseeing the action of the poem is the abstract personification of 'Indian Summer', which Johnson treats simultaneously as a kind of chthonic *genius loci* of North American nature and an abstract guardian spirit of Indigenous peoples. As the poem opens, Indian Summer sleeps,

Trusting a foreign and a paler race  
To give her gifted son an honoured place  
Where Death his vigil keeps.<sup>31</sup>

Johnson plays directly into settler stereotypes by portraying Indigenous people as uncomplicatedly coextensive with the natural world, and while 'Indian Summer' lies dormant in its deathlike sleep, it expresses a reassuring confidence in the honour and good will of the settlers.

As Johnson's poem proceeds, her speaker lauds the qualities for which Red Jacket is best remembered: his eloquence (he 'stirred the hearts' of the settlers whose 'heirs' now bury him), his oratory ('factious schemes succumbed whene'er he spoke | To bid his people rise'), his capacity for improving those around him (he 'blessed the little good and passed the wrong | Embodied in the weak'), and his enormous intellect.<sup>32</sup> These are, notably, the qualities that one might associate with a skilled diplomat: what Johnson memorializes is Red Jacket's ability to mediate disputes and prevent conflict. This choice is especially notable given that Red Jacket was well known to the American public for siding with the United States in the War of 1812 – a significant reason why the Buffalo Historical Society might have seen him as a compelling figure to memorialize. Johnson downplays any settler association of Red Jacket with war or battle, writing that 'The keenest flint or stone | That barbed the warrior's arrow in its flight' could not compare to what 'he attained alone' by deliberation and contemplation.<sup>33</sup> She invokes Red Jacket as a statesman rather than a warrior, a role arguably more difficult to assimilate smoothly into a settler history, since he appears in 'The Re-Interment' as the autonomous representative of a sovereign people rather than a mere participant in the events of American history.

Perhaps the most interesting passage in the context of decadence, though, comes just before the volta, when the speaker begins to consider the significance of the re-interment for relations between settlers and Indigenous people. The speaker muses that

The world has often seen  
A master mind pulse with the waning day  
That sends his waning nation to decay  
Where none can intervene.<sup>34</sup>

The poem at this point seems to affirm the myth of the vanishing Indian, and thus a narrative of Indigenous decadence, by portraying the decline of the Seneca as a historical inevitability that no

one can change. Red Jacket, the ‘master mind’, emerges as a kind of twilight figure, a historical personage uniquely suited to thriving as the curtain closes on his people’s history. Johnson ascribes no cause to the decline of the Seneca but presents them as a ‘waning nation’, not one made to wane by specific historical agents or forces. The decline of the Seneca appears, like the passage from ‘Indian Summer’ into autumn that opens the poem, as if it were a natural process built into the world. As the re-interment concludes and the poem ends, Johnson suggests that Indigenous decline will be made good by creating the conditions for the emergence of a powerful and vigorous settler society: the spirit of ‘Indian Summer’ appears to the speaker in a vision and calls for the ‘rising nation of the West, | That occupies my land’, to ‘Forgive the wrongs my children did to you | And we, the red skins, will forgive you too.’<sup>35</sup> The violence of colonialism thus appears as if it were a symmetrical phenomenon whose responsibility must be borne equally by settlers and Indigenous peoples.

By a certain reading, these lines go further than a mere endorsement of the myth of the vanishing Indian by perversely casting its fulfilment in the reburial of Red Jacket as a means of settler-Indigenous reconciliation – a gesture made all the more questionable by the fact that it presumes the historical death of one of its parties. But this illusion falls apart when, just prior to the vision of ‘Indian Summer’, Johnson’s speaker lapses, for the first and only time, into first-person reflection:

And few [Indigenous nations] to-day remain;  
But copper-tinted face and smoldering fire  
Of wilder life, were left me by my sire  
To be my proudest claim.<sup>36</sup>

Like Johnson herself, the speaker has an Indigenous father, and though the lines’ markers of Indigeneity still largely conform to settler stereotypes, the Indigeneity they demarcate is the speaker’s most meaningful inheritance – the aspect of their past that most vitalizes them in the present. The poem suddenly and fundamentally pierces the myth of the vanishing Indian with this proclamation of Indigenous survival and persistence, which also radically restructures the meaning

of the poem's seasonal imagery. The reburial takes place in autumn, during which 'Indian Summer' has fallen into a deathlike sleep that suggests the fallenness of the Seneca. The situation initially seems static and irreversible, but by the time the speaker discloses their own Indigeneity, Johnson restores to the seasons their cyclical meaning: Red Jacket may be dead, but the speaker lives; it may be the autumn of nations, but after winter and spring will come anew the spirit of 'Indian Summer', which is not truly dead but merely sleeping. This revelation transforms 'The Re-Interment of Red Jacket' into a markedly more complicated gesture than the one that it appears to be making. To read the poem while foregrounding the speaker's revelation is also to see that it treats the myth of the vanishing Indian as an artifice, a mere story. If the myth is performed into being in the first place by settler discourses about Indigenous people, it can just as easily be performed by the Indigenous people it mythologizes in a way that insists upon its blatant fictitiousness. Yet, at the same time, the poem offers us no sense of a way beyond this play and counter-play of artifice – behind one mask there is another. Indeed, it is in this sense that, as Lauren Grewe has argued, 'Johnson's performance [in "The Re-Interment"] of the metrically-savvy Englishwoman who reveals her Indian heritage [...] thus prefigures her more famous stage performances.'<sup>37</sup>

### **Indigeneity on the Stage: Johnson's Recitals**

It is now necessary to turn to these performances and consider their resonances with the decadent aesthetics of artifice.<sup>38</sup> From her entry onto the performance circuit in 1892 until her retirement from the stage in 1909, Johnson toured at sometimes feverish pace across Canada and the United States, and made three notable transatlantic visits to the United Kingdom (in 1894, 1906, and 1907), stirring up enormous public interest.<sup>39</sup> But what about these performances was so striking? Firstly, they heavily emphasized Johnson's explicitly Indigenous material, playing directly to the prevailing tastes of a literary marketplace eager for romanticized depictions of Indigenous life, fuelled in no small part, as I have argued, by discourses of anti-decadence. There were strong incentives to play to the fantasies of an audience that was hungry for vicarious experiences of Indigeneity, no matter



how fantastic. Gerson observes, tellingly, that while broadly ‘Indigenous’ content makes up only about ten percent of Johnson’s poetry, such pieces made up fully half of the material for her performances.<sup>40</sup> The second factor in the success of Johnson’s performances was their structure. She regularly took the stage wearing a distinctive buckskin dress, with her hair unpinned and free flowing; after the intermission, she would return to the stage wearing an elaborate Victorian gown, with her hair neatly pinned up.<sup>41</sup> In these costume changes, Johnson capitalized on her white-passing status to subvert her audience’s expectations of what an Indigenous woman looked like and to produce a kind of culture shock in her audience.

To grasp the full significance of this performance and the artifice that it entails, one must know something of Johnson’s upbringing. She identified as Mohawk from childhood but also grew up living much as any relatively well-to-do Victorian *bourgeoise* might and did not view this upbringing as being in tension with her Indigeneity. Until her father died in 1884, she lived comfortably at the family estate of Chiefswood, the impressive Italianate home that he built in the 1850s, where she had access to a piano, a wide range of books, and household servants.<sup>42</sup> Johnson belonged to what scholars have sometimes described as a Christian, predominantly Mohawk elite among the Haudenosaunee of Six Nations – an elite characterized, in the late 1800s, by its material prosperity, English education, acceptance of Anglicanism, and high rate of intermarriage with settler families.<sup>43</sup> Though the most memorable aspect of her performances was her buckskin dress, which her audiences read as an icon of authentic Indigeneity, and thus a symbol too of the anti-decadent qualities habitually conflated with it in the *fin de siècle*, Johnson did not grow up wearing traditional Mohawk dress.<sup>44</sup> Though she was defiantly Mohawk, her upbringing had more in common with her audiences’ than many realized.

Another crucial detail about Johnson’s performances, and one that reveals them most dramatically as exercises in self-fashioning, is that the buckskin costume her audiences viewed as an embodiment of authenticity was anything but – it was, rather, a carefully crafted piece of artifice that Gerson has described as a ‘collage of various artefacts that represented Aboriginality, based

on an illustration of Minnehaha, the fictional heroine of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's popular narrative poem, *The Song of Hiawatha*.<sup>45</sup>



Fig. 1: E. Pauline Johnson in her performing costume. Her attire was inspired by illustrations of Minnehaha from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1855 epic *The Song of Hiawatha*.



Fig. 2: E. Pauline Johnson in everyday attire.

The costume thus signifies a vague, indefinite Indigeneity – not a manifestation of a specific Indigenous culture but a kind of pan-Indigenous lure for the settler imagination. Johnson’s stage work literalized as much as possible the fact that the Indigeneity her audiences desired was little more than a figment of their own imaginations, which she presented back to them in dramatic form. Though sharply distinct in content, Johnson’s wry performances of settler stereotypes resemble the strategy Wilde adopts in his decadent comedies of manners. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), Wilde mocks the high-toned moralism of his audience while inviting them to laugh at the mockery; Johnson similarly gives her audiences the vision of Indigeneity that they want to see, while progressively complicating it and drawing attention to its fictitiousness.

The pan-Indigenous nature of Johnson’s buckskin costume is striking when considered alongside the views about literary representation of Indigenous people that she expresses in the essay ‘A Strong Race Opinion’, which appeared in the same year that her stage career began, in 1892. Settler writers, she suggests, inflict a kind of discursive violence upon Indigenous people in their stereotyped depictions of Indigenous women. One of the hallmarks of this failure of settler imagination is a tendency to reduce Indigenous characters to symbols of Indigeneity writ large. ‘The Indian girl we meet in cold type’, Johnson argues, ‘is rarely distressed by having to belong to any tribe, or to reflect any tribal characteristics’.<sup>46</sup> She is never allowed to be a determinate or specific person, either in the sense of having her own individual agency or, just as importantly, in the sense of belonging to any identifiable nation. This generalizing approach to Indigenous women characters flattens an immense range of important distinctions, reducing people with their own specific cultural forms, political organizations, traditions, ceremonies, and histories to an indistinct mass. Johnson concludes her critique with a piercing question: ‘do authors who write Indian romances love the nation they endeavour successfully or unsuccessfully to describe [...] or is the Indian introduced into literature but to lend a dash of vivid colouring to an otherwise tame and

sombre picture of colonial life?<sup>247</sup> In the hands of settler writers, in other words, Indigenous life is all too often reduced to mere spectacle.

But how do we square these comments with Johnson's stage career, which seems to contradict them at every turn? Is it not precisely this stereotypical, pan-Indigenizing fantasy of the exotic cultural other that she enacted every night on the stage? In a certain sense, her performances could be read as an elaborate inside joke, a performance of caricatured Indigeneity for an audience too ill-informed to know better or be open to dissuasion. Her performances also played up the fluidity of what her audience presumed to be clear and sharp demarcations between non-overlapping identity categories such as 'white' and 'Indigenous'. Her switching from one guise to another makes a point of just how porous these boundaries could be, especially in the context of a long colonial history in which the settler state aggressively pursued the assimilation of Indigenous people into a hegemonic settler culture. Further still, her nuanced practices of self-fashioning imply that the Victorian gown and the buckskin dress are in fact both costumes, as if to say that the refined attire and cultivated affectations of bourgeois women at the fin de siècle are as theatrical and confining as the vision of Indigenous womanhood she invoked on the other side of the intermission. Perhaps most complicatedly, though, Johnson's recitations made a spectacle of the fact that what seemed to be the most real and authentic elements of her persona (and thus those that seemed most to promise vicarious access to a world of vivifying nature, the integrative holism of Indigenous life, and so on) were in fact the most profoundly artificial and crafted. Though the paying public might have envisioned Johnson as a symbol of anti-decadence, the implication of her performances is ultimately not unlike the view that Wilde famously puts in the mouth of Vivian in "The Decay of Lying": 'Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life.'<sup>248</sup> It was never likeness to life, after all, certainly not to Indigenous life, that her audiences desired. To be sure, Johnson's position differs meaningfully from the one Wilde places in Vivian's mouth. For Vivian, what is deplorable in a world reduced to 'careless habits of accuracy', in which 'the modern novelist presents us with dull facts under the guise of fiction', is its excruciating boredom.<sup>49</sup> For Johnson,

the stakes are different: the decadent cultivation of artifice is not seasoning for the bland gruel of life but a tactic for living amid discourses that alternately presume or anticipate her demise.

The appeal and importance of incorporating a figure like Johnson into the decadent canon is that she crafts for us something that cannot be understood as a mere imitation of the canonical sensibilities, aesthetics, and thematic investments of European, American, or even Canadian decadence, but which we must nevertheless understand as being in dialogue with these varieties. Furthermore, her work cannot be fully grasped without a sense of how settler ideas about Indigeneity at the fin de siècle were bound up with ideas about decadence. Johnson's affiliations with the decadent literary world were surprisingly deep, and her poetry and recitals participate meaningfully in a decadent aesthetic of artifice while extending this aesthetic to speak to areas of concern that settler decadents seldom engaged with at length. When Johnson took to the stage, she satirized not just the roles that she was compelled to perform but her audiences' inability to see them as roles. These performances startled the logic by which anti-decadence and Indigeneity could appear as coextensive terms. They did so not only by insisting on the survival and perpetuity of Indigenous life despite the myth of the vanishing Indian (as she does in poems like 'The Re-Interment of Red Jacket') but also by showing the supposedly decadent figure of the Indigenous woman to be indistinguishable from and capable of trading places with its antithesis, the figure of the Victorian lady, since neither image grants real or immediate access to what they claim to represent. Ironically, it is by a decadent aesthetic practice of artifice and self-fashioning that Johnson shows her audience that no intrinsic decadence clings to either of these images, that decadence is not a cultural fact *per se* but a discourse, a method of narrating – and of performing.

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<sup>1</sup> Hector Charlesworth, 'Miss Pauline Johnson's Poems', in *Tekabionwake: E. Pauline Johnson's Writings on Native North America*, ed. by Margery Fee and Dory Nason (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2016), pp. 262-66 (p. 262).

<sup>2</sup> Elissa Zellinger, 'E. Pauline Johnson's Poetic Acts', *ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, 62.2 (2019), 331-80 (pp. 332-33).

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the distinction between exoticism and autoexoticism, see Xiaofan Amy Li, 'Introduction: From the Exotic to the Autoexotic', *PMLA*, 132.2 (2017), 392-96 (p. 394).

- <sup>4</sup> See Zellinger, 'E. Pauline Johnson's Poetic Acts', for the fullest treatment of the complex agency involved in Johnson's autoexoticism.
- <sup>5</sup> Carole Gerson, 'Rereading Pauline Johnson', *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 46.2 (2012), 45-61 (p. 56). See also Elaine Showalter, 'Introduction', in *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1993), pp. vii-xx.
- <sup>6</sup> Charlesworth, p. 263.
- <sup>7</sup> Gilbert Parker, 'Introduction, *The Moccasin Maker*', in *Tekahionwake: E. Pauline Johnson's Writings on Native North America*, ed. by Margery Fee and Dory Nason (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2016), pp. 276-79 (pp. 277-79).
- <sup>8</sup> Theodore Watts-Dunton, 'In Memoriam: Pauline Johnson', in *Tekahionwake: E. Pauline Johnson's Writings on Native North America*, pp. 281-86 (p. 285).
- <sup>9</sup> The Latin phrase, meaning 'nobody's land', has historically been used in colonial legal contexts to designate territories that are (allegedly) unoccupied by any state and therefore free for occupation.
- <sup>10</sup> Charles Mair, 'Pauline Johnson: An Appreciation', in *Tekahionwake: E. Pauline Johnson's Writings on Native North America*, pp. 269-76 (pp. 271-72).
- <sup>11</sup> Mair's identification of Johnson with Romanticism, though intended as a judgement of her anti-decadence, is unintentionally perceptive of her relationship to the aesthetic discourses of decadence, given that many scholars have understood literary decadence as a development or mutation of Romanticism. If, as David Weir argues, the Romantic artist 'looked at nature from a distance and saw something sublime, something behind or beyond nature', the decadent took the next step of displacing nature with the very apparatus by which the artist envisions or understands it: art itself. As I argue later in this article, Johnson's poetry and stage performances enact and exploit a similar displacement. See David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. xv.
- <sup>12</sup> See Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992), p. 38.
- <sup>13</sup> Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 29. See also Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1979), pp. 14-15.
- <sup>14</sup> Mair, p. 271.
- <sup>15</sup> Quoted in Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 99.
- <sup>16</sup> Ernest Thompson Seton, 'Tekahionwake (Pauline Johnson)', in *Tekahionwake: E. Pauline Johnson's Writings on Native North America*, pp. 279-81 (p. 280).
- <sup>17</sup> See Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination: 1880-1900*, trans. by Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 25-27 and 72-74.
- <sup>18</sup> D. M. R. Bentley, *The Confederation Group of Poets, 1880-1897* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 20-22.
- <sup>19</sup> David Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature against the Grain, 1890-1926* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), pp. 101-02.
- <sup>20</sup> Nick Mount, *When Canadian Literature Moved to New York* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 74. See also Bentley, p. 221.
- <sup>21</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag and Carole Gerson, *Paddling Her Own Canoe: The Times and Texts of E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake)* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp. 76 and 119.
- <sup>22</sup> Betty Keller, *Pauline Johnson: First Aboriginal Voice of Canada* (Montreal: XYZ Publishing, 1999), p. 37.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.
- <sup>24</sup> Strong-Boag and Gerson, p. 144.
- <sup>25</sup> Keller, pp. 97-98.
- <sup>26</sup> Charlesworth, pp. 264-66.
- <sup>27</sup> Jerome McGann, 'Swinburne's Radical Artifice; or, The Comedian as A. C.', *Modernism/modernity*, 11.2 (2004), 205-18 (p. 213).
- <sup>28</sup> Lauren Grewe, "'To Bid His People Rise": Political Renewal and Spiritual Contests at Red Jacket's Reburial', *Native American and Indigenous Studies*, 1.2 (2014), 44-68 (p. 49).
- <sup>29</sup> For a detailed account of the background and implications of the re-interment, see Grewe, pp. 47-51.
- <sup>30</sup> Strong-Boag and Gerson, p. 147.
- <sup>31</sup> E. Pauline Johnson, 'The Re-Interment of Red Jacket', in *Tekahionwake: E. Pauline Johnson's Writings on Native North America*, pp. 38-40 (p. 39).
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>37</sup> Grewe, p. 61.

<sup>38</sup> I do not consider here the links between decadence and the intermediality of Johnson's stage work (which involved recitations of original material and thus operated at the juncture of physical performance and textuality), but this strikes me, given Katharina Herold-Zanker's recent account of intermediality in the performances of Anita Berber, as another profitable avenue for considering Johnson's relation to the decadent *milieu*. See Katharina Herold-Zanker, 'Intermediality and Decadent Performance in Anita Berber and Sebastian Droste's *Die Tänze des Lasters, des Grauens und der Ekstase* (1923)', *Volupté*, 4.2 (2021), 64-88.

<sup>39</sup> Gerson, 'Rereading Pauline Johnson', p. 48.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>42</sup> Strong-Boag and Gerson, p. 49.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>44</sup> Grewe, p. 59.

<sup>45</sup> Gerson, 'Rereading Pauline Johnson', p. 48.

<sup>46</sup> E. Pauline Johnson, 'A Strong Race Opinion', in *Tekahionwake: E. Pauline Johnson's Writings on Native North America*, pp. 155-63 (p. 156).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>48</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *Plays, Prose Writings, and Poems*, intro. by Terry Eagleton (Toronto: Everyman's Library, 1999), pp. 69-99 (p. 87).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

## Disavowing Naidu: Nationalism and Decadent Poetics in India

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‘Historical narratives necessarily produce silences that are themselves meaningful.’

Michel-Rolph Trouillot<sup>1</sup>

When I was first introduced to the work of Sarojini Naidu in my graduate class, ‘Globalization and Transnational Decadence’, I was shocked and uncomfortable – shocked because, in my twenty-plus years of education in India, I had only tangentially encountered Naidu’s poetry as ‘nationalist’, or at best, lyrically redolent of precolonial pastoralism; and uncomfortable, because the history of sexual excess, narcissism, and misogyny in decadent literature was sharply at odds with the Naidu I remembered from my middle school English classes. Intrigued by what I thought was a taxonomic inaccuracy, I reviewed the current curricula of a few top- and middle-tier Indian universities, which, predictably, yielded no surprises – Naidu is still being taught in India under modules that examine ‘themes such as nation-building, the politics of language, and the rewriting of history’<sup>2</sup> or ‘the polyphonic images of the Indian society’.<sup>3</sup> While the University of Calcutta syllabus makes a passing reference to the ‘ambivalent attitude towards colonial resistance realized since the latter half of the nineteenth century’, the term ‘decadent’ – which faced conservative backlash after the widely publicized Oscar Wilde trials – is conveniently missing from prefatory accounts of Naidu’s poetry in India. Although Naidu has recently risen to prominence in Western criticism for ‘la[y]ing claim to an at once English yet Oriental poetic voice through the insistent beat of her sultry, decadent refrains’,<sup>4</sup> it seems as if Indian literary history has chosen to elide her allegiance to European decadence in order to dissociate her from its notorious degeneracy, which could potentially undermine her suitability for the role of a patriotic poet and the first female Governor of the United Provinces.<sup>5</sup> Thus, on the one hand, there exists a growing body of Western scholarship that examines the ways in which Naidu ‘wrote a part for herself into the decadent



script that London wove around her'.<sup>6</sup> On the other, a counter-mechanism operates within the Indian context to routinely sanitize her legacy, supported by a complex nexus of literary historians, scholars, and political parties that stand to benefit from such acts of misinterpretation and misrepresentation.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps it might be helpful to take a step back here, and clarify this claim in the context of present-day Indian politics. The gradual assimilation of Naidu into a nationalist canon is one of the many instances of literary censorship and curriculum control that have afflicted the Indian educational system under the broader cultural phenomenon known as the saffronization of India. Admittedly, nationalism can be a strong unifying force, especially in colonies striving for independence, but, when pursued to an excess, it takes on the undesirable qualities of jingoism and xenophobia, which we find in its exclusionary version being preached and practised in contemporary India. In our current climate of toxic partisanship, particularly in the aftermath of the Hindu right's landslide electoral victories in 2014 and 2019, nationalism has become a glorified buzzword to defend structural inequalities and the violation of minority rights by the government. In 'Mounting Majoritarianism and Political Polarization in India', Niranjan Sahoo argues that the 'divide between secular and Hindu nationalist visions of Indian identity', which has existed since the late nineteenth century, has recently been brought to boil with the formation of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1980, the mobilization of Hindu nationalism during the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, and the BJP's election to federal power in 2014 and 2019.<sup>8</sup> The most recent blow to Indian secularism has been wrought by the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019, whose roots go back to the final years of colonialism in India. After undergoing several modifications between 1955 and 2015, the proposed amendment to the citizenship bill was passed with an overwhelming majority in both the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha in 2019, becoming the Citizenship Amendment Act, 'which grants religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan a speedier path to Indian citizenship, but excludes Muslims'.<sup>9</sup> This exclusion, coupled with the BJP's conveniently-timed decision to create a national database of

Indian citizens – called the National Register of Citizens (NRC) – has resulted in massive discontent throughout the country, turning what ‘could have been otherwise an inane Census exercise [...] into a political slugfest and patriotic competitiveness’.<sup>10</sup> The Union Home Ministry’s decision to selectively close down the nation’s boundaries and deport illegal immigrants is driven by a parochial notion of ‘nationalism’, alarmingly influenced by religious fundamentalism. The social, political, and ethical debates about nationalism have deeply permeated our literary scholarship and pedagogy, which, I hope, will explain the urgency of this intervention, and excuse the polemical charge of some of the arguments that I make in this article.

Regardless of context, one might wonder how Naidu, the first female President of the Indian National Congress, and a celebrated champion of the people’s cause, fits into the right-wing nationalist agenda. Indeed, even though her later works were composed in the service of the nation, the essence of Naidu’s poetry was undeniably cosmopolitan, and there was no clean break with decadence in her poetic career. In her own words from a January 1905 letter to Edmund Gosse, as quoted by Elleke Boehmer, Naidu worked hard to ‘add [her] little exotic flower to the glorious garland of English verse’, reinforcing her aesthetic inheritance and aspirations, often overlooked by later Indian critics.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, although Naidu was famous enough to be voted among the ten greatest living Indians in a poll conducted by the *Indian National Herald* in 1926, historian Ramachandra Guha reminds us of her Hindu-Brahmin-Bengali ancestry, which might have partially influenced her popularity.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, Makarand Paranjape, a leading scholar of Indian writing in English and the editor of the only authoritative selection of Naidu’s works, *Sarojini Naidu: Selected Poetry and Prose*, argues in his introduction to the *Essential Reader* that Naidu was neither a relentless firebrand like Subhash Chandra Bose, nor an astute politician like Mahatma Gandhi, but ‘a celebrity publicist and public relations officer of the Congress in general and Gandhi in particular’.<sup>13</sup> For Paranjape, Naidu is ‘one of those great people whose greatness is most difficult to identify and substantiate’.<sup>14</sup> While I maintain my reservations about this harsh assessment, Paranjape does highlight a crucial aspect of Naidu’s poetry, which explains why she is endorsed as

a nationalist poet on both sides of the political spectrum. Naidu's colonial angst is sublimated in ornamental language and imagery, and her poetry is too meek to inveigh against the injustices of the system, too delicate to take up arms in defence of the people. Her brand of nationalism – of the nostalgic, idealistic, meretricious kind – poses no threat to the dominant socio-political order, regardless of her political affiliations, which accounts for her presence in multiple anthologies and textbooks even to this day. Therefore, the biggest criticism of her poetry has become, ironically, her greatest claim to fame, for everything that makes her a mediocre poet (according to critics like Paranjape) also makes her the perfect candidate for the role of a right-wing-approved nationalist poet.

Interestingly, while the Penguin anthology of decadent poetry is bookended by Wilde and Naidu, both consolidating her association with the movement and identifying her as one of its key practitioners, Indian criticism has consistently focused on her lyricism, her patriotic idealism, and her keen eye for beauty. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, whose incisive work, *Indian Writing in English* has been effusively acknowledged and recommended by scholars like K. D. Verma, denudes Naidu's poetry of its decadent associations, entirely missing what Elleke Boehmer later calls the 'risqué expressions of feminine sexual submission liberally distributed across her poems'.<sup>15</sup> Foreshadowing Paranjape's qualification of Naidu's works as vacuous – representing a dead aesthetic and nostalgic for a feudal past – Iyengar observes: 'No room for obscurity or profundity here; simplicity and directness are sovereign, and the appeal is the appeal of the old, the unfading, the undying.'<sup>16</sup> Iyengar's rapturous appreciation of Naidu's poems pays particular attention to her visual connoisseurship and sensitivity to beauty – 'the beauty of living things, the beauty of holiness, the beauty of the Buddha's compassion, the beauty of Brindavan's Lord' – but fails to (or more appropriately, refuses to) locate the cultural and literary influences that could have informed such aesthetic predilections.<sup>17</sup> Although contemporary Indian scholarship documents Naidu's indebtedness to Arthur Symons and Edmund Gosse for their sage counsel during the formative years of her poetic career, these records only serve to reinforce the story of her

transformation from an imitator of British Orientalism to a true poet of the Deccan, without substantially touching on the literary implications of these friendships and especially their impact on Naidu's fascination with decadence.<sup>18</sup> Paranjape traces the influence of Shelley, Tennyson, Swinburne, and the Pre-Raphaelites in Naidu's poems, and concludes, 'Sarojini's aesthetics is feudal, though her politics is democratic nationalism.'<sup>19</sup> His analysis of Naidu's 'tendency towards hedonistic self-abandon and escape from reality', coupled with her preference for 'the more ornate, more latinate, more exotic, more unusual' over 'the simple, functional, and ordinary' verges on a tacit acknowledgment of her decadence – or her interstitiality, at the least – but instead of connecting the dots for his readers, he interprets the poems as embodying 'the feudal ideal' and embracing classical Indian aesthetics with their 'emphasis on *alankara* or the "beautiful form" in poetry'.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps Paranjape's insistence on feudal nostalgia in Naidu's poems is not a deliberate obfuscation of her decadence, but a substitution of one form of decadence for another. Nonetheless, this article is both an inquiry into the systemic omission of decadence from patriotic, nationalist, and decolonizing accounts of Indian literary history, and a humble attempt at its rehabilitation. To this end, I will question and complicate the carefully curated legacy of the Nightingale of India, and trace the aesthetics of decadence in the lush textures of her poems in *The Golden Threshold* (1905).

However, before I proceed any further, it would be useful to situate the disavowal of Naidu's decadence in the global context of Queen Victoria's death in 1901, the First World War from 1914 to 1918, and the Wall Street Crash in 1929. As Kate Hext and Alex Murray argue in their joint introduction to *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, the indulgences of fin de siècle decadence came to be regarded as anachronistic and inappropriate in the aftermath of history's savagery. Even the most vociferous defenders of the movement soon became disillusioned with its blithe insouciance:

In 1928 A. J. A. Symons, himself a great chronicler of decadence, concluded that the Great War had cleaved his age apart from that of Wilde, Arthur Symons, Lionel Johnson, and the Rhymers' Club, who long ago gathered in the Cheshire Cheese to recite their

languorous verses: 'Freed from the restrictions and hypocrisies against which they strove, we are irked by the despairing clamour of their revolt; exhausted by the greatest war in history, we are in no mood for merely introspective woe; absorbed in our own time we forget the problems by which these young men were perturbed. In the twilight end of the nineteenth century there seemed no answer to a bleak materialism.'<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, Gosse – to whom Naidu had dedicated *The Golden Threshold* – retrospectively diagnosed the 'laxity of manners, and [the] wretched sensitiveness to personal inconvenience' as alarming portents of 'national decay'.<sup>22</sup> The rise of modernism and its moralizing deprecation of 'art for art's sake' further weakened the influence of decadent writers by 'paint[ing] them as relics of a bygone age' and paving the way for their institutional irrelevance.<sup>23</sup> In 1960, Harry Levin framed decadence and modernism as fundamentally adversarial movements, claiming that every 'revolutionary generation tends to be succeeded by a reactionary one; to put it less politically and more psychologically, there seems to be a cyclic oscillation between tough and tender minds'.<sup>24</sup> In this oppositional framework, modernism is controversially cast as the 'tough' (and by association, masculine and virile) successor of an effeminate/queer aesthetic which was rendered obsolete by the brutalities of the war. The rejection of decadence around the turn of the nineteenth century also rose out of the cumulative resistance of various decolonizing movements that privileged social realism over gilded abstractions and called for a revisionist poetics of responsibility. The members of the Indian Progressive Writers' Association, for instance, claimed in their manifesto, published in English in the February 1936 issue of the *Left Review*, that 'the object' of their association was

to rescue literature and other arts from the priestly, academic and decadent classes in whose hands they have degenerated so long; to bring the arts into the closest touch with the people; and to make them the vital organs which will register the actualities of life, as well as lead us to the future.<sup>25</sup>

The cultivated indolence and alleged moral degeneracy of fin-de-siècle aestheticism, which was also cast as decadent, were deemed incompatible with the social and ethical obligations of this fraught moment, not only in India, but, as Robert Stilling argues in *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry*, in all 'cultures emerging, like spokes on a wheel, from the same declining empires around the same time'.<sup>26</sup>

As a sense of national identity began to crystallize in India around the end of the nineteenth century after the Sepoy Mutiny, the demand for a national literature that would capture the heart of India and celebrate a distinctively Indian sensibility grew louder and stronger in different parts of the country. Interestingly, in a letter to Gosse dated January 1905, not long after the annual meeting of the Indian National Congress in December 1904, Naidu – who was already a popular orator and a determined champion of the nationalist cause – wrote with barely-concealed excitement (and perhaps, a hint of irony), ‘far from being the insignificant little provincial I had thought myself I was treated almost as a national possession. I!’<sup>27</sup> Naidu was, of course, not oblivious to the enormity of the task at hand: ‘My public was waiting for me’, she continued, ‘no, not for me, so much as for a poet, a national poet, and it was ready to accept me if I would only let it’.<sup>28</sup> The ending of the letter – ‘if I would only let it’ – is playfully narcissistic, but it also makes a crucial point about Naidu’s tacit endorsement of her reception as a ‘national poet’ of an emerging India. Additionally, in a speech for 1917 entitled ‘The Soul of India’, Naidu also poses ‘decadence’ – possibly in the more social and political sense of the term, but not without its concomitant associations with *fin-de-siècle* literary decadence – as the antithesis of nationalism: ‘The British were a ‘bold and vigorous race with a glorious literature and a glorious heritage of freedom’, but they ‘reaped in India a disintegration of all the national life and a decadence of the national culture’.<sup>29</sup> What, then, do we make of Naidu’s complicity in her gradual assimilation into a nationalist narrative? More importantly, would it even be fair to argue that existing historiography has done a great disservice to her poems if she consciously gave in to reductive taxonomies of her craft?

Of course, for those who are familiar with the trajectory of her life, Naidu’s tactical adaptability requires no introduction. Naidu had sailed for England in September 1895 to continue her studies at King’s College, London, and later at Girton College, Cambridge. Here, as Boehmer observes, the ‘relatively stable local and regional identities and belief systems [she] brought over from home were thrown into new, unpredictable, and quintessentially modern mixes’.<sup>30</sup> As a young

Indian girl of sixteen, who required access to the cultural institutions of the West and the publishing world of important writers and critics like Symons and Gosse, she soon took to writing what Gosse called verses

that were skilful in form, correct in grammar and blameless in sentiment, but they had the disadvantage of being totally without individuality. They were Western in feeling and in imagery; they were founded on reminiscences of Tennyson and Shelley [...] this was the note of the mockingbird with a vengeance.<sup>31</sup>

Yet Naidu's colonial mimicry was masterful enough to earn her the attention and curiosity of important men in literature, who not only read her poems with care and patience, but also offered her advice on how to break through the smokescreen of fustian and fantasy.<sup>32</sup> For example, Gosse wrote in the introduction to *The Bird of Time* (1912) that in order to reconstitute herself as 'a genuine Indian poet of the Deccan', Naidu must tap into both her authentic Indianness and her delicate femininity:

I ventured to speak to her sincerely. I advised the consignment of all that she had written, in the falsely English vein, to the waste-paper basket. I implored her to consider that from a young Indian of extreme sensibility, who had mastered not merely the language but the prosody of the West, what we wished to receive was [...] some revelation of the heart of India, some sincere penetrating analysis of native passion, of the principles of antique religion and of such mysterious intimations as stirred the soul of the East long before the West had begun to dream that it had a soul.<sup>33</sup>

Despite his Orientalist assumptions about native authenticity, Gosse seems to have discerned the exact strain of Romantic escapism in poems like 'The Snake Charmer' and 'Village-Song' that blunted the revolutionary edge of Naidu's earlier poems. Later Indian critics such as Iyengar or Paranjape would diagnose this belated echo of Romanticism as hedonistic, preserving the colonial hierarchy that decolonization was striving to undo. Paranjape writes in the introduction to the *Essential Reader*: 'Not only did Naidu represent a dead aesthetic, but her romanticism was of a particularly meretricious kind'.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, what she needed was a radical transformation – a break away from the formulaic, Orientalist tropes of the West, in favour of a poetry that could retaliate and strike.

The enthusiastic reception of Naidu's subsequent collection, *The Golden Threshold* (1905), attests to the successful completion of what Boehmer calls her 'western make-over' – the combination of 'technical skill learned outside the 'magic circle' of the Orient with inside knowledge', to produce poems 'as luminous in lighting up the dark places of the East as any contribution of savant or historian'.<sup>35</sup> In his introduction to the book, Symons writes that the poems

hint, in a sort of delicately evasive way, at a rare temperament, the temperament of a woman of the East, finding expression through a Western language and under partly Western influences. They do not express the whole of that temperament; but they express, I think, its essence; and there is an eastern magic in them.<sup>36</sup>

Early reviews of *The Golden Threshold*, catalogued in Iyengar's history of Indian writing in English, also indicate that Naidu, the 'national poet', had finally arrived upon the literary scene with this perfectly timed collection:

'This little volume should silence forever the scoffer who declares that women cannot write poetry', so wrote the *Review of Reviews*; 'Her poetry seems to sing itself as if her swift thoughts and strong emotions sprang into lyrics of themselves', cooed *The Times*; and the *Glasgow Herald* made an important point: 'The pictures are of the East it is true: but there is something fundamentally human in them that seems to prove that the best song knows nothing of East or West' [...] In India she was hailed as the Nightingale of Indian song, and J. B. Yeats's portrait of her made her a figure of pure romance. She emerged from seclusion, and she appeared on the Congress platform. The times too – those were the days of *Bandemataram* – were propitious for her entry into politics, and she moved among leaders a leader, lending colour and music and humour and vivacity to their meetings.<sup>37</sup>

However, while this national turn in her poetry certainly helped her political career – Naidu was appointed as the President of the Indian National Congress in 1925 and later became the first woman to hold the office of Governor in 1947 – a nuanced reading of *The Golden Threshold*, '[c]arven with delicate dreams and wrought | With many a subtle and exquisite thought', reveals the decadent underpinnings of her patriotic poetry and the political motives behind their convenient misinterpretation.<sup>38</sup>

As intimated earlier in this article, the association with decadence – derived etymologically from the Latin verb 'decadere', which means 'to fall' – could have jeopardized Naidu's involvement in the struggle for a 'new India', rising from the ruins wrought by British colonial rule. The



decadent connoisseurship of beauty in all its perverse and transgressive forms also made it injudicious for Naidu to openly ally with the rich and problematic heritage of Huysmans and Wilde. Furthermore, the tender and delicate aesthetic of fin-de-siècle literature was fundamentally irreconcilable with the tough and robust rhetoric of nationalism which Naidu had to co-opt as a way of surviving in the male-dominated world of Indian politics. Considering the ramifications of admitting to her decadent loyalties, it made perfect sense for Naidu to let herself be canonized as a poet of the independence movement, while *performing* this stereotyped identity, particularly for her Indian audience, to innovative and subversive ends.

*The Golden Threshold*, which cemented Naidu's reputation as a nationalist poet in 1905, was written, quite literally, at the threshold of India's independence, at a time when Naidu herself was at the threshold of a revitalized poetic and political career after her brief but productive stay in Europe. However, as Ana Parejo Vadillo observes, *The Golden Threshold* introduced 'the languages of India into [Naidu's] verse' in turn producing 'a new decadent symbology', such that 'words became thresholds to a new literary and political world'.<sup>39</sup> The idea of liminality immanent in the word 'threshold' also offers valuable insight into the assortment of Oriental imagery that features throughout the collection. As Paranjape asks, 'is the collection a sort of threshold or passage to India itself for Western readers?' According to Paranjape, the nationalist in Naidu 'would want to introduce her readers not to an earthen or clayey India, but a magnificent, golden India, embellished by her imagination and carefully ornamented so as to be pleasing and delectable to her foreign readers'.<sup>40</sup> Thus, while 'threshold' evokes a sense of in-betweenness that is central to Naidu's poetics, 'golden' alludes to her affiliation with the decadent history of ornamentation and artifice. Besides, the book seals its decadent credentials through its own fin-de-siècle ornamentation and publication history, even as it announces the birth of a new India, on the cusp of a golden era. *The Golden Threshold* opens with a portrait by Jack Butler Yeats, the brother of W. B. Yeats, and was published in London by William Heinemann, who also published Max Nordau's

*Degeneration* (1895), Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), Henry James' *The Awkward Age* (1899), and Symons's *Poems* (1902).

'The Snake Charmer', from *The Golden Threshold*, illustrates the tensions between decadence and nationalism in Naidu's poetry. By exoticizing a familiar scene from rural India, where a snake charmer hypnotizes venomous snakes by playing a flute-like instrument, locally known in Hindi as the 'pungi', it serves as an apt example of her self-orientalism:

Whither dost thou hide from the magic of my flute-call?  
In what moonlight-tangled meshes of perfume,  
Where the clustering keovas guard the squirrel's slumber,  
Where the deep woods glimmer with the jasmine's bloom?

I'll feed thee, O beloved, on milk and wild red honey,  
I'll bear thee in a basket of rushes, green and white,  
To a palace-bower where golden-vested maidens  
Thread with mellow laughter the petals of delight.

Whither dost thou loiter, by what murmuring hollows,  
Where oleanders scatter their ambrosial fire?  
Come, thou subtle bride of my mellifluous wooing,  
Come, thou silver-breasted moonbeam of desire!<sup>41</sup>

The poem is composed in three quatrains, each with the abcb rhyme scheme of a traditional folk ballad, harking back, in its formal conservatism, to the overwrought poems of decadent predecessors like Wilde's 'Athanasia', Symons's 'Javanese Dancers', or 'The Absinthe Drinker'. The lack of formal experimentation is complemented by its anachronistic language ('whither', 'thee', 'thou', etc.) and a cloying excess of Oriental clichés like the 'deep woods', the 'palace-bowers', the fragrant 'jasmine bloom', the 'golden-vested maidens', and finally, the 'milk and wild red honey', reminiscent of the 'honey-dew' and 'milk of Paradise' in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan'. The last stanza of the poem is also indebted to Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', which idealizes and exoticizes Greek antiquity. The negotiation, dialogue, and overlap between Romantic and decadent sensibilities have been the focus of scholarly attention since the publication of Symons's *The Romantic Movement in English Poetry* (1909), so one might argue that the echo of Romanticism in Naidu's poetry is symptomatic of her decadent affiliation.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, instead of capturing the

authentic essence of rural India, Naidu seems to synaesthetically recreate (and corroborate) the mystical, remote, and luxuriant India of the Western Romantic imagination, constructing an idea of the nation that could not be farther from its wretched reality of successive plagues, famines, and economic hardship, which Romesh C. Dutt documents in *The Economic History of India* (1904). Paranjape vindicates Naidu's Orientalism by bracketing it with the strain of wistful nostalgia that was common in patriotic poetry of her time:

What Sarojini tried to do was to offer an entry into this unspoiled India. Of course, it would have been too painful to portray it with all the horrors of its poverty, inequality, disease, and suffering; if only these were glossed over, then a very attractive image of India would emerge, traditional, vivid, vibrant, colourful, and joyous.<sup>43</sup>

Paranjape's 'defence' of Naidu's *incidental* decadence is symptomatic of her slow but steady interpellation into normative modalities of nationalism that I have hinted at throughout this essay.

To the Western reader, Naidu's sensualization of India is unequivocally decadent in its challenge to realism, which behoves art to be faithful to social realities – especially when said art is tasked with rallying support for a patriotic cause. Indeed, the integration of myth and history, realism and fabulation in Naidu's works at a time of unprecedented political turmoil promoted an orientalist panorama of 'deep woods', 'murmuring hollows', and 'golden-vested maidens' that one would have expected her to critique as a prominent leader of the Indian nationalist movement. After all, the publication of *The Golden Threshold* coincided with the territorial reorganization of the Bengal Presidency (also known as the Partition of Bengal) along religious lines, which caused a tremendous furore and spurred nationwide protests that consolidated into the Swadeshi movement in India. The Swadeshi movement was a drive for self-sufficiency through domestic production, which Gandhi described as the soul of 'purna swaraj' or self-rule. Evidence of political backlash and civil unrest in the wake of the Partition are copiously documented in newspapers of the pre-Independence era, such as the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *Bande Mataram*, or *Bengalee*. For example, an article titled 'Partition Proclamation and Swadeshi Movement: Public Meetings'<sup>44</sup> in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, published on 30 October 1905, shortly after the implementation of the

Partition, describes anti-Partition meetings along with the names of prominent participants and a list of speeches delivered in Tangail. Another article, 'Notes from Capital', printed in the *Bengalee* on 1 September 1905 offers a robust first-person commentary on the 'ever-increasing pitch of anti-Partition and boycott movement[s] in Bengal'.<sup>45</sup> While political tensions continued to simmer all over the country, exposing frictions and fault-lines within the Swadeshi Movement as a result of the radicalization of Indian nationalism, Naidu's poems remained unsullied by the political fray, painting an idealized image of India rather than representing the reality on the ground. Paranjape observes that Naidu's

palanquin-bearers, wandering singers, Indian weavers, Coromandel fishers, snake-charmers, itinerant beggars [...] are all made to deny the hardship and toil of their occupations, hide their dispossession and marginalization, and celebrate their lowly and oppressed state. They become picturesque, exotic figures in tableaux, frozen in various attitudes of quaintness.<sup>46</sup>

All the alleged flaws of decadence, Paranjape ascribes to Naidu's poetry. However, a preference for artifice, 'the heightening of sensuality in the imagery until every sense is stimulated to excess', and the 'definite tendency towards hedonistic self-abandon and escape from reality' become, in his historical-materialist critique, a measure of her 'feudal aesthetics', as opposed to a clear indication of her decadent sensibilities. Although Naidu's nationalism remains restricted, by and large, to the domain of the performative, her aesthetic predilections are dismissed as the excesses of patriotic idealism and not, explicitly, the excesses of decadence. Padmini Sengupta, in her brilliant (but incomplete) biography of Naidu, asks: 'Did Sarojini Naidu exult in two forms of existence? One in the glare and turmoil of political agitations, youth movements, and women's emancipation, and the other in the sweet-scented, heavily-curtained drawing rooms of a secret woman's world?'<sup>47</sup> The answer is yes, but Sengupta too misidentifies the decadent strain in Naidu's poetry as feminist sentimentalism, thus failing to theorize the influence of the dichotomous 1890s in the exhilarating anticipations of renewed vigor and the simultaneous regress into lyric melancholy throughout her oeuvre. Paranjape justifies Naidu's idealizing, Orientalist, and belatedly Romantic poetics in such a way that downplays the aesthetic inheritance of her verse, emphasizing instead its cultural

aspirations for India. However, a closer analysis of her work reveals how she draws on and resists these seemingly incompatible literary modalities to create a push-and-pull effect within her poems, making it difficult – and sometimes impossible – for the reader to distinguish between the affiliative and the contentious, the sincere and the subversive.

As noted earlier in this article, Naidu's poems cannot easily be mapped onto a parochial framework of nationalism rooted in religious fundamentalism and minority persecution. For example, 'Wandering Singers' begins with a direct reference to Naidu's cosmopolitan vision:

Where the voice of the wind calls our wandering feet,  
Through echoing forest and echoing street,  
With lutes in our hands ever-singing we roam,  
All men are our kindred, the world is our home.<sup>48</sup>

The eponymous singers migrate across space, from wilderness ('echoing forest') to civilization ('echoing street'), and across time, from a harmonizing present where 'all men are (their) kindred, the world is (their) home' to a decadent past 'of cities whose lustre is shed | The laughter and beauty of women long dead'. Connecting these itinerant communities to the figure of the *flâneur* in decadent history, Vadillo remarks that the 'poem evokes the urban decadence of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), of James Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night* (1880), of Amy Levy's 'A March Day in London' (1889), and of Rosamund Marriott Watson's 'The City of Dreams' (1895)'.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the 'wandering singers' resemble the *flâneur* in their emancipatory unbelonging, but their outsiders' gaze does not attempt to collapse and contain the infinity of the Other as they move from one place to another, making the world their home. Although not explicitly articulated anywhere in the poem, it may be assumed that Naidu's singers belong to the precarious underclass that was forced into migratory existence by changes in land settlement and revenue systems under colonial governance.<sup>50</sup> Pollinating the acquired tropes of decadence with the poignant cadences of marginalized voices, Naidu brings the arts closest to the people, and glorifies them as the real harbingers of change. 'Wandering Singers' claims that the peripheral status of the singers provides them with a penetrating insight into happiness, simplicity, and sorrow ('Our lays are of [...] |

happy and simple and sorrowful things'), which gives nuance to their art and colours their vision of the future:

What hope shall we gather, what dreams shall we sow?  
Where the wind calls our wandering footsteps we go.  
No love bids us tarry, no joy bids us wait:  
The voice of the wind is the voice of our fate.

The poem does not end on a hopeful note of impending liberation, as one would expect of a 'nationalist poem', but instead vacillates between the 'dreams' of dead civilizations and the 'hope' of a forward-dawning futurity. Interestingly, Vadillo quotes a 1918 political address by Naidu at the Kanya Mahavidyalaya in Jullundur, which establishes a direct connection between her poetry and her political speeches:<sup>51</sup>

You have seen in your cities, it is a very common sight in India, the wandering singer with a stick on his shoulder with two bundles tied up on its each end, going from city to city singing songs. I stand before you today as a wandering singer like that with all my possessions carried in my two bundles – one a little bundle of dreams and another growing bundle of hopes. These are the only two things which I have in this world.<sup>52</sup>

In identifying with the wandering singers, Naidu admits to her own yearning for an unsullied past as well as her uncertainty and ambivalence about the future of the Indian Independence Movement. Given its denial of harsh social realities and the economic hardship of migratory workers deprived by colonial policy, one might wonder how a poem like 'Wandering Singers' ends up in school textbooks to this day. However, as I have tried to argue in this article, Naidu's decadent anti-realism aligns so closely with patriotic idealism that it is easy to mistake (or misread) one for the other. And it is precisely this aesthetic overlap between two distinct, and even oppositional, ideologies that challenges Paranjape's dismissal of Naidu as a 'minor figure in a major mode'.<sup>53</sup> Matthew Potolsky writes that

antinationalism [was] central to decadent writing after 1870, arising in a variety of contexts and in many different works. Decadent antinationalism attacks a powerful new conception of political community not, as one might expect, from the perspective of the individual monad but from that of a rival community united by taste rather than origins or geography.<sup>54</sup>

However, unlike Huysmans's *Des Esseintes*, Naidu manages to straddle the line between decadence and nationalism, ironizing her own canonization by both Indian and Western critics, and questioning what political or aesthetic ends such collections might serve.

The diversity of subject-positions that Naidu adopts within *The Golden Threshold* gives her the freedom to be infinite in a Whitmanian sense, proving that decadence and nationalism are not diametrically opposed, but rather mutually constitutive of her anti-colonial poetics. For Naidu, the only way to avoid being someone is to be everyone at once. Even though the collection begins with a sketch of her as a 'precocious, prepubescent Victorian poetess', she immediately rejects the pose of exaggerated Western femininity in favour of a fluid selfhood that manifests as variously as possible and resists invasion and appropriation by the reader's gaze.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps the most brilliant instance of Naidu's ad hoc subjectivity can be found in the short poem, 'Humayun to Zobeida' (translated into English from Urdu), which replicates in content the effusive overtures of Elizabethan sonnets or the French *blazon*:

You flaunt your beauty in the rose, your glory in the dawn  
Your sweetness in the nightingale, your white-ness in the swan.

You haunt my waking like a dream, my slumber like a moon,  
Pervade me like a musky scent, possess me like a tune

Yet, when I crave of you, my sweet, one tender moment's grace,  
You cry, 'I sit behind the veil, I cannot show my face.'

Shall any foolish veil divide my longing from my bliss?  
Shall any fragile curtain hide your beauty from my kiss?

What war is this of Thee and Me? Give o'er the wanton strife,  
You are the heart within my heart, the life within my life.<sup>56</sup>

In this poem, Naidu uses the framework of European decadence to allude to the decadence of Mughal courts – finding in the failure of the erstwhile Mughal Empire a historical parallel for the fall of Rome, and, in its ruins, the inspiration for a decadent poetics of beauty and decay. She equips Humayun, the mighty emperor, with the Oriental rhetoric of European decadence to exalt the beauty of his beloved – and yet, as the poem unfolds, we are slowly made aware of the sexual

motives that underlie his lyric exuberance. Unlike Humayun, whose life and achievements have been exhaustively documented in sprawling volumes of history, Zobeida, the poem's exoticized addressee (and possibly, his secret mistress) does not exist in anywhere in the archival discourses and secondary scholarship on the Mughal Empire. We see Zobeida only through Humayun's eyes, and hear her only through his voice, but the stolid finality of her utterance – 'I sit behind the veil, I cannot show my face' – even when it is refracted through a petulant Humayun, conveys an impression of strength and dignified intransigence. By giving Zobeida a name and imbuing her with an indomitable spirit of resistance, Naidu manages to both deflate the ornamental insincerity of Humayun's verses and draw attention to the historical processes of obscurement that regulate the politics of presence and absence.

Humayun's imperial genealogy sets up an uncanny resemblance between the Mughals and the European colonial empire that craved to 'pervade' and 'possess' the Oriental body politic by means of violent loot and plunder. Interestingly, while Naidu usurps the subject-position of the colonizer vis-à-vis the exoticized Orient, we hear an echo of her *real* voice in Zobeida's response, which, as we have noted earlier, is ventriloquized by the colonizer and probably goes through several layers of distortion and silencing before it reaches our ears. Like Zobeida, who refuses to 'lift her veil' and accede to Humayun's entreaty, Naidu also denies the West an authentic vision of India by recreating, as Paranjape notes, 'the picture of India painted by Anglo-Indian and English writers – a land of bazaars, full of bright colours and perfumes, and peopled with picturesque beggars, wandering minstrels and snake-charmers'.<sup>57</sup> Yet, even though she fails as a social realist, Naidu's tactical idealism presents no obstacle to her assimilation into the role of a nationalist poet.

Zobeida's insistence on hiding her 'face' brings to mind the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and his foundational contribution to the ethics of Otherness. At the heart of Levinasian ethics lies a transformative encounter with the Other, who *faces* the subject directly, accuses and shames him for his complacency, and calls him into responsibility. As the subject reaches out of his corporeal prison and responds to this call, he becomes beholden to the Other, for they facilitate



his Becoming and rescue him from social determinations. The appeal of the Other lies in their irreducible alterity that can neither be fully apprehended, nor reconstituted as per the subject's stipulations. Prior to the ethical encounter – to being elected by the Other – the subject is the sole epistemic custodian of his world that is ordered by *his* consciousness, and the Other is an extension of *his* selfhood, commandeered at will, depending on *his* whims and fancies. Levinas categorically enucleates this egotistical 'I' that represses the Other, or tries to contain the chaotic syntax of their infinity in the syntagmatic and paradigmatic orders of language. The fission of the imagined core of selfhood is triggered by the overwhelming strangeness of the Other's face that judges and commands, and brings the subject to account. In the ideal ethical relation, the subject ceases to evaluate the Other against an arbitrary checklist and allows himself to be confronted by their staggering difference, which cannot be absorbed into his limited, narcissistic vision of the world. The encounter thus reveals to him his own ontological debt to the Other, as his subjectivity derives from the severity of their indictment.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, Levinasian ethics theorizes the prospect of a recuperative interaction between the erstwhile colonizer and the Orient, provided the two remain categorically distinct, as the moment the 'I' of the colonizer tries to seize upon the 'you' of the Other, they cease to be infinite, and slip back into the loop of social indexicality from which there is no escape. However, in the specific context of 'Humayun and Zobeida', the importunate zeal of the speaker to collapse the distinction between 'thee' and 'me', and subsume Zobeida's alterity within the narrow terms of decadent exoticism, immediately forecloses the possibility of an ethical encounter based on love, care, respect, and mutual obligation. Thus, Zobeida sits resolutely 'behind the veil' and does not 'show [her] face', much like Naidu herself, who refused to play into the 'hidden agenda' that Paranjape detects in Gosse's patronizing counsel:

a hidden agenda is evident in the task which Gosse set for Sarojini. His expectation of her for 'some revelation of the heart of India, some sincere penetrating analysis of native passion, of the principles of antique religion and of such mysterious intimations as stirred the soul of the East' betrayed the deep longings of the post-Industrial West for, some area of experience untouched by modernity, unspoiled, pristine, and authentic, in brief, a

longing for its Other. To escape the oppressive and overpowering advance of the machine age seemed to be the compelling challenge before Victorian poetry. The poetic medievalism of the Pre-Raphaelites was one way of meeting the same need as was the search for fresh locales and topics in Browning and Tennyson. In its search of its Other, a convenient place for Europe to look was in its vast colonial spaces. Here, it could find, to its own reckoning, all the savagery, primitivism, irrationality, and mysticism that it had suppressed within itself.<sup>59</sup>

Naidu's poems co-opt this Oriental framework of 'savagery, primitivism, irrationality, and mysticism' with a view to ironizing the terms of Otherness formulated by the West. These poems are 'decadent' insofar as they manipulate the anti-realist objectives of the fin de siècle to carve out an *artificial* image of India – of 'spice and scent | Of rich and passionate memories blent' – but an attentive reading exposes the cracks in its foundation, and alerts us to the elaborate constructedness of both her decadent project and of the national ideal.<sup>60</sup>

Like her ambivalent poetry, Naidu also stands at the 'golden threshold' between nationalism and decadence, 'evok[ing] the decadent movement to construct [her] own literary genealog[y] against the grain of various calls to formulate a national literature'.<sup>61</sup> As I have tried to show in this article, her poems expediently oscillate between a subtle ironization of fin-de-siècle decadence and an optimistic investment in its possibilities, uncovering the potential for alternative poetic modalities within its morass of ideological and structural contradictions. Although later critics have cleansed her reputation by sleight of hand, and misattributed her decadence to feudalism and feminist sentimentalism in ways that have enhanced her eligibility as a nationalist poet, Naidu's decadence was integral to her nationalism. In the context of colonial India, and particularly during the Partition of Bengal in 1905, decadent anti-realism was a tool of anti-colonial nationalism, which makes Naidu's poetry more complex, unique, and intellectual than some of the contemporary scholarship in India would have us believe.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> BA English Honors syllabus, Jadavpur University:

[http://www.jaduniv.edu.in/upload\\_files/dept\\_file/1313490111-1.pdf](http://www.jaduniv.edu.in/upload_files/dept_file/1313490111-1.pdf) [accessed 2 November 2022].

- <sup>3</sup> MA English syllabus, University of Calcutta: <https://www.caluniv.ac.in/cbcs-pg/pg-files/Eng-11-1-19.pdf> [accessed 2 November 2022].
- <sup>4</sup> Elleke Boehmer, *Indian Arrivals 1870–1915: Networks of British Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 13.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 133.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> ‘In a landmark 1923 book *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?*, the conservative leader and revolutionary V. D. Savarkar coined the term Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) to challenge the secular conception of Indian nationhood propounded by Gandhi and Nehru. Pro-Hindutva political activists turned Savarkar’s idea into a mass movement in 1925 by founding the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a paramilitary volunteer organization dedicated to promoting Hindu nationalism. The RSS, which became the fountainhead of the Hindu nationalist movement, rallied support from a network of sister organizations known as the Sangh Parivar’. Niranjan Sahoo, ‘Mounting Majoritarianism and Political Polarization in India’, in *Political Polarization in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. by Thomas Carothers and Andrew O’Donohue, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p. 10. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/08/18/mounting-majoritarianism-and-political-polarization-in-india-pub-82434> [accessed 17 April 2023].
- <sup>9</sup> Sahoo, p. 13.
- <sup>10</sup> Ganesh Devy, ‘NRC: An Idea Turned into a Political Slugfest’, *Deccan Herald*, 10 September 2019. <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/main-article/nrc-an-idea-turned-into-a-political-slugfest-760522.html> [accessed 5 February 2023].
- <sup>11</sup> Elleke Boehmer, ‘East is East: Where Postcolonialism is Neo-orientalist – the Cases of Sarojini Naidu and Arundhati Roy’, in *Stories of Women: Gender and Narration in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 158–72.
- <sup>12</sup> Ramachandra Guha, ‘Choosing the Ten Greatest Indians’, *Hindustan Times*, 8 April 2018. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/columns/choosing-the-10-greatest-indians/story-cNUwGfVx1B6079SWs5JBVM.html> [accessed 16 May 2023].
- <sup>13</sup> Makarand Paranjape, ‘Introduction’, in *Essential Reader: Sarojini Naidu* (Gurgaon: Penguin Random House, 2022), p. xiv
- <sup>14</sup> Paranjape, ‘Introduction’, p. xiii
- <sup>15</sup> Boehmer, *Indian Arrivals*, p. 63.
- <sup>16</sup> K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1985), p. 212.
- <sup>17</sup> Iyengar, p. 225.
- <sup>18</sup> See Boehmer, *Indian Arrivals*, p. 11, where she quotes the historiographer Hayden White: ‘Events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others.’
- <sup>19</sup> Makarand R. Paranjape, *Making India: Colonialism, National Culture, and the Afterlife of Indian English Authority* (New York: Springer, 2003), p. 182.
- <sup>20</sup> Paranjape, *Making India*, p. 184
- <sup>21</sup> Kate Hext and Alex Murray (eds), *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), p. 3.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 5.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 6.
- <sup>25</sup> Mulk Raj Anand et al., ‘Manifesto of the Indian Progressive Writers’ Association, London’, *New Left Review*, February 1936, n.p.
- <sup>26</sup> Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 17.
- <sup>27</sup> Sarojini Naidu, *Selected Letters: 1890s to 1940s*, ed. by Makarand Paranjape (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996), p. 45.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Padmini Sengupta, *Sarojini Naidu: A Biography* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1966), p. 124.
- <sup>30</sup> Boehmer, *Indian Arrivals*, p. 14.
- <sup>31</sup> Edmund Gosse, ‘Introduction’, in Sarojini Naidu, *The Bird of Time: Songs of Life, Death and the Spring* (London, Heinemann, 1912), pp. 1–7 (p. 5).
- <sup>32</sup> In a letter to her soon-to-be husband Govindarajulu Naidu, Sarojini wrote, ‘(e)verybody, of course, here as elsewhere [...] makes a pet of me – you see I am far the youngest and a curiosity – so I shan’t be left long to myself’. See Naidu, *Selected Letters*, p. 30.
- <sup>33</sup> Gosse, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.
- <sup>34</sup> Paranjape, ‘Introduction’, p. xv.
- <sup>35</sup> Boehmer, ‘East is East’, p. 159.
- <sup>36</sup> Sarojini Naidu, *The Golden Threshold*, ed. by Arthur Symons (London: Heinemann, 1905), p. 10.
- <sup>37</sup> Iyengar, p. 215.

- <sup>38</sup> Naidu, 'Alabaster', in *The Golden Threshold*, p. 53.
- <sup>39</sup> Ana Parejo Vadillo, 'Decadent Women Poets: Translingual Thresholds', *Feminist Modernist Studies*, 4.4 (2021), 1-20 (p. 8).
- <sup>40</sup> Paranjape, *Making India*, p. 173.
- <sup>41</sup> Naidu, 'The Snake Charmer', in *The Golden Threshold*, p. 33.
- <sup>42</sup> 'Keats was more than a decadent, but he was a decadent, and such a line as "One faint eternal eventide of gems", might have been written, in jewelled French, by Mallarmé [...]. Keats, at a time when the phrase had not yet been invented, practised the theory of art for art's sake. He is the type not of the poet, but of the artist'. Arthur Symons, *The Romantic Movement in English Poetry* (New York: Dutton, 1909), pp. 305-06.
- <sup>43</sup> Paranjape, *Making India*, p. 182.
- <sup>44</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 'Partition Proclamation and Swadeshi Movement: Public Meetings', 30 October 1905, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, British Library, London.
- <sup>45</sup> *Bengalee*, 'Notes on Capital', 1 September 1905, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, British Library, London.
- <sup>46</sup> Paranjape, *Making India*, p. 182.
- <sup>47</sup> Sengupta, *Sarojini Naidu*, p. 44.
- <sup>48</sup> Naidu, 'Wandering Singers', in *The Golden Threshold*, p. 2.
- <sup>49</sup> Vadillo, p. 12.
- <sup>50</sup> Anand A. Yang, 'Peasants on the Move: A Study of Internal Migration in India', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 10.1 (1979), 37-58.
- <sup>51</sup> 'Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Jalandhar, [was] one of the first girls' schools in the Punjab, which developed into a college and served as a model for women's institutions not only in the Punjab but in many other provinces as well'. Madhu Kishwar, 'Arya Samaj and Women's Education: Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Jalandhar', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12.1 (1986), 9. <https://www.epw.in/journal/1986/17/review-womens-studies-review-issues-specials/arya-samaj-and-women-s-education-kanya#> [accessed 16 May 2023].
- <sup>52</sup> See Vadillo, p. 13.
- <sup>53</sup> Paranjape, 'Introduction', p. xv.
- <sup>54</sup> Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 71.
- <sup>55</sup> Sheshalatha Reddy, 'The Cosmopolitan Nationalism of Sarojini Naidu, the Nightingale of India', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 38.2 (2010), 571-89 (p. 571).
- <sup>56</sup> Naidu, 'Humayun to Zobeida', in *The Golden Threshold*, p. 50.
- <sup>57</sup> Paranjape, *Making India*, p. 179.
- <sup>58</sup> Emanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond the Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Norwell: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991).
- <sup>59</sup> Paranjape, *Making India*, p. 179.
- <sup>60</sup> Naidu, 'Alabaster', in *The Golden Threshold*, p. 53.
- <sup>61</sup> Stilling, p. 17.

# The End of Great Periods: Late Ottoman Decadent Poetry and the End of the Ottoman Empire

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This article examines late Ottoman Decadence through the 1910 *Fecr-i Atı* [Dawn of the Future] manifesto and the literary criticism of its most famous signatory, Ahmet Haşim (1887-1933). Through this case study, I explore what Kristin Mahoney has called the ‘political utility of decadence’ within the Ottoman-Turkish sphere.<sup>1</sup> Haşim’s writing across the Ottoman Empire-Turkish Republic divide illustrates the ways in which the aesthetic practices and linguistic register of Ottoman poetry were increasingly understood in the final decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as displaying the markers of literary greatness from a previous social order, ones which impeded the development of a uniquely Turkish national literature. In other words, for certain literary critics, deploying the aesthetic practices of Ottoman poetry became linked to a specifically Ottoman imperial decline and, consequently, also became shorthand for implying the connection between certain aesthetic practices and Turkey’s political progress in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Through the focus on Haşim, what becomes clear is the way that a pervasive discussion of decadent aesthetics is symptomatic of Ottoman literary decline, and later Turkish literary belatedness vis-à-vis Europe is also connected with disparate – and at the time diametrically opposed – positions in the debate on the modernization and reform of Ottoman-Turkish literature. As one of the potential avenues for the renewal of Ottoman letters, decadent aesthetics came under attack in the late nineteenth century but continued to thrive as an aesthetic practice well after the establishment of the Republic in 1923. However, Ottoman-Turkish poets who were denounced as decadents, *and* their detractors, are both explicit in their critical writing about the cultural traffic between Ottoman-Turkish and Western ideas and writers. Therefore, the conversation in the Ottoman-Turkish sphere is not about whether or not to engage with Western

literary traditions, but rather which specific Western literary traditions are appropriate to engage with and in what manner should they be engaged with in order to renew Turkish letters.

This article explores how a sense of literary decline in relation to Europe led to the embrace of decadent aesthetics and a motivation by certain poets to modernize poetry that existed separately from the trends of realism, vernacularization, and utility that ultimately came to define Turkish nationalist literature. The concept of ‘decadence’, as it was put to cultural work across the Empire-Republic divide, is a particularly important touchstone for examining alternatives to the prevailing version of Turkish literary history. Focusing both on the historical literary-critical conversations which put forward a definition of Ottoman decadent literature, an exploration of decadence as a literary critical term in Turkey reveals the ways in which the conversation around decadence becomes a coded discussion around the idealized participation of Turkey within international power structures that underwent substantial change during the period under study.

### **Decadence, Decline, and the Fall of the Ottoman Empire**

Decadence has long been connected to a sense of the end or decline of empire. As Regenia Gagnier has claimed, ‘Modern decadence arose with empire and nation-states’.<sup>2</sup> As the ‘sick man of Europe’ discourse attests, in many ways the Ottoman Empire was the empire in decline *par excellence* at the end of the nineteenth century. While this perception of decline was deeply connected to the Orientalist representations of contemporary European observers, the sense of Ottoman imperial decline also has a long tradition within Ottoman historiographical practices.<sup>3</sup> The confluence of this local historiographical practice alongside those by European Orientalist outsiders has become known as the ‘Ottoman Decline Paradigm’, which suggested that the empire had been in decline since a golden age in the sixteenth century.<sup>4</sup> This perception of waning Ottoman imperial power on the global stage in the late nineteenth century precipitated a series of Westernizing reforms in the empire, which encompassed nearly every aspect of life, from legal, military, and educational reforms, extending even into the realm of literature.<sup>5</sup> Known as the Tanzimat, a term meaning

reorganization, these reform processes were initiated in 1839 and ended with the promulgation of the first Ottoman constitution in 1876. Baki Tezcan has argued that Ottoman historiography produced in the Tanzimat era asserted that the previous Ottoman regime was ‘irredeemably corrupt and had been in decay since the sixteenth century’.<sup>6</sup>

This local use of the decline paradigm to fuel the modernizing reform of the Empire has had lasting implications on how both Ottoman imperialism and the modern have been understood in Turkey. The fact of Ottoman imperialism is frequently downplayed in scholarly literature in favour of teleologies that emphasize the late Ottoman Empire as a period of increasing Turkish national development. Christine Philiou has discussed this phenomenon as the ‘absent nineteenth century’ in Ottoman historiography, suggesting that ‘suddenly we look *back*, from the Turkish nation-state’, a shift which makes it difficult to confront ‘our deep assumptions about teleological change and normative economic and political development, to see other trajectories that may have existed’.<sup>7</sup> Arif Camoğlu has described this tendency of literary scholars to read late Ottoman writers as setting the stage for the subsequent nationalist reform projects as ‘an ideological practice of inclusive exclusion whereby these Ottoman Turkish authors are admitted to the literature of the nation through the denial of the imperial affiliations’.<sup>8</sup> Particularly in Anglophone scholarship on Ottoman-Turkish literature, the late Ottoman imperial state is generally portrayed as the historical precondition for the rise of a specifically Turkish nationalism.<sup>9</sup>

Literary criticism from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries took a similar stance toward the Ottoman literary tradition. In the literary sphere, this sense of decline has long been applied to the *divan*, or Ottoman poetic tradition. In parallel to the historical rise and fall of the empire itself, scholarly work on Ottoman literature also emphasizes a golden age of poetry in the sixteenth century which gradually falls into creative stagnation until the reform programmes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>10</sup> While both the Ottoman and the specifically literary decline paradigms have been productively challenged in recent years, I am interested here in the pervasive sense, by no means unique to the Ottomans, that good literature is the literature

of a state with a strong political system.<sup>11</sup> In the late Ottoman Empire, this sense of political decline also corresponded with a sense of literary decline in the European literary sphere. This led to pervasive debates over how and in what ways literature should be reformed. While authors disagreed over the nature of this reformed literature's aesthetic practices, they were largely in agreement that a renewed Ottoman literature would allow the Ottomans to re-assert their cultural importance on the world stage and ultimately reclaim imperial superiority from Europe.

In this account, literature in general, but especially the novel, was envisioned as a vehicle to inculcate readers with a modernity that became increasingly coded as Western during the *fin de siècle*.<sup>12</sup> Historically, the rise of the Ottoman-Turkish novel has been associated with the reform processes of the *Tanzimat*, and scholars have emphasized the ways in which literature from this period advocates for increased rationality, realism, and simplification or vernacularization of literary language.<sup>13</sup> For many years, the writing of late Ottoman literary history has centred around Ottoman modernization, which has valorized the aesthetic and formal literary practices that advocate for modernization-as-Westernization at the expense of other aesthetic developments happening concurrently.

The rise of a decadent aesthetic practice within the Ottoman literary sphere is deeply connected to these Westernizing reform processes. This places the Ottoman conversation on decadence squarely within an imperial framework, but with connotations of imperialism that are distinctly different from the settler colonialist experience of Anglo-European empires. The Ottoman Empire's position as an expansionist empire and the Turkish Republic's stance as a nation pursuing a kind of modernity-as-self-decolonization in the twentieth century places it in a globally unique position, one which troubles the binary account of colonized and colonizer structuring much postcolonial literary inquiry.<sup>14</sup> As Cemal Kafadar notes, decline is not only a matter of perception; it can also be a matter of position-taking. This idea is particularly intriguing in the case of late Ottoman poetry. As Ayşe Zarakol has explored, the concepts of decline and its binary opposite, greatness, exist not only in reference to ideas of political power and material



domination. Greatness is, as she argues, ‘about manifesting certain symbolic markers’, while decline is ‘about not displaying the correct symbolic markers or displaying the markers of greatness from a previous social order as another is coming into being’.<sup>15</sup> The late Ottoman Empire, particularly in the years surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, was very much a period in which an old social order was being dismantled and another was coming into existence.

At the same time, the ‘correct symbolic markers’ used to display sovereignty became increasingly national across the first two decades of the twentieth century, not only for the Ottoman Empire, but globally. The Empire experienced the rise of an ethnic Turkish nationalism, as opposed to the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional identities which had previously characterized it.<sup>16</sup> In other words, ethnically homogenous nation-states based on the Westphalian model increasingly became a symbol of sovereignty in the national order, while heterogenous, multi-ethnic empires, particularly those outside Europe, were increasingly described as declining state formations. This increased focus on the nation and ethnic nationalism as the new symbolic order was also true in literature. The symbolic markers – including the language, metaphors, forms, and themes – of the Ottoman Divan tradition became increasingly stigmatized in favour of literature which signalled its participation in the reform and modernization efforts.<sup>17</sup> The associations of Ottoman Divan poetry with imperial decline meant that the aesthetic practices, themes, and vocabulary of this imperial poetry became an important repository from which Ottoman-Turkish poets who eschewed the idea of literature’s participation in these reform processes could draw.

### **Ahmet Haşim and the Question of Decadence**

Poet Ahmet Haşim was born in Ottoman-controlled Baghdad in 1887.<sup>18</sup> His father was part of the Ottoman administration there, and his mother died when Haşim was very young, a loss which animates much of his poetry. He received an early education in Ottoman letters, including instruction in Arabic and Persian, languages whose vocabulary and grammatical structures made

up a substantial part of Ottoman literature at the end of the nineteenth century. After moving to Istanbul following the death of his mother, he attended the famous *Mekteb-i Sultanî*, known today as Galatasaray Lycée, a high school which was responsible for the education of many Turkish writers and intellectuals in the late Ottoman Era, including poet Tevfik Fikret and novelist Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu. Crucially, the school provided instruction in French language and literature, which is where Haşim first discovered the Symbolist movement and the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé in particular. In addition to his poetic career, Haşim was also a prolific columnist for newspapers and periodicals such as *Dergah*, *İkdam*, and *Akşam*, among others, with his critical writing far outstripping his poetic output.<sup>19</sup> Despite being known primarily as a poet, he published only two collections of poetry during his lifetime: *Göl Saatleri* [*Hours of the Lake*], published in 1921 and *Piyale* [*The Wine Chalice*] in 1926. Additionally, he also held a post in the Ottoman Public Debt Administration, a position which ultimately allowed him to travel to Paris where he published a history of Turkish literature in the *Mercure de France*, an influential journal of the Symbolist movement.

Haşim's first association with decadence comes with his participation in the *Fecr-i Ati* group.<sup>20</sup> In 1910 this group of poets and novelists published a manifesto in the *Servet-i Fünûn* journal. Signed by Haşim, Refik Halit Karay, and Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, among other famous Turkish writers, the *Fecr-i Ati* statement is considered the first manifesto published in the Empire. If we examine both the *Fecr-i Ati* manifesto and Haşim's later literary criticism, the idea of decadent aesthetics as a relational negotiation between empires looms large. Indeed, one of the crucial aspects of the Manifesto relates to the ways in which the *Fecr-i Ati* group align themselves in relation to European poets. The manifesto declares: "The members of Dawn of the Future will work to represent and proclaim themselves a small exemplar to their contemporary European peers in the expectation of being an emerald bower within this literary wasteland."<sup>21</sup> The positioning of the *Fecr-i Ati* highlights their relationship as equals and colleagues to their European contemporaries, while their representation of the Ottoman literary sphere as a 'wasteland' suggests

that they view themselves as peerless within the Empire. Following this statement, the manifesto ends not only with a proclamation that they will translate the ideas of the West for the East, but that they will also serve as a conduit for dispersing the developments of Ottoman literature to the West.

The 1910 manifesto is both a response to a perceived sense of European civilizational and literary superiority and a call for Ottoman poets to re-assert their own identity through a specifically Ottoman type of poetry while projecting that poetry on the world stage. The signatories of the manifesto use noticeably decadent ideas (i.e., the ‘emerald bowers’) to articulate the relationship between Ottoman and European literature. Examining these documents reveals that decadent aesthetics were one of the tools Ottoman authors used to preserve a distinctly Ottoman literary power at home while advocating for the dissemination of that literature to decadent literary networks in Europe in order to project their literary vision beyond imperial boundaries in the final years of Empire and the early years of the Republic. Part of this projection of poetic vision beyond the Empire was meant to re-assert Ottoman literary power on the global (but still primarily European) literary stage. Decadent aesthetic practices thus become part of late Ottoman literature’s participation in the competing states narrative.

These ideas also circulate in Haşim’s seminal essay of literary criticism, ‘Şiir Hakkında Bazı Mülâhazalar’ [‘Some Thoughts About Poetry’]. Although this work is best known as the introduction to the second edition of *Piyale*, published in 1928, the essay was originally published in the journal *Dergâh*’s inaugural issue in 1921. The essay works to delineate what is good poetry, advocating for a mystical understanding of poetry as ‘a sacred and nameless source, buried within nights of mystery and the unknown outside the fields of perception’.<sup>22</sup> It calls for a re-enchantment of poetry connected to the symbolic register of the Ottoman Divan tradition. Haşim configures this understanding of poetry as arising out of a debate in late Ottoman literary culture, in which his poem ‘Desire at the end of the day’ was ‘considered by some people to be more cryptic than

necessary', therefore sparking a debate about meaning and clarity within poetic expression, to which Haşim's essay is a response.

For Haşim, the emphasis literary reformers placed on clarity and accessibility undermined the essential nature of poetry and was a fundamental misunderstanding of the difference between literary genres. He argues that 'a poet's language exists not in order to explain like prose, but to almost evoke sensations, it is a language between music and words'.<sup>23</sup> Haşim goes on to argue that prose is the realm of 'reason and logic', associating prose with the literary currents which aimed to represent modernity and through that representation bring about modernity in late Ottoman society. In contrast to this, he argues that 'the unknown outside the fields of perception, which on occasion reflects the light of enlightened waters onto the horizons of our perception'.<sup>24</sup> His use of image and metaphorical language here not only resonates with the language of European critics of decadent and Symbolist poetry such as Arthur Symons and Walter Pater, but it also evokes the themes and imagery of the Ottoman Divan tradition. Referring to the 'gardens of poetry' and suggesting that poetry is 'like a rose in the night', Haşim draws on the metaphoric tradition of the Ottoman Divan to argue for poetry's autonomy from the currents of literary rationality, clarity, and modernization that were advocated by his contemporaries.<sup>25</sup> As prose writing, particularly the novel, became increasingly associated with Turkish national literature in the early twentieth century, these statements can also be understood as Haşim's desire to recuperate poetic practices in the face of nationalist encroachment.

Haşim's use of writer and theologian Abbé Henri Bremond's contributions to debates regarding 'pure poetry' that occurred in France illustrates how Ottoman authors drew on European poetry and criticism to affiliate themselves with European decadent networks. This debate about pure poetry, which Haşim says occurred 'a few months ago', essentially aligns with his larger arguments about poetry, which is that 'poetry's magical effects' are undercut by including the 'judgement, logic, rhetoric, coherence, analysis' which is typical of prose.<sup>26</sup> On the surface this seems fairly straightforward: Haşim is presenting recent critical developments in France to Turkish

readers and reflecting upon how European insights into literature can be applicable in the late Ottoman context. Yet, on closer examination, it becomes clear that Haşim presents the debate regarding poetry's meaning and clarity in Ottoman letters as temporally prior to the same debate in France. In other words, this is not a debate that Haşim learned about through his reading of French sources and imported into the Turkish-Ottoman context, but rather he is using a French debate to illuminate ongoing discussions germane to Ottoman poetry. As such, he reaches out to European literary criticism not to insist upon the belatedness or decline of Ottoman-Turkish poetry, but rather to demonstrate the temporal coequality of the Ottoman and European literary debates, thus positioning Ottoman poetry as both contemporary to and equal with its literary counterparts.

Haşim also addresses poetry, specifically the work of Mallarmé, in 'Sembolizmin Kıymetleri' ['The Value of Symbolism'], published in the newspaper *Hayat* on 26 May 1927. In the article, Haşim claims that 'the poet, who has no relation to the author [of novels] who is active in recording the circumstances of his time, is apart from time and location'.<sup>27</sup> This understanding of the poet as divorced from the specificities of time and space flies in the face of the nationalist movements in Turkish literature, which were highly invested in the creation of a uniquely Turkish literary form. The literary critical discussions surrounding Turkish nationalist literature emphasized realist literary aesthetics as a means of creating a literature unique to Turkey in the twentieth century. By claiming a timelessness for poetry and the poet, Haşim rejects the idea that poetry should participate in the temporal and location-bound representative practices of realist novels valorized by the government-sponsored literary reforms.

Despite his clear admiration for Mallarmé, Haşim also argues that Mallarmé's innovative force was not quite as new as many understood it: 'Nevertheless, the value that Mallarmé gave to the symbol was not entirely a new artistic principle. All of Egypt, Phoenician, Greece, all of eastern and western poetry had "symbols" centuries before Mallarmé'.<sup>28</sup> This assertion critiques the idea of European poetic primacy, dispelling the idea that Symbolism originated in France and dispersed

elsewhere across the globe. It also establishes a parallel between the two literary traditions, suggesting that they share a history of poetic use of the symbol long before the movement known as Symbolism in Europe. We also see how Haşim's understanding of Symbolism and decadent poetry are thus grounded in and read through the lens of his early education in Arabic and Persian literature, a training which would have allowed him to access the symbolic register of an older, Eastern poetic tradition. In turn, his extensive engagement with European Symbolist poetry leads him to reflect not only on the Ottoman Divan tradition, but also on how that tradition is being put to work in the early Turkish Republic.

Haşim's literary criticism in French makes Ottoman-Turkish literary developments visible to Western readers. In 1924, Haşim published 'Les Tendances actuelles de la Littérature turque' ['Recent Developments in Turkish Literature'] in the *Mercure de France*.<sup>29</sup> While the history of the journal goes back to the seventeenth century, by the early twentieth century, the *Mercure* had established itself as a prominent journal affiliated with the Symbolist movement, publishing the work of Mallarmé, André Gide, and Guillaume Apollinaire. In Haşim's article, he outlines a history of Turkish literature since the Tanzimat era, a period of modernizing and Westernizing reform that predated the establishment of the Turkish Republic. In his effort to make the development of Turkish literature legible to a Francophone readership, he links Turkish authors to their French and European counterparts, suggesting, for example, that poet Tevfik Fikret is similar to François Coppée for introducing enjambment and prose verse forms and novelist Halit Ziya resembles Mallarmé in his development of Symbolism.<sup>30</sup> Yet what is compelling about this practice is the distinction Haşim makes between imitation and reading one literary practitioner as similar to another in order to make the history of Turkish literature understandable to those writing in France. In the article he denounces the *Edebiyat-i Cedide* movement which emerged around 1890, saying that it is 'd'imitation européenne' [an imitation of European literature], accusing them of writing in a French grammar but with Turkish words and of modernizing literature through 'a tendency towards Francization'.<sup>31</sup>

In Haşim's literary criticism we see the development of literary decadence as an aesthetic and a literary-critical practice becoming the centre of a complex and multi-layered process of making French poetry known to Turkish readers, Turkish poetry known to French readers, and establishing a parallel between the two literary traditions without asserting European literary primacy over Ottoman letters. Yet, to understand Haşim's legacy and the reception and status of his work within Turkish literary history, we need to understand the long history of the debate on decadence in the Ottoman Empire.

### **Ottoman Decadence and 'Dekadanlar Tartışması'**

The literary sphere in the late Ottoman Empire had a strong tradition of discussing and debating decadence as a negative quality. The most prominent of these statements against decadence is novelist and public intellectual Ahmet Midhat Efendi's well known attack on decadence in the 'Dekadanlar Tartışması', or decadence controversy, of 1897-1900.<sup>32</sup> The debate was initiated by the publication of Midhat's article 'Dekedanlar' in the newspaper *Sabah* in March 1897. Centring around poetry published in the *Servet-i Fünun* journal, the decadence controversy helped to shape debates regarding the proper avenue for modernization and reform of Turkish literature, raising questions about the old versus the new, local versus foreign literary production, and what was national or authentic.<sup>33</sup> For the purposes of this article, I focus on one of the pillars of Midhat's attack on decadent literature: its adoption of a language artificially influenced by Arabic, Persian, and French, as well as its use of Divan poetic imagery.

By famously claiming that it is 'necessary to read in Turkish but think in French' in order to understand poetry published in the *Servet-i Fünun* journal, Midhat rejected the linguistic cosmopolitanism of Ottoman decadent poetry.<sup>34</sup> As an advocate for the reform of the Ottoman language, Midhat's own literary work emphasized a simplified language system and vernacularization that centred around Turkification of a language that had historically borrowed extensively from Arabic and Persian vocabularies and grammatical structures.<sup>35</sup> Ottoman decadent

poetry, as represented by the *Servet-i Funiin*, through its reliance on loan words and grammatical constructions from Arabic, Persian, and French, as well as its desire to reanimate the symbolic register of the Ottoman Divan tradition, declared itself as connected to the imperial tradition as opposed to Midhat's Turkification.

Decadent literature has often been described, in Regenia Gagnier's words, as 'literatures perceived, or self-nominated, [...] designat[ing] a temporal category of the decline away from established norms', and this is what makes the decadent poetry of the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century so interesting.<sup>36</sup> Not only was the idea of an 'established norm' for Ottoman literature entirely in flux, but in contrast to the realist and moralist literary style that Midhat both advocates and writes in, what he terms 'decadent' is closer to the 'norms' of the Ottoman poetic register in its revitalization of imagery, syntax, vocabulary, and form. In Midhat's account, decadent poetry is figured explicitly as a literature of a failing empire. In contrast, the literary currents which emphasized rationality, vernacular language, and secularization are literary qualities which have been associated with an explicitly Turkish national identity.

While the decadence controversy peaked in the late nineteenth century, decadent aesthetic practices, as we have seen in the writing of Haşim, continued to animate one branch of the search for a new Ottoman, and later Turkish, poetry. In this sense, it served a political function to advocate not only for the continued importance of the Ottoman poetic register, but it also put forward ideals of poetic cosmopolitanism, artistic autonomy, and imperial identity, in the face of increasingly nationalist currents that were gaining political and literary ground in the Empire. In the decadence controversy, two opposing views of how literature should function in society are posited: that literature should be didactic, useful, morally instructive, and expository in its explanations of modernity, and that literature should exist as an end in and of itself. As is exemplified by the *Servet-i Funiin* poets and *Fecr-i Ati* group that came after them, this call for aesthetic autonomy was a rejection of the explicitly modernizing function of literature. Within these opposing understandings there are also disparate understandings of the role of Empire. In



didactic literature, language and literacy are tools to be manipulated for the personal financial and moral success of the characters, which is often an allegory for imperial or national success.<sup>37</sup> However, in the version which advocates for aesthetic autonomy, as we see with the poetry of Haşim, empire is a repository from which archaic forms can be drawn. The later signatories of the *Fecr-i Ati* manifesto drew on this legacy in advocating for an increased connection between European and Ottoman literatures.

The kind of literary-critical didacticism exemplified by Midhat has its parallels in the Republican-era understanding of late Ottoman political culture. As Tezcan has noted, these texts reveal ‘a strong belief that opposition to the New Order and its Tanzimat could only be of a reactionary nature. The underlying assumption here is that the New Order is an instrument for reaching contemporary civilization.’<sup>38</sup> As we can see from Midhat’s writing on decadence, decadent literary practices associated with the use of Arabic and Persian loan-words as well as Ottoman aesthetic practices, were seen to undermine literature’s ability to help construct the New Order and impeded the Empire in reaching the perceived levels of contemporary European civilization.

### **The Reception of Decadence and the Turkish Literary Critical Tradition**

Haşim never claimed the title of ‘decadent’. Yet, his friend and contemporary Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, who penned a short biographical elegy of Haşim published a year after Haşim’s death in 1933, suggests that the larger cultural understanding of his writing was that of ‘Haşim *symbolist*; Haşim *Parnassian*; Haşim *Mallarmé-ian*’.<sup>39</sup> While Kadri ultimately disagrees with those characterizations, his assessment of Haşim is one that calls into question Haşim’s commitment to the Turkish national programme, both literary and political. Kadri indicates that Haşim ‘was not a man who believed in nationalist principles’, while also asserting that because he was from a Baghdadi family ‘he was considered to be part of the Arab race’.<sup>40</sup> These statements distance Haşim ethnically and politically from the Turkish nationalist project, casting him as an outsider to the nation. While to grow up in the provinces such as Baghdad was evidence of one’s imperial

cosmopolitanism, to be part of the Arab race in the Turkish Republic was to be excluded from national identity projects that enshrined ethnic Turkishness as the essential component of the new nation's identity.

However this assessment is contradicted by Kadri's claim that Haşim was 'spiritually and mentally a pure Turk [...] a child of Istanbul'.<sup>41</sup> It is particularly interesting to consider exactly what kind of Turk he regards Haşim to be, in that Kadri positions Haşim's version of Turkishness as fundamentally Ottoman: 'Haşim was not Turkish literature's first Baghdadi poet. As far as Fuzuli and Ruhi were Turkish, Ahmet Haşim was also equally Turkish.'<sup>42</sup> Here Kadri refers to two sixteenth-century Divan poets who both had connections to Baghdad and who also wrote in Turkish in addition to Persian and Arabic: Fuzuli (c. 1494-1566) and Ruhi (d. 1605).

Particularly in the case of Fuzuli, the critical reception of Ottoman poetry in the Tanzimat and early Turkish Republic was largely one of rejection. In *Mukaddime-i Celal*, Namık Kemal, an Ottoman statesman and author, identifies Fuzuli's *The Epic of Leyla and Mecnun* as evidence of the degradation of the Ottoman poetic tradition. In this article he attacks Ottoman Divan poetry, claiming that 'narratives such as *Hüsn-ü Aşk* and *Leyla and Mecnun*, they each have the characteristics of a mystical tract, given their subject matter and mode of composition'.<sup>43</sup> This mystical strand in Divan poetry, Namık Kemal argues, means that it is

based on subjects that lie altogether outside the realm of nature and reality [...] and since they are devoid of all literary requirements such as the depiction of morals, explanation of customs and description of feelings, they are not novels but pertain to the genre of old hags' tales.<sup>44</sup>

Kemal's rhetoric highlights yet again how, in late Ottoman literary criticism, literary quality was often synonymous with literature's ability to instruct. Kadri might have been connecting Haşim to a longstanding tradition of Turkish-Baghdadi poets. Yet within the general critical backlash against the Ottoman poetic tradition during the Tanzimat era, as seen in both Midhat's decadence controversy and Kemal's denunciation of Fuzuli's Divan, this raises questions about

Karaosmanoğlu's intent behind insisting upon the connection between Haşim and the earlier Baghdadi poets.

We can see echoes of both Kadri's assessment and Tanzimat-era influence on literary criticism written about Haşim from the mid-century, particularly in a critical rhetoric surrounding Haşim's use of language. Asım Bezirci claims that the language of Haşim's early poetry is 'heavy and bombastic', in that 'the number of foreign words many times exceeds that of the Turkish words. Prepositional phrases are put together according to the rules of Persian and weigh heavily. There are too few verbs, too many adjectives.'<sup>45</sup> This exact critique is repeated verbatim in relation to Haşim's 1926 collection *Piyale* later in the same book. This insistence that Haşim's language is not purely Turkish – including Bezirci's tally of Turkish versus Persian words – echoes Midhat's earlier injunctions against the use of non-Turkish words in poetry and his consequent dismissal of such poetry as decadent. Here again we see how a poet displaying the linguistic and aesthetic register of an earlier social order results in a critical dismissal in that, for Bezirci and other critics, the use of Persian vocabulary and grammar renders Haşim's identity as a Turkish poet suspect. Yaşar Nabi has also suggested that Haşim drew from both Arabic and Persian sources, yet goes one step further in arguing that by doing so Haşim 'remained always foreign'.<sup>46</sup> Consequently, according to Nabi, Haşim was not part of the national literature [Milli Edebiyat] movements.<sup>47</sup>

In this sense both Nabi and Bezirci insist upon Haşim's essential Ottomanness as opposed to Turkishness. Not only does he use non-Turkish language, but that language distances him from the very people that art and literature were supposed to address in the Turkish national literary movement. Bezirci stresses the difficulty of Haşim's language, especially to contemporary ears, arguing that it 'appeals not to the people, but to the *havas*, the highest strata, to intellectuals'.<sup>48</sup> At the time Bezirci was writing, to appeal to intellectuals at the expense of the people went against the nationalist injunctions to take art and literature 'halka doğru', or to the people.<sup>49</sup> These things in conjunction with an insistence on him being referred to as 'Arab Haşim', make clear his mid-century reception was also one which distanced him from nationalist movements and identities.

To put another kind of nail in the coffin of Haşim's poetic greatness, Bezirci claims:

In all of the poems there is an air of sorrow, of pessimism. [...] Anxiety, desolation, desperation, grievance at being alone, searching for the mother, waiting for the beloved, yearning for love and a desire to die are main themes. The influence of the *Servet-i Fünun* is visible.<sup>50</sup>

This emphasis on the mood of Haşim's poetry alongside the statement of *Servet-i Fünun*'s influence is a clear and critical insistence on the essential decadence of his poetry. At the same time, 'waiting for the beloved' is a consistent theme within Ottoman Divan poetry.<sup>51</sup> Yet again we see criticism that insists upon Haşim's essential Ottomanness: he is foreign (i.e., of the Empire, not actually Turkish); he does not participate in National Literature movements; he uses the imagery and themes of Divan poets; he uses the multiple languages and grammars of Empire; and he is influenced by one of the most famous decadent movements in Turkish literary history, the *Servet-i Fünun*. As we can see here, Republican-era literary critics in Turkey have relied heavily on the central assumptions of Tanzimat-era literary critics, particularly those published by the novelist and ideologue Midhat, in the evaluation not only of literary decadence, but of Turkish literature as a whole.

## Conclusions

Focusing on the aesthetic practices of a later cohort of writers brings into sharp distinction the political stakes of decadence across the Empire-Republic divide in Turkey. In particular, literary decadence in poetry was defined contra the emerging nationalist literary tradition. As such, it was seen to undermine the nationalist re-assertion of Ottoman-Turkish literary power on the global literary stage in ways that were directly connected to the projection of Turkish political power. Yet, as articulated in Haşim's critical writing, decadent aesthetic practices were still deeply invested in bilateral cultural exchange with similar literary movements in Europe while simultaneously reanimating the thematic and linguistic register of an earlier imperial tradition. This highlights a key understanding of the role decadence plays in the connection between the Ottoman Empire

and Europe as a conduit for literary relations. We have ample scholarly evidence that Ottoman authors, such as Midhat, saw their original writing as an act of making Western ideas legible to Ottoman readers and played a significant role in the development of Ottoman-Turkish literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, what is less obvious and revealed by Ottoman decadence, are the ways in which Ottoman poets worked to make their poetics and literary development legible to European audiences. Focusing on both sides of the equation, we can understand the crucial role of not only decadent literature, but decadent literary criticism, within inter-imperial relations.

Returning to the questions that animated this journal issue's focus on decolonizing decadence, Ottoman-Turkish literary decadence has an unusual relationship with predominantly Western myths of progress and modernization. On the one hand, it can be seen as a reaction against the aesthetic practices of Turkish literary nationalism which equated realist literature with modernity and progress according to the Western model. On the other, Ottoman-Turkish decadence also engaged European aesthetic practices in order to assert a different narrative of Turkish literary development, emphasizing the parity and fundamental exchange of literary relations between Europe and Turkey. The reliance of decadent aesthetics on the linguistic and thematic registers of the Ottoman imperial Divan tradition means that its connections to imperialism came to be seen as 'manifesting' the symbolic markers of the previous, imperial social order at the same time the national social order was taking shape. Furthermore, the state-sponsored promulgation of Westernizing reform processes that spanned the Empire-Republic divide highlights that anti-Western political movements did not always go hand-in-hand with processes of nationalization as they did in other decolonial movements across the globe. As literary scholarship on Ottoman-Turkish literature continues to grapple with the unique status of Ottoman imperialism as existing simultaneously as an empire with colonial holdings, such as the Baghdad of Haşim's youth, and as a political entity that was encroached upon by European imperial expansion,

we can begin to tease out the larger implications of Ottoman decadence's reliance upon the imperial tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> Kristin Mahoney, 'Taking Wilde to Sri Lanka and Beardsley to Harlem: Decadent Practice, Race, and Orientalism', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 49.4 (2021), 583-606 (p. 590).

<sup>2</sup> Regenia Gagnier, 'The Geopolitics of Decadence', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 49.4 (2021), 607-20 (p. 609).

<sup>3</sup> For more on this see Donald Quataert, 'Ottoman History Writing and Changing Attitudes towards the Notion of "Decline"', *History Compass*, 1 (2003), 1-9; Jane Hathaway, 'Problems of Periodization in Ottoman History: The Fifteenth through the Eighteenth Centuries', *The Turkish Studies Association Bulletin*, 20.2 (1996), 25-31; Alp Eren Topal, 'Against Influence: Ziya Gökalp in Context and Tradition', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 28.3 (2017), 283-310; Ayşe Zarakol, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); and Baki Tezcan, 'Lost in Historiography: An Essay on the Reasons for the Absence of a History of Limited Government in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 45.3 (2009), 477-505.

<sup>4</sup> The decline paradigm is summarized in Quataert, 'Ottoman History Writing', and Bernard Lewis, 'Some Reflections on the Decline of the Ottoman Empire', *Studia Islamica*, 9 (1958), 111-27.

<sup>5</sup> See Erik Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Tezcan, 'Lost in Historiography', p. 478.

<sup>7</sup> Christine Philliou, 'The Ottoman Empire's Absent Nineteenth Century: Autonomous Subjects', in *Untold Histories of the Middle East: Recovering Voices from the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. by Amy Singer, Christoph Neumann, and Selcuk Aksin Somel (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 143-58 (p. 143).

<sup>8</sup> Arif Camoğlu, 'Inter-imperial Dimensions of Turkish Literary Modernity', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 64.3 (2018), 413-57 (p. 449).

<sup>9</sup> Texts on Turkish literature that situate the rise of the Turkish novel within the late Ottoman Empire include Ahmet O. Evin, *The Origin and Development of the Turkish Novel* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1983), and Azade Seyhan, *Tales of Crossed Destinies: The Modern Turkish Novel in Comparative Context* (New York: Modern Language Association, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> See Victoria Holbrook, *The Unreadable Shores of Love: Turkish Modernity and Mystic Romance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> For work that challenges the idea of stagnation in the Ottoman literary sphere, see M. Kayahan Özgül, *Dîvan yolu'ndan Pera'ya selâmetle: modern Türk şiirine doğru* (Ankara: Hece Yayınları, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> For more on the connection between the Turkish novel and the modernization process, see Kader Konak, *East-West Mimesis: Auerbach in Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Ayşe Özge Koçak Hemmat, *The Turkish Novel and the Quest for Rationality* (Boston: Brill, 2019); and Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar, *The Politics and Poetics of Translation in Turkey: 1923-1960* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> See Seyhan, *Tales of Crossed Destinies*; Nergis Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Monica M. Ringer and Etienne Charrière (eds), *Ottoman Culture and the Project of Modernity: Reform and Translation in the Tanzimat Novel* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Historiographical work under the umbrella of Ottoman Orientalism, Orientalism *alaturca*, or Ottoman colonialism has emphasized how the Ottoman state pursued models of sovereignty which increasingly mirrored European colonial discourses of imperial expansion and practices of rule towards imperial subjects on the peripheries of the empire in places like Yemen, Libya, Iraq, and Albania. See Mostafa Minawi, *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa: Empire and Diplomacy in the Sahara and the Hijaz* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Ussama Makdisi, 'Ottoman Orientalism', *American Historical Review*, 107 (2002), 768-96; Selim Deringil, "'They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery': The Late Ottoman Empire and the Post-Colonial Debate", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 45 (2003), 311-42; Isa Blumi, *Rethinking the Late Ottoman Empire: A Comparative Social and Political History of Albania and Yemen, 1878-1918* (Istanbul: Isis, 2003); and Milen V. Petrov, 'Everyday Forms of Compliance: Subaltern Commentaries on Ottoman Reform, 1864-1868', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 46 (2004), 730-59.

<sup>15</sup> Zarakol, *Before the West*, p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> For more on ethnic Turkish nationalism see Hugh Poulton, *Top Hat, Grey Wolf, and the Crescent: Turkish Nationalism and the Turkish Republic* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> See Seyhan, *Tales of Crossed Destinies*, and Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*.

<sup>18</sup> For more on Haşim's life, see Beşir Ayvazoğlu, *Ömrüm Benim Bir Ateşti Ahmet Haşim'in Hayatı, Sanatı, Estetiği, Dramı* (Istanbul: Kapı Yayınları, 2016); İbrahim Demirci, *Abmet Hâşim'in Nesirleri* (Istanbul: Ebabil, 2017); İnci Enginün and Zeynep Kerman (eds), *Abmet Haşim Bütün Eserleri*, vols I-IV, *Dergah Yayınları* (Istanbul, 1991). In addition to monographs there are also special issues of the literary journals *Kitap-lık* and *Hece* dedicated to Haşim:

*Kitap-lik* no. 95: Ahmet Haşim ve Modern Şiir, Haziran [June] 2009; *Hece*, no. 241: Ahmet Haşim, Ocak [January] 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Haşim's newspaper articles are collected alongside his poetry and book-length prose in the four-volume edition of Haşim's collected works, edited by İnci Enginün and Zeynep Kerman and published by Dergâh Yayınları.

<sup>20</sup> Despite the fact that Haşim signed the *Fecr-i Atî* manifesto, there is some debate over the full extent of his participation in the group. Beşir Ayvazoğlu's biography of Haşim suggests that he distanced himself from the group after signing, while İbrahim Demirci suggests that Haşim engaged with group members by publishing reviews of their poetic works and criticizing the *Servet-i Fünûn* generation.

<sup>21</sup> *Servet-i Fünûn*, no. 977, 11 Şubat 1325 [24 February 1910], p. 38.

<sup>22</sup> "Some Thoughts About Poetry" in *Global Modernists on Modernism*, ed. by Alys Moody and Stephen Ross (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 194-98 (p. 194).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196 and 198.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.195.

<sup>27</sup> Ahmet Haşim, 'Sembolizmin Kıymetleri', in *Ahmet Haşim Bütün Eserleri: Gurababane-i laklakcan, diğer yazıları*, ed. by İnci Enginün and Zeynep Kerman (Istanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 1991), pp. 294-95.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 295.

<sup>29</sup> Ahmet Haşim, 'Les Tendances actuelles de la Littérature Turque', *Mercure de France*, 627 (1 August 1924), 641-55.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 644.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> For more on the decadence controversy, see Fazıl Gökçek, *Bir tartışmanın hikayesi: dekadancer* (Istanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2014); Saliha Paker, 'Ottoman Conceptions of Translation and its Practice: The 1897 "Classics Debate" as a focus for examining change', in *Translating Others*, ed. by Theo Hermans, 2 vols (Manchester: St Jerome Publishing, 2006), II, pp. 325-48; and Nergis Dolcerocca, 'Ottoman Tanzimat and the Decadence of Empire', in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 245-63.

<sup>33</sup> Gökçek, *Bir tartışmanın hikayesi*, p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> Ahmet Midhat Efendi, 'Dekadanlar', *Sabah*, 2680, 10 Mart 1313/22 [14 March 1897].

<sup>35</sup> In reference to vernacular and Turkification in the works of Ahmet Midhat Efendi, Nergis Ertürk's 'Words Set Free' in *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*; see Seyhan's *Tales of Crossed Destiny*, A. Holly Schissler, 'Afterword', in *Felâtn Bey and Râkım Efendi: An Ottoman Novel*, trans. by Melih Levi and Monica M. Ringer (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2016).

<sup>36</sup> Regenia Gagnier, *Literatures of Liberalization: Global Circulation and the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 132.

<sup>37</sup> Canonical early Ottoman novels including Ahmet Midhat Efendi's novel *Felâtn Bey and Rakım Efendi* and Recaizade Mahmud Ekrem's *Araba Sevdası [The Carriage Affair]* often present characters who either conform to this idea as an illustration of virtuous, productive Ottoman modernity or represent characters whose departure from these ideals leads to their downfall. See Nurdan Gürbilek, 'Dandies and Originals', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 102.2/3 (2003), 599-628; and Melis Hafez, 'Imagining Ottoman Dandies and Industrious Effendis', in *Inventing Laziness: The Culture of Productivity in Late Ottoman Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 147-93.

<sup>38</sup> Tezcan, 'Lost in Historiography', p. 481.

<sup>39</sup> Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, *Ahmet Haşim monografi* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2020 [1934]), p. 12.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32 and 31.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Ahmet Ö. Evin, *Origins and Development of the Turkish Novel* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1983), pp. 19-20

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Asım Bezirci, *Ahmet Haşim – Şairliği ve Seçme Şiirleri* (Istanbul: Gözlem Yayınları, 1967), p. 28.

<sup>46</sup> Yaşar Nabi, *Ahmet Haşim: Hayatı, Sanatı, Eseri* (Istanbul: Varlık Yayınları, 1952), p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>49</sup> The phrase 'halka doğru', or towards the people, comes from ideologue of Turkish nationalism Ziya Gökalp's *Principles of Turkism*. In the book he suggests that the Turkish nation needs to go both towards the people and also towards the West ['Batıya doğru'].

<sup>50</sup> Bezirci, *Ahmet Haşim*, p. 66.

<sup>51</sup> For more on the representation of the beloved in Ottoman Divan poetry, see Walter G. Andrews, *Poetry's Voice, Society's Song: Ottoman Lyric Poetry* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985).

Which Translation?:  
Identifying the True Source of Patten Wilson's *Shahnameh* Illustrations

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Recent scholarship has stressed the influence of translation on late nineteenth-century literary and artistic developments (indeed, 'Decadence and Translation' was the theme of a [Volupté special issue](#) in 2020). Focusing on the British context, Annmarie Drury describes how English poetry at this time was 'profoundly pervious, susceptible to historical-cultural currents arising from the territorial expansion and imperialist tensions that Britain experienced at the time'.<sup>1</sup> Translators, in her phrase, 'ministered to this susceptibility', mediating foreign genres and prosodic forms that by their assimilation into anglophone literary culture both 'tested' and 'transformed' English poetry. Given the importance of translators at this time, and the potential ramifications of their decisions and methods in translation, an obvious question to ask when trying to gauge the reception of a single work of foreign literature by one individual British writer or artist is, 'which translation were they using?' Take the poetry of Sappho: until relatively recently, most translators of her 'Ode to Aphrodite' gendered the speaker's beloved as male. But as early as 1835, the philologist Theodor Bergk proposed the opposite – a distinction of perhaps major significance for a contemporary reader into whose hands *his* translation happened to fall.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, any scholar investigating a fin-de-siècle dramatist who was influenced by Ibsen is likely to consider which of the various English translations then available he or she consulted, and if both, then which was preferred. The subtle differences between Gosse's and Archer's versions are even the subject of a comic misunderstanding in J. M. Barrie's 1891 farce, *Ibsen's Ghost*, when it emerges that two characters in dialogue have been speaking their lines from variant play texts.<sup>3</sup> If translational variants were conspicuous enough to be a subject for popular humour in the 1890s, then for us in the present they must be an object of serious enquiry.



Verifying which translation was used is not always straightforward: it may require careful comparison of variants with some unattributed or fragmentary notes kept by the author we are studying, or perhaps a consultation of their surviving library or marginalia. Nonetheless, the work is done on the understanding that such details matter. Consider Gina's line in *The Wild Duck* (1884), 'mandfolk er nu så underlige, de; de skal altid ha' noget at dividere sig med'.<sup>4</sup> A British reader's perception of this as a *decadent* remark might depend on whether they had Archer's 1890 translation to hand ('men are strange beings; they must always have something to pervert themselves with'), or a different version that appeared in the same year by Karl Marx's daughter, Eleanor: 'men folk are such queer creatures; they must always have something to divide themselves with'.<sup>5</sup> Both translators were attempting, with greater or lesser success, to convey the irony of Gina's malapropism, by which she describes the pistol Hjalmar keeps for rabbit-shooting as an instrument not of diversion [divertere] but of division [divider] – a seeming mistake, but one that annoys Hjalmar nevertheless. Archer deviates somewhat from the text by choosing to evoke the concept of perversion, used so memorably and repeatedly a few years later by Arthur Symons in 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' (1893), whereas Eleanor Marx Aveling adopts the more literal 'divide' (though she does venture the singularly English 'queer'). Notably, in neither case would the British reader have got the benefit of the 'nu' in Gina's remark: men are *now* so odd, so 'underlige' (literally, un-straight), she does in fact say. So translators' omissions may be as significant as their inventions.

We are not yet accustomed, however, to exercising such diligence with texts from Asian traditions. Even as they are apt to celebrate the cosmopolitan reading habits of the late nineteenth century, too frequently scholars have neglected to identify the specific book that triggered a certain British poet's interest in Persian lyric, a British sceptic's interest in Buddhism, or a British socialist's interest in the Quran. Occasionally a vague reference to the *Arabian Nights* or Omar Khayyam has been considered sufficient to sketch the Orientalist commitments of the era. Sometimes scholars have assumed – not always incorrectly – that whichever was at that time the most popular or most

commonly available version of the Bhagavad Gita, on the Confucian *Analects*, was the one that must have been read by the subject of their investigation. This may seem innocuous enough, but insufficient rigour encourages misattributions, and the toleration and perpetuation of error even in cases of considerable historical significance. A signal example is the famous letter of 1827 in which Goethe predicted the rise of ‘weltiliteratur’ [world literature] after reading a Chinese novel he had borrowed from the ducal library in Weimar. Astonishingly, even within the last decade major publications have misidentified the work in question, leading Leslie O’Bell to conclude that scholars have simply ‘not investigated whether Goethe’s comments about the plot of the novel he was reading correspond to any particular translated Chinese novel’.<sup>6</sup> Even when they are not so blatant, our lapses recapitulate the devaluing and pigeonholing of Asian literature associated with colonial rule. Consequently, we cannot possibly speak of *decolonizing* the study of the fin de siècle until we accord the same philological respect to Chinese, Persian, or Sanskrit as, to give a recent example, Yopie Prins does to Greek in her study of Victorian women’s engagement with tragic drama. This article is thus in part a call for us to recover our acumen as textual scholars and comparatists.

But there is a further reason why I cite Prins, specifically. Her work highlights how imprecision about sources can be compounded by the historical dismissal of ‘amateur’ work by translators marginal to established scholarship, notably women.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes well-received at their time of publication, the work of amateur orientalists – active outside the academy or the higher branches of colonial service – was often subsequently sidelined, further obscuring the truth about which translations exerted the most influence over certain individuals or groups. Sometimes these marginal figures brought different emphases of interpretations to the source text, of lasting value and significance. Female translators, for example, were inclined to dwell on female characters long overlooked in the male-dominated tradition of commentary and exegesis: thus *The Iliad of the East*, Frederika Richardson’s 1870 abridgement of the *Ramayana*, gives greater space and agency to Sita than most other translations then available.<sup>8</sup> For this reason the hard graft and attention to

minutiae that allows us to answer the question, ‘which translation?’, is not worth pursuing merely for the sake of scholarship, but because it allows us to undo the biases that have shaped the field. In this article I will present a single example to highlight the pitfalls of failing to identify the correct source, and the benefits to be gained by doing so correctly. Specifically, I will prove that the drawings of episodes from the Persian epic poem, the *Shahnameh*, by the illustrator Patten Wilson (1869-1934) were not inspired by Matthew Arnold’s ‘Sohrab and Rostum’, as has commonly been thought, but by *The Epic of Kings* – an abridgement made in 1882 by the female popularizer, Helen Zimmern. But first I will offer an anecdote that demonstrates the significance of Persian poetry for British understandings of decadence, while also illustrating the diversity of late Victorian translation practices, and reminding us of the wide and prolonged influence of Arnold’s poem.

In the 1876-77 academic year, the Dublin students’ magazine *Kottabos* published a series of English translations by an undergraduate, Oscar Wilde, of excerpts from Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*. In late 1877, Smith, Elder & Co published a translation of the entire play by a more established writer, Robert Browning. The two versions reflect fundamentally different philosophies of translation. As Iain Ross explains, Wilde generally cleaved (with some deviations) to the method laid out by Arnold in the Oxford lectures published as *On Translating Homer* (1861). Arnold’s policy was that Greek should be rendered in a modern English diction that would embody the clarity and inherent ‘nobility’ of the original – just as Homer himself might have written it, had he been born an Englishman. In pursuit of this felicitous effect, Arnold averred, ‘the translator must without scruple sacrifice [...] verbal fidelity to his original’, rather than risk any ‘odd and unnatural effect’ by attempting to reproduce the peculiarities of the Greek. By contrast, Browning’s version was the product of an approach that prized literalness above all else, and that sought through weird idioms and prosodic variation to alienate English readers from the text, emphasizing the cultural distance between them and antiquity. As he announced in his preface, Browning wished to render the *Agamemnon* ‘in as Greek a fashion as English will bear’.<sup>9</sup> Such an undertaking might even involve the use of modern vernacular or dialect to convey the demotic tone of the original, a strategy

considered ignoble by Arnold, and an insult to classic texts that for him embodied the ‘sweetness and light’ that was so sorely lacking in the debased, fragmented culture of the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Among the other things Wilde wrote during his time at Trinity College Dublin was a translation, into Greek, of the dying speech of Sohrab from Arnold’s ‘Sohrab and Rustum’. It features in an exercise book containing a number of Wilde’s efforts at composition in Greek tragic verse, efforts that were rewarded with the college’s Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek. It was a subject aptly chosen. ‘Sohrab and Rustum’ narrates one of the central episodes in the *Shahnameh* of Firdausi, an epic poem regarded as foundational to the Persian literary tradition. Largely owing to Arnold, late Victorian readers became broadly familiar with the story, which tells of how Sohrab unknowingly battles with and is mortally wounded by his estranged father, the Persian hero Rustem. When Rustem recognizes his son by a jewelled clasp fastened on his arm, he roars in anguish, but the dying youth begs the older man to quell his rage and reconcile himself to what has been ordained by fate:

Father, forbear! For I but meet to-day  
The doom which at my birth was written down  
In Heaven, and thou art Heaven’s unconscious hand.<sup>10</sup>

For Arnold, the episode offered a fit subject for the domesticated ‘Homeric’ English style he would later extol in his lectures on Greek translation, a style that imitated the paratactic quality of Homer, in which a series of grand images are rapidly juxtaposed. It was a method based on his understanding of the *Shahnameh* as a heroic epic akin to the *Iliad* – an idea inherited, it seems, by Wilde, who echoed Arnold’s thinking in a letter he sent a few years later, in 1879, to his friend Helena Sickert. ‘I am sure you know Matthew Arnold already’, Wilde wrote, enclosing as a gift a volume of the poet’s selected verses, ‘but still I have marked just a few of the things I like best in the collection’. One of the poems Wilde marked, with blue silk thread, was ‘Sohrab and Rustum’, which he describes as ‘a wonderfully stately epic, full of the spirit of Homer’.<sup>11</sup> Thus the act of

translation was, for Wilde, relatively straightforward: he merely needed to render in actual Greek what Arnold had already reconceptualized as Grecian.

So what bearing does this have on the decadent tradition in which Wilde was to play such a significant role after he left the university? Arnold had himself derived his ideas about the *Shahnameh* largely from ‘Le Livre des Rois’, an 1850 essay by Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve. The French critic identifies Firdausi explicitly as ‘l’Homère de son pays’ [the Homer of his country]. Moreover, he vindicates the *primacy* of Firdausi’s tale of tragic filicide, to which later stories on the same pattern (whether in Persian or other languages) constitute increasingly sophisticated and therefore debased iterations of a raw and primitive ur-text. To turn from the Sohrab and Rustem episode to Canto VIII of Voltaire’s *Henriade*, which also narrates the death of a son at the hand of his unknowing father, is to feel, Sainte-Beuve quips, as if one has passed from the banks of the mighty Ganges to a pond at Versailles.<sup>12</sup> Such is the height from which epic poetry has fallen in modern times. This bias in favour of epic reflected a general departure from the interests of earlier Persianists, like Sir William Jones, who had focused their attention on the lyrical odes of Hafez (1325-1390 CE). The consequent ascendancy of Firdausi (940-1019 CE) within mid-nineteenth-century orientalism enabled the establishment of a lineage of decline, attributable in part to European biases and in part to the *Shahnameh* itself, which elegiacally chronicles the kings of ancient, Zoroastrian Persia, a civilization long since overcome by foreign dynasties and converted to Islam. Hafez’s ghazals and other contemporary lyric forms thus came to be read not only as the stylistic zenith of Persian poetry but as its efflorescence, so that by the turn of the century Britain’s pre-eminent Persianist, E. G. Browne, could remark that the entire Persian tradition was ‘essentially the literature of a decadence’, with ‘pessimism’ and ‘pantheistic spiritualism’ being its chief decadent characteristics.

Commissioned to write a two-volume history of Persian literature, Browne could not decide how to chronologically divide the volumes. The evolution of Persian literature, he protested to his publisher, was so much less voluminous than its decadence.<sup>13</sup> In this way the Persian literary

canon lent itself to European narratives of imperial decline, with the *Shahnameh* standing forth, like Homer, as one of a handful of unadulterated, archaic texts from which ‘primitive’ vitality and the heroic ethos might be recovered. Browne himself confessed to not especially enjoying it, drawn temperamentally as he was to the ‘decadent’ characteristics of later lyric poetry. But among the *Shahnameh*’s other Victorian admirers was William Morris, who valued it for the same reason he valued Icelandic saga. ‘The heroic cycle of Iran had long held in his mind a place next to those of Greece and Scandinavia’, remarked his first biographer, and in 1883 Morris even began work on his own translation.<sup>14</sup> Though he ultimately abandoned it, his Persian interests continued to multiply. Notably, in 1893 he was instrumental in persuading the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A) to purchase the Ardabil Carpet, bringing this epitome of Persian craftsmanship to London at a time when the country’s modern industry and manufacturing (including railways, telegraphs and the tobacco trade) were conspicuously dominated by British commercial interests, a situation that had sparked unrest in Iran as recently as 1891.<sup>15</sup> The carpet acquisition was thus only one of many ways in which the country’s glorious past, and its present decay, were juxtaposed in the public imagination.

The relationship of Persia to European decadence and aestheticism had already been developing for some years, therefore, when in 1895 Wilson published a series of remarkable drawings in *The Yellow Book* based on episodes in the *Shahnameh*. They are not accompanied by any text. Only their titles indicate the source of the legend depicted, and even these seem to expect of the viewer some prior acquaintance with the story: ‘Rustem Firing the First Shot’ (Volume 4, January 1895), ‘A Drawing’ (Volume 5, April 1895), ‘Sohrab Taking Leave of his Mother’ (Volume 6, July 1895), and ‘The War Horses of Rustem’ (Volume 11, October 1896). So influential has ‘Sohrab and Rustum’ been on British understandings of the *Shahnameh*, that Arnold has been commonly credited with inspiring Wilson’s contribution. Gallerists and auctioneers have more than once made this assumption. When one of Wilson’s preparatory sketches of a warhorse came up for sale in 2007, the curatorial notes explained that ‘Ruksh is Rustrum’s [sic] horse in Matthew

Arnold's poem "Sohrab and Rustum".<sup>16</sup> When selling some later works by Wilson, the biography assembled by an online dealer based in Minneapolis, the Grapefruit Moon Gallery, records that his early drawings for *The Yellow Book* were 'inspired by a prose translation of the original epic poem, Rustem and Sohrab [sic] by Matthew Arnold'.<sup>17</sup> As it happens, 'Sohrab and Rustum' is composed in verse, not prose. Though based closely on Firdausi's narrative, it is also not a translation. Indeed, it is not even an indirect translation, for while in theory Arnold could have compensated for his scant knowledge of the original language by consulting the English version of James Atkinson (1832), or the French of Jules Mohl (the first volume appearing in 1838), in practice he drew chiefly if not wholly on Sainte-Beuve's essay, which quotes Mohl at length.

As Reza Taher-Kermani has shown, Arnold in fact never intended a translation of the story: 'rather, he wanted to render it into something resembling a Greek (Homeric) episode'. This is why 'Sohrab and Rustum' does not begin with Sohrab's birth and childhood, as does the equivalent section in Firdausi's original, but with the hero emerging sleepless from his tent on the eve of his fateful combat with Rustem. Thus, like several books of the *Iliad*, Arnold's reworking opens at dawn in the silence before a battle.<sup>18</sup> The distinct martial emphasis Wilson has given to his images may have supported the assumption that they were inspired by Arnold. In the first Rustem, surrounded by his turbaned retainers, twists in his saddle to loose an arrow at Sohrab. In the second the youth, still mounted, has managed to lasso his father, and the two warriors are about to duel at close quarters. Dense cross-hatching on the armour and undergrowth contrasts with large areas of blank page describing the white walls of a fortress, and the smooth flank of Rustem's horse. These are bright, crisp, scrupulous line drawings, closer to Pre-Raphaelitism than the ink nocturnes published by Beardsley in preceding issues of *The Yellow Book* – indeed, they do not quite reproduce Arnold's Homeric vision, but grow increasingly medieval and chivalric as the series progresses. In 'Sohrab Taking Leave of his Mother', the departing hero pauses in a loggia supported by painted columns resembling a Norman church. His mother is robed like an Arthurian queen, while behind them rise the towers of a Persian Camelot. Graphic art from colonial India

may also have had its influence: the groom in ‘The War Horses of Rustem’ looks more like a Punjabi *sais* in a drawing by John Lockwood Kipling than an ancient Iranian (fig. 1).



Fig.1: ‘The War Horses of Rustem’, *Yellow Book* 11 (October 1896). Courtesy of Yellow Nineties 2.0, with thanks to Professor Lorraine Janzen Kooistra of Toronto Metropolitan University.

Wilson’s drawings belong then to a brand of artistic orientalism that views Asia – more particularly, those parts of Asia under direct or indirect British control – as a fit venue for intricate detail, naturalism, and objectivity. The same aesthetic mindset had prompted Kipling’s son, Rudyard, a few years earlier, to compare a Shia preacher in Lahore to a figure in a Venetian fresco.<sup>19</sup> This was quite a different orientalism from that of Aubrey Beardsley, attracted as he was to the grotesque, the fantastic, and the subjective, and realized in the flat planes of colour he admired in



the volume of *shunga* [Japanese erotica] purchased for him in Paris by William Rothenstein. Ironically, Wilson by no means eschewed this style of orientalism more typically associated with *The Yellow Book*. See, for example, the *japoniste* cover he designed for the sixth issue, which shows two women – one in the act of removing a peacock feather-printed robe – bathing in a pool.<sup>20</sup> But otherwise the *Shahnameh* images offer, in the pages of *The Yellow Book*, more than a hint of colonial late Pre-Raphaelitism, and suggest a rejection of decadent aesthetics. The late Matthew Arnold, who himself idealized South Asia as a place where detached observation and ‘the criticism of life’ was practised to a high degree, would perhaps have approved.<sup>21</sup>

But as we look more closely, we perceive that Arnold cannot have been the source of Wilson’s illustrations – or at least he cannot have been the only source. One piece of evidence that clearly disproves this supposition is a fifth *Shahnameh* illustration that Wilson published in 1901, not in *The Yellow Book* but in the Arts and Crafts magazine, *The Studio*. The drawing depicts Rustem encountering the legendary bird, the Simurgh, atop the Alborz Mountains, a scene from the hero’s youth which narratively predates his combat with Sohrab, and which consequently does not feature in Arnold’s poem.<sup>22</sup> Another is the article by Walter Shaw Sparrow that appeared in the same magazine a few months later, in which Sparrow – as if to put right a common misconception – states plainly that Wilson’s drawings were ‘inspired, not by the poem in which Matthew Arnold tells how Rustum killed his own son unwittingly in single combat, but by reading a prose translation of Firdausi Tusi’.<sup>23</sup> To which translation can Sparrow have been referring? Setting aside the French text prepared by Mohl, in its six cumbersome and very expensive volumes, as improbable, the English possibilities are few. The earliest translations were Joseph Champion’s, published at Calcutta in 1785, and Stephen Weston’s from 1815. Both were dramatically abridged, and long out of print by the 1890s. They were also verse translations, whereas Sparrow specifies prose. A more likely candidate is James Atkinson’s *Sháh Námeb of the Persian Poet Firduasí*, first published in 1832 and reissued in a cheap reprint series, the Chandos Classics, in 1886. But Atkinson’s translation is only partially in prose. One possibility remains, a text traditionally overlooked in histories of

Persian literary influence in Britain, because it is not an original translation but was produced instead – in the same way as William Morris’ incomplete version – using the French text of Mohl. That its author was a woman, and an unapologetic amateur, has no doubt also contributed to its neglect. Helen Zimmern explained in her preface that competence in Persian was unnecessary, since her goal was to ‘popularize’ the legends narrated by Firdausi ‘in his immortal epic’.<sup>24</sup> With a canny eye for the non-expert audience, she persuaded the critic and man of letters Edmund Gosse to write a prefatory poem, ‘Firdausi in Exile’, and further ornamented her book with two illustrations by Gosse’s brother-in-law, Lawrence Alma-Tadema. The first of these, adjoining the title page, shows an early episode in the *Shahnameh* in which Zal amazes a party of women by bringing down a duck in mid-flight with a well-aimed arrow. Significantly, Wilson’s first drawing, ‘Rustem Firing the First Shot’ (fig. 2), also depicts a feat of Persian archery.



Fig.2: ‘Rustem Firing the First Shot’, *Yellow Book* 4 (January 1895). Courtesy of Yellow Nineties 2.0.

Zimmern's father, a Jewish lace merchant, had emigrated from Hamburg in 1856, and she naturalized as British in 1881.<sup>25</sup> In the same year, Vernon Lee met her during a boating excursion on the Thames and left a sympathetic, if somewhat condescending portrait: 'a pleasant, intelligent little black woman, quite capable of doing good work but who has to do hack reviewing to support her people'.<sup>26</sup> Whether it was financial necessity or personal preference that set her course for Grub Street instead of the university, by this point Zimmern had carved for herself a viable niche in literary London. She was assisted in this by several male patrons, among them Gosse and Browning, who as I have already mentioned was strongly interested in translation – not only from Greek, but also Hebrew and Persian. She had evidently struck up a friendship with Browning by late 1882, when she sent him a copy of *The Epic of Kings*. 'Certainly I will read – not "look through" – your beautiful book, and report of it as fairly as I can [...]. Yours affectionately / Robert Browning.'<sup>27</sup> Most important of Zimmern's early contacts, though, was Richard Garnett, courteous polymath and chief librarian at the British Museum. 'When next I come to the Museum I shall gladly avail myself of your kind permission to ask your advice in literary matters', she wrote in 1873, at the start of a lengthy correspondence. 'It happens I am just now much in need of some.' It may have been with Garnett's help that she got her first work, reviewing German books for the *Examiner*. Meanwhile he expanded her horizons, discussing with her Buddhism, Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, and Persian literature, of which an early taste was Sadi's maxim, 'O square thyself for use! A stone that is fit for the wall is not left in the way'. 'What a charming Persian proverb that is', she responded. 'Would that I may prove a fitting stone, then I shall not despair of being left on the ground'.<sup>28</sup> Crucially, he also introduced her to the *Shahnameh*, and it may even have been Garnett who originally suggested the idea of a popular translation.<sup>29</sup>

Garnett is also likely to have introduced her to Gosse, who eventually wrote two poems for her – not only 'Firdausi in Exile', which prefaced her *Epic of Kings*, but also a second commemorating the book's publication, addressed to her privately and existing, to my knowledge, only in the form of a manuscript I found tucked among some papers of Zimmern's publisher, T.

Fisher Unwin, at Bristol University. The verses begin by comparing Zimmern to the eighteenth-century woman of letters and Constantinople resident, Mary Wortley Montagu, casting himself in the role of Montagu's spurned suitor, Alexander Pope, and her as the contemporary poet Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea.

If this were Spence's classic parlour,  
The epoch seventeen twenty-three,  
If I were Pope, that little snarler,  
And you were courtliest Winchilsea,

With brilliant points my verse I'd vary,  
I'd magnify your Persian feast,  
And vow that vapid Lady Mary  
Had merely travestied the East.

Her visions thro' half-open portals,  
Her bulbuls singing in the vine,  
Were but the common-place of mortals,  
While yours were gleams of the divine;

That all the heroes of her travels  
Were vulgar many living clods,  
While your sublimer speech unravels  
The battles or the loves of gods.

Gosse quaintly conjures a prior era of British orientalism, one captivated with Persian lyric rather than epic poetry, though his history is imprecise. Montagu lived in the early eighteenth century, before the advent of William Jones' Hafez translations, and thus she never refers to 'bulbuls singing in the vine' (though she was an avid reader of a very different eastern text, the *Arabian Nights*, then in its first novelty). Gosse's goal, however, is to suggest that Zimmern's *Shahnameh* might initiate a fresh oriental craze, which will not only add a new branch to the public understanding of Persian literature, but also rectify the clichés and 'travesty' of past representations. By associating her with two aristocratic predecessors, he also disguises her own rather more straitened circumstances and her debt to him as patron.

There is a touch of gallantry here which does not altogether do Zimmern justice, especially when Gosse goes on to warn of how her genteel dilettantism ('wits', 'arts', and 'lettered graces') may fail to please the modern tribe of male, scholarly pedants, who will pounce upon any mistake

in her research. His patronizing assumption, it seems, is that her work is indeed likely to contain such trifling, feminine errors. It would appear in Gosse's mind there is such a thing as Ladies' Persian, or Ladies' Arabic, which is marked by clumsy transcription and missed diacritics – in the same way that 'lady's Greek', as Romney remarks mockingly in *Aurora Leigh*, is Greek written 'without the accents'.<sup>30</sup>

It were an easy labour, Helen,  
To prove you brightest of your sex,  
And swear that men turn pale in telling,  
The provinces your wits annex.

But arts like these are out of fashion,  
And critics, whom may God preserve,  
Might fly into a dreadful passion,  
And firk us as we well deserve.

Might find an x or z repeated  
In some romantic hero's name, –  
A chaste Arabian adverb cheated  
Of half its dot, – and cry you shame!

With lexicons and rueful faces  
They might pursue an erring word,  
Nor more regard your lettered graces  
Than cats respect a singing-bird.

I will not tempt these bearded wonders  
By any public praise of mine,  
Lest they should launch their secret thunders,  
And slay us without call or sign.

Your work is done; the antique poet  
Beneath his rose-tree cries you thanks,  
And pride – the winter flood-waves show it –  
Swells old Euphrates' storied banks.

Till time destroys our motley story,  
And drowns our century's shame and fame,  
This volume will sustain your glory,  
And with FIRDUSI's link your name.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps the most touching aspect of Gosse's tribute is its implied promise that any blame *The Epic of Kings* should meet with will be borne jointly ('firk us', 'slay us'), but that any praise will be Zimmern's alone. On the other hand, though she may 'annex' whole provinces of knowledge,

Zimmern's task is a subsidiary one in service of her antique source, Firdausi. Gosse, it may be noted, does not call her work a translation – the manuscript is headed, correctly enough, "To Helen Zimmern, on receiving her paraphrase of "The Epic of Kings"". And rather than commending the book to its contemporary audience, the clear-sighted Gosse foresees that it must first avoid shipwreck on the rocks of criticism before finding a safe harbour in posterity. In fact, the book was favourably received: complimentary reviews helped it to a second edition, in 1883, and a third in 1886 targeted at a young audience. But in the longer term its reputation dwindled. It re-appeared in 1906 with a small press in New York, and when it was next reissued, in 1926, by Macmillan, Zimmern's preface was removed and replaced with that of Wilfred Jones, the young American who – according to the title page – had 'rediscovered' the text. This is perhaps unsurprising, since from the beginning the book had been triply disadvantaged. It was subject firstly to the deprecation of translation as a derivative undertaking, in contrast to original composition. Secondly, scorn for amateur translators and 'popularizers' as usurpers of scholarly privilege meant it would not be seen as a contribution of lasting significance to Persian studies. Finally, the side-lining of women within orientalism added a third handicap.

But returning to Wilson, the evidence that proves beyond doubt that he took his cue from *The Epic of Kings*, and the reason why we should care, are the same. For our concern as decolonial scholars is to recover silenced voices and occluded perspectives, and from her marginal position as an amateur, a Jew, and a woman, Zimmern saw the *Shahnameh* in a particular way. When her version is compared with those of her male peers, something that becomes noticeable in Zimmern's treatment is her concern for the women of the Sohrab story. As I have mentioned, Wilson's third drawing (fig. 3) shows the impetuous youth bidding a final farewell to his mother Tahmineh, a character who in Arnold's poem is referred to only in passing. The drawing shows an erect, robed woman frowning at her son as she fastens upon his arm the clasp that, she hopes, will identify him to his father Rustem should they meet in battle. In Atkinson's translation, Tahmineh weeps and wails when her son demands to know his true lineage and proposes to sally forth and

prove his valour: ‘Tahmineh wept bitterly, but her entreaties were of no avail – the youth being unalterably fixed in his determination’.<sup>32</sup>



Fig.3: ‘Sohrab Taking Leave of his Mother’, *Yellow Book* 6 (July 1895). Courtesy of Yellow Nineties 2.0.

But in the same scene, Zimmern’s princess only feigns reluctance at Sohrab’s departure, while inwardly rejoicing at his appetite for war, and this bears a much stronger likeness to the haughty and regal figure Wilson has delineated.<sup>33</sup> In Firdausi’s original, Tahmineh’s inner feelings during her exchange with Sohrab are not actually described, and thus Zimmern’s rendering of the scene

is supplemented with her own invention. But nevertheless, her portrayal of a woman who, upon hearing the eventual news of her son's demise, slices off his horse's tail and sets fire to his palace, much better reflects the Tahmineh of Firdausi than Atkinson's matron, who, rather than incinerating Sohrab's possessions, clutches them 'with melancholy joy, / In sad remembrance of her darling-boy', before sinking into a 'trance' of grief.<sup>34</sup> Whether this reflects Atkinson's ideal of femininity, or merely his use of a defective manuscript copy, Tahmineh's decision to retain the things as keepsakes instead of destroying them is a clear deviation from the original, which Zimmern, working from the more accurate text of Mohl, rectified in English. Her princess's sorrow is, moreover, of an altogether more passionate order: Tahmineh tears her hair, wrings her hands, and heaps 'black earth upon her head', before marshalling her emotions and carrying out her actions with the ritual propriety expected of a noblewoman.

Then she caused the garments of Sohrab to be brought unto her, and his throne and his steed. And she regarded them, and stroked the courser and poured tears upon his hoofs, and she cherished the robes as though they yet contained her boy, and she pressed the head of the palfrey unto her breast, and she kissed the helmet that Sohrab had worn. Then with his sword she cut off the tail of his steed and set fire unto the house of Sohrab, and she gave his gold and jewels unto the poor. And when a year had thus rolled over her bitterness, the breath departed from out her body, and her spirit went forth after Sohrab her son.<sup>35</sup>

Another female character who takes on greater stature in Zimmern's version of the story is Gordafrid, the warlike maiden whose cheeks, in the Persian, are said to turn black with rage when she witnesses the humiliation of her lord Hojir at the hands of Sohrab, who with his followers is making a relentless advance across Persia in quest of Rustem. Having watched Hojir roped by Sohrab, bound and led away as a prisoner from the battlements of their castle, Gordafrid decides to take matters into her own capable hands.

So she took forth burnished mail and clad herself therein, and she hid her tresses under a helmet of Roum, and she mounted a steed of battle and came forth before the walls like to a warrior. And she uttered a cry of thunder, and flung it amid the ranks of Turan, and she defied the champions to come forth to single combat.<sup>36</sup>

Disguised as a boy, Gordafrid engages and temporarily checks the advancing Sohrab. To their single combat Zimmern devotes more lines than to any other in the epic, save that of Sohrab's



final encounter with the warrior who, unbeknownst to him, is really his father Rustem. In her treatment Zimmern did not depart in the slightest from the literal French translation at her elbow – she merely rendered the story in full. The liberty Zimmern took was editorial, as she condensed other episodes to lend more pages to Gordafriid, a character whom Arnold completely elides, and who in Atkinson is made the basis of a donnish footnote speculating whether Firdausi might have poached the figure of the ‘warrior dame’ from Homer or Herodotus.<sup>37</sup> While Wilson did not choose to depict this episode, it is noteworthy that, as in the scenes involving Tahmineh, Zimmern’s version shows itself here much more than a mere prose equivalent of Atkinson’s verse. She offers a particular slant upon the legend, sometimes ministering to the original better than the trained Persianist who preceded her, and treating it as something culturally distinct rather than seeking a Grecian antecedent. Then again, could it be that Wilson did turn his pen to Gordafriid after all? The second illustration, titled enigmatically ‘A Drawing’ (fig. 4), shows what appears to be Sohrab and Rustem battling before the walls of a castle, Sohrab having caught his father about the waist with his lasso. It is a weapon used often enough in the heroic duels of the *Shahnameh*, but not, it must be admitted, in the combat of Sohrab with Rustem, as Zimmern tells it. Moreover, the two are said to have locked swords not under the ramparts of a fortress, but on a battlefield between the encampments of their respective armies. Could it be that ‘A Drawing’ shows not Sohrab pursuing Rustem, but Sohrab about to truss the unfortunate Hojir at the gate of his own castle? And in that case, who must be the young smooth-cheeked warrior with waving hair emerging from the bottom right of the frame, her back turned to us, advancing and drawing her sword on Sohrab – who else but Gordafriid? ‘In her we recognize a Brunhild’, remarked the *Saturday Review* in its appreciative notice of *The Epic of Kings* in February 1883, ‘as she rides forth to single combat with Sohrab’. Yet she is no longer recognized today in Wilson’s illustration, which is what happens when female translators are allowed to fade into obscurity, and when scholars fail to verify sources.<sup>38</sup>



Fig.4: 'A Drawing', *Yellow Book* 5 (April 1895). Courtesy of Yellow Nineties 2.0.

Reuniting Zimmern's text with Wilson's drawings enables us to gauge how the former, and subsequently her readers, intervened in the conversation about Persian decadence. The publication of the Gordafriid drawing, in issue five, coincided with Beardsley's departure from *The Yellow Book*. Tainted by his association with the by now disgraced Wilde, he was removed as art editor and his duties assumed by Wilson. It is tempting to speculate that Wilson chose or was encouraged to proceed with his *Shahnameh* illustrations in order to change the tone of the magazine, substituting a heroic and 'primitive' orientalism in place of the decadent and erotic imagery favoured by his predecessor. I have found nothing to substantiate this, the John Lane papers at the Ransom Centre yielding no clues, though if it were the case, then that too would be in keeping with Zimmern's exposition of the *Shahnameh*. Firdausi, she remarks somewhat oddly in her introduction, 'disdains all bizarrerie'.<sup>39</sup> Antedating the exaggeration and 'strained metaphors' that have come to be

associated with ‘Orientals’, she explains, his is a poem of a ‘naive archaic character’, written like all true epics ‘in the infancy of a race or people’. Citing Comte’s law of three stages, outlined in the *Course in Positive Philosophy* (1842), Zimmern proposes that the legendary basis for an epic is laid down in a society’s ‘supernatural’ stage. ‘Only then have traditions their true natural ring and flavour’, she writes, ‘only then can they be put into form and preserved so that they reproduce for all time that peculiar, inimitable fragrance, that aroma of the childhood of the world’. When oral tradition (‘the lay of the native bard’) historically grows silent or corrupt, she proposes, there arises a modern poet, ‘great, large-hearted, national’, to fix these legends in the form of an epic poem. In this the poet acts as the embodiment of the nation’s popular spirit – ‘so long’, she adds significantly, ‘as it is not fatally degenerate’ – and that service Firdausi performed for Iran.<sup>40</sup>

There is nothing very extraordinary about this reading. Zimmern is asserting the primacy of the *Shahnameh*, its irreproachably ‘national’ and classic quality, in the same way that Sainte-Beuve and Arnold did – only she is doing so in the language of the *fin de siècle*, and buttressing the thesis of national degeneration and its cultural manifestation, decadence, by drawing attention to its opposite. At the same time, she is treating the text with a marked philological respect, admitting her ignorance of Persian but emphasizing the epic’s fundamental otherness and the cultural gulf separating the nineteenth-century reader from Firdausi’s tenth-century context. ‘I have tried in all cases to preserve the peculiarities of Eastern imagery and allusion’, her preface explains, while she adopted the diction of the King James Bible in an effort to remove the stories ‘from everyday speech’, and thus ‘to remove them from the atmosphere of to-day’.<sup>41</sup> In this, she followed the translation strategies developed by her friend Browning for Aeschylus, instead of the approach taken by Arnold with Homer. Finally, as a female popularizer, she draws attention to episodes overlooked or elided by professional, male orientalists. She was thus a better custodian, in a sense, of the richness and particularity of the original, even as she shared the same assumptions as her contemporaries about historical and literary decline through vertical tiers of civilization. By offering a way of admiring the *Shahnameh* not inextricably connected to and dependent on Greek

epic, she was enabling new ways of imagining the poem and, if only in small way, advancing British understanding of it at the turn of the century. Matthew Arnold's 'Sohrab and Rostum' was a highly influential poem. It was admired by the young Wilde, and no doubt by other writers who were born in the mid-century and rose to prominence in the 1880s and 1890s. But it was not the text that inspired Wilson. If we don't look for the real vectors of transmission, whereby certain stories, characters, images, and metaphors detached from their native traditions and produced an impact in English literature, then our ideas of cultural exchange will be fundamentally flawed. We will continue to cleave, helplessly, to canonical writings, and recapitulate the same process of marginalization that first removed the true source into critical obscurity. We will do a disservice to the Persian original, by underestimating the extent and complexity of its influence in British fin-de-siècle culture, and while we may have succeeded in decentering the study of decadence from its European hubs, we will not have done the patient and precise work necessary to decolonize our scholarship.

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<sup>1</sup> Annmarie Drury, *Translation as Transformation in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Joan DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho, 1546-1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 245-46.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Shepherd, *The English Theatrical Avant-Garde 1900-1925* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2023), p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Henrik Ibsen, *Vildanden: Skuespil i Fem Akter* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1884), p. 118.

<sup>5</sup> Henrik Ibsen, *Ibsen's Prose Dramas: Ghosts; The Enemy of the People; The Wild Duck*, trans. by William Archer (London: Walter Scott, 1890), p. 309; Henrik Ibsen, *The Wild Duck: a Drama in Five Acts*, trans. by Eleanor Marx Aveling (Boston: William H. Baker, 1890), p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> Leslie O'Bell, 'Chinese Novels, Scholarly Errors and Goethe's Concept of World Literature', *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, 87.2 (2018), 67. The novel was the *Huajian ji*, translated by Peter Perring Thoms, in 1824, as *Chinese Courtship*.

<sup>7</sup> Yopie Prins, *Ladies' Greek: Victorian Translations of Tragedy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed discussion of *The Iliad of the East* and contemporary *Ramayana* translations, see my *Asian Classics on the Victorian Bookshelf: Flights of Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 152-65.

<sup>9</sup> Iain Ross, *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 86-88.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Selected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1878), p. 54.

<sup>11</sup> Rupert Hart-Davis and Merlin Holland, eds., *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 83. The blue silk thread became apparent when the volume came up for auction at Sotheby's a few years ago: <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2004/oscar-wilde-l04414/lot.8.html> [accessed 25 October 2022].

<sup>12</sup> 'La même impression que si l'on passait du fleuve du Gange à un bassin de Versailles'. Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, 'Le Livre des Rois, par le poète persan Firdousi publié et traduit par M. Jules Mohl', *Causeries du Lundi: Tome Premier*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Paris: Garnier, 1857), p. 344.

<sup>13</sup> E. G. Browne to T. Fisher Unwin, 12 May 1901, ALS, Berg Collection, New York.

<sup>14</sup> J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1899), II, p. 92.

<sup>15</sup> Nikki R. Keddie, *Religion and Rebellion in Iran: The Tobacco Protest of 1891-92* (London: Cass, 1966), pp. 3-5.

- <sup>16</sup> <https://www.the-saleroom.com/en-gb/auction-catalogues/david-lay-f-r-i-c-s/catalogue-id-2720213/lot-4809188> [accessed 5 March 2023].
- <sup>17</sup> <https://grapefruitmoongallery.com/20082> [accessed 28 October 2022].
- <sup>18</sup> Reza Taher-Kermani, *The Persian Presence in Victorian Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 131.
- <sup>19</sup> Thomas Pinney, ed., *Kipling's India: Uncollected Sketches, 1884-88* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), p. 269.
- <sup>20</sup> Thanks to Margaret Stetz for drawing my attention to this image.
- <sup>21</sup> Arnold arrived at this conclusion from his reading of the Bhagavad Gita. See 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time', in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. by R. H. Super, 11 vols (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960-77), III, p. 174.
- <sup>22</sup> Patten Wilson, 'Rustum and the Simoorg', in *Modern Pen Drawings: European and American*, ed. by Charles Holme, special number of *The Studio* (Winter 1901), 51.
- <sup>23</sup> Walter Shaw Sparrow, 'Some Drawings by Patten Wilson', *The Studio*, 23 (August 1901), 193. The epithet "Tusi" refers to Firdausi's home town of Tus.
- <sup>24</sup> Helen Zimmern, *The Epic of Kings: Stories Retold from Firdusi* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1882), p. v. For an example of the disregard with which her book has typically been treated, see John D. Yohannan, *Persian Poetry in England and America* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1977), p. 316, where it features only in the bibliography, classed under 'secondary' works.
- <sup>25</sup> 'Naturalization Certificate: Helen Zimmern', HO 334/10/3427, National Archives, London.
- <sup>26</sup> Amanda Gagel, ed., *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, 1856-1935*, 2 vols (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016-20), I, p. 296.
- <sup>27</sup> Robert Browning to Helen Zimmern, 22 November 1882, ALS, Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor University.
- <sup>28</sup> Zimmern to Garnett, 21 June - 24 July 1873, ALS, MS-1545 (Richard Garnett Collection), 64.7, Harry Ransom Center, Texas.
- <sup>29</sup> In her preface, Zimmern acknowledges her obligations to Garnett, 'to whom I owe my first introduction to the beauties of Firdusi'. Zimmern, *Epic of Kings*, p. vii.
- <sup>30</sup> Prins, *Ladies' Greek*, p. 7.
- <sup>31</sup> Edmund Gosse, untitled poem, Papers of Jane Cobden Unwin, Box 1, DM 851, Bristol University Special Collections, Bristol.
- <sup>32</sup> James Atkinson, *The Sháh Námeb of the Persian Poet Firdausi* (London: Oriental Translation Fund, 1832), p. 182.
- <sup>33</sup> Zimmern, *Epic of Kings*, p. 136.
- <sup>34</sup> Atkinson, *Sháh Námeb*, p. 603.
- <sup>35</sup> Zimmern, *Epic of Kings*, p. 171.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- <sup>37</sup> Atkinson, *Sháh Námeb*, p. 560.
- <sup>38</sup> 'The Epic of Kings', *Saturday Review*, 55.1425 (17 February 1883), 220.
- <sup>39</sup> Zimmern, *Epic of Kings*, p. xxiv.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. vi, xi, xxv.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii.

J. B. Bullen, Rosalind White, and Lenore A. Beaky, eds,  
*Pre-Raphaelites in the Spirit World: The Séance Diary of William Michael Rossetti*,  
(Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022), 169 pp. ISBN 9781789974423

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About a week before I sat down to read *Pre-Raphaelites in the Spirit World*, an edited version of William Michael Rossetti's 'séance diary', I had a Zoom appointment with an Indigenous Two-Spirit tarot reader for an ancestral reading. The first thing to note is that, despite my Zoom working fine a couple of weeks earlier, when the Zoom call began, I couldn't hear a word the tarot reader was saying. We tried again and again; nothing worked. Eventually, frustrated, I said that I had to bow out, and the reader called me on my cell phone and asked if I had been 'blocked' lately, turning technological difficulties into something metaphysical and, you'll note, my 'fault'. The person also said that the night before a 'maternal figure holding a white lily' had appeared to them, trying to communicate with me, then they asked if my mother had 'passed'. When I said no, they quickly changed gears and said that sometimes living people appear in visions in order to communicate with other living people. I begin this review with a personal anecdote because William Michael Rossetti's séance journal is full of these moments: for believers (such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning), certain words and names and images resonated, suggesting contact from the spirit world. For non-believers (such as Robert Browning, apparently), all spiritualists were scam artists preying on vulnerable people who missed their loved ones. Admittedly, I did make the appointment for an ancestral reading, but even at the time of the ill-fated Zoom call (I cancelled the follow-up appointment; feel free to psychoanalyze me as you will) it struck me that 'a maternal figure holding a white lily', a flower that can symbolize purity or love or loss, depending on how you wish to interpret it, is a pretty textbook example of something that would likely resonate with a lot of people, if not the majority of people who have booked an ancestral reading. My personal beliefs are, of course, likely of little interest to my readers, but this experience was in the back of

my mind as I read Rossetti's séance diary, sometimes frustrated with the willingness to believe (ostensible) spiritualists when one is racked with sadness and/or guilt, as was the case for William Michael's brother, the painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, after his wife Elizabeth Siddal died of an opium overdose. Indeed, Rossetti's guilt-infused mourning for Siddal is what led William Rossetti to begin attending séances (sometimes with Dante Gabriel, sometimes without him), and recording the sessions.

It is in part because Dante Gabriel Rossetti plays such a central role in William Michael's notes, that the book, which is edited by J. B. Bullen, Rosalind White, and Lenore A. Beaky, will, perhaps, be of more interest to historians of British art than literary scholars. Historians concerned with spiritualism and the occult, particularly the intersections between decadence, spiritualism, and occultism, will also find the slim volume useful. The text includes a list of figures (which includes artworks by Dante Gabriel, and importantly for feminist art historians, by Siddal as well), and an introduction written by Bullen and White. After the introduction an annotated version of the séance diary from 1865 until 1868 takes up the majority of the pages, but there is also a Part II, which includes a, it must be said, extremely strange letter (part of which was apparently comprised of automatic writing) from artist-turned-spiritualist Anna Mary Howitt to Dante Gabriel. Beaky has written a helpful introduction to the letter, which will, like many of the annotations for the séance diary, be of interest to feminist art historians, given that Beaky makes it very clear that a vicious critique in 1856 from Pre-Raphaelite champion and famous misogynist John Ruskin impacted Howitt so intensely that she gave up artmaking and turned to spiritualism (p. 17). There is evidence here for scholars interested in affect and psychology to engage with, considering the emotional and psychological consequences of sexist criticism on female artists as well as possible motivations for women in particular to turn to spiritualism, one of the few areas in the Victorian period in which they would be listened to with seriousness and respect, at least by believers. Dennis Denisoff makes this important point in his recent book *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860-1910: Decay, Desire, and the Pagan Revival* (2022), and his chapter 'Occult Ecology and the

Decadent Feminism of Moina Mathers and Florence Farr' can be productively put in dialogue with Howitt's letter. As Denisoff remarks: 'the popular occulture so tightly interwoven with decadence readily encouraged female authority, incorporated affirmations of womanhood into its structures, and offered the most complex models of pagan feminist empowerment from the period' (p. 141).

Bullen and White's introduction to William Michael Rossetti's diary, which is now held in the University of British Columbia's Special Collections, is clear, chronological, and helpful for understanding the context and background of Rossetti's text. The editors observe that '[i]n the 1860s, personal collections of spiritualist experiences abounded, mediums both British and American flourished, and spiritualist journals were widely read and highly popular' (p. 3). The approximately twenty private séances that William Michael recorded took place between November 1865 and August 1868. Siddal died on 11 February 1862. Apparently, Dante Gabriel's attendance at séances began in 1858, but after his wife's death, his interest in séances took on a new intensity. It is worth noting that the editors acknowledge important work written by feminist art historians such as Griselda Pollock, Jan Marsh, and Deborah Cherry, noting that Pollock and Cherry argued in a 1988 article that Siddal's last name should be spelled 'Siddall' (p. 4). Bullen and White observe in a note that they have used the spelling 'Siddal' because that is the spelling the artist used on several of her own artworks. While the introduction is, at times, repetitive, it lays a sturdy foundation for the séance diary that follows. The introduction also includes several relevant illustrations, including Dante Gabriel's *Portrait Sketch of Elizabeth Siddal* (1850-1860, n.d.), a pen and brown ink drawing, which depicts an apparently ill Siddal seated and holding her head, her eyes closed, and his *How They Met Themselves* (c. 1850-1860), a metaphysical pen-and-ink drawing on paper that is now in the Fitzwilliam Museum's collection in Cambridge (UK). The editors have also reproduced in colour Siddal's gouache on paper entitled *The Haunted Wood* (1856), which is possibly a scene from a ghost story or, perhaps, a kind of metaphysical self-portrait depicting the artist with long blonde hair, haunted by illness, if not death.



The Rossetti brothers frequently called upon Siddal during séances, and sometimes she appeared, according to William Michael's diary, as in Séance no. 8, which was held on 4 January 1866. Interestingly, Dante Gabriel's mistress and muse Fanny Cornforth sometimes acted as the medium during these séances. Alas, we don't have any indication of how Cornforth felt about being asked repeatedly to summon her partner's dead wife. The first séance that William Michael documented took place on Saturday 11 November 1865 (but was recorded on 15 November) at 7 Bristol Gardens, Maida Hill. One of the most interesting things about that first séance is that the medium was a Mrs Marshall, who William Michael describes as 'the washerwoman medium late of Holborn' (p. 58). This comment raises the spectre of class in the context of spiritualism, indicating that some working-class women made extra income doing séances for middle-upper class and artistic social circles. In a helpful note, the editors write that Mary Marshall (1801-1875) was born in Shadwell 'of very humble origins', and they observe that '[a]ccounts of her mediumship frequently interpreted her coarseness and social class as proof of her powers' (p. 57 n. 2). Marshall's 'otherness' and exoticness as a poor woman did not shield her from classist insults such as the one that appeared in *Reynold's Newspaper* on 30 September 1860. The author described her as a 'great, stout, coarse, vulgar-looking woman, with a countenance utterly deficient in intellectuality'. The Royal Society likewise perceived her as 'vulgar, low-bred, [and] illiterate' (p. 57 n. 2).

The last séance that William Michael recorded took place on 14 August 1868 at Dante Gabriel's studio in Cheyne Walk. According to Bullen and White: 'Fanny Cornforth appears to have been the medium' (p. 55). The séance diary ends not with a bang (despite some rapping and table movements), but with a whimper, as there were only 'muddled responses' (p. 55), and when a name of the spirit was asked for, 'Er' was the response. The editors write that "'Er" for Elizabeth Rossetti' came back', which seems like a stretch but was certainly what Dante Gabriel was hoping for: 'Dante Gabriel then began a substantial exchange with the spirit asking if it was his wife. "Yes". If she was happy: "Yes". And whether he would see her immediately should he join her in the afterlife. "No"'. The introduction ends quite abruptly with this last séance, with the authors

summarizing: ‘Gabriel then asked whether Fanny was the medium at this séance, and receiving the answer “Yes”, Fanny withdrew her hands and the manifestations came to a standstill’ (p. 55). A final paragraph from the editors indicating what eventually became of not only Dante Gabriel and William Michael but also Fanny would have wrapped up the introduction nicely. The séances described by William Michael become tedious after a while, but the notes that the editors provide, identifying the various participants and clarifying their relationships to the Rossetti brothers, are the true value of the text.

The book is fleshed out by including Anna Mary Howitt’s odd letter to Dante Gabriel that the artist *manquée* wrote in multiple sittings over three days in late 1856 while she was in Rouen. As Beaky tells us in her introduction to Part II, the letter ‘informed Rossetti that her spirit guides’, including artists Fra Angelico and Michelangelo, had declared Rossetti ‘one of the greatest painters ever yet born’ (p. 117). Rossetti knew Howitt and her family, but it still seems strange that Howitt wrote such a long and enigmatic, and indeed contradictory, letter to the artist. The letter was written before Siddal died, and although early in the letter Howitt says to share the letter’s contents with Siddal, later she warns Rossetti against showing it to his wife, but there is nothing obviously untoward in the letter. The letter, which is now in the Special Collections at the University of British Columbia, includes what Beaky calls ‘a vitriolic outburst of automatic writing dictated by a spirit guide’, as well as hieroglyphs and different styles of writing. As Beaky notes, ‘the letter is a visual artifact’, and it is highly significant that Howitt writes at one point that she ‘will be one of the greatest women of the age’, given the letter was written after Ruskin’s evisceration of Howitt’s art (p. 118). The letter, then, suggests that spiritualism helped Howitt cope with the affective fallout of Ruskin’s criticism (p. 124), and helped her regain her confidence. Indeed, Howitt’s descriptions of her communion with her spirit guides recalls the ecstasy of St. Theresa, suggesting both a spiritual experience and embodied, sexual pleasure:

I felt frequently as if enveloped in an atmosphere which sent through my whole frame warm streams of electricity in waving spirals from the crown of my head to the soles of

my feet; and occasionally, generally at midnight, I was seized with twitchings and convulsive movements of my whole body... (quoted in Beaky, 126).

That is certainly a serviceable description of sexual ecstasy. Beaky concludes her introduction by observing that '[i]n early 1856, Anna Mary Howitt had received Ruskin's devastating response to *Boadicea* and, directed by spirits, she covered her paintings over with snakes' (p. 136). Iconographically, this is fascinating. Howitt, who described herself as going into a period of 'darkness' (depression?) after Ruskin's critique of her depiction of a powerful woman, then covered that female subject with the symbol of another powerful, threatening *femme fatale*, Medusa, and in doing so, experienced a kind of catharsis that helped her experience self-actualization, turning from the art form of painting to the art form of spiritualism. On the whole, read as literary texts as well as personal memoirs, William Michael Rossetti's séance diary and Howitt's letter provide many glimpses into the fragile but resilient human psyche, whether the reader is a believer in spirits or not.

Gustave Kahn, *The Solar Circus*, trans. by Sam Kunkel  
(Michigan City, IN: First to Knock, 2023), 227 pp. ISBN 9781734906066

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Given the vast number and variety of contributions Gustave Kahn made to the French literary and artistic fields in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is surprising he is not better known in France or elsewhere. Kahn was an exceptionally multi-faceted author and critic who, among other achievements, had a major impact on free verse in France and the development of the French Symbolist movement in the 1880s and 90s. In the early twentieth century, Kahn was a significant influence on F. T. Marinetti, the Italian founder of Futurism. During the 1920s and 30s, Khan played a major role in the French Jewish cultural renaissance. This prolific writer published more than 1600 articles, books, and poems during a fifty-year period from 1886 to his death in 1936, and his art criticism is still read to this day.

The last 20 years has seen a flurry of critical attention around Kahn's work. He has been the subject of two colloquia in France in 2005 and 2006. The Museum of Jewish Art and History in Paris organized an exhibition devoted to him in 2006-2007. In 2009, Classiques Garnier published an edited collection of articles: *Gustave Kahn [1857-1936]*. A separate edited collection, *Gustave Kahn: Un écrivain engagé*, appeared in 2013 with the Presses universitaires de Rennes, providing a broad view the writer's involvement in his time. These are, of course, accessible only to a Francophone audience. Unfortunately, little English-language scholarship exists except for some studies of Kahn's art criticism.

The increased critical interest in Kahn has its parallel in the translation of his works. The new translation of his 1898 novel *Le Cirque solaire* [*The Solar Circus*] sheds a welcome light on an important dimension of his work. It joins Brian Stableford's *The Tale of Gold and Silence* (Blackcoat Press, 2011) and Colin and Sue Boswell's *The Mad King* (Snuggly Books, 2021) as the third novel by Kahn to be translated into English in recent years.

The novel is the curious tale of Count Franz, ruler of a Bohemian state, who prefers solitude to governing. One day, he sees a passing circus and is immediately attracted to the lead performer Lorely. His decision to follow the circus and Lorely for some time manages to move him out of his solipsistic existence. After the circus establishes a permanent footing in London, he learns that his younger brother Otto, who wants to push Franz out of power and rule with a strong hand, has been killed. Franz returns to his kingdom and to his solitary ways. This is a novel not motivated action but by Franz's interaction with the exceptional world of the circus.

Sam Kunkel's translation of *The Solar Circus* is first rate, which is especially notable given the challenges Kahn's novel presents for the translator. His introduction helps to align English-language readers' expectations with some of the novelty of Kahn's style. This allows Kunkel to respect Kahn's proclivity for long sentences, whose structures reflect key dimensions of the novel itself. Equally difficult is the impact of Kahn's free verse on the novel as its influence represents an important dimension for Kahn. Kahn uses archaic vocabulary to help set the tone of the tale even though it is set in contemporary Europe. The novel includes references to myths, legends, and literatures from around the world. This edition provides helpful explanatory footnotes to guide the reader through them. The edition provides both an introduction and note of explanation at the end of the novel, by the translator, that provide necessary context for understanding the work's significance, as well as an interesting reflection on the novel by the publisher.

Before the late 1890s, Kahn's literary publications were almost exclusively poetry, which was considered the highest form of literature in the nineteenth century. However, his interest in writing novels had been present since his earliest years as a writer as his 1882 correspondence with Stéphane Mallarmé indicates.<sup>1</sup> His first novel, *Le Roi fou* [*The Mad King*], appeared in serial form in 1895 and as a separate volume the following year. This was followed by several novels including *Le Conte de l'or et du silence* [*The Tale of Gold and Silence*] and *The Solar Circus*, both in 1898.

*The Solar Circus* was published at a time when the Naturalist fiction of Émile Zola occupied a dominant position in literature. As a Symbolist writer, Kahn's emphasis is not on the material

reality of the world but the cerebral experience of it. In one of the first articles that helped define the Symbolist movement in 1886, he wrote ‘le rêve étant indistinct du réel’ [dreams are indistinct from the real]. This breaking down of the barrier between the dream world and the material world foreshadows a central dimension of Surrealism elaborated in the 1920s. Critics noted this aspect of his work when the novel first appeared. Léon Blum, writing in the avant-garde *La Revue blanche*, asked ‘A-t-il vécu, a-t-il rêvé?’ [Is this an adventure or a dream?]<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Paul D’Armon, a critic for the newspaper *Le Voltaire*: ‘Le poète est constamment en insurrection contre la sottise des Apparences que nous nommons la Réalité. [...] [C’est] simple pour lui, [...] de montrer symboliquement le Réel capituler devant le Rêve’ [The poet is constantly in revolt against the foolishness of Appearances that we call Reality. [...] [It is] simple for him [...] to symbolically show the Real capitulating before the Dream].<sup>3</sup>

One way to blur the boundaries between dream and reality is through combining poetry and prose. As Kahn stated in an article in 1902, ‘il ne faut pas séparer la prose des vers, dans le cerveau d’un auteur, ce sont des moyens d’expression jumeaux qui doivent rester liés l’un à l’autre’ [One must not separate prose from verse, in the mind of an author, these are twin means of expression that must remain linked to each other].<sup>4</sup> This blending of poetry and prose is one of the challenges faced by Kunkel. In his introduction, he describes the phenomenon as ‘poetic sentences’ (p. 19). The infusion of poetic language into prose produces a more impressionistic vision rather than direct and minute description. In other cases, dimensions of Kahn’s poetry are rendered not through poetic form but by creating another key aspect of the Symbolist aesthetic: sensation. Kunkel makes note of Kahn’s use of exceptionally long sentences that are composed of a seemingly endless stream of items, evoking the sights one would see when watching a parade of circus performers.

Interestingly, Kahn tried unsuccessfully to produce a stage version of the novel. The nearly complete manuscript can be found at the Bibliothèque nationale de Paris. Poetry played a role, as Sophie Lucet points out in her examination of the manuscript which includes both prose and

verse.<sup>5</sup> This seemed to be a project to which Kahn was attached. The Théâtre Antoine announced the inclusion of a five-act *Le Cirque solaire* in its 1901-02 season.<sup>6</sup> Kahn must have continued to work on the play as it is mentioned again in 1908 as being a great lyrical drama in three acts and five tableaux with music by Henry Lutz.<sup>7</sup>

The setting of a circus serves to highlight the contrast between the dream-like, artificial world of performance and the ordinariness of everyday reality. The choice of a circus may seem odd for the twenty-first century reader. However, as Jennifer Forrest notes:

The last half of the nineteenth century represents the height of the circus as an elegant entertainment, doomed to become thereafter associated almost exclusively with the pastimes of the popular classes and children. Patronized assiduously by high society, the bourgeoisie, artists, poets, and novelists, the performance of the circus acrobat offered to creative minds new aesthetic opportunities that challenged conventional concepts of narrative technique, space, time, and identity.<sup>8</sup>

The circus was a widespread motif in literature and art of the time as it provided an otherworldly experience of performers doing what is seemingly impossible (flying through the air, for example) and exciting the emotions of spectators all the while being grounded in the real.

Although Symbolist writing does not usually take the form of traditional political literature, Kahn consistently argued that literature should be social in nature. The conclusion of the novel has parallels with *The Mad King*. In both novels, the story ends with social upheaval in the kingdom. The mad king is assassinated by a member of his family. In *The Solar Circus*, although Franz is the ruler, his younger brother Otto ruled while Franz was abroad with Lorely and attempted to push Franz out of power. Otto's authoritarian approach to government creates dissatisfaction among the people, one of whom assassinates him. The social upheaval depicted in both novels mirrors Kahn's views that moderation in a government is essential and that leaders must consider the needs of all their citizens and not just those who have money and power.

Another social dimension is visible in Kahn's dedication of the novel to the Naturalist writer Zola: 'In profound admiration, for the man of courage and the writer.' The brief statement indicates a radical shift in Kahn's position on Zola. Previously, Kahn had been vehemently

opposed to Zola and his form of realism. Indeed, the very aesthetics of *The Solar Circus* charts a different path for the novel. *The Solar Circus* was published at the height of the Dreyfus Affair, that split France along many cultural and ideological lines – especially regarding antisemitism. Kahn was Jewish and like other Jews suffered the consequences of discrimination. However earlier in 1898, Zola had published his famous ‘J’Accuse...!’ and put his own reputation on the line in defence of the Jewish captain Dreyfus who was falsely accused of treason. Not only did Zola’s actions change Kahn’s views of him politically but they also caused a shift in his position toward Zola’s novels of the end of the century.<sup>9</sup>

Sam Kunkel has provided an excellent opportunity to discover an unfamiliar piece of French literature constructed with a complex fabric that weaves together many different strands into a delightful read.

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<sup>1</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance, t. IV. 1890-1891. Supplément aux tomes I, II, et III, Tables* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 466n.

<sup>2</sup> Léon Blum, ‘Les Livres’, *La Revue blanche*, 1 December 1898, 556-58, (p. 557).

<sup>3</sup> Paul D’Armon, ‘Le Cirque Solaire’, *Le Voltaire*, 10 December 1898, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Dieudonné, ‘Une Enquête: Chez les Porteurs de Lyre: Gustave Kahn’, *La Presse*, 20 September 1902, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Sophie Lucet, ‘Kahn et le théâtre: Utopie et pratique’, *Gustave Kahn: Un écrivain engagé*, ed. by Françoise Lucbert and Richard Shryock (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes), p. 110.

<sup>6</sup> This is announced throughout the press. See, for example, ‘Courrier des Théâtres’, *Le Siècle*, 4 July 1901, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Le Masque de Verre’ [pseudonym of Pierre Mortier], ‘Échos’, *Comoedia*, 16 February 1908, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Forrest, *Decadent Aesthetics and the Acrobat in Fin-de-Siècle France* (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on Kahn’s shift, see Richard Shryock, *Lettres à Gustave et Rachel Kahn* (Paris: Nizet, 1996), pp. 272-73.



Decadence and the Fairy Tale Symposium  
Goldsmiths, University of London, 24 March 2023

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On 24 March 2023, international scholars, academics, early career researchers, and members of the public attended the symposium ‘Decadence and the Fairy Tale’, hosted by the Decadence Research Centre at Goldsmiths in association with Goldsmiths’ Centre for Comparative Literature. The symposium was the first of its kind to examine the importance of the fairy tale in the context of the wider decadent tradition and the fairy tale’s own decadent tendencies. The fairy tale has long been perceived as a text intended for children, yet this symposium sought to highlight how decadent writers and artists drew upon this same tradition as a source of inspiration for some of their most subversive and sexually dissident adult texts. Oscar Wilde, Olive Custance, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Jessie Marion King, to name just a few writers of interest during the symposium, all viewed the fairy tale’s engagement with fantasy and escapism as an opportunity to explore occult esotericism, transgressive forms of sexuality, fluid gender identities, and queer desire. Culminating in an afternoon roundtable that brought the speakers together in order to discuss the significance of the decadent fairy tale and its continuing relevance for the twenty-first century, the symposium highlighted ground-breaking research in the fields of both decadent studies and the fairy tale tradition.

The symposium began with Alessandro Cabiati’s keynote, ‘Marvellous Abnormalities: Fairy Tales, Decadence, and Deviance in the Late Nineteenth Century’. Using the pathological treatises of Richard von Krafft-Ebing as a framework, Cabiati provided compelling evidence of decadent themes of sexual fetishism and psycho-sexological obsession, termed ‘monomania’, in a close reading of Mary de Morgan’s ‘The Seeds of Love’ (1877), Wilde’s ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’ (1891), and Marcel Schwob’s ‘La petite femme de Barbe-bleue’ [‘Bluebeard’s Little Wife’] (1894). Cabiati’s paper demonstrated how British and French decadent writers integrated adult

concerns over mental illness and sexual ‘deviance’ into a genre traditionally viewed for children. Marie-Claude Canova-Green chaired an engaging question session that further discussed the decadent treatment of fairy tale figures such as Bluebeard and the ogress, who Cabiati argued were repeatedly compared against real life examples of criminals seen as socially or sexually deviant.

Cabiati’s keynote paper was followed by the first panel of the day, ‘Oscar Wilde, Olive Custance, and Jessie Marion King’. The panel opened with Megan Williams’s paper “‘An artist Slaying his own Soul’: Oscar Wilde, Ethel Carnie Holdsworth and l’aube de siècle radical culture’. Through a comparative reading of thematic parallels and similar imagery in Holdsworth’s ‘The Blind Prince’ (1913) and one of Wilde’s best known fairy tales, ‘The Happy Prince’ (1888), Williams drew thought provoking new connections between the socialist fairy tales of the working-class writer Ethel Carnie Holdsworth and Wilde, an influence on her work. The second paper, Frankie Dytor’s ‘Olive Custance and Fairy Tale Renaissance’, explored the potential for both the fairy tale and fairy tale landscape to disrupt and query traditional forms of gender, sexuality, and desire, and took as a primary example the shifting gender identities of the poet Custance, who identified as a prince, princess, and page in both her literary work and her relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas. Dytor’s paper offered an effective counterpoint to the perception of the fairy tale as a predominantly heteronormative genre, and Michelle Reynolds, in ‘Decadent New Women in Jessie Marion King’s Illustrated Edition of Oscar Wilde’s *A House of Pomegranates*’ emphasised the importance of illustration in providing a visual representation of alternative decadent womanhood and proto-feminist sexuality. In her close examination of King’s illustrations for Wilde’s *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), Reynolds provided new insight into how King’s work represented a ‘fusion’ of her Scottish identity, Wilde’s Irish national identity, and her interest in the ‘New Woman’ figure.

After a magical lunch and a browse of the Snuggly Books book stall, the second panel, ‘Decadence, the occult, and folklore’ chaired by Alessandro Cabiati, opened with Damian Walsh’s paper, ‘Many secrets and many answers: the occult rituals of Wilde’s fairy tales’. Walsh’s paper explored themes of secrecy and mysticism in *A House of Pomegranates* and offered new insights into

Wilde's interest in the occult and the esoteric, which Walsh argued was evidenced in the symbolic language of his fairy tales. The significance of symbolism and mystery was also a key concern for James Dowthwaite in his paper, "‘Nous n'avons pu sortir du château enchanté’: The Use of the Barbe-bleu Story in Huysmans and Maeterlinck". As with Cabiati's earlier keynote, Dowthwaite outlined the pervasive interest in the 'Bluebeard' motif in the French decadent fairy tale, and traced the recurrence of the 'Bluebeard' figure in key decadent texts such as Huysmans' *Là-bas* (1891) and dramatic works such as Maeterlinck's *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* [*Ariadne and Bluebeard*] (1899). Dowthwaite identified fairy tale elements in the latter work, yet also suggested points where Maeterlinck deviated from the textual model circulated by Charles Perrault, for instance, in the ambiguity and dissembling of gender relations that results from the author's choice to depict the survival of Bluebeard's wives. Both *Là-bas* and *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* subvert the language of the fairy tale in order to ensure that the mystery and secrecy at the heart of each work remains intact.

Naomi Fukuzawa's 'Lafcadio Hearn's *Kwaidan* as Japanese Decadent Folklore' transported the audience from the French decadent fairy tales of Maeterlinck to the Japanese folk tales of Lafcadio Hearn (also known as Koizumo Yakumo). She presented Hearn as a fairy tale writer, and discussed the influence of the rise of Japanese modernity upon his interpretation of traditional folk tales. Fukuzawa identified how Hearn's prodigious work drew on various diverse cultural influences, including Hearn's own Greco-Irish background, to forge a relationship between Western fairy tales, ancient medieval Japanese tales, and decadent tropes. One memorable example was Hearn's reinterpretation of the Japanese 'Yuki-Onna' [Snow Woman] legend, which subverted a predatory nature spirit known as 'Yuki-Onna' into a decadent *femme fatale*. Fukuzawa's paper concluded with several compelling examples of modern filmic and televisual adaptations of Hearn's tales that fuse concepts of decadent Orientalist sexuality with folkloric horror and supernatural transformation, asserting Hearn's continuing significance for modern global perspectives on decadence studies.

Similarly, transformation was a key theme in Victor Rees' 'An Empire of Trees: B. Catling's *The Vorrh* as 21st-century decadent fairy tale'. Rees' presentation delved into how the novelist and performance artist B. Catling drew on the fairy tale's turn towards hybridity to construct the world of the 'Vorrh', a vast, uncharted forest that casts a supernatural pull over Essenwald, a small colonial town on its border. Rees underscored the decadent connotations of Catling's work, particularly in regard to the transformative, subversive potential of the aestheticization of nature, and the decline of empire – two prominent decadent concerns. Rees argued that Catling's construction of the Vorrh parallels the decadent treatment of the natural world as a source of monstrosity and excess but claimed that this emphasis on excess enables the decadent tradition and the fairy tale tradition to exist simultaneously. Rees' paper provided an ideal pathway through to the plenary roundtable, chaired by Lucia Boldrini, during which speakers and attendees reflected further on the ambiguities and complexities of the decadent fairy tale and its enduring subversive appeal. This engaging debate carried through into a drinks reception, and the perfect conclusion to a memorable and thought-provoking day.

The considerable interest in the symposium has resulted in a selected number of the presented papers being recorded and made available on the [British Association of Decadence Studies' website](#). A special issue of *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, dedicated to the decadent fairy tale and with the aim of reflecting and expanding upon the findings of the symposium, is planned for the future.

Global Decadence, Race, and Futures of Decadence Studies Conference  
Online, 31 March - 1 April 2023

Rachael Nebraska Lynch and Gunja Nandi

George Washington University and Texas Christian University

Comments from the closing roundtable serve as the point of departure for our review of the ‘Global Decadence, Race, and the Future of Decadence Studies’ conference, held virtually from 31 March to 1 April 2023. Sponsored by the Jefferson Scholars Foundation, the University of Virginia Arts and the Office of the Provost & the Vice Provost of the Arts, and the Decadence Research Centre at Goldsmiths, University of London, the event was a short but profound glimpse into the current state of the field of decadence studies.

When the roundtable participants were asked about their introduction to the field, Jane Desmarais described how decadence was ‘siloesd’ in Victorian Studies when she began her career. Her characterization recurred amongst the responses from fellow panellists; Peter Bailey, Kristin Mahoney, Dennis Denisoff, and Stefano-Maria Evangelista. Denisoff responded that he had searched for a ‘decadentism that preceded nineteenth-century British and French Decadence’, while Evangelista historicized the field as not even existing when he was completing his doctoral program. Bailey explained that although his journey had begun with Aestheticism, ‘Decadence explained race better’. Citing Regenia Gagnier and Tanya Agathocleous, Mahoney discussed the decentring of British nineteenth-century studies from its likewise ‘siloesd’ discipline. These responses capture how the move to globalize decadence studies was prioritized by the conference chair, Cherrie Kwok, and vice-chairs Joe McLaughlin and Amy Sailer.

As two graduate students who are working on decadence and nineteenth-century studies more broadly, we found the conference highly generative for our own work (Gunja Nandi approaches the century from a postcolonial perspective, while Rachael Nebraska Lynch is a Victorianist with a focus on queer theory and disability studies). To us, the event demonstrated a commitment among current and emerging decadence studies scholars to engage with critical

frameworks that have historically been de-emphasized in nineteenth-century studies, and echoed Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong's call for Victorian studies to 'become undisciplined'. Invoking Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), they elaborated that 'un-disciplinarity invokes a set of strategies for living, thinking, and being within a negative ontology: a "total climate" of anti-Blackness that has produced and continues to produce the conditions that sustain Western modernity'.<sup>1</sup> The conference practised this undisciplining throughout its program, including panel topics such as 'East Asian Decadences', '21st-Century Decadences', 'Gender, Race, and Sexuality: Decadence's Haunting Bodies', 'Indigeneity, Race, and Reception in Late 19th-Century Decadences', and 'Black Decadences from Harlem to the Caribbean'.

The event's panels also highlighted the inherently interdisciplinary nature of decadence studies, cutting across a swathe of critical, historical, and theoretical perspectives to examine multiple contemporary approaches to decadence, and the multifarious implications of it in various post-colonial, spatio-temporal, and cultural crossroads. Over the two-day period, several presenters addressed gaps and ruptures in dominant nineteenth-century archives, thus engaging in the arduous task of rendering visible that which had hitherto remained largely invisible – unarguably one of the fundamental tasks of undisciplining. Cherrie Kwok's 'After Haiti: Jeanne Duval and the Rise of Duvalian Decadence' referred to seeking traces of Duval's resistance towards Baudelaire in the archives, defined the anti-imperial and anti-racist ethos of a new concept called Duvalian Decadence, and explored how decadent aesthetics arose as a result of racial contact and conflict between the traditions of white Euro-Americans and formerly colonized or enslaved people of colour. Sriya Chakraborty's 'Decadence, Trans-gression, and the Politics of the Archive' addressed the archival absence of subjects faced with multiple jeopardies along gendered, racial, sexual lines, and the necessity of compiling alternative 'Black/Queer counter-archives', vis-à-vis her analysis of *Lote* (2020) – an award-winning avant-garde novel by Shola Von Reinhold. Von Reinhold also gave the first plenary talk of the conference. Titled 'Pink Diamond, Black Grotto',

they focused on Doris Payne (the famous Black and Indigenous jewel thief from West Virginia in the twentieth-century) and explored how excess, ornamentality, and thieving are powerful expressions of refusal and joy against the settler colonial politics of Black and queer fugitivity.

In a talk titled ‘Biblical Beefcake, Greeting Cards, and Gilgamesh’, the second plenary speaker, Robert Stilling, focused on how the Black, queer counter-archive of Richard Bruce Nugent’s illustrations systematically pushes the boundaries of racial and homoerotic expression. Stilling’s attention to how Nugent’s campy and queered Biblical canon acquired kitschy dimensions was echoed in papers such as William Rees’s ‘Feeling “Mighty Real”: Disco, Self, and Sylvester’, which recalled how the gaudy excesses of the 1970s disco scene allowed queer people to embrace the liberatory campy artifice of performing multiple identities. Von Reinhold’s opening plenary talk, which included their melodious playing of the harp, captured the affect of this instinctive retreat into the artifice of slippery identities and cosmetic ornamentation, as a mode of survival and resistance.

These threads were especially helpful for our research – particularly Nandi’s, which foregrounds the openly eroticized but abjected bodies of queer Oriental dancers, fetishistically rendered as decadent exotic spectacles by the Orientalist discourse permeating most of nineteenth-century Western literature. Her research focuses on symbolist and decadent poetry from India that use the language of decadence to delineate postcolonial resistance to the violence historically inflicted upon the textual/sexual bodies of the communities of these dancers by the discursive continuum of Western Orientalism, British colonialism, and Indian anti-colonial nationalism. However, Sheng-Mei Ma’s ‘Pacific Envy of *Crazy Rich Asians*’ served as a timely reminder for us that some post-colonial responses also continue to cater to anglophone audiences by deploying decadent aesthetics to perpetuate self-orientalising portrayals of racialized stereotypes.

Significant concerns regarding the challenges facing the field today also surfaced during the discussions, primarily in relation to the unprecedented proliferation of decadence studies from its localized, apolitical origins associated with Aestheticism. Indeed, if every field and every subject

intersects with, and is construed as decadent, then nothing remains distinctively so, in which case, the ubiquity and universalization of decadence paradoxically results in its disappearance. However, as primarily a postcolonial studies scholar, Nandi appreciated the presenters' unanimous treatment of decadence as a discourse of the marginalized, wielded as a tool for resistance to neo-imperialist ideologies. As long as decadence invests in this oppositional stance, it does not seem likely to be subsumed within the mainstream, in opposition to which it is defined.

Somewhat atypical for academic conferences, the event also featured two creative writing roundtables where poets and novelists shared their contributions to decadent literature and poetry. These roundtables offered Muñozian performances where, as poet Dustin Pearson mentioned, glimpses of a utopia on the horizon emerged, with decadent poetry 'resolving the violence' committed against the body.<sup>2</sup> Others such as Santiago Vizcaíno read his poetry in Spanish, facilitated by translator Kimrey Anna Batts, in which the translation functioned as both an access tool but also part of the reading's performative intimacy. Also highlighted were other forms of worldmaking within the decadent style: poet Paul Cunningham noted how, within decadent poetry, especially that of Ario Herondo, 'language accumulates' and the 'neologism-heavy language' of the style appealed to him. Joyelle McSweeney's poetry was full of these neologisms and worldmaking, which was punctuated with her disclosure during the Q&A of how her hearing impairment informs her poetics. These themes were especially helpful to Lynch's work on cripqueer and racialized excess and the body in nineteenth-century British literature; the creative writing panels performed into existence practices of repair and resistance, further emphasizing decadence studies' relationship to the study of the body.

The conference produced critical interventions in decadence studies and opened up numerous generative possibilities. Rachel Teukolsky has referred to Victorian decadence as an '[un]democratic enterprise' that 'thrived on a power dynamics of inequality'.<sup>3</sup> Despite transgressing lines of gender normativity, decadence can remain complicit in its reinforcement of elitist, misogynist, Orientalist, and imperialist ideologies. The concluding roundtable panellists, each of



them a colossus in their own right, have regularly contended with decadence's uneasy relationship with racial and cultural power hierarchies. They have now created a foundation for emerging scholars to take this work forward with the goal of undisciplining the field, questioning when decadence functions normatively as well as unearthing where resistance and alternative decadent modes have gone under-examined.

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<sup>1</sup> Chatterjee, Ronjaunee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong, 'Introduction: Undisciplining Victorian Studies', *Victorian Studies* 62 (2020), 369-91 (pp. 369-71).

<sup>2</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Teukolsky, 'On the Politics of Decadent Rebellion: Beardsley, Japonisme, Rococo', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 49 (2021), 643-66 (pp. 644-45).

## Notes on Contributors

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**Alexander Bubb** is Senior Lecturer in English at Roehampton University in London, and his research focuses on translation, migration and multilingualism in the Victorian world. His first book, *Meeting Without Knowing It: Kipling and Yeats at the Fin de Siècle*, came out in 2016. A study of the two poets during their formative years in 1890s London, it won the University English Book Prize and was shortlisted for the ESSE Book Awards. His second book, *Asian Classics on the Victorian Bookshelf: Flights of Translation*, investigates the English popular translations through which texts like the *Ramayana*, the *Analects* of Confucius, and the Qur'an were made accessible and disseminated to the nineteenth-century general reading public. It was published by Oxford University Press in April 2023.

**Sriya Chakraborty** completed her bachelor's degree in English at St. Xavier's College, Kolkata (India), and her master's degree at The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad (India). She is currently a second-year PhD student in Literature, Media, and Culture at Florida State University. Her work primarily focuses on post-1900 British and American Literature, with a special emphasis on post-war, transatlantic experimental poetry and art. Her research interests also include theories of the avant-garde, literatures of war and trauma, aesthetics of violence in post-war literature, history of the lyric, decadence, modernity and globalization, and post-colonial Indian writing in English.

**Tim Clarke** is Assistant Professor of Humanities at the University of King's College in Halifax, Canada, where he teaches in the Foundation Year and Contemporary Studies Programmes. His current research explores the shifting significations and counter-intuitive influence of discourses about decadence in nineteenth century and modernist literatures in the United States. His work has previously appeared in publications such as *Twentieth-Century Literature* and *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth Century Americanists*.

**Eleanor Keane** is a PhD researcher in the Department of English and Creative Writing at Goldsmiths. Her thesis will examine fin-de-siècle fairy tales as examples of queer decadent narratives, and her research interests focus on the decadent fairy tale, literary decadence and the visual arts, and expressions of gender, decadence, and sexuality within the late nineteenth century. Eleanor is a member of Goldsmiths' Decadence Research Centre and the British Association of Decadence Studies (BADS) Executive Committee. She holds an MA in Literary Studies from Goldsmiths and an MSc from City University. Her article 'Baudelaire's Celestial Vision of Jeanne Duval' was included in *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies* 4.1 (2021). Eleanor co-organized 'Decadence and the Fairy Tale', a symposium hosted by the Decadence Research Centre at Goldsmiths in March 2023.

**Rachael Nebraska Lynch** is a PhD candidate in the Department of English at George Washington University. She received a Bachelor of Arts in English and Secondary Education from Saint Michael's College and a Master of Arts in English from George Washington University. She explores whiteness, disability, and class in British literature with occasional forays into Weimar cinema and the Nazi regime. Her current research project focuses on the relationship between nineteenth-century racial Anglo-Saxonism, whiteness, and eugenics using Black sexuality studies and crip/queer theory. She has published an essay on disability and race in *Get Out* in a special

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**Gunja Nandi** received her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in English literature from Presidency University, Kolkata, India in 2019 and 2021 respectively. She secured the highest scores in both programmes, and was thus awarded a Gold Medal. She joined the Department of English at Texas Christian University in fall 2022 as a doctoral student in English literature, and has recently completed her first year in the programme. Her doctoral research project intends to interrogate the concepts of the nation-state, nationalism, and national literature vis-à-vis her exploration of various post-colonial marginalized experiences as delineated in nineteenth and twentieth century Gothic fiction from India and Ireland. Besides the Gothic mode, she approaches an interrogation of the 'post' in the postcolonial through several alternative avenues like Decadence and Diaspora. Besides her obvious interest in gender studies, queer studies, and postcolonial studies, her research interests also proliferate into fan studies and popular culture. She has presented her research at several conferences including the British Women Writers Conference.

**Richard Shryock** is an associate professor of French at Virginia Tech. His work focuses on French fin-de-siècle literature and the intersection of literature and politics with a special emphasis on the politics of the French Symbolist movement in literature. He has published extensively on Gustave Kahn including *Lettres à Gustave et Rachel Kahn* (Paris: Nizet, 1996), a new edition of Kahn's *Odes de la 'Raison'* (Paris: Les Editions du Fourneau, 1995), and, co-edited with Françoise Lucbert, *Gustave Kahn: Un Écrivain engagé* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2013). He was the co-curator with Françoise Lucbert of the exhibition 'Gustave Kahn (1859-1936): Écrivain symboliste et critique d'art' at the Museum of Jewish Art and History in Paris. He also serves as an editor for the journal *Histoires littéraires*.

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**Robert Stilling** is Associate Professor of English at Florida State University, where he teaches courses in British, Irish, and Postcolonial literature. He is the author of *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* (Harvard University Press, 2018), which received the Modernist Studies Association Prize for a First Book. He has published on decadence and colonial and postcolonial literature and art in *Volupté*, *PMLA*, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, *Cusp*, and *Feminist Modernist Studies*.

## 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 the *Oxford Handbook of Decadence* (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.

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